

The Oratorians and I

by Lester Gaither

The Oratorians have had a profound impact on all aspects of my life. I am a convert to the Catholic faith. I was converted at eighteen years of age. Becoming Catholic was much more than a religious change, it was a social, emotional Revolution in the midst of a changing world. One would have to be able to appreciate the segregated and Jim Crow south to fully understand what being a Catholic meant. The Catholic Church was under attack by the black and white communities. My parents always appeared to be tolerant of the Church although they were advised to forbid their children to attend the Catholic Church. Activities at the Church Recreational Center became a mecca for the youth of color in Rock Hill.

The priests assigned to St. Mary's over the years were **Fathers Henry (Tevlin), Edward, and James**. Each was a perfect fit for their assignments at St. Mary's in spite of their being entirely different in personality. Father Edward appeared studious and intellectual. Father James was outgoing and athletic, and Father Henry was delicate and sensitive. These priests were assigned to St. Mary's during the forties when the entire country was just overcoming "The Great Depression." Many thought the priests were wealthy. This could have been because they each had an automobile and the Church Rectory was a new brick building.

The priests resided in the small Rectory which caused some members of the black community to protest that they were violating the segregation laws by residing in a black Community. This violation was never enforced.

Father James taught the youth basketball, softball, and swimming. Father James taught swimming at the Catawba River. The public pools of course were off limits to people of color due to the segregation laws. About this time the City of Rock Hill built a Pool and Recreation Center explicitly for the black community. The irony of this gesture was that the Public Recreation Center was almost next door to the St. Mary's center. This meant that minority youth from other parts of the town were denied access to swimming and other recreational facilities, due to the distance and location of the Recreation Center. The priests impacted many youth of the Community in that it was the first time a first class facility was available to black (colored) boys and girls. The Oratorians also tutored and prepared students for academics.

My relationship with the Oratorians has been personal and intimate. My brother, Mack was the first baptized convert at St. Mary's in 1946. At this time, having ten persons at Mass was a lot. My father was converted during his illness. Father Henry visited him several times week. Poppa described Fr. Henry as a fine young man who explained the Bible to him. My father died in the fall of 1949, and he was the first to have a funeral at St. Mary's. A sister and several nieces and nephews have converted to the Church as a result of being introduced to the priests who were

instrumental in the conversion of my brother Mack.

I, personally was introduced to catechism by Fr. James who spent hours with me at a critical time in my life. He was precise and clear in explaining all questions about religion and the Church. The one thing that stands out was that Fr. James maintained that each person must be responsible for oneself. He also stressed family life and obedience to God. However, he advocated that one was expected to defend oneself when necessary. It was this type of training and experience that enabled me to set proper goals for myself and to instill these qualities in my family.

Rock Hill would be considered as a moderate Southern town. We did not have any lynchings or KKK activities to deal with. However, Jim Crow and segregation was a way of life which denied non-whites the basics for living. Walking a tight rope the Oratorians gave us courage and self-esteem. We did not have brothers and sisters to prove special programs. However, we felt fortunate to have the Oratorians. I am eternally grateful to have had them in my life.

I am now retired after having worked thirty-five years as an educator and social worker. I still envision St. Mary's to be my home parish.

May God bless St. Mary's parish and the Oratorians.