

## Fr. Joe Chapter 2 – Prejudice In his own words...

When Archbishop Alter appointed me to one of the missions, he said, "I don't want you to make converts, I want you to break down prejudices in the area. People who grow up and live in a Catholic neighborhood or atmosphere cannot understand prejudice and the impact it has on a person. The person feels shunned and rejected, you are there, but do not belong, you are a marked person like Cain in the Bible.

You will hear older Catholics say that they pass through the area, but never stop, but it is the last stronghold of the Ku Klux Klan. People would say that there would never be a Catholic church in the town.

I began to experience the effects of prejudice the first day I spent in the town. What bothered me most was that my parishioners were affected. One man told me not to send the *Catholic Telegraph* in the mail, the mailman would know that he was Catholic. I heard one of the students talk about one of the senior girls, who was a good student, but would not be picked as valedictorian because she was Catholic.

A girl in high school started drifting from the Church. I picked her up one Monday night to take her to religious instructions and asked her what was wrong. She said that there were only a few Catholics in the world and that she did not want to be rejected all of her life. I explained to her that there were many Catholics all over the world and that some of them are famous people, such as Bing Crosby, Rosemary Clooney, Frank Sinatra, Governor Gilligan and Senator Kennedy. She was surprised by this, and thanks to God, she continued coming to church.

One Sunday morning some grade school children came to me and said, "We don't know what to do. In school they serve us fish on Thursday and meat on Friday. I said, "Don't panic, brown bag it on Friday. Maybe you could make Limburger cheese sandwiches and set them on the heater all morning." They laughed, and I told them not to be impatient.

We finally mapped out a program and we were here to stay, but we would not preach or try to convert people to Catholicism. We would not interfere with school or civic matters. We would cooperate in any way that we could. We would dress up and beautify our property so it was an asset to the town.

After a few years, things began to change. People would stop in and say a good word and be friendly. The school served fish on Friday, and even hired a Catholic principal. It gave me the opportunity to counsel and address the students along with other ministers. The town also began to favor us.

One night at a council meeting many people jammed the room complaining about the condition of the streets. The mayor reported they did not have any money to fix the town. The mayor asked, "Is there any more business?" The man stood up and said, "I was talking to the Catholic preacher, and he said that if he had some gravel, he could level out the rest of the side of the road along their property."

The mayor slammed down the gavel, sent two loads of gravel to the Catholic church tomorrow morning. Little by little and year by year, things got better.

Jesus tells us, "Blessed are those who suffer persecution for the sake of righteousness. Be glad and rejoice. Your reward is in persecution in some form or other. It may not be by shedding our blood or by giving up one's life as the holy martyrs did, but whenever we stand up for what we believe and for what is right, we face opposition, ridicule and rejection.

We cannot give up or run away or fight back. Sometimes we find refuge in strength in others who have the same faith and the same values and, therefore, the same treatment. This is easier in areas where there are many Catholics than it is in areas where there are just a few and scattered Catholics.

Jesus tells us to turn the other cheek. You win them over with love.