RELIGION, RACE, AND RIGHTS IN CATHOLIC LOUISIANA, 1938-1970

Abstract

by

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Away from the traditionally understood flashpoints and well-known actors within the civil rights struggle, South Louisiana and its most significant social and religious institution offer an essential case for examining the complex interplay of religion and racial consciousness in the twentieth century south. Tracing the religious sources of progressive activism and conservative reaction in the region, I argue that Catholicism, as both an institution and an ideology, decisively shaped how Louisianans, both African American and white, understood and acted upon the mid-century struggle for human rights. From unionization and voter registration efforts among black Catholic communities in the 1940s to the integration of Catholic institutions and the white backlash that followed, the Catholic experience in Louisiana encapsulated a variety of social and political conflicts. Into these confrontations, Louisiana Catholics wove intense religious struggles over the nature of religious authority, spiritual fulfillment, and social liberation. A close study of their experience reveals in important ways both the complexity and the intensity of the larger struggle over the meaning of race in twentieth century America.
For Louis A. “Doc” Poché, S.J.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This dissertation examines Catholic encounters with the dramatic social and economic changes taking place in Louisiana between the high point of Jim Crow and the end of the 1960s. Catholicism, as both an institution and an ideology of popular beliefs, rituals, and social values, decisively shaped how Louisianans, both African American and white, understood and acted upon the dramatic social and economic changes taking place around them. In the early 1900s, rising white hostility to African Americans and the legal and economic barriers of Jim Crow prompted official church actions to create a separate Catholic world for blacks in the shadows of a growing white church. In response to white pressures and driven by its own paternalistic concern for its “failed mission” in the years after the Civil War, the institutional church created schools and churches staffed by outside missionaries to serve the “Negro Apostolate” in the Deep South. While such official actions alienated blacks from the mainstream of Catholic life in Louisiana, African Americans nonetheless forged within this separate space a distinctive social and religious community through which they would make sense of the larger social struggle throughout the early twentieth century.

These communities also provided significant—if often limited—foundations for black challenges to white dominance in the region. By the 1940s, the increasingly concerted activities of African American Louisianans in both social and religious spheres
converged with the efforts of white Catholic social reformers who envisioned the post-war south as an ideal proving ground for Catholic social teaching on labor, industry, and social reconstruction. The incongruities between this Catholic vision of social order and the spiritual and social aspirations of black southerners created an uneasy alliance. Nonetheless, by bringing the church’s historic commitment to organized labor into the world of black sharecroppers and tenant farmers, this alliance also yielded significant moments of class-conscious solidarity. By the 1950s, as many American liberals shifted attention from the earlier New Deal vision of economic injustice to the specific issue of racial segregation, Catholic social reformers hoped to carry the church’s teaching on Christian unity and social order into an effective movement for interracial justice. From the beginning of the decade until 1956, when Archbishop Joseph Francis Rummel declared segregation “morally wrong and sinful,” Catholic interracialists emphasized the moral conversion of southern whites as the key to the southern race problem. In the process, they framed black southern protest within a distinctive Catholic theological worldview that emphasized the teaching authority of the church and its timeless vision of justice. Such a framework both limited and enhanced Catholic commitment to the larger civil rights struggle.

In the second half of the 1950s, segregationists effectively undermined the Catholic interracial campaign. As one of the first private movements against school integration after the 1954 Brown v. Board decision, the mobilization of people in the pews constituted the backbone of massive resistance in the region. Reflecting the priorities of segregationist leaders throughout the south who projected an image of respectability and patriotism amid black challenges to the “southern way of life,”
Catholic segregationists in Louisiana legitimized their movement by creating a viable theological space within Catholic teaching for segregationist attitudes. By employing the assistance of many priests and demonstrating their devotion to the “One True Church,” they cast the ideas and motives of Catholic interracial leadership, especially those of Archbishop Rummel, as a radical departure from Catholic doctrine. This grassroots movement effectively delayed integration through the end of the decade. Had Catholic schools integrated four years earlier as originally intended, many progressives argued, New Orleans might have offered a symbol of racial justice in the Deep South. But the 1960 New Orleans School Crisis, involving the entry of four black children into two formerly all-white public schools, epitomized the church’s failure to act decisively in the years following Brown.

It also dramatically complicated black Catholic self-understanding at mid-century. Throughout the end of the 1950s, as the church delayed integration and whites in both the pews and the state-house forced interracialists underground, black laity who had endured decades of religious and social segregation began to question not only the church’s moral authority and resolve in effecting significant social change, but also their own. Through the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Greensboro Sit-ins, and other protest efforts, African American southerners began mounting more concerted and forceful challenges to Jim Crow. As they did so, black Catholics in Louisiana struggled to define their place within both the Catholic Church and the larger black struggle. Responding to this disillusionment, and to pressures from national Catholic interracial organizations, a group of prominent laity in New Orleans stepped in to promote Catholic school integration. In contrast to the earlier movement, concerned as much with asserting church’s unique
theological stake in the civil rights drama, this new movement sought practical solutions in implementing integration on the local level. Their efforts, among other things, demonstrated the emergence of lay leadership at a time when the issue was at the center of the Vatican’s efforts to reorient the church to the spiritual and social struggles of the modern world.

Despite their successes, racial reconciliation proved a much more limited, halting, and frustrating process. Throughout the decade, whites continued to ensure that school integration would take place under difficult circumstances and with minimal effect upon larger social and economic inequalities. This climate of resistance seen in both the larger political climate and within the intimate setting of parish meetings severely challenged Catholic leadership at the very moment the nature and function of traditional social and political institutions had come into question. In response to the inequalities associated with the implementation of integration—the closure of black schools in favor of white ones most especially—many African Americans defended black Catholic facilities that had sustained their communities through decades of oppression. Inspired by Vatican II and movements for a more self-possessing black consciousness in the late 1960s, African Americans challenged the church to develop a more authentic Catholicism forged by and responsive to their unique historical experience.

On the local parish level, the conflicts, anxieties, and racial resentments between black and white Catholics over the previous decades fed into significant conflicts over the nature of Catholic identity in the 1960s. As black Catholics continued to carve a distinctive social and theological space within the post-Vatican II church, many white Catholics, meanwhile, read the liturgical and ecclesiastical changes of the period as
symptomatic of a larger antinomian spirit of the 1960s. Anti-war protests, the civil rights movement, and urban disorders throughout the country attacked southern values and belief systems. Whites responded with rising grassroots conservative campaigns aimed at removing the explicit racism of earlier movements but with the goal of upholding a southern system of social order. Reflecting larger social and political trends among whites in the 1960s, these Catholics bought in to a rising grassroots conservatism bolstered by white movement from urban centers to suburbs. In the midst of these polarizing social and political forces, priests and women religious struggled to re-negotiate their own role in the church. The challenges they faced in translating the changes of Vatican II to the local parish inflected the Deep South’s racially charged climate in the post-integration era. By the end of the decade, the social movements religious struggles throughout the twentieth century created a mixed legacy for the Catholic Church that continues to be felt today throughout the region.

Within this broad narrative, a critical examination of the complex interplay between religion, social politics, and racial consciousness in Catholic Louisiana both deepens and challenges our understanding of the life and death of the Jim Crow South in several ways. Each builds upon my larger argument that a thorough examination of the most significant social and religious institution in a state that has remained on the margins of civil rights historiography offers a chance at a more integrated narrative of the meanings, motives, conflicts, triumphs, and tragedies of the civil rights era.

First, this dissertation illuminates the day-to-day world of the Jim Crow south and the civil rights movement. Drawing from historians like John Dittmer and the sociologist
Aldon Morris, I argue that for all of our attention to the major flashpoints, prominent institutions, and well-known actors involved in the civil rights struggle, we often overlook the ways these dramatic moments of racial oppression and empowerment, and the leaders that emerged from them, developed from the daily struggles of local communities to develop a sense of place and purpose in their lives. Indeed, A.P. Tureaud remains one of the most well known civil rights figures in Louisiana. Not big on speeches or major movements, however, the majority of his successes and struggles could be found in his daily work securing insurance compensation for the poor, meticulously documenting complaints against local sheriffs and voter registrars, and using the Catholic fraternal organization, the Knights of Peter Claver, and local parishes to effect voter registration campaigns and create a more unified and aggressive NAACP. Tureaud seamlessly blended Catholic community development with efforts to unify African American Louisianans across denominational and class lines.¹

Kim Lacy Rogers’ oral history of New Orleans leadership offered a good starting point for my study, but the experiences of earlier community organizers and private citizens who may not have seemed worthy to scholars focused on the 1960s era activism deserve more attention.² Segregated on narrow benches in the rear of churches, African Americans

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² Kim Lacy Rogers, Righteous Lives: Narratives of the New Orleans Civil Rights Movement (New York: NYU Press, 1993). While Rogers focuses primarily upon Civil Rights leadership in New Orleans, another model for my study, Greta De Jong’s, A Different Day: African American Struggles for Justice in Rural Louisiana, 1900-1970 (Chapel Hill, 2002), offered a useful starting point for my study. DeJong places CORE activism in Louisiana within historians’ ongoing conversation on the relationship between early twentieth-century activism and the development of the formal civil rights movement. In the process, she draws upon the Robin D.G. Kelley’s notion of “infrapolitics,” or how daily, private actions often manifested larger political goals. Kelley articulates this idea most clearly in Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class (New York: Free Press, 1994); Adam Fairclough’s Race and Democracy: The
Americans spearheaded efforts to establish faith communities and nurture a more authentic Catholicism in opposition to whites as early as the 1910s and 1920s. Attention to the people in the pews also places within the larger civil rights narrative the drive of a group of high school students in Marrero, Louisiana, in 1959. Tired of being relegated to the benches and moved by larger efforts at integration throughout the region, the teenagers made a dramatic claim to the front pews, only to draw a violent reaction from several white parishioners who severely beat two men, one of who still feels the effects of the trauma to this day. The episode demonstrated not only a breakdown in clerical leadership at both the parish and hierarchical level. It also prefigured a movement by emboldened white segregationists a year later in response to public school integration. The New Orleans School Crisis of 1960 and the breakdown of religious and civic leadership that accompanied it garnered international attention. The racial resentments and anxieties that fueled it could be seen a year earlier in this small parish community.

Second, and related to this first goal of offering a local history of a larger ideological and social movement, my dissertation attempts to correct a significant asymmetry found in both civil rights history and accounts of religious leadership within the movement. In his prescription for the future of civil rights historiography, the historian Charles Eagles notes the absence of extensive study of the civil rights era’s historic “losers.”  

demagogues and politicians. This study examines the private movements and motives of white segregationists, examining the religious elements of their protest and the ways they structured their defense of Jim Crow within a distinctly Catholic social and theological worldview. Historians Paul Harvey, Donald Matthews, and Jane Dailey all examine various facets of what Harvey calls a “folk theology of racial segregation.” Lacking the ability to depose integrationist priests and challenge the hierarchy, Catholic segregationists perhaps strove more adamantly than Protestants in developing a distinct theology of racial difference and social place.

My attempts to account for their actions, combined with my examination of local black laity who selectively appropriated Catholic leadership and ideals toward their own movements, also corrects another significant asymmetry in accounts of Catholic involvement in the movement: an emphasis upon institutional religion. Several scholars, including Adam Fairclough and Bentley Anderson on Catholic Louisiana, offer important accounts of white religious leadership and its place in the civil rights movement. Fairclough’s comprehensive Race and Democracy pays significant attention to the influence of the Catholic Church upon the outcome of the civil rights struggle in Louisiana, particularly the decade-long effort to integrate parochial schools. R. Bentley Anderson’s book, Black, White, and Catholic, meanwhile, illuminates a pivotal moment in the rise and fall of Catholic interracialism in the 1950s. The approach of both scholars is important but limited largely to institutional responses to the larger social conflicts of

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mid-century Louisiana. While Fairclough emphasizes the limitations of Catholic leadership, Anderson perhaps overcompensates for this by highlighting the progressive vision of these students and religious leaders. I would argue that in order to truly understand the Catholic stake and contribution to the civil rights movement, to more effectively integrate Catholic experience into southern history, we must place the Catholic Church’s integration campaign within the larger sweep of Catholic development in twentieth century Louisiana.5

Building upon these institutional approaches, this dissertation casts an analytical eye beyond the official debates over the integration of churches and schools and the identity of the official Catholic Church within the larger civil rights movement. As an institution, the Catholic Church offered an important venue where blacks and whites in Louisiana encountered one another and developed strategies of protest and resistance. But Catholicism as an “–ism,” a polyvalent culture of popular beliefs, rituals, and social values, must also be examined through the various experiences of hierarchy, clergy, laity, black, and white. This dissertation seeks to illuminate the dynamic relationship between religious authority, popular belief, and lived experience among various actors within in the civil rights south. Building on recent scholarship within both religious studies and history that examine the theological underpinnings of the central events and figures of the Civil Rights Movement, I use the Catholic Church to examine what I call a “lived theology” of racial conflict and social change. Into the daily confrontations taking place throughout the civil rights movement, Louisiana Catholics wove intense religious

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struggles over the nature of religious authority, spiritual fulfillment, and social
liberation.  

To be sure, Archbishop Rummel and the men and women religious who led local communities remain prominent in my study. I do not cast aside the institutional history, nor do I downplay the influence of formal theological movements. Both, however, constitute part of a larger cultural history of religious authority. This approach has been undertaken most recently by the historian Leslie Tentler in her work on Catholic culture and the history of the church’s teaching on contraception throughout the twentieth century. Following Tentler, I hope to show how formal religious concepts, particularly Paulistic notions of the Mystical Body of Christ and natural law teachings, played a role in this story. Progressive religious leaders sought to uphold Catholic teaching as the most effective force for a thorough integration of a severely fractured society. But like Tentler, and the historian James Bennett who studies the early years of segregation in Catholic New Orleans, my concern remains with the lived space between doctrine and practice, religious belief and social action.

Catholic Louisiana offers a particularly useful case study for examining the religious meanings that underlay the daily struggles between blacks and whites throughout the black freedom struggle. Even before Hurricane Katrina directed

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8 James B. Bennett, *Religion and the Rise of Jim Crow in New Orleans* (Princeton, 2005). Bennett examines “the intersection and frequent tension between belief and practice.” Bennett argues against white appropriations of theological principles in constructing Jim Crow. This dissertation, particularly Chapter 5, examines more deeply some of the religious ideas that came to fuel white resistance by mid-century.
significant scholarly attention to the racial and economic inequalities of New Orleans, Louisiana had come to occupy a more prominent place in American and civil rights historiography. Indeed for all its cultural differences—indeed because of them—Louisiana demonstrates the social, economic, and racial dynamics of both the twentieth century south and, especially after World War II, the United States as a whole. In the years after the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the Louisiana legislature set the standard for Massive Resistance. The onslaught of laws and regulations designed to suppress the vote, undercut federal authority over schools, and prevent parochial school integration combined with the efforts of regional citizens’ councils and parish (county) authorities to produce one of the most oppressive environments for civil rights activism in the nation. Additionally, the fact that the Deep South’s largest city became a bastion of the Jim Crow South despite its racial and religious heritage says much about the ways white southerners at the turn of the century consciously and forcefully constructed social, moral, and economic boundaries that circumscribed black southern life well into the 1960s. In New Orleans, no less than elsewhere, whites perpetuated Jim Crow through a formal and informal system of laws, customs, rituals, debts, and retributions. The

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10 Of the voluminous literature on Jim Crow as both a legal and social system, see Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: A Culture of Segregation in the South* (Vintage, 1999). Hale illuminates the ways white southerners created a “culture of segregation” by constructing a black “other” in the daily interactions in streets and homes, as well as in modern media. Leon Litwack’s *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (Vintage, 1999) offers a more concrete portrait of black life in the region. Litwack offers important insight into the ways blacks in an era before the formal “Civil Rights Movement” moved within and challenged white dominance.
church in New Orleans emerged as a significant venue for white assertions of dominance, as well as acts of black resistance.

New Orleans’ importance as a historical nexus of racial conflict and religious expression, however, supplemented events in other parts of Louisiana where Catholics either took their cues from or defined themselves against the actions and attitudes of New Orleans Catholics. To be sure, most of this study centers on the Crescent City, where the Catholic Church was most prominent and where reformers focus much of their efforts. But to ignore the communities in rural areas where so many African Americans lived in the 1930s through the 1950s would be to overlook the social and religious backgrounds of many who participated in the urban conflicts of later decades. For a significant portion of African Americans in rural Louisiana, the consequences of racial difference compounded the benighted economics of plantation agriculture to produce the some of the lowest quality of life in the nation. The experiences of priests and women religious working among black communities illuminate the day-to-day world of rural black southerners facing massive dislocation amid the growth of post-war southern industry. As farm consolidation and mechanization forced many blacks to cities in both the north and the south, Louisiana became a land of stark but telling contradictions between the emergence of the Sunbelt prosperity and the plight of black sharecroppers in rural Louisiana. African Americans who left the region carried their religious heritage and memory from rural Louisiana as far as Chicago, Detroit, and Los Angeles. Their impact upon this national migration, and the centrality of sharecropper life to Catholic reformers’ mission merit a consideration of their experiences.
What follows, then, is a series of interwoven stories told thematically and chronologically across the decades from the Great Depression to the major conflicts over integration through the 1960s. Black Catholics and white, clergy and laity, urban and rural, Catholic hierarchy and local parish communities; all interacted within and through Catholic structures and ideologies to make sense of the dramatic social changes taking place around them. The result is an integrated narrative of high politics and grassroots activism, black and white consciousness, and the moral and political sensibilities that shaped them.

In the end it is not a happy story. It is not one of progress or a commitment to a better common understanding of social problems in Louisiana. How could it be? The images and voices that came from New Orleans a year and a half ago in the wake of Hurricane Katrina revealed a community still tragically divided along racial, cultural, and economic lines. But I hope that “Religion, Race, and Rights in Catholic Louisiana” will contribute to our understanding of both the sources of community division as well as the opportunities for unity and renewal. I hope it will reveal to both scholars and popular audiences how religious leadership, beliefs, and practices both shaped and reflected an intimate engagement with the daily struggles over the meaning of race in the twentieth century United States.
CHAPTER 2:
JIM CROW CATHOLICISM

Since its inception in 1895, the National Eucharistic Congress heralded the Catholic Church’s powerful presence on the American landscape. Its 1938 gathering in New Orleans would be no different. Prior to the opening ceremony in October, President Roosevelt sent a letter to Archbishop Joseph Francis Rummell extolling the principles of democracy and freedom that would bring so many faithful to the public celebration of the Holy Eucharist in City Park. At such a moment in history, he declared, “no greater blessing could come to our land today than a revival of the spirit of religion.”¹ For Louisianans in particular, shaken by the Huey Long assassination and the populist leader’s legacy of corruption and scandal, the congress’ demonstration of spiritual leadership might offer a much-needed salve. Rummel certainly hoped that the celebration might demonstrate a “unity of faith among Catholics,” transcending the social divisions drawn sharply in previous years. At such moments of social turmoil, he declared in his opening sermon, Christ’s holy presence in the Eucharist joined together “all classes of human society, all states of life, and all ages at the communion rails.”²

¹ Roosevelt to Archbishop Joseph Francis Rummel, 1 October 1938, facsimile printed in The Eighth National Eucharistic Congress, New Orleans, Louisiana, October 17, 18, 19, and 20, 1938 (Marrero, Louisiana: Hope Haven Press, 1941): xix.

Few church celebrations invited as much hope and fear. For the first time in its history, the Eucharistic Congress would grace the heart of Dixie. The Knights of Peter Claver, an African American Catholic fraternal organization, declared that the choice of New Orleans as host city “carries with it greater significance than we are able to understand.” White supremacy forged deep and pervasive social divisions in the Deep South’s largest city, and “to hold such a congress in a city whose ordinances relegated one group to the rear and, in a state which boasts of discriminatory laws, against a group of God’s children,” the church’s effort was “a bold venture.” Indeed, another observer recalled, “To anyone even slightly familiar with the South it seemed almost inevitable that trouble would ensue.”

In the months leading up to the public celebration, meeting planners also sensed its significance for the future of both the Catholic Church and African American southerners. One-third of all black Catholics resided in Louisiana, which also contained one of the highest percentages of African American Catholics in the country. Repressive city ordinances and general white hostility both within the church walls and beyond had created a fear among the Knights that “the Negro will be pushed on the side lines again.” White New Orleanians, after all, “regard us as less than step-children…they would be glad if we would move to some remote vicinity outside of the state until they need us.”

African American Catholics hoped to avoid any reaffirmation of their second-class status in both church and society. A successful Congress, they believed, promised a renewal of

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5 *The Claverite*, v. 18, no. 7 (October, 1938): 3.
faith in the Roman Catholic Church, and black Catholics “will be stronger Catholics and
more eager to assist in the spreading of the principles of Catholicity.” In returning this
devotion, “Clergymen of our Church will do well to help us in our struggles toward
economic well being.” Indeed, they hoped, the church would set a course toward a new
day for African American Southerners.

A congress that challenged the laws and social customs circumscribing black life in the south would certainly mark a significant departure for a church that counted Jim
Crow among the faithful in Louisiana. From the end of the Civil War through the rise of
legal segregation in southern society at large, white assertions of racial superiority
dramatically shaped the Catholic Church’s policies toward African Americans in
Louisiana by the turn of the century. While local congregations relegated blacks to
benches in the rear of the church, the archdiocese created a system of separate “national”
parishes, enlisting the support of outside missionaries committed to the “Negro
apostolate.” By the 1930s, black Catholics lived, worshiped, prayed, and struggled in the
shadows of a largely white church. But in the years leading up to the 1938 congress, the
growing interest of local Catholic leadership in black needs engendered a cautious
optimism. With the arrival of Archbishop Rummel in 1935, the Knights believed, black
Catholics had “a real and sincere friend, one who has felt deeply and keenly the injustice
and the sting of prejudice perpetuated against our group.” Knights praised the ease with
which he responded to African Americans in New Orleans. Rummel “is much worried

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6 The Claverite 17, no. 1 (October 1938): 3.
7 The Claverite, Vol. 17, no. 7 (October, 1937).
about the Colored side of the matter,” one sister reported from Xavier University.⁸ Even if the prelate had yet to challenge white Catholics on the race question, Rummel’s standing in the community and his experience as a priest in the north made him a fitting advocate. “Whenever a member of the Caucasian race finds an opportunity to defend us, we are instantly set free,” one Knight declared.⁹

Black Catholics insisted that equal treatment at meetings and processions would advance the larger black struggle for justice. Rummel responded by assuring access to every service, including several sectional meetings to address the “special problems” of black Catholics. When the Congress finally arrived in October 1938, it remained true to the prelate’s word. “There was some fear that there might be trouble between the Catholic Colored people and Catholic White,” one sister declared, “but the archbishop handled everything in a masterly manner.” At the children’s mass, black children joined whites in song, black altar boys walked with white altar boys, and “the Colored people had one-tenth of the chairs at the Municipal Stadium where the final Benediction was given.”¹⁰ In many cases, “the Negroes were actually given the edge on most white people,” one journalist insisted. The “colored” section at the stadium sat nearest the altar, an arrangement that even prompted whites to claim the seats before being ordered to vacate. Police also exhibited a general, if unusual, concern for black participants. The

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⁸ Mother M. Agatha to Reverend Mother Katherine Drexel, 12 May 1937, in H30c, Box 3, Folder 3, Archives of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament (SBSA), Bensalem, Pennsylvania.

⁹ Claverite 17, no. 1 (October 1938): 3.

¹⁰ Mother M. Mercedes to Very Reverend Joseph A. Hickey, DD, Thanksgiving Day, 1938, in Box 7, Folder 9, MMM Correspondence (H20A), Archives of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, Bensalem, Pennsylvania (SBSA).
“courtesy and kindness” exhibited by local authorities “stood out prominently in comparison to the treatment of individual policemen to the colored people in the past.”

Xavier University also occupied a prominent place in the Congress. As the nation’s only Catholic institution devoted exclusively to higher education of African Americans, the school drew the praise of many church officials. At a solemn Pontifical Mass celebrated there, several thousand clergy and laity brought white and colored alike together to the Eucharistic table. Sectional meetings on campus praised the church’s commitment to higher education for black Catholics and the achievements of Xavier’s founder, Mother Katharine Drexel and the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. Under her direction, proclaimed Rev. Maurice Sheehy of the Catholic University of America, priests and women religious of Xavier “have erected here the beginning of what may be the most significant Catholic institution of our times.” Like the Knights of Peter Claver, Xavier students and staff had feared discrimination during the congress, promising that they “will be keenly on the watch for any points of discrimination.” But, as with stadium arrangements, city ordinances relaxed for Xavier students, much to the relief of Xavier’s president, Mother M. Mercedes. At a vocal performance in the Roosevelt Hotel, the Xavier choir “stole the show” as it sang Negro spirituals. “It was the first time they had ever entered the hotel through the front door.”

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13 Mother M. Mercedes to Rev. Joseph Kelly, SSJ, 21 March 1938, and Thanksgiving Day, 1938, both in Box 7, Folder 9, Mother M. Mercedes Correspondence (H20A), Archives of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, Bensalem, Pennsylvania (SBSA).
The crucial test for the church and the city came at the conclusion of the Congress with a three-mile procession of the Most Blessed Sacrament through the streets of New Orleans among a parade of the various Holy Name Societies. In the planning process, Rummel struggled with different factions over the issue of integrating the parade. “He says that both sides will have to make concessions,” one sister described the prelate’s efforts to make it “for the honor and glory of God, and not a cause of dissension.” The majority of whites were not disappointed. With the Knights of Columbus forming the vanguard and the Knights of Peter Claver the rear guard, the procession remained segregated. African American parishes marched in their own section at the end. Such an arrangement, one observer noted, “might have been interpreted as efforts to segregate the colored.” Quite the contrary, he argued, black organizations “held the place of honor immediately before the clergy, bishops, and archbishops who preceded the Papal Legate, Cardinal Mundelein, with the Most Blessed Sacrament.” Verifying this privileged place, he added, church officials “broke out in a spontaneous round of wholehearted applause” when the black contingent passed the reviewing stand. Indeed, the procession had demonstrated “marks of special favor and consideration” accorded black Catholics.

It adds another to a long list of achievements by which the Catholic Church has quietly but most effectively pushed back racial prejudice and brought alien people closer together in the bond of a common faith. It was a magnificent public demonstration of what is going on every day where the Catholic Church is in a position to make felt her personal influence, not by revolutionary violence but by Christian fortitude.\footnote{14 M. Agatha to Katherine Drexel, 12 May 1937, H30c, Box 3, Folder 3, SBSA. 15 De Paul, “A Lesson in Race Relations in the South,” 7.}
Clergymen and black Catholics alike hailed the congress as an overwhelming success. For these few days, while the faithful transformed New Orleans into a truly American Catholic city, “our poor colored were enriched with experiences beyond their dreams,” one priest boasted. The Eucharistic Congress proclaimed above all a fundamental Christian unity across all ages, classes, and races. The “kindnesses and considerations” shown black Catholics demonstrated the church’s commitment to this important group. The Knights of Peter Claver echoed many of these attitudes. Referring to the absence of racial discrimination, the fraternal organization declared that “at the insistence of the clergy, the devil himself came pretty near declaring for himself a holiday. In the air above our heads and among the populace there was a very distinct feeling of charity for all.” The opportunity to demonstrate their deep fidelity to the church also “did more for us that we can appreciate at this time. Watch for results henceforth and you will be able to trace the influence back to New Orleans, where our friends saw us in a true light.”

Yet, as many black Catholics knew, the true measure of the congress’ success lay in the years that followed. Through their conflicts both within church walls and without, black Catholics and white, lay and clergy, would define the meaning of Catholic unity within the racially charged atmosphere of the post-World War II South. In worshiping alongside white co-religionists, African Americans had occupied a special place in the congress, but a separate one nonetheless. The “kindnesses and considerations” extended African American Catholics bespoke a deep sense of permanence about the color line. At a speech to Xavier University, Cardinal Mundelein asserted the Eucharistic Congress’

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16 Claverite 18, no. 8 (November, 1938): 2.
significance to the church’s mission among African Americans. “For many years I have felt that the most important mission in the world is among the colored people in the United States.” The mass entry of African Americans into the Catholic Church “should begin right here at the Eucharistic Congress.”

God wants them there; they are His beloved children. They make splendid Catholics. They are docile, obedient, generous and most deeply religious. They become attached to their priests, as do their children to the Sisters that teach them. They love the ceremonies of the Church, and they delight to pour forth their hearts in song to God.17

In committing the church to the spiritual uplift of African American Southerners, Mundelein nonetheless underscored a latent faith held by many white southerners in the Jim Crow South: that blacks not only accepted their place within a “natural” social hierarchy defined by race, but also required it for their own spiritual and social benefit. The congress, then, not only voiced the church’s commitment to African American southerners, but also verified the latter’s place within southern Catholic life.

Historians of U.S. Catholicism in the early twentieth century often speak of the “parallel world” that Catholics guarded, socially separate and ideologically distinct from the mainstream of American thought and life. For immigrant Catholics in the urban north, the Eucharistic Congress celebrated the church’s enduring presence in America. Its central message of human unity before the sacred presence of the Holy Eucharist challenged modern Americans’ dominant ethos of rugged individualism. But the 1938 congress in New Orleans held a different set of meanings for participants and observers.

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It verified white southern belief in a separate religious and social world for black southerners. In order to examine the post-war struggle for the meaning of Catholic unity in post-war Louisiana, it is important to understand this world of Jim Crow Catholicism that shaped black and white Catholic responses to the challenges of the mid-twentieth century south. While white racism created this parallel Catholic community, black Catholics forged it through their persistence and devotion to the church. The latter’s salvific message of spiritual unity and social coherence, combined with limited resources available to black Catholics, offered an important—if often limited—ideological and institutional foundation for black activism.

Baptized into the Jim Crow south by their initial encounters with segregation and discrimination—both within the church and in southern society as a whole—African Americans who remained committed to the church also shaped the encounters and ministries of priests and women religious committed to serving them. Born largely in the north and educated in northern convents and seminaries, these missionaries hoped to create a religious space within the Jim Crow south that won black converts to the Catholic fold by providing resources and educational programs for black southerners. The inner tensions and tangible possibilities associated with these mission efforts in south Louisiana fueled the emergence of black laity and missionaries determined to galvanize the church’s resources for the larger black social struggle in the Deep South. An understanding of the social and religious dynamics of this “parallel” Catholic world is crucial to understanding the lineaments of Jim Crow and the development of Catholic life in the twentieth century south.
In *Trouble in Mind*, Leon Litwack begins with stories of black “baptisms” into the southern world of Jim Crow. At every turn, Litwack describes, young African Americans learned the system of arbitrary boundaries, taboos, and manners that restricted movement, kept larger aspirations in check, and ultimately framed a separate and inferior world for black southerners. In the Catholic Church no less than society at large between the turn of the century and the 1930s, the often-violent consequences of racial difference forged a distinctive black world in the shadows of white society. In the birthplace of *Plessy*, Louisiana Catholics often defined the measure of whiteness within the intimate setting of the liturgy. At a parish in Leonville, Louisiana, for example, several parishioners evicted a “very white colored man” who had approached the altar rail with whites to receive Holy Communion. The priest, an excitable Frenchman, later explained to him, “My dear fellow, you had a good right to go to Communion as anybody there but you were not prudent. You see that it cannot be done.” At another church in Glencoe, Louisiana, a white man attacked a boy for putting his finger in the holy water font before the man’s wife. The following Easter Sunday, another boy brushed past a white woman in a crowded service, inciting another fight outside after Mass. Such situations, one witness told Mother Katharine Drexel, “Could not have been avoided, as there are only three benches and one pew reserved for colored people in that Church.”

For Alexander Pierre Tureaud, the humiliating extension of the south’s racial caste system into the pews promoted a new and striking racial awareness unknown through much of his early childhood. Born in 1899, the future civil rights attorney and

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activist in the NAACP and the Knights of Peter Claver came of age amid ecclesiastical struggles to define the proper place for black Catholics within an increasingly “American” church. In the 7th Ward neighborhood of his youth, Tureaud played in the streets with his Italian, Filipino, and Irish neighbors, often scavenging broken cantaloupes around the French Market and harassing Italian workers “who use to carry these great big baskets on the heads.” Racial antagonisms were always present in New Orleans, but among his friends “there was very little racial abrasion. We used to go in each other’s homes.” Creoles like the Tureauds had grown accustomed to the racial fluidity of New Orleans and the Catholic Church in post-bellum Louisiana. African-French families rented pews at the front of churches and established a worship space with little regard for matters of black and white. But as white hostility grew at the turn of the century, Tureaud and his family eventually found themselves on the margins of a rapidly changing church. “We were in the church but we weren’t really a part of it.” Tureaud’s father soon rejected the segregated church, for “he didn’t feel like, as a Catholic, attending segregated services or participating in these things with the attendant humiliation that came with it—all of which had the sanction of the Archbishop.”

By the turn of the century, white demands for racial separation began significantly shaping the official church’s policy toward African American Catholics. Concerned for the latter’s spiritual well being, the Dutch-born Archbishop Francis Janssens moved to create a separate system of black parishes. But this “national” parish solution did not

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19 A.P. Tureaud interview with Dr. Joseph Logsdon, undated typescript in special collections, University of New Orleans.

immediately take hold. Black and Creole Catholics resisted the creation of St. Katherine’s in 1895. The efforts of the Creole Citizens’ Committee and local black parishioners merely reinforced a larger clerical apathy toward black Catholics. In turn of the century New Orleans, whites still feared “separate” far less than they abhorred “equal.” Whites who feared such forms of racial empowerment especially rejected the establishment of Catholic schools for blacks. In the small town of Arnaudville, the establishment of St. Francis Regis by the Jesuit Fathers and Katharine Drexel in 1893 prompted intense resistance from local whites. On the first day of class, a white supremacy group known as The Regulators galloped around the school cracking whips as the principal, Sister Martina, gathered her twelve students on the front steps. A week later, the vigilantes set fire to the school.21

In New Orleans, where whites largely relied on city ordinance and custom more than vigilantism to enforce black inferiority, diocesan priests marginalized once-prominent black parishioners. Save for the usual rites of passage afforded all Catholics, Tureaud remembered, “there was no special attention given to us and because we were, more or less, in a segregated society we didn’t have any opportunity to make the church a part of our social as well as our religious life.” Under canon law, no Catholic could be barred from parishes, and “I don’t know if we had to go to the church in the parish where we lived, but we did go there even though we worshipped under circumstances that must have been humiliating.”22 Born in 1898, Audley Moore was five when the church began

21 “One Hundred Years on the Upper Teche: Arnaudville, LA 1853-1953,” manuscript in Box 3, Folder 19, Roger Baudier Manuscripts, Archives of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, hereafter cited as Baudier Manuscripts, AANO.

22 A.P. Tureaud interview by Joseph Logsdon, numerous dates, 1968-71, undated typescript in UNO Special Collections.
segregating parishioners. Her mother had a very prominent member of St. Joseph’s at the
turn of the century when she arrived one Sunday to find the silver plaque with her name
removed.

Well, my mother went there only to find a screen up in the back of
the church saying, ‘For Colored Only,’ and she was ushered away
from her pew to the back of the church. I saw my mother cry. I saw
my mother, who had taught me never to show your feeling, I saw
the tears roll down my mother’s cheek, and she stayed in back of
that pew, knelt down. I can remember as though it was yesterday,
you know? Now my spirit was, I’d walk out, but she stayed there.23

The rise of Jim Crow in southern society forced the church’s recommitment to
separate churches and schools. In 1909, the archdiocese carved a second parish, St.
Dominic’s, from the abandoned facility of the relocated Mater Dolorosa Church. Setting
a trend for other parishes to follow, the pastor informed African Americans that they
would remain at the “old church” off the main avenue. Black parishioners abhorred the
“unfortunate bait and switch” that took place. As Joseph Verrett, a future Josephite and
parishioner later recalled, “after enlisting the black parishioners to support the, the new
church, they then, when it was completed said, well, now this would be the church of the
whites, and this St. Dominic’s is all your own…”24 As the hierarchy cast it as a matter of
spiritual survival, black hostility turned to grudging acceptance. Audley Moore’s mother,
who later died in childbirth when Moore was only five, became one of the founders of St.
Catherine’s Church. Garveyism eventually set an ideological course for the younger
Moore. In 1930 she joined the Communist Party. Her mother, however, “was in that

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24 Father Joseph Verrett interview with Jim Bennett, 27 August 1998, typescript in “Father Verrett”
file, Josephite Fathers Archives, Baltimore, Maryland (hereafter cited as JFA).
Roman thing in the first place, and to go and build herself a Roman thing—although it was a black thing…it was the same situation, with a white priest.”

Where separate parishes remained unfeasible, the segregation of races within the Catholic liturgy grew even more systematic. Screens and special markings of “reserved” or “colored” cloistered African Americans in the rear of churches. “You were welcome in any church as long as you knew your place,” said Verrett. After all, in the 1930s and 1940s, “we didn’t go to church, to make a statement or protest.” White demands for congregational separation irritated Katharine Drexel. One man reporting to the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament founder suggested that money be raised for a separate wing for African Americans in the church to “save the colored people from insult.” His own experience prompted the suggestion after his daughter attended Communion next to a black woman. “Would you allow your daughter to go to Holy Communion with that nigger and you do not resent it?” one parishioner protested. The frustrated Drexel refused the request. Even more than separate churches, these “interracial” congregations and the confrontations they created revealed the popular fears, prejudices, and presumptions of southern whites during the rise of Jim Crow in the early twentieth century. In the river town of Convent, northwest of New Orleans, laity fought bitterly with the pastor of St. Michael’s, Father Joseph Dreyer, S.M., “because of his attitude toward the blacks.” When Dreyer sought to integrate church services, parishioners declared him a “menace” and demanded that the provincial of the Marists remove him. “The admirable zeal, the

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26 Verrett interview by Jim Bennett, 27 August 1998.

sincerity and devotion of that man will destroy the good results governing the proper places of people.” While blacks certainly deserved “all religious advantages” accorded them as Christians, spiritual progress, they insisted, would not come “at the price of social equality.”

Black Catholics derived some hope from the handful of religious, like the Marist Dreyer, who refused to advance segregation. Most, however, facilitated the creation of a separate Catholic world for black southerners. With the rise of a native southern clergy less sympathetic to the needs of black Catholics, the “Negro question” fell largely to outside orders of priests and women religious, even further marginalizing black Catholics in the region. The two most prominent of these were the Society of St. Joseph (Josephites) and the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament (SBS). Founded by Katharine Drexel as a direct mission to African American and Native American Catholics, the SBS sisters staffed a number of schools and founded Xavier University in 192-.

While many blacks continued to excoriate the separation of parishes, others identified strongly with the Josephites among the rural plantations and city parishes of New Orleans, Baton Rouge, Lake Charles, and Lafayette. “I cannot tell you how great is my desire that the good Josephite Fathers may always remain with us,” one woman from

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28 Twelve parishioners of St. Michael’s Parish to Father Henri de la Chapelle, S.M., Provincial, in Marist Files, Archives of the Archdiocese of New Orleans (AANO). I am grateful to Father Frank M. Uter, S.M., at St. Michael’s Church in Convent for this reference.

St. Joan of Arc declared. “What they have done for us is simply wonderful.”30 The first Josephite had arrived in Louisiana among the cypress and Spanish moss of Petite Prairie in 1897. It was there where Pierre LeBeau, SSJ, found a chapel converted from an old country store in 1874. Sustained by local black Creoles as a mission of Immaculate Conception Church, the chapel became the first of many Josephite parishes in a mission territory that, by the 1930s, stretched from Southeast Texas into Mississippi. The Knights of Peter Claver entrusted Catholic priests with much of their desire for African American social betterment. Indeed, were it not for a hostile Catholic laity, one Knight declared, “the barriers of prejudice would be immediately let down.” Unfortunately, they lamented, the work of Josephites and others committed to black Catholics had little effect on the majority of white society in Louisiana. “The clergy is powerless and they can only appeal to the magnanimity of the parishioners and point out to them what is the true meaning of religion.”31

Most local priests refused even modest appeals to Catholic unity. The Leonville pastor lamented to Drexel that he could not visit the school for black children, for fear that “the people would be jealous. The Cure that was here before me buried a saintly, old, colored woman near the graves for the whites and blessed it. He had to fly for his life, so you see one must be prudent.”32 Only later would Catholic interracialists excoriate priests who blessed white racism, whether through casual assent or vocal support. Many black Catholics even came to fear some diocesan priests in the early decades of the twentieth

31 The Claverite, Vol. 17, no. 7 (October, 1937).
century. Those who attended Mater Dolorosa Parish in the 1930s knew better than to attend on days the pastor’s blood pressure ran high. Explaining to a Josephite priest the ways the pastor would “take it out on the Joanavarkers,” one black parishioner mimicked him roaring from the pulpit that they should “stick to their own church.”

Yet for many missionaries committed to the African American apostolate in the South, the depth of white prejudice at Catholic services and the refusal of local priests to “scandalize” their white parishioners underscored the permanence of Jim Crow Catholicism in Louisiana. Separate parishes, they concluded, remained the only solution for black Catholics. A Josephite priest explained to one disaffected parishioner that, “God brought good out of evil by the forming of colored congregations in separate churches where every opportunity is given for the practise [sic] of religion.” Nonetheless, African American Catholics in the 1930s continued to resent the presence of both segregated liturgies and separate churches. “Will there be any screens in heaven?” members of St. Peter Claver’s Church in New Orleans protested at a local parish mission. Another who rejected the use of separate facilities explained why he had left the church altogether. The flight of blacks from the church troubled missionaries and black Catholics alike. “We tried to go to the Catholic Church in St. Martinville but they didn’t want us,” one convert recalled years later. “So we joined Baptist. On one Sunday the Baptists baptized over one hundred members who were turned-out Catholics. My grandmother told me that since we couldn’t go to our church and we needed to go to some church, then we had better join

33 Edward F. Murphy, Yankee Priest: An autobiographical journey, with certain detours, from Salem to New Orleans (Garden City, NY, 1952): 189-190.
Baptist.” Efforts to “welcome home” Catholics proved difficult for communities lacking any financial or clerical support.34

Others, however, remained committed to both the church and its ordained messengers. The experience of A.P. Tureaud especially encapsulated the struggles of African American Catholics within the constraints of Jim Crow Catholicism to sanctify both church and society. Frustrated with Catholic New Orleans by the time he reached 17, Tureaud left the Deep South to work as a day laborer in Chicago. On the journey he witnessed first hand the poverty of African American sharecroppers in the rural south. All the way north, black farmers ran after the train “in order to escape peonage and slavery.” Tureaud reflected on his own “middle-class life” in New Orleans. “I knew nothing about the low wages of the unskilled laborer.” Chicago Catholicism also proved a harsh lesson in the consequences of color. Yet if the depth of prejudice among Polish and Irish Catholics in Chicago impressed Tureaud, so too did the militancy of African Americans. “Leadership in New Orleans had been at a standstill. They had no incentive to do anything because it was so frustrating,” he recalled. “In Chicago, they were talking politics.” Tureaud admired the networks that taught newly arrived black migrants to cope with the hardships of labor and segregation while planting seeds of protest. As World War I energized African American politicization throughout the region, blacks “began making those demands as a matter of common decency and life.”35

He eventually moved to Harlem before landing in Washington, D.C., as a librarian for the Department of Justice. After graduating from Howard Law School in


35 Logsdon interview.
1925, the young Tureaud returned to New Orleans and joined the NAACP in 1928. Tureaud inherited the struggles of African American lawyers to establish a place in a legal profession driven by white connections to judges, jury, and civic elites. Even the NAACP and black clients opted for white counsel that more easily navigated the uneven terrain of civil rights litigation. Tureaud practiced law part time while working for the Collector of Customs. He remained there for fifteen years before opportunity finally came with a salary equalization suit on behalf of black teachers in New Orleans. Such a case, Liva Baker notes, involved no usual “hat-in-hand” settlement common in the early days of civil rights litigation. Deep issues of social equality were at stake, and when the local teachers demanded that the Orleans Parish School Board pay on an equal scale, Thurgood Marshall assigned the young attorney to the daily operations of a lawsuit that lasted ten years. The case forged a strong friendship between Tureaud and the national NAACP leader. It also set the young Tureaud on a course to become, by the end of the 1930s, the most prominent—and busiest—African American civil rights lawyer in the Deep South.

Renewing his commitment to the Catholic Church in the region as well, Tureaud helped lay the foundations for future black Catholic activism. His home parish of Corpus Christi was widely celebrated as the flagship African American Catholic parish in the nation. With roughly 8,000 members joining the largely “colored Creole” section of the


7th Ward, the parish packed six Sunday Masses and contributed to African American social life through Rosary and Holy Name Societies as well as youth councils and sporting leagues.\textsuperscript{39} The Society of St. Joseph staffed the parish, which Tureaud credited with developing important social institutions for African American Catholics. In 1917, Josephites began the Knights of Peter Claver in Mobile before moving its major organizational efforts to New Orleans. Serving as the organization’s National Advocate, Tureaud channeled his legal expertise and capacity for tedious paperwork into the operation of the KPC’s insurance program and other social provisions for the betterment of life among poor blacks in the region. The popularity of such programs often frustrated leaders who feared distorting the organization’s real aims. “In the Knights of Peter Claver I have always believed that too many of our members have been interested solely in the fraternal insurance rather than a program of intellectual intercourse.” Others reminded members of the “spiritual insurance” the group provided.\textsuperscript{40}

Tensions among the Knights in the early 1930s turned on issues of organizational identity. Members especially questioned its relationship to the northern-based Federated Colored Catholics. Founded in 1925 by Howard University professor Thomas Wyatt Turner, the FCC promoted black advancement within the church and society through education and participation in the larger black movement for justice. The desire of FCC members to maintain a distinct black identity within the church caused a rift with priests who promoted the idea of Catholic “interracialism.” When the question of the Knights’ support for the FCC and the larger black struggle arose, KPC’s applauded the group for

\textsuperscript{39} Colored Harvest 19:4 (August-September 1931).

\textsuperscript{40} Tureaud to J.H. Clouser, 27 November 1943, Box 3, Folder 26, APT Papers, ARC.
“championing our fight for Social and Economic Justice as a group and is fighting tooth and toenail the demon prejudice among Catholics.” After all, “We would not be worthy of the title of Knight if we did not fight for the weak, for our rights as free men.”41 The two organizations nonetheless represented very different styles of Catholic action. To the FCC’s overt criticism of church discrimination, the Knights of Peter Claver presented an almost sanguine demeanor. In the process of righting its own wrongs the church, Knights insisted, would bring “the Negro to Catholicism, because the Catholic Church offers the only real solution to the race problem.” The KPC’s publication, The Claverite, eschewed “controversial issues” like lynching and discrimination, arguing that “we must be very careful and we, might say, very conservative.”

Of course, we believe organized protest will eventually bring about results. We also believe that our friends, though being a small minority of the body politic, drop a word now and then in our behalf. In fact, while they deplore the condition of other racial minorities, they bring our sufferings before the mirror of public opinion. As far as the clergy is concerned, we know that they work quietly for our well being.42

Over the next ten years, however, the Knights’ commitment to social activism would grow to become a central foundation of their identity. In the 1940s, KPC’s played a crucial role in the reformation of the NAACP. Tureaud remained at the center of this mobilization. A product of his legal training and patient demeanor, the mild-mannered Knight exemplified the ways so many civil rights leaders immersed themselves in the day-to-day brass tacks of social uplift. When complaints arose of discrimination within National Recovery Administration programs, Tureaud pledged to carefully investigate

“all inequalities of pay and working conditions.” Local employers, he complained, “are firing colored workers and hiring white workers at the increased pay.” Tureaud also ensured action on inequitable distribution of farm loans. In 1938, he protested to FDR the removal of 250 black families from the delta region of Transylvania, Louisiana, under a Farm Security Administration relocation program. “It is the belief of the white merchants that this is unnecessary and that the change of location is against the wishes of the colored families who have lived in Transylvania for more than three generations…” The families were eventually dispersed around the region and replaced by white farmers. Both the New Deal and Huey Long’s own version in Louisiana proved of little assistance to black farmers.43

Even if Tureaud was light on prophetic speeches—he often cautioned many colleagues against their impatience—his letters and communications reveal the lawyer’s devotion to broadening the base of black community organization. In unifying black consciousness across rich and poor, Creole and “American Negro,” Tureaud persisted in his “cool-headed manner,” even in potentially hostile situations. Tureaud detested the ways transit companies dubbed black train porters the enforcers of Jim Crow. “No serious thinking Negro laughs at things like that,” he fumed. While boarding a train to Lafayette with several members of the Ladies Auxiliary of the KPC, a porter demanded that the young lawyer ride in the white coach. In protest, Tureaud insisted that “I’m colored so I’ll just sit right here and wait for the four other ladies who are coming behind me.” Another porter stormed off and returned with two policemen demanding that Tureaud

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43 Tureaud to Louis Israel, 2 January 1934, in Box 1, Folder 7; Tureaud to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Box 8, Folder 4, both in A.P. Tureaud Papers, Amistad Research Center (ARC), Tulane University. Fairclough, Race and Democracy, 43-44.
give up his ticket and move to the rear to make room for the overflow of whites. The latter complied, earning a ride in the “colored” coach for the trip. Reflecting on the event, he demanded that Clavers “take action for this uncalled for interference with our civil rights.”

Tureaud and the Knights’ ambition to unify the social and spiritual cause of African Americans built upon the efforts of many black Catholics in the years between the rise of “Jim Crow churches” and World War II. Particularly among the bayous and rural areas of south central and southwest Louisiana, black sharecroppers and tenant farmers gathered faith communities together to sustain their devotion despite clerical neglect. In 1908 in Lake Charles, a group of African American lay men led by a small drug store owner named Louis Adams demanded the church’s attention to the spiritual needs of poor blacks in the region. The Sisters of the Holy Family and local church recommended a black laywoman, Eleanor Figaro, for the task of bringing the area’s black Catholics together. After gathering together “scattered members of the faith” for religious instruction, Figaro opened a one-room school. By the time Katharine Drexel assigned three sisters to the school in 1922, Sacred Heart Parish, run by Holy Ghost Fathers, had emerged as a source of black leadership in the region. In 1944, Harold Perry, the first boy of the parish to become a priest and the future Auxiliary Bishop of New Orleans twenty years later, offered his first Solemn Mass. For her efforts in gathering “the small band of Catholic negroes in and around Lake Charles, Louisiana,” instructing them in religious

44 The Claverite 24: 8 (November 1944): 5.
devotion and “the rectification of invalid marriages,” the Vatican awarded Figaro with the “Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice” Papal Medal.45

Baptized into this world of Jim Crow Catholicism, African Americans persisted in forging local faith communities. In the process they influenced the response of newly arrived priests and women religious to the condition of poor blacks in the region. When the Superior of the Sacred Heart Nuns arrived in the small village of Grand Coteau and asked to see the “leaning man of the colored race,” locals immediately took her to Willie Lawrence, one time Grand Master of the local Knights of Peter Claver. Born in 1874, Lawrence and his family rented a pew in the rear for many years before whites began demanding that he wait for whites and then “go all around church to get in their pew.” African Americans waited in the back after Mass before being allowed to exit after white parishioners, the worst of whom often mistreated his wife and daughters. Half of the parish’s blacks, he explained to the bishop of Lafayette, Jules Jeanmard, were drifting away from the church. Lawrence’s request for a separate church met with opposition from white and black alike. “But he went anyway, and got it,” one local reported. St. Peter Claver soon experienced standing room only at Sunday Masses, “and the communion rail is crowded.” Lawrence spent much of his life working for the Jesuits in the region.46

As blacks forged a distinctive Catholic world in the first half of the twentieth century, they even asserted their superiority over white Catholicism. Liturgies at black parishes, they affirmed, embraced the sounds, rhythms and spirit of Catholicity in ways

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45 Sacred Heart Parish Convent Annals, 1922-1950, SBSA; Louisiana Weekly 8 January 1949.
46 Anonymous to Joseph H. Fichter, S.J., 3 February 1938, in Box 1, Folder 1, Joseph H. Fichter Papers (JHF), Special Collections, Loyola University of New Orleans (Loyola), New Orleans, Louisiana.
that white co-religionists did not. One regular recalled in 1946 their fondness for the life and song in a “Negro parish” that did not infuse the apathetic white parish nearby. The priest at their parish encouraged song, “for you are a part of the Sacrifice; in fact, it is very hard for me to get along without you, for ‘we are all one in Christ.’” They recalled their surprise at attending a mass at a white church. “I thought to myself: ‘It must sound like heaven when so many people sing together.’” But when the priest entered the sanctuary and intoned the Asperges, “the large congregation did not answer him with that mighty peal of heavenly voices I had expected to hear.” Only the choir loft emitted any response.

Everyone was busy telling his or her beads or reading out of a prayerbook. All seemed to be completely indifferent to what was going on between the priest in the sanctuary and the singers in the loft. “Why don’t they sing?” I asked myself. Then I began to wonder if this were really a Catholic Church.\footnote{N.N., “The Story of a Negro Parish,” \textit{Orate-Fratres} 20, no. 8 (June 1946): 370-375.}

In challenging the apathy and misguided hierarchicalism of white churches, black parishes, they affirmed, embodied the Catholic Church’s true spirit of unity, sacrifice, and celebration.

As these experiences suggest, priests and women religious who encountered the social and religious world of the Jim Crow South between 1910 and the 1930s could tap into a rich foundation of African American Catholicism sustained largely by lay initiative and perseverance. Clergymen who analyzed their vast missionary endeavor seldom recognized this spiritual groundwork immediately. Convinced of the Church’s “failed mission” after the Civil War, John T. Gillard, S.S.J., offered paternalistic valuations of black spirituality and morality. The Josephite scholar could readily imagine African
Americans spiritually languishing in the years before the rise of separate churches and schools. His 1930 *The Catholic Church and the American Negro* outlined the challenges that missionaries faced in reclaiming the church’s lost souls throughout the Deep South. African Americans, he noted, had fallen away in significant numbers in the decades following the Civil War. Slavery had weakened the moral fiber of most black southerners, drawing them to the emotionalism of Protestant religion. The church’s efforts to win over this neglected flock from Protestant missioners thus required the formation of separate parishes that “impose responsibility upon the Negro,” calling him “to exercise leadership in various parish organizations.” He called upon missionaries to promote Catholicism’s spiritual discipline among the former slaves. In its emphasis on the “colored question,” the church’s approach to black ministry often ignored the subjectivity of black experience within the economic and social hardships of the Deep South.  

While many communities did suffer from clerical neglect, assessments of the church’s mission to black southerners often undervalued the ways black laity shaped religious communities alongside and through the efforts white missionaries. Black Catholics not only embraced the rhythms of the Church of Rome, but also claimed them as their own. Parish life might remain priest-centered, while prayer, worship and music taught by the sisters in local schools all reflected standard forms displayed throughout the pre-Vatican II era. Black Catholics nonetheless read ideas of redemption, deliverance,

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and sacrament in both spiritual and social terms through a unique sense of shared struggle. From their early encounters with African American laity through their efforts to promote voting and labor rights in the region, missionaries learned to place their own Catholic visions of spiritual ministry within this experience. By the 1930s, many black Catholics would agree with the Josephite Edward F. Murphy’s assessment that “our colored brethren must at times be weary of having everything that concerns them treated as a ‘question.’”

Murphy’s own baptism into the Jim Crow South certainly demonstrates the ways local communities influenced missionaries’ early visions of ministry. Filled with high-minded Catholic ideals nurtured in a northern seminary, the young Murphy exited the train in New Orleans with a copy of Newman’s *Idea of a University* in one hand, ready to assume his role as Xavier professor and pastor of St. Joan of Arc. But the Josephite’s initial introduction exposed the often-tenuous relationship between priest and people. It also revealed the ways “outsiders” like Murphy struggled to fit within a parish and community structure built upon the self-sacrifice of black laity. His first lesson came from Alice Murray. The parish assistant met the priest at the door with a “sharp resentful look,” and a greeting implying “that she had seen pastors come and go and was capable of surviving yet another.” Murphy initially fumed, asserting that he, as the pastor, was “in charge” and that her services were no longer needed. When the outgoing pastor informed him of the numerous duties of his faithful volunteer, Murphy’s tone quickly changed. Over the next several days he learned of the financial burdens placed upon

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49 John T. Gillard, *The Catholic Church and the American Negro* (1930): 68-75; Murphy quote from the *Catholic Action of the South*, 18 March 1933; clipping in David Jackson Collection, Xavier University Special Collections (Xavier).
parishioners and churches alike. “I was downcast and could see myself only as a rank outsider…”50

This initial encounter stood in sharp contrast to parishioners’ “tear-filled testimonials” to the outgoing priest, or to the ways the schoolchildren and parishioners soon embraced Murphy—upon Alice Murray’s insistence.51 In his memoir, Yankee Priest, Murphy’s flair for the dramatic does not obscure the priest’s very real sense of frustration and weakness as he struggled to define his place as an outsider within this black southern world. Within the parish structure alone, he found much at odds with his own ideals of clerical leadership:

Another disturbing factor lay in a tendency of every parish meeting to be two. Under the eye of authority people were normally docile; beyond it, they easily swung into a state of being pretty much themselves. The way I saw it, suppression, as an unremitting condition, had forced them into the habit of conformity with white will; but away from the range of that will, they were inclined to vent the passion for freedom that burns in every man, whatever his complexion.52

African Americans in the Jim Crow South had learned to vent that passion in carefully selected moments, gaining advantage when they could over white southerners. Murphy learned these lessons. The Josephite recalled being “high on emotion in those early days” as he encountered the racism and poverty that faced parishioners on a daily basis. To the outgoing priest, he decried the “injustice” of having two parish housekeepers sharing one salary. He immediately shouted “something about the encyclicals of Leo XIII and Pius XI and a just wage and resolved that I’d raise the wretched sum to at least ten.” He later

50 Murphy, Yankee Priest: An autobiographical journey with certain detours from Salem to New Orleans (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1952): 189.

51 Ibid.: 182-191.

52 Murphy, Yankee Priest: 201.
realized that “Father Neifert’s economics had been less crazy than Christian” in Depression era New Orleans.\textsuperscript{53}

Patterns of race in the Crescent City likewise stunned the idealistic missionary who abhorred “the Dixie dogma that the Negro must be kept in his place.” After learning of the nearby Mater Dolorosa pastor’s occasional outbursts against black parishioners who attended out of convenience, only another lesson from Alice Murray could keep him from upbraiding the pastor. To his surprise, most “Joanavarkers” were quite fond of the truculent priest. Murphy nonetheless resented the pastor’s sense of \textit{noblesse oblige}. The latter gave money to the “colored church” on the side, but continued to insist that, had Cain and Abel lived further apart, “murder might have been averted.” Such kindnesses bespoke a sense of permanence about the color line. “Would the South ever change so long as the \textit{status quo} in race relations continued to be regarded as unchangeable?”\textsuperscript{54}

Murphy assayed the complex tensions among southern communities, and certainly his own place within them. “I sensed the color line, but not so much the tendrils of natural kindliness that crept over it in spite of everything,” he noted. Murray and many black southerners calmly tread a path through this world of manners and obligations. When asked if she grieved over the prejudices and injustices heaped upon African Americans, one responded, “No, Father; not anymore. I useta. Not for my people, so much as for white folks…they’ve got so much to answer for that I pity them, and wouldn’t change places with’m for anything.”\textsuperscript{55} Murphy also sensed the tensions between

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid. 191.

the older generation and the “New Negro” he observed through his years in New Orleans. Their “persistent humility and their look-away-to-the-stars attitude, which is so satisfactory to white superiority and purpose, are denounced as an obstacle to the progress of the group.” Xavier students especially, he noted, decried the “hat-holding, head-bowing, faithful old ‘darky.’” Murphy’s place within this debate was anything but settled. As a priest, he embraced an otherworldly spirit of an older generation. The New Negro mistakenly underestimated the “old fashioned Negro,” Murphy argued. Their forceful passivity did not appease whites as much as “occasioning in them a sense of personal shortcoming.” While applauding this new rights consciousness among black southerners, “let us hope that, with all this well-merited and over-due advancement, he will not forfeit the very sacred something which enabled his forebears…to see the long night sprinkled with a blessing of unearthly light.”

Neither fully immersed within nor completely detached from the daily struggles of his parishioners, Murphy’s early experiences reflected the inner tensions of many Catholic missionaries suddenly facing the social and economic realities of the Deep South. From the give and take of planter paternalism in rural Louisiana to encounters with local police, voter registrars, and streetcar operators in cities, missionary priests and women religious learned at every turn the larger system of courtesies, rituals, debts, and retributions that defined Jim Crow. Their encounters within this created a separate world in which African Americans worked and prayed invariably reshaped their early visions of ministry. Limited resources in Depression-era Louisiana, hostile white laity, and the

56 Ibid.
occasional resistance of black laity compounded missionaries’ own personal doubt and fear.

Josephites’ frequent use of the term “Yankee priest” in their writings revealed their common self-understanding as religious outsiders in the Jim Crow South. As native-born diocesan clergy joined white Catholic elites in New Orleans in wringing their hands of black Catholics, missionaries often resented their alienation from the majority of southern Catholic life. “It is no exaggeration to say that the weight of Catholic opinion, and more of practice, stands silently by, apparently indifferent, while missionaries fight the battle of their lives.” The attitudes of the majority of lay and clergy in the Deep South, they argued, threatened their work among black southerners. “Our aim is to make good Catholics of our colored fellow citizens, but first we have to overcome their prejudices against us,” Peter Hogan wrote. “Because we are white men, they distrust us.”

The actions and attitudes of white laity also jeopardized mission work in these areas. “I can’t begin to say how many times I have seen the foundations, which required months of preparation wiped out in a few minutes by the prejudices of some thoughtless Catholic.” For many Josephites who envisioned ministry as “reclamation” of black Catholics, white Catholic prejudice prompted an awareness that “before all else a grievance must be righted—not always an easy task.”

As with Murphy, missionaries struggled to immerse themselves in the social and economic realities that generations of black southerners faced on a daily basis. A

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57 *Colored Harvest* 20:4 (August-September 1933).

58 *Colored Harvest* 33:2 (April-May 1946).

59 Ibid.
Pennsylvania-born Irish priest recalled his surprise seeing the clean shoes of young girls in the church, only to find out they “carried a rather nice pair in a package” to put on at the church. “Reminds me of how we used to do up in the coal-mines!!” Nonetheless, he added, “it is so different.” In rural Louisiana especially, where patterns of seasonal work, cycles of indebtedness to white landowners, and planter paternalism defined life more than Jim Crow laws, the hardships of educating youth, gathering faithful congregants, and attending to the immediate needs of the parish proved difficult for many missionaries. Hanks’ recalled the “black gumbo of dirt of the plantation country” that turned to mire when the rivers rose, leaving workers with little to make a living.

The swamps become crawling, eerie things where frogs bellow at twilight and katydids beg for sunshine. The season has a weird effect on people hereabouts. The short snatches of songs are forgotten, and the peals of joy are changed to mournful songs. They stand in the barns and watch the rain beat down the cotton and drive the blooms into the mud. Then they chant: “Wu’k all day to mak a crop,…And dog days come and never stop. ….De mules cant wuk Father cant pay his debt. Hey, hey.”

The 1927 Flood still haunted much of the countryside. “It robbed the poor people of their crops, their cattle, and ruined many of their homes,” Father George Hanks wrote of his parishioners in Breaux Bridge. Two thousand souls walked seven or eight miles from the various plantations to attend Sunday Mass, where collections never topped three dollars. “They have no money,” yet chickens and eggs became currency for everything from cigarettes to a priest’s sick call. Such conditions created a difficult climate for missionaries. In Crowley, where rice workers labored in the fields and mills from “can’t see to can’t see,” how could the pastor, one local priest asked, “think of ways and means

60 Colored Harvest 19:3 (June-July 1931).
61 Colored Harvest 20:5 (October-November 1933).
to have his flock pay the church debts?” The annual church bazaar provided some financial relief, and became “a gala day in the parish. The people come from all around, and for one day in their lives they ‘let loose.’”  

Josephites decried King Cotton’s legacy: the paternalistic relationship between planter and worker that rural African Americans to the land. “All the people here work on the different plantations are very poor,” Joseph Van Baast described the Cassard Lane region, “and besides this are all very deep in debt to the plantations stores who advance food to them when laid-up on account of no work or rainy days.” In New Roads Gillard learned of a tenant farmer who paid $100 dollars a year rent for 17 acres, despite the fact that cotton prices rarely topped seven and three quarter cents a pound. Such expenses left little for basic necessities for five children and his wife, Gillard recalled. Even through “his evident difficulty in making ends meet and the lack of cash, this tenant farmer made an annual contribution to the church of a hundred pounds of cotton.” Reflecting on these conditions, Gillard hoped the Josephites might help “to undo the harm cotton has done to this nation’s soul by restoring to the Negro’s soul some measure of justice and preparing him not only for a better life in the next where there will be no cotton and probably few big time growers.”

Yet through this constant awareness of limitation, missionaries among African American southern communities proclaimed the Catholic Church as “the only moral force in the world which is big enough to solve their problems.”

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62 Colored Harvest 24:5 (October-November 1936).
63 Colored Harvest 23:4 (October-November 1935).
64 Colored Harvest 29: 1 (February-March 1941).
65 Colored Harvest 25: 1 (February-March 1937).
encounters with southern poverty across the pages of the *Colored Harvest*, a publication designed for a largely northern audience of potential donors. Religious missionaries’ praise for work done “among the Colored” in their writings reflected their desire for financial support and their willingness to endure the poverty and racism that daily constrained the lives of their parishioners. Priests often waxed romantic about their work. One in New Roads, northwest of Baton Rouge, praised the “charming faith and reverence for the priest that makes work amongst the people of Louisiana so encouraging.” Parish missions often drew a crowd of enthusiastic worshipers. “Their Catholicity so deeply imbedded in their souls makes them to-day a credit to the Church.” Priests’ mission among African American southerners often involved supplanting one form of paternalism with another. Gillard’s attention to the ways blacks became identified as “Father-so-and-so’s” generated a similar sense of ownership within these communities.

Missionaries’ priority, of course, was the establishment and maintenance of local faith communities and schools committed to the spiritual and educational uplift of black southerners. Between the 1910s and the 1950s, these schools grew throughout the region to serve Catholic and Protestant children alike. Priests boasted over their ability to provide bus transportation for children attending classes around the harvesting seasons. The success of education and ministry in the region involved accommodating to white racism in many ways. At Holy Ghost Parish the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament hoped to avoid “forcing the issue of having converts seek admittance to white parochial schools, or seek to be registered in white parishes.” Laity, they believed, ought to focus on more spiritual purposes. For adults who complained of discrimination during Mass in areas

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66 *Colored Harvest* 19:3 (June-July 1931).
where black churches were not an option, Sisters encouraged that they attend “because it is their duty, and they love the Mass, and are therefore not concerned about other people…Where children say that white Catholic boys and girls make fun of them – is it not best to remind them that young people are mischievous and make fun of one another because they like to do it, regardless of color.”\(^67\) The teacher, they added, must “distract their attention by asking them to name some of the many wonderful things God has done for them, and God alone matters.”\(^68\)

Nonetheless, tensions and compromises within these communities, alongside missionaries’ own struggles with the dynamics of white supremacy in rural Louisiana, created a distinctive theology of ministry in the region. Interactions between lay and clergy, black and white, planter and worker, all shaped missionaries’ vision of Catholic ministry, creating a productive—if often uneven—tension between spiritual and social redemption. Parish communities offered important centers of political literacy, where parishioners discussed the right to vote as the first step toward social equality. As priests and women religious developed relationships with students, parishioners, and local whites, they also emerged as important racial go-betweens where black advocacy for workers’ rights often carried lethal consequences. Even white missionaries were not immune to local harassment. In Napoleonville, Father Harry Maloney endured constant threats for organizing workers in the sugar cane fields.

When a gang of white hoodlums raped a Negro girl, the fiery little Irishman from Connecticut stormed the Sheriff’s office and demanded action. He was physically assaulted but he did not stop.


\(^68\) Ibid.
He has asked the FBI to investigate. Many a Negro minister would have doubtless shown the same courage. But the stark fact is—*he would not have lived to remember it.*

Priests and women religious could use their role as parish leaders to challenge traditional patterns of labor and race in the Deep South.

The material conditions of rural Louisiana also prompted a variety of pastoral strategies that challenged traditional structures of parish authority. Given the shortage of missionaries in certain areas, Gillard hoped that a lack of financial resources and personnel might engender a stronger lay apostolate in the region.

I think one of the mistakes we have made in our missionary approach in this country is that we have not taken the people as we find them, with all their limitations. We have over-emphasized the priest and the Mass, not, of course that the place of the priest or the mass can be over-emphasized in the Catholic plan of life, but we have over-emphasized them in the sense that if there was no priest to give the Mass to the people they got nothing. This, I believe, is a mistake.

But rather than young people “who have ambition for a bright future; they won’t stay on the farms,” he suggested “older, settled, married couples.” Such lay catechists would lead prayers and rosary services for local laity. As laity soon demonstrated, they could also use these channels to organize and spread a deeper racial consciousness throughout many remote areas of Louisiana.

Conflicts over ministry within the African American apostolate, however, inevitably turned on the question of black priests. In a hierarchical, clergy-centered Catholic Church, the elevation of African American southerners to significant positions

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70 Gillard, “The Rural Negro,” to the Catholic Rural Life Conference, Jefferson City, Missouri, October 1941, Box 6, Gillard Papers, Josephite Fathers Archives (JFA).
of authority, many argued, would prove crucial to any Catholic-led movement for black rights. By the mid-1930s, only a token number of black priests served in congregations throughout the south. For missionaries who measured success by the number of converts to the faith, black priests would certainly win over the untrusting masses. For John Gillard, black priests “possess a thorough understanding of the Negro soul. They will have shared the humiliations and trials of their people, and they will know from experience how to reach the motivating forces to energize them to better achievement.”

But Gillard also expressed reservations about any aggressive pursuit of black vocations. “Not infrequently the very fact of being white is an advantage: there may be times and occasions when the colored priest because of the trees sees not the wood.” Gillard explained further that “in the Roman collar there is no magic power to change social conditions.” Those believing they might emerge as race leaders might too often abandon Catholic doctrine for more secular aims. God, after all, “is the Dispenser of vocations.” Moreover, an effective clergy would have to rise from the “talented tenth” of black southerners, those who possessed sufficient education to properly implement church doctrine in the daily lives of a community. As Stephen Ochs has argued, Josephites’ halting efforts to integrate seminaries and pulpits through the early twentieth century reveal deep antipathies among many church officials toward a black clergy. The attitudes of Mundelein, Gillard and others all revealed a common attitude among the hierarchy, as late as the 1950s, that blacks made better clients for the church’s missionary outreach.

Black Catholics nonetheless demanded priests they could call their own. Aside
opening new opportunities for leadership within the church, black clergymen who were
baptized into the southern world of Jim Crow consecrated the collective struggle of black
southerners against social and economic oppression. When St. Augustine Seminary
ordained three priests into the Society of the Divine Word in 1934, blacks read it as a
significant moment in the future of the church. The Knights of Peter Claver argued that
the ordination would “disprove the fallacy that we are altogether a happy go lucky people
and incapable of serious thought and action.” While these men now looked forward to a
“thankless vocation that is filled with untold sacrifices, self-abnegations, danger and hard
work,” as ministers they became “positive proof that we are ready and willing to work
unselfishly for the salvation of the souls of mankind as those of other races.” The Knights
invoked Pius XI’s call to supply every nation with its own native clergy.  

The name Rousseve had become synonymous with native Catholicism in
Louisiana. Baptized in St. Augustine’s parish in New Orleans, the Rousseve children
received first communion training in a segregated corner of the classroom. When the
priest removed the Rousseve name from the family pew and implemented segregated
seating, the family moved to the Josephite Holy Redeemer Parish. Of this family of five
sons and three daughters, two became professors at Xavier University while Marcella
Rousseve joined the Sisters of the Holy Family while Maurice became one of the first
three Divine Word Fathers ordained in 1934. His first public Mass at Holy Redeemer had
to be delayed a half-hour because of the crowds. “It seemed as if all the Colored folk of
New Orleans had turned out en masse for the happy occasion,” one Mother Margaret

72 The Claverite (June 1934).
Mary, SBS, wrote of the occasion. “It as next to impossible to get through the crowd.” A two week mission given by Rousseve in Cassard Lane produced “miraculous results,” according to one Josephite. The priest drew crowds of black and white Catholics alike. Rousseve spent much of his career serving the Diocese of Lafayette. “A great spiritual revival is expected,” one Claver wrote of another Lake Charles appointee, Father Anthony C. Bourges, S.V.D., “besides the return of many who have fallen away and many conversions.”

Yet despite these early achievements, full commitment to black ordination remained unsettled. Laity nonetheless continued to mobilize their resources in response to the challenges and possibilities of World War II America. In the early 1940s, the Knights and Ladies of Peter Claver began speaking a more forceful language of social activism. As A.P. Tureaud aggressively pursued civil rights cases, he also exhorted church leaders to engage the demands of black Catholics more earnestly. Distressed by the slow pace of the KPC’s social justice activity, Grand Knight Edward LaSalle proclaimed “a new approach” to recruiting new members to the Knights of Peter Claver. “There was once a time Clavers could try to get new members by stressing cheap insurance. There is no cheap insurance.” In order to younger members, he insisted, “we have a new talking point that has universal appeal.”

We are in a period of change, war accelerates changes. Why not change the traditional attitude on the race question. We ask ourselves why impose the duties of citizens on us and deny us the rights of citizens. There is no answer except one. Race hatred. We are despised, robbed of our Natural and Civic rights because of an
accident of birth. Our status as human beings is ignored…separate is the traditional answer for solutions. 74

Clavers, LaSalle added, must pursue the “Catholic way” of seeking justice. “We Clavers are Catholics and the Catholic way has the only permanent solution to our difficulties.” 75

The challenge was to awaken white clergymen to a deeper social consciousness. Tureaud suggested an educational campaign directed at whites in New Orleans to develop social consciousness among whites in New Orleans. The Knights would circulate “some worthwhile book or periodical about Negro life,” among priests and seminarians. “In this way I hope to bring to the attention of these white leaders the thoughts of Negro leaders and writers so that these white priests may know how we feel about certain matters.” 76

Seminaries especially would be apt places for the distribution of black literature among future church leaders. 77

When the NAACP and Congress of Industrial Organizations turned their attention to the voting rights in the years after World War II, Tureaud and the Knights stumped Catholic communities throughout Louisiana. While churches, they hoped, would emerge as schools for political literacy, some clergymen obstructed such efforts. A 1946 speech by Tureaud to a group of black Catholic war veterans in Opelousas encouraged an aggressive pursuit of black suffrage. But after the meeting the assistant pastor of the church informed Tureaud that local opposition to black voting rights “was immovable.” Besides, he continued, “We…would not want our boys to mix in politics.” For Tureaud

75 Ibid.
76 Tureaud to Jane Wagner, 12 October 1943, Box 3, Folder 25, APT Papers, ARC.
77 J.H. Clouser to Peter Wynhoven, 6 November 1943, Box 3, Folder 26; Tureaud to Jane Wagner, 12 October 1943, Box 3, Folder 25, both in APT Papers, ARC.
the incident not only reflected the extent of white resistance in the Acadiana region of South-central Louisiana, but “more pointedly the statement indicates frequent misunderstanding and unwillingness of religious leaders (the most competent individuals by position amid local conditions) to support any effort to acquiring of civil rights.”

Nonetheless, by 1950, one observer reported, many priests announced registration dates from the pulpits. “The CIO and Catholics run almost a dead heat in leadership for registration.”

In addition to kindling a deeper commitment within the church to civil rights in the WWII era, Tureaud and the Knights of Peter Claver also played a prominent role in reforming the NAACP in Louisiana. “Several young men became alarmed over the ‘do nothing’ condition in the local branch of the NAACP,” Tureaud wrote. In 1940 they formed “The Group,” an association demanding a bigger and more active NAACP branch. When it presented a slate of candidates for office, Tureaud recalled, “the fight grew hot.” With more than twelve hundred ballots cast, the older establishment prevailed, thanks in large part to the influence of local newspapers. Distressed by the conservatism of the black press, Tureaud demanded “a paper that would be in keeping with their ideals.” He and several Knights of Peter Claver founded the New Orleans Sentinel in 1940. The paper became the mouthpiece of this militant wing of the NAACP, campaigning for labor unions and criticizing the middle-class dominance of the organization. As Adam Fairclough has argued, The Group represented the dissolution of

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78 A.P. Tureaud, undated speech, Box 15, Folder 14, APT Papers, ARC.

79 David Hepburn, “Negro Catholics in New Orleans,” Our World (April, 1950), Clipping in David J. Jackson Press Clippings Collection, Archives and Special Collections Division, Xavier University of Louisiana.

80 A.P. Tureaud, The Claverite 20, no. 9 (December 1940).
divisions between Creole elites and African Americans. Recognizing their common
economic struggles, they sought to unify black Louisianans in both rural and urban areas. While the Knights of Peter Claver remained committed to the “Catholic way” of understanding and challenging the social crises facing the south, they also understood the importance of unifying the race across denominational borders.81

Xavier University also became synonymous with black lay activism. When the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament began staffing rural schools throughout South Louisiana, they developed a teacher education program for women committed to uplifting the race throughout the region. “Both poles of the system meet, as it were, in the rural school where the graduate of Xavier is teaching the country children the rudiments of knowledge and the elements of religion, heart and soul intent upon her task,” Mother M. Mercedes, then Superior of the SBS, wrote in 1938. “No opportunity for the improvement of the minds of the children, of living conditions, in the neighborhood, are lost upon these teachers.”82 Working within the framework of Catholic sisters’ emphasis on spiritual and educational uplift, Laywomen in rural communities quickly emerged as local leaders committed to overcoming the educational inequalities of public and Catholic schools in the region. Xavier students sponsored catechism classes, training in the singing of Negro spirituals, and athletic events for locals of all ages.

This spirit of emulation stirred up among the young by the influence of Xavier University has moved older people to desire activities in which they, too, can engage. The return to the

81 Fairclough: 49, 61.

82 “Impressions of Mother M. Mercedes on Her Visitation of Louisiana, 1938,” Box 6, Folder 7, Mother M. Mercedes Correspondence, SBSA.
Sacraments of many lapsed Catholics, as a result of this revival of interests in parish affairs, is inevitable.83

Xavier’s School of Social Service also stimulated lay activism that many believed to be dormant. In 1934, the school hired a German-born social worker, Dr. Katherine Radke, to run its fieldwork program. “She is, by and large, the most progressive and able of the white teachers,” Edward F. Murphy lauded. In her short time at Xavier, Radke oversaw student casework and encouraged exceptional students to pursue additional studies in social work. In 1935, she proposed a Child Clinic for Xavier students to study and alleviate the specific conditions of child poverty in the area.84 She also analyzed the difficulties of mobilizing community resources. In Depression-era New Orleans, abuses associated with community programs frustrated Catholic reformers in the city. Radke complained to Tureaud that, “racial discrimination has been introduced into the administration of relief.” The amount of black applicants to the Department of Public Welfare measured four to three compared to white applicants, yet in the late-1930s the department began accepting relief clients based on a 50-50 scale. With half of public assistance now given out to each race, “the excess number of colored clients had to be dropped from relief rolls.” Older persons would also receive a maximum sum of $10 per month. “The outcome of this policy in regard to Negro health and wholesome child development is obvious.”85

83 Ibid.

84 Dean to Dr. Katherine Radke, 20 November 1934, “Radke Personnel Files,” Special Collections and Archives, Xavier University of Louisiana; Edward F. Murphy to Mother M. Agatha, 17 July 1935, “Edward F. Murphy File,” Box 39, no. 25, Mother M. Katherine (MMK) 10, Archives of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, Bensalem, Pa. (SBSA).

85 Katherine Radke to A.P. Tureaud, 12 July 1937, Box 8, Folder 4, A.P. Tureaud Papers, Amistad Research Center (ARC).
Faculty and students involved with the School of Social Service also emerged as community and race leaders. Ernest J. Wright’s service as president of the student government, editor of the paper, and captain of the football, basketball, baseball, and track teams paved the way for a career committed to social justice in New Orleans. “At Xavier… the Sisters called me their boy,” he remembered of his college years. “When the sisters wanted something done, Wright was their boy.” Radke soon took Wright under her wing, encouraging him to go on to a general social work training at Michigan, “not just Catholic social work like the Sisters wanted. She told me to get prepared for group and community work and to learn psychiatric case work.” Wright continued his training in Detroit and Cincinnati before returning to New Orleans with an intense desire “to help my people.” Most of the early social workers in the city came from Xavier, Wright explained. “Several Negroes that looked like whites went down for interviews. They didn’t know they were Negroes at first. That’s the way they got the first jobs.”86 Wright also became a prominent labor advocate and regular columnist for the *Louisiana Weekly*. In 1941 he founded the People’s Defense League, often known as a more aggressive competitor of the NAACP. In 1946 the charismatic Wright complained about African Americans in New Orleans: “not enough of them are willing to be jailed, abused or killed in the struggle… It is about time the colored people in New Orleans and Louisiana wake up.”87 Wright left the Catholic Church after marrying a divorced woman. His column, nonetheless, often directed attention to the church’s role in post-war liberal efforts.

86 Giles A. Hubert, “Notes on Leadership: Ernest J. Wright,” July 1959, Box 2, Folder 11, Giles A. Hubert Papers, Amistad Research Center (ARC).

87 Fairclough: 54-56; *Louisiana Weekly* 20 July 1946.
Xavier also enjoyed the services of several faculty members who connected students and missionaries alike to the larger movement for black consciousness in the World War II era. Sisters praised the efforts of Ferdinand Rousseve, an MIT graduate and professor of architecture who served on the New Orleans Council of social Agencies, the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, and the Urban League of Greater New Orleans. David Jackson, a history professor, also emerged as a prominent advocate for a Catholic-led racial justice movement. When NAACP president J. Edwin Wilkins criticized the Catholic Church at a youth council meeting in 1940, Jackson refuted Wilkins’ claims that the church “is more interested in developing nuns and priests” than in justice for blacks. “Within the Catholic Church there are individuals who have demonstrated by their lives and work a profound interest in the problems which confront the American Negro,” Jackson retorted. The Archbishop especially “has personally urged and encouraged all Catholic Negro youths to participate wholeheartedly in the coming Southern Negro Youth Congress.”

“Organized religion is probably the strongest single force in the community life of the United States,” the *Louisiana Weekly* declared in 1946. “Whatever reason for the church’s new found liberalism, it is heartily welcomed.” Between the rise of Jim Crow in southern society and the World War II era, black Catholics in Louisiana laid important

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88 *Louisiana Weekly*, 24 February 1940.
89 *Louisiana Weekly*, 2 November 1946.
foundations for spiritual and social development. Facing the challenges of a hostile white laity and a recalcitrant clergy, they shaped the development of the church’s African American apostolate in ways underappreciated by those focusing primarily on the establishment of religious communities throughout the region. Working within and through these institutions, black Catholics claimed the church as their own, at every turn challenging it to live the message of Christian unity and salvation that it proclaimed. By the mid-1940s, the Catholic Church, many blacks argued, had begun to take notice. But the tremendous social and economic changes wrought by wartime mobilization offered new challenges and opportunities for black southerners and white Catholic reformers. The Second World War generated a southern world ripe with revolutionary possibilities but light on social visionaries. In the years that followed African American efforts to calibrate Catholic teachings to black demands for freedom and social equality would remain a constant challenge.
On the fiftieth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, a Josephite priest exhorted the Knights of Peter Claver to “begin their program of acquiring a knowledge of Catholic social teaching.” Pope Leo XIII’s 1891 statement on “The Condition of Labor,” *Rerum Novarum* was already a milestone in the history of Catholic social thought. Annunciating the church’s concern for the working masses, it called for an activist government to protect society’s most vulnerable members from the abuses of industrial capitalism. It also supported labor unions and trade associations between workers and management to work toward mutual understanding of common needs and secure proper living wages for all workers. Resonating with a rising progressive spirit in Europe and America, this “Catholic answer” to the modern social question at the turn of the century became the foundation of future Catholic statements on social reconstruction that made their way into the New Deal and other reform efforts in the 1930s. Forty years later, *Quadragessimo Anno* renewed the church’s commitment to widespread social organization that ensured fair distribution of resources. In championing a timeless vision of social order in accordance with natural law principles, both encyclicals answered the cry of “the poor and helpless,” the priest proclaimed to his black audience, “and if Pope Leo were alive
today he would say to them as he once said of old…‘We will triumph over prejudice, injustice, and error.’”

It was a tough sell in the Deep South, where race inflected all visions of reform. Forged in the political and social milieu of industrial Europe, Catholic social teaching stemmed the tides of class resentment by articulating a hierarchical vision of social order and progress. Labor unions, trade associations, religious organizations, local parishes, and families all fit within a coherent moral and economic system that bound society together against the vagaries of modern thought and society. *Rerum Novarum*’s roots in labor strife among a visible and powerful working class meshed poorly with the realities of life for blacks in the Jim Crow South. Catholic reformers nonetheless insisted upon Catholic social teaching’s seamless engagement with the region’s social and economic crises. Indeed for many social visionaries, the region offered Catholicism its richest proving ground. “We are in our industrial beginning, so to speak,” one reformer proclaimed, hoping that “the South would avoid the terrible human and economic costs incurred in the industrialization of other sections.” By illuminating the moral implications of labor exploitation and the material conditions through which one achieved salvation or bore the burdens of sin, Catholic teaching certainly challenged the south’s prevailing social and economic hierarchy.

While white southern leaders defended a system of social caste in which all people knew their place, Catholic social visionaries attacked the patterns of labor exploitation and racial discrimination that threatened the moral law. Catholic

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2 Louis J. Twomey to Robert T. Dixson, 5 December 1949, Box 15, Folder 1, Louis J. Twomey Papers, Loyola University of New Orleans Special Collections (Loyola).
missionaries, who envisioned their ministry as a project to “reclaim” black Catholics in the 1920s and 1930s, gained confidence that their constituents would eventually embrace the church’s social wisdom. In his 1934 tour of Louisiana missions, the superior of the Josephites, Louis B. Pastorelli, praised the efforts of priests and women religious laboring for the spiritual and social betterment of black southerners. “One general observation which impressed itself upon me is a certain spirit of unrest among the Negroes as regards church affiliation.” The social and economic crises of the Great Depression, he declared, “has given to our Fathers an admirable opportunity to verify the axiom of Christ, ‘By their fruits you shall know them.’” In hearing the Gospel through the actions of priests, he declared, blacks “are beginning to see that according to Christ’s own standard the Catholic Church measures up where others fail.”

Between the New Deal and the rise of legal challenges to segregation in the 1950s, an increasingly vocal black movement for political and economic rights converged with a concerted effort by clergymen and progressive laity to implement Catholic social teaching in the region. From the Catholic Committee of the South and Archbishop Rummel to the vocal and “encyclical-happy” admonishments of labor priest Louis J. Twomey, S.J., Catholic reformers envisioned the post-war south as an ideal proving ground for the church’s distinct message of social unity and order. The New Deal and the Second World War wrought tremendous social and economic changes in the south. Like southern liberals in the New Deal and WWII years, Catholic progressives viewed the black struggle in terms of the larger economic uplift of the region. Drawing from early liberal efforts in the late-1930s, Twomey and other Catholic reformers moved to organize

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workers and shape black southern expectations in conformity with the church’s socially engaged and spiritually fulfilling message. The successes and failures of their movement revealed the intrinsic ties between labor conflict and the emergence of civil rights activism. It also reveals how conservative response to these early social struggles would lay the foundations for white resistance in the 1950s and 1960s.

At Catholic parishes and schools, the nexus of church teaching and the lived experiences of black southerners, African Americans in southern Louisiana confronted both the strengths and limitations of Catholic social reform in productive but also contentious ways. A Catholic vision of unity and order within the framework of church authority certainly struggled against the realities of life in the Jim Crow South, where hierarchies of race and social place guarded whites against the aspirations of blacks. Moreover, too often clergymen and social reformers framed the movement in terms of their anxieties over the place of the church in the development of the industrial south, and the larger struggle over Catholic influence amid social upheavals worldwide. Reformers’ language of Catholic advancement often alienated black Catholics who hoped to move within and through the church in support of the larger movement for black consciousness in the 1940s.

In the 1950s, Catholic efforts to impose a distinct social theology upon the rapidly changing economic and social worlds of post-war Louisiana collapsed. Southern backlash to Brown v. Board of Education in 1954 and the rise of anticommunism placed liberals on the defensive. Planter and industrialist resistance to labor reform fed into the rising movement against integration. At the heart of both was the fundamental struggle over the meaning of race in a rapidly changing southern world. The Catholic hierarchy,
meanwhile, struggled to infuse local parish life with the ideals of social unity articulated in emerging concepts of Catholic Action and Mystical Body teachings. The average lay Catholic, one priest lamented, remained largely “compartmentalized” from the social implications of Christianity. In the meantime, the black struggle to define their place within the church revealed many of the ideological incongruities that would emerge in later decades. Nonetheless, through the 1940s, black activists’ strategic appropriation of Catholic resources, and Catholic reformers’ pursuit of political and economic reform in terms of Catholic social theology, produced significant moments of interracial activism. These moments revealed as much of what historian Pete Daniel has described as the “revolutionary potential” of the post-war South—indeed the United States as a whole—as it did the significant disconnect between Catholic principle and black ambition.4

The Catholic reform impulse in the South reflected the rise of southern liberalism generally between the late New Deal years and the end of World War II. In 1938, the FDR administration launched a wave of local studies to examine southern society and economy when it targeted the region as “the Nation’s number one economic problem.” King Cotton’s legacy and the south’s colonial status vis-à-vis northern industry after the Civil War had not only enslaved the region to agricultural production and low-end industry, but also ravaged it with poor health, inferior public services, and inadequate

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housing.\textsuperscript{5} Chapel Hill sociologists Arthur F. Raper and Ira De A. Reid blamed the south’s benighted patterns of southern labor for the region’s economic and social crisis.

“Southern communities are essentially feudalistic,” they declared in the 1941 *Sharecroppers All.*\textsuperscript{6} The paternalism of planters and factory owners sealed the majority of southerners within a world of minimal opportunity. As a whole, these studies revealed a Depression-stricken region cursed with the double-burden of low wages and lower expectations.

Yet for Catholic and liberal reformers alike, the south in the New Deal and World War II era offered an important opportunity for emerging theories of government-driven social uplift. Immediately after the FDR Administration’s *Report on Economic Conditions of the South*, southern progressives ranging from civil rights advocates to labor unionists and urban reformers gathered at an interracial meeting in Birmingham, Alabama, to form the Southern Conference for Human Welfare. By 1946, the organization had grown to over ten thousand members. The SCHW gave institutional substance to a multivalent southern liberalism benefiting from the social and economic upheavals of the Second World War. Its range of progressive ideas reflected the New Deal’s reform spirit. It also reflected the administration’s primary concern with economic uplift. The crisis facing black southerners, the SCHW insisted, stemmed from a backward economy that plagued poor southerners, black and white alike. In the face of political dominance by the county-seat alliances and city machines, liberal reformers demanded a


\textsuperscript{6} Arthur D. Raper and Ira De A. Reid, *Sharecroppers All* (Chapel Hill, 1941): v.
movement for “political and industrial democracy.”

In 1946 the organization poured its support into “Operation Dixie,” a full-scale effort by the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) to unionize the southland.

To many, the CIO’s Operation Dixie and its competitor in the AFL constituted the pinnacle of class-conscious interracial activism. Nonetheless, liberal efforts to organize southern workers met with significant obstacles almost as soon as they began. Anti-communism emerged as a priority in American social politics, prompting a conservative drift in the CIO. The organization eventually split from the SCHW when the latter sided with the popular-front liberals against Truman. The group failed to establish local organizations that channeled a unified political vision against entrenched leadership of the county-seat elite. As anticommmunism emerged as a proxy for racial backlash in southern politics, southern industrialists and planters turned local police officers against union officials and harassed African American workers who attempted to organize. In 1947, the Taft-Hartley Labor Management Relations Act further crippled unionization in the south by requiring certification that union leaders had never belong to the Communist Party and opening the door for state passage of Right-to-work laws. Such ordinances, its critics complained, undermined worker solidarity by allowing them to seek employment without joining local unions. Employers could thus exploit racial divisions more effectively. By 1949, both “Operation Dixie” and the SCHW effectively collapsed under anti-labor and anticommmunist pressures.

If the SCHW embodied the promise and failure of southern liberalism between World War II and the mid-1950s, the Catholic Committee of the South played a similar role.

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7 Bartley, The New South: 27.
role for the Catholic Church in the region. Soon after FDR’s 1938 declaration, Bishop Gerald P. O’Hara of Savannah declared the region the church’s “religious opportunity number one.” Catholic layman Paul Williams of Richmond declared an end to “the old defeatist attitude” that had plagued the south since the Civil War. Now with this regional renaissance, “we discover an amazing thing—that the Catholic Church is to play an all important part.” O’Hara and Williams insisted that only a movement bringing the moral law to bear on southern society would bring about the goals many southern liberals and African Americans sought. “All the problems that exist in the world as to how men shall act toward their fellow men also exist in our South, but in a concentrated form” one priest proclaimed. “And we know that the Catholic Church has the solutions to these problems. We know it because we know that they are moral problems.”

The south’s emergence as the nation’s dominant economic problem coincided with the rise of a transatlantic Catholic endeavor gaining strength throughout the 1930s. Defined as the “participation of the laity in the apostolate of the hierarchy,” Catholic Action championed a renewal of Catholic faith in a secularized world. Modern thought and new conceptions of social leadership threatened the place of religious leaders in the industrial world. Catholic Action’s establishment of lay organizations in business, labor, and politics filled this gap by implementing the church’s moral wisdom in local settings. Reformers would reject the term “social Catholicism” on principle. Concepts of the social and the religious remained interconnected within Catholicism, despite the forces of modernism and materialism that “compartmentalized” the realm of religion away from

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8 Richmond Times 22 October 1940, clipping in Box 1, Folder 5, Catholic Committee of the South Papers (CCS), Amistad Research Center (ARC).

the day-to-day world of economics and politics. “There should be no divorce between religion and life,” one textbook on Catholic Action declared, “no double standard of social morality which calls for an impeccable private life, but which conforms to secular standards in the fields of government and business.” In reintegrating the religious and social, Catholic social action moved the salvific unity and order embodied in the Catholic liturgy into the world. Man’s ultimate destiny, after all, was unity with God. But individuals could only achieve salvation within a tightly bound community, through which the private economic decisions and prejudices of individuals reverberated, shaping the material conditions that properly guided one to ultimate unity with God.

Proclaiming these principles and joining this worldwide movement, southern Catholic reformers hoped to “unify and coordinate Catholic endeavor in the Southland, so as to restore all things in Christ.” Paralleling the SCHW, O’Hara, Williams, and several clergymen met in Atlanta in 1940 to discuss the state of southern labor, industry, and “social problems generally with a view to applying to the solutions of these problems Christian principles.” The result of the meeting was the Catholic Committee of the South. According to one textbook on Catholic action at mid-century, the organization would be composed of different units, each of which applied Catholic social teaching to issues of race, labor, education, and economic advancement of the south. Members were not modest about its implications. Following in the spirit of Catholic Action, the Catholic Committee of the South hoped to draw individuals back to the church as an essential component of social reconstruction. Above all, “we want to make the Church

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11 O’Hara to Most Rev. Peter L. Ireton, D.D., 12 June 1940, Box 1, Folder 3, CCS Papers, ARC.

known to the immense non-Catholic (but religious) population of the South,” O’Hara wrote to the future TV priest, Fulton Sheen, “and perhaps bring them to embrace the Catholic Faith.”

In meeting the challenges of racial conflict and social change, the CCS remained true to the prevailing theology and architecture of Catholic authority. Not only responding to the needs of the working masses in industrial Europe and America, Rerum Novarum and subsequent Catholic teachings challenged modern social theory that viewed a world in flux, torn by evolving and culturally derived conceptions of “the good” in society. By contrast such as the philosopher John Dewey faced the injustices of the industrial age with faith in social experimentation and evolution. Leo XIII’s revival of Thomistic philosophy in the late-19th century stressed an inherent order and intelligibility of divine law that governed human society. Reflecting an eternal “Good” through Catholic structures of authority and ritual, the church became the worldly arbiter of that guided human society. Only a true integration off all peoples back to the spiritual beliefs and ecclesiastical structures of Catholicism could bring about genuine social change, reformers insisted. The teachings and practices of the institutional church directed all mankind to unity with God.

In contrast to other regions where liberal reformers advanced secularism, the southern mindset offered perfect opportunity for the religious aims of Catholic activism, CCS members believed. “Whatever the reason the fact remains that atheism is unknown in the South and agnosticism is without meaning.” Southerners were a religious people. Protestantism nonetheless weakened the south’s defense against this “insipid and vacuous

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13 Gerald P. O’Hara to Fulton Sheen, 20 March 1940, Box 1, Folder 2, CSS Papers, ARC.
rationalism” plaguing other parts of the world. As the region advanced industrially, it became increasingly vulnerable.

They find themselves chided by the taunt of emotionalism. They know their position is a reasonable one but they lack the reasons to support that position of belief. They know that Christ must live in their thoughts and actions but they find themselves lost to interpret Christ satisfactorily in those thoughts and actions because amongst themselves they find no authority other than a human and consequently errant authority to interpret Christ for them.14

As many reformers noted, the specter of Protestantism contributed to the compartmentalization of spiritual life from the secular. Upholding man’s dignity as a spiritual and social being, Catholic authority offered a way of reintegrating the spiritual longings and social needs of southerners. In doing so, it acknowledged the hierarchy as “the first and final authority.” Catholic Action certainly promoted more concerted lay efforts to integrate “all members of our Church, in accordance with the ideals set forth by Our Holy Father, in the religious, economic and cultural life of the nation…” At the same time, one CCS founder insisted, the committee was more of an “organism” than an organization, a movement that implemented more than defined a spirit and vision of social reform. “As an organism we desire to unify the Catholic manpower of the South, to serve our Bishops and priests in any way they may direct…”15

The rise of communist influences in the Southern Conference for Human Welfare evidenced the dangers of a Protestant worldview, reformers insisted, and demanded an organism of Catholic Action that brought the church’s wisdom into the daily struggles of poor southerners. While initially drawn to the SCHW, many church officials feared the

14 Undated Report in “Paul D. Williams Folder,” CCS Papers, ARC.

15 Paul Williams to Gerald P. O’Hara, 20 January 1941, Box 1, Folder 6, CCS Papers, ARC.
organization’s decentralized and often radical elements. One reported to Rummel that while Communists in no way dominated the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, they were, nonetheless “striving vigorously to determine its policies.” At one meeting Communist influence “was evident from the parrot like repetition of slogans and programs.” In contrast to the SCHW’s multifarious vision, the CCS boasted the “unifying and directing principle” embodied by the church and its teachings.16 “We are approaching a serious crisis in the social and economic spheres,” one activist clergyman declared, “and to meet this crisis, to determine the character of its solution, to make it serve the interests of Catholicism and true Americanism, we who have the only genuine answer to the problem must act quickly and effectively.”17

The SCHW and the Catholic Committee of the South did share important similarities that reveal the priorities and limitations of southern social reformers in the late New Deal years. Despite the CCS’s criticism of communist influences within the southern organization, both groups feared the overheated rhetoric of anticommunism shaping political discourse in the post-war era. One priest active in the labor movement in New Orleans attacked the ways “White Supremacy is hiding behind a scare of Red Supremacy.”18 More significantly, much like the SCHW, the Catholic Committee of the South viewed the southern race crisis as an extension of the region’s economic backwardness. Southern labor, one priest complained, suffered from “an entrenched attitude of paternalism” that circumscribed life for all laborers, particularly African American workers.

16 John F. Cronin to Joseph Francis Rummel, 1 May 1942, Box 1, Folder 13, Catholic Committee of the South Papers (CCS), ARC.

17 Louis J. Twomey to Harry L. Crane, S.J., 22 September 1945, Box 1, Folder 2, Louis J. Twomey Papers, Special Collections, Loyola University of New Orleans.

18 Colored Harvest, November 1948.
American workers in the fields. Only the mobilization of workers across racial lines could move the south toward a fuller integration of the social and the religious in southern life. Indeed both southern liberalism and Catholics’ own parallel movement revealed a growing sense of political opportunity occasioned by the New Deal and the Second World War. As reformers turned their attention to the most populous and politically contentious state in the south, these ideals met the aspirations of blacks who infused this “spirit of 1938” with their own distinct vision of spiritual and social progress.

The delirium of Louisiana politics offered unique challenges for reformers struggling to apply Catholic social teaching in the south. The legacy of populist leader and political kingpin Huey Long haunted the landscape. After his assassination in 1935, so-called Longites and anti-Longites clamored to fill the power vacuum. Anti-Long progressives hoped that Long’s death would finally open the state up to New Deal program. For the Josephite Edward Murphy, Long’s opposition to New Deal programs exacerbated the poor conditions faced by African Americans in New Orleans. “Federal funds seem to have passed us by, and our poor are in danger of starvation. But surely relief will come from Washington!” Conservatives, weary of the Kingfish’s unique brand of class-conscious populism, sought to reign in the scandal-riddled social programs that had solidified Long’s power and popularity among the lower classes, black and white alike. In the process, the New Orleans police declared open season on the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Local officials, at the behest of businessmen, suppressed

19 Published in 1942, W.J. Cash’s *Mind of the South* lent weight to the argument about southern paternalism being at the heart of the south’s economic and social crisis. Cash argued for the continuity of economic life between the slave plantation days through the mobilization of the region’s resources in the decades following the Civil War. At its heart, the 1940s south maintained all the trappings of a plantation economy.
strikes, raided homes, and arrested organizers. Longites, meanwhile, faced with the legal consequences of corruption, did little to stop the violence. The 1940 scandals that broke under Governor Richard W. Leche cast the state into further turmoil. Leche’s anti-Longite successor, Sam Jones, rose to the governor’s chair vowing a new day for Louisiana politics and business: “Louisiana has been dirty. Louisiana has been corrupt,” Jones told a group of religious leaders. By demanding “a halt on extravagances,” Louisianans “demanded the restoration of the proper moral values in public life.”

By the beginning of World War II, political virtue equaled minimal government and a benign neglect of the resentments Long had articulated.

For most critics, Huey Long’s stage presence had always overshadowed the substance of his programs. Murphy lamented the populist’s appeal among poor blacks in the state. Long’s tight control over local services in New Orleans, he complained to his superior, had indirectly hurt African Americans in the city more than anyone else. “After Huey Long’s vindictive work is undone, New Orleans should enjoy a bit of prosperity again.” Catholic reformers rolled their eyes at his oversimplified rhetoric of social reform. When America Magazine asked the Kingfish if he had read the famous social encyclicals, Rerum Novarum and Quadragessimo Anno, Long replied, “Have I read them! I was the one who put them in the Congressional Record…and I quote the Pope in my book…” But when the interviewer read some of the encyclical passages calling for the organization of occupational groups, Long declared that it sounded too much like

20 Sam Jones to religious leaders of New Orleans, “Put Politics in Religion,” 30 April 1940, Sam H. Jones Papers, Manuscripts Collections, Tulane University Special Collections (New Orleans, La.)

21 Edward F. Murphy to Louis B. Pastorelli, 29 September 1935, in “Edward F. Murphy Files,” Josephite Fathers Archives (JFA) (Baltimore, Md.).

Roosevelt’s National Recovery Administration. “If it’s NRA, I’m against it.”

Unimpressed with the southern populist, Catholic reformer John Ryan denounced his Share Our Wealth program as “the misuse of statistics, the calm disregard of the principles of mathematics, and the contempt for economic realities.”²³

Catholic appraisals of the Kingfish revealed deep and far reaching anxieties over his emotionally potent brand of politics. In the Catholic mind, the religious fervor Long engendered placed him within the church’s larger ideological conflict against populism throughout the world. “What we have now is a welter of dissatisfaction that lies open to the exploitation of anybody who denounces loudly and promises hugely.” Defending the church’s tradition of orderly social reform in accordance with divine law, for instance, *America* drew significant comparisons between Long and Mexican leader Lazaro Cardenas. The latter had risen to power by inspiring similar hopes among the poor, but Cardenas’ agrarian radicalism also bolstered a virulent anticlericalism that pushed the institutional church to the edges of social influence. “If the friends of social order and justice stumble and blunder, as they so often have in recent months, there will be many Huey Longs, because Huey himself was a success only because the popular mind was in chaos.”²⁴

But in revising Long’s historical legacy, historians have often discounted the ways African Americans in Louisiana read Long’s legacy. Certainly he assembled an overly abiding cohort of political faithful. “He walked the land like Jesus Christ and left nothing undone,” said one black laborer in Louisiana. “He gave the Negroes and all poor

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people hope,” wrote another. But, despite his weak record of social aid—even
detriment—to black Louisianans, Long inspired among the lower classes, black and
white, a sense of what was possible. A.P. Tureaud and other black leaders would
certainly agree with Catholic thinkers that the ideologically vacuous populism of Huey
Long threatened a proper “constitutional rule of justice and order.” Tureaud nonetheless
understood the Long years as an awakening to the virtues of charismatic and aggressive
leadership.25

If one Catholic reformer in Louisiana approximated Long’s reputation as an
advocate for the poor, it was Monsignor Peter Wynhoven. Founder in 1932 of the
diocesan newspaper, Catholic Action of the South, and organizer of the Associated
Catholic Charities, Wynhoven personified the Catholic social apostolate in early
twentieth century New Orleans. In 1910 he championed a hotel and job-finding agency
for the homeless and later founded Hope Haven near Marrero, Louisiana, a school for
orphaned and abandoned boys. Madonna Manor for younger children soon followed.
Archbishop Shaw praised the Dutch-born priest as “the father of the widow and the
orphan.”26 The area’s growing Italian population on the West Bank of New Orleans
fueled the endeavors of this “militant priest and citizen,” who ceaselessly appealed to
wealthy Louisianans “like a guilty conscience.” Wynhoven’s intense concern for the
social conditions that shaped the deeds of criminals surprised even Murphy. After a visit
with Wynhoven and one incarcerated murderer, Murphy recalled,

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Fairclough, Race and Democracy, 44-45.

Baudier, The Catholic Church in Louisiana, 533-534; Archbishop Shaw to Peter Wynhoven, 7 June 1934,
facsimile in Baudier, “Msgr. Peter Wynhoven’s Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of Ordination,” (New Orleans,
1934), in Archives of the Archdiocese of New Orleans (AANO).
never since seeing him have I wittingly passed snap judgments on
the frightful deeds of goaded humanity…Nor have I ever since
recoiled from the morally bereft and diseased, but better
remembered that a priest must be a physician of the soul.27

Many believed that this prominent spokesman for the church would become
Archbishop Shaw’s successor in 1935. Wynhoven’s sympathies with the “Americanist”
school of Catholic thought, however, caused friction with the church hierarchy. The latter
appointed the more ultramontane Rummel instead. Wynhoven emphasized the important
role played by laity in leading society away from the forces of materialism and “rugged
individualism” that threatened the common good. In the process, he assisted with public
school teacher equalization lawsuits in New Orleans.

But if Wynhoven advanced the Catholic answer to the social question in New
Orleans, he also demonstrated the deep incongruities between black social consciousness
and Catholic sense of “social order and justice.” Black need had created an important
opportunity for Catholic advancement, he acknowledged. But that same social
vulnerability to the economic and social trappings of Jim Crow also opened the door for
subversive influences threatening “the peaceable process of social justice” in the region.
In a 1943 piece titled “Rising Shadow,” Wynhoven pointed to the rise in black
delinquency in the months following Pearl Harbor as evidence of such forces.
Communism exploited black discontent, and blacks should watch their deportment and
turn to the church for guidance. The article incensed the Knights of Peter Claver, who
accused Wynhoven of displaying the same stilted paternalism of many reform-minded
clergymen toward the clients of Catholic social outreach. “While we greatly appreciate
your efforts to protect us from, and to warn us of impending harm,” one KPC told

27 Murphy, Yankee Priest: 221-22.
Wynhoven, “we believe your approach was not in keeping with what we believe to be the Catholic spirit.” More importantly, the letter played into the hands of white southerners, KPC’s insisted. Wynhoven underscored white fears of social misrule, justifying white violence and discrimination against blacks.

Wynhoven responded by registering his shock that “the spirit of the day has apparently entered your ranks.” African Americans, he countered, had long ignored the warnings of many well-intentioned priests who quietly worked for their social betterment. Because they ignored these efforts, he saw fit to “warn your people against the riotous and rebellious spirit” of the day and combat “the inclination of some Negro sympathizers to criticize well disposed people who are calmly working for your interests but who are not violently given to demands in your behalf.” Such attitudes, he added, “will not pay dividends, especially here in the South.” One Josephite, however, joined the KPC’s, accusing the labor priest of writing “as a blasé southern politician forgetting Him who is our host in the Sanctuary.” Thanks to Wynhoven, he fumed, white southerners must surely “pray and thank God that they are not like the rest of men! How long must we be patient with such undiluted paganism?” Wynhoven’s actions before and after the article’s appearance also alienated black Catholics. The labor priest ignored blacks when he sought approval for his article. “Surely in the thirty years you have worked with us

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28 John H. Clouser to Monsignor Peter Wynhoven, 6 November 1943, Box 3, Folder 26, APT Papers, ARC.

29 Monsignor Peter Wynhoven to Archie W. Arnaud, 28 October 1943, Box 3, Folder 25, APT Papers, ARC.

30 Ibid.

31 R.A. Auclair to Msgr. Peter Wynhoven, 14 December 1943, in Box 3, Folder 26, APT Papers, ARC.
and for us you must know some Negro whose intelligence you respect and whose opinion could be acceptable in matters of this kind,” one Knight declared.  

Wynhoven, of course, was hardly alone in pointing up the black man’s “state of mind” as a threat to social order, let alone a battleground for a variety of competing social ideologies. In a 1944 series of articles for Christian Century titled “Can Catholicism win America?” Harold Fey characterized blacks’ wartime discontent as fodder for a “Catholic plan for changing the industrial order.” Catholics’ guiding principle of a “corporative state” promised ownership for workers and gave them a stake in society. It was also a plan “adopted but never put fully into effect by Benito Mussolini.” The hierarchy’s once hesitant response to the “Negro question,” Fey believed, was suddenly growing to reveal not simply their concern for “witnessing the Christian faith,” but also for “considerations of power.” Catholics hoped to “win Negroes to obedience to Rome.” No doubt Catholic reformers believed wholeheartedly that the black struggle, as Fey put it, “provides a large opportunity for Catholic expansion.”

The controversy between Wynhoven and black Catholics certainly revealed white missionaries’ anxieties toward black social consciousness, particularly amid the social and economic challenges of the Second World War. Edward Murphy, pastor of St. Joan of Arc lamented, quoting the planter and writer William Alexander Percy that “the Negro is losing his greatest asset, his politeness.” At the same time, he added, “he is reflecting what he has found.” White hostility toward African Americans had created a situation in which the latter were all to willing to assert their rights once changing economic

32 Clouser to Wynhoven, 6 November 1943, op. cit.

conditions provided the opportunity. For Catholic clergymen and activists, Catholic Action provided the only hope for white liberals’ much sought mannerly revolution. In joining the NAACP and the Urban League, Catholics would infuse social reform efforts with a truer sense of Christian charity. “The voice of Catholicism must be raised for justice and protection of our humble brothers, else it is neither Catholic, nor even a voice.”

Facing Protestant and secular challenges, white clergymen advanced the church’s social message in terms of a larger struggle against the forces of modernism, Protestantism, and communism at mid-century.

The Knights’ refusal to see it in such terms evoked frustration from missionaries and revealed a significant ideological chasm between black Catholics and their church. Despite the prejudices of white Catholics that drove many blacks to embrace other faiths, one Josephite, for example, excoriated black recalcitrance toward church teachings.

White Catholics certainly failed to live up to those teachings, but “should the master of any school be blamed if his pupils do not live up to what they are taught?” In the face of such discrimination, black Catholics themselves ought to consider their own attitudes. “It is just as inconsistent for Negroes to disbelieve the doctrines of the Catholic Church because some Catholics do not practice them perfectly as [it] is for white people to condemn all Negroes because of the disreputable lives of some Negroes. Let the Negro be first to be fair if he asks fairness…”

For their part, black Catholics grew weary of paternalistic attitudes that viewed them as fair game within a larger ideological struggle. To Wynhoven’s accusations of disloyalty, one Knight countered, “If you believe that our


35 Colored Harvest 22, no. 5 (October-November, 1934)
strength grows out of our weakness, then you may be willing to concede that our actions were as friendly to you as yours were to us.”36 Tureaud blasted Wynhoven for his willingness to “make Negroes public property to abuse as he sees fit.” Indeed for Tureaud, the Knights pulled too many punches when it made the Wynhoven controversy a private affair between the order and the archbishop. “I certainly ought to have a personal right to answer his abuse without the protection that has been given his letter.”37 Tureaud and the Knights all agreed that Catholic concern for black vulnerability presumed rather than combated white hostility. The latter’s own apostasy from Christian charity met few challenges from the Catholic hierarchy in the 1940s.

While the Clavers themselves warned black Catholics against acts of impatience, they understood delinquency as a response to rising white hostility in the war years. The war, after all, fundamentally reshaped the social structure of the south. As northern soldiers moved south for training, rural southerners moved into the region’s urban areas to work in war-related industry. Housing shortages abounded, while these larger demographic transitions significantly altered the cultural geography of the south by bringing black and white into close contact. As such transformations threatened whites’ sense of social place, violence against blacks in urban areas and around military camps kept A.P. Tureaud’s law office and the NAACP busy. In Camp Livingston, Louisiana, a white officer ordered a black non-commissioned officer to shoot a sick black soldier, one reported to Tureaud. “About 300 colored soldiers have now gone AWOL.” Meanwhile, “we have had cases of the police actually killing Negroes while handcuffed right here in

36 A.P. Tureaud to John H. Clouser, 27 November 1943, Box 3, Folder 26, APT Papers, ARC.
37 Ibid.
Tureaud stressed the need for a statewide NAACP to deal with violence and discrimination occurring throughout the region.

Yet despite the conflicted meanings of black delinquency that came to the fore in the early 1940s, both African Americans and liberal clergymen understood the important ways World War II mobilization increased the opportunities for black social criticism. As much as the hierarchy could be accused of trying to reign in black social aspirations, Archbishop Rummel understood that “the war has brought to the fore conditions that have always been with us. The full benefits of our free institutions and the rights of our minorities must be openly acknowledged and honestly respected.” Indeed, the *Louisiana Weekly* declared, “the solution of the race problem which was effective for forty years will no longer work. For the one essential element for success, the compliance of the Southern Negro is gone.” Like the hierarchy, Tureaud and the Knights of Peter Claver hoped to place organizational structure upon black frustration. As Edward LaSalle insisted, if African Americans met the challenges of change with louder demands for social and political equality, they did so as faithful Catholics who supported their pastors, attended communion, and expressed their patriotism in word and deed. Nonetheless, he lamented, “We participate in these activities on one side of a great social wall.” He praised the patriotism and faith of the Knights of Peter Claver, but declared that the order would not accept segregation.

Our people will respond if their eyes are opened and the task of leadership is to open their eyes. Our Order should go in for freedom in a big way. We should refuse to participate in any patriotic demonstration on a Segregated basis. We should refuse to

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38 A.P. Tureaud to C.A. Williams, 13 October 1942, Box 8, Folder 12, APT Papers, ARC.

39 *Louisiana Weekly*, 5 December 1942, and 7 June 1941.
assist in a religious rally on a Segregated basis. The courage must be found to put into action our disgust of segregation.  

Indeed, black Catholics remained committed to working in and through the church as part of the larger black struggle against racism and economic oppression. Black Catholics’ strategic appropriation of church leadership and resources offered important opportunities for unifying blacks across the region. As we have seen, Tureaud and fellow churchmen stood at the center of the NAACP politicization in Louisiana. “The Group,” as they were known, persisted in unifying the organization across class and denominational lines.

Tureaud’s impassioned defense of the church evidenced black Catholic commitment to the church’s spiritual and social resources. In 1943, the attorney denounced the *Pittsburgh Courier* when the influential black publication criticized blacks in New Orleans for their apathy toward the black struggle. A sense of defeatism, the paper declared, derived in part from their failure “to win out in any encounter with the nefarious political entities that control the State.” Largely, however, it was the Catholic Church that conditioned black lethargy, according to the *Courier*. A frustrated Tureaud attacked the reporter’s insinuation that un-zoned neighborhoods for black and white in New Orleans constituted a social disadvantage for blacks. “Seemingly disappointed that, superiorly to other cities, we have little or no ghetto here, he stigmatizes the whole city of New Orleans as an economic ghetto.” In criticizing the Catholic Church, Tureaud fumed, “Mr. Young really goes berserk.”

There are good, bad and indifferent Catholics as well as Protestants, and sometime the less representative elements in a community are more organized and vocal. The Church herself is

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40 *Claverite* 23, no. 7 (October, 1943): 5.
impeccable like her Founder. The Church’s members belong to the well-know human race with all its faults and failings. The Church upholds a peerless light. She is not at all accountable when her children grope in willful darkness.\textsuperscript{41}

Black assertions of political rights, he and fellow churchmen declared, often depended on the priest who lived in both black and white social worlds. In his own parish of Corpus Christi, congregants praised the efforts of Edward Casserly, SSJ, who “has been most frank in speaking up for Negroes in the Catholic Church and in matters pertaining to their rights and justices.”\textsuperscript{42}

While some priests balked at black social struggles, many in areas particularly hostile to black activism emerged as important voices of protest. Priests confronted local officials on behalf of their parishioners at a time when black assertions of leadership proved fatal. In Pass Christian, Mississippi, Rev. George Strype, SSJ, excoriated the “local machine politicians” under the control of the state Senator and demagogue Theodore Bilbo. When four black veterans went to cast their vote in the senatorial election, the bailiff turned them away. “I went to inquire why they could not vote. The aforementioned bailiff told me that the election managers decided last night that Negroes would not be allowed to vote.” One of the managers “also added that they could vote, if they painted their faces white.”\textsuperscript{43} In Breaux Bridge near Lafayette, Clausy Cloy and three companions brought Father M. Parent with them to register at the courthouse in St. Martinville. When they arrived the sheriff called Parent into his office to talk to him privately. When the priest insisted that all of them be present the sheriff warned that “you

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{41} A.P. Turead to P.L. Prattis, 8 March 1945, Box 3, Folder 38, APT Papers, ARC.
  \item \textsuperscript{42} \textit{Louisiana Weekly} 30 March 1940.
  \item \textsuperscript{43} Rev. George T.J. Strype, SSJ, to Hon. Lamarr Caudley, U.S. Attorney General, 2 July 1946, Box 8, Folder 39, APT Papers, ARC.
\end{itemize}
are headed for trouble, and that will mean bloodshed.”44 As these experiences demonstrated, efforts to break the bonds of disfranchisement proved particularly difficult in rural areas where planters controlled local law enforcement. “It is one thing to speak from the housetops about civil rights in a city the size of Lake Charles,” declared black labor leader Ernest Wright, “but another to do so in Lake Arthur or Jennings…”45

Blacks nonetheless persisted in maneuvering through the capricious demands of local registrars and parish sheriffs. Traveling through Catholic churches throughout the region, Tureaud promoted voting rights as the linchpin of black empowerment. By 1945, the NAACP noted marked improvement in the number of registered voters throughout the region, particularly in New Orleans. Tureaud put his legal talents on display in 1945 when he argued the case of *Hall v. Nagel* in St. John the Baptist Parish. In Federal court, Tureaud and Thurgood Marshall presented clear evidence that Nagel, the registrar, asked black registrants questions he did not ask of whites. “Their arguments and please were concise, conclusively based on fact and eloquently delivered,” one observer noted, “occasionally the defense attorneys were caught napping.”46 The NAACP lauded that after the case “Negroes in New Orleans registered without any trouble.” It encouraged members to continue pressing for voting rights. “As an underprivileged group, we should definitely be interested in what Louisiana Congressmen are going to say on FEPC, Public Housing, Federal aid to Education, 65 cents per hour minimum wage, enlarged Social Security Program, etc.,” the Citizens’ Committee declared. “The ease with which

44 Clausy Roy to NAACP, 22 December 1947, Box 9, Folder 4, APT Papers, ARC.
45 *Louisiana Weekly*.
46 *Louisiana Weekly*, 13 April 1946.
Negroes are registering now should not; must not lull us into complacency. Since we have started, let’s stay in the fight until the issues are settled by court decisions.\footnote{47 Citizens’ Committee to NAACP members, 2 December 1945, Box 8, Folder 33, APT Papers, ARC.}

African American labor activist Ernest J. Wright demanded the “‘work, fight, and pray’ plan in moving forward in Louisiana, with special emphasis on WORK. Too many of us just sit idly by and expect God to fight our battles.” Wright hoped that successes in the field of voting rights would translate into a fuller engagement in industrial democracy. In 1946, an Associated Negro Press article identified the gradual movement of organized into black social consciousness. In the major strikes following the First World War, black workers served as scabs, only intensifying racial strife in northern industrial centers and southern mines. But after the 1930s, African Americans could not be found “right in the middle of strikes.” For Wright, “strong labor unions will go a long way in improving the general welfare of the Negro.”\footnote{48 \textit{Louisiana Weekly}, 13 April 1946.} No issue could have been more pressing in the months after V-J Day, the \textit{Louisiana Weekly} declared in early 1946. Black workers in Baltimore, New Orleans, and Mobile were laid off from war jobs in a drive to “restore southern feudalism” The rise of white supremacy “has been identified as the greatest anti-labor force in the south.”\footnote{49 \textit{Louisiana Weekly}, 5 January 1946.}

The Catholic Church’s historic stake in pro-labor causes brought Archbishop Rummel and the hierarchy to the center of social reform in 1940s Louisiana. For Wright, the church proved vital as “negroes were labeled as Communists who spoke out against the vicious practices of jim-crowism…” The hierarchy’s advocacy of important labor measures, many hoped, would whittle away at white hostility to “social Catholicism” and

\footnote{47 Citizens’ Committee to NAACP members, 2 December 1945, Box 8, Folder 33, APT Papers, ARC.}
\footnote{48 \textit{Louisiana Weekly}, 13 April 1946.}
\footnote{49 \textit{Louisiana Weekly}, 5 January 1946.}

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challenged many churchmen who “have time and time again advocated the ‘take it slow policy.’” In a 1940 speech to a Catholic Industrial Conference in the city, Archbishop Rummel upbraided Catholics who “would deny the Church every right even to express her mind in connection with social problems, not to speak of using her authority in the enunciation of definite principles for the guidance of human society.” Catholics who succumbed to the “material philosophy” of the age ignored the truth that “the conditions under which human intelligence and labor may be bought and sold” were, in fact “eminently moral” concerns.

When we consider further that man has also a spiritual nature, marked and signed with the imprint of the image of God, destined to be elevated to the dignity of a child of God and to the enjoyment of the Kingdom of Heaven, we can readily understand that every question that tends to either ennoble or degrade this dignity belongs to the province of the Church, the divine custodian of the human soul.

Rummel also deplored the fact that 63.2 percent of families living in New Orleans remained in the low-income group. Shortly after the conference, Rummel and several priests created a Social Action Summer School to teach clergymen and laity the practical applications of *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno*. He also created the Archdiocesan Social Action Committee, appointing Reverend Vincent O’Connell to chair alongside Reverend Jerome Drolet. Both priests became synonymous with labor reform in the 1940s, playing a central role in the confrontations between the church and Catholic plantation owners in southeast Louisiana. Like Wright, Rummel and his assistant and

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50 *Louisiana Weekly*, 23 November 1946.

51 Joseph Francis Rummel, “The Church and the Social Order,” Address delivered before the Regional Meeting of the Catholic Conference on Industrial Problems, April 8-9, 1940, Copy in Tulane University Special Collections.

52 See especially Thomas A. Becnel, *Labor, Church, and the Sugar Establishment*: 60-67.
future head of the Catholic Committee of the South, Vincent J. O’Connell, also criticized the unwillingness of many black Catholics to participate in unionization drives. “You have failed to take leadership in the field of Labor in New Orleans, and that is lamentable,” O’Connell declared.\(^\text{53}\)

O’Connell immediately made a name for himself as a thorn in the side of Catholic planters while serving as a chaplain in German P.O.W. camps in the sugar cane regions of southeast Louisiana. The labor priest would routinely inspect the labor conditions in local sugar cane fields and plants. Throughout the decade, O’Connell tackled the intrinsic ties between labor and race discrimination in Louisiana. Quoting Pius XII, he assaulted southern racism as one of the “four great cankers” weakening the achievement of the common good, alongside “economically selfish individuals who prevent decent Christian living for workers…” Such evils, he declared, “must be faced with candor and the solution dictated by Christian principles must be accepted with resolute courage.”\(^\text{54}\)

Throughout the decade, the committee enjoyed minimal to modest success in unionizing Louisiana workers. More telling were the confrontations that the church began forcing with the region’s economic and political elite. Jerome Drolet especially caused eyes to roll among conservative whites in the pews, often reading antisegregation material from the pulpit and denouncing anti-labor forces that sought to ban sit-down strikes in the late 1930s. Born in Kankakee, Illinois, the labor priest studied under Bishop Francis J. Haas at Catholic University of America. After moving to New Orleans, he fought communist

\(^{53}\) Claverite (November 1946): 9.

\(^{54}\) Colored Harvest, November 1948.
influences within the local International Longshoremen and Warehousemen’s Union and led the charge against a 1944 right-to-work bill.55

Rummel, as the historian Thomas Becnel outlines, consistently supported the two outspoken priests. Repeatedly chastising Louisiana politicians for their resistance to fair labor practices, Drolet, O’Connell and the Catholic Committee of the South threw the church’s influence into the two central struggles of late-1940s southern politics: the Fair Employment Practices Committee and the Dixiecrat Revolt of 1948. The wartime implementation of the FEPC had provided an important moment in the history of Catholic action in New Deal legislation. The Commission, O’Connell lauded, protected the right of all individuals to secure a living wage. “Too often we have been offered the choice between total planning by an all-powerful state and unplanned, so-called “free” competition. The forcing of such a choice is artificial and unnecessary.”56 When a move for a permanent Commission in reached the Senate, however, Louisiana politicians led the chorus of southern opposition. Allen J. Ellender, a Catholic Senator from Thibodaux, Louisiana, in the heart of sugar cane country, had offered consistent support for large agricultural interests against the efforts of unions and the church. Ellender, who kept a copy of Rerum Novarum among his papers, was not unfamiliar with the church’s social teachings. He did, however, challenge the FEPC at every turn, along with one of the cornerstone of the New Deal, the Wagner Act. For Ellender, the law mandating federal support of labor unions led to rampant abuse of rights for labor. “Under such a system,


56 Louisiana Weekly, 11 December 1948.
there has grown an obnoxious crop of arrogant, power-drunk labor leaders who have little respect for the law and still less for their fellow countrymen.”

At a January 1946 hearing on the FEPC in Houma, Louisiana, Ellender denounced the plan for a permanent commission, declaring that it “will put the Negroes 10 years back in their progress.” O’Connell upbraided the senator for making it “an entirely Negro issue” and reminded him that once Jews, Catholics, and Mexicans are all denied security of a job and a living wage, “they will have nothing to lose” when the extent of their resentment came full circle. That spring, Ellender and Senator John Overton initiated a southern filibuster of the congressional bill for a permanent FEPC. When Ellender and Overton put Louisiana center stage in southern resistance, Drolet attacked the race-baiting politicians. “Both our U.S. Senators showed the world that they were completely ignorant of the basic reason millions gave their lives to beat Hitler,” Drolet fumed. Thanks to the filibuster, however, the bill had no chance for consideration.

The continued movement of African Americans from rural areas into cities and the tensions associated with housing and job competition further heightened the potential for racial strife toward the end of the decade. As Louisiana made the sharp transition to a predominantly urban state with growing industry, social relations in cities like Baton Rouge and New Orleans became more segregated than they had ever been.

The Catholic hierarchy struggled to keep pace with the rapidly transforming economy and social geography of the Pelican State. Guarded in many ways by their status as clergymen, Drolet and O’Connell continued their assault on southern politicians.

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57 Allen Ellender to Gladys Hippler, 5 June 1946, Box 594, “Labor Strikes” Folder, Allen Ellender Papers, Nichols State University Special Collections (Thibodaux, Louisiana).

58 Fairclough, 147.
In 1948, the Catholic Committee of the South attacked the Dixiecrat Revolt, a movement of southern democrats against the Democratic Party’s civil rights platform. O’Connell, now chairman of the organization, declared Dixiecrats similar to communists. After all, both “are given to hypocrisy, desire dictatorship and seek to establish ‘company unions.’” Amid both a conservative resurgence that cast aspersions of communism on progressive movements in the South and a widening rift among liberal factions, the timing indeed seemed crucial. In June of 1947, the United States passed the Taft-Hartley Labor Management Act. Allowing states to pass right-to-work and open-shop legislation, the act undermined unionizing efforts in the region. The Catholic Church immediately recognized the far-reaching implications of such a move. Alongside Taft-Hartley, the Dixicrats’ racially charged anti-labor rhetoric augmented white lay hostility to social Catholicism. This atmosphere of anti-labor reaction that sought to keep blacks in their place as field workers and removed many of them from war-era employment.

In the face of these conflicts, Rummel sought more concerted efforts at unifying the church’s teachings with the exigencies of the industrial south. In 1947, he championed a labor school at Loyola that would bring workers and management together to examine and implement the labor encyclicals in the new south. “No one will question the timeliness,” Rummel announced, “especially in this area of the Deep South, where there is so little understanding and sympathy with the teaching of the Church on the principles of Social Justice.” As a leader of the school, he got Louis Twomey. Like few others, the career of this indefatigable Jesuit connected Catholics’ labor oriented social

59 CCS undated press release, Box 2, Folder 22, CCS Papers, ARC.
vision to the plight of African American southerners. Twomey recognized the sweeping changes facing the post-war south.

Our opportunity in the south is particularly promising. Two great changes are taking place in our culture: industrialization and a readjustment of racial relations. Both of these movements are gathering strength daily. It is certainly going to take a great deal of intelligent thinking and planning, a great deal of moral courage and physical effort to keep these inevitable changes from becoming purely secular. What is taking place right now is going to change the face of the future. The extent to which we, in cooperation with other soundly progressive agencies, are able to impregnate these economic and social changes with the principles of Christ will be the measure of the Christian character of the new South.\

Suddenly realizing its own material potential, the south’s greatest strength was also its greatest weakness. Southerners had yet to fully succumb to the rampant materialism and “rugged individualism” that plagued much of the world, a product of “abuses in our so-called free enterprise system which condition the soil for the growth of communist activity.” But Twomey nonetheless feared the south’s failure to create a productive via media between unchecked capitalism and communism.

For Twomey, the loss of a sense of Catholic unity lay at the heart of the nation’s social problems. He feared the south’s “reconstruction” in terms that guided progressivism elsewhere. Fully conscious of the need to maintain a productive distinctiveness in the modern world, he called upon Catholics to reassert their scholastic identity and provide a fortress against two competing social ideologies: communism and American liberal ideals that placed no basis for justice in natural law. Neither of these

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60 Christ’s Blueprint for the South 1, no. 3 (5 January 1949).

strains of thought, he believed, offered a genuine solution to the central problem of modern life: a rugged individualism brought on by what he called a “Protestant interpretation of economic life.” Indeed, the major culprits for Twomey and his students in the rising social crises of the 1950s were not so much the race-baiting politician or Klansman, but rather the likes of Martin Luther and John Dewey. Luther’s influence, the Jesuit wrote, made every man his own judge of the meaning of sacred scripture, allowing him to ignore the social directives of Christ and His Church. And if the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey were correct in stripping from knowledge any grounding in philosophy and religion, he insisted, “then we might just as well tear up the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution…for there are no such things as inalienable rights which do not find their source in God.” As an alternative to these secular ideologies, Twomey argued for the reassertion of a “true and and effective directing principle,” a “whole Catholic approach to the modern crisis, which is in effect a social crisis.”

Throughout the 1950s Twomey emerged as the literal voice of social Catholicism in the South. His publication written exclusively for the Society, *Christ’s Blueprint for the South*, challenged Jesuits to promote Christian social principles in their primary mission as educators of future southern leaders. The “social problem” was, after all, “a complex pattern of many distinct but interrelated problems. It may be defined as the sum total of all those serious maladjustments in society, of those critical distortions of right order, of those grave miscarriages of justice…” As a result, educators and administrators of Jesuit colleges must become “an efficient moulder of modern youth.” Like the family, the labor union, or the parish, the classroom became “a cell” in the larger social organism.

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62 Twomey to Edward D. Rapier, 5/31/1949, Box 1, Folder 1, Louis J. Twomey (LJT) Papers, Loyola.
of society. This unit propagated a sense of the common good in society, joining the religious and social aims of an ideal community.\textsuperscript{63} Into the 1960s, as segregation occupied center stage as the major source of economic discrimination for African Americans, Twomey excoriated the lack of social education among both Jesuits and Catholics as a whole, believing that Catholic education bore the major responsibility for shaping a future progressive leadership. “Our educational system is largely focused on training its students how to be material successes in life, with little or no concern for the higher values of human living.”\textsuperscript{64}

No area demonstrated a deeper need for Catholic reform and organized labor than the sugar cane industry. Indeed, as nexuses of race and labor exploitation at mid-century go—Watts and Detroit for African Americans, and Mexican workers in Northern California, for example—few match the historically entrenched significance of the plantation regions of southeast Louisiana. Embedded in a tropical climate, the intensity of cane labor since the early days of settlement often elicited brutal master-slave relationships and some of the more striking slave revolts in the antebellum south. The sugar cane territory along the riverbanks between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, moreover, evoked the stark contrasts and tragedies of post-war southern life. Petrochemical plants loomed over black cane cutters in the fields, for whom little had changed in the past 100 years, Twomey and the National Agricultural Workers’ Union lamented. A work force of about ten thousand, eighty percent of whom were African Americans, lived and worked in the cane fields in some of the most dismal conditions in

\textsuperscript{63} \textit{Christ’s Blueprint for the South}, October 1955, LJT Papers, Loyola.

\textsuperscript{64} Twomey, “The Price of Freedom,” address delivered 1951, copy in LJT Papers, Loyola.
the United States. Many lived in the same, whitewashed slave quarters, their debt to the company owners cementing their place in what Twomey called “this last vestige of pre-civil war decadence.”

Twomey joined labor activists in denouncing the “entrenched attitude of paternalism” that inhibited the growth of labor unions. “Paternalism does not recognize the status of man in a free society and sets one man up as Lord and Master over his fellow human beings,” the NAWU reported. “This hold-over from the ante-bellum days is equally bad for the employer and the worker since it also de-emphasizes the significance of the wage earners actual income.” The forced system of indebtedness perpetuated by the south’s benighted labor practices converged with the modern impersonal forces of modernization and market capitalism, the National Agricultural Workers’ Union lamented. Black Louisianans remained “in the midst of a miserable existence, subject to the most dangerous tensions.” Despite their claims to taking care of their own, the NAWU added, owners “know little or anything about the social end economic problems their workers face, they either care little about them or make no serious effort to cope with them. They would soon find out that many of their workers are

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undernourished from a diet consisting mainly of beans and rice.” Plantation workers, Twomey declared, “live in a state of almost semi-feudalism.”

Like all other human beings they have an instinctive desire for freedom and for decent working and living conditions. But for generations an almost impenetrable wall of Paternalism has severely limited their possibility of enjoying this freedom and decency. Of themselves they are powerless to make any effective efforts to right their pitiable condition. Strong union organization is really their only hope.

At every turn, labor reformers and clergymen fought the “county-seat alliances” that cemented planters’ power through their ties to local political and legal authorities. Sheriffs gained reputations for their brutal treatment of black workers and protection of white economic interests. In Assumption Parish, where authorities allowed prostitution and gambling to run freely, the Louisiana Weekly reported, African Americans “live in constant fear of Sheriff Richard.” When Richard slapped and threatened to whip a woman until she confessed to a minor theft, her priest, Father Harry Maloney, “almost came to blows” with him. After Maloney went into the courthouse to upbraid authorities the sheriff stormed out after him declaring, “I try to do what’s right.” Maloney rebuked, “By brutalizing my people.” The woman and her husband, Julius Cheatham, later filed a suit against Assumption Parish with Maloney’s assistance.

Maloney remained a central figure in the Catholic drive for labor unions in the Napoleonville area. Between 1951 and 1953, priests’ assault on planter paternalism reached full strength when the National Agricultural Workers’ Union (AFL) took to the

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67 Ibid.

68 Twomey to Mr. M. W. Miller, Director of the Southern Conference of Teamsters, 27 May 1953, in Box 15, Folder 7, LJT Papers, Loyola.

69 Louisiana Weekly 24 September 1949.
fields to organize laborers among the large plantations of Godchaux Sugars, Inc. and other prominent companies. Labor organizers used the connections priests had forged with workers to spread their influence into the fields. Clergy regularly organized interracial meetings in local churches and translated union leaders’ messages into French. Priests, the National Agricultural Workers Union lauded, “have made their church and school facilities available and have otherwise encouraged the workers on the plantations as well as the little farmers to join the Union.” The backing of Archbishop Rummel, too, “is most potent, as both workers and employers are Catholic.”

Twomey underscored the significance of the church’s presence in the region to the famous waterfront priest, John Corridan. Twomey feared the spiritual consequences of the church not getting involved in the movement. “I am working very closely with these organizers,” Twomey wrote the famous waterfront priest John Corridan, “because the church simply must be identified with the union movement if we are to win the thousands of souls who have been lost to the Church largely because the plantation owners, the majority of whom are Catholics, have never made it possible for these workers to lead normal lives.” Nonetheless, he lamented, “we are scared stiff of the strike largely because of the overwhelmingly great number of Negroes involved.”

Planters countered church activism by appealing to Rummel for Maloney’s removal. “Father Maloney is under a lot of heat,” the NAWU reported. “All the big planters have asked the Arch Bishop to remove him and accusing him of organizing cane workers. However, he is standing firm.” The idea of removing such a labor leader upset

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70 NAWU-AFL Press Release, 14 August 1953; H.L. Mitchell to Hugo Ernst, 20 October 1953, Reel 37, Southern Tenant Farmers Union Papers, on microfilm at Amistad Research Center (ARC).

71 Twomey to John Corridan, 8 October 1953.
Twomey. “For the sugar cane workers in Assumption Parish, Father Maloney is the principal source of hope for the dawn of a new era in which their value as human beings will be truly acknowledged and protected.” Maloney eventually stayed in Napoleonville, but planters persisted in drawing a sharp line between the confessional and the cane field. “It was somewhat staggering to run into the violent opposition shown by many Catholic Plantation owners,” Twomey recalled. Planters’ general attitude “seemed to be that priests should stick to the pulpit and not become involved in matters which were none of their business.” Owners framed many of their protests in paternalistic attitudes toward African American workers. “If the Catholic Committee is sincerely interested in the welfare of the laborers,” one grower wrote, “teach the laborers to take advantages of the opportunities they now have.” Laborers, he added, “have a lot to learn about their duties as well as their rights!”

The NAWU’s success, however, allowed it to force the issue with planters at a wage hearing in July of 1953 under the U.S. Department of Agriculture. At the hearing Union leaders denounced a suggested wage increase by planters as inadequate to supply the needs of the workers. Shortly thereafter the chairman of the Catholic Committee of the South exhorted planters on the need for more advanced living standards for workers and the latter’s right to organize in a union. The Archdiocesan Council of Catholic

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72 Twomey to Rummel, 12 May 1953, Box 15, Folder 7, LJT Papers, Loyola.

73 For a good discussion of the church’s encounter with sugar growers and the National Agricultural Workers Union in the 1940s and 1950s, see Thomas A. Becnel, Labor, Church, and the Sugar Establishment: Louisiana, 1887-1970 (Baton Rouge, 1980), 58-67; Becnel’s study prompts important questions about the connections of organized labor to the racial conflicts associated with the integration movement in the 1950s. On both sides of the integration debate, activists and white segregationists cut their teeth on the labor and Right-to-work struggle by engaging Catholic teaching and using religious organizations to develop a formal response to larger calls for integration.

74 Olin V. Joffrion, Letter to the Editor, Catholic Action of the South, 12 November 1953.
Women conducted an investigation of plantation housing. At the hearing it demanded immediate attention to the deplorable conditions facing workers. After the hearing, the Union praised, “our organizational work has gone at a rapid pace. Today our group, known as the Sugar Workers Union, numbers two thousand dues paying members.” An Executive Board had begun overseeing field stewards on all the organized plantations, with African American workers emerging as local leaders in each district. Shortly thereafter, “The overseers on the plantations then suddenly began to show an unusual interest in the welfare of their men,” the union reported to Rummel. But it did not take long before the growers switched tactics. “Men began to get fired.” The South Coast Sugar Corporation fired the president of a union in the Montegut District. When two leading growers in Paincourtville fired a leading union man, “an immediate walk out occurred.” After one day, however, the owner reinstated the worker and all went back to normal. The Southdown Sugar Corporation began securing signatures stating that the workers who had been fired would vacate company-owned housing within twenty-four hours.75

Heading into the fall, tensions grew heavier. In September union members voted in favor of a strike if owners refused to go to the table with workers. William McCollum, manager of Southdown Sugars, Inc., one of the largest growers in the region, declined the invitation to meet with any union representatives declaring that both the federal and state governments excluded agricultural workers from any legislation granting the right of workers to organize. Ellender and other southern politicians had played key roles in

75 Hank Hasiwar to Archbishop Rummel, 28 August 1953, STFU Papers, Reel 37, on microfilm in ARC.
keeping farm workers out of labor legislation. “Suffice it to say that the employers are growing more militant in their determination to break the union, just as the workers are becoming more militant in their demand that the union shall be recognized,” the union reported to Rummel. “We regard the situation as becoming increasingly hazardous. A general strike may soon be forced upon the laborers.” On October 12, 1953, Local 317 walked out, with over 95% of field workers participating. The strike shut down 50 plantations in the region around Reserve, Houma, Raceland, and Thibodaux. Over the next forty-eight hours, plantation owners cut off utilities to housing and delivered fifty eviction notices to union leaders. “It remains to be seen whether the bosses will have the guts to issue eviction notices to the 2000 members listed on the Union’s roll up to last Saturday,” the NAWU noted. Plantation owners also sponsored a radio broadcast of a Baptist minister, Rev. Poindexter, who urged the strikers to return to the fields. Local authorities arrested and held one union leader, John Tillman, for five days after he passed out union literature. Tillman was released on a plantation owner’s bond, under orders to work or return to jail. “Unfortunately, when we saw him at midnight on the plantation, he was unwilling to leave and did not want us to take any action,” the Workers’ Defense League reported.

76 William McCollum, to Henry E. Hasiwar, 8 October 1953, in Box 15, Folder 9, LJT Papers, Loyola.

77 Report on the strike of Sugar Workers Union, Local #317,” 15 October 1953, Reel 37, STFU Papers.

78 Rowland Watts, Workers Defense League Nat’l Secretary, to Twomey, 17 November 1953, Box 15, Folder 9, LJT Papers (LJT Papers), Loyola.
Yet despite such “despicable acts,” the League noted, “the strike was remarkably peaceful and the sheriffs very well behaved.”\textsuperscript{79} It ended within a week. Workers had fallen short of their primary objectives, but laborers and clergymen still read it as an important moment of rights consciousness in this remote corner of the Deep South. Twomey lauded the efforts of priests in the struggle. “Many priests identified themselves with the cause of the strikers. For their pains they were called many unprintable names even by the Catholics among the growers. Nonetheless I am convinced that the Church did make significant gains through the participation of these priests.” Labor officials, meanwhile, realized the far-reaching consequences of the strike. At one meeting a black union member stood up and declared, “We won the strike the day we went out. Men for the first time. The white folks became aware that we are Negroes.”\textsuperscript{80}

The Catholic-led strike, however, also strengthened the resolve of Catholic industrialists and planters who refused to trade one form of paternalism for another. “Why don’t you keep your nose out of such and both labor and management will benefit thereby,” one wrote Twomey.\textsuperscript{81} Frustrated by the seeming strength of both organized labor and the church in reaching workers, sugar planters provided the main push for state regulation of union activity. In the process, they sought to mount a more direct challenge to the Catholic Church unique concept of “sin.” The timing was indeed significant. In the summer of 1954, only weeks after the monumental \textit{Brown} decision, the state legislature introduced a right-to-work bill that significantly undercut labor organizing by outlawing

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{80} Watts to Twomey, 17 November 1953, Box 15, Folder 9, LJT Papers, Loyola.

\textsuperscript{81} Anonymous to Louis J. Twomey, SJ, 29 May 1954, Box 28, Folder 11, Louis J. Twomey Papers (LJT Papers), Loyola University of New Orleans.
the union shop. Rummel condemned it as “reactionary legislation that will violate the principles of social justice.” The bill, he proclaimed, made “a mockery of the constitutional right to organize for the common good and welfare.” Rummel appointed Twomey to act as his representative in the state legislature, where the latter invoked papal support of labor unions since the nineteenth century. For the labor priest, right-to-work “pretends to protect individual rights” while ignoring “the serious obligation that every man has as a social being to render his proportionate contribution to the common good.” Seeking the necessary material conditions that prepared man for union with God, labor unions protected the common rights and dignities of human beings.82

In what seemed a dress rehearsal for later confrontations between laity and “liberal” clergymen, on May 30, 1954, a group known as the Catholic Laymen’s Committee for the Right-to-Work took out an ad in the Times-Picayune arguing that the hierarchy was manipulating the social doctrine of the church and using its authority to push a partisan agenda. Twomey blasted the statement as “a subtle and dangerous distortion of the Catholic Church’s position.”83 The group, however, also countered Twomey in the legislature by quoting lengthy passages from the work of Edward A. Keller, C.S.C., a Notre Dame professor who argued for papal approval of right-to-work. The bill passed in July, but the issue of clerical authority in social relations continued. In his final speech to the legislature, the labor priest had denounced Catholic relativism on labor rights. Catholics, he insisted, “are as free as any other citizens” in taking a position on public issues. But, “when these issues are vested with serious moral implications, it

82 Twomey to Joseph Fitzpatrick, SJ July 9, 1954, box 15, folder 11; Twomey to Michael J. Greene, box 15, folder 13, both in LJT Papers, Loyola.

83 Catholic Action of the South, 3 June 1954.
comes with ill grace and misguided independence that Catholics equate their own conclusions with those of their recognized spiritual leader.” While stopping short of placing the “pain of sin” on Catholic supporters of right-to-work, such an insinuation of Catholic obligation angered many Catholics who resented this “coercion of the laity by the use of an implied threat of moral sanction.” One protest argued that the church might as well “require the laity to hold cards for which a fee would have to be paid.” Another challenged Catholic emphasis on social reform, declaring that, “we shall always, more or less, be living in a valley of tears.” Moreover, “I am quite certain the desire of Pope Pius XI as expressed in His encyclical “Quadragesimo Anno” has not been presented in clear enough or positive enough wording for the individuals who have made material successes of themselves to thoroughly understand.”

For Twomey, the conflict indicated significant strides in the use of “the Louisiana State Legislature as a forum for the dissemination of Catholic social doctrine…” Such moments proclaimed “the high esteem the Church has for the working masses and for the little people in general.” However, Twomey lamented, the struggle also demonstrated the commitment of many Catholics to a “compartmentalized” religious world. Support for right-to-work “is an indication of how tragically the Catholic educational system has failed to train its students… I pray that we have the courage and the humility to go about correcting these weaknesses at once.”

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85 Twomey to Rt. Rev. Msgr. Irving DeBlanc, USL Catholic Student Center, 8 July 1954, Box 15, Folder 11, LJT Papers, Loyola.
Yet precisely when schools became the central battleground over the meaning of race in mid-twentieth century America—and in many ways because it did so—labor unions in the south declined significantly. White response to Brown fueled anti-labor efforts. H.L. Mitchell pinpointed segregationist organizations as the major threat to the advancement of labor unions in the 1950s. “Although the White Citizens Councils were set up to keep the southern Negro ‘in his place,’” Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union founder H.L. Mitchell explained, “there is substantial evidence that the movement is directed at trade unions.” Industrialists, planters, and “Right-to-Work Councils” all poured money and members into what Mitchell denounced as the “new ku klux klan.”

The decline of labor activism in Louisiana reflected the fate of southern liberalism as a whole in the post-war era. Anti-communist rhetoric and the rise of the “race question” to a fever pitch by the mid-1950s obscured southern liberals’ early vision of broad-scale economic reformation. As many historians have argued, American liberals themselves largely abandoned the class-conscious rhetoric of the New Deal era and movements to secure “industrial democracy” as a cornerstone of American freedom.

For Twomey, liberal abandonment of economic reform revealed the rise of “rugged individualism” in American society. Where liberals failed to unify labor with the south’s central social crisis at mid-century, church leaders like Twomey hoped to draw upon the theological resources undergirding labor reform to frame a genuine movement for racial integration. Interracialists found significant guidance in the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ, a central organizing principle for Catholic Action that preached

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87 Ibid.
a fundamental human unity amid the centrifugal forces of industrialization and social conflict. Twomey joined a handful of priests in advancing the Mystical Body doctrine through his labor school and student groups and Loyola University in New Orleans. The interracial movement successfully joined progressive minded Catholics from around the region committed to bringing the moral law to bear on the south’s most critical social crises. But, as Catholic social reformers in the 1930s and 1940s illustrated, Catholic thinkers’ struggle to calibrate church teaching to the plight of black southerners often amounted to efforts to fit black social expectations into this “Catholic answer” to the American dilemma.

Indeed, this movement, just like the church’s labor struggles in the decade previous, revealed many of the same incongruities between black social activism and Catholic social theology. Indeed, as evidenced by activists in the Catholic Committee of the South and members of the hierarchy committed to social uplift in the World War II era, the Catholic philosophical framework guiding social reform had more in common with the southern past than its emerging present. Even as both liberal and Catholic social reformers condemned the paternalism defining the economic and social world of the Jim Crow South, Catholics envisioned more of an idealized, de-racialized version of southern paternalism than a wholesale assault upon it. Their belief that the south constituted an ideal proving ground for a Catholic social vision revealed in many ways their insistence that workers and families fit within a necessary order, guided by a system of social and religious expectations. Alongside a rising emphasis on individual civil liberties, Catholics continued to offer encyclical-laden visions of community and group rights within the structures of Catholic authority.
CHAPTER 4:
SIN AND SOCIOLOGY

For many of his family and colleagues, Louis Twomey’s frustrations with “un-Catholic” social relations got the best of his judgment. When the labor priest accepted an invitation to speak to the NAACP, his brother warned, “you will increase the heat of those who are opposed and may engender heat into those who are now calm. The NAACP is a red flag to the South.” The labor priest’s tirades, challenging everything from the individualistic ethic of modern Americans to the state of labor and race relations in the Deep South drew reactions from conservative Catholics nationwide. Such a public presence certainly made him a target of the majority of South Louisiana’s Catholic establishment. “I have little respect for our Archbishop and less for you,” wrote one angry New Orleanian. “[I]t is men like you that make Catholics commit mortal sin.”

But for Twomey, years of scholastic training amid the Great Depression and the rise of militant nationalism worldwide had illuminated the social and economic forces that militated against the common good. They energized him with a determination to bring Catholic social teaching to bear on an area of the Deep South known for both its Catholic devotion and its distaste for the church’s social apostolate. Twomey embraced

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1 John J. Twomey to Louis J. Twomey, 16 April 1956, Box 20, folder 4; Anonymous to Twomey, 11/21/1955, Box 28, folder 1, both in Louis J. Twomey Papers, Special Collections, Loyola University of New Orleans.
this challenge with unapologetic zeal. “Why don’t I see a single black face here?” he thundered to a shocked student body at Loyola University of New Orleans.² Such was his personal demeanor and status as a cleric that most could feel graced by his presence no matter how abrading his politics. Solons in Baton Rouge, plantation owners in Thibodeaux, or businessmen in New Orleans might roll their eyes at reports of another speech made by the indefatigable labor priest, redolent as they were of Catholic social idealism. But Twomey, as one friend and biographer has observed, had a genuine southern quality about him. When you listened to his emotionally charged speeches and radio broadcasts or read his newsletters, you knew where his passions lay. This was downright “unjesuitical.”³

If so, then his colleague at Loyola of New Orleans was thoroughly Jesuit. Scholarly, esoteric, and downright curmudgeonly at times, the New York-born sociologist, Joseph H. Fichter, shared the labor priest’s impatience with southern racism. Few, however, could understand his methods. Operating in an era of the American church hostile to his brand of social-scientific objectivity, Fichter measured everything from the frequency of confession in urban parishes and patterns of behavior among alcoholic clergymen to police brutality. His efforts earned him a “watch” file with the FBI and local authorities. Yet even sympathizers wondered where he might sight his analytical crosshairs next. In revising his manuscript of *Religion and Social Science* in 1953, Fichter noticed a remark from the church’s Censor Librorum: “the author has a grievance

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³ Ibid.
against priests.” “I suppose the only way he could startle me more would be if he asserted that I am anti-Jesuit,” he bristled. In the 1950s south especially, Fichter’s tactics were bound to draw severe reaction from layman and clergyman alike. Sociological and psychological analyses of the impact of segregation on schoolchildren played a key role in the monumental Brown v. Board decision. To many, the Supreme Court decision constituted the most recent and grandest assault on the “southern way of life.”

Fichter and Twomey’s attitudes toward the southern church and its most prominent leader differed as well. Twomey admired Archbishop Rummel and extolled the virtues of southern honor. “That grand guy, the Archbishop,” he proclaimed in after the Right-to-Work struggle, “now has the labor movement in Louisiana in the palm of his hand.” Rummel’s leadership, Twomey believed, would fuel a movement from within the south to achieve a more authentic source of self-identity than Jim Crow.

We are a proud region. And indeed there is very much of which we can be justly proud. But some aspects of our past offer no ground for pride to a basically noble and religious people. And there is too much that is noble and religious in Southern hearts for us any longer to tolerate principles and practices scarcely compatible with nobility and religion. It seems to me that the time is long overdue when we must have the courage and the zeal to sift the wheat from the chaff of our Southern traditions and thus prepare for true greatness.

Like many southern liberals, Twomey held out faith in the South’s capacity for self-healing. The northern-born Fichter, meanwhile, preferred to examine the region’s backwardness. His interest in the South, particularly in New Orleans, was decidedly academic. Unlike many members of the Catholic Committee of the South, Fichter viewed

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4 Joseph H. Fichter to Joseph Francis Rummel, 7/3/1953, Box 1, folder 6, Joseph H. Fichter Papers (JHF Papers), Loyola University of New Orleans (Loyola).

5 Twomey to Edward D. Rapier, 14 February 1949, Box 19, Folder 3, Louis J. Twomey Papers, Special Collections, Loyola University of New Orleans (Hereafter cited as LJT Papers).
the church’s southern setting as more of a handicap to Catholic advancement than an opportunity. Twomey and the committee embraced southerner’s unique immunity to the forces of modernism. Fichter derided the south’s spiritual and social lethargy, quantifying and analyzing it in his most famous and notorious book, *Southern Parish*. While both agreed that the southerner needed the spiritual discipline of the Catholic Church in order to overcome his otherworldly complacency, Fichter questioned Rummel’s ability to translate Catholic moral teaching into definitive social action. “In spite of his brave proclamations about the immorality of racial segregation and of his frequent exhortations to brotherly love,” he later recalled, the archbishop “was ineffectual as a social activist.”

Yet in spite of their differences—indeed in many ways through them—both Twomey and Fichter emerged as the Catholic voice of grassroots desegregation in New Orleans. Twomey carried the church’s support for labor reform into the most significant social issue at mid-century America. Across radio airwaves, in speeches, and through his newsletter, *Christ’s Blueprint for the South*, Twomey broadcast his Catholic critique of Jim Crow. At every chance he insisted that only the south’s re-conversion to the spiritually and socially integrative power of the One True Church would bring about a genuine realization of the region’s potential for justice and salvation. To Twomey’s passion, Fichter added a quiet logic, willing, as one reviewer noted, to set down a bombshell in southern custom through “the calm objective presentation of facts.”

He engaged his students at Loyola University in sociological research to study the depth of southern prejudice. By analyzing Jim Crow’s effects on black southerners and

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challenging the assumptions that underlay white fears of social disorder, he hoped to move this “project” on human behavior into a foundation for social change. After all, he recalled, it was impossible to remain altogether detached from what he believed to be demanded by God.

The careers of Twomey and Fichter encapsulated the promise and failure of Catholic interracialism in the 1950s south. They joined Archbishop Rummel and a handful of “liberal” clergymen, including Shreveport priest Joseph B. Gremillion, in a concerted campaign to reshape the social conscience of southern whites. While certainly not the lone voices of social dissent in Louisiana, interracialist clergymen articulated the church’s authority on integration at a time when few clerics on a parish level felt willing—and few laity able—to challenge Jim Crow in such broad strokes. Balancing social data and education on living conditions for Louisiana blacks with Catholic social thought and moral theology, the Catholic interracial movement culminated in interracialists’ largest educational campaign in 1956. Against the climate of oppression generated by opportunistic southern politicians in the years after the 1954 Brown decision, Catholic interracialists upheld the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ, advancing an essential unity of humans, as the timeless and unwavering principle around which black and white southerners would forge a common social and spiritual identity.

The movement, however, drew headlines but few converts from among white southerners. Indeed, despite their confidence in the moral potency of Mystical Body teachings and Catholic hierarchical authority, they struggled to develop a solid pastoral program to meet the challenges of racial conflict at mid-century. The recalcitrance of many clergy and laity throughout the region, of course, had always frustrated
But white resistance turned to outright hostility in the wake of the *Brown* decision. In response to this backlash, Rummel issued a pastoral letter in 1956 declaring segregation “morally wrong and sinful.” Committing the Deep South’s largest private school system to integration, the statement earned praise from progressives across the country. No other city in the region had committed to integration on such a large scale. But what seemed a highpoint in the confrontation between Catholic authority and southern resistance quickly faded. By the end of the decade, the church had retreated from the frontlines of the integration movement.⁸

The Catholic interracial campaign in Louisiana nonetheless profoundly shaped the development and perception of Catholic thought and social action as a whole in mid-century America. Few Catholic communities drew as much attention to their plight as the south’s largest diocese, for few cities represented the promise and frustrations of interracial organizing better than New Orleans. Viewing themselves at a significant crossroads in the history of the south and church, reformers projected onto the integration movement profound anxieties over the place of both the parish community and religious leadership in the modern world. Catholic interracialists’ unique perspective on the race question, the nature of religious authority, and the meaning of social liberation within the context of both, all framed the rhetoric and actions of Catholic reformers as they sought to put a unique Catholic stamp on the Second Reconstruction. An examination of the interweaving and often conflicting ideological forces and anxieties that shaped their movement from within also reveals the tensions that shaped the larger integration

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movement in the 1950s south. By the 1960s, the “theological drama” of the civil rights movement played out in the streets, lunch counters, and jailhouses across the south. In the decade preceding it, however, church leaders, civic officials, and social theorists all negotiated the tensions between federal policy and community action, American liberalism and prophetic religion, social science and social morality.

“The study of history is primarily the study of the incarnation of ideas, the idea becoming the flesh of the social body.” Joseph B. Gremillion extolled the local parish community as the point where Christ’s Word entered the day-to-day world of human society. For Gremillion, laity in the 1950s needed a deeper awareness of “the whole Christ who lives in every nation, race, and time.” The parish, he insisted, must become an active agent in the church’s struggle for racial justice. Despite south Louisiana’s prominence at the center of Catholic interracial movement in the south, perhaps no figure embodied the movement’s careful balance of moral idealism and social opportunism. Born in Moreauville, Louisiana, on a cotton and cane farm with black sharecroppers, Gremillion emerged as an advocate of racial justice through his struggle to translate social theology into pastoral practice. Unlike Fichter and Twomey, whose positions at Loyola University often shielded them from the give-and-take world of clergy-lay interaction, Gremillion confronted the visceral forces of white prejudice with remarkable vision and personality. One of the most conspicuous men in Shreveport, walking up the street in clerics and a colorful straw hat, Gremillion strolled in black neighborhoods and white, surprising his parishioners with his ability to be so forthright in a city that rivaled Birmingham and Montgomery in its racial attitude toward blacks. “This is Shreveport,”
one Jesuit resident later explained, “USSR with a police state and thought control, and the rule of the White Councils…The lesson thus imparted is that any Catholic in this Soviet citadel who raises his voice for racial justice is thereby signing his death warrant.”

In this North Louisiana city, where he founded St. Joseph’s Parish in 1947, and where Catholics had as much social influence as a Baptist in the French Quarter, Gremillion brought together a small core group of Catholic laity to discuss how church teaching could be brought to bear on the dominant social problems of the day. If the hierarchy and parish priests disseminated centuries of Catholic doctrine, the laity implemented them in the world. Ideas must move through the parish and become “incarnate in the managerial, political, family and work life of my parishioners; in the Monday morning real life situations…the idea becomes the act, economic theory the contract, social concept the custom, political ideal the statute.”

Gremillion’s “Think Groups,” as they were called, soon spread to other towns in Louisiana. Meetings gathered a variety of professionals to talk about subjects of both social and theological significance. Catholic interracialist leader Stephen P. Ryan praised the “complete acceptance of the Catholic principles of charity and justice” that permeated the meetings.

To hear them talk calmly and deliberately of the many ramifications of the race question, not excluding interracial marriage, and to sense the genuinely spiritual nature of their response to it was an experience which anyone who has been concerned with the relations of the races down here for a long time will not soon forget.

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9 J.J. McCarthy, S.J. to Twomey, 3 October 1961, Box 21, Folder 10, LJT Papers, Loyola.


Many members, upon first joining, felt surprised by the range of topics: the nature of existence, man’s relationship to God, atheism, how “laissez faireism and secularistic thinking” underlay modern social problems, and how best “to establish the basis of Catholic social principles (or the laws and rules of natural justice).”

These kitchen-table meetings reflected the hope and anxiety of a church confronting new challenges to Catholic identity and tradition. The basis of humans’ relationship to one another, they discussed, was rooted in man’s awareness and knowledge of God. How was it to be reawakened in a new age of movement and uncertainty? Members prided themselves on the intellectualism of the meetings, but also remained wary of “arm-chair philosophizing … without any positive, social re-action to convictions.” Gremillion hoped to move them beyond their contemplation. Out of one group, architects and financiers began a low-income housing project in Shreveport. Another brought together a forum for how to implement integration immediately after Brown v. Board. “Some of Father Joe’s boys planted those seeds…he made us instruments for justice in this city,” one attendee recalled years later.

Gremillion’s uncommon faith in interracial organizing unhinged most whites in his midst. “You’re pushing this nigger business to far, Father,” one parishioner fumed. “It’s all right to give the nigger better wages and more schooling, but this business of social equality, no sir!” Such attitudes proved distressing for the visionary priest, who

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12 Report on Simmesport Meeting, 2 September 1951, Film 40, Reel 1, Joseph B. Gremillion Papers, Special Collections, Louisiana State University at Shreveport (LSUS).


14 Tribute by Riley Fell given at Funeral Mass, miscellaneous files, both in Joseph B. Gremillion Papers, LSUS; Gremillion to Catholic Committee of the South Meeting, report in Catholic Action of the South 4/30/1953.
defended his stance as a southerner. “My granddad fought in the Confederate Army. I remember when my grandmother’s personal slave servant died. Yes, I’m from the South and I’ve a lot to make up for.”15 With the largest contingent of Catholics in the region, he insisted, “Catholic Louisiana must set an example of interracial justice and charity which can set the compass for the whole South.”16 In 1954 he began a branch of Friendship House in Shreveport. The organization of Catholic lay men and women gathered both races together regularly in Mass, prayer, and community action to “sanctify themselves and the society in which they live through an effort to restore the justice and love of Jesus Christ to individuals and to social institutions, particularly with a view to interracial justice.”17 Staff workers and residents of the house were to “practice evangelic poverty” in all aspects of their daily lives. The 1954 Brown decision brought issues of “race-mixing” sharply into focus. Gremillion believed that white response would be predictably loud but ultimately shallow. Amid the rising cries of protest from southern whites, “A man in public life … cannot ignore this public sentiment, so he must at least go through the motions of protesting.” Nonetheless, “by the time test cases and litigation come to an end, say in two or three years, the community will accept the decision…”18

North Louisiana quickly became the seedbed of white resistance when the state representative from Claiborne Parish, William Rainach, spearheaded the establishment of Louisiana’s Joint Legislative Committee to Maintain Segregation. Such official


16 Ibid.: 90.

17 Description of Friendship House, Film 40, Reel 1, Joseph B. Gremillion Papers, on microfilm at Special Collections, Louisiana State University at Shreveport (LSUS).

18 Gremillion, Response to Supreme Court decision (undated) on Film 40, Reel 1, Joseph B. Gremillion Papers, LSUS.
sanctioning of segregationists offered significant obstacles to grassroots activists, particularly teachers, who filled state jobs. The region also saw massive purging of African Americans from the voting rolls. The Associated Citizens’ Councils of Louisiana flourished in Shreveport, while the interracial community and poor relief service came in direct conflict with local authorities. On night a visitor from the New York interracial community, Thomas Wright, went on a drive with Loretta Butler, a black staff worker in Shreveport and Ann Foley, director of the local Friendship House. The three parked to view the sunset over Cross Lake when a patrol car approached and a policeman arrested all three for breaking race-mixing ordinances. Foley, Butler, and Wright were held incommunicado and verbally abused by authorities.

Gremillion was incensed, but Friendship House had come to an interesting crossroad for activists struggling to define their place. “We could make an issue of such maltreatment,” he suggested. But Foley interjected. “Maybe jail, the fear and embarrassment, are what He wants us to undergo. Should we complain at an opportunity to turn the other cheek?” The conversation calmed Gremillion a bit, but with it came an awareness of his place on the outside of this experience.

Obviously the police attack only the lay workers; they will not lay a finger on me, the chaplain, the priest. But I am the Other Christ, Christ Priest and Victim. Can I allow the staff to continue as victims while I remain secure, a mere spectator? Can I ask them to suffer that from which I am immune?19

As we have seen, priests’ unique status often empowered them to act as go-betweens in planter dominated regions of the rural south. Never fully engaged in either the black or white worlds, many Josephites emerged as negotiators on behalf of their parish

communities. But in the mid-1950s, as black communities increasingly embraced the calling to “turn the other cheek” in the face of white resistance, Gremillion pondered the changing role of the clergyman within the arena of social protest. In some ways, the hierarchy determined it for him. Within a few years, the Diocese of Alexandria ordered the house closed. By 1957, Gremillion, facing declining health from the stresses of his ministry, decided to leave St. Joseph’s and pursue an academic vocation.

Gremillion’s experience as a pastor on the front lines of interracial activism offers a fitting prelude to the careers of Loyola’s two academics who, like the Shreveport priest, projected onto the mid-century struggle for human rights profound anxieties over the place of Catholicism in the modern world. Extensive population shifts, particularly white movement to the suburbs; the rise of a youth culture bent on pushing the lines of middle-class respectability; the growth of that very middle class with a consumer culture that gave individuals access to new sources of identity; and, certainly, the pressing issue of racial segregation, all interacted to dramatically alter the American social landscape. The decentralizing forces of post-war America threatened the parish as a central organizing unit for a common social and spiritual good. The influence of Catholic social thought also seemed on the verge of decline. The New Deal had witnessed the high tide of Catholic influence on the social question. But this heyday of producer-centered corporatist rhetoric, reflecting the influence of Father John A. Ryan’s program on social reconstruction and Catholic notions of communalism, had dissolved by the end of the 1930s as American liberals shifted their focus on broad, structural reforms to more individualized notions of consumer rights and civil liberties. By the 1950s, rugged individualism and a new consumer culture seemed firmly entrenched in the American
psyche. Gremillion pondered the image of the Knight of Columbus at mid-century, alienated in a new world, who “fights a lonely battle, a defensive rear-guard skirmish. The fight to avoid positive evil plus the temptation of succumbing to the miasma of neutrality toward God.” Such an environment found a church in danger of exerting “precious little group impact upon the most pressing social issues of the changing South.”

Indeed, despite images of 1950s Catholicism as bedrock, comfortable and confident in the distinctive cultural and intellectual world it had forged over the previous decades, a profound fear also underlay its action and rhetoric. Twomey pinpointed the cultural crisis at hand. “In our mad rush to acquire automobiles, television and radio sets, overstuffed furniture, deep-freezers and a thousand other products of our technological genius,” he asserted, “the age-old truth that man does not live by bread alone has been by-passed. We have become complacent in our own physical well-being, and even callous toward the suffering of those less fortunate.” For many clergy, including Fichter, Twomey and Gremillion, the battle for the hearts and minds of individuals was to be fought in the realm of labor and civil rights reform. To the confusion of the post-war world, they proclaimed, the church offered a timeless certainty, one that could best promote the American values of democracy and equality where secular liberal arguments seemed ill-equipped—and Protestant ones divided—on the race issue.

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21 Twomey to Catholic Conference on Industrial Problems, Portland, OR, 5 December 1951, Box 2, Folder 4, LJT Papers.
For New Deal liberals making the transition into the post-war world, the pressing race question introduced new dimensions to a broad social problem once defined as primarily economic. Late New Dealers had abandoned the corporatist vision of a regulatory state embodied by such institutions as the National Recovery Administration, upholding instead a notion of progress and the “American Dream” intertwined with the virtues of consumerism, material prosperity and individual civil liberty. The New Deal’s lack of attention to issues of race—in fact, the discriminatory practices seen in many agencies’ programs throughout the South—left them largely out of sync with African-American struggles for justice that would emerge in the mid-1950s. Their intellectual roots lay in the likes of John Dewey, and, in the post-war world, with Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. Both believed that rationalism would eventually triumph over irrational forces—especially, for Dewey, religious ones—in guiding the country into an age of economic justice.22

The defeat of a European fascist state built on ideas of racial superiority, and the rise of a communist one willing to exploit America’s own struggles with white supremacy both made race the central issue of post-war America. With the publication of An American Dilemma by Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal, American liberals finally placed race in their reform vocabulary. Harry Truman’s modest statements and efforts at reform reflected Myrdal’s influence. Yet in Myrdal one found a similar tone of optimism: the American creed of egalitarianism would ultimately triumph over racial discrimination. Ironically, such “militant anti-pessimism,” as David L. Chappell

describes, led to a rather complacent faith in the American system. In a world in which Americans struggled against the Soviet Union to project themselves as the natural end of human justice, liberals upheld the power of American democratic ideals to right society’s wrongs. With their minds more often focused abroad, and with little awareness of the deep currents of racial prejudice in the South, liberals’ perspective on the civil rights struggle fell short of the emotional potency that sustained the black freedom struggle at mid-century.23

Liberal optimism could not move African Americans to more confrontational techniques to effect change in Southern society. According to David L. Chappell, it had to come from more “prophetic” sources. Thus, Martin Luther King Jr.’s focus on nonviolent direct action and civil disobedience was more in line with the worldview of the eminent theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, to whom the former devoted much attention as a scholar. Niebuhr confronted the race question in the 1920s as a minister among African American migrants in Detroit. Although a post-war liberal, it was Niebuhr’s notion of human limitation that set him apart from other social critics. Unlike liberals, or Social Gospelers of an earlier era, the theologian ridiculed their abiding faith in human progress. He leveled a pessimistic theory at rationalists who believed that education could overcome an injustice born of ignorance. Man’s inherent sinfulness lay at the root of social injustice. Thus, human institutions, reflecting at best the standards of the most morally weak among them, could not be counted on to take the moral high ground. With

23 Ibid. See also Mary L. Dudziak, Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy (Princeton, 2000).
an eye toward more “other-worldly” standards of human conduct, Niebuhr believed that force was often necessary to effect change.24

The experience of the 1950s South justified many of his claims. Two years after Brown, Niebuhr found a wide disparity between “the law, embodying an ideal” and the persistence of Jim Crow. Massive Resistance to the Supreme Court proved “that there is even now no clear supremacy of a law based upon human rights over the mores of a community that does not acknowledge the common humanity of fellow citizens.” For Niebuhr, the Court had only strengthened the defiance of many southern whites, who revived a Lost Cause identity as a society embattled by outside forces of centralized government and communism. Individual southerners might more clearly arrive at conscientious choices, but “group pride” bolstered race prejudice. Citizens’ Councils exploited whites’ fear of moral disorder. The legal dismantling of segregation effected few changes in the mind of the south. “The law sometimes plays a creative role,” but it usually merely “regularizes and symbolizes” advances made by either gradual accommodation, or through “a violent eruption of dissident forces.” Niebuhr thus rejected civil law as the primary impetus to social change.25

Gremillion, who read Niebuhr, agreed that, “we must understand the irrational in man.” His experience in Shreveport with local parishioners and law enforcement verified the Protestant theologian’s take on social relations. Where legal recourse fell short of the emotional force needed to overcome white oppression, Christianity offered a potent source of dissidence. “Christ is such a radical by suburban American standards,” the

24 Chappell, “Niebuhrisms and Myrdalieries,” 10-16; Taylor Branch, Parting the Waters: America in the King Years (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 82-84.

priest added. “But the great thing about Christ is that into the gaping wounds caused by the rooting-up He pours the soothing ointment of His love. Do I?”26 Civil rights activists charged by Christian faith perpetually asked this question. Christian principles subjected southern racism to universal and timeless moral principles that guided human thought and conduct. As the arbiter of this moral law, the institutional church, Niebuhr believed, had a key role to play in the civil rights struggle. He compared church authority to another consistent ethic, the Bill of Rights. “In both cases, one secular and the other religious, one political and the other ecclesiastical, the norm is imposed from above upon a recalcitrant democracy.” Niebuhr, perhaps as well as anyone, underscored what Twomey argued to be the ideal weapon against racial discrimination. While decrying the inadequacies of “moral-suasion,” the theologian believed that the Catholic Church offered something Protestant churches did not: “the inclusive community of a sacramental rather than a chummy fellowship.” The church, embodying centuries of social thought, offered most nearly the “universal dimension intended in the gospel.”27

Catholic thinkers characterized this sacramental fellowship in terms of the Mystical Body of Christ. A concept derived from the writings of St. Paul and given renewed attention in the Papal Encyclicals of Pius XI and Pius XII as well as the larger Catholic Action movement, the doctrine of the Mystical Body developed from a neo-Thomistic view of human knowledge and salvation, in which all human inquiry would ultimately lead to the essential Truth behind the universe. This self-contained intellectual system, first and foremost, recognized human capacity to discern God’s eternal law. As

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27 Ibid.
essentially a social being, man implemented this natural law in a society whose proper end was the common good of all humanity. By affirming a corporate sense of the world, a Christian, read one authority on Catholic Action, “cannot sanctify himself by a mystical escape from the social order.” Rather, one must recognize one’s place in the world as essential to salvation. This not only meant that man is called to recognize a mutual state of imperfection, but also that every action—political, economic, or otherwise—has a relationship to the spiritual and physical well being of the whole of society.  

Given papal approbation in the 1940s, Mystical Body theology fit within this natural law framework, and its advocates in New Orleans and Shreveport within the larger story of Catholic interracialism. As an organic vision of human society, it upheld the natural orientation of all humanity, the many parts, to the head or core of society, the church. As inheritors of Catholic neoscholastic thought, New Orleans clergymen defined segregation as an unnatural disorientation of the Mystical Body of Christ. Members of that body, therefore, must reorient themselves to recognition of equality as a natural human condition and essential to the well being of the whole. They must also realize the interrelatedness of all human activities to that common good. The Catholic progressives in New Orleans decried what they saw as “part time” or “compartmentalized” Catholicism among white laity in the region. “An unswerving faith in supernatural truth and an exact observance of private and family morality are indispensable,” Twomey noted.

But they are not enough to qualify one as a fully rounded Catholic. For Catholicism is [a] divinely fashioned pattern for integral living. It does not pertain only to a part, but to the whole of human life. It is the authoritative guide which sets the course a Catholic

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ought to follow in all his relationships as a spiritual, political, economic and social being.29

For Twomey, the Mystical Body had been segregated long before the onset of Jim Crow. Indeed, the root of the social problem, he believed, lay in both liberal and Protestant foundations. In attacking the anti-labor movement, he had blamed the south’s social condition on “a Protestant view of economic life.” Martin Luther’s legacy had effectively separated the spiritual from the social. Racism and labor strife were only part of larger social problems that they argued had resulted from man’s turning away from the one True Church. Conversion of southern society through church involvement in labor organizing and the interracial movement, he felt, would lead humans back to the revealed and rational truths embodied by the Catholic Church.

But the ideology of Catholic interracialism shared important elements with both the liberal and Niebuhrian streams of thought. With Niebuhr, it shared a concern for a universal ethic, rejecting pragmatists’ democratic ideal that the only guiding truth lay in the will of the majority. For Catholic interracialists, the Catholic Church, grounded in an ahistorical view of truth and natural justice, embodied a more genuine form of liberalism than did those who claimed the title. Twomey excoriated Dewey’s rejection of philosophy and religion as the basis of human knowledge and the social order. “If this dictum were adopted as a practical directive in this thinking and actions of Americans, then we might as well tear up the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution…for there are no such things as inalienable rights which do not find their source in God.” For this reason, he demanded that Loyola and other Catholic schools refocus on their scholastic identity. Law students especially, he decried, had failed to use the natural law

29 Catholic Action of the South, 24 June 1954 (emphasis in original).
tradition, “the only sound philosophy of law,” to combat the Positivism rife in the American legal system.\textsuperscript{30}

Harold L. Cooper, SJ, a philosophy professor at Loyola, also set a genuine “Catholic liberalism” against the pragmatism of Dewey. While economic liberalism, or laissez-faireism, was antithetical to man’s calling as a social being, the “progressive” liberalism of nineteenth century reformers “could be no more than a naturalistic humanism.” On such bases, and through a “naïve trust in man’s unadulterated rationality,” reformers’ efforts at racial equality were often disingenuous, driven by self-interest and a desire to “give the lie to Communism’s strongest argument against the American way of life.” Instead, “it is not enough for a Catholic to accept liberal programs of action.” The Catholic liberal must acknowledge the partiality of such aims in relationship to the true justice embodied by Christ.

He would not destroy our venerable institutions, but he insists that they may need overhauling at times. Above all, he would inform them with a new soul, breathe into them a new life: for not only must they be better adapted to man’s present needs in the City of this World. They must be made truly to be the stepping stones to the City of God.\textsuperscript{31}

Gremillion joined Cooper and Twomey joined Gremillion in facing new challenges to the Catholic social and philosophical citadel with a dual sense of fidelity to Catholic doctrine and openness to developing it within the southern experience. Society may change its own discriminatory laws, they reasoned, but only the Catholic Church could challenge the spirit of the laws by offering a grounding in solid moral principle.

\textsuperscript{30} Twomey to Clayton Fritchey, 11/1949, Box 1, Folder 8, LJT Papers, Loyola.

\textsuperscript{31} Harold L. Cooper, “The Catholic Liberal,” Address delivered at Loyola University, 4 March 1955, to the Commission on Human Rights of the Catholic Committee of the South, copy in Box 44, Folder 20, Joseph H. Fichter (JHF) Papers, Loyola.
Despite their rejection of the intellectual roots of American liberals, Catholic interracialists did share with liberals a “militant anti-pessimism,” an overweening faith in their own particular creed. Whereas Myrdal and others maintained faith in the embedded democratic values of the American creed, interracialists exuded a profound confidence in their ability to orient white Catholics to the common good through the guidance of Catholic teaching. At a time when Catholic thinkers sought to seize American constitutional foundations as their own by underscoring their natural law roots, they could hardly afford to lose faith in either. “Our aim is to unite Catholics in the Mystical Body of Christ by actually practicing the principles we hold high, such as charity and social justice,” Fichter told one layman in New Orleans. Although he later grew impatient with the hierarchy and pushed for a more forceful stance by Rummel, Fichter always believed that Catholics more than anyone else “are eager for open intelligent discussion on race relations.” The sociologist declared,

I am pleasantly surprised in one way that this ‘trouble’ has not appeared, and I also feel vindicated in my constant judgment of the basic charity and good sense of New Orleans Catholics. Maybe it is also a good proof that when we do God’s work in His way we can’t go far off the track.32

Clergymen determined to “sanctify the social” insisted that a movement for interracial justice must begin and end with a Catholic authority that had the authority to orient all individuals—but especially white Catholics—to the common good through both education and the obligation of Catholics to the church’s moral authority. Forces within the hierarchy and among their fellow Jesuits would certainly test this early optimism.

32 Fichter to Herbert Christenberry, 2/2/1949; Fichter to Thomas Shields, 2/17/1949, both in Box 49, Folder 3, JHF Papers, Loyola.
Yet, in the early-1950s, the activities of both Fichter and Twomey forced the race issue upon a complacent white laity like no effort before or since.

For Twomey, the Catholic campus at mid-century became the frontline. In 1948, an interracial relations committee of the New Orleans Province declared that Jesuits teaching white youth were in a unique position, “with our wealth of religion and moral doctrine” to cultivate the proper attitudes on race relations.\textsuperscript{33} Twomey seized the educational principle from the very beginning, often likening society at large to a classroom that must create a “climate” suitable for the achievement of social justice.

To do this, the teacher must himself be convinced and must labor to convince his students that the class is a Christian “family,” a cell in the Mystical Body, an integral part of the larger community which is the entire school. From such indoctrination should flow the realization that what hurts the class, hurts all in the class, and what’s good for the class is good for all in the class. The fact of the Mystical Body with its dogmatic and moral implications can quite naturally lead to a discussion of how its spirit can be made the motivating force of the few or many students in fulfilling their obligations towards each other and towards the class as a whole. If the teacher can succeed in putting over this idea, he will be in a fair way towards conditioning his students to understand the basic demand of social justice … Once the foundation of social consciousness has been laid, the teacher and the students have a norm with which to measure the impact on the class (social consequences) of conduct, good or bad, on the part of the class members.\textsuperscript{34}

In many ways, Loyola seemed an ideal canvas for this Catholic vision. As the leading Catholic university in the heart of the Deep South, Loyola trained future civil leaders and “among all the American Jesuit universities and colleges, was probably in a position to make the most effective move for the spread of the Church in the United

\textsuperscript{33} New Orleans Province, Institute of Social Order, Interracial Relations Committee, Loyola Jacques Yenni, SJ to general audience, 9 July 1948, Box 19, Folder 3. LJT Papers.

\textsuperscript{34} Christ’s Blueprint for the South (November 1955).
States.” The Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament credited him with the entry of Xavier students into Loyola’s graduate programs. The admission of these graduates—including the future president of Xavier University and prominent leader of black New Orleans, Norman Francis, into law school—was “a most wonderful feat, and took place only after a great deal of suffering and importunity and imploring” on the part of Twomey and Fichter. 35

Unlike Twomey, the scholar Joseph Fichter hardly saw himself as the charismatic leader of Catholic interracialism. Such a position, he argued, needed a “trained expert,” one who claimed the South as his own. “The Church in the South, particularly in the realm of higher Catholic white education, should have a spokesman who will teach and talk and write on the racial problem from the point of view of a Southern Catholic.” Nonetheless, in 1948 his organizing energy at Loyola led to the first formal campaign by the Archdiocese of New Orleans to address racial segregation. Building on the activities of the regional Catholic Committee of the South, Fichter gathered together a group of clergy and laity, black and white, to form the Commission on Human Rights at Loyola University. The CHR offered a springboard for activists working through a variety of channels. Over the next five years, it encouraged participation in such groups as the Urban League of Greater New Orleans and the NAACP. It also published its own newsletter, *The Christian Impact*, and met monthly at African-American and two permissive white parishes in New Orleans.

35 Twomey to Rev. Vincent A. McCormick, 18 July 1951, Box 19, Folder 8, LJT Papers; Sister M. Agatha to Mother Anselm, 10/30/1952, Box 3, Folder 3, Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament—Louisiana Corporation Files, Special Collections, Xavier University of Louisiana.
Fichter characterized the CHR as “a powerhouse of ideas, as a center of knowledge, as an inspiration for social action in the broader field of the Church.” Percy Cruezot, an African American dentist and CHR member, outlined the spirit of the group in its faith that “Evolution, not ‘President Truman’s revolution’ will solve this problem. Education to the idea of equality must be used.” For Cruezot and many members, local parishes offered the base of a grassroots social movement. While one might proceed with caution in the rest of society, “the pastors have complete power over nearly all rules in their parishes.”36 Twomey underscored this optimism. “‘I am convinced that if we could get clerical thinking and acting in line with the clear doctrine of the Church relative to the heresy of White Supremacy,’” Louis Twomey explained, “we could straighten out the laity in a relatively short period of time.”37

Joining Twomey’s campus initiative, the sociologist also spearheaded a student-led movement, the Southeast Regional Interracial Commission (SERINCO). The group’s newsletter, The Christian Conscience, targeted students at Loyola, Xavier, Dominican, and Sacred Heart colleges in the region. “Our aim is to prepare the ‘white’ part of the student community for the day of Negro entrants—as students, and to work in our home parishes—as parishioners,” one student leader wrote. All SERINCO activities centered on its annual “Interracial Sunday” held on the second Sunday of Lent each year. Gathering students and civic leaders for worship and discussion, Interracial Sunday themes ranged from the theological to the practical, including, “Prejudice: The Crucifixion of the Mystical Body,” and “Legal Aspects of Segregation and

36 Fichter to Harry Crane, 11/1/1947, Box 1, Folder 3; Fichter to Commission on Human Rights, 4/1/1955. Box 45, Folder 22; Cruezot interview by Fichter sociology student, 4/5/1949, all in JHF Papers; Fichter, One-Man Research, 82.

37 Twomey to Joseph Reiner, 10/23/53, in Box 19, Folder 3, LJT Papers.
Discrimination.” Meetings also featured essay and speech contests that involved local Catholic high school students and parents. “[M]eetings are about the only place we can have interracial activity as students,” one student wrote, but “there is frequently too much talking of principles instead of techniques.”

Indeed, many complained, attendees frequently fell into the “heresy of discussion,” as one speaker described it, “the people who come up with grandiose ideas at meetings, who want to philosophize about race relations, who shake their heads over the terrible state of affairs, and WHO DO NOTHING.” How to turn their head-shaking into social action was a matter of constant and often stifling self-examination, especially for white students in the organization. The latter found it necessary to overcome not only “the external opposition of the older generation, our parents, brothers, sisters and other relatives,” but also their own adherence to the south’s dominant culture.

One man, prominent in interracial work told us once that Catholic college students are smug, lacking in humility, are obsessed with a craze for leadership and lack patience with the slowness of older people. He told us that the carryover into post-college life by students from our group is outstandingly disappointing. This was and still is a serious charge. The people he was talking about were sincere, hard working people during their collegiate days in the commission. Was the social pressure of society too strong for them?

Jack Nelson, a future civil rights attorney and member of several progressive organizations while at Loyola, recalled that, despite his constant interaction with African Americans growing up, “We were going to pursue our dreams in a white world.”

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38 Edward Kammerer to Dawn Proteau, 1 November 1951, Box 49, Folder 18, JHF Papers.


40 Kammerer to Proteau, 1 November 1951, Box 49, Folder 18, JHF Papers.
Education and professional employment largely remained the exclusive domain of the white south.41

The culture of Loyola administration also proved a difficult obstacle. In 1948, when the group adopted a resolution to challenge Jim Crow, several feared that their statement was too forceful, implying a demand for immediate action “towards the complete here-and-now removal of educational segregation.” On their own volition, students concluded that the group must simply support “any possible practical action.”42 This was not enough to appease Loyola administrators, however, who said that such organizations “might very well become a group of malcontents thus hindering instead of helping race relations.” The university president suggested to Fichter that SERINCO discontinue meeting on campus, and that the Christian Conscience not be connected with Loyola University.43 In stark contrast to the student activism of later years, rife with challenges to inherited authority, SERINCO remained loyal to the hierarchy and conservative in its approach to social change. Prayer and liturgy remained central, and members heeded the hierarchy’s directives to err on the side of caution. Rummel repeatedly asked students to exercise “prudence, patience, and tact” in their efforts to fight discrimination. “You will have to exercise this patience for a considerable time…but you must continue to pray for a spiritual understanding between the races.”44

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41 John P. Nelson interview with Kim Lacy Rogers, June 22, 1988, transcript in Rogers-Stevens Oral History Collection, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University (ARC); See also Kim Lacy Rogers, Righteous Lives: Narratives of the New Orleans Civil Rights Movement (New York, 1993), 56-59.

42 The Christian Conscience, summer 1948, copy in Box 50, Folder 22, JHF Papers.

43 Thomas J. Shields to Fichter, 9/9/1948, Box 1, Folder 3, JHF Papers.

44 Speech by Rummel to SERINCO, printed in Times Picayune, 10 March 1952.
The tone of many of their communications and meetings demonstrated their fidelity to the notion of the One True Church. While SERINCO initially worked with student groups at Tulane and Dillard Universities, members grew disgusted over the theoretical wrangling they encountered. “It is evident that the strongest possible appeal for racial integration, the Mystical Body of Christ, had little effect on the minds of non-Catholic students.” Instead, they decided, Loyola and Xavier were to maintain a separate student movement based on Catholic principles. Unlike other religions, they argued, “the Catholic Church teaches an integrated moral system and the Catholic may not choose which commandment, precept, principle he will follow and which he will reject.” The Christian Conscience even traced the “compartmentalized” attitude of many white Christians to the effects of the Protestant Reformation, whose message “made man’s cross seemingly lighter because it revolved, not around Christ, but around man…The heresy of Martin Luther is one which tears apart the Mystical Body of Christ.” Catholics who challenged the authority of the church on race relations led “logically to the same errors into which Luther fell.” Like the sixteenth century reformer, they placed “the spiritual welfare and the strength of the Church in grave danger.”

Yet despite their loyalty, the culture of both university administration and student life continued to undermine the efforts of student activists. Loyola’s prominence in the cultural and religious world or New Orleans was, for Twomey, a source of promise. It was also an important weakness. Located in Uptown New Orleans amid the white-columned homes of St. Charles Avenue, Loyola University—not to mention neighboring Tulane University—evoked New Orleans privilege and power. Many future leaders of the

\[45\] The Christian Conscience, vol. 5, number 12 (June 1953), vol. 4, no. 5 (November 1951), copy in JHF Papers.
segregationist movement were prominent alumni. Fraternities on campus regularly held minstrel shows, something Fichter denounced to the administration as “a public and gratuitous insult to their [African-American] race.” As injury to insult, while the Loyola-owned WWL Radio refused to allow Fichter airtime for lectures presented by the Commission on Human Rights, it left plenty for “Lifelines,” a right-wing program funded by Texas oil billionaire H.L. Hunt.46

The majority of Loyola’s Jesuit faculty likewise resisted the designs of the interracialists. In 1950, Twomey asked permission to have Loyola admit “a few highly-screened Negro law students.” He hoped that would eventually lead to larger-scale integration in later years. In measuring the potential backlash, Twomey submitted “that even though the student body might conceivably be severely curtailed, the resulting gain for Christ, the Church and the American Assistancy would far out-weigh whatever loss Loyola would sustain.”47 His fellow Jesuits were not convinced. “All the consultors are against you,” the provincial informed Twomey. When Twomey and Fichter sought to establish a series of sessions to discuss human rights in 1952, the board excoriated their attempts to use the works of Ralph Bunche as a text and to hold an integrated meeting. “I am glad to be able to be the first to vote a definite, and unalterable ‘NO’ to the question on the adoption of the Seminar on Human Relations at the undergraduate, graduate, in-service and every other level.”48

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47 Twomey to Rev. Vincent A. McCormick, 18 September 1951, Box 19, Folder 8, LJT Papers, Loyola.

labor priest fumed, “is the typical attitude of many other Jesuits in the South and elsewhere for that matter. Such an attitude can be accurately if bluntly described as one which upholds the theory of ‘white supremacy.’”

But like other areas of the civil rights south, it was the reluctant moderate on campus who often proved most troubling. Recalling his collegiate experience, one former Loyola student described a university in the mid-1950s mired in confusion, held back as much by those people “of good will” than the die-hard segregationists on campus. The position of Fichter in particular “appears to be a rather remarkable phenomenon in view of his fifteen or more years of anguish over the attitudes and practices of those around him who ought to have had greater vision.” Twomey viewed student apathy on campus as the greatest obstacle. It was a problem deeply rooted in Catholic higher education, he believed. Catholic schools had successfully distanced themselves ideologically from secular institutions. The Catholic intellectual tradition at mid-century, grounded in the Neoscholastic marriage of revealed truth and human reason, claimed to preserve a sense of the order and intelligibility of the universe. In an age of intellectual and political cynicism, the revival of Thomistic thought in Catholic schools offered what many Catholic thinkers believed to be a sound philosophy of life, one that would enable students to shape the culture around them. For Twomey, Catholic education failed to live up to the ideal to “train the individual in what it means to be a member of society.” Twomey believed, few people seemed willing to challenge prevailing social norms. Without the guidance of Church social teachings, “we have allowed our students to

49 Twomey to McCormick, 18 September 1951, Box 19, Folder 8, LJT Papers, Loyola.

50 Donald E. Nicodemus to Fichter, 19 April 1959, Box 2, folder 1, JHF Papers, Loyola.
formulate their own social philosophy as best they can.” The result was a system of education that was separate, but tragically indistinct, from the surrounding culture.51

Loyola’s own surroundings did not help. Teeming with self-doubt and constrained by political forces in Baton Rouge, New Orleans was Loyola writ large. Despite the early promise of Catholic interracialism in the Crescent City, the experience of Twomey and Fichter was typical. In many ways, interracialists’ faced more obstacles in New Orleans than in Shreveport, where Catholics remained in a smaller minority. New Orleans had always enjoyed a vague reputation akin to the “progressive mystique” of historian William H. Chafe’s Greensboro.52 Outsiders lauded the region as a progressive beachhead in the segregated Deep South. For Catholic interracialists in particular, the Crescent City provided the ideal setting for putting a unique Catholic stamp on the Second Reconstruction. “We have a strong mixing of races and cultures since the first French settlers came,” a Jesuit told one reporter. “Our Catholic culture is Latin, not Irish, a difference it terms of tolerance.”53

The Crescent City, in fact, offers a case study of social complacency amid misplaced confidence in the inevitability of social change. In all probability in the mid-1950s, the Crescent City was to be the “chink in the wall of states’ rights resistance to the


52 William H. Chafe’s Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina and the Black Freedom Struggle (Oxford, 1980), argues that Greensboro’s “progressive mystique” contradicted a social reality that continued to make blacks a dependent underclass. Due to its Creole heritage and its reputation as the South’s “scarlet sister,” New Orleans shared a similar image. Louisiana politics, thanks to Huey Long, was more bifactional than elsewhere. See Adam Fairclough, Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972 (Athens, Georgia, 1995), xix, xx, 4-8. But, Fairclough notes, despite a seemingly complex color line and quasi-progressive state government, white supremacy took hold in the region as strongly as elsewhere in the South.

Supreme Court.” Outsiders remained confident that New Orleans offered “a chance to balk the forces that have prevailed in Georgia, South Carolina and Mississippi.” But, for those who daily witnessed the interactions of blacks and whites in the city, New Orleans presented significant challenges. “In New Orleans there exists a vicious and insidious veiled prejudice which can be found nowhere else,” Percy Cruezot, a member of the CHR, argued. “Because of its nature, it is worse than the open antagonism of most Southern cities.”54 But in many ways, New Orleans became more rule than exception in the racial dynamic of the Jim Crow South: Jim Crow was not so much an institution as an aggregation of individual confrontations. Performed on buses, in movie theaters and restaurants, and every time an African American drank from the wrong fountain—even in the subtleties of yielding the sidewalk—, segregation was an act, not a state of being. In the Crescent City, with black neighborhoods flowing seamlessly into white and constant interaction in private homes and on streets, in Mardi Gras parades and bars, one had to make a special effort to segregate. Actions were deliberate, not de facto.

Few whites understood this mixture of subtle and not-so-subtle antagonisms better than Archbishop Rummel and Joseph Fichter. Both men viewed segregation as the south’s deepest moral and social problem. Social segregation not only threatened Catholic unity amid a rapidly changing social and economic climate in the south, it also threatened social stability as a whole. Jim Crow, Rummel later declared, “has practically relegated the Negro to an island-like existence.” In 1949, Rummel took a significant stance against both social and religious segregation when insisted on making African

American Holy Name societies part of a Holy Hour procession in whites-only City Park. It was to be “an expression of the catholicity of our holy faith and the universality of the membership of our church.” Rummel cancelled the Holy Hour service when city officials refused to allow blacks into City Park. In contrast to his later closing of a parish mission and eventual excommunications, it was a passive denial of sacraments to white laity, intended to prick their conscience on the race issue.

The timing was apt. At the turn of the decade the struggle for park facilities for African Americans in New Orleans reached a fever pitch when A.P. Tureaud threatened Mayor DeLesseps Morrison’s administration with direct action. The prominent black attorney and Catholic layman insisted that if equal facilities were not provided, he would encourage blacks to begin using City Park. Even with the threat of violence, Tureaud insisted, New Orleans African Americans “were willing to take their chances, and were tired being given the run-around by the City.” One city official warned: “he was not asking for advice.” The Morrison administration had indeed recognized the need for more parks. But after escaping an election year driven by his opponent’s race-baiting, Morrison maintained that “it is bound to have nasty repercussions politically.” More than the Dixiecrat tirades, Morrison feared the political influence coming out of newer, middle-class white neighborhoods that both feared black encroachment and had the potential of steering the next election. Annoyed with the mayor’s political expediency, the Pittsburgh Courier praised Rummel’s move as the first definitive statement made by any authority in the city. “It has been the fashion for liberals in the South to view with alarm and
deplore the generations-old segregation system, but it has remained for a high Catholic official to challenge it.” The clipping made its way to Morrison’s desk.55

In 1953 Rummel made the first of two statements on the morality of racial segregation. “Blessed Are the Peacemakers” lacked the moral force of his later statement, but, issuing it a year before Brown, the prelate called upon his flock to assume a position of moral leadership in a society still lacking a defining legal statement. “Public laws, customs of long standing, regulations and agreements of institutions and between business interests are obstacles not easy to overcome, but we can do much to aid this cause of justice and charity by making segregation disappear in our Catholic church life.” He excoriated the persistence of segregation within the liturgy. While encouraging black Catholics to “retain their loyalty and membership in their special congregations,” he added, “they should not be harassed when they attend services in any parish church or mission…” Twomey and Fichter viewed the statement as a boon to their own programs, an encouragement for further activity by Catholic laity. Coming before Brown, the statement did little to stir the laity. But Rummel continued to press legislators on the issue of Right-to-Work laws and labor organizing.56

Jim Crow’s presence in Mass remained one of the most pressing issues for interracialists hoping to move the church’s vision of unity in the Mystical Body of Christ outward into society. “Segregation in the church is one of the most serious of the


injustices practiced against the Negro,” one black Catholic stated. In a survey sponsored by Fichter’s sociology class at Loyola, several African Americans identified discrimination in Catholic institutions as “particularly offensive,” and that its end might best come about through a broad “pulpit campaign.” “How can a Catholic love Christ when he is not willing to receive Christ in his body at the Communion Rail next to his Negro brother? Or to sit in the same pew with him?” Clarence Howard exhorted one Interracial Sunday crowd. The African American priest warned that the practice of segregation was driving many from the church. “Why are there so many small ‘store-front’ churches among Negroes?”

In the Archdiocese of New Orleans, the actual practice of segregating parishioners took different forms. By the late-1940s, only a few churches had placed “colored” signs in the back of the church. Several had signs simply stating “reserved,” evoking a sort of privileged status in the back of the church. Another church used a moveable screen akin to streetcars. Yet in many cases, some said, segregation was simply a matter of habit. One person, reporting from St. Theresa of Avila, noted, “there seems to be no actual segregation at Mass, but rather a reluctance on the part of the majority of Negroes to sit anywhere but in the rear of the church.” All too often, however, this habit was an enforceable one. Despite early directives by Rummel for ushers to allow integration in pews, their actions continued to trouble the archdiocese. Most experiences were similar to that of a group of girl scouts from Xavier Prep who, while attending a regional conference, went to Mass at a nearby Jesuit Church. Upon entering, the usher directed them to the rear pew. When some white parishioners attempted to sit directly in front of

them, he brought them to the front of the church, while another white girl and boy were removed to a center aisle away from the girls. However, when a black man entered the usher ordered, “Come sit here, boy.” After noticing the girls’ displeasure, he chided, “Y’all in the right church, ain’t you?”

When his students attended segregated services to study their persistence, several pastors complained to the province that his students were “making an issue of the Colored question.” Fichter remained unsympathetic. “The pastors who are ‘surprised and resentful’ would be cheered to no end if they would take the trouble to learn the facts.” Rummel himself had requested further statistical studies of Carrollton area parishes, using them to assess the number of “colored” signs that needed removal. He painted the conflict as an early battle for the place of social science within Catholic institutions. “We Catholics generally are far behind other groups in the application of sociological ‘know-how’ to our own social institutions and structures,” Fichter argued. “I would consider my training wasted and myself failing in duty if I did not apply it for the good of the Church, the Society and the University.” Fichter also remained wary of constant exhortations to spirituality as the primary solution. “As a clergyman,” he noted, “I had great faith in prayer, but as a sociologist I saw the necessity for combining action with prayer in any attempt to alleviate the racist immorality among my fellow Catholics.”

Like other interracialists, Fichter feared the declining influence of local parish upon society at large. His reputation with local parishes only worsened with the

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58 Survey results of mass attendance in New Orleans, found in Box 40, Folder 1-7; Mrs. Oscar A. Boise to the pastor of Jesuit Church, 4/26/1955, Box 45, Folder 22, both in JHF Papers.

59 Harry L. Crane to Fichter, 5/31/1949; Fichter to Crane, 6/1/1949, both in Box 1, Folder 4, JHF Papers.

60 Joseph Fichter, One Man Research: Reminiscences of a Catholic Sociologist: 82.
publication of his most famous work, *Southern Parish*, in 1951. A sociological study of “St. Mary’s” in “Riverside”—alias for Mater Dolorosa Parish in uptown New Orleans—, the book challenged local parishes to be the strongest means of “channeling the influence of Christianity to the larger community.” Roman Catholicism, he argued, “is the institution with the best possible prospect of reintegrating Western culture” by combating the anomic forces of the modern world. Fichter viewed the parochial system as a microcosm of the universal church and the primary agent of social stability. “Even if Christianity actually fails in the foreseeable future to replace our materialistic ethics and to reconsolidate our society, I think that it has within itself the power to do so.”

In pursuit of a viable thesis for all parishes, Fichter “scored” Mater Dolorosa parishioners on a variety of subjects ranging from personal piety and liturgical commitment to social thinking. Given his ideal of how a church should shape society by truly integrating personal morality and social justice, what he found in his case study parish was a church whose leaders “are a little more than half-Catholic in their thinking.” Christening parties seemed nothing more than cocktail parties, Fichter observed. Rather than celebrating a sacramental bond, they offered families an opportunity to cultivate business or political ties. Meanwhile, the parish was failing to unite the larger community in the Catholic faith. “The presence of non-Catholics and of dormant Catholics in the geographical parish of St. Mary’s indicates the extent to which it falls short of this ideal.” If converts existed, it was mainly due to marriage, only three “due to direct proselytizing by the priest.” The race issue surfaces throughout the book, as Mater Dolorosa indeed reflected its own setting in the Deep South. For Fichter, it supported an earlier position that parishioners united “more on secular ideologies than on common religious beliefs.”
Very few seemed to have any ethical qualms over the racist aspect of the Dixiecrat program, Fichter observed. In questions of integration, those asked were “even more opposed to racially integrated Catholic parishes than they were to integrated kindergartens.”

In typical fashion, Fichter let loose no passionate tirade against “St Mary’s,” concluding simply, “perhaps it would be more accurate to say that this parish has not been awakened to its full religious possibilities.” But response to his book made it seem as though he had issued a vicious condemnation. Intended to be the first of a multi-part series, *Southern Parish*’s remaining volumes were suppressed at the urging of the Mater Dolorosa’s pastor, Monsignor Joseph. “You seem to be in real trouble,” Rummel informed Fichter. “I know that I gave it the green light—and told him [Joseph] so—but he demands that you stop all publication and withdraw the book from the market.” Citing a heart ailment, Joseph claimed to have become so aggrieved by the book’s findings that the archdiocese halted publication out of respect for his health. “In other words,” one critic of the action declared, “the possibility of his being ill-affected was put in the balance against the probability of Catholic sociology’s gaining a great contribution…” One volume alone, a Loyola history professor added, “can mean little without the rest of the findings contained in the other three volumes.” Most remained highly critical, however, calling *Southern Parish* an indictment of Catholic laity. Fichter had indeed

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become a man “intensely admired or severely criticized...because of his efforts after racial justice in conservative New Orleans.”\textsuperscript{62}

The \textit{Southern Parish} controversy illuminated a significant crossroads in the history of Catholic thought at mid-century. Catholic higher education struggled to reconcile modern social scientific methods to the traditional neoscholastic emphasis on timeless principles that guided human conduct and served as the basis for human knowledge.\textsuperscript{63} From a generation of social scientists, several who took to the south in the 1930s as a real-life laboratory, Fichter inherited the idea of a fresh inquiry into the meaning of culture, and the belief that individuals developed a distinctive personality within society as a product of changing and interacting social forces. Such views had dramatically altered earlier biological thinking on race that fueled white faith in the “natural” moral and social inferiority of blacks. In this new cultural understanding of racial difference, the environments in which southerners lived, not inherited biological characteristics, shaped racial identity. Scholarly inquiry into the social and mental effects of segregation on black children later fortified the 1954 \textit{Brown v. Board} decision.\textsuperscript{64}

To these ideas, Fichter added a conviction that the local Catholic community could dramatically shape culture. In line with many social theorists who examined the south in the 1940s, Fichter dissected a local church in cultural captivity in the hopes of asserting a universal Catholic ethic upon southern society. In the process, he excoriated


Catholic sociologists whom he believed lagged behind the innovations of mainstream scholars. “Catholic sociologists are not in the same league with these fellows,” he complained to the Jesuit Provincial in New Orleans. The controversy exacerbated the already poor reputation Catholic scholarship suffered.

Among non-Catholic social scientists the notion still prevails that the Church is interested in propaganda and not in the publication of truth revealed through research. At every lecture I give and at every convention I attend I am confronted with this same type of attitude. Most often it is put in a pleasant, friendly and veiled way, but it comes down to the question: “If your Church is interested in science and knowledge and truth, as you say, why can’t you get the rest of **Southern Parish** published?”

Fichter proposed a drastic revision of Loyola’s academic standards. “They give a BS in Social Science in which no sociology is required!” At the same time, Fichter’s confrontation with “St. Mary’s” also reveals a larger conflict over the role and focus of sociology in the lived experience of southerners. Sociology itself emerged as a major bugaboo in segregationist thought. White southerner leaders denounced the court decision as illegitimate, grounded in sociology rather than constitutional principle. For white Catholics in New Orleans, Fichter’s method became a sign of secularist thinking threatening the sacred rite of Catholic practice.

At the same time, Fichter also inherited a certain irony about mid-century sociology. For all of the attention given to black personality within the social and cultural framework of the 1930s, and the influence of such inquiry in the 1954 *Brown* decision, many of the more influential social critics in the 1940s and 1950s largely focused on the mental fabric of the white south. W.J. Cash’s *Mind of the South* famously dissected the

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65 Fichter to Jesuit Provincial, 23 January 1957, Box 1, Folder 17, JHF Papers.

66 Ibid.
southern “savage ideal” of gender and racial hierarchy extended from the antebellum era. From a far more optimistic perspective, Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal concluded that, “the Negro problem is primarily a white man’s problem.” An extension of interracialists’ concurrent Catholic version of the “American Creed” was their insistence that Catholic efforts should primarily develop the white south’s moral fitness for desegregation. After 1953, interest in labor by both liberals and Catholic reformers dissipated, and with it a more determined focus on the consequences of Jim Crow. Interracial meetings and pronouncements by the hierarchy addressed the need to overcome the sin of segregation.

The 1954 Brown decision brought racial integration sharply into focus, as competing interests vied to make sense of the Court’s decision. For the archdiocese, particularly the Commission on Human Rights, the moral mission now had a legal foundation. The Catholic interracial movement, Fichter noted, “saw the NAACP winning legally; they were convinced that their church would win morally.” Shortly after the Supreme Court’s decision, Rummel and the Archdiocesan School Board declared the Supreme Court to be in accord with Christian social principles. Rev. Msgr. Charles Plauche, Chancellor of the Archdiocese, warned against disobedience of the federal order: “I would appeal to all responsible members of the community not to rebel against the constituted authority or to waste time in useless gestures of defiance.”\(^6^7\) The Louisiana legislature had little time to ponder such directives from either the church or the Federal Government. The only state government in session during the monumental decision, Louisiana immediately began erecting a legal wall of resistance to the Supreme

\(^6^7\) Fichter, One-Man Research, 79; Southern School News, 3 February 1955.
Court, invoking police power of the state to block attempts to desegregate schools.

Indeed, Massive Resistance became for Louisianans “massive legislation.” Solons prided themselves on being the “smartest in the Southland.” By June 28, 1954, three bills passed by a 78-11 vote. \textit{Catholic Action of the South} denounced them as “the most vicious and dangerous legislative proposals we have ever seen in the United States.” Particularly offensive were stipulations applying to private schools. “If Archbishop Rummel, his brother bishops…or any priest or lay person spoke or wrote to exhort obeying of the U.S. law they would become liable to prosecution.”\textsuperscript{68}

Despite overwhelming support of the bills, six New Orleans Catholic Senators objected to the items that placed Catholic schools under sanction, successfully removing them and achieving for the church a brief stay against the state’s legal pressure. While the church was not completely satisfied—hoping for a complete elimination of the bills—it applauded the effort of Sen. David H. MacHauer. “I cannot vote to sustain a principle that has long been immoral and is now declared illegal,” MacHauer argued, saying that he refused to take “an affirmative step to violate Christian principles.” He criticized Leander Perez for “using vile language against the Archbishop to try and get us to go along with certain provisions” of the segregation bills. Perez himself denounced the Senators’ efforts as “a traitorous action” designed to “sell down the river the inherent rights of the majority of White children in this state.”\textsuperscript{69}

As schools emerged as the central battleground over the meaning of race in mid-century America, practical concerns thwarted early efforts at desegregation. While

\textsuperscript{68} \textit{Catholic Action of the South}, 1 July 1954 and 8 July 1954.

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.
Catholic leaders hailed Rummel’s stance on behalf of racial justice, lauding that it “befits her position as the one true Church founded by Christ,” schools were nonetheless overcrowded. In New Orleans alone, parochial school attendance, which constituted almost 40 percent of the city’s total school attendance in 1953-54, rose by more than 2000 students from the previous term. This complication coincided with mounting grassroots opposition to desegregation in New Orleans and its surrounding areas. Once thought implausible for this very Catholic and very progressive Southern city, “by the end of 1954,” Fichter wrote, “the White Citizen’s Councils had spread from Mississippi to New Orleans, where some of its organizers and many of its members were Roman Catholics.”

If before Brown, most white Catholics looked upon the church’s social action with a certain degree of annoyance, their attitudes and actions turned downright obstinate in the months after the famous decision. In Jesuit Bend, Louisiana, twenty miles south of New Orleans in Plaquemines Parish, white parishioners refused to allow a black priest, Rev. Gerald Lewis, to offer Mass at its local mission parish. Upon the priest’s arrival at the chapel, a delegation of parishioners accompanied by a squad car from the parish sheriff’s office met Lewis and requested that he not attempt to perform his duties. Archbishop Rummel hastily closed the mission chapel until parishioners were willing to allow anyone he appointed say Mass. “[T]hose who were responsible for turning away this priest of God committed an act of injustice, uncharitableness and irreverence. They also violated the laws of the Church, which definitely forbid and make subject to severe penalties the interference with the exercise of ecclesiastical authority or function.”

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70 Catholic Action of the South, 14 October 1954; Southern School News, 1 October 1954; Fichter, One-Man Research, 83.
opposed to the Archbishop formed the Citizens’ Council of Plaquemines Parish. The incident made headlines from New York to Rome, projecting Rummel into the spotlight. The Catholic Committee of the South, a regional organization supporting human rights initiatives, pleaded with the Citizens’ Council and the local congregation to cease their defiance. “We know the cessation of Masses has brought sadness into your hearts and homes,” they implored, blaming their actions on a group of rabble-rousers “who want to confuse you.”

While the Catholic newspaper from Louisiana painted the incident as isolated, implying that in fact many congregations allowed black priests to serve in the region without protest, parishioners forced the archdiocese’s hand in its moral condemnation of segregation. The CHR had always maintained that the church must not pursue a combative tactic. “[T]he Church’s interest in race relations doesn’t exist because she is fighting segregation.” Rather, they were to continue a positive approach to promote integration, “to develop the wholeness of the human heart and mind; the wholeness of the human race.” After the rise of Citizens’ Councils, many felt the need to take a more active role in refuting the argument of segregationists. Several incidents proved that they wanted nothing less than to challenge the universality of church teachings by invoking their own version of Catholic sanctity. Indeed, it was only a matter of weeks before a congregation in Erath, Louisiana, in the Diocese of Lafayette, found two women under the decree of excommunication for attacking another female teacher of an integrated

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catechism class. While the women repented a week later, the incident brought the debate over church authority once again to a dramatic pitch.\footnote{Reverend Maurice Shean, “Curing the Sore of Racism” to the CHR, \textit{Catholic Action of the South}, 17 April 1955; 4 December 1955.}

In response to Jeanmard’s decree, a number of Catholics joined the “Southern Gentlemen’s Organization of Louisiana.” Upon speaking to members in the Lafayette Diocese, a leader of the group, J.D. Constant, claimed to have been motivated by the Knights of Columbus and his priest at St. Anthony’s Parish in Baton Rouge. His Catholic standing remained in question, however, as the priest and all Baton Rouge branches of the KC denied any record of him. But these revelations failed to appear prior to a “Southern Gentlemen” meeting in Erath to denounce Bishop Jeanmard. Constant’s invocation of church approval helped white laity strengthen their faith in their own version of Catholic commitment. The group prompted a local pastor to denounce them as “traitors to the South, who are deliberately destroying the peaceful and gracious living in small towns…and are attempting to perpetuate a sad historical mistake by inciting mobs…”\footnote{Ibid., 12/18/1955; See also R. Bentley Anderson, “Prelates, Protest, and Public Opinion: Catholic Opposition to Desegregation, 1947-1955.” \textit{Journal of Church and State} 46 (summer 2004): 617-44.}

Even before these incidents, Rummel had assessed the atmosphere in South Louisiana and determined that integration of parochial schools could not be accomplished before September of the following year. “[W]e are confronted with the tradition of segregation over a period of 150 years, the present crowded conditions of our parochial schools for Negro as well as White children and the responsibility of maintaining the present interest and enthusiasm of all our Catholic people for Catholic education.” The statement frustrated Fichter, who believed such capitulation to the opposition would only
strengthen their will to resist both the Supreme Court and the church. When the Supreme Court handed down its second decision in the Brown case in 1955, the mounting opposition on both the grassroots and state level convinced the CHR and church officials of the need for an information campaign to counteract white resentment. Superintendent of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, Henri Bezou, addressed this need to the CHR in September of 1955:

It is probable that more heat than light has been generated in the South ever since the United States Supreme Court handed down its May 17, 1954 decision on the school desegregation issue and implemented it with its May 31, 1955 decree. When the decision and its implications are discussed, there is usually more of a stirring of emotions than a stimulation of the intellect, more of impassioned oratory than clear and logical thinking – on both sides. 74

The first half of 1956 became a highpoint of activity for the Commission on Human Rights. Through Loyola University, Joseph Fichter acquired support from the Fund for the Republic to sponsor a series of guest lectures. Behind the imposition of police power of the state in 1955 to protect the “public health, morals, better education, peace, and good order”, the CHR argued, lay a set of influential assumptions about the dangers of integration for school children, specifically, the dangers posed by black school children to whites. 75

“The campaign of propaganda and education I proposed at the end of 1955 was largely born out of frustration at the slow pace of change,” Fichter recalled. The CHR’s lecture series fulfilled Rummel’s desire to educate the population and make them willing to integrate. Experts on such topics as juvenile delinquency, public health, and moral

74 Monsignor Henri Bezou, “Desegregation and the Catholic School System.” Address delivered at Loyola University to the CHR, 23 September 1955, CHR. Box 44, Folder 21, JHF Papers.

75 Fichter, One-Man Research: 83.
issues appeared in New Orleans to deliver speeches attacking segregationists’ claims. Fichter characterized it as his “spectacular drive” to desegregate the Catholic school system, the victory of sociological insight and the universal message of the church over the dogmatic assertions of the neo-Lost Cause. The CHR, claimed Fichter, was “concerned solely with persuading Catholic parents, teachers and priests that integration in the Catholic elementary and high schools will work.”

Complimenting this lecture campaign was Rummel’s 1956 statement declaring segregation “morally wrong and sinful,” and announcing the church’s intention to integration Catholic parochial schools. Like Brown, Rummel’s statement merely offered structural support to the efforts of many grassroots activists laboring for racial justice in the shadows of the white south. As we have seen, religious and laity struggled on a daily basis to secure educational and political equality in the region. With the support of Josephites and the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, laity continued to press the church for rights even as they defended it against black critics who questioned the otherworldliness of Catholic missionaries. Rummel’s authority, blacks maintained, stood out prominently against the efforts of so-called “progressive” politicians in New Orleans and Baton Rouge whose loyalties shifted with the changing political winds.

But after 1954, those winds blew fiercely against the efforts of grassroots reformers. The most concerted effort to block integration came under the guidance of north Louisiana legislator William Rainach, the leader in the fight to pass the state’s Right to Work legislation. “We should fight back with every resource, fight, and continue to fight, until the whole country has realized the ruinous error committed by a Supreme

76 Ibid.
Court that based its decision, not upon law, but upon socialist theory spawned in communism.” Rainach founded the Joint Legislative Commission to Maintain Segregation and coordinated a government campaign to remove blacks from the voting rolls. Giving official sanction to the local Citizens’ Council movement, the state also set out to suppress interracial activism. It passed ordinances to fire public school teachers who supported salary equalization for blacks and integration of schools. As many members of the CHR were teachers, the move severely crippled the organization’s efforts. In 1955, Rainach resurrected a 1926 state law passed to suppress the Ku Klux Klan by requiring all organizations submit their rolls to the state government. As one constituent wrote in calling Rainach’s attention to the anti-KKK bill, “It’s possible now that it may be used for a more worthy purpose.” The law not only effectively dismantled the NAACP. “What all of you together have done is restoring hope and confidence to people all over the South,” state Senator Allan Ellender lauded, “and I am hearing widespread praise of your own actions from the people of Louisiana.”

Negative publicity and grassroots counter-action driven by the White Citizens’ Councils also became the undoing for both the archdiocese and the Commission on Human Rights. Amidst the group’s education campaign, a controversy at Loyola brought accusations of communism on Fichter and others. On February 26, the Honorable Hulan Jack, an African American Catholic and borough president of Manhattan, New York, spoke at an Interracial Sunday meeting in which he praised Archbishop Rummel for his “courageous leadership” in the struggle for racial justice. Prior to the meeting, Emile

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77 Rainach to Mr. W. E. Debnam 24 September 1955, Box 1, Folder 10, William Rainach Papers, Special Collections, Louisiana State University at Shreveport (LSUS).

78 W.A. McLees to Rainach, 9 November 1955, Box 1, Folder 11, Rainach Papers, LSUS.
Wagner, a member of the Orleans Parish School Board and leading Catholic segregationist, discovered that the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) had investigated Jack for participation in “communist-influenced activities.” The Archbishop refused their request to deny Jack the opportunity to speak. Rummel also used the occasion to accuse segregationists of introducing “principles of communism into the United States.” After the meeting, Leander Perez and Wagner publicized the accusations against Jack and later wrote to Pope Pius XII, denouncing the incident and seeking to secure Rummel’s retirement as archbishop. Wagner dropped the charge of communism against Jack, complaining instead that, from an ecclesiastical perspective, the latter was an unsuitable speaker.

When a Citizens’ Council rally jeered angrily at the mention of Rummel’s name later that year, the CHR denounced it as “anti-American, anti-Southern, anti-Catholic and irreligious people.” The council responded immediately, calling for an FBI investigation into Fichter. Both incidents only compounded the already apparent inability of the CHR and Rummel to effectively educate the Catholic population of New Orleans on the need for integration. One angry recipient of the CHR’s newsletter responded to the campaign, “I believe that all your paper will gain will be the White Catholic people discontinuing their support to the Catholic Church.” White flight from the pews was certainly foremost on the Archbishop’s mind as he continued to delay the integration of schools. His increasing reluctance caused a widening rift in the already tense relationship between Fichter and the Archdiocese. Even Loyola administration began to distance itself

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79 The Jefferson Herald, 8/16/1956; Fichter, One-Man Research, 94-95. Emile A. Wagner, “In the Matter of an Appeal to His Holiness, Pope Pius XII by the Association of Catholic Laymen, July 24, 1957, Box 84, Folder 10, LJT Papers.
from the CHR. The school refused Fichter’s request for another grant from the Fund for the Republic to continue its education campaign. Yet the CHR needed little help in collapsing. That year a state official demanded that the organization fulfill a state law requiring organizations to list their membership with the secretary of state. The law subsequently forced many members to resign for fear of being fired or become the subject of public ridicule. In one of the great ironies in the history of Louisiana civil rights, the 1926 anti-Klan law crippled both the NAACP and the CHR.80

Fichter spent the following year as a research fellow at the University of Notre Dame. When SERINCO’s meetings drew sparse attendance, he lamented this loss of involvement, “particularly at this time when the bigots and the racists have driven so many other respectable people to cover. It would be a shame if they could score up a victory over the Catholics, the Jesuits and Loyola by pointing out that they ‘silenced’ the student group.” He saw the subsequent few years as a time for the Church to reload. The current project had garnered too much negative attention, Fichter told Rummel:

I feel that the time has come either for a re-organization of the CHR or for the formation of a new Catholic Inter-Racial Council of New Orleans. In the light of the determined racist groups on the local scene the interest lay Catholics are willing to work in a Catholic organization…only if they have the positive and expressed approval of Your Excellency.81

The decline of Catholic interracialism over the course of the next four years culminated in the 1960 New Orleans School Crisis. So vocal were the protesters and so silent the voices coming from city hall and St. Louis Cathedral that it is easy to overlook the

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80 Rummel to Fichter, 3/26/1956, Box 46, Folder 4; Fichter to David F. Freeman, 8/16/1956, Box 46, Folder 8, Both in JHF Papers.

81 Fichter to Pat Donnelly, 2/17/1957, Box 1, Folder 17; Fichter to Rummel, 1/1/1959, Box 46, Folder 9, both in JHF Papers.
decade of struggle that preceded it, especially the interweaving ideological conflicts and meanings that shaped the movement.

The integration of parochial schools, and the larger Catholic movement for interracial justice occurred at an important crossroads in both Catholic and Southern history. Interracialists assaulted the political and social milieu of the 1950s south with an anxious confidence about the potency of the church’s “integrated moral system” in overcoming the sins of southern racism. Grounded in a natural law framework, clergymen determined to “sanctify the social” insisted that a movement for interracial justice must begin and end with a Catholic authority that had the authority to orient all individuals—but especially white Catholics—to the common good through both education and the obligation of Catholics to the church’s moral authority. But the interracialists’ awkward reconciliation of neo-scholastic foundations of Catholic education with the demands of modern social science and social reform proved short sighted. Both Catholics and liberals turned their attention to the white south, whose prejudice quickly became a policy issue that threatened the image of the country and the church. Both also insisted that the dominant “creed” of American constitutionalism, grounded as it was in the natural law, would eventually prevail over white prejudice.

In 1956 Rummel addressed the graduating class of Xavier University in New Orleans with a tone of concern and optimism. “Our picture down here at the present moment is far from being a pleasant picture,” he acknowledged. But Rummel implored graduates of this African American Catholic university to remain faithful to a peaceful solution. Ever mindful of the need for Catholic unity, and confident in the church’s ability to shape the daily moral decisions of the white laity, he emphasized, “I do not
think a solution is going to be found in forceful exertions. We seek a solution which will cause the least possible disturbance of human emotions.”\(^{82}\) Such statements betrayed the limitations of many reformers, religious and secular, as they struggled to make sense of a new language and method of protest by the turn of the decade. For Rummel, like so many white clergymen throughout the south whose statements underscored a Catholic sense of unity and order, boycotts and street protests threatened a social stability that was necessary for promoting legitimate reform and encouraging an inner unity of the races.

But, from the mobilization of blacks in the streets of Selma and Montgomery to the church bombings, sit-ins and fire hoses, the struggle for racial justice, and the subsequent white backlash that it sparked, was about disturbing human emotions. For revolutionaries like Martin Luther King, it was about using the Christian message to confront flaws in the social order. David L. Chappell has shown how King’s background in prophetic religion—particularly as articulated by Reinhold Niebuhr—understood social injustice to be a product of man’s inherent sinfulness, an irrational force that often required an irrational, emotional corrective. Only direct action, rather than existing legal structures, could bring about legitimate social change.\(^{83}\)

As the church entered the violent era of Massive Resistance, it faced a group of white Catholics who not only brought their emotional defense of the “southern way of life” to the forefront, but also structured it with a sense of Catholic obligation. Both segregationist white Catholics in the pews and a significant number of priests sought to

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\(^{82}\) Xavier Herald 31:9 (July, 1956).

legitimize their movement by grafting race onto the uniquely Catholic language of social unity and spiritual order.
CHAPTER 5:
THE CATHOLIC CITIZENS’ COUNCIL

The season of repentance was to have new meaning for Louisiana Catholics. On Ash Wednesday, 1956, the local paper reported that the federal district court in New Orleans had struck down Louisiana’s recent amendment permitting the state’s use of “police powers” to prevent public school integration. The ruling judge, J. Skelly Wright, also ordered the public school board to develop a plan for desegregation “with all deliberate speed.” Four days later, Catholics sat in the pews on the first Sunday of Lent as priests read a pastoral letter from Archbishop Joseph Francis Rummel declaring racial segregation “morally wrong and sinful because it is the denial of the unity and solidarity of the human race.” Unlike the Fifth Circuit Court’s decision, which challenged state attempts to control the operation of local schools, Rummel was responding to resistance from below. Six years after his initial order to integrate Sunday liturgies and parish organizations, African Americans remained segregated behind screens and “colored” signs. In the rural community of Jesuit Bend, white parishioners barred an African American priest from celebrating Mass, prompting Rummel to close the chapel until its members opened its altar to priests of any race. Most recently, several prominent lay Catholics in New Orleans challenged the church’s authority in condemning “social
problems,” prompting this authoritative statement by the Catholic hierarchy in New Orleans.¹

For the Louisiana Catholic writer Walker Percy, the prelate’s statement was a turning point for the laity, and not simply in the immediate matter of school integration. “The truth is that the Catholic Church and the twentieth century have caught up with the white Catholics of the South,” the Louisiana writer proclaimed shortly after Rummel’s letter. Percy foresaw in the archbishop’s Lenten directive a dramatic end to the white southern Catholic temper. Southerners had woven a narrow thread of Christian obligation into a social order shaped by the doctrine of Jim Crow. Masked by “an incredible triumph of manners,” the southerner could once live comfortably in this social world, knowing he would die a guiltless Christian. But now, outrageous as it was, Percy declared, the church “is no longer content to perform rites of passage; she has entered the arena of the living and must be reckoned with.”² As Rummel laid down his command, outsiders at least watched with a measure of optimism. “On the whole, Louisiana Catholics have taken this quietly,” a New York Times reporter felt. “Some local priests may not agree with integration. But when a Roman Catholic priest disagrees with a policy laid down by his bishop and backed by the Vatican, there’s little the priest can do except pray.”³

By the end of the decade, however, progressives witnessed a church that had largely retreated from the arena of the living. Exhorting most Catholics to seek solution in prayer and patience, Rummel, to many, passed from interracialist visionary to

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ineffectual well-wisher in the larger movement for civil rights in Louisiana. Catholic schools remained segregated until 1962, with most progressives decrying the inaction of civil and religious leaders amid the violence of the 1960 public school crisis. The experiences of Rummel and Catholic interracialism certainly occupy a central place in the historical narrative of the Catholic south and civil rights in Louisiana. But exclusive attention to the strengths and weaknesses of the hierarchy and the priests and women religious who supported the movement only contributes to the asymmetry that already characterizes civil rights scholarship as a whole. As a result, white southern opposition to the civil rights, often known as Massive Resistance, remains a monolithic, top-down movement by southern statesmen who used state legislatures and regional white citizens’ councils to circumvent the Supreme Court and coalesce popular white resentment around a variety of anticommunist, states’ rights, and neo-confederate tropes.

This traditional picture is important but incomplete. Louisiana offers an ideal model for examining the aggressive, often inventive efforts of southern legislatures to

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stand between the schools and the High Court. The state legislature, for one, gave official
sanction to the local citizens’ council movement, which organized local white resistance
in the wake of the Brown decision. Louisiana’s most famous segregationist leaders,
William Rainach and Leader Perez, effectively paired the race issue with anti-
communism and threats of moral endangerment to secure political power and undermine
the influence of the once-dominant populist Earl Long. The story of Long’s famous
meltdown over the race issue in the state legislature in 1959 overshadows the extent to
which race-baiting frustrated Catholic leadership at all levels as well. “Were you to hear
some of these Louisianan politicians, especially Rainach,” one beleaguered nun in Lake
Charles commented, “one could only pray that God would help people to ‘relish what is
right and just.’”

The social atmosphere in the churches that prevented Catholics from doing so was
a source of constant frustration for interracialists. But undergirding this edifice of official
pronouncements from the state and the activities of the regional Citizens’ Councils was
an aspect of white resistance far more pervasive and deeply rooted. For those who
accepted political leaders’ rhetoric of self-victimization and racial resentment, massive
resistance was a religious movement. As lay Catholic leaders, segregationists throughout
South would respond to social integration in terms of deeply held religious beliefs and
obligations. When southern politicians from Rainach and Perez to George Wallace
proclaimed the “southern way of life,” they tapped into a complex of values, a system of
moral order structured by social inequality.

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7 SBS Sisters to Mother Mary Anselm, December 15, 1957, Box 14a f. 7, “Lake Charles, Sacred Heart
Church 1940-1973” collection, Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament Archives (SBSA), Bensalem, Pa.
This chapter seeks to illuminate the largely overlooked anxieties, ideologies, and general motivations of white resistance, particularly the motivations of average southerners who bought into the emotionally charged rhetoric of citizens’ council leaders and politicians. An examination of the “other side” of the Catholic desegregation campaign not only enhances our image of southern Catholic life in the waning years of Jim Crow, but also challenges our understanding of the ideas and individuals that shaped massive resistance in the south as a whole. In coalescing mid-century white resentment, Catholic segregationists drew on the strength of the region-wide citizens’ council movement and local anti-labor efforts to mobilize laity against Rummel and “liberal” clergymen. In the process, they promulgated a religious defense of Jim Crow that sought to exploit the theological breaches of the church’s “new morality” of interracialism and provide a religious grounding for massive resistance rooted in white fears of moral disorder. As one of the first movements by private citizens against integration in the south, the white Catholic response to the hierarchy’s integration plan formed the backbone of massive resistance in the region. A closer analysis of the ideas that motivated this movement, then, both shapes our appreciation for the complexities of white resistance and further illuminates the deep religious meanings that underlay the daily confrontations taking place throughout the civil rights movement.

8 Recent historians have laid the groundwork for investigating white resistance from the “bottom up.” Charles Marsh, God’s Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights (Princeton, 1997); Marsh’s unique and ambitious study of the religious motivations on all sides and at all levels of civil rights activism paved the way for further analyses of white religion. See especially Jane Dailey, “Sex, Segregation, and the Sacred after Brown,” Journal of American History, 91 (June 2004), 119-44; David L. Chappell, “Religious Ideas of the Segregationists,” Journal of American Studies, 32 (August 1998), 237-62; and Paul Harvey, Freedom’s Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War through the Civil Rights Era (Chapel Hill, 2005), esp. 218-50. This essay argues for the importance of Catholic segregationists in understanding the ways white southerners constructed religious defenses of Jim Crow.
Viewing themselves as defenders of a social order that the Catholic hierarchy was meant to embody, the segregationist movement was, to say the least, a unique expression of lay rights at a time when shifting roles for laity and clergy lay at the heart of the Catholic Church’s *aggiornamento*. But, as many observers in the 1950s noted, the constant and often contentious negotiation of the proper spheres for religious and secular authority had always defined Catholic life in Louisiana. These conflicts forged a peculiar southern Catholic temper that some believed lay at the root of white resistance. Louisiana Catholics were, after all, *French* Catholics. As one observer noted, Louisianans latent “Jansenism and Gallicanism dating from the arrival of the original French settlers” had manifested in numerous conflicts between clergy and laity over the appointment of priests and the delivery of unpopular sermons.⁹ For the church historian Roger Baudier, a rampant “laicism” developing since the early days of the church in the region had inverted “the proper order in religious society,” allowing southern Catholics to skirt moral teachings by questioning the disciplinary reach of the church. “Your laicist would have the church authorities conform with their views for the achievement of the goal of the time, and these goals have varied during the past two centuries.”¹⁰ In framing Catholic dissent in this manner, interracialists hoped promote a solution to the problem of clerical authority in Louisiana: laity just had to become better Catholics, part of the mainstream of American Catholic life. In integrating southern society in the 1950s, Catholic leaders believed they could invoke an inherent sense of loyalty and discipline among the Catholic laity, regardless of whether history was ever on their side.

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By the 1950s, white laity who occupied a significant place in the social and economic power structure in south Louisiana had forged a comfortable modus vivendi between religious and social authority. When Rummel and Twomey stood up to challenge the dominant labor practices of Louisiana Catholic planters, however, they forced a confrontation with the church that influenced later conflicts over desegregation, and indeed the larger debate over clerical authority in social politics. “The Stoic-Christian Southerner is offended when the Archbishop of New Orleans calls segregation sinful (or discusses the rights of labor),” the Louisiana writer Walker Percy explained. “It is as if a gentleman’s agreement had been broken.”

To this violation of traditionally understood boundaries—which had always defined Jim Crow—white laity responded publicly and vehemently. A group known as the Catholic Laymen for Right to Work publicly challenged Rummel’s right to pronounce authoritatively on the moral implications of economic legislation. Despite Twomey’s open challenging of the group, the Catholic Laymen for Right to Work planted the seeds of dissent within the Catholic laity of the region. Indeed, the group reveals the intrinsic connections between anti-labor forces and the rise of white resistance in the mid-1950s.

Organized labor certainly understood the dangers posed by grassroots segregationism. “Although the White Citizens Councils were set up to keep the southern Negro ‘in his place,’” Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union founder H.L. Mitchell explained, “there is substantial evidence that the movement is directed at trade unions.” Rummel both understood and feared the intrinsic connections between anti-labor and

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segregationism. Industrialists, he declared in a speech at Notre Dame, promoted white resistance “with an interest in perpetuating cheap labor and questionable working conditions.” By the mid-1950s, the Citizens’ Council movement had gained significant ground in Louisiana, with some figures listing the Catholic-heavy Greater New Orleans Citizens’ Council as the largest in the South. Industrialists, planters, and “Right-to-Work Councils” all poured money and members into what Mitchell denounced as the “new ku klux klan.”13

Councilmen, however, rejected the image of the hood and rope, and in the process set organized labor within a larger constellation of concerns over preserving the “southern way of life.” If segregationists were to wield influence in 1950s America, they insisted, they would have to shun the extra-legal militancy of the past and project an image of themselves and the Jim Crow South as the true measure of Americanism. A self-proclaimed movement of the south’s “best citizens,” the Citizens’ Council, they declared, embodied the professionalism and respectability of white resistance. The result was a massive PR campaign. Councils could educate white southerners on the dangers posed by the federal government, “expose” individuals associated with the integration and union movements, and generally rouse whites to action without ever claiming to incite violence or physical coercion. “The councilmen assume no responsibility,” a Nation reporter explained. “They grind out the letters on the mimeograph and hope that hate and fear will do the rest.”14 The conduct councils inspired was varied but effective.

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“There is fear of course of physical violence,” New Orleans priest Jerome Drolet noted, “but mostly it is fear of losing jobs.”

The council’s goal of dignified resistance and polite intimidation would certainly shape white Catholic responses to the hierarchy. Drolet, another labor priest who spent the previous decade attacking state opposition to the Fair Employment Practices Commission, described to Dorothy Day his first-hand experience with the council’s “well organized public relations department.” After Mass one Sunday, members circulated fliers accusing him of promoting communism in the church. Under investigation by the House Un-American Activities Committee’s, Father Drolet, the flier insisted, had spent his seminary years distributing the *Daily Worker* to classmates. The priest’s direction to remove the fliers from car windshields led to the arrest of his African American assistant. Drolet’s assertive demeanor never ceased antagonizing segregationists. But council pressure drove much of the Catholic interracial movement underground.

In the years after *Brown*, councils could not only draw upon anti-labor momentum, but crowds of angry churchgoers as well. While some analysts hoped that “general disinterest” might keep New Orleans from the numbers of Jackson or Birmingham, Rummel feared their influence over the laity. As one leader boasted, the archbishop’s stance against segregation in 1956 “has helped us tremendously.” Council bulletins throughout the region boasted of the amazing support given the cause of segregation by white Catholics. “The army of resistance to integration is filled with loyal members of the Catholic faith,” *The Councilor* proclaimed, “marching side by side with

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16 Ibid.
other faithful members of all creeds!”17 Another council leader delighted in the account
of a Catholic segregationist from Missouri who hoped that “the Protestant people of the
South will try to see the Catholic viewpoint where the two groups have a common
interest in this struggle.”18 Such ecumenism was strategic. In the efforts of citizens’
councils throughout the south to cast themselves in a light of respectability,
segregationists could highlight a Catholic—sometimes even Jewish—participation that
cleansed the stains of Klanism.19

In the wake of Archbishop Rummel’s pastoral letter, membership grew rapidly
under the leadership of Catholic layman Emmett Irwin. The well-known physician often
invoked his medical expertise to fan popular fears of “race mixing.” In addition to
mobilizing prominent Catholic laity, Irwin exuded the professionalism so important to the
councils. As the integrationist judge and constant council target, J. Skelly Wright,
recalled, when a well-known physician who traveled in the highest echelons of New
Orleans society sat at council rallies next to a delta-bred rural demagogue like Leander
Perez, it “dignified the movement.”20 With Irwin and Perez alongside the journalist and
Catholic layman Jackson Ricau, segregationists seemed to forge a productive alliance
between the professional class of the emerging industrial south and the reactionary
populism of its plantation belt heyday. Even more than the 1948 Dixiecrat Revolt,
Massive Resistance to the Supreme Court managed to engage the urban elite more fully

William Rainach Papers, Special Collections, LSUS.

18 *The Citizens Council* 2:7 (April, 1957), copy in Box 65, Rainach Papers, LSUS.


20 J. Skelly Wright, interview with Glenda Stephens, 9 December 1978, Kim Lacy Rogers-Glenda
Stephens Oral History Collection, Amistad Research Center (ARC), Tulane University.
in a concerted effort to thwart federal authority and Catholic hierarchy. Such marriages were not without their conflicts, of course. Leander Perez, who helped orchestrate the 1948 Dixiecrat Revolt against Truman and played a central role in the state’s onslaught of anti-integration legislation, often alienated those wishing to downplay the Delta Boss’ anti-Semitic overtones and rural racist constituency. In 1958, Perez’s language of “Zionist conspiracies” finally forced a schism with Ricau, who later formed the South Louisiana Citizens’ Council.21

In enforcing segregation in Plaquemines and St. Bernard Parish, Perez rivaled the most tenacious Latin American caudillo, exerting “as much control as you have over your living room,” one member of the national Catholic Interracial conference lamented. But while one local integrationist insisted that Perez’s Catholicism was “purely accidental,” his status as a Catholic layman who could just as easily address the Ku Klux Klan as their “Grand Dragon,” clearly worried Catholic interracialists across the nation.22 Indeed, despite his exceptionally virile language and his open defiance of a “communist brainwashed” hierarchy, Perez, like Irwin and his future fellow excommunicant Ricau, connected Catholics in the pews to the widespread voices of a defiant South. In the ear of southern governors and churchgoers alike, Perez would often appeal to his constituency’s religious loyalty. “I am a Catholic, although not an Archbishop Catholic,” he declared to one council rally. Rather, “they call me a ‘mother at the knee Catholic’ because I understand what it taught because I learned it at my mother’s knee.”23 As such, he


22 Henry Cabirac to Msgr. Charles Plauche, 5 July 1962, Box 1, Folder 6, Catholic Council on Human Relations Papers (CCHR), Amistad Research Center.

insisted, his was “not a revolt against the Catholic church. God forbid any such thought against Mother Church.”24 Interracialists didn’t buy it. But the potency of his language certainly frustrated their efforts to draw Catholics into the authoritative teaching of the church. In 1955, Perez had directed a rebellion against the hierarchy in his home region of Plaquemines Parish. When several members of St. Cecilia’s chapel in Jesuit Bend refused the entry of a black priest to celebrate Mass, Rummel placed the congregation under interdiction, refusing to reopen the church until parishioners consented to his choice of celebrants.

When church officials attempted to meet with parishioners, however, only a handful appeared. The rest, under Perez’s direction, gathered to form the first citizens’ council in the area. Parishioners declared the Archbishop’s letter “a threat” from an outside influence and demanded said it was “up to the people” to meet this challenge. In a letter to Rummel, parishioners expressed their refusal to allow black priests any “spiritual, social or personal contact with members of their families.”25 The letter incensed Rummel, but the conflict continued for over two years. As the chapel languished under interdiction, it became, in Rummel’s own words, “a symbol of resistance to the authority of the church and of contempt for the holy priesthood.” When St. Cecilia’s finally reopened in 1958 with a white priest at the altar and a congregation segregated down the middle, many African Americans read it as a victory for white resistance in the region. “When they reopened the chapel in Jesuit Bend,” one said, “they


put the Negroes on the other side, and God on the outside.”

Evidenced by Jesuit Bend, the white resentment engendered by Perez and the councils would continue to hamstring Catholic interracialism. “When we compare the numbers that attend our gatherings with those who attend the meeting of the Citizens’ Councils,” Rummel admitted to one priest regarding interracialist activities, “we are certainly not reaching the masses.” Perez agreed.

Rummel’s frustrations with council influence reflected the Catholic Church’s constant struggle to offer a unifying social and spiritual voice in a rapidly changing south. Between World War II and the 1960s, industrialization and the migration of rural southerners, black and white, to towns and cities converged with Cold War anxieties and black assertions of political rights to fuel upper and middle class fears of social and, as many saw it, moral corruption. Once bound by Jim Crow’s system of manners, customs, and social expectations that ordered society, constrained black life, and ensured white status, the “New South” suddenly challenged the sense of givenness that underlay white defenses of the “southern way of life.”

Councils responded to these fears with neo-Confederate symbolism and religious fervor. At one council rally, “the women around me wore vague, Sunday-sermon expressions of relaxation,” one journalist described. “The men’s eyes were squinted, hungry, as they sought the Word…” Another meeting in New Orleans in May of 1956 drew a crowd of six thousand seekers who angrily booed...

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26 Louisiana Weekly, 12 April 1958; Times Picayune 2 April 1958, and 7 April 1958; For more on Jesuit Bend, see Stephen Ochs, Desegregating the Altar: The Josephites and the Struggle for Black Priests (Baton Rouge: LSU Press); Anderson, Black, White, and Catholic, 145-148.

27 Rummel to Joseph Fichter 26 March 1956, box 46, folder 4, Joseph H. Fichter Papers, Special Collections, Loyola University of New Orleans (JHF).


the archbishop as his name was introduced as a member of the Urban League. Later that evening, several whites burned a cross on the lawn of Notre Dame Seminary adjacent to the archbishop’s residence. When interracial activists scored the council’s actions as anti-American and anti-Catholic, segregationists retorted that “hundreds of thousands of Catholics,” including many clergymen, opposed integration and proudly supported the council. With a 1956 *Catholic Digest* poll showing 76 percent of southern Catholics in favor of segregation, Rummel’s fears were easily understood.30

Yet Catholic participation in the White Citizens’ Council constitutes only part of a larger religious and social struggle. Council membership, in fact, fell in 1957. Nonetheless, the heart of white resistance in the region, I would argue, lay in the actions of smaller religious groups that drew upon the council’s tactics and its image of “polite protest” to challenge Archbishop Rummel’s unique concept of “sin.” Such an approach was not only necessary for a devout laity who took the idea of “sin” seriously, but also for a group of southerners in a church that could, in the words of parochial school superintendent Henry Bezou, cripple Jim Crow “with the stroke of a pen.” Responding to both the moral and the practical issues at stake, Catholic segregationists set out to secure the support of clergymen and marginalize the archbishop’s position outlined in his 1956 pastoral, “The Morality of Racial Segregation.” The resulting movement was, at once, an assertion of lay rights and a defense of the One True Church as they saw it.

Parents and Friends of Catholic School Children denounced the church’s “clandestine conspiracy” to integrate schools, “the gory details of which have purposely been withheld from the laity.” The group demanded that the people in the pews, “once

they have been informed, set and determine their own objectives.”31 At Jesuit High School, the Blue Jays Parents’ Club introduced a resolution that separate facilities were “entirely adequate” and that integration would inevitably lower the school’s scholastic standards “because of the disparity that exists between the races in the area of health, morality and culture.” Parents’ clubs at St. Francis Xavier in Metairie and Holy Name of Mary in Algiers took similar actions. When the principal of Jesuit, Claude J. Stallworth, SJ, ruled the group out of order, between 75 and 100 parents stormed out of the meeting, claiming that discussion “was unfairly stopped” after the resolution had been circulated among 900 club members over the previous months. “This is an organized movement,” Stallworth warned.32

At the heart of it stood the intelligent and “harassingly persistent” Emile Wagner, a prominent lawyer who sat on the Orleans Parish School Board. In addition to his organization of white laity against Catholic school integration, Wagner’s desire to challenge the theological issues at stake in the desegregation struggle won him the admiration of citizens’ council members throughout the South. Council papers reprinted and parents’ clubs circulated his letters at meetings: models, in their minds, of calmly reasoned and doctrinally sound dissent against “social Catholicism.” Through the end of the decade, Wagner orchestrated a religious struggle against the hierarchy that was, according to one contemporary scholar, “the most fascinating such debate, perhaps, in the history of the South.”33 His challenge to church authority on the immorality of the color


32 Times Picayune, 11 January 1956; 4 December 1955; and 17 December 1955.

line became so ubiquitous that while on retreat in Convent, Louisiana, one participant even asked the priest, “Why is it that I may not receive the Sacraments because I practice birth control when Emile Wagner is permitted daily to receive the Sacraments?”34

The sullen Wagner, a widower with five children, spent much of his time answering that question himself. “I am a Catholic, and by standards which were considered true just a few years ago, a good one…”35 In all aspects of church life, he assured his audience, segregationists remained committed Catholics who paid the bills and led Holy Name Societies, Rosary services, and parents’ clubs. Segregationists were also loyal followers of the archbishop’s pastoral leadership. After the citizens’ councils booed Rummel during several rallies, Wagner expressed his shock to Pius XII: “Never in the history of living Catholics in this region has a Catholic Archbishop been subjected to such humiliating and derogatory treatment.” At the same time, he insisted, Rummel had largely brought it upon himself. At an Interracial Sunday in February of 1956, the prelate had stood beside and praised the efforts of Hulan Jack, a black Catholic and Manhattan borough president that Wagner and Leander Perez had “exposed” as a member of “subversive” organizations prior to the meeting. When the program proceeded despite this revelation, he declared, the ensuing media controversy subjected the church to grave scandal.36 Moreover, “The Morality of Racial Segregation” had generated confusion and division among the laity. “As a result, educated Catholics have become demoralized and

34 C. Ellis Henican to Archbishop Joseph Francis Rummel, 14 August 1961, in Box 1, Folder 5, Catholic Commission on Human Relations Papers, Amistad Research Center.
35 Emile A. Wagner to Edmund B. Bunn, SJ, 10 November 1955, copy of circular in Box 53, Folder 3, Joseph H. Fichter Papers (JHF Papers), Loyola University.
36 Emile Wagner, “In the Matter of an Appeal to His Holiness Pope Pius XII by The Association of Catholic Laymen,” (24 July 1957), 10; copy in Box 83, Folder 10, LJT Papers; for a good discussion of the Hulan Jack controversy, see Bentley Anderson, Black, White, and Catholic, 153-161.
uneducated ones scandalized.” He demanded that the church provide laity with a “rational basis” for morally mandating integration “just as he was so informed when the immorality of birth control was denounced.”

In crafting his opposition to the hierarchy, Wagner, like many segregationists, could emphasize a narrow but self-satisfying distinction between his disdain for the matter of racial integration and his opposition to the manner of it. Similar to the ways states’ rights advocates calmly invoked constitutional principle rather than the more undignified aspects of white supremacy to challenge federal enforcement of integration, Wagner insisted that it was the hierarchy’s abuse of its authority that so offended Catholics. Insisting that, “I have no hatred of the Negro,” Wagner acknowledged the ways African Americans could, one day, attain first class citizenship. “I will and do work arduously for the general improvement of his condition…although admittedly the Negro has done little for himself.” But because a gross disparity in social and moral standards still existed, both Rummel and the Supreme Court endangered the social and moral well being of whites. However, he declared, “the thinking Catholic resents even more the foisting upon him of an unproved principle, whatever it be, than he does the integration of the Negro with the white…”

After all, the promulgation of undefined moral principles exposed laity to the ravages of moral relativism. Avoiding the virulent rhetoric of Leander Perez, Wagner grounded his ideological assault on desegregation in Catholic intellectual adherence to natural law, canon law, and papal teachings. A doctrine contrived at the behest of the

NAACP and other influences, Rummel’s sudden declaration on the sinfulness of segregation was offensive to the immutability of moral law and “a denial of God’s intelligence and justice.” The interracialist priest Harold L. Cooper, S.J., had explained to Wagner that integration was the product of a “subjective growth in understanding” of the natural law over time. Wagner countered by declaring Cooper “dangerously close to heresy.” Cooper “seems to define natural morality as what persons in authoritative positions in any era want it to be, who justify their holding by explaining it to be a ‘subjective growth in understanding.’” For evidence of this subjectivity, one needed to look no further than the confessional, where priests often refused to discuss segregation. Some even dismissed laity who came to confess the sin of segregationism. These confused laity, Wagner complained to the Holy See, “have been refused absolution in some confessionals and granted absolution in others. Imagine the confusion in the minds of these Catholics and the scandal!”

After joining Leander Perez in exposing Hulan Jack as a communist sympathizer, Wagner grew so enthusiastic about his popularity that he organized the Association of Catholic Laymen. On March 28, 1956, its directors solicited membership in a *Times-Picayune* ad addressed to “members of the Roman Catholic Church of the Caucasian race.” Mirroring Catholic interracial organizations such as the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) based at Loyola, the Association of Catholic Layman fashioned itself as a think tank for social science and Catholic ideology. Where the CHR rejected

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40 Ibid.

41 Emile Wagner, “In the Matter of an Appeal to His Holiness Pope Pius XII,” 4.
segregationist claims about the physical and spiritual dangers of integration, Wagner’s group would counter with its own facts and figures. Where the CHR united its members in prayer and discussion of all Christians’ unity in the Mystical Body of Christ, the Association of Catholic Laymen sought to “unite all Catholics in daily prayer to the end that the Holy Spirit may enlighten and guide this Association…”

The ad and the group’s very existence incensed Rummel, who feared the confusion and dissension the group—quite deliberately—was causing among the laity. When the archbishop threatened the group with excommunication, Wagner discontinued soliciting members. But as with many organizations that formed Catholic segregationism, its members continued to voice and reinforce their beliefs. Wagner circulated his appeals among laity committed to a faithful dissent against the Archbishop. When he appealed to the Pope in the summer of 1957, he declared that despite his respect for the Archbishop and willingness to adhere to church teachings, “no competent attempt has been made to offer a conclusive proof to establish the validity of the principle.” It was the duty of the Holy See “to speak out and eliminate the doubt and burden of conscience in this—this only archdiocese in the world—where racial segregation is morally wrong and sinful.” One may only guess how Wagner might have responded, but structures of church authority worked to his benefit. As the hierarchy long maintained, local ordinaries had ultimate authority in individual dioceses in most matters. The Holy See would thus not answer the Association directly, allowing Wagner the room he needed to continue promoting faithful dissent among the laity.

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42 “Articles of Incorporation of Association of Catholic Laymen,” 12 March 1956, copy in Box 82, Folder 29, LJT Papers.

43 Wagner, “In the Matter of an Appeal to His Holiness, Pope Pius XII,” 4.
Wagner’s efforts to create a theological space for Jim Crow carried tremendous influence and shaped the discourse of a number of segregationists. The responses of these Catholic laity to interracialist clergymen and the hierarchy not only reveal the segregationist quest for respectability and intellectual legitimacy in the 1950s south, but, as Wagner demonstrated, the deep moral issues many believed to be at stake in the civil rights struggle. “To state that there is no difference between the races,” one angry white insisted, “is to say that Almighty God has no purpose in all this.” Even if such statements also masked more tangible social and material aims, segregationists’ moral imagination, and the way it shaped their deepest anxieties and prejudices, is not to be overlooked. What the historian Paul Harvey calls a “folk theology of segregation” speaks to the ways Jim Crow had evolved into a defined system of moral—as much as social—boundaries for white southerners. Donald Matthews explains that a set of myths, symbols, and rituals associated with Jim Crow—from the notion of the “black beast rapist” and references to black men as “boy,” to “Colored” signs and lynching—sustained and promulgated segregation as a religious system that infused the social world and defined life for southerners, black and white alike. The south’s racial caste system reflected a divine order. Heretics often suffered violent consequences.

For Catholic segregationists, the Church’s own distinct ideology of order and place, sustained through ritual and symbol and reinforced in the interactions between lay and clergy within the context of devotion, prayer, and the Mass, structured this southern religious worldview. “Colored” signs on pews, separate churches staffed by non-native

44 Herman P. Folse to Twomey, 21 November 1955, in Box 19, Folder 15, LJT Papers, Loyola.

clergy and women religious, and expectations of black reverence toward whites during liturgy all reinforced a sense of divine order and social place. In responding to the post-war challenges of organized labor and the civil rights movement, Wagner, Jackson Ricau, and others revealed the ways Catholic segregationists, over the course of the twentieth century, had placed this southern “folk theology of segregation” within a distinctly Catholic theological and ecclesiastical framework. This framework shaped not only their response to integration, but also to the ecclesiastical and social transformations of the 1960s.

Central to this process had been the historical development of a popular theology of the priesthood. While mid-century observers were fond of pointing out the peculiar and often violent anticlerical heritage of Louisiana Catholics, the segregationist quest for legitimacy and respectability at mid-century prompted a more nuanced version. In the Jim Crow south, priests became powerful but inherently flawed figures. Despite playing an essential role within the church as intermediaries of the sacred, they remained detached “from the day to day world of hard reality.” As such, Parents and Friends of Catholic School Children warned, priests were more vulnerable than most to “the air of materialism and secularism” surrounding them, presenting a menace to both “the management of social affairs” and “the management of family affairs.”

We are in opposition to the clergy intruding themselves into any of the phases and areas of living other than their proper and appointed sphere, the strict practice of sacerdotal and ecclesiastical profession. Priests are maintained by society to preach the word of God, to baptize babies, to marry persons, to bury the dead, administer the Sacraments, and to keep the prescribed records normally maintained in connection therewith.
“Singularly inept” in the affairs of politics, labor, and business, clergymen overreached when placing moral weight atop the racial structures of southern society.46

The general disposition of priests serving white congregations certainly reinforced this attitude. Indeed, many priests offered significant support to white resistance. In the Diocese of Lafayette, one had become legendary for his opposition to Rummel. Insisting that there would never be integration in his parish, the priest’s tirades in the church bulletin had become so startling that even parishioners complained that he was “unnecessarily violent about race and excessively prejudiced, determined to ‘stir things up’.”47 In New Orleans on the day priests were to read “The Morality of Racial Segregation,” the pastor of the 7 pm Mass at St. James Major parish warned his congregation about a lengthy letter on the race question that priests were being forced to deliver. After coloring his reading with racist remarks about the health, morality, intelligence and resourcefulness of blacks, he assured them, “I know what is on your minds, and I am in sympathy with you.” While the Archbishop claimed it was a moral issue, “I still think it is social,” he declared, adding that the letter was not the final word on the matter. Additional information by doctors, sociologists, social workers and others would “shed more light on the subject.”48

Such defiance shocked Clarence Laws, a leader of the local branch of the NAACP who happened to be attending St. James Major that evening. Laws, whose patience with

46 Parents and Friends of Catholic School Children, undated circular, copy in Box 83, Folder 12, Louis J. Twomey Papers.


the church already ran thin, expressed to Rummel the personal injury and hurt “because of what I consider a deliberate lack of charity manifested by this priest toward my church, my spiritual leader and my race.” He warned the church that, “unless the members of the clergy of our faith are in harmony in matters respecting morality the results can be only increasing misunderstanding, confusion and open defiance of the teachings of the Church and the laws of our country.” Twomey agreed that, “there can be little doubt that the battle against prejudice, specifically against racial prejudice, is made immeasurably more difficult when a prejudiced laity can hide behind a prejudiced clergy.”

Few were as outspoken as the pastors in Lafayette and St. James Major, but they didn’t have to be. Many worked behind the scenes. The theological erudition with which Emile Wagner crafted his defense of Jim Crow has prompted the historian R. Bentley Anderson to investigate the assistance some Jesuits gave to the indefatigable layman. Wagner’s partner, Jackson Ricau, also delighted in the opposition of a Reverend Sam Hill Ray, S.J., former Dean of Men at Loyola who labeled the Brown decision a “victory for Communism.” Intentionally refraining from discussing the morality of segregation or integration, Ray claimed that the Supreme Court endangered state sovereignty and the Tenth Amendment. “While some Jesuit Fathers have been extremely articulate in espousing racial integration,” Ricau noted, “it is a fact that many Jesuits share opposite views.” At the same time, Leander Perez who often invoked the “friendly priests” at his

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49 Ibid. Laws wrote numerous times in the Louisiana Weekly, criticizing both the church and the Knights of Peter Claver for refusing to take a more definitive stance on integration.

50 Christ’s Blueprint for the South, October, 1959. Copies in Special Collections and Archives, Loyola University, New Orleans.

51 The Citizens’ Report, August, 1959, copy in Box 84, Folder 3, LIT Papers; For more on Sam Hill Ray and Jesuit support of Catholic segregationism see Anderson, Black, White, and Catholic: 84, 89-91.
service once remarked, “a priest’s popularity and effectiveness correlate positively with his ability to fish, handle a shot-gun competently, enjoy good meals, and otherwise manifest the tastes of his communicants.”

Indeed, most clergymen simply avoided the race issue from the pulpit, with some even refusing to read Rummel’s pastoral letter. Harold J. Cooper, a chaplain at Loyola placed much of the blame for white prejudice squarely on the shoulders of priests who, largely through inaction, “abet, promote, preach and generally approve of a social pattern such as racial separatism.” While it was true that so many local priests had lived in a climate of prejudice all of their lives that predisposed them to anti-integrationism, the most regrettable result, the Jesuit argued, was their promotion of a “ compartimentalizing theology” that relegated Christian virtue to the narrow realm of moral instruction. “Don’t break the sixth commandment and make the novena to St. Ann!” Cooper mocked. He warned that through such Pharisaism Christians “are only too frequently driven by fear rather than motivated by love.” Segregationist leaders, after all, perfected the rhetoric of fear, and if priests continued to bind parishioners to “a mere system of do-goodism,” the church would never compete for the souls of white laity. Cooper admonished that unless seminary education was reformed to commit priests to a more thorough theology, the priest “will think just as his parishioners do. Instead of molding their thought, his will be shaped by theirs.”

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54 Ibid.
main source of white resistance. “If we of the clergy lack the forthrightness to champion an ‘unpopular’ cause, how can we expect the laity to have the courage to carry the burden?”

For segregationists, of course, Twomey became the model of the intrusive clergyman. A vocal interracialist who frequented NAACP rallies and exhorted southern Catholics to heed the church’s call to social and spiritual unity in the Mystical Body of Christ, the Jesuit’s countless speeches attacking everything from “rugged individualism” and modern American consumerism to racial segregation drew the ire of Catholics throughout the country. Offering a window into the private sentiments that formed Catholic segregationists’ worldview, letters to Twomey ranged from the truly hate-filled to the genuinely distraught, at once threatening and prayerful. “Would it not be logical for you to preach religion instead of urgin[g] the negroes here to violence,” one wrote on the back of a postcard depicting a New Orleans slave block. But while another prayed for Twomey that “God be just in your judgment!” one New Orleanian claimed to be so saddened by his speeches that she offered, “from the heart,” to pray for the priest every day.

It just makes my heart sad, and you have spoiled a beautiful day, because you are neglecting your duties as a Priest. Segregation should be no concern of yours! It is hoped that you will forget all that unhappiness, and believe and love God more, and live as he wants you to do – ‘saving souls.”

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55 Christ’s Blueprint for the South, January 1959, collection in LJT Papers.


57 Mary Restivo to Louis Twomey, 21 November 1955, Box 28, Folder 11, LJT Papers.
The notion of the “fatherly” priest also had its limits. Twomey’s assertion that young Southerners “cannot follow the lead of many of their parents” certainly incensed whites, who were quick to point out that a priest “will never understand a father’s feelings and responsibilities.”58 Celibate priests unable to have daughters or wives of their own, the argument followed, would never understand the sexual dangers racial integration posed to white women. Indeed, some protests against priestly involvement in the civil rights movement revealed southern constructions of gender that reinforced racial segregation. As the very symbol of southern virtue, the image of the vulnerable white female elevated the southern male defense of segregation, says Jane Dailey, to “cosmological significance” in the southern mind. In a patriarchal southern world, the place of the celibate male was thus tenuous at best. While some priests could be, as one segregationist described, “real men who worked to make both races happy by living apart and getting along,” by and large, priests’ place outside dominant models of male power undermined their influence as political actors.59

Priests’ failure to suit white southerners’ affinity for “one helluva fella” politics augmented other distinctly Catholic protests against those, like Twomey, who threatened the vitality of the One True Church. “What you have done with Archbishop Rummel points up the heresy behind the heresy – to Protestantism to Atheism,” one wrote.60 For the lay Committee for Catholic Truth, the current struggle against interracialist heresies

58 Undated clipping, Chicago Daily News; Alfred Kronlage to Twomey, 15 February 1959, both in Box 28, Folder 12, LJT Papers.


60 Richard E. Smith to Twomey, 7 July 1954, Box 15, Folder 11, LJT Papers.
was merely a continuation of the 14th century struggle for “the ancient ways of the church” against “the conceit of theologians.” Citing William T. Kane’s History of Education, the group declared that interracialist clergymen, like their pre-Reformation forebears, had begun to assume “an authority which was not from God.” In making “the human science of theology the final test of faith,” their actions “stirred a vague rebelliousness” that only the Council of Trent could rectify. The group exhorted listeners to heed the warning of Our Lady of Fatima to pray the rosary in order to prevent “another great and tragic collapse of the Holy Mother Church.”

Fatima, they declared, warned the faithful about priests who had become, in the words of one segregationist, “an unwitting tool of the Communist conspiracy.” Segregationists had seen this in the Hulan Jack controversy at Loyola and continued to attack “radical” clergy. While the latter remained largely immune to charges of direct collusion, segregationists did often take priests to task for being “against the people who are against communism.” At a public hearing in March 1957 in Baton Rouge, a Catholic policeman and student at Loyola, Hubert Badeaux, testified to a radio audience that he had uncovered a deliberate plot by communists to “set the Catholic masses in motion.” The zealotry of some clergymen on the race issue left the church especially vulnerable to the reds. “I am a Roman Catholic myself, and I am appalled at the attitude of some Catholics—clergymen and otherwise—who believe that Communists wouldn’t dare jump within fifty miles of the church.”

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62 First quotation from Irma Dreuil to Louis Twomey, 18 February 1959, Box 28, Folder 12, LJT Papers; State of Louisiana, Joint Legislative Committee, “Subversion in Racial Unrest, and Outline of a Strategic Weapon to Destroy the Governments of Louisiana and the United States,” 332.
As potent as anticommunist tropes remained, however, it is possible to overemphasize them. Communism remained a selective target for many segregationists. In fact, many segregationists placed a larger “doctrine of equalitarianism” at the root of Catholic interracialism. “The South holds small enthusiasm for egalitarian doctrines based upon the infinite perfectibility of man,” read one authority on segregationism. “Theoretically, to be sure, men are born to equal rights; but empirically, for good or ill, these rights are incapable of equal exercise.”63 Rummel’s moral rejection of segregation on the basis that it perpetuated inequality between the races prompted Wagner and others to consult papal encyclicals on democracy. Drawing especially from Leo XIII and Pius XI they denounced “The Morality of Racial Segregation” as a heretical approbation of an egalitarian society “that would abolish all class distinction and social hierarchy.” At least three segregationists followed Wagner’s lead in extracting from Pope Pius XII:

Inequalities based not on whim but on the nature of things, inequalities of culture, possessions, social standing – without, of course, prejudice to justice and mutual charity – do not constitute any obstacle to the existence and the prevalence of a true spirit of union and brotherhood.64

That such a statement could be read as a defense of Jim Crow demonstrates common white assumptions of a “natural” racial hierarchy that existed for the good of both races. The Jesuit Harold Cooper of Loyola countered that segregation was not morally wrong “because it creates inequality and class distinction. It is morally wrong


64 Pius XII, “Democracy and a Lasting Peace,” December 25, 1944; Segregationist quoted in Harold A. Cooper, SJ, response to Felix H. Lapeyre, 30 April 1956, Box 83, Folder 9, LJT Papers.
because it creates *unjust* inequality and *perverted* class distinction.”65 They also rejected the interracialist concept of human unity in the Mystical Body of Christ. Unity, one declared, “does not demand, by any intrinsic necessity, the destruction of segregated parts. Desegregation is not at all an essential while the diverse nations or races pay Him homage and obedience.”66

The irony is that in fighting both the NAACP and the Catholic hierarchy, segregationists more readily invoked a sense of the “common good” in their rhetoric. The Catholic interracialist language of unity and order meshed poorly with the emerging language of the black freedom struggle throughout the 1950s. H. Richard King has examined the ways new understandings of liberation were developed and articulated in the day-to-day struggles of grassroots civil rights activists.67 By contrast, drawing from an ahistorical and hierarchical view of society in which all individuals fit within a defined structure of social and moral order, Catholic leaders cautioned black youth against “exertions of force” and exhorted whites to recognize, through their rational capacity to discern God’s law, an inherent sense of spiritual and social unity that binds all humans. Segregationists’ self-understanding as the defenders of the southern social order complimented and developed this view of the Catholic Church as the arbiter of moral order. For segregationist leaders and many grassroots activists, the common good of society was achieved when all people knew “their place,” and fit within a natural system of social hierarchies. Appeals to southern “manners” and customs, to an idealized

65 Ibid.

66 Patrick Warren Menaugh to Peter Duffy, 26 April 1955, Box 50, Folder 7, Joseph H. Fichter Papers, Special Collections, Loyola University of New Orleans (JHF Papers).

southern past in which the land of Dixie won the moral cause against modernity and corruption, and insistence that blacks reclaim the role of their subservient forebears, all expressed this sense of divine order. For many emerging activists, the emotionally charged appeals of white southerners could only be challenged by equally emotional responses.

The idea of Catholic unity within a racial hierarchy defined the theology of Una Gaillot, a housewife and mother who also denied any major preoccupation with “the reds.” Unlike other Catholic segregationists who sought to engage Catholic social thought, Gaillot preferred biblical arguments to defend Jim Crow. “I fully acknowledge that the Roman Catholic Church alone has the right to interpret the Scriptures,” she declared, “but I still question… I am merely repeating God’s word and I think that is weight enough.” Similar to Wagner’s own veil of obedience, Gaillot claimed she “would be the biggest integrationist on the face of the earth” once offered proof of its moral validity.68 Despite her open defiance, Gaillot spoke with great reverence for the Archbishop. Her local pastor, she recalled, had encouraged her to fight the removal of “colored” signs from pews. “I don’t think as long as Archie [Rummel] lived it was ever moved.”69

In response to the integration movement in the late 1950s, Gaillot also founded Save Our Nation, Inc. to offer “conclusive proof from the Scripture and the tradition of the Roman Catholic Church, that segregation is definitely right and integration is wrong.”

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68 Mrs. B.J. Gaillot, interview with WYES-TV, 7 February 1961, transcript in series 10, Box 9, Folder 18, National Catholic Conference on Interracial Justice Papers (NCCIJ), Marquette University Special Collections.

69 Una Gaillot, interview by the author, 14 February 2005.
against the Archbishop, and consult the Bible for proof of the sanctity of Jim Crow. “We believe we are certainly living in the latter times,” the group declared, “when St. Paul informs us that we will experience special onslaught of deceiving spirits of the church.”

Save Our Nation encouraged laity and priests alike, especially the Josephites, to meet in public forum and turn the tide against integration. Interracialists, they believed, fulfilled Paul’s premonition that future church leaders will “heap up to themselves teachers according to their own lusts, and they will turn away their hearing from the truth and turn aside rather to fables.” Save Our Nation likewise recalled Catholic traditions that segregated Christian communities from non-Christian. “How much more should we obey God in the segregation of the races?”

To the interracialists’ convictions that their position could be arrived at through a reasoned engagement with Catholic teaching and tradition, Gaillot scoffed. “There is no way segregation is morally wrong and sinful,” she thundered. “The whole Bible from beginning to end is segregate, segregate, segregate!” In addition to typical white southern references to Paul’s “many nations,” the mark placed upon Cain and the “curse of Ham,” all of which evidenced God’s segregation of the races, Gaillot claimed to have exclusive evidence in God’s original “blood Covenant” with Moses. She overlaid racial identities upon Old Testament genealogies. The idea of the white race as a “chosen people” formed the basis of her argument, if not her true belief. Gaillot’s arguments were not atypical of a number of segregationists who labored to construct a solid Biblical

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71 Interview with Una Gaillot by the author, 14 February 2005.

defense of Jim Crow. Scholars debate the extent to which they did or even could formulate a true theology of segregationism grounded in scripture.

Gaillot nonetheless offers an interesting perspective into the moral imagination that shaped white Catholic segregationism. When asked about her motivation, Gaillot recalls an idyllic New Orleans that she walked as a child, an orderly world saturated with Catholic symbolism and southern manners. All people knew their place in this world. As a child, she stood in awe when, walking by a convent in the French Quarter, her mother warned her not to go near it. She carried this lesson into every aspect of her life. “The Negro knew better, just like the white knew better,” she later told one interviewer. As she grew up in a society bound by the tenets of public segregation, Gaillot imposed a deep sense of sacred space and Catholic obligation on the structures of southern society. Her involvement with the church began later in life, she recalls, when a priest in her local parish allowed her to clean around the tabernacle because the “Negro” maid was unfit to approach the Blessed Sacrament.73

Images of her carrying pickets demanding an audience with the archbishop and accusing the hierarchy of socialism became symbols of lay resistance. Yet, despite being one of the most famous lay dissenters in the Catholic Church, Gaillot claims that she always remained “behind the scenes,” a supporter in a white man’s cause. “I’m a housewife,” she repeatedly declared. As a woman, Gaillot stood in stark contrast to the likes of Wagner, Ricau, and Perez, men who wielded influence over the school board and the legislature. Until very recently, she has even refused to go by any name other than Mrs. B.J. Gaillot. When Wagner encouraged her to answer some of the clerical

73 Interview with Gaillot by the author 14 February 2005.
challenges posed to her and her group, she often explained her own limitations and her unwillingness to go beyond her duty as a wife and mother. But she often challenged their commitment to white supremacy. Though she spoke very highly of the gentleman who would be an unwavering friend and ally, she criticized Emile Wagner for his capitulation to the excommunication threat in 1956. After her own excommunication in 1962, she likened herself to Joan of Arc, who, like her, “never got her trial” after taking a stand for the true message of the church.

Through the use of this patroness, Gaillot also offers an important perspective on the role of women in the segregationist movement. Indeed, while the image of white resistance remains that of men in ten-gallon hats wielding clubs and cigar-toting politicians, southern women provided a major force for white resistance. While men would excoriate the “race-mixers” by invoking the image of the vulnerable white female, women emphasized their role as wives and mothers in ways that minimized their agency even as they expanded it throughout the era. When approached by Wagner to take a more active role in the movement, she explained that her first “duty” was as a housewife and mother. She would claim that massive resistance was primarily the work of southern gentlemen, but women embodied for many the very dignity and decorum that white resistance proclaimed. Save Our Nation, and especially Gaillot, became prominent members of “the cheerleaders,” the notorious group of mothers who lined the walkway to Frantz and McDonough public schools to protest court-ordered integration. Gaillot excoriated John Steinbeck’s depiction as anything other than polite protest. “We were ladies,” she declared, offering an alternative image of the genteel and faithful women. To Gaillot, it was an important distinction between “haters” of African Americans and the
lovers of a tightly bound Catholic world. The loss of that society was nothing short of tragic for Gaillot. After her excommunication in 1962, she recalled, she stood outside the church on Good Fridays as a symbol of loss.74

Jackson Ricau likewise portrayed a church under siege and moving toward a significant breaking point. In September of 1960, the journalist exhorted Catholics to be wary of parish priests who allowed the spirit of times into the pews. When several black teenagers moved to the front of a church in Marrero in March of 1959, the ensuing melee outside, he declared, emboldened the NAACP to “take the churches one by one.” At Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish in 1960, two blacks refused to follow the ushers to their assigned seats in the back. When the ushers took the matter to the pastor “who said, among other unkindly things, that they were ‘prejudiced.’” When the ushers refused to take up a collection, the pastor billed them for $300. “We have not heard that the ushers intend to comply in any way with this unusual request.” When a Jesuit English teacher told his class that “Emile Wagner is the biggest disgrace of Jesuit High,” Ricau fumed, “God give us more men like Emile Wagner!”

When we, the white Christians, are victorious in this struggle for segregation and states rights over the Communist atheists, fellow-travelers and do-gooders who know not what they do, then, perchance, it will be said of Mr. Wagner, as was said of a typical Southerner not yet 100 years ago, that “He was of the stuff that made the resistance of the South the marvel of the world.”75

The efforts of Ricau, Gaillot, and Wagner to frame white resistance through Scripture and Catholic teaching emboldened white resistance at a pivotal moment in the history of both the Catholic Church and the Deep South. Bolstered by a significant

74 Ibid.

number of priests, lay resistance from the pews paralyzed the hierarchy. “It’s your move, gentlemen,” Rummel told a frustrated group of liberals. “You know the state of mind of the people as well as I do. You create the atmosphere necessary for success of such a move and I’ll make it.” Rummel’s weakening position resulted from a variety of internal and external factors. His failing health over the previous years complicated matters for many church officials. In the months leading up to the 1960 New Orleans School Crisis, as much attention shifted to the question of public school integration, the atmosphere of popular dissent created by this ideological and institutional revolt exacerbated the church’s already tenuous position with the state government. Driven by Catholics, legislators in Baton Rouge continued to threaten the church with taxation of property and the removal of state funded amenities. These measures augmented the struggle between the state and the federal court over the former’s right to intervene in the local school board. Emile Wagner, who happened to be on the board, frustrated the other members willing to comply with the court.

In his 1956 decision ending *Bush v. Orleans Parish School Board*, Judge J. Skelly Wright ordered the public school board and the state to form an integration plan. Facing pressure from the state, local Citizens’ Councils, and Catholic parents’ groups, the state and school board continued on its course of defiance. In 1960, Governor-elect Jimmie Davis drew the battle lines between the federal court and the state government when he campaigned on the promise that he would maintain segregation at all cost. Religion and race drove the election. Perez and Rainach, who actually ran in the primary, threw their weight solidly behind Davis and against DeLesseps S. Morrison. Above all the election.

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76 Rummel quoted in Osbourne, *Segregated Covenant*: 81.
proved that New Orleans stood on an island in the late-1950s. For lack of any real outside support, it remained for civic leaders to pave the way for integration. Alone among school districts in Louisiana, the board in New Orleans contained a handful of integration supporters, but faced with local and state pressure, Wright believed it would never develop an adequate response to the court decision. On May 16 he developed his own sweeping plan: all first graders in the city could choose to attend the nearest white school or remain where they had been. Knowing that the measure was too comprehensive for anyone to tolerate, Wright hoped the sympathizers in the Orleans Parish School Board would develop its own process by August.77

Sensing its own crisis of authority amid federal pressure, the state legislature once again went on the offensive. In the months leading up to Wright’s deadline, Perez set up shop in a Baton Rouge hotel room, authoring several anti-desegregation bills designed to delay what now seemed an inevitable clash between the federal government and local authorities. Costing the state $500,000, the special legislative session enacted twenty measures in a climate of intimidation and coercion for potential court-sympathizers. Jack Nelson, a prominent integrationist attorney in New Orleans, observed the sheer desperation of Louisiana politicians and their unwillingness to follow legal reason. He described the scene to the leaders of the National Catholic Conference on Interracial Justice:

Please believe me when I tell you that the situation is critical. Last Saturday I was in Baton Rouge and attended one of the sessions. The insults and abuse heaped upon witnesses before the committees who testified advocating opposition to the bills are incredible. The vast majority of the legislators, particularly those who live in the northern part of our State, have lost all sense of fair

77 Fairclough: 234-236.
play and decency. They openly speak of the use of force, and I am quite confident are attempting to provoke another “Little Rock” incident.78

By summer 1960, the thought of New Orleans becoming “another Little Rock” was clearly on the minds of all officials, integrationists and segregationist alike. Catholic interracialists feared the church turning a deaf ear as it had done during the 1957 Little Rock Crisis. Not only did church leaders refuse to open discussion on integration, but the diocesan newspaper actually supported the charges of many segregationists that federal enforcement of the issue constituted a significant abuse of authority. The editor of the diocesan paper, William O’Donnell, ran a series of six cover stories repudiating the U.S. Catholic Bishops’ 1958 Statement condemning racial segregation. “His analysis of the race problem allows the Arkansas Catholic to preserve a peaceful conscience while continuing to practice racial discrimination against all Negroes.” Much like the Louisiana Catholic who followed the moral dictates of white lay leaders, the Arkansas Catholic lacked “an effective understanding of the formal and explicit teachings of the Church on this problem.” He “both emotionally and intellectually accepts Mr. O’Donnell’s criteria as the balm for his conscience.”79 In Louisiana, segregationist Catholics also stood at the center of the state legislation designed to interpose the governor’s authority between the court and the school board. “Approximately one-third of both houses of the Legislature are Catholics,” Twomey fumed, “most of whom received their entire education in Catholic schools. And yet not more than six of these registered any but the mildest of


protests…” Wright set up a special three-judge panel to strike down the laws as they came out. The only real legal option for Davis leading into the fall session was the ability to close all public schools if he believed integration posed an imminent danger.81

Leading into the November deadline, the Archdiocese hoped to at least integrate simultaneously with public schools, but Rummel’s health concerns complicated matters. While in Baton Rouge for the dedication of St. George Catholic Church, the archbishop suffered a fall while praying the rosary on a sidewalk. Shattering several bones in his leg, the archbishop remained in a hospital in Baton Rouge for the period leading up to the school opening. The circumstances, according to Monsignor Henry Bezou, superintendent of schools, “kept the archbishop from witnessing or reacting authoritatively to the debacle when two public schools were integrated to a token degree.” That did not stop legislators, however, who visited Rummel’s hospital room in an effort to convince him to cancel integration.

At a meeting of the Archdiocesan school board on October 19, officials declared that pastors of local churches should be informed of their “grave responsibility to prepare their teachers for integration.” As the Governor prepared for his standoff with the court, local parents insisted on knowing the church’s position on the matter. Until seemingly the last minute, Catholic schools prepared to integrate the day public school doors opened to all students. On November 11, a recovering Rummel met with Bezou and the Vicar General to discuss his orders. The next day, the archdiocese sent a telegram to pastors declaring that Catholic schools in Orleans Parish were to be integrated “as originally

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80 Christ’s Blueprint, December 1960.

81 Fairclough: 235.
planned if and when public schools are actually integrated.” At the same time, the message acknowledged, “existing conditions indicate no certainty.” Given the tensions surrounding the public school board, Catholic integration “will take place only when public school integration has been effectively carried out.” Rummel also sent a letter marked “Confidential” to every pastor proposing a tentative integration date of November 21. Three days later, the letter was read to a mass meeting of the Citizens’ Council in Municipal Auditorium. When the Associated Press telephoned the archdiocese for a comment on the council meeting. Mayor Morrison, meanwhile, fearing the widespread panic and shortage of law enforcement that might accompany simultaneous integration, pleaded for the church to hold off until a future date. An official from Baton Rouge called the Chancery Office to warn that punitive measures would be passed if Catholic schools were integrated.82 Faced with his failing health and pressure from all sides, the Archbishop halted any integration action coinciding with the public schools.

New Orleans’ “decent into barbarism,” as Twomey described November of 1960, nailed the coffin for Catholic interracialism in Louisiana.

Unruly mobs of teen-agers, egged on by adults, jeered, catcalled and hissed the Federal marshals as they escorted one six-year old Negro girl to one previously all-white school, and three other Negro children to a second such school…In addition to their roughhouse antics at the schools, the teen-agers tied up the center of the city with “protest” demonstrations before the City Hall and the downtown office of the School Board.83

That evening, Perez stirred followers at a council rally. “Don’t wait for your daughter to be raped by the Congolese. Don’t wait until the burrheads are forced into your schools.

82 Minutes of Archdiocesan School Board Meeting, 30 November 1960, in “Integration: School Board Meetings, Minutes and Notes (1954-1962)” Folder, AANO.

83 Christ’s Blueprint for the South, December 1960.
Do something about it now." The next day, a mob of angry whites marched up Carondelet Street to the school board office. The New Orleans police and fire department used high-pressure hoses to disperse the crowd. Over the next few days whites randomly attacked blacks walking down the street or riding on buses. White parents of the two schools in the 9th Ward immediately withdrew their children while only a handful remained in the schools the rest of the year. The journalist and segregationist leader Jackson Ricau published the names and a brief bio of individuals involved in carpooling children to the schools. One priest involved. The latter were treated to harassment and economic pressure. Father Jerome Drolet especially drew fire from white Catholics for acting as a “decoy” while parents escorted their children into the school.

The lack of civil or religious authority was obvious throughout the crisis. Mayor Morrison remained silent, insisting that the mob of angry whites was clearly in the minority and that most were from outside New Orleans in St. Bernard and Plaquemines Parishes. He also blamed national media for blowing the incidents out of proportion. “On one day this week there were less than 100 people demonstrating—yet when I saw this on TV the same night, I got the impression that the whole city was rioting.” Morrison, however, could not dodge responsibility for the crisis. Whatever vague reputation he enjoyed as a social reformer came under fire as enraged citizens from around the country sent letters condemning his silence in dealing with the rioters. Resistance from white Catholics at all levels generated a broad sense among southern segregationists that they

84 Times Picayune 16 November 1960.

had defeated the Archbishop. Jesuit interracialist John LaFarge denounced this “total capitulation of the Church to a militant laity.” Reports of the National Catholic Conference on Interracial Justice (NCCIJ) also reflect the anxieties of a universal church losing its moral foothold in the Deep South. “We have been saddened and shocked to observe that some so-called Catholic laymen should go so far as to publicly defy and revile their appointed Church authorities, and to revile Negro citizens in our country.”

The rise of the Citizens’ Councils in the Southern U.S. had sent a message to American liberals and clergymen alike that their enemy was more than a benighted legal system or a set of habits out of touch with proper Christian teaching. Rather, segregationism was a complex, often creative movement that stirred the religious emotions of its congregants. Whatever motivated politicians in the mid-1950s to appeal to the masses on behalf of states’ rights, segregationism, anticommunism, and a list of other causes, the consequence of their rabble-rousing transcended political or economic ends. To examine white resistance from the ground up, then, is to examine the religious meanings that made average white southerners buy in to politicians’ rhetoric of victimization. The color line had become for white southerners a religious system, a source of moral certainty. In constructing a black “other” over decades of racial segregation, it imparted a psychological boundary between where sin was and where it was not. White Catholics could thus absolve themselves of a number of social and

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spiritual sins so long as they acted to defend segregation. But when, in 1956, the
archbishop declared segregation “morally wrong and sinful,” he undermined this moral
certainty. Laity responded as committed Catholics, determined to undermine
interracialists’ and the hierarchy’s moral influence and generate a spirit of faithful dissent
against the church.

As Catholic interracialists lamented the lost opportunity amid the crisis, African
American Catholics questioned the commitment of the church to the larger cause of black
freedom. Amid rising calls to direct action and rejection of institutional approaches to
social justice, black Catholics between the mid-1950s and the actual integration of
parochial schools in 1962 sought to push the church into action while they negotiated
their role as part of the larger black freedom struggle. To their efforts we now turn.
CHAPTER 6:

FAITHFUL DISCONTENT

At the 9 a.m. Mass on January 18th, 1959, two seniors from Xavier Preparatory School, Carroll Pierre and John Mitchell, sat in the front row of St. Joseph the Worker Parish in Marrero, breaking the color barrier for the first time. After several threats by the ushers, the pastor, Father Anthony Rousso, ordered them to allow it. Fifty whites stormed out of mass. “If he thinks more of the bastards than he does of us, let him keep ‘em,” one shouted while shaking his fist at Rousso. Even after the congregation settled in, most remained nervous. “I never sat in a church that was so quiet and solemn,” another witness recalled of the weeks that followed. St. Joseph’s, a largely Italian congregation located just across the river from New Orleans, differed little from most churches in the region. While Archbishop Rummel had ordered the removal of “colored” signs in 1950, actual integration remained for local congregations to accomplish. Yet nearly a decade later, and four years after Rummel closed a church in Jesuit Bend for barring a black priest from a church sanctuary, the Marrero church still segregated blacks to the last three pews. Lay associations remained whites-only, and one-sixth of the parish’s nine hundred families sent their children across the river or to nearby All Saints Church, a black parish, for religious education. ¹ As with many parishes in the region, St. Joseph the Worker’s

parishioners passively defied the church’s teaching, while its priest simply desired peace among his interracial congregation.

Public buses and trolleys in New Orleans had recently integrated with little or no hostility. The teenagers now believed the time had come to eliminate segregation in the central ritual of Catholic life. “God does not see skin color. He sees souls,” Pierre declared. “Besides it was cramped. John and I just made up our minds to sit where we pleased.” Over a year before four black college students in North Carolina would set the stage for the rise of nonviolent direct action throughout the south, Pierre and Mitchell’s own seemingly spontaneous act of defiance needed little theological rationale. Like the Greensboro students who challenged the “whites-only” policy of a Woolworth’s lunch-counter, they simply acted out of frustration over their second-class status. While some older black parishioners accused Pierre and Mitchell of pushing “too fast” and “too hard,” others decided to move to the front as well. The teenagers soon organized a Catholic action group at the parish.²

White hostility also intensified. One week after the initial move, an usher—also a local deputy—flashed a gun on Mitchell’s mother as she attempted to join her son. Rousso summoned police to guard the church as Archbishop Rummel, knowing that St. Joseph’s had ignored his original integration order for a number of years, denounced the “manifestations of ill temper, harsh words, threats of violence and even the show of arms.” The prelate chastised, “Certainly no one can believe that God was pleased or the holy house honored by these acts of irreverence and uncharitableness!” White

parishioners largely ignored the censure. As the church bulletins ran pleas for peace, many members changed parishes to avoid the hostility. In the following weeks, ushers refused to send around a regular collection for Negro and Indian missions, causing Pierre’s action group to solicit funds on their own so that “Father Rousso won’t be blamed.”

As Rousso tried to calm his congregation over the following month, the emboldened teenagers from Xavier declared victory, prompting a reporter from *Jet* magazine, Marc Crawford, to investigate their story. Fearful of white response, the archbishop and his pastor hoped to minimize any attention given to direct action movements within church walls. Both Rousso and Rummel urged Crawford not to publish any account of St. Joseph the Worker. But the article, “How Negro Kids Integrated A Louisiana Catholic Church,” appeared in the March 5th issue of *Jet*. One picture showed a teenager kneeling in prayer. Another featured black youths meeting to discuss their resistance strategies. “We are willing to die for our rights,” one teenager told Crawford. “This is our church, too.” Despite the author’s favorable characterization of a priest who endured threats and attempts from segregationsists to run him out of the parish, the article angered Rousso. Believing that teenagers should have born their struggle in silence, he denounced them in his homily on March 1st.

But the priest’s censure also roused white anger. Shortly after Mass fifteen white parishioners seized upon two of the teenagers, James and Lionel Jackson, as they exited the church. The mob severely beat them with tire irons, fists, and a blackjack before two

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3 Pittman, 28; Crawford, 28.

4 Crawford, 27; *Louisiana Weekly*, 7 March 1959.
deputies appeared to break up the melee. The Jackson brothers and O’Neal Dumas, an older man who stepped in to help, sustained severe head injuries and body contusions that required hospitalization. While police made arrests on both black and white parishioners, members of the parish insisted that the beatings were perpetrated by “a small group of white men who hardly ever came to church on Sunday.” Rousso himself could bear no more. A week after the beatings he took sick leave, citing a case of “extreme nerves, bearing on the verge of a complete nervous breakdown.” His parish remained in turmoil. Even though blacks remained in the front pews over the following months, segregated parish organizations continued to develop and white resentment grew.

The incident electrified racial tensions in Marrero and the surrounding area. As Jet magazines disappeared from shelves, activists on both sides sought to make sense of the violence at St. Joseph’s in terms of the larger struggle over the meaning of race in late-1950s Louisiana. Segregationists recast the event as a black assault on a sacred institution. “The Negroes came out of the church with tire tools,” explained the Citizens’ Report. “A Negro woman used a weighted purse for a club. One of the Negroes said, ‘The NAACP and us are going to take the churches one by one. This is a part of a plan.’” Even if the author, Catholic layman Jackson Ricau, was simply ill informed several months later, he filled in the blanks using a popular storyline. Like that of many Catholic segregationists, Ricau’s Citizens’ Report writings would privilege the Catholic Church as a crucial battleground in the struggle against “outside agitators.” For Ricau and

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5 Louisiana Weekly, 3/7/59; Jet, 15:18 (March 12, 1959); Pittman, 28.

6 Ibid.

7 Citizens’ Report vol. 2 n. 9 (September 1960), copy in Louisiana Ephemera Collection, Louisiana Collection, Tulane University Special Collections.
many white laity, as we have seen, Rummel’s public utterances against segregation, alongside the “communistic” activities of interracial priests evoked fears of a church letting its guard down in the midst of great spiritual conflict across the South and the nation. Marrero was fitting proof, and by conjuring an image of the church as embattled, even infiltrated by subversive forces and ideologies, segregationists could justify a position both loyal to the institutional church and hostile to the archbishop’s specific message.

Yet for many African Americans, the Marrero incident illuminated the extent of Catholic retreat from the cause of black southerners. Wittingly or not, the majority of priests continued to obstruct racial progress within church. Despite the efforts of Catholic interracialists throughout the 1950s to pursue a clergy-centered integration movement from the pulpit, most southern clergymen remained in Rousso’s difficult position. In the racially charged atmosphere after Brown v. Board, when race-baiting politicians and citizens’ council magnates stumped the South in crusades to arouse the passions of white citizens, diocesan priests were rarely prepared to balance their pastoral duties with the demands of a changing society. Even where a priest was inclined to challenge his parishioners’ deeply ingrained racial attitudes, “it would take more than the common allotment of courage,” one observer noted, “to risk the inevitable hostility, ridicule or ostracism that would follow the expression of untraditional views.”

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8 William A. Osbourne, The Segregated Covenant: Race Relations and American Catholics (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967). While Osbourne notes the general inertia, even hostility, on the part of most diocesan priests toward the Archbishop’s call for integration, he emphasizes the effect of the state legislature, rather than that of local resistance, on the church’s struggle to integrate in late-1950s Louisiana.
place at a future time because of the deep-seated prejudices which are involved in this particular problem,” the Catholic Committee of the South warned shortly after the Supreme Court decision. More than anyone else, local priests “will be forced to make decisions one way or another in this matter, and also be called upon to explain matters to their people.”

For interracialists, the parish priest stood on the front line. A vital local church, according to Joseph Fichter, “not only bespeaks an internally strong Catholic social structure but also promises solidarity for the larger community and nation in which it exists.” Despite efforts of the CCS, SERINCO, and the Commission on Human Rights to engage the laity outside of the parochial structure through lectures, essay contests, and Interracial Sundays, the parish remained the one and only place where the majority of Catholics encountered the church’s message. The Catholic interracial movement—indeed the authority of the church as a whole—depended upon each parish’s obedience to the universal church’s teachings. The local priest made the church’s message of racial unity real to his congregants. “I am convinced that if we could get clerical thinking in line with the clear doctrine of the Church relative to the heresy of White Supremacy,” Louis Twomey explained, “we could straighten out the laity in a relatively short period of time.” In balancing his own priestly concerns with those of the students, Rousso’s success or failure was also that of Catholic interracialism.

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11 Twomey to Joseph Reiner, 23 October 1953, Box 19, Folder 3, LJT Papers, Loyola.
But Rousso and most parish priests familiar with this situation hardly fit the prophetic mold that Twomey and others cast. While some priests, as we have seen, deliberately encouraged white resistance, most struggled to define their pastoral role in the racially charged atmosphere of the 1950s. “We are trying; we are working; we are praying,” one southern pastor declared. “I, for one, have prudently and cautiously faced the problem.” Local priests, he added, faced a number of limitations in confronting a hostile white laity. “Ours is a humble task. A few priests in the South have made national headlines for their great courage; the rest of us are trying to hold on to little gains and overcome great losses.”

While Twomey and Fichter could both be sympathetic, their position at Loyola away from gun-toting ushers allowed them to idealize their interracial vision. Twomey especially insisted upon the work of the clergy in guiding the movement. For the Jesuit, priests’ failure to assert the church’s moral stance enabled segregationist leaders to exploit the popular fears of white southerners. “If we of the clergy lack the forthrightness to champion an ‘unpopular’ cause,” he continued, “how can we expect the laity to have the courage to carry the burden?”

Rousso certainly hoped that his white parishioners would respond charitably to these local changes now taking place.

In mediating between the priestly and the prophetic, attending to his parish’s spiritual needs while cautiously supporting these students, the Marrero priest hardly could have imagined the results of his own forthrightness. After supporting the teenagers’ efforts, the priest’s pulpit denouncement, in fact, “set off a hate-fuse among white worshippers,” the *Louisiana Weekly* explained. White Catholics took out their rage on the

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13 *Christ’s Blueprint for the South*, January 1959.
black congregants “immediately after they had shared in Holy Communion, a symbol of oneness in Christ.”

Local priests’ inability to translate interracialists’ moral message to the pews had also encouraged a growing apathy among the hierarchy, black leaders argued. For indeed, additional blame for the incident, the paper charged, “could be placed at the Archbishop’s door.”

Rummel declared his shock over the Marrero, stating that, “we were not prepared for any incident of this kind. We had made every effort to bring about a conciliatory understanding” among parishioners. He also ordered the congregation to offer a day of prayer and reflection.

African Americans remained underwhelmed. Other bishops in the South had achieved integration without trouble, one Weekly editorial fumed, “and there would be no trouble in New Orleans either if Archbishop Rummel made it crystal clear to recalcitrant laymen that he will brook no foolishness.”

The Marrero incident and response from both sides thus represents a significant moment in the process of both pastoral and black Catholic self-identification. As priests struggled to move abstract principles of interracialism into the pews, the teenagers who simultaneously moved a spirit of peaceful confrontation there exposed deep tensions between African American Catholics, their church, and the larger black freedom struggle in the late-1950s South. While acknowledging the essential unity of the Civil Rights Movement across class and denominational lines, black Catholics often defined themselves as distinct from Protestant sources of activism. Amid rising racial tensions in

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14 Louisiana Weekly, 14 March 1959.
15 Louisiana Weekly, 21 March 1959.
16 Catholic Action of the South, 8 March 1959.
17 Louisiana Weekly, 21 March 1959.
the Deep South over the destruction of the color line in all aspects of southern society, black Catholics in New Orleans remained committed to the Roman Church as a source of spiritual and social coherence. At the same time, however, the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement and the failure of white churches throughout the south to join the tide of boycotts and protests from Montgomery, Greensboro, and elsewhere forced black Catholics to question not only the Catholic Church’s commitment to racial justice, but also their own. No less frustrated with their church’s inability to direct the Civil Rights Movement in Louisiana, black Catholics voiced a faithful discontent that they hoped would renew the Catholic Church’s call to social justice in the late 1950s. Their experience, and the larger social crises that reshaped their view of both the church and American society, are important to understanding the ways African Americans would respond to the revolutionary challenges of the decade to come.

Declaring segregation “morally wrong and sinful,” Rummel’s 1956 pastoral letter provided a powerful moral impetus to the integration of New Orleans society. Interracialists hailed it as a defining moment in a career marked by uncommon concern for the social welfare of black southerners. But in the years after Brown, as race baiting politicians and Citizens’ Council magnates stumped the South in support of segregationism, Rummel’s moral declarations offered little comfort for African Americans. While the state legislature and local councils collaborated to block integration and eliminate black voting, white laity fought to keep social reform at a safe distance from the altar. In the meantime, the archdiocese’s refusal to solidify its moral position with a tangible commitment to school desegregation fed into rising black disillusionment.
African American southerners had begun to question the effectiveness of both civil rights litigation and negotiation within white institutions. King’s famous 1963 “Letter from Birmingham Jail” exposed deep and historic tensions between the priestly and the prophetic in southern religion.18

In New Orleans especially, black Catholics faced difficult challenges in coming to terms with both a larger black criticism of the “white” church and their own frustrations with the Catholic Church’s historic neglect for their welfare. Shortly after Rummel’s postponement of integration in the summer of 1956—the first of many over the next six years—the Louisiana Weekly declared it “no surprise” that, at one of the high points of segregationist backlash, the archdiocese would renege on its original plan. Such was the spirit of mid-1950s Louisiana, they believed, deeming New Orleans a “gutless and cowered community” for giving in to the “threats, smears, and subtle intimidations of the white supremacy crowd…” Rummel and the Catholics, at least, “have made a start small as it might be,” but “it is mighty strange that a community composed largely of Catholics, Negroes, and Jews should be bullied and pushed around by a few vocal white supremacy artists.”19

Such realizations challenged African Americans’ early faith in Catholic moral authority. In translating church teachings into social action, interracialists in the Commission on Human Rights, labor action schools, and Catholic student groups hoped to forge a Catholic-led movement for human rights in the region. Citing the church’s longstanding support for labor reform, for instance, A.P. Tureaud consistently lauded

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18 See especially Jonathan Bass, Blessed Are the Peacemakers (Baton Rouge, 2001). Bass explores the ways King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” shaped the lives of his intended audience, the city’s eight prominent white clergymen.

Rummel and Lafayette Bishop Jules B. Jeanmard for their “outstanding services to humanity.”\textsuperscript{20} Catholics’ historic support for organized labor seemed to offer a model for the black freedom struggle. In 1957, the \textit{Weekly} reprinted an article by Catholic labor leader George Higgins, who challenged southern states’ suppression of the NAACP by invoking the church’s 1888 approval of the Knights of Labor, another organization that relied on secrecy to protect its members. Pope Leo XIII’s assertion that “man is permitted by a right of nature to form the private societies” recognized the natural rights of human beings to organize for social betterment. The NAACP was no exception, Higgins declared. Both the Knights of Labor and the various groups associated with civil rights depended on the anonymity of its membership. While one may oppose the tactics of the NAACP, “we are talking about its very right to exist as an autonomous organization in a free society.”\textsuperscript{21} Higgins’ and Cardinal Spellman’s endorsement also served as ammunition for Clarence Laws, regional director of the NAACP, in countering Leander Perez’s assault on the organization.\textsuperscript{22}

But Laws, a prominent lay Catholic, and the \textit{Weekly} both, more times than not, criticized those same sources of moral leadership. Already enraged over the audacity of certain priests to openly flout Rummel’s authority from the altar, Laws demanded that the Vatican answer the Association of Catholic Laymen’s appeal to the Pope regarding the morality of segregation. Were Rome to defend Rummel’s position and uphold the doctrine of the “common origin and equality of all men,” the church could clear up

\textsuperscript{20} A.P. Tureaud to Haydel J. Christopher, 4 May 1956, Box 4, Folder 5, A.P. Tureaud Papers, ARC.

\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Louisiana Weekly}, 19 January 1957; See also Jay P. Dolan, \textit{The American Catholic Experience} (Notre Dame, 1992), 332.

\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Louisiana Weekly}, 9 February 1957.
“much of the confusion and doubts which this group has caused in the minds of others,” Laws reasoned. “This should no doubt strengthen the archbishop’s position and hasten integration in the diocese.” Unfortunately for both the NAACP leader and Rummel, the Vatican made no formal reply, and the confusion and doubt bred by Catholic segregationists continued to frustrate activists.

Laws also upbraided black Catholics themselves for their seeming apathy in the freedom struggle. In response to Rummel’s earlier postponement of integration in 1956, the NAACP leader demanded that fellow Catholics of his race “express, in the clearest terms possible, their disappointment over this additional delay.” He hoped that the Knights of Peter Claver especially would take the lead in “restating the ageless principles of the Catholic Church on the matters of brotherhood and the unity of man.” But the Knights made no statement on the matter that year, and in a speech to a Holy Name Society at Epiphany Catholic Church, Laws declared that he was “both ashamed and disgusted” that African American Catholics refused to make their contribution to the fight for full citizenship.

Negro Catholics as all citizens must speak out against human injustices or our silence might be construed as a satisfaction with the status quo. I know of not a single right being deprived of Negroes to which we are amuned [sic] because we are Catholic.25

Laws’ charges against his fellow churchmen in New Orleans reflected a larger concern for the conspicuous dearth of Catholics among the growing ranks of racial activists. Published in 1960, sociologist Daniel C. Thompson’s *The Negro Leadership*

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23 Ibid.

24 Clarence Laws to Beverly Baranco, 6 August 1956, Box 4, Folder 37, A.P. Tureaud Papers, ARC.

Class examined the varieties of black activism in New Orleans. Ranging from the “Uncle Tom” to the “negotiator” and the “race man,” Thompson noted an overwhelming majority of Protestant clergymen among black leadership, despite the fact that most African Americans in New Orleans were Catholic. The absence of black priests certainly played a role in this Catholic apathy, Thompson believed, noting that the church “does not provide this important gateway to the development of leadership among its Negro constituents as do the Protestant Church.” The Knights of Peter Claver underscored these findings. “Unlike Martin Luther King,” one Claverite declared, “we as Catholics have not had our people in a position as clergymen until recent times. And even now, such a position is on a negligible scale.” Liturgical style was also to blame, Thompson argued. While Protestant churches “through their various activities, create an atmosphere of race pride,” Catholicism’s spiritual discipline and ritualism “is less conducive to the development of a race-conscious leadership among its members.”

One New Orleans Protestant leader in particular, Reverend A.L. Davis, successfully bridged the roles of “negotiator” and “race man” with his astute calculation of the strengths and weaknesses of legal action. In 1957, the educated and charismatic pastor of New Zion Baptist Church called for a successful boycott against Mardi Gras, declaring that “New Orleans Negroes will not dance while Montgomery Negroes walk.” Through Davis’ initiative, Martin Luther King appeared in New Orleans churches to stir up support for bus integration. But Davis usually preferred negotiation to direct action where it was possible. That same year, he filed suit with A.P. Tureaud against the mayor


of New Orleans to eliminate segregation on city buses and streetcars. With the support of integrationist judge J. Skelly Wright, this litigation strategy paid off: segregation on buses ended in May of 1958.28 As the months passed with no violent confrontations to speak of, African Americans in New Orleans found not only empowerment in this achievement but “amusement and humor” as well. According to one passenger, blacks enjoyed observing whites’ post-integration behavior on buses, something they were fond of calling “Jack-in-the-box.”

Most times, the second a Negro sits beside a white person, he jumps up with great rapidity. Many of them, if they find they must sit behind Negroes, move as soon as a seat is available in front. It would seem to me, they must be quite worn out when they get off the transit vehicle.29

Local litigation and negotiation through white political structures certainly played an important role in the removal of many social barriers in the late-1950s, but many were quick to stress interconnectedness of the freedom struggle throughout the South. By generating an unprecedented show of organization, spirit, and discipline, the Montgomery Bus Boycott had made Davis and Tureaud’s work more effective. “I don’t think desegregation on the busses would [have] come as quickly as it did or as easy in this city if the Montgomery movement had not happened and had not been successful,” Ernest J. Wright noted. “It set the pattern.”30 Wright and others hoped that black New Orleanians might take a lesson from the boycotts. If black Catholics unified their goals

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28 Baker and Fairclough footnote; Kim Lacy Rogers characterizes Davis as a “transitional interracial leader” who emerged in the 1950s and 1960s. His ability to move through white circles led to his close ties with Mayor DeLesseps Morrison and his ability to “deliver the black vote” to the Democratic mayor. At the same time, he also supported the organization of CORE in New Orleans. See Rogers, Righteous Lives: Narratives of the New Orleans Civil Rights Movement (New York, 1993): 22, 40, 46.


30 “Notes on Leadership: Ernest J. Wright, July 1959,” by Giles Hubert, in Giles Hubert Papers, ARC.
and techniques with those of the larger movement, they might establish a significant beachhead in the civil rights struggle by desegregating the south’s largest and most ethnically diverse city.

Wright’s own activities since the 1940s had certainly revealed the intrinsic connections between organized labor and organized racial activism. A social worker and advocate for African American and workers’ rights, Wright had spent his college years at Xavier under the tutelage of Katherine Radke, a German-born professor of social work who often challenged the church and local NAACP leaders to assault poverty in New Orleans. Wright’s People’s Defense League, often thought of as an NAACP rival, organized … By mid-century, Wright consistently chided the older African American leaders who failed to sufficiently “push” white progressives. “The old leadership is too well established and its not too much interested in changes and progress.”31 A.L. Davis also believed in the need for greater unity among blacks. “Oh, we’ve made strides,” the pastor declared to journalist John Howard Griffin. “But we’ve got to do a lot better.” Whites in New Orleans had mastered the art of playing blacks against each other, another gentleman told Griffin. “Until we as a race can learn to rise together, we’ll never get anywhere. That’s our trouble.”32

Yet despite the tensions between “old” leadership and new, 1958 was also a positive year for the NAACP. As Adam Fairclough has argued, historians’ tendency to portray the group as a conservative forerunner of the more confrontational Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee has

31 Ibid.

32 John Howard Griffin, Black Like Me (New York, 1960), 32.
caused many to overlook its crucial role in mobilizing grassroots activism. In the early 1940s, the organization flourished in New Orleans through organizing campaigns that reached across historic class and religio-cultural divisions. In the 1950s the state’s legislative backlash against *Brown* drove the organization underground by demanding publication of the group’s membership rolls. Yet despite the risk of exposing members to economic or physical retaliation, nineteen NAACP branches in Louisiana resumed operations by registering their membership with the state. In Lake Charles, the organization, through the efforts of Doretha A. Combre, gained admittance of African Americans into McNeese State College. The NAACP’s successful voter registration campaign, the integration of City Park and Louisiana State University in New Orleans, and the lifting of the ban on interracial sports competitions, all stood out for J. Harvey Kerns, the head of the Urban League, as the result of what collective action could accomplish.

Laws applauded these gains. Fearing their own tendency to insulate themselves from the larger movement, he exhorted Black Catholics to acknowledge, “that there are men of goodwill in every race and creed.” An African American priest proclaimed that “Catholics, especially, ought to appreciate the NAACP’s drive for the Negro’s civil rights, for it seeks to uplift exploited victims among Christ’s Mystical Body.”

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absence of Catholic leadership—lay or clergy, black or white—grew all the more evident as the archdiocese postponed integration over the next several years. When, in 1957, the *Louisiana Weekly* attempted to contact African American Catholic leaders to gauge their reactions to the hierarchy, only Laws replied, commenting that he was “disappointed but not surprised.” The *Weekly*, however, excoriated the “glaring contradiction and weakness” of Catholic leadership. It wondered how someone like Emile Wagner or William Rainach could force segregationism so vehemently upon the Archbishop and the Catholic Church.

New Orleans has become a focal point for Catholics all over the world, because what is done here now will be reflected around the world…It is becoming somewhat confusing and embarrassing to Catholics when Sen. Rainach of the white supremacy crowd applauds the action of Archbishop Rummel to retain segregation in the Catholic schools…

Many black Catholics, however, resented such attacks. A month after the *Weekly*’s denunciation, five future leaders of the Catholic Council on Human Relations, including Numa Rousseve and Victor Labat, demanded that the influential publication examine “certain facts and realities” regarding Catholic leadership. Objecting to the *Weekly*’s ignorance of the church’s positive gains, they reminded readers that as early as 1953, Holy Name Societies and Metropolitan Unions had been operating on a non-segregated basis, as had the Archdiocesan Council of Catholic Women, the Sodality Union, and the Catholic Students’ Mission Crusade. Two African Americans sat on the Archdiocesan School Board, which, they argued, “was probably the first in the South officially and publicly to applaud the U.S. Supreme Court decision from the point of view of religion, morality, and social justice.” Catholic School Principals and Catholic School

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*Louisiana Weekly, 31 August 1957, and 7 September 1957.*
Teachers’ Institutes had also been integrated, with race relations in all of the above remaining both “wholesome and good.” Regarding Rummel, they added, “we feel that in these trying times our most able and energetic leader is entitled to the trust and confidence of all our people.”

Rousseve and Labat countered black leadership’s criticism of the institutional church. As future members of the New Orleans Catholic Committee on Human Relations, they hoped to work within Catholic channels of authority to bring about a more genuine integration of southern society. Yet many black Catholics believed that such an approach would continue to have mixed results. As long as the hierarchy focused more attention to shaping white attitudes than providing a spiritual support for black concerns, blacks’ priorities would always remain marginal. In 1957, the diocese responded to segregationists’ challenges by issuing a pamphlet written by Father Robert Guste. Directed at moderate segregationists, *For Men of Good Will* was primarily meant to ally white concerns. Parents had certainly been “haunted by many fears,” Guste acknowledged. Segregationist leaders convinced whites that integration would incite widespread disorder in the region. But such fears were ill placed. Integration posed no danger to the morality or physical health of youth. Moreover, he assured readers, the Archbishop was hardly interested in enforcing sweeping changes for which the community was spiritually unprepared.

Even now, to have ‘to force this thing down people’s throats’ is not the desire of the Archbishop of New Orleans. His passionate desire is to convince the minds and win the hearts of his people. He has

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38 *Louisiana Weekly*, 5 October 1957.
In addressing white fears of miscegenation, the pamphlet also reaffirmed interracialists’ conviction that intermarriage posed no sin. Liberal clergymen’s argument that it was better to marry across races than outside of the Catholic fold had long irritated segregationists. At the same time, however, Guste assured his audience that the church discouraged any marriage “in which there would be serious danger of separation or divorce. Such would often be the case for Negro-white marriages.” He added that the “background and the environment of the parties to any marriage, whether they are of the same race or of different races, is a cause for concern about the success of the marriage.” Such moderate integrationism hardly inspired confidence in either side of the struggle. Catholic segregationists distributed the pamphlet to audiences as evidence of the continued corruption of morals by priests entrusted with their protection. For liberals concerned about the economic challenges facing African Americans, the pamphlet merely acknowledged the material and spiritual effects of Jim Crow, rather than attempting a comprehensive solution to the problem. Its primary aim was to condition the white conscience for acceptance of racial integration. Displeased with the results of “moral-suasion,” black leaders believed that the hierarchy’s constant attention to segregationist sensibilities increasingly alienated African Americans from the church.

Indeed, many Catholics and Protestants alike stood behind black leadership’s criticisms. Since the turn of the century, the church had offered whites both a spiritual and organizational framework for asserting a racial hierarchy in southern society.

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40 Ibid.: 40.
Segregationists who grafted white supremacy onto Catholic orthodoxies of order and place presented their cause as a defense of the church’s immutable wisdom. Ushers enforced segregation in many churches. The Jesuit Bend incident in 1955 especially revealed the ways whites used Catholic institutions to exert dominance over African Americans. Rummel strengthened his reputation as an interracial leader when he closed the church in 1955. But the triumph was fleeting. The hierarchy had assumed whites, faced with interdiction and the denial of sacraments, would not be so willing to trade liturgy for white supremacy. The latter’s refusal to relent for three years prompted Rummel to lift the sanction in 1958. “Higher motives,” he argued, must prevail. “We cannot permit the closed chapel to stand forever as a symbol of resistance to the authority of the church and of contempt for the holy priesthood.”

Black leadership deemed the move a disgrace. When St. Cecilia chapel in Jesuit Bend reopened on Easter Sunday, segregation intact and a white priest at the altar, angry readers flooded the *Weekly* with protests against the hierarchy. One reminded fellow readers that it was the second time “the Archbishop has gone back on his word.” The image of blacks and whites separated on either side of the aisle enraged activists who saw it as yet another victory for the Citizens’ Councils. “When they reopened the chapel in Jesuit Bend,” one said, “they put the Negroes on the other side, and God on the outside.” Like Marrero a year later, St. Cecilia’s transformation from interracialist “moment” to segregationist stronghold remained a symbol of the New Orleans church’s swampy moral ground. Unsurprised by the move, Stephen P. Ryan, Dean of Xavier

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42 Ibid.
University, declared the church’s display of fear and circumspection symptomatic of the larger decline of southern liberalism in the late 1950s. “Possibly the most serious sign of bad times in the South is the quiet, orderly, but none the less ignominious retreat of the white ‘liberal’ from the battlefield.” Ryan, who resented positive reports about “progress” amidst resistance, blamed the current timidity of “former open sympathizers” for a largely “defeatist” attitude among blacks. Black Catholics, he added, “are particularly distressed by the fact that integration policies enunciated months ago have yet to be reduced to practice.” On a national level, Catholic interracial leaders like John LaFarge condemned the “cooling off period” among church leaders as “a mere excuse for doing nothing.” In the wake of the Little Rock Crisis, the atmosphere of repression in the 1950s South belied clergymen’s faith in gradualism. “It is ‘gradual’ only in that it is gradually getting more violent,” a Paulist priest asserted. Moral dictates accomplished nothing when the majority of priests refused to translate them into pastoral practice in the pews and classrooms, Twomey also wrote.

At the same time, “liberal” priests’ impatience with the apathy of fellow clergymen often drifted toward a similar critique of black Catholics themselves. Jesuit Harold L. Cooper, for instance, lamented the conspicuous absence of black Catholics among African American leadership. Famous for his criticism of priests’ complicity in the segregationist movement, Cooper challenged blacks to take a more active role in the emerging grassroots campaigns for social justice. In a sermon in St. Louis Cathedral, Cooper declared that since black Catholics, unlike their companions in other

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44 “Clergy, Laity Dragging Heels”; and John B. Sheering, “Father LaFarge Scores the Lipservers,” reprint in Louisiana Weekly, both from 6 September 1958.
denominations, stood on objective moral principles in condemning segregation, their unwillingness to join the freedom struggle “should be somewhat humiliating to Catholic Negroes.” The Jesuit admonished the Knights of Peter Claver to “do something comparable to what Protestant Negroes have done in Montgomery and elsewhere. Get up and fight for your rights, not because they are yours, but because every injustice violates the rights of God.” 45 Cooper’s exhortation may have startled his audience, but it also revealed a view within some white liberal circles.

Cooper also unearthed the dilemma faced by many black Catholics in the years after Brown, one caused by “liberal” clergymen themselves. The Knights certainly agreed with Cooper that black Catholics, as Catholics, must view segregation as “a sin against God.” With the Church as the one true social and spiritual guide, black Catholics agreed with interracialist clergymen that they must lead the South’s moral reconstruction. Nonetheless, Cooper’s rebuke seemed ironic to many listening to the priest’s sermon. After all, according to Ora Lewis Martin, priests were largely to blame for black apathy in the first place. For decades clergymen in charge of black Catholics’ spiritual well-being had created a frustrating dilemma, he replied to Cooper. Priests on both sides of the issue trapped black laity “between two alternatives, each of which is equally degrading to us.” On the one hand, most priests demanded that black parishioners remain “docile, meek, and patient with wrongs.” Regardless of the true teachings of the church, such men insisted upon reverence and “blind respect” for their authority, lest blacks stray into ignorance, radicalism, and communism. On the other hand priests like Cooper complained that blacks “who comply with their unreasonable demands, are docile,

45 Harold L. Cooper, “The Catholic Negro’s Approach to Integration,” sermon delivered to LW, 9 September 1959.
coward, and lacking of leadership.” Perhaps black Catholics’ problem was their unquestioning devotion to the clergy, Martin suggested.

The Knight of Peter Claver voiced black Catholics’ frustration with black and white attitudes on all sides of the integration struggle. African American Protestants criticized Catholicism as antithetical to the freedom struggle. And, while white liberal Catholics denounced blacks’ failure to take advantage of the church’s intellectual and spiritual resources, conservative clergymen undermined black Catholic participation in the larger social movement. In response, Martin demanded that African American laity “rid ourselves of this dilemma.” Reverence for the priest as “minister of the sacraments” remained essential to black Catholics’ sense of identity, he declared, but laity must also be allowed to accept or reject the teachings of a particular priest “according to our own judgment and ability to stand up on our own feet, with dignity and fearlessness.”

When we have personalities, we shall discover how well we shall be able to accomplish a much greater victory than Martin Luther King has accomplished. For, whereas, he has succeeded in a victory over the power of men to deny material possessions to us, we shall attain a victory over the desires of men to deny material or spiritual benefits to us.

In rising to the challenges of the black freedom struggle, black Catholics would become faithful but critical servants of the church. In defining their role against both Catholic and Protestant sources of social activism, African American Catholics embraced their religion as the source of social and spiritual coherence even as they asserted a certain independence of conscience that challenged its traditional structures of authority. They rejected the self-satisfied pietism of “liberal” priests and the apathy of most who

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47 Ibid.
stood behind the altars in Louisiana. In a Jim Crow world structured by a similar assertion of moral and social hierarchy, liberation of the laity within the pews became a necessary step toward a larger social liberation. Yet they would also challenge the ways their Protestant counterparts fought segregation.

The Bishops’ 1958 Statement, “Discrimination and the Christian Conscience,” provided hope to the faithfully discontented. With the assistance of Rummel and a handful of southern bishops, the National Bishops’ Conference demanded an end to racial discrimination and all forms of segregation. “Our nation now stands divided by the problem of compulsory segregation of the races and the opposing demand for racial justice.” The statement also declared discrimination a moral crisis, challenging segregationist claims that interracialism and the church’s attention to “social issues” undermined the hierarchy’s religious authority. The answer to this crisis lay implanted in the hearts and minds of all men, the statement declared. “Reason alone taught philosophers through the ages respect for the sacred dignity of each human being and the fundamental rights of man.” The bishops’ also emphasized the need for prudence and patience. “The problems we inherit today are rooted in decades, even centuries, of custom and cultural patterns. Changes in deep-rooted attitudes are not made overnight.” Therefore, “all must act quietly, courageously, and prayerfully before it is too late.”

Interracialists interpreted the Bishops’ statement as an important step from moral principle to social action. “The bishops offered some concrete and valuable suggestions as to programs of action,” one observer declared. The bishops’ had identified deficiencies in voting rights, schooling, housing, and jobs for African Americans as the main threats

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to the social morality and order. In overcoming these limitations, he exhorted readers to “find out the methods that have worked. Read about them, if necessary, but study them first-hand, if possible. Learn the obstacles. Be prepared for discouragement. Expect failures. But, with Christian courage and full reliance on God’s help, press forward.” With legal desegregation and ecclesiastical backing providing groundwork for “a lessening of prejudice against the Negro,” Stephen P. Ryan further reasoned, “time, education, and good will” might eventually effect significant change in southern society.49

But, as Ryan and many recognized, the hierarchy’s support of racial justice was hardly the issue. While the U.S. Bishops placed the weight of Christian doctrine and natural law squarely behind the black cause, the desegregation of Louisiana Catholicism remained a struggle to be fought in the pews. The attitudes of local priests, to say nothing of their white congregants, remained a difficult hurdle. At St. Leo the Great Parish in New Orleans, a parishioner wrote Rummel expressing her surprise that his October 1958 letter even contained a section on racial discrimination. “It was not until Monday morning…that I learned of the full content of the letter,” she said after attempting to call the St. Leo’s rectory. “Truthfully, I was astonished as this is the first time that I recall hearing a letter from your office being read differently or in part, thus depriving the parishioners of the information to be conveyed by your Excellency.”50

Local Catholic resistance operated in like manner throughout the south. In the months following the Little Rock integration crisis, for instance, the Arkansas diocesan


paper hoped to steer Catholic attention from the impending showdown between state and federal government by assuring readers that the Brown decision was “but only an interpretation of an amendment, which was interpreted differently by another Supreme Court (1896), which was composed of men just as capable as the present members [.]” After the publication of “Discrimination and the Christian Conscience,” the editor, William O’Donnell, attempted the same reinterpretation in a series of front-page articles. “His analysis of the race problem allows the Arkansas Catholic to preserve a peaceful conscience while continuing to practice racial discrimination against all Negroes,” the Interracial Review fumed. “The failure to provide any leadership or voice in defense of racial justice is a great disappointment to the Catholic Negro. It is all the more painful in view of the fact that most Protestant denominations have taken a positive stand.”51 As late as 1962, the Jesuit interracialist John LaFarge reported, “some four of the southern bishops are still definitely unfavorable to any organized action of the Church in favor of desegregation. They are for charity…to the Negroes without disturbing the status quo…”52

The church’s inability to shape even its own local congregations frustrated activists. “Despite the clear teaching of the Bishops,” Twomey wrote, “silence on the race issue still remains pretty much unbroken even in Catholic pulpits and Catholic classrooms.”53 As local priests and laity persisted in refracting the bishops’ message for a white audience, interracialists faced significant challenges in determining how and to


53 Christ’s Blueprint for the South, January 1959.
what extent the statement would hope to make inroads into southern race relations. Hoping that local interracialists would continue to steer a prudent course between apathy and brashness, “Discrimination and the Christian Conscience” challenged local leaders to form new organizations that tested the waters of local parish life yet still acted decisively toward integration. In New Orleans, Stephen Ryan called for another organization that brought together “southerners with integrationist sympathies.” Like the Commission on Human Rights and SERINCO, the new group would provide a forum for liberal Catholics to “get together and form a solid front.”

Older fraternal organizations also turned more direct attention to the social cause of black southerners. In 1959, the Knights of Peter Claver finally adopted a strong social justice platform, demanding that black Catholics take on a more prominent social and ecclesiastical role. Indeed, throughout a period in which forms of racial oppression were greater “than at any time since the Reconstruction period,” according to Laws, black Catholics remained determined to fight both within and through the church in removing Jim Crow from New Orleans society. For Laws, fresh from his experience as an NAACP leader in Little Rock, African American Catholics needed the church “for the fulfillment of his long-denied rights, as well as his spiritual yearning.” He believed that their desire to become full members of the church and their ability to use its message to effect change in society at large “will determine not only their future but in a large measure, the future of the race, of Catholicism and Democracy as well.”

54 Louisiana Weekly, 3 January 1959.
Xavier University in New Orleans especially faced the inner conflicts of reconciling Catholic fidelity with black protest. A source of pride for the church and the black community in New Orleans, the university produced many future civic leaders while embracing its identity as a Catholic institution of higher education. Reflecting the philosophy of Catholic higher education at mid-century, Xavier sought to provide students a fortress against the dangers of modernist ideas. “The very reason for our existence is the very opposite of Secularism,” its president, Mother M. Agatha declared in 1946. Embracing the neo-scholastic philosophy of Catholic higher education at mid-century, Xavier offered its students core philosophical and theological courses that advanced the notion of an orderly, intelligible system of knowledge—both social and cosmological. Xavier, Agatha declared, was to be “a little world in itself…my own well-beloved little world.”56 Over the next two decades, its students struggled to reconcile the school’s cornerstone mission with the increasingly potent language of black social liberation.

In the early 1950s, members of the Xavier community joined the Commission on Human Rights and the student-run Southeast Regional Interracial Commission. For both groups, the Catholic tradition’s emphasis on an organic, communal salvation and the moral authority of church teachings provided a necessary guide to solving the South’s dominant social problem. Students, administration, and faculty all proclaimed that only the church could unify southern society at a particularly divisive moment. In approaching this moral crisis in the south, wrote Ernest Morial, the future mayor of New Orleans,

“there must be a movement away from a self-centered scheme of personal salvation to a
spirit of unselfish brotherhood.”\textsuperscript{57} Catholic teaching, another declared, “considers every
possible circumstance that might impede eternal happiness. Unless man can properly
exercise his right to live, the exercise of this duty will become more difficult.”\textsuperscript{58}

Xavier students joined many Catholic college students from around the country in
expressing in increasingly strong terms their concern for racial justice in the church. “As
Negro Catholics we are a still smaller minority both in the Catholic Church and among
Negro people,” several members of SERINCO declared in 1956. Nonetheless, “we have
an even bigger stake in this country and in the South than most whites have.”\textsuperscript{59} In joining
the Catholic interracial movement, African American students emphasized their
commitment to Catholic unity across racial lines, particularly in the church’s central
rituals and practices. Racial justice, they believed, began in the parish. How could this
larger social liberation take place if local congregations continued to prohibit black
membership in liturgies and Catholic organizations? Even the local Knights of Columbus,
many fumed, “is not a Catholic organization but an exclusive club of white men who
profess to be Catholics.”\textsuperscript{60} SERINCO also called for an end to “Jim Crow” churches
throughout the region. “Maybe the Negro parish was necessary back around the turn of
the century when the segregated system started,” they declared, but this parallel black
Catholic world shaped by southern racism must come to an end. White Catholics could
once confine their concern for black co-religionists through Sunday appeals to the “Negro

\textsuperscript{57} Xavier Herald, February 1951.

\textsuperscript{58} Xavier Herald, March 1954.

\textsuperscript{59} SERINCO, “We Don’t Take Negroes Here,” printed in Catholic World 182 (January 1956): 1090.

mission” or in ushers’ orders that the black man “sit where he belongs.” Now, however, “we want to belong to a Catholic parish, not to a Catholic Negro parish,” students demanded. “We want to get married, have our children baptized and confirmed in this desegregated parish. We want to send our children to the parish school. We said our children, not our grandchildren.”

But student activism at both Loyola and Xavier troubled the archbishop and the majority of clergymen. As college campuses gradually grew into schools of political activism in the late 1950s, Xavier seemed a likely place for nurturing a unified black and Catholic voice that challenged racial oppression. The possibilities of student activism at the school concerned Rummel, who in 1956 warned the school’s graduating class against “forceful exertions” in overcoming the sins of southern racism. Demonstrating calmness and fortitude, Catholics must “seek a solution which will cause the least possible disturbance to human emotions.” Certainly they lived in difficult times, he acknowledged. Segregationists dominated the current social and political climate, unprepared to “listen to reason or arguments.” White intransigence might inspire a growing militancy among the oppressed. Nonetheless, the prelate urged confidence in prayer. The latter, Rummel noted, “is especially powerful, because where reason fails, prayer succeeds.” Segregationists might use fear to stir the emotions of white southerners, but the solution “must be in conformity with Christian justice and charity.” By “returning meekness for harshness” in Christ’s image, Xavier students would emerge as “race men” of a uniquely Catholic mold:

Be among the first to try to lift up and elevate your own people.
You must keep your objectives and methods clear. Be as altruistic

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as possible in uplifting your people along the lines indicated. Render service in the Spirit of Christ. Ask God to bless you a guide you. Be leaders of your people.62

Heeding Rummel’s guidance, Xavier remained committed to the “Catholic way” of advancing the cause of black Southerners. As members of SERINCO, students joined their white counterparts at Loyola and Dominican in a movement to advance the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ in the integration movement. So fundamental was this vision of racial justice that the group later distanced itself from interracial movements at neighboring Tulane and Dillard. The “common sacramental bond of Catholicism” and the church’s “integrated moral system,” they argued, distinguished them from non-Catholic activists in the ways they hoped to achieve social equality.63 In the face of outside criticism, students and the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament also emphasized their historic commitment to educational uplift in rural Louisiana. Education, the sisters argued, was the primary vehicle for racial activism. “The work done in these schools by the self-sacrificing young women who have received their degrees from Xavier University has been aptly described as one of the finest pieces of Catholic Action in America today,” one sister declared in 1941. Over the next three decades, female graduates of the university emerged as race leaders within these communities. Combined with the efforts of Josephites to organize voting campaigns and labor unions, the educational and spiritual ministries of the SBS and Xavier students “proved to be a potent force in the life of these rural people.”64

62 Xavier Herald, July 1956.

63 Christian Conscience 5, no. 12 (June, 1953), in Box 51, Folder 1, Joseph H. Fichter Papers, Loyola.

Xavier could no doubt point to a variety of social programs and achievements inspired by the sisters and the church. But the school’s commitment to the larger cause of black southerners came under scrutiny when four college students in Greensboro, North Carolina, set off a wave of nonviolent demonstrations throughout the South. A definitive symbol of the civil rights movement’s turn toward direct action and student protest, the sit-in movement quickly spread throughout the south. In Baton Rouge, several students at Southern University were arrested and expelled for staging a sit-in near campus. The *Louisiana Weekly* lauded that the sit-ins destroyed the myth that “Negroes are satisfied with conditions as they are in the South.” In its place, “A ‘new Negro’ has emerged to make the ideal of democracy in America real despite the crackpot hatemongers who don’t scare anyone anymore.”

The spirit of non-violent agitation worried Catholic leaders almost as much as it irritated segregationists. While the former continued to urge patience over brashness, the latter focused significant attention on the potential of Catholic education to stir black protest. In March of 1960, state Senator William Rainach went on television accusing Xavier University and Dillard University, the city’s two prominent African American colleges, of hosting courses for the practice of non-violent resistance. The administration of Xavier emphatically denied the accusation. “We have checked our faculty and student body and find no evidence of any ‘lunch-counter classes,’” Sister M. Josephina declared in a public statement. “Furthermore, we deplore this statement of Mr. Rainach as an attempt to involve Xavier University in that which would tend to create a racial disturbance in our community.” Shortly afterward, the school hosted a meeting to discuss

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the issue of direct action. “Xavier agrees heartily with the principle, ‘the right to protest,’” Josephina told students. But “Xavier, for which you as students stand, will not be a part at this point of what has become a public demonstration.” While she did not question the reasoning behind the protests, “the question is that of method—the method of intelligently and effectively expressing one’s opinion. Xavier does not have to defend or explain its views on integration.” She added that while the university could not stop students from individually participating, no student group could do so.66

Students sent letters of protest to state congressmen and senators underscoring Sister Josephina’s statement. They also contributed a policy statement of their own, urging fellow students to stand by their Catholic faith in preparing for social progress. But Xavier’s fervor in defending itself against the charges of racial agitation prompted many students and activists to question the school’s commitment to the race. Alumnus Ora Lewis Martin, who exhorted Claverites and priests to recognize black Catholics’ important opportunity, ridiculed the “stand-offishness” and apathy of Xavier students and faculty. “The so-called protest to Rainach resembled more of apology because it infers disapproval of passive resistance in public. The fact that less than half the entire student body at Xavier cast any vote at all is food for thought.” Students’ commitment to the “Catholic way” drew criticism from many activists throughout the region. Etienne Currault added that, “I am ashamed both of and for Xavier.”

For nearly 100 years he has been receiving an education of sorts – with what results? Obviously, the answer to the Negro’s quest for human rights and dignity does not lay in prayer, petition or education. It lies, it seems to me, in political action. The years ahead are not likely to be peaceful. Sister Josephina and others

who share her sentiments had better get used to the idea. It is going
to get a lot worse before it gets better! 67

The administration, Currault added, had “divided Negro ranks when unity is so
much needed. It placed Xavier University outside the ranks of intelligent Negro political
action.” If black New Orleanians, particularly black Catholics in the Crescent City were
to overcome their reputation for social complacency, Xavier students would have to forge
stronger ties with the black movement. 68

Both sides of the issue cast the debate as a struggle over the nature of their
Catholic calling. To Martin’s insistence that black Catholics move from their foundation
in objective moral truth the forefront of the civil rights activism, many students at Xavier
insisted that those same moral foundations had moved them toward many positive actions
for the betterment of black southerners. “Xavierites are by no means unaware of the
social problems of the Afro-American,” William Terrell declared. “Xavierites are by no
means unmoved by the increasing indignities showered upon the Afro-American,
Xavierites are taking positive actions other than prayer and petition.” Students “shall
always strive to take the most fruitful avenue of action.” Another student argued that
Xavier itself was a protest against segregation. “No, Xavier did not take part in the
demonstration,” James Perry III noted, “but we spend our efforts increasing the voting
power of the Negro. To us, 100,000 voters is 100,000 times stronger than any single
demonstration.” Perry exhorted listeners to understand the tactics of the Catholic
institution, which combined thoughtful prayer with legal action. “We dare you to join us
in our daily Mass to petition the grace of God, in our prayers for enlightenment. We dare

68 Ibid.
you to assist us in trying to become an educated people.” Faithful to Rummel’s belief that students should follow a peaceful and prudent approach to the race crisis, the men defended the church and Xavier. “Race prejudice may be combated both directly and indirectly. Like all erroneous acts, it may be both attacked and cured. To hold otherwise is moral defeatism.”

In many ways, Xavier students’ debate over the proper “Catholic way” of responding to racial struggle reflected black middle-class anxiety as much as religious obligation. Xavier students represented an educated black elite that envisioned the civil rights movement not only through the lens of Catholic prayer and education, but also through a better social and economic status than that of many black activists in the late 1950s and 1960s. In his study of black leadership in New Orleans, Daniel Thompson noted black Catholics’ middle-class upbringing as one major impediment to their sense of common purpose with blacks. Nonetheless, as new generations began to gain that sense of common struggle, students in and around Xavier, including students at Xavier Preparatory School and St. Augustine High School, saw the Greensboro sit-ins as a challenge to move middle-class sensibilities into social action. The well-dressed and studious blacks who challenged the Woolworth lunch counter’s racial policy exuded respectability and moral discipline against a mob of an angry and slovenly white teenagers. In the process of determining their commitment as black Catholics to the larger social struggle, black Catholic students hoped to join this movement in assertions of their status as Americans who shared in the moral and economic prosperity of post-war America.

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One way was to demonstrate their vitality, as consumers, to the economic life of the region. In April of 1960, Professor Raymond B. Floyd and the Consumers’ League of New Orleans led the picketing of stores along Dryades’ Street for their refusal to hire black employees. Student protests had a profound effect on older generations who questioned the extent to which most black New Orleanians would sit idly by as the “New Negro” bore the brunt of white aggression. “Are our college youths to meet the challenge alone?” one wondered.

Today, it seems that security is all important too often. I feel, we are satisfied to play it safe, to aim only for the “sure thing” and while most of us still dream of making some sort of contribution, in our lives may be safer and saner—but we are in the end making a world in which fewer and fewer ever catch a glimpse of the hallmarks of democratic living. We might conclude that what is needed are men in this whirlwind.70

For others, a Catholic movement for middle-class respectability meant a purging of older French-Creole customs. As early as 1957, many blacks in New Orleans rejected participation in Mardi Gras celebrations, claiming solidarity with King and other activists who sacrificed bus rides to achieve equality. By the turn of the decade, students at St. Augustine High School and elsewhere turned this boycott of a public celebration into a rejection of the cultural backwardness that it represented. As one group resolved in 1961, “It is against our ideology of progress as Negroes seeking first class citizenship.” Mardi Gras celebrations largely excluded African Americans and became public rituals of white condescension. “Flambeaus,” or torch carriers begged for change in between floats. This menial status was augmented by a “cynical air by whites when favors are caught by

70 John B. Mack III, to Editor of the Louisiana Weekly, 23 April 1960.
Negroes.” Black New Orleanians, they declared, ought to spend their time and money supporting the NAACP, CORE, and the Urban League.\textsuperscript{71}

Many black Catholic activists framed their vision of social reform within the same middle-class sensibilities that most white southerners possessed. Civic elites and local political leaders, they reasoned, would eventually negotiate with black leaders who demanded an equal share of the political and economic life of the region. Through their loyalty to the church and its demand for patient but effective moral leadership, black Catholics hoped to maneuver faithfully through white structures of authority to achieve equality. But the discontents of modern urban life, the systemic inequalities that marginalized blacks socially and economically from the white south, betrayed the limitations of such faith. Throughout the early 1960s, student sit-ins and consumer league protests that exuded optimism about the possibilities of inclusion. But they coincided with drastically shifting patterns of thought and life in black New Orleans.

As African Americans moved off the farms throughout the 1950s, gravitating to urban centers and creating housing shortages in largely black areas of the city, the resulting housing and economic crises challenged not only the structures of church and civic leadership, but also the ideals of inclusion that drove the early civil rights movement. Even in New Orleans, where sociologists and urbanists talked of “salt-and-pepper” neighborhoods, observers noted the massive population shifts that had been shaping urban areas in other parts of the United States. In New Orleans, whites relocated to newly developing areas in Jefferson Parish. More well-to-do blacks also moved away from the once prominent Central City neighborhood on the outskirts of Orleans Parish.

\textsuperscript{71} “Reasons Why We as Progressive Minded American Negroes Should Shun Carnival,” undated copy in Box 5, Folder 2, Charles B. Rousseve Papers, ARC.
St. Bernard and Jefferson Parishes both grew in population of white and black residents.

Giles A. Hubert, a scholar of urban studies, feared the weakening economic structure of the inner section of Orleans Parish.

And so, as that population becomes increasingly black, you have a low income population which is handicapped by discriminatory wage ceilings, discriminatory employment practices, discriminatory educational facilities and discriminatory social services of all kinds. The city fathers find themselves left with a central consuming population which has little chance of becoming high purchasers, high rent payers or high tax payers.  

As Central City gradually imploded, and housing projects such as St. Bernard and Desire grew, black and white citizens, he concluded, “should organize the political strength that their numbers indicate and through united and organized effort compel the city fathers to recognize them as partners in the development of the city.”

As religious leaders across all denominations faced an ever-broadening range of social problems, many sensed the passing of older sources of black leadership, particularly in religious organizations. The well-studied transformation of the civil rights movement from inclusion, or an integrationist pursuit of the “American dream,” to separatism and the nationalistic fervor of Black Power grew from a realization that the problems facing African Americans lay within the very limitations of that dream. Black experiences began to cast doubt upon interracialists’ belief in the salvific unity of the Mystical Body of Christ. Even the Jesuit activist Louis J. Twomey began to recognize the limitations of interracialist moralizing. Especially after Little Rock, he identified federal force as a necessary component in the achievement of racial justice. Federal intervention

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72 *Louisiana Weekly* 23 April 1960.

73 Ibid.
would not nurture the type of spiritual unity that activists once idealized, but over time, he believed, segregationists “must be made to fear it.” As one Associated Negro Press editorial described the black mindset in 1960, “Religion is fast being ruled out and power and force are being ruled in and the prospects are not assuring. When conscientious souls mention the brotherhood of man, as a possibility to save mankind from itself, they are laughed to scorn.”

By mid-1960, the future of race relations, and the church’s stake in it, seemed to rest squarely on the issue of school integration. Following Skelly Wright’s court order for the integration of the first grade in public schools, a committee of Catholic parents met with Rummel in May to see about enrolling four boys into a new school in the City Park region. The archbishop declared the move unwise. As New Orleans drifted toward the dubious distinction of being “another Little Rock,” in the fall of 1960 many black Catholics continued to support the archbishop and Catholic clergymen. A group of 2300 black Catholics petitioned the archbishop for a day of prayer to cast the struggle “in its true moral light.” As a religious issue, the petition stated, “its solution rests in the triumph of Christian justice and charity in the hearts of men.”

Clarence Laws was hardly surprised by such resignation. In the months leading up to the crisis, he declared that of all the five state to which he was assigned as NAACP field director, New Orleans and Louisiana branches generally had made the least progress. The ensuing debacle in November of 1960 exposed deep divisions among black Catholics regarding their commitment to the church. Even the historically rights-conscious Josephites came under scrutiny. During the months of violence and white

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protest, the order issued a statement in white newspapers appealing to all Catholics in a spirit of unity. Several African American parishioners demanded that the *Weekly* acknowledge the Josephites’ commitment to black uplift. “I, as a member of a Catholic church, guided by Josephite Fathers, am very proud of the move and I hope all of you will welcome their hats to our ring,” one wrote. Many, however, considered their statement indicative of the entire church in the region: “limited and insufficient.” The order had done much for the race throughout their history in Louisiana, one respondent noted. Nonetheless, the Catholic Church “has definitely had a chance to act in this situation,” he fumed. “My following statement, I realize can not be accepted by a well indoctrinated Catholic, but it is true nevertheless. The Catholic Church of the South is generally insincere.”

To Black Catholic spokesman Warren McKenny, Rummel’s only sincere consideration toward the “race problem” seemed to be his concern for the white race.

We believe that in making your prudential judgments on the applications of principles concerning race relations, you have centered your attention upon the realities, the reactions, and the sensitivities of WHITE Catholics…We, as Negroes, have long felt that it is most unfortunate that the experience of Church administrators and of their advisors is experience within a ‘white’ world.”

African Americans and other laity who had been members of the Commission on Human Rights increasingly questioned the role of the hierarchy in racial justice work. “Precisely what seems to be the problem with Rummel,” Matthew Ahmann of the National Catholic Conference on Interracial Justice fumed. Making matters worse was

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76 Warren McKenny to Rummel, 11/29/61, Series 10, Box 10, Folder 3, National Catholic Conference on Interracial Justice Papers (hereafter NCCIJ), Marquette University Special Collections.
the timidity of most laity in the region. “[A]re people trying to go slow to hide behind his skirts?”

As a spiritual event, the New Orleans School Crisis revealed the deep divisions in Catholic thought and life in New Orleans and put the final nail in the coffin for the broader vision of Catholic interracialism. No longer would the church place itself on the forefront of racial justice through a broad moral campaign to win the hearts and minds of white southerners. At the same time, the crisis opened the way for a new type of Catholic leadership that, unlike most interracial clergymen, had experienced and maneuvered through the day-to-day world of Jim Crow. Knowing the pressures of conformity within white society and the opportunities for human decency in the cracks of a decaying system, Catholic laity, many believed, would emerge as prominent voices in the Catholic integration campaign. Their experiences, to which we will turn in Chapter 6, reveal the promises and limitations of the “school question” as the central battleground of the civil rights movement.

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77 Matthew Ahman to Henry Cabirac, 6 July 1961, in Series 31, Box 1, Folder 2, NCCIJ Papers (Marquette).
CHAPTER 7:
EXCOMMUNICATING JIM CROW

Jack Nelson never needed a “St. Paul-type” conversion from the sins of southern racism. While his family seldom discussed the issue, the mild-mannered, angular attorney caught early glimpses of how South Louisianans constructed Jim Crow in their daily lives. In the Uptown New Orleans of his childhood, a black man strolling by the porch usually prompted panic by neighbors and an immediate call to the police. The sight of the same man minutes later in the back seat of a touring car “probably made me feel very secure,” he remembered. At his mother’s plantation in LaFourche Parish during his later childhood, a “strange affection” between blacks and whites meant that plantation workers could flee their one-room whitewashed houses in “the Quarter” to ride out hurricanes in the big house. Both races ate, sang, and worshiped together. Older African American men on the plantations taught white boys “about life,” how to hunt, fish and grow crops. ¹
From Nelson’s early childhood, segregation was custom, not belief system, and “in some mysterious way,” he later recalled, “God made me free of prejudice.”

Nonetheless, as he came of age during World War II the world remained white. Nelson wanted to be a well-respected and rich attorney, and after his infantry service in

the Philippines he enrolled at Loyola to receive a bachelors in economics and accounting. “We were going to pursue our dreams in a white world,” Nelson recalled to historian Kim Lacy Rogers. In 1947, however, the young law student met Louis Twomey, an encounter that set him on course to be, in the words of one observer, “the South’s loneliest lawyer.” Over the next twenty years, the indefatigable attorney and devout Catholic stood at the forefront of civil rights reform in New Orleans. Nelson organized the Save Our Schools campaign in 1960; challenged Emile Wagner’s seat on the school board; engaged Leander Perez in public television debate; served as vice chairman of the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice; defended freedom-riders and sit-in demonstrators in the earliest stages of direct action; became chief advocate in the integration suit against Tulane University; represented the 3,000-member tribe of Houma Indians in a discrimination suit in Terrebonne Parish; and eventually won successful entry of St. Augustine’s High School into the all-white Louisiana High School Athletic Association. In 1963, he was the only white lawyer in the twelve southern states regularly handling civil-rights cases.²

Like many “inside agitators” in the 1950s South, Nelson paid a steep price for his rare vision. “The personal and family cost of interracial involvement both in terms of financial loss and social ostracism,” he once told a reporter, “has been considerable.” But Nelson’s commitment to the lonely road of civil rights advocacy grew from convictions nurtured by Twomey back at Loyola. “Man has a sacredness about him,” the Loyola

Jesuit taught, and he must have all economic, political, social, and cultural opportunities to live in accordance with that created dignity. Neither majority opinion nor the dictates of shifting cultural or economic expedience dictated the extent of basic rights given an individual. Such thinking was contrary to Catholic social and Judeo-Christian principles, Twomey explained to Nelson. As revolutionary as it might have seemed in 1947 (even 1957), the latter reasoned, a belief in equal rights was a natural extension of a belief in God. Those who attended his civil rights class in Twomey’s Institute for Industrial Relations learned Nelson’s lesson: racial discrimination was “a serious watering down of our spiritual heritage.”

As a participant in the activities of the New Orleans Catholic interracial organizations in the 1950s, Nelson believed as many involved in Interracial Sunday meetings and student groups did: the authority and the spiritually integrative power of the church were essential to overcoming southern racism. “Of all the agencies in the South struggling for interracial justice and charity,” Nelson told an interracial group in New York, “the Catholic Church is uniquely equipped.” The Bishops’ 1958 statement reinforcing Rummel’s own moral demands had given southern society “a definite body of truth, an unerring set of principles.” These higher principles, reflecting the moral law that guided human actions, affirmed man’s inherent dignity and formed the foundation of civil laws. As the latter were meant to achieve “right order” according to God’s will, Nelson maintained, “the effort of the legislator must be to incorporate directives which man can follow so that he will be fulfilling the purposes for which God created him.”

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4 John P. Nelson, “The Challenge of Loving My Neighbor,” speech to Catholic Interracial Council of New York, October, 1959, in Box 1, Folder 9, Nelson Papers, ARC.
the height of Louisiana’s legislative resistance to court-ordered integration, Nelson
excoriated the state’s segregationist laws a perversion of the moral law.⁵

His attack on segregation, however, grounded as it was in the ideals of conformity
to the moral law, also recognized the reality of Jim Crow’s tenure in Louisiana. “The
problems we inherit today are rooted in decay, even centuries of custom and cultural
patterns,” Nelson admitted to a group at Louisiana State University in 1959. A year
before the New Orleans School Crisis, he challenged his audience to “take a hard look at
the practical problems involved in desegregation and to assess our responsibilities…”
Political and religious leaders, along with those from the legal profession were “the kinds
of forces that must be brought to bear upon this problem.” Nelson certainly believed that
“to come to some solution ultimately, one must within his own soul come to a greater
sense of the personal dignity of man and his spiritual nature.” From the enforcement of
civil rights measures in the South to open occupancy policies in Northern cities, *practical
actions, guided by conformity to Catholic social ideals, were necessary in achieving this
ultimate end.⁶

Yet even as the national bishops had begun to take a more public moral stance
against discrimination in 1958, the recalcitrant laity of New Orleans and the surrounding
parishes continued to frustrate the local hierarchy. The Louisiana Legislature maintained
its onslaught of legal measures determined to stand between the schools and the federal
courts in the months leading up to the crisis. As Catholic congregations echoed local
politicians’ cries for segregation at all cost, Nelson lamented that for all the church’s

⁵ “Buttons and Moral Laws,” Nelson speech at LSU, 1959, in Box 1, Folder 9, Nelson Papers, ARC.

⁶ Ibid.; Nelson also expressed concern over black migration North being met with discriminatory
policies and white hostility. Both North and South, he insisted, shared the same lack of interracial dialogue.
moral authority to challenge these voices of resistance, “the classroom is silent, the pulpit is silent, the Catholic press is silent.” In November of 1960, as angry mobs took to the streets to protest the entry of four children into two formerly all-white public schools, he complained to a friend that this lack of leadership among the clergy, especially the Archbishop, “has resulted in uncertainty and anxiety among his flock. Add this to the fear and ignorance which has always been with us, and we have a pitiful state of affairs.”

Catholic leaders nationwide declared New Orleans a disaster area. As the city brushed itself off from the violent aftermath of public school integration, the National Catholic Conference on Interracial Justice labeled Louisianans’ problem a “crisis of conscience.” For the NCCIJ, formed in 1958 in response to the U.S. Bishops’ statement, the difficult situation in the Crescent City demanded action beyond pulpit denunciations and token expressions of interracial solidarity from the hierarchy.

There comes a time, and this is one in Louisiana, when private attitude and action is an insufficient display of a just attitude, of a willingness to do right. These times men, individually, have to choose to give public backing to right choice; to give open support to constructive steps forward. Otherwise the racist will lead; and if such is the case, the right thinking, but silent, man shares responsibility for this evil.

The interracial justice envisioned a decade earlier by Catholic activists who idealized unity in the Mystical Body of Christ, Twomey and Nelson now believed, “is not going to come from within people.” And for all of the emphasis placed on segregation as a spiritual crisis besetting Southern Catholics that only the Church could fully heal, federal force now appeared essential to overcoming it. Pressure from Washington

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7 Jack Nelson to Dennis Clark, 11 November 1960, Box 1, Folder 1, both in John P. Nelson Papers, Amistad Research Center (ARC).

“doesn’t make for tranquility in a community,” Nelson declared, but “this is the only source we have for waking people up to the fact that all people have a certain dignity.”

Twomey agreed that since nothing had emerged from Catholic pulpits and pews in the late 1950s to challenge the influence of the White Citizens Councils, “real progress in desegregation in the South will be dependent on the amount of federal pressure exerted. And since Southerners do not respect federal authority, they must be made to fear it.”

Jack Nelson was but one prominent member in the emergence of a group of Catholic laity committed to the integration of parochial schools in New Orleans. In March of 1961, he became secretary of the newly formed Catholic Council on Human Relations. An association under the auspices of the NCCIJ, the council stated as its main goal the “promotion of interracial justice in New Orleans.” However, it specifically aimed to break the bottleneck of resistance to parochial school integration created not only by southern whites, but also by Rummel’s own unwillingness to move. Unlike the earlier interracial movement, the hierarchy, not the people in the pews, became the main target of a movement that believed in practical measures rather than public preaching to achieve racial justice. The Commission on Human Rights and the hierarchy in the early-1950s had exhausted the latter strategy of moral suasion, many council members reasoned. Distinct from these early interracial activists who fashioned a theological movement, they best described themselves as integrationists. Their main goal was the attainment of integration.

9 “Two Southerners Speak Their Minds,” transcript of a recorded conversation between Jack Nelson and Louis Twomey, 1961, Copy in Box 1, Folder 11, John P. Nelson Papers, ARC.

10 Ibid.
For Nelson and many laity who emerged in the 1960s to challenge segregation from the pews, schools remained the central battleground over the future of southern race relations. As a leading educator in the region with the ability to influence a significant number of southern children, moreover, the Catholic Church’s stake in the school question demonstrated the Catholic commitment to the black freedom struggle as a whole. In fulfilling its immediate, tangible goals, the CCHR worked. As some have argued, white liberals played an important, if understated, role in the success of the early civil rights movement. Prominent among the civic and religious leadership of the south, these individuals prepared civic elites, local government, and moderate segregationists for acceptance of racial integration, if not reconciliation.  

In their own way, Catholic integrationists prepared the hierarchy for integration by neutralizing the segregationist threat that had been so effective in the late-1950s. In March of 1962, the Archdiocese finally announced full-scale integration of Catholic parochial schools. The hierarchy demonstrated its commitment to integration by excommunicating three prominent segregationists in the spring of 1962. Both accomplishments, the CCHR argued, contributed to the destruction of segregation in public life. They offered valuable assistance to public school integration and helped generate a new climate of openness to desegregation that led to the eventual integration of lunch counters and hospitals in the city. Integrationists applauded the moral victory being won by New Orleanians in the expectation that it would carry to other parts of Louisiana.

More broadly, the Catholic Council on Human Relations also represented the emergence and official acceptance of a prominent laity just as the issue of lay leadership became central to the church’s radical “updating” during the Second Vatican Council. Among the most significant changes of the council was the turn to experience as a source of revelation. In responding to the modern needs and anxieties of the Catholic laity on the local level, the church would more readily turn to laity to translate universal doctrine into pastoral guidance. Nelson embraced the church’s challenge to laity with an uncharacteristic fervor for racial justice. In 1965, a nun teaching at a local high school praised Nelson as the “emerging layman” after the attorney visited her classroom to speak of the important social changes taking place around them. “Even though many of them did not agree with everything you said, they still admired and respected you because of your dedication and courage in this difficult area.” The speech, she lauded, had generated a few “partial conversions” among the white students who listened to Nelson’s challenge. “These same thoughts could have been presented by a priest in the pulpit or in a classroom, but the effects would not have been as impressive…Your professional competence blended with your Christian outlook actually amazed some of the students.”

Yet for all of its accomplishments by the mid-1960s in achieving integration and excommunicating the archbishop’s most vocal opponents, the excommunication of Jim Crow as a racist ideology proved a much more continuous, complicated, and divisive process. The problem for many laity, especially black Catholics, was how to most effectively bring Catholicism’s universal demand for human dignity and justice into the

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12 Sister Mary Lucy to John P. Nelson 7 October 1965, Box 4, Folder 18, John P. Nelson Papers, ARC.
most significant and divisive social issue in twentieth century America. Whites continued to resist school integration by resorting to a variety of measures that accelerated their movement out of public schools and city centers. Black activists had for too long witnessed a church willing to respond to white anxieties while lacking a decisive plan to integrate Catholic education and practice on terms equitable to both races. Amid the rise of Black Nationalism and the Second Vatican Council’s deeper recognition of local culture and community as a source of sacred presence, black Catholics began to question not only the ability of religious and governmental institutions to integrate African Americans into society, but also the reasoning behind it. The church by the end of the decade may have grown more attentive in principle to the needs and desires of the laity and the local community, and willing to achieve effective integration of schools and churches. But they also found a society and Catholic community more divided than ever. An analysis of the social and religious ideals and the practical limitations shaping the integration of Catholic schools offers important insight into the meaning of school integration itself amid the rise of civil rights agitation and widespread social division throughout the nation.

One might call it a massive PR campaign. The Catholic Commission on Human Relations represented a definitive cross-section of the city’s African American and progressive white laity. Ernest Morial would later become the first African American mayor of New Orleans. Numa Rousseve was a well-known African American activist and faculty member at Xavier University. C. Ellis Henican, another prominent attorney and member of New Orleans’ white “power structure,” had worked closely with Judge J.
Skelly Wright in advancing the Federal Court’s desegregation plan. In one way, the 300-member Catholic Council on Human Relations represented the emergence of a progressive professional class in the wake of the New Orleans School Crisis. Distressed by the economic toll of mob-violence and images of angry mothers cursing children outside the schoolhouses, professional leaders in New Orleans were determined to take the reigns of civic leadership, if only to recover the city’s tarnished image.¹³ This PR impulse drove many southern communities to comply with federal authority during the desegregation crises. With civil rights activists responsible for forcing the issue in the first place, these moderates shared, if nothing else, a common commitment to peace.

In couching a social idealism in a pragmatic language, the group had two important predecessors. In the months leading up to the New Orleans School Crisis, several prominent elites gathered to form the While SOS could boast the membership of prominent integrationists—including Joseph Fichter—its reputation as a group of elite white liberals undermined both its influence over local authorities and its ability to persuade much of the local community. Among the first to push integration from a purely pragmatic, business-minded perspective, SOS preferred to avoid moral arguments. Instead, it emphasized the economic impact of closing the schools. Having long viewed their struggle as a moral cause, segregationists took exception. “I am a little surprised to find in the pamphlet that most of the things ‘that will happen’ have to do with business,” one wrote. “Is that more important than the great principal of education for all, in a

¹³ Sociologist Morton Inger did blame many “business progressives” for their complicity in the crisis. Such individuals, including Emmett Irwin, contributed to citizens’ councils and the Davis campaign. They also dignified hatemongering in South Louisiana through their support of Perez. See Inger, Politics and Reality in an American City, 70-88. New Orleans certainly lacked the business progressives of other cities like Atlanta or Dallas. Nonetheless, according to Adam Fairclough, “businessmen were not so obtuse that they failed to see that continuing turmoil over integration would badly hurt the city’s economy.” See Fairclough, Race and Democracy, 253-55.
manner best suited to all?” Another excoriated SOS’s ignorance of “the thing that will cost us more than any amount of money and that is the loss of our social and cultural inheritance as well as the eventual loss of our own race.”\(^{14}\) At the same time, another group, the Committee for Public Education found the same pragmatism rather effective. Unlike SOS, the CPA contained no famous “white liberals.” Its typical member was a segregationist but, as one proclaimed, she was “a law-abiding citizen first.” CPA activists appeared to be more in touch with the realities of integration than SOS’s elite white agitators.\(^{15}\) After the school crisis, the organizing energies of both groups largely faded until civic elites determined that they must resurrect the city’s and the church’s reputation.

Yet to integrationists, New Orleans not only presented a unique Public Relations nightmare in the wake of the school crisis, but also an important opportunity to salvage community leadership in influential ways. The CCHR reflected this attitude. For as much as it desired to mend the church’s image, the group also believe that by introducing the largest full-scale integration of any school system in the South, it would significantly smooth the road toward a fuller recognition of black rights in the Deep South. “Although our problems are great here,” CCHR executive director Henry Cabirac assured the NCCIJ, “so are our human resources.” With the support of Rummel who insisted that the group encompass the entire archdiocese, the organization formed in March of 1961. As the school crisis and other incidents had made clear, rural areas like Plaquemines Parish would hardly foster the type of progressive leadership that Uptown New Orleans would.

\(^{14}\) Anonymous to Norbert Sand, 25 August 1960; Anonymous to Sand, 19 August 1960, both in Box 1, Folder 1, Save Our Schools Papers, ARC.

“Naturally, we don’t expect to accomplish much in the rural areas,” Cabirac continued. “Our only hope is to neutralize their effect.” The CCHR also hoped to build on the successes and failures of earlier interracial movements. After questioning Catholic leaders from other communities that had achieved successful integration, it concluded that the glaring weakness of the original Catholic interracial movement in New Orleans had been its desire for publicity. One interracial council chaplain in St. Louis, for instance, advised them to avoid the “goldfish bowl technique” when conducting its campaign. “There are times when too much publicity, and I believe that you had this experience, can harm your efforts and even prevent the reaching of your goal.” Others made similar comments. “There is no need to tell you in N.O. the unfortunate effects that publicity often has in this difficult problem.”

Determined to act more covertly, the CCHR not only feared attention from segregationist groups, but had also grown weary of the Catholic Church’s own public moral pronouncements, ungrounded as they were in definitive actions.

For any Catholic publication from New Orleans, or New Orleans Catholic source to extol the virtues of Racial Justice at this time would certainly look like the height of hypocrisy … if I remember correctly the appeal that the early Church had in the eyes of the pagan was summarized by their saying, ‘See how the Christians love one another,’ not ‘hear how they love one another.’

The NCCIJ agreed, urging the New Orleans hierarchy to move beyond preaching to the individual conscience and highlighting its token gestures of interracial solidarity. Such

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16 Henry Cabirac to Matthew Ahmann, 20 February 1961 and 20 March 1961, in Series 31, Box 1, Folder 1, NCCIJ Papers, Marquette.

17 “Report of the Executive Director,” Catholic Council on Human Relations, 3 July 1961, in Box 1, Folder 4, CCHR Papers, ARC.

romanticism undergirded a paralyzing moderation. Indeed, many observers believed that the crisis derived not so much from the actions of its “haters” as from its overwhelming population of interracial inactivists. “We must be prudent, they say – ad nauseam,” one northern observer bristled. Donald Thorman excoriated how southern moderates could excuse their caution by pointing elsewhere. “We don’t want to rush into this like the North and have laws on the books but hate in our hearts for each other as you do,” Thorman girded. “We want to accomplish integration with love.”

As many progressives came to believe, whether segregationist or integrationist, clergyman “afraid of offending his congregation,” or layman “afraid for his job,” a moderate was a moderate. Already disappointed over Rummel’s failure to take the heat off of Frantz and McDonough in 1960, Judge J. Skelly Wright confided to Henican that the church was not only losing its position of moral leadership in a predominantly Catholic community, but was also “being help up in ridicule” by activists and reactionaries alike. Rummel’s foot-dragging, Wright believed, had quickly become “an invitation to continue to boycott the public schools as a sure means for keeping the parochial schools from ever desegregating.” For Jack Nelson, the laity’s, even the CCHR’s, quiescence was particularly inexcusable. “The actions of the Catholic Council have been most discouraging,” he complained to the national conference. “Everywhere I go I constantly hear the same song – ‘We can’t do anything until the Arch gives a command.’”


20 Nelson to Matthew Ahmann, June 29, 1961, in Series 4, Box 3, Folder 3; C. Ellis Henican to Rummel, Series 10, Box 9, Folder 18, both in NCCIJ Papers, Marquette.
But while Nelson excoriated the “well meaning moderate who would conceal himself in a cloak of prudence,” the climate of fear generated by the New Orleans School Crisis and the state government in both New Orleans and Baton Rouge was a very real concern for many in the CCHR. The council’s lack of representation in the state capitol frustrated members, especially as legislators continued to threaten integrated schools with measures designed to strangle the Catholic school system financially. “There are many people who are willing to work but who do not want their names connected with the organization,” Cabirac to Ahmann. “I am afraid this situation will continue for a while.”

Driven by the need for people of good will and pragmatic responses, the committee hoped to study the political climate and negotiate within the possibilities it presented.21

It also had to examine the local Catholic community’s own racial climate to identify the potential sources of local parish leadership. By surveying priests throughout the archdiocese, the group determined that around twenty-five percent of Catholic parents could be considered “avid segregationists.” The bulk, roughly half, preferred “white only” schools but would not necessarily “participate in a rebellion.” A final twenty-five percent would support desegregation. The CCHR also examined lay leaders in these parishes, rating them from the stalwart segregationists to the apathetic, ill-informed moderates in high places. While most congregations contained a smattering of village integrationists, it concluded, few wielded influence over pastors who varied so widely on the issue. No priest could be considered an avid segregationist, the CCHR believed, but the lack of priestly unity troubled the organization. “The kind of support needed will not

21 Nelson to Lloyd K. Garrison, 18 December 1962, in Box 4, Folder 18, John P. Nelson Papers, ARC; Cabirac to Ahmann, 28 March 1961 and 18 April 1961, in Series 31, Box 1, Folder 1, NCCIJ Papers, Marquette.
simply be the passing on of information,” it said of priests’ role, but rather “a genuine conscience support of the church’s doctrine of social justice. This must be done without apology or reservation.”

Local pastors’ unenthusiastic response to the CCHR’s questionnaire, however, made the council wonder if they could ever accomplish integration through traditional structures of authority. Despite the best efforts of Catholic interracialists, the idea that the hierarchy could serve as arbiter of a Catholic interracial morality was by now wishful thinking. For one CCHR member complaining to Rummel, most of the progress in New Orleans had in fact been accomplished through lay involvement. No longer able to work within the top-down structures of moral authority, the laity’s efforts to “sell” the idea of integration to local pastors, he declared, “are necessary to produce continuing results.”

The issue of lay-clergy cooperation, reflecting both black and progressive white frustrations, thus remained central to the CCHR’s vision. When it and similar groups formed in other communities under the guidance of the National Catholic Conference on Interracial Justice, the latter urged bishops and local pastors to cooperate with this “large reserve of men and women of good will.” With so many priests resistant to the archbishop’s message since the early 1950s, the CCHR encouraged laity to assert their status as moral authorities on the race question over a clericalism that too often dominated interracial movements.

It seems to me that our broad aims are to retain our autonomy without our work being threatened by the traditional habits of organization within the church. At the same time, we gain the

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22 Catholic Council on Human Relations, “Interpretation of Interviews Conducted with Selected Catholic Priests,” Box 1, Folder 10, CCHR Papers, ARC.

23 F. Winter Trampolin to Rummel, 14 September 1961, in Series 31, Box 1, Folder 2, NCCIJ Papers, Marquette.
confidence of the Bishops and relate to them individually more and more directly.24

Much like segregationists in the years after Brown who hoped to shape clerical authority by grounding moral principles in lived experience, integrationists sought to assist pastors in translating abstract theological notions of interracialism into a solid pastoral program.

The appointment of John P. Cody as Auxiliary Bishop later that year would only heighten concerns about the status of the laity in the pastoral atmosphere of the pre-Vatican II Church. While the CCHR knew that Cody fully supported integration, they feared his commitment to clerical control of the campaign. While in Kansas City, Cody had refused permission for a group of lay people to form an interracial council because of “his belief that it is primarily the responsibility of the ordinary to use his authority to secure racial justice in his diocese…” 25 Upon Cody’s arrival in the summer of 1962, the CCHR assured the prelate that it would “never do anything that, even to the slightest extent, would embarrass His Excellency,” promising “an unreserved acceptance of Your Excellency’s leadership in this cause.” 26 Nonetheless, integrationists in the archdiocese insisted that laity compose “‘shock’ teams of qualified persons” to “go into the parish to assist the pastor.” The group suggested workshops for local priests where speakers “can

24 Matthew Ahmann to Cabirac, 27 September 1961, in Series 31, Box 1, Folder 2, NCCIJ Papers, Marquette.

25 Southern Field Service Report to the Directors of the NCCIJ, August 1962, NCCIJ Papers, Marquette.

26 CCHR to John P. Cody, 3 July 1962, in Box 1, Folder 5, CCHR Papers, ARC.
outline the theology of the case,” and help clergy develop it into a viable pastoral program.27

Such strategies were essential, they believed, in achieving the kind of organic unity that the church proclaimed. As angry mothers continued to line the sidewalks in front of Frantz and McDonough schools to taunt the city’s first students in integrated schools, the group became determined to break priests’ and the hierarchy’s silence by assuring both of growing community support for integration. The first step was to disabuse its fear of economic reprisals. The superintendent of parochial schools, Henri Bezou, believed not only that parishioners might cut off funds, but also that legislation from the state government would place tax burdens upon church property. Henican tried to assure him that the church “would have more funds than there would be bands to contain them” through donations to the Archdiocesan School Fund. The council also sought out Moon Landrieu, a state representative “well disposed to desegregation,” to convince the hierarchy that the reactionary tide in Baton Rouge reached low ebb. Despite Governor Jimmie Davis’ public commitment to segregation, Louisiana faced a deficit of $73 million, and needed a favorable federal court decision to secure its right to Tidelands oil revenue. The window of opportunity was going to be short, Landrieu believed. Perez hoped to force a quick settlement so he “could again start pulling sufficient strings” for punitive laws. At least for the moment, however, the state was not likely to endanger its chances by continuing to enforce segregation.28

28 Cabirac to Henican, 5 June 1962, in Box 3, Folder 21, CCHR Papers, ARC.
Like many southern states, Louisiana would increasingly turn to passively promoting it instead. With “massive legislation” to block the Supreme Court no longer effective, legislators throughout the south promoted private education through grant-in-aid measures designed to circumvent integration by assisting students attending private schools. A year after the Frantz and McDonough debacle, parents of children attending the two schools opened 9th Ward Private School on the corner of Marais and St. Claude. Leander Perez led the effort to offer this largely working-class white population a chance at private, segregated education. “My heart went out to them,” Perez declared at the dedication. “Those dear little children are the pawns of the dirtiest, lowest grade of politics ever seen in this country.” The brand-new, one-story structure housed 445 students, “a monument,” Perez added, “to freedom and liberty.”29 As segregationists erected structures with private funds to house student “refugees,” African Americans remained in dilapidated and overcrowded public schools. Adding insult to injury, the state, at the urging of segregationists, withdrew approval of the sale of bonds for new public school buildings near the Desire Housing Project.30

In organizing these “white flights schools,” the New Orleans Education Foundation and other political forces promulgated a “freedom of choice” mantra that continues to influence governmental education policy. Integrationists feared the threat that these schools posed to public and Catholic schools alike. As troublesome for the church was the fact that several prominent Catholics had a hand in forming the

29 “Excerpt from a talk by Leander Perez, Sr., on Opening of Ninth Ward School,” n.d., copy in Box 1, Folder 16, CCHR Papers, ARC.

Foundation. Such Catholic support also infuriated Ahmann, who complained to Archbishop Patrick O’Boyle in Washington that New Orleans Catholics were capable of causing “grave scandal” for the church.

I must say to you frankly, that while I have the deepest affection and the greatest respect for Archbishop Rummel, I do not understand why he has tolerated repeated scandal given by prominent lay people and even some of his priests.31

One clergyman in particular, Father Carl Schutten, became a trustee of the Foundation alongside Emile Wagner. A long-time thorn in the side of progressive Catholics, Schutten’s refusal to read pastorals on race was only the first step toward his support for Citizens’ Council activities throughout the city. His position as editor of the Catholic Action of the South certainly cut down on articles related to the interracial apostolate. “There is every reason to believe,” Ave Maria concluded, “that their [Schutten and Wagner’s] connection with a group that to the public eye at least smacks of segregation will not help the image of the Church in the minds of most Americans.” At Rummel’s demand, Schutten eventually stepped down from the board. He also began to distance himself from Emile Wagner. But Catholic segregationism continued to frustrate activists. The Knights of Columbus Council of De La Salle High School even made their hall available for a parents meeting to discuss the new private school system.32

Nonetheless, these fledgling efforts would eventually encounter numerous financial and constitutional roadblocks. In 1961, A.P. Tureaud initiated a lawsuit against Grant-in-Aid when he applied for assistance for his twin daughters. With the legal and financial weakness of Grant-in-Aid and the willingness of Louisiana legislators to put

31 Ahmann to Patrick O’Boyle, n.d. in Series 10, Box 10, Folder 1, NCCIJ Papers, Marquette.

aside the massive resistance campaign, the church sensed a new opportunity to carry through on its integration plan. An August 1961 meeting between the CCHR, Rummel and Bezou yielded no actions. But with the second year of public school integration proving less volatile that fall, albeit with the same measure of tokenism, the group once again met to discuss the dangers of Grant-in-Aid, the weaknesses of massive resistance, and the possibilities of integrating schools the following year. For all the danger it posed to Catholic school attendance, Grant-in-Aid was “more political than legal,” they believed. In addition, CCHR members believed, a number of Catholic legislators stood ready to oppose segregationists in the capitol. The confidence that enough “right-minded” Catholics sat in the pews to dilute the influence of the local Citizens’ Council chapters, also seemed to satisfy Rummel and Bezou.

By November, with Bezou more convinced of the opportunity presented by the state government and the CCHR’s chaplain, Monsignor Charles Plauche, at Rummel’s ear, the latter determined that an order should be issued for the following fall. Although the archbishop initially wanted only the first three grades integrated, the CCHR pursued a sweeping decision: all schools were to be integrated at all grade levels. With token integration still dominating the public schools, a move involving over 36,000 children and 70 parochial schools would eliminate the possibility of “target parishes” for segregationists hoping to stand in the doorway. Issuing the announcement early enough might also allow tempers to cool by the time the doors opened in the fall. With careful planning, the CCHR remained confident that parochial school integration in a city that
was 50 percent Catholic would have a tremendous effect on the community as a whole, especially in promoting a fuller integration of public schools.\(^{33}\)

In March of 1962, Archbishop Rummel made his decision public. Without mentioning the word “desegregation” or African Americans specifically, the archdiocese announced, “all Catholic children may apply for admission to the Catholic schools of the Archdiocese, both elementary and secondary, parochial and private, according to accepted educational standards.” Registration for the fall of 1962 was to begin in April.\(^{34}\)

“I expect Catholics to show the same loyalties as have been shown in many other dioceses including those of southern states,” Monsignor Bezou declared. At the same time, Henican secured a promise from Judge Wright that he would simultaneously order the full integration of the first six grades of public school, which he did shortly afterward. He also declared the Pupil Placement law inapplicable to public schools.\(^{35}\) Both decisions were, in fact, the first such sweeping measures for public schools in the Deep South, “and the fact that we had something to do with it,” an elated Cabirac told the NCCIJ, “I think is tremendous.”\(^{36}\)

Most of the support for Rummel, as expected, came from within New Orleans city limits. At one Knights of Columbus meeting, members stood and applauded as the prelate entered the room. Despite rumors that collections were down in some parishes—one priest found chocolate candy in the collection plate, another licorice sticks—diocesan

\(^{33}\) “Proposed Statement of Policy With Regard to the Desegregation of Catholic Elementary Grades,” n.d., in Box 1, Folder 10, CCHR Papers, ARC.

\(^{34}\) *Southern School News* 8 (April, 1962): 1,6.

\(^{35}\) *States’ Item*, 4 April 1962.

\(^{36}\) Cabirac to Ahmann, 7 November 1961, in Box, NCCIJ Papers, Marquette.
affairs functioned as usual. Some recalcitrant clergymen were also coming around. As the CCHR reported, one pastor well known for his conservatism told his parishioners that “‘some of ou[r] brethren are asking for rights for which they did not ask in the past, and as Christians it is our obligation in both justice and charity to give them these rights.’” Another pastor at St. Rose de Lima told the school’s P.T.A. that Rummel’s order was to be accepted without any discussion. He received a round of applause. 37 As one relieved council member declared, after Rummel had “vacillated up until the last minute,” the laity “were able to learn the workings of a southern Bishop’s mind better than any other way we could have anticipated.”

Even the state government seemed to be holding favorably for the church. While Wagner still believed that the state could legally enact punitive measures against the church, most legislators had grown weary of railroading segregationist laws through the legislature. In June the House overwhelmingly defeated a bill that would have removed tax exemption from religious or charitable groups promoting integration. One representative had denounced the measure as “strictly spite legislation and it is aimed at the Catholic church and Loyola University.” Another reminded members that, for all their dangers to the sanctity of segregation, Catholic schools in Louisiana relieved the state taxpayers of a considerable educational expense. By August, the state backed off and a beleaguered Emile Wagner resigned from the school board. In the process, the Catholic segregationist leader also toned down his attacks against the church.

Die-hard segregationists accused Wagner of an early surrender, continuing to excoriate Catholic claims to authority on the race issue. “They are not the church. They

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37 Cabirac to Henican, 26 April 1962, in Box 3, Folder 21, CCHR Papers, ARC.
are only misdirected officials or managers of the Church,” Leander Perez railed shortly after the announcement. “Every decent white parent should take his child out of parochial schools,” he continued. “Do as your conscience directs. Shut their water off and you’ll see them turn about-face.” Jackson Ricau, head of the South Louisiana Citizens’ Council, called the decision tragic. “New Orleans will emerge as a city of terror,” he declared. With no scriptural approbation and even less support from the clergy, Rummel was betraying a white Catholic population that had “fed, clothed and sheltered the clergy” and built the Catholic schools “while paying taxes for public schools.”

Una Gaillot, founder of Save Our Nation, continued to defend segregation on biblical grounds. As the hierarchy held meetings inside the Archbishop’s residence, Gaillot and her group gathered outside. Women and children paraded in Sunday dress with signs accusing the hierarchy of socialism and communism. If the press couldn’t get enough, the CCHR certainly could. “This woman is dangerous,” Cabirac declared, worried that she “has undoubtedly received much more national and international publicity than she should have merited.”

By April of 1962, with registration rapidly approaching, the hierarchy decided that it was time to silence these outspoken segregationists. Cody, newly arrived from Kansas City and willing to exert clerical force, instructed Monsignor Plauche to compose a letter to several segregationists demanding that they cease from fomenting “rebellion against the Church.” It also warned that excommunication “will be automatic.” One segregationist legislator, Rodney Buras, met with Rummel and emerged saying he would


39 Cabirac to Henican, in Box 3, Folder 19; Henican to Cody, 3 July 1962, in Box 2, Folder 23, both in CCHR Papers, ARC.
abide by the decision. Ricau, however, responded with a public letter of his own, contending that the archbishop was once again exceeding his authority.

If your Excellency has found fault with my conduct, it is because Your Excellency has gone beyond the boundaries of your ecclesiastical regimen and has engaged in anthropological aberrations with the support of a number of theologians. It was precisely this sort of mischief that split the Holy Mother Church in the Fourteenth Century.

Gaillot immediately scheduled a meeting with the Archbishop and two witnesses, declaring that she would accept excommunication gracefully if the archbishop did not show her error in her interpretation of the Bible. The hierarchy, however, denied the request for witnesses and the meeting did not take place. Perez made no formal response to Rummel or Cody, later declaring that he never received the letter from Msgr. Plauche.

On April 16, Plauche read a public letter charging that since all three had shown “flagrant disregard” for the “fatherly counsel” of the archbishop, they were excommunicated. As they had done in the months after Rummel’s 1956 announcement, segregationists immediately attacked the move as both an abuse of clerical authority and bad theology. Ricau called the excommunication “an act of desperation resulting from six years of frustration and failure to dent the Catholic laity on the ‘morality’ of compulsory integration.” Later that month, at St. Francis Xavier Church in Metairie, he stood at the doorway as his 20-year-old daughter walked unaccompanied down the aisle to meet her bridegroom. While no one could confirm that any church official had actually barred him from entering, Ricau read a prepared statement explaining the clergy’s refusal to allow him to the sacred honor of walking his daughter down the aisle. Such a move, he fumed,

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40 *Ave María*, 2 June 1962.

41 *States Item*, 12 April 1962.
“clearly reveals how far the hierarchy will go to suppress a Catholic who is telling the truth about racial integration.”

Gaillot also made a public spectacle of the excommunication. “To the best of my knowledge, Mussolini and Castro were never publicly excommunicated,” she proclaimed to a crowd parents meeting. Years later, she would also stand outside her son’s wedding years later. More significant in her memory was the day after the order, when she confronted Rummel on the lawn of his residence during a rosary procession. Breaking into the crowd, she knelt before the prelate, demanding that the he admit the influence of Satan on his decision. “I am not apologizing,” she told the frustrated archbishop. “Look to heaven and admit it’s God’s law to segregate. Admit before God and yourself that you did not want to integrate.” Women at the service later led Gaillot away. Both the excommunication and her confrontation with the prelate, for whom she still claimed great admiration, became a defining moment in her spiritual life that she still recounts today, the point that set her on a decades-long struggle with the hierarchy. At one meeting that drew about 260 people, the mother of two bemoaned having been “deprived of Mass and the sacraments and this is a sin that falls on the heads of the hierarchy.” She compared herself to a lost sheep with the clergy making no attempt to save her. In their stead, “the three who have been excommunicated will lead the erring laity and clergy back to the paths of truth.”

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42 Times-Picayune, 29 April 1962.
43 Times-Picayune, 4 May 1962.
44 Times Picayune, 8 April 1962.
45 Report on meeting held by Una Gaillot at Jerusalem Temple, 4 May 1962, Box 1, Folder 6, CCHR Papers, ARC.
Indeed for a time the excommunications seemed to galvanize segregationists’ commitment to both Jim Crow and Catholicism. While Gaillot viewed the excommunication as a moment that has since defined her commitment to “One True Church,” Ricau acted in much the same manner. Once the dramatic liturgical changes of Vatican II arrived, the revolutionary atmosphere of the mid-1960s created by both integration and the “new morality” of the Council prompted him to dismiss the church itself as illegitimate. Perez, meanwhile, assured Catholic segregationists that the hierarchy would eventually “mend their ways and come back to the true teachings of the Catholic Church.” While shouting “better excommunication than integration!” to one protest rally against the excommunications, the 70-year-old Perez, wearing a ten-gallon had and waving cigar also advised followers “this is not a revolt against the Catholic Church. God forbid any such thought against Mother Church. We’re Catholics and we’re going to stay Catholics.” Perez attended Mass the following Sunday at St. Joseph’s in Gretna.

The excommunication of Perez, Ricau, and Gaillot seemed a victory for the New Orleans church. For the NCCIJ, the national image of the church “took on heroic dimensions as the Archbishop withstood the picketing and verbal assaults of the racists.” But, the organization wondered, “how does this fickle public image of the church correspond to reality?” Indeed, most integrationists in New Orleans knew that, in addition to the excommunicants’ continued following, its effect on the general racial attitudes of whites in the pews was minimal. For the average African American attempting to

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46 New Orleans States-Item, 17 April 1926.

47 Lafayette Advertiser, 26 April 1962.
integrate the church, “it is still an uneasy experience, for if one sits in any pew, especially toward the middle or front of the church, he is liable to sit alone even though the aisles may be jammed with standers.” At communion, too, “the irksome question arises, ‘Wait ‘til last?’” Even priests in parishes where Citizens’ Council members were prominent continued assuring white parents that African Americans who attempted to register their children in schools “will not be permitted to enter.”

As these responses to the excommunications indicated, the question of how deeply segregationists clung to a gospel of racism could only be answered in the months, even years that followed. For the Catholic Church as a whole in the beginning of the 1960s, the event, and the decision to integrate schools raised more questions than it answered. For NCCIJ director Matthew Ahmann, the motives behind the move were clear, but he too questioned its effectiveness. The overall impression the excommunications gave, he feared, was that a Catholic “can comfortably be a segregationist, as long as he does not make it a public issue in a fight with his bishop. This impression would lead Catholics to feel that they can continue to harbor prejudice and live a segregated life. Wrong, of course.”

Ave Maria agreed. “Let’s say good-by to Leander and his puppets,” one writer admonished. “There is a more serious problem facing Catholics in dioceses throughout the South.”

While avid segregationists had certainly been marginalized by the fall of 1962—many resorted to phone banks in order to harass church and CCHR officials—the struggle to implement integration, and in the process shape the general attitude of

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49 Cabirac to Henican, 16 June 1962, CCHR Papers, ARC.

50 Ahmann to Cabirac, 19 April 1962, in Series 31, Box 1, Folder 3, NCCIJ.
Catholics in the region, brought a new set of anxieties for the CCHR and the hierarchy in the fall of 1962. School registration that April saw few incidents. One Josephite priest, Father Eugene McManus reported that African American Catholics were generally well received and that “the Catholic Negro community is convinced that the Church means what it says.” Nonetheless, the CCHR’s initial assessment of white laity was correct: while most Catholics in the pews would not openly participate in any open rebellion against the church, by and large they opposed integration. Furthermore, the lay teacher “has no organization,” meaning those on the front lines of integration lack “a proper understanding of the teachings of the Church on this subject and what the Church hopes to accomplish in moving forward.” Making matters worse, many clergy and women religious seemed to be demonstrating “either lack of sympathetic acceptance or something just short of willingness to follow.”

And, of course, Perez wasn’t going anywhere either. It did not help integrationists that the very first Catholic school to open its doors to all races in August was in Plaquemines Parish, the heart of radical segregationism and the Delta Boss’s personal sovereignty. The parish’s geography alone had long frustrated activists. Sticking directly into the Gulf of Mexico as one narrow stretch of wetland, its one main road made it difficult for civil rights activists to travel up and down without local harassment. Yet it was here, with few places to hide, that the assertive but dogged pastor of Our Lady of Good Harbor Parish, Rev. Christopher Schneider, waged a personal struggle to keep his

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51 “Good-Bye, Leander,” Ave Maria, 96 (22 September 1962): 16; Cabirac to Henican, 26 April 1962, in Box 3, Folder 21, CCHR Papers.

52 CCHR to Cody, 3 July 1962, in Box 1, Folder 5, CCHR Papers.
school open against the dictates of Leander Perez. The episode would later become the subject of a CBS *Sixty Minutes* documentary, “The Priest and the Politician.”

The evening before opening day, Perez exhorted parents to stand outside to “watch the four or five little Negroes as they are being paraded into your schools.” As the students gathered for opening Mass that day, parents stood holding picket signs. “The more you know about God the more you know about everything else,” he told these young students as they prepared to walk into class. Several students then made their way to the “Negro school” on bus, the priest escorted 38 white and 5 African American students to the “white” school. A substantial number, from the original 340 students the previous year, had withdrawn. Local authorities in control of state resources denied the use of public school buses, along with new state textbooks, school lunch funds, and federal milk funds. Several bus drivers quit, leaving priests and nuns in charge of the school to take over their duties.53 Indeed, by now whites in Plaquemines were well versed in Perez’s definition of subtlety. Before the school had even opened on Wednesday, Schneider moved the school bus down the driveway only to find the brakes had been bled. The next evening, several white parents, according to the Perez, approached blacks “to reason with them and let them know they were being used as pawns to sell our people down the river.” One black parent who had already lost his job moved his family out of Plaquemines within the day. None of the other African American children even reported for class on day two. “They had their day yesterday. Now it’s our turn,” one bystander declared with about 100 other congregants. After Mass a car arrived in front of the school to trumpet a recording of “Dixie” as the children walked back to class. That evening one

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Catholic sister received a call warning that sisters and priests would be tarred and feathered. Schneider, having already received bomb threats, urged the unsympathetic local sheriff for more police protection. Instead he received more harassment.54

When continued threats to priests, nuns and students forced the school to close on the third day, the FBI launched an investigation at the direction of Robert F. Kennedy. Officials arrived on the scene of the 30th of August trailed by Perez. Greeted by a roar of approval from white parents in front of the school, the Dixiecrat mastermind and boss of Plaquemines praised the group for conducting themselves “as ladies and gentleman.” Plaquemines Parish citizens, he declared, had endured a number of hurricanes over the recent years, “But we have never been confronted by a situation where our very church, our religion, your property, has been more basely, outragedly [sic] violated.” Regarding Schneider, he declared, “I don’t mean to call this poor, sniveling priest a Communist. He is only taking orders.” Perez charged the hierarchy with deliberately choosing Buras to create an incident after the Kennedy administration gave Archbishop Cody a $3 million payoff to desegregate.55

As whites continued to congregate and threats persisted, the number of students dwindled to zero over the next month. Perez even attempted to invite the sisters to teach catechism in the public schools. The latter remained in empty classrooms as Our Lady of Good Harbor opened every morning for the rest of the year. But when, the following fall, the school attempted to open again on a desegregated basis, militants soaked the roof in gasoline and ended the matter once and for all. African Americans had nowhere to go but

55 States-Item, 31 August 1962.
out. So sharply were racial lines drawn by the Delta boss’ rule that when blacks registered for the nearby Catholic school for mulattoes, mulatto parents protested so vehemently that it forced the school to close. According to historian Glen Jeansonne, when the CBS special on the incident aired in 1963, most of the responses that came in from across the country expressed support for Perez. Nothing could really be done about Plaquemines, Cabirac lamented, “at least this year until he is either put in jail or dies.”

Fortunately for the archdiocese, desegregation within the city limits proved more manageable, if substantially incomplete, over the next several years. Prior to school opening in the Crescent City, the New Orleans Police Department, in coordination with FBI and public and parochial school officials, developed a strategy to minimize local resistance. Officers at Catholic schools were to patrol the areas in plainclothes, removing the aura of federal enforcement. With a full-scale plan in place and the hierarchy’s refusal to publish the names of integrated schools or the number of African American children attending them, officials hoped that white resistance would not only be delayed, but also effectively decentralized. When, on September 4, 60 African Americans desegregated 20 parochial schools in the city, pickets arrived at several parishes. At St. Rita’s fifty-five white parents looked on as a nun put her arm around the shoulders of one small boy and shepherded him into line. At Mater Dolorosa, Gaillot’s home parish, three African American children entered as the excommunicant stood outside with a sign reading “Cody Scared to Talk Bible With Me. False Teacher Resign or Repent.” With some schools reporting that enrollment was “down a bit,” most seemed to be free of any initial

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56 Jeansonne, Leander Perez, 269-270; Times Picayune, 28 August 1963; Cabirac to Ahmann, 10 October 1962, in Series 31, Box 1, Folder 3, NCCIJ Papers, Marquette.
violent reactions. At St. Rose de Lima, the entry of one African American girl prompted several white mothers to take their children out of line.

In Westwego, one Our Lady of Prompt Succor parent attempted to break through police to get his son out when two African Americans walked in. After a brief scuffle several parents entered the school and remove their children. That evening Gaillot led 250 protesters outside of Archbishop Cody’s residence, including children who carried signs denouncing the hierarchy. On day two, as roughly 160 African Americans entered 25 elementary and high schools, a handful of schools witnessed more significant responses. In Westwego, 300 parents returned to jeer at priests and parents bringing children to school. One black parent returned to her car to find the windshield smashed in. As the priest arrived, one protester shouted, “You’re smiling now, but you won’t be Sunday.” While Mater Dolorosa parents continued to hold a vigil in a tent outside the school in the upscale Carrollton Avenue neighborhood, bomb threats plagued St. Rose de Lima and St. Raphael’s. For the latter, a first-day attendance of 1244 dropped to 861 three days later after the arrival of the only registered black child.57

Most parishes, however, began weathering the storm, leaving school officials satisfied that it was only a matter of time before schools—and the coffers—returned to normal. “Quiet seems to prevail Deo Gratias!” the St. Rose principal reported on the 7th.58 Since 1956, “economic boycotts” had been a persistent white threat against the integration of schools. When desegregation finally occurred, many whites delivered on the promise, “but not as much as you’d think,” one priest observed. After all, he added,

57 States Item, 4 September 1962; 5 September 1962; Catholic Schools Administration, “Supervisors’ School Attendance Reports (September 4-7, 1962),” School Desegregation Files, AANO.

58 “Supervisors’ School Attendance Reports,” School Desegregation Files, AANO.
parishioners were not exactly generous to begin with. “I wish those big talkers had in the past put their money where their mouths are today.” Many parents continued to boycott parochial schools while overall participation in church programs had decreased as well. Nonetheless, the archdiocese and the CCHR marked it as a successful campaign. Before departing for the Second Vatican Council, Bezou extended his appreciation to religious and lay teachers, as well as policemen and FBI who facilitated the relatively painless transition. “Our confidence proved well founded,” Others credited the community itself. “It seems,” the Times Picayune declared, “that it is the Catholic citizenry that has made up its own mind to stand fast by the overweening principle of orderly, fair, public-spirited conduct.” Such a spirit would “disappoint sensation-seekers and antipathetic outsiders.”

Perhaps it was a turning point in white attitudes. The temerity and organization of segregation campaigns certainly seemed to dissipate in the wake of integration, leaving segregationists to resort of a variety of unruly strategies and mixed messages. A local radio station, WSHO, for instance, carried shows in which radical segregationists, including members of the Parents and Friends of Catholic School Children, launched anti-Catholic and anti-Semitic attacks, both once a bête noire of “respectable resistance.” One participant even blasted Jesuits who “swear to promote Catholicism at all costs, including stabbing pregnant women in the womb.” Another Parents and Friends spokesperson insisted that the Catholic hierarchy be whipped in the streets. At a meeting hosted by Gaillot, a local Baptist group used the opportunity to proselytize by handing

59 Draft, “St. Joseph’s Article,” Box 1, Folder 10, CCHR Papers, ARC.


61 Times Picayune, 5 September 1962.
out a pamphlet titled “The Greatest Question.” But, clutching her Catholic Bible, Gaillot would always insist that the One True Church would ultimately find its way.\(^6^2\)

Segregationist meetings also began to draw smaller crowds. At one meeting of Parents and Friends, the eight people in attendance decided to cancel. The influence of the Citizens’ Councils had also begun to wane throughout 1962. Immediately after the excommunications, councils had gathered to protest the actions as illegitimate. One such meeting featured Perez denouncing the archbishop as Jewish-Zionist leaning. Officers at the meeting claimed they could not be identified “for fear of being excommunicated.”\(^6^3\)

But integrationists knew that sooner or later attention had to turn from concerns over more radical opponents of segregation and toward the more general apathy and prejudice of white parents and parishioners. Like the excommunication of the three segregationists, school desegregation itself raised important questions about the effectiveness of the church in shaping race relations in the community.\(^\) The CCHR certainly hoped that their accomplishments would direct social progress in New Orleans as a whole. “Perhaps as important as school desegregation itself,” the council wrote, “have been the advances following in its wake. It appears that opening the doors of all parochial schools to Negroes has served as a catalyst for many other community changes.” The council reported effective lunch counter desegregation in September of 1962, the push toward merit employment in downtown department stores and the imminent hotel and Municipal Auditorium desegregation as examples. But like local

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\(^6^2\) Cody to Monsignor Plauche, 22 October 1963, in Box 2, Folder 23; Report of Gaillot’s meeting, held May 4th, 1962 at Jerusalem Temple, in Box 1, Folder 6, both in CCHR Papers, ARC.

\(^6^3\) Report on Meeting of the Parents and Friends of Catholic Children, 22 August 1962, Box 1, Folder 6, CCHR Papers, ARC.
parishes, it acknowledged, “there is much work waiting to be done in the field of
terracial justice.”64

With the central battleground over race relations seemingly occupied,
integrationists also hoped that the integration of Catholic schools might also effect
changes in local parish life. Thirteen years after Rummel’s order to remove Jim Crow
signs, the local church “now seems enroute to acceptance,” the NCCIJ noted. Some
parish societies received African Americans “without any misgivings.” In fact, “there
have been some examples of white children inviting their Negro classmates into their
homes.” But such instances were more exceptions to the larger pattern of racial prejudice
that persisted throughout communities. The subtle but damaging assertions of white
dominance continued to plague parishes and schools alike. The CCHR acknowledged that
most parents “are forbidding their children to become too friendly with the Negro
children.” Even some nuns and lay teachers “have shown less tact than they could have”
in welcoming the change in the classrooms as well. One African American boy, for
instance, attempted to volunteer at his new school “but was declined the opportunity of
serving.”65 African Americans who desired to attend Mass also endured “mistreatment or
chilling isolation in an empty pew,” the NCCIJ reported. After generations of
mistreatment in the pews, integrationists feared, black Catholics “now voice criticism and
dissatisfaction with the church. This is the Negro who ‘doesn’t feel that he is a true
brother in this Mystical Body.’”66

65 Henican to Cody, 12 December 1962, in box 1, folder 5, CCHR Papers, ARC.
Very few African Americans still saw educational equality as the most pressing problem anyway. “[I]t is simply not of the same urgency as the larger inequality of economic opportunity, police brutality and hospital discrimination.” In 1964, the Urban League cited Catholic leaders who painted a grim portrait of the situation in New Orleans. Approximately 300 African Americans attended formerly all-white parochial schools. But there remained 100,000 black Catholics in the Archdiocese, all of whom were being refused hospital care in New Orleans. Catholic hospitals “are listed as “For White Only””. Catholic leaders have rationalized and come up with many excuses for the Church policy of denial of medical services for its Negro members.” According to another leader,

The church has spoken out on gambling and other ‘harmless’ issues; yet, she ignores the widespread problems of segregation, of poverty, illiteracy, poor politics, etc., which plague this city and her many members. The church universal has said many beautiful things about these problems; the Pope has written Erudite Encyclicals on the subject, but WHAT HAS THE LOCAL CHURCH DONE TO DO AWAY WITH SEGREGATION, POVERTY, ILLITERACY, POOR POLITICS?  

In 1964, the Social Welfare Planning Council in New Orleans underscored this condemnation with stunning reports of its own. Housing conditions in the city had grown critical over the previous ten years. “This alarming situation exists in New Orleans even after extensive slum clearance for expressway construction, the Civic Center, and other improvements, has in past years eliminated thousands of sub-standard dwellings.” The report blamed “an astounding lack of community information regarding the problem, and

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67 Ibid.
an equal absence of broad involvement of the community remedial action.” Given its poor financial shape, the CCHR it began to wonder if it would ever move this integrationist spirit into the community at large. For the time being, the council remained fixed upon “cleaning up our own house” by desegregating retreat houses, implementing nondiscriminatory hiring clauses in church construction, and developing educational programs in archdiocesan schools on racial justice. By 1964, the organization’s coffers had largely run dry.

In its own self-assessment, the CCHR would acknowledge that the larger aims of racial unity and justice remained a long-term project for a more committed generation of lay activists. With the CCHR’s admittedly limited, covert, and “almost sub rosa” approach to school desegregation, “the Council has not outlined a concrete program that all members could participate in.” By the middle of the decade, desegregation was more of a symbolic achievement than a reality. Nonetheless, it is easy to underestimate the impact of groups like the CCHR, and the extent to which so-called “moderate” organizations in the thick of the civil rights revolution achieved any significant change. The integration of parochial schools revealed a remarkable pooling of local resources, lay and clergy, African American and white, to effect a Catholic vision of social justice at a particularly contentious moment in the region’s history. As early Catholic Action advocates had argued, social problems “are directly the responsibility of the layman and only indirectly the responsibility of the priest.” Laity, another declared, “are called in a

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69 C.J. Eagan, Jr., to Pierre Villere, 20 March 1964, Box 1, Folder 10, CCHR Papers, ARC.

70 CCHR, Meeting Minutes, 1 March 1963, in Box 1, Folder 14, CCHR Papers, ARC.

peculiar way to take the initiative in social reform … Authority does not and cannot initiate such reforms.”72

The hierarchy of the mid-1960s may have yielded to the social wisdom of progressive laity in directing integration efforts, but progressive Catholics as a whole nonetheless faced significant social and political hurdles. The state continued to support the establishment of new private schools while the majority of whites remained resistant to the larger spirit of interracialism. CCHR members bristled at Louisiana’s tuition assistance program, which used a sales tax to support students attending a rising number of private non-sectarian schools. “You are very well aware that the grant-in-aid program presents a menace to the Church both for the present and the future,” the archdiocesan Chancellor warned Cody.73 The legislation encouraged groups like the Parents and Friends of Catholic School Children to continue urging parents to cut off support to the Catholic school system. The group’s paper, the Catholic Warrior, demanded an exodus into “white flight” schools. “Just to think, you pay for the privilege of integration. Why not apply for grant in aid and go to a private white school. Don’t be a sucker all your life.”74 By 1964, state tuition assistance had channeled roughly 6,000 students from integrated New Orleans schools—about half of that from Catholic schools—into newly erected private schools. In Louisiana as a whole, 10,136 students attending 58 private


73 Chancellor, Archdiocese of New Orleans to Cody, 22 March 1964, in Box 1, Folder 3, CCHR Papers, ARC.

74 The Catholic Warrior Volume 1, No. 4 (September, 1963), in Vertical Files, Louisiana Collection, Tulane University Special Collections.
schools were to receive $3.5 million that year. The amount exceeded state allocations per pupil to city schools in New Orleans.  

Henican, along with Tureaud and Nelson, understood the important bearing the program had on Catholic education. In a memorandum to the Archdiocese, the National Catholic Welfare Conference supported the local church’s involvement in defeating several pending provisions to the state constitution that supported grant-in-aid. Catholic schools, it believed, could help prove that the tuition grant program “is rooted in the wrongful concept of racial discrimination” if they could demonstrate that children attending parochial schools received no state support at all. In the process, the church might also protect itself by keeping any pending court decision on the matter from containing “far reaching statements, unnecessary to the issue and potentially harmful to the constitutional status of our parochial schools.” If the court, for instance, declared as a major premise that a state was obligated to maintain a public school system as an administrative structure, such a sweeping opinion might threaten state support for private schools as a whole. “Therefore, any influence which the Church might be able to exert in desegregation litigation, should be exercised to keep it as closely as possible in the channel of racial discrimination…” Equipped with a solid legal strategy, Henican prepared the lawsuit. But Cody refused to attach the church to any action attacking Grant-

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75 “Ten Years in Review,” Southern School News, May 1964; See also New Orleans Times Picayune, 23 March 1963, reporting that 5,923 children in Orleans and Jefferson Parish received aid, a significant portion of the 6,250 for the entire 18 parish region. The paper also reported that 183 African Americans were receiving gants to remain in “Negro schools.”

76 Henican to Cody, 27 February 1964, in Box 1, Folder 3, CCHR Papers, ARC.

in-Aid. Aware of these larger issues of private school funding, the prelate believed that such a suit would do more harm than good.78

When courts and strained budgets eventually put an end to the Grant-in-Aid program over the next few years, whites persisted in building private schools. By the turn of the decade, “segregationist academies” flourished throughout the south. Citizens, according to one analysis, “are taxing themselves heavily to open alternative schools…ones that stress their values, their attitudes, their principles of morality and right.”79 Efforts to erect “white flight schools” became part of a larger program of white resistance shaping the latter half of the 1960s. State funding and private contributions to such schools allowed whites to perpetuate, under the “freedom of choice” rubric, a system of moral and social boundaries that ensured the survival of Jim Crow in the religious, economic, and social life of the region. In severely limiting the scale and effectiveness of school integration, as Adam Fairclough notes, whites would assure that where integration did occur, it would do so under the worst possible circumstances.80 Not least of these circumstances was the dramatically altered racial geography of the city.

“The problem of desegregation in New Orleans must be viewed against the general pattern of white and Negro distribution in the city,” one integration council noted in 1969. Throughout the previous two decades, the migration of African Americans into the city and the flight of whites to neighboring areas dramatically altered a “salt-and-pepper” or “checkerboard” social pattern that sociologists used to characterize New Orleans. As

78 Cabirac to Charles Wittenstein, 7 April 1964, in Box 1, Folder 3, CCHR Papers, ARC.
whites moved out of the city over the course of the 1950s, potential tax revenue moved with them. The transition not only generated a consistent decline in the quality of public school education, but also contributed to the decline in urban life in New Orleans. By the mid-1960s, Catholic schools now faced the challenge of blending two seemingly conflicting values: to educate Catholic youth, wherever they were, or to use its educational and social resources to promote the dignity of life for all people.

The burden of stemming a rapidly diverging social and religious community fell to Philip Hannan, who succeeded Cody in 1965. Most notably, Hannan initiated a variety of anti-poverty programs in conjunction with the Federal Government, but his implementation of effective Catholic school integration left a mixed legacy. Through the second half of the decade, Hannan fought the dangerous trend of allowing Catholic schools to become “white flight” schools in their own right, a trend begun in 1962 when Cody oversaw the construction of brand new churches and schools in predominantly white and growing areas of the Lake Pontchartrain shore and Jefferson Parish. By 1968, the eleven new schools had a total enrollment of 6,261 students with no blacks. By 1971, only four blacks attended the schools. While diocesan officials would maintain that the church had to move to where the people were, others questioned the motivation of such decisions. One black nun declared the building process “a slap in the face!” while others pointed out that the new white churches had plenty of pews to offer.81

As local pressures for new schools in affluent white areas mounted upon Hannan, federal enforcement of integration complicated the church’s efforts to implement integration. In June of 1966, a representative from the Department of Health, Education,

and Welfare visited Baton Rouge and expressed dissatisfaction with the level of integration accomplished by Catholic schools in Louisiana. The widespread persistence of black schools in proved the church’s non-compliance, federal officials argued. “It must be noted that despite the evident signs of good faith, there remain schools attached to churches which were originally set up specifically to serve Negro parishioners and which retain their segregated character.”

HEW pressured schools in Louisiana by withholding federal funds for educational improvement.

Monsignor Henry Bezou, still superintendent, assured the federal Office of Educational Opportunities, a division of the HEW, that slow but steady progress was being made. “Objective observers of both races in this community have found it incomprehensible that the attitudes and position of the Catholic Church of this Archdiocese have been questioned.” Moreover, “what we have done here has not been by court mandate but through moral imperative and deep-seated conviction.”

Church officials pointed up the numerous accomplishments of Hannan during his short tenure in the area. The Archbishop stayed in close contact with students at Xavier University, whom he believed would emerge as leading lay educators in schools throughout the region. Instructors might assist the ranks of the Sisters of the Holy Family and the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. Both, he believed, might increasingly serve in integrated and white schools to promote greater interracial understanding. The Archdiocese also announced its compliance with the general law of the Roman Catholic Church insisting upon “territorial parishes.” “Some parishes and schools serving only Negroes have been

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82 Harole Howe II, Commissioner of the HEW to Senator Russell Long, 12 September 1966, in “Desegregation Files,” AANO.

83 Henry Bezou to David S. Seeley, 11 August 1966, in “Desegregation Files,” AANO.
discontinued,” one report stated. “Territorial limits will be given to all parishes that will be established.” 84

In other parts of Louisiana as well, where effective integration did not occur until the end of the decade, church officials defended the record of prelates who had worked for years to promote racial unity with little or no support from federal or state resources. In defending itself against charges by the HEW of resisting integration, the Diocese of Lafayette responded by emphasizing the history of the church’s support of African American social progress. Long before governmental agencies had developed strategies for enforcing segregation from afar, one church official countered, Bishop Jeanmard, “had only the good will of his people by which to put aside racial prejudices and that good will very often was not evident.” 85 In Baton Rouge, Bishop Robert Tracy declared HEW’s findings to be “‘news’ indeed.” Tracy pointed out that of the nine formerly black schools had been closed down between 1965 and 1967. Tracy emphasized that the diocese had been a “leading force here in eliminating racial discrimination from the community.” 86 In both regions, integration did not occur until the turn of the decade, when public schools began integration beyond a token level.

The bishops had indeed set the course over the previous decades. On both the national and the local level, Catholic bishops as a whole stood solidly behind integration and worked to secure federal funding for integration programs. But in many ways the daily minutiae of implementation that relied upon the goodwill of local communities remained beyond their reach. HEW officials joined a chorus of local Catholic leaders

84 Father Iverson to Msgr. Bezou, 15 June 1966, “Desegregation Files,” AANO.
85 Msgr. Ignatius A. Martin to Herbert C. Kane, 27 June 1966, in “Desegregation Files,” AANO.
86 The Catholic Commentator (Baton Rouge) 10 February 1967.
who questioned the hierarchy’s capacity for substantive leadership. As one federal report to the Nixon Administration later suggested, education reformers had for too long ridden upon a “great man theory” that attributed “to officially designated leaders much power to alter the course of events.” Despite bishops’ celebrated efforts for racial justice over the previous decades, integration—or lack thereof—remained largely a matter of local initiative and resistance. The relationship of laity to priests, and priests to the women religious who ran the parish schools, “are much more voluntaristic than is generally recognized.”

Grassroots committees that communicated the immediate needs of students, faculty, and parents to officials in charge of appropriating funds and consolidating schools bore the burden of maintaining effective integration in the relocation process.

At the local level, a number of progressive laity and women religious argued that the achievement of racial justice must come from greater professionalization and centralization of diocesan resources at all levels. Women religious in particular spearheaded the process, arguing that only equal distribution of school funding and the placement of knowledgeable officials would mitigate the possibility of creating Catholic “segregationist academies” in the region. These officials would not only be more familiar with local conditions, but also with newer intellectual understandings of race and culture emerging throughout the decade. In a series of meetings of the Conference of Major Superiors of Louisiana, several congregations of women religious outlined the range of complications affecting integration. The sisters hoped to develop strategies to standardize the teaching of interracial justice at schools throughout Louisiana. One committee report

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87 Erickson and Donovan, The Three R’s of Nonpublic Education in Louisiana: Race, Religion, and Region, A Report to the President’s Commission on School Finance (Chicago, 1972): 2.
in 1969 declared, “Our Catholic schools, as currently operating, are not integrated to an extent that manifests that they stand for Christian availability for all people. Moreover, many of our schools are often, unwittingly, instruments for the perpetuation of racism.”

The sisters’ fears were well founded. Indeed, despite these pleas by more extremist segregationists to abandon Catholic education out of principle, what happened to parochial schools in Louisiana between 1961 and 1971 in comparison with other regions of the country is particularly telling. In the mid-1960s, Louisiana Catholic school officials had every reason to expect a significant decline in attendance. Private non-sectarian schools continued to appeal to many whites, while Vatican II’s loosening of moral obligations to attend parochial schools enabled Catholic children to attend public schools without the “pain of sin.” Statistics nationwide reflected the church’s new attitude. Catholic schools across the nation witnessed a 23.1 percent drop in enrollment. Yet Louisiana’s Catholic schools declined by only 12.8 percent. The temporary setback in 1962-63 of about 3,000 students fleeing integration was followed immediately by several years of expansion, especially in Baton Rouge and Lafayette, where public school integration was delayed until the end of the decade. This trend was consistent in Catholic schools throughout the South. The initial “shock” in school attendance inspired by Vatican II in 1962 and 1963 wore off. Realizing that desegregation was more symbolic than real, whites not only continued to support Catholic schools but also increased their commitment to them. According to one analysis for the Nixon Administration, this recovery could be attributed to population movement into the region.

88 Final Report of Ad Hoc Committee to Major Superiors of Louisiana, 19 December 1969, SBSA.

and the unwillingness of southerners to “catch up” with the spirit of Vatican II. “It seems evident, however, that race-related events are the most powerful explanatory variables.”

When integration of public schools throughout the state in 1970 sparked an exodus of whites from the system, the Catholic bishops of Louisiana encouraged white support of the public school system. Parents had many reasons to leave public schooling, the bishops admitted. Many expressed fear for the quality of their children’s education. “It would be unfair for us to enter into a one-sided debate on the validity of this reason…We admit quite readily that parents rightly should be concerned over the sufficiency and expertise of the schools which their children attend. This has always been the sentiment of responsible parents.” At the same time, church officials declared,

we feel parents should go beyond the present moment. Not only must they be responsible toward their children, they must also exercise that responsibility toward the social welfare of all the people. Maintaining and supporting the public schools at this critical time is an exercise of that social responsibility. Abandoning the schools would, in our opinion, be a socially irresponsible act.

The good will of Catholics, government officials were quick to point out, would continue to evade south Louisiana communities well into the 1970s. At the turn of the decade, roughly 6,700 students transferred from public schools to Catholic schools. Hannan insisted that the number of transfers did not seem “massive” compared to total enrollment. Where situations did arise in which white parents deliberately fled integration, “I told the pastors not to accept students whose motivation was simply to flee

90 Ibid.
integration… I also made it a rule of the archdiocese that every high school reserve 10 percent of its facilities for minority groups.”

But more than the bishops, women religious in Louisiana responded to the desperate situation with a set of policy statements and guidelines that asserted Vatican II’s recognition of the “inalienable right to an education corresponding to his proper destiny and suited to his native talents, his sex, his cultural background, and his ancestral heritage.” The Conference of Major Superiors declared its solid commitment to the elimination of segregation in Catholic education.

We will, therefore, insist that the administration in Catholic schools in which sisters are employed accept students of all races and cultural backgrounds, and we will insure that their admission and enrollment policies promote this cross-section of society. We will further require that these schools, staffed in whole or in part by sisters, adopt and execute a positive program of interracial activities.93

Committees of women religious staffing the schools developed a “Corporate Plan of Action” for sisters to bring bishops’ policies to every level of school governance. The plan included the introduction of lay and religious consultants and the appointment of a Director for Inter-Cultural Activities at each school to coordinate a more authentic interracial community. It also urged the establishment of scholarships for blacks and a careful study of “the registration patterns in your schools in reference to blacks and to transfers from public schools.”94 Consultants and directors would make recommendations

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92 The Catholic Herald Citizen (Milwaukee, Wisconsin) 24 January 1970, Box 2, Folder 8, New Orleans General Collection, copies on file at Xavier University Special Collections, New Orleans.

93 Final Report of Ad Hoc Committee to Major Superiors of Louisiana, 19 December 1969, copy in SBSA.

94 “Plan of Action for Implementation of time-table for statement of policy on Christian Education and Racial Integration, as adopted at Meeting held on Thursday, February 12, 1970,” copy in SBSA.
for curriculum additions and “innovative methods required for meeting the needs of racial and ethnic minorities,” and add to the school libraries a variety of materials that “promote better understanding and respect for ethnic and racial groups in society.”

The 1969 Report of the Major Superiors of Louisiana grabbed the attention of Catholics throughout the country. One government investigator for the Nixon Administration described the conference’s actions as “the most systematic positive effort I encountered toward racial integration.” Implementing the call of the Vatican for greater lay involvement, women religious took it upon themselves to promote the active representation of grassroots voices on diocesan committees charged with implementing school integration. More than arguing for the influence of laity and grassroots servants of the church, women religious in the process asserted their important function as women. When the Archdiocese of New Orleans appointed three Sisters to the Archdiocesan Board of Directors in 1971, the three insisted that they would “enhance the board’s awareness of the personal elements involved in Church organization and administration.” One appointee, Mother Rose De Lima of the Sisters of the Holy Family argued that women played an essential role in connecting laity to the hierarchy, representing the voices of all Catholics who faced the day-to-day challenges of implementing the hierarchy’s policies. “We hope to help determine need priorities… women are often more aware of the personal effects of decisions.”

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95 “Role of the Human Relations Education Director, As Recommended by the Ad Hoc Committee,” undated, copy in SBSA.

96 Erickson and Donovan, The Three R’s of Non-public Education in Louisiana, 54.

97 Clarion Herald, 9 February 1971.
At the turn of the decade, the larger culture of women’s liberation sharpened the critique of women religious against both the patriarchalism of the church as well as southern constructions of gender that perpetuated racial inequality. As we will see in the next chapter, many sisters intertwined their own sense of personal liberation with larger social struggles of blacks in the Deep South. In some cases, many women religious found encouragement from the Second Vatican Council to move out of their more traditional role as educators. Others declared that the only way to do so was to pursue vocations as laywomen. But as many either left religious orders altogether or found callings in “new ministries” that moved them out of traditional roles as educators, this new space for women religious also complicated the process of racial integration. Between 1970 and 1972, dioceses in Louisiana witnessed a wave of withdrawals from parochial schools. The Sisters of Notre Dame withdrew from several schools in the region, including Most Holy Rosary in Houma, Sacred Heart elementary on Canal Street in New Orleans, and St. Genevieve’s elementary in Thibodaux. The move forced a handful of the schools to close. With a declining number of women religious in the school system, such personnel changes exacerbated the persistent racial tensions and economic and educational disparities that the sisters had identified as endemic to Jim Crow. The movement of nuns out of teaching rolls created a greater need for lay teachers, which in turn raised tuition rates. This process effectively pushed many African Americans out of Catholic schools altogether.

Indeed, the politics of racial integration at all levels managed to alienate black Catholics even further from their church. Where bishops pushed to integrate parochial schools, financially precarious black schools often faced closure. The movement of black
students into white schools placed the burden of interracial justice exclusively upon African American children and their parents. By 1971, eleven dual schools still operated in the Lafayette diocese. Father Theodore Hesburgh, president of the University of Notre Dame, criticized the United States Catholic Conference for its complicity in desegregation proceedings in Louisiana that “are being directed and controlled by the very persons who have resisted integration.” Pronouncements by ecclesiastical officials over the course of ten years “have not dismantled the dual school system, nor have they undone the increased enrollment of white students fleeing integrated public schools.”

Over time, hostility in white schools, the unequal distribution of resources, and the unwillingness of bishops or diocesan officials to respond to black demands generated widespread resentment among African American communities. One observer studying the situation 1970 declared it a unanimous opinion among black Catholics that great numbers were leaving the Catholic Church, “and that the reason is what they see as the Church’s ambivalence or passivity on race… The most conservative estimate was that at least one-third of young blacks raised as Catholics are actively anti-Church, and that the number is growing.”

Schools became the symbol of the white institution’s ignorance of the needs and desires of black Americans. Priests and nuns who remained in the school systems found themselves in an uphill battle against the tides of social re-segregation, much of it caused by a highly justified black resentment of the integration process. In Church Point in central Louisiana near Opelousas, a member of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament...

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resigning from her post articulated the dissatisfaction of both religious and African American Catholics when she declared that “the act of consolidating schools does not contribute to the dignity and brotherhood of man.” Bishops in charge of the situation refused to consider the “hard earned efforts of the black people building their own institution.” In the process of integrating schools, they did not consult with those most intimately involved in desegregation. Nor did they consider the “comparative poverty coupled with a history of oppression and consequent dependence on bosses, middle-class employers, and monied people in the white community” that relegated blacks to the bottom rungs of society. Even after black students were allowed to attend Our Lady of Sacred Heart, “it is reasonable to believe that the patterns of the past will be perpetuated in an institution controlled by whites and owned by them.” 100

As the politics of racial integration began to conflict with the realities of life for blacks in Louisiana and the rest of the nation, even government officials would question the wisdom of eliminating “black schools” without honest efforts to engage black community leaders. In 1971, a report by the Nixon administration challenged the assumption made in 1966 by the H.E.W. that the elimination of historically black communities constituted an inherent moral good. “National evidence is cited to indicate that many Catholics approve the preservation of inner-city Catholics schools that serve black exclusively or predominantly, largely because public schools in the area seem seriously substandard.”101 While the interracialist ideal still shaped the thought of many Catholic reformers, most blacks who bore the responsibility for integration rejected the

100 Name withheld to Mother Mary Elizabeth, 8 March 1971, in “Church Point Files”, SBSA.

terms under which it was being implemented. “Numerous black Catholics in Louisiana argue that racial integration in the schools should be delayed until it can be effectuated under conditions more favorable to the interests of black people.”102

In rural Louisiana especially, rising tuition costs and a lowering quality of life made separate black Catholic schools and churches a matter of both economic necessity and community pride. African American communities in central Louisiana defended the historically significant schools and the religious orders that served them. In Bellevue, Louisiana, a largely black Catholic community, Christ the King Elementary School had been serving students in the central Louisiana region west of Opelousas. In 1971, most people in the area remained day laborers for large farms. Very few owned farms in the area. “About six other families own or are paying on their homes,” one resident reported. “The rest have to pay rent or else they live in a house owned by the big farmers.”103 As blacks rallied around the school and its principal, Sister Jane Frances, the community became a model of social stability. Between 1942 and 1971, the enrollment of Christ the King had risen from 147 to 204 students, financed mainly through local contributions by residents. Tuition had risen from $1.40 per child per year to $5.00. Noting the importance of the school to the farmers in the region, the Diocese of Lafayette refused to endanger its students’ future by consolidating it with nearby St. Ignatius in Grand Coteau. “If this were a moral issue, we would have pushed it further. I would hesitate to go in there and change anything without some assurance that the children would not be pushed out of Catholic education.”104

102 Ibid.

103 Erickson and Donovan, The Three R’s of Non-Public Education in Louisiana: 137.

104 Ibid.: 143.
Baton Rouge also witnessed an increased commitment to black Catholic education in the early 1970s. Throughout the 1960s, Bishop Robert Tracy developed a strong reputation for his promotion of civil rights. In 1963, the Baton Rouge prelate persuaded the Second Vatican Council to include a condemnation of racial discrimination in its resolutions. He also demanded that each parish organize a “Social Responsibility Committee” to attack the economic and social effects of racism. When the integration of public schools spawned an attempt by whites to move into Catholic schools, once Catholic school official boasted, “We headed them off at the pass!” Tracy insisted upon full cooperation with governmental directives.

But in 1971, Tracy attempted to integrate two Catholic schools by consolidating the historically black St. Francis Xavier with nearby St. Agnes. When the resulting drop in enrollment at St. Francis caused a financial crisis for the school, parishioners protested that they were suddenly “playing into the bishop’s hands” by phasing out the school. Led by a group of Sisters of the Holy Family stations at St. Francis, the group protested that, “as usual, Blacks are expected to suffer the consequences of white defiance and hatred, even though we are attempting to fulfill our responsibility as cooperatively as possible.” In their demand that Tracy maintain the school, the sisters voiced a rising spirit among black Americans. Over the previous decades, the church, as a white institution, had depended upon black docility in the face of discrimination. Now, however, “That spirit of blind obedience is rapidly coming to an end, especially in this situation. Perhaps, now, it is time that we show how resentful and wrathful we can be by also proving to Bishop Tracy and others of his philosophy that our patience, too, can be exhausted.”

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The bishop responded by pointing out that in 1968, the parish senate passed a resolution demanding closure of the school. “It was I, alone, who worked and went out and found the funds to keep St. Francis open, against strong opposition from the parishioners themselves.”

Three years later, parishioners were now pressuring for its survival. When Tracy failed to render a final decision by mid-September, the Sisters and members of the Newman Club at Southern University organized a protest of 300 parents on the lawn of the bishop’s residence. The students led the group in song and prayer. The next day, a picture in the Catholic paper showed the group raising their fists as a symbol of Black Power. As one report concluded,

Many parishioners at St. Francis Xavier seem to have developed a new sense of identity, according to our informants. Many blacks are disillusioned with what they find when transferring to white-dominated churches and schools, and as a consequence, are convinced that they must govern themselves, through their own institutions, at least for some time to come. Integration still seems to be the goal, but a goal to be achieved in such a way that the dignity and autonomy of black people is preserved. What is currently at issue, furthermore, is not only the future of the parish and its school, but the demand by black Catholics for self-determination. They are furious over the fact, as they see it, that whites continue to make vital decisions for them, no matter how well intentioned these decisions may be.

Tracy responded by securing a diocesan grant to support the schools $30,000 financial shortfall.

The confrontation between Tracy and the parishioners of St. Francis Xavier in Baton Rouge reveals an important moment in the growth of black consciousness both within the church and without by the end of the decade. The influence of Black

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107 Erickson and Donovan, The Three R’s of Non-Public Education in Louisiana: 125.

Nationalism on Catholic self-understanding in the late-1960s will be addressed more fully in the next chapter. But the incident also reveals the significant limitations of the Catholic integration campaign that kept the church from excommunicating Jim Crow as a social and religious force in the Deep South. Responding to these larger federal pressures, and continually thwarted by internal tensions over the meaning of racial integration, Catholic efforts throughout the 1960s to desegregate parochial schools in Louisiana created a mixed legacy. The Catholic Church in Louisiana achieved integration just as the issue of racial “equality” itself passed from attention in the larger black freedom struggle. Catholic school integration also occurred precisely when federal standardization of racial desegregation in public and private schools caused intense resentment on all sides of the issue. The revolutionary atmosphere in both church and society that shaped these responses to segregation is the subject of the final chapter.
CHAPTER 8:
THE POLITICS OF RECONCILIATION

It seemed fitting that a bishop from Baton Rouge, the birthplace of southern legislative resistance to Brown v. Board in 1954, would address the issue of race at the Second Vatican Council. Indeed, throughout Bishop Robert Tracy’s time in Rome, he told reporters, “I am bombarded with questions on the racial issue, from taxi drivers to bishops, once they find out I am from Louisiana…”¹ During deliberation of the council’s influential “People of God” encyclical at the second session in 1963, Tracy rose to question the narrow language presented in its assertion that, “There is no inequality in Christ or in the Church arising from nationality, sex or social condition.” Bishops throughout the United States, Tracy reminded the council, confronted daily the effects of racial prejudice and “are striving to instruct their people in matters of social justice and charity…” A Council statement on the fundamental principle of equality of all races “would bring great consolation to all those persons in the world who are deprived of equal liberty and who are burdened and humiliated purely because of their race.” Tracy’s statement was not easy. In preparation for his intervention at the council, “I found myself

confronted with a curious difficulty.” He struggled in vain to find the precise Latin word for race, he discovered, “there was no such word!”2

Arising within a Catholic Church struggling to make sense of its own place in the modern world, the southern bishop’s filibuster heralded the spirit of the age. “All the major newspapers of the world gave it front-page coverage,” Tracy wrote. The noted journalist Paul Blanshard, famous for his warnings against the rise of Catholic power in the United States, asked Tracy how the church’s attention to racial conflict would affect the rate of interracial marriage. But while many Council Fathers applauded the statement as part of the council’s larger vision, one that oriented the church’s Latinized past to the realities of the modern world, Tracy’s actions were largely born of recent and localized frustrations over the rise of white segregationism in Louisiana. Indeed, it was doubtful most Louisiana Catholics even learned about it immediately. Baton Rouge papers relegated it to page five, “protecting me, as usual, from my own imprudence.” The capital of Louisiana stood defiantly against the federal government in 1960 when the courts and the school board attempted to desegregate schools. The state continued to promote a program of passive resistance when it approved the funding of non-sectarian private schools for white children avoiding integration.3

anchored by these experiences, Tracy downplayed the statement’s far-reaching effects. “The elimination of racial barriers, while strictly necessary in justice,” he later noted, “would nevertheless open up other equally difficult and fundamental problems.”4

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3 Ibid.
Indeed, Tracy and other southern bishops introduced Rome to a unique southern perspective on the church’s momentous self-discovery. As protests throughout the south and white response to black demands awakened a country to the depth of southern oppression and violence, Catholic progressives in Louisiana struggled to tone church teaching to the fever pitch of the civil rights movement. Its primary means of meeting the demands of black protest, the desegregation of parochial schools, became mired in the daily confrontations over racial ratios, busing, and school closings. The implementation of the church’s once grand vision of unity in the Mystical Body of Christ fueled both white backlash and black resentment. But confrontations over the school question and its deep meaning to those involved on all sides cannot be seen outside of the larger climate of dissent and reaction shaping South Louisianans and their church.

Moving beyond the school question, this final chapter takes a broader scope toward understanding the changing perceptions of religious authority, spiritual identity, and social order taking place throughout the 1960s. Both within the church and without, centrifugal social, cultural, and economic forces of the decade dramatically altered the ways Louisiana Catholics perceived both the nature and function of religious leadership. The Civil Rights Movement, the rise in political activism, and the rise of a more militant and self-possessing black identity in the country all challenged the “givenness” of southern society established over decades of racial segregation and political stasis. Ecclesiastical changes in Rome heightened these tensions for south Louisianans. The Second Vatican Council introduced a new spirit of openness to the presence of God’s message in a variety of cultures, experiences, and belief systems. It also brought recognition of new forms of lay leadership and drastically altered liturgical forms and
practices. Many welcomed these changes, invoking the “spirit of the council” as a way of making Catholic teachings relevant to the particular cultural expectations, social tensions, and spiritual anxieties of people where they lived. But for others, the parallel loss of this “givenness” of Catholicism meant the failure of important defenses against the broader social and cultural challenges of the 1960s.

Embedded in their own local experience of these dramatic changes, four major groups of Louisiana Catholics read and responded to the challenges of Vatican II and the sixties with conflicting senses of hope and loss, promise and failure. First, the local Catholic hierarchy sought to adapt the changing spirit in Rome to the racially and politically charged atmosphere of South Louisiana. The elevation of Harold Perry, S.V.D., to Auxiliary Bishop in 1965 connected blacks’ social and spiritual strivings to the hierarchy as never before. Nonetheless, throughout the decade, Archbishops Cody and Hannan, along with Perry, confronted the realities of poverty, social unrest, and racial separatism in 1960s Louisiana in contentious and often contradictory ways. Two other groups, black Catholics and their white co-religionists, struggled to reconcile their faith with the drastic social challenges taking place around them. Younger generations of black Catholics yearned for an authentically black and Catholic identity that made sense of their unique cultural and religious inheritance. Emerging black assertions of power and place dramatically reshaped their acceptance of Catholic authority. Their increasingly vocal protests against the Catholic Church as a “white” institution seemed to ring true when the hierarchy permitted the reentry of Leander Perez into the church in 1969.

Former segregationists, meanwhile, rejected black attitudes and challenges to social and clerical authority as indicative of larger subversive forces at work within the
church. They intertwined a defense of southern society with a rejection of the church’s sudden aggiornamento through Vatican II. Witnessing the dissolution of timeless liturgical forms, they excoriated a weak and vague “new morality” creeping into southern society and the Catholic Church. Even as white progressives embraced many of these spiritual and ecclesiastical changes, they faced significant challenges in bringing them to bear on the central conflict of the 1960s. Mystical Body theology, with its emphasis on the unity and order of the Catholic community, had disappeared. In its wake, the church embraced more diverse expressions of Catholic faith that belied interracialists’ earlier vision.

As many searched within Catholic sources for a meaningful and spiritually integrative faith, a significant group of men and women religious who moved between both worlds of ecclesiastical authority and local Catholic life faced new possibilities, challenges, and frustrations within their self-understanding as religious ministers. Examining the ways Louisiana Catholic response at all levels to Vatican II inflected racial conflict, and the manner in which they sought to place larger social changes within new conceptions of spiritual identity, is important to understanding the religious and social climate in South Louisiana today. Indeed, their experiences embody the pervasive and ongoing struggle to bring a socially and spiritually integrative faith to bear on the human tragedies wrought by the political and racial legacies of the Deep South.

Throughout the first half of the 1960s, black New Orleans achieved halting but relatively peaceful progress toward the desegregation and achievement of civil rights. Through the strategic use of protest, litigation, and negotiation with the city’s white elite,
a variety of civil rights organizations converged to take advantage of the city’s growing aversion to social unrest.⁵ Racial violence was bad for business, many civic leaders concluded. Even if a spirit of racial reconciliation remained largely elusive throughout the city, a desire for a peaceful solution to the demands of black protest opened the door for effective negotiation of civil rights. A new generation of civil rights activists had emerged that bridged the gap between older legal minds like A.P. Tureaud, still legal council of the NAACP in the 1960s, and later grassroots activists. Among them, the Creole Catholic Ernest Morial became the first black mayor of New Orleans. Like many black leaders, Morial capitalized on the advancements of earlier generations, having attended the newly desegregated LSU Law School and befriending Tureaud on his way to a prosperous political career. Morial stood by the attorney’s belief in formal political power through voting rights and the attainment of public office for black civic leaders.⁶ In their minds, the NAACP’s patience proved rewarding. In 1965, Tureaud stated that blacks were “fully integrated” in the petro-chemical industry and shipbuilding firms throughout the region. The black man’s only obstacle was his lack of training in the field.⁷

For younger activists, however, deeper obstacles remained. Indeed, by the mid-1960s, African Americans in Louisiana remained noticeably split in their assessment of their gains. As a result, they questioned the strategies for further advancement. Countering Tureaud’s optimistic portrait of Louisiana blacks, Lolis L. Elie of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) observed minimal gains and mere “lip service” by

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⁶ Ibid.: 80-82.

Louisiana leaders. “I’m not convinced that the powers that be have reconciled themselves. They feel they can drag this thing out as long as possible.”

Younger generations criticized NAACP leaders’ excessive concern for negotiation with white civic leadership and business elite. Such strategies, they argued, proved too limited to overcome generations of racial oppression. Blacks must force the issue upon the white south, regardless of the number of whites willing to accept modest gains. The sit-in movement begun in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1960 ignited an era of non-violent direct action that accomplished precisely that. Two years later, the Freedom Rides from Washington, D.C., to New Orleans offered similar dangers and possibilities for black activists. By stirring the prospect of civil unrest, African Americans in New Orleans could wield influence over local civic leaders who feared continued loss of revenue and reputation. As early as April of 1960, boycotts and sit-ins came to businesses along Dryades Street. The Consumers League of Greater New Orleans believed that if blacks could not prick the moral conscience of whites, they could at least demonstrate their importance to the economic vitality of the region. Its goals and gains remained relatively modest compared to other protests throughout the region. The boycotts nonetheless heralded the rise of a new generation of activists in the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), which provided much of the organizing force for the protests. Capitalizing on the NAACP’s overwhelming timidity and desire for racial negotiation, the organization intended to support nonviolent direct action in response to southern racism.

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9 Fairclough: 272-73.
next few years, both CORE and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) emerged as the central voices of social protest in the South.

Black activists did not limit their criticism to the NAACP and white civic leaders. As we have seen, the rise of direct action constituted a sharp questioning of traditional institutions and their capacity for civil rights leadership. Like early NAACP activists, Catholic leaders urged black faith in the power of voting rights. Addressing a confirmation class in Church Point, Bishop Maurice Schexnayder of Lafayette spoke for an hour exhorting parents to attend to their religious and political duties on behalf of their children. “I know your problem,” he declared. The demands of field labor through much of the year, he admitted, deprived many children of a good Catholic education. “But you have a vote. Use it, and when the politicians come to you for your vote, ask them what they are going to do for your children.” While black activists would not question the bishop’s support for their rights, the church’s excessive attention to shaping white attitudes frustrated activists who sought the affirmative leadership of a traditional authority. With the advent of CORE and the SNCC, they hoped, activists might force the church “to come out of hiding and face the issue.” According to the Urban League of Greater New Orleans, while the Catholic Church had uttered “many fine statements” in support of black struggle, it wondered, “Where are the Christian actions?” Indeed, after years of hoping and praying for change from the pews under the guidance of the clergy, time had run out for the church.

The hour of judgment is already upon us. The segregated, the poor, the underprivileged, the hungry, the uneducated, the exploited—these have tired of waiting in vain for the acts of love which should have followed the Christian words of love. Now they are beginning

10 Our Mother of Mercy Convent Annals, 9 May 1962, H40 B2 LA: Church Point Files, SBSA.
to help themselves. A tremendous shaking of the foundations has failed to awaken Christians from their sleep. It is now almost too late. The Negro has begun to redeem himself, to save his people and fill them with concrete hope.11

Church leaders at all levels viewed this awakening—particularly the SNCC—with a dual sense of promise and trepidation. “I certainly do not feel that I can honestly condemn SNCC,” the Jesuits’ most outspoken interracialist, Louis Twomey stated to one concerned Catholic. “It is a non-cohesive, loosely structured group…in one place it does undoubtedly good work, in another its activity is at time quite irresponsible.”12 For Twomey, where the SNCC lacked a solid ideological grounding, Catholicism offered a means of making sense of the drastic social challenges of the decade. It placed the black struggle within a larger struggle for human dignity whose proper end was unity with God. Black activists in the SNCC, he argued, certainly defended that dignity against decades of oppression. But like many clergymen, Twomey feared that social activism might become an end in itself.

Against the social tensions occasioned by both direct action and white resistance over the previous decade, the hierarchy also boasted the relatively peaceful integration of parochial schools in 1962. This important breakthrough sped the process of public school integration and bolstered movements to integrate other public and private facilities in the region. For many, these goals could not have been accomplished without increased cooperation between the hierarchy and the laity. The Catholic Commission on Human Relations and other lay organizations believed that the personal experiences of racial tension and intimidation in their daily lives made the laity most fit to reconcile Catholic


12 Louis J. Twomey to John Ciekot, 13 April 1965, Box 22, Folder 6, LJT Papers, Loyola.
principle with practice. Even the authoritarian Archbishop John Cody, who came to New Orleans in 1962 to assist an ailing Rummel, informed the faithful in New Orleans that the council would offer new opportunities for laity to take a more active role in the church. Like other church leaders, Cody saw several important opportunities in the upcoming ecumenical council. “It has been reported that Archbishop Cody said that one of the main purposes of the coming ecumenical council is to increase unity within our own Church,” Henry Cabirac of the Catholic Council on Human Relations declared, “and that one of the greatest, if not the greatest, obstacle to unity is racial segregation. He says that the Holy Father is afraid of giving the impression that the Catholic Church is primarily a white Western Church.”

Cody’s short tenure in New Orleans nonetheless made enemies of activist laity on all sides of the integration issue. Indeed, while Rummel received most of the praise from progressives for the achievement of integration in the fall of 1962, segregationists placed most of the blame squarely upon the auxiliary bishop. The aging Rummel may have stirred the emotions of white congregations a decade earlier when he labeled anti-labor forces apostates and declared segregation “sinful.” But, in the minds of many die-hard segregationists, it was Cody’s blatant abuse of clerical power that ultimately led to integration. Una Gaillot wrote the Vatican identifying Cody as the main culprit in her excommunication. “Since my excommunication, Archbishop Rummel has resigned and His Excellency Archbishop John P. Cody is now in authority.”

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13 Henry Cabirac to C. Ellis Henican, 31 May 1962, in Box, Folder, CCHR Papers, ARC.

14 Una Gaillot to His Holiness the Pope, 19 September 1962, copy in Box 7, Folder 9, New Orleans General Collection, Josephite Fathers Archives (JFA).
of outside pressures rather than his own will. Employing typographers, the militant housewife went to great lengths to prove that either Cody or another member of the hierarchy had forged Rummel’s signature on the writ of excommunication.¹⁵

For other Citizens’ Council stalwarts, Cody’s actions in both New Orleans and later in Chicago connected their cause to that of Catholic immigrants in the north. George Singlemann, one prominent council member, expressed sympathy with Polish communities in Chicago who bore the brunt of the prelate’s efforts to dismantle ethnic parishes and unify Catholic practice. “He took their prayer books away,” Singlemann told historian Kim Lacy Rogers. “He burned them all up. Took them away…their religion, their way of thinking.” Singlemann’s solidarity with the plight of Chicago Polish reflected similar efforts on the part of southern political leaders to bring their protest against the federal government onto a larger stage. Sensing the opportunity and common cause among white northerners, particularly in urban ethnic neighborhoods facing an influx of African American migrants, Alabama Governor George Wallace in particular gained national support by adopting, by the mid-1960s, a more universal anti-liberal language. Such rhetoric downplayed race and emphasized popular resentment of federal efforts to enforce racial integration in both school and neighborhood. As the clerical equivalent of federal power in both New Orleans and Chicago during his career, John Cody offered a fitting foil for conservative Catholics.¹⁶

¹⁵ Gaillot interview by the author, 14 February 2005.

Nonetheless, as we have seen in Chapter 6, Cody’s desire to consolidate the archdiocese under his control more often frustrated progressives who hoped to move the Catholic Council on Human Relations into positive action on other social problems.

Throughout his tenure in New Orleans, he stirred persistent tensions over Catholic identity within the civil rights movement. In 1964, a number of black students from local Catholic high schools participated in a protest march for voting rights on City Hall. Fearing potential violence against their students, a number of Josephite priests attended the march by following along in their car to watch over their students. A policeman took down the license plate number and contacted the Chancery Office, prompting Cody to upbraid the priests. The prelate later issued a statement reiterating the archdiocese’s policy forbidding clerical involvement in protest marches. Since the demonstrations by black New Orleanians “primarily concern legal rights, and are only indirectly related to the Church, priests and religious should not take part in public demonstrations without the explicit permission of the Most Reverend Ordinary.” This directive, he added, “must not be interpreted as a negative or indifferent attitude on the part of the Archdiocese. Rather should it be understood that the intervention of the clergy or religious could be misunderstood by many of our fellow citizens and used against the Church.” While “we yet don’t know its full meaning,” the Jesuit Louis Twomey told one curious priest, “it has had something of a withering effect on the initiative of the priests.” Twomey expressed a deep concern over the potential consequences of such actions.17

Cody’s policy of clerical non-involvement proved effective. A year later, Twomey’s Jesuit colleague, Joseph Fichter, noted the lack of involvement by New Orleans religious in the Selma Marches in Alabama.

I have been bothered by the fact that apparently no one from New Orleans heeded the 8 March call of Martin Luther King to come to Selma for the march on the next day. We had priests and laity from all over the country with us that day, but I looked and enquired in vain for New Orleans people. Has anyone at all from there gone to Selma-Montgomery in the ensuing period?18

The lack of priestly participation from this most significant region augmented the already “despicable” actions and attitudes of the bishop of Mobile, who condemned the participation of priests and women religious in the Selma Marches. “I don’t know whether I should feel sorry for or angry at Archbishop Toolen,” Twomey added. “But certainly, the role he played in the Selma affair did little to ingratiate the Church either with the Negroes or those who feel that the Church should get out of the Middle Ages.”19

Aside from a handful of bishops, few had made any positive statements on civil rights or the rise of social protest in the Deep South. In 1963, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops had declared that Catholics “should do our part to see that voting, jobs, housing, education and public facilities are freely available to every American.” But priests refused to read it in the dioceses of Alexandria and Jackson-Natchez.20 Between the unenthusiastic response of priests on the local level and the “prudence” of bishops in many southern dioceses, Fichter fumed, the church would lose much moral ground in the movement. Thanks to the 1964 Civil Rights Act, “President Johnson has now made it

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19 Twomey to Rev. Harry Heiter, SJ, 27 April 1965, Box 22, Folder 6, LJT Papers, Loyola.

20 New Orleans Item, 26 August 1963.
“safe” for them to admit that they are Americans, even if they don’t want to go to the extreme of admission that they are successors to the Apostles and representatives of Christ.”²¹

A 1964 article in *Ramparts* offered an especially dim portrait of Catholic leadership in New Orleans. Local ordinaries refused to integrate hospital facilities and other services, the author, John Beecher, reported. Segregationists continued to defy the church’s integration policies with relative ease, he added. The “white flight” schools springing up throughout the region sheltered a largely Catholic white student population through state support. Most damning for Beecher were the lackluster responses coming from the Archbishop’s residence. “The vacillation of Archbishop Rummel and the excessive timidity of his successor, Archbishop Cody, have to be seen in the context of the lay revolt which the Church’s integration policy has provoked.” Nonetheless, Beecher added, “It is highly doubtful that anything has been gained by the procrastination and pussy-footing on the racial issue which characterize recent archdiocesan strategy.” For all his seeming authority in the face of the citizens’ councils, Cody especially exuded the church’s “masterfully vague” commitment to racial justice. Attending a Civil Rights party hosted by Twomey’s Institute of Human Relations, Cody praised the civil rights workers as pioneers, adding “You all know—at least those of you who know me—where I stand.” As Beecher wrote, one integrationist leader later quipped, “Yes, we know…he stands squarely in the middle, right on dead center.”²²

²¹ Fichter to Twomey, 26 March 1965, Box 22, Folder 5, LJT Papers.

While the archdiocesan news organ, *The Clarion Herald*, refuted the charges made by *Ramparts*, a report by the Urban League of Greater New Orleans underscored Beecher’s findings. Despite the church’s insistence that proper moral guidance would ultimately prevail over racism, the hierarchy failed to direct major desegregation efforts, let alone shape the attitudes of white Catholics. “There is very little true integration in this community,” one Catholic leader noted. “Even though Negroes are ‘allowed’ to attend so-called white churches, there is no real participation in parish life.” Of the eighteen community service societies offered by the archdiocese, ten were listed as “white only,” while three were listed as “Negroes only.” But perhaps the most telling was the general treatment of whites toward blacks in the parishes. A white woman attending one church in 1964 entered with two African American companions, one of whom as a non-Catholic interested in the church. “On entering they were met by an acquaintance of the white Catholic: ‘Hello Agnes,’ she said, ‘I see you have your nigger friends with you.’” For one respondent to the Urban League report, the casual racism of whites in the pews were a direct reflection of the church’s own attitude toward civil rights.

This lack of leadership on the part of church authorities, the many omissions which amount to grave sins against justice and charity on their part, totally contradicts and negates the very teachings of Christ and condemns the Catholic Church to a position of weakness and unmeaning in the life of this community.23

Local Catholic discontent with the hierarchy’s leadership coincided with the rise in civil rights agitation throughout the South. Efforts to enforce the 1964 Civil Rights Act on the local level in Birmingham, Montgomery, and elsewhere sparked a wave of violent confrontations that captured the attention of the world. In rural Louisiana, by contrast,

black Catholic communities effected subtle but significant challenges to white
dominance. On the day of the passage of the Civil Rights Bill, July 3, a parishioner at Our
Mother of Mercy in Church Point entered a café in town, sat down and ordered his lunch.
“The white men who frequent the restaurant all stood up, but his appearance was so
sudden and unexpected that the matter passed without incident,” one sister reported.24
This grasping for modest gains continued when black Catholics in Church Point initiated
another fight for suitable education that year with the local white political boss, Jack
Daigle. “Mr. Daigle, brother of the mayor, and the wealthiest man in town controls
everything from here to Lake Charles,” the sister continued. “Our people had been to see
him several times about getting a high school for the Colored in Church Point but he had
put them off.” That August, Sister Inez and the pastor pro-tem, Father Tyne, confronted
Daigle, saying that since no suitable school existed for blacks, it would be necessary to
integrate the white school. “After he calmed down,” Inez reported, Daigle arranged for
them to attend Sunset School in nearby Crowley.25

Minor victories had a way of perpetuating white control as much as anything, to
be sure. Daigle insisted that it would be necessary to get a court order if Father Tyne ever
wanted to integrate the white school in Church Point. After the initial integration of the
lunch counter, the parents of a girl attempting several times to sit there “were warned that
they would lose their jobs if the girl continued her attempts to integrate.” But, for lack of
any concerted Catholic leadership, black Catholics armed with decades of experience in
mobilizing local resources and playing to the weaknesses of white leadership effected

24 Our Mother of Mercy Convent Annals, 1964, H20 B2 LA: Church Point, SBSA.
25 Ibid.
changes within their limited sphere as members of Catholic communities. The Brooklyn-born Holy Ghost Father, Reverend A.J. McKnight, CSSp., became president of the Southern Consumers’ Cooperative that operated in several parishes in central Louisiana. The cooperative secured federal support for the promotion of black ownership of business, education, employment, and education. McKnight declared that the program sought to “help our people help themselves.” At a PTA meeting “he urged our people to organize and take advantage of the many projects offered them by the government before it was too late.”

*Ebony* magazine applauded McKnight’s 14 years “creating a peaceful economic revolution” in rural Louisiana.

For years, SNCC and CORE sought to organize Negro sharecroppers in the rural South, only to become so disillusioned by the poor results that they shifted operations to the crowded ghettos of the North. But the Catholic priest remained to persist in his projects with the poor, developing an unshakable inner calm in the face of frequent attacks and debilitating reversals.

McKnight exuded confidence in the organizing power of local Catholic communities. In defining their grassroots struggle within their identity as a parish community, they maintained faith that the hierarchy might one day catch on to the “peaceful revolutions” in their midst.

October of 1965 seemed a turning point in the hierarchy’s commitment to the grassroots black struggle. Only days after the appointment of Philip Hannan as Archbishop of New Orleans, the Vatican elevated 49-year-old Harold Perry to Auxiliary Bishop. With the appointment, Perry became the first African American prelate to serve in the United States in the twentieth century. A native of Lake Charles, Louisiana, Perry’s

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26 Ibid., 1965.

27 *Ebony*, May 1968.
faith and ministry developed in the dynamic community of Sacred Heart Parish. His ordination as a priest in the Society of the Divine Word became a watershed in the history of Catholic ministry to African Americans in the Deep South. Perry spent the next several years serving as chaplain to the Knights of Peter Claver, a prominent member of the National Catholic Council on Interracial Justice, and eventually provincial of the Society of the Divine Word. In July of 1965, Perry became the first black clergymen to act as guest chaplain of the United States House of Representatives. “I was accepted as a priest,” Perry promised one reporter. “I expect to be accepted as a bishop.”

In his elevation to the hierarchy Perry inaugurated a new era of racial reconciliation in this embattled region. As a clergyman, he connected the missionary impulse of Catholic leaders with the drive of many black Catholics for a distinct place within the mainstream of the Catholic Church. Leading up to the 1960 New Orleans School Crisis, he criticized the church’s failure to integrate parochial schools as a serious blow to the church’s mission to African Americans. “An astounding 97 per cent of the Negroes are still left to be brought into the Church,” he said. “From the view of a missionary in the South interested in conversions of the colored race, a great hindrance to our work has been the slow desegregation of churches and schools.” Perry also consistently denounced the peculiar dualism in the church over seventy years that “has deprived the Negro of full participation in the community of the people of God and also has permitted the conscience of the Church at large, as well as that of many individuals, to rest undisturbed.”

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28 *The Sun* (Baltimore, MD), 3 October 1965; clipping in Perry Collection, JFA.

29 *Catholic Messenger* (Davenport, Iowa), 8 September 1960; clipping in Perry Collection, JFA.

His elevation to bishop in the heart of the Catholic south carried several meanings for both black Louisianans and the larger struggle to integrate Louisiana Catholicism. First, Perry’s ordination signaled the waning of die-hard segregationism in the region. On the day of his installment, Una Gaillot and a small cohort of firebrands hoisted signs declaring the illegitimacy of a black priest. The event garnered significant attention in the national news, but the majority of local reports dismissed it as an amusing sideshow. In becoming auxiliary bishop, Perry hoped to reconcile Catholic Louisiana with its violent past in a way that nurtured common understanding among the races. “Many White persons throughout the South now feel that integration is inevitable, but they face this dilemma: How can we accept defeat without losing face? How can we salvage our self-respect after disrespecting such a large percentage of the people so long?”

Second, as a black Catholic and Louisiana native, Perry intimately connected the economic and social crises facing African American southerners to the Catholic Church in unprecedented ways. Echoing other black activists in the late-1950s, Perry criticized the commitment of black Catholics to the civil rights movement. Decades of segregation within the church and a paternalistic attitude of clergymen toward them had certainly created “a strong conservatism among Negro Catholics.” But black Catholics had a special opportunity to bring the church’s radical and unifying message to the movement. At the same time, he challenged civil rights protesters to recognize the more systemic problems of economic and political inequality that would remain long after social demonstrations faded into memory. “The scars caused by decades of poverty and

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31 Clarion Herald, 7 October 1965.

32 Catholic Messenger, 12 August 1965.
privation due to racism will be starkly visible in our country,” he told a San Francisco Conference on Religion and Race. “At this late hour, it is evident to all involved in the freedom movement, to even a slight degree, that to protest injustice is only the beginning of the work towards achieving justice.”

The beleaguered city of New Orleans presented a tremendous challenge to Catholic urban reformers. A study by Dr. James Murphy at Tulane identified serious deficiencies in the economy, housing, and infrastructure in the city at the end of the decade. A declining port and stagnating tourism combined with a poor industrial base to increase unemployment and cripple the city’s tax income. New Orleanians perpetuated a “closed society attitude” which only worsened throughout the decade. A “lack of strong organization to marshal resources and energies for community action” derived mainly from a conservative business leadership and a critical lack of concern for the “high proportion of unskilled, uneducated and unemployed Negroes.” The latter, it added, would soon number more than fifty percent of the city’s population. As one Catholic writer quipped, it was time to put aside an old-world attitude toward modern problems.

Here clearly is a call for concern, not apathy. For action – not words! We hope somebody is listening, and prepared to do something this year besides gripe and grope, mask and march, charade and parade, and yell: “Throw Me Sumthin’ Mister!”

As the issue of urban poverty came full circle in the mid-1960s, Perry exhorted Catholic officials to offer both spiritual and material support to the black struggle.

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31 Perry quoted in *Catholic Transcript* (Hartford, Conn.), 6 May 1965, clipping in Harold Perry Collection, JFA.

34 James T. Murphy, “New Orleans: A statistical profile of economic and other characteristics (preliminary),” n.p., 1969, in Louisiana Collection, Tulane University Special Collections, Jones Hall.

35 Mel Leavitt, “Our City is Decaying,” *Clarion Herald*, 30 January 1969, copy in Box 2, Folder 6, New Orleans General Collection, Xavier University Special Collections.
Seventy years of segregation had relegated black Americans to the lower rung of society, and the church’s interest in poverty should go beyond token statements on interracial justice. For decades, he noted, “Statements concerning brotherhood and racial equality have been made in abundance. But now it is time for us to join the Negro freedom movement and commit ourselves to the work of teaching, leading and giving example in the daily life of the community for Christian conduct in race relations.” Perry urged religious institutions to take the reigns in guiding a social restructuring that ensured justice for black Americans. Churches “should adopt and adhere to fair employment policies and practices at all levels.” In addition, “Investment of funds by religious groups should be in keeping with stated moral principles. Funds should be invested with a conscious goal of furthering equality of opportunity, particularly through financing of integrated housing projects and developments.”

Moving beyond integration, Perry and Archbishop Hannan inaugurated a variety of social outreach, housing, and urban uplift programs in and around New Orleans with the assistance of the Office of Economic Opportunity. In the Desire Street housing project, the archdiocese began its “Witness” program, engaging youth in summer sports, educational, and spiritual activities. Between 1965 and 1968, the program expanded to employing over 100 seminarians, 35 Sisters and 120 Neighborhood Youth Corps workers in 70 schools. Said one worker in the Desire Project, “Conditions are so crowded here because of lack of playground space that we have to bus out at least 100 kids a day just to have room to breathe.” As many seminarians noted, the program’s employment of

36 Catholic Messenger, 12 August 1965.
37 Ibid.
38 Clarion Herald 11 July 1968.
seminarians especially connected future clergymen to the conditions of the poor in New Orleans. “I believe it’s going to make better priests out of us.”

The program even made its way to the beleaguered St. Joseph the Worker Parish in Marrero. The site of a 1959 riot outside the church when a handful of youths attempted to integrate seating in Mass, St. Joseph’s boasted in 1968 an extensive program that brought the new rhythms of Catholic life to the youth of the area. “There is a lot of hip-swinging, guitar-led folk music, Peanuts cartoons, hand-clapping, foot-stomping, and plenty of patience,” one reporter described. The program involved laity at every step, organizing them into neighborhood associations. “Then they appoint area captains to continue the work and arrange for Mass in the homes and informal meetings to discuss religious problems as they affect adults.”40 While many laity and religious played a significant role in applying Vatican teachings to local practice, Perry’s presence, many hoped, might draw African Americans and whites together the development of the post-conciliar church. His very presence, said one nun after his first Solemn Pontifical Mass in Lake Charles, drew the races together in unprecedented fashion. “The Church was crowded with Negroes and whites, and it was a deeply moving sight to see the congregation praying and singing together, seemingly unaware of the fact that, a few short years before, such an occasion would be unheard of in the deep Southland!”

“Witness” joined a larger initiative by the National Catholic Conference on Interracial Justice, which urged the church to increase its efforts in solving the urban crisis throughout the nation. One representative questioned whether the church’s national

39 Ibid.
40 Clarion Herald 18 July 1968.
41 Immaculate Heart Convent Annals, 8 January 1966, H40 B2 LA: Lake Charles, SBSA.
effort “represents a serious commitment.” In 1969, Hannan led a group of Louisianans on a march in Washington to protest the dismal state of welfare programs in the region. Hannan pointed out that Louisiana’s generous welfare grants had encouraged families from neighboring states of Arkansas and Mississippi to move into Louisiana. While the Nixon Administration promised sweeping changes in welfare programs, “we have an immediate emergency I was trying to help.” Hannan urged the Department of Agriculture, to no avail, to improve the food stamp program with larger bonuses for the poor.42 Perry, meanwhile, demanded a greater understanding of inner-city problems in the urban community. “I recognize the fact that there are problems which black people must thing through and deal with in their own way.” The bishop insisted, however, that too many urban communities are “apathetic about urban human problems. These are problems which white people must think out for themselves and deal with accordingly.” Urban problems in New Orleans, he added, “are massive and we all need each other.”43

Finally, and most significantly for many African Americans shaping a new social and political consciousness in the 1960s, Perry’s appointment heralded the death of the so-called “Negro Apostolate” in the country. “The term seems not only contradictory but repugnant,” black Catholic leader and regional NAACP director Clarence Laws declared in 1965. To Laws, the concept proclaimed larger marginalization of blacks from the mainstream of Catholic life. In a speech to Perry and others at the Southern Catholic Leadership Conference in Atlanta, Laws excoriated the concept for making African Americans a mere “appendage” of the church’s mission. “Negroes were unhappy with

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43 *Times Picayune*, 4 March 1969.
this division in the Church then—70 years ago—as they are now.” Laws invoked the Citizens’ Committee’s late-19th century protests against both the Plessy decision and the rise of racial separation in the church.

The problem now for Laws was that the Catholic Church remained a white church. For all the opportunities to embrace the black experience as a definitive force in Catholic thought and action, the church still reached out in charity to blacks in a way that only marginalized them further. Laws echoed the sentiments of a Dallas woman who demanded that missionaries “STOP demanding that we be grateful for what they did a hundred years ago for the Negro. They should find some other objectives for their vocations.” Excessive attention to the contribution of missions, he argued, had allowed church leaders to ignore persistent discrimination in both church and society.

In the current social revolution in the United States, which has as its aims the securing of full human rights and dignity for all men, it is a tragic fact that among the least conspicuous of all groups in that struggle, are members of both the Clergy and the Laity of the Negro Apostolate. As many Church leaders preached docility, patience, obedience and honor to masters during slavery, today, through words and action or inaction, knowingly or unknowingly, many preach a doctrine of subservience, patience, and conformity to the status quo.44

Not only were priests attitudes defiant of the larger social movement in the mid-1960s, but also to the very spirit of change within the church itself. Indeed, despite the call of Pope Paul VI to recognize the responsibility and wisdom of the laity in church affairs, local communities continued to suppress the lay black voice.

Rather than simply change the language of the “Negro Apostolate” to suit Vatican II’s embrace of cultural diversity, Laws articulated a fundamental shift in black

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Catholics’ sense of religious authority in the mid-1960s. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, black Catholics laid claim to the Roman Church in the face of white oppression. They asserted their commitment to the rites and rhythms of the Roman Catholicism and demonstrated their loyalty to the priests and women religious who served them. As a means of protest, they condemned the “un-Catholic” attitudes of southern whites and challenged the church to develop a more authentic social and religious self-expression based on its own timeless teachings. But in the 1960s, white segregationists continued to flaunt their own version of orthodoxy, while the hierarchy continued to ignore the black struggle. Amid the rise of Black Nationalism and the decentralization of Catholic identity through the changes in Vatican II, African American Catholics responded by carving a distinct theological and religious space within the church. The institutional church may become more responsive to and reflective of black identity, they argued, but either way, black Catholics could claim a theological wisdom passed on from their unique experience of slavery, economic and political disfranchisement, and segregation.

African Americans perceived and expressed this radical transformation in black and Catholic thought within the day-to-day world of parish life. The practical effects of Vatican II were most visible in the Catholic Liturgy, where the transition from the use of Latin to the use of English unsettled many Catholics. In Corpus Christi Parish in New Orleans, older black Catholics did not immediately take to the Council’s radical changes in Liturgy, one sister reported. Christmas saw three midnight Masses in the parish. “The church was filled to capacity with those who wished to hear the familiar Latin in the Solemn High.” Yet, over time, “more and more the English is being accepted as the Mass
is understood better.” Changes in Liturgical form opened the way to a variety of cultural expressions that empowered black Catholics.

But beyond these immediate changes in parish life, younger generations embraced a variety of new avenues within the church through which they could assert a new cultural and political understanding as black Americans. At St. Joseph’s Academy in New Orleans, a group of girls captured national attention with the formation of the Black Revolutionary Action among Soul Students (BRASS). The “black power” organization, one insisted, aimed to help black students find their historic cultural identity. The group demanded that black Catholics overcome their historically middle class baggage. “The only danger with BRASS,” a leader declared, “is if it becomes a black middle class group. We can’t forget that there are poor black men in the ghetto.” BRASS reflected the desire of black youth to separate not only from white cultural and historical bonds, but also from older generations who bought into them. The group’s exclusion of whites from membership produced a conflict with high school administration. Members defended their position to “do their own thing,” however. “The blacks have to separate for a while so that we can find ourselves. If we can’t get together with ourselves, we can’t get together with anybody.” Older generations had hidden them from that identity, they insisted. While they inherited a deep faith from their parents as Christians, one explained, “my parents think ‘white.’”

In the latter half of the 1960s, the growing black critique of American political and religious institutions fueled a rising dissatisfaction within the church that

45 Convent Annals, January 1964, Corpus Christi, New Orleans, Louisiana, H40 B2 Box 18, Folder 3, SBSA.

46 Lucien Salvant, “Black Students at SJA Showing their ‘BRASS,’” Clarion Herald, undated clipping in New Orleans General Schools, Box 1, Folder 9, JFA, Xavier University Special Collections.
reached into local black parishes as well. In May of 1968, a group of 325 African Americans led by H. “Rap” Brown, chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, stormed St. Francis de Sales Catholic Church when the archdiocese prohibited them from using the main building for a meeting. At a rally in Shakespeare Park, several members of the SNCC exhorted the crowd to take a stance against the governor, John J. McKeithen, and church authorities who had managed to appease blacks for years. “You’re chumps,” Brown shouted. “McKeithen tells the world that all his ‘niggers’ in Louisiana are satisfied, and you do nothing to show that you are in disagreement with him. You’re chumps. There’s a church in your community and they tell you that you can’t go in it.” When rain began to soak the crowd at the park, Brown declared, “I’m not going to stand in the rain and talk to you. If you want to hear me and they won’t let you in that church which is in your community, then you should kick the door down.”\footnote{Brown quoted in \textit{Louisiana Weekly}, 24 May 1968.} Shortly afterward a group marched to the church at the corner of Second and Loyola streets. Others followed in vehicles. When the police surrounded the area with riot troopers, the crowd dispersed.\footnote{\textit{Louisiana Weekly}, 24 May 1968.} The parish council at St. Francis later clarified that it had never permitted such a meeting, and it was only a few members of the young adult council that invited Brown back for a small group discussion. The council members “are all black people and residents of Central City. They voted unanimously and strongly against the use of our facilities.”\footnote{Ibid.} When the group contacted Brown about their decision, the latter used it to stir the crowd.
Both the Rap Brown incident and the controversy over BRASS demonstrated the ways Catholic youth connected to larger black challenges to American institutions in the 1960s. The superior of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, Mother M. David, instructed the order in 1968 that “we must be very conscious of the changing thought patterns and attitudes of our people; we must learn to appreciate them; know how to accept them; help those who are struggling for personal identity in this time of crisis.” The Sisters, she added, would refuse to condemn “Black Power.” Instead, religious leadership should understand the reasons for its growth among younger generations. Fueled by their willingness to question the accepted wisdom of the church and their parents, youth certainly energized the movement. But while the dramatic changes in black Catholic life can be attributed to the positive steps young people took toward asserting their distinct black and Catholic identity, the persistence of white racism in the pews and the policies of the church toward school integration also drove a much larger, multi-generational black protest against the church. By the 1970s, as *Newsweek* noted, the optimism brought by Harold Perry in 1965, had died. The hierarchy had yet to allow black Catholics to “impress our own character and style on churches in black communities,” the National Office of Black Catholics believed. It also failed to convince blacks that the Catholicism at its best “contributes to the struggle for liberation.” A number of factors contributed to black alienation from the church. Ironically enough, the very willingness of the church to don evangelical styles common among black Protestants turned many blacks away.

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50 Mother M. David to Sisters, 25 April 1968, M. David Correspondance, SBSA.

“Almost all of our folks converted from more demonstrative backgrounds,” one Atlanta priest explained, and they left them for a quieter form of worship.”

Though far from unified in their attitudes toward the post-Vatican II church, particularly the liturgy, black Catholics could identify the central problem of both church and society as one of authenticity. They would not embrace the post-Vatican II church without questioning its meaning to their own historical experience. As with its failures to implement school integration on terms equitable to black communities, the church’s general commitment at the Council to a more productive engagement with local cultures and experiences faced critical challenges within unique racial and economic crises shaping the Deep South. As one sociologist studying the church in New Orleans described, the inauthenticity of institutional Catholicism derived not only from its inability to respond to African American needs on their terms, but also its inability to recognize that such was the case. “While espousing one belief, the institution ‘acts’ upon another, yet is unaware of, or disregards, this apparent contradiction…the inauthentic institution, like the inauthentic individual, does not ‘know’ itself.”

For black Catholics, nothing demonstrated the institution’s hypocrisies more than the 1967 reconciliation of Leander Perez with the church. That year, the family of Perez approached the Archbishop about the possibility of lifting the political boss’ excommunication. The family, many believed, feared the consequences of his burial outside of the church. Archbishop Hannan dispatched a priest to witness a speech at Fort

52 Ibid.

Jackson in lower Plaquemines Parish in which an apparently contrite Perez retracted his statements challenging the authority of Archbishop Rummel. Many later protested that such a public excommunication should have necessitated a more public reconciliation. Instead, they argued a relative handful of people witnessed the speech, which occurred at a public dedication of a generator in the region.\footnote{54 See Glenn Jeansonne, \textit{Leander Perez: Boss of the Delta} (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1977); Interview with Philip H. Hannan. Tape recording by author, 5 May 2004.} The event received no press coverage and went largely unnoticed until the 77-year-old Perez passed away a year and a half later. His requiem mass at Holy Name of Jesus Parish on the campus of Loyola University ignited a firestorm of protest from students, clergymen, and activists alike from throughout the region.

At Loyola, two priests led a group of students in protest against Hannan, whose lifting of the excommunication had been “mere legalism,” they argued. “Leander Perez may be a saint in the eyes of God, according to the lights of his own conscience. Nevertheless, what he publicly stands for is in no way in accord with the beliefs of the Christian religion. Since this is true, let us say so.”\footnote{55 \textit{The Maroon} (Loyola University of New Orleans), 28 March 1969.} A group of six Dominican priests also denounced the event as “disgrace.” “When men without any religious faith at all are preaching decency and concern for brotherhood, where does that leave us in the Catholic Church, who are caught in the act of publicly honoring as one of our members a man who is a racist?”\footnote{56 \textit{Louisiana Weekly}, 29 March 1969.} The \textit{Louisiana Weekly} added, “It could be, we concede, that Judge Perez was reconciled to the Catholic Church. But, we ask, Was he reconciled to his brother
(Biblically speaking)?” Both Hannan and Holy Name of Jesus defended their decisions, the latter stating that the denial of Catholic burial would have demonstrated a similar lack of charity.

The situation in local parishes throughout Louisiana also revealed significant gaps between Catholic ideals and church leadership. In 1969, a member of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament protested to Lafayette Bishop Maurice Schexnayder, that for all of the bishop’s words in supporting black equality, changes must be effected more immediately on the local level. Priests and laity might put the hierarchy’s statements into action. “Yet, the facts remain. Blacks are not welcomed in white churches.” In her own parish, black still entered from a separate door, attended communion on a separate rail, and “make the stations of the Cross only at their own separate stations.” She decried, “The very existence of such a horror – the very presence of a Catholic priest presiding over such a scandal with the apparent approval of his bishop speaks to the people of the diocese much more loudly and clearly than the six letters you referred to in your latest communication to us.”

Reports on the state of black Catholic membership in 1970 painted a dismal portrait. One study indicated that the lack of hierarchical leadership in the field of race relations generated widespread disillusionment. While the church had developed wide-ranging efforts to improve the socio-economic status of black Americans, its failure to modify white attitudes constituted a significant failure.

The general consensus, then, among all those questioned on this topic, both black and white, is that young black Catholics,

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57 Louisiana Weekly, 5 April 1969.

58 Name withheld to Maurice Schexnayder, 22 August 1969, in Sister M. David Correspondence, SBSA.
particularly educated ones, are leaving the church in large numbers; and that the only issue over which they are leaving is that of race. They are confronting an identity crisis as black Catholics, and they are coming out black rather than Catholic.59

At the height of racial tensions throughout the nation, the incident with Leander Perez only further alienated the church from a black laity desperate to use church resources as a means of dismantling the social and economic barriers left by Jim Crow. As a whole, black Catholic laity, along with many priests and women religious challenged the church to develop a more authentic social and religious expression. Their commitment to the church, they hoped, might fundamentally reshape Catholicism in the Deep South in a way that unified the faith’s distinct sacramental life with their unique inheritance as African Americans.

The rise of “black power” within the local Catholic Church certainly incensed many white segregationists in the late-1960s. The latter viewed both ecclesiastical and social reform as an assault on traditional white communities. In the process, they joined a larger middle class chorus of white resentment against governmental policies of racial and economic reconciliation. Indeed, while the integration of Catholic schools and the excommunication of three prominent segregationists in 1962 seemed a major moral defeat, white Catholic segregationists found new life in the rise of populist conservatism throughout the nation. Against the violence of blacks in the inner cities and licentiousness of student radicals, Alabama governor George Wallace offered a language of traditionalism and “law and order.” Wallace, along with Barry Goldwater, and South

Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond, articulated a complex of concerns over the nature of governmental authority and the necessity for social order. Wallace’s message adapted well to the social and economic anxieties of urban northerners as much as it did to the post-integration south. Gone was the explicit language of racial antagonism. In its place came a formal ideology of grassroots conservatism, unprecedented in scope and structure.\(^6^0\)

While many historians place the decline of the white citizens’ councils at the end of the 1950s, white conservatives in Louisiana nonetheless benefited from an already well-established network of grassroots activists who mobilized in the 1950s to defend their own distinct sense of social and religious order against Catholic interracialism.\(^6^1\) Like their counterparts elsewhere, conservative white Louisianans utilized local resources and people to develop a solid consensus movement that made the transition from a regionalized anti-integrationism to a more national movement of economic and social conservatism. A decade after the demise of the Catholic Layman’s Association, as the church lent support to the rising welfare state, and federal expansion and regulation of integration, former Catholic segregationists continued to weave a larger social-political protest within its attack on the church. One Catholic protested that the church was, once again, “endlessly suggesting unfairly that the whites are to blame for everything and that whatever the Negro does is well done.” At the same time, “There is never any attempt on the part of the Church or the government to make the Negro understand that all rights are


accompanied by responsibilities.” The church’s once timeless sense of morality was suddenly succumbing to the morality of the 1960s. “It is regrettable that a well-balanced sense of right and wrong no longer seems to exist in the Church today and that charity on the part of the Catholic Church no longer appears impartial and universal, but rather a virtue that is displayed in a biased and specific manner according to the whims of the human will.”

Jackson Ricau, one of the three individuals excommunicated in 1962 for his stance against integration, emerged as a central figure in this movement. As a transitional figure from old-school segregationism to modern conservatism, Ricau did remain more firmly planted in the schoolhouse door than most. Unlike many conservatives who downplayed explicit racial language in their complaints against big government and social immorality, Ricau continued to weave older segregationist tropes into his protests against the Catholic hierarchy. In his appeal to Hannan in 1969, Ricau persisted in questioning the validity of Rummel’s 1956 statement condemning segregation. He pointed that at the end of “his unprecedented pastoral,” the archbishop had admitted that, “‘there are differences between the races’” that “‘require further study and consideration.’” Cody’s and Rummel’s brashness in enforcing integration, he believed, had led to the social disarray segregationists warned about in the years after Brown. Pointing to the violence rampant in other parts of the country and the rise of black aggression in New Orleans specifically, he accused the hierarchy of ignoring the moral and economic dangers of integration. “I foresaw the impending tragedy – the destruction

62 P.H. to the Editor, Clarion Herald, 13 March 1969.
of white Catholic schools… But all the Archdiocesan authorities could see was that I was a segregationist.”63

Seven years after his excommunication, Ricau excoriated the proliferation of black separatism within the Catholic community. The rise of Black Power, and Archbishop Perry’s approbation of it in speech and writing throughout the archdiocese had exposed the hypocrisy of the church in a time of moral chaos.

Here is a bit of fine irony. While Archdiocesan authorities continue to anathematize me and two other publicly excommunicated Catholic leaders of segregation organizations on the grounds that what we believe and do are immoral, I now read in a Catholic paper where your auxiliary bishop, Harold Perry, is a leader of a black segregationist organ.64

For Ricau, Black Nationalist influence within the church put the lie to Mystical Body theology that had been the driving force of Catholic interracialism in the 1950s. If separatism was a sin against the essential unity of Catholicism, how did Perry and others explain the need for distinctive black Catholic communities and liturgical practices? For many black Catholics, Vatican II inspired Catholics worldwide to value more culturally embedded expressions of faith. In their minds, black Catholics could now lay claim to their own distinct and meaningful religious identity. “What about ‘White’ identity?” Ricau fumed. “If the Negroes truly want racial identity – without lawlessness, of course, well and good. But it means the concept of so-called racial equality is now a thing of the past.”65 Archbishop Hannan, he declared, “now approves of the Negro doing what he has condemned in the Caucasian – practicing segregation.” Because the archbishop supported

63 The Citizens’ Report (August-September 1968): 1-2, Louisiana Ephemera Collection, Louisiana Collection, Tulane University Department of Special Collections.

64 Ibid.

Black separatism in various aspects of society and church, moreover, “he is morally bound to lift the excommunication from three segregationists who, in the self-same interest of racial identity.”

The fusion of white Catholic protest against black power with their reaction to changes in Catholic practice offers an important perspective on the cultural history of the post-conciliar church. Indeed, for all of the major changes in the church’s orientation to the modern world, an emphasis on ecumenism, and belief in the role of historical experience in shaping religious thought, the majority of American Catholics read these larger theological transitions through the immediate and tangible revolution in Catholic liturgy. Vatican II had taken the Latin out of the Mass, made the priest face the congregation and acknowledge their role in the Eucharistic prayer, fostered a sense of community by having congregants offer a “sign of peace” before communion, and introduced new musical forms and instruments to the worship. The response of a congregation to these changes bespoke deep anxieties over the sources of both social and religious authority. One group expressed their shock that a priest at St. Francis Xavier would remark that “the Mass is too dull” and that he would offer “lively new hymns” to “jazz up” the church. “Some of us are rather perturbed to find that this man in cleric garb seems not to be able to stifle the jazz rhythm in his soul, even in the holy season of Lent,” they added. “We wonder if he would suggest the Bourbon strip joints as an exhilarating change in the DULL days of Lent?”

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66 Ibid.

67 “Holy Mother Church, Whither Goeth Thou?” undated circular, copy in Box 53, Folder 3, Joseph H. Fichter Papers, Loyola.
Others, including Ricau, blamed racial integration for the sudden assault on sacred practice. Indeed, by the mid-1960s, Catholic segregationists had plenty of reasons to believe their earlier prophecy had come true: integration would annihilate Catholicism as they knew it. Despite frequent and explicit language of lay rights in segregationist literature, a Catholic theology of segregationism had rested upon the constant and pervasive sense of one’s place, something that also defined the pre-Vatican II Church. When the revolutionary message of the Council hit New Orleans, many whites responded with similar animosity as they had in 1956. Some denounced the “equalitarian” liturgy as a manifestation of the south’s larger social turn. “St. Peter’s ‘changeless’ Church is being changed almost beyond recommended,” one New Orleanian fumed.

We now have a Mass book with six skeletons on the cover and with the Soviet-style title “The People’s Mass Book” … Communicants are now instructed to pick up the unconsecrated host from a receptical [sic] at the Church door, form a ‘bread’ line and march to an ‘upright’ Communion … our beautiful hymns are being replaced by secular tunes, jazz savagery, Negro spirituals, Gypsy hullabaloos, tootennany clamor, or what have you.”

They insisted that spiritual fulfillment began with liturgical order. In the larger struggle over the meaning of race throughout the decade, white Catholic rejections of the “gypsy hullabaloos” and “people’s hymnals” demonstrated the ways local Catholics wove intense political struggles into ongoing debates over religious practice.

Ricau both read and exploited these deep rifts in local Catholic life in terms of the larger struggle over race and rights in modern Louisiana. If the Jim Crow South and the pre-Vatican II church had anything in common, after all, it was a sense of place. Like the laity within the Mass, black southerners once knew where they belonged. But the new

“egalitarian” Mass of the 1960s and 1970s undermined this sense of place that defined both the southern and Catholic way of life. Ricau spent much of his later career through the 1980s—and many pages of the *Citizens’ Report*—championing a return to the traditional Latin Mass. In 1977, he railed against Archbishop Hannan for reprimanding a priest in the Society of St. Pius V, a traditionalist organization, for celebrating the Latin Mass in the archdiocese. On the Feast Day of Pius V, Ricau wrote Hannan defending the actions. Quoting St. Thomas Aquinas, he declared that the church must “hold firmly that our Faith is identical with that of the ancients. Deny this and you dissolve the Unity of the Church.”69 He defended the excommunicated Archbishop Lefebvre, a Swiss prelate whom the church found in error for refusing to recognize the new orders of Mass. “What error?” Ricau wondered.

No one has been able to say what it is. Has he embraced some heresy? Defied the Church’s true doctrines? No. He is considered “disobedient” simply because his faithfulness to his vows runs counter to the Vatican’s will to “update” the true ancient precepts in the name of “growth.” So if there is any schism, it won’t come from Archbishop Lefebvre.

Ricau’s views resembled that of many who became known as “sedevacantists,” believing that the line of Popes had been broken with Vatican II. While he challenged his excommunication throughout the 1960s, his later belief that the “True Church” had disappeared with the Council enabled him to continue a segregationist spirit of respectable protest. Ricau also tapped into a larger national network of conservative Catholics. As he continued his fight into the 1970s, drew inspiration from the writings of a Rev. Marian Palandrano, Editor and Publisher of *St. Michael’s News*. In 1969, Palandrano denounced the “ecclesiastical hypocrisy in our Catholic Church” that led to

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the excommunications in New Orleans. Ricau quoted Palandrano as insisting that the action “has no force in Canon Law or Moral Theology.” Ricau encouraged readers to support the controversial priest.

Extreme as his position was, Ricau placed liturgical changes within a constellation of concerns that many conservatives shared in the late 1960s. At the center of this emerging conservative worldview was the broad question of authority and its social, moral, and political bases. To the larger conservative rejection of the cultural revolutions of the 1960s, he added a vocal challenge to the loss of moral discipline within the church. In Ricau’s understanding, the rise of racial violence in the inner cities, social protests against the government, the sudden prevalence of the birth control pill, and the disappearance of traditional structures of Catholic worship, all derived from a loss of valid moral grounding that began in 1954. He condemned the “new morality” at work in Catholic schools, arguing that new religion textbooks honored the achievements of communist sympathizers like Martin Luther King and downplayed the sins of premarital sex. The results of the church’s weak stance against the times came to fruition in 1973, he believed. Nearly twenty years after Brown, he applauded Archbishop Hannan’s stand condemning the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision legalizing abortion. Such a ruling, he declared, “strikes at the very heart of Christian teaching.” But, he added, “too bad the clergy didn’t oppose—as we did—the Supreme Court’s 1954 school desegregation decision which took away the rights of States as guaranteed by the Constitution and paved the way for the destruction of the races through amalgamation and disorders of all kinds.” He reminded Hannan that it was never too late to take such a stand now. After all,

“If the clergy had taken a stand against this shocking decision from the beginning, the Supreme Court could not have gone as far as it has.”

The Second Vatican Council infused the social and political conflicts of the 1960s with intimate meaning for many white Catholics in Louisiana. Yet despite Ricau’s ranting against the interconnected crises of social and moral leadership, many accepted the challenges of Vatican II and the Civil Rights revolution. For them, the council not only opened the door for new lay opportunities, but also obligated laity to lead the formation of local religious communities as they developed a modern Catholic identity and made sense of racial changes taking place around them. In Baton Rouge, the hotbed of legislative resistance to integration, laity organized a Lay Congress in 1968 that challenged the church to reshape the administrative and educational structures of the church. A group of more than two hundred delegates created boards for social responsibility, finance, and public relations. It also recommended that the total teaching magisterium of the Church be used to educate the individual Catholic on the causes and nature of social problems.

Like segregationists who hoped to travel the well-worn paths of lay initiative in the 1950s, progressive laity also drew from the organizing power of earlier groups that offered grassroots support for the church’s interracial campaign. Jack Nelson embodied the “emerging layman” of the 1960s. Nelson recognized the dramatic challenges and changes in attitude facing young Catholics as part of their generation. “They are no longer willing to be considered by society as if they are in incubation – particularly

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72 Catholic Commentator, 10 May 1968.
during their school years with the fond hope that when they finally do graduate they will be perfect carbons of the preceding generation.” The young adult desired “to unshackle himself from the chains of deep-rooted customs in an effort to create at least his portion of society in his own image.” Such a transformation, he hoped, would enable young white Catholics to understand the black American’s demand for freedom.

If you want to understand the restlessness of the Negro, you start by looking in your own hearts – for as you dream of fulfillment they so dream. As you thirst for knowledge, they so thirst. As you demand the right to be different, they so demand. The end in view is to create a society in which the dignity of every human being is acknowledge[d], respected, and protected. Obviously the role of freedom in such a society is to make it possible for all, regardless of race, color and national origin, to live in the fullness of His incomparable worth.73

The church, he hoped would provide youth with a useful guide for understanding the challenges facing young Americans. As future lay leaders, they might overcome the legacies of Jim Crow Catholicism and answer blacks’ call to a more authentic Catholic faith.

In many ways, Nelson’s alma mater embodied the white Catholic struggle to reconcile the church’s past with the enormous social and religious challenges facing lay and clergy alike. His generation of progressive laity, nurtured under the tutelage of Louis J. Twomey, S.J., recognized the conflicts facing Loyola students a decade later. As the Civil Rights Movement intensified segregationist hostility throughout the south, and black activists challenged the ideological commitments of white liberals, students remained less confident than their predecessors about the religious resources at their disposal. In 1965, college students throughout New Orleans formed the Students For

73 Speech by John P. Nelson to the Newman Club of Southeastern Louisiana University, 30 September 1965, copy in Box 1, Folder 18, John P. Nelson Papers, ARC.
Integration, staging a series of sit-ins at local restaurants. Loyola members of SFI criticized students for their lackadaisical attitude toward Catholic social teaching and civil rights. One leader fumed that too few “want to get involved with something that won’t immediately benefit them.”74 Most troubling, however, was the general attitude of white churchgoers. That May, SFI staged a vigil outside of Holy Name of Jesus Church for two victims of civil rights murders in Alabama. Students reported their shock at the attitudes of parishioners, some of whom entered the church shouting at them. An old woman approached the organizer and told him he “ought to be ashamed.” Two other men denounced the students as “white trash,” and communists. The Selma police, one taunted, “had the right idea…every one of those damned niggers should be killed.” During the mass, one couple bristled when the priest exhorted the congregation to pray for the civil rights workers in Alabama. “Well, we just won’t support the church anymore.” Another left proclaiming that she might as well have not gone to mass.75

In this atmosphere, it was easy to romanticize the early Catholic interracial movement. To that small cohort of men and women “of good will,” the Commission on Human Rights and the Southeast Regional Interracial Commission offered a small but tightly bound community of Catholics who championed the church and its ideological and ecclesial structures as the ideal of God’s universal wisdom at work in the world. The teaching authority of the church, they believed, could not be denied, despite the hostility of many whites. That authority would eventually win out in unifying Mystical Body of Christ and healing the divisions of Jim Crow. A decade later, however, activists would

74 *The Maroon* (Loyola University of New Orleans), 26 February 1965.

75 *The Maroon*, 2 April 1965.
lament the waning of that “Loyola spirit,” as one former interracialist termed it. Vatican II placed laity at the center of Catholic thought and practice, but it also shook the theological foundations upon which Catholic reformers had previously stood against the tides of southern resistance. In large part, the social and spiritual upheaval of the 1960s meant the end of Catholic interracialism as a distinct ideology of unity and order.

In its place, they feared, the church offered few alternative visions to solve the “identity crisis” facing college students throughout the nation. “Never before in history have American students had so much to say about so many things,” one observer of American university life wrote. Yet for all of the activism and energy of youth, they remained unfulfilled within a larger existential struggle. Catholic sociologist Andrew Greeley described the crisis facing young Americans as a loss of “predictability.” Greeley lamented the loss of a sense of community among Catholic youth. Despite America’s material wealth in the second half of the twentieth century, the society they inherited “is not a good place in which to develop a mature and stable personality. For our society itself is not stable; in the only culture in history where change has become almost a value in itself, stability and consistency are qualities which must be sacrificed.” To be sure, Greeley added, much good would come from the “frantically dynamic nature of our society.” But the loss of significant social and spiritual moorings concerned many ministers and young Catholics alike. On Loyola’s campus, many white students responded to the black Catholic struggle by clinging to many of its spiritual elements. Through its radical “updating” over the course of the 1960s, its emphasis on the church as

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the “People of God” and its acknowledgement of God’s teaching and presence in the flux of daily life, the church might develop a more authentic sense of self.

Shaped by black challenges to government and institutions, they feared that the local hierarchy in New Orleans frustrated that spirit. At a 1968 meeting on campus, students and faculty under the guidance of Father Louis A. “Doc” Poché confronted Archbishop Hannan on the state of the Vatican Council among New Orleans Catholics. Many perceived a lack of honest engagement between the hierarchy and laity, particularly regarding the church’s stake in race relations. One student insisted that if the archdiocese was really doing all that it could do to alleviate racial tensions then “there must be a breakdown at the parish level.”

Hannan exhorted students that if they felt they were still being treated like children in the parish, then they should become more involved. Poché dismissed the meeting as more smokescreen from the hierarchy. “It is sad to note that the Church ‘establishment,’ even when represented by a bishop as real as Philip Hannan, fails to make meaningful contact with students today.”

Such internal struggles over the meaning of Catholic thought in 1960s America also manifested in several ongoing debates on both Loyola and Xavier campuses over each school’s theology and philosophy curricula. At Xavier administrators witnessed an increasing number of non-Catholic students over the course of the decade. Responding to trends across campuses both regionally and nationally, many Xavier students rejected the meaning and purpose of traditional theology courses. In May of 1969, tensions between students and more tradition-minded faculty led to a sit-in at the school, with protesters

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77 *The Maroon*, 18 October 1968.

waving a black flag of liberation attempting to lock the administration door. The university’s president, Dr. Norman Francis, a graduate of the school and the first African American to attend Loyola University School of Law, agreed to a meeting with the protesters. The latter demanded, among other things, the placement of books by black authors on the university’s shelves, the appointment of a black priest as chaplain, and the elimination of theology and philosophy requirements. Students also protested the “apathy” of the majority of Xavier students toward black liberation.

By the fall, the administration appointed Jerome LeDoux, SVD, as chaplain of the university and began a liturgical commission to explore new ways of religious worship. The school also started a periodical, Review of Soul, to engage students in recent trends in black thought and culture. “Xavier could become a center of black culture,” the student paper wrote. Changes at Xavier were felt Uptown at Loyola, where administration upheld theology requirements for students. At the same time, many faculty members began to rethink the ways such courses responded to students. The Second Vatican Council’s expansion of theological inquiry to draw from new voices and cultures across time, they insisted, created new opportunities for the theology curriculum. Theology instructor and chaplain “Doc” Poché admitted that he had no formal training in black theology, but he nonetheless assembled a course, titled “Readings in Black Theology.” The course, he recalled, was mainly for black students, though a handful of whites eventually joined. “Soon,” he later recalled, “we were reading the Bible in a fresh, liberating light,”

Like the followers in Galilee whose same questions echo their own experiences, African-American students were standing before the same challenge: to walk away, or to believe and to act. The demon whose name was Legion was still abroad in human society, still

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79 Xavier Herald, May 1969.
unexpelled. It was an exciting time to be in the classroom, surely a high-point in my thirteen years at Loyola.

In the minds of many progressives, the theology course was Vatican II at its best. Driven by a need to respond to black lay perspectives, “Readings in Black Theology” answered the call of Jesuit sociologist Joseph Fichter to “adapt our lives to the cultural demands that are place upon us where we are.”

Like many priests, however, Poché questioned his place within this religious and social awakening. “I had moments of serious doubt,” he admitted. Students challenged his understanding of the black struggle. They sharpened his awareness of the personal anxieties facing students on campus. All of these encounters prompted a sense of uncertainty within Poché. “When the students discussed their experiences and criticized the strategies of black leaders, I often felt like an outsider. I began to ask myself what would it take for me to enter their experience.” Poché reflected the anxieties of many men and women religious who faced a constellation of concerns arising from larger ecclesiastical, social, and political changes around them. The council forced men and women religious to renegotiate their role as ministers to the laity. “Remarkably enough, whenever a topic is discussed nowadays, Vatican II still haunts the memory,” Notre Dame president Theodore Hesburgh explained to Joseph Fichter. “It has discharged upon

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80 Joseph Fichter to Margaret T. Grottendeck, 13 September 1967, Box 3, Folder 9, JHF Papers, Loyola.

the Christian churches new and bothersome problems that require our best wits and wisdom.”

As we have seen in Chapter 6, many women religious responded to the continual controversies over school integration by withdrawing from religious orders altogether. In 1968, two Josephite priests in New Orleans joined them. Fathers Joseph Messina and James Quinlan resigned from their positions at St. Augustine High School, stating that, “no hope remains for St. Augustine to be anything more than a rapidly deteriorating second rate school.” The Archdiocese consistently neglected the physical facilities of the school and “insulted black people by giving the school second rate attention and support.” Quinlan abhorred the benighted discipline tactics of the school, where principal had informed him that, “the best way to deal with an unruly student is to punch him in the mouth.” These actions were overtly racist, he protested. “It is common knowledge that it is not impartially applied.” A year previous, “a student was punched into unconsciousness by a teacher and no action was taken to correct this situation…” As a result, Quinlan and Messina would withdraw from the school, and the Josephites altogether. At the end of the decade, women religious left the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament in protest against the church’s apathy toward integration and the larger black struggle.

The decision of some men and women religious to laicize rather than seek new ministries demonstrated the ways ministers invariably interwove personal anxieties over vocation with their commitment to the larger social movement around them.

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82 Theodore Hesburgh to Joseph Fichter, 18 September 1969, Box 4, Folder 1, JHF Papers, Loyola.

83 James P. Quinlan to Parents, 17 August 1968, in St. Augustine File, JFA, Baltimore.
Vatican’s refusal to lift the rule of mandatory celibacy for all religious created a vocational crisis across the nation. So, too, did the constraints placed upon ministers within order, many of whom resented limited roles as schoolteachers in schools that refused to integrate. Sisters claimed that they could never work in the types of new ministries needed by the poor in the Deep South, sisters protested against the constraints of their calling as teachers. Facing the challenges not only of racial integration, but also the need to re-negotiate their role as ministers among both the laity and the hierarchy, men and women religious brought to bear on the social struggle their own desire for personal liberation. In their protest against St. Augustine’s, Quinlan added that, “Fr. Messina may eventually marry,” while “I plan to remain single for the present.”

The actions of women religious who pursued a similar course angered some priests who were quick to point out the “truth of the matter,” as Father John Barnett, SSJ, in Mallet, Louisiana, described. “They left the community. Having created all the trouble…and influenced decisions, because they were voting members, they then proceeded to get up and even run, go off and get married, or whatever may be.” The sisters who stayed, he believed, “caved in under a bunch of young sisters lecturing them, and telling them how everything had been done wrong for so long…” One priest in Mallett who had criticized the sisters’ policy of withdrawing from the school system fumed over the willingness of many to “go off and get married.” Even when they claimed other reasons for leaving, “an awful lot of them no more worked for the poor than that wall did.”

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84 Ibid.
85 Fr. John Barnett, SSJ, conversation with Fr. P.E. Hogan, 27 October 1970. transcript in SBSA.
86 Ibid.
In Baton Rouge, a pastor at Christ the King Parish declared in his homily that he could no longer “in good conscience,” continue the mass. The priest, Father Cody, then left the sanctuary in front of a crowd of stunned parishioners. One witness, Charles Babin, English professor at Louisiana State University, admitted that he was more surprised at the manner of the priest’s exit than the fact that he later left the priesthood to attend law school. Babin himself had left the Benedictine monastery, stating that many of his classmates had vocations “that had been sort of imposed upon them in various ways.” As for Cody, he added, the Claretian “had a very strong social consciousness and believed that the church was not doing sufficient work in that area… I think his reasons for leaving the altar that day had to do both with the situation in segregation and desegregation and also the war in Vietnam.” Cody eventually worked as a community organizer in Chicago.87

For all the attention we may focus on the number of men and women who left religious life in the years after Vatican II, it is easy to overlook the challenge of remaining within the church in the face of dramatic social and religious tensions. As a priest in Grand Coteau, Doc Poché would witness how the idealistic rage of the 1960s—seen in the streets of Birmingham and New Orleans, Chicago and LA—manifested in the finger pointing and eye-rolling of blacks and whites at a parish council meeting over the destination of the “second collection” and the proper form of liturgical music. Facing

87 James Babin interviewed by Karla Woggon, 13 May 1992, transcript in Lower Mississippi Valley Collection, LSU Department of Special Collections (Baton Rouge, Louisiana).
such struggles, Poché would reflect longingly on his black studies course at Loyola. He would also lament what seemed an unbreakable wall of fear and mistrust that remained.\textsuperscript{88}

So, too, would August Thompson, an African American priest in Natchez, Mississippi. Thompson applauded that religious leaders in the region “finally have a ministerial alliance which is integrated.” Race was more the central issue than ecumenism, he added. “We have not done anything spectacular, yet the main thing is that we meet at this time. It has taken us a while to really begin to TALK to each other. Now we are going to have to do a job of tackling some of the real problems that still exist.”\textsuperscript{89} In the schools, he added, “we did get some more integration,” but only about 24 of 128 blacks who originally signed up to attend the white school were attending. “Things have not always been easy for them it seems. About a week ago I used my authority as Notary Public to sign some complaints they had made through a lawyer. We do not know what relief this will bring to them since the case has not come up as of yet. They also have to find their own transportation to school at this time.”\textsuperscript{90} For all of his efforts as a minister in the region, he lamented, it had been a long time since he returned to his hometown in Louisiana.

But I want to get to the place where I was born, baptized, confirmed, made my First Communion, left for the Seminary and later said My First Solemn Mass. You see for years I was officially told that I could not say a scheduled Mass in my parish. Now I hear this has all passed by the wayside. Thus, I am most anxious to finally after more than ten years as a priest be able to experience

\textsuperscript{88} This information is based on numerous conversations between the author and Louis A. “Doc” Poché, most in the summer of 2004 at his parish in Gramercy, Louisiana.

\textsuperscript{89} August Thompson to Louis J. Twomey, Christmas 1967, Box 13, Folder 1, LJT Papers, Loyola.

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid.
what it feels like to be truly a priest in ones hometown. One of these days, soon I hope you will see me again.91

Thompson’s annual Christmas letter in 1967 offers a revealing portrait of the day-to-day life of religious ministers in the post-integration South. Constant re-negotiations of social power and religious leadership within church communities shaped their experience.

Within this local setting, ministers hoped to create new avenues for social and religious influence in the post-Vatican era. Such efforts instigated confrontations with local laity and the hierarchy alike. In Lafayette, Bishop Schexnayder protested to Mother M. David of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament that some of the sisters had “incited people to riot” at St. Lawrence Parish in Mowata. The priest at the parish had long been instructed to allow blacks to sit in the main sanctuary, but over three weekends, the nuns there gathered them outside to call their attention to the injustices that remained in the church. According to the pastor, Schexnayder reported, “they sow the seed of distrust among the colored people and go so far as to say that something is going to happen to the church, that it could bombed…” This sisters reportedly “frighten the colored to the extent that some of them do not come back.” Some told the congregants that they should be “ready to fight and pray,” and that “they should not stand for these conditions.” The Bishop insisted that “these Sisters would do much more good if they attended to their own duties in their respective parishes.”92 Mother M. David protested that neither the priest nor the bishop had their facts straight on the matter. “Their story was quite different

91 Ibid.

92 Maurice Schexnayder to Motehr M. David, 5 September 1969, Mother M. David Correspondence, SBSA.
from what you had been told.” The encounter added fuel to the ongoing fires of racial integration.

The lives of men and women religious, both those who left and those who stayed, perhaps demonstrate better than any other group the Catholic struggle to reconcile the church’s and the south’s divided past with the new political, social, and spiritual strivings of individuals, black and white, in the 1960s. A priest storming away from the altar at a homily, a nun staging a small “sit-in” at a local church, or a theology professor struggling “to enter their experience,” all illuminate the ways Catholics, indeed all Christians in the South, would continue to deal with their inheritance as southerners. The politics of reconciliation in Louisiana left a mixed legacy that continues to the present day.
EPILOGUE

In 1970 a writer for *South Today* painted a dismal portrait of the Catholic Church’s racial legacy in the South. The church placed a heavy hand in matters of belief and doctrine, forbidding interfaith marriage and birth control and demanding that Catholic children attend parochial schools. “If the church had any fears of fallibility, it did not let on to the world.” Yet in the midst of this, “on matters of race the Catholic Church in the South was persuaded at least until the mid-fifties to abandon doctrines, ignore its own law, and throw moral baggage out the window.” Certainly, he added, the church had its fair share of visionaries. “Here and there, the efforts of its braver priests and members gave sporadic examples of a universal light in the local darkness.”¹ Even through the 1960s, priests and women religious marching side by side with Martin Luther King in Selma proclaimed the universal church’s support for the cause of African Americans and solidarity with oppressed people throughout the world. Yet by the end of the 1960s the persistence of segregation and discrimination belied their action and rhetoric, revealing a history of internal tension and public timidity by Archbishop Rummel and the Catholic hierarchy. “Where there was any conflict of interest between the church’s organization and the church’s mission, the organization was allowed to

win.”² The promises of the mid-1950s, when Rummel declared segregation “morally wrong and sinful” had failed to take hold amid the white southern backlash against *Brown v. Board*.

The hierarchy’s successes and failures certainly merit significant attention. But in gauging the Catholic place within the formal civil rights movement, we must not ignore a significant and much longer history of Catholic encounters with the social and economic consequences of Jim Crow. Recent events in New Orleans have offered a window into this history. In April of 2006, black Catholics in New Orleans challenged the Catholic hierarchy to reopen historically black St. Augustine Catholic Church. Archbishop Alfred Hughes’ desire to consolidate church resources in the aftermath of the hurricane had offered for many a grim reflection of the 1960s desegregation efforts that closed black churches and schools. After heated protest, the parish finally reopened on Palm Sunday, with parishioners “bellowing familiar tunes such as ‘Down by the Riverside.’”³ Black parishioners efforts to reclaim this sacred space reflected not only their desire to recover both spiritually and physically from the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, but also their continued struggle to proclaim a distinct and authentic Catholic identity after decades of oppression.

The south Louisiana community nonetheless remains significantly divided. From the very first conflicts over the segregation of Catholic life in New Orleans and efforts to implement the Church’s social teachings in the sugar cane fields of southeast Louisiana through movements for social and economic justice in the 1960s, black and whites in the

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² Ibid.
³ *Times Picayune*, 10 April 2006.
region sought an authentically Catholic understanding of the changing world around them. But their efforts and beliefs have often undermined an essential call to social and spiritual unity. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, as the Gulf Coast community attempts to rectify the social, economic, and environmental injustices built up over decades of neglect, its challenge will remain that of A.P. Tureaud’s and Archbishop Rummel’s, to keep the promises made in Catholic social teaching by preserving the dignity of life for all peoples. Black and white, lay and clergy, have historically assigned religious meaning and mobilized religious resources in response intense to social and economic challenges. As the Gulf Coast community moves forward, we must continue to draw upon the lessons and meanings of their struggles to integrate Catholic life in the region.
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