

Stephen Eckert's Apostolate in the Early 1900's

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Capuchin Friar Worked Among the Poor in Milwaukee, Wisconsin USA

A short tribute on the grave of Fr. Stephen Eckert in the Capuchins' Church of St. Benedict the Moor, Milwaukee, sums up his life as a tireless apostle: "The apostle and champion of the colored race".

His name is missing on the tombstone. It is as though this poor Capuchin from Ontario, Canada, born on 28 April 1869 into a family of emigrants from Bavaria, were the only apostle to African Americans.

His family fostered and encouraged his incipient sympathy for religious life which took him first to St. Jerome's (today Kitchener) College in Berlin, Ontario, run by the Resurrectionists and later run by the Capuchins, religious of whom his parents often spoke, recalling the holiness of Bro. Corrado of Parzham whom they had met at Altötting, Germany. When he was 21 years old, Stephen asked to have a trial experience at the Capuchin Friary in Detroit, Michigan. He returned a year later to become an exemplary and admirable novice, with only one disappointment: the absence of any kind of sport. This was a great sacrifice for someone who, like him, had been the bulwark of the team on which he had played as a boy, even to the point of earning the epithet "an engine impossible to oppose".

However, he naturally overcame this hardship and confronted the challenges of study with tenacity, arriving at his ordination to the priesthood on 2 July 1896.

Thereupon he immediately made himself available for any form of apostolate, "because", he wrote to his Superior, "it is better out of obedience to gather leaves that have fallen from a tree than to be involved in important enterprises or lofty tasks".

He was taken at his word and sent to fill in as friaries were gradually opened in the Province — at New York, Cernwell Heights, Fond du Lac — where he devoted himself above all to catechesis for children and assistance to the sick, regretting the aloof and cold attitude of these souls whom he would have liked to warm with his words.

One day he was summoned to the death bed of a young man who had fallen away from the Church. Fr. Stephen, who was busy in a parish of New York where he had been preaching, set out on the long journey late that night and on foot. Having heard the young man's confession, he made his way back as dawn broke. Marvelling at such dedication, the family started once again to go to church.

When he was transferred to Wisconsin, his confreres wrote: "Fr. Stephen worked here with great success and has been loved and respected not only by the parishioners but also by the large number of Protestants who had come into contact with him".

People remembered among other things that when he had been chaplain at St. Anne's Hospital he had managed to have a copy of the New Testament placed in all the wards.

Harvester of souls, man of prayer

One Sister who knew him in that period wrote: "We who have had the good fortune to be personally acquainted with him are proud and happy that our epoch produced such a great reaper of souls. An atmosphere of holiness and warmth surrounded this genuine priest who was wholly dedicated to souls; his presence made them instinctively aware of his profoundly religious nature. He was a man of prayer who tirelessly recommended the importance and need for prayer".

Although he was prepared to work with everyone and for everyone, Fr. Stephen felt a special attraction for African American people, among whom the Protestants, in particular, were already working.

In 1903 he wrote to his Superior: "I humbly ask you for the privilege of devoting my life to missionary work alone, in conformity with God's holy will. I must point out that since last year I have been thinking of going south to work with the Blacks; so if you think that this might redound to the greater glory of God, I would be glad to do so...".

He had to wait eight years. He was sent at last to the mission of St Benedict the Moor, which had recently been given up by the Jesuits who had opened it in 1886. It was located at the heart of the territory inhabited by "Blacks", the term that was in use during Fr. Eckert's time for African Americans.

He managed to adapt one room for himself; he chose a better one for the chapel, convinced that in order to address this cause, the priority was recourse to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, before whom he would spend a large part of the night.

Within two months, Fr. Stephen made contact with 450 people, going from house to house, giving rise to waves of wonder for no one had ever "dared" to do as much. It is needless to say that this wonder became trust, which is why, when it became known that he was to open a school, he was immediately able to gather about 40 children, half of whom lived far away.

He then opened a boarding school since he felt that "one can do more with one year boarding than with five at day school".

He entrusted its direction to the Notre Dame Sisters, recommending that they follow the regulations he had drafted, and certain fundamental details on which he insisted: respect for the individual, the ban of corporal punishment and all coercive means; an insistence on prevention so that the children might be properly introduced to virtue. This virtue was not to be imposed but fostered, cultivated and taught.

Himself a passionate sportsman, Fr. Eckert included in the regulations, as a complement to an integral and harmonious education, various athletic activities and at times even went to the sports ground to teach game techniques and respect for the rules.

He organized a shoe repair shop for the boys and a sewing school for the girls; he opened a nursery school to help working mothers; he set up an employment agency and made a hall available for meetings.

Everyone recognized that he was the first Catholic priest to be totally at the service of "the colored race", as his epitaph confirms, and that he was the most zealous champion of their rights.

An early advocate of human rights

About 30 years before the Declaration of Human Rights he was already affirming that rights existed and that all should be able to enjoy them for the sole reason that they live in the world: the right to life, to freedom, to safety and to fair treatment without discrimination.

Fr. Stephen was unable to resign himself to the idea that they be considered inferior or be excluded from specific responsibilities due to poverty or lack of education. He said so from the pulpit, at conferences, in the pages of journals and he wrote it to his Bishop.

"Blacks are our brethren, for, in common with us, they have the same Father who is in Heaven....

"The greatest help we can give Blacks is to help them raise their children; thousands of parents are unable to do so because of the lack of social institutions for them".

With serene firmness he did his best to make it understood that the Church is not the "White Man's" monopoly but open to all and rejoiced to see them entering her, sure of being welcomed.

"To do something for the Blacks", he would say, "we must first convert the Whites to their cause". For this reason he founded "Committees for race relations" and "Study Circles".

His initiatives met with a success that perhaps even he had not anticipated and there came a point when he needed more room. When the future of his school was threatened, however, Fr. Stephen bowed his head, saying that he was saddened because the education of these children, about whom no one seemed to care, had been jeopardized.

Despite this, he continued to work with the self-same zeal and passion, saying that he was ready "to die for each one of them", because they had a greater need than others for understanding, esteem and affection.

Fr. Stephen was not given the concrete opportunity to die for them since pneumonia, which he had contracted after a demanding preaching session in Britt, forced him to stop his apostolate. He refused to be hospitalized as the doctor suggested and returned to Milwaukee, to the people he served, and whom he wished to greet one by one.

Eventually, he was obliged to be admitted to the hospital, where he died on 16 February 1923, mourned by all the faithful of St. Benedict the Moor.

However, all were comforted by the news that the Diocese was initiating the process of the beatification of "their" apostle and champion. The diocesan process was concluded on 25 June 1959 and presented to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints on 22 April 1977.

Commenting on his resilience in carrying out his apostolate, one of Fr Stephen's confreres wrote: "If you force him onto the roof of a house, he will calmly climb down the other side as though nothing had happened".

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