

WINDOW

CREIGHTON UNIVERSITY

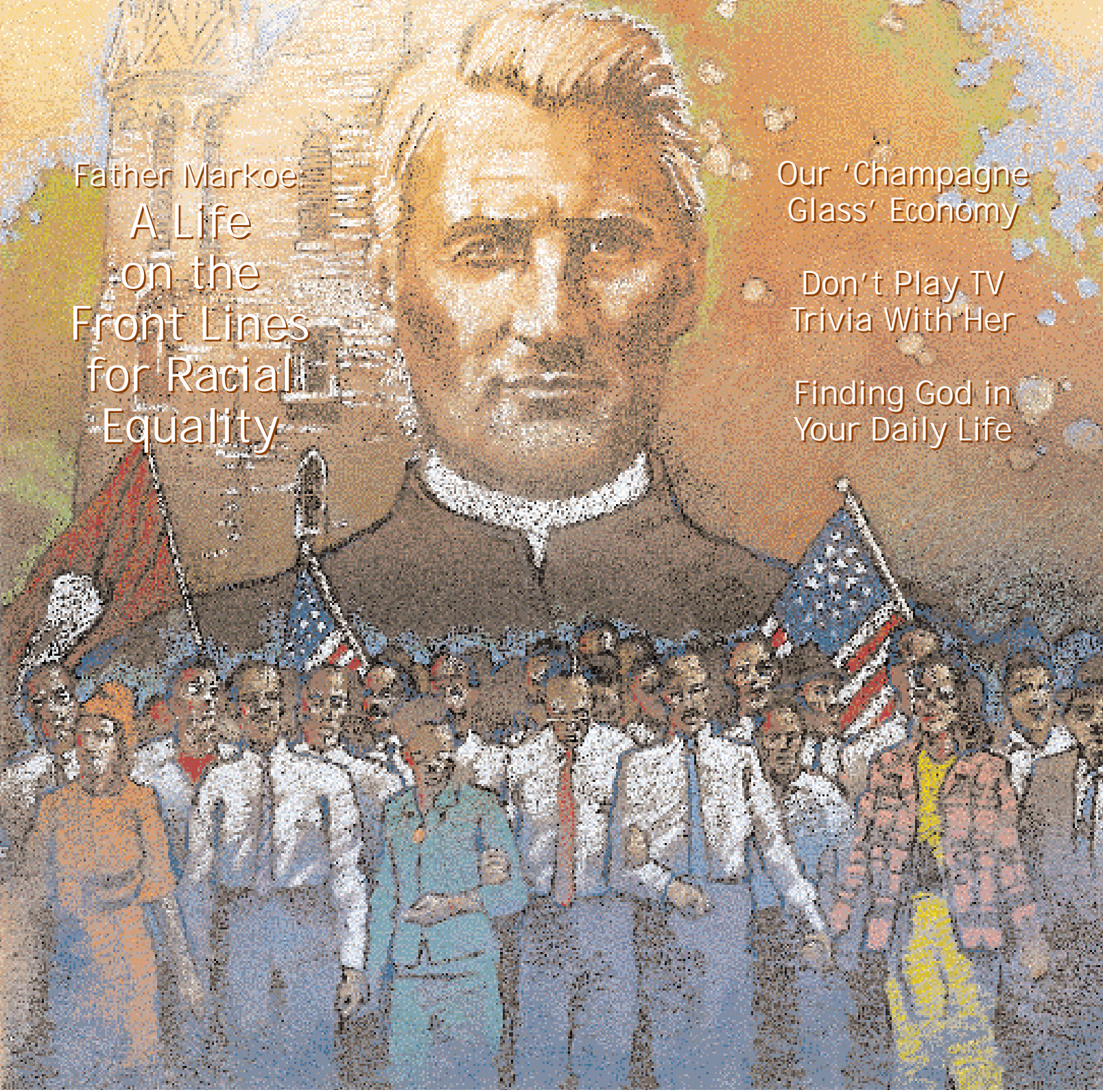
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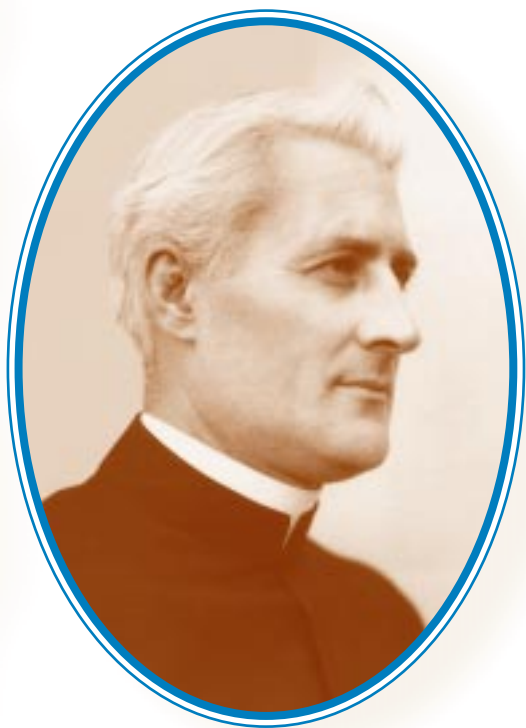
Father Markoe
A Life
on the
Front Lines
for Racial
Equality

Our 'Champagne
Glass' Economy

Don't Play TV
Trivia With Her

Finding God in
Your Daily Life





“It Has Been the Few Who Have Acted, Who Have Saved Us from Unspeakable Scandal”

By Bob Reilly

On the 3rd of April, 1965, two years before his death, Fr. John P. Markoe, S.J., sat impassively as the honoree at a testimonial dinner.

The Brandeis Student Center was packed with friends and admirers, including members of the De Porres Club for which Markoe served as moderator. John Howard Griffin, author of the blockbuster *Black Like Me*, was guest speaker, and among those on hand to salute the Jesuit activist were Roy Wilkins, executive secretary of the NAACP; Whitney Young, executive director of the National Urban League; and Frank Morrison, governor of Nebraska. Archbishop Gerald T. Bergan apologized publicly for not being more openly supportive of Markoe.

“He was right,” acknowledged Bergan, “and your Archbishop was wrong.”

Griffin declared that Fr. Markoe and his Jesuit brother, William, were “in the cauldron when most of us were in diapers,” alluding to the long careers both men had spent in combatting prejudice.

For more than two hours, Griffin held

that audience with stories of his experiences while disguised as a black man. He mentioned incidents so painful, he couldn’t describe them in his book — including his being denied access to a Catholic church one Sunday, the same church to which he had been welcomed a year earlier as a prominent white journalist. He detailed the racist attitudes inherent in our society. We were mesmerized. I remember wanting to reach for a glass of water during that long speech, delivered quietly, flatly, without histrionics. My hand wouldn’t move.

Turning toward Markoe, Griffin said: “It has been the few — and I say that word sadly — it has been the few who have acted, who have been what we all profess to be, who have salvaged us from unspeakable scandal — if indeed we have been salvaged from unspeakable scandal.”

Griffin was on target. In that post World War II era, there were few saints and many sinners. Most of us didn’t do enough. We took comfort in our own beliefs and conduct, tallied the names of black friends. But the truth is that we

didn’t protest loudly enough or often enough against discrimination — in our neighborhoods, our business community, our churches.

Today we may be losing sight of those times. This generation may not appreciate what it was like to be black then, not only in the distant and disparaged South, but in Omaha. Jews insist they must explain the Holocaust again and again, because the knowledge of what happened in those years is slipping away. They are right. We need to see ourselves as part of a history which is both proud and ugly. So we’re bound to recall Omaha and Creighton as they were 50 years ago.

During the Second World War, some 2 1/2 million African-Americans served in the Armed Forces, the vast majority of them in non-combat roles — transportation, quartermaster corps, as Navy stewards. Conventional wisdom questioned their reactions under fire. Only the Tuskegee Airmen managed to leap this barrier, chalking up a remarkable record of enemy planes destroyed. For the remaining military, rear echelon duty



The fighting Markoes: Fr. William Markoe, S.J. (left), and Fr. John Markoe, S.J. (right), flank writer John Howard Griffin.

was the norm. Despite the non-discrimination clause in the Draft Act of 1940 and the Fair Employment Practice Act of 1941, blacks in the military found segregation everywhere - training camps, troop trains, and even USOs.

I recall no black members of our Creighton R.O.T.C. unit, and, when we finally got to Fort Benning, to Officer Candidate School, our company was composed of three platoons, two white and one black, each in a separate barracks. There was little fraternization. When graduation day arrived, perhaps 85 percent of the white candidates received their lieutenant's bars, while less than 3 percent of the black aspirants were commissioned. Again, conventional military wisdom averred that white troops wouldn't serve under black officers and that black troops preferred to be led by white officers. Color lines in the armed forces weren't erased until President Harry Truman took action in 1948. Even then, change came slowly.

It wasn't much different in civilian life.

Spurred by the promise of higher wages and the presumed decline in discrimination, black families had moved north by the thousands in the second decade of this century. Omaha's black population doubled in those years. By 1950, there were more than 16 thousand black citizens of Omaha - all confined to the Near North Side, except for a small

section of South Omaha. Unemployment was high in this small community, per capita income half that of whites, the chances for advancement slim, and illness and death far higher than that in other areas of the city. Eighty-seven percent of African-Americans employed held unskilled or ser-

vice jobs - on the railroad; in the packing houses; in hotels, restaurants and clubs; as maids or janitors. Only 13 percent had clerical, professional or semi-professional jobs. They lived in an area where half the homes failed to meet minimum housing code standards.

In his master's thesis, Creighton graduate Dr. Jeffrey H. Smith, MA'67, wrote:

"The post-war housing boom almost completely ignored Omaha's non-white

population. During the ten year period from 1947 to 1957, twenty-three major housing sub-divisions of one hundred homes or more were developed, none of them open to non-whites...between 1952 and 1957, there were 13,293 new homes built; only 32, or .002 percent, were available to Negro buyers."

Personal humiliations were even more traumatic.

Tessie Edwards, one of the city's most respected educators, recalls being consigned to a balcony at the Brandeis Theater and remembers seeing her father directed to the back door of a restaurant in order to purchase a meal. In high school, she was barred from student organizations, occupied a study hall for black students only, and ate meals alone in protest of the segregated lunchroom. While this was a public high school, the Catholic high schools were hardly better. Only one, Notre Dame Academy, openly welcomed black students.

"I used to walk up 24th Street," she says, "swinging my book bag, and I'd pass by Creighton, and I wondered if they would let me in. I saw no black faces there, although I believe there were a couple of black students in the School of Pharmacy."

In all of the nation's Jesuit colleges and universities, there were less than 500 black students.

But Miss Edwards, as thousands of Creighton Prep students addressed her during her teaching years on the 72nd Street campus, did enter Creighton and graduated with a major in history in 1949. She appreciated the education she received, and made some lifelong friends, but the experience wasn't without problems.

"One Jesuit suggested to me that I not attend his class one day because they would be discussing race relations," she said, "and he thought it might be embarrassing for me."

She ran into Fr. Markoe on her way to the library and told him of the incident. Furious, Markoe dashed off to confront and berate his colleague.

By that time, things were starting to change.

It would be wrong to leave the impression that there were no people in



Markoe, here in uniform, was a 1914 graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point.



Omaha opposing bigotry and discrimination. Among diocesan priests there were the McCaslin brothers and Fr. Jim Stewart and a few others who took the heat. Some ministers, teachers and businessmen bucked the trend. And Creighton had its highly visible dissenters.

Fr. Austin Miller, S.J., preached social justice, ran a labor school, and insisted

On his deathbed, Fr. Markoe advised his friend, Fr. Renard, never to give “an inch” in the struggle against racism

on equality for all workers. Fr. John J. Killoren, S.J., served a primarily black congregation for 22 years at St. Benedict’s. Other Jesuits and laity on the faculty lived out their convictions in a variety of ways. But the activist approach was not applauded by everyone on the Hilltop. Debates on the morality of racism were common. In theory, everyone agreed to the dignity and equality of all people. But must a business owner integrate if this meant losing clientele? Was he responsible for the prejudice of others?

Fr. John Markoe, S.J., had no doubts on this issue.

“Racism is a God Damned thing,” he would insist. “And that’s two words — God Damned.”

He instructed his adherents never to give an inch and, on his deathbed, he imparted the same advice to his friend, Fr. Henri Renard, S.J. Never give an inch.

Fr. Markoe is a book in himself, and Dr. Jeffrey Smith has written that volume, *From Corps to CORE*. It reads like fiction.

A West Point alumnus and classmate of Eisenhower and Dewey Spatz, Markoe won honorable mention as an All-American end, and stood ramrod straight his entire life. Graduating 87th in a class of 107, Markoe found himself

assigned to a black regiment charged with patrolling the Mexican border. A heavy drinker, the young lieutenant specialized in breaking up barrooms and made the mistake of trying to force a senior officer to drink with him. He was dismissed from the Army and returned to Minnesota to work as a lumberjack. He also joined the state’s National Guard unit and, when Pancho Villa became a threat, he was summoned back to the border. Here he served with distinction and was promoted to captain. His nickname remained “Cap” for the rest of his life, but the promotion did nothing to temper his drinking sprees. He continued to make life miserable for bar owners and ended up one day in an adobe jail. A strong man, he broke through the wall and wandered out into the desert. A Mexican spotted him, lifted him onto his burro, and returned him to his outfit. During that ride, so the legend goes, Markoe swore off liquor for life. Whatever the truth of this conversion, he did turn his life around and joined the Jesuits in 1917. Along with his brother William, also a Jesuit, he signed an unusual pledge to “give and dedicate our whole lives and all our energies” to “the Negroes in the United States.” He wound up, eventually, at St. Louis University, where he and others set about trying to integrate the student body. That earned him exile to Omaha — and Creighton. The year was 1946. Within a year, he had his perfect tool for carrying out his life’s mission — the newly-formed De Porres Club.

If one name deserves to be mentioned above the rest among that cadre of courageous students, that name is Denny Holland, BS’49. He approached Markoe about doing something to redress the injustices witnessed daily in the city. Markoe encouraged the organization that became the De Porres Club in 1947. Its stated purpose was “to educate people to think along lines of charity and justice as

regards inter-racial matters.” Their patron, Blessed Martin de Porres, a Peruvian of mixed ancestry, was canonized 15 years later.

“We met every Monday night from 7 to 10,” says Holland. “First, at Creighton, until we became too controversial and were asked to move.”

Members headquartered at several North Omaha locations, including the back room of *The Omaha Star*, where owner Mildred Brown made them welcome. Brown, characterized by elegant hats and sometimes inflated circulation figures, was a woman of conviction. She had to walk a narrow line, wooing white advertisers while informing black readers. And she paid the price in lost revenues and broken windows.

Denny Holland, too, faced some handicaps.

“Often the mail to the De Porres Club would come in re-sealed,” he says. “And our phone was tapped, I think. You’d hear a few clicks every time I picked it up. If I was out late in the Near North Side, I might be followed by a couple of detectives — but I think they were just

trying to be sure I made it home safely.”

Holland lived near the De Porres Center, or camped out behind *The Omaha Star*, or stayed with the family of Dr. Ed Corbett, a Creighton English professor. Corbett, also a club member, along with colleague Chet Anderson, recalls the inspiration of Fr. Markoe.

“His utter conviction that fighting for civil rights was what we should all be doing kept us going,” remarks Corbett, now retired from teaching at Ohio State University. “He was appalled that anyone — including his fellow faculty members — didn’t agree. He made a believer out



Markoe is shown in this picture as a lieutenant in the U.S. Cavalry.



In this historic photograph, the 1913 Army varsity football team (whose members would go on to greatness in World War II) poses for a picture. Fr. Markoe is sixth from the left. At the position 10th from the left stands the man who would become President of the United States after his distinguished military career: Dwight D. Eisenhower. Omar Bradley, who

of my wife, too. I can still see her marching in one of those picket lines, our baby in her arms."

The confrontations didn't come right away.

"I thought we might be just a prayer group," recalls Holland. "We met, discussed articles on racial justice, had speakers. One night Fr. Markoe suggested we adjourn and go en masse, black and white members, to a local restaurant that refused to serve blacks. I was nervous about it, but I went."

That was the beginning of years of persistent action. The De Porres Club pioneered techniques that later became famous in the South. A dozen years before a quartet of students refused to move from a Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, N.C., resulting in the coining of the term, "sit-in," Holland and others were employing the same strategy in Omaha. Four years before the Montgomery, Ala., bus boycott, the Club launched a similar campaign against the Omaha and Council Bluffs Street Railway Company.

Reading the minutes of the organization, it's amazing what they accomplished and even more amazing what they attempted. They followed up on complaints about unjust treatment, initiated contacts with businesses that wouldn't hire minorities, distributed literature, gave talks, wrote letters to the media, marched in protest, confronted authorities. When attempts were made to integrate the closed ranks of taxicab drivers, they rode cabs all day, persuad-

ing the cabbies. They called to task schools that staged minstrel shows in blackface. When member Bertha Calloway, now director of the Great Plains Black Museum, was denied

The De Porres Club pioneered techniques of fighting segregation that became famous in the South a decade later

admission to a skating rink, they came down hard on the owners. Segregated swimming pools were targeted, and barbershops in the Creighton area that wouldn't cut the hair of black students. When a black couple moved into a hostile white neighborhood, De Porres members stood watch in front of the home. They staged plays and promoted lectures with themes of racial justice.

As a regular practice, a mixed group from the Club selected restaurants to visit to test their policies on serving minorities. Most major eating establishments opposed seating blacks. "It's bad for business to serve colored people," argued many owners. Members wrote to these offenders, reminding them of local statutes against discriminating, called on them in person, and sometimes began legal proceedings.

Hotels were similarly investigated.

"This was a real problem," says Tessie Edwards. "One reason black people tried to get a large house is because, when relatives or friends came to visit, you had to have room for them. They weren't welcome in our hotels. And then there was always the problem of where you could eat."

Even touring road companies experienced discrimination. Black members of the cast of *Kiss Me, Kate* were refused service. Typically, higher prices were quoted to black people to discourage patronage. De Porres exposed this tactic. A black Club member would phone a certain hotel and be told there was only one room left, at \$18, a high price at the time. Shortly thereafter a white member would call and be offered a \$5 room. This two-person attack might also be made in person. Eventually, hotels and restaurants were informed by their parent associations that they must abide by the law. De Porres and their allies, organizations like the Urban League, scored another victory.

The Club took on companies, large and small, that practiced unfair hiring policies.

When the Coca Cola plant adjacent to the Near North Side, refused to hire black drivers, claiming it was "not good business to employ Negroes in positions where they could come in frequent contact with the public," Creighton students and other Club members visited and revisited management, wrote myriad letters, encouraged ministers in the area to



would become another of WWII's top generals, stands 14th from right. Other well-known classmates (not on the Army team) were Generals Van Fleet, Stratemeyer, and McNarney. The West Point class was known at the "Class the stars fell on," for the number of four- and five-star generals it produced. They saw action in two world wars.

preach against this restrictive policy, contacted Coca Cola customers, and finally picketed the firm. Although the soft drink bottlers stated their business was not affected, they admitted they couldn't afford the negative public relations, so they capitulated and accepted black applicants.

Reed's Ice Cream Company, also headquartered on 30th Street, had a similar record of discriminatory hiring practices. It took a year of picketing, sermons from area pulpits, distribution of leaflets and other techniques to reverse the situation. Help came from other organizations and from many sections of Omaha. Black customers ceased their visits to Reed's stores. Ice cream sales plummeted, and the company scrapped its policy.

A tougher assignment was the Street Railway System.

Says Tessie Edwards, "I heard people say that, if you allowed blacks to drive buses, any woman riding alone would be in danger of rape."

This was an era, remember, when white passengers rarely rode north of Cuming Street.

The campaign took years. De Porres staged rallies; posted cards to citizens throughout Omaha,

asking them not to ride the bus; and asked people who did ride to pay their 18 cents fare in pennies as a form of protest. They picketed and they picketed. Mildred Brown appeared before the mayor and council, arguing:

"If our boys can drive jeeps, tanks and jet planes in Korea, in the fight to save democracy, make democracy work at home. Make it work in Omaha. I say to you, your honor, the mayor, if the tram company will not hire Negroes as drivers, we prevail on you to remove the franchise of the bus company."

Pressured on all sides and threatened with the loss of their franchise, the Street Railway System surrendered and agreed to add black drivers.

Club members also visited school principals and pastors. It hurts to admit, as Denny Holland claims, that much of the criticism against the Club came from Catholics. "Sunday," said one observer, "was the most segregated day of the week." Some pastors ordered De Porres members out of their rectories and told them they would decide who is a member of the parish and who isn't. One black Catholic was told in the confessional not to come back. Other pastors protested that these minori-

Fr. Markoe in his traditional priest's robes.



ties already had a church to attend, St. Benedict's, at 25th and Grant streets.

Started in 1919 at the request of a small group of black Catholics, St. Benedict's began as a mission church administered by Jesuits. Fr. John Killoren, S.J., became pastor in 1948 and remained there until 1970.



John Killoren, S.J.

Dr. Jack Angus, recently retired from Creighton's department of sociology and currently writing a book on St. Benedict's, says that many veteran parishioners think

of Fr. Killoren's tenure as the high point in the church's history. Still, there were some who decried the notion of a church for black Catholics and leveled the charge of paternalism. They saw St. Benedict's as an excuse by some parishes to refuse membership to blacks living within their boundaries.

"But Fr. Killoren clearly had a vision of his own," says Angus. "He worked quietly but effectively. He may not have been a revolutionary, but neither was he an evolutionary. He didn't accept the system and worked to reform it."

Less charismatic than Markoe, Killoren focused on developing young leadership, providing recreational opportunities, instituting a job placement center, integrating more African-American aspects into the liturgy.

Joyce Goodwin was a member of the



Fr. Markoe (in straw hat) leads a march in Omaha late in his life in the 1960s.

St. Benedict's Youth Club.

"For the black community of the time," she says, "this was the focal point of our social lives. It was a strong motivating force in our lives, with lasting effects. Most definitely."

Mrs. Goodwin, while looking back on those years with affection for the fun they had and the leadership they learned, also reflects soberly on the negatives.

"I think of the many great minds spent litigating about civil rights," she states, "when they might have been pursuing careers in science or the arts. But at least we had some support in developing our self esteem. Youth today doesn't value life as much as we did."

Fr. Killoren, who ministered to the Arapaho and Shoshoni in Wyoming after his St. Benedict's pastorate, also worries about the direction young people are taking today.

"There doesn't seem to be the same family structure and support we experienced," he says.

Now chaplain to a senior citizen facility in St. Louis, and author of a recent book of Jesuit missionary Fr. Peter De Smet, Killoren realizes his approach was different from that of Fr. Markoe. He admits that his Jesuit counterpart played a major role in opening doors and breaking down barriers.

"But you must be able to stay inside once the doors are opened," he says. "We can't count on good will alone."

Through Fr. Killoren's efforts, stu-

dents from St. Benedict's were able to attend other Catholic high schools, and he had the ear of the Archbishop on other parochial matters. He built a sports complex at the parish and legislated for more lighting here and in other parks.

"We worked across religious lines," he adds. "A great number of our kids were not Catholic. But their parents were good. They never complained about any undue influence exerted by us."

Once when Fr. Robert Hupp, then in charge of CYO teams, encouraged Killoren to field a basketball team, the St. Benedict's pastor explained that a majority of his players were not baptized Catholic.

"Jack," said Fr. Hupp, in accepting the team, "haven't you ever heard of Baptism of Desire?"

In 1953, Fr. Killoren managed to get parish boundaries set, taking St. Benedict's out of the mission church category and adding white members of the congregation...many of them Creighton students living in public housing.

Claiming that you must combine realism with idealism, Killoren was never insensitive to the pain suffered by his constituents.

"We can never appreciate how much hatred and suffering was packed into what we now refer to as the 'N' word," he says with sadness.

Today, by any standard of measurement, the young people who came out of Fr. Jack's multi-faceted program are the leaders in black society, here

and elsewhere.

While Fr. Killoren was working his low profile magic, Fr. Markoe was making his presence felt in board rooms and council chambers. There is no doubt that he drove the De Porres Club members to achievements they never would have essayed. He reminded listeners that there was only one race, the human race. He encouraged, cajoled and shamed members into action. In his talks at meetings, he mixed philosophy and religion with tactics. He seemed to be everywhere, berating public officials and embracing young black children, carrying placards and ministering to the poor.

For members of the Club, it wasn't all picketing and protesting. They staged events to raise funds, had their own dances and picnics. They painted houses for indigent families and stuffed acres of envelopes. They worried about funding, with their treasury balance normally below \$100, and they pressed others into the struggle.

There was progress, but the larger issues seem to diminish by millimeters. The Club minutes reveal how frustrating this mission must have been, with phone calls and letters unanswered, and misdirection common. Management blamed the unions for hiring deficiencies, educators faulted the qualifications of black candidates, and service industries transferred guilt to their intolerant customers. Still, the Club persisted, even as its active years were numbered.

Other vignettes surface from that era.

Frs. Reinert, Miller and I sponsored Dr. Claude Organ, chairman of Creighton's surgery department, for membership in a prestigious Catholic society, one that goes nameless only because it is unfair to single out one culprit among the many offenders. Organ was rejected, and we three sponsors resigned in protest. The final irony came when the white janitor who cleaned Dr. Organ's office commiserated with the nationally-prominent physician. "I voted for you," he apologized.

Fr. Miller arrived one morning at Union Station after an all-night train ride. He was tired and just wanted to get to Creighton and his bed. A cab driver who had bypassed a waiting black fami-



ly, one ahead of Miller, opened the door of his cab. Miller considered for a moment his own exhausted state and reflected that his actions weren't going to solve the racial problems of the United States. Then he stopped and reconsidered, realizing this largely invisible decision was important. He reminded the driver of the law on discriminating in fares and insisted he take the others first.

Once, on the occasion of my black secretary's birthday, several of us went to lunch at the Omaha Athletic Club. I was naive, not crusading. Except for our group, there were no black diners. The waiters, all African-Americans, served us in what seemed like five minutes. How humiliating this must have been for them.

When Tessie Edwards, her sister and her mother, moved to a white neighborhood, petitions were circulated to keep them out. But Rabbi Sidney Brooks and Susie Buffett, wife of the famed investor, kept vigil with the Edwards, night after night. Fr. Reinert also lent his support.

These were small blips on a dark screen, while the De Porres Club patiently soldiered on. Now they addressed the public school situation.

There were no black teachers in Omaha's public high schools and the three dozen black teachers at lower

*It's a different world now,
but far from perfect.
"I still get some strange
looks at the Handshake
of Peace," says
Tessie Edwards.*

levels were confined to five elementary schools on the Near North Side. Many of them served an apprenticeship in clerical or janitorial posts before being allowed to teach. Club members trying to change this racist policy met with evasive answers or closed doors. Even picketing Joslyn Castle proved futile. Not until a change in administration

did reform occur.

By this time the De Porres Club was in decline. Members left town or joined the service and the ranks were thinned. When Fr. Markoe died, it took the heart out of the movement.

Denny Holland was still in the trenches, although he had agonized about his family's move from Omaha's ghetto. Fr. Markoe had assured him, "Wherever you go, Denny, that neighborhood will be integrated." With Tessie Edwards, who had also moved "where the neighbors were very nice," Holland currently works on a committee funding scholarships for black students to attend Catholic high schools. Bert Calloway struggles to keep open the doors of the Great Plains Black Museum, seeking to preserve a heritage largely hidden. Fr. Jack Killoren generates the same enthusiasm now for his new apostolate among the elderly.

It's a different world now, but far from a perfect world.

"I still get some strange looks at the Handshake of Peace," comments Tessie Edwards.

Discrimination in housing and unemployment is more subtle, but just as destructive. The gains we've made as a society have not been allocated evenly. It took the violence of the mid '60s to shake us into some sense of responsibility. And, despite all the obvious improvement, few of us have learned how to associate with people of another race on a comfortable, casual basis.

Years ago, Irv Poindexter, a black member of the De Porres Club, said to me, "Bob, how come every time I talk to a white man, we have to discuss sports or civil rights? I watch television, read books, see movies. I have problems raising a family. Some mornings my car won't start. Why can't we talk about these things?"

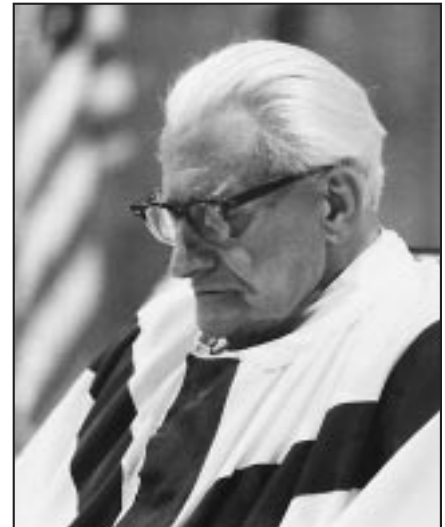
He's right. We should be able to do this. And we must thank God for people like Irv and Denny and Tessie and others who instruct us. We owe them a great deal.

Not long before he died, Fr. John Markoe asked me to come to his room in the Jesuit cloister. I was surprised at the spartan character of his quarters. There

was no bed, just a rocking chair in which he slept. His only furniture consisted of that rocker, a desk nearly devoid of papers, a desk chair and a few cardboard cartons stuffed with books and folders.

"When I go," he explained, "it won't take 10 minutes to clear up my effects."

He said he wanted to give me some-



Fr. Markoe, late in life.

thing of his in return for the things I had done for him. I couldn't think of anything I had ever done for this man. All I ever felt was guilt for not doing more. He insisted that I choose one of his possessions. So I opted for a copy of that great black and white photo John Howard Griffin took of him, a portrait that captures all of the compassion, all of the fire, all of the no-surrender determination. He gave it to me.

Then he said something I have puzzled over since.

"You know, Bob," he predicted, "the black man in America will save the white man's soul."

Did he mean we would learn from the sufferings of our less privileged citizens and move away from our own focus on materialism? Did he refer to the tenacity of black Catholics who persevered in their faith when they had every reason not to do so?

Or did he mean that we would one day realize what we have done as a people, as a nation, to men and women of a different color? And in that realization, we shall redeem ourselves?

I hope he meant that. **W**