

# THE SORROWFUL MYSTERIES OF THE NEGRO CATHOLIC

by WARREN HINCKLE

LEON AUBRY learned to cut hair the hard way. His father was a postman in rural New Orleans, in the days before parcel post, and whenever someone living along his long, circuitous route ordered anything through the mails — even a lawnmower — he had to carry it. There were no work load limits then, especially for a Negro postman, and the calluses that grew on his father's hands developed in time into tumours. That was when Leon learned how to cut hair, when his father could no longer hold the scissors with which he gave haircuts every three weeks to Leon and his seven brothers. Leon was 16 when he learned the trade, his first barber chair a large rock near his parents' frame house in New Orleans, and two years later when he graduated from high school he became a barber.

The term in New Orleans is "tonsorial artist," and Leon, displaying a respect for tradition not often evident in the neon lights and boulevards of southwestern Los Angeles, calls his barber shop at 323 West Jefferson Boulevard "Aubry's Tonsorial Parlor."

He has been thirty years a barber, and has been cutting hair at the same shop in Los Angeles for the past ten years, and this summer he got his first citation.

The barber inspector said Leon didn't wash his hands properly before he went on to the next customer. "If they want to get that technical, they can put just about every barber in the state out of business," Leon said. The citation came during Leon's second "inspection visit" of the summer — a visit soon followed by two other "inspections," all four within a six-week period. Barber inspections are normally made four times a year.

The extraordinary series of inspectors' calls were during Aubry's struggle with his cardinal, James Francis McIntyre of Los Angeles. Aubry is the leader of a group of Negro Catholics who have taken their grievances against the Cardinal's peculiar stance on race relations to the streets. They have paraded in front of the foreboding portals of exclusive Fremont Place, the site of the Cardinal's residence, and picketed the Los Angeles Chancery Office.

Aubry had to change his phone number to stop the flow of abusive telephone calls from fellow Catholics, white Catholics, who told him the "niggers" were hurting the Church. The front window of his home has been boarded up, because it faces a quiet residential street which is shadowy at night, and both his house and his barber shop have been under police protection because of bomb threats. Leon doesn't know what to make of the sudden rash of inspection visits — only one

of the "inspectors" would show his credentials — but he feels, in some intangible way, that they are a manifestation of the Cardinal's displeasure. At least one state official, Los Angeles Assemblyman Charles Warren, is concerned that the inspection visits might be linked with Aubry's social protests.

Leon loves his church, and as he sees it, he is fighting to be able to live in it — and with his conscience.

"The South was black and white," he said. "They hid segregation behind the law and everybody kind of accepted it, the Church accepted it, and the Negroes in the Church learned to live with it. Negroes were always active in the Church, where I grew up in New Orleans. My father helped to build several parishes, he pitched and helped to build them with his hands, as the Negroes were always willing to do, and as soon as I was old enough I was working in the Catholic Youth Organization."

It is Aubry's brand of Catholic — those long-suffering Negroes from the South who wanted to share in the life of their church even in an openly segregated society — who compose the "outside groups" which Cardinal McIntyre is said to have described as "half-whites and mongrels" and blames for the controversy that has



Leon Aubry

recently rocked his affluent, sprawling, conservative archdiocese.

For when Aubry and other Southern Negro Catholics came to Southern California, they expected more of the Church than they had come to expect in the deep South.

They were bitterly disappointed. "Out here, in Los Angeles, we found segregation—and segregation in many ways worse than in New Orleans, because it was more tacit and subtle. In the South, segregation was practiced under color of law, but in Cardinal McIntyre's archdiocese, it thrives in many areas behind the cloak of the Church itself."

Attacks on Cardinal McIntyre's social theory have been couched in general, often bitter terms, by Negro and white Catholics, both laymen and priests, who consider his administration an open scandal. The Cardinal, only after the attacks intensified enough to gain objective attention in the national press, attempted to answer them in terms even more general—"the well known position of the Church against racism," and "the right of the individual conscience to be wrong."

**B**UT LEST IT BE FORGOTTEN, the case against the Los Angeles Cardinal is grounded on hard, shocking specifics, the unheard Sorrowful Mysteries of the Negro Catholic. Listen to Leon Aubry:

"When I came to Los Angeles I found a pattern of ghetto building; when Negroes moved into a parish that was predominantly white, the white Catholics started moving out, and never a word came from the parish priest to try to stop them. As the pattern grew, this matter was constantly brought to the attention of the Chancery—the matter of the sin of racism—of white Catholics leaving and rebuking other Catholics because of their skin, but the Chancery did nothing and still refuses to work to stop it.

"In Ascension parish, seven or eight years ago, the Mexican-Americans were up in arms because many Negroes were moving in. The parish had a large Mexican-American element, and the old pastor there, who has since died, told a group of Mexicans at a public meeting: 'Don't worry, we have a plan for getting rid of the niggers'.

"In Holy Name parish, where I live, the priest who was the pastor when Negroes started moving in reacted by simply ending all the parish social functions, bazaars, teen-club meetings and things, so the races wouldn't have to mix. The functions have come back, now the parish is almost all black and it's all right I suppose to have Catholic social gatherings since, as one priest explained it to me, 'There's no longer the problem of the white daughter coming in contact with the Negro'.

"In a Catholic grammar school here—in a third grade music class—the Sister was doing something on Stephen Foster. And she asked that all the kids with colored blood please stand up. Well, the Negroes in the class stood up, and a little Mexican boy stood up with

them. The Sister told him to sit down and said that she wasn't talking about him. The Mexican boy asked why not, 'Ain't I colored like my friends here?' And the Sister said no, she just wanted the kids with *colored* blood because they could sing *Old Black Joe* so much better than the rest.

"At a Catholic school in Altadena, where Negro and white kids played together in the school yard, a priest called a 16-year-old white girl aside and told her that she shouldn't play with the 'Little Joe's' any more, meaning the Negro boys her age, because they were getting to be 'Big Black Joes.' She told one of her friends, a Negro, what the priest said, and he told his parents.

"Just a few months ago Vernon Mitchell, a Negro, bought a house in a Catholic parish in Burbank. His Catholic neighbors got together and decided they didn't want a Negro living there and they came to his house and asked him to move out. He went to the parish priest and asked him to talk to the people, but the priest refused. The priest told him: 'These are white Catholics, members of the parish. If they don't want you here, you're just going to have to get out.' And I know of very few Negro Catholics who don't have an experience like this one.

"A Negro lady, Doris Bordnave, made six trips to the Catholic girls' high school to try to get her daughter in. She finally told the nun: 'If I can't get my daughter enrolled here, I'll have to send her to public school.' And the nun told her: 'Well, maybe God didn't intend for her to go to Catholic school'.

"In many parishes—it wasn't just an isolated thing—when Negroes started coming to Sunday Mass, the ushers would put them all in one section. When a Negro wouldn't sit where he was pointed, but knelt down in a white section, the whites would try and slide over and leave a few empty spaces.

"A friend of mine tried to join the Holy Name Society when he moved into Holy Name parish some years back. The priest just looked at him and said, 'What do you mean, join the Holy Name Society!' He was really shocked at the idea. Just last year, in a new parish, St. Bernadette's, a predominantly white parish in Baldwin Hills, a customer of mine, Edward Johnson, tried to join the Holy Name Society. The priest told him he would just have to wait to get in, at least six months. But a white friend of his got him in. He told him, 'Just start coming up to the Communion rail and receiving with us every Sunday and we'll get you in,' and he did.

"About six years ago, when my brother's boy was in Catholic grammar school here, he signed up to go into the seminary. All his papers were right, but when he got there he was told they didn't take Negroes unless their skin was at least a little lighter than his. Then my brother went to his parish priest to complain about this, and the priest said, 'Why Mr. Aubry, why didn't you tell me your son wanted to be a priest, I

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# the conscience of a cardinal

**Conscience** *Your continued silence concerning the racist language of the proposed constitutional amendment to nullify California's new fair housing law forces me to bound you in this manner.*

**Cardinal McIntyre** The Archdiocese has consistently refrained from advising or suggesting preference in political matters. When an issue is submitted to the people for vote, it does not behoove the Archbishop of Los Angeles to encourage the clergy to presume to direct the faithful in the expression of their individual judgment and consequent vote. In such political matters, our position is to leave the decision to the individual conscience.

**Conscience** *You must be aware of the giant inconsistency of your position. You led two successful political campaigns to defeat a parochial school tax on the California ballot. You have denounced Supreme Court decisions on Bible reading. You have endorsed the new civil rights bill. You have opposed Federal aid to education. Further, THE TIDINGS, the Archdiocesan paper of which you are publisher, actively agonizes over the fate of Madame Nhu, attacks civil disobedience, fumes about how the U.S. is going down the drain and smolders about the Red menace at home and abroad. There is every indication that you are very concerned about molding the opinion of your people on political matters.*

**Cardinal McIntyre** In each example you mention, the Church is substantially involved. Thus, it is my duty as Ordinary of this Archdiocese to make certain positions clear to the faithful. The feeling of the Church on the race question is clear on the printed page for all to see. The Los Angeles area has a brilliant record on integration, particularly in housing. Agitators are trying to separate me from my flock, much in the way that Communists stir up people of good will.

**Conscience** *One thing should be made quite clear both to you, Eminence, and to the faithful of your Archdiocese. Five Catholic bishops in California refuse to regard Proposition 14 as a purely political matter. Archbishop McGucken of San Francisco, Bishop Donohoe of Stockton, Bishop Bell of Sacramento and the bishops of Oakland and Santa Rosa can hardly be considered agitators. Bishop Donohoe, co-author of the*

*arguments for "No on 14," has suggested that politics is a branch of ethics and that, in such questions as the initiative raises, the moral framework must be exercised. Bishop Bell has urged his priests to denounce the initiative from the pulpit and has condemned the racist language as un-Christian and immoral. THE TIDINGS has yet to open its editorial mouth on the subject. Yet, the church IS involved.*

**Cardinal McIntyre** Quite naturally, I am concerned by all the confusion on the subject. Most importantly, I fear for my people who are not always ready for complex problems such as this matter presents. Property rights are important to all Americans and yet, I know that human rights must precede them. This is my difficulty: how can I avoid "rocking the boat" with many prominent Catholic laymen, some of them Papal Knights, who support the initiative and also contribute heavily to the Archdiocese. More simply how does the spiritual leader of the flock exert leadership over the political animal in man?

**Conscience** *I refer you to the 1963 joint pastoral letter to the American people by the Bishops of the United States on racial harmony. It said, in part: "We insist that the heart of the race question is moral and religious. It concerns the rights of man and our attitude toward our fellow man." There is no mention of race or discrimination being a political issue.*

**Cardinal McIntyre** The radicals and agitators will cry for more and more if such a statement is forthcoming. How can these people be quieted once and forever?

**Conscience** *I am your individual conscience and it seems to me your duty on this matter is clear. You have a brilliant record of achievement in such areas as school construction, financial acumen and articulation on the Church's position on major subjects. Put on the Red Hat, take up the crosier, swat the bigots and the merchants of fear and hate. Tell your prominent Catholic laymen, tell your priests!*

**Cardinal McIntyre** Perhaps a summit meeting of the Catholic hierarchy throughout California is in order. The Bar-Jonah may not be the ideal place but, Conscience, you have given me some good thoughts. On your way out, ask Monsignor Hawkes to step in. I think he should be the first to know my feelings.

