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THE N.A.A.C.P. AND THE VIRGIN MARY

by Thomas Strobhar

The birth of Jesus may be the best-known story in history. For some, it is only a story, touching in its simplicity but not to be taken seriously. For two billion others, it is the literal truth. There has been much commentary about it, but few have questioned the basic outline. The story, as told, is of Mary and Joseph on their way to Bethlehem and their being forced to sleep in a stable because there was no room at the inn. Jesus was born, and the rest, as they say, is history.

It is of some interest, then, when a new version of the blessed event is offered. The revised version came not from some obscure scholar, but from Kwesei Mfume (pronounced em-foo-may), who at the time was serving as president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). In June 2004, Mfume went to the campus of Catholic University to lecture them on what it means to be racist. He felt their decision to bar a chapter of the NAACP from their campus was ample evidence for the charge.

Regarding the birth of Christ, Mfume offered the following:

If it was wrong 2000 years ago to discriminate against the Virgin Mary because the inn keeper didn't like what he thought was her philosophy thereby banning her from checking into the hotel and forcing her to sleep and give birth in a manger. Then it is just as wrong 2000 years later for the inn keepers at Catholic University to ban a student chapter of the NAACP because of what they think is it's [sic] philosophy and then force it into a modern manger through the use of intolerance and discriminatory treatment.

Thus, according to Mfume, a room was refused at the "hotel" not because of a lack of rooms, but because of a discussion about philosophical beliefs between Mary and the innkeeper. Also, according to the president of the NAACP, the child was not just placed in a manger after He was born, but Mary was forced to sleep and give birth in the same manger!

Mfume's biblical account has never before been rendered on the planet. Mary is best known for what she did not say, but perhaps Mfume has some divine in

sight. When a real biblical scholar was asked about the possibility of a discussion of philosophical beliefs between Mary and the innkeeper, Fr. Thomas Thompson, director of the Marian Library at the University of Dayton (Ohio) and an acknowledged expert on Mary, called Kwesei Mfume's account "purely imaginary." According to Fr. Thompson, "There is no basis at all for believing there was a discussion of Mary's philosophical beliefs." After learning the full context of Mfume's remarks, Fr. Thompson referred to them "a cheap swipe."

In a written copy of Mfume's remarks provided by the NAACP, he offers sentences such as this: "Jim Crow Sr. is dead - but at Catholic University Jim Crow jr - Is alive and well." And, Mfume says, "Neither Archbishop McCarrick, the College of Cardinals nor the Pope himself should be caught guilty of the crime of silence on the matter of racial discrimination at Catholic University." Wow! (The full text of this speech is available at www.fightpp.org—scroll to the bottom of the page.)

Mfume was present when actor/comedian Bill Cosby suggested that African-Americans needed to improve their English skills in order to succeed. According to the *Washington Post*, Mfume was "stone-faced" when he heard Cosby's remarks. Obviously, less than perfect grammar hasn't kept Mfume from getting elected to Congress and rising to the top of the nation's oldest civil rights organization. Senator Joseph Lieberman, D-Conn., has even suggested Mfume would make a good Supreme Court justice. In the meantime, Mfume is running for the United States Senate to replacing the retiring Paul Sarbanes (D-Maryland)—a race he is widely expected to win.

The NAACP (where, as Mfume said in his statement, they "believe that colored people come in all colors") has annual revenues in excess of \$35 million. Mfume, presumably, could have availed himself of someone else in his organization to assist him with his shortcomings. Of course, be it English or history, one must

first recognize one's deficiencies before one asks for help.

If one has the nerve to distort the best-known story in history, it is a much easier accomplishment to rewrite the history of the NAACP. This time, Mfume was joined by Julian Bond, chairman of the NAACP Board of Directors, as well as its other members who had unanimously approved the following resolution: "A woman denied the right to control her own body is denied equal protection of the law, a right the NAACP has fought for and defended for nearly 100 years."

While the civil rights struggle arguably was about a broad range of rights (the right to vote, to public accommodation, to fair housing, and so forth), few civil rights veterans knew it had anything to do with abortion. As political columnist Joseph Sobran once said, "Forty years ago abortion and homosexuality weren't issues, they were unmentionables." To suggest the NAACP was fighting for this right not just 40 years ago, but almost 100 years ago, is ludicrous. It is also insulting to the efforts of countless numbers of people, many of them priests and nuns, who fought for civil rights and are unreservedly pro-life.

This odd historical view of the confluence between civil rights and abortion led to an NAACP press release in February 2004 that was headed, "NAACP Board Takes Historical Pro-Choice Position." It was this press release that convinced Catholic University to keep the NAACP from establishing a chapter on campus. Oddly, the press release has been removed from the NAACP website and no one at the NAACP communications office can find a hard copy of it. But history is not that easily erased.

The University's decision led to charges of racism, but Mfume failed to mention the educational institution's concerns about the NAACP's stand on abortion in his speech on campus. Would he be upset if Catholic University approved an organization that had a policy leaving the question of slavery to individual choice?

Mfume says the NAACP is officially neutral on abortion. When he was reminded of the February press release announcing the unanimously passed resolution of NAACP's board, he claimed it did not reflect the group's official policy. Why? The full membership did not vote on it. Say what? If this were true, why was a statement released to the press? Who would have known there was a difference between a decision of the Board of Directors and the entire membership? The sudden distinction was certainly not made in the press release.

When two groups sought an actual vote on the subject of abortion from the full NAACP membership at the recent convention, they were denied. One resolution brought by an affiliate from Macon, Georgia, was disallowed because the chapter had supposedly not filed a financial statement.

Another resolution calling for neutrality on abortion was spearheaded by Dayton (Ohio) Black Americans for Life. It was rejected as unnecessary because, they were told, the NAACP was already neutral. There was no talk about voter suppression or "just count the votes" as there was by NAACP officials in Florida in 2000.

One would surely wonder how the NAACP could have a neutral position if there has never been a vote? And does not a decision by the board of directors carry both moral and legal weight? Is not taking a position, as they clearly did in the February news release, the same as taking a side?

Do not ask Mfume; history is what he says it is. The Virgin Mary talked to the innkeeper about her philosophy, the NAACP has been fighting for "a woman's right to control her own body" for almost 100 years, and the NAACP is officially neutral when it comes to abortion. It is an Orwellian world where real history is denied or distorted. Those who disagree are maligned as racists.

The philosopher George Santayana once said, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Mfume, Julian Bond and the rest of the Board of the NAACP should simply be loudly denounced. The NAACP can rightfully claim many proud moments in its long history. Unfortunately, however, it can no longer be trusted to tell people about the history of the group without rewriting it.

Unfortunately, Mfume's charges of "bigotry, prejudice and intolerance" had their desired effect. After "dialoging" with the NAACP and, of course, meeting with students, Rev. David O'Connell, C.M., president of Catholic University, announced that he would allow a chapter of the NAACP to form on campus. Mfume still claims the NAACP has no official stand on abortion and charges that the University has misinterpreted the NAACP's position.

Mfume got what he wanted. Catholic University avoided a threatened lawsuit and placated a small number of students. No apology for insulting Catholic University, the Pope and others was given or requested.

The Virgin Mary did not speak to the innkeeper. She also did not speak to Rev. O'Connel. If the Virgin Mary had spoken with Rev. O'Connel, she may have reminded him that groups which smear the University, the Catholic faith, distort the truth, and bully the people of God should be forever unwelcome on campus.

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