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BLACK NUNS  
AND  
THE STRUGGLE TO DESEGREGATE CATHOLIC AMERICA AFTER WORLD WAR I

By

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Black Nuns and the Struggle to Desegregate Catholic America after World War I

by SHANNEN DEE WILLIAMS

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Since 1824, hundreds of black women and girls have embraced the religious state in the U.S. Catholic Church. By consecrating their lives to God in a society that deemed all black people immoral, black Catholic sisters provided a powerful refutation to the racist stereotypes used by white supremacists and paternalists to exclude African Americans from the ranks of religious life and full citizenship rights. By dedicating their labors to the educational and social uplift of the largely neglected black community, black sisters challenged the Church and the nation to live up to the full promises of democracy and Catholicism. Yet, their lives and labors remain largely invisible in the annals of American and religious history. This is especially true of their efforts in the twentieth century, when black sisters pried open the doors of Catholic higher education, desegregated several historically white congregations, and helped to launch the greatest black Catholic revolt in American history.

This dissertation unearths the hidden history of black Catholic sisters in the fight for racial and educational justice in the twentieth century. Specifically, it chronicles the diverse and strategic efforts of black nuns in the long fight to secure African-American access to religious life and Catholic education after World War I. Drawing upon

previously-ignored archival sources, oral history interviews, and a host of secular and religious periodicals, this study argues that black sisters are the forgotten prophets of American Catholicism and democracy. Though practically invisible in the scholarship on the African-American freedom struggle and the Catholic Church, black sisters played critical *and* leading roles in the fight to dismantle barriers in the white-dominated, male-hierarchical Church. By demanding adherence to canon law and Catholic social teachings, black sisters were instrumental in forcing Church leaders to adopt progressive stances on issues such as black Catholic education, the development of African-American priests and sisters, and *briefly* black liberation. While resistance campaigns to equity and justice proved strident and largely successful, black sisters nonetheless endowed the Catholic Church with a rich tradition of righteous struggle against racial and gender injustice and faithfulness unparalleled in the United States.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In 2007, I set out to produce the first historical study of African-American Catholic sisters in the twentieth century. With my dissertation now complete, I relish the opportunity to thank everyone who has graciously supported me through this process. I am deeply indebted to a host of colleagues, mentors, family members, friends, and strangers who have at various points offered me encouragement, asked me difficult questions, and challenged me to produce a study worthy of the spirit-filled women whose lives and labors fill these pages.

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thank my fiancé for his untiring friendship, love, and support. That a person like him exists reminds me constantly that love can only be a gift from God.

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents. Their unyielding love and encouragement is one of my life's greatest blessings. At the tender age of seven, my mother (with her parents' support) converted to Catholicism, and her ongoing journey in the Church remains a powerful testimony to enduring faith of the African-American Catholic community in the face of racial exclusion and bigotry. My father was the first and greatest historian that I knew. Although he did not live to see me receive my Ph.D., his faith in me and my abilities strengthens me every day.

This study is also dedicated to the hundreds of courageous black women and girls who dared to profess the sacred vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience in a church that often sought to deny them their very humanity. For those who entrusted me with their personal (and often painful) stories, I am forever grateful. For those who could not bear to tell me their stories but still prayed for the project's success, thank you immensely. I remain a member of the Church of my birth because of the sacrifices, sufferings, and faith of these extraordinary women of God. I have tried to tell their story to the best of my abilities using the sources available to me. Any mistakes are my own.

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## Introduction

“Education and religion are the first two subversive forces that an oppressed people can use to liberate themselves. Religion is the guts of all human life; it can be used to silence a people or deliver a nation.”<sup>1</sup>  
 -The National Black Sisters’ Conference, 1972

In 1975, the nation’s community of black Catholic sisters was in deep crisis. After seven decades of steady population growth and the dismantling of some key barriers blocking African Americans’ full and equitable participation in the U.S. Catholic Church, the national population of black sisters was in rapid decline. Like their white and male counterparts in the Church, black sisters were departing religious life in record numbers. In fact, black sisters were defecting from religious life at nearly double the rate of their white counterparts.<sup>2</sup> In the previous decade, over 200 black sisters had requested release from their vows, and scores more were preparing to quit their convents.<sup>3</sup> With candidates for religious life becoming increasingly rare in the wake of equal rights gains in the American workplace and rising racial conservatism in the U.S. Church, the future of African-American female religious life was at best uncertain. At worse, it was doomed.

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<sup>1</sup> “NBSC Practicability Study: Rationale,” Folder: National Black Sisters’ Conference, National Office for Black Catholic Papers, St. Thomas University Archives. Copy also contained in National Black Sisters’ Conference Papers at Marquette University Archives and Special Collections, hereafter NBSC Papers.

<sup>2</sup> “More Blacks Than Whites Leaving Religious Life,” *The Catholic Post*, August 30, 1970, n.p., NBSC Papers. In 1973, the Central Committee of the National Black Sisters’ Conference initiated a series of conferences designed to study the organization and black sisters’ population in the United States. Using figures prepared in conjunction with the Executive Director of the Leadership Conference of Women, the NBSC found the dropout rate for white sisters between 1966 and 1972 was 6%, while for black sisters it was 12%. See “Information Sheet,” in *National Black Sisters’ Conference In/Search Workbook*, 23, NBSC Papers.

<sup>3</sup> From 1965 to 1975 alone, black congregations lost a combined total of 230 sisters, or roughly 30% of their membership. See *Annual Catholic Directory* entries for the Oblate Sisters of Providence (OSP), the Sisters of the Holy Family (SSF), and the Franciscan Handmaids of the Most Pure Heart of Mary (FHM) for 1965 and 1975. Although the National Black Sisters’ Conference attempted to survey the nation’s white congregations to gain a statistical profile of the specific exodus of black sisters from white orders in the early seventies, most white congregations refused to participate. However, it is clear that many white orders lost all or most of their African-American members during this period. See Sister Cecilia Abhold, FCSP to Sister M. Martin de Porres, RSM, January 23, 1970, NBSC Papers, MUSCA. See also Completed “Survey of Black Sisters,” 24a.

Equally distressing was the state of the nation's famed black Catholic educational system. In 1965, there were 349 historically black Catholic elementary and secondary schools and one historically black Catholic college, educating over 100,000 African-American pupils annually.<sup>4</sup> The following year, the Baltimore-based Oblate Sisters of Providence made national headlines when they founded Mount Providence Junior College, the nation's first (and only) Catholic institution of higher education to be administered by a historically black religious congregation.<sup>5</sup> Five years later, however, the future of the black Catholic educational system was bleak. In the wake of school integration, Church financial woes, massive white Catholic flight to suburban areas, and the ongoing mass exodus of teaching sisters from religious life, archdiocesan and diocesan school boards began to downsize the Church's highly-decorated educational infrastructure. Most often, Catholic schools in inner-city and predominantly black communities were the first on the chopping block despite fierce opposition from the African-American Catholic community. By 1975, most of the nation's 349 black Catholic elementary and secondary schools were facing either closure or merger, if they had not already done so.<sup>6</sup> With large numbers of black religious women and men leaving their communities, the black Catholic educational system facing extinction, and white Catholic

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<sup>4</sup> Although the number of black Catholic schools remained marginal in comparison to historically and predominantly white Catholic schools in the United States, the black Catholic educational system experienced steady growth during the first six decades of the twentieth century. See *Our Negro and Indian Missions: Annual Report of the Secretary of the Commission for the Catholic Missions among Colored People and the Indians* (Washington, D.C.: Commission for Catholic Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians, 1920, 1950, 1960), 12, 22-23, and 22-23.

<sup>5</sup> "Negro Catholic School to Open," *New York Times*, September 6, 1966, 11. See also Sharon C. Knecht, *Oblate Sisters of Providence: A Pictorial History* (Virginia Beach, Va.: The Donning Publishing Company, 2007), 113.

<sup>6</sup> "Focus: Catholic Education and the Black Community," *Impact* 1 (May-June 1971): n.p., copy in Brother Joseph Davis papers at the University of Notre Dame Archives and Special Collections, hereafter CDAV. See also Hebert G. Stein, "A Brief Interview with Sister Martin de Porres," ca. 1971, in personal collection of Dr. Patricia Grey, formerly Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey, R.S.M. Author has a copy of article.

hostility to black equality and civil rights increasing, the Catholic Church was fast losing what little moral authority and legitimacy it had left in the African-American community.<sup>7</sup>

Reflecting on the crisis in the *National Catholic Reporter* in 1975, Sister Mary Shawn Copeland, an Adrian Dominican Sister and executive director of the National Black Sisters' Conference, was bleak. "The future of the black Catholic nun is dubious," she wrote. "Today's rising American Catholic conservatism is the kind of conservatism that spelled the end of the first black sisterhood."<sup>8</sup> Referencing the racist and ecclesiastical suppression of an all-black ancillary community of Loretto Sisters in 1824, Sister Mary Shawn linked the current exodus of black sisters from religious life explicitly to the historical legacy and ongoing reality of white racism in the U.S. Church. "For most black women," she wrote, "their initiation into religious life was an experience devoid of sensitivity, of understanding, of appreciation for their culture, their heritage, their religious and spiritual dispositions, and frequently their very persons."<sup>9</sup> Chronicling the long and "uneasy story" of black Catholic sisters in the United States, Sister Mary Shawn documented the highly contested beginning of the nation's black sisterhoods in the nineteenth century, the racist and longtime exclusion of black women and girls from most

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<sup>7</sup> White Catholic resistance to African-American equality and racial integrations was especially strong in New Orleans, Milwaukee, Chicago, Detroit, and Boston. See John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.) For more detailed discussions of white Catholic resistance to racial integration and black equal rights campaigns, see R. Bentley Anderson, "Prelates, Protest, and Public Opinion: Catholic Opposition to Desegregation, 1947-1955," *Journal of Church and State* 46(2004): 617-44; Justin D. Poché, "The Catholic Citizens' Council: Religion and White Resistance in Post-War Louisiana," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 24(2006): 47-68; Ronald P. Formisano, *Boston against Busing: Race, Class, and Ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s*. (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Patrick D. Jones, *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009. See also Eileen McMahon, *What Parish Are You From?: A Chicago Irish Community and Race Relations* (Lexington, K.Y: University Press of Kentucky, 1995).

<sup>8</sup> Sister Mary Shawn Copeland, "Black Nuns: An Uneasy Story," *National Catholic Reporter*, March 7, 1965, 9.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

white orders, and the destructive impact of European cultural domination on the Church. “The involvement of white males (priests and bishops), societal pressures on black people, the church’s treatment of women, the existence of only white European congregational models, black peoples’ self-hatred and their suspicion of most black institutions are factors in the story of the black religious congregation” she wrote.<sup>10</sup> Regarding the fiercely-contested entry of black women into white congregations, Sister Mary Shawn, a member of a predominantly white order, argued that movement had been not only “diffusive of black talent,” but also a source of great tension and division among black sisters that remained unresolved.<sup>11</sup>

In 1968, the National Black Sisters’ Conference was formed to address many of the challenges and barriers that their marginal population faced in the U.S. Church. In mid-August of 1968, 155 of the nation’s approximately 1,000 black Catholic sisters, reeling from the assassination of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., gathered for a weeklong meeting at Mount Mercy College (now Carlow University) in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to discuss their role in the ongoing black revolution. Organized by 25-year old Sister M. Martin de Porres (Patricia Muriel Rita Francis) Grey, Pittsburgh’s first black Religious Sister of Mercy, the meeting had marked the first time in their 124-year history that black sisters had gathered on a national stage to confront and protest racism in the Church.<sup>12</sup> In the coming years, the organization would embark on an ambitious campaign to make black sisters visible in the nation and confront individual and

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<sup>10</sup> Copeland, “Black Nuns,” 9.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Sister Louis Marie Bryan, “History of the National Black Sisters’ Conference,” in *Celibate Black Commitment: Report of the Third Annual National Black Sisters’ Conference* (Pittsburgh: NBSC, 1971) 2-9. See also Shawn Copeland, “A Cadre of Women Religious Committed to Black Liberation: The National Black Sisters’ Conference,” *U.S. Catholic Historian*, 14 (1996): 121-144.

institutional racism and sexism within and outside of the Church. Their efforts led them into collaborations with several civil rights and black power organizations, landed them on picket lines across the country, and led them to Vatican City in 1971 to voice their grievances and demand justice for black Catholics in the United States to highest-ranking authority in the Church—the Pope.<sup>13</sup> In that same year, the NBSC, working in conjunction with the African-American Catholic laity and the National Office for Black Catholics, launched a national campaign to stop the mass closings of Catholic schools in urban and predominantly black communities.<sup>14</sup>

However, the great exodus of black sisters from religious life, which included the devastating departure of NBSC foundress Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey in 1974, began to take its toll on the organization by 1975. “Our greatest need and most difficult task is that of replicating ourselves,” Sister Mary Shawn wrote. “We have had little success; fewer than 1,000 of some 130,000 American sisters are black.”<sup>15</sup> Citing the general lack of support from hostile white and conservative black orders, Sister Mary Shawn pointed to the NBSC’s involvement in the establishment of an indigenous religious congregation in Benin City, Nigeria as perhaps a “significant contribution to religious life.” “Only the most daring and determined options will prevail;” she wrote. “[N]ew systems of formation and initiation are of necessity; the shape and shade of religious communities must change; new paradigms of communal living and organization must be explored.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> George Dugan, “Five Black American Catholics Will Take Grievances to Pope,” *New York Times*, October 2, 1971. See also “Blacks Lobby for Papal Interview,” *Signs of Soul* 4 (January 1972): 1, 13, 15.

<sup>14</sup> “NBSC Press Release: Black Nuns Opt for Community Controlled Schools,” *Signs of Soul* 3(May 1971): 8. The statement was released by the organization on April 20, 1971.

<sup>15</sup> Copeland, “Black Nuns,” 9.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 9, 14.

Indeed, for Sister Mary Shawn, the future of black female religious life and the black apostolate in the United States depended on it.

Yet, the radical and structural changes needed to facilitate African-American retention and growth in female religious life and preserve this ancient tradition in the U.S. Church would not be realized. In 1976, Sister Mary Shawn Copeland, suffering from exhaustion and frustration, resigned from the National Black Sisters' Conference. Two decades later, Copeland, like so many of her peers who came of age politically in the sixties and seventies, departed religious life for good.<sup>17</sup> Though the election of several African-American priests into the U.S. episcopacy in the 1980s and 1990s offered renewed hope to those struggling for racial justice and educational equity, the national population of black sisters continued its steady decline.<sup>18</sup> By the turn of the twenty-first century, approximately 300 African-American sisters remained in the U.S Catholic Church.<sup>19</sup> While increasing vocations from the African continent have slowly begun to augment dwindling numbers of African-American sisters and revitalize congregations in recent years, African American female vocations to religious life are largely a relic of the

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<sup>17</sup> Dr. Shawn Copeland, interview by author, March 5, 2007.

<sup>18</sup> In 1966, the Holy See appointed Father Harold R. Perry, S.V.D. as the auxiliary bishop of New Orleans. Bishop Perry was the first self-identified black bishop in the United States. Ninety-one years earlier, the Vatican had appointed James Augustine Healy, bishop of Portland, Maine, where he remained in leadership until his death in 1900. Although Healy, the child of an Irish plantation owner and his "mulatto" slave, was of African descent, he passed for white and steadfastly refused to associate with the African-American community or advocate racial justice during his tenure in religious life. See Stephen J. Ochs, *Desegregating the Altar: The Josephites and the Struggle for Black Priests, 1871-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 26-27, 446. In 1984, there were 10 African-American bishops in the United States. See "What We Have Seen and Heard: A Pastoral Letter on Evangelization from the Black Bishops of the United States (1984)" in *"Stamped with the Image of God": African Americans as God's Image in Black*, eds. Cyprian Davis, O.S.B. and Jamie Phelps, O.P., (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2003): 135-6. In 2012, there were 16 living African-American prelates in the United States, one of whom is an archbishop and five of whom are retired. See the directory of the National Black Catholic Congress, [http://www.nbccongress.org/aboutus/congress\\_directory/](http://www.nbccongress.org/aboutus/congress_directory/) (accessed on July 26, 2012).

<sup>19</sup> Sister Roberta Fulton, SSM, interview by author, February 6, 2010. Sister Roberta Fulton was the current president of the National Black Sisters' Conference at the time of my interview, and this number was the organization's estimate.

past. With the exception of a few, including the indomitable Sister Thea Bowman, F.S.P.A., who is currently under consideration for sainthood in the Catholic Church, African-American Catholic sisters remain largely unknown to the vast majority of Americans, Catholic and non-Catholic, black and non-black alike.<sup>20</sup> Few have ever seen a black sister. Fewer are aware of their long and rich history in the United States, especially in the fight to dismantle racial barriers in the Catholic Church.

This dissertation unearths the hidden history of African-American Catholic sisters in the fight for racial and educational justice in the twentieth century. Specifically, it chronicles the diverse and strategic efforts of black Catholic nuns in the long fight to secure African-American access to religious life and Catholic education after World War I. Beginning in the 1920s, state legislatures began requiring the higher education and certification of private school teachers across the nation in order to secure school accreditation. Required by Church authorities to comply with the new state mandates but barred from Catholic higher education solely on the basis of race, black teaching sisters were faced with a monumental crisis that threatened not only their survival, but also the future of their schools in the United States. Armed with the code of canon law (promulgated in 1918) and Vatican mandates that all Catholics be educated in Catholic schools, the nation's black teaching orders launched a quiet and strategic campaign to pry

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<sup>20</sup> Currently, three deceased black American nuns are being considered for sainthood in the Catholic Church. They are Mother Mary (Elizabeth Clarisse) Lange, foundress of the Baltimore-based Oblate Sisters of Providence, Mother Henriette Delille, foundress of the New Orleans-based Sisters of the Holy Family, and Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration Thea Bowman, a well-known educator, singer, and powerful advocate for racial and education justice in the Catholic Church. See Ervin Dyer, "Black Nun Being Examined for Sainthood," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, November 28, 2010, 4. In 2010, Pope Benedict XVI declared Henriette Delille "venerable," the first official step toward becoming a saint. See Bruce Nolan, "Henriette Delille Moves Closer to Sainthood for Work with New Orleans Slaves," *The Times Picayune*, March 29, 2010 [http://www.nola.com/religion/index.ssf/2010/03/henriette\\_delille\\_moves\\_closer\\_to\\_sainthood\\_for\\_work\\_with\\_new\\_orleans\\_slaves.html](http://www.nola.com/religion/index.ssf/2010/03/henriette_delille_moves_closer_to_sainthood_for_work_with_new_orleans_slaves.html) (accessed July 26, 2012). For a greater discussion of Sister Thea Bowman, see Charlene Smith and John Feister, *Thea's Song: The Life of Thea Bowman* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009).

open the doors of Catholic higher education and secure the accreditation of the black-administered Catholic educational system—a critical and necessary step in the larger fight for black recognition and justice in the U.S. Church. However, in the absence and deliberate suppression of a substantial black Catholic clergy in the U.S., black sisters often had to forge uneasy agreements with racist and paternalistic white ecclesiastical authorities and religious communities in order to accomplish this task. They also had to assume a “seemingly accommodationist” stance toward racial segregation and white supremacy in the Church and adopt a gradualist approach in the fight for racial justice.<sup>21</sup>

In 1939, Oblate Sister of Providence Mary of Good Counsel (Helena Mercedes) Baptiste, one of two black sisters selected to (re)integrate the Catholic University of America in 1933 and one of the first African Americans to earn a graduate degree from Villanova College (now University), offered one of the few extant written justifications for the historically conservative posture of the nation’s black sisterhoods. She declared: “[Negro sisters] know the temper of the South which accepts as axiomatic white supremacy and [we] would be foolhardy to advocate any theory or system which would bring overt acts of violence upon [our] heads or the heads of [our] pupils...At the same time, [we] are not unaware of the injustices of this bi-racial set-up...[and we] are courageous enough to renounce wrong as wrong with no cringing on questions or morality.”<sup>22</sup> Reflecting on what she labeled as the “conservative radicalism” of her community, Baptiste argued that black sisters had found the strategic balance needed between black radicals like W.E.B. Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson and conservatives

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<sup>21</sup> Copeland, “Black Nuns,” 9.

<sup>22</sup> Sister Mary of Good Counsel Baptiste, “A Study of the Foundation and Educational Objectives of the Congregation of the Oblate Sisters and of the Achievement of These Objectives as Seen in Their Schools,” (M.A. Thesis, Villanova College, 1939), 56-7.

like Booker T. Washington during the era of Jim Crow apartheid.<sup>23</sup> However, Baptiste also made clear that although the Oblates adopted a gradualist approach to the fight for racial justice they never accepted the legitimacy of white supremacy or the morality of racial segregation in the Church. Nonetheless, she conceded that her order had to “give their pupils the conservative attitude of the Church which is the result of an experience of many centuries” in order to preserve their mission.<sup>24</sup>

Although the strategic conservatism and pragmatism of this generation of black sisters ultimately insured the survival of the nation’s black teaching sisterhoods and the black-administered Catholic educational system through the Jim Crow era, it also proved extremely costly for African-American sisters in the long run. Black sisters in black orders were often instructed to never mention race outside of the convent or discuss among themselves their frequent and hostile encounters with racist and paternalistic whites within and outside the Church. As a result, many black sisters in black communities found it difficult to negotiate the life and the spiritual conundrum of a racially-segregated Church.

Pioneering black sisters in white congregations faced similar difficulties. Often the only or one of a few black members in their congregations, which could number in the thousands, many routinely endured racist bullying, ostracism, and pressure from their white counterparts . Many were encouraged to deny and degrade their racial heritage in order to remain in their communities. As African-American Sister of the Blessed Sacrament Christine Nesmith famously quipped in the seventies, “Entering an order

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<sup>23</sup> For a discussion of the different strands of black political thought and uplift strategies during the nadir of American race relations, see August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1966) and Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

<sup>24</sup> Baptiste, “Foundation and Educational Objectives,” 55.

meant ceasing to be black and looking on what you grew up with as uncouth. You could do the Irish jig, but anything African was taboo.”<sup>25</sup>

The onset of the civil rights movement and the liberalizing reforms of the Second Vatican Council finally offered black sisters the opportunity and space to confront racism and sexism in the Church. It also empowered them to embrace and celebrate their blackness and the spiritual traditions of the African-American community fully.<sup>26</sup> Led by the generation of sisters who desegregated the nation’s historically white orders in the post-World War II era, black sisters who came of age politically in the late sixties and seventies proved unwilling to make the same racial compromises and concessions as their predecessors. Indeed, most were willing to risk it all, including departure from religious life, in order to expose and protest fully the sins of racism and sexism in the Church. Tragically, many of the sisters who had pried open the doors of Catholic higher education and kept the fight for black religious alive during the Jim Crow era proved *as religious superiors* unable to make the necessary structural and ideological changes needed to keep the next generation of black sisters in religious life. Their failures and the intractability of racism in the Church ultimately sealed the fate of the nation’s community of African-American sisters in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

This dissertation documents the complicated and painful history of black sisters’ accommodation and struggle for equity and justice in the white-dominated U.S. Catholic Church. Drawing upon previously ignored archival sources, 33 oral history interviews,

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<sup>25</sup> Edward B. Fiske, “Finding Identity, Black Nuns Put Soul Into Religious Life,” *New York Times*, August 15, 1971, 22.

<sup>26</sup> See Sr. Eva Marie Lumas, S.S.S. and Mary McGann, R.S.C.J. “The Emergence of African American Catholic Worship.” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 19, no. 2 (Spring 2001): 27-65 and *Let It Shine!: The Emergence of African-American Catholic Worship* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

and a host of secular and Catholic periodicals, it argues that black sisters are the forgotten prophets of American Catholicism and democracy. Though practically invisible in the scholarship on the African-American freedom struggle and the Catholic Church, black sisters played critical *and* leading roles in the fight to dismantle barriers in the U.S. Church. By demanding adherence to canon law and Catholic social teachings, black sisters were instrumental in forcing Church leaders to adopt progressive stances on issues such as black Catholic education, the development of African-American priests and sisters, and *briefly* black liberation. Although resistance campaigns to equity and justice proved strident and largely successful, black sisters nonetheless endowed the Catholic Church with a rich tradition of righteous struggle against racial and gender injustice and faithfulness unparalleled in the United States.

By centering the “subversive habits” of black sisters (both literally and figuratively) in the fight to dismantle barriers in Catholic America, this study offers major revisions to historical narratives of the origin and nature of Catholic involvement and leadership in black liberation struggles in the United States. Specifically, it demonstrates how the struggle to secure African-American access to female religious life and Catholic education provided black Catholics and their allies with the necessary platform upon which to challenge the legitimacy of white supremacy and the practice of racial segregation in the Church. It also highlights the gross deficiencies that emerge when black Catholics are not centered in their own history and fully incorporated into histories of the American Catholic experience and of broader struggles for justice and equity. Indeed, the marginalization of black sisters in American history deeply underscores of the ongoing challenges of political memory and the importance of oral

history in the face of scholarly amnesia and erasure.<sup>27</sup> Thus, this study aims to restore the lost Catholic dimension of the modern African-American freedom struggle and illuminate how black sisters as students, teachers, principals, college presidents, university professors, nurses, civil rights activists, and black power leaders challenged the Church and the nation to live up to the full promises of Catholicism and democracy.

### **Historical and Historiographical Significance**

Despite the proliferation of historical scholarship on Catholic sisters over the past thirty years, black Catholic sisters in the United States remain historically and historiographically understudied.<sup>28</sup> Since 1824, hundreds of black women and girls have embraced the religious state in at least eight historically-black Catholic sisterhoods and a host of historically-white congregations in the United States. Yet, their lives and labors remain virtually invisible in the annals of American and Catholic history. To date, only

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<sup>27</sup> For discussions of the politics of historical memory, oral history, and mining forgotten historical subjects, see Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995); Deborah Gray White, "Mining the Forgotten: Manuscript Sources for Black Women's History," *Journal of American History* 74, no.1 (1987): 237-42; Rhonda Y. Williams, "'I'm A Keeper of Information': History-Telling and Voice," *Oral History Review* 28(2001): 41-64, and Jacqueline Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* 91 (March 2005): 1233-1263.

<sup>28</sup> The most recent works include: Margaret M. McGuinness, *Called to Serve: A History of Nuns in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Anne Butler, *Across God's Frontiers: Catholic Sisters in the American West, 1850-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Edward T. Brett, *The New Orleans Sisters of the Holy Family: African-American Missionaries to the Garifuna of Belize* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012); Sarah A. Curtis, *Civilizing Habits: Women Missionaries and the Revival of French Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Kathleen Sprows Cummings, *New Women of Old Faith: Gender and American Catholicism in the Progressive Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Mary J. Henold, *Catholic and Feminist: The Surprising History of the American Catholic Feminist Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Amy L. Koehlinger, *The New Nuns: Racial Justice and Religious Reform in the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2007); Emily Clark, *Masterless Mistresses: The New Orleans Ursulines and the Development of a New World Society, 1727-1834* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Suellen Hoy, *Good Hearts: Catholic Sisters in Chicago's Past* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006); and Maureen Fitzgerald, *Habits of Compassion: Irish Catholic Nuns and the Origins of New York's Welfare System, 1830-1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006). See also Coburn's "An Overview of the Historiography of Women Religious: A Twenty-Five Year Retrospective," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 22 (2004):1-26.

two historical monographs exist on African-American Catholic sisters. In 2002, historian Diane Batts Morrow shattered the scholarly silences surrounding the lives and experiences of African-American women religious with the publication of *Persons of Color and Religious at the Same Time: The Oblate Sisters of Providence, 1828-1860*.<sup>29</sup> Ten years later, Edward T. Brett added to the historical canon on black nuns in the United States with the publication of *The New Orleans Sisters of the Holy Family: African-American Missionaries to the Garifuna of Belize*.<sup>30</sup> However, much more research needs to be undertaken in order to offer a nuanced historical overview of this unique sorority of black Catholic women and girls.

Despite their significant contributions to the historiography of U.S. Catholic sisters, the two existing monographs on African-American Catholic nuns are limited temporally and geographically. For example, Morrow's pioneering award-winning study of the Oblate Sisters of Providence (OSP), the nation's first successful community of black Catholic nuns, concludes just prior to the start of the Civil War, when the community population was less than 20 sisters and OSP ministries had not yet expanded beyond their native Baltimore. Brett's study of the New Orleans-based Sisters of the Holy Family (SSF), the second successful community of black nuns in the United States, is also limited. Although Brett's study follows the order into the twentieth century and briefly examines the impact of the Second Vatican Council on the SSF, its primary focus is on the SSF's foreign missionary work in Belize, which despite its importance constituted only a marginal portion of the order's ministries. Virtually no work has appeared on black sisters' spiritual and educational labors during the rise of Jim Crow

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<sup>29</sup> Diane Batts Morrow, *Persons of Color and Religious at the Same Time: The Oblate Sisters of Providence, 1828-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

<sup>30</sup> Brett, *The New Orleans Sisters of the Holy Family*.

apartheid in the late nineteenth century, when their numbers and ministries began to increase exponentially.<sup>31</sup>

Save for a few journal articles, two published memoirs, and a recent biography of Sister Thea Bowman, F.S.P.A., historical scholarship on African-American Catholic sisters in the twentieth century is also minimal.<sup>32</sup> Such scholarly myopia is especially curious considering the fact that the national population of black sisters continued its steady climb at the turn of the twentieth century and peaked in the mid-1960s at approximately 1,000.<sup>33</sup> It was also during the twentieth century that black sisters made their most significant and enduring contributions to the struggle for racial and educational justice by desegregating Catholic higher education and female religious life and organizing on the national level to protest racism and sexism in the Church after Vatican II. Thus, a nuanced historical treatment of black sisters in the twentieth century is long overdue, and “Subversive Habits” seeks to make that critical contribution to the fields of United States, African-American, women’s, religious, and educational history. It also

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<sup>31</sup> Theresa A. Rector’s “Black Nuns as Educators,” *Journal of Negro Education* 51 (Summer 1982): 238-53, provides a very general overview of the educational endeavors of the OSP, SSF, and FHM.

<sup>32</sup> See Copeland, “The National Black Sisters’ Conference;” Smith and Feister, *Thea’s Song*; Sister Louis Marie Bryan, S.C., D.S.W., *All Along the Way: Gifts, Blessings, and Graces from Our Loving God* (Clifton Corners, NY: Jubilee Studio, 2010), Cornelia F. Sexauer, “A Well-Behaved Woman Who Made History: Sister Mary Antona’s Journey to Selma,” *American Catholic Studies* 115 (Winter 2004): 48-51; Sister Mary Gabriella Guidry, S.S.F. *The Southern Negro Nun: An Autobiography* (New York: Exposition Press, 1974); Sister Mary Roger Thibodeaux, *A Black Nun Looks at Black Power* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1972).

<sup>33</sup> Population statistics on black Catholic sisters in the United States have been historically elusive. Though one can easily trace the population growth and decline of sisters in black congregations in the *Annual Catholic Directory*, it is impossible to do the same for those black sisters in white congregations using the same source. In 1962, the Society of the Divine Word conducted a series of national surveys to determine the number of African-American priests, brothers, sisters, and seminarians in the United States. It found that there were 983 black sisters living in the United States in 1962, with over three-fourths holding membership in black orders. See “983 Negro Nuns in U.S., Catholic Magazine Reveals After Survey,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, August 8, 1962, 10. In 1965, the total population of sisters in black congregations according the *Annual Catholic Directory* was 772. So, if the number of black sisters in white congregations simply remained unchanged between 1965 and 1968, the national population of black sisters at the founding of the National Black Sisters’ Conference would have been at little over 1,000. All NBSC records note that the national population of black sisters stood at approximately 1,000 at the time of its founding in 1968.

seeks to underscore the central, though largely ignored, importance of the struggle for black sisters and their ministries in the larger fight for black recognition and rights in the U.S. Catholic Church.

To date, the limited scholarship on the black struggle for equity and justice in the U.S. Catholic Church centers largely on the fight to develop an African-American Catholic clergy—a band of priests, brothers, bishops, archbishops, and cardinals who could access formal power in the white- and male-dominated Church hierarchy.<sup>34</sup> Unlike their Protestant, Muslim, and non-Western counterparts, African-American Catholics were long denied priests (or formal male religious leaders) of their own race to serve their pastoral needs in the U.S. Church. Indeed, for the earliest generations of self-identified African-American priests, racist white prelates steadfastly refused to ordain them and assign them to parishes in the United States. Instead, most were ordained and stationed in posts in the Caribbean and West Africa thousands of miles away from their African-American communities. Others remained deliberately hidden as instructors or assistants

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<sup>34</sup> Historical scholarship on the black struggle for equity, justice and rights, or what can be called the black Catholic freedom struggle, (and resistance to it) is minimal. See Ochs, *Desegregating the Altar*; Davis, *Black Catholics*; R. Bentley Anderson, *Black, White, and Catholic: New Orleans Interracialism, 1947-1956* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2005); James B. Bennett, *Religion and the Rise of Jim Crow in New Orleans* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); David W. Southern, *John LaFarge and the Limits of Catholic Interracialism, 1911-1963* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996); Marilyn Nickels, *Black Catholic Protest and the Federated Colored Catholics, 1917-1933: Three Perspectives on Racial Justice* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1988); Nickels, “Thomas Wyatt Turner and the Federated Colored Catholics,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 7(1988): 215-232; Copeland, “A Cadre of Women Religious Committed to Black Liberation;” Joseph M. Davis, S.M. and Cyprian S. Rowe, “The Development of the National Office for Black Catholics,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 7(1988): 269-75; David Spalding, C.F.X., “The Negro Catholic Congresses, 1889-1894,” *Catholic Historical Review* 55(October 1969): 337-357; and Gary B. Agee, *A Cry for Justice: Daniel Rudd and His Life in Black Catholicism, Journalism, and Activism, 1854-1933* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2011); Morris J. MacGregor, *The Emergence of a Black Catholic Community: St. Augustine’s in Washington* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1999); Dorothy Ann Blatnica, V.S.C., *At the Altar of Their God: African American Catholics in Cleveland, 1921-1961* (New York: Garland, 1995); and William A. Osborne, *The Segregated Covenant: Race Relations and American Catholics* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967).

in seminaries and predominantly white northern parishes.<sup>35</sup> Historians Cyprian Davis and Stephen Ochs have meticulously documented how the deliberate and racist exclusion of African-American men from the Catholic priesthood and the ranks of the U.S. episcopacy well into the twentieth century robbed black Catholics of “legitimate” spokesmen and effective racial justice advocates within the Church.<sup>36</sup> The deliberate suppression of an African-American clergy combined with rampant discrimination in the white-dominated Church helped to render Catholicism unappealing as a religion to the vast majority of African Americans for much of U.S. history. It also precipitated the development of two major, though ultimately short-lived, black lay protest movements: the black Catholic congresses of the late nineteenth century and the Federated Colored Catholics of the United States during the early twentieth century, prior to the great black Catholic revolt of the late sixties and seventies.<sup>37</sup>

However, virtually no scholarly attention has been paid to the equally important struggle for black sisters and their long fight to secure African-American access to Catholic education. Long before there were black priests in the United States, there were black sisters who founded some of the nation’s earliest Catholic schools, orphanages, and nursing homes for African Americans. Beginning in 1824, black women became the first representatives of the African-American community to embrace the religious state in the

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<sup>35</sup> Ochs, *Desegregating the Altar*, 359-61. See also the historical portraits of the nation’s first black priests in Albert S. Foley, S.J., *God’s Men of Color: The Colored Catholic Priests of the United States, 1854-1954* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Co., 1955).

<sup>36</sup> Ochs, *Desegregating the Altar*; Davis, *Black Catholics*, 146-62, 203, 218-19, 233-34.

<sup>37</sup> For documents and detailed discussions of the two earliest black lay protest movements, see Congress of Colored Catholics of the United States, *Three Catholic Afro-American Congresses* (1893. Reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1978); Nickels, *Black Catholic Protest* and “Thomas Wyatt Turner and the Federated Colored Catholics;” Spalding, “Negro Catholic Congresses;” and Agee, *A Cry for Justice*. See also Dolores Egger Labbe, *Jim Crow Comes to Church: The Establishment of Segregated Catholic Parishes in South Louisiana*. (1971. Reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1978).

U.S. Catholic Church. Barred from joining white sisterhoods due to exclusionary admissions policies, black women first succeeded in becoming sisters by establishing their own orders. Between 1824 and 1922, at least eight historically black and Afro-Creole Roman Catholic sisterhoods were organized in the United States. These congregations were the all-black ancillary community of the Sisters of Loretto (1824) in Loretto, Kentucky; the Oblate Sisters of Providence (1828-present) in Baltimore, Maryland; the Sisters of the Holy Family (1842-present) and the Sisters of Our Lady of Lourdes (1882-1930s) in New Orleans, Louisiana; the Sisters of the Third Order of Saint Francis (1888-1913) in Convent, Louisiana; the Sisters of the Third Order of Saint Francis (1889-1913) in Savannah, Georgia; the Franciscan Handmaids of the Most Pure Heart of Mary (1916-Present) in Savannah, Georgia and later Harlem, New York; and the all-black Good Shepherd Sisters or Magdalens (1922-1960s) in Baltimore, Maryland.<sup>38</sup> It is also important to note that in 1845, two ex-Oblate Sisters of Providence—Therese (Theresa Maxis) Duchemin and Ann Constance (Charlotte) Schaaf—both of whom could pass for white, founded the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (IHM) in Monroe, Michigan as an exclusively white congregation. After racial and gender hostilities forced their exile to Pennsylvania in 1859, Maxis and Schaaf established two additional, and exclusively white, branches of IHM sisters in Immaculata and Scranton before the same hostilities drove them to seek refuge with the Grey Nuns in Ottawa,

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<sup>38</sup> Davis, *Black Catholics*, 98-115. See also Lisa Marie Brown, *Posing as Nuns, Passing for White: The Gouley Sisters* (New Orleans: Privately Printed, 2010); Joseph B. Code, "Negro Sisterhoods in the United States." *America* 58 (January 1938): 318-19; Michael J. McNally, "A Minority of a Minority: The Witness of Black Women Religious in the Antebellum South." *Review for Religious* 40 (1981): 260-69; Agnes Kane Callum, "The Black Magdalen Sisters of Baltimore," *The Catholic Review*, February 10, 2005, 16-T and "Colored Magdalens" file in the Josephite Archives.

Canada.<sup>39</sup> Of the eight known U.S. black sisterhoods, all but one, were (or were designed to be) teaching communities, and all were founded in the South, where the vast majority of the nation's black Catholics resided until the Second World War.<sup>40</sup>

Although they could not access formal power in the Church due to their race and sex, black sisters, like their male counterparts, represented a serious threat to white supremacy. White Catholics, religious and lay alike, vehemently (and oftentimes violently) opposed black sisters characterizing their existence as “a profanation of the habit.”<sup>41</sup> Ecclesiastical authorities in New Orleans went so far as to prohibit the Sisters of the Holy Family from making public vows or wearing a habit in public from their founding in 1842 until 1872.<sup>42</sup> Black sisters were also subjected to white supremacist violence and terror and routinely endured verbal insults and physical intimidation (e.g. being forced off sidewalks, threats to burn down their schools and convents, etc.) from racist whites, Catholic and non-Catholic alike.<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, by consecrating themselves to God in a society and Church that deemed all black people immoral, black sisters provided a powerful refutation to the virulent and racist stereotypes used by white supremacists and paternalists to exclude African Americans from the ranks of Catholic religious life and U.S. citizenship rights.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, by dedicating their labors to the

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<sup>39</sup> Margaret Gannon, I.H.M., ed., *Paths of Daring, Deed of Hope: Letters by and about Mother Theresa Maxis Duchemin* (Scranton, P.A.: IHM, 1992), 3-5. See also Morrow, *Persons of Color*, 186-92 and Joseph B. Code, “Mother Theresa Maxis Duchemin.” *America* 74 (22 December 1945): 317-19.

<sup>40</sup> Davis, *Black Catholic*, 98-115. John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries*, 29, 55, 72, and 103.

<sup>41</sup> Diane Batts Morrow, “The Difficulty of Our Situation: The Oblate Sisters of Providence in Antebellum Society,” in *Uncommon Faithfulness: The Black Catholic Experience*, ed. M. Shawn Copeland (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 28.

<sup>42</sup> Tracy Fessenden, “The Sisters of the Holy Family and the Veil of Race,” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 10(Summer 2000): 204-5. See also

<sup>43</sup> Ochs, *Desegregating the Altar*, 26. Many of these incidents will be discussed in detail in this study.

<sup>44</sup> For a discussion of white attitudes toward African Americans during and after slavery, see Winthrop Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill, N.C.:

educational and social uplift of the largely neglected black Catholic community, black sisters forced the U.S. hierarchy to acknowledge, if only nominally, the existence of its African-American constituency and laid the critical groundwork for the great expansion of the black Catholic educational system and the larger African-American apostolate in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>45</sup>

Unsurprisingly, black sisters also served as the earliest and fiercest champions of black priests in the United States. Historical records reveal that members of the Oblate Sisters of Providence and the Sisters of the Holy Family, the nation's two oldest historically black sisterhoods, educated and mentored a significant portion of the first two generations of African-American priests in the United States.<sup>46</sup> Archival sources and oral history also reveal that black sisters firmly believed that their spiritual perfection and educational successes in the African-American apostolate would help mitigate white opposition to the ordination of black men or at the very least invalidate frequent and insidious white claims that black Catholics did not want priests of their own race.<sup>47</sup> As

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University of North Carolina Press, 1968); George M. Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971); Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Daughters of Sorrow: Attitudes Toward Black Women, 1880-1920* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Carlson Publishing, Inc., 1990); Patricia Morton, *Disfigured Images: The Historical Assault on Afro-American Women* (New York: Praeger, 1991); John C. Murphy, *An Analysis of the Attitudes of American Catholics toward the Immigrant and the Negro, 1825-1925* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1940); I. A. Newby, *Jim Crow's Defense: Anti-Negro Thought in America, 1900-1930* (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1965).

<sup>45</sup> See Posey, Thaddeus John, O.F.M., Cap. "Praying in the Shadows: The Oblate Sisters of Providence, a Look at Nineteenth-Century Black Spirituality." *U.S. Catholic Historian* 12, (Winter 1994): 11-30 and "An Unwanted Commitment: The Spirituality of the Early Oblate Sisters of Providence, 1829-1890," (PhD diss., St. Louis University, 1993), and Emily Clark and Virginia Meacham Gould. "The Feminine Face of Afro-Catholicism in New Orleans, 1727-1852.," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 59(April 2002): 409-448.

<sup>46</sup> Ten of the first 23 self-identified African-American men ordained to the Catholic priesthood were educated and mentored by the Oblate Sisters of Providence (OSP) or the Sisters of the Holy Family (SSF). See Albert S. Foley, S.J., *God's Men of Color: The Colored Catholic Priests of the United States, 1854-1954* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Co., 1955).

<sup>47</sup> This insidious and false claim was most notably promoted by Father John T. Gillard, S.S.J., the white spiritual director of the Oblate Sisters of Providence. Though a fierce champion of the Oblate Sisters

Oblate Sister of Providence Mary of Good Counsel (Helena Mercedes) Baptiste cogently argued in 1939: “[T]he very existence of a colored religious [sister] is an ever present if unvoiced argument that highly developed religious life is not only possible for Negroes but even desirable.”<sup>48</sup> Thus, the struggle for black sisters was inherently linked to the struggle for black priests and the larger struggle for black rights and recognition in the Church and must be understood as such.

In the absence of a substantial African-American Catholic clergy until the late sixties, black sisters and lay Catholics also shouldered the burden of advocating for racial justice and struggling against racism and white paternalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Church. Following the clerically orchestrated demise of the Federated Colored Catholic lay movement in mid-1930s, black sisterhoods became the community’s chief ambassadors to the white hierarchy and paternalist white orders working in the African-American community and remained such until the black Catholic revolt of the late sixties. Black congregations also served as safe havens for scores of young African-American women and girls who were refused admission into the nation’s white congregations solely on the basis of race well into the 1960s. Thus, an examination of black sisters’ diverse and strategic efforts during this critical period is necessary and long overdue.

Although much of this study takes place within Catholic boundaries, it does intersect with the larger black freedom struggle in significant ways and holds important implications for future scholarship on the black Catholic community and its integration

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of Providence and black sisters more generally, Gillard was vehemently opposed to the ordination of black men and an ardent racial paternalist. See Diane Batts Morrow, “‘To My Darlings, the Oblates, Every Blessing’: The Reverend John T. Gillard, S.S.J., and the Oblate Sisters of Providence,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 28(Winter 2010): 8-9.

<sup>48</sup> Baptiste, “Foundation and Educational Objectives,” 54.

into African-American, religious, women's, educational, and civil rights history. First, the entry of black women and girls into religious life in the U.S. Catholic Church must be taken up by feminist scholars and included in historical discussions of black women's struggles for human dignity, bodily integrity, and respectability. As historians of black women have effectively demonstrated, the social, political, economic, and sexual vulnerability of black women during and after slavery forced black women to develop myriad strategies to protect themselves and their bodies from assault and exploitation.<sup>49</sup> In her seminal study of the women's movement in the black Baptist Church, historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham argued that black Baptist women developed a "politics of respectability" and a feminist theology to resist exploitation and assault in American society and exert power within their respective houses of worship.<sup>50</sup> However, historians of black women and Catholic sisters have failed to examine the political and arguably feminist implications of the unique entry of black women and girls into religious life in

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<sup>49</sup> For a detailed discussions of black women's resistance to sexual, political, and economic exploitation during and after slavery, see Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I A Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, rev. 1999) and *Too Heavy A Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1999); Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and The Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on The Culture of Dissemblance," *Signs* 14 (Summer 1989): 912-920; Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997); Danielle McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010); Crystal Feimster, *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993) and "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *Signs*, 17 (Winter 1992): 251-74; Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1984); Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); and Stephanie J. Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do: Black Professional Women Workers During the Jim Crow Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

<sup>50</sup> Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 185-230.

the white-dominated, male-hierarchical Catholic Church.<sup>51</sup> While I do not suggest that the primary goal of black sisters' embrace of the religious state was political or feminist (the call and desire to serve God was always the answer), the women I interviewed for this study almost always made note of the limited employment opportunities available to them prior to the civil rights movement. "I only could have been a teacher, a nurse, or a maid" was the common retort of black sister interviewees. (The common retort of my white sister interviewees was "I only could have been a teacher, a nurse, or a secretary.") Moreover, the current and former black sisters interviewed often alluded to (without prompts) the "perils" that they as black women faced in the secular world. One former sister explicitly mentioned the frequent rape of black maids in white households.<sup>52</sup> Thus, becoming a sister offered spiritual respectability and a relatively safe alternative to other gendered and racialized forms of labor as well as an opportunity for poor and working-class black women to earn a higher education in ways distinctly different from white women. Moreover, despite tensions among different immigrant groups within the Church, in general white women faced fewer barriers to their entry into religious life and more easily claimed respectability in secular society.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> While historian Diane Batts Morrow has gestured at the feminist implications of black women embracing the religious state in a slave society in her study of the OSP, a more thorough historical examination of the radical and politically transformative dimensions of black female religious is needed. Indeed, the clear distinctions between the two denominations and the white-dominated structure of the U.S. Catholic Church meant that respectability and politics meant different things at different times for black Baptist and Catholic women. Black Catholic feminist and womanist theologians have made the connections. See Onita Estes-Hicks, "Henriette Delille: Free Woman of Color, Candidate for Roman Catholic Sainthood, Early Womanist." In *Perspectives on Womanist Theology: Black Church Scholars Series*, Vol. 7, edited by Jacquelyn Grant, 41-54. Atlanta, Ga.: The ITC Press, 1995, for one of several examples.

<sup>52</sup> Dr. Patricia Grey (formerly Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey, R.S.M.), interview by author, March 22, 2010.

<sup>53</sup> For discussions of ethnic conflict among white women religious sisters, see Margaret Susan Thompson, "Sisterhood and Power: Class, Culture, and Ethnicity in the American Convent."

Embracing the religious state also enabled black women to contest racist and sexist assaults on their humanity and morality, which were cornerstones of the white supremacist regimes of slavery and Jim Crow apartheid. For example, it is no coincidence that the first two successful black Catholic sisterhoods were founded in cities (Baltimore and New Orleans, respectively) that contained two of the nation's largest slave markets, where black women's nude bodies were abused, displayed, commodified, and sold on the auction block on a daily basis.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, after the Civil War, the Sisters of the Holy Family explicitly sought the spiritual recovery and redemption of sites in New Orleans associated with the sins of racism and slavery.<sup>55</sup> For example, one of the earliest properties that the sisters purchased after the war was a former slave traders' pen on Chartres Street that the SSF used to establish their famed St. Mary's Academy for (Colored) Girls in 1870. As early SSF community historian Sister Mary Bernard Deggs explained it, "No one would think of buying it for the very reason that it had previously been a [slave] traders' yard and many sins had been committed at that place, not only sins, but the most horrible crimes. It must have been the will of God that our sisters should buy the place to expiate the crimes that had been committed there...It was there that we completed the beautiful habit which we now have."<sup>56</sup> In 1881, the SSF purchased

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*Colby Library Quarterly*, 25, no.3 (September 1989): 149-75; Mary Ewens, O.P., "The Leadership of Nuns in Immigrant Catholicism." In *The American Catholic Religious Life: Selected Historical Essays*, edited by Joseph M. White (New York: Garland Publishing, 1988), 14-62, and McNamara, *Sisters in Arms*.

<sup>54</sup> For a discussions of the sexual vulnerability of black women in the domestic slave trade, see Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999) and Edward E. Baptiste, "'Cuffy,' 'Fancy Maids,' and 'One-Eyed Men': Rape, Commodification, and the Domestic Slave Trade in the United States," *American Historical Review* 106 (December 2001): 1619-1650.

<sup>55</sup> Fesseden, "The Sisters of the Holy Family," 204-5.

<sup>56</sup> Sister Mary Bernad Deggs, *No Cross, No Crown: Black Nuns in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans*, edited by Virginia Meacham Gould and Charles E. Nolan (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2001), 46. This is edited version of an early history of the SSF completed by Holy Family Sister Mary Bernard Deggs in 1896.

the French Quarter's infamous Orleans Ballroom, which had hosted the Crescent City's lascivious "quadroon balls," where women of their class, color, and status would have been subjected to unspeakable, though legally-sanctioned, sexual exploitation by white and Afro-Creole men. As Deggs put it, the Orleans Ballroom had been "a den of sin."<sup>57</sup> However, from 1881 to 1955, it served as the home of the SSF motherhouse (administrative headquarters) and their famed St. Mary's Academy for (Colored) Girls.<sup>58</sup> In 1891, the SSF purchased another property on Tonti Street in New Orleans that had been "a place of sin and bad example" and transformed it into their noted home for orphan girls.<sup>59</sup>

For black sisters, the actual habit (the clothing of religious women and men) also served as a unique source of tension and conflict over the years, which has yet to be fully recognized and analyzed by historians of Catholic women religious.<sup>60</sup> Because habits engendered a respect for womanhood and piety exclusively reserved for white women, many whites, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, violently resisted black sisters wearing habits in public. Reflecting on the power and significance of the habit for the SSF after the Civil War, Sister Mary Bernard Deggs wrote, "We had a very hard time for we had many enemies who wanted to degrade our dear little community as poor as we were. During that time, we were persecuted by the Sisters of St. Joseph in this city. They tried all that they could to make us take off our habits. That was after forty-five or fifty years that we had worked and suffered to have a religious habit. No one would think that we

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<sup>57</sup> Deggs, *No Cross, No Crown*, 73.

<sup>58</sup> *A Celebration of Faith: Henriette Delille and the Sisters of the Holy Family* (New Orleans: NOLA African-American Museum of Art, Culture, and History, 2008), 32-33. The SSF motherhouse was transferred to the Chef Menteur Highway property in 1955. St. Mary's Academy was transferred to the Chef Menteur Highway property in 1964. In the same year, the SSF sold the Orleans Street property for \$675,000.00.

<sup>59</sup> Deggs, *No Cross, No Crown*, 63.

<sup>60</sup> Historians of black Catholic women religious have generally been the exception.

were anything if we were not dressed in the holy habit.”<sup>61</sup> Though their habits did not always shield black sisters from racist and/or sexist violence, it did often serve as a source of protection or at least prompt a swift defense of black womanhood from blacks and a small number of whites, when black sisters were subjected to white supremacist violence and threats in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The habit also became a source of great tension between different generations of black sisters in the late sixties and seventies when younger black sisters began abandoning their traditional habits and experimenting with African-inspired and lay attire after Vatican II. Though leaders of the National Black Sisters’ Conference linked their vows of celibacy explicitly to black liberation, many younger sisters argued that their habits served to distance them from the very people with whom they sought to link arms in the struggle for racial justice and human dignity. Activist-oriented black sisters specifically argued that their habits often engendered immediate suspicion or reverence, making meaningful activism difficult. Thus, many young black sisters began to abandon their habits as the seventies progressed. However, many older sisters, especially those in black orders, were unwilling to relinquish the habits they had fought so hard to obtain. Indeed, the nation’s black congregations never abandoned their habits, while most members of white orders did in the post-conciliar era. Thus, embracing the religious state (and the political and feminist implications of the action) was markedly different for African-American women for white and must be analyzed as such.

Second, the struggle for black Catholic education was part and parcel of the larger black freedom struggle in the United States. Historians James D. Anderson and Heather Andrea Williams have meticulously demonstrated that the fight for literacy and quality

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<sup>61</sup>Deggs, *No Cross, No Crown*, 41.

education has long been a cornerstone of the black struggle for freedom and justice in the United States.<sup>62</sup> Yet African-American pursuits for Catholic education remain largely neglected in histories of the civil rights movement and the larger freedom struggle. Though black Catholics have historically made up a small percentage of the total African-American population, hundreds of thousands of African Americans, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, have been educated in Catholic schools at some point in their lives.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, the African-American fight for black Catholic education has intersected with the larger freedom struggles of the twentieth century in significant and public ways.

For example, during the Jim Crow era, tens of thousands of African-American parents searching for alternatives to nonexistent or grossly under-funded public education for African Americans enrolled their children in the black Catholic educational system. The mass migration of African-American southerners to the urban centers of the North and Midwest after World War II had a particularly profound impact on the system.<sup>64</sup> While much scholarly attention has been given to African Americans' violent clashes with unwelcoming and hostile white Catholic residents in these areas, less attention has been given to the entry of tens of thousands of African-American children into the northern Catholic educational system and its impact on the Church. Because many of these children converted to Catholicism and often brought their family members with

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<sup>62</sup> See James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 148-273; Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African-American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 174-200; and Katherine Mellen Charron, *Freedom's Teacher: The Life of Septima Clark* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

<sup>63</sup> For selective accounts of black experiences in Catholic schools, see Jacqueline Jordan Irvine and Michele Foster, eds. *Growing Up African American in Catholic Schools*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1996. See also Margaret A. Diggs, *Catholic Negro Education in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Diggs, 1936).

<sup>64</sup> James N. Gregory's *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005) provides a great overview of the distinct phases of African-American migration out of the south and its impact on American society, culture, and politics.

them, black conversion rates soared at the mid-century. By 1960, over half of the nation's black Catholics were converts and located in newly formed black enclaves in Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Milwaukee, and Pittsburgh.<sup>65</sup> It would be these enclaves that would largely give rise to the generation of black priests, sisters, brothers, and seminarians who forcefully confronted racism in the Church in the late sixties and seventies. Moreover, when archdiocesan and diocesan school boards began closing or merging the nation's black Catholic schools in the late sixties and seventies, black Catholics across the country organized impressive resistance campaigns to keep their schools open and if possible transform them into community-controlled institutions.<sup>66</sup> Oftentimes, they received widespread support from the black community in their respective locales, and this activism carried black Catholic leaders into a host of secular black political organizations, including the Black Panther Party, the Congress of African Peoples, and the National Black Political Convention of 1972.

However, very little attention has been paid to black Catholic entry and participation in the civil rights and black power movements.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, historians have often characterized black Catholics as conservative and late to the public fight for racial justice.<sup>68</sup> However, this interpretation grossly ignores the way in which institutional racism and the deliberate and substantial of exclusion of blacks from religious life in the

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<sup>65</sup> McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries*, 180.

<sup>66</sup> There is a rich historiography emerging on the black struggle for community-controlled education, and the efforts of black Catholics, and black sisters in particular, must be included in this dialogue. For examinations of the black struggle for community-controlled schools and its opposition, see Thomas Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008); Jerald F. Podair, *The Strike that Changed New York: Blacks, Whites, and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Crisis* (New Haven, Ct.: Yale University Press, 2004); and Derek Edgell, *The Movement for Community Control of New York City's Schools, 1966-1970: ClassWars* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1998).

<sup>67</sup> The scholarship of Father Cyprian Davis is an exception though it generally focuses on key male activists. See Davis, "Black Catholics in the Civil Rights Movement in the Southern United States: A.P. Tureaud, Thomas Wyatt Turner and Earl Johnson," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 24(2006): 69-81.

<sup>68</sup> McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries*, 162. See also Davis, *Black Catholics*, 256-7.

Church actively circumscribed black Catholic protest prior to King's assassination in 1968. It also ignores the fact that when able many black Catholics enthusiastically joined the public fight for racial justice and garnered a significant amount of media attention as a result. Moreover, in 1968, black religious and lay Catholics launched the greatest black Catholic revolt in American history, which among many things galvanized and propelled an already fierce white Catholic resistance movement that continues to the present day. Thus, this study not only offers a corrective to popular and scholarly understandings of black Catholic protest, but also broadens scholarship on the black freedom struggle by drawing much-needed attention to the fight for racial equity and justice in one of the most powerful (and racially conservative) churches in the United States.

### **Chapter Overview**

My analysis of black sisters' efforts in the fight to eliminate racial barriers in the U.S. Catholic Church commences shortly after the conclusion of World War I, when state legislatures and ecclesiastical authorities began requiring the higher education and certification of private school teachers. Mandated by church canon law to attend Catholic schools but barred from U.S. Catholic higher education solely on the basis of race, the nation's black teaching sisterhoods faced a monumental crisis—one that threatened not only the future of their congregations, but also the future of the black Catholic community's most prized possessions—black-administered Catholic schools.

At the same historical moment, black lay Catholics frustrated with rampant discrimination and exclusion in the Church began organizing on local and national levels to combat institutional racism. Led by the fiery Dr. Thomas Wyatt Turner, a biology

professor at Howard University and a prominent member of Washington D.C.'s black protest community, scattered lay organizations combined forces to become the Federated Colored Catholics of the United States (FCC) in 1924. Though gutted by paternalistic and racist white ecclesiastical authorities in the 1930s, the FCC proved successful in soliciting critical Vatican support in the effort to raise the status of African Americans in the U.S. Church. Perhaps most significantly, FCC efforts provided black sisters with the critical leverage needed to secure admission into several Catholic colleges and universities (most notably the Catholic University of America) and ensure the accreditation of the vast majority of their schools during the Jim Crow era.

Chapter one chronicles the quiet revolution waged by the nation's black Catholic teaching sisterhoods as they fought to erect and sustain a quality, albeit segregated, educational system staffed by and for African Americans in the Jim Crow South. It centers on the diverse and surreptitious strategies that black sisters employed to circumvent racial segregation in Catholic higher education and ensure African-American access to accredited black-administered Catholic education after World War I. This chapter also illuminates the high religious and political stakes involved in battles over black Catholic education and the dangers that black sister-educators routinely confronted as they fought to transform Catholic schools into educational sanctuaries for African-American children.

Chapter two narrates the largely hidden struggle to integrate the nation's historically white Catholic sisterhoods. To date, the entry of black women and girls into white congregations remains among the most under-researched and least-reported on topics in American religious history. This chapter chronicles black nuns' gradual, and

fiercely-contested, entry into white orders, which overwhelmingly took place after the Second World War. It also analyzes the impact of white supremacy on female religious life and its effect on the nature and quality of life inside the convent. Though most white congregations never accepted an African-American candidate in the twentieth century, the opening up of a small handful of white orders proved critical in the black struggle for rights and recognition in the U.S. Church. Specifically, it was this generation of pioneering black sisters, many of whom were first and second-generation southern migrants to the urban North, who would lead the public charge against racism and discrimination in the Church after Second Vatican Council.

Chapters three and four examine the impact of the civil rights movement and the liberalizing reforms and activist-oriented mandates of Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) on the political consciousness and orientations of black Catholic sisters in the United States. Culminating in black sisters' widely publicized participation in the Selma voting rights protests of 1965, chapter three chronicles the gradual entry of black sisters into civil rights activities and racial justice organizations in the wake of Vatican II. Chapter four examines the historic formation of the National Black Sisters' Conference (NBSC) in 1968. It also highlights the fierce tensions and debates that erupted in the nation's female congregations as black sisters energized and radicalized by the black power movement began to confront and testify publicly about their mistreatment and racism in religious life and the wider Church.

Chapter five takes black sisters through the crucible of the seventies, when they turned their chief energies to the crises of African-American religious life and black Catholic education. Specifically, it examines black sisters' diverse efforts in the fight to

reverse the great exodus of African Americans from religious life and halt the mass closings of Catholic schools in predominantly black and inner-city communities in the wake of massive white Catholic suburbanization, school desegregation, and resurging white racism. Notable among these efforts was Project DESIGN launched by the National Black Sisters' Conference in 1971. An acronym for the "Development of Educational Services in the Growing Nation," Project DESIGN sought to strengthen and maintain parochial schools in inner-city and black communities by transforming them into community-controlled institutions. The initiative also sought to develop programs to promote African-American retention in female religious life and increase black vocations. This chapter concludes with the abrupt and devastating departures of several key activists from the National Black Sisters' Conference and religious life in the mid-to-late seventies.

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In the following pages, black Catholic sisters appear as they viewed themselves: vowed women of God struggling for equity and justice in a white-dominated, male hierarchical Church bent on keeping its African-American constituency subordinate. Most of the women documented in this study waged this fight as members of historically black congregations, while the remainder organized and raised their voices in protest as members of predominantly white sisterhoods. They are teachers, principals, nurses, PhDs, college presidents, civil rights activists, black power leaders, southern migrants, Caribbean immigrants, native northerners, southerners, feminists, social workers,

university professors, and theologians. Many were the first black students and/or administrators at several of the nation's Catholic colleges, universities, nursing schools, and hospitals. Some are political radicals, while others are strategic conservatives. Sometimes, they are both.

Despite their geographic, occupational, and ideological diversity, every black sister examined in this study agreed on a central issue: that a racially-segregated Church—one that barred African Americans from full and equal participation in religious life and the laity—was an inherently un-Catholic Church. By embracing the religious state in a Church and society that deemed all black people immoral and unworthy of the rights of full citizenship and equality, black sisters challenged the Church and the nation to live up to the full promises of democracy and Catholicism. Although their strategies for demanding equity and justice for the African-American community differed greatly over the twentieth century, black sisters endowed the Church with a legacy of righteous struggle for justice and an authentic expression of Catholicism. As former National Black Sisters' Conference president Sister Loretta Theresa (Agnes Elaine Miriam) Richards, F.H.M., put it in 2009, "The Catholic Church wouldn't be Catholic if it wasn't for us."<sup>69</sup>

As for those African-American sisters who defected from religious life, the vast majority of them remained in the Catholic Church. As laywomen in parishes across the nation, community workers in the public and private spheres, and theologians and university professors in the academy, they continue the fight for justice and equity in American society and the Church. For those handfuls of African-American women who

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<sup>69</sup> Anthony Calypso, "The Real 'Sister Act': Black Nuns in America," *The Griot*, August 26, 2009, <http://thegriot.com/2009/08/26/the-real-sister-acts-black-nuns-in-america/> (accessed on June 30, 2012). See also Sister Loretta Theresa Richards, F.H.M., interview by author, December 8, 2009.

remain in religious life, they do so with an unwavering commitment to justice and faith unparalleled in the Catholic Church. This study is a record of their monumental achievements, heartbreaking defeats, and gut-wrenching compromises. Most importantly though, this dissertation is a record of the unfaltering grace of the nation's black Catholic sisters and their insurmountable faith in God, education, and the Catholic Church in the face of unspeakable sufferings and unholy discrimination.

### **Notes on Terminology**

Throughout this study, I have used the terms “sister,” “nun,” and “woman religious” interchangeably. The term “woman religious” is the canonical identification for a sister engaged in apostolic works such as teaching or nursing, while the term “nun” refers specifically to a sister living in cloistered setting and whose primary work is prayer. The overwhelming majority of the women discussed in this study are women religious. However, sisters in apostolic communities often referred to themselves using all three terms, and I have done the same. I have also included a glossary of terms used in this study that might be unfamiliar to those outside of the Catholic Church.

### **Glossary**

<u>apostolate</u> :	mission and ministry to a specific field or community
<u>apostolic community</u> :	group of religious engaged in ministries that answer a need in society (e.g. teaching, nursing)
<u>canonization</u> :	the process by which a deceased person is declared a saint by the Catholic Church
<u>charism</u> :	spirit of the community resulting from the founder's experience of God

<u>cloister:</u>	enclosed building, set of buildings, or part of a building into which only members of a contemplative religious community may enter
<u>congregation:</u>	community of religious with vows
<u>contemplative community:</u>	community whose primary work is prayer and maintain minimal contact with outside world
<u>convent:</u>	shared residence for a religious community
<u>cradle Catholic:</u>	a person who was baptized into the Catholic Church as an infant
<u>foundress:</u>	a woman who establishes a religious order or congregation
<u>habit:</u>	the distinctive clothing worn by members of some religious communities; have diverse meanings for sisters and others though
<u>ministry:</u>	public services rendered by members of the Church
<u>mother:</u>	title of respect given in some religious communities to sisters elected or appointed to leadership
<u>motherhouse:</u>	administrative headquarters of a religious community
<u>novice:</u>	a person in training and preparing to profess vows in a religious community
<u>nun:</u>	sister whose primary focus is prayer in an enclosed cloistered setting
<u>postulant:</u>	a person at the first toward full membership in a religious community
<u>religious:</u>	a person, either male or female, who pledges to live in accordance with a community's vows, which are most often poverty, chastity, and obedience
<u>sister:</u>	a woman who is a professed member of a religious community/congregation
<u>vocation:</u>	an inclination or calling toward a particular state of life

## Chapter One:

### “Nothing Is Too Good for the Youth of Our Race”<sup>1</sup>:

#### The Struggle for Black Catholic Education in the Jim Crow South

“Not only parents...but also all those who take their place, have the right and grave duty of taking care of the Christian education of children.”

-Canon No.1372, Code of Canon Law of the Holy Roman Catholic Church, 1917<sup>2</sup>

“I am afraid we are going very far now yielding to prejudice when we exclude the Colored Sisters from the [Catholic University.]”

- Most Reverend Michael J. Curley, Archbishop of Baltimore, 1932<sup>3</sup>

“[W]e are taking every opportunity to make our Sisters as well equipped for the class room as any white Sisters.”

-Mother M. Consuella Clifford, Superior General of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, 1933<sup>4</sup>

In early August of 1933, Mother M. Consuella (Rebecca) Clifford, superior general of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, faced a crisis of epic proportion regarding her teaching staff assigned to Immaculate Conception High School in Charleston, South Carolina. During the previous month, Mother Consuella and Most Reverend Emmet M. Walsh, bishop of Charleston, had communicated to one another their mutual desire to secure the accreditation of the nascent high school department before the start of the 1933-1934 school term. Because Immaculate Conception was one of only thirty-five black Catholic high schools in the nation and the first of its kind in South Carolina (where the state spent more than four times the amount educating a white child than it did an African-American child) its success, and specifically its ability to grant state-accredited

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<sup>1</sup> This quote is taken from a speech given by Oblate Sister of Providence Mary Laurentia Short at the 1931 convention of the Federated Colored Catholics of the United States. See Sister M. Laurentia, O.S.P., “The Oblate Sisters of Providence and Higher Education,” *Chronicle* 5(January 1932): 8-9.

<sup>2</sup> Edward N. Peters, trans., *The 1917 or Pio-Benedictine Code of Canon Law* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2001), 462.

<sup>3</sup> Most Rev. Michael J. Curley, Archbishop of Baltimore, to Rt. Rev. Msgr. James Hugh Ryan, Rector of Catholic University of America, June 6, 1932, Archbishop Curley’s Correspondence, Archives of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, Baltimore, MD (hereafter cited as AAB).

<sup>4</sup> Mother M. Consuella Clifford, O.S.P. to Most Rev. Emmet M. Walsh, Bishop of Charleston, August 8, 1933, Mother Consuella Clifford Administration Files, Archives of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, Baltimore, MD (hereafter cited as OSP Archives).

diplomas, became paramount to proponents of black Catholic and college-preparatory education in the Jim Crow South.<sup>5</sup> Yet, the all-black Oblate Sisters of Providence, the school's principal teaching staff, and the diocese of Charleston found themselves in the midst of a seemingly inescapable and potentially embarrassing predicament. Only two members of the high school's faculty—Sisters Mary Angela Wade and Mary Edwina Holley—held bachelor's degrees in August of 1933, and according to the recently revised rules and regulations of South Carolina's state department of education, four degreed teachers were required in order for Immaculate Conception High School to award state-certified diplomas to its first graduating class in June of 1934.<sup>6</sup> For Mother Consuella and Bishop Walsh, their ambitious and widely-touted campaign to provide South Carolina's African-American citizens with their first Catholic high school stood on the brink of a very early (and public) failure.

Beginning in the 1920s, episodes like the accreditation crisis faced at Charleston's Immaculate Conception High School played themselves out in Catholic schools across the nation. Following World War I, recently revised state legislation began requiring the certification and advanced training of private schoolteachers throughout the country. Although the Catholic Church, which operated the nation's largest independent school system, had fiercely resisted secular attempts to regulate its educational facilities in the past, ecclesiastical authorities largely began to reverse their stance in the postwar years. Believing that state approval would not only elevate the standards of Catholic education,

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<sup>5</sup> In 1935, the state of South Carolina spent \$10.63 for every African-American pupil while it spent \$48.00 per white pupil in its public educational facilities. See David T. Blose and Ambrose Caliver, *Statistics of the Education of Negroes 1933-34 and 1935-36*. U.S. Department of Interior, Office of Education. Bulletin 13, 1935 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1939), 15.

<sup>6</sup> Bishop Emmet M. Walsh to Mother M. Consuella Clifford, July 25, 1933 and Mother Consuella to Bishop Walsh, July 28, 1933, Mother Consuella Clifford Admin. Files, OSP Archives.

but also greatly bolster the Church's postwar patriotism and mass expansion projects, church officials strategically embraced the national campaign for teacher certification and school accreditation. As a result, the higher education of sisters—who constituted the lifeblood the U.S. Catholic educational system—increasingly became a top priority for the heads of archdiocesan and diocesan school boards and the leadership of the nation's Catholic teaching orders of women.<sup>7</sup> However, for black sisters, who formed the vanguard of the teaching staffs of the nation's African-American Catholic schools, the Church's postwar demand that all Catholic teachers become state-certified embodied a central contradiction. Church mandates and canon law dictated that all Catholics be educated in Catholic schools.<sup>8</sup> Yet, the vast majority of the nation's Catholic colleges, universities, and normal institutes systematically excluded African Americans, including Catholic religious, from admission solely on the basis of race. Even the Catholic University of America, which was racially-integrated at its opening in 1889, had placed a moratorium on the admission of American-born blacks during World War I and would

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<sup>7</sup> For a useful discussion of the post-World War I Catholic teacher certification and school accreditation movement, see Sister Betrande Meyers, *The Education of Sisters: A Plan for Integrating the Religious, Social, Cultural and Professional Training of Sisters* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1941); Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to the Present* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 287-293; Timothy Walch, *Parish School: American Catholic Parochial Education from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1996), 134-151; and Joseph H. Fichter, S.J., "First Black Students at Loyola University: A Strategy to Obtain Teacher Certification," *Journal of Negro Education* 56 (1987): 535-549. See also Eileen Mary Brewer, *Nuns and the Education of American Catholic Women, 1860-1920* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1987).

<sup>8</sup> At the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore held from November 9 to December 7, 1884, U.S. ecclesiastical authorities promulgated a body of educational legislation that directed the church for the next half century, with the rallying cry being "Catholic schools for Catholic children." The decrees centered on: 1) the establishment of parochial schools; 2) the obligation of the pastor in the establishment of parochial schools; 3) the obligation of parents to send their children to Catholic schools; 4) making parochial schools efficient; and 5) the establishment of institutions of higher education for Catholic youth. See Dolan, *American Catholic Experience*, 271-272. See also canon no. 1374 which reads: "Catholic children should not frequent non-Catholic, neutral, or mixed schools, namely, those that allow non-Catholics to attend." in *Pio-Benedictine Code of Canon Law*, 462 and Pope Pius XI's *Encyclical on Christian Education* promulgated on December 31, 1929.

not lift its ban until the summer of 1933 after capitulating to nearly two decades of sustained black Catholic protest.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the nation's three historically-black Catholic teaching sisterhoods, who labored almost exclusively in the Jim Crow South prior to World War II, were left to secure the higher training of their sisters and the accreditation of their schools with very little institutional support from their Church.

This chapter explores the quiet revolution waged by African-American Catholic women religious as they fought to erect and maintain a quality Catholic educational infrastructure for and staffed by African Americans in the Jim Crow South. Like their white counterparts across the nation, black orders were confronted with the herculean task of bringing their schools and the educational qualifications of their teaching sisters up to state code in the aftermath of World War I. Yet, because black sisters were formally excluded from Catholic higher education, their efforts to obtain teacher certification and school accreditation were substantially more difficult than those of white sisters and largely took place under a strictly-guarded veil of secrecy. Thus, the diverse and surreptitious strategies that the general councils of the nation's black Catholic teaching orders devised and employed to circumvent racial segregation and secure the higher training of their sisters offer us a unique window into the racial and educational politics of a heretofore largely overlooked group of African-American southerners—Catholics—

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<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the re-integration of Catholic University of America in 1933, see C. Joseph Nuesse's "Segregation and Desegregation at the Catholic University of America," *Washington History* 9(1997): 54-70. Note Nuesse downplays the role of black Catholic protest and the Oblate Sisters of Providence in re-integration of CUA. In fact, he does not even provide the names of the three OSP (Mary Frances Gilpin, Mary Venard Harrison, and Mary Consolata Gibson) who re-integrated CUA in the summer of 1933 and only provides the name of one of the two OSP (Mary of Good Counsel Baptiste and Mary Consolata Gibson) who earned their bachelor's degrees from the Catholic Sisters' College of CUA the following spring. See *OSP Motherhouse Annals*, Box 36, June 19 and 25, August 3, and September 18, 1933 entries, OSP Archives, which detail the entrance of the OSP to CUA. Also note that persons of African descent, Catholic or otherwise, not born in the United States could still gain admission to CUA, to which African-American Catholics frequently and bitterly called attention.

and the U.S. Church during the Jim Crow era. They also underscore the high political stakes involved in the contest over black Catholic education in the segregated South.

For African-American parents searching for alternatives to grossly underfunded or nonexistent public schools during the Jim Crow era, Catholic schools often emerged as educational sanctuaries for their children. In some southern towns and cities, Catholic schools were among the first or the only educational institutions open to African Americans at various moments in history. For example, in Baltimore, Maryland, St. Frances Academy for Colored Girls, established by the all-black Oblate Sisters of Providence in 1829, was the among the first schools (and the first Catholic institution) open to African-American children, free and enslaved, in the city.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in New Orleans, St. Mary's Academy for Colored Girls, established by the all-black and Creole Sisters of the Holy Family in 1867, was the first secondary school open to African Americans in the entire state of Louisiana, where there were no public high schools for black youth as late as 1916.<sup>11</sup> As a result, black Catholic schools often became targets of state harassment and white supremacist violence. They also engendered the contempt and disapproval of some black Protestants who remained both skeptical of the predominantly-white Catholic Church and fearful of white reprisals.

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<sup>10</sup> Diane Batts Morrow, *Persons of Color and Religious at the Same Time: The Oblate Sisters of Providence, 1828-1860* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 46. See also Sister Mary Reginald Gerdes, "'To Educate and Evangelize': Black Catholic Schools of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, 1828-1880," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 7(1988): 183-99 and Michael F. Rouse, *A Study of the Development of Negro Education Under Catholic Auspices in Maryland and Washington, D.C.* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1935).

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Office of Education, *Negro Education: A Study of the Private and Higher Schools for Colored People in the United States: Prepared in cooperation with the Phelps-Stokes Fund Under the Direction of Thomas Jesse Jones, Specialist in the Education of Racial Groups, Bureau of Education* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1917), 2: 287.

Although the Catholic Church's financial support of its black schools greatly paled in comparison to that of its white institutions, it nonetheless played a critical role in southern black education in the twentieth century. In 1916, the Church operated 112 schools for approximately 13,507 black youth in the country—the most schools of any other predominantly white religious denomination at the time.<sup>12</sup> By 1920, it operated 144 schools for approximately 19,048 African-American youths, the overwhelming majority of whom were southerners. By 1950, the number of black Catholic schools in the nation had grown to 312, and their pupils, the majority of whom were either southerners or southern migrants to the urban North, Midwest, and West, numbered approximately 68,000. Ten years later, African-American attendance in the nation's 349 historically-black Catholic schools had reached nearly 92,000 pupils.<sup>13</sup> Though black nuns ceased to constitute the majority of sisters teaching in black Catholic schools by 1920, their pioneering efforts and achievements in black education helped to secure critical ecclesiastical and congregational support for the African-American apostolate, thus ensuring the survival of black Catholic education through the Jim Crow era.

Although the fight for quality education has been a cornerstone of the black struggle for freedom and justice in the United States, African-American pursuits for Catholic education remain largely neglected in the scholarship.<sup>14</sup> As a consequence, the

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<sup>12</sup> *Negro Education*, 1: 303-4 and 2: 287.

<sup>13</sup> *Our Negro and Indian Missions: Annual Report of the Secretary of the Commission for the Catholic Missions among Colored People and the Indians* (Washington, D.C.: Commission for Catholic Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians, 1920, 1950, 1960), 12, 22-23, and 22-23. Note also that these numbers only account for African-American children in all-black or predominantly black Catholic schools. Those black students in predominantly white schools across the country are not included.

<sup>14</sup> This omission is curious considering the high educational success rate of African-American Catholics and blacks educated in Catholic schools. In 1990, a national survey of religious identification that revealed that contemporary black Catholics had a higher educational success rate than the overall American average regardless of race. See Seymour P. Lachman and Barry A. Kosmin, "Black Catholics Get Ahead,"

pivotal roles that black teaching sisters played in the struggle to secure African-American access to Catholic education, particularly in the early desegregation of Catholic higher education, remain widely unknown and underappreciated. Missing, too, is a thoughtful analysis of the politics of white supremacy in the U.S. Catholic educational system. Though white sisters constituted the majority of Catholic women religious teaching in the southern black apostolate by World War I, their entry into the field had been largely facilitated by the pioneering efforts and early successes of black teaching sisters and Vatican pressure. Moreover, many white sisters teaching in southern black missions held and expressed racially derogatory views about African Americans, were often paternalistic in their treatment of their students and their parents, and even discouraged religious vocations among their charges solely on the basis of the race. This was especially true for young black girls who desired to become members of the historically white congregations which had educated them. Thus, the fight to preserve black-administered Catholic education in the Jim Crow South was inherently political and inextricably linked to the larger struggle for black recognition and rights in the white-dominated Church.<sup>15</sup>

In 1921, black sisters, working in covert alliance with a small cadre of church prelates, priests, university administrators, and a few willing white teaching orders, began

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*New York Times*, September 14, 1991. See also Jamie Phelps, O.P., ed. *Black and Catholic: The Challenge and Gift of Black Folk* (Milwaukee, W.I.: Marquette University Press, 1997).

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of white supremacy and black politics in the Jim Crow South, see Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Knopf, 1998); Grace Hall, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1998); Robin D. G. Kelley, "'We Are Not What We Seem': Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South," *Journal of American History*, 80 (June 1993): 75-112; Joel Williamson, *A Rage for Order: Black/White Relations in the American South since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (1955. Reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); and Howard Zinn, *The Southern Mystique* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968).

quietly desegregating U.S. Catholic colleges and universities. In the process, they earned scores of teaching certificates and advanced degrees and successfully secured the accreditation of the vast majority of their schools. Though historians have often (and solely) credited a few individual white Church officials and women religious with catalyzing and leading the crusade against racial segregation and exclusion in the U.S. Catholic educational system, it was, in fact, black teaching sisters—anchored by an increasingly vocal and militant African-American Catholic constituency working under the umbrella of the Federated Colored Catholics of the United States—who largely steered the moral compass of the Church and its all-white hierarchy on such matters in the pre-*Brown* era.<sup>16</sup> For black Catholic leaders, the survival of Catholic schools, led by black nuns, was essential to the political fight for black religious, particularly the development of an African-American clergy—a band of brothers, priests, bishops, and archbishops—who could potentially access formal power within the patriarchal Church

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<sup>16</sup> To date, there has been no full-length study published documenting the struggle against racial segregation and exclusion in the U.S. Catholic educational system. There are, however, a host of journal articles, book chapters, and dissertations that detail examples of individuals and/or specific Catholic institutions that preceded the federal government in desegregating their facilities. Some recent works include: Charles S. Padgett's "Schooled in Invisibility: The Desegregation of Spring Hill College, Mobile, Alabama, 1948-1963," (PhD diss., University of Georgia, 2000) and "'Without Hysteria or Unnecessary Disturbance': Desegregation at Spring Hill College, Mobile, Alabama, 1948-1954," *History of Education Quarterly*, 41 (2001): 167-88; Joseph Kight's "How about September?: Archbishop Joseph F. Rummel and the Desegregation of the Roman Catholic Parochial Schools in New Orleans, 1962," (master's thesis, University of New Orleans, 1997); R. Bentley Anderson's "'Norman Francis is a Negro': Race, Religion, and Catholic Higher Education in New Orleans, 1947-1957," (PhD diss., Boston College, 2001), "Black, White and Catholic: Southern Jesuits Confront the Race Question, 1952," *Catholic Historical Review* 91 (2005): 484-505 and "Prelates, Protest, and Public Opinion: Catholic Opposition to Desegregation, 1947-1955," *Journal of Church and State* 46 (2004): 617-644; James E. Glinski's "The Catholic Church and the Desegregation of Boston's Public Schools," in *Boston's Histories: Essays in Honor of Thomas H. O'Connor*, eds. James M. O'Toole and David Quigley (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004), 246-269; Richard J. Roche, *Catholic Colleges and the Negro Student* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1948); and Justin David Poche's "Religion, Race, and Rights in Catholic Louisiana, 1938-1970," (PhD diss., University of Notre Dame, 2007). Save for Joseph Fichter's pioneering 1987 essay, "The First Black Students at Loyola," and several OSP and SSF bachelor's, master's and doctoral theses, the role of black Catholic sisters in the desegregation of U.S. Catholic higher education has largely been ignored and/or forgotten.

and thus advocate on behalf of the entire black Catholic community. By demanding that U.S. ecclesiastical authorities adhere to canon law and the Church's creed of universal Christian brotherhood, black sisters and their allies constructed a radical counter-discourse of power, which enabled them to wage a moral assault on the legitimacy of white supremacy and the practice of racial segregation in the Church. As a result, black sisters not only pried open the doors of Catholic higher education in the pre-*Brown* era, but also erected a quality black-administered Catholic educational system that helped sustain the African-American community during the Jim Crow era.

### **The Politics of Black Catholic Education in the Segregated South**

On March 25, 1922, *Colonel Mayfield's Weekly*, a pro-Ku Klux Klan newspaper based in Houston, Texas, ran a front-page story detailing a potentially explosive situation uncovered at a Catholic convent in Liberty County, Texas. Written by its white supremacist editor, Billie Mayfield Jr., an ex-colonel in the Texas National Guard and the Klan's candidate for the Texas lieutenant governorship that same year, the article reported that a "colored convent," operated by a white priest, in Ames, Texas had recently become a site of interracial Catholic education.<sup>17</sup> Mayfield also noted that the priest in question "preaches to mixed audiences at Aims" and "gives communion to white and blacks at the same altar." Outraged at the thought of white children "being raised on terms of absolute equality with the negro children," Mayfield issued a fiery warning against the continued Catholic evangelization of black southerners. "I tell you people, the

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<sup>17</sup> For biographical details on Mayfield, see Charles C. Alexander, *The Ku Klux Klan in the Southwest* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965) 123-4, 192, 194-6. See also Arnold S. Rice's *The Ku Klux Klan in American Politics* (New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1972), 24-5. Rice calls *Colonel Mayfield's Weekly* "perhaps the most outspoken pro-Klan newspaper in the nation."

effort to Catholicise the colored man is fraught with the gravest danger,” he declared. “We don’t want any negro Catholics in this country who will be subservient to a foreign ruler who believes in social equality.” Concluding, Mayfield called for the “cooperation of the colored protestants and the Ku Klux Klan” in helping to remedy what he believed to be an impending southern crisis.<sup>18</sup>

A few days later, unknown persons placed a note on the rectory door of Father Alexis LaPlante, S.S.J., who headed the all-black Sacred Heart mission in Ames, Texas. Signed simply “K.K.K.,” the letter threatened to dynamite both the mission’s school and church and demanded that Father LaPlante immediately leave town. If Father LaPlante refused, the letter also threatened to tar and feather him publicly.<sup>19</sup> That night, an armed contingent of black Catholic men from Liberty County stood guard outside of the church’s rectory and the tiny convent attached to the Sacred Heart School, where three Sisters of the Holy Family resided and prayed. And for the next several weeks, the armed guards remained at their posts until the threat of violence had sufficiently passed away. All the while, the Sacred Heart mission school continued to operate with approximately 90 children under the educational charge of the three black nuns.<sup>20</sup>

Following World War I, anti-Catholic sentiment reached a new plateau in the United States. On the federal level, legislation aimed indirectly at stagnating Catholic population growth began severely restricting immigration from southern and eastern

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<sup>18</sup> “Catholic Convent in Liberty County Where Whites and Blacks Mingle Freely: Reported That New York White Children and Southern Darkies Eat and Sleep Together in Catholic Schools,” *Colonel Mayfield’s Weekly*, March 25, 1922, 1.

<sup>19</sup> “Death Claims Another Josephite Father,” *The Colored Harvest*, 35 (April-May 1947): 10-11.

<sup>20</sup> “Land of the Ku Klux Klan,” *The Colored Harvest*, 10 (July-August 1922): 13. See also “Administrative File of Father Alexis Laplante,” and “Ames, TX Mission File,” *Josephite Archives*, Baltimore, MD, and Sister Mary Borgia Hart, “Violets in the King’s Garden: A History of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family” B.A. Thesis, Xavier University, 1931, 1922.

Europe in the 1920s.<sup>21</sup> In national politics, opposition to the growing Catholic influence in the northern Democratic Party helped to resurrect (and to an extent redefine) the Ku Klux Klan, a white-over-black terrorist organization founded in the South after the abolition of slavery.<sup>22</sup> In the urban North and Midwest, elaborate church parades and the relative overnight appearance of Gothic cathedrals in city skylines drew both enthusiastic praise *and* contempt from various news outlets and citizens in Catholic America's heartland. However, the Klan's threatened assault on the all-black Sacred Heart Mission in Ames, Texas in 1922 cannot be understood simply as a by-product of rising anti-Catholic nativism in the nation. Indeed, its roots also lay deep in the centuries-long history of white opposition to African-American literacy and education *and* in white post-emancipation fears of black social and political citizenship.

In 1891, Daniel A. Rudd, chief architect of the Colored Catholic Congress movement and editor of the *American Catholic Tribune*, the nation's first and only black-operated Catholic newspaper, declared "the Catholic Church alone can break the color line. Our people should help her to do it."<sup>23</sup> Wary of regional and national shifts toward racial segregation, Rudd called upon the Church to take the lead in opposing white supremacy. "We believe there is no leadership quite so capable as that of the Catholic Church," he wrote, "because she has up to this time, been the only successful leader of

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<sup>21</sup> Dolan, *American Catholic Experience*, 356. For a useful historical overview of U.S. immigration policy during the 1920s, see Mae M. Ngai's *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 1-55.

<sup>22</sup> In 1924 and 1928, notably, Klan leaders sent scores of delegates to the Democratic National Conventions in New York City and Houston, Texas, respectively, to oppose the presidential nomination of Alfred E. Smith, the long-serving Catholic governor of New York. See Rice, *Ku Klux Klan in American Politics*, 74-91.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Cyprian Davis, O.S.B., *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (New York: Crossroad Pub. Co., 1990), 166.

men of all the other races.”<sup>24</sup> Rudd and his supporters argued that full black access to Catholic education and the development of an African-American clergy were essential to breaking the color line and helping black people advance in society and the Church. Rudd also called upon the U.S. Catholics to follow the social teachings of the Church in order to insure the full actualization of universal Christian brotherhood in the nation.<sup>25</sup> Although the appeals of the five Colored Catholic Congresses of the late nineteenth century fell upon mostly deaf ears within the Church, their demands were powerfully resuscitated after World War I by a new generation of black Catholic leaders, including black sisters. This time, the black fight for Catholic education would garner some notable clerical support and achieve some key victories, particularly in higher education. It also gained a host of new opponents bent on keeping the South Protestant and dominated by whites by any means necessary.

Unlike in the North, southern campaigns waged against the Catholic Church were often deeply informed and influenced by anti-black prejudice, specifically white fears about black advancement through education. To proponents of white supremacy, the existence of a black Catholic educational system—which fell largely outside the state’s purview and control—threatened to undermine white domination over black southerners. In the opening to his March 25, 1922 diatribe against the Ames mission, Billie Mayfield Jr., articulated this particular fear. He wrote:

I told you people of America, that we had a peculiar situation in the South. That the negro problem was a serious and a grave problem, and to leave us alone, down here, that we could handle the matter fairly for the white people and fairly for the colored people. That we treat our colored people right; that we furnish him with schools in which to educate his young, work for him to

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<sup>24</sup> Davis, *Black Catholics*, 166.

<sup>25</sup> For a greater discussion of Rudd and the Colored Catholic Congresses, see Gary B. Agee, *A Cry for Justice: Daniel Rudd and His Life in Black Catholicism, Journalism, and Activism, 1854-1933* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2011).

support his own; that we like the colored man and are his friends. I told you that move to Catholicise him, to make him subservient to influences outside of America would be a dangerous menace to the peace and happiness of the negroes and the whites. Any thinking man knows this.<sup>26</sup>

Though the U.S. hierarchy maintained a strict code of racial segregation in its institutions and routinely ignored the Vatican's pleas to eliminate the color line and raise the status of African Americans within its boundaries, Mayfield nonetheless made explicit links between Catholic evangelization, education, and black equality. Especially disconcerting to Mayfield was the prospect of black Southerners taking to heart the Church's universalist creed of brotherhood and demanding full social and political citizenship for themselves in their respective communities. "No color line in the Catholic Church and 18,000,000 colored Catholics in the south," he proclaimed. "What would we be into?"<sup>27</sup> Because Catholic schools also served as the primary vehicles to evangelization in African-American communities in the post-emancipation era, their physical structures and teaching staffs became frequent targets of harassment and violence.<sup>28</sup> However, white Anglo-Saxon "Christian" terrorist organizations, such as the Klan, were not alone in their distrust and fear of the Church and its interests in black southerners.

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<sup>26</sup> "Catholic Convent," 1.

<sup>27</sup> "Catholic Convent," 1.

<sup>28</sup> Though the "white children" in question at the Sacred Heart School in Ames were in fact African-American children (who could pass for white) from the New York Foundling Asylum, the prospect of white and black children learning and socializing on an equal basis was enough to prompt a violent threat and visit from the Klan. See "Land of the Ku Klux Klan," 13. Though not explicitly stated, one must also consider the likelihood that part of Mayfield's rage was directed at the notion of black sisters providing Christian education to white children at a moment in American history when most whites considered all black women to be immoral and promiscuous and when state laws and customs strictly prohibited such interactions between black women and white children. In other words, black women could be maids and mummies to white children but not teachers or spiritual role models. For a meticulous examination of white obsession with the black mammy figure, see Micki McElya's *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007. For discussion about how children learned race, see Jennifer Ritterhouse, *Growing Up Jim Crow: How Black and White Southern Children Learned Race* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

Opposition to black Catholic education manifested itself on diverse levels in the Jim Crow South. State legislative and education officials, black and white Protestants, white Catholic religious and laypersons, and members of white neighborhood associations and terrorist organizations, all mounted formal and informal resistance campaigns to the southern black Catholic educational system. On the state level, southern legislatures began passing a series of measures aimed at limiting the spread of Roman Catholicism across the region in the 1910s. Such bills sought to authorize state inspection of convents, parochial schools, and other private institutions; to prohibit the carrying or drinking of alcohol, including sacramental wine, at churches; to authorize the taxation of church property; and to authorize the compulsory attendance of children in public schools.<sup>29</sup> Oftentimes, proposed legislation also sought to criminalize black Catholic education, if indirectly. In Florida, for example, state representatives introduced a series of anti-Catholic bills in the 1913, 1915, and 1917 legislative sessions. Among the proposed legislation was House Bill 415, “An Act Prohibiting White Persons From Teaching Negroes in Negro Schools, and Prohibiting Negro Teachers From Teaching White Children in White Schools in the States of Florida, and Providing for the Penalty Therefor [sic],” introduced by Representative E.D. Prevatt of Clay County on April 23, 1913. The act provided that violators could be fined up to \$500 and imprisoned in the county jail for six months. Overwhelmingly approved in both houses, the act was signed into law by Governor Park Trammell on June 7, 1913. Because the bill was not explicitly anti-Catholic in its text and was instead widely viewed as a “negro” issue, it failed to

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<sup>29</sup> Robert B. Rackleff, “Anti-Catholicism and the Florida Legislature, 1911-1919,” *Florida Historical Quarterly*, 50 (April 1972): 356-64 and David P. Page, “Bishop Michael J. Curley and Anti-Catholicism in Florida,” *Florida Historical Quarterly*, 45 (October 1966): 101-17.

illicit any protest in Catholic news outlets. However, its enactment held serious implications for the state's black Catholic schools, which were almost exclusively staffed by white sisters. This was fully realized when three white Sisters of Saint Joseph were arrested and jailed for operating a Catholic school for African-American children in Saint Augustine three years later.<sup>30</sup>

In the previous year, an identical law pending in the Georgia state legislature had precipitated the formation of the Handmaids of the Most Pure Heart of Mary, the youngest of the African-American Catholic teaching sisterhoods. If passed, the measure—seeking to bar whites from instructing blacks and blacks from teaching whites—would have barred African-American students from Georgia's parochial school system, then solely staffed by white women religious.<sup>31</sup> Seeking to circumvent the impending state law, Father Ignatius Lissner, a member of the American province of the Society of African Missions stationed in Savannah, recruited Eliza Barbara Williams, a native of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, to organize a new black teaching order to staff one of the city's four black parochial schools. A former assistant superior of a suppressed all-black Franciscan order in Convent, Louisiana and a former novice in the Oblate Sisters of Providence, Williams was working as a domestic for the Sisters of Notre Dame at Trinity College in Washington, D.C. when Father Lissner requested her help. Upon learning of Father Lissner's intention, Williams offered him her life savings and moved to Savannah

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<sup>30</sup> On April 24, 1916, three white Sisters of Saint Joseph who operated St. Benedict the Moor School in Lincolnville, the historically black section of Saint Augustine, Florida, were arrested in violation of the 1913 law. See Barbara E. Mattick, "Ministries in Black and White: The Catholic Sisters of St. Augustine, Florida, 1859-1920," (PhD diss., Florida State University, 2008), 158-82.

<sup>31</sup> *Journal of the Senate of the State of Georgia, Regular Session* (Atlanta, GA: Chas. P. Byrd, State Printer, 1915), 134, 252, 272. The bill in question was no. 17 introduced by J.B. Way and sought to "prohibit white teachers from teaching in colored schools and colored teachers from teaching in white schools." See also pp. 247-48. Source is contained at the Georgia Historical Society in Savannah, Georgia.

six months later to start up her work. Within a year of the order's founding in 1916, the Handmaids numbered six and staffed the St. Anthony School in West Savannah. To date, the Handmaids are the only Catholic sisterhood known to have been explicitly organized to defy racial segregation laws and educate African-American children.<sup>32</sup> Though much of the anti-Catholic legislation proposed in the South was defeated, widely un-enforced or repealed, knowledge of attempts to criminalize black Catholic education help to illustrate the hostile legal climate in which sisters teaching in the southern black apostolate labored. All the while, resistance on the ground remained firmly entrenched.

Outside of formal politics, opposition to black Catholic education during the Jim Crow era often translated into public and private smear campaigns against the Church as well as the verbal abuse of sisters and priests working in the southern African-American apostolate. It also included acts of physical intimidation and violence. However, depending on the race and gender of the individual, sisters, priests, and lay teachers experienced and negotiated this resistance quite differently.

White sisters teaching in black schools routinely endured being called “nigger sisters” or “nigger lovers” by local whites (Catholic and non-Catholic) who opposed their actions.<sup>33</sup> They also faced ostracism from other white sisters who lived and labored in their respective locales—many of whom held equally bigoted views about black Catholic education and African Americans, more generally.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, white sisters teaching in the southern black apostolate were almost always able to retain the privileges of

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<sup>32</sup> For account of the founding of the Handmaids, see Father Lissner's handwritten account contained in the Archives of the Archdiocese of Savannah in Georgia, hereafter AADS. See also, “Congregation File: Sister M. Theodore,” Box 103, Folder 6, OSP Archives.

<sup>33</sup> Mattick, “Ministries in Black and White,” 46.

<sup>34</sup> Sister Charlotte Marshall, O.S.P., interview by author, digital recording, Catonsville, Md., February 19, 2010. Marshall noted that the white BVM sisters who educated her in Memphis, Tennessee routinely endured ostracism and taunts from other white sisters teaching in the city.

whiteness and femininity, which guaranteed them automatic social protections unavailable to black sisters. Thus, white sisters were able to navigate the contested terrain of black Catholic education the Jim Crow South while avoiding physical violence. In the case of the three white Sisters of Saint Joseph who were arrested and jailed in Florida in 1916, two of the sisters were immediately bonded out of jail. Moreover, when Sister Mary Thomasine Heir, the school's principal, refused the bond offer, the judge allowed her to be held at the convent in custody of a priest rather than being sent to the county jail. Some historians have even suggested that the sisters' arrest was orchestrated by St. Augustine's Bishop Michael J. Curley to test the limits of the 1913 law. When the court finally ruled that the law did not apply to private institutions, white sisters teaching in the black apostolate in Florida were protected from further legal molestation.<sup>35</sup> Black sisters, who were not allowed to teach in white schools anyway, were not so fortunate.

Like white sisters, black teaching sisters often endured verbal and racist taunts from their adversaries in the Jim Crow South. Black sisters were routinely labeled as "the little nigger sisters" in their respective locales.<sup>36</sup> Black sisters also faced ostracism from white sisters. Ironically, some of the fiercest and cruelest opposition from white sisters came from those working in the southern black apostolate. In Savannah, for example, local black Catholics widely celebrated the formation of the Handmaids of Mary in 1916 providing them with provisions and securing a house for the order. However, local white sisters frequently expressed their disgust at the endeavor to Father Lissner. Lamenting the fact that no white sisters came to welcome or visit the Handmaids, Lissner wrote, "As

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<sup>35</sup> Mattick, "Ministries in Black and White," 158-82.

<sup>36</sup> Karen Katafiasz, "A New Voice for the New Black Sister," *Saint Anthony Messenger* 11 (April 1974): 38.

real Southerners they could not believe that a colored woman could make a real Religious Sister. I was blamed for the mistake. ‘It is a shame’ they said. Father Lissner will soon find out his mistake. ‘He may give them the veil but will prevent them from stealing chickens and telling lies?’”<sup>37</sup> Such virulent antipathy expressed toward black sisters in Georgia is especially curious considering the seeds of the black apostolate in Savannah were sown by Mother Mathilda Beasley, the state’s first black nun, and her small band of Franciscan sisters in the late decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>38</sup>

Unlike white sisters, black nuns had neither the privileges nor the protections of whiteness or femininity as they negotiated the dangerous contours of the southern caste system. Moreover, white ecclesiastical authorities often remained reserved in their defense of black religious and their schools, especially if there was widespread public dissent on the matter or if they themselves secretly held contempt for African Americans. One major consequence of this was that black sisters and their students were more susceptible to violent attack.

In one particularly disturbing example from 1921, the Saint Louis, Missouri branch of the Oblate Sisters of Providence withstood a month-long terror campaign waged by their neighbors following the relocation of their St. Rita’s Academy for Colored Girls and Convent to an all-white section of town. In early August of 1921, the Saint Louis Oblates purchased a three-story brick property located at 4650 South Broadway in the all-white, riverfront community of Carondelet. In response, neighboring property owners, many of whom were Catholics, began devising ways to evict three

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<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Gary W. McDonogh, *Black and Catholic in Savannah, Georgia* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1993), 215.

<sup>38</sup> See next chapter for a more comprehensive biography of Mathilda Beasley. See also “Mother Mathilda Beasley” file, AASD.

sisters and their twenty-four girl students—who had to be brought to the house in groups of two and three by white escorts. After failing in an attempt to have the city’s building commissioner revoke the sisters’ renovation permit, Carondelet residents then appealed to Saint Louis Archbishop John J. Glennon to have the sisters and their students relocated to a section of town where they would not be “objectionable.” When the archbishop’s office refused to intervene, residents resorted to extralegal means. On August 21, a Sunday, a night watchman hired by the Oblates to guard the sisters and their students intercepted a white man (believed to be a neighbor) breaking into the convent through a window. After the incident, a police detail was assigned to the property to protect the sisters and their students around the clock. In the meantime, white oppositional forces regrouped and returned to seeking the sisters’ eviction through “legal” channels.<sup>39</sup>

In the case of the Handmaids of the Most Pure Heart of Mary, the departure of Father Lissner from Savannah in 1920 following a series of bitter disputes with Bishop Benjamin Keiley left the sisters without a clerical ally and increasingly vulnerable to growing anti-black and anti-Catholic hostilities in the state. While very little information has survived detailing the circumstances surrounding the Handmaids’ forced exile from Georgia, which began in 1921, it is clear that Bishop Benjamin Keiley dismissed the Handmaids from their teaching positions in the parochial schools soon after Father Lissner’s departure and replaced them with white sisters. While the circumstances which led to the Handmaids’ dismissal are not clear, it is known that Bishop Keiley held racially

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<sup>39</sup> “Nuns at Negro Convent Ask Police to Protect Them from Neighbors: Trespasser on South Broadway Grounds Believed Near-By Resident,” *St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat*, August 23, 1921, 2. See also “Neighbor Residents to Continue Efforts to Evict Negro Nuns,” *St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat*, August 24, 1921, 2; “Welfare Association Formed to Fight Negro Encroachment: South Broadway Body Organized After Location of St. Rita’s Convent,” *St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat*, September 4, 1921, 6; and OSP Missions: St. Rita’s Academy, Box 45, Folder 2, OSP Archives.

derogatory views about the competency and morality of black religious and African Americans more generally. In fact, when Bishop Keiley gave Father Lissner permission to organize the Handmaids, it was clear that he did not want any black sisters teaching in the city's white parochial schools. Moreover, Bishop Keiley vehemently opposed the development of an African-American Catholic clergy in the United States and worked diligently to thwart Father Lissner's attempt to establish a seminary to train black men for the priesthood in Savannah. (Lissner eventually established St. Anthony's Mission House, an integrated seminary, in Tenafly, New Jersey in 1921.<sup>40</sup>) Bishop Keiley's publicly-expressed contempt for Father Lissner based on Lissner's Jewish heritage also hastened his departure from Savannah.<sup>41</sup>

To support themselves and their fledgling ministry, the Handmaids operated a laundry business at night and begged along the Savannah waterfront on weekends.<sup>42</sup> However, escalating white hostility to the presence of black Catholic religious in Georgia prompted the Handmaids to join the exodus of African Americans out of the state. In 1921, Mother Mary Theodore took a small band of Handmaids to Tenafly, New Jersey to serve as domestics at St. Anthony's Mission House and to seek out a northern mission. In early 1923, Archbishop Patrick Hayes of New York invited the Handmaids to come and work in Harlem's rapidly expanding southern black migrant and immigrant community.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ochs, *Desegregating the Altar*, 266. Unfortunately, Lissner's seminary soon failed as white students vehemently opposed the presence of black students at the seminary.

<sup>41</sup> See McDonogh, *Black and Catholic in Savannah*, 218-21; Ochs, *Desegregating the Altar*, 257-60 and 263-66.

<sup>42</sup> Sister Loretta Theresa Richards, F.H.M., interview by author, digital recording, December 8, 2009. See also "Our History," on the FHM website < <http://franciscanhandmaidsofmary.org/history.htm>>, accessed January 2, 2013.

<sup>43</sup> "The History of the First Fifty Years of the Franciscan Handmaids of the Most Pure Heart of Mary," (New York: Privately Printed, 1967) in the Archives of the Sisters of the Holy Family, New Orleans, Louisiana, hereafter SSF Archives. The pages in this source are not numbered. See also Cecelia

Upon her return to Savannah to make arrangements for the remaining Handmaids to travel North, Mother Theodore noticed an increased hostility to the presence of black Catholic religious among the city's white citizens. Especially disconcerting to them was the prospect of the arrival of Savannah's first black priest following the ordination of the Reverend John Joseph, the first black alumnus of Saint Anthony's Mission House.<sup>44</sup>

In a letter to Father Lissner dated July 27, 1923, Mother Theodore lamented the widespread white opposition to the prospect of Father Joseph's assignment to the all-black St. Anthony's Mission in West Savannah. She reported that local whites stopped her in the street to express their disgust about the proposal. "Now we meet the Colored Sister," they caustically remarked. "Next we will be meeting the colored priest." Mother Theodore also noted the opposition of the white Franciscan sisters who staffed the city's black Catholic schools. Believing that it was enough that Savannah already had black sisters, the Franciscans complained that the city did not need a black priest. Even Bishop Michael J. Keyes, Keiley's successor, opposed Father John's assignment to Savannah and later stated that he wanted mission work among African Americans in his diocese left to the white S.M.A. Fathers and presumably only white sisters.<sup>45</sup>

Upon learning of the Bishop Keyes's rejection of Father John's assignment, black Catholics in Savannah were furious. Voicing her own frustration with the un-Catholic attitudes of the white clergy and women religious and her fear of a mass exodus of African Americans from the Church as a result of such hostilities, Mother Theodore wrote, "The Japanese...Italians...Chinese...Africans have priests... Why can't the

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Moore, "Keeping Harlem Catholic: African-American Catholics and Harlem, 1920-60." *American Catholic Studies* 114, (Fall 2003): 3-22.

<sup>44</sup> Ochs, *Desegregating the Altar*, 273-74.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 274. Note this letter is cited and quoted in *Desegregating the Altar*.

American Negroes?”<sup>46</sup> For Mother Theodore and other African-American Catholics, the fate of black Catholics in the United States remained uncertain if white clergy and sisters were to remain firmly in charge of the African-American apostolate. For them, only the substantial development of an African-American clergy, who could access formal power in the Church, could ensure the security of their fledgling community and increase evangelization efforts among black Americans.

By the close of 1923, the Handmaids permanently relocated to New York City. There, they staffed the city’s first black Catholic day nursery and taught in Harlem’s black parochial schools. In their early years in Harlem, the Handmaids also affiliated themselves with the Order of Saint Francis. It would be twenty-seven years before they returned to the South on a mission.<sup>47</sup>

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Although the Supreme Court’s landmark 1925 decision in *Pierce v. Society of Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary* guaranteed the right of Catholic (and other private) schools to operate in the United States, southern opposition to black Catholic education remained steady through the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>48</sup> Nonetheless, overcrowded conditions in black public schools, the high state rankings of black Catholic schools, and the quiet emergence of a small black middle class in the South all

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<sup>46</sup> Ochs, *Desegregating the Altar*, 274.

<sup>47</sup> “The History of the First Fifty Years of the Franciscan Handmaids of the Most Pure Heart of Mary,” n.p.

<sup>48</sup> For a discussion of this landmark case, see Paula Abram, *Cross Purposes: Pierce v. Society of Sisters and the Struggle over Compulsory Public Education*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009. See also Douglas J. Slawson, *The Department of Education Battle, 1918-1932: Public Schools, Catholic Schools, and the Social Order* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005).

precipitated the entry of thousands of African-American children into southern black mission schools and private academies during the Jim Crow era. For church prelates, priests, and sisters invested in winning black souls, Catholic schools were essential to evangelization efforts in the African-American community. By supplying urban and rural black communities with first-rate schools staffed with willing and self-sacrificing sister-teachers, church officials reasoned that conversion—first among the students and later among their parents and other family members—would soon follow. Oftentimes, this strategy proved successful.

In cities and towns where black Catholics made up a significant proportion of the population, Catholic schools were in high demand. For African-American Catholic parents seeking to fulfill their canonical duty and right to provide a Catholic education for their children, the lack of Catholic schools, open to black youth, left a bitter taste and often moved them to action. Despite months (and oftentimes years) of pleading with church officials and religious orders to establish a school for black youth in their respective locales, parents could still come up empty-handed. However, when they were successful, many communities enthusiastically embraced the coming of the sisters and the building of the Catholic schoolhouse and church. The mission annals of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, for example, are filled with descriptions of elaborate community celebrations and barbeques thrown in honor of the sisters upon their arrivals in southern towns and cities. Similarly, when they were forced to withdraw from a school, black sisters were often besieged with petitions and letters begging them to stay. In one striking example, Mrs. P. B. Parks, the president of the Parent-Teacher Organization at the Holy Trinity School in Orangeburg, South Carolina, pleaded with the Oblate Superior General

not to withdraw her sisters from the school. "Being a part of the community, the white here would like nothing better than for the school to close as we do not get any cooperation from them whatsoever," she wrote. "If we do not have any Sisters we will be at a lost [sic] as we feel the Sisters make the school and they are the ones the parents and students rally behind." As a result of the black community's pleas, the Oblates remained in Orangeburg for another ten years.<sup>49</sup>

Even still, African-American opposition to Catholic education was not uncommon. The abysmal lack of black priests and the rigid and humiliating practices of racial segregation in most Catholic institutions had historically rendered the Church unappealing as a site of spiritual worship for the vast majority of African Americans. As a consequence, many non-Catholic black southerners were initially opposed to the idea of sending their children to Catholic schools even if staffed by black sisters. Fear of white retaliation also prompted many black Protestant ministers to discourage members of their congregations from enrolling their children in Catholic schools and vacation bible schools led by sisters. Such was the case in September of 1949, when three Oblate Sisters of Providence opened St. Gerard Elementary School in Aiken, South Carolina. Despite desperately overcrowded conditions in the city's public schools, only sixteen children were enrolled at St. Gerard on the first day. The sisters soon learned from one of their pupils that local black Baptist ministers had "warned the people not to have anything to do with it." They also learned that a white Baptist minister had previously gone into the

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<sup>49</sup> Mrs. P. B. Parks to Mother Mary of Good Counsel Baptiste, June 3, 1971, OSP Archives, OSP Missions R9, Box 102, Folder 2.

local African-American churches and warned the ministers and their congregations not to enroll their children in St. Gerard.<sup>50</sup>

In the Aiken case though, black suspicions and fears soon subsided. Black ministers gradually ceased in advising their congregations to boycott the school once white pressure wore off and they learned that students were not required to convert to Catholicism. Local parents who desired smaller classroom sizes (and who could afford to do so) slowly began to transfer their children to St. Gerard. An influx of black families into the city to work at the local H-bomb plant also contributed to the rapid increase in the student population at St. Gerard the following year. Two years later, the school, which began with only four grades, had increased to six in addition to the kindergarten, and its enrollment stood at approximately 75 students.<sup>51</sup>

Despite occasional protests waged by black Protestants, Catholic schools slowly became attractive to hundreds of black parents across the South. And those led by black nuns often served as great sources of pride in black communities across the South. The systematic exclusion of young black men from admission to U.S. seminaries had precluded the substantial development of an African-American clergy. As a result, black sisters served as the African-American Catholic community's primary spiritual role models and representatives to the U.S. hierarchy. Their successes *and* failures often set the tone for ecclesiastical actions on behalf of the African-American community. Indeed, their pioneering achievements in black evangelization and education had prompted U.S. and Vatican church officials to encourage several communities of white women religious

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<sup>50</sup> See Sister Stella Maria's handwritten account of the "History of the St. Gerard School in Aiken, South Carolina" dated March 1, 1952, OSP Archives: Missions R9, Box 100, Folder 1.

<sup>51</sup> "History of St. Gerard School."

to enter into the African-American apostolate during the Jim Crow era. Most notable among these women was Katharine Drexel, who in 1891 founded the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament for Indians and Colored People. Daughter of prominent Philadelphia banker, Francis Anthony Drexel, Katharine and her two sisters inherited a \$14 million trust upon their father's death. Initially concerned with the plight of Native Americans only, Drexel was urged by her spiritual advisor and confidante James O'Connor, Bishop of Omaha, in 1889 to consider expanding her expectant ministry to African Americans.<sup>52</sup> In later years, the now-sainted Drexel would be instrumental in providing financial support to build hundreds of black Catholic churches and schools throughout the nation. Most notably, her order founded Xavier College (now Xavier University of Louisiana) in New Orleans in 1925. Moreover, her order quickly grew and eventually provided a large share of teaching personnel in the southern black apostolate.

Upon the entry of several communities of white women religious into the southern black apostolate, black teaching orders were faced with added pressures. Not only did many of these communities have more financial and personnel resources than the black orders, but also many ecclesiastical authorities preferred to staff their black schools with white sisters. While this preference was sometimes based on the racial prejudices of church prelates and priests, it was also due to black sisters' increasing lack of teaching credentials. Because southern boards of education increasingly raised teacher requirements, black sisters were faced with an uncertain future in the Jim Crow South if Catholic institutions of higher education did not open their doors to them.

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<sup>52</sup> Davis, *Black Catholics*, 135-6.

## **Black Sisters and the Struggle for Catholic Higher Education**

Among the most egregious of the U.S. Church's policies toward its black constituency during the Jim Crow era was the systematic and explicitly racist exclusion of African Americans, including women religious, from the nation's Catholic higher educational system. While the Church was a private institution and not legally obligated to enforce segregation laws within its boundaries, the vast majority of Catholic colleges and universities followed and even reinforced the status quo. As a consequence, these discriminatory policies placed black congregations, who strove to abide by church law and custom, in an extremely difficult position. While black colleges and universities would accept black sisters, black leadership councils were reluctant to send their members to these institutions because they considered it a violation of church law. In the case of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, minutes from general council meetings reveal that the U.S. Apostolic Delegate Pietro Biondi, during a visit to the motherhouse on May 26, 1927, specifically stressed to the sisters that they "should not be allowed to attend non-Catholic colleges."<sup>53</sup> Required by church leaders to secure the accreditation of their schools, but banned from Catholic higher education on the basis of race, black sisters forged secret agreements with white church leaders and congregations in order to accomplish the task. In the process, they quietly desegregated several Catholic colleges and universities and ensured the survival of the black-administered Catholic educational system through the Jim Crow era.

For most scholars of American history, the pivotal roles that black sisters played in the desegregation of Catholic higher education remain widely unknown. While reasons

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<sup>53</sup> "Council Meetings of the Oblate Sisters of Providence 1903-1932 and Corporation Matters discussed with the Counsellors," Vol. 1, Administration Files, Box 44, Folder 5, OSP Archives.

for this historical amnesia are layered, it is clear that the pressing demand to secure the state certification of Catholic schools operated by black nuns in the Jim South first initiated the desegregation of Catholic higher education. Members of the Oblate Sisters of Providence integrated St. Scholastica College in Atchison, Kansas in 1923; Villanova College in Villanova, Pennsylvania in 1924; Saint Louis University in Saint Louis, Missouri in 1927; the College of Notre Dame of Maryland in Baltimore in 1929, the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. in 1933; Rosary College in River Forest, Illinois in 1937; and Maryville College in Saint Louis, Missouri in 1939.<sup>54</sup> Members of the Sisters of the Holy Family desegregated Loyola University of the South in New Orleans, Louisiana in 1921 and again in 1951 and Seton Hill College for Women in Greensburg, Pennsylvania in 1942.<sup>55</sup>

In 1931, under the administration of the order's second superior general Mother Mary Charles Wilson, the Handmaids secured the educational assistance of three white New York City-based Dominican Sisters of Sparkill (Marie Ignatia, Genieve, and Francis) and Sister Virginia Marie, O.P. to help prepare them to enter Manhattan College Extension for Sisters, where many local sisters enrolled to earn their teaching credentials. By the early 1960s, the Handmaids had also secured the support of the New York City-based Sisters of Charity who operated Mount Saint Vincent College in the Bronx. Although the college did not keep records noting the race of their students until the late

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<sup>54</sup> Sister Mary of Good Counsel Baptiste, O.S.P., "A Study of the Foundation and Educational Objectives of the Congregation of the Oblate Sisters of Providence and of the Achievement of These Objectives as Seen in Their Schools," MA Thesis: Villanova College, 1939, 56.

<sup>55</sup> Statistics compiled from the following: Fichter, "First Black Students at Loyola," Padgett, "Desegregation at Spring Hill College," and the Holy Family Summer School Files at the Archives of the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill in Greensburg, PA, hereafter ASCSH.

sixties, it is widely believed that the Handmaids were the first or among the institution's first black students and graduates.<sup>56</sup>

Unlike their secular counterparts who often braved angry and violent white mobs as they desegregated public and private schools in the aftermath of the landmark *Brown* decision in 1954, black sisters entered the ivory towers of the U.S. Catholic Church in the twenties, thirties, and forties in the face of very little overt violence *or* fanfare. However, the relative lack of physical violence that black sisters encountered should not be understood as an absence of opposition to their presence in Catholic higher education. Nor should their presence in Catholic higher education in the pre-*Brown* era be interpreted as evidence of the Church's progressive thinking on racial and educational matters in the age of Jim Crow.

As the foot soldiers of the early movement to desegregate Catholic higher education, black sisters and their allies knew that if they did not proceed cautiously and strategically, their penultimate goal of eliminating racial barriers in the U.S. Church might suffer an irrecoverable defeat. For black Catholic leaders, the entry of black sisters into Catholic higher education was the first step in dismantling the many barriers that prevented the fledgling African-American Catholic community from full recognition and support from the Church. Moreover, because black sisters had educated a substantial

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<sup>56</sup> "The History of the First Fifty Years of the Franciscan Handmaids of the Most Pure Heart of Mary," SSF Archives. When the Franciscan Handmaids of the Most Pure Heart of Mary, the youngest of the African-American Catholic teaching sisterhoods, relocated from Savannah, Georgia to Harlem, New York in 1923, the sisters first operated St. Benedict's Day Nursery, the first Catholic nursery for black children in the city. In addition to their work in early childhood education, the Handmaids operated a soup kitchen for Harlem's poor and downtrodden. In 1925, they established St. Mary Convent School in an effort to continue the education of their charges from the St. Benedict's. However, it was not until 1931, after the death of their founder Mother Mary Theodore Williams that the Handmaids endeavored to secure the higher training of their sister-teachers. When the Handmaids finally returned to the South in 1950 to open Christ the King Elementary School in High Point, North Carolina, their first mission outside of Harlem since their exile from Savannah, the sisters had all of the required teaching credentials to lead the school into the last half of the twentieth century.

number of the men who comprised the nation's first two generations of black priests, the survival of their schools was understood as necessary if the fight for a black clergy was to be won. As such, the struggle to secure the accreditation of their schools in the Jim Crow South—where the overwhelming majority of African-American Catholics lived and labored—emerged as a critical test case for black teaching sisters and the wider African-American Catholic protest community.

In most cases, knowledge of the admission of black nuns to Catholic colleges and universities in the pre-*Brown* era remained restricted to a small, select group of individuals usually consisting of one or two university administrators, an archbishop or bishop, the general councils of the white teaching orders who staffed the institutes, and black sisters. The press was almost never made aware of such events, and in the rare case that such activities did find publication, anonymity of the author and individuals involved outside of the black sisters was generally enforced. Moreover, because black teaching orders, like many white orders, could rarely afford to release more than two or three members at a time to pursue their higher education full-time, most black sisters took university classes during the summer and/or on weekends. Thus, the potential for white public protest and violence against their admission was greatly reduced. Nevertheless, black sisters faced an uphill battle in their pursuit of higher education.

Black sisters encountered staunch resistance from state officials, ecclesiastical authorities, and white sisters alike in their struggle for teacher certification and school accreditation. State officers charged with investigating educational compliance and upholding local segregation laws used legal and extralegal measures to ensure that southern Catholic institutions of higher education remained all-white. Ecclesiastical

authorities, many of whom held and promoted racist views of African Americans, largely ignored pleas from the Vatican to eliminate the color line in the U.S. Church and upheld racial segregation in their Catholic schools. In one glaring example, Father Harold Gaudin, S.J., a staunch segregationist, terminated Loyola University of the South's 16-year educational association with the Sisters of the Holy Family and ordered all records of the endeavor contained in the university's files destroyed upon his installation as president in 1937.<sup>57</sup>

Often though, the fiercest opposition raised to the higher training of black sisters came from white sisters, who often viewed African Americans as racially inferior and unworthy of both the habit and the privileges of Catholic higher education. White nuns frequently protested against the admission of black nuns to university-affiliated normal institutes organized for teaching sisters. Moreover, when black sisters sought the higher educational assistance of white orders, many of whom operated their own women's colleges, their pleas were almost always rejected. In the classroom, black sisters often encountered harassment and isolation from their peers and instructors alike. These occurrences often forced the leadership of the black orders to devise a set of rules and suggestions for sisters entering college as a way of protecting the sisters as well as preventing any racial confrontations. In one striking example from the Oblate Sisters of Providence, Sisters, who were attending college, were instructed to "pay no attention to any remarks relative to the Negro race—whether made by white Sisters, the Professor, or secular students." It stated, "As religious we have no race issues." If such remarks were passed, Sisters were advised not to repeat them to any Oblate Sister as it might cause "a

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<sup>57</sup> Fichter, "First Black Students at Loyola," 543-47.

violation of charity.”<sup>58</sup> These suggestions, however, often encouraged some black sisters to embrace a code of silence and deference that would come back to haunt them years later. Nonetheless, the very fact that black sisters were able to desegregate as many Catholic colleges and universities and earn as many degrees as they did during this period stands as a searing testament to their own courage, determination, and faith.

An examination of two key educational victories achieved by black nuns during the Jim Crow era—the establishment of an accredited summer normal school operated by the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill for the Sisters of the Holy Family in 1921 and the re-integration of Catholic University of America by the Oblate Sisters of Providence in 1933—offers a unique glimpse into many hardships that black sisters faced as they fought to obtain teacher certification and secure the accreditation of their schools. It also illuminates two forgotten episodes of true interracial cooperation and Catholicism in the face of strident racism and segregation.

### **The SSF and the First Desegregation of Loyola University of the South**

In the spring of 1921, a pamphlet prepared and distributed by the New York City-based Catholic Board for Mission Work among the Colored People made a special appeal on behalf of the nation’s African-American Catholic sisters. Entitled “The Colored Sisters: A Plea for Fair Play and Equal Opportunity,” the pamphlet indicted the Church for its policy of excluding African-American women religious from Catholic higher education. “The three orders of colored women, with their 400 sisters, are a nucleus,” it read. “They need more sisters with NORMAL TRAINING, more with COLLEGE

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<sup>58</sup> “Suggestions for the Sisters Attending College,” Congregation: Education: Box 19, Folder 21, OSP Archives. This source is undated.

DEGREES... They were not permitted to enter Catholic colleges or universities either before entering the convent or after; they have been heartlessly EXCLUDED EVEN FROM THE SUMMER COURSES and have been compelled to draw upon their already slender means to secure private instruction for the few that could be spared for this work.” Calling for at least six (two for each black order) annual scholarships to be established at accredited U.S. Catholic colleges and universities, the pamphlet cited the leading example of the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill, who in 1920 had been the first to respond to the board’s appeal to staff a Normal School for the nation’s black sisters. Appealing for charity and racial justice, the pamphlet concluded: “We Catholics owe this to these wonderful women not only for what they have done and suffered, but to equip them properly for their tremendous future work for the Church and for Negro Womanhood. We of the white race have done much to degrade Negro Womanhood, as is incontestibly [sic] proven by the presence of 5,000,000 mulattoes in our midst. We ought to make some reparation.”<sup>59</sup>

Founded in 1907, the Catholic Board for Mission Work among the Colored People was a small federation of white priests and church prelates engaged in black Catholic missionary work and headquartered in New York City. Originally led by Monsignor John E. Burke, the longtime pastor of St. Benedict the Moor Catholic Church in Harlem, the board was organized primarily to raise and distribute funds to support the Church’s southern black missions. Through its monthly publication, *Our Colored Missions*, the board also waged a propagandistic assault against racial discrimination in the Church and wider American society. Though often paternalistic in its

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<sup>59</sup> “The Colored Sisters: A Plea for Fair Play and Equal Opportunity,” ca. 1921, prepared by the Catholic Board for Mission Work among the Colored People, ASCSH.

characterizations of the black Catholics, the board was nonetheless unrelenting in its support of the nation's three black Catholic teaching orders and sincere in its commitment to expanding Catholic educational opportunities for African Americans. In addition to paying the annual salaries for over 200 sisters teaching in the southern black apostolate, the board was instrumental in helping to establish and fund an accredited summer normal school for the Sisters of the Holy Family in 1921.

Heralded by the board as “the greatest movement in all time for the betterment of the Negro race,” the establishment of the Holy Family Summer School marked the first significant step toward the desegregation of Catholic higher education in the Jim Crow South.<sup>60</sup> Originally affiliated with Loyola University of the South, the summer school, administered by the all-white Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill, enabled the Sisters of the Holy Family to earn their state teaching certificates secretly under the auspices of a Catholic institution of higher education during the height of Jim Crow apartheid. In the process, the Holy Family Sisters secured the accreditation of the vast majority of their schools in Louisiana, Florida, and Texas and helped to loosen the hinges on the doors of southern Catholic higher education. Yet, during its formative years, the school faced a series of distinct challenges that highlight the various obstacles that black sisters faced in the struggle for higher education and teacher certification.

In 1920, changes in the state constitution began requiring the certification of private school teachers throughout Louisiana. Barred from admission to the state's only Catholic institution of higher education, Loyola University of the South, on the basis of race, the general council of the Sisters of the Holy Family, headquartered in New

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<sup>60</sup> “History of the First Summer School,” *Our Colored Missions* 7(September 1921): 130.

Orleans, began to seek means to establish an accredited normal institute at their motherhouse to train their sisters, many of whom entered religious life without a high school diploma. Prior to this, the higher training of the Sisters of the Holy Family had been piecemeal at best. In addition to operating their own informal normal school led by the sisters with the greatest amount of teaching experience, the Holy Family Sisters hired private instructors from the North to administer summer classes for their teaching sisters. However, this practice caused a severe financial strain on the order's already limited budget. Moreover, Holy Family records reveal that the various individuals hired to administer the summer school proved to be less than effective.<sup>61</sup> As a result, Mother Mary of the Sacred Heart, superior general of the Sisters of the Holy Family, sought the advice and assistance of her community's ecclesial superior, Most Reverend John Shaw, Archbishop of New Orleans. Installed in New Orleans in 1918, Archbishop Shaw also served as the president of the Catholic Board for Mission Work among the Colored People in New York City. In early 1920, he wrote to the board's director general, Monsignor John Burke, requesting his assistance with the Holy Family situation. After receiving the request from Monsignor Burke to staff a teacher training institute for the nation's black sisterhoods, Mother Mary Joseph Harvey, superior general of the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill, pledged her order's support. The "Black-caps," as they were affectionately known, of Seton Hill were the only order to respond in the affirmative to the board in 1920.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Hart, "Violets in the King's Garden." See also "Closing Address to the Ven. Sisters of the Charity. Summer 1922," ASCSH.

<sup>62</sup> Fichter, "First Black Students at Loyola," 537-38. See also 1920-1921 correspondence for "Holy Family School" at ASCSH and Betty Porter, "The History of Negro Education in Louisiana." *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 25 (July 1942): 728-821.

Although the Sisters of Charity, who conducted Seton Hill College for Women in Greensburg, Pennsylvania, had originally agreed to operate a summer normal institute for both the Sisters of the Holy Family and the Oblate Sisters of Providence, financial difficulties and geographic distance prevented the realization of such an undertaking. The Oblates had also been able to secure the assistance of two Baltimore-based Xavierian Brothers (Simeon and Bede) to help their degreed sisters conduct summer normal classes for the remaining members. They would also soon gain the local assistance of Baltimore chapter of the Sisters of Notre Dame who opened up the doors their College of Notre Dame in 1929.<sup>63</sup> Thus, the board and the Sisters of Charity focused their attention primarily on the establishment of the Holy Family Summer School in New Orleans.

Working in secret conjunction with the Sisters of Charity, Archbishop Shaw, and Father Francis X. Twellmeyer, S.J., superintendent of the archdiocesan school system and director of the summer school and extension program at Loyola, the Catholic Board for Mission Work among the Colored People financed the entire operation, providing all of the necessary teaching supplies, paying the travel fees and salaries of the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill, and arranging for the Sisters of Charity to reside with a local white order during the summer. (Note: Racial segregation laws and custom in Louisiana prohibited black and white persons from residing under the same roof outside the realm of employment. Moreover, because the Holy Family Motherhouse was located in the heart of the Crescent City's famed and well-trafficked French Quarter, everyone involved agreed that it would be safer if the Sisters of Charity resided with the Ladies of Sacred Heart to avoid detection.) Under this arrangement, academic credits earned by the Holy

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<sup>63</sup> Father Sullivan to Sister M. Francesca, November 6, 1920, ASCSH. See also Grace H. Sherwood, *The Oblates' Hundred and One Years* (New York: MacMillan, 1931): 193-6.

Family Sisters at their normal institute would be granted through Loyola. The Holy Family Sisters would then apply to the state and test to receive their respective teaching certificates.<sup>64</sup>

On June 21, 1921, six Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill (Mary Bertrand Wall, Marie Monica Blickenstorger, M. Thecla Carroll, M. Ferdinand Love, Teresa Vincent Mahoney, and Anne Elizabeth Regan) arrived by train in New Orleans.<sup>65</sup> The following morning, the six sisters began their work as the inaugural staff of the Holy Family Summer School. Six weeks later, the sisters concluded their session and returned to Greensburg. In an anonymous account of the first summer session published in *Our Colored Missions* in September of 1921, one faculty member declared, “My notion of the Negro has undergone a change. I have heard so often that he is lazy, that he will not work. These colored sisters work. They could not have worked harder.” She continued, “Each gave the best that was in her. And this best in many instances means more than good. It means that in a land where the colored race is prevented by law and custom from opportunities freely given the white race, these colored women alone and in little groups, have striven for the higher education that they feel need to teach the children of their own race. They have made splendid use of even the shadow of an opportunity.” When asked if the members of her order would be returning to the South, she responded, “Please God we shall form the habit of going back to the South...Summer after Summer, as long as we are needed, the

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<sup>64</sup> Fichter, “First Black Students at Loyola,” 537-38.

<sup>65</sup> “Summer School for the Sisters of the Holy Family, 1921-1957: Faculty Lists,” ASCSH.

“Black-caps” of Seton Hill will be found working among the colored Sisterhoods of the South.”<sup>66</sup>

And over the course of the next thirty-six years, the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill returned annually to New Orleans to operate a summer normal school for the Sisters of the Holy Family. In addition, the Holy Family Sisters secured the support of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament for Indian and Colored People, who operated the historically black and Catholic Xavier College, who agreed to offer full-tuition scholarships to any Holy Family Sister desiring a bachelor’s or master’s degree. (This began in 1928 and ended in the 1990s.)<sup>67</sup> Xavier also offered its support in ensuring the accreditation of Holy Family Summer School following the termination of its affiliation with Loyola in 1937.<sup>68</sup>

In 1929, the Louisiana State Board of Education began to investigate the legality of the arrangement between the Holy Family Sisters and Loyola. On September 29, 1929, a “Mr. Lewis” made an unannounced visit to the Holy Family motherhouse to inquire about their program “giving College Credits.” Though rebuffed by the Sisters and administrators at Loyola, the state remained vigilant.<sup>69</sup> However, with the installation of Father Harold Gaudin as president of Loyola in 1937, that state found an ally among the New Orleans Jesuit leadership. In mid-August of 1937, Father Harold Gaudin, S. J., a staunch segregationist, terminated the institution’s affiliation with the Holy Family

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<sup>66</sup> “The History of the First Summer School,” 130-131. Parts of this article were reprinted three years later in *America: The National Catholic Weekly*. See “Seton Hill and the Negro Sisters,” *America*, December 13, 1924, 213.

<sup>67</sup> Fichter, “First Black Students at Loyola,” 542-3. Several SSF noted that the agreement ended sometime in the 1990s.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Sister M. Eusebia to Sister Agnes Marie, September 29, 1929, ASCSH.

Summer Normal School. He also ordered all record of the endeavor contained in the university's files destroyed.<sup>70</sup>

In response, Mother M. Elizabeth Bowie, then superior general of the Holy Family Sisters, decided to plead her case directly to Father Gaudin. After Father Gaudin rebuffed one of her subordinates over the telephone, Mother Elizabeth wrote him a letter. In the missive, she detailed the history of the Holy Family Summer School and its affiliation with Loyola and the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill. She also informed him that she had contacted Sister Anne Elizabeth Regan, director of the Holy Family Summer School, who would write him from Greensburg to corroborate her claims. "The Sisters of Charity have been working whole-heartedly with us and for us, and I would not like to any shadow cast upon their actions," she wrote. "The Jesuit Fathers also have stood by us all through the years and I feel that you can take care of the situation when you know that it is without lowering the standard of Loyola."<sup>71</sup>

Despite receiving letters from the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill and the Catholic Board for Mission Work Among the Colored People explaining his predecessors' arrangement with the Holy Family Sisters and copies of the Holy Family Sisters' transcripts with the Loyola University seal, Father Gaudin remained firm in his decision. In a letter written to Mother M. Elizabeth and dated August 17, 1937, Father Gaudin caustically dismissed the notion that Loyola had ever affiliated itself with the Holy Family Summer School. "I assure you, my dear Sister, we are as willing now to help you as we have ever been," he wrote. "I was greatly worried when I received you because to send a letter saying that the work done during the Summer School was done

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<sup>70</sup> Fichter, "First Black Students at Loyola," 543-47.

<sup>71</sup> Mother M. Elizabeth to Reverend H. Gaudin, August 14, 1937, SSF Archives.

under the auspices of Loyola University, that is under our supervision, would not be true. We could never have given credit for such work.”<sup>72</sup> Following the termination of Loyola’s affiliation of the Holy Family Summer School, Xavier, which had become fully accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools, affiliated itself with the institute. However, the sisters who had not yet received their teaching certificates were forced to begin their coursework anew having lost those credits from Loyola. Also, some of the Holy Family Sisters who had earned Loyola credits were denied a renewal of their state teaching certificates.<sup>73</sup>

Although the first desegregation of Loyola University proved to be short-lived, it did provide the Sisters of the Holy Family an opportunity to begin securing the accreditation of their schools throughout Louisiana, where the overwhelmingly majority of the nation’s African-American Catholics resided prior to 1960. They also secure the accreditation of their schools in Florida and Texas. From the mid 1920s through the 1950s, Catholic schools staffed by the Holy Family Sisters in Louisiana were consistently ranked among the highest achieving schools in the state for African Americans and led other black Catholic schools as well. In the meanwhile, their relationship with the Sisters of Charity blossomed into a decades-long educational partnership, which among many things led to the establishment of a scholarship program that provided Sisters of the Holy Family the opportunity to attend Seton Hill College and earn their bachelor’s degrees. In 1944, Sister Mary Esperance Collins, a ten-year member of the Sisters of the Holy Family, received her A. B. degree in Botany from Seton Hill becoming the institution’s

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<sup>72</sup> Harold A. Gaudin, S.J. to Sister M. Elizabeth, August 17, 1937, SSF Archives.

<sup>73</sup> Fichter, “First Black Students at Loyola,” 547.

first Black graduate.<sup>74</sup> Over the course of the next thirty years, sixteen other Holy Family Sisters earned their bachelor's degrees from the university.<sup>75</sup>

In 1958, the general council of the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill voted not to return to New Orleans to staff the Holy Family Normal School. In the two previous decades, more and more Holy Family Sisters had earned bachelor's and graduate degrees, and they had slowly begun to replace the Sisters of Charity on the teaching staff of the normal institute. So much so that by 1958, the Sisters of Charity felt that they were no longer needed. In a letter dated April 22, 1958 to Mother Mary Phillip Goodman, superior general of the Sisters of the Holy Family, Mother M. Claudia Glenn, superior general of the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill, announced the final withdrawal of the Sisters of Charity from the staff of the Holy Family Summer School. She wrote, "Before starting this I desire to assure you, Mother, that our work with your excellent Community has been from the first a labor of love. In the beginning your Community needed the help we gave, and then and now always responded heartily to every effort made. Today I believe that you have many sisters of your own that can do the work for your young sisters...I think you will agree with me that your sisters can staff these courses competently in every case and with distinction in every case, too." She went on to state, "Our interest in your beloved Community will never change. We shall expect to have two members enrolled in [Seton Hill] College...I shall write the word to Father Kramer and suggest to him that the funds assigned for our travel South be transferred to summer

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<sup>74</sup> *Our Colored Missions*, 3 (August 1944): 116.

<sup>75</sup> Fichter, "First Black Students at Loyola," 548. See also "Folder: Scholarship Program for Sisters of the Holy Family of New Orleans, Louisiana, at Seton Hill College, Greensburg, Pennsylvania," ASCSH.

tuition for your sisters. May God bless you, Mother, and keep you and each dear sister of your Community close to His Sacred Heart.”<sup>76</sup>

A Catholic predecessor to the famed Freedom School project launched by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in 1964, the Holy Family Normal School was a radical experiment in interracial Catholicism, education, and democracy. It also sowed the seeds for the official desegregation of Loyola University of the South, now Loyola University-New Orleans. In 1951, two Sisters of the Holy Family—Mary Letitia Senegal and Mary Catherine Waiters—were awarded tuition scholarships to the Loyola University Extension Program and became the first two black students to obtain academic credit from the institution “officially.” (Note: As sisters, they attended part-time. Sister Mary Catherine became ill and was forced to withdraw. She died in 1958. Sister Mary Letitia earned her BA in 1960.<sup>77</sup>) In 1952, twenty-one year old Norman Francis entered Loyola University’s Law School. A longtime pupil of the Holy Family Sisters at St. Paul’s Elementary and High School in Lafayette, Louisiana, and graduate of Xavier University of Louisiana in New Orleans, Francis was one of the first two full-time African-American students admitted to Loyola. In 1955, he became the institution’s first African-American graduate, when he earned his Juris Doctorate.<sup>78</sup>

Recalling his primary and secondary education under the tutelage of the Sisters of the Holy Family at St. Paul’s half a century later, Norman Francis noted that it was a Holy Family Sister who had encouraged him to pursue his higher education at Xavier,

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<sup>76</sup> Mother M. Claudia to Mother M. Phillip, April 22, 1958, ASCSH.

<sup>77</sup> Fichter, “First Black Students at Loyola,” p.

<sup>78</sup> Anderson, *Black, White and Catholic*, 98-110. Upon the heels of Loyola’s desegregation in 1952, the Religious of the Sacred Heart, who operated College of the Sacred Heart, a Catholic women’s college in Grand Coteau, Louisiana, some 145 miles west of New Orleans, admitted their first black student in the fall of 1953.

where she was then studying. (A Holy Family Sister had also taken his older brother Joseph under her wing after he announced to her in the 1930s that he desired to become a priest.<sup>79</sup>) Francis, who became president of his alma mater Xavier in 1968, also recalled that since his inauguration a delegation from the Holy Family Sisters had been present at each of his presidential addresses.<sup>80</sup> While the SSF do not appear in any historical account of the desegregation of higher education in Louisiana, their efforts—first in the fight for school accreditation and then through their students—were critical in helping to break the color bar at Loyola.

### **The OSP and the Re-Integration of the Catholic University of America**

Like the Holy Family Sisters, the Oblate Sisters of Providence, the nation's oldest black congregation, undertook the task of secretly desegregating Catholic colleges and universities after World War I. In addition to becoming the first black students at Villanova College in 1924 and Saint Louis University in 1927, the OSP led the fight to re-integrate the Catholic University of America in 1933. Initially open to African-American men, the Catholic University placed a moratorium on the admission of American-born blacks during World War I. (Virulent white opposition to black students at the Catholic University and escalating racial tensions on the American homefront prompted Church officials to initiate the policy.<sup>81</sup>) However, at the war's conclusion, the doors remained closed to African Americans, even as state law and church mandates

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<sup>79</sup> Albert S. Foley, *God's Men of Color: The Colored Catholic Priests of the United States 1854-1954* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Co., 1955), 276.

<sup>80</sup> Dr. Norman J. Francis, interview by author, September 11, 2009.

<sup>81</sup> Nuesse, "Segregation and Desegregation at the Catholic University of America," 59-61.

increasingly required black sisters to professionalize their ranks and secure the accreditation of their schools.

For the OSP leadership council headquartered in Baltimore, less than 45 miles north of Washington D.C., the Catholic Sisters' College at CUA was the desired choice to send their sisters for higher education. Opened in 1911, the Catholic Sisters' College was organized to provide teacher training primarily to the nation's teaching sisterhoods. However, it was also open to female public and private schoolteachers. By 1919, it had instructed over 200 laywomen and 1,800 sisters representing 151 congregations from across the United States and Canada. During the 1929-30 academic term, CUA opened its doors to women and transferred all of the graduate work conducted under the auspices of the Sisters' College to the University proper.<sup>82</sup> However, black sisters were still excluded from admission, leaving their secondary schools in jeopardy as state laws began explicitly requiring degreed sisters to secure high school accreditation.

Thus, the fight to re-integrate the Catholic University of America during the interwar period helped to radicalize black Catholics struggling for racial and educational justice in the Church in new and important ways. On November 3, 1919, Dr. Thomas Wyatt Turner, writing as chairman of the Washington, D.C. based-Committee for the Advancement of Colored Catholics, sent a twenty-page typed missive to Archbishop Giovanni Bonzano, the Vatican's Apostolic Delegate to the United States. In the letter, Turner detailed the inferior and humiliating conditions under which African-American Catholics had been forced to worship due to national segregation laws and the racially discriminatory practices of the Church. Stating that black Catholics were "without voice

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<sup>82</sup> Thomas Edward Shields, "The Need of the Catholic Sisters College and the Scope of Its Work," *The Catholic Educational Review*, 17 (September 1919): 420.

anywhere in the Church,” Turner pleaded with Archbishop Bonzano to condemn all acts of discrimination against black Catholics on the basis of color in the Church. Turner also provided a detailed list of grievances that black Catholic lay leaders had gathered from around the country. Chief among the committee’s concerns was the Church’s continued neglect of the Catholic education of African-American children. Especially disconcerting to Turner was the abrupt change in the admissions policy at the Church’s national university.<sup>83</sup>

Approved by Pope Leo XIII on March 7, 1889, the Catholic University of America officially opened its doors in Washington, D.C. on November 13 of that same year. Founded by the U.S. bishops as an institution of higher learning for men, Catholic University accepted black applicants in its early days.<sup>84</sup> In fact, Turner had himself briefly studied at the school in 1901 after earning his bachelor’s degree from Howard University. He had to withdraw soon after though due to financial problems. When Turner reapplied to the institution in 1914, he was refused admission with no further explanation despite his appeals to the university’s registrar. (Turner went on to earn a Ph.D. in biology from Cornell University in 1921—the first African American to earn a doctorate from the institution.<sup>85</sup>) By 1917, black applicants to the Catholic University were routinely denied admission explicitly on the basis of race.<sup>86</sup> In the committee’s brief to Archbishop Bonzano in 1919, Turner specifically decried the exclusion of black teaching sisters from the institution’s Catholic Sisters College, which was frequented by

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<sup>83</sup> Davis, *History of Black Catholics*, 217-220.

<sup>84</sup> Nuesse, “Segregation and Desegregation at the Catholic University of America,” 55-57.

<sup>85</sup> Nickels, *Black Catholic Protest*, 21-22.

<sup>86</sup> Nuesse, “Segregation and Desegregation at the Catholic University of America,” 58-9. A letter dated November 22, 1917 from the university’s registrar Charles F. Borden to an unnamed black applicant, for example, stated that “colored students are not matriculated” and that it was “tried once with exceeding unhappy results, and the policy had to be adopted otherwise.”

women religious from across the country in order to fulfill their necessary degree requirements. “Catholic authorities have gone far ahead of the city, civic practices in oppressing and discriminating against their fellow Catholics,” Turner wrote.<sup>87</sup> For the committee, the exclusion of black sisters and other African-American Catholics from the Catholic University of America and other Catholic colleges and universities threatened to undermine the very foundations of black Catholic education (and Catholicism) in the nation and could not go unchallenged.

Speaking in 1931 at the seventh annual convention of the Federated Colored Catholics, the nation’s leading black Catholic protest organization, Oblate Sister of Providence Mary Laurentia Short concurred. “Our Catholic youths and even those who are not of our Faith are demanding higher education under Catholic leadership,” she declared. “They as Catholic students, you as Catholic parents, and we as Catholic educators know that the salvation of our young people lies not necessarily in higher education in the secular sense.” Sister M. Laurentia specifically called upon black Catholics to take the lead in helping to finance the higher education of the members of her order. “The Holy Father’s Encyclical on Christian Education leaves no room for doubt that every Catholic child should be in a Catholic school,” she proclaimed. “But every Catholic school means increased demands upon the Sisters who staff that school.” Striving to continue meeting “the heavy demands made upon them by the increasing exactness of State Boards of Education,” the Oblates, Sister M. Laurentia explained, had proven themselves well-prepared for Catholic higher education, as many had already undertaken graduate work at such notable institutions as Villanova College and Saint

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<sup>87</sup> Nuisse, “Segregation and Desegregation at the Catholic University of America,” 59.

Louis University. “We stand, as always, ready to sacrifice ourselves unreservedly in preparing ourselves better to train your children,” she proclaimed. “[However], the day has passed when the training of Catholic teachers for the children of our race can be left to the haphazard methods of charity. Our people must stand back of us by founding scholarships, establishing burses, and making generous contributions towards providing university training for the candidate for the work of the Oblate Sisters of Providence.”<sup>88</sup>

While protest against the exclusion of African Americans from CUA remained steady through the 1920s and early 1930s, it was not until 1932 that Archbishop Curley began exerting pressure on university administrators to re-admit African-American students to the school’s summer sessions. In a letter dated June 6, 1932 and addressed to Bishop James Hugh Ryan, Rector and President of Catholic University, Curley wrote, “I do not think the presence of our Colored Sisters at the Summer School would cause the slightest objection. Some snippy lady in a Habit from the South might turn up her nose, but I am sure that she could be put down as one unworthy of her Habit.” Curley continued, “I am afraid we are going very far now yielding to prejudice when we exclude the Colored Sisters from the school. It is a matter that I really think should get some consideration.”<sup>89</sup> While Curley does not specifically allude to any factors that might have precipitated his actions, he did take a special interest in the OSP following his installation as Archbishop of Baltimore in 1921. Moreover, as the spiritual advisor to the FCC, Curley was privy to the growing militancy of the nation’s black lay leadership, particularly in their demand for Catholic higher education.

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<sup>88</sup> Sister M. Laurentia, O.S.P., “The Oblate Sisters of Providence and Higher Education,” 8-9.

<sup>89</sup> Archbishop of Baltimore to Rt. Rev. Msgr. J. H. Ryan, June 6, 1932, Curley RGI, Document R1646, AAB.

Organized in 1924, the FCC was an outgrowth of the “Committee Against the Extension of Race Prejudice in the Church,” founded in 1917 by Dr. Thomas Wyatt Turner, a biology professor of at Howard University and a parishioner at St. Augustine’s Catholic Church in Washington, D.C. According to its mission statement, the FCC sought to “bring about a closer union and better feeling among all Catholic Negroes; to advance the cause of Catholic education throughout the Negro population; to seek to raise the general status of the Negro in the Church; and to stimulate Catholic Negroes to a larger participation in racial and civic affairs of the various communities and of the whole country.”<sup>90</sup> As a black lay organization, the FCC promoted racial pride and black self-determination. It also called for an immediate end to the practice of racial segregation in the Church, especially in higher education. As a result, its black leaders were often at odds with its white clerical membership, who both resented Turner’s leadership and feared white reprisals if segregation was terminated.<sup>91</sup>

In fact, two months after Curley wrote to Bishop Ryan, the Federated Colored Catholics penned a letter to Pope Pius XI pleading for an end to racially discriminatory practices in the Church and specifically cited the case of the Catholic University. Noting that black Catholics supported the Catholic University through annual collections, the Federated Colored Catholics pointed out that the school excluded black sisters while it regularly accepted non-Catholic white students and while many prominent secular

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<sup>90</sup> Nickels, *Black Catholic Protest*, 42-60.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. The FCC promoted racial pride and self-determination among African-American Catholics. It also provided the lay organizational base for launching attacks on racial discrimination in the U.S. Church, particularly with regard to the exclusion of African Americans from Catholic schools. Especially egregious to the organization was the systematic exclusion of African-American Catholic teaching sisters from the overwhelming majority of the nation’s Catholic colleges and universities.

institutions admitted African Americans.<sup>92</sup> Perhaps fearing Vatican repercussions and a public smearing of his personal record on race relations, Curley's moved to act. However, he remained cautious. While advocating for the admission of a black woman graduate of Howard University to Catholic University's summer school for graduate courses in March of 1933, Curley advised Dr. Roy Deferrari, director of the summer school, to give it "mature thought" and to take it up with the Rector. "This whole colored question is simmering from one end of the Country to the other," he cautioned, "and is potentially dangerous to the Faith."<sup>93</sup>

However, the timidity with which white church authorities approached racial injustice threatened the very livelihood of black-administered Catholic educational system. In a letter dated August 8, 1933, Mother M. Consuella Clifford eloquently outlined the unique (and race-specific) challenges that her order (and the other black teaching sisterhoods) faced in the struggle for teacher certification and school accreditation. She also used the opportunity to take exception to Charleston Bishop Emmet Walsh's expressed disappointment at her inability to provide "a properly qualified staff" for Immaculate Conception High School.<sup>94</sup> For Mother Consuella, Bishop Walsh's professed indignation was not only hurtful but profoundly unjust especially when he, along with the rest of the hierarchy, remained thunderously silent regarding the exclusionary admissions policies at U.S. Catholic colleges and universities.

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<sup>92</sup> Nickels, *Black Catholic Protest*, 42-60. See also Marilyn W. Nickels, "Thomas Wyatt Turner and the Federated Colored Catholics," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 7(Summer 1988): 215-32.

<sup>93</sup> Archbishop of Baltimore to Dr. Deferrari, March 30, 1933, Box 9, Document D484, AAB.

<sup>94</sup> Mother M. Consuella Clifford, O.S.P. to Most Rev. Emmet M. Walsh, Bishop of Charleston, August 8, 1933, Mother Consuella Clifford Administration Files, OSP Archives.

Maintaining Church-mandated deference and etiquette, Mother Consuella wrote, “I realize and appreciate very keenly your hopes and aspirations for the school, and am most anxious to make possible the realization of your plans. But I am sure Your Excellency knows only too well the handicaps and difficulties under which our Community is laboring.” She continued, “As a matter of fact it might truly be said that if Catholic institutions of higher learning had opened their doors to our Sisters sooner and with greater welcome, neither Your Excellency nor I would be in the present embarrassing situation as regards the Immaculate Conception High School.”<sup>95</sup>

Emphasizing the great strides and tremendous sacrifices that her order had made in order to secure the higher education of their sisters, Mother Consuella reported that during the past summer alone twenty-one of her sisters had undertaken course work at five Catholic colleges and universities, including the Catholic University of America, Villanova College, and St. Louis University. Moreover, the Oblates had secured the assistance of the all-white Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, who operated the all-black and Catholic Xavier College in New Orleans, Louisiana, to direct a summer normal course for the remaining sisters at the Oblate motherhouse in Baltimore, Maryland.<sup>96</sup>

Offering a temporary solution to the situation at Immaculate Conception High School, Mother Consuella suggested that Bishop Walsh secure two degreed teachers from Xavier College for the upcoming school year to ensure state approval of the high school diplomas to be awarded in the spring. If such a remedy proved suitable to him, Mother Consuella guaranteed Bishop Walsh that she would have two additional degreed Sisters to send to Charleston the following year. Following Bishop Walsh’s approval, the

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<sup>95</sup> Clifford to Walsh, August 8, 1933.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

impending crisis at Immaculate Conception High School was temporarily averted.<sup>97</sup>

However, the long-term fate of Immaculate Conception's high school department rested squarely on the shoulders of two Oblate Sisters of Providence (Mary of Good Counsel Baptiste and Mary Consolata Gibson) who were soon scheduled to enter the Catholic Sisters College of CUA as the institution's first African-American full-time students in over a decade.<sup>98</sup>

In early June of 1933, working in secret alliance Archbishop Curley, Rev. John Gillard, S.S.J., the Oblate Chaplain, and Dr. Roy J. Deferrari, Oblate Sisters Mary Frances Gilpin, Mary Venard Harrison, and Mary Consolata Gibson re-integrated the CUA summer session. That September, Sisters Mary of Good Counsel and Mary Consolata enrolled as full-time students at the Catholic Sisters College. According to their agreement with university officials, if the two sisters earn superior grades, the Catholic University of America would reopen its doors to African Americans permanently.<sup>99</sup> On June 13, 1934, Sisters Mary of Good Counsel and Mary Consolata

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<sup>97</sup>Following Bishop Walsh's approval, two recent Xavier College graduates (Misses Chlotide Labat and Irma Henry) were secured via emergency telegram to New Orleans to staff Immaculate Conception's high school department for the 1933-1934 academic year. In October of 1933, Miss Sylvia Labat, a graduate of Xavier College and Howard University, replaced Irma Henry, who received a full-time teaching position in the New Orleans public school system. See "Missions: South Carolina: St. Katherine: Annals (1917-1942), "150-53, OSP Archives.

<sup>98</sup> Mother Consuella to Bishop Walsh, August 8, 1933.

<sup>99</sup> The motherhouse annals of the Oblate Sisters of Providence from June to September 1933 document the re-integration of the Catholic University by the order. The entry for Monday, June 12, 1933 from the OSP motherhouse annals reads: "Sisters Liberata & Mary of Good Counsel went to the Catholic University at Washington to see about having two Sisters attend the University this summer." One week later, the following entry was made: "This morning Sisters Liberata, Frances, Venard & Consolata went down to Catholic University this morning to conclude arrangements for three Sisters to attend the Summer School there. Sisters Frances, Vernard & Consolata were registered. They will reside at St. Augustine's Convent, which is to be kept open this summer because Fr. Olds wants some Sisters to be there as the Fathers are moving 1118 up to 1719-15 St." An entry from Thursday August 3, 1933 reads: "The examinations in the Normal & High School classes began to-day [led by two Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament]. Sisters Venard & Frances, accompanied by Sister Adrian came up from Washington to-day. Classes are over at Catholic University, but Sister Consolata will be up on Saturday." One month later, an entry for Monday, September 18, 1933 reads: "Sisters Mary of Good Counsel & Consolata left this

earned their bachelor's degrees from CUA.<sup>100</sup> Although barred from taking part in the commencement ceremonies, the two OSP became CUA's first American-born black graduates in more than a decade and its first black women graduates. Their academic excellence also ensured the school's termination of the ban that had been placed on the admission of American-born blacks during World War I.<sup>101</sup> Three months later, two OSP traveled by train to Charleston, South Carolina to join the teaching staff at Immaculate Conception High School and ensuring its permanent accreditation soon thereafter.<sup>102</sup> And with that, Mother Consuella had made good on her promise to Bishop Walsh and Charleston's African-American citizens.

## Conclusion

For the nation's blossoming community of black Catholic sisters, the fight to obtain teacher certification and school accreditation after World War I had far-reaching consequences. It not only helped to precipitate the early desegregation of Catholic higher education in the United States, but also it positioned black teaching sisters to take leading roles in struggle for racial justice and educational equity in the Church. By demanding that ecclesiastical officials recognize and insure the canonical right of every Catholic child to a Catholic education, black sisters helped to steer the moral compass of the U.S.

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morning for Washington, where they will attend the Catholic University this year. They will reside at St. Augustine's Convent." See entries for June 12 and 19, August 3, and September 18, 1933 in OSP Motherhouse Annals, OSP Archives.

<sup>100</sup> Entry for "Wednesday, June 13, 1934," OSP Motherhouse Annals, OSP Archives.

<sup>101</sup> In Sister Mary of Good Counsel's congregation file, a summary reads: "In 1933 Sister Mary of Good Counsel was selected to be one of the first Black sisters in an educational experiment in integration at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. She and her companion (Sister M. Consolata Gibson) were so successful that the following year the University opened its doors to all qualified Black applicants, and thus became the forerunner in integration of Catholic educational institutions." See "Congregation File: Sister Mary of Good Counsel (Helena Mercedes) Baptiste," Box 37, Folder 2, OSP Archives.

<sup>102</sup> "Missions: South Carolina: St. Katherine Annals (1917-1974), 167," OSP Archives.

Church on the matters of racial segregation and education during the Jim Crow era.

Moreover, their educational victories helped to undermine the moral legitimacy of white supremacy and racial barriers that existed in Church. Nonetheless, the practice of racial segregation and promotion of white supremacy would persist in the U.S. Church.

However, it moved forward on highly unstable ground.

The mass migration of African Americans out of the South, which began during World War I, continued through the interwar period and contributed largely to the great expansion of the African-American Catholic community after the Second World War. By 1950, the black Catholic population in the United States would nearly triple with new or greatly-expanded black Catholic enclaves appearing in urban areas such as Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Milwaukee, and Cleveland. The entry of tens of thousands of southern black migrant children into Catholic schools in the urban North and West propelled conversion rates in the African-American community. It also helped to lay the foundation for the entry of scores of African-American women and girls into the nation's historically white Catholic sisterhoods after the Second World War.

## Chapter Two:

### Desegregating the Habit:

#### The Fight to Integrate Catholic Female Religious Life

“At the present time, there are some of the older Sisters of the Congregation who are opposed to the reception of Colored candidates, though this, of course, is not founded on any *definite* reason. In due time, it is thought by all concerned that this antagonism will die out.”<sup>1</sup>

- Saint Louis Archdiocesan Statement on the Impending Desegregation of the Sisters of St. Mary, 1946

“I tried to act and talk and live white, because it was the only way I’d be accepted at all in the convent. And I forgot my own culture, my own black parents down South, and tried my best to be what the white nuns wanted me to...The others sisters always laughed at me for the way I talked and walked. And I tried not to resent their laughter. In fact, I tried to laugh right along with them.”<sup>2</sup>

- Sister Daniel Marie Myles, Entered Milwaukee Province of the School Sisters of St. Francis in 1949

“Whites who attempt to teach...black [people]...how to love God and [their] fellowmen, yet refuse themselves to accept black candidates, to truly accept them, shout by their actions if not by their words, the pharisaical attitude denounced by Christ, ‘Don’t do as I do, do as I say.’”<sup>3</sup>

- Sister Anna Cox, S.B.S., Entered the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament in 1953

Sitting in her high school guidance counselor’s office in Rock Island, Illinois in 1935, seventeen-year old Alice Chineworth received devastating news. According to her counselor, a Sister of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVM), Chineworth would be unable to fulfill her lifelong dream of becoming a sister in the religious order who had educated her and her siblings since she was five years old. Though Chineworth’s counselor confessed to her that she indeed had a vocation for religious life in the Catholic Church, under no circumstances could the seventeen-year old be permitted to enter the

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<sup>1</sup> “Pro Memoria,” 3, in “Franciscan Sisters of Mary” File at the Archives of the Archdiocese of Saint Louis, hereafter AASL. Emphasis on “definite” is mine.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Sara Harris, *The Sisters: The Changing World of the American Nun* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1970), 279. Date of Myles’s entrance obtained in phone conversation on August 17, 2011 with SSSF Archivist.

<sup>3</sup> Sister Anna, S.B.S., “The Black Candidate,” in *Prayer and Renewal: Proceedings and Communications of Regional Meetings of the Sister-Formation Conferences 1969*, edited by Sister Mary Hester Valentine, S.S.N.D. (New York: Fordam University Press, 1970), 43. Date of Cox’s entrance and last name obtained in email correspondence with SBS archivist on September 26, 2011.

BVM congregation headquartered in Dubuque, Iowa. “You cannot become one of us because of your color,” Chineworth’s counselor told her, and in response, the unsuspecting, doe-eyed youth burst into tears.<sup>4</sup>

Decades later, Chineworth recalled that it had never occurred to her that she could be denied admission to religious life in the “universal” Catholic Church solely on the basis of race. Having witnessed and experienced what she perceived to be the genuine kindness and generosity of her educators, especially her kindergarten teacher, Alice had decided early in her life to “be a Sister just like Sister Mary Fidelis.”<sup>5</sup> However, the BVM’s whites-only policy effectively barred Alice from embracing the religious state in their community in 1935. It also opened her eyes fully to the depths of white racism in the U.S. Church. By the turn of the twentieth century, racial barriers in the Church had effectively turned most Catholic institutions, including religious orders of men and women, into bastions of white supremacy and racial segregation. However, Alice Chineworth, like hundreds of other black Catholic women and girls, was resolved to become a religious sister.

Following the advice of her guidance counselor, Chineworth wrote to Mother Katharine Drexel, superior general of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament for Indians and Colored People (SBS), seeking admission into her order headquartered in suburban Philadelphia. Founded in 1891, the SBS was the largest congregation of women religious working in the African-American apostolate in 1935. Because the SBS educated

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<sup>4</sup> Sister Mary Alice Chineworth, O.S.P., interview by author, digital recording, Catonsville, Md., February 1, 2010. See also Sister Mary Alice Chineworth, O.S.P., “My Little Vocation Story,” accessed August 2, 2011, <http://www.oblatesistersvocations.com/SrAlice.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

thousands of African-American youths in their elementary and high schools annually and operated the nation's only historically black Catholic institution of higher learning, Chineworth's guidance counselor reasoned that the order would surely accept African-American candidates. However, the SBS also rejected Chineworth on the basis of race. In a personal letter, Mother Katharine informed Alice that it was her order's official policy not to admit African-American applicants in order to insure that the SBS would not draw prospective candidates from the nation's historically black Roman Catholic sisterhoods. Interestingly, the SBS did not accept Native-American applicants in 1935 either, though there were no Native American sisterhoods in which refused applicants could seek refuge.<sup>6</sup> Mother Katharine then provided Alice, an aspiring educator, with the addresses of the motherhouses of the nation's three historically-black Catholic teaching orders (the Oblate Sisters of Providence, the Sisters of the Holy Family, and the Franciscan Handmaids of the Most Pure Heart of Mary) and encouraged her to seek admission into one of them. One year later, Chineworth entered the Oblate Sisters of Providence, the nation's oldest black Catholic sisterhood, headquartered in Baltimore. In 1944, she professed her perpetual vows.<sup>7</sup>

Two years later, the all-white Sisters of St. Mary of the Third Order of St. Francis (later the Franciscan Sisters of Mary), headquartered in St. Louis, Missouri, jolted Catholic heads when they admitted three African-American postulants into their community, the first since their founding in 1872.<sup>8</sup> Though the three postulants (Hilda Rita Brickus, Pauline Catherine Townsend, and Elizabeth Louise Ebo) would be strictly

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<sup>6</sup> Chineworth, interview by author.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> "Here and There," *Our Colored Missions*, 32 (December 1946), 179.

segregated from their white counterparts and subjected to demeaning and humiliating Jim Crow practices throughout their early tenure in the order, the desegregation of the Sisters of St. Mary in 1946 marked a critical turning point in the history of female religious life in the U.S. Church.<sup>9</sup> Prior to World War II, African-American challenges to racially exclusionary policies in the nation's all-white Catholic sisterhoods fell mostly on deaf ears, with extremely rare exceptions. Like their male counterparts, young black Catholic women and girls aspiring to embrace the religious state were systematically denied entry to the vast majority of the nation's religious communities solely on the basis of race. As a result, those seeking admission into white orders were often, though not always, tracked into the nation's historically black sisterhoods. An undetermined number of black female vocations were lost to the Church simply because many white vocation directors did not know *or* care that black orders existed. After World War II, however, expanding calls for racial justice, increased Vatican pressure, and the ever-present need for more female vocations finally prompted the leadership of the nation's all-white sisterhoods to reconsider the utility and morality of their racially restrictive admissions policies. As a result, a small handful of white communities slowly began to admit African-American candidates.

This chapter examines the fiercely contested, though largely unsuccessful, struggle to integrate the nation's white Catholic sisterhoods after World War II. The

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<sup>9</sup> Names collected at the Archives of the Franciscan Sisters of Mary in St. Louis, Missouri, hereafter FSM Archives. See also "Negro Nursing Sisters," *The Colored Harvest* (December 1946-January 1947): 2-3.

omission of this struggle from histories of the Catholic Church and the African-American freedom struggle is surprising considering the substantial scholarly and popular attention given to the desegregation of historically-white institutions and spaces. Within the past twenty years alone, hundreds of monographs, autobiographies, biographies, and film documentaries have meticulously documented individual and collective struggles to integrate historically-white schools, professions, athletic teams, neighborhoods, and even the Catholic priesthood. Such battles have been the subject of scores of major motion pictures, made-for-television movies, songs, poems, and paintings and have been enshrined as well in a wide variety of textbooks, museum exhibitions, and public history sites across the nation. Yet, the fight to integrate female religious life in the U.S. Catholic Church remains conspicuously hidden, and the lives and experiences of the young black women and girls who desegregated the nation's historically white orders in the post-World War II era remain largely unexplored. Missing, too, is a thoughtful analysis of the politics of white supremacy in female religious life and its effects on the nature and quality of life inside the convent. As a result, the inability, and in many cases unwillingness, of U.S. Catholic sisterhoods to confront racism within their ranks has been rendered invisible in the annals of American and religious history.

Despite the recent proliferation of scholarship on U.S. Catholic sisters, race remains widely under-utilized as a category of analysis in the history of female religious life.<sup>10</sup> As a result, the abysmal lack of racial diversity in U.S. Catholic sisterhoods has been widely misunderstood and misrepresented. In particular, the small population of

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<sup>10</sup> The most recent works include: McGuinness, *Called to Serve* (2013); Butler, *Across God's Frontiers* (2012); Curtis, *Civilizing Habits* (2010); Cummings, *New Women of Old Faith* (2009); and Koehlinger, *The New Nuns* (2007).

black sisters in the United States has often been attributed to a historical lack of vocations from the African-American Catholic community. However, historians have failed to analyze the full impact of racially restrictive admissions policies on the character and make-up of U.S. Catholic sisterhoods. In fact, most studies have failed to document that such policies even existed.<sup>11</sup> While it is nearly impossible to determine how many hearts were broken and how many black female vocations were lost to the Church due to these racist policies, it is painfully clear that Catholic sisterhoods were among the fiercest strongholds of racial segregation and white supremacy in the twentieth century. Most remained staunchly opposed to the integration of their ranks through the civil rights era. Many never admitted an African-American candidate in the twentieth century. Moreover, oral history testimonies reveal that many black sisters who entered white communities in the post-World War II era endured years of bullying, neglect, and other forms of racist abuse from their white counterparts. In particular, many black sisters in white orders felt pressured to deny and degrade their racial heritage in order to feel accepted in their communities. As African-American Sister of the Blessed Sacrament Christine Nesmith put it, “Entering an order meant ceasing to be black and looking on what you grew up

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<sup>11</sup> Exceptions include: Koehlinger’s *New Nuns* (briefly mentioned in the introduction), Lara Medina’s *Las Hermanas: Chicana/Latina Religious-Political Activism in the U.S. Catholic Church* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004); Diane Batts Morrow’s *Persons of Color and Religious at the Same Time: The Oblate Sisters of Providence, 1820-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002). Though Jay P. Dolan’s *The American Catholic Experience: A History of from Colonial Times to the Present* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 371, documents the existence of the racially exclusionary admissions policies of the nation’s white sisterhoods, he writes that by the 1950s black women and girls were admitted and welcomed into these communities. However, most white orders remained segregated throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and oral testimonies of black sisters in white congregations from the late sixties and seventies reveal that a substantial number, if not most, received a hostile reception into their communities.

with as uncouth. You could do the Irish jig, but anything African was taboo.”<sup>12</sup> Such abuse and the prolonged intractability of white supremacy in religious life eventually drove scores of black sisters out of their communities, decimating an already limited population. Thus, a critical examination of the African-American struggle to integrate Catholic sisterhoods is long overdue. It reminds us that, when present, racial bigotry and white supremacy often proved incredibly intractable behind convent walls.

### **Black Sisters in White Orders Prior to World War II**

Although African-American entry into historically white Catholic sisterhoods in the United States was overwhelmingly a post-World War II phenomenon, there were some notable exceptions. Between 1824 and 1889, at least eighteen African-American women embraced the religious state in historically white Catholic sisterhoods in and outside of the United States. A significant majority of these women were southern-born, and most spent their religious lives laboring in the U.S. South, where the overwhelming majority of the nation’s black Catholics resided. In fact, the first black women to embrace the religious state in the U. S. Catholic Church were members of an ancillary community of the all-white Sisters of Loretto founded in Kentucky in 1812. Though the black sisters were given a different veil from the white sisters and organized as a separate community, they seemingly professed their vows with white sisters in 1824. However, the departure of Father Charles Nerinckx, the Loretto founder and champion of black sisters, in the

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<sup>12</sup> Edward B. Fiske, “Finding Identity, Black Nuns Put Soul Into Religious Life,” *New York Times*, August 15, 1971, 22..

same year spelled a quick demise for this first attempt at black female religious life.

Father Guy Chabrat, Father Nerinckx's successor, dismissed the black Loretto sisters from their vows and sent back them into the world believing that "the time was premature for colored nuns."<sup>13</sup>

The Catholic Church's active participation and substantial economic investment in the institution of chattel slavery (religious orders of men and women owned thousands of slaves) insured that black women's entry into white communities in the nineteenth century were generally restricted to extremely light-skinned women who could pass for white.<sup>14</sup> Prior to the Civil War, for example, preferential treatment based on skin color largely, if not exclusively, restricted African-American entry into white Catholic sisterhoods to candidates with visible European heritage. Because the names and descriptions of the five black women who became postulants in the all-white Sisters of the Loretto in 1824 have been lost to history, it is impossible to state that all of the women who entered white communities prior to the Civil War could pass for white.<sup>15</sup> However, because these five postulants were free women, it is more likely than not that many, if not all of them, had visible white parentage and/or grand-parentage.<sup>16</sup> It is also important to note that at least one attempt and two proposals were made to establish

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<sup>13</sup> John T. Gillard, *Colored Catholics in the United States* (Baltimore, Md.: Josephite Press, 1941), 197.

<sup>14</sup> For a greater discussion on the U.S. Church's economic investment and participation in chattel slavery, see Randall Miller and Jon Wakelyn, eds., *Catholics in the Old South* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1999).

<sup>15</sup> Most of the earliest records of the Loretto Sisters were destroyed in a fire at the turn of the twentieth century. See Ann C. Minogue, *Loretto Annals of the Century* (New York: The America Press, 1912), 96-7. See also, L.W. Reilly, "Negro Sisters of Loretto," *The Colored Harvest* (Oct. 1898): 54.

<sup>16</sup> John T. Gillard, *Colored Catholics in the United States* (Baltimore, Md.: Josephite Press, 1941), 197.

interracial sisterhoods in the early nineteenth century.<sup>17</sup> Though these sisterhoods never materialized or proved sustainable, in each case the admission or involvement of black women and girls encompassed only free Afro-Creole women, who were light-skinned and could likely pass for white. In the case of the American branch of the Society of the Sacred Heart in Grand Coteau, Louisiana in 1819, Louis Gillaume Dubourg, bishop of Louisiana and a proponent of racial segregation and white supremacy, went so far as to advise Sister Philippine Duchesne, foundress and superior of the order, to admit only single, unattached women of mixed blood (Indian or African) who might otherwise be susceptible to prostitution. Even then, these women of color were only to be “admitted to a sort of subaltern profession, with a different habit than converse sisters.”<sup>18</sup> Writing from France in 1820, Mother Madeleine-Sophie Barat, foundress and superior of the French Sacred Heart Sisters, expressed similar concerns. In particular, she feared white reprisals and violence in response to the admission of black women and girls into the nascent transplant community. Indeed, Mother Sophie granted her tentative approval to admit black sisters on the condition that their admission be kept hidden from outsiders.<sup>19</sup>

Because the Ladies of the Sacred Heart were also a slaveholding community, it is also

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<sup>17</sup> In 1819, Sister (now Saint) Philippine Duchesne proposed the admission of “a few girls of color, desiring religious life” into the American branch of the Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus located in Grand Coteau, Louisiana. Sometime in the 1820s, Sister Ste. Marthe Frontier, a member of the French religious community Les Dames Hospitalieres, proposed the foundation of an interracial sisterhood in New Orleans, Louisiana. In 1836, Jeanne Marie Aliquot, Henriette Delille, Juliette Gaudin, and six other women of color brief established an interracial Catholic sisterhood in New Orleans, Louisiana. Known as the Sisters of the Presentation, the order was quickly terminated by religious authorities as it violated state segregation laws. See Curtis, *Civilizing Habits*, 58-9; Cyprian Davis, O.S.B., *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1990), 105-6; Sister Mary Bernard Deggs, *No Cross, No Crown: Black Nuns in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans* (Bloomington, ID: Indiana University Press, 2001), edited by Virginia Meacham Gould and Charles E. Nolan, 205-6, n. 24, 28; and Sister Mary Borgia Hart, *Violets in the King’s Garden: A History of the Sisters of the Holy Family of New Orleans* (New Orleans: Privately Printed by SSF, 1976), 17.

<sup>18</sup> Curtis, *Civilizing Habits*, 58.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

likely the admission of free Afro-Creole women, among whom slaveholding was not uncommon, was more acceptable than the admission of darker-skinned African Americans.

That a small handful of black women sought *and* gained admission into historically white orders in the nineteenth century remains a phenomenon that has yet to be fully researched and analyzed by historians and theologians alike. However, the lack of scholarly attention to pioneering black sisters in white congregations cannot be attributed simply to intellectual myopia or the lack of a sincere effort on the part of researchers to mine congregational archives. Evidence of black women's entry and experiences in white orders simply may not exist. Materials contained in archival collections, like other historical artifacts, are subject to the destructive nature of time as well as to natural and man-made disasters. Moreover, as historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot has masterfully demonstrated, archives are constructed entities and therefore inherently reflect the silences, preferences, and prejudices of their respective depositors and archivists.<sup>20</sup> However, the early history of black sisters in white Catholic orders is elusive for similar *and* dissimilar reasons. First, because it is virtually impossible to determine how many light-skinned black women (who could pass for white) simply entered white orders without ever revealing their racial heritage, the exact number of black women to enter white communities, and their full geographical diversity, will likely never be known. Second, in at least three documented cases, white sisters (individually and collectively) deliberately suppressed knowledge about pioneering black sisters in their

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<sup>20</sup> For Trouillot's discussion see, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

communities; purged corroborating evidence from their convent archives; and rendered those women and/or their racial heritage invisible in their congregational histories. One sister-historian excluded the central role that anti-black prejudice and racism played in her order's nineteenth-century decision to bar admission to African-American and Native American women in her community's official congregational history. Such attempts to erase both black sisters and evidence of white bigotry from the historical record illuminate the difficulties inherent in reconstructing black women's history in white orders. Nonetheless, a brief overview of the documented cases prior to World War II is extremely useful. These cases make clear the existence and formation of informal and formal racial barriers that defined and shaped the nature of all women's entry into religious life in the U.S. Church. They also provide the critical and necessary foundation for understanding the prolonged intractability of white supremacy in female religious life in the twentieth century.

Between 1834 and 1875, at least eight extremely light-skinned African-American women, who deliberately sought to pass for white, and one who sought to establish an exclusively Afro-Creole congregation in New Orleans entered seven different historically white Catholic sisterhoods in the United States and Canada. Those congregations are the Dames de la Retraite in Charleston, South Carolina; the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (IHM) in Monroe, Michigan and Immaculata and Scranton Pennsylvania; the Congregation of Notre Dame in Montreal, Canada; the Mount St. Vincent Sisters of Charity of New York; the Order of Saint Benedict in Covington, Kentucky; the Good Shepherd Sisters in Boston, Massachusetts; and the Religious

Hospitallers of Saint Joseph in Montreal, Canada.<sup>21</sup> In three of these cases, white sisters deliberately suppressed knowledge about the racial heritage of their black members.

In 1835, the Dames de la Retraite, a French transplant community to Charleston, South Carolina, surreptitiously admitted a woman “known to be a mulatto” into their order. Upon Bishop John England’s discovery of the sister’s racial heritage, he immediately called for her dismissal citing fear of a race riot and the state law banning “coloured persons in schools as teachers.” However, Madame Hery du Jarday, the superioress of the order, whom the bishop described as “touched in the head,” refused to dismiss the woman as she “thought her white.” Though it is unclear what sentiments actually motivated Madame Hery to accept a “mulatto” woman into her community, it is clear that she knew of the woman’s racial heritage beforehand and helped her to secure “foreign papers stating she was white.” She also initially threatened to have anyone who said the woman was a “mulatto” prosecuted. In a letter dated February 23, 1836, Bishop England revealed that the “mulatto” sister was still residing in the convent six months after he had ordered Madame Hery to dismiss her.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> In 1850, Henriette Delille, foundress of the historically Afro-Creole and black Sisters of the Holy Family, secretly made her novitiate under the all-white Ladies of the Sacred Heart in St. James Parish, Louisiana. In 1853, fifteen-year old Marth Ann Healy of the famed black though passing Healy clan entered the Congregation of Notre Dame in Montreal, Canada. In 1872, twin, Afro-Creole sisters Marie and Marie Emilie Gouley of New Orleans, Louisiana entered the novitiate of the Order of Saint Benedict in Covington, Kentucky. In 1873, Amanda Josephine Healy entered the Good Shepherd Sisters in Boston, Massachusetts as a postulant but left the community three months later. On November 21, 1873, Josephine entered the Religious Hospitallers of Saint Joseph in Montreal, Canada, where she remained until her death. In April 1874, Eliza Healy entered the Congregation of Notre Dame in Montreal, Canada, where she remained until her death. See Hart, *Violets in the King’s Garden*, 10; James O’Toole, *Passing for White: Race Religion, and the Healy Family, 1820-1920* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 173, 179-220; Lisa Marie Brown, *Posing As Nuns, Passing for White: The Gouley Sisters* (New Orleans: Pel Hughes Printing, 2010), 19; and Davis, *Black Catholics*, 109-10.

<sup>22</sup> Bishop England to Dr. Cullen of the Irish College of Rome, February 23, 1836, (From the Archives of the Irish College in Rome) in *The Records of the American Catholic Historical Society* 8(1897): 230-5.

In 1845, two ex-Oblate Sisters of Providence Marie Therese (Theresa Maxis) Duchemin and Ann Constance (Charlotte) Schaaf, both of whom could pass for white, founded the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (IHM) in Monroe, Michigan as an exclusively white congregation.<sup>23</sup> After Maxis's death in 1892, IHM leaders colluded with a host of ecclesiastical authorities to erase Maxis and Schaaf from the popular and historical memory of their order and thwarted scholarly attempts to document the IHM's African-American heritage for well over a century.<sup>24</sup> As Monroe leader Mother Domitilla Donohue put it in 1928: "[W]e are convinced that silence is the fairest, wisest, and most agreeable way of committing oblivion to this subject."<sup>25</sup> IHM leaders even went so far as to undermine an attempt launched by Father Leonard DiFalco, a Brooklyn priest, to have Maxis canonized in the 1930s out of fear that the racial heritage of the chief foundress would be re-discovered.<sup>26</sup>

Sometime before the Civil War, the Mount St. Vincent Sisters of Charity of New York also admitted a woman of African descent, who could pass for white. The woman, who was a native of Charleston, South Carolina, was known in religion as Mary Rosina, and served as the superior general of the order from 1891 to 1894.<sup>27</sup> Described in her

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<sup>23</sup> Margaret Gannon, I.H.M., ed., *Paths of Daring, Deed of Hope: Letters by and about Mother Theresa Maxis Duchemin* (Scranton, P.A.: IHM, 1992), 3-5.

<sup>24</sup> See Marita-Constance Supan, I.H.M., "Dangerous Memory: Mother M. Theresa Maxis Duchemin and the Michigan Congregation of the Sisters, IHM," in *Building Sisterhood: A Feminist History of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 65. See also pp. 31-68 and Morrow, *Persons of Color*, 186-92. Not until the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century would IHM sisters formally recognize their African-American foundress. See "Many Stories-One Heart: Oblate/Tri-IHM Gathering, July 29-31, 2005," *Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary: Newsletter and Annual Report* 40 (September 2005): 5-8.

<sup>25</sup> Supan, "Dangerous Memory," 65.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>27</sup> *The Catholic Church in the United States of America*, vol. 2, (New York: The Catholic Editing Company, 1914), 54.

order's only full-length history, published in 1960, as the "most hidden of the community's Mothers General," Mary Rosina Wightman's given secular name, her exact dates of entrance and profession of vows, and clues detailing her experiences in the community have all been lost.<sup>28</sup> Though the community's historian did not elaborate on the cause of Mother Mary Rosina's elusiveness, oral history has revealed that upon the discovery of Wightman's African-American heritage after her death, one of her successors "destroyed everything in the archives that pertained to her—except a prayer book and rosary."<sup>29</sup>

It is also important to note that the Sisters of the Holy Family, founded in New Orleans in 1842 exclusively for free and elite Afro-Creole women, admitted its first postulant of slave heritage in 1870. The admission of Chloe Preval, a dark-skinned, ex-slave domestic laborer, initially split the color-conscious order and spawned the creation of a new black sisterhood in northern Louisiana in 1882. By 1883, however, the Sisters of the Holy Family had removed its formal admissions restrictions based on skin color and status.<sup>30</sup> As historian Edward T. Brett has argued, "Had the barrier between the more privileged sisters from the *gens de couleur libre* and the less privileged, but large black population not been removed, the Holy Family Sisters would have found it increasingly

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<sup>28</sup> Marie de Lourdes Walsh, *The Sisters of Charity of New York, 1809-1959*, 3 vols. (New York, Privately Printed, 1960); I: 225-27.

<sup>29</sup> Margaret Susan Thompson, "Philemon's Dilemma: Nuns and the Black Community in Nineteenth-Century America: Some Findings," *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia* 96(1986): 6.

<sup>30</sup> Sister Mary Bernard Deggs, *No Cross, No Crown: Black Nuns in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2001), edited by Virginia Meacham Gould and Charles E. Nolan, 5-7.

difficult, if not impossible, to recruit a sufficient number of new postulants.”<sup>31</sup> Though color prejudice and discrimination remained in the Holy Family community, their decision to admit ex-slave and English-speaking black women ensured the great expansion of the Sisters of the Holy Family in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

In the three nineteenth-century cases in which historically white orders admitted or assisted in the novitiate training of black women who could not pass for white, the pioneering sisters received their spiritual training outside of the United States. Frederica Law, Frances Johnson, and Mathilda Beasley all traveled to Europe to undergo their novitiate training in the early to mid 1880s. Interestingly, each woman was likely of slave heritage and embraced the religious state in a branch of Franciscan sisters with English roots. In the early 1880s, for example, Frederica Law of Savannah, Georgia traveled to Rome to enter the novitiate of the Missionary Franciscans of the Immaculate Conception (MFIC), founded by a former Anglican nun.<sup>32</sup> On October 19, 1882, Law received her religious habit at the Shrine of the Portiuncula in Assisi and took the religious name Sister Benedict of the Angels. However, Sister Benedict died one year later on December

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<sup>31</sup> Edward T. Brett, “Race Issues and Conflict in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth Century Religious Life: The New Orleans Sisters of the Holy Family,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 29 (2011): 121.

<sup>32</sup> Sister Mary Assumpta Ahles, O.S.F., *In the Shadow of His Wings: A History of the Franciscans* (Saint Paul, Minn.: The North Central Publishing Company, 1977), 138-53. Founded by Mother Mary Ignatius Hayes, a former Anglican nun, in Belle Prairie, Minnesota in 1873, the MFIC were ministering to the freed slave population in southern Georgia by 1878. In 1879, the order established the Industrial School for Coloured Children, a boarding academy and orphan asylum located in Harrisonville, Georgia, right outside of Augusta. While very little biographical information has survived about Law, it is clear that she traveled from Savannah to Harrisonville in the late 1870s and studied under Mother Ignatius and her pioneer band of sisters at the Industrial School. Law’s two nieces also attended the school. While there, Frederica Law described as “an intelligent and virtuous young woman” felt God’s call to religious life and expressed to Mother Ignatius her desire to join the MFIC. In 1881, Mother Ignatius achieved canonical status for her order and succeeded in establishing the community’s novitiate in Rome. Soonafter, Frederica Law traveled with a group of sisters and aspiring postulants to Rome and entered the MFIC novitiate.

30, 1883 in Rome of an unknown illness.<sup>33</sup> On her deathbed, Sister Benedict professed her perpetual vows as a Missionary Franciscan of the Immaculate Conception and was subsequently buried in Rome. She was the first member of her order to die.<sup>34</sup>

Around the same time Frederica Law entered the Missionary Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception in Rome, 23-year old Frances Johnson, a former Catholic domestic worker living and laboring in Baltimore, traveled to London and entered the novitiate of the Franciscan Sisters of Mill Hill.<sup>35</sup> While there, Johnson received the order's grey habit and professed her religious vows as Sister Xavier, O.S.F. She remained in London until 1887 whereupon she returned to Baltimore and labored at her order's St. Elizabeth Home until she was debilitated by an unknown illness.<sup>36</sup> Sister Xavier died in 1894. In a lengthy tribute published in *The Colored Harvest*, her greatest desire was stated to have been "to see one of her own race a priest."<sup>37</sup> Appropriately then, her

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<sup>33</sup> Ahles, *Shadow of His Wings*, 153.

<sup>34</sup> Rita H. DeLorme, "Frederica Law," *Southern Cross* (2004), 3.

<sup>35</sup> "A Colored Nun: Sister Xavier, a Pioneer of Her Race in the Order of St. Francis," *The Irish World and American Industrial Liberator*, October 7, 1894, 6. Raised as a Protestant, Johnson had converted to Catholicism in 1877 at the age of 19 and received her catechetical training under Father John Slattery, superior general of the Josephite Fathers, an English order of priests ministering exclusively to the African-American community in the late nineteenth century. In 1881, the Franciscan Sisters of Mill Hill, England, a sister community to the Josephites, arrived in Baltimore to labor exclusively in the African-American community. They first took charge of the Foundling Asylum for Colored Orphans, which had been established in 1877 by a black woman, and soon renamed it the Saint Elizabeth Home, where they instructed their charges in domestic labor and other industrial skills. Upon learning of the sisters' arrival, Johnson, with the support of Father Slattery, offered her assistance to the Franciscans with the expressed hope of one day joining their community. Soon thereafter and upon the invitation of Mother Abbes, superior general of the English sisters, Johnson traveled to London and began her novitiate training at the Franciscan motherhouse. For more on the Josephite Fathers, see Stephen J. Ochs, *Desegregating the Altar: The Josephites and the Struggle for Black Priests, 1871-1960* (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1990). For more on the Franciscan Sisters of Mill Hill, see *Colored Catholics*, 191, 229.

<sup>36</sup> "Colored Nun," 6.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

requiem mass was sung by Father Charles Uncles, S.S.J., the first African-American Josephite, a man whom she unfortunately never met.<sup>38</sup>

While Frederica Law and Frances Johnson remained in the historically white Franciscan sisterhoods that provided their spiritual training, Mathilda (nee Taylor) Beasley of Savannah (by way of New Orleans) opted instead to found her own order of black Franciscan sisters in 1889.<sup>39</sup> A short time before 1885 and with the support of Father Oswald Moosmuller, a white Benedictine monk working in black Savannah, Beasley sailed to York, England and underwent spiritual training for one year in a Franciscan novitiate.<sup>40</sup> In 1887, Mother Mathilda Beasley, O.S.F., as she was then known, and Father Moosmuller founded an orphanage for African-American girls in Savannah, the first of its kind in the state.<sup>41</sup> Two years later, Beasley founded the Sisters of the Third Order of Saint Francis, the first black community of religious sisters in the state of Georgia, and renamed her orphanage the St. Francis Industrial and Boarding

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<sup>38</sup> “Colored Nun,” 6.

<sup>39</sup> Born in New Orleans, Louisiana in 1832 or 1834, Mathilda Taylor was the daughter of an Afro-Creole mother and a Native-American father. (Some sources say Beasley’s mother was an enslaved woman, named Caroline, owned by James C. Taylor.) Orphaned at an early age, Taylor was living and working as a dressmaker and at a restaurant in Savannah, Georgia by 1860. It is also believed that Taylor operated an illegal school for blacks in her Savannah home prior to the Civil War. In 1869, Taylor married Abraham Beasley, a successful black merchant and a Catholic widower from Richmond, Virginia. Soon after her marriage, Beasley converted to Catholicism. After her husband’s death in 1877, Beasley donated all of the money and land in her husband’s estate to the local Catholic Church and requested that part of her inherited wealth be used for the establishment of an orphanage for black children. One historian has inferred that Beasley may have done this to atone for her husband’s sometime participation in the domestic slave trade as a seller. Her early life as an orphan and her growing desire to embrace the religious state in the Church likely also played a significant role. For more biographical details on Mother Mathilda Beasley, O.S.F., see typed bios of Beasley in “Mother Mathilda Beasley” File, Archives of the Diocese of Savannah, GA, hereafter ADS. See also *Black Catholics*, 110-11, Susie King Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp: An African American Woman’s Civil War Memoir* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2006), originally published in 1902, 6, Sylvia G. L. Dannett, “Mother Mathilda Beasley (1834-1903),” in *Profiles of Negro Womanhood*, vol. 1 (Yonkers, NY: Educational Heritage, Inc., 1964), 144, and “Mathilda Beasley” Timeline, ADS.

<sup>40</sup> Typed bios of Beasley in “Mother Mathilda Beasley” file and *Black Catholics*, 110-11

<sup>41</sup> “Mathilda Beasley” Timeline, ADS.

School for Girls.<sup>42</sup> When her tiny band of sisters began to falter financially in the early 1890s, Beasley sought to forge coalitions with white sisters working among African Americans on equitable terms. However, Beasley quickly learned that white sisterhoods working among African Americans proved to be just as hostile to African-American equality in the Church as any other proponent of white supremacy. Indeed, Beasley's efforts toward equitable sisterhood precipitated the formal exclusion of women of color from the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament for Indians and Colored People in 1893.

In 1891, Bishop Thomas Becker of Savannah penned a letter to Mother Katharine Drexel, foundress of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament for Indians and Colored People (SBS) asking her to consider incorporating Mother Beasley's fledgling band of black Franciscan sisters into her order.<sup>43</sup> In 1893, Mother Mathilda and another sister from her community traveled to suburban Philadelphia in order to plead their case directly to Mother Katharine and resided for "some weeks" at St. Elizabeth's Convent, the SBS motherhouse.<sup>44</sup> However, during Beasley's visit, the SBS firmly decided against the integration of their ranks and formally implemented the order's whites-only admissions policy. An entry from the SBS Annals from 1896 recounts the 1893 decision.

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<sup>42</sup> Gary Wray McDonogh, *Black and Catholic in Savannah, Georgia* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1993), 106.

<sup>43</sup> McDonogh, *Black and Catholic in Savannah*, 214. In his letter, Bishop Becker pleaded in the spirit of racial paternalism. "Why not try to have a sisterhood here which might envelope Sister Matilda [sic] and her poor assistants in some lowly grade and utilize them," he asked. "This, or something similar might ward off the obloquy which is charged against the church that she either does nothing for the colored folks or does it in a very slovenly manner!" Otherwise, he feared Mother Mathilda's community might fail, and such failure would serve as a severe setback for the Church's missionary work among African Americans. Referencing the lack of novitiate training of the two remaining members of Mother Beasley's community, the Bishop continued, "Mathilda has two black women as helpers and quasi-Sisters to attend some thirty girls ranging from two to fifteen about... If she had good Sisters from the north whose heart who be in this work—in a few, a very few years, many Southern girls would join them."

<sup>44</sup> SBS Annals from 1896 (recounts 1893 decision), 99-100, Archives of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, hereafter SBS Archives.

Specifically, it notes 1) “the strong racial feeling now existing in this country with respect to the Indian and Colored Races;” 2) “social prejudice” among potential white recruits; 3) “the innate sensitiveness of both Indians and Colored;” and 4) the “existence of two large and flourishing communities for Colored Sisters” as their justification for refusing to incorporate Beasley’s community into their own.<sup>45</sup> Despite characterizing Mother Beasley as “a very saintly Colored woman,” the SBS voted against *even* providing novitiate training for the members of her order who lacked it.<sup>46</sup>

Ironically, just prior to this decision, the SBS had voted to admit a Native-American postulant into the order. On January 15, 1893, Georgiana Burton, “a Seneca Indian,” came to live at the St. Elizabeth Convent as a guest at the special request of a local pastor.<sup>47</sup> A convert to Catholicism, Burton had initially sought to enter a newly-established Native-American community in the West. However, the sudden disbanding of that community left Burton with an uncertain future. As a result, the SBS took a vote whether to admit Burton as a member of their community, and the majority voted in favor of admitting her as a House Sister.<sup>48</sup> However, the SBS’s unwillingness to accept African-American sisters led the order to backtrack on its earlier decision to accept Burton. Interestingly, though, the SBS’s official (and centennial) history states that the order’s decision not to admit African Americans was the result of a request made by Mother M. Elizabeth Bowie, who served as the superior general of the Sisters of the Holy

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<sup>45</sup> SBS Annals from 1896, 99-100.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

Family from 1909 to 1918 and from 1930 to 1946.<sup>49</sup> According to the SBS history, “Mother M. Elizabeth...had asked Mother Katharine not to accept Negro applicants as the Holy Family Superior believed it would hurt the Negro congregations.”<sup>50</sup> In a note to the quotation, the order’s historian also wrote, “No trace of a similar request from the Oblate Sisters of Providence has been found, but as many of their major superiors had been taught by the SBS, Mother Katharine probably believed they should have the benefit of the practice as well.”<sup>51</sup> However, the SBS annals clearly document that racism was a, if not *the*, chief motivating factor behind the order’s implementation of its whites-only admissions policy. Following what she described as the SBS’s “fatal blow,” Mother Mathilda returned to Savannah to seek other means of saving her congregation and her mission to African Americans.<sup>52</sup>

Mother Mathilda and Bishop Becker next appealed to the Missionary Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception in Augusta, Georgia for assistance, which the order agreed to provide in January of 1896.<sup>53</sup> The following October, three white Missionary Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conceptions from Rome arrived in Savannah to take over the St. Francis Home. The white sisters also seemingly agreed to incorporate Mother Beasley’s community into theirs in some manner. A letter dated May 24, 1898 to Josephite Father John Slattery signed from “Mother Mathilda”, but likely written by one of her subordinates, detailed the impending merging of her community, which then

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<sup>49</sup> Dates gathered from the Archives of the Sisters of the Holy Family, hereafter SSF Archives.

<sup>50</sup> Sister Patricia Lynch, S.B.S., *Sharing the Bread: Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, 1891-1991* (Bensalem, Pa.: Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, 1998), 407.

<sup>51</sup> Lynch, *Sharing the Bread*, 407.

<sup>52</sup> Mother Mathilda Beasley, O.S.F. to Mother Kath[a]rine Drexel, July 3, 1893, SBS Archives.

<sup>53</sup> McDonogh, *Black and Catholic in Savannah*, 214.

numbered four, with the Missionary Franciscan Sisters. In the letter, however, Mother Beasley revealed deep misgiving about working with the white Franciscan sisters. Mother Mathilda went so far to say that she and the “youngest...& best” sister would not remain with the white sisters because they “are so radical.”<sup>54</sup> She stated, too, that the two oldest members “may stay just for a home.”<sup>55</sup> While the letter does not reveal the exact nature of the tensions between the black and white congregations, Mother Beasley wrote, “I am going out in the cold world to be alone until I pass for I see [plainly] that I [can’t] stay with them.”<sup>56</sup> Lamenting the impending loss of her mission, she continued, “It is sad to give up the mission but better give [it] up then let them make me do it as I see they will.”<sup>57</sup>

Despite her misgivings, Mother Beasley and at least two other black sisters lived and worked alongside the Missionary Franciscans in her orphanage for the next few years.<sup>58</sup> On December 8, 1901, Hannah Geary of Savannah and Ella Pollard of Annapolis became the last women to receive the habit of Mother Beasley’s Franciscan community.<sup>59</sup> Mother Beasley continued to work in the orphanage that she founded and took in sewing, donating her earnings to the African-American community until her death on December

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<sup>54</sup> Mother Mathilda [Beasley] to V. Rev. J. R. Slattery, May 24, 1898, SBS Archives. According to historian Cyprian Davis, by 1896 Slattery had become “the unofficial Catholic supervisor of all African-American Catholic work in the United States.” See Davis, *Black Catholics*, 113.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> Mother Mathilda [Beasley] to V. Rev. J. R. Slattery, May 24, 1898, SBS Archives.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> “A Brief History of St. Benedict’s Parish, 1874-1974,” in “Mother Beasley” file, ADS. One member of Beasley’s community died soon after the white sisters officially took over St. Francis Home on January 6, 1899, while the youngest sister soon left Savannah to join the Oblate Sisters of Providence in Baltimore.

<sup>59</sup> “Received the Habit: Two Colored Girls Made Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi,” *Savannah Morning News*, December 9, 1901, 8-4. Handwritten copy in “Mother Beasley” file, ADS.

20, 1903.<sup>60</sup> Seven years later, the *Savannah Tribune* reported the death of the last surviving member of Mother Mathilda's community. However, this sister was no longer living with or under the control of the white Missionary Franciscans or the Church. Instead, she apparently maintained her vows in isolation.<sup>61</sup>

Though it seems Mother Mathilda's band of black Franciscan sisters lived and labored alongside white Missionary Franciscans Sisters for the first few years of the twentieth century, no existing evidence suggests that the two orders ever officially merged. Indeed, when Hannah Geary and Ella Pollard received their habits in 1901, the *Savannah Morning News* reported that they "received the habit of the Third Order Regular of St. Francis of Assisi" not the habit of the Missionary Franciscan of the Immaculate Conception sisters.<sup>62</sup> Thus, Mathilda Beasley was the last known and self-identified African-American woman to embrace the religious state in a historically white sisterhood in the nineteenth century.

Anti-black racism and the U.S. Church's unapologetic embrace of Jim Crow in the late nineteenth century closed most of the loop holes that had enabled the admission of black women, light or dark-skinned, in the previous decades and formally institutionalized white supremacy in female religious life. In 1903, Father Joseph

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<sup>60</sup> "Mother Beasley Interred Today: Died Facing the Altar in Her Private Chapel," *The Savannah Press*, Monday Afternoon, December 21, 1903, Typed Copy in "Mother Beasley" file, ADS. See also typed copies of "Died at the Altar" *Savannah Morning News*, December 21, 1903; *Evening Press*, December 21, 1903; and *Morning News*, December 22, 1903. Local community members found Mother Mathilda dead in her cottage, kneeling in her private chapel and dressed in her religious habit.

<sup>61</sup> McDonogh, *Black and Catholic in Savannah*, 215. It is unclear when this black sister parted ways from the Missionary Franciscan Sisters, who remained in Savannah until the late 1930s or early 1940s. A 1905 report of *Mission Work Among the Negroes and the Indians* stated that the black and white Franciscan sisters still "live together under the same roof, devoting themselves to the care of colored children." See *Mission Work Among the Negroes and the Indians* (Jan. 1905): 16-29. Typed copy in the Josephite Archives.

<sup>62</sup> "Received the Habit," 8-4.

Anciaux, a Belgian missionary priest working among African Americans in the U. S. South, penned an explosive missive to Holy See exposing the deteriorating condition of blacks in the nation and in the Church. Among the many racist abuses committed against black Catholics by their white counterparts, Anciaux specifically decried the racially exclusionary admissions policies of the nation's white sisterhoods and cited the expulsion of several black sisters from white orders, many of whom had been in their communities for several years, after discovery of their racial heritage.<sup>63</sup> As a result of the hardening of the color line, documented African-American entry into white orders virtually ceased, and black participation in U.S. female religious life was systematically restricted to the nation's marginalized black sisterhoods. Save for the nineteenth-century Holy Family Sisters, the nation's historically, and self-identified, black orders never instituted racially-restrictive admissions policies.<sup>64</sup> The U.S. Church likely lost hundreds of black female vocations due to these racist admissions policies and its other Jim Crow practices, creating a dearth of black sisters and vocations in the twentieth century. However, scores of determined black Catholic women and girls were fortunate enough to know or learn about the existence of black orders. Additionally, in at least one documented case, a U.S.-born and educated black woman, who could pass for white, professed religious vows in a French order in Paris in the early twentieth century—suggesting that light-skinned

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<sup>63</sup> Cited in Kenneth L. Woodward, *Making Saints: How the Catholic Church Determines Who Becomes a Saint, Who Doesn't, and Why* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 234. See also "A Report to the Holy See "On the Situation of African Americans in the United States, 1903," in *"Stamped with the Image of God": African Americans as God's Image in Black*, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2003), edited by Cyprian Davis, O.S.B. and Jamie Phelps, O.P., 88-9.

<sup>64</sup> Prior to 1870, admission into the New Orleans-based Sisters of the Holy Family was restricted to free and elite Afro-Creole women. See Sister Mary Bernard Deggs, *No Cross, No Crown: Black Nuns in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2001), edited by Virginia Meacham Gould and Charles E. Nolan, 5-7 and Brett, "Race Issues and Conflict in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth Century Religious Life," 121.

African-American women could still join communities outside of the United States in certain circumstances.<sup>65</sup>

After World War I, key national and international events helped to begin the process of loosening restrictions barring African-American admission into the nation's historically white sisterhoods. First, African-American lay Catholics in Baltimore and Washington, D.C. frustrated with rampant discrimination and exclusion began organizing on the national level to combat institutional racism in the U.S. Church and increase the population of African-American religious men and women. Though gutted by paternalistic white ecclesiastical authorities in the 1930s, the Federated Colored Catholics (FCC), as this movement came to be known, proved successful in soliciting critical Vatican support to raise the status of African Americans in the U.S. Church.<sup>66</sup> Second, the election of Eugenio Maria Giuseppe Giovanni Pacelli to the papacy on March 2, 1939 gave black Catholics fighting for racial equity and justice in the U.S. Church a powerful ally and champion in the Vatican. A proponent of "native" religious and a public critic of racial segregation and bigotry, Pope Pius XII called for special attention to the plight of the "Negro people" in the "field of religion and education" in one of his earliest encyclical addresses.<sup>67</sup> Soon after, Pope Pius XII and Vatican officials began increasing pressure to force the U.S. hierarchy to eliminate racial barriers in their institutions, especially in religious life. Third, the mass migration of African Americans from the

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<sup>65</sup> Sister Mary Ellen O'Hanlon, O.P. "Two Little Stories: Two Lessons," *Our Colored Missions* 35 (March 1949): 38-9.

<sup>66</sup> For an overview of the Federated Colored Catholics of the United States of America, see Marilyn Wenzke Nickels, *Black Catholic Protest and the Federated Colored Catholics, 1917-1933: Three Perspectives on Racial Justice* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1988).

<sup>67</sup> See "Sertum Laetitiae: Encyclical of Pope Pius XII on the Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary of the Establishment of the Hierarchy in the United States," November 1, 1939.

South to the urban centers of the North, Midwest and West, which began during the First World War and surged again in the 1940s, and the consequent black migrant encounter with the Catholic heartland, played an exceedingly important role. Specifically, thousands of African-American migrant parents, frustrated by the lack of access to quality public education in the “Promised Land,” enrolled their children in Catholic schools, overwhelmingly operated by white sisterhoods as an alternative to unequal public education.<sup>68</sup> The consequent influx of black children, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, into northern, mid-western, and western parochial schools had multiple effects, including increasing black evangelization rates and producing a new and larger cadre of young black Catholic women and girls, who would soon seek admission into the white sisterhoods that educated them. Fourth, the outbreak of the Second World War re-energized black freedom struggles in the United States. As the Allied forces sought to defeat fascism and Aryan supremacy abroad, African-Americans also mobilized to defeat white supremacy and racial apartheid on the American home front. With Nazism under global assault, Jim Crow increasingly became a political and moral liability for the United States and the Catholic Church. Racial apartheid remained on increasingly unstable ground as the nation and the Church entered the global fight against communism after the war.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> For a greater discussion of the black encounter with the urban Catholic North, see John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth Century Urban North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

<sup>69</sup> For a scholarly discussion of the Catholic Church’s rampant anticommunism, see James J. Hennessey, *American Catholics: A History of the Roman Catholic Community in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983). In most black Catholic periodicals, the belief that the Church would lose blacks to communism if it did not increase their evangelization efforts was widely discussed.

Finally, significant shifts in the racial attitudes of some white Catholics, including a handful of white sisters and other religious officials, proved to be the last necessary component for launching a significant attack on racially-restrictive admissions policies in female religious life. In 1944, two sisters and a postulant defected from the all-white Dominican Monastery in Catonsville, Maryland, a suburb of Baltimore, and founded the Dominican Monastery of St. Jude in Marbury, Alabama. In a statement published in *The Colored Harvest*, soonafter, Sister Mary Dominic of the Rosary, O.P., superioress of the new order, wrote, “The purpose of this new foundation is the acceptance of Negro postulants who wish to lead the life of cloistered religious. Here every opportunity will be given to colored girls who feel called to the contemplative life to try their vocation and God willing, become one day Dominican Nuns of the Perpetual Adoration and Rosary.”<sup>70</sup> At the time of her letter, Mother Mary Dominic noted that “four colored girls have already applied for admission.”<sup>71</sup> The order accepted its first African-American postulant, Geraldine B. Mouton of Lafayette, Louisiana, in 1945. Mouton received the holy habit of the Dominicans on June 13, 1946.<sup>72</sup>

Prior to the founding of St. Jude Monastery, African-American women seeking to embrace the cloistered and contemplative religious state could generally only do so in the nation’s first and all-black auxiliary community of Good Shepherd Sisters, known as the “Colored Magdalens,” founded in Baltimore in 1922.<sup>73</sup> In one documented exception, the all-white Poor Clare sisters of Bordentown, New Jersey, admitted an African-American

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<sup>70</sup> Sister Mary Dominic of the Rosary, O.P., “Cloistered Dominicans Open Monastery for Colored Candidates,” *The Colored Harvest*, Oct.-Nov. 1944, 7.

<sup>71</sup> Sister Mary Dominic of the Rosary, O.P., “Cloistered Dominicans,” 7.

<sup>72</sup> “Interracial Sisterhood,” *Colored Harvest* (June-July 1946): 3.

<sup>73</sup> Gillard, *Colored Catholics*, 190-91.

postulant in 1936 “with the intention that eventually she would establish her own [segregated] house.”<sup>74</sup> On March 25, 1936, Harriet Dayson of New York City began her novitiate training with the Poor Clares. She professed her first religious vows on June 9, 1938. However, when it became clear that Dayson would not be able to establish her own separate house, she was dismissed from the order on June 9, 1941.<sup>75</sup> Thus, the establishment of St. Jude Monastery as an interracial community of contemplative sisters registered the first major victory in the fight to integrate contemplative female religious life in the United States in the twentieth century.

Though the interracial Dominicans initially met some white resistance to their establishment in Marbury, the order remained and continued to grow drawing recruits from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds from across the nation.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, as a cloistered community, the Dominican sisters were completely sequestered from the secular world and thus relatively safe from public, and physically violent, confrontation with opponents to their interracial program. However, the admission of three black postulants into the historically-white Sisters of St. Mary, a nursing order, in Saint Louis, Missouri two years later held greater and potentially dangerous implications.

## **Black Sisters in White Orders after World War II**

On July 26, 1946, Hilda Rita Brickus of Brooklyn, New York, Pauline Catherine Townsend of Washington, D.C., and Elizabeth Louise Ebo of Bloomington, Illinois

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<sup>74</sup> John T. Gillard, S.S.J. to Dr. Carroll, April 30, 1941, in the National Catholic Welfare Conference Collection at the Archives of Catholic University of America, hereafter CUA Archives.

<sup>75</sup> Sister Miriam Varley, e-mail message to author, March 1, 2011.

<sup>76</sup> “Mother Dominic, Founder of Ala. Monastery, Dies,” *The Catholic Review*, July 29, 1966, 16.

became the first black postulants in the history of the Sisters of St. Mary of the Third Order of Saint Francis headquartered in Saint Louis, Missouri. On December 7, 1946, two additional black postulants, Mary Antonette Gale of Pine Bluff, Arkansas and Bessie Lee Hardy of Norfolk, Virginia entered the Sisters of St. Mary.<sup>77</sup> Though they were not the first black women to seek admission into the historically white nursing order, founded in 1872, they were the first to be accepted. They were also the first self-identified and publicly-recorded black women to enter a historically-white apostolic community in the twentieth century—a major breakthrough in a nearly sixty-year campaign to dismantle formal racial barriers blocking African-American entry into historically-white Catholic sisterhoods in the United States. Unlike contemplative sisters, who remained within the cloister, sisters laboring in apostolic communities performed public ministries, such as nursing and teaching, and interacted with the secular world on a daily basis. As such, the potential for public opposition *and* support increased exponentially. Though Brickus, Townsend, and Ebo were initially admitted into the order on a strictly separate and unequal basis, their entry into the Sisters of St. Mary marked a major turning point in the fight to integrate female religious life in the U.S. Church.

Like the Bordentown Poor Clares, who briefly admitted Harriet Dayson in 1936, the Baltimore Good Shepherd Sisters, who founded a separate and all-black contemplative order in 1922, and the Sisters of Loretto, who established an auxiliary, if short-lived community of black sisters in 1824, the Sisters of St. Mary had initially planned to establish a separate branch of black sisters. These women would to staff and

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<sup>77</sup> Dates of entrance contained in FSM Archives. See also “Negro Nursing Sisters,” *The Colored Harvest* (December 1946-January 1947: 2-3).

administer the congregation's all-black hospital, established in 1933, rather than integrate the order.<sup>78</sup> In addition to having a separate novitiate house built for future black sisters, the order forced the earliest black postulants to enter the back doors of the main motherhouse and subjected them to other humiliating and racist abuses. Though willing to treat black patients in their hospital, most white sisters in the order were staunchly opposed to the admission of black candidates on any basis and refused to interact with them on equal terms.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, most sisters held derogatory views of African Americans. Among many things, the general council of the order had initially planned to extend the customary three-year period of temporary vows for the black postulants in order to "guard against what has been considered a common negro tendency to instability and irresponsibility."<sup>80</sup> However, immediate and sustained opposition from a few local priests, archdiocesan and Vatican officials, and the black postulants themselves, eventually forced the Sisters of St. Mary to abandon their plans for establishing a separate black community.<sup>81</sup> In 1950, the order's black sisters, who then numbered six, were permitted to reside in the motherhouse and integrated into the daily routine of the order. However, white antipathies remained.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> "Pro Memoria," 1-2, in "Franciscan Sisters of Mary" file in AASL.

<sup>79</sup> "Pro Memoria," 3. An excerpt from this statement prepared in 1946 by the archdiocese of Saint Louis reads: "At the present time, there are some older Sisters of the Congregation who are opposed to the reception of Colored candidates, though this, of course, is not founded on any definite reason. In due time, it is thought by all concerned that this antagonism will die out." This belief was ultimately disproved.

<sup>80</sup> Mother Mary Concordia, S.S.M. to Most Reverend John J. Glennon, Archbishop of Saint Louis, March 27, 1945 in FSM file, AASL.

<sup>81</sup> See "Pro Memoria." See also Mother Mary Concordia, S.S.M. to Rt. Reverend Msgr. John P. Cody, December 2, 1946, in FSM file in AASL.

<sup>82</sup> FSM Chronicles Book #3-B: 1944-1953, pp. 481-82, FSM Archives.

Prior to World War II, historically-white Catholic sisterhoods in the United States had routinely and systematically ignored applications and pleas from African-American women and girls seeking admission into their ranks, despite clear and ever-present directives from the Vatican to nurture and flower religious vocations among African Americans. The Sisters of St. Mary, for example, had begun rebuffing admission requests from black nurses as early as 1933, following their establishment of St. Mary's Nursing School, the nation's first Catholic nursing school for "Colored Girls."<sup>83</sup> Ironically, white orders working the African-American apostolate often proved to be the most resistant to the integration of their own ranks. Though often willing to "take up the white (wo)man's burden" and work in African-American communities, most white sisters refused to interact with African Americans on equitable terms. In the case of the Sisters of St. Mary, and many other white orders, their endeavors in the African-American apostolate were largely the result of Vatican and ecclesiastical encouragement and pressure as opposed to a sincere commitment to racial justice. However, as Jim Crow increasingly became a political and moral liability in the U.S. and Catholic fight against communism after the war, African-American Catholics won new allies in the battle to eliminate racial barriers in the Church. In particular, Vatican officials increased their pressure on the U.S. hierarchy to integrate the religious life. Less than two months after Brickus, Townsend, and Ebo entered the Sisters of St. Mary, Cardinal Samuel Stritch of Chicago, acting on behalf of the Holy See, met with fourteen southern prelates in New Orleans and received their pledges to accept "worthy candidates of the Colored race for the diocesan clergy."<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> "Pro Memoria."

<sup>84</sup> Ochs, *Desegregating the Altar*, 403-5.

Moreover, a small but increasing number of white lay Catholics, working with black cowshippers, began publicly expressing favorable opinions toward integration. As a result of these changing racial attitudes and Catholic anticommunist fears, a small handful of white sisterhoods began taking steps to integrate their ranks.

In October of 1946, the Missionary Sisters Servants of the Holy Ghost, a white order working in the African-American apostolate, announced that they would “accept colored candidates” and published a call for black vocations in the *St. Augustine’s Messenger*—a first for the monthly magazine, whose proceeds aided the cause for more “Negro Priests and Religious.”<sup>85</sup> In addition to applauding the efforts of the Holy Ghost Sisters and the actions of the Sisters of St. Mary three months earlier, the editors also listed six additional white communities, which had expressed to the editors their willingness to accept “colored girls and young ladies as members.”<sup>86</sup> The six communities were: the Parish Visitors of Mary Immaculate in New York City; the Sisters of Social Service in Los Angeles, the Dominican Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in Marbury, Alabama, and two branches of Carmelite nuns in Boston, Massachusetts and Grand Rapids, Michigan.<sup>87</sup> Of the eight white communities, three (the Dominican branches) were contemplative orders, which did not have active public ministries. Two (the Sisters of St. Mary and the Holy Ghost Sisters) worked in the African-American apostolate, and only one (the Dominican Sisters of Perpetual Adoration) was located in the Deep South, where a substantial portion of the nation’s black Catholics resided. In other words, out of the nearly 600 communities of Catholic sisters living and laboring in

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<sup>85</sup> “A Call to the Missionary Life,” *St. Augustine Messenger* 24 (October 1946): 179.

<sup>86</sup> “Good News!” *St. Augustine Messenger* 24 (October 1946): 169-170.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

the United States in 1946, only 12 (8 white; 4 black) would accept black candidates. By 1949, only 21 female novitiates could be listed as willing to accept African-American candidates.<sup>88</sup> However, this number would increase exponentially over the next two decades, especially with the onset of the civil rights movement and the Second Vatican Council.

Between 1946 and 1962, scores of young African-American women and girls entered white orders in the United States. Many of them were the first African-American members in the history of their congregations, such as Mary Dolores Allen of Saint Louis, who entered the Missionary Servants of the Holy Ghost in Techny, Illinois in 1947<sup>89</sup>; Jennie Seabrook, who entered the novitiate of the Ursuline Sisters in Beacon, New York in 1949<sup>90</sup>; Joyce Ruth Williams of Chicago (by way of Summit, Mississippi) who entered the Sisters of the Order of Saint Benedict in St. Joseph, Minnesota in 1949<sup>91</sup>; Francesca Thompson of Indianapolis (by way of Los Angeles), who entered the Sisters of St. Francis in Oldenburg, Indiana in 1951<sup>92</sup>; Bertha Elizabeth Bowman of Yazoo City, Mississippi, who entered the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in LaCrosse, Wisconsin in 1953<sup>93</sup>; Cora Marie Billings of Philadelphia, who entered the Religious

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<sup>88</sup> Raymond J. Bernard, "Sisterhoods and the Negro," *Social Order* 28(155): 42.

<sup>89</sup> Photo of "Candidates for the Blue Sisters" in *St. Augustine Messenger* 25 (March 1947): 56. Caption reads: "The first colored candidate (seated first from right), Mary Dolores Allen, of St. Louis, Mo., has two brothers in the seminar at Techny.

<sup>90</sup> "First Negro in Catholic Sisterhood," *The Colored Harvest* (March 1949): 15.

<sup>91</sup> Sister Owen Lindblad, O.S.B., "Sister Joyce Williams: A Voice for Interracial Justice," *Crossings* 35(March 2009): 8.

<sup>92</sup> Sister M. Francesca, O.S.F., "Thrice Called," in *Twice Called: The Autobiographies of Seventeen Convert Sisters*, edited by George L. Kane, (Milwaukee, WI: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1959): 91-102.

<sup>93</sup> Charlene Smith and John Feister, *Thea's Song: The Life of Thea Bowman* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), xv.

Sisters of Mercy in Philadelphia in 1956<sup>94</sup>; Brenda Marie Williams of Chicago, who joined the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth in Chicago in 1957<sup>95</sup>; Sister Marie Thomas of Detroit, who joined the Home Visitors of Mary in Detroit in 1957<sup>96</sup>; Jamie Phelps of Chicago, Illinois (by way of Pritchard, Alabama) who entered the Adrian Dominican Sisters in Adrian, Michigan in 1959<sup>97</sup>; Patricia Muriel Grey of Sewickley, Pennsylvania, who entered the Religious Sisters of Mercy of Pittsburgh in 1961<sup>98</sup>; Norma Fae Griffin of Columbus, Georgia, who entered the Vincentian Sisters of Charity in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1962<sup>99</sup>; and Patricia Haley of Columbus, Georgia (by way of Birmingham, Alabama), who entered the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth in Kentucky in 1963.<sup>100</sup> Others would re-integrate their orders, like Sandra Elizabeth Slater of Philadelphia, who in 1962 entered the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Westchester, Pennsylvania. Unaware of the order's African-American heritage at the time of her entrance, Slater was the community's first African-American postulant since ex-Oblate Sister of Providence Mother Theresa Duchemin Maxis founded the IHM branch in 1859. Young black women and girls also reintegrated the Missionary Sisters of Immaculate Conception and the Franciscan Sisters of Baltimore in the post-World War II era, helping to restore their respective orders' pioneering, but abandoned, commitments

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<sup>94</sup> Sister Cora Marie Billings, R.S.M., telephone interview by author, July 6, 2010

<sup>95</sup> "Sister Mary Judith (Brenda) Williams" file in OSP Archives.

<sup>96</sup> "All for Jesus Through Mary," *The Colored Harvest* (September 1957): 3.

<sup>97</sup> Sister Jamie Phelps, O.P., interview by author in New Orleans, Louisiana, July 22, 2009, digital recording. (Note: Sister Jamie explained that there were two black Puerto Ricans in the order before her. However, they didn't identify as black. Sister Jamie was first U.S. born-black in order.)

<sup>98</sup> Dr. Patricia Grey, interview by author in Sewickley, Pennsylvania, June 21, 2009. Grey was formerly Sister M. Martin de Porres, R.S.M., founder of the National Black Sisters' Conference.

<sup>99</sup> "Sister Mary Julian Griffin" file, ADS.

<sup>100</sup> Sister Patricia Haley, SCN, telephone interview by author, March 30, 2012.

to racial diversity and equity.<sup>101</sup> It is also important to note that some time in the early 1960s, the Sisters of the Good Shepherd in Baltimore integrated the all-black Magdalen community, founded in 1922 as a separate entity, into the historically white branch.<sup>102</sup>

Despite the historic entry of scores of black women into white congregations in the post-World War II era, opposition to the complete integration of U.S. female religious life continued to manifest on all levels. Formal and informal racially restrictive admissions policies and practices in white sisterhoods proved particularly difficult to dismantle even after court and legislative victories declared racial segregation unconstitutional in the United States. Prior to that, white Catholic authorities and religious superiors had routinely defended their Jim Crow practices by arguing that racial segregation was the law of the land and that challenging it would jeopardize their already marginal position in the American body politic. However, as formal segregation became less acceptable in U.S. society, white leadership councils overwhelmingly remained recalcitrant in their opposition to the integration of their communities.

In 1949, Father Raymond Bernard, a Jesuit scholar and member of Saint Louis University's Institute of Social Order, began studying racial integration in U.S. sisterhoods. Between 1951 and 1957, he conducted three questionnaire surveys among the nation's religious communities of women in order to ascertain their policies regarding

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<sup>101</sup> See image of Norma Lambert (Sister Mary Edward) as children and an adult. "Images" in *Josephite Harvest* (January-February 1964): 15. Also see image of a black Missionary Sister of the Immaculate Conception in "Negro Nuns in the U.S.A." *Divine Word Messenger* (June 1962): 184-85.

<sup>102</sup> Agnes Kane Callum, "The black Magdalen Sisters of Baltimore," *The Catholic Review*, February 10, 2005, 16-T. See also "Colored Magdalens" file in the Josephite Archives.

“the admission of qualified Negro girls.”<sup>103</sup> Father Bernard’s undertaking represented the first scholarly attempt to study the impact of Jim Crow on U.S. female religious life in the twentieth century, and his findings documented the persistence of white supremacy and racial bigotry in the face of secular desegregation. In 1951, 156 of the 553 individual U.S. novitiates surveyed disclosed that they had admissions policies favorable to the *idea* of admitting “qualified Negro girls.” 51 responded unfavorably; 66 were doubtful; and the remaining 280 communities failed to respond.<sup>104</sup> In 1951, no deep South state reported any professed black sisters.<sup>105</sup> In 1954, the same year that the U.S. Supreme Court declared racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional, the results were only marginally better. Out of the same 553 novitiates, 193 disclosed that they had admissions policies favorable to admitting “qualified” black applicants. 19 responded unfavorably; 5 were doubtful; 127 were “unsettled officially”; and 23 stated “no policy given.” 186 communities failed to respond.<sup>106</sup> In an article published in *America* in 1956, Father Bernard went so far as to question the sincerity of white religious communities of women, who were facing a vocational crisis at mid-century. He wrote, “I myself know of a congregation in a largely non-Catholic region of this country which has had requests to

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<sup>103</sup> Raymond Bernard, S.J., “Some Anthropological Implications of the Racial Admission Policy of the U.S. Sisterhoods,” *The American Catholic Sociological Review* 19 (June 1958): 125. See also Raymond Bernard, S.J., “Jim Crow Vocations,” *Social Order* (June 1949): 214-44 reprinted in *Interracial Review* (November 1949): 171; “Interracial Vocation Opportunities: Supplemental List of Seminaries and Novitiates,” *Social Order* 2 [Old Series] (1949): 454-55; “More Vocation Opportunities,” *Social Order* 3(1950):368; “Sisterhoods and the Negro,” *Interracial Review* 28 (1955): 42-45; and “Integration in the Convent,” *America* 95(April 26, 1956): 83-4.

<sup>104</sup> “Integration in the Convent,” 83. One vocation lost was that of Elaine Clyburn. The first African-American graduate of Mount St. Joseph Academy in Buffalo, New York in 1952, Clyburn sought admission into the congregation of her former educators only to be rejected solely on the basis of race. See Elaine Clyburn, interview by author, March 27, 2012.

<sup>105</sup> “Sisterhoods and the Negro,” 43.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

start schools in 19 different cities, but simply has not enough womanpower. The superior has had novenas made in honor of Blessed Martin de Porres (who in 1962 became the first black person from the Americas canonized by the Church) for plentiful vocations—but if Blessed Martin sent her two dozen Negro applicants, it is quite doubtful whether they would be accepted.” He continued, “Many other institutes which complain about the scarcity of vocations have drawn a color-line on would-be applicants—yet continue to pray for more vocations to arrive at their door.”<sup>107</sup> The following year, 290 of the 628 communities surveyed responded favorably to the admission of black candidates; however, this number still represented less than half of the nation’s sisterhoods.<sup>108</sup> Moreover, of the 355 African-American applicants and inquirers recorded by the respondents to Father Bernard’s 1957 survey, 194 (roughly 55 percent) had not carried through with their applications or persevered in their orders, suggesting the persistence of informal barriers to African-American entry and acceptance in white orders.<sup>109</sup>

Indeed, despite the willingness of some white orders to accept black candidates in the post-World War II era, black women and girls seeking to enter white communities continued to face obstacles to their admission—many before they even wrote a letter of inquiry or submitted an application. Because many white sisters working in the African-American apostolate held racially derogatory views of African Americans, their interactions with their black charges and their parents were often laced with paternalism. In some cases, white sisters used racist language, including the n-word, in the presence of and/or towards their students and actively (and passively) discouraged them from

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<sup>107</sup> “Integration in the Convent,” 83.

<sup>108</sup> “Some Anthropological Implications,” 130.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

aspiring to the religious state in their communities.<sup>110</sup> Civil rights leader and cradle Catholic Diane Nash, for example, recalled a particularly disturbing encounter with a white Sister of the Blessed Sacrament as a child. As a student at St. Anselm Catholic School in Chicago in the late 1940s, a white sister nonchalantly told Nash, “You know we love God because we deal with the least of God’s people.”<sup>111</sup> Unsure about how to respond, Nash, then only a child, remained silent. However, the sister’s words remained with her. Such hurtful treatment left many black girls disenchanted with religious life and the Church, more generally. Many abandoned their calls to religious life before ever inquiring of the white orders that had educated them, fearing rejection or encountering additional white hostility. Such was the case for Nash, who still aspired to become a sister in her high school years. However, apprehension and the reality of white racism in female religious life eventually forced Nash to abandon her call. Instead, she enrolled in Fisk University in Nashville, where she emerged as a leader in the local black student movement and later the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.<sup>112</sup>

Many African-American parents and relatives cognizant and resentful of racially paternalistic white sisters and priests also actively discouraged black girls from seeking to embrace the religious state in white orders. Oftentimes, this was done to protect their daughters from the reality of racism in the Church and particularly from potentially hostile white sisters. Such was the case when fifteen year-old Charlotte Marshall

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<sup>110</sup> Loretta H. Graham, interview by author, via telephone, April 26, 2011. See also Willingham interview.

<sup>111</sup> Linda T. Wynn, “Diane Judith Nash: A Mission for Equality Justice and Social Change,” in *Tennessee Women: Their Lives and Times*, edited by Sarah Wilkerson Freeman and Beverly Bond, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009): 284.

<sup>112</sup> Wynn, “Diane Judith Nash,” 284.

informed her father that she desired to become a member of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVM), who staffed St. Augustine's Catholic School in Memphis in the 1940s. When Charlotte's father firmly stated no without an explanation, she was initially distraught. However, two years later, when Charlotte's BVM high school counselor informed her that she could not enter the community, solely on the basis of race, Marshall finally understood her father's position. Charles Marshall did not oppose his daughter's dream of becoming a religious sister, but he knew that the BVM would not accept Charlotte because she was black and only because she black. By telling Charlotte no years before, he hoped to spare his daughter the humiliation and despair of rejection. When Charlotte informed her father of her counselor's devastating news, he stated plainly, "I was wondering when you were going to get it."<sup>113</sup> Fortunately though, Charlotte Marshall's vocation would not be lost to the Church. Victoria Chineworth, a white lay assistant working with the BVMs in Memphis, soon learned of Marshall's predicament and informed her about the Oblate Sisters of Providence, whom Marshall joined one year later. Years before, Chineworth's daughter, Alice, had suffered the same blow from the BVMs but had found reprieve and sisterhood in the Oblates. After her husband's death in the early 1940s, Mrs. Chineworth began working with the BVMs in an effort to save any black vocations that might otherwise be lost due to the whites-only admissions policy. In the late 1940s, Chineworth sent two additional graduates of St. Augustine's to the Oblates.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Sister Charlotte Marshall, O.S.P., interview by author, digital recording, Catonsville, Md., February 19, 2010.

<sup>114</sup> Marshall, interview by author. See also Sister Alice Chineworth interview by author.

For the scores of black women and girls who submitted applications to enter white congregations after World War II, many faced additional obstacles during their application processes, which were often unbeknownst to them. Though increasingly open to the admission of black candidates, many white female leadership councils were not true proponents of integration or racial equality. Instead, integration often translated into the deliberate admission of only one or two black sisters in white communities, whose numbers could reach into the thousands. For example, in 1960, the Cincinnati, Ohio chapter of Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur voted to accept their first black candidates, Saundra Ann Willingham and Violet Marie Dennis. Though the community had received applications from three exceptionally qualified African-American teenagers in 1960, the order decided against accepting the application of an African-American graduate of their St. Joseph Academy in Columbus, only because the community had voted to accept two and not three inaugural black postulants.<sup>115</sup>

Like the nation's white seminaries and male religious orders for the first half of the twentieth century, many white sisterhoods initially tailored their selections to young women and girls who they considered would most easily adapt to "white-centered" convent life and not directly challenge the racism of their white counterparts.<sup>116</sup> Oftentimes, this meant extremely light-skinned applicants, who paternalistic whites expected not to exhibit racial militancy and whose physical appearance would not readily

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<sup>115</sup> Saundra Ann Willingham, interview by author, digital recording, June 29, 2012.

<sup>116</sup> See Stephen Ochs, *Desegregating the Altar: The Josephites and the Struggle for Black Priests, 1871-1960* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1933). Ochs meticulously documents that the very few white seminaries and religious orders that would accept black men generally and insidiously accepted one "mulatto" man, who could pass for white, every few years. Religious superiors did this so that their community's social transgression would not be easily recognized outside of the seminary and in an unsuccessful ploy to undermine the charge of racism in their admissions policies by African Americans.

reveal the order's desegregation. In the case of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, who finally admitted their first black candidate in 1950, the order initially implemented a gradual desegregation plan, admitting one only black candidate in 1950 and two more in 1951. Because none of these women remained in the community for more than a year or ever professed vows, their records are closed. However, oral history testimony reveals that these women were extremely light-skinned and members of prominent Afro-Creole families in New Orleans.<sup>117</sup> In 1955, Juliana Haynes became the first black woman to profess religious vows as a Sister of the Blessed Sacrament.<sup>118</sup> Oral history testimony also reveals that some white SBS sisters were still directing black applicants to black orders as late as the 1970s. When Gilda Marie Bell contacted the SBS vocational director in 1972, for example, she was first instructed to seek admission into the Sisters of the Holy Family. However, after a hostile reception by an older Afro-Creole Holy Family Sister at the front door of their motherhouse, Bell, a dark-skinned, non-Creole African American, returned to the SBS, who subsequently admitted her.<sup>119</sup>

Racial bigotry and prejudice also persisted among many white sisters, making efforts to integrate female religious life often untenable. Oral history testimonies of black sisters who entered white communities after World War II are filled with incidents of verbal and physical bullying, deliberate ostracism, and other forms of racist abuse (including cultural supremacy) from their white counterparts and superior generals. From refusing to use the same bathroom facilities as their black congregational members to

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<sup>117</sup> Sister Sylvia Thibodeaux, S.S.F. interview by author in New Orleans, Louisiana, digital recording, August, 19, 2009.

<sup>118</sup> Sister Gilda Marie Bell, S.B.S., interview by author in New Orleans, Louisiana, digital recording, May 4, 2009.

<sup>119</sup> Bell, interview by author.

subjecting black sisters to daily racial taunts, racist whites in female congregations often sought to make life unbearable for pioneering black sisters, hoping to drive them out of the orders. In her early years as a novice and postulant at St. Rose Convent in Lacrosse, Wisconsin, Sister Thea (Bertha Elizabeth) Bowman, for example, routinely endured questions and teasing about her hair and southern mannerisms from her white counterparts. In one particularly disturbing encounter, some of the older members of the community told Sister Thea, then just an aspirant and only sixteen years old, that: “Black people go to nigger heaven together with the dogs and other animals.”<sup>120</sup> Sister Jamie Phelps, who entered the Dominican Sisters in Adrian, Michigan in 1959, recalled similar experiences. “Back in those days, [black sisters were] a novelty,” she noted. “Congregations were not really prepared to receive black women. And if they received us, we had to pass all the tests.” She continued, “If you were one of the first blacks in your religious congregation, you had to dispel people’s negative expectations of you.”<sup>121</sup> Phelps also recalled that the inter-ethnic discrimination (specifically white Irish and Italian hostilities toward Polish sisters) present in her congregation helped her to recognize that she was not alone in her fight to worship and serve God with dignity and respect.<sup>122</sup> Thus, she resolved to just being herself and praying that her white counterparts would accept her for whom she was.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Charlene Smith and John Feister, *Thea’s Song: The Life of Thea Bowman* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 54-55.

<sup>121</sup> Smith and Feister, *Thea’s Song*, 55.

<sup>122</sup> Sister Jamie Phelps, O.P., interview by author in New Orleans, Louisiana, July 22, 2009, digital recording.

<sup>123</sup> *Thea’s Song*, 55.

However, many black sisters in white communities felt pressured to deny their racial heritage and respective upbringings, no matter how stable and loving, in order to feel accepted in their orders. Sister Daniel Marie (Jannie) Myles, a native of Yazoo City, Mississippi who entered the Milwaukee Province of the School Sisters of Notre Dame in 1949, for example, endured years of white-enforced and self-imposed racial hatred in her order. In talk given to an audience of white and black sisters in the early 1970s, she recounted:

In my postulant days we went to college at the Mother House. In my freshman English class everybody laughed at the way I talked when I got up to answer a question. So...I made up my mind that I wasn't going to answer questions or raise my hand and talk until my English improved. So when I didn't raise my hand, what they assumed to be the reason was what they called my 'Negro sullenness.' Nobody bothered to ask *me* the reason why I'd quit speaking in class. But one day I told one of the nuns who sometimes taught the class my true reason. She said to me, 'Well, it's all right if you don't want to talk, Sister. Because even if you did talk, I don't think you could raise your grade. There's only so far that you can go in this classroom, and that's up to a grade C. So it doesn't really matter if you don't talk.' [Nonetheless]...I still looked at and listened to the white sisters, and I imitated them. That was because I would have done anything to have them be friendly. I wanted to assimilate. I was so lonesome all the time, and they didn't accept me. During Recreation time, I'd walk up to sisters and they'd turn away when they saw me coming. I used to pray to God to change me—change *me* and not them—so I'd be acceptable to them, and they wouldn't turn away when they saw me coming. Some of the sisters, when I tried a little group, would tell me, 'No, get out of here.' This was after I did everything I knew how to try to become white...I was ashamed of being black then and nobody really let me be as white as I tried.<sup>124</sup>

Not until the admission of two additional black candidates in the late 1950s would Sister Daniel Marie find sincere and authentic sisterhood and fellowship in her community.

The hostility and bullying that seventeen-year old Kathryn Glenn encountered during her first year as a postulant in the Sisters, Servants of the Holy Ghost (later the Sisters, Servants of the Holy Spirit) nearly forced her to abandon her call to religious life in 1958. Born in Birmingham, Alabama and raised in Chicago, Glenn had converted to

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<sup>124</sup> Quoted in Sara Harris, *The Sisters: The Changing World of the American Nun* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1970), 279. Date of Myles's entrance obtained in phone conversation on August 17, 2011 with SSSF Archivist.

Catholicism in the seventh grade. Educated by the Felician Sisters and the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament on Chicago's South Side, Glenn pledged her life to God as a teenager following her younger brother's miraculous recovery from a life-threatening illness.<sup>125</sup> As she progressed in school, Kathryn set her sights on becoming a missionary.<sup>126</sup> In 1958, Glenn, then seventeen years old, and her friend Dolores Simms, entered the novitiate of the Holy Ghost Sisters in Techny, Illinois. Although the order had admitted its first black postulant, Mary Dolores Allen, in 1947, there were no black sisters in the community in 1958. Moreover, immediately into their postulancy, Kathryn and Dolores were subjected to what Glenn later called daily "bullying" from their white counterparts. Within a few months, Simms became very ill and was dismissed from the order. Upon her return to Chicago, Simms informed Kathryn's mother of the abuses she had suffered and which Kathryn was still suffering. In response, Kathryn's mother immediately informed Father George Stephen, S.V.D., Kathryn's religious advisor and the white pastor of Chicago's historically black St. Elizabeth's Catholic Church. In turn, Father Stephen quickly traveled to Techny to speak to Kathryn and the superior general of the Holy Ghost Sisters. "Had Father Stephen come the day before, I probably would have left the convent with him," Glenn later recalled. "But, I had prayed about it and promised God that I would keep my vow to Him."<sup>127</sup> In an effort to deter the white sisters from further

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<sup>125</sup> Sister Rose Martin Glenn, S.S.p.S., interview by author, digital recording, Memphis, Tennessee, November 20, 2009.

<sup>126</sup> Sister Rose Martin Glenn, interview by author. With the help of her pastor Father George Stephens, S.V.D., Glenn first sought admission to the Maryknoll Sisters and the Medical Missionaries, the only two American orders of missionary sisters. However, both orders told Glenn that she would have to wait until she was 21 or attained suitable higher training. Suspicious of the Glenn's rejections, Father Stephens encouraged her to apply to the Sisters, Servants of the Holy Ghost, a sister community to his own order of priests, the Society of the Divine Word.

<sup>127</sup> Glenn, interview by author.

harassing Glenn and protect her vocation, Father Stephen visited Kathryn in the convent every week for the next two years. In 1960, Kathryn professed her first vows as Sister Rose Martin, in honor of Saint Rose of Lima and Blessed Martin de Porres.<sup>128</sup>

Though many black sisters in white communities faced overt and passive resistance to their presence, there were a few exceptions. Sandra Slater, who entered the novitiate of the IHM sisters in 1962, for example, reported that she experienced no hostility from her white counterparts during her tenure in the order. Slater did note, however, that she was not made aware of her order's African-American heritage until years after her departure from religious life.<sup>129</sup> Similarly, Loretta (nee Louis) Graham, who entered the novitiate of the Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Africa in 1954 and took the name Sister Martin de Porres, reported that she encountered no racial animosities before her departure from the order one year later.<sup>130</sup> Sister Mary Francesca Thompson, who entered the Franciscan Sisters of Oldenburg, Indiana in 1951, remembered being horrified upon hearing reports of her peers' encounters with blatant racism in their orders in the late 1960s. Unlike many of her peers, Sister Francesca, an extremely light-skinned African-American woman, had been warmly welcomed and accepted into her order.<sup>131</sup> Thompson recalled though, "There was one sister [of Charity] who was told by her reverend mother, 'You know, sister, I just don't think you belong with us. I think you belong with your own kind.'" Reflecting on this revelation, Sister Francesca stated, "I

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<sup>128</sup> Glenn, interview by author.

<sup>129</sup> Sandra Elizabeth Slater, interview by author, via telephone and postal mail, August 31, 2011. Her name in religion was Sister Mary Reginald.

<sup>130</sup> Graham, interview by author.

<sup>131</sup> Smith and Feister, *Thea's Song*, 55-56, 104-5. See also, Sister M. Francesca, O.S.F., "Thrice Called," in *Twice Called: The Autobiographies of Seventeen Convert Sisters*, edited by George L. Kane, (Milwaukee, WI: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1959): 91-102.

[was] just floored---I just [couldn't] imagine people being treated like that."<sup>132</sup> In the same interview, Sister Francesca recalled another unnamed black sister who would not invite her parents to her investiture or profession ceremonies "because she did not want to them to know that she was not allowed to make her vows with the other sisters." The Reverend Mother of that specific community told the black sister: "We wouldn't want to offend our white parents."<sup>133</sup>

Though some black sisters in hostile white orders remained in their congregations, many found the burden of being the only black person, or one of a few, in their communities and the unchecked racism of their white counterparts too heavy to bear. Indeed, a significant portion of the pioneering black sisters in white orders did not persevere in their orders. For those who remained, life behind convent walls was often difficult. Though the transition to religious life was difficult for most young women, irrespective of race, the existence and persistence of racial bigotry and white cultural supremacy in the Church and the lack of structural changes to accommodate fundamental differences among members often tokenized and marginalized sisters of color. (Latina women in white orders, similarly, endured racist abuses, among which included being systematically relegated to domestic labor positions, i.e. maids and cooks, for their white counterparts.)<sup>134</sup> Though time and spiritual perfection sometimes won black sisters sincere friends and allies in their communities, many black sisters persevered in their vocations in isolation during the early years of desegregation. Because of the inherently

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<sup>132</sup> Smith and Feister, *Thea's Song*, 105.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid*, 56.

<sup>134</sup> For an examination of the hostile reception of Latina women into white U.S. sisterhoods, see Lara Medina, *Las Hermanas: Chicana/Latina Religious-Political Activism in the U.S. Catholic Church* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005).

insular nature of convent life, which severely limited sisters' communications with the outside world, including their blood relatives, the additional isolation that many black sisters endured as a result of deliberate ostracism made convent life especially lonesome. Moreover, the refusal of many white sisters to use the same toilets, utensils, and accommodations as their black counterparts subjected many black sisters to a daily ritual of humiliation and shame which was generally endured by black sisters with a host of masked smiles and deferential behaviors.<sup>135</sup> As Pittsburgh Religious Sister of Mercy M. Martin de Porres Grey admitted, "When I cried in my room at night, I made sure nobody knew it. When I was with the sisters, or anybody for that matter, I kept smiling through my hurt."<sup>136</sup>

As an increasing number of black sisters became professed members of their orders and entered the public sphere as nurses and teachers in hospitals and schools, white resistance began to mount outside convent walls. Oftentimes, white opposition to the integration of these historically white Catholic spaces resulted in verbal assaults on black sisters by white adults and children alike. White patients sometimes refused to be treated by black sisters nurses. For example, while a student at the St. Andrew school of Nursing in Bottneau, North Dakota in the early sixties, Sister Teresita Weind, S.M.P., was refused entry into the home of a white family during her public health rotation. The

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<sup>135</sup> Dr. Patricia Grey, telephone interview by author, February 26, 2012. See also Grey's interview, with author, on June 21, 2009

<sup>136</sup> Sara Harris, *The Sisters: The Changing World of the American Nun*, (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1970) 251.

white family among many things called Sister Teresita a “Black witch.”<sup>137</sup> Similarly, while a nursing student in Pittsburgh, Religious Sister of Mercy M. Martin de Porres Grey, endured daily racist insults from an elderly white female patient in her order’s Mercy Hospital. However, after Sister M. Martin de Porres continued to visit the woman daily for several months, the patient finally admitted that she thought blacks were nothing more than servants and animals.<sup>138</sup>

Some white Catholic parents refused to permit black sister-teachers to instruct their children, solely on the basis of race. Sometimes, these white antipathies erupted into incidents that threatened physical violence against black sisters. In 1962, for example, outraged white mothers withdrew their children and picketed at an all-white Catholic grammar school in Chicago following the assignment of a black sister to the school to teach third grade. Holding placards in revolt against the “black nun,” the white mothers sustained their public protest for several days.<sup>139</sup> Similarly, when Sister of Notre Dame de Namur Marie Dennis was assigned to teach math and science in Columbus, Ohio, in 1967, a cross was burned in front of the convent.<sup>140</sup> As hostility to black sisters in historically-white spaces erupted across the country, it became increasingly clear that structural changes would be necessary for black sisters to remain in white communities and labor in their order’s institutions free from violence. Some white orders rose to the

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<sup>137</sup> “Sister Teresita Weind, SNDdeN: Provincial of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur,” in *Ministries in African American Catholic Communities*, 176, <[http://www.catholiccincinnati.org/wpcontent/uploads/2011/01/Section\\_IV\\_2008.pdf](http://www.catholiccincinnati.org/wpcontent/uploads/2011/01/Section_IV_2008.pdf)>

<sup>138</sup> Harris, *Sisters*, 247-8. Grey, interview by author.

<sup>139</sup> “Catholic Students Condemn Racism in American Life,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, May 1, 1962, 11. See also author’s interview with Sister Jamie Phelps, O.P., who recalled that this also happened to a black Puerto Rican sister in her order who was assigned to an all-white school in Chicago. It may be the same case.

<sup>140</sup> Jo Ann Kay McNamara, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns Through Two Millennia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 598.

challenge. In the case of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, the mother superior of the Columbus, Ohio branch threatened to expel any students who participated in the impending boycott of Sister Marie Dennis following the cross burning.<sup>141</sup>

Other orders, however, responded by releasing black sisters from their vows. Such happened to Brenda Marie Williams, who entered the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth, a Polish order in Chicago, in 1957. As a sixteen-year old aspirant in the community, Williams, a second-generation southern migrant to Chicago, learned to read and speak Polish, preparing herself to teach in one of her order's schools. She was invested in the community on July 16, 1958 and professed her first vows two years later. However, Williams was not permitted to profess final vows "as they [ultimately] felt her vocation was not for their Polish order."<sup>142</sup> In a letter dated several years later, the provincial superior of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth confessed that Williams was "a polite and sociable person—easy to get along with others; thoughtful of others and helpful." She also characterized Williams as a "good student" with a "God endowed...vocal voice" and "an avid reader." However, Mother M. Getulia maintained that Williams did not have a vocation in their community. She wrote, "[W]hen [Brenda] came into the Juniorate and college work, she found a free excess to reading; she read much and sometimes to the neglect of other duties." She continued, "Her attention was called to this [reading] – for, the distractions would prey upon her from time to time. It was felt, she cannot go on like this, for neither God had any glory from her service, nor

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<sup>141</sup> McNamara, *Sisters in Arms*, 598.

<sup>142</sup> Sister Mary Angela Wade, O.S.P. to Mother Williams [Hundley], March 15, 1965, OSP Archives. See also "Sister Mary Judith (Brenda) Williams" file in OSP Archives. William professed her first vows as a SHFN on July 16, 1960.

did she profit in her spiritual life.”<sup>143</sup> Although Williams did not want to leave her community, she had no choice and no ecclesiastical authority to whom she could appeal. She left the order on July 16, 1963. However, Williams’s vocation would be temporarily saved when she found a confidante and friend in Mother Mary Angela Wade, superior of the Holy Name of Mary Convent in Chicago two years later. Mother Angela soon wrote home to Baltimore to Mother Mary William Hundley, superior general of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, in hopes of saving Brenda’s vocation, which the Oblates soon did.<sup>144</sup>

### **Conclusion**

On October 8, 1965, Brenda Marie Williams entered the novitiate of the Oblate Sisters of Providence in Baltimore. One year later, she professed her first vows as Sister Mary Judith. Although thankful for the opportunity to re-enter religious life with the Oblate community, the pain of Williams’s rejection by the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth continued to haunt her. Like scores of black sisters before her, Williams had been called to serve God in the order of white sisters who had educated her only to discover that the color line remained firmly in tact behind most white convent walls. Even though permitted to join the Sisters of Holy Family of Nazareth in 1957, race ultimately superseded religion and vocation in the minds and hearts of the leadership of

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<sup>143</sup> Mother M. Getulia, CSFN, Provincial Superior, to Reverend Mother M. William, O.S.P., March 27, 1965, OSP Archives.

<sup>144</sup> Sister Mary Angela Wade, O.S.P. to Mother William [Hundley], March 15, 1965, OSP Archives. See also Sister Mary Angela Wade, O.S.P. to Rev. Mother Mary William [Hundley], O.S.P., July 8, 1965, OSP Archives.

the white community. Forced to depart her community and left with no other suitable alternative, Williams turned to the nation's historically black sisterhoods, who had for decades been rescuing rejected black vocations in the Church. The Oblates were glad to have Williams in 1965, but it had become increasingly, and *painfully*, clear that the persistence of racism and white supremacy in the nation's white orders could no longer go publicly unchallenged by black sisters.

Sweeping changes taking place in the nation and the Church brought on by the convergence of the modern civil rights movement and the liberalizing reforms of Second Vatican Council in 1965 finally created the opportunity and space needed for black sisters to begin to confront the reality of white supremacy and racism in the Church, specifically in female religious life. Over the course of the next three years, black sisters in white *and* black orders gradually began to take a more active and public role in challenging racial discrimination in the Church and in the nation at large. By joining black protest organizations, participating in public demonstrations for African-American freedom and justice, and publicly identifying and challenging the racism of white sisters, black sisters helped to resurrect a black Catholic protest tradition, which had lain largely dormant since the 1930s. At the same time, they helped to sow the seeds of the greatest black Catholic revolt in American history.

### Chapter Three:

#### “SERVICE FIRST! SERVICE NOW! SERVICE ALWAYS!”:

#### Civil Rights and the Resurrection of Black Catholic Protest after Vatican II

“I am here because I am a Negro, a nun, a Catholic, and because I want to bear witness...I’m here today because yesterday [in Saint Louis] I voted.”

-Sister Mary Antona (Elizabeth Louise) Ebo, S.S.M., Selma Voting Rights March Participant, 1965<sup>1</sup>

“I was fired up to go to Selma. I wanted to go. So, I asked Mother Angela for permission and she said:  
‘Noooo!’”<sup>2</sup>

-Sister M. Virigine (Ruth Willa Mae) Fish, O.S.P.

“The march on Washington had fired me up, the bombing of [four] girls in Birmingham had enraged me, the assassination of Malcolm X had embittered me. None of these events seemed to capture more than the casual attention of my [white] community...I eventually had to ask myself how I could justify such total identification with this institution which was not only white, but so racist and authoritarian.”<sup>3</sup>

-Saundra Willingham, formerly Sister Melanie, S.N.deN., who left her community in 1968

In the winter of 1959, twenty-one year old Sister Thea Bowman, F.S.P.A., then a student at Viterbo College in LaCrosse, Wisconsin, published an article in the school’s literary magazine detailing African-American life under Jim Crow in her hometown of Canton, Mississippi. Entitled, “Passing beneath the Southern Sun,” Sister Thea’s essay painted a haunting portrait of the segregated South—one in which most white southerners were not only nostalgic for a brutal and slavery-dominated past, but also hell bent on keeping their African-American counterparts subordinate by any means necessary in the face of the rising civil rights movement. “Segregation is an invulnerable tradition,” Sister Thea wrote. “Mississippi was the second state to join the Confederacy, and ‘Old Miss’ must ever hold on to her traditions, fly her confederate flags, and insist on the inalienable

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<sup>1</sup> *Sisters of Selma: Bearing Witness for Change*, directed by Jayasri Majumdar Hart, Hartfilms and Alabama Public Television, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Sister M. Viriginie (Ruth Willa Mae) Fish, interview by author, digital recording, Catonsville, Md., March 11, 2010. (Quote is in my handwritten notes, as Sister Viriginie said this to me before we began recording.)

<sup>3</sup> Saundra Willingham, “Why I Quit the Convent,” *Ebony* 24 (December 1968): 5-6.

supremacy of the great white race.”<sup>4</sup> Five years earlier, the U.S. Supreme Court had struck down the constitutionality of racial segregation in the nation’s public schools in its landmark *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* decision and sent shock waves throughout the country. By ruling that racially-segregated schools were in violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, the Supreme Court had finally armed African Americans with the necessary legal precedent to challenge racial inequality in all areas of American life. However, it had also set into motion a vicious and violent campaign of white resistance to the promised gains in black rights in public *and* private spheres. And Sister Thea, who at the tender age of fifteen departed her native Mississippi to become a nun in Wisconsin, had secretly kept abreast of the two disparate struggles as she underwent spiritual training and entered college in 1958.<sup>5</sup> For Sister Thea, the burgeoning civil rights revolution (and the violent response it engendered) was not something that she, unlike many of white peers, could avoid or ignore even if she tried. For Thea, the first African-American sister in the history of the LaCrosse-based Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, the struggle was inherently personal.

“I lived through the days when [Mississippi] Senator [Theodore G.] Bilbo paraded up and down Main Street---his resolve to keep ‘niggers’ away from the polls,” Sister Thea wrote. “I was not old enough to vote, but I am old enough to remember the Bilbo cartoons that plagued our papers and my elders’ conversations of deceit, trickery, and violence used against Negroes at Mississippi polls.”<sup>6</sup> The granddaughter of Mississippi slaves, Sister Thea had also witnessed firsthand the inherent violence of Jim

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<sup>4</sup> Thea Bowman, “Passing beneath the Southern Sun,” *Touchstone* (Winter 1959): 5-11. Reprinted in Charlene Smith and John Feister, *Thea’s Song: The Life of Thea Bowman* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 5-9.

<sup>5</sup> Smith and Feister, *Thea’s Song*, xv, 36-88.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

Crow during her childhood, and it had shaped her racial and political consciousness long before she entered Saint Rose Convent, where she endured racist mistreatment and cultural isolation. Thus, with the onset of the southern black freedom movement, Sister Thea believed that the time had come for black citizens to claim their full and equal rights in all areas of their lives. “My people need leaders, prudent, capable, and strong,” she wrote. “[Negroes] are not clamoring for integration but they want equal rights—jobs, educational facilities, equitable public services... Through the centuries my people have been a starry-eyed happy people of hope—hope for the future and for better days.”<sup>7</sup> And the ever-optimistic Thea, who had always planned to return to Mississippi and labor among “her people,” was ready to take her place in the black freedom struggle. However, Sister Thea, and scores like her, would find their way blocked by the very institution to which they had dedicated their souls.

Despite having a clear and present desire to do so, activist-oriented black Catholic sisters were not readily permitted to join the civil rights movement during its formative years. While the canonical rules of enclosure strictly prohibited Catholic sisters from participating in public “spectacles” prior to Second Vatican Council, the U.S. Church’s own ambivalent stance toward racial justice and the ongoing reality of racial discrimination and exclusion in most Catholic institutions also played an active role in discouraging its members from publicly endorsing and supporting the movement in its early years. As a result, Catholic participation in the civil rights movement prior to Vatican II was minimal and limited almost exclusively to a small percentage of black and white lay Catholics, most often, though not always, associated with the Church’s interracial justice movement. Following the liberalizing reforms and activist-oriented

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<sup>7</sup> Smith and Feister, *Thea’s Song*, 9.

mandates of Second Vatican Council, which opened in 1962, Catholic participation in civil rights activities began to increase significantly. However, obstacles to black sisters' full participation in the public fight for racial justice remained even in the wake of the Church's official, though egregiously tardy, entry into the struggle during the historic Selma protests of 1965.

This chapter analyzes the impact of the modern civil rights movement and the liberalizing reforms of Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) on the political consciousness and activism of black Catholic sisters in the United States. Specifically, it chronicles the gradual, and fiercely contested, entry of black sisters into civil rights activism and the larger public fight for racial justice after the onset of *aggiornamento*, or modernization, in the global Catholic Church. Unlike their Protestant counterparts, black Catholics as a whole were late in their contributions to the civil rights movement. Underscoring the unique and historical obstacles that precluded black sisters from civil rights activism, this chapter traces how activist-oriented sisters navigated and challenged the racial and logistical barriers that severely circumscribed their efforts. It also examines the fierce tensions and debates that arose as young black sisters coming of age politically in the fifties and sixties adopted a more confrontational approach to racial discrimination, especially in the wake of public desegregation and the rise of "black power" in the late sixties.

Although a substantial amount of scholarly attention has been given to the Catholic Church's notoriously late and marginal participation in the black civil rights movement, the efforts of black Catholics remain largely under-explored and marginalized in the scholarship. As a result, many historians have often characterized black Catholic

political activism (especially prior to the King's assassination) as overwhelmingly conservative or non-existent.<sup>8</sup> However, such an interpretation ignores the ways in which Catholic protocol and longstanding racial discrimination and paternalism in the Church actively precluded many black Catholics from fully and publicly demonstrating their support for racial justice prior to and even in the immediate years after Second Vatican Council. Second, it dismisses the importance, and arguably political dimensions, of the decades-long struggle waged by African-American Catholics to worship with dignity and participate equitably in the full life of their Church. Third, scholarly and popular characterizations of black Catholics as conservative routinely overlook the fact that *when able* many black Catholics readily entered the secular fight for racial justice, participating and exercising leadership in local and national civil rights organizations and movements. This was true even of the nation's marginal population of black Catholic sisters, whose opportunities to enter public activism were more circumscribed than those of their white and male counterparts.

Although African-American Catholic sisters were not represented in great numbers in racial justice organizations or civil rights activities prior to 1968, their marginal presence and participation should not be interpreted as a lack of interest in or commitment to the fight for racial justice. Indeed, in the long and deliberate suppression of a substantial black Catholic clergy in the United States, black sisters undertook significant endeavors to dismantle racial barriers in the Church and wrested critical gains, largely in the field of education, during the Jim Crow era. As the African-American face

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<sup>8</sup> For most recent examples, see John T. McGreevy's *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), Amy L. Koehlinger, *The New Nuns: Racial Justice and Religious Reform in the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

of the Catholic Church through the mid-twentieth century, black sisters had also kept the fight for black religious alive in the face of an ambivalent and often hostile all-white hierarchy and overwhelmingly white laity. However, black sisters (bound by their religious vows of obedience) had to shun traditional modes of protest and often disavow a “politicized” racial consciousness in order to insure their survival and that of their ministries.

Thus, the convergence of the civil rights movement and Second Vatican Council placed the nation’s community of black sisters, which numbered approximately 1,000 in 1962, at a difficult crossroads. Although black sisters unequivocally supported the aims of the civil rights movement, the ongoing reality, and seemingly intractability, of white supremacy and racism within Catholic boundaries kept black sisters’ public activism minimal even as the global Church began to encourage and sanction it. In fact, most activist-oriented black sisters found their communities unsympathetic to their growing desire to enter the black freedom struggle after Vatican II. While the first black sisters to appear in civil rights demonstrations and racial justice organizations were members of white orders, most white congregations remained apathetic and sometimes even antagonistic to their efforts. In fact, most white sisterhoods still refused to accept African-American candidates, solely on the basis of race, in the wake of public and private desegregation. Those white orders that did accept black candidates often remained culturally insensitive and inimical to the unique plight of their pioneering black members.

Activist-oriented sisters in black orders also struggled against the historically and strategically conservative posture of their communities. The leadership councils of the nation’s black sisterhoods, long and severely marginalized within the Church, remained

reluctant to permit their members to engage in racial justice activism outside of their traditional apostolates after Vatican II. This was especially true as white Catholics, religious and lay, emerged as some of the most violent and vitriolic leaders of the backlash against civil rights gains across the country. Also of critical concern to black leadership councils was the growing fragility of the nation's black Catholic educational system, then facing an uncertain future in the wake of public and Catholic school desegregation. As such, black sisters in black orders were generally prohibited from participating in secular or Church-based racial justice activities, especially if it required release from their teaching duties in the early years of Vatican II.

However, Catholic participation in the Selma voting rights protests of 1965 proved to be a critical turning point for black sisters struggling to become publicly visible and active. The U.S. Church's widely-publicized turn in favor of black civil rights and the groundbreaking participation of hundreds of sisters in the protest finally created the space and approval for many sisters to enter the black freedom struggle. Nonetheless, activist-oriented black sisters continued to encounter obstacles to their participation in the public fight for racial justice. In particular, many found themselves shut out from or marginalized within the sister-oriented racial justice organization and the larger racial justice apostolate in the Church. As white sisters increasingly moved to become the face and force of racial justice in the Church, a growing number of black sisters in white communities began to question publicly their coworshippers' qualifications to lead and speak on issues of racial justice. In particular, they drew attention to the ongoing reality of racism and discrimination in the Church, especially in religious life. Black sisters in black orders also began to clash publicly with the strategic conservatism and timidity of

their leadership councils and demand more opportunities to participate in racial justice activities outside of their traditional apostolates. By the late 1960s, this pivotal cadre of black sisters radicalized by their own experiences of racial discrimination within and outside of the Church and inspired by rising calls for black power proved unwilling to make the same racial and political compromises as their predecessors. In the process, they helped to resurrect a uniquely Catholic protest tradition that had lain dormant in the African-American community since the 1930s.

### **Black Sisters and Civil Rights Activism Prior to Vatican II**

In 1945, John Robert Badger, a Catholic columnist for the *Chicago Defender*, a leading black national newspaper, issued a call for political and government action after witnessing what he deemed a rather disturbing encounter involving two black nuns on a New Orleans streetcar. According to Badger, the two sisters, undoubtedly members of the Sisters of the Holy Family, boarded an overcrowded streetcar, on which he was riding during a visit to the Crescent City. Because there were no more seats available in the “colored” section, the two sisters were forced to squeeze uncomfortably into the rear of the streetcar. Noticing the sisters’ predicament, a black stevedore asked the streetcar conductor to move the “For Colored Only” sign forward, so that the car’s vacant seats could be used and the sisters could be seated. However, as the stevedore did so, the elder of the two sisters interrupted the man, stating simply, “Never mind, son, we’ll stay in our place.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> John Robert Badger, “World View: Catholics and the Peace,” *Chicago Defender*, May 5, 1945, 13.

For Badger, an African-American Catholic, the incident had been unconscionable. It had been the first time that Badger had “ever seen a Negro nun,” and initially he had been filled with pride. However, at the end of the encounter, Badger felt nothing but pity for the two Holy Family sisters and anger at a world that subjected even consecrated women of God to the humiliating and dehumanizing practices of racial segregation. For Badger, the sisters’ passive response was proof positive of the U.S. Church’s profound failure to live up to its universal creed and minister effectively to its African-American constituency. He also thought the sisters had “become resigned to acceptance of an intolerable world.” In response, he called for greater black Catholic attention and political activism directed at their government, rather than looking to “their Church and their priest,” where he thought change was improbable, if not impossible.<sup>10</sup> Although Badger’s assessment of the sisters’ actions seemingly ignored the fact that most African Americans living in the Deep South in 1945 would have responded similarly under the same set of circumstances, his documentation of the incident provides an important glimpse into the unique travails of black Catholic sisters.

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, black Catholic sisters *as a rule* avoided public engagement with civil rights activism. They did not join black civic or political organizations nor did they participate in public demonstrations against racial segregation, discrimination, or violence. When presented with the opportunity to speak publicly on the matter of civil rights in the pre-Conciliar era, black sisters for the most part declined such invitations. On the rare occasions when black sisters did enter the public record to discuss black rights, it generally involved those sisters being subjected to some form of racist discrimination or terror. However, even then their voices were often muted or their

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<sup>10</sup> Bader, “World View,” 13.

response to the offense generally reflected their sacred disavowal of the secular world and all matters concerning it.

As consecrated women of God, black sisters, like all Catholic religious, were bound by the rules and regulations of a male-dominated and hierarchical Church. Although pioneering Catholic sisters in the United States had been able to pursue a host of diverse apostolic activities and engage with the secular world in nontraditional ways as a result of the Church's missionary status in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the promulgation of church canon law in 1918 severely circumscribed sisters' mobility and restricted their apostolic activities largely to established Catholic spheres—schools, hospitals, and parishes. As historians of Catholic sisters have thoroughly documented, the Code of Canon Law imposed a set of normative rules of enclosure for religious sisters that emphasized uniformity and “privileged the contemplative and devotional cultivation of the ‘state of perfection’ by individual religious over corporate works of charity outside of the convent.”<sup>11</sup> Within Catholic boundaries, sisters' activities were largely restricted to prayer and the apostolic works of their congregations. Moreover, as a part of their spiritual formation, sisters were routinely instructed to view the sacred and the secular as “separate and distinct realities.”<sup>12</sup> As a result, sisters were strictly prohibited from unnecessary engagement with the secular world lest their consecrated status be jeopardized. As Lora Ann Quinonez and Mary Daniel Turner put it, it would have been “unthinkable” for Catholic sisters to participate in any type of public discourse in the pre-

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<sup>11</sup> Koehlinger, *New Nuns*, 24-25. See also Mary Ewens, O.P., “Women in Convent,” in *American Catholic Women: A Historical Explorations*, ed. Karen Kennelly, C.S.J. (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 36-37 and Margaret Susan Thompson, “The Validation of Sisterhood: Canonical Status and Liberation in the History of American Nuns,” in *A Leaf from the Great Tree of God: Essays in Honour of Ritamary Bradley, S.F.C.C.*, ed. Margot H. King (Toronto, Ontario: Peregrina Publishing Co., 1994), 38-78.

<sup>12</sup> Koehlinger, *New Nuns*, 25.

Conciliar period.<sup>13</sup> However, the burdens of racism and segregation restricted the growth, mobility, and apostolic endeavors of black sisters to a much greater extent than their white counterparts. It also imposed a stricter set of rules and guidelines on black sisters, which among many things often forced them to assume a more politically and culturally conservative public posture than their white counterparts. As a result, black sisters had to develop strategies to negotiate and navigate the contours of racial segregation without engaging in the traditional forms of protest utilized by African Americans to mitigate their marginal status in society.

Black and female in a white-dominated, male-hierarchical Church, African-American sisters lived and labored within extremely constrained conditions. They also paid a heavy price for their obedience in the deeply-segregated U.S. Catholic Church. For example, in the absence of an African-American clergy, black sisterhoods had to forge uneasy alliances with paternalistic and oftentimes hostile white ecclesiastical authorities and religious orders in order to wrest critical concessions and resources for the marginalized communities that they served. As a consequence, they had to shun formal protest and assume “a seemingly accommodationist” stance to racial segregation. In one of the few extant written justifications for the historically and strategically conservative position of black sisterhoods, Oblate Sister of Providence Mary of Good Counsel (Helena Mercedes) Baptiste explained it aptly in 1939. “[Negro sisters] know the temper of the South which accepts as axiomatic white supremacy and [we] would be foolhardy to advocate any theory or system which would bring overt acts of violence upon [our] heads

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<sup>13</sup> Lora Ann Quinonez and Mary Daniel Turner, *The Transformation of American Catholic Sisters* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 67. See also James, R. Cain, *The Influence of the Cloister on the Apostolate of Congregations of Religious Women* (Rome: Lateran University, 1965).

or the heads of [our] pupils,” she wrote. “At the same time, [we] are not unaware of the injustices of this bi-racial set-up...[and we] are courageous enough to renounce wrong as wrong with no cringing on questions of morality.” Nonetheless Baptiste, who had been one of two OSP selected to re-integrate the Catholic University of America in 1933 and one of the first African Americans to earn a graduate degree from Villanova College in 1939, conceded that the OSP had to teach their pupils the “conservative attitude” of the Church as a matter of survival. “Catholic Action is racial,” Baptiste wrote, “and the Sisters urge it upon their colored charges as they should, but they also counsel Catholic conservatism because of the undeniable difficulties present in any program which throws the two races into contact.”<sup>14</sup>

Even when black sisters were operating within their “legitimate” bounds as consecrated women of God, they had to be especially careful not to engender any further antipathy from often already-hostile whites in the Church. While the mere sight of a black woman in a religious habit riled many a white Catholic, religious or lay, to indignation and protest, others simply demanded that black sisters be relegated to a clear and inferior position in the Church. Thus, black sisters were forced to endure deliberate exclusion from events designated for religious in their respective locales as well as routine insults about members of their race during their interactions with whites in the Church. When required, black sisters subjected themselves (without protest) to the rules and customs of racial segregation when they entered white Catholic spaces, oftentimes entering through the back doors of white convents, churches, and administrative offices and waiting extended periods of time to be acknowledged and eventually seen. Black

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<sup>14</sup> Baptiste, “A Study of the Foundation and Educational Objectives of the Congregation of the Oblate Sisters of Providence,” 57-8.

leadership councils also strictly followed the rules of canon law and dictates of obedience often to the dismay and chastisement of some of their sincere white supporters in the Church. As Oblate superior Mother M. Consuella (Rebecca) Clifford once privately confided to a white Sister of the Blessed Sacrament in 1929, “It is far better to wait than to gain the ill will of ecclesiastical authorities. We would rather be criticized for being timid than to incur trouble for the Community in the end. God’s time is not always our time.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, the strategic timidity with which black sisters approached civil rights activism and public challenges to racial segregation and discrimination is understandable. However, it did not mean that black sisters were unconcerned with racial justice.

At the same moment that the Code of Canon Law severely restricted sisters’ mobility and activities, black sisters used the same law and the Catholic Church’s creed of universal Christian brotherhood to expand their reach within the U.S. Church. After World War I, black leadership councils forced the desegregation of several Catholic colleges and universities in order to obtain higher education for their members and secure then state-mandated accreditation of their schools. In the process, black orders erected a highly-decorated Catholic educational system for and staffed by African-Americans, in which they nurtured a substantial class of black Catholic professional men and women. They also transformed their schools into educational sanctuaries for African-American parents and children searching for alternatives to underfunded public schools and Catholic schools that would not accept African Americans. As educators of black children, black sisters had the difficult task of preparing their students to become highly-efficient and productive Catholic citizens in a society and Church that could legally discriminate against them solely on the basis of race. Although they often stressed

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<sup>15</sup> Sister M. Consuella to Mother Mercedes, September 27, 1929, SBS Archives.

conservatism as a matter of survival, black sisters always emphasized racial pride, taught “Negro” history, and strove to be models of spiritual and professional excellence to their students. Dr. Deborah James, a former pupil of the Oblate Sisters of Providence in North Carolina, for example, credited her Oblate instructors with being a powerful influence on her and teaching her the importance of “making a way out of no way.”<sup>16</sup> Reflecting on her Oblate instructors and education, James wrote:

These women never seemed subservient or reluctant to seek what they determined was necessary for the children of their care. They consistently struggled to provide new opportunities and challenges for us. That included everything from entering us in city-wide speaking and spelling contests to choral and basketball tournaments. And we were all supposed to share even down to our uniforms for the good of the group. When we were faced with a new challenge, we were simply expected to meet it. (I did not know what an “Oratorical Contest” was until Mother Dolorosa entered me in it, but I knew I had to try to win and she and the whole class would help.) These were not passive women, though they were prayerful. These were not retiring women, afraid of the world and so hiding out in a convent. These were not the charming, naïve, simple souls of television and movie mythology. They not only lived in the neighborhood but were a part of it.<sup>17</sup>

James also credited the memory of her Oblate models for keeping her in the Catholic Church later in life when it continued pushing a racially and political conservative agenda at the expense of the poor and Catholics of color.

Sister M. Judith Therese (Percalette Olivia) Barial had similar recollections of her Catholic education under the historically Creole and black Sisters of the Holy Family. In particular, Barial noted the marked difference in the education she received from the Irish Holy Ghost Sisters in her hometown of Pascagoula, Mississippi, during her elementary school years and from the Holy Family Sisters while a boarding student at their premier St. Mary’s Academy for (Colored) Girls in the mid-1950s. While Barial maintained that she received a quality education under both orders, she noted that her white elementary

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<sup>16</sup> Deborah James, “A Good Catholic Woman: Reflections on Conflict and Continuity in the Nineties,” in *My Soul is A Witness: African-American Women’s Spirituality: A Sourcebook* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), edited by Gloria Wade-Gayles, 238.

<sup>17</sup> James, “Good Catholic Woman,” 238-9.

school sister-instructors maintained a clear social distance from their black pupils and their families outside of school. They never visited their black pupils in their neighborhoods or homes or participated in black community events. “We knew them only at school, but not in our neighborhoods,” Barial reflected. However when the absence of Catholic high school for black girls in Pascagoula forced Barial’s parents to send her away to St. Mary’s Academy in 1954, she immediately recognized the difference. “I felt at home [with the Holy Family Sisters],” she stated. Barial also noted that it was unmistakably clear that the Holy Family Sisters, unlike her former white sister-educators, wanted and expected her to succeed, color notwithstanding. Thus, when she decided to enter religious life upon her high school graduation in 1958, she only applied to one order: that of her Holy Family educators.<sup>18</sup>

As the institutional face of the African-American Catholic community, members of black sisterhoods and later white congregations also kept the fight for black religious alive in the face of an often ambivalent and hostile white Catholic hierarchy and laity. In addition to mentoring a significant portion of the nation’s earliest generations of black priests, black sisters, through the very existence, provided a powerful refutation to the vicious racial and sexual stereotypes used by white racists and paternalists to justify the exclusion of black men from the ranks of religious life in the U.S. Church. As Oblate Sister of Providence Mary of Good Counsel Baptiste argued in 1939, “the very existence of a colored religious [sister] is an ever present if unvoiced argument that a highly developed religious life is not only possible for Negroes but even desirable.”<sup>19</sup> Black

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<sup>18</sup> Sister Mary Judith Therese (Percalette Olivia) Barial, interview by author, digital recording, July 7, 2009.

<sup>19</sup> Baptiste, “Foundation and Educational Objectives of the Congregation of the Oblate Sisters of Providence,” 54.

sisterhoods also saved hundreds of black female vocations to the Church not only by encouraging and nurturing vocations among those under their tutelage and care, but also by serving as repositories for the scores of black Catholic women and girls rejected entry into the nation's white sisterhoods solely on the basis of race.

Though black sisters did not join or publicly support secular black political organizations prior to Vatican II, there were brief, but pivotal moments when black sisters did support inherently political endeavors for racial justice in Church-affiliated organizations. For example, the Oblate Sisters of Providence and the Sisters of the Holy Family publicly supported the Federated Colored Catholics (FCC) of the United States during the height of the organization's influence and activities. Organized in 1924, the FCC was a national network of black Catholic lay organizations that sought to raise the status of African Americans in the Church and prevent the extension of racial prejudice within Catholic boundaries.<sup>20</sup> During its most influential years, the FCC, under the fiery leadership of Dr. Thomas Wyatt Turner, led the charge against racism in the Church, protesting any and all forms of discrimination that precluded African Americans from participating fully and equitably in the life of the Church. Though most of the organization's efforts were directed at combating racial discrimination and prejudice within the Church, the FCC was also very much concerned with raising the social and political status in African Americans in secular society. The final three tenets of the FCC platform, for example, dealt explicitly with black citizenship rights.<sup>21</sup> At the sixth annual

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<sup>20</sup> For a historical overview of the FCC, see Marilyn Nickels, *Black Catholic Protest and the Federated Colored Catholics, 1917-1933: Three Perspectives on Racial Justice* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1988).

<sup>21</sup> "Platform of the Federated Colored Catholics," *The Chronicle* 4 (September 1931): 549, in "Federated Colored Catholics" File, Josephite Archives. Platform 10 reads: "We wish to enjoy the full rights of citizenship, in direct proportion to the duties and sacrifices expected of our group, and cheerfully rendered by us to our country in peace and in war."

convention in Detroit in 1930, the FCC adopted an additional platform calling for equal opportunities for black Catholic boys and girls “called to the priesthood or to the religious life” and for them “to receive such educational facilities as are necessary for the same.”<sup>22</sup> The FCC’s concerted demands and efforts to raise up a substantial class of African-American priests and women religious captured the attention of the nation’s oldest and most established black sisterhoods, who had up until that point mostly avoided public associations with the organization.<sup>23</sup>

In the following year, fourteen Oblates (ten stationed in Saint Louis and four from Baltimore) and two Holy Family Sisters from New Orleans attended the annual FCC convention in Saint Louis, Missouri as delegates.<sup>24</sup> It marked the first time in FCC history that black sisters had formally participated in the conventions, and their presence was noted in the African-American national press. During the convention’s session on “Catholic Action,” Oblate Sister of Providence Mary Laurentia Short, then stationed in Saint Louis, delivered an invited address in place of the OSP superior, Mother Consuella Clifford. Although edited by her superiors in Baltimore, Sister Mary Laurentia’s address nonetheless retained a tone of political urgency.<sup>25</sup> In soliciting financial support for OSP higher education, Short specifically called for the black Catholic community to stand behind her order “by founding scholarships, establishing burses, and making generous contributions.” Short, who in 1927 quietly desegregated Saint Louis University, also

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<sup>22</sup> “Platform of the Federated Colored Catholics,” 549.

<sup>23</sup> During the 1929 FCC in Baltimore, the OSP did connect with the organization. The motherhouse annals reveal that several FCC delegates traveled to the OSP motherhouse to visit with Sisters “known to them.” Eight OSP also attended the convention’s High Mass at St. Peter Claver Catholic Church. See Diane Batts Morrow, “‘To My Darlings, the Oblates, Every Blessing’: The Reverend John T. Gillard, S.S.J., and the Oblate Sisters of Providence,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 28(Winter 2010): 9.

<sup>24</sup> “Catholics Close Big Annual Session in Missouri City,” *Chicago Defender*, September 12, 1931, p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> Morrow, “‘To My Darlings,” 10-11.

rejected racist sentiments that sought to deny African Americans' access to quality, Catholic education. Noting that it was "a source of pride" for her community to be able to contribute to the advancement of black literacy and higher education, Short argued that "nothing is too good for the youth of our race."<sup>26</sup> Later that day, the Oblates stationed in Normandy, Missouri, just outside of Saint Louis, hosted a dinner on the grounds of their St. Francis Orphanage as a part of the FCC's festivities.<sup>27</sup>

However, black sisters' public support of the FCC would be short-lived. Following the controversial and clerically-orchestrated ouster of Turner from the FCC presidency in 1933 and the subsequent bitter and public split between black lay leaders and paternalistic white clergy members over the direction of the organization, the nation's black sisterhoods apparently continued their public association with the FCC, which continued on nominally until the 1950s. However, black sisters did not abandon the FCC's outgrowth: the white and cleric-directed interracial justice movement, whose non-confrontational and individualized approach to racial justice came to define the Church's method of addressing racial discrimination and prejudice in the next three decades.<sup>28</sup> For example, Oblate Sisters of Providence were founding members of the Saint Louis-based Sisters Conference on Negro Welfare (SCNW). Organized in 1943, the SCNW was an outgrowth of the city's recently established Catholic Interracial Council and Clergy Conference on Negro Welfare. In 1947, the SCNW comprised about forty

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<sup>26</sup> Sister M. Laurentia, O.S.P., "The Oblate Sisters of Providence and Higher Education," *The Chronicle* 5 (January 1932): 8-9. See also Sister M. Laurentia (Catherine Eleanor) Short, Congregational File, Box 92, Folder 13, OSP Archives. Sister M. Laurentia matriculated at St. Louis University seemingly by certificate in 1927. She earned her A.B. in Education in 1935. Her SLU transcript is in the file.

<sup>27</sup> "The Seventh Annual Convention Program of the Federated Colored Catholics of the United States: Saint Louis, Missouri, September 5, 6, 7, 1931," *The Chronicle* 4 (September 1931): 554.

<sup>28</sup> Bryan N. Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (New York: Orbis Books, 2010), 48-50. For a greater discussion of the FCC controversy and the clerically-orchestrated switch to interracialism, see David W. Southern's *John LaFarge and the Limits of Catholic Interracialism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), 105-85.

Sisters (six of whom were OSP) representing seven different congregations laboring among African Americans in the city and sought “to discuss the common problems of the various Sisterhoods in [Negro] Catholic schools, hospitals, and orphanages, in the St. Louis area.”<sup>29</sup> While it is unclear how long the SCNW lasted, black sisters did play an active role within the organization during its early years and attempted to promote the critical importance of black teachers and input in the African-American apostolate. For example, an entry from St. Rita’s Convent on April 22, 1944 reads, “At 2:30 p.m. Mother Rita and Sister Anselma attended the meeting of the Sisters Conference on Negro Welfare. Sister Anselm read a paper which she had prepared on ‘Negro Educators.’ It was enthusiastically received by the members.”<sup>30</sup>

There were also brief moments when members of black orders broke protocol with regard to discussing civil rights publicly prior to Vatican II. For example, in 1944, an article entitled “What the Negro Wants in America” appeared in *The Liguorian*, a monthly Catholic magazine. According to the magazine’s editor, Father D. J. Corrigan, C.S.S.R., the article was authored by Mother M. Philomena (Emma) Micheau, a 25-year member of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, and submitted “with considerable reluctance...and then only under the assurance that it would do some good.”<sup>31</sup> The essay explicitly called for an end to segregation in areas and facets of American and Catholic life. However, Mother Philomena later disclaimed authorship. Instead, she stated that Reverend Corrigan interviewed her on the subject and then wrote the article in her name.

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<sup>29</sup> Thomas J. Harte, C.Ss.R., “Catholic Organizations Promoting Negro-White Race Relations in the United States,” Ph.D. diss., Catholic University of America, 1947, 141. See also Clarence J. Howard, S.V.D., “Missouri Compromise No More!” *St. Augustine Messenger* 24 (December 1946): 218, 220.

<sup>30</sup> Annals of St. Rita’s Academy and Convent, April 22, 1944, OSP Archives.

<sup>31</sup> Mother M. Philomena, O.S.P., “What the Negro Wants in America,” *The Liguorian* (November 1944): 569-71. In Personal Files of Sister M. Philomena (Emma) Micheau, OSP Archives. At the time, Mother Philomena was serving as the superior of the order’s orphanage in Normandy, Missouri and had been recently appointed to the serve as the order’s Novice Mistress.

While it is unclear who actually wrote the article, Mother Philomena did admit to submitting to an interview to discuss racial segregation with Father Corrigan. Nor did Micheau distance herself from the article's condemnation of racial segregation, suggesting at least that she supported the essay's arguments even if they were not her exact words.<sup>32</sup>

Save for these rare exceptions, black sisters overwhelmingly maintained a clear social and political distance from the African-American secular community prior to Vatican II as mandated by Church law and custom. As stated earlier, black leadership councils often proved to be more politically and socially conservative (at least on the surface) than their white counterparts in a conscious effort to refute doubts about African-American suitability for the consecrated state. Although black superiors occasionally permitted some of their members to participate in the activities of Catholic interracial councils, black sisterhoods focused their chief efforts on spiritual perfection, the higher education of their members, academic excellence, and the expansion of their educational ministries across the country. And these remained their chief concerns as major racial barriers in secular society began to fall after World War II, first in the armed forces and later in the wake of the Supreme Court's landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling.

For example, black orders, building upon their successful desegregation of key Catholic colleges and universities in the 1920s and 1930s, continued to challenge the discriminatory admission policies in Catholic higher education in the forties and fifties.

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<sup>32</sup> Note included in personal files of Sister M. Philomena (Emma) Micheau, OSP Archives. Because claiming authorship would have put Mother Philomena at severe odds with the leadership of her order, who actively maintained that sisters should refrain from publicly or privately commenting on secular matters, especially those involving the social and political status of African Americans, it is quite possible that Mother Philomena simply lied.

This became increasingly necessary as the OSP and SSF began expanding their missions outside of the South. Prior to 1940, black sisters had traditionally focused their ministries in the deep and border South, where the overwhelming majority of the nation's black Catholics lived and labored. However, in the wake of the great African-American migration during World War II, a substantial increase in black Catholic evangelization led to the emergence of significant black Catholic enclaves in several northern, Midwestern, and western cities. As a result, black leadership councils experienced a noted increase in appeals for sisters to staff black Catholic schools outside of the South. Although their ever-present shortage of personnel and resources (in comparison to many white orders) meant that black orders would have to refuse more northern missions than they could accept, by the onset of Second Vatican Council, the Oblate Sisters of Providence and Sisters of the Holy Family were represented in a host of locales in the North, Midwest, and West. For example, in 1962, the Oblate Sisters of Providence staffed schools in Chicago, Detroit, Saint Paul-Minneapolis, Trenton, New Jersey, Buffalo, New York and Sharon, Pennsylvania.<sup>33</sup> The Holy Family Sisters, who had chiefly centered their efforts in Louisiana, Florida, and Texas, expanded to Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1932 and Compton, California in 1962.<sup>34</sup> In 1950, Harlem-based Franciscan Handmaids of the Most Pure Heart of Mary accepted their first mission outside of the archdiocese of New York since their arrival in 1923. In the fall of that year, the Handmaids sent four members to staff Christ the King Mission School in High Point,

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<sup>33</sup>Sharon C. Knecht, *Oblate Sisters of Providence: A Pictorial History* (Virginia Beach, VA: The Donning Company Publishers, 2007), 36-95. By this time, the Oblates also operated schools for children of African descent in Cuba and Costa Rica.

<sup>34</sup> Typed Timeline of "Missions and Foundations of the Sisters of the Holy Family," contained in SSF Archives.

North Carolina.<sup>35</sup> After staffing an elementary school and catechetical center in New York for a quarter century, the FHM returned to the South from which they had been exiled. (Their founding headquarters was in Savannah, Georgia.) By 1962, the FHM administered and staffed four black Catholic elementary schools in High Point and Wilmington, North Carolina, Georgetown, South Carolina and Harlem, New York.<sup>36</sup>

With Oblates and Holy Family Sisters so far away from their motherhouses and the Catholic colleges and universities that accepted their members, it became necessary for sisters to seek entry into Catholic institutions of higher education in closer proximity to their new missions. For example, in 1949, eight Holy Family Sisters, stationed in Tulsa, Oklahoma, desegregated Benedictine Heights College in Guthrie, Oklahoma, when they enrolled in summer school classes and resided on campus.<sup>37</sup> Oblate Sisters of Providence stationed in Chicago, Minneapolis, and Detroit also became some of the earliest black students at DePaul University in Chicago, Cardinal Stritch College (now University) and Mount Mary College in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the College of St. Teresa in Winona, Minnesota, St. Catherine's College (now University) in Minneapolis, and the University of Detroit-Mercy.<sup>38</sup> Holy Family Sisters also entered several northern Catholic colleges in the fifties and sixties, including Mount St. Joseph College in Cincinnati, Ohio, Cardinal Stritch, the College of Saint Teresa, and Marylhurst College (now University) in

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<sup>35</sup> "A Family Overtakes Christ," *The Colored Harvest* (February 1951): 8-9.

<sup>36</sup> "Negro Nuns Serve 1,000 Guests at Annual Fund-Raising Dinner," *New York Times*, May 28, 1962, 40. The FHM also operated and staffed a day nursery, a community center for elderly women, and a summer camp for underprivileged girls in the New York archdiocese.

<sup>37</sup> Clarence J. Howard, S.V.D., "Progress in the Negro Apostolate in 1950: Great Strides on All Fronts," *St. Augustine Messenger* 28(January 1950): 4-7, 21.

<sup>38</sup> See convent annals from Chicago, Minneapolis, and Detroit, which note Sisters taking classes at these institutions, OSP Archives, and *Oblates in Action* 10 (Fall 1967): 2, which notes that Sister Evangelista received her Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education from St. Catherine College.

Lake Oswego, Oregon.<sup>39</sup> In addition to enrolling in several northern Catholic colleges and universities, black sisters continued to desegregate such institutions in the South. For example, in 1950, Oblate Sisters of Providence Mary Immaculate (Naomi) Smith and Anselm became the first black women to enter Loyola University of Maryland. They earned their master's degrees in education in 1953.<sup>40</sup> In 1951, members of the Oblate Sisters of Providence staffing the St. Joseph School in Mobile, Alabama, appear to have been the first black and women students at the Jesuit-administered Spring Hill College when they enrolled first during the summer session and later in Saturday classes during the regular term to maintain their required teaching credits.<sup>41</sup> Twelve years later, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. would inadvertently champion the sisters' efforts when he saluted Catholic leaders in Alabama for opening Spring Hill College in his famous "Letter from a Birmingham Jail."<sup>42</sup> Unbeknownst to King, the higher educational needs and demands of black sisters had forced Catholic leaders to become pioneers of desegregation in the South—not inherent moral fortitude.

The entry of scores of young black Catholic women and girls into predominantly white sisterhoods (overwhelmingly in the North) in the post-World War II era also led to the desegregation of several additional white Catholic colleges and universities, most often run by their congregations. It also facilitated the desegregation of several other

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<sup>39</sup> Edward T. Brett, *The New Orleans Sisters of the Holy Family: African American Missionaries to the Garifuna of Belize* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 72. See also educational records of SSF who participated in teacher-exchange program with the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill, ASCSH.

<sup>40</sup> Sister Naomi Smith, O.S.P., interview by author, digital recording, Cantonsville, Md., May 5, 2010.

<sup>41</sup> "Survey Shows Pattern Varies in College Desegregation," *Southern School News*, 6 (December 1959): 1, in AANOLA. See also Charles S. Padgett, "'Without Hysteria or Unnecessary Disturbance': Desegregation at Spring Hill College, Mobile, Alabama, 1948-1954," *History of Education Quarterly*, 41 (Summer 2001): 180. Padgett suggests that this happened as early as 1949, when it would have been Holy Family Sisters, who were then the only black sisters stationed in Mobile.

<sup>42</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (1963; Reprint, Signet Classic, 2000), 78.

historically-white and Catholic spaces long barred to African-American sisters, including the faculties and staffs of schools, hospitals, nursing homes, and catechetical centers. For example, Sister Thea Bowman not only desegregated the Lacrosse, Wisconsin-based Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration (FSPA) in 1956, but also the FSPA's St. Rose High School in 1953, Viterbo College in 1958, and the faculties of three FSPA schools, including Viterbo in 1972 after she earned her Ph.D. in English from Catholic University. In 1955, Bowman even became the first black patient treated at River Pines Sanatorium in Stevens Point, Wisconsin, where she resided for ten months after contracting tuberculosis while still an aspirant in her community.<sup>43</sup>

Though not overtly political, the entry of black sisters into these historically white Catholic spaces and their day-to-day struggles placed black sisters in a unique position to break down racial barriers on individual levels. For example, one white Benedictine sister who attended college in the 1940s with Sister Joyce Williams, the first black Benedict sister in Collegeville, Minnesota and a Mississippi native, attributed her awakening to the plight of African Americans to her classmate. She recalled, "I had never heard of such things as lynchings. Joyce filled me in on how the blacks were treated in Mississippi. And that kind of understanding filtered though to other students."<sup>44</sup>

White women who entered the Pittsburgh chapter of the Religious Sisters of Mercy in 1961 with Patricia Muriel Rita Francos Grey, the first African American accepted in the order, also remarked of the profound impact of Grey's presence. Reflecting on her close friendship with Grey while in the convent, Kathleen Madigan noted, "Patte had a visual personality. She was very intelligent and spoke very well. Her

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<sup>43</sup> Smith and Feister, *Thea's Song*, xv, xvi, 42-43, 64-65.

<sup>44</sup>Sister Owen Lindblad, O.S.B., "Sister Joyce Williams: A Voice for Interracial Justice," *Crossings* 35(March 2009):6.

head was always up, and she was proud of her African-American heritage from the very beginning.” For Madigan, who had very little personal contact with African Americans before meeting “Patte,” their friendship was truly enlightening as was witnessing firsthand the hostility that Grey faced because she was black. For example, Madigan recounted an episode when Grey performed a “Hambone” dance skit in an effort to introduce her peers to African-American culture during a social event held for sisters at the motherhouse. At the conclusion of Grey’s skit, Madigan recalled, “there was complete silence.” No one clapped or offered any form of recognition or support to Grey. Madigan noted too that although many of the white sisters had more in common with Grey, who came from an upper-middle class suburb of Pittsburgh, than she did, most of the sisters refused to treat Patte as an equal and routinely questioned her intellectual capabilities, despite Grey’s superior record of academic excellence. The close bond between Grey, known as Sister M. Martin de Porres, and Madigan, known as Sister Timothy Mary, also provided moments for social transgression in the convent, oftentimes out of pure necessity. For example, Madigan recalled that Patte had to secretly teach her how to straighten African-American hair with a pressing iron for special days at Mount Mercy convent when all sisters were required to wear their hair straightened.<sup>45</sup>

Even in extremely hostile white congregations in which black sisters were severely bullied and ostracized by their white counterparts, the mere presence of black sisters undoubtedly had an effect on some of their white counterparts. In some cases, the perseverance and spiritual perfection of black sisters under such hostile conditions undoubtedly challenged some white sisters’ racist perceptions of African Americans. If

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<sup>45</sup> Kathleen Madigan, formerly Sister Timothy Marie, R.S.M., telephone interview by author, digital recording, December 1, 2011. See also Dr. Marianne Felice, formerly Sister Mary Carla, R.S.M., telephone interview by author, digital recording, December 2, 2011.

not, the entry of black women and girls at least made unknowing white sisters aware of their communities' racially-exclusionary admissions policies and the reality of racial discrimination in the "universal" Catholic Church. If all else failed, the sudden and often "unexpected" departure of black sisters at least conveyed to those sisters truly invested in integrating their ranks that something within their respective communities was awry. Such was the case for the leadership of the Cincinnati branch of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur after their two pioneering black members left the order in 1968 and 1969 respectively. Although the Notre Dame spiritual directors had repeatedly chastised their African-American members for being "too sensitive" to racial discrimination, the "unexpected" defections of Violet Dennis and Sandra Willingham from religious life forced the SNDdeN to institute structural changes in their recruitment and formation programs.<sup>46</sup> Departure from hostile communities likely proved to be the only form of protest available to black sisters in the pre-conciliar period.

However, as the southern civil rights movement began to gain steam, black sisters in both black and white orders found it increasingly difficult to remain silent on the specific matter of black freedom or the ongoing reality of racial discrimination within Catholic boundaries. This became especially true as racial barriers began to fall in the public sphere after the *Brown* decision and as white Catholics emerged among the fiercest proponents of massive resistance to desegregation and black equality in private *and* public spheres. For many black sisters in white orders, many of whom were native southerners or first or second-generation migrants to the North, the onset of the civil rights movement offered them an opportunity to educate their white counterparts openly on the plight of African Americans in convents and classrooms. Because many had

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<sup>46</sup> Sandra Ann Willingham, interview by author, digital recording, June 29, 2012.

personal experience with the laws and customs of *de jure* segregation, black sisters in white congregations were sometimes able to demonstrate their ability to speak on such issues with legitimacy and authority and even garner empathetic ears among their white instructors and peers as a result.

For many black sisters in black communities, the onset of the civil rights movement also proved pivotal. In the face of significant and increasing racial progress and their orders' one hundred or more years of service in the U.S. Church, members of black orders, especially those in college, began to test the boundaries of segregation and exclusion in their day-to-day actions. This became most apparent in their individual dealings with white sisters.

For much of their history in the United States, black sisters had been routinely ostracized by their white counterparts in religious life. White sisters as a rule maintained a clear social distance from their African-American counterparts in their dioceses and archdioceses, excluding black sisters from local meetings and social gatherings of sisters and subjecting them to humiliating and condescending behavior when in their presence. Indeed, many white sisters held racially derogatory views of African Americans and believed that black sisters debased the religious habit. At the annual meetings of the National Catholic Educational Association, which were routinely attended by the nation's black teaching orders, for example, white sisters, outside of the Sisters of Blessed Sacrament, refused to speak to black sister-participants and rarely acknowledged their presence. "It was so silent," Oblate Sister of Providence Mary Alice Chineworth later recalled. "Black sisters from other communities were always friendly to us as were the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, but no one else spoke to us. We were always separate."

Chineworth also noted that black sisters were never consulted or invited to be speakers at the NCEA conventions during the Jim Crow era, and topics related to black Catholic education were rarely on the agenda prior to the 1960s.<sup>47</sup>

Inside college classrooms, relations between black and white sisters were little better. During the Jim Crow era, white sisters frequently protested the admission of black sisters into Catholic colleges, universities, and other training institutes exclusively reserved for sisters. Even as black sisters began to desegregate white college classrooms in order to secure the higher education required of them by the Church, problems remained. Oblate Sister of Providence M. Virginie Fish, for example, recalled the tensions inherent in the higher educational partnership between the OSP and the Baltimore chapter of the School Sisters of Notre Dame (SSND), who administered the College of Notre Dame of Maryland, the nation's first Catholic college for women, founded in 1896.<sup>48</sup> In 1929, the SSND had opened the doors of their college to the OSP to assist them in acquiring state-mandated higher education and teaching certificates, when racial segregation barred black sisters' entry into the vast majority of Catholic colleges and universities. However, many OSP frequently complained to their superiors and peers that their SSND instructors and classmates interacted with them in a condescending and paternalistic manner. Sister Virginie also recalled that the motherhouse frequently received complaints from SSND about OSP members remaining on the college's campus after their classes were over. In other words, although OSP were permitted to attend classes, they were not expected to sit leisurely on the quad or

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<sup>47</sup> Chineworth, interview by author.

<sup>48</sup> Tracy Schier and Cynthia Russett, eds., *Catholic Women's Colleges in America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University, 2002), 25.

participate in the full life of the campus like other sisters and secular students.<sup>49</sup> Because OSP leaders could not risk the termination of their arrangement with the SSND for the sake of their schools, they did not confront officials about the mistreatment. Instead, OSP leaders devised a set of rules and suggestions for sisters attending college, which severely restricted their behaviors on campus and encouraged timidity and docility on the parts of black sisters even when subjected to racist treatment by their instructors and/or classmates.<sup>50</sup> The Holy Family Sisters and the Franciscan Handmaids apparently had similar rules and guidelines.<sup>51</sup>

However, as racial barriers began to fall in the public and Catholic spheres, many black sisters in black orders proved unwilling to let the un-Christian behavior of their white counterparts to go unchallenged. This became especially true as younger black women and girls, who were coming of age in the midst of the civil rights movement, began to enter communities and as activist-oriented sisters entered college. For example, in 1956, Holy Family Sister Doris Goudeaux caused quite a stir among her community members after she publicly lambasted one of her white sister-classmates at Louisiana State University for her racist behavior toward members of her order. Although white sisters in New Orleans had historically avoided social interactions with the Holy Family sisters, Sister Doris was shocked that they continued to do so in the wake of recent developments in the archdiocese.

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<sup>49</sup> Fish, interview by author. Sister Mary Alice Chineworth also recalled that many sisters had bad experiences with the Notre Dame Sisters in Baltimore recalled that they often address them in a condescending and paternalistic manner.

<sup>50</sup> "Suggestions for the Sisters Attending College," Congregation: Education: Box 19, Folder 21, OSP Archives. This source is undated.

<sup>51</sup> See Sister Sylvia Thibodeaux, interview by author, digital recording, August 19, 2009. See also Sister Doris Goudeaux, S.S.F., interview by author, digital recording, New Orleans, La., August 18, 2009 and Sister Loretta Theresa Richards, F.H.M., interview by author, digital recording, December 8, 2009.

In 1955, the Holy Family Sisters moved from their longtime headquarters at 717 Orleans Street in the city's historic French Quarter to their new motherhouse on Chef Menteur Highway on the city's east side.<sup>52</sup> In addition to having a host of modern conveniences, the new SSF motherhouse featured an indoor swimming pool, the first among the sister congregations in the archdiocese of New Orleans. And in the spirit of charity, the SSF graciously opened their pool to the local white sisterhoods so that all could share in the luxury, which many did. During these groundbreaking swim visits, black and white sisters swam and socialized together, for the first time in New Orleans. Many of the Holy Family sisters even forged what they initially thought to be sincere friendships with their white counterparts during that first summer and truly believed that these swim visits were helping to break down racial barriers in female religious life. Among them was Sister Doris.

However, when Sister Doris matriculated at LSU's Graduate School the following fall, she immediately noticed that the same white sisters with whom she had swam and socialized a few weeks earlier deliberately avoided her on campus. When Sister Doris approached them to say hello in the classroom or elsewhere, the white sisters always turned and walked away without speaking or acknowledging her presence. After a few weeks of this behavior and against the strident objections of other community members also studying at LSU, Sister Doris publicly cornered and confronted one of her white sister-classmates about the issue. To Sister Doris's dismay, the white sister admitted that the members of her community were explicitly forbidden to acknowledge or associate with black sisters outside of the Holy Family convent. Stunned, Sister Doris responded

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<sup>52</sup> New Orleans African-American Museum of Art, Culture, and History, "A Celebration of Faith: Henriette Delille and the Sisters of the Holy Family," Privately Printed, 2008, 32, SSF Archives.

that if black sisters were so unworthy to speak to in public, then white sisters should not feign friendships with them behind closed doors or take advantage of their pool facilities. She also told the offending sister to share her message with the rest of the white sisters on campus, which the sister apparently did. From that point on, Sister Doris avoided her former pool mates both on campus and during their continued swim visits to the Holy Family motherhouse.<sup>53</sup>

Although individual sisters in black communities increasingly pushed the boundaries of their respective order's conservative posture in the wake of the *Brown* decision, black leadership councils continued to maintain their institutional silence on the matter of civil rights. This remained true even as prominent ecclesiastical authorities began to denounce the immorality of racism from the pulpit and initiate plans to desegregate Catholic facilities within their respective jurisdictions. Though black orders undoubtedly supported church prelates finally taking up the cause of racial justice, the open and violent rebellion of most white Catholics against proposed integration across the country undoubtedly left black leadership councils wary of taking a public stand. For example, in New Orleans, following the landmark *Brown* decision in 1954, New Orleans Archbishop Joseph A. Rummel made serious plans to integrate all Catholic schools in the archdiocese. However, white Catholic segregationists quickly mobilized against Rummel's plans on the local and state levels. As a result, the Archbishop delayed the proposed desegregation of Catholic schools under his jurisdiction for nearly eight years. However, in March of 1962, Rummel renewed his pledge and announced that all Catholic schools would be integrated in the upcoming fall, setting the stage for an epic showdown

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<sup>53</sup> Goudeaux, interview by author. In my interview with Holy Family Sister Sylvia Thibodeaux, she also cited this incident and recalled the controversy it stirred in the congregation. See Thibodeaux, interview by author.

between the prelate and the masses of white Catholics, who violently opposed to his decision.<sup>54</sup>

Although most white clergy and women religious in New Orleans fiercely opposed integration, a small handful of local white priests and religious publicly supported Rummel and condemned the racism of the Catholic-led massive resistance campaign. In 1961, for example, members of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament and Josephite Fathers stationed in New Orleans published full page advertisements in the local press in support of racial integration and condemned white racism.<sup>55</sup> The predominantly white SBS, who administered several black Catholic schools in the archdiocese, including Xavier University, specifically lambasted the efforts of white Catholic segregationist women's groups, under the leadership of Mrs. Una Gaillot, who conducted daily protests at the archbishop's residence and argued that the Bible upheld racial segregation.<sup>56</sup> However, the historically Creole and black Holy Family Sisters remained conspicuously silent during desegregation crisis in New Orleans. Even after Archbishop Rummel excommunicated three leading white Catholic segregationists, including Gaillot, who continued to organize opposition to his plans, on April 16, 1962, the SSF remained silent.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, the only recorded response of the SSF to the crisis appeared on April 24, in the *New York Times*, which featured a photograph of two Holy

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<sup>54</sup> For a good discussion of this Catholic school desegregation crisis in New Orleans, see Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2002) 2<sup>nd</sup> edition and Justin D. Poché, "Religion, Race, and Rights in Catholic Louisiana, 1938-1970," Ph.D. diss., University of Notre Dame, 2007.

<sup>55</sup> See "The Josephite Fathers Make An Appeal to Catholics!" copy in XULA Archives and "The Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament Issue a Call to Catholic New Orleans," *Catholic Action*, February 12, 1961, 13. The SBS statement was also published in the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, the *New Orleans States-Item*, and the *Louisiana Weekly*.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, "Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament Issue a Call."

<sup>57</sup> "3 Racists Excommunicated by Louisiana Archbishop: Perez, Mrs. Gaillot, and Ricau Ousted for Opposing School Integration—Vatican Voices Support," *New York Times*, April 17, 1962, 1.

Family Sisters, who worked as domestics in the archbishop's residence, eight days after the excommunication. In the photograph, the two Holy Family Sisters are shown with their eyes to the ground as they sidestepped a placard-carrying white woman protesting the archbishop's excommunication decision. The two sisters' actions epitomized the community's public response.<sup>58</sup>

While the fear of retaliatory white violence was undoubtedly a chief motivating factor in the SSF's silence (an assaulted or murdered black nun would have garnered little sympathy in New Orleans where white Catholics were willing to bomb white schools and convents that supported desegregation), it is also likely that the Creole-dominated Holy Family Sisters remained hesitant because a significant portion of Afro-Creoles also participated in the backlash to the civil rights movement in New Orleans.<sup>59</sup> Although subject to racial segregation laws like all persons of African descent in the city, the Afro-Creole population had long maintained an identity exclusive of both whites and blacks and retained certain privileges of exclusivity within the social structure of the city.<sup>60</sup> Thus, impending desegregation in the public and private spheres also threatened Creole supremacy in certain spaces and prompted many to oppose integration alongside whites.

In the SSF, Creole color prejudice and discrimination against darker-skinned, non-French African Americans had bitterly split the order in 1870 following the admission of Chloe Preval, a dark-skinned, ex-slave domestic laborer. Although the SSF eliminated the color and class restrictions in their admissions procedures soon thereafter,

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<sup>58</sup> "New Orleans Street Scene," *New York Times*, April 24, 1962, 24.

<sup>59</sup> Brial, interview with author. White opponent to Catholic school desegregation issued dozens of bomb threats to the administrators of schools scheduled to integrate in 1962. On August 26, 1963, white segregationists in Plaquemines Parish, the hotbed of resistance to school integration, bombed Our Lady of Good Harbor Parochial School, an integrated Catholic school. See "Black Severely Damages Buras Parochial School: Gasoline Believed Used to Trigger Explosion," *Times-Picayune*, August 28, 1963, 1, 12.

<sup>60</sup> Brial, interview by author. For a greater discussion of place of Creoles in segregated Louisiana, see Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 1-22, 383.

colorism remained a problem and among other factors resulted in the predominance of extremely light-skinned, Creole superiors in the order, whose racial conservatism was also often rooted in their unique cultural heritage.<sup>61</sup> Such internal problems created even further difficulties for activist-oriented black and Creole sisters struggling to reconcile themselves with the ongoing reality of racial discrimination and exclusions in the Church. However, the onset of Second Vatican Council, which officially opened on October 11 1962, would finally give activist-oriented sisters the space to contemplate openly their place in the modern black freedom movement. It would also force the all-white U.S. hierarchy to take a clear position on racial justice as resistance to civil rights gains within Catholic boundaries grew stronger.

Called by Pope John XXIII shortly after his election to the papacy in 1959, Vatican II sought to bring the Catholic Church into the modern era and increase its relevance in response to worldwide struggle for justice and peace. Over the course of the next three years, the Council, which was attended by over 2,700 prelates from around the world, produced a corpus of decrees calling for *aggiornamento* (or modernization) in the Church and mandating among many things major reforms in the liturgy and religious life.<sup>62</sup> For example, in addition to loosening many of the regulations that had severely restricted sisters' movements and activities after the codification of Church canon law, Vatican II encouraged a celebration of the Church's ethnic pluralism and diversity, which included terminating the centuries-long tradition of saying Mass in Latin rather than in the respective community's native tongue. The Council also exhorted all Catholics, as the

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<sup>61</sup> Thibodeaux, interview by author. Of the seventeen superior generals of the Holy Family Sisters, only two have not been extremely light-skinned or Creole descent. See "A Celebration of Faith," 26-7.

<sup>62</sup> Timothy McCarthy, *The Catholic Tradition: Before and After Vatican Council II, 1878-1993* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1994), 62-64.

“People of God,” to engage fully with the world and “promote human justice,” declaring social justice activism as a primary way of fulfilling the Church’s mission.<sup>63</sup> Although many Catholics were shocked by and resisted many of the reforms and mandates called for by Vatican II, others readily and enthusiastically embraced the challenge. This was especially true of Catholics who supported racial equality and justice in the United States.

Thus, beginning in 1962, significant numbers of Catholics, most of whom were associated with the Catholic interracial movement, slowly began joining civil rights demonstrations across the country. Following Pope John XXIII’s public condemnation of racial discrimination in his pastoral letter *Pacem in Terris* in April 1963, a small number of priests and sisters also appeared in local and national civil rights marches. In July of 1963, for example, six white Franciscan sisters participated in a picket of the segregated Illinois Club for Catholic Women on the Loyola University campus organized by the Chicago Catholic Interracial Council.<sup>64</sup> Two months later, scores of Catholics from black and white parishes, including several priests, were counted among the nearly 250,000 observers and demonstrators at the historic March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.<sup>65</sup> Archbishop Patrick O’Boyle of Washington, D.C. delivered the opening prayer at the event. Although no Catholic sisters participated in the 1963 March on Washington, many watched the day’s events on television behind their convent walls.

For example, the motherhouse annals of the Oblate Sisters of Providence in Baltimore note that the sisters requested and received special permission to watch footage

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<sup>63</sup> John O’Malley, *Tradition and Transition: History Perspectives on Vatican Council II* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1989), 17. See also Walter Abbot, SJ, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press, 1966).

<sup>64</sup> Koehlinger, *New Nuns*, 53.

<sup>65</sup> Father Cyprian Davis, O.S.B., interview by author, digital recording, July 2, 2009. Father Cyprian was one of a handful of black priests and seminarians who participated in the March on Washington. See also McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries*, 149-51 and “God’s People on the March,” *Josephite Harvest* (Jan.-Feb. 1964): 12-13.

of the March on Washington demonstration on television. The annalist wrote, “We saw and heard Archbishop O’Boyle of D.C. give the opening prayer at 2:00 p.m. We saw other priests, ministers and Rabbis in the crowd. Listened to the courageous and inspiring talks of Wilkins, Randolph and others. Heard the songs of Marian Anderson, Mahalia Jackson...Saw President Kennedy with Walter Ruether, Martin Luther King, and other leaders. All the announcers spoke of the well-ordered and well-dressed vast assembly of persons Negro and white. Not any violence among the demonstrators.”<sup>66</sup> Nonetheless, the pragmatism of the nation’s black sisterhoods continued to bar their members from direct participation in the civil rights struggle. It also often placed their members in difficult and often contradictory positions as the civil rights movement progressed. For example, three months after the OSP watched the March on Washington on television, an entry in the same annal revealed that on Saturday, November 16, a group of OSP attempted to take a few of their students to a local performance of Langston Hughes’s hit play, “Black Nativity.” However, upon their arrival at the playhouse, the sisters and students were informed by an unnamed source that it would be inappropriate for them to attend since Hughes was “an atheist and Communist.”<sup>67</sup> Ultimately, the sisters and their students returned home without attending the play. Fourteen years earlier, Hughes had been the OSP’s guest of honor during their Negro History Week celebration at St. Alphonsus Catholic School in Wilson, North Carolina.<sup>68</sup> However, Hughes’s ties to the Communist Party U.S.A. and his investigation by the House of Un-American Committee (HUAC) in 1953 made him an enemy of the profoundly anti-Communist Catholic Church and a

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<sup>66</sup> “Entry: Wednesday, August 28, 1963,” *OSP Motherhouse Annals*, Box 44, OSP Archives.

<sup>67</sup> “Entry: Saturday, November 16, 1963,” *OSP Motherhouse Annals*, Box 44, OSP Archives.

<sup>68</sup> Langston Hughes, “Poetry Buys a Ticket for Little Trip South During History Week,” *The Chicago Defender*, February 26, 1949, 6.

pariah to most sisters.<sup>69</sup> As such, the sisters could no longer risk association with the famous writer or his racially-conscious play that imagined the Holy Family as black. Nonetheless, members of black orders continued to test the boundaries of their veil in the wake of the Second Vatican Council.

By 1964, an increasing, though still very small, number of Catholic sisters began appearing in local civil rights demonstrations across the country. In Gary, Indiana, and Saint Louis, Missouri, several white sisters and at least one black sister were counted among participants in local marches for equality opportunity and decent housing.<sup>70</sup> In November of that same year, Sister Maria Mercedes, the novice mistress of the all-black Franciscan Handmaids of the Most Pure Heart of Mary, participated in a nationally-televised panel discussion on race relations in the Catholic Church on ABC's "Directions '65." In addition to calling attention to the ongoing reality of racial discrimination in the Church, Sister Maria Mercedes specifically noted the fact that the Church had lost "many Negro vocations to the sisterhoods because of the prejudicial policies of many religious orders." She also spoke of the disbelief that she often encountered among Catholics, including priests, when she identified herself as a Catholic nun. When asked by the panel's moderator, Josephite Father Philip Berrigan, if the Church had "lost the Negro," Sister Maria Mercedes cautiously replied, "No. It has not lost the Negro, provided that it recognizes its mistake and corrects it now."<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> For a discussion of Hughes' Communist sympathies and consequent state harassment, see Arnold Rampersand, *The Life of Langston Hughes: 1941-1967, I Dream A World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 88-107.

<sup>70</sup> Rev. John G. Barnett, S.S.J., "The March on Washington," *The Josephite Harvest* (Sept.-Oct. 1963): 16-17. See also "God's People on the March," *Josephite Harvest* (Jan.-Feb. 1964): 12-13.

<sup>71</sup> "Direction, 65?" *The Josephite Harvest* (Nov.-Dec. 1964), 20.

However, it would not be until the historic black voting rights marches from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama four months later that the U.S. Church officially staked its claim in the black civil rights movement. During the campaign, hundreds of Catholic sisters from across the country unexpectedly joined the protest and generated a substantial amount of media attention as result. For many, the image of Catholic sisters dressed in the full habits of their orders marching in Selma and other cities across the North under the banner of civil rights and human justice was especially powerful. It also alerted civil rights leaders and sisters themselves to the unique contributions that nuns as “symbols of God” could make to the racial justice fight.<sup>72</sup> Although white sisters, who made up over 95 percent of the total population of Catholic religious in the United States in 1965, constituted the majority of sisters who participated in the Selma protest, a significant number of black sisters also stepped forward to support the protest. By marching in Selma and in a host of sympathy demonstrations in the North that March, this pivotal cadre of black sisters firmly broke the longstanding taboo that had specifically precluded their predecessors from engaging in civil rights activism. In the process, they set the stage for the emergence of a new kind of black religious sister—one who had a rightful place on the frontlines of the public struggle for racial justice and one who would increasingly challenge racism within Catholic boundaries.

### **Black Sisters and Impact of the Selma Voting Rights Marches of 1965**

On Wednesday, May 10, 1965, six Catholic sisters from the archdiocese of Saint Louis in Missouri made history when they flew to Selma, Alabama, and joined the voting

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<sup>72</sup> Koehlinger, *New Nuns*, 75, 78,

rights marches taking place in the city. Part of a 54-member interracial and ecumenical delegation from Saint Louis, the six sisters (two Sisters of Loretto, two Sisters of Saint Mary, two Sisters of Saint Joseph of Carondelet) had not only come to demonstrate their support for the black voting rights, but also to protest the gross violation of human rights that had taken place in the city three days earlier.<sup>73</sup> On Sunday, March 7, 1965 approximately 600 African-American demonstrators en route to Montgomery, Alabama, were savagely beaten by a force of state troopers, city policemen, and local white supremacists while attempting to cross Edmund Pettis Bridge in downtown Selma. The carnage of “Bloody Sunday,” as it was later called, constituted one of the more horrific displays of state-sanctioned violence against African Americans in the of the civil rights era and rocked the moral conscience of the nation. Two days later, Dr. King, seeking to mobilize national support for black voting rights and interracial peace, issued a clarion call to the nation’s religious leaders to come to Selma and demonstrate their support for the brutalized activists.<sup>74</sup> Although hundreds were expected to descend on Selma that Wednesday, the arrival of scores of Catholics, religious and lay, jolted heads, white and black alike. The presence of the six sisters from Saint Louis was especially striking. Never before had Catholic sisters participated in a major demonstration for civil rights in the United States, and the significance of their participation was not lost on observers.

Although a few individual Catholic prelates publicly expressed support for civil rights and initiated desegregation plans within their dioceses and archdioceses by 1965, the all-white U.S. hierarchy, as a whole, remained at best ambivalent toward the fight for

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<sup>73</sup>*Sisters of Selma*. See also Cornelia F. Sexauer, “A Well-Behaved Woman Who Made History: Sister Mary Antona’s Journey to Selma,” *American Catholic Studies* 115(Winter 2004): 48-51.

<sup>74</sup> For a detailed discussion of the Selma campaign, see Taylor Branch’s *At Canaan’s Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-68* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 44-67.

racial justice. At worst, they were outright hostile to the black freedom struggle, often with the enthusiastic support of whites in the Church. This remained true even as public opinion shifted in favor of desegregation after the landmark *Brown* decision in 1954. For example, U.S. Catholic leaders were the last among the nation's seventeen major religious denominations to issue a statement in support of the landmark *Brown* decision to the great dismay and embarrassment of church officials in Rome. Only after persistent and strident pressure from Vatican authorities, including a deathbed order from Pope Pius XII, did the nation's bishops finally capitulate and issue an official statement in support of the *Brown* decision in late 1958.<sup>75</sup> However, the bishops' statement, "Discrimination and the Christian Conscience," clearly reflected their ambivalence on the matter. While the statement did denounce racial segregation as incompatible with the Christian view of the human person, it offered no proposals for action but rather commended a "method of quiet conciliation." Moreover, it came four years late and thus had little impact on proponents of white supremacy and segregation within Catholic boundaries.<sup>76</sup>

On the ground, white Catholics, religious and lay, openly and violently revolted against the prospect of desegregation in both private and public institutions. In cities and towns across the nation, white Catholics served as foot soldiers and leaders of the resistance campaigns to black migration into urban areas and the backlash to the *Brown* decision.<sup>77</sup> Even in the wake of social justice directives of Second Vatican Council and Pope John XXIII's condemnation of racial discrimination in *Pacem in Terris* in 1963,

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<sup>75</sup> Massingale, *Racial Justice*, 53-55.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 55.

<sup>77</sup> For a greater discussion of white Catholic opposition to desegregation, see R. Bentley Anderson, "Prelates, Protest, and Public Opinion: Catholic Opposition to Desegregation, 1947-1955," *Journal of Church and State* 46(2004): 617-44; Justin D. Poché, "The Catholic Citizens' Council: Religion and White Resistance in Post-War Louisiana," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 24(2006): 47-68.

many white ecclesiastical authorities and a majority of the white laity remained publicly hostile to racial equality. Thus, most civil rights leaders and observers expected the Catholic response to King's clarion call to be minimal, and *no one* anticipated the participation of the six Catholic sisters from the archdiocese of Saint Louis. And, forty-one year old Sister Mary Antona (Elizabeth Louise) Ebo, the only black woman in Saint Louis delegation, drew an inordinate amount of attention from the media and the demonstrators on that fateful day.

Nineteen years earlier, Ebo had made history when she became one of the first three African-American women accepted in the Saint Louis-based Sisters of St. Mary. On March 9, 1965, Ebo made history again when she accepted the invitation of her superior to join the Saint Louis delegation headed to Selma. Although fearful of the unique danger that she faced as the only black sister in the group, Ebo, a nursing sister and hospital administrator, knew that she had to go. During her tenure in religious life, Ebo had gained a "bad" reputation for speaking out against racial injustice within her order and in the wider society.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, after she learned about the violence on "Bloody Sunday" from black women employees at St. Mary's (Colored) Infirmary, Ebo told them, "I would go to Selma if I wasn't wearing this habit."<sup>79</sup> Soonafter she made the statement, Ebo received the phone call informing her about the Saint Louis delegation and asking her if she wanted to go. "I didn't want to be a martyr," Sister Mary Antona later reflected. "But it was either put up or shut up."<sup>80</sup> Later that evening when Sister Antona learned of the vicious (and ultimately deadly) beating of white Unitarian minister James Reeb in Selma,

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<sup>78</sup> Sister Mary Antona (Elizabeth Louise) Ebo, F.S.M., interview by author, March 26, 2007.

<sup>79</sup> Paul Good, "Selma's Mayor Blocks Another Attempt," *Washington Post, Times Herald*, March 11, 1965, A1.

<sup>80</sup> Ebo, interview by author. Also see *Sisters of Selma*.

she prepared herself for the worst. Sister Mary Antona knew that if she was arrested, she would be separated from the rest of the delegation and that her habit would carry little weight in the eyes of white supremacists.<sup>81</sup> But, she decided that she was willing to die for the cause of racial justice, and the unique significance of her presence among the inaugural “Selma Six” was not lost on any observer that day or in the coming weeks.

For example, when Edmundite Father Maurice Ouellet, the white pastor of Selma’s St. Elizabeth’s (Negro) Catholic Church, picked up the Saint Louis delegation on Wednesday March 10, his attention was immediately drawn to Sister Mary Antona. Father Ouellet, who had been secretly active in the civil rights campaign in Selma, immediately recognized the special significance of her presence among the cadre of sisters. “She was as black as black could be,” Ouellet reflected years later. “And, I said to myself oh my God this is going to make a difference.”<sup>82</sup> Civil rights leaders and demonstrators responded similarly when the Saint Louis delegation’s arrived at Brown Chapel A.M.E. Church, the starting point of the marches, a few hours later. Reverend Andrew Young of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), who was addressing the crowd of demonstrators, stopped mid-sentence upon noticing the delegation standing in the doorway of the Church. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he announced, “one of the great moral forces of our nation has just arrived.”<sup>83</sup> Turning toward the main doors, the men, women, and children packed into the Church immediately rose to their feet in applause. Though filled from corner to corner, the demonstrators immediately made a pathway for the sisters, who were quickly ushered to

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<sup>81</sup> John Feister, “Sister Mary Antona Ebo, F.S.M.: Brave Sister of Selma,” *St. Anthony’s Messenger* (March 2007) online issue, <http://www.americancatholic.org/Messenger/Mar2007/Feature1.asp> (accessed on June 5, 2012).

<sup>82</sup> *Sisters of Selma*.

<sup>83</sup> *Sisters of Selma*. See also Sexauer, “A Well-Behaved Woman,” 48-51.

the stage and offered seats.<sup>84</sup> However, Sister Mary Antona was given the pastor's chair, the seat of honor, and was the only sister singled out by civil rights leaders to address the crowd of demonstrators inside the sanctuary that day.<sup>85</sup> As she approached the pulpit, Reverend Anderson, pastor of Brown Chapel, proclaimed that it was the first time that he had ever seen a "Negro nun" and stated that Sister Mary Antona had a message for Sheriff Jim Clark, Mayor Joseph Smitherman, Bull Connor and Governor George Wallace. "You don't have to be white to be good and holy," he stated as the crowd erupted in applause.<sup>86</sup>

After Sister Mary Antona's brief address, in which she proclaimed her support of black voting rights, Young retook the stage and acknowledged the importance of the sisters' presence stating that it was "the first time for the nuns to come forward this publicly on the matter of civil rights." He also noted that he had "never been sure of the commitment of the Catholic church in the field of human rights," but that now "the stand of the Church could be made clear to the South and to the world." At the conclusion of the meeting, Young suggested that the sisters lead the demonstrators, with Sister Mary Antona at the head of the march.<sup>87</sup> When the marchers were halted by an armed coalition of local and state forces on Sylvan Street in Selma's Negro district a few blocks later, Sister Mary Antona was the first person invited to address the crowd of city officials and news reporters. Facing a wave of Confederate flags and malicious white faces, she Sister Mary Antona did not shrink from proclaiming her views. "I am here because I am a Negro, a nun, a Catholic, and because I want to bear witness," she proclaimed. "I feel it is

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<sup>84</sup> *Sisters of Selma*. See also Sexauer, "A Well-Behaved Woman," 49.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.* See also Ebo, interview by author.

<sup>86</sup> *Sisters of Selma*. See also Sexauer, "A Well-Behaved Woman," 49 and Ebo, interview by author.

<sup>87</sup> Sexauer, "A Well-Behaved Woman," 50.

a privilege to be here today... yesterday being a Negro I voted, and I would like to come here to say that I feel that every citizen, every Negro citizen, as well as the white, has a right to vote and should be given the right.”<sup>88</sup> Sister Mary Antona also publicly declared that she was “a Negro” and “very proud of it,” breaking yet another longstanding taboo among the nation’s marginal population of black Catholic religious men and women.<sup>89</sup>

On the following morning, photographs of Sister Mary Antona and the cadre of Saint Louis sisters laced the front pages of several local and national newspapers including the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*.<sup>90</sup> While most newspaper accounts refrained from printing Sister Mary Antona’s public declaration of racial pride, many noted her presence as the “Negro nun.” Although many Catholics, including Archbishop Thomas J. Toolen of Mobile-Birmingham, publicly condemned the participation of sisters in the Church’s inaugural stand in Selma, thousands were called to action as a result of the sisters’ protest.<sup>91</sup> For scores of activist-oriented black sisters desperate to join the public fight for racial justice, Sister Mary Antona’s widely-publicized stand in Selma had been especially important. Not only had she been among the groundbreaking cadre of sisters to join the Selma protest, but she had also proven that black sisters had an especially important role to play in the ongoing struggle for black liberation.

Three days after the Saint Louis sisters’ stand in Selma, Sister Ann Benedict (Barbara) Moore joined a delegation to Selma composed of sisters and priests from the

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<sup>88</sup> Feister, “Brave Sister of Selma.” See also *Sisters of Selma* and Ebo, interview by author.

<sup>89</sup> *Sisters of Selma*.

<sup>90</sup> John Herbers, “Mayor and Police Block 3 New Marches in Selma,” *New York Times*, March 11, 1965, 1. Good, “Selma’s Mayor Blocks Another Attempt.”

<sup>91</sup> For a recent discussion of the Church’s response to the Selma protest and Toolen’s specific position, see Andrew S. Moore, *The South’s Tolerable Alien: Roman Catholics in Alabama and Georgia, 1945-1970* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2007).

archdiocese of Kansas City, Missouri.<sup>92</sup> Ten years earlier, Sister Ann Benedict, a second-generation migrant from Mississippi and convert to Catholicism, had become the first African American accepted into the Kansas City chapter of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Carondelet.<sup>93</sup> And like Sister Antona, Sister Ann Benedict had gained a reputation for being outspoken on issues of racial injustice during her early tenure in the community. She had also quietly kept abreast of the burgeoning civil rights movement as she underwent spiritual training and entered college. Thus, when offered the opportunity to join the Kansas City delegation, she said yes without hesitation, and her participation in the protest had a profound impact on her racial and political consciousness. Reflecting on her experiences in Selma years later, Sister Ann Benedict stated, “[T]he state troopers were there in full riot gear. Looking at their faces, I thought a lot of them seemed to have been as frightened as we were... It was a metanoia for me because after that I felt that I had made a decision... that if I was going to die, it was okay.”<sup>94</sup> Indeed, her experiences in Selma and her willingness to die for the cause of racial justice, like many march participants, became her springboard into public activism.

Although Sisters Mary Antona and Ann Benedict were the only two black sisters to participate in the Selma protest, several more participated in a host of sympathy marches held in cities across the North and Midwest. One of the most dramatic demonstrations took place in New York City on March 14 when approximately 15,000 people, including over 500 sisters, priests, and brothers, marched through the predominantly-African-American Harlem community in support of black voting rights. March organizers also demanded federal intervention to stop the violent state-sanctioned

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<sup>92</sup> *Sisters of Selma*. See also Sister Barbara Moore, C.S.J., interview by author, April 30, 2007.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *Sisters of Selma*. Ellipses are Sister Ann Benedict’s.

repression of black voter registration campaigns in Selma.<sup>95</sup> Although most newspaper accounts did not acknowledge their participation in print, several black sisters from various New York-based congregations, including the all-black Franciscan Sisters of the Most Pure Heart of Mary, were counted among the marchers.<sup>96</sup> While it is unclear why the historically conservative FHM permitted some of their professed members to participate, it is likely that the archdiocese's massive support for the demonstration encouraged the sisters to break protocol.

Another massive Selma sympathy demonstration was held in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. On Tuesday, March 16, 3,000 of the city's black and white residents marched from the predominantly African-American Hill district to the new federal building located downtown to protest the ongoing repression of voting rights activists in Selma. Among the march participants were several priests and sisters from local congregations, including 22-year old Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey, Pittsburgh's first black Religious Sister of Mercy.<sup>97</sup> Grey had wanted to join her community's delegation, which was marching in Selma on the same day, but the Mercy superior general, Mother Thomas Aquinas (Elizabeth) Carroll, had refused stating that she did not want her community's only black member becoming "too militant."<sup>98</sup> However, Mother Thomas Aquinas did allow Sister M. Martin de Porres to lead the 65-member student delegation

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<sup>95</sup> Philip Benjamin, "15,000 March Through Harlem to Protest the Racial Strife in Selma," *New York Times*, March 15, 1965, 1.

<sup>96</sup> See UPI photograph of sisters marching in Harlem in McGreey's *Parish Boundaries*, 157. See also copy of the March 20, 1965 issue of the New York *Amsterdam News* contained in Box 61, Folder 4 in Catholic Interracial Council of New York Collection, CUA Archives. The article, "When the Word Is Given—They Rally Around," features a photo of 3 black sisters (likely FHM from their habits) marching alongside white Sisters of Charity. One of the black sister marchers is carrying a placard that reads: "END ALABAMA INJUSTICE."

<sup>97</sup> "'Osservatore' Deplores Selma Conflict," *Pittsburgh Catholic*, March 18, 1965, 1. Original provided to me by Dr. Patricia Grey, formerly Sister M. Martin de Porres, R.S.M.

<sup>98</sup> Dr. Patricia Grey, interview by author, August 11, 2007.

from the order's Mount Mercy College in the local demonstration. This decision proved pivotal in Grey's subsequent entry into the public fight against racial injustice in the coming years.

While no Oblate Sisters of Providence or Holy Family Sisters participated directly in the Selma protest, archival sources and oral histories reveal that members of the nation's oldest two black sisterhoods kept abreast of the struggle and supported it in the ways available to them. For example, a photograph contained in the congregational files of Oblate Sisters of Providence reveals that Sister Mary Consolata Gibson participated in a meeting of Baltimore-area sisters in support of the Selma protest. In the photograph, two white sisters (Sr. Michael C.S.P. and Sr. Catherine, O.P.) are shown descending the steps of building with six other sisters of differing habits, including Sister Mary Consolata, looking on in the background. A heading for the photograph reads: "Two Sisters Leave for Selma."<sup>99</sup> Thirty-one years earlier, Sister Mary Consolata had been one of two Oblates selected to re-integrate Catholic University of America. (See chapter one.) Convent annals also reveal that OSP and SSF sisters stationed throughout the country said special prayers for peace in Selma and were granted special permission to watch televised footage of the protests. An entry from the OSP motherhouse annals for Thursday, March 25, 1965, for example, notes that evening prayers were said privately in order "to give all an opportunity to see the live historical March of Selma to Birmingham under protection of Federal Groups."<sup>100</sup>

Some members of these communities even pushed their superiors further. In the wake of the surprise participation of sisters in the early stages of the Selma protest, for

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<sup>99</sup> "Two Sisters Leave for Selma," photograph in Congregation Record Groups, Box 49, Folder 2, OSP Archives.

<sup>100</sup> OSP Motherhouse Annals, March 25, 1965, OSP Archives.

example, Oblate Sister of Providence M. Virginie Fish, a teacher stationed at Holy Name Catholic School and Convent in Chicago, Illinois, requested permission to travel to Selma to participate. However, Sister Virginie's local superior Mother Mary Angela Wade (Mary Martha Loretta) vehemently refused. Reflecting on the incident decades later, Sister Virginie stated, "I was fired up to go to Selma. I wanted to go. So, I asked Mother Angela for permission and she said: 'Noooo!'"<sup>101</sup> Although Mother Angela permitted Sister Virginie and the other Oblates stationed at Holy Name to participate in weekly activities of the Urban Apostolate of Sisters (UAS), a Chicago-based organization committed to the principles of racial justice, prior to the Selma protest, she steadfastly refused to permit the Chicago OSP to participate in public demonstrations.<sup>102</sup>

Undoubtedly, the unique dangers that black sisters faced played a major role in the decision of Mother Mary Angela, who had been one of the first three African-American students at Villanova College in 1925.<sup>103</sup> However, Sister Virginie and the other young activist-oriented Oblates stationed at Holy Names kept their pressure up.

Less than a month later, five Chicago Oblates, including Sister M. Virginie, attended a talk by Selma activist Father Maurice Ouellet, S.S.E., sponsored by the UAS. Speaking on the role of Catholic sisters in the black freedom struggle in the wake of Selma, Father Ouellet urged the sisters present to become apostles for racial justice in the North. "Selma was the opening shot of the war," he proclaimed. "If SCLC comes to

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<sup>101</sup> Sister M. Virginie (Ruth Willa Mae) Fish, interview by author, digital recording, Catonsville, Md., March 11, 2010. (Quote is in my handwritten notes, as Sister Virginie said this to me before we began recording.)

<sup>102</sup> See Holy Name Convent Annals beginning in February of 1965, OSP Archives.

<sup>103</sup> "OSP Administration: Meetings: Council: 1903-1932," Vol. I, Box 44, Folder 5, OSP Archives. See also Congregational File of Sister Mary Angela Wade, Box 78, Folder 9, OSP Archives.

Chicago, they will need the Sisters.”<sup>104</sup> Aware of the opposition mounting to Catholic sisters’ growing participation in civil rights activities, Father Ouellet nonetheless encouraged UAS members to push forward in their efforts and even risk disobedience in the name of racial justice. He also warned his overwhelmingly white audience of sisters against assuming a paternalistic posture toward the African-American community in the quickly evolving black revolution. “The Church has been slow,” Father Ouellet reminded his UAS audience. “The Sisters and Priests in Selma have a fine reputation---not the Church as a whole.” Of particular concern to Father Ouellet was the Church’s ongoing failure to confront and combat racial exclusion and discrimination within its own ranks and boundaries, especially within religious life. “The negro priests in [my] community have spoken to [me] about it and Father imagines that any negro Sister has had feelings of discrimination in some of the religious communities,” he stated. “We are not always aware of our prejudices.”<sup>105</sup>

At the conclusion of Father Ouellet’s talk, the five Oblates present requested a private conference with the southern priest, during which the sisters spoke at length with him about their growing desire to enter the public fight for racial justice and the obstacles to doing so. A few days later, the following entry appeared in the Holy Name annals: “After school...Sisters Michael, Josine, Donna Marie, Vincetta, and Virginie (driver) went to a[n] Urban Apostolate League to hear Father Maurice Luellet [sic], S.S.E. of Selma, Alabama speak of the Negro Apostolate and conditions in Selma. We felt as if we had met Christ Himself in the flesh. Father is tremendous in his Christian convictions.”<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> “Selma, Alabama: Typed Transcript of Father Maurice Ouellet Speech to UAS at St. Joseph School, Chicago,” April 5, 1965, Mary Benet Papers, University of Notre Dame Archives, hereafter CBEN.

<sup>105</sup> “Selma, Alabama,” Transcript, CBEN.

<sup>106</sup> Entry in Holy Name of Mary Convent Annals, Wednesday, April 7, 1965, OSP Archives.

Two weeks later, Father Ouellet bypassed Chicago superior Mother Angela Wade and wrote to Oblate superior general Mother Mary William Hundley in Baltimore to plead the case of the five Chicago Oblates directly. “Never have I met sisters more enthused over the work that is being done in this country in the field of race relations,” Father Ouellet remarked of Sisters M. Virginie (Ruth Willa Mae) Fish, M. Michael (Josephine Agnes) Grant, M. Vincetta (Edith Minetta) Duncan, M. Josine (Willa Dean) Sumpter, and Donna Marie (Carolyn Ann) Kelly. “I could not help but think to myself what a tremendous impact these sisters could have in any community in which they might be working.” Coming to his point, Father Ouellet begged. “I hope that if the opportunity presents itself that you will let your sisters take part in the struggle in which we are all engaged.” He continued, “I know that you will feel for their safety and this is certainly to be taken into consideration. However, I think that the time has come when oftentimes we must place personal safety aside and do what must be done in the name of the Church. As I spoke to the sisters I felt that they wanted to do so much.”<sup>107</sup> For Ouellet, who recognized the role that black sisters could play in the ongoing struggle, the participation of Oblate Sisters and the nation’s other black orders was critical.<sup>108</sup>

Though there is no record of a response by Mother Mary William to Father Ouellet, the position of the nation’s black orders on their members’ involvement in protest activities in early 1965 was clear. Though black sisterhoods unequivocally supported the aims of the civil rights movement, the survival of Catholic schools operated by black orders facing an uncertain future in the wake of Catholic and public school

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<sup>107</sup> Very Rev. Maurice F. Ouellet, S.S.E. to Rev. Mother William, O.S.P., April 21, 1965, OSP Archives.

<sup>108</sup> Father Ouellet had written to Sister Mary Antona soon after her participation in the Selma protest expressing such sentiments. See Sexhauer, “A Well-Behaved Woman,” 50.

desegregation was paramount and took precedence over any other racial justice matter. As a result, sisters in black orders who desired to take a more visible and public role in the freedom struggle were strictly forbidden from doing so if it required them to absent their academic and spiritual duties. Thus, although members of black orders would slowly begin appearing in local marches and Church-approved demonstrations in the aftermath of Selma, their primary responsibilities remained in the classroom or elsewhere within their traditional apostolates.<sup>109</sup> However, black leadership councils would soon be forced to rethink their positions as their communities underwent conciliar-mandated renewal after 1965 and as hundreds of white sisters moved to become the face and force of racial justice in the Church.

As historian Amy Koehlinger has argued, “the Selma protest proved to be a singularly powerful catalyst to arouse sisters to pursue apostolic works among African Americans.”<sup>110</sup> Before that, most white sisters had historically shunned apostolic work among African Americans and as a rule ostracized the marginal population of sisters, white and black, who labored in the African-American apostolate for decades. However, after Selma and Second Vatican Council’s call to social justice activism, a significant portion of white sisters changed their position in important ways. For those who participated in the Selma protest directly, the experience had been liberating and transformative. As participant and School Sister of Notre Dame Mary Peter (Margaret)

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<sup>109</sup> For example, on November 6, 1965, two Oblate Sisters of Providence joined a host of priests, sisters, seminarians, the Catholic Archdiocesan Women’s Committee, and hundreds of citizens in a protest march through downtown Baltimore for open housing organized by the city’s Federation of Civil Rights Organizations. See Matthew J. O’Rourke, S.S.J., “Dramatizing a Need: Open Housing,” *Josephite Harvest* (Nov.-Dec. 1965): 8.

<sup>110</sup> Koehlinger, *New Nuns*, 53.

Traxler remarked, “After Selma, you can’t stay home again.”<sup>111</sup> For others, Selma helped to expand what it meant to be a Roman Catholic sister. Long prohibited from direct engagement in civic and political affairs in the pre-conciliar period, sisters could now become social justice advocates and activists, and many viewed the black freedom struggle as a useful training ground to become what many were then calling “new nuns.”<sup>112</sup> As a result, in the immediate aftermath of Selma, hundreds of Catholic sisters entered the public fight for racial justice in a host of venues—some during free time from their traditional apostolic labors and others on a more permanent basis.

With the visibility of Catholic sisters’ new interest in civil rights activities after the Selma protest, many religious orders received invitations from various racial justice organizations to contribute. In the spring of 1965, for example, Kate Jordan, founder of the Pax Christi Institute (a secular institute of religious women) in Greenwood, Mississippi, visited the provincial house of the Order of Saint Benedict in Collegeville, Minnesota, and invited the Sisters to assist in Pax Christi’s racial justice efforts. In addition, the Minnesota province of the Order of Saint Benedict organized and conducted their own racial justice initiatives. That summer, the Benedictines, who had been anxious to become involved in such an endeavor, sent five sisters to assist in the educational and community work of Greenwood’s Saint Francis Center administered by Pax Christi. Inspired by the efforts of Freedom Summer of 1964, the Benedictines named their endeavor “Operation Mississippi.” The five Benedictines (two of whom were African

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<sup>111</sup> Sister Mary Peter Traxler, “After Selma, Sister, You Can’t Stay Home Again,” *Extension* 60 (June 1965): 16-18.

<sup>112</sup> For a greater discussion of this phenomenon, Sister M. Charles Borromeo, CSC, ed., *The Changing Sister* (Notre Dame: Fides Publishers, 1965) and *The New Nuns* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1968) and Margaret Traxler, ed., *New Works of New Nuns* (St. Louis, Mo.: B. Herder, 1968) and *Split-Level Lives: American Nuns Speak on Race* (Techney, Ill.: Divine Word Publications, 1967).

Americans and native Mississippians) joined eleven Pax Christi members, fifteen seminarians, a layman, two Sisters of Notre Dame, two Sisters of Mercy, and two Mission Helpers of the Sacred Heart in conducting a host of summer programs (i.e. literacy and arts classes) aimed at raising the quality of life for African Americans in Greenwood. The group also made home visits, prepared medications for the dispensary, and established drama clubs for the local children before returning to their regular teaching positions in the fall.<sup>113</sup>

In other instances, individual sisters created their own programs aimed at uplifting impoverished and neglected African Americans or simply joined black freedom organizations in their respective locales. Sister Mary Julian (Norma Fae) Griffin, the first black Vincentian Sister of Charity in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, did both while on her first teaching assignment at St. Jude High School in Montgomery, Alabama in the mid-sixties. After school, Griffin conducted basic literacy classes for adults in the rural communities outside of Montgomery and joined the local black voter registration campaign. In 1964, Sister Mary Julian also became active in the Alabama Human Relations Council, which quickly led her into direct action initiatives and demonstrations against segregation and racism in Montgomery to the great fury of white Catholic leaders in the city.<sup>114</sup>

For sisters who could gain substantial releases from their communities, most entered the black freedom struggle through Church-sponsored racial justice organizations that placed sisters in a host of initiatives and projects across the country. Among the most prominent of these sister-oriented racial justice organizations was the Department of

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<sup>113</sup> Sister Johanna Becker, O.S.B., "Operation Mississippi: An American Mission," *American Benedictine Review*, 17 (1966): 69-70.

<sup>114</sup> See C.V. and Typed Biography of Sister Mary Julian Griffin, V.S.C. in "Sister Mary Julian Griffin, V.S.C." File, AAS.

Educational Services (DES) of the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice (NCCIJ) headquartered in Chicago, Illinois. Founded in 1964, the DES was organized “to increase awareness of racial justice issues among Catholics by improving visibility and influence of the NCCIJ” in the Catholic community.<sup>115</sup> Following the Selma protest, the DES came under the leadership of Selma voting rights participant Sister Margaret Traxler, a white School Sister of Notre Dame, who quickly became the most visible sister associated with the fight for racial justice. Through a host of ambitious DES programs, funded by anti-poverty grants from the federal government or private philanthropic organizations, hundreds of Catholic sisters were channeled into the civil rights movement. Some programs were aimed at dispelling racist attitudes among white sisters, such as the DES’s Traveling Workshops in Intergroup Relations. In these five-day workshops, led by a group of five sisters who traveled the country in a rented station wagon, sisters “explored the sources of human conflict—especially racial conflict—and strategies for resolution.”<sup>116</sup> Other programs placed sisters into direct actions programs aimed at promoting racial justice “either by challenging white supremacy among [white] Catholics or by responding to specific needs in African-American communities.”<sup>117</sup> Some of these initiatives included sister-led summer academic enrichment camps for low-income black children in Chicago and a program that placed Northern sisters on the faculties of southern historically-black colleges and universities, in order to allow their regular black faculty members to complete their doctorates.<sup>118</sup> Because participation in these efforts often required either temporary or permanent release from traditional

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<sup>115</sup> Koehlinger, *New Nuns*, 80.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 15, 17, 64-123, 176-225.

apostolates, many of the sisters active in the early years came from larger communities that could afford to release members. Because of the historic and ongoing exclusion of black women and girls from white congregations and the marginal population of the nation's black orders, sisters released to participate and lead these Church-sponsored initiatives were overwhelmingly white.

Although black sisterhoods were initially reluctant to allow their members to enter the black freedom movement formally, many leadership councils did begin to loosen the restrictions that they placed on their members' involvement in the struggle for racial justice as their communities underwent conciliar-mandated spiritual renewal. On October 28, 1965, the Second Vatican Council issued *Perfectae Caritatis*, in which Pope Paul VI addressed religious orders of men and women directly and called for radical reform. In addition to mandating that congregations undertake a substantial self-study of their communities, including their original charisms, *Perfectae Caritatis* encouraged orders to re-imagine all facets of their life, including religious garb, living arrangements, religious observance, enclosure, etc., in order to become effective agents of change in the modern world.<sup>119</sup> Keeping within their strict adherence to Church law, the Oblates, Holy Family Sisters, and Franciscan Handmaids of Mary all began renewal in some fashion soon thereafter, ahead of their formal chapter meetings.<sup>120</sup>

Because black orders had pioneered Catholic service to the African-American community and traditionally served the excluded, most black superiors actually came to view entry into the public field of racial justice as an extension of their founders' legacies

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<sup>119</sup> Koehlinger, *New Nuns*, 47.

<sup>120</sup> Knecht, *Oblate Sisters of Providence*, 31; "Administration of the Reverend Mother Marie Anselm, June 17, 1958 – June 17, 1970," typed timeline, 3, SSF Archives; and Patricia Lucas, "Diary of Change," in *Midwives of the Future: American Sisters Tell Their Story* (Kansas City, MO: Leaven Press, 1985), edited by Ann Patrick Ware, 176.

and their previous educational and religious activism. Speaking at the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of the Sisters of the Holy Family in New Orleans, Louisiana in 1967, for example, Mother Marie Anselm Duffel reflected on the “new dimensions” required of the SSF in the wake of the Second Vatican Council and the changing dynamics of the black freedom struggle. Announcing the order’s new rally cry of “SERVICE FIRST! SERVICE NOW! SERVICE ALWAYS!” a play on the segregationist rally cry of Alabama governor George Wallace, Mother Marie Anselm paid homage to the Holy Family foundresses and outlined a new course for the order. “Wherever opportunity opens a door—whether it be the integration of an erstwhile all-white faculty on any academic level, or whispering an act of love in the ear of a dying man or woman in our Home for the Aged,” she proclaimed, “we deem it not only an obligation but also a blessing to be present.”<sup>121</sup>

Although the leadership councils of black orders remained cautious about releasing sisters from their traditional educational duties, they increasingly permitted members to participate in Church-sponsored demonstrations and initiatives. This was particularly true when such efforts allowed black sisters to demonstrate their educational preparedness and expertise, i.e. integrating faculties and serving on diocesan and archdiocesan educational boards, or break new racial ground for their orders. For example, in 1957, the Oblates accepted their first mission to staff Our Lady of Help of Christians, an all-white Catholic elementary school in Saginaw, Michigan.<sup>122</sup> In 1964 and 1967, the Oblates received and accepted two additional missions to teach in all-white

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<sup>121</sup> Rev. Mother Marie Anselm, S.S.F., “New Dimensions for New Demands,” *Divine Word Messenger*, March 1968, 59-62. Copy in SCSH Archives.

<sup>122</sup> “Outline of Michigan Missions and Dates” in OSP Archives. See also Knecht, *Oblate Sisters of Providence*, 80.

Catholic elementary schools in Lavonia and Three Rivers, Michigan respectively.<sup>123</sup> While black sisters had historically been prohibited from teaching in white Catholic schools, white attitudes changed in the wake of the *Brown* decision. But those changes were inspired as well by the burgeoning exodus of sisters from religious life and their subsequent withdrawal from the faculties of white Catholic schools, which left many dioceses and archdioceses desperate for sister replacements, no matter what color. As a result, white ecclesiastical authorities and parents' councils, for the first time in their histories, began requesting the services of the nation's black orders. Cost-effectiveness (hiring nuns was much cheaper than lay teachers) also guided many of these decisions, and the Oblates long restricted in their ministries jumped at these opportunities to help break down racial barriers on the parish level.<sup>124</sup> In 1967, the Oblates also released two members from their teaching duties in predominantly black schools to help integrate historically white faculties in Florida and Minnesota. Sister M. Virginie Fish was released at Holy Names in Chicago to integrate the Benedictine faculty of St. Joseph Public School in Dade City, Florida. In the same year, Sister Concepta Marie integrated the Dominican faculty of Incarnation Catholic School in Minneapolis, Minnesota.<sup>125</sup> The Oblates also released Sister Monica (Elaine Juanita) Dean in 1967 to teach English at historically black Howard University in Washington, D.C., her alma mater.<sup>126</sup>

Changes occurred at administrative as well as faculty levels. In September of 1965, the Holy Family Sisters accepted an invitation from New Orleans Archbishop John

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<sup>123</sup> Outline of Michigan Missions and Dates" in OSP Archives. See also "Three Rivers," *Oblates in Action: Newsletter* 10(Fall 1967): 1.

<sup>124</sup> Knecht, *Oblate Sisters of Providence*, 80-81.

<sup>125</sup> "Sister M. Virginie," and "Sister Concepta Marie," *Oblates in Action: Newsletter* 10(Fall 1967): 1.

<sup>126</sup> "Sister M. Monica." *Oblates in Action: Newsletter* 10(Fall 1967): 1.

Patrick Cody to have one of their members (Sister Mary de Sales) serve as one of the Archdiocesan School Supervisors.<sup>127</sup> It marked the first time that a Holy Family sister had served in administrative capacity on the Catholic school board. Two years later, the Holy Family Sisters reached out to their old friends, the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill, in Greensburg, Pennsylvania, to initiate a teacher exchange program to “bring about racial integration at the religious faculty level in the Catholic elementary schools” of the archdioceses of New Orleans and Pittsburgh.<sup>128</sup> The experiment in faculty integration involved four pilot schools in each archdiocese, in which the exchange teachers would live with the receiving community and serve as regular faculty members under the respective administration. Before the initiation of the formal program, scheduled to begin in the fall of 1967, the Holy Family Sisters had first offered the services of Sister Aquinata Cuillier to the Sisters of Charity’s all-white Elizabeth Seton High School in Brookline, Pennsylvania. Unsurprisingly, when interviewed by the local Catholic newspaper about her historic assignment one year later, Sister Aquinata refused to comment on the civil rights movement when asked. But she did note that she had incorporated “Negro history” into her high school history lessons and spoke on the topic throughout Pittsburgh.<sup>129</sup>

Forty-six years earlier, the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill had broken ranks with their white counterparts and traveled to New Orleans annually to help establish and staff summer school classes for the Holy Family Sisters, when racial segregation barred black sisters from Catholic higher education. Although the Sisters of Charity discontinued their

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<sup>127</sup> “Administration of the Reverend Mother Marie Anselm, June 17, 1958 – June 17, 1970,” 3.

<sup>128</sup> “News Release” in “Faculty Exchange Program” File, ASCSH. See also “Administration of the Reverend Mother Marie Anselm, June 17, 1958 – June 17, 1970,” 3.

<sup>129</sup> Bill McClinton, “Five Negro Nuns Serving Here in a Unique Teacher Exchange,” January 12, 1968, Newspaper Unknown, Copy in ASCSH.

staffing of the Holy Family Summer School in 1958 (once the Holy Family Sisters could staff their own normal institute), the two orders remained closely associated as Holy Family Sisters continued to matriculate at Seton Hill College for Women under a scholarship program established in 1942 by the Sisters of Charity for the Holy Family Sisters.<sup>130</sup>

By 1967, members of the Oblate Sisters of Providence and the Sisters of the Holy Family had integrated all-white Catholic school faculties in Florida, Oklahoma, and Pennsylvania; participated in sister-exchange programs with white orders in Pennsylvania; and worked in inner-city apostolate programs in Detroit, New Orleans, Chicago, and Baltimore.<sup>131</sup> Sometime in the 1960s, the Harlem-based Franciscan Handmaids of the Most Pure Heart of Mary also integrated the historically-white faculty of Cathedral High School for Girls in Manhattan.<sup>132</sup> During the summer of 1967, the Holy Family Sisters also released a member to lead and coordinate a traveling race-relations workshop sponsored by DES. She was the first member of a black order to join the prominent sister-led racial justice organization.<sup>133</sup>

In the midst of their entry into the public fight for racial justice, black sisters also continued to blaze trails in Catholic higher education. For example in 1965, Holy Family Sister Mary Reginald (Jean) Carter became the first black sister in the United States to earn a Ph.D., when she received her doctorate in Spanish from St. Louis University, an institution first integrated by the Oblate Sisters of Providence in 1927. After receiving her

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<sup>130</sup> For greater discussion, see chapter 1 of this dissertation.

<sup>131</sup> Anselm, S.S.F., "New Dimensions for New Demands," 61.

<sup>132</sup> Richards, interview by author.

<sup>133</sup> Anselm, S.S.F., "New Dimensions for New Demands," 61.

degree, Carter integrated the faculty of the College of Great Falls in Montana.<sup>134</sup> Three years later, Holy Family Sister Mary Sylvester (Mary Lovenia) Deconge became the second black sister in the United States to earn a Ph.D, receiving her doctorate in mathematics from Saint Louis University. She subsequently became the first black woman to join the faculty of Loyola University in New Orleans, where she taught from 1968 to 1971.<sup>135</sup> Although many black sisters in black communities held master's degrees (most of which were earned during their tenure in religious life), time constraints and lack of community resources (in comparison to white orders) had prevented black sisters from joining their white counterparts in the highest ranks of education. While at least two Oblates held doctorate degrees when they entered their communities, the first Oblate to earn a Ph.D. was Sister Mary Alice Chineworth, who in 1972 earned a Ph.D. in Psychology from Catholic University of America.<sup>136</sup>

In 1966, the Oblates made higher educational history when they opened Mount Providence Junior College on the grounds of the new motherhouse in Catonsville, Maryland. An outgrowth of their accredited normal school, the Oblate Institute, Mount Providence was open to secular female students and offered a host of two-year associate degrees in the liberal arts. During their opening ceremonies, Mount Providence was heralded by then Senator Robert F. Kennedy for its dynamic and innovative approach to education. Open to all female students regardless of race, Mount Providence was the first

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<sup>134</sup> "Scholarly Sister," *Jet Magazine*, June 24, 1965, 27. See also "Administration of the Reverend Mother Marie Anselm, June 17, 1958 – June 17, 1970," 4, and Mrs. Roger L. (Caroline) Putnam to Most Reverend William G. Connare, August 10, 1965, ASCSH.

<sup>135</sup> See also "Administration of the Reverend Mother Marie Anselm, June 17, 1958 – June 17, 1970," 4 and "Mary Lovinia [sic] Deconge-Watson: Religious Vows and Mathematics," in Wini Warren, *Black Women Scientists in the United States* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000, 82-3.

<sup>136</sup> Chineworth, interview by author. See also Baptiste, "A Study of the Foundation and Educational Objectives of the Congregation of the Oblate Sisters of Providence," 56. A faculty list from Mount Providence Junior College notes that Sister Mary Josephita Larrea Melgares, O.S.P. held a Ph.D. in Spanish from the University of Havana earned in 1960.

U.S. Catholic institution of higher education founded by a black congregation.<sup>137</sup> After seven decades of sister-led Catholic higher education for women in the United States, black sisters had finally joined their white counterparts as college founders and administrators.

Black sisters in white congregations also continued to blaze trails in their traditional assignments. Many were the first to integrate the staffs of their order's schools or hospitals when they received their two- to three-year assignments. Some found themselves breaking such barriers with each new assignment. Black sisters also begin to break barriers in the administrative ranks. For example, in 1966, Sister Mary Reginalda Polk, a Sinsinawa Dominican and a native of Tuskegee, Alabama, became the first black principal of a Milwaukee Catholic School at Saint Gall Church in Wisconsin.<sup>138</sup> In 1967, Selma march veteran Sister Mary Antona Ebo was chosen to lead St. Clare Hospital in Baraboo, Wisconsin. She was the first black sister to head a hospital in the United States.<sup>139</sup> As black sisters in white communities began to pursue doctoral degrees paid for by their communities in the mid-to late sixties, many became involved in the various black student and consciousness movements taking root campuses across the country. For many black sisters, this exposure proved pivotal in raising their racial and political consciousness. In particular, it encouraged many black sisters who had long suppressed

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<sup>137</sup> "Negro Catholic School to Open," *New York Times*, September 6, 1966, 11. See also Knecht, *Oblate Sisters of Providence*, 113.

<sup>138</sup> "Milestones in Black Catholic History-Our Story: Archdiocese of Milwaukee" Online Timeline, Archdiocese of Milwaukee, <http://www.archmil.org/ArchMil/Resources/MilestonesinBlackCatholicHistory07.pdf> (accessed on June 5, 2012). See also, Karen Burroughs, "Being Black Isn't All That Makes This Nun Stand Out," *Hyde Park Herald*, October 14, 1987, 8 and "Deaths: Sister Mary Reginalda Polk, School Principal, *Milwaukee Journal*, January 13, 1990, 5." Sister Reginalda's obituary in the *Hyde Park Herald* notes that her father had been the official photographer for the Tuskegee Institute, where members of her order had served during the Jim Crow era.

<sup>139</sup> Feister, "Brave Sister of Selma."

their racial identity in predominantly white congregations to reclaim their African-American heritage proudly. It also further encouraged black sisters to become involved in the larger fight for racial justice as well as become more vocal about racial discrimination within their own congregations.<sup>140</sup>

However, as increasing numbers of black sisters sought to offer their services and expertise through Church-affiliated racial justice organizations and initiatives, many encountered resistance to their presence and participation. Oftentimes, this opposition was rooted in the legacy of white supremacy and ongoing racial discrimination in the Church, specifically female religious life. In one striking example from 1967, Selma veteran Sister Mary Antona Ebo wrote to the director of the sister-led DES to express her frustration at her predominantly-white community's refusal to release her to participate in a racial justice initiative. "Perhaps you can use this as a reply to some of the people who criticize you for not having Negro sisters on the team," Sister Mary Antona wrote. "[It is due] not only [to] the lack of generosity of those orders who may have a sister to contribute...but also [to] the orders who have for so long taken a 'lily-white' attitude toward God-given vocations. Perhaps, some of the rest would have Negro sisters to contribute if the attitude would have been different."<sup>141</sup> One year later, when up for another position with the NCCIJ, Ebo was passed over for a white sister with little experience among African Americans.<sup>142</sup>

Black sisters in white orders who participated in racial justice initiatives or joined black freedom organizations individually also experienced obstacles and opposition that were racially-based. For example, of the five Minnesota Benedictine sisters who

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<sup>140</sup> Smith and Feister, *Thea's Song*, 99-103.

<sup>141</sup> Letter cited in Koehlinger, *New Nuns*, 13.

<sup>142</sup> Ebo, interview by author.

participated in “Operation Mississippi” during the summer of 1965, two were African-American and natives of Mississippi. According to Benedictine Sister Johanna Becker, a white participant, the black Sisters Joyce Williams and Chonchita Smoot “knew firsthand the problems and hardships of the Negro in the South and gave valuable information to their less experienced companions.”<sup>143</sup> However, Sister Joyce Williams later revealed that her participation in “Operation Mississippi” had not been “a satisfying experience.” In particular, Williams noted that she had “felt encumbered by the decisions of her [white] companions.”<sup>144</sup> In Montgomery, Alabama, Vincentian Sister of Charity Mary Julian Griffin endured a host of formal and informal threats from white archdiocesan officials and religious because of her individual and organizational contributions to the local black freedom struggle. When Griffin refused to halt her activities, she was eventually dismissed from her teaching assignment at St. Jude High School.<sup>145</sup>

Such impediments to black sisters’ activism and leadership within and outside of church-sponsored and sister-led racial justice programs in the post-conciliar period reveal the profound difficulties in breaking down structural barriers in the absence of black leadership in the Church. Even whites active in the racial justice apostolate, no matter how sincere, failed to address fully individual and structural racism in the Church. Although some sister-sponsored initiatives were aimed at dispelling racial and derogatory myths and stereotypes about black people held by whites in the Church, most programs placed white sisters with little or no experience laboring among African Americans or with little knowledge of African-American history into racial justice initiatives.

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<sup>143</sup> Becker, “Operation Mississippi,” 69-70.

<sup>144</sup> Lindblad, “Sister Joyce Williams,” 9.

<sup>145</sup> Typed Biography of Sister Mary Julian Griffin, V.S.C. in “Sister Mary Julian Griffin, V.S.C.” File, AAS.

Moreover, many white sisters entering the racial justice apostolate held racially derogatory views of African Americans and brought their deeply-held beliefs in the moral superiority of whites into their respective programs, profoundly limiting their effectiveness.<sup>146</sup> The fact that many white sister-leaders in the racial justice apostolate openly expressed disdain for calls for black power and self-determination in the wider nation further demonstrated, especially to activist-oriented black sisters, the profound limitations of these white-led initiatives.

For Sister M. Melanie (Saundra Ann) Willingham, one of two pioneering African-American Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur in Cincinnati, Ohio, the intractability of white racism in the Church, especially among female religious, proved more than she could handle by 1968. Three years earlier, Willingham had matriculated as a full-time student at the University of Dayton after completing her novitiate training, and it was there that Willingham became fully aware of her community's miseducation and how "backward" she was in relationship to the civil rights movement. "Young people with less experience than I were much more knowledgeable in the history, sociology, and psychology of our people," she later wrote. "They were able to argue and challenge while I could only sit back in ignorance. I was humiliated by my state of mind, it was white."<sup>147</sup> In an effort to become active, Willingham joined the local Catholic interracial council only to find herself and her concerns misunderstood or dismissed by whites in the organization. "The more actively I involved myself in the Catholic Interracial Council, the more threatened my fragile psychic equilibrium became," she wrote. "I eventually had to ask myself how I could justify such total identification with this institution which was not only white, but

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<sup>146</sup> Koehlinger, *New Nuns*, 19.

<sup>147</sup> Willingham, "Why I Quit the Convent," 68.

so racist and authoritarian that it cannot accept the factual reality that its schools were segregated; so racist that it cannot comprehend the message the dirt of black “vocations” is testifying; so racist that it does not even know the meaning of the word paternalism and is far indeed from seeing itself implicated therein.”<sup>148</sup> Following the assassination of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in April of 1968 and a gut-wrenching experience with racism in the DES-sponsored Summer in Suburbia initiative in Cleveland one month later, Sister Melanie made up her mind to defect from religious life.<sup>149</sup>

## Conclusion

1968 proved to be a pivotal year for the nation as a whole and for the nation’s black Catholics. The urban rebellions of 1967 had pushed the nation further to the precipice of a monumental racial crisis and the release of the Kerner Commission Report in February 1968 placed the blame firmly on the doorsteps of racist white America. “Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal,” the report stated.<sup>150</sup> Although many white sisters active in the racial justice apostolate remained resistant to calls for black self-determination, a few working in the African-American community began to voice their concerns about the dangers of white sisters’ irrational opposition to “Black power” and their ongoing failure to acknowledge their part in the racial problems of America. In a letter dated February 13, 1968 to the executive committee of the Conference of Major Superiors of Women (later the Leadership

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<sup>148</sup> Willingham, “Why I Quit the Convent,” 74.

<sup>149</sup> Saundra Ann Willingham, interview by author, June 29, 2012. While participating in the Summer in Suburbia program, sponsored by the Department of Educational Services of the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice, in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1968, a young white boy turned a water hose on Sister Melanie while she was conducting a door to door race relations survey in an all-white, Catholic neighborhood with a group of white sisters.

<sup>150</sup> Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*,” 705-6. See also *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorder* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968).

Conference on Women Religious), Sister Mary Schultz, HVM, of Detroit, Michigan, was clear. “[I]n our metropolitan area there is a serious white backlash—one of the most fanatical leaders being a Catholic. Our sisters can innocently contribute to this polarization if they are uninformed of the reality. Frankly, Mother, I find so many Sisters have no idea of the reality of racism in our midst—of the psychological damage we are doing...How many of our Sisters know what is meant by Black Power?—the legitimate goals...Catholics have a special obligation since they still constitute a major white institution in the cities.”<sup>151</sup> Schultz, the foundress of a predominantly white congregation that had historically worked in African-American community, did not believe that white sisters should abandon the inner city; but she argued that they could not be effective “prophets in this struggle” if they remained grossly uninformed about the true plight of African Americans.<sup>152</sup> However, it would take the soul-chilling assassination of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. two months later and the “unexpected” revolt of the nation’s black Catholic priests, sisters, and laity soon thereafter to force whites in the Church to reconsider their stances or risk losing what little credibility they had left in the African-American community. In bringing about the full resurrection of black Catholic protest in the country, a pivotal cadre of black religious men and women, radicalized by their experiences of racial discrimination both within and outside of the Church, proved willing to risk it all, including defection from religious life, in order to rid Catholic America of racism once and for all.

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<sup>151</sup> Sister Mary Shultz, HVM to Mother M. Omer and the CMSW Executive Committee, February, 13, 1968, CLCW in UNDA.

<sup>152</sup> Schultz to Omer.

## Chapter Four:

### “Liberation Is Our First Priority:”<sup>1</sup>

#### The Formation of the National Black Sisters’ Conference

“After the assassination of Martin Luther King, I told my superiors that I could no longer work in a white school.”<sup>2</sup>

-Sister Joyce Williams, O.S.B.

“I’d never seen black nuns before—all together and just talking ‘about black people.’ It was very emotional, and it made me rethink a lot of my values and be more honest about my blackness.”<sup>3</sup>

-Sister Yvonne Tucker, O.S.F. Reflecting on the First National Black Sisters’ Conference in 1968

“The survival of the Catholic Church in the black community will depend largely upon the involvement of dedicated religious women, and the survival of *true* religious life will depend upon the ability of religious congregations to meet the challenges hurled at them by the black community as a whole and more especially by the black women within their ranks.”<sup>4</sup>

-Sister Elizabeth Harris, H.V.M., “The Survival of the Black Sister,” (1970)

As news of the assassination of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. trickled into the motherhouse of the Pittsburgh Religious Sisters of Mercy (RSM) on the evening of April 4, 1968, Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey thought the world had turned upside down. “I was so stilled,” she reflected years later. “I kept thinking to myself, ‘How could this happen?’”<sup>5</sup> Like the brutal lynching of fourteen-year old Emmett Till thirteen years earlier, King’s death was “unfathomable” to the twenty-five year old novice sister.<sup>6</sup> For many, King’s assassination at such a pivotal moment in the black freedom struggle was clear proof of America’s unwillingness to deal seriously with the sin of racism within its

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<sup>1</sup> Quote is from NBSC chief architect and foundress Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey, RSM. It is cited in Eleanor Blau, “Black Nuns Seek Community Rule in Schools,” *New York Times*, August 21, 1971, 18.

<sup>2</sup> Edward B. Fiske, “Finding Identity, Black Nuns Put Soul into Religious Life,” *New York Times*, August 15, 1970, 22.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Sister Elizabeth Harris, H.V.M., “The Survival of the Black Sister,” *Sisters Today* 41(March 1970): 402. Sister Harris delivered this paper at the 1969 NBSC meeting at the University of Dayton. See

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Patricia Grey, formerly Sister M. Martin de Porres, R.S.M., interview by author, digital recording, June 21, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, interview by author, November 3, 2011.

boundaries. For activist-oriented black sisters struggling join the public fight for racial justice, like Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey, it was also the last straw.

Seven years earlier, eighteen-year old Patricia Muriel Rita Francis Grey had made history when she entered the Pittsburgh chapter of the Religious Sisters of Mercy as its first black postulant. Barred admission to the all-white Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden, Pennsylvania, one year earlier solely on the basis of race, Grey had entered the RSM with high hopes about America's changing racial landscape and excited by the vast possibilities that consecrated life afforded her. In particular, Grey, a cradle Catholic and a native of suburban Sewickley, Pennsylvania, was eager to fulfill her call to serve humanity and gain a deeper understanding of the "quiet havoc" that had been taking place inside of her about the mystery of religious life. However, like many pioneering black sisters in white orders, Grey's hopes of being accepted and treated as a human being in Pittsburgh's 600+ member Mercy community were quickly dashed.<sup>7</sup>

During her early tenure in the RSM, Sister M. Martin de Porres was subjected to racist intimidation, bullying (sometimes physical), and ostracism by many of her white "peers" and sister-instructors on a daily basis.<sup>8</sup> Some members of Grey's band (sisters who entered an order in the same year) refused to speak to her during their novitiate years. Many routinely questioned the cleanliness of their African-American counterpart and refused to use the same bathroom facilities as she did among many other insults. Grey's band members and novitiate superiors also made frequent attempts to humiliate Grey publicly in an effort to drive her out of the order. In one jarring example, the RSM postulant directress publicly derided Grey after she mistakenly used the bathroom in the

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<sup>7</sup> Grey, interview by author, June 21, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. See also Harris, *The Sisters*, 243-66.

motherhouse's infirmary before class. Though everyone saw Grey exit the bathroom, the postulant directress wrote on the class chalkboard, "Who was the asinine person that used the bathroom in the infirmary?"<sup>9</sup>

Often singled out by race, Grey also quietly endured the humiliating paternalism of even her "supportive" superiors, who initially viewed and treated her more like a racial experiment than a young sister desiring the perfected state of consecrated life. Unlike the rest of her band members, for example, Grey was not allowed to select her name in religion. At the end of her first year in the order, Grey requested the name Sister Mary Louise. However, Mercy superiors forced Grey to take the name of America's first black saint, Martin de Porres, in an effort to celebrate their community's "achievement" in racial integration.<sup>10</sup> In another jarring episode from Grey's postulancy, Mercy superiors removed Grey from a spiritual formation class required of all novice sisters after she asked too many questions during a theological discussion. Initially, Mercy superiors deemed that Grey's racial heritage limited her intellectual capacity to understand the complexities of Catholic theology and spirituality. However, the Mercy Sisters were eventually forced to reverse their position after Grey was placed under the private instruction of a French theologian then teaching at the order's Mount Mercy College, who subsequently informed Mercy superiors that Grey was "brilliant" and invited her to study theology in France.<sup>11</sup>

Despite such clear and racist opposition to her presence in the RSM, Sister M. Martin de Porres elected to persevere in religious life. "I was so hesitant to label them racist or discriminatory at the time," she later reflected. "I was always very slow to

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<sup>9</sup> Grey, interview by author, June 21, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

anger.”<sup>12</sup> Even when Mercy superiors repeatedly refused her requests to become active in the black freedom struggle *after* Vatican II and the entry of a few white RSMs into the racial justice apostolate, Grey chose to obey rather than dissent.<sup>13</sup> However, King’s assassination and the subsequent rebellions that swept the nation marked a critical turning point in Sister M. Martin de Porres’s tenure in the Pittsburgh Religious Sisters of Mercy. Though she remained committed to the principles of religious life and the Catholic Church at large, Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey finally lost patience with white ignorance and racism. If King’s Christian and nonviolent message of love and justice was not acceptable to white America, Sister M. Martin de Porres wondered what was. She also wondered how Catholic leaders would respond to the nation’s then-heightened racial crisis.<sup>14</sup>

Because Catholic leaders had fallen egregiously short in their responsibility in the fight for racial justice, Grey strongly doubted the ability of white religious, male or female, to help lead the Church through the national crisis spawned by King’s assassination. She also seriously doubted their willingness and ability to address the ongoing reality of racial discrimination and exclusion within their own ranks and boundaries. Within weeks, the 25-year old Mercy Sister, with the unexpected and enthusiastic support of her superior general, called for an unprecedented gathering of the nation’s approximately 1,000 black Catholic sisters at Mount Mercy College (now Carlow University.) For Grey, the time had come for black nuns to take up their rightful place in the black revolution. She also believed that the time had come for the Catholic

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<sup>12</sup> Grey, interview by author.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

Church to become a true and living witness for *all* people or risk losing what little moral authority and credibility it had left, especially among black Catholics.

This chapter chronicles the pivotal years between 1968 and 1971, when black Catholic sisters finally emerged as visible and formidable leaders in the public fight for racial justice both within and outside of the U.S. Church. Specifically, it narrates the historic formation of the National Black Sisters' Conference (NBSC) in 1968 and examines the organization's diverse efforts during the first three years of its existence. In mid-August of 1968, 155 black Catholic sisters reeling from the King assassination gathered at Mount Mercy College in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to discuss for and among themselves their responsibility and place in the ongoing black revolution.<sup>15</sup> Organized by 25-year old Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey, R.S.M., Pittsburgh's first black Religious Sister of Mercy, the weeklong meeting marked the first time in their 144-year old history that African-American Catholic sisters gathered on a national stage to confront and protest racism in the Church and the wider American society. It culminated in the formation of the National Black Sisters' Conference, the first explicitly political and national organization of Catholic sisters in U.S. history, and sent shockwaves throughout the Church.

Prior to that, most black sisters' engagement with the black freedom struggle had been severely circumscribed by institutional racism and sexism in the Church. Although the liberalizing reforms and activist-oriented mandates of Vatican II facilitated the entry of hundreds of Catholic sisters into the public fight for racial justice in mid-1960s, the ongoing reality of racism and exclusion in the Church continued to limit black sisters'

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<sup>15</sup> Sister Louis Marie Bryan, "History of the National Black Sisters' Conference," in *Celibate Black Commitment: Report of the Third Annual National Black Sisters' Conference* (Pittsburgh: NBSC, 1971) 2-9

participation and leadership. As a result, those sisters who entered the black freedom struggle during and immediately after Vatican II were overwhelmingly white, and many proved either unwilling or ill-equipped to deal effectively with individual and structural racism in the Church. Specifically, many of these white sisters held derogatory views of African Americans and were profoundly hostile to the emerging black power movement and calls for black self-determination and leadership in U.S. society.<sup>16</sup> However, the soul-chilling assassination of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. proved to be a momentous awakening to the profound limitations of paternalistic and hostile whites active in the black freedom struggle. It also marked a critical turning point in the long and strategic battle waged by the nation's black Catholic sisters in the fight for racial and educational justice. In particular, a pivotal cadre of black sisters, inspired by the black power movement and radicalized by their own experiences of racial discrimination, proved unwilling to let the rampant racism of their white brothers and sisters in Christ go unchecked any longer.

Characterizing themselves as a “radical movement” in the “white racist” Roman Catholic Church, the NBSC sought to make black sisters and the Church as a whole more visible and relevant in the black freedom struggle and the African-American community at large.<sup>17</sup> As an outgrowth of the Black Catholic Clergy Caucus, the NBSC specifically served as a space through which black sisters could educate and empower themselves to become both spiritual and political leaders in their respective congregations and communities. By testifying about the racist abuses to which they had been subjected in

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<sup>16</sup> Koehlinger, *New Nuns*, 19. See also testimonies various NBSC members.

<sup>17</sup> “The Survival of Soul: National Black Sisters’ Conference Position Paper” in *Black Survival: Past, Present, Future* (Pittsburgh: NBSC, 1970), 155-59. See also Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey, R.S.M., “The National Black Sisters’ Conference Is Because,” in *Celibate Black Commitment*, 97.

religious life, NBSC members publicly indicted the moral bankruptcy of a white-dominated and racially segregated Catholic Church. By envisioning themselves as leaders and committing themselves “unceasingly to the liberation of black people,” they directly challenged the masculinist ethos of black power emanating from both within and outside of the Church. NBSC leaders also brought critical national attention to two crises then threatening the survival of the Catholic Church in the African-American community: 1) the mass exodus of black sisters from religious life in explicit protest to racial discrimination and 2) the mass closings of Catholic schools in predominantly black communities.<sup>18</sup> Within the first three years of its existence, the NBSC would embark on an impressive and ambitious journey to rid the Catholic Church of racism *and* sexism for good. In the process, they helped launch the greatest black Catholic revolt in American history.

### **The Awakening of Black Nun Power**

The assassination of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4, 1968 rocked the moral conscience of the world. Although King’s national star had fallen greatly in the three years prior to his death as a result of his anti-Vietnam War and economic justice activism, King nonetheless remained the seminal icon of the black civil rights movement and an international symbol of peaceful protest. Indeed, just four years earlier, King at age 35 had made history when he became the youngest person to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.<sup>19</sup> As such, news of his assassination in the midst of the black sanitation workers’ strike in Memphis, Tennessee tore at the minds and hearts of all

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<sup>18</sup> “The Survival of Soul,” 155.

<sup>19</sup> Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*, 365-767.

those concerned with humanity and justice. It also served as a profound call to action in the struggle for racial justice.

As condemnations of King's assassination rang out from around the world, including the Vatican, thousands upon thousands of U.S. citizens poured into the streets of the nation's cities and towns in anger, despair, and protest.<sup>20</sup> For them, King's assassination was proof of the moral bankruptcy of white America and the intractability of white racial violence. For the nation's black Catholics, who had long been marginalized in their powerful but racially conservative Church, King's assassination was the final straw. Their frustration increased as state and police attempted to quell the rebellions in northern cities and did so by turning unapologetically to violence. Because the Catholic Church had played a significant role in racial segregation and unrest in the urban North *and* in the backlash to civil and equal rights gains throughout the country, many black Catholics could no longer reconcile themselves with their Church's ongoing failure to be a living witness for all people.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, in the wake of King's death and the violent uprisings, a substantial cadre of black Catholics, religious and lay, decided to risk it all, including public defection from their beloved Church, in order to rid it of racism and injustice.

For the nation's black Catholic sisterhoods, King's assassination marked a monumental turning point in their public posture toward secular politics and resulted in scores of their members' unprecedented engagement with the public dimension of the

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<sup>20</sup> Ernest A. Lotto, "Pope Condemns Killing of Dr. King, Writes Prayer for Use by Catholics," *The Catholic Review*, April 12, 1968, 1.

<sup>21</sup> McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries*, 1-132. See also Anderson, "Prelates, Protest, and Public Opinion," 617-44; Poché, "The Catholic Citizens' Council," 47-68; Ronald P. Formisano, *Boston against Busing: Race, Class, and Ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); James E. Glinski, "The Catholic Church and the Desegregation of Boston's Public Schools," in *Boston's Histories: Essays in Honor of Thomas H. O'Connor*, edited by James M. O'Toole and David Quigley (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004), 246-269.

black liberation struggle. Although the annals of black sisterhoods rarely recorded events associated with the civil rights movement or revealed sisters' emotions, King's assassination was a major exception. Annals from black convents across the country reveal that sisters were publicly distraught over King's murder and the subsequent rebellions. An entry on April 4, 1968 from Holy Name of Mary convent in Chicago, for example, reads: "Mass—8am; 11am—Grade 7; Dr. Martin Luther King shot and killed in Memphis Tenn; Horrible! – News every 15 minutes; Lost; Martin Luther King is dead!; Special Report; Sr. Vianney's brother came to visit her."<sup>22</sup> The annals for the following day document the ongoing shock of the assassination as well as the beginning of the rebellions in Chicago. The annalist wrote, "Mention of & prayers for Martin Luther King at Mass; Parents upset in afternoon; Many came for their children. Others were dismissed at 2:30; High School pupils in disorder Morgan Park & Fenger; Much disorder in Loop—West side—Fires—looting; King praised by all—Too Late; R.I.P.; Sr. Vianney went out with her brother on some business; No school. S. Xavier!"<sup>23</sup> Four days later, five white Dominican Sisters from Chicago's St. Barnabas parish attended at special memorial mass held for Dr. King at Holy Name in an attempt to promote racial solidarity.<sup>24</sup>

King's assassination also moved many members of black orders to action. For example, several Oblates stationed in Washington, D.C. left the protection of St. Augustine's Convent to provide medical aid to those wounded in the riots that swept the nation's capital city.<sup>25</sup> On April 7, 1968, two Oblate Sisters of Providence (Mary Loyola

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<sup>22</sup> Entry in Holy Name of Mary Convent Annals, Thursday, April 4, 1968, OSP Archives.

<sup>23</sup> Entry in Holy Name of Mary Convent Annals, Friday, April 5, 1968, OSP Archives.

<sup>24</sup> Entry in Holy Name of Mary Convent Annals, Tuesday, April 9, 1968, OSP Archives.

<sup>25</sup> Chineworth, interview by author.

and Francine) stationed at St. Joseph's Convent and School in Mobile, Alabama, took part in a memorial march for Dr. King in the city.<sup>26</sup> Two days later, eight members of the Sisters of the Holy Family traveled to Atlanta, Georgia, for King's funeral service and marched in the procession that followed.<sup>27</sup>

Members of black orders also responded to King's assassination in print breaking a longstanding taboo within their communities with regard to commenting publicly on the black freedom struggle. Although white voices had historically dominated the Catholic press on the matter of civil rights and racial justice, the voices and opinions of black Catholics were in high demand in the wake of King's death. The *Catholic Review*, Baltimore's archdiocesan newspaper, for example, published a powerful editorial written by Oblate Sister of Providence Mary Deborah (Julia Jannette) Johnson, in which she reflected on King's assassination and the deteriorating soul of America. In particular, Sister Mary Deborah called attention to the Catholic Church's historic and unapologetic embrace of racial segregation and white supremacy and the profound damage that white racism had done to African-American perceptions of self-worth. "How 'involved' was the Church when racism within the structure of the 'universal' Catholic Church appalled many a Protestant, and many a Negro Catholic, who for years had to sit in the back of the temple of his welcoming unprejudiced God, or could only attend a 'colored' parish," Sister Mary Deborah asked. "While many can be lauded for their efforts toward equality for all men, much of the Church has been asleep to these racial concerns too long—and between minor stirrings it turns over again into a secure soundness. I fear that before long

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<sup>26</sup> Entry in St. Joseph School and Convent Annals, April 7, 1968, OSP Archives.

<sup>27</sup> "Eight Holy Family Sisters Participate in Final Rites for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Contact: Holy Family Newsletter*, 10 (May 22, 1968), 1. They were Mary Madeleva, Mary Gervase, Miriam Teresa, Marie Assumpta, Euseba Marie, Madeleine Sophie, Marie Fidelia, and M. Judith Therese Barial.

if it does not permanently arouse itself peacefully, the ‘signs of the times,’ of which it so frequently speaks, will incite a most startling and perhaps most unwelcome awakening.”<sup>28</sup>

For black sisters living and laboring in hostile communities, the awakening to which Sister Mary Deborah referred was already well underway. Despite the widespread public outcry over King’s assassination, the fact remains that a substantial number of whites, including Catholics, publicly rejoiced at King’s murder and remained firm in their opposition to racial justice. And for black sisters laboring among and for such hateful people, white intransigence in the face of such a devastating national tragedy finally proved to be more than they could handle. Minnesota Benedictine Sister Joyce Williams, for example, requested a transfer to serve on a mission in the African-American community after one of her white male students at St. Cloud Cathedral High School in Minnesota publicly rejoiced at King’s murder. The student stood up in Sister Joyce’s class and stated, “That’s one down and how many more to go?” For Williams, the episode was one of the rudest awakenings that she had experienced in her nineteen-year tenure as Benedictine. “After the assassination of Martin Luther King, I told my superiors that I could no longer work in a white school,” Sister Joyce later reflected.<sup>29</sup> “I fel[t] as a black woman, and a black nun in particular, that my place [was] with the black community.”<sup>30</sup> Shortly thereafter, Sister Joyce was released from her duties and permitted to relocate to Cleveland, Ohio, to work with Project Bridge, a racial justice initiative

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<sup>28</sup> Sister Mary Deborah Johnson, O.S.P., “The Plea of a Negro Sister: ‘Give Testimony to the Gospel,’” *The Catholic Review*, ca. May 1968 in Personal File of Sister Mary Deborah (Julia Janette) Johnson, OSP Archives.

<sup>29</sup> Edward B. Fiske, “Finding Identity, Black Nuns Put Soul Into Religious Life,” *New York Times*, August 15, 1970, 22.

<sup>30</sup> Lindbald, “Sister Joyce Williams,” 10.

sponsored by the Department of Educational Services of the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice.<sup>31</sup>

Holy Family Sister Sylvia Thibodeaux had a similar experience and response in wake of King's assassination. In 1967, Sister Sylvia, known then in religion as Rita Francis, was assigned to desegregate the faculty of the predominantly white Bishop Kelley High School in Tulsa, Oklahoma.<sup>32</sup> Although Sister Sylvia had been optimistic about the position's potential to help "build racial harmony," her reception by the white Sisters of Divine Providence and the white parents' organization had been unapologetically hostile. Reflecting on what she would later call a "soul stifling" experience, Sister Sylvia noted that none of the whites affiliated with the school had ever encountered a black woman who was not a maid and refused to accept Sister Sylvia as a professional and equal.<sup>33</sup> The white sisters' with whom Sister Sylvia lived and worked, for example, refused to use the same "facilities" as she did, assigned her and a Latina sister to the "last rooms" in the convent, and refused to sit by Sister Sylvia at the dinner table. White parents frequently labeled Sister Sylvia a "socialist" and routinely objected to her teaching history that exposed their children to "radical" ideas, such as those they contained in Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*.<sup>34</sup> However, it was not until whites in Tulsa, including most of the parents of her students, openly celebrated King's assassination that Sister Sylvia decided to leave her teaching post at Bishop Kelley in explicit protest. Unlike Sister Joyce, however, Sister Sylvia could not request a transfer from her mission

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<sup>31</sup> Lindbald, "Sister Joyce Williams," 10-11.

<sup>32</sup> Mother Marie Anselm Administration Timeline, SSF Archives. See also Thibodeaux, interview by author.

<sup>33</sup> Phyllis Coons, "Parochial School Run as Community Enterprise Is Success," *Boston Globe*, May 20, 1973, 52.

<sup>34</sup> See also Arthur Jones, "Holy Family Mission: Local Schools, Africa and Belize," *National Catholic Reporter*, March 5, 1999, 1.

on the basis of racial discrimination. As a “Negro sister,” it was a part of her community’s charism to suffer specifically and gladly under the burden of race. However, Thibodeaux knew that if her superior general became aware of the unbecoming behavior of her white housemates, many of whom had abandoned their habits and openly dated and socialized with the white priests attached to Bishop Keiley, Mother Marie Anselm Duffel would re-assign her elsewhere, which the SSF superior soon did.<sup>35</sup>

Hostile responses to King’s death from white sisters behind convent walls also spurred unprecedented public protest from black sisters in predominantly white congregations. Pittsburgh Religious Sister of Mercy M. Martin de Porres Grey observed the hostile and violent reactions of some of her community members in the wake of King’s assassination and its violent aftermath. This not only facilitated her re-entry into the public fight for racial justice, but also set her on a course that would forever change the political history of black Catholic sisters in the United States.

Three years earlier, Sister M. Martin de Porres, like hundreds of Catholic sisters, had been baptized into the civil rights movement through her participation in the Selma voting rights protest. Although Grey had not been permitted to travel to Selma, she had been allowed to lead a delegation from her order’s Mount Mercy College in a city-wide support demonstration through downtown Pittsburgh.<sup>36</sup> In the aftermath of the Selma protest, however, Grey, like many black Catholic sisters, had been prohibited by her superiors from any further civil rights activism out of fear that she might become “too militant.”<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, Grey remained a fervent observer of the black revolution,

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<sup>35</sup> Thibodeaux, interview by author.

<sup>36</sup> “‘Osservatore’ Deplores Selma Conflict,” *Pittsburgh Catholic*, March 18, 1965, 1. Grey, interview by author.

<sup>37</sup> Grey, interview by author.

quietly awaiting her chance to join the struggle in which she and other black sisters had a personal stake. Certainly, she had not anticipated that it would take King's assassination that forced her superior's hands.

After learning of King's death, Sister M. Martin de Porres had wandered aimlessly around the Mercy motherhouse searching for understanding and a place for quiet reflection. For her, King's assassination was simply unconscionable. Even more distressing was the fact that Grey had to endure the trauma of King's death in a community of white nuns among whom she "never felt at home."<sup>38</sup> When Grey walked into rooms where sisters were discussing the crisis, her white counterparts always went quiet and cold. In one profoundly disturbing encounter that occurred while Grey was watching television footage of the rioting that occurred in wake of King's death, an older white Mercy nun, Sister Susan, approached Grey with a balled fist and threatened her yelling, "If anything happens to my family!" Catching herself, Sister Susan stopped mid-sentence and stormed away. For Grey, then a seven-year member of her order, the hateful encounter proved almost unbearable. However, soon after the incident, Mercy superior Mother Thomas Aquinas called Grey into her office privately and offered her some unexpected support.<sup>39</sup>

While Mother Thomas Aquinas had initially balked at Grey's desire to join the Selma protests of 1965, she completely reversed her stance in the wake of King's assassination and the profoundly hostile reactions of some of her peers. "What do you want to do for your people?" Mother Thomas Aquinas asked Grey. "Tell me what it is,

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<sup>38</sup> Grey, interview by author.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

and I will use every resource at my disposal to assist you.”<sup>40</sup> Ready to act but unsure of her course, Sister M. Martin de Porres found direction a few days later when she received an impromptu invitation to join a historic meeting of the nation’s black priests in Detroit, Michigan, scheduled to take place on April 16, 1968.

Like their female counterparts, the nation’s black Catholic priests had been moved to action in the wake of King’s assassination. Long barred from the nation’s seminaries solely on the basis of race and subjected to humiliating racial paternalism, neglect, and discrimination in the white-dominated Church, black priests constituted less than 1 percent of the total national population of Catholic priests in 1968.<sup>41</sup> Yet, unlike their female counterparts, black priests were not formally barred by sex from accessing clerical power in the Church. Following Chicago mayor Richard Daley’s infamous “shoot to kill” order aimed at looters and rioters following King’s murder, Father Herman Porter, a black diocesan priest in Rockford, Illinois and vice president of the Catholic Conference on the Interracial Apostolate (CCIA), called for a special meeting of the nation’s approximately 177 black priests in Detroit, just ahead of the start of the annual CCIA meeting sponsored by the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice. The specific purpose of the caucus was for black priests to discuss among themselves their responsibility and the Church’s role in remedying America’s ongoing racial crisis.<sup>42</sup> Although news of the meeting was to reach only black clergy, word soon made its way to Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey following a chance meeting with Father John Labauve,

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<sup>40</sup> Grey, interview by author.

<sup>41</sup> See Ochs, *Desegregating the Altar*.

<sup>42</sup> Davis, *Black Catholics*, 257. See also “Negroes Criticize Daley Order to Shoot Arsonists,” *New York Times*, April 17, 1968, 29 and Robert B. Semple Jr., “Clark Criticizes Daley’s Order to Shoot Looters,” *New York Times*, April 18, 1968, 40.

an African-American SVD priest, who was visiting the archdiocese of Pittsburgh a few days before the Detroit meeting.<sup>43</sup>

During their meeting, Father Labauve was deeply impressed with Grey's intellect, spirituality, and passion for racial justice. As a result, he informed the sister of the upcoming priests' caucus and invited her to attend. Soon thereafter, Grey requested and received permission from Mother Thomas Aquinas to travel to Detroit with Father LaBauve to participate in the impending caucus.<sup>44</sup> Scheduled to begin prior to the start of the annual CCIA conference, whose theme that year was "Black Power and the White Church: The Christian Ministry in the Ghetto and the Suburb," the black priests' caucus was a watershed event in the U.S. Catholic Church.<sup>45</sup> Never before had the nation's black priests met together as a body, and the gathering was greatly anticipated by the small fraternity of black men, who had long been excluded from formal power in the U.S. Church. What was not anticipated was the arrival of uninvited guests.

Because Father Porter had intended for the meeting to be restricted to black priests only, the unexpected arrivals of Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey, Father Dan Malette, a white Chicago priest active in the black freedom struggle, and Brother Joseph Davis, an African-American member of the Society of Mary, initially caused a great

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<sup>43</sup> While on a tour of St. James Catholic School and Convent in suburban Sewickley, Pennsylvania, Father Labauve had been introduced to a black woman cook, who was a friend of Sister M. Martin de Porres's mother, Mary Elizabeth Grey. (Years before, Mary Grey had worked as a part-time cook and laundress for the all-white Sisters of St. Joseph (CSJ) of Baden, Pennsylvania attached to St. James. However, when the Baden CSJ rejected the application of her daughter Patricia in 1959 solely on the basis of race, Mary had terminated her employment with the sisters.) During their conversation, Mary Grey's friend had informed Father Labauve about Pittsburgh's lone black Mercy sister. Soon thereafter, Labauve made his way to downtown Pittsburgh and secured a private meeting with Sister M. Martin de Porres in Mount Mercy Convent. Grey, interview by author.

<sup>44</sup> Grey, interview by author.

<sup>45</sup> Davis, *Black Catholics*, 257.

stir.<sup>46</sup> Still, the approximately sixty black priests present soon agreed to permit Brother Davis to stay and observe in an unofficial capacity, but they initially asked Sister M. Martin de Porres and Father Malette to leave.<sup>47</sup> When Grey refused, the men, including recently elected New Orleans Auxiliary Bishop Harold Perry, engaged the twenty-five year old Mercy sister in a heated debate about why she as a “sister” should leave.<sup>48</sup> When Grey proceeded to hold her own against the men, the group begrudgingly voted to permit her to stay though in an unofficial capacity like Davis. As such, Grey was not allowed to be recorded in the meeting’s minutes or address the group formally. Sister M. Martin de Porres was also not allowed to vote when the priests’ eventually drafted their historic statement to the nation’s bishops in which they declared the Catholic Church as “primarily a white racist institution” and called for greater decision-making and authority in the black community among many other things.<sup>49</sup> Nonetheless, Sister M. Martin de Porres’s presence at the first meeting of the Black Catholic Clergy Caucus proved to be pivotal, especially as the men present began to recount publicly their painful and humiliating experiences of discrimination and rejection in their respective orders and in the Church at large.

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<sup>46</sup> Joseph Davis, “The Beginning of the National Office for Black Catholics, 1971,” in *“Stamped with the Image of God”*: African Americans as God’s Image in Black, edited by Cyprian Davis, O.S.P. and Jamie Phelps, O.P. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 118.

<sup>47</sup>Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey, R.S.M., “Ejection of Whites from Black Sisters’ Conference,” unpublished copy, ca. August 1968, in NBSC Papers, MUSCA. According to Grey, Father Malette left the caucus with a smile on his face, remarking, “I expected this.”

<sup>48</sup> Grey, interview by author. See also Harris, *The Sisters*, 255.

<sup>49</sup> “A Statement of the Black Catholic Clergy Caucus, 1968” in *“Stamped with the Image of God”*: African Americans as God’s Image in Black, edited by Cyprian Davis and Jamie Phelps (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003) 111-114. See also “Negro Priests Assail Catholic Church as Racist,” *New York Times*, April 19, 1968, 39.

For Sister M. Martin de Porres, listening to the gut-wrenching personal testimonies of her male counterparts was a consciousness-raising experience.<sup>50</sup> It also prompted Grey to challenge the men to think more broadly about their demands for black leadership and self-determination in the Church. Indeed, clergymen's stories were all too familiar to the young Mercy sister, and she reasoned that most of the nation's black sisters, if given the same platform, would testify to enduring similar abuses. Moreover, Grey feared that without the support and efforts of black sisters, who she guessed outnumbered black priests significantly, the black priests' caucus might prove ineffective in their inaugural bid to wrest power from the all-white hierarchy. Reflecting on her presence at the founding of the Black Catholic Clergy Caucus a few years later, Sister Martin de Porres stated:

I was the only sister in attendance. I got up and suggested they open the caucus to sisters and allow us to participate in it fully. I pointed out that there are too few black priests and too few black Catholics in the teaching body of the hierarchy. For this reason the black priests ought to combine forces with us and that maybe if this happens, our power will begin to be heard in the hierarchy. Well, it caused quite a stir, because they had a black male and a black female hangup. I challenged them very openly on the matter, and I accused them of prejudice against their own women and of allowing themselves to be so dominated by their prejudices that they were acting irresponsibly toward the black people.<sup>51</sup>

Although an informal vote was subsequently taken to appease Sister M. Martin de Porres, the vast majority of priests present voted against the inclusion of sisters in the caucus. After the vote though, one priest supportive of Grey suggested that she organize the nation's black sisters in a similar fashion, which she now considered given the priests' exclusive caucus.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Grey, interview by author.

<sup>51</sup> Harris, *The Sisters*, 255.

<sup>52</sup> Grey, interview by author. See also Harris, *Sisters*, 255, Bryan, "History of the National Black Sisters' Conference," 2-9, and M. Shawn Copeland, "A Cadre of Women Religious Committed to Black Liberation: The National Black Sisters' Conference," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 14 (Winter 1996): 121-144.

Upon her return to Pittsburgh, Sister M. Martin de Porres immediately requested permission from her superior to begin organizing a weeklong gathering of the nation's black Catholic sisters, to which Mother Thomas Aquinas Carroll agreed. To further express her support, Carroll offered the facilities of the order's Mount Mercy College to host the conference. Unlike the priests, Grey believed that a conference would be a better fit than a caucus because it would be "educational" in nature.<sup>53</sup> In a clear change in official Church posture toward the black liberation movement, Grey also received written endorsements of support for the first National Black Sisters' Conference from Mother Mary Omer, S.C., the president of the Conference of Major Superiors of Women (which became the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in 1971) and Pittsburgh Bishop John J. Wright, who also served as chairman of the National Bishops Social Action Commission on Human Relations.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of King's assassination, a handful of white Church leaders demonstrated a sincere willingness to accept and support black leadership and black-led racial justice initiatives in an effort to remedy America's racial crisis. Grey also soon received the support and assistance of another pioneering Pittsburgh black nun, Vincentian Sister of Charity Mary Julian (Norma Fae) Griffin, who had returned to the city on summer break from her teaching position in Montgomery, Alabama.<sup>55</sup>

In her inaugural letter sent to the superiors of the nation's Catholic sisterhoods in early May of 1968, Sister M. Martin de Porres stressed the importance and necessity of

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<sup>53</sup> Mary Lou Berger, "Denies Black Nuns' Meeting a 'Caucus,'" *Pittsburgh Catholic*, July 1968, copy in NBSC papers, MUSCA.

<sup>54</sup> "Black Nuns Schedule Pittsburgh Caucus; Bishop Wright, Mother Omer Support It," *National Catholic Reporter*, July 3, 1968, 2.

<sup>55</sup> "Black Nuns Schedule Pittsburgh Caucus," 2. See also Grey, interview by author and "Sister Mary Julian Griffin, V.S.C." File, AAS.

the first National Black Sisters' Conference in the wake of King's assassination and the formation of the Black Catholic Clergy Caucus a month earlier. She wrote, "The Negro priests strongly advised me to do something to bring all the Negro sisters in the United States together in order to evaluate the role of Negro sisters within the Church and their respective communities, to deepen their understanding of themselves and their people, and to determine more effective ways to contribute to the solution of America's racial problem."<sup>56</sup> In particular, Grey emphasized that black sisters had to "support each other and understand [black] people's position if [they were] ever to remain loyal members of [their] congregations."<sup>57</sup>

In a follow-up letter to those sisters who committed to the national meeting by early June 1968, Sister M. Martin de Porres wrote, "I feel that we Negro religious women must use every ounce of our strength to help our people, our sisters, the parochial school, and the priests in parish work to actualize brotherhood."<sup>58</sup> Fearful of the reality of the Catholic Church's waning interest and credibility in black communities, especially in the inner city, Grey expressed hope that the actions and influence of black sisters could help to salvage the Church's reputation in the black freedom struggle and the African-American community at large. She also recognized how important it was for the National Black Sisters' Conference and its goals to remain firmly in the possession of black sisters without white oversight. "Many Mothers General, whether they have Negro sisters or not, have expressed in letters that they feel this should be a permanent conference," Sister M.

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<sup>56</sup> "Black Nuns Schedule Pittsburgh Caucus," 2.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Sister Martin de Porres Grey, "Follow-up Letter for Upcoming First NBSC," ca. July 1968 in personal collection of Sister Antona Ebo.

Martin de Porres wrote. “Of course, all of this and more will be up to the decision of us all.”<sup>59</sup>

Although a significant number of congregations responded positively to the idea of the National Black Sisters’ Conference and even sent donations to help finance the first gathering, most Mothers General expressed deep, though unsubstantiated, suspicions about the endeavor. Of the six hundred and thirty-three letters that Sister M. Martin de Porres sent out, only 200 major superiors responded, and many of the letters that Grey received were outright hostile. Several white superiors accused Sister M. Martin de Porres of attempting to polarize the Catholic community along racial lines and refused to send any delegates to the first gathering.<sup>60</sup> Unsurprisingly, the majority of those superiors did not have any black members to send. Specifically, of the 200 superiors who replied to Grey, one-third had no black congregational members.<sup>61</sup> Even in cases in which superiors expressed favorable opinions of the NBSC, their correspondence with Grey often revealed the profound racial tensions that existed within their respective communities.

For example, in several letters, superiors noted that though they would gladly send delegates to the NBSC, if they only had a Negro sister to send. In many instances, these communities had lost their one and only Negro sister in the wake of King’s assassination. In a letter dated June 21, 1968, for example, Mother M. Florence of the Sisters of Divine Providence in Kingston, Massachusetts wrote, “I would have been as a

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<sup>59</sup> Sister Martin de Porres Grey, “Follow-up Letter for Upcoming First NBSC,” ca. July 1968 in personal collection of Sister Antona Ebo.

<sup>60</sup> Grey, interview by author. See also John C. Haughey, “Black Sisters Become Soul Sisters,” *America*, August 2, 1969, 67, Bryan, *History of the National Black Sister’ Conference*, 6, and Harris, *Sisters*, 252-53.

<sup>61</sup> Haughey, “Black Sisters Become Soul Sisters,” 67.

happy and proud to send our one and only Negro Sister to the Conference (Aug. 18-24) but S. Mary Rose left the Community last week. Sister seemed happy but she told me she really was not and she wanted a family of her own. I asked Sister to send some other girls to us for we feel there is a gap here which we do not want.”<sup>62</sup> In a similar vein, Sister Mary Daniel, provincial of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur in Ilchester, Maryland, applauded Sister Martin de Porres in her endeavor as the superior believed that it would “result in much good for the cause of the racial justice.” However, she wrote, “We do not have any members who qualify as Black Sisters and this I regret exceedingly. We did have one Sister but she left our community about a month ago.”<sup>63</sup>

Some letters revealed that informal racial barriers continued to bar the entry of qualified black Catholic women and girls into historically-white congregations in the United States. In a letter to Grey dated June 21, 1968, for example, Sister M. Catalina of the Sisters of Saint Joseph in Milton, Massachusetts wrote, “We do not have any Negro Sisters in our Community, Sister. This does not mean that we would not accept them, however. We did have two Negro applicants, but neither of them passed the physical examination.”<sup>64</sup> Other communities such as the Sisters of Charity (SC) in Emmitsburg, Maryland, and the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus in Rye, New York, made a point to note that although they did not have Negro sisters in their U.S. congregations, they did have several in their African congregations.<sup>65</sup> Mother Mary Helena Barnes, S.H.C.J.,

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<sup>62</sup> M. Mary Florence to Sister M. Martin de Porres, R.S.M., June 21, 1968, NBSC President Correspondence, 1968, NBSC Papers in MUSCA.

<sup>63</sup> Sister Mary Danie, SND to Sister M. Martin de Porres, R.S.M., June 26, 1968, NBSC President Correspondence, 1968, MUSCA.

<sup>64</sup> Sister M. Catalina to Sister M. Martin de Porres, June 21, 1968, NBSC President Correspondence, 1968, MUSCA.

<sup>65</sup> Sister Eulalia to Sister M. Martin de Porres, R.S.M., July 1, 1968 and Mother Mary Helena Barnes, S.H.C.J. to Sister M. Martin de Porres, R.S.M., July 8, 1968, NBSC President Correspondence, 1968, MUSCA.

wrote, “Sad to say, we do not have any Negro Sisters in our Society. We have two Nigerian Novices in our Noviceship in Rosemont, Pennsylvania, but they will be returning to Nigeria when they are professed. We have fifty Sisters of our Society in Nigeria and Ghana, and we have established two native sisterhoods there.”<sup>66</sup>

Other letters received revealed that many black sisters in white orders continued to deny and degrade their black heritage even in the wake of the rising mantra of “Black is Beautiful.” In her letter to Grey, Mother M. Euphrasia of the Religious Sisters of Mercy in Brooklyn, New York, for example, noted that none of her members classified themselves as “Negro,” though she and others considered two of them to be so. The two members in question were Panamanian and had visible African heritage. However, Mother M. Euphrasia noted, “[T]hey look upon themselves as Spanish and not Negro. Actually, they are a combination of Indian, Chinese and Spanish, but dark enough to be considered here as Negro.” Mother M. Euphrasia also noted that the two sisters were junior members and “did not wish to be considered part of this Conference.”<sup>67</sup>

While one cannot say for sure whether the two Panamanian Mercy sisters wanted to take part in the NBSC, many white superiors with black sisters in their communities, especially those who were activist-oriented, deliberately withheld news of the impending meeting from their black members.<sup>68</sup> For example, the superior of the Sisters of St. Mary (SSM) in Saint Louis, one of the first white communities to break the color barrier in the twentieth century, did not respond to any of Grey’s correspondence or inform the multiple black sisters in her community of the upcoming conference. In fact, Selma

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<sup>66</sup> Mother Mary Helena Barnes, S.H.C.J. to Sister M. Martin de Porres, R.S.M., July 8, 1968.

<sup>67</sup> Mother M. Euphrasia to Sister M. Martin de Porres, R.S.M., June 21, 1968, NBSC President Correspondence, 1968, MUSC.

<sup>68</sup> Grey, interview by author. See also Haughey, “Black Sisters Become Soul Sisters,” 67.

march veteran Mary Antona Ebo, S.S.M. only learned about the first NBSC by chance while interviewing for a job with the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice in Chicago. Although Ebo lost out on the position to a white sister, a white priest there informed her of the upcoming NBSC. Shocked, but not surprised, Ebo immediately wrote to her superior and confronted her about the matter. She also informed the eight other black sisters in her community about the meeting and soon contacted Sister M. Martin de Porres to secure a spot on the NBSC speakers' platform.<sup>69</sup>

Such clear resistance from white superiors matched with the persistence of the cloister mentality among many black sisters undoubtedly limited the reach of the NBSC even before its inception. Equally if not more troubling to Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey, however, was the mounting resistance to the NBSC from black sisterhoods, whose members accounted for over three-fourths of the total national population of black sisters.<sup>70</sup> Although several members of black orders responded publicly and passionately to King's assassination and its violent aftermath, most black leadership councils remained opposed to their members' full engagement with the black revolution. This was especially true of the Sisters of the Holy Family in New Orleans and the Franciscan Handmaids of the Most Pure Heart of Mary in Harlem, whose fiercely conservative and color conscious Creole superior generals publicly opposed black power.

In the case of the Holy Family Sisters, Mother Marie Anselm Duffel did not initially respond to the letter announcing the NBSC. After receiving Grey's follow-up letter in June, Mother Marie Anselm finally responded and stated that she would send just

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<sup>69</sup> Ebo, interview by author. See also Typed Transcript of Sister Mary Antona Ebo, S.S.M., "Contemporary Opportunities and Limitations of the Black Sister in a White Community to Promote Racial Solidarity," Talk from First NBSC, NBSC Papers, MUSCA.

<sup>70</sup> "Negro Nuns in the U.S.A." *Divine Word Messenger* (June 1962): 184-85.

one sister from her community, which then was largest congregation of black sisters in the United States.<sup>71</sup> And to the great disappointment and quiet fury of many activist-oriented Holy Family Sisters, Mother Anselm selected Sister Mary Letitia Senegal, a politically conservative, older Creole sister, to serve as the community's representative.<sup>72</sup> Following an uproar from several Holy Family Sisters who wanted to participate in the NBSC and pressure from local black and white priests, Mother Anselm selected Sister Sylvia Thibodeaux, still stationed in Tulsa, to serve as a second delegate to the first National Black Sisters Conference.<sup>73</sup>

Opposition to the impending NBSC meeting and black sisters' growing desire for leadership in the freedom struggle also emanated from white sisters active in the Church's racial justice apostolate. Following her participation in black priests' caucus, Sister M. Martin de Porres received special release from her duties to become an active and visible presence in black liberation efforts. In addition to serving on the executive council of Pittsburgh's Black United Front, coordinating a summer Upward Bound college-preparatory program for underprivileged youth, and organizing a race relations workshop for students at Mount Mercy in the months leading up to the conference, Grey began attending local and national meetings aimed at nurturing the post-conciliar nun, especially in the black revolution.<sup>74</sup> In July 1968, for example, Grey attended a national conference in Chicago organized and sponsored by the Department of Educational

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<sup>71</sup> Mother Marie Anselm, S.S.F. to Sister Martin de Porres, R.S.M., June 25, 1968, NBSC President Correspondence, NBSC Papers, MUSCA. Records from The Annual Catholic Directory reveal that the SSF surpassed the OSP as the largest black sisterhood in the United States between 1955 and 1965. The SSF remain the largest black congregation in the U.S.

<sup>72</sup> Barial, interview by author. See also Thibodeaux, interview by author.

<sup>73</sup> Goudeaux and Barial, interviews by author. See also Fr. James F. LaChapelle, S.V.D. to Sister M. Martin de Porres, July 1, 1968; Edwin Cabey to Sister M. Martin de Porres, July 8 and 22, 1968; and Richard F. Wagner, S.S.J. to Sister Martin de Porres, July 8 and 15, 1968.

<sup>74</sup> Grey, interview by author. See also Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey's "CV," January 1972, NBSC Papers.

Services. The theme of the sisters' conference was "New Works of New Nuns."<sup>75</sup> Under the leadership since 1965 of white School Sister of Notre Dame Mary Peter (Margaret) Traxler, the DES had become the most prominent sister-led racial justice organization in the Church. It had also channeled hundreds of sisters into the black freedom struggle.<sup>76</sup> However, the intractability of racism and white supremacy in the Church, and especially among religious, had profoundly limited the DES's efforts and initiatives from the very beginning.

Thus, when Sister M. Martin de Porres voiced her concerns about the ongoing reality of racism and discrimination in the Church and the profound limitations that it placed on black sisters active in the black freedom struggle at the July conference, many of the white sister-participants feigned indignation. Of particular concern to Grey was the fact that many of the white sisters present presumed to speak about the black experience from a position of moral superiority and frequently disregarded black humanity. For Grey, black people could and did speak for themselves, and black sisters had invaluable lessons and expertise to offer to white sisters active in the racial justice apostolate. Yet, many whites, especially sisters, refused to listen and accept them as equals. At the conference, Grey also had an especially tense encounter with DES leader and conference organizer Sister Mary Peter Traxler, one that Grey later described as laced with racial paternalism.<sup>77</sup> Whatever the specifics of the matter, it is clear that after the conference Traxler went so far as to give a grossly misleading account of Grey's comments to the national Catholic press. Specifically, Traxler told a reporter for the *National Register* that

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<sup>75</sup> Koehlinger, *New Nuns*, 100. See also James R. Sena, "'Nun Power' - New Course Charted," *The National Register* 44( July 21, 1968), copy in NBSC Papers, MUSCA.

<sup>76</sup> Koehlinger, *New Nuns*, 80.

<sup>77</sup> Grey, interview by author.

“the black militant nun [referring to Sister M. Martin de Porres] questions white Sisters teaching black children, resents white nurses nursing black patients.”<sup>78</sup> Traxler also stated that Grey told the audience of white sisters to get out of the “black ghetto” without just cause.<sup>79</sup> Traxler’s statements and the reporter’s failure to solicit a direct quote from Sister M. Martin de Porres resulted in a substantial national controversy for the young Mercy sister, still in the midst of soliciting support for her conference.<sup>80</sup> Although Traxler would eventually retract her statement and express dismay at what she then considered “unintended harshness,” a significant amount of damage was already done as a few white superiors, who were initially favorable to NBSC, threatened to rescind their support after reading the article. Grey also faced a substantial backlash within her own community.<sup>81</sup>

Despite such challenges, Grey continued organizing and recruiting speakers for the first NBSC meeting. Interestingly, efforts by white sisters to discredit Grey and the NBSC in the press actually helped to spread the word about the meeting, which soon reached a substantial number of black sisters. In one letter that Sister Martin de Porres received, a black sister wrote:

I feel it is so very important right now to witness to our own people that we are ‘HERE’ and that we do ‘CARE’ and that we are ‘AWARE.’ Our black students on campus have let me know that they do not feel we are doing much for the cause. May we make all aware that we will be heard from in the future and that dreams for a whole America are held sacred by the black religious of America. May God prosper what you have so bravely begun.<sup>82</sup>

In another letter that reveals the Pan-African reach of the first NBSC, a black nun from Nairobi, Kenya wrote:

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<sup>78</sup> Sena, “‘Nun Power’- New Course Charted.”

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Sister M. Martin de Porres, R.S.M. to Editors of the Denver Catholic Register, July 23, 1968, NBSC Papers.

<sup>81</sup> Sister Mary Peter Traxler, S.S.N.D. to Editor, Denver Register, July 22, 1968, NBSC Papers. See also Sister Christina Marie, “RSM Memo Re: July 21 article Denver *Register*,” July 24, 1968; Sister Stella Maria, S.B.S. to Sister Martin de Porres, July 22, 1968; Mother M. Claudia to Sister M. Martin de Porres, R.S.M., August 5, 1968, NBSC Papers, MUSCA.

<sup>82</sup> Bryan, *History of the NBSC*, 5.

I am an African sister studying in the United States. My order is a pure African order, and since I will be going back to teach, I am sure the experience with the Afro-American sisters and a share in their thoughts and problems will be very helpful to me in my future work...Please remember to reserve a place for me.<sup>83</sup>

Such enthusiastic responses from black sisters helped to buoy meeting preparations when negative responses were received, and all demonstrated to Sister M. Martin de Porres the critical necessity of the political organization of the nation's black sisters. The diverse responses also revealed to Grey the potentially dangerous path upon which she had set course. Nonetheless, she marched forward with her plans, and by the middle of August, everything was in place.

On Sunday, August 17, 1968, 155 black Catholic sisters representing 79 congregations, 45 U.S. cities, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the newly independent East African nations of Uganda and Kenya arrived at Mount Mercy College in downtown Pittsburgh for the first National Black Sisters' Conference.<sup>84</sup> It marked the first time in their 144-year old history in the United States that black Catholic sisters had gathered on a national stage to confront and protest racism, and the weeklong meeting proved to be a powerful "consciousness-raising" event. Save for the recent conciliar-mandated chapter meetings and previous anniversary celebrations of the Oblate Sisters of Providence and Sisters of the Holy Family, never before had so many black sisters been gathered in one space. For black sisters in historically white orders, the simple gathering of so many black sisters was exhilarating. As one sister stated, "I never knew there were so many black Sisters in this country."<sup>85</sup> Indeed, some black sisters in white communities had believed that they were the only black sister in the entire country prior to learning about

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<sup>83</sup> Bryan, *History of the NBSC*, 5.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> Mary Lou Berger, "Black Nuns Ponder Their Responsibilities," *Pittsburgh Catholic*, August 23, 1968, copy in NBSC Papers, MUSCA.

the NBSC.<sup>86</sup> Others had mistakenly thought they were the only black sister in their respective locales. For example, eight black sister-delegates from the Chicago area only learned of each other's existence through their participation in the first NBSC.<sup>87</sup> One of the two African delegates, who was the superior of her order back in Kenya, similarly confessed that she "had only come into contact with one black sister and one black priest in her travels across the U.S." prior to attending the NBSC.<sup>88</sup> Even Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey had only learned of the existence of the nation's black sisterhoods two years earlier after meeting Holy Family Sister Sylvia Thibodeaux at a talk by black power advocate Stokely Carmichael at St. Vincent College in Latrobe, Pennsylvania.<sup>89</sup>

For members of black orders, the founding meeting of the NBSC was also profound and inspirational. Although the nation's black superior generals were initially hesitant about permitting their members to participate, all three communities sent delegates to the founding meeting. Oblate Superior General Mother Mary of Good Counsel (Helena Mercedes) Baptiste, a dark-skinned New Orleanian Creole, sent the largest delegation of sisters (29) from any community, black or white.<sup>90</sup> The predominantly white Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament sent the second largest contingent of black sisters (27).<sup>91</sup> Still highly suspicious of the utility of the NBSC, Franciscan Handmaid Superior General Mother Miriam Cecilia Cormier, an extremely light-skinned New Orleanian Creole, sent two delegates, while Holy Family Superior General Mother

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<sup>86</sup> Grey, interview by author.

<sup>87</sup> "Promoting the Black Sister's Voice," *Crosswinds*, November 1968, copy in NBSC Papers, MUSCA.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Grey and Thibodeaux, interviews by author.

<sup>90</sup> "First National Black Sisters' Conference: Projected Membership," Program, NBSC Papers. Ebo, interview by author.

<sup>91</sup> Grey, interview by author. See also Harris, *Sisters*, 256 and Sister Louis Marie Bryan, S.C., D.S.W., *All Along the Way: Gifts, Blessings, and Graces from Our Loving God* (Clifton Corners, NY: Jubilee Studio, 2010), 102-106.

Mary Anselm Duffel, also an extremely light-skinned New Orleanian Creole, ultimately sent just one delegate.<sup>92</sup> (Although Holy Family Sister Sylvia Thibodeaux had been given permission to attend the inaugural NBSC, difficulties in Tulsa had precluded her participation.<sup>93</sup>) While the Oblates sent delegates who had expressed interest or been active in the public fight for racial justice in some fashion, the Holy Family and Handmaid superiors deliberately sent delegates who were politically conservative. Handmaids Loretta Theresa Richards and Jacinta Marie, for example, were selected by FHM superior Mother Miriam Cecilia to attend the inaugural NBSC specifically because they were older and conservative. “I was in my forties, and I wasn’t particularly outspoken about political matters at that point in my life,” Richards later reflected.<sup>94</sup> Richards also noted that the members of her community were not watching television or reading the newspaper on a regular basis back then, so it had been extremely difficult to stay informed about the black freedom struggle. Indeed, Richards confessed that she only knew who Malcolm X was at that point in her life because she remembered seeing him preaching on the streets of Harlem.<sup>95</sup>

Yet, Sister Loretta Theresa’s participation in the founding NBSC served as a powerful political awakening, and her positive interactions with black sisters in white orders played a key role. “The black sisters in white communities treated us [from the black orders] with such reverence,” Richards reflected.<sup>96</sup> Richards, a descendant of Garveyites, had been educated by white sisters in Harlem for all of her life, but she,

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<sup>92</sup> Ebo, interview by author. “Projected Membership.”

<sup>93</sup> Sister Sylvia Thibodeaux to S. M. Martin de Porres Grey, R.S.M., n.d. but likely ca. February 20, 1969, NBSC President’s Correspondence, MUSCA

<sup>94</sup> Sister Loretta Theresa Richards, F.H.M., interview by author, digital recording, December 8, 2009.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

unlike many of her black schoolmates who desired to become religious, had purposefully chosen to enter a black order. “My call was always to a black order,” Richards reflected.<sup>97</sup> Yet, she noted that many of her friends had looked upon the black sisterhoods with derision and suffered countless rejections and indignities while attempting to enter white orders in the New York metropolitan area. Having always wondered what happened to her former classmates who were able to gain admission into white communities, Richards soon learned as scores of NBSC delegates began to testify publicly about the racist abuses to which they were subjected in their respective congregations. Racist insults and bullying suffered in silence, the pressure to deny one’s racial and cultural heritage, and the depressing isolation of being the only or one of a few blacks in a white congregation often hostile to black freedom were common themes among the sisters’ testimonies during the NBSC sessions. And, Sister Loretta Theresa, deeply moved by the experiences of her peers, felt a keen responsibility as a member of a black order to support those in hostile white communities in any way that she could. She also resolved to go back to her community and force the issue before her conservative superiors.<sup>98</sup>

Most of the meeting’s attendees were young religious sisters in their twenties. Among the dozens of activists, educators, professionals, and religious leaders who gave presentations at the first NBSC meeting were Father Lawrence Lucas, vice president of the Black Catholic Clergy Caucus, noted Black psychologist Dr. Alvin Poussaint, Pittsburgh Mercy Superior and former Mount Mercy College present Mother Thomas Aquinas, Selma voting rights march participant Sister Antona Ebo, S.S.M., Oblate Sister

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<sup>97</sup> Richards, interview by author.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

of Providence Mary Deborah Johnson, and Dr. Nathan Wright Jr., the urban affairs director for the Archdiocese of Newark, New Jersey.<sup>99</sup> In a rather tense moment during the first day of sessions, Wright, who gave the conference's introductory remarks in a lecture entitled, "Spirit, Mood and Necessity of Black Power to Realize Authentic Christian Love," asked all of the whites not scheduled to speak, including local reporters, activists, and observers, to exit. Although all official NBSC press announcements and invitations had clearly stated that most sessions would be closed to white observers, some whites either fretful or doubtful of black autonomy deliberately ignored these directives.<sup>100</sup> While some black sisters initially protested the exclusion of the white observers and reporters, a consensus was soon reached concluding that the desperate racial crisis in America and the long denial of black self-determination in the Catholic Church demanded that black sisters decide for themselves their next course of action without the interference and surveillance of whites. Moreover, many of the participants agreed that certain aspects of their program needed to remain "family business" in order to insure candid and open discussions among the delegates.<sup>101</sup> (White observers were welcome to attend Sunday Mass, which featured Black gospel music, Bongo drums, and other Africa-inspired cultural forms as well as the education panels held on Thursday.<sup>102</sup>) Even in her talk, "Black Religious Women in the Religious Life of the Church Today,"

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<sup>99</sup> Mary Lou Burger, "Most of Meetings Limited to Blacks," in *Pittsburgh Catholic*, August 23, 1968, in personal collection of Sister Antona Ebo. See also, "Conference Highlights," in Personal Collection of Sister Antona Ebo; and "Negro Nuns Hold National Conference: Whites Are Ejected; Speaker Urges Strength in Unity," *Saint Louis Review*, ca. early September 1968 in personal collection of Sister Antona Ebo.

<sup>100</sup> Grey, "Ejection of Whites." See also *Crux of the News*, June 24, 1968, copy in NBSC Papers, MUSCA.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., "Conference Highlights," "Most of Meetings Limited to Blacks," and "Negro Nuns Hold National Conference," 10.

<sup>102</sup> Grey, "Ejection of White." See also "Conference Highlights," and "First National Black Sisters' Conference," Program in NBSC Papers.

Mother Thomas Aquinas Carroll stressed the need for the NBSC to remain autonomous and encouraged the black sisters present to take the lead in anti-racist struggles in the Catholic Church.<sup>103</sup>

Yet, the long and historic marginalization of black sisters in the Church, the persistence of the cloister mentality, and the ongoing reality of racism left many black sisters feeling ill-equipped even to talk about many of the issues put forth at the first NBSC. Unsurprisingly then, “Black is beautiful” was a revolutionary concept for many of the delegates, particularly among older sisters and those in white communities, who had long been forced to maintain a certain level of invisibility in their orders and shun racial consciousness and pride, much less formal protest. Even Selma march veteran Sister Antona Ebo, who was forty-four years old at the first NBSC gathering, had been initially uncomfortable with Sister M. Martin de Porres’s use of the term “Black” when she first learned about the conference. “I wasn’t too sure about this ‘Black is Beautiful’ stuff,” she recalled. “I was a Negro and proud but I was told growing up that black was bad.”<sup>104</sup> However, upon her arrival at Mount Mercy, Sister Mary Antona’s fears were quickly assuaged.

Sister Louis Marie (Beryl) Bryan, a member of the Sisters of Charity of Convent Station, New Jersey and a doctoral candidate in social welfare at Columbia University at the time, remembered experiencing a similar level of discomfort with the term “Black” during the first NBSC. In her address as NBSC Vice-President two years later, Sister Louis Marie embarrassingly recalled, “[t]hose of you who attended the 1968 meeting in Pittsburgh might remember that even during the first few days there I had difficulty

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<sup>103</sup> “Conference Highlights,” Mary Lou Berger, “Black Nuns Ponder Their Responsibilities,” *Pittsburgh Catholic* August 23, 1968, 2-3.

<sup>104</sup> Ebo, interview by author.

saying or thinking ‘black’ instead of ‘Negro’ or ‘colored.’ I shall never forget my own Freudian slip, booming out over the microphone trying to explain where I was coming from, and saying instead, ‘I am a white sister from a white community.’”<sup>105</sup> Delegates from black orders also testified to the existence of a culture of self-hatred in the nation’s black sisterhoods. In particular, a few delegates directed attention to the issue of colorism in the Holy Family Sisters, and the fact that many light-skinned Afro-Creole sisters discriminated against black Anglo sisters and students solely on the basis on color.<sup>106</sup> Such examples of black sisters initially being uncomfortable with the concept of “Blackness” and the tensions existing around color in some black communities reveal the deep level to which black self-hatred was cultivated and re-enforced in the Catholic Church. Yet, their public testimonies set into motion the process by which black sisters could challenge their marginalization and the ongoing reality of racism.

As the weeklong conference came to its conclusion, the 155 NBSC delegates recognized the great need to capture the spirit of the moment and to transform the meeting into an institution from which to launch a national program of social justice and awareness led by black sisters. The delegates voted overwhelmingly to make the NBSC a permanent organization and conference, established four regional divisions, and elected nine black sisters to an executive board, three of whom were always to be representatives from the nation’s historically black congregations.<sup>107</sup> The delegates also unanimously

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<sup>105</sup> Ebo, interview by author. See also “History of the National Black Sisters’ Conference,” 5; Sister Louis Marie Bryan, S.C., D.S.W., *All Along the Way: Gifts, Blessings, and Graces from Our Loving God* (Clifton Corners, NY: Jubilee Studio, 2010), 102-106.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> “NBSC Press Release, August 26, 1968” in personal collection of Sister Antona Ebo. First members elected to the NBSC executive board: Sister Gregory Fewes, O.S.F., School Sisters of St. Francis, Chicago, IL; Sister M. Letitia Senegal, S.S.F., Sisters of the Holy Family, New Orleans, LA; Sister Joyce Williams, Order of St. Benedict, Chicago, IL; Sister Jacinta Marie, F.H.M., Franciscan Handmaids of Mary, New York, NY; Sister M. Francesca Thompson, O.S.F., Sisters of St. Francis, Indianapolis, Indiana;

elected Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey to serve as the NBSC's first president. A press release prepared by the NBSC executive board soon announced, "Black Sisters Declare: 'BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL.'"<sup>108</sup> In one of the few interviews given to reporters at the conclusion of the conference, Sister M. Martin de Porres specifically celebrated the unique gifts of the nation's black sisters and urged religious congregations to become truly relevant or risk further alienating or even losing their black members. "It was unbelievable the many talents that were represented in this group," Sister M. Martin de Porres stated. "For so many of them it was the first time they had been sent to represent their communities [in any capacity]...I thought to myself how few religious communities are taking advantage of this great resource of black sisters. I also thought of how easy it can be for a black sister in a white community to lose her identity."<sup>109</sup>

With the tremendous success of the first National Black Sisters' Conference a reality, Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey could breathe a quick sigh of relief and celebrate—if only briefly. After all, she had been proven right. Not only was there a significant cadre of black religious sisters desperate and ready to become active in the black freedom struggle, but many were also prepared to risk disobedience and more in order to confront racism and sexism in the Church. With a national organization finally in place that recognized and truly valued the unique talents and skills that they possessed, black sisters could finally embark on a public campaign of racial justice without the constraints and oversight of paternalistic whites and even black religious men. However,

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Sister M. Janvier, C.R. Congregation of Most Holy Rosary, Chicago, IL; Sister M. Marcellina, O.S.P., Oblate Sisters of Providence, Baltimore, MD; Sister M. Antona, S.S.M. Sisters of St. Mary of the Third Order of St. Francis, Baraboo, WI; Sister Ann Barbara, S.C.N., Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, Louisville, KY. Dr. Vincent Harding also briefly served on the board.

<sup>108</sup> "NBSC Press Release."

<sup>109</sup> "Promoting the Black Sisters' Voice," 81.

decades of racist abuse and suppression in convents across the United States mandated that NBSC members first re-educate and re-orient themselves to a black perspective in order to become truly effective leaders in the black revolution. They also had to address immediately the growing exodus of black sisters from religious life then well under way. As Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey put it, “The National Black Sisters’ Conference is interested in the survival of black nuns, first, to service the black kingdom in the liberation process, and secondly, to bring black resources and perspective to a white church.”<sup>110</sup>

### **Finding Identity, Fighting the Exodus**

Among the immediate goals of the newly-organized National Black Sisters’ Conference was the need to reconfigure the image of the black Catholic sister in the minds of Americans, especially the black protest community. During one of the many lively discussions that took place at the inaugural meeting in 1968, panelist Johnny Clark, a black undergraduate student at the University of Pittsburgh, questioned black sisters’ relevance to the black liberation struggle.<sup>111</sup> Referencing two painful encounters that he had while attempting to introduce himself to black sisters that he encountered, Clark publicly lambasted black sisters, whom he argued continued to use their habit to distance themselves from non-Catholics, especially young black men.<sup>112</sup> Although the black sisters and priests present challenged Clark to consider black sisters’ long history of service to the black community, several admitted that Clark’s animosity was rooted in a

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<sup>110</sup> “NBSC Confidential Memo to Members,” September 1, 1971, 1.

<sup>111</sup> “An Awakening of Black Nun Power: Catholic Sisters Caucus at Pittsburgh Confab,” *Ebony*, (1968), 44-48.

<sup>112</sup> Typed Transcript of Talk by Johnny Clark on “Thursday Panel,” in NBSC Papers. See also, “An Awakening of Black Nun Power.”

deep and painful truth. By embracing the religious state in the racist U.S. Catholic Church, black sisters and priests had often been forced to turn their backs on the African-American community in profound ways. In particular, many black religious had become alienated from the black community and culture and acclimated to the unholy discrimination of their Church. Some black delegates from white orders, for example, admitted that they had deliberately sought to distance themselves from the black community and black culture in order to appear “white” in the minds of their peers.<sup>113</sup> Some NBSC delegates even admitted that they had previously looked down on sisters in black orders and refused to acknowledge black congregational members when they met encountered them in public spaces.<sup>114</sup> Similarly, black sisters in black communities noted their ambivalent feelings about black sisters in white orders, especially since most of them had entered black communities directly as a result of being barred from white sisterhoods. As Father Clarence Williams, a founder of the Black Catholic Clergy Caucus and early supporter of the National Black Sisters’ Conference, put it, “[W]e were in seminaries and convents where people accepted us as experiments usually because most places didn’t know if we could *have* black priests or black sisters... You were trying to be a credit to your race; you were trying be as white as possible in your diction, in your conduct.”<sup>115</sup>

Delegates to the Pittsburgh meeting also pointed out that the Catholic Church’s historically hostile posture toward African Americans had severely jeopardized its

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<sup>113</sup> Grey, interview by author.

<sup>114</sup>“Handwritten Notes from Black Sisters Conference Small Group Discussions, 8-20-1968,” NBSC Papers. See also Anthony Calypso, “The Real ‘Sister Act’: Black Nuns in America,” *The Griot*, August 26, 2009, <http://thegriot.com/2009/08/26/the-real-sister-acts-black-nuns-in-america/> (accessed on June 30, 2012).

<sup>115</sup> Smith and Feister, *Thea’s Song*, 103.

credibility among black people and remained a significant hindrance to black sisters' entry and acceptance into the public fight for racial justice. Benedictine Sister Joyce Williams, for example, testified to the cool reception that she had received from black teachers in Chicago when she became active in a summer inner-city education apostolate led by white sisters in 1968. Because Sister Joyce wore a veil and was a Catholic sister, the black teachers wholeheartedly believed that she could not be fully trusted or considered really black. Understanding the root of that mistrust, Williams made a point to distinguish herself from the paternalistic and often offensive white sisters with whom she worked, and it proved pivotal in her success in the project.<sup>116</sup> Because of their historic lack of visibility and leadership in civil rights campaigns, black sisters understood that they had to first demonstrate their sincere commitment to black liberation. In particular, they had to rehabilitate the image of the Catholic sister, and the Church at large, in the minds and hearts of most African Americans, who saw both entities as white and racist. Thus, NBSC members immediately focused on the task of promoting the image of the "new black sister" to the wider American audience and centering their voices and expertise in the racial justice apostolate in the Church.

Upon their return from the Pittsburgh meeting, NBSC delegates delivered formal reports to the superiors and leadership councils of their respective congregations detailing the aims, objectives, and necessity of their newly-formed organization. Most delegates also shared their conference experiences and thoughts on the black revolution with any member of their community willing to listen. Many did so in informal settings, such as in personal conversations with their community members during recreation time or over

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<sup>116</sup> Typed Transcript, "Reactors to 'The Contemporary Opportunities and Limitations of the Black Sisters in a White Community to Promote Racial Solidarity' Panel," NBSC Papers.

meals, and some took the opportunity to begin challenging the racism of their white peers, especially those whom they knew held racially derogatory and paternalistic views of blacks yet considered themselves experts on “ministering to the Negro.” For example, Sister M. Veronica, one of two African delegates to the first NBSC, specifically began public addressing the hypocrisy of many of the white sisters in her community that ministered in Africa. In a January 27, 1969 letter to Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey, she wrote:

I am now a bit more militant than I was before I attended the conference and I am proud of it. Some of the white sisters I live with were very happy that I came but others are very sorry that I was ever exposed to such things...I make it worse when they [ask] me if I think missionaries should be going to Africa and I tell them if they were going to preach Christ's love to the Africans, they should have stayed at home to teach their brothers how to love My Black brothers here and when all that is done they can go to Africa---charity starts at home. Allowing for individual differences, any-body who is over in Africa as a Missionary and lets black people be treated the way they have been and are still now here, I call her a hypocrite. I do not understand some of the American Christians. There is a parish here where the Pastor would rather throw a desk outside of the classroom than give it to a black child. Now what is that? There are days when I feel like abandoning my religious life but [it] is by the people like you that I want to join hands with because I believe that even though some are evil and ignorant many are good and fight for the right.<sup>117</sup>

Some delegates also shared their conference experiences and perspectives in formal presentations. For example, Sister of Saint Joseph Ann Benedict (Barbara Ann) Moore detailed her experiences at the first NBSC in a formal talk to over 100 guests during Avila College's home-coming celebration on October 6, 1968. For Moore, a nursing instructor at Avila, the Pittsburgh meeting had been inspirational. “It was a wonderful week of study, prayer and charity,” she stated. “We found a greater awareness of what it means to be black—to be ‘black and beautiful.’” Sister Ann Benedict also emphasized the positive and Christian aspects of black power to her white audience and

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<sup>117</sup> Sister M. Veronica to Sister [M.] Martin [de Porres], January 27, 1969, NBSC President's Correspondence, NBSC Papers, MUSCA.

cited the Catholic Church's failure to take a leading stand in the fight for racial justice as the major source of ongoing racial problems within Catholic boundaries.<sup>118</sup>

Local Catholic and secular newspapers across the country also published several feature stories documenting individual NBSC delegates' experiences at the historic Pittsburgh meeting in the weeks following the conference's conclusion. Because press access to the NBSC sessions had been severely circumscribed, individual sisters' stories often offered details about the conference that had been restricted to meeting participants. Charged with promoting the image of the "new black sister," delegates also used this unprecedented access to the media to present their own thoughts on racial justice, white racism, and the Catholic Church, often for the first time. While delegates generally highlighted the Christian foundations of black power and laid the problem of racism firmly at the footsteps of white America in their interviews, many also took these opportunities to declare their allegiance to the black liberation struggle publicly and unsparingly. "I really believe in [the] black front," Oblate Sister of Providence Mary Monica Dean told reporters from Washington's D.C. *Afro-American*. "I really found [the conference] a sincere searching for the truth—awakening young people to see that we must do some re-writing of history books to give us a feeling of pride in this country...before black and white can unite, it is necessary to have this new black liberation front."<sup>119</sup>

Feeling renewed in their calls to religious life and empowered by the unique sisterhood shared at the Pittsburgh meeting, many delegates also began requesting

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<sup>118</sup> "A Nun Probes Negro's Needs: Avila Nursing Instructor Tells of Black Sisters' Meeting: Talk at Home-Coming," *Kansas City Times*, October 7, 1968, copy in NBSC Papers. See "Negro Nun's View: White Racism Caused Black Power," copy, n.d. in NBSC Papers.

<sup>119</sup> "Nun Says: 'I Really Believe in Black Front,'" *Washington, D.C. Afro-American*, December 12, 1968, n.p., NBSC Papers, MUSCA.

permission to participate in the black liberation struggle—many for the first time. In several cases, this translated into organizing or becoming active in local Black Catholic lay and youth caucuses; requesting permanent transfers from their superiors to serve and minister in black communities; holding anti-racism and black studies workshops and seminars in their respective convents, parishes, and schools; and/or selling dashikis and other black-inspired goods to raise funds for the NBSC and the wider black Catholic movement. Some delegates also sought increased contact with the secular community and began attending meetings of prominent black freedom organizations, such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Congress of Racial Equality, and the Black Panther Party, as well as a host of local black freedom and community organizations. In Montgomery, Alabama, for example, Sister Beatrice (Tarcissius) Jeffries, S.B.S. joined Vincentian Sister of Charity Mary Julian Griffin in the Montgomery Improvement Association and its Project Blackout, an economic boycott of white-owned businesses in the city’s downtown district.<sup>120</sup> In Baltimore, Oblate Sister of Providence Mary Judith (Brenda Marie) Williams became active in a host of black protest and cultural organizations, included the Soul School, founded by Baltimore C.O.R.E. member Benjamin “Olugbala” McMillan. There, Sister Judith taught local youth black history as well “the artistic and literary contributions of black people, black consciousness, pride, the ‘collective psyche,’ and their relationship to black freedom.”<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> “Black Boycott in Alabama: Project Blackout,” *Signs of Soul* 1(December 1969): 3.

<sup>121</sup> Rhonda Y. Williams, “Black Women, Urban Politics, and Engendering Black Power,” in *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*, edited by Peniel Joseph (New York: Routledge, 2006), 86. The S.O.U.L. (Society of United Liberators, Inc.) School was founded by the Baltimore chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in 1966. For more information on the S.O.U.L. school, see Rhonda Y. Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women’s Struggles Against Urban Inequality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 187-89. See also Al Rutledge, “Militant Nun Leaves Convent,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, February 1, 1969, 1.

Black sisters in Detroit, under the leadership of Religious Sister of Mercy Mary Kimberley Clark, quickly emerged as one of the most active and visible regional black sisters' committees in the nation following the historic Pittsburgh meeting. On September 10, 1968, Sister Mary Kimberley sent out a letter inviting all 18 black sisters (representing seven communities) working in the Detroit area, one black priest, Father Donald Clark, and the archdiocese's one black major seminarian, Homer McClarty, to a meeting at St. Monica's Convent to coordinate efforts to unify themselves locally and chart a plan of action in the archdiocese.<sup>122</sup> Clark argued that black sisters had to help educate white religious to the plight of the black community. Noting that racism was "a white problem," Clark suggested that "the power of the Black Sisters in the Detroit Archdiocese could organize a program that would educate all of our Religious Sisters in the area."<sup>123</sup> She also argued that black sisters had to direct their own energies to helping solve black problems. "Being black, we are a part of the black revolution," Clark stated.<sup>124</sup> Soon thereafter, black sisters in communion with hundreds of black lay Catholics and clergy in Detroit gained substantial local and national attention through their participation in a host of local black protest organizations and when they launched coordinated sit-ins and pickets to protest the closing of the city's only black Catholic high school, St. Martin de Porres, in 1970.<sup>125</sup>

In the wake of the NBSC's formation, black sisters also emerged as the preferred sister-speakers on issues of racial justice in the Church. In a January 6, 1969 letter to

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<sup>122</sup> Sister Mary Kimberley Clark, R.S.M. to Sister Re: The Detroit Archdiocesan Black Sisters' Committee, September 10, 1968, NBSC Papers, MUSCA. See also, "Black Sisters Convene," *The Mercy Detroitier* 5 (October 1968): 1.

<sup>123</sup> Clark to Sister, September 10, 1968.

<sup>124</sup> "Black Sisters Convene," 1.

<sup>125</sup> "Black Catholic in Detroit" Folder, NBSC Papers, MUSCA.

Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey, Sister Anita Robinson, a Benedictine Sister in Minnesota, reflected on this newfound popularity in the racial justice apostolate. “It is funny how things snowball as a result of one event, isn’t it,” she wrote. “One of the things that has happened here in Minnesota is that the six of us from here who attended the Conference have been invited and given panels at all the major Religious motherhouses in the state... We have spoken to Benedictines, Franciscans, Notre dames, and I even went to a group of Carmelites in their monastery (even though behind a grill)... In all we have given eight panels with two more to go... We mostly speak on Black Power, White Racism, Miseducation, the Church and the Black Man, Black Religious in a White Community.”<sup>126</sup> Finally recognized as precious commodities in the racial justice apostolate, black sisters utilized these opportunities to address a host of issues in the Church, including the ongoing reality of racism in religious life and the cultural deficiencies inherent in most spiritual formation programs.

Black sisters also began calling public attention to the inadequacies of white sisters active in the racial justice apostolate in the United States. At the Pittsburgh meeting, NBSC members specifically drew attention to the hypocrisy of the significant cadre of white sisters, who entered the black apostolate attempting to become “saints through dying for the Black Revolution” while discriminating against black sisters in their own communities.<sup>127</sup> Many NBSC members also questioned these sisters’ motives suggesting instead that some like, DES director Sister Mary Peter Traxler, were simply using the black freedom struggle as a platform from which to gain credibility and fame in order to launch a national campaign for (white) women’s rights and ordination in the

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<sup>126</sup>Sister Anita Robinson, O.S.B. to Sister M. Martin de Porres, January 6, 1969, NBSC President’s Correspondence, NBSC Papers, MUSCA..

<sup>127</sup> Harris, *Sisters*, 265.

Church.<sup>128</sup> Speaking at a “Soul Weekend” at St. Michael’s Community Center in Hartford, Connecticut in early April 1969, Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey, told a room of over 150 white sisters that they “won’t convert anybody until they convert themselves and their constituents.” In particular, she noted that “liberal” whites seeking to work in the black community were often “patronizing, paternalistic, and condescending” and wanted “freedom without risks.” Grey also argued that racism was a white problem and often perpetuated by “good people who do not or cannot understand what the problem is. They may perform individual acts of kindness or charity toward the black man. But neither kindness nor charity is justice.”<sup>129</sup>

Though she did not say it publicly at the Hartford meeting, Sister M. Martin de Porres also knew that some white sisters were entering the black freedom struggle specifically to pursue sexual encounters with black men. At the 1968 Pittsburgh meeting, some NBSC delegates had suggested as much in their private conversations with one another.<sup>130</sup> Thus, most black sisters were not shocked when *Review for Religious* published an explosive article by Sister Audree Emery which confirmed their suspicions in 1969. In her essay, entitled “Experiment in Counseling Religious,” Emery, a sociologist and clinical counselor in Los Angeles, California, documented at least 78 cases of ex-religious sisters, who were expecting children out of wedlock with fathers who were “members of underprivileged minority groups.” Emery also noted that “not one

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<sup>128</sup> “Handwritten NBSC Steering Committee Minutes,” August 24, 1968, NBSC Papers, MUSCA.

<sup>129</sup> “Black Sisters Says Racism Is a White, Not Black Problem,” *The Catholic Transcript*, April 18, 1969, 9.

<sup>130</sup> Grey, interview by author. See also Harris, *Sisters*, 260-66. Harris documents this and includes of portrait of a white ex-sister who had an affair and child with a married black man. At the 1970 NBSC, Sister Helen Marie Christian, R.S.M. discusses this issue publicly during her talk entitled, “Psychological Implications of the Celibate Black Commitment.” Sister Helen Marie notes that many were becoming pregnant while they were still in the convent, and that many more had simply not been caught yet. See *Celibate Black Commitment*, 81.

was a victim of rape.”<sup>131</sup> Thus, NBSC members made it a point to begin to confront and protest publicly the hypocrisy and immorality of white sisters attempting to teach black people moral and civic values when they lacked such and were often seeking to exploit black suffering for personal and political gain.

In addition to becoming regular speakers and writers on racial justice in their various communities and on the national circuit, delegates from the historic Pittsburgh meeting also took it upon themselves to recruit additional black sisters to the National Black Sisters Conference. Sister Jayne Marie Simon, O.S.C., a black Carmelite contemplative in Omaha, Nebraska, for example, took the leading role in identifying the nation’s black contemplatives and encouraging them to support the “heroic efforts” of the NBSC.<sup>132</sup> In an article published in the August 1969 issue of *Contemplative Review*, Sister Jayne Marie, one of only three contemplatives to attend the first NBSC, made a special appeal to the nation’s black contemplatives to attend the next meeting at the University of Dayton. “As black religious women, we have chosen to commit ourselves to a life of dedication to others through a vowed life in God. During this period of our history, as urgent commitments toward promoting a greater awareness of human values claim us, we contemplatives must emerge to stimulate a revolution in depth that hopefully will result in racial solidarity.”<sup>133</sup>

Because members of black congregations constituted over 75 percent of the total national population of black sisters, most delegates felt a special responsibility to rally their congregations to support the nascent NBSC, which was overwhelmingly made up of

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<sup>131</sup> Sister Andree Emery, “Experiment in Counseling Religious,” *Review in Religious* 28(1969): 43-44.

<sup>132</sup> “Anyone for Africa?” *Signs of Soul: National Black Sisters’ Conference Newsletter* 1(Dec. 1969): 3.

<sup>133</sup> Sister Jayne, “Black Contemplative,” 8.

black sisters in white congregations. However, delegates first had to make black power more palatable to their conservative superiors and members who remained skeptical of the utility of the NBSC in the white-dominated Church. For example, upon their return to their community, the 29 OSP delegates immediately delivered a position paper to their superiors emphasizing the Christian dimensions of black power and the critical necessity of the NBSC which they had crafted during the conference.<sup>134</sup> Three days later, OSP delegates held an open forum on Black Power for their entire community at Mount Providence College. The ten-point platform, unanimously endorsed by the delegates, which includes three “elder” Oblates, called for their community to become “relevant” and endorse a clear concept of Black power in its five key components: 1) Black consciousness and racial pride; 2) socio-economic power; 3) political power; 4) cultural power; and 5) educational power. They also proposed that every Oblate school become a “cultural and resource center” for their local communities and called for substantial changes in their educational curriculums. Specifically, they proposed that black history and culture be fully incorporated into all subjects rather than teaching black history separately.<sup>135</sup>

Franciscan Handmaids of Mary Loretta Theresa Richards and Jacinta Marie also returned to their Harlem-based congregation determined to make their conservative leadership listen and become more receptive to black sisters’ full and complete engagement with the black revolution. Unlike the OSP and SSF, the FHM leadership council had regressed into political conservatism in the wake of King’s assassination, prompting a mini-revolt within the order. Writing in her diary on Tuesday, June 25, 1968,

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<sup>134</sup> NBSC to “Our Black Sisters in Christ,” August 25, 1968, OSP Archives.

<sup>135</sup> “Black is Beautiful: An Open Forum on Black Power: Given by Oblates for Oblates,” packet, Admin., R9, Box 12, Folder 2, OSP Archives.

FHM Mary Immanuel (Patricia) Lucas, the sister of Black Clergy Caucus founder Father Lawrence Lucas, for example, noted:

It's hard to believe this is really happening to us. Every meaningful change that would attract young black women or even whites, now that they are running in herds to the inner city, is being either deleted or tabled. It almost seems like someone learned a new word and is trying to use it in every sentence. Delete this...I move that we delete...

At lunch break when most of us were crying or just simply disgusted. Sister Elaine suggested we pray and sing "We shall Overcome." We did not overcome anything. The afternoon session was another disaster. Perhaps tomorrow will be better.<sup>136</sup>

Indeed, Sisters Mary Loretta and Jacinta Marie, who were members of the FHM leadership council, had been selected as the community's delegates to the NBSC because they were social and political conservatives. Thus, upon their return to the community, they immediately sought to confront their superiors and implement changes in the order to halt the exodus of young sisters then taking place.<sup>137</sup>

In the case of the New Orleans-based Holy Family Sisters, however, outside intervention would be necessary. At the first NBSC meeting, Holy Family delegate Mary Letitia Senegal had rejected her "capability to entertain a position" in the organization permanently when she was elected by default to the NBSC executive board.<sup>138</sup> Senegal had also publicly expressed her displeasure with the NBSC and the black power movement at large, informing NBSC board members that her report to her community would be highly unfavorable.<sup>139</sup> Thus, in early February of 1969, Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey traveled to the SSF motherhouse to meet with Holy Family Superior Mother

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<sup>136</sup> Patricia Lucas, "Diary of Change," in *Midwives of the Future: American Sisters Tell Their Story*, edited by Ann Patrick Ware (Kansas City, MO: Leaven Press, 1985), 176.

<sup>137</sup> Richards, interview by author.

<sup>138</sup> "Handwritten NBSC Steering Committee Minutes," August 24, 1968, NBSC Papers, MUSCA.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.* See also Barial, interview by author. Holy Family Sister Judith Therese Barial noted in her interview that Senegal had "nothing but bad things to say about the Black Sisters' Conference" during her report to the community.

Marie Anselm Duffle to explain the position and purpose of the NBSC directly.<sup>140</sup>

Although the encounter proved tense at moments, Grey convinced Duffel to permit more SSF to attend the next NBSC.<sup>141</sup> Soon after her visit to New Orleans, Grey also received a letter from Holy Family Sister Sylvia Thibodeaux, who was then preparing to leave her teaching position in Tulsa to work with the Association of Urban Sisters in inner-city Boston. In the letter, Thibodeaux expressed her support of the NBSC and noted that she had helped her community become aware of the “grave need” that existed for the organization. “I’ve been informed as to the difficulties you had making contact with our Community,” she wrote. “Know that there are many among us, who are loyal supporters, and are completely interested. Like many religious (perhaps more so) we are going through a crisis of self-discovery, and how we can be of best service to God’s community of men. Please God we are finding our objectives.”<sup>142</sup> Sister Sylvia also expressed her willingness to help Grey in any way that she could, including leading a substantial delegation of SSF to the next conference, which Thibodeaux soon did.<sup>143</sup>

From August 6 to 16, 1969, over 200 black sisters gathered at the University of Dayton in Ohio for the second National Black Sisters’ Conference. The theme of the 10-day conference was “Black Survival: Past, Present, Future.” Organized in the form of a black studies institute, delegates were immersed in black history, culture, theology, and spirituality and received packets filled with educational materials to incorporate into their school curriculums and ministries. Speakers included noted black civil rights activists

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<sup>140</sup> S. M. Martin de Porres Grey, R.S.M. to Mother Marie Anselm, SSF, February 19, 1969, NBSC President’s Correspondence, MUSCA.

<sup>141</sup> Grey, interview by author. See also S. M. Martin de Porres Grey, RSM to Sister Sylvia Thibodeaux, February 26, 1969, NBSC President’s Correspondence, MUSCA.

<sup>142</sup> Thibodeaux to Grey, ca. February 20, 1969.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid. See also Thibodeaux, interview by author.

Reverend C.T. Vivian, Director of Affiliates in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Bernice Regan, then an instructor at Spelman College, as well noted black theologians and historians Dr. Vincent Harding and John Henrik Clarke.<sup>144</sup> Similar to the Pittsburgh meeting, white sisters and priests were restricted from most sessions, save for the Soul Mass and educational panels.<sup>145</sup>

At the Dayton conference, NBSC delegates formalized the structure of the organization, drafting their constitution. Twenty one delegates also wrote the organization's position paper, "The Survival of Soul."<sup>146</sup> In pledging "to work unceasingly for the liberation of black people," the NBSC position paper denounced white racism in the world and within the church community and articulated the objectives and strategic counterpart programs through which the NBSC sought "to chart [a] course of action to the end that all may be free, and in that freedom to become one in God."<sup>147</sup>

These objectives were:

1. To importune our society, especially our Church and religious congregations, to respond with Christian enthusiasm to the need for eradicating the powerlessness, the poverty, and the distorted self-image of victimized black people by responsibly encouraging white people to address themselves to the roots of racism in their own social, professional, and spiritual milieu.
2. To help promote a positive self-image among ourselves, in our black folk, especially in our black youth, through knowledge of and appreciate for the beauty of our rich historical and cultural heritage.

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<sup>144</sup> *Black Survival: Past, Present, and Future: The Second Annual Report of the National Black Sisters' Conference* (Pittsburgh: NBSC, 1970), x-1. See also "Black Survival" Program, NBSC Papers.

<sup>145</sup> Sister Jayne, "Role of the Black Contemplative," 8.

<sup>146</sup> "The Survival of Soul: National Black Sisters' Conference Position Paper," in *Black Survival*, 154-159. The 21 delegates were S. Nathan Marie Adams, SSND (Chairman), S. Anita Robinson, OSB, S. Louis Marie Bryan, SC, S. Marie Codre Williams, OSF, S. Alfred Marie Russell, OSF, S. Elaine McPherson, FHM, S. Consolata Gibson, OSP, S. Christella White, OSP, S. Gene Alma Hancock, OP, S. Margaret Coleman, BVM, S. Maedine Russell, OSB, S. Helen Marie Christian, RSM, S. Judith Therese Barial, SSF, S. Yvonne Tucker, OSF, S. Dorothy Jackson, HM, S. Paulette Norvel, OP, S. Juan Ricardo Houston, SND, S. Marie Infanta Gonzales, OSP, S. Paraclete Young, OSP, S. Angela Marc Murray, SP, and S. Teresita Weind, FSM.

<sup>147</sup> "The Survival of Soul," 157.

3. To stimulate community action aimed at the achievement of social, political, and economic black power and to participate in programs that exist already in the civic communities of which we are members.
4. To initiate, organize and/or participate in self-help programs through which we can educate ourselves and our black people, thereby encouraging the utilization of those resources which are useful to black people.
5. To employ the energies of the National Black Sisters' Conference for the development of the personal resources of individual sisters for the deepening of our spirituality and for the promotion of unity and solidarity among black religious women.
6. To develop and utilize fully the potential represented by the National Black Sisters' Conference through effective participation in the Central Office for Black Catholicism [NOBC], and through initiation and endorsement of all activities and programs which can support and enhance the growth of black religious leadership within the Church and in our religious communities.<sup>148</sup>

“The Survival of Soul” also maintained that despite centuries of oppression black people were still in proud possession of “that indefinable yet identifiable ‘soul’” which NBSC members would readily assert through their various political and social programs.<sup>149</sup>

At the conclusion of the Dayton meeting, delegates were left to ponder the question, “Where do we go from here?” For NBSC leaders, immediate attention had to be directed at halting the alarming exodus of young black sisters from religious life then well-underway in the Church. While organizing the inaugural NBSC in 1968, Sister M. Martin de Porres had first become acutely aware of the burgeoning exodus of black sisters from religious life, especially among young sisters in temporary vows. Sandra Willingham, a black community organizer and social worker in Cleveland, Ohio, made the crisis clear to delegates at the Pittsburgh conference.. Three weeks prior to the conference, Willingham had defected from the Cincinnati province of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur in explicit political protest against the overt racism and paternalism of her community members. “White religious women make it well-nigh impossible for

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<sup>148</sup> “The Survival of Soul,” 157-8.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.,156.

Black religious women to exist as integral human beings in white orders,” Willingham had stated. “They do this on a number of counts and on several levels but they make it impossible mainly by refusing to let the Black woman be black.”<sup>150</sup>

At the Dayton conference, NBSC leaders confirmed that a massive exodus of black sisters was well-underway in the Catholic Church. Within the previous year, over 50 of their members had departed religious life, and scores more were planning to depart their congregations in the coming weeks.<sup>151</sup> In a few cases, sisters departed their communities on good terms. However, most had either defected from religious life in explicit protest or been forced out of their congregations as a direct result of their involvement in the black liberation struggle or the racial conservatism of their superiors. In a widely-publicized case in Baltimore, Oblate Sister of Providence Mary Judith (Brenda) Williams was dismissed from the order in January 1969 after she spoke publicly on the utility of violence in the black revolution. Though NBSC and BCCC members had been speaking widely on the utility of Christian violence in the struggle against racism in the wake of King’s assassination, OSP leaders had strictly forbidden Williams from doing so out of fear of white retribution. Thus, when Williams continued to speak on the issue, OSP superiors released Williams from her vows.<sup>152</sup>

For Williams, her dismissal from the OSP was especially bitter since the order had been a sanctuary. Three years earlier, the Oblates had saved Williams’s vocation to religious life after she was dismissed from the all-white and Polish Sister of the Holy

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<sup>150</sup> “Typed Transcript of Talk by Miss Sandra Willingham at First NBSC Meeting on August 20, 1968” in NBSC Papers, MUSCA. In December of 1968, Willingham’s “Why I Quit the Convent,” published in *Ebony* magazine, brought national attention to the difficulties of black sisters in white congregations. See Willingham, “Why I Quit.”

<sup>151</sup> Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey, R.S.M., “An Overview of the National Black Sisters’ Conference,” *Sisters Today*, 42 (1970): 138.

<sup>152</sup> Al Rutledge, “Militant Nun Leaves Convent,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, February 1, 1969, 1.

Family of Nazareth in Chicago solely on the basis of race. Although NBSC members and local black Baltimore leaders protested on Williams's behalf, the OSP leadership council remained firm in their decision, leaving a bitter taste among many activist-oriented black sisters, especially those from the OSP.<sup>153</sup>

Similarly, in the Franciscan Handmaids of Mary, the racial conservatism of their Creole leadership spurred a substantial exodus in late 1968. NBSC delegates Mary Loretta Theresa and Jacinta Marie had urged their superior to adapt to the changing times, but Mother Miriam Cecilia had remained firm in her opposition to sisters' involvement in the black freedom struggle and other initiatives in their communities. As a result, several younger sisters began departing the community. On November 29, 1968, Sister Mary Immanuel (Patricia) Lucas expressed her frustration in her diary. "Ten years in the motherhouse and I can't stand it any longer," she wrote. "I need space to think and reflect. The community is stagnant, refusing to move ahead." In the same entry, Lucas also noted that several novice members were preparing to leave the community. "A fashion show was held tonight next door in the juniorate," Lucas wrote. "Mother Miriam Cecilia would have died if she had seen some of her former novices modeling the clothes they were going to wear when they leave in a few weeks. The fashion show is over and the exodus is in full swing."<sup>154</sup>

In addition to dismissals and forced departures from religious life, black sisters faced an onslaught of resistance to their rising racial awareness and political activism. In some cases, when NBSC members requested permission to become active in the black freedom struggle and ministries outside of their traditional apostolate, their superiors

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<sup>153</sup> "Sister Mary Judith (Brenda) Williams" file in OSP Archives.

<sup>154</sup> Lucas, "Diary of Change," 176-77.

denied their requests for explicitly political reasons. Such was the case for School Sister of Notre Dame Nathan Marie (Sherrill) Adams, who in 1962 became the first African American accepted into the eastern province of the SSND. After her participation in the first NBSC, Sister Nathan Marie requested permission to work in a black school as well as “get involved in [black] community social and political activities.” However, her superiors refused, simply stating, “That is not the work of Notre Dame.” Adams remained barred from such activities until the election of a new and progressive Notre Dame superior in 1971.<sup>155</sup>

Some NBSC members were fired from their positions in certain dioceses and archdioceses because of their political activism. For example, in May 1969, Sister Mary Julian Griffin was terminated from her teaching position at St. Jude High School in Montgomery, Alabama, because she refused to stop participating in local freedom movement activities.<sup>156</sup> Already a full-professed sister, Griffin returned to Pittsburgh to await re-assignment to racial justice ministry. However, a significant percentage of NBSC members were in temporary vows and thus more vulnerable since they could be dismissed without Vatican approval or knowledge. Thus, in addition to facing unjust dismissals, many NBSC members were delayed in taking their final vows as punishment for their political activism. Even NBSC president Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey was prevented from taking her final vows in 1968 because her superiors, save for Mother Thomas Aquinas Carroll, felt that she “was not yet ready.”<sup>157</sup> Left with no forum or

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<sup>155</sup> Laura A. Kiernan, “Nun Takes Vows 9 Years Late,” *Washington Post*, July 29, 1972, E8.

<sup>156</sup> Typed Biography of Sister Mary Julian Griffin, V.S.C. in “Sister Mary Julian Griffin, V.S.C.” File, AAS.

<sup>157</sup> Grey, interview by author.

method of appeal, Grey was forced to wait an additional year to profess her final vows, which she did one week after the conclusion of the Dayton conference.<sup>158</sup>

In early 1970, the NBSC sent a questionnaire to the nation's religious congregations of women listed in the 1969 Annual Catholic Directory in order to gain a better statistical profile of black Catholic sisters living and laboring in the United States. While many congregations refused to participate, those questionnaires received back proved significant as they confirmed NBSC leaders' fears about the source of the mass exodus of black sisters from religious life. In one telling example, the survey from the Issaquah, Washington, chapter of the Sisters of Providence (FCSP) revealed that the community had no black sisters, professed or novice. In the previous two years, the FCSP had lost their only two novice members. According to the FCSP provincial superior, "One postulant left on her own decision. She said her being black had no bearing on her decision. She appreciated what community had done for her. There was question of the other postulant's ability to live community life. She was defensive and race conscious. She did not receive permission to receive the holy habit."<sup>159</sup> With white racism and black conservatism threatening an even larger exodus before the next national meeting, NBSC leaders focused much of their energies on remedying the crisis. In particular, they worked to develop concrete programs and initiatives to ensure the retention and growth of black sisters in the Catholic Church.

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<sup>158</sup>On August 24, 1969, Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey made her final professions as a Religious Sister of Mercy in her home parish of St. James Catholic Church in Sewickley, Pennsylvania. At the historic ceremony, celebrated by BCCC president Father Donald Clark, Sister M. Martin de Porres pledged to "live as a black woman concerned with the deeds of God on behalf of His people." The historic ceremony also featured black gospel music and African-inspired dance. See "Arise, Search, Embrace: Ceremony of the Final Profession of Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey among the Sisters of Mercy, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania," 2, 3, 6, 11. NBSC Papers, MUSCA,

<sup>159</sup>Sister Cecilia Abhold, FCSP to Sister M. Martin de Porres, RSM, January 23, 1970, NBSC Papers, MUSCA. See also Completed "Survey of Black Sisters," 24a.

From August 9 to 15, 1969, over 200 black sisters, priests, and seminarians gathered for the third National Black Sisters' Conference at the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana, under theme of "Celibate Black Commitment." According to Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey, the theme was selected in direct response to the black vocational crisis and to understand the full root of it. Those present listened to presentations on the history of their nascent organization and assessed their commitments and future in the black freedom struggle and the Catholic Church. As Oblate Sister Providence Mary Marcellina Brooks stated in her address, "No longer can it be said that religious do not know what's happening. Many black religious *are* what happening." Similarly, Sister of Charity Louise Marie (Beryl) Bryan noted, "Those of us who went to Pittsburgh in 1968 ashamed to be black experienced a metanoia second only to our first conversion as committed religious women. Those of us who went to Pittsburgh fully aware of the joy and beauty of being black were strengthened and reaffirmed in that joy and beauty. For all of us, the Pittsburgh experience meant a renewal of our fervors as religious and the determination to address ourselves as black religious women to the unmet needs of black folk in America who have been denied the richness of that life which God had sent His only Son to give to all men everywhere for all time."<sup>160</sup>

Delegates to the third conference also renewed their vows of celibacy, noting the utility of such in times of great social change and upheaval.<sup>161</sup> In her address, Holy Family Sister Theresa Perry, then a doctoral candidate in theology at Yale University, linked celibacy explicitly to black liberation, challenging the masculinist ethos of black

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<sup>160</sup> Bryan, "History of the National Black Sisters' Conference,"

<sup>161</sup> Sister Antoinette Rene, "Psychological Implications of Celibate Black Commitment," in *Celibate Black Commitment: Report of the Third Annual National Black Sisters' Conference* (Pittsburgh: NBSC, 1971), 78-85. See also, Sister Theresa Perry, "An Overview of Celibate Black Commitment" in *Celibate Black Commitment* (Pittsburgh: NBSC, 1971), 34-39.

power that sought to limit black women's contributions to reproduction and motherhood. "To be celibate means that we have dedicated ourselves totally and completely to building the new...to ushering in the future," Perry stated. "That is the only way we can participate in the process of humanization...The challenge is to free yourself enough so you can free other people."<sup>162</sup> Similarly, Sister M. Martin de Porres argued, "To be a celibate woman, to be a black woman, to be a committed woman—knowing that you have all three of these strains of power simultaneously swimming in your body of woman pronounces promise and danger for yourself, your fellow sisters, you friends—men, women and children."<sup>163</sup>

At the Notre Dame conference, NBSC also pledged their full support of the recently-established National Office for Black Catholics (NOBC) in Washington, D.C., under the leadership of Brother Joseph M. Davis, S.M. As members of the NOBC executive board, NBSC leaders sought to join in union with the leadership of all the newly-formed black Catholic organizations (religious and lay) in combating racism in all of its manifestations in the Church. They also sought work with the NOBC in coordinating "the redistribution of black religious women to better meet the demands of the black community" as well as "facilitating the achievement of Catholic schools in black communities."<sup>164</sup>

In early September of 1971, the NBSC established the Tribunal for Black Religious Affairs in order to address the specific crisis of black sisters in temporary vows facing dismissal or forced departure from their congregations for their activism in the

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<sup>162</sup> Sister Teresa Perry, SSF, "An Overview of the Celibate Black Commitment," in *Celibate Black Commitment*, 36.

<sup>163</sup> Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey, RSM, "The National Black Sisters' Conference is Because," in *Celibate Black Commitment*, 95-6.

<sup>164</sup> Grey, "An Overview," 140.

freedom movement. NBSC president Grey formally announced the Tribunal's creation on September 10, 1971 at the Conference of Major Superiors of Women in Atlanta, Georgia, and explained its critical necessity. "The Tribunal is an answer to the immediate stresses felt by the growing number of black sisters in temporary vows who have little or no security and legal protection," Grey stated. "These sisters, in predominantly white congregations, are being asked to leave or forced to leave through feelings of alienation from their congregations because they have chosen involvement in the black community over and above commitment to the white-oriented apostolate of their congregation."<sup>165</sup> Consisting of seven members (2 sisters, 1 brother, 1 priest/canon lawyer, 2 secular attorneys, and 1 psychologist), the all-black and Catholic Tribunal aimed to function "when called upon by a sister to investigate, review and recommend courses of action to resolve differences between the black sister and her congregation; to advise strategies the sister should employ to help her congregation to understand her viewpoint." The Tribunal also proposed to arbitrate for the client with her congregation's leadership, if and when it became necessary.<sup>166</sup>

Recognizing the specific need for cultural understanding and sensitivity by white superiors and novice directresses in order to ensure the retention and growth of black sisters in white congregations, the NBSC also launched the Black Sisters' Formation Institute in 1971. Since 1968, NBSC members had been conducting formation workshops for white superiors and retreats for black sisters to complement the nation's spiritual formation programs that lacked racial and cultural sensitivity to the plight of black sisters in the white-dominated Church. However, it was clear that a formal apparatus, separate

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<sup>165</sup> "NBSC Press Release," September 9, 1971, 1-2, NBSC Papers.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

from the national Sister Formation Institute, was necessary in order to halt the exodus and allow the retention and growth of black sisters in religious life. Forty white major superiors and members of vocation recruitment teams from across the nation attended the first NBSC Formation Institute held at the Weber Center in Adrian, Michigan from October 17-22, 1971. While less than seven percent of the nation's religious communities of women were represented at the institute, most who attended were awakened to the plight of black sisters in a profound way. "The total experience was agonizing—searching—longing," one white participant stated. "Coming to a deeper awareness of what it is to be black—to be a black religious—and an understanding of how much we need your leadership and your uniqueness. My soul has been wrenched. I know I have died and have emerged a new woman." Another simply stated, "It was a confrontation on the deepest level of the experience of separation—a confrontation of the reality of racism and material values in our society. It was also a confrontation with myself of what I really stand for or wish to stand for and what I do not stand for."<sup>167</sup> Many left with the realization that, as one sister put it, "our biggest job is among ourselves—racism among whites—religious and lay."<sup>168</sup>

Despite such notable endeavors and achievements on the part of the National Black Sisters' Conference to address practical concerns facing their membership and the black Catholic community at large, mounting resistance to the black Catholic movement and ongoing black defections from religious life and the Church continued to limit its influence and successes. In 1970, the NBSC had claimed a membership of over 350 sisters, or approximately one-third of the national population of black sisters. It had also

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<sup>167</sup> "NBSC Formation Institute: Total Black Experience," *Signs of Soul* 4(January 1972): 11

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

replaced the Department of Educational Services as the nation's most prominent sister-led racial justice organization and served as the organizational model for the Las Hermanas, a racial justice organization of Chicana and Latina nuns, and the National Black Seminarians' Association, first organized at the third NBSC meeting.<sup>169</sup> Yet, just as the NBSC had begun to implement its major programs and initiatives, support for the organization and the black Catholic movement began to drop substantially, most notably among white clergy and prelates.

Following King's assassination, a notable number of white ecclesiastical authorities and leaders in the Church (driven largely by shock and guilt) briefly demonstrated a sincere willingness to listen to black demands and accept black leadership in the fight for racial justice within Catholic boundaries. Several archdioceses, dioceses, religious congregations, and Catholic organizations also provided substantial financial support to the black Catholic movement in its early years. However, by 1971, white Catholic allies in the fight for racial justice were becoming an endangered species. Progressive white priests and sisters who had demonstrated a sincere commitment to racial justice were departing religious life in droves in protest against the rising conservatism in the Church, while the triumph of massive white resistance campaigns across the country had begun to undermine the gains of the previous two decades. Most telling though was the state of the black Catholic educational system and white indifference to it. Specifically, white-directed integration initiatives matched with the

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<sup>169</sup> Sister Gloria Graciela Gallardo to Sister M. Martin de Porres, March 5, 1971, NBSC Series 2,10, Box 1, Folder 98, MUSCA. See also "Black Seminarians Meet in D.C.," *Signs of Soul* 3 (May 1971): 7. For a discussion of the struggle of Chicano priests for rights and equity in the Church, see Richard Edward Martinez, *Padres: The National Chicano Priest Movement*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005.)

Church's financial woes, driven largely by white Catholic suburbanization, had prompted the closings and/or mergers of several Catholic schools in inner-city and predominantly black communities. Because Catholic schools have been the chief vehicles for evangelization in the black community and the primary source from which vocations to religious life were drawn, many black Catholics openly decried the closings and the lack of black ecclesiastical authorities to whom they could appeal as proof of the U.S. Church's retreat from racial justice reform.

At a joint weekend conference of the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus and the National Black Catholic Lay Caucus held in Detroit, Michigan, in mid-August 1971, for example, over 1,600 delegates debated whether or not they could remain in the Catholic Church in the wake of its growing irrelevancy in the black community. Meeting under the theme, "Black First, Catholic Second," the delegates cited the callous closings of black and inner-city Catholic schools and the existence of only one black bishop in the United States as proof of the Church's hostile indifference to its African-American constituency. "Education is the most important thing for our children," stated Mrs. Nancy Higgins, a delegate from Detroit who had three children in the archdiocese's then embattled, all-black St. Martin de Porres High School. "We don't need drug centers or birth control centers as much as we need good schools."<sup>170</sup> Delegates also called for the establishment of an all-black seminary and organized a committee to investigate the possibility of establishing a black Catholic American rite similar to the Eastern Rite of the Roman Catholic Church that would only have to answer to the Vatican. For many, without black leadership and self-determination, the Church would cease to function effectively in the black community. As black Catholic Clergy Caucus president Father

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<sup>170</sup>Vescey, "Black Catholics Weigh a Break," 18.

Lawrence Lucas put it, “We’re not talking about tokenism, we’re talking about power.”<sup>171</sup>

At their fourth annual conference held in Pittsburgh from August 14 to 20, 1971, NBSC leaders also adopted a more separatist stance in the Church, emphasizing the critical need for community control and black Catholic leadership.<sup>172</sup> Two weeks later, the NBSC Board of Directors censured the federal government’s school desegregation policy, calling it ‘divisive and detrimental to the development of black excellence.’<sup>173</sup> With white opposition to school desegregation and busing at an all-time high and increasingly violent, NBSC leaders also rejected integration and busing as viable options, especially when it meant closing quality black schools and refusing to institute substantial changes in educational curricula that reflected racial and learning diversity. Instead, they argued that “the black child is best prepared to be a constructive and productive citizen of the United States of America in an educational system founded on black values, black culture, and black mores.”<sup>174</sup> For black sisters, and the black Catholic leadership as a whole, it had become increasingly clear that the survival of an effective and truly Catholic Church in the black community demanded community-controlled institutions under black leadership.

However in order to secure power and the critical resources necessary to become a self-determining entity within the Church, black Catholic leaders would need to bypass the U.S. hierarchy and secure support for their cause from the highest-ranking official in

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<sup>171</sup> George Vecsey, “Black Catholics Seek Archbishop: Caucus Picks Ten Candidates for Capital Archdiocese,” *New York Times*, August 23, 1971, 17. See also George Vecsey, “Black Catholics Weigh a Break With Church at Detroit Meeting,” *New York Times*, August 21, 1971, 18.

<sup>172</sup> Blau, “Black Nuns Seek Community Rule,” 18.

<sup>173</sup> “NBSC Press Release: 9 September 1971,” NBSC Papers, MUSCA.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

the Church, Pope Paul VI. Thus, in a bold and unprecedented move in early October 1971, the leadership of the newly-formed national black Catholic religious and lay organizations formed a delegation and traveled to Vatican City to present their grievances directly to the Pope. The six-member delegation included attorney Charles Hammock, President of the Board of Directors of the National Office for Black Catholics; Estelle Collins, a member of the Baltimore Region of the National Black Lay Catholic Caucus; Joseph Dulin, president of the National Black Lay Catholic Caucus; Brother Joseph Davis, S.M., director of the National Office for Black Catholics; Father Lawrence Lucas, president of the Black Catholic Clergy Caucus; and Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey, R.S.M., president of the National Black Sisters' Conference.<sup>175</sup>

Although leaders of the black Catholic revolt had contemplated requesting papal intervention as early as 1968, the principal catalysts for the October 1971 trip were the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' (USCCB) allocation of only \$150,000 of the \$500,000 requested by the National Office for Black Catholics to implement its programs and initiatives in 1970; and the announcement of the retirement of Patrick Cardinal O'Boyle, archbishop of Washington D.C in 1971.<sup>176</sup> During America's civil rights years, Cardinal O'Boyle had been one of a few U.S. prelates to support publicly the fight for racial justice and black civil rights publicly. In particular, O'Boyle had been instrumental in forcing the nation's bishops to endorse publicly the *Brown* decision and

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<sup>175</sup> George Dugan, "Five Black American Catholics Will Take Grievances to Pope," *New York Times*, October 2, 1971. Note the article only states that there were five delegates, because Brother Joseph Davis had gone ahead to Rome to secure an official appointment with Pope Paul VI. See also "Off to Rome," *New York Amsterdam News*, October 16, 1971, C14 and "Blacks Lobby for Papal Interview," *Signs of Soul* 4 (January 1972): 1, 13, 15.

<sup>176</sup> Joseph M. Davis, S.M. and Cyprian S. Rowe, "The Development of the National Office for Black Catholics," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 7(1988):272-3.

denounce racism as a sin.<sup>177</sup> Thus, his impending retirement left many black Catholics uneasy, especially as white clerical support for racial justice reform and for the NOBC continued to wane and black leadership in U.S. clerical ranks remained almost nonexistent. In 1971, of 249 U.S. bishops, only one was black, and Most Reverend Harold Perry S.V.D. of the archdiocese of New Orleans was only an auxiliary bishop, with no official power.<sup>178</sup> Because Washington D.C. was a black majority (over 70 percent) city and one of the cradles of black Catholicism and education in the United States, black Catholic leaders especially felt that Cardinal O'Boyle's replacement should be a black man, who could advocate for the African-American community both within and outside of the Church. As such, at the 1971 Detroit conference, delegates produced a list of ten possible African-American candidates to succeed Cardinal O'Boyle to submit to Pope Paul VI.<sup>179</sup> Because the Vatican would be also hosting a month-long synod of the world's bishops to discuss the crisis of the priesthood and the Church's role in social change in October, black Catholic leaders decided that it would be an importune time to make the trip, so that they could also present their grievances before a global audience that was likely more willing to listen.<sup>180</sup>

On October 2, 1971, five members of the delegation of black Catholic leaders departed New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport en route to Vatican City.<sup>181</sup> (Brother Joseph Davis had flown to Rome several days earlier in order to secure the

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<sup>177</sup> Massingale, *Racial Justice*, 53-55. See also discussion of O'Boyle in chapter 3.

<sup>178</sup> Vescey, "Black Catholics Seek Archbishop," 17.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.* The ten candidates were Reverends Rollins Lambert of Chicago, August Thompson of Louisiana, George Clement of Chicago, Lawrence Lucas of Harlem, New York, Edwin Cabey of Epworth, Iowa, Joseph Francis of San Francisco, California, Eugene Marino of Baltimore, Maryland, Charles Burns of Cleveland, Ohio, Herman Porter of Willamette, Illinois, and Albert McKnight of Louisiana.

<sup>180</sup> Dugan, "Five Black American Catholics," 35.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*

appointment with the Pope.<sup>182</sup>) Announcements of the delegation's historic trip were carried in most major city and Catholic newspapers. A full-length photograph of five of the six delegation members was featured prominently in the black-owned New York *Amsterdam News*.<sup>183</sup> Although deeply frustrated with the white U.S. hierarchy, the delegation continued to demonstrate trust and faith in the Church. In particular, they remained hopeful that Vatican officials, who had historically proven to be more attentive to their African-American Catholic constituency than U.S. ecclesiastical authorities, would once again step in on their behalf and force the U.S. hierarchy to hold true to its professed commitments to racial and human justice. However, it would soon become clear to the delegation that the marginal power and influence that black Catholic leaders had been able to wield in the midst of the international fallout from King's assassination was quickly disappearing.

## **Conclusion**

On October 8, 1971, the historic delegation of black Catholic leaders to Vatican City gained an unprecedented hour and a half audience with Vatican Secretary of State Giovanni Bennelli, second in power only to Pope Paul VI.<sup>184</sup> During their meeting, the delegates informed Archbishop Bennelli that the Catholic Church was "dying" in the black community and highlighted the interconnected crises of black vocations and the mass closings of black Catholic schools as proof of its increasing irrelevancy. Citing the ongoing reality of racism in the Church and the pressing need for black leadership, the delegation also presented Archbishop Bennelli with a list of their recommendations for

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<sup>182</sup> Dugan, "Five Black American Catholics," 35. See also Davis and Rowe, "Development of the National Office for Black Catholics," 273.

<sup>183</sup> "Off to Rome," New York *Amsterdam News*, October 16, 1971, C14.

<sup>184</sup> "Blacks Lobby for Papal Interview," 1, 13.

the D.C. archbishop as well as copies of several black Catholic publications, including Father Lucas's searing autobiography *Black Priest/White Church: Catholics and Racism* as well as the NBSC's *Signs of Soul*, *Celibate Black Commitment*, *Black Survival*, and *The Black Religious Woman as Part of the Answer*.<sup>185</sup>

However the delegates' meeting with Bennelli was not as fruitful as they had hoped. Upon the delegation's return to the United States, Sister M. Martin de Porres offered her thoughts on the "difficult but enlightening" encounter in an interview first published in *Signs of Soul*. "Archbishop Bennelli's response to delegation was one of skepticism," Grey stated. "Such facts were in conflict with the reports from white American bishops about what they were doing for black Catholics in the United States."<sup>186</sup> She also noted that the Vatican was "not really conscious of the plight of black America, much less black American Catholics." Although Sister M. Martin de Porres acknowledged that Archbishop Benelli was "obviously and admittedly frustrated at his inability to alleviate our anxiety," she noted that he nonetheless counseled patience and continued dialogue with the U.S. bishops, whom the delegates argued were insincere and superficial in their approach to racial justice. However, in the wake of the triumph of massive white resistance campaigns in secular society and the Church, Grey argued "black Catholics...[could] no longer afford slow and measured progress."<sup>187</sup> Instead, the fate of the black Catholic community rested in the ability to develop and sustain black leadership and authority in the Church. For the National Black Sisters' Conference, this meant continuing their efforts to halt the mass exodus of black sisters from religious life and directing a substantial amount of their attention and resources to remedying the then

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<sup>185</sup> Blacks Lobby for Papal Interview," 13.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

full-blown crisis of black Catholic education. Without black Catholic religious and schools, the Church would cease to function effectively, if at all, in the African-American community. Thus, within months, NBSC leaders, anchored by the black Catholic community, launched a national initiative to transform inner-city and predominantly black Catholic schools into community-controlled institutions.

## Chapter Five

### Fighting for Survival:

#### The Struggle for Black Sisters and Catholic Education in the Post-Civil Rights Era

“Within five years, most parochial schools in Black communities will be non-existent. [But]...[i]t does not have to happen.”<sup>1</sup>

-Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey, R.S.M., 1971

“The [Catholic] school does not belong to the church. It belongs to the people. Therefore, community control necessitates that the leadership responsibility of black Catholic schools be invested in the black community and actively implemented by black administrators.”<sup>2</sup>

-The National Black Sisters’ Conference, 1971

On Monday, April 5, 1971, several representatives from Baltimore’s recently-organized Black Catholic Lay Caucus (BCLC) traveled to the motherhouse of the Oblate Sisters of Providence for an urgent meeting with Mother Mary of Good Counsel Baptiste. Distraught over the impending closings of several black Catholic schools across the nation, BCLC members aimed to align themselves with the OSP’s distinguished superior general and develop a long-term plan to remedy the crisis threatening the future of the black Catholic educational system. Armed with some disturbing local news, BCLC representatives also sought to warn the 64-year old Reverend Mother of a duplicitous movement underway in their own archdiocese—one which they argued was waging war on the growing black Catholic movement and its oldest and most prized soldiers. “The Oblate Sisters of Providence should be made aware of the fact that some priests have initiated long range plans to close black schools staffed by the Order,” the delegates charged. “In order to shift attention from their plans and motives they will attack and

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<sup>1</sup> Hebert G. Stein, “A Brief Interview with Sister Martin de Porres,” ca. 1971, in personal collection of Dr. Patricia Grey, formerly Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey, R.S.M. Author has a copy of article.

<sup>2</sup> Betty Medger, “Black Nuns Fight to Save Schools,” *Washington Post*, May 29, 1971, C8.

deliberately antagonize the Sisters in hope that the Order will withdraw. They will then place the blame for the school closings on the sisters.”<sup>3</sup>

To repulse the clerical assault which they argued would only “escalate and intensify,” BCLC representatives stressed the need for “strong black leadership” and unity among black Catholics, religious and lay. They also called for radical changes in the mindsets of black Catholics long subordinated in the white-dominated, male-hierarchical Church. “The traditional Negro Catholic responses that ‘white is right’ must be replaced with an objective and analytical assessment of the role we, as blacks, have played in the perpetuation of the oppression of our people,” delegates maintained.<sup>4</sup>

For BCLC members, the survival of African-American Catholic education (now threatened with extinction) depended largely upon the support and leadership of black nuns fully attuned to the black revolution and aware of its opposition, especially within the Church. Nonetheless, caucus members also expressed a keen sensitivity to the precarious position from which black sisters operated. Specifically, they acknowledged the unique pressures that black religious increasingly faced from “black and white Catholics” to either “defend the Church or their people.” Thus, BCLC delegates sought to reassure Baptiste of their continued support no matter what the future held for the black Catholic movement. Still, they also cautioned her against timidity in the face of such strident opposition to racial and educational justice. “We will hang together or we will hang separately,” delegates eerily predicted.<sup>5</sup> And the OSP’s embattled superior, who once characterized the members of her congregation as “conservative radicals,” perhaps

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<sup>3</sup> “Black Lay Caucus Meeting with Reverend Mother, Baltimore, MD., Monday, April 5, 1971,” typed statement, OSP Archives, Administration R9, Box 12, Folder 16.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

even agreed. Whatever Baptiste considered, the meeting with the BCLC and the difficult decisions that she (and other black sister-leaders) would make in the coming years prompted monumental transitions in African-American female religious life and the black-administered Catholic educational system—transitions that would leave the nation’s community of black religious struggling for direction and fighting for survival as the decade matured.

This chapter chronicles black sisters’ diverse efforts in the fight to preserve African-American Catholic education and female religious life in the crucible of the seventies. Like the rest of the nation’s religious superiors in 1971, Mother Mary of Good Counsel was knee-deep in an institutional crisis that few could have predicted. After decades of steady and exponential growth, the U.S. Catholic Church was in a state of utter distress. In the previous five years, thousands of religious men and women had departed their congregations. Although some of the departures were temporary, most were permanent. Equally disturbing was the state of the nation’s famed Catholic education system. Between 1965 and 1971, over one thousand Catholic elementary and secondary schools closed, and thousands more were threatened with extinction. For many observers, the crisis had not yet reached its peak. For the nation’s 604 female congregational leaders, however, the crisis had to be halted if their communities and institutions were to survive.

In 1966, the national population of Catholic sisters had reached an all-time high of 181, 421.<sup>6</sup> Within the next five years, however, the number plummeted to fewer than

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<sup>6</sup> Dolan, *American Catholic Experience*, 438.

147,000, not including deaths.<sup>7</sup> With fewer young women choosing to embrace the religious state as a result of expanded opportunities in the public sector and growing disillusionment with religious life, the future of the Catholic social welfare infrastructure (built and sustained on the cheap labor of sisters) was in serious jeopardy. This was especially true of the parochial school system, then experiencing rapid enrollment decline and threatened with financial collapse in inner-city communities. Thus, at the dawn of the 1970s, female congregational leaders faced the herculean tasks of both reversing their dwindling memberships and keeping their order's institutions open and viable in the face of crisis.<sup>8</sup>

Nonetheless, the vocational and educational crises of the post-civil rights era were markedly different and substantially more acute for the nation's population of black sisters. Not only was the rate of African-American departures from religious life double that of white departures, but Catholic schools located in inner-city and predominantly black communities were also much more likely to face closure or merger than their white and suburban counterparts despite increasing African-American enrollments.<sup>9</sup> Because Catholic schools had historically served as the primary vehicles for evangelization in black communities, many observers viewed archdiocesan and diocesan decisions to close predominantly black and inner-city Catholic schools (often made without the consultation

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<sup>7</sup> "Information Sheet," *National Black Sisters' Conference In/Search Workbook* (1973), 23-4, NBSC Papers, MUSCA.

<sup>8</sup> Helen Rose Fuchs Ebaugh, *Out of the Cloister: A Study of Organizational Dilemmas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993) and *Women in the Vanishing Cloister: Organizational Decline in Catholic Religious Orders in the United States* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1993). See also Ann Carey, *Sisters in Crisis: The Tragic Unraveling of Women's Religious Communities* (Huntington, Ind.: Our Sunday Visitor, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> "Information Sheet," 23. See also National Office for Black Catholics, "The Crisis of Catholic Education in the Black Community," January 15, 1976, NOBC Papers; Timothy Walch, *Parish School: American Catholic Parochial Education from Colonial Times to the Present* (Washington, D.C.: National Catholic Educational Association, 2003), 169-87; and William E. Brown and Andrew M. Greeley, *Can Catholic Schools Survive?* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1970), 47-191.

of faculty or parents) as clear proof of a concerted Church effort to abandon its commitments to African-American and impoverished communities. As a coalition of black priests, sisters, and lay Catholics fighting proposed school closures in Detroit put it in 1970: “Education is liberation! And quality education is vital to the survival of the black community...The Catholic Church, if it is seriously interested in the survival of the Black community—the Black Catholic community—must take a stand in favor of our schools...in the inner city.”<sup>10</sup>

Seeking to keep the Church visible and relevant in the African-American community, black sisters rallied to keep Catholic schools open and viable in predominantly black and inner-city areas. Working in alliance with a host of local and national organizations, black sisters picketed the offices of archdioceses and dioceses that planned to close black and inner-city schools; demanded equitable black representation on task forces created to downsize parochial schools; seized Churches associated with schools threatened with extinction; designed school curriculums that demanded academic excellence and emphasized black pride; introduced innovations to the educational apostolate; and ultimately became leaders in the struggle for community control. However, white clerical opposition to sisters’ public activism along with financial difficulties and ideological differences within the black Catholic community plagued movements organized to preserve black Catholic education from the very beginning. As the seventies wore on, resurging racism in U.S. society and waning ecclesiastical support for racial justice eventually forced thousands of African-American Catholics, including

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<sup>10</sup> “Press Release from Detroit Black Catholics for Action,” December 5, 1970, NBSC Papers. The statement is signed by Joseph Dulin, President of the National Black Lay Catholic Caucus and Pro-Tem Chairman of the Detroit Black Lay Catholics, Jesse W. Cotton, Chairman of the Michigan Black Lay Catholic Caucus, Sister Mary Shawn Copeland, C.S.S.F, and Sister Maria del Rey Plain, O.P.

sisters, to reconsider their membership and participation in a Church seemingly bent on evading its moral and conciliar responsibilities to equity and justice.

### **The Crisis of Black Catholic Education in the Post-Civil Rights Era**

In 1965, the U.S. Catholic parochial system was the largest private school system in the world.<sup>11</sup> Since the turn of the twentieth century, Catholic elementary and secondary schools had experienced rapid and even exponential growth. From 1900 to 1957, the rate of Catholic school growth was double that of public schools.<sup>12</sup> Between 1945 and 1962, Catholic school enrollment increased by an estimated 129 percent while public school enrollment only increased by 69 percent.<sup>13</sup> In 1965, Catholic school enrollments peaked with the Church educating 5.5 million students, or roughly 12 percent of the nation's students, in over 13,000 elementary and secondary schools.<sup>14</sup> For U.S. prelates, reaching this plateau represented a major achievement in the long struggle to fulfill one of the Church's most sacred mantras: "Catholic schools for Catholic children." Nonetheless, the rapid expansion of the parochial system did not take place without negative consequences. Increasing enrollments not only pushed classroom sizes to unsafe levels, but also severely strained Church resources, especially that of Catholic sisters, whose unpaid labor had built and sustained Catholic schools.

Beginning in the 1950s, a small contingent of church officials openly questioned the wisdom of the parochial schools' rapid growth. Citing the common overcrowding of Catholic classrooms and the unique strain placed on teaching sisterhoods, which despite

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<sup>11</sup> John Fialka, *Sisters: Catholic Nuns and the Making of America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003), 172.

<sup>12</sup> Walch, *Parish School*, 174.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 176.

<sup>14</sup> Fialka, *Sisters*, 172.

their best efforts never had enough teachers to meet demand, a few clerics even argued that parish schools should begin limiting rather than increasing their enrollments. Otherwise, the quality of Catholic education would suffer. In 1956, Monsignor William McManus, the assistant director of the National Catholic Welfare Conference's Department of Education, surveyed 28 archdiocesan and diocesan school systems and found that each was strained beyond capacity. As a result, they turned away hundreds of students annually. In his article, "How Good are Catholic Schools?" published in *America*, the prominent Catholic weekly, McManus wrote, "Our schools' rapid growth also explains the occasional awkwardness of Catholic education, overcrowded classrooms, temporary employment of poorly qualified teachers, 'hit or miss' procedures in selecting students, and clumsy supervision." For McManus and others, the Church's goal to have every Catholic child in a Catholic school was simply unrealistic. Even with peak enrollments in 1965, the U.S. Catholic educational system only educated 47 percent of the Church's children.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, with ever-increasing school enrollments severely straining Church resources and forcing parochial schools to turn away tens of thousands of students every year, even lay observers began to question the usefulness and viability of the Catholic educational system. In her searing critique, *Are Parochial Schools the Answer?* (1964), Mary Perkins Ryan, a white Catholic housewife and prominent voice in the liturgical reform movement, argued that the parochial school system had outlived its cultural and historical purposes. Specifically, Ryan argued that the parochial school model was severely limited as it failed to address the comprehensive needs of adult Catholics and

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<sup>15</sup> Walch, *Parish School*, 180. The article was published on September 8, 1956.

various life experiences of its diverse participants.<sup>16</sup> Other critics of the Catholic school system cited its overcrowded classrooms and the lack of money, teachers, and space as proof of the need for reform and perhaps even downsizing.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, the majority within the Church in 1965 still agreed that Catholic schools had to be sustained. But, few could have predicted the massive decline that the nation's parochial school system would face in the coming years.

Between 1965 and 1970, U.S. parochial school enrollments dropped by over 13 percent.<sup>18</sup> While demands for Catholic education remained relatively high, especially among African Americans and white Catholic suburbanites, declining numbers of sisters translated into higher tuition rates for parents since schools were compelled to hire lay teachers to supplement depleted teaching staffs. Unable and in many cases unwilling to pay the higher costs, thousands of middle and working-class parents withdrew their children from parochial schools and placed them in public schools. Combined with the mass migration of thousands of white Catholics to suburban areas, where the parochial school system was much less developed, total Catholic school enrollments plummeted. Between 1965 and 1968, elementary school enrollment, alone, dropped from 4.5 million to 3.9 million students.<sup>19</sup> As a consequence, archdioceses and dioceses across the country began closing hundreds of schools.

By 1970, over 1,500 Catholic schools had closed, and church finance and school committees were preparing to close over a thousand more.<sup>20</sup> While no area of the country

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<sup>16</sup> Mary Perkins Ryan, *Are Parochial Schools the Answer?: Catholic Education in the Light of the Council* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964).

<sup>17</sup> Walch, *Parish School*, 170-77.

<sup>18</sup> Percentage determined by educational statistics gathered from Walch, *Parish School*, Fialka, *Sisters*, and the *Annual Catholic Directory*.

<sup>19</sup> Walch, *Parish School*, 178.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 180.

was exempted from the crisis, Catholic schools located in inner-city and predominantly black communities were hit especially hard despite increasing demands for Catholic education in those areas. Northern cities, like Milwaukee, St. Paul, Chicago, Detroit, and Denver, recorded enormous one-year drops in Catholic school enrollment and closed scores of parochial schools, including some of the region's oldest institutions.<sup>21</sup> While church and state-mandated school integration prompted the closing of a handful of southern black Catholic schools prior to 1965, the crisis of the late sixties threatened the nation's famed black Catholic educational system with outright extinction. Between 1968 and 1969, alone, 637 Catholic schools closed across the country, and the doomed schools were overwhelmingly located in predominantly black and inner city communities.<sup>22</sup>

While white suburbanization, the declining availability of teaching sisters, increased operating costs, and doubts about the viability of the parochial system contributed to the overall crisis of Catholic education in the late sixties and seventies, these factors do not adequately explain the unique crisis of black Catholic education during the period. Indeed, as white Catholic school enrollments plummeted between 1965 and 1970, African-American enrollments actually increased. In 1965, there were approximately 99, 245 black youths enrolled in over 349 Catholic elementary and secondary schools. By 1970, black enrollments reached an all-time high at 112, 987, despite the increasing fragility of the inner-city and black Catholic school systems.<sup>23</sup> Although black Catholic school enrollments dropped to 107, 313 in 1975, the five-year decline in black enrollments was largely the result of school closures and mergers, not

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<sup>21</sup> Walch, *Parish School*, 180.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> These statistics were gathered from typed reports of *Our Negro and Indian Missions* from 1965 and 1970 contained in the Josephite Archives.

declining African-American support for Catholic education.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, African-American Catholics mounted impressive protests and campaigns on both the local and national level to halt the closings of parochial schools in their communities and keep Catholic education accessible to black youth. Moreover, African-American parents repeatedly proved more willing to pay higher tuition rates and experiment with a host of creative strategies to preserve Catholic education than their white counterparts.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the crisis of black Catholic education was not simply the result of Church financial straits and doubts about the viability of the parochial system. It was also rooted in the long history of Church leaders' unwillingness to invest substantially in the education and evangelization of African Americans.

Fifty years earlier, the black-administered Catholic educational system had experienced a somewhat similar threat to its survival when states began requiring the higher education of teachers in private schools in order to secure school accreditation. Required by Church prelates to comply with the new state mandates but barred from Catholic higher education solely on the basis of race, black sisterhoods, supported by a militant black lay movement, rallied to preserve their schools by forging strategic educational agreements with white prelates and teaching communities. While these alliances reeked of racial paternalism, black congregations successfully secured the accreditation of the vast majority of their schools and thus ensured the survival of African-American female religious life and black-administered Catholic education. As a consequence, however, black congregations disavowed public criticism of racism in the Church and society at large. These racial compromises also cost the African-American

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<sup>24</sup> Typed *Our Negro and Indian Missions* reports from 1975, Josephite Archives.

<sup>25</sup> NOBC, "The Crisis of Catholic Education."

Catholic community its militant lay leadership following the controversial (and clerically-orchestrated) ouster of Dr. Thomas Wyatt Turner as the president of the Federated Colored Catholics in 1933.<sup>26</sup> However, the black Catholic educational crisis of the sixties and seventies was markedly different from the crisis of the Jim Crow era in important ways.

Unlike their predecessors in the Jim Crow era, African-American Catholics demanding racial equity and justice in the Church in the post-civil rights era were fighting on a radically transformed American social landscape. The destruction of legalized racial segregation in secular society provided black Catholics with greater authority and leverage to challenge the persistence of racial exclusion and injustice within Church boundaries. No longer could Catholic prelates justify their institution's racist practices by pointing to secular society and the Church's precarious position within it. Moreover, the activist-oriented mandates of Second Vatican Council and the Church's entry into the black freedom struggle, albeit late, signified at least a willingness on the part of some Catholic leaders to begin to address and atone for the historical and ongoing reality of racial discrimination and exclusion in the Church.

Still, Catholic responses to demands for racial justice proved mixed at best. While black Catholic priests and sisters achieved a host of monumental firsts during the civil rights era, perhaps most notably in the appointment of Father Harold Perry, S.V.D. as the nation's first self-identified black Catholic bishop in 1965, true integration proved elusive.<sup>27</sup> For example, archdiocesan and diocesan plans (generally devised by whites) to integrate its institutions, particularly its schools, almost always demanded the closing of

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<sup>26</sup> See chapter one for a detailed examination of this.

<sup>27</sup> Ochs, *Desegregating the Altar*, 446.

black Catholic schools and the limited entry of black children into previously all-white Catholic schools with non-integrated faculties.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, white southern and urban Catholics mounted massive and violent campaigns against racial integration and justice across the nation with the direct and indirect support of many Church leaders, prompting many black Catholics to question publicly the sincerity of white Catholic commitment to racial justice. As a result, some black Catholics began to leave the Church while others vowed to stay and fight.

Beginning in the late 1960s, public protests against the mass closings and mergers of Catholic schools located in inner-city and predominantly black communities erupted across the nation. From New Orleans to Chicago, Charleston to New York, and Cincinnati to Detroit, African-American Catholics, religious and lay, demanded that Catholic schools remain open in black communities and accessible to those who needed them the most. Activists also publicly accused white ecclesiastical authorities, priests, sisters, and school boards of deliberately abandoning their professed commitments to black Catholic education and racial justice in the wake of massive white (Catholic) resistance to civil and equal rights reforms. While many black (and some white) observers charged that the closures and mergers were guided by anti-black racism, ecclesiastical and school board officials (overwhelmingly white and male) quickly dismissed such claims. Instead, church officials routinely cited the declining number of teaching sisters, increased operating costs, and the large presence of black Protestants in formerly white Catholic urban neighborhoods as the chief catalysts for the closures,

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<sup>28</sup> Catholic Committee of the South, "Catholic Schools and Desegregation: A Study," copy in author's possession, Tulane Amistad Research Center, hereafter TARC. See also NOBC, "The Crisis of Catholic Education;" Joseph Natras, *Politics, Race, and Schools: Racial Integration, 1954-1994* (New York: Routledge, 1997); and Adam Fairclough, *A Class of Their Own: Black Teachers in the Segregated South* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

especially in the inner-city.<sup>29</sup> However, ever increasing African-American Catholic school enrollments and the demonstrated willingness of African-American parents to pay substantially higher tuition rates than their white and suburban counterparts belied claims that the inner-city and black Catholic educational systems were no longer viable investments for the Church.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, many observers asked how Catholic spiritual leaders could morally justify divesting from the inner city while at the same time directing the bulk of its resources to building a brand new educational system to accommodate massive white Catholic suburbanization, in part the result of movements opposed to racial integration. “It is shocking to learn that the schools that are being ‘phased out’ are inner city schools which have the largest enrollment,” William E. Brown, a white Catholic activist, wrote in 1970. “Surely we have lost our way when we deliberately abandon the poorest of the poor...What message can possibly come through to these...people and the...communities among whom they live, except that the Church is not interested in them because they drain off too much energy and money?...The faith and courage of these...people...[fighting for] these schools holds up to shame before God and men the lack of charity and generosity of the people and their leaders who proclaim themselves to be the people of God, Christ present in the world.”<sup>31</sup>

Citing the uncommon loyalty of African Americans to the U.S. Church despite its history of racial segregation and exclusion, black Catholic activists argued that the decision to close inner-city and predominantly black Catholic schools was tantamount to racial genocide. Detroit’s black Catholics, fighting the archdiocese’s 1970 proposal to

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<sup>29</sup> Walch, *Parish School*, 169-87. See also NOBC, “The Crisis of Catholic Education.”

<sup>30</sup> NOBC, “The Crisis of Catholic Education.”

<sup>31</sup> Brown and Greeley, *Can Catholic Schools Survive?*, 53.

close 75 percent of its schools, including the city's only black Catholic high school, proclaimed: "Blacks have demonstrated, picketed, protested, prayed, cried, and believed in the White racist Church in an unfruitful effort to become full human beings and total members of the Church... This in itself is a failure on the part of the Church."<sup>32</sup> For them, Catholic schools, rather than churches, were the number one priority in the inner city, and they demanded that funds used to maintain Churches be used instead to keep Catholic schools open, where they were most needed.<sup>33</sup> However, demands for the survival of black and inner-city Catholic education consistently fell upon callous ears in the white-dominated Church.

While radical organizing among the nation's black priests, sisters, seminarians, and lay Catholics resurrected militant African-American Catholic protest in the late sixties and seventies, it also engendered a fierce backlash among white Catholics, progressive and non-progressive alike. Calls for black self-determination and demands for school curricula that emphasized racial pride and incorporated black studies were routinely met with suspicion and hostility by many white priests and sisters. Perhaps most telling were white ecclesiastical and clerical responses to African-American despair over the closings of Catholic schools in predominantly black and inner-city communities. Unlike their white counterparts, African Americans did not have equal access to quality public education. Moreover, African Americans argued that virulent white opposition to school integration in both the public and private sectors belied the utility of integration.

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<sup>32</sup> "Press Release," December 5, 1970, signed by Joseph Dulin, President of the National Black Lay Catholic Caucus, Jesse W. Cotton, Chairman of the Michigan Black Lay Catholic Caucus, Sister Mary Shawn Copeland, CSSF, and Sister Maria del Rey Plain, OP. See also Susan Holmes, "Black Catholics Seize Church: Dearden Sees 75% of Schools Shut," n.d., "'No School, No Church,' 200 Protesters Shout," and Dulin, et al to His Eminence John Cardinal Dearden, November 29, 1970, in "Black Catholic Movement in Detroit" Folder in NBSC Papers.

<sup>33</sup> "Press Release," December 5, 1970.

Instead, they argued that it illustrated the pressing need for the maintenance and survival of the predominantly black Catholic educational system, especially schools with integrated or all-black faculties. However, white-led archdiocesan and diocesan school boards steadfastly refused to give such matters serious consideration when deciding which schools to keep open and which to close. Such callousness prompted proponents of black Catholic education to devise a host of strategies to keep those schools viable in the wake of integration, financial crisis, and resurging white opposition to racial and educational equity.

Unsurprisingly, black teaching sisterhoods were the first to recognize and articulate the unique crisis of black Catholic education. As integration became the mandate of the land in the 1950s, the nation's black-administered Catholic schools, like their public and sectarian counterparts, were almost always the first casualties. From 1954 to 1965, six OSP-administered and seven Holy Family-administered schools closed or merged. All but one of these schools was located in the South.<sup>34</sup> Recognizing that archdioceses and dioceses generally viewed historically black Catholic schools as expendable in the era of desegregation, black superiors initially limited their members' engagement with the public fight for racial justice partially out of pure necessity. It is also likely that black leadership councils, like other black educators, anticipated the challenges of desegregation and focused on ensuring that their institutions remained viable alternatives for black students if school integration failed.

Black teaching sisterhoods were also among the first to experience the clerical backlash to the radical organization of the black Catholic community. Specifically, black superiors increasingly faced pressure from white clerics to remove "militant" black

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<sup>34</sup> Statistics gathered from OSP and SSF Archives.

sisters from leadership positions in Catholic schools. Sisters specifically targeted were those who attempted to incorporate more black studies materials into their curriculums and who emphasized racial pride as a key component of Catholic education. Initially some black superiors sought to protect their members from such harassment. For example, in 1969, Father André Bouchard, the white rector at Washington, D.C.'s historically black St. Paul's and St. Augustine Catholic Church, penned a letter scolding OSP superior general Mother Mary of Good Counsel Baptiste for assigning Sister Majella Neal as the school's principal for the 1969-70 academic year. Bouchard callously described Sister Majella, a NBSC foundress, as "a woman who has no concern for the community or a willingness to understand it." While Father Bouchard admitted that he was to blame for "a misunderstanding" between the two at the beginning of their relationship, he nonetheless advised Baptiste "to advise and council Sister Mejella[sic] so that the experience [at Sts. Paul and Augustine would] be a fruitful one both for the school and for this community."<sup>35</sup>

Because of the systematic exclusion of black men from the priesthood and the staunch refusal of white prelates to assign black priests to black parishes, black-administered Catholic schools were generally attached to black parishes led by white priests. Many of these educational partnerships were fraught with tension since many white priests working in the African-American apostolate, like their female counterparts, held racially derogatory views of African Americans and acted under the guise of racial paternalism.<sup>36</sup> Combined with the sexist and misogynist views that many white priests

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<sup>35</sup> Father André Bouchard to Mother Mary of Good Counsel, September 3, 1969, OSP Archives.

<sup>36</sup> The refusal of white prelates to ordain and later assign black priests to black parishes and the racial paternalism of white priests working among African Americans are thoroughly examined and

also overtly maintained, genuine respect for black sisters' leadership in Catholic schools was rare. Indeed, prior to the black Catholic awakening of the late sixties and seventies, black superiors generally counseled their members working alongside hostile white priests and sisters to endure while strategically maneuvering to either transfer their sisters or use white paternalism to their advantage.<sup>37</sup> However, by 1969, even the most conservative of black superiors refused to permit such blatant disrespect for their members and for their longstanding educational apostolate to the black community to go unchallenged.

Mother Mary of Good Counsel, for example, took serious exception to Father Bouchard's negative characterization of Sister Majella and *her* commitment to the black community. Baptiste also questioned the source of Father Bouchard's displeasure with Sister Majella since he had only known her for a few weeks. "You mention that Sister Mary Majella has no concern for the community or a willingness to understand it," Baptiste wrote. "It would be interesting to know the basis for this statement considering the fact that she has been there hardly a month... There are several sides to every question, Father, and unless we are totally involved it is very difficult to sift the fact from personal opinion." Moreover, instead of heeding Bouchard's demand to get Sister Mary

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discussed in Och's *Desegregating the Altar*, Davis, *The History of Black Catholics*, and Southern, *John LaFarge and the Limits of Catholic Interracialism*.

<sup>37</sup> Letters from sisters to the OSP superior general complaining about such treatment from racist and paternalistic white priests are common from the Jim Crow era through the 1970s. One poignant example contained in the OSP Archives involves the congregation's assignment to Holy Name of Jesus Catholic School in Chicago, Illinois in 1941. After one particularly difficult year, the school's principal hand-wrote a 16-page letter of complaint Father John F. Ryan, a white priest assigned to the parish, who consistently undermined their authority, encouraged the children to do the same, and routinely insulted their pupils' parents because they defied his racist perceptions about African Americans. See Sister Jean Marie to Reverend Mother, Month of the Sacred Heart, ca. 1946. See also Morrow, "'To My Darlings, the Oblates,'" which examines the complicated relationship between the OSP and their longtime chaplain and champion Father John T. Gillard, a white Josephite priest who not only held racially derogatory views about African Americans, but also fiercely opposed the ordination of black men to the priesthood.

Majella in line, Baptiste suggested that the best remedy to the conflict would be for Father Bouchard to “assist [the OSP] by a real spirit of communication and support.”<sup>38</sup>

Despite Baptiste’s efforts to assuage tensions at Sts. Paul and Augustine, Father Bouchard and his successor Father Leonard Hurley continued to harass Sister Majella forcing her transfer or risk termination in 1970. Such was also the case for Oblate Sister of Providence Marilyn Hopewell who was forced to transfer from her teaching position at Washington D.C.’s historically black Holy Comforter Catholic School after several run-ins with a white teacher (formerly a brother) during the same academic year. After Sister Hopewell’s removal and the forced transfers of all five OSP assigned to Sts. Paul and Augustine for the 1969-70 academic year, black lay Catholics in D.C. protested what they called “the politics of genocide being performed on...the Oblate Sisters by the white hierarchy of Washington, D.C.” Black parents specifically cited the “persistent, sinister pressure...constantly exerted on the black women of the Oblate Order to ‘keep them in their place’ and to ‘whip them into line.’” They also championed the efforts and commitment of Sisters Majella and Marilyn to the black community, noting that “those who come under the most merciless attack are the faithful, loyal women who have the courage and stamina to defend the rights and interests of black children.”<sup>39</sup>

As white clerical pressure increased, black superiors began to encourage their members to seek innovative ways to preserve black Catholic schools and experiment with their apostolate. In 1969, the Holy Family Sisters released Sister Sylvia Thibadeaux from her teaching duties in Tulsa, Oklahoma and permitted her to relocate to Boston to join the

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<sup>38</sup> Mother Mary of Good Counsel to Rev. Andre Bouchard, September 13, 1969, OSP Archives.

<sup>39</sup> “An Open Letter Re: Father Hurley’s Destruction of Black Women (The Oblate Sisters of Providence)”, ca. 1970, in St. Augustine’s and St. Paul File, OSP Archives.

Association of Urban Sisters.<sup>40</sup> Founded in 1968 by local sisters opposed to white flight, the AUS sought to coordinate efforts to maintain the city's urban Catholic schools and be receptive to increasing demands for black teachers and administrators.<sup>41</sup> Thibodeaux joined the teaching staff of the St. Joseph Community School, formerly a parish school, in 1969 and became the institution's principal one year later. Soon thereafter, Thibodeaux became a prominent figure in the local struggle for community control, arguing that if African Americans were to determine their own destiny, then "[they] must control areas [they] occupy—educationally, spiritually, economically, in every way."<sup>42</sup>

Such thoughts were also reflected in the OSP's initial support of an attempt to transform their famed St. Frances Academy for (Negro) Girls into a community school in 1969. Two years earlier, Sister Mary Paraclete (Doris C.) Young, a 25-year OSP, had assumed the leadership of St. Frances Academy charged with keeping the nation's oldest black Catholic school open and viable. Fearful that declining enrollment numbers and waning Church support might force St. Frances to close, Young and her staff devised a host of strategies to keep the school open. For example, in 1968, when she could not afford to pay \$20,000 in lay teacher salaries, Sister Mary Paraclete, an NBSC founder, invested \$2,000 in a car to transport seminarians from Woodstock College located in suburban Baltimore to teach at St. Frances during the week. The following year, Young applied for a federal antipoverty grant to transform the OSP's flagship school into a community school. "St. Frances Academy will open in September if I have to crawl to

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<sup>40</sup> "Administration of Reverend Mother Marie Anselm, June 17, 1958 to June 17, 1970," typed report in SSF Archives.

<sup>41</sup> Thibodeaux, interview by author. See also Koehlinger, *New Nuns*, 14.

<sup>42</sup> "Blacks Must Control Black Schools," *Pittsburgh Catholic*, August 20, 1971, n.p., in NBSC Papers.

Washington,” Young told local reporters in early 1969.<sup>43</sup> When her Model Cities grant application was rejected, Sister Mary Paraclete was undeterred.

Soon thereafter, Sister Mary Paraclete began soliciting Baltimore archdiocesan support to help actualize her proposed Brentwood-Forrest Community Center. Envisioned as “an oasis in the ghetto,” the \$16 million educational center was to be built on the land adjoining St. Frances Academy and include a church, library, theater, residences, a language laboratory, cafeteria, a child development center, a health center, and a research center. It “would educate every level of the family simultaneously,” Young proclaimed.<sup>44</sup> Although Sister Mary Paraclete’s proposal received enthusiastic written endorsements from a host of community leaders and organizations, including the OSP leadership council, Baltimore mayor Thomas D’Alexandra, U.S. Senator Joseph Tidings (MD), the Baltimore Archdiocesan Urban Commission, and even Baltimore’s Cardinal Lawrence Shehan, the white-led archdiocesan finance committee flatly rejected the proposed center as “unrealistic, unfeasible, and impossible.”<sup>45</sup> For Young and other proponents of black Catholic education, the archdiocese’s refusal to support the black-led initiative while supporting the development of the suburban Catholic educational system was proof positive of the Church’s opposition to black self-determination and leadership. They also understood it as part and parcel of the Church’s ongoing educational divestment from black communities across the country, prompting a host of protests in Baltimore.

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<sup>43</sup> “Academy Seeks Federal Aid: St. Frances Fights to Stay Open,” *Catholic Review*, February 7, 1969, n.p., copy in OSP Archives.

<sup>44</sup> Patrick Joyce “Thirty Stage March at Catholic Center,” *The Catholic Review*, July 3, 1970, A-7, copy in OSP Archives.

<sup>45</sup> Sister Mary Paraclete Young, “The Brentwood Forrest Community Center Proposal: An Oasis in the Ghetto,” copy in author’s possession. The letters of endorsement are included in the proposal. See also Joyce, “Thirty Stage March,” A7.

On Wednesday, June 30, 1970, Sister Mary Paraclete led approximately 25 local activists, including several OSP, in a two-hour protest outside the administrative headquarters of the archdiocese of Baltimore. Carrying placards that read: “Archdiocese rejects black Catholics,” “the Cardinal is guilty,” and “the Catholic Church is racist,” the protesters sought to expose the Church’s ongoing retreat from racial justice reform, most recently manifested in the archdiocese’s refusal to provide substantial financial support for Brentwood-Forrest Community Center.<sup>46</sup> While the protesters’ efforts to obtain funding for the community education center failed, they did convince the Archdiocesan Finance Committee to subsidize St. Frances’s operating and restoration costs for the next three years.<sup>47</sup> However, the protests also engendered a bitter divide between black Catholic activists and the white-dominated Baltimore archdiocese, leaving the OSP leadership council in a contentious middle position. While seemingly capitulating to protesters’ demands, white archdiocesan officials and other clerics increased their pressure on the OSP leadership council to get Sister Mary Paraclete and her teaching staff under control.

Although black congregations remained firmly committed to the survival of black Catholic education, the unique financial vulnerability of their institutions and their own tenuous legacy of strategic conservatism placed black leadership councils in increasingly precarious positions. Faced with strident white opposition to black self-determination and clerical pressure to clamp down on outspoken black sisters, black leadership councils proved unable to provide the support necessary for militant and creative struggles to

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<sup>46</sup> “25 Picket Archdiocese Offices: East Baltimore Group Charges Failure to Back Ghetto Plan,” *The (Baltimore) Sun*, July 1, 1970, C7. See also Patrick Joyce “Thirty Stage March at Catholic Center,” *The Catholic Review*, July 3, 1970, A-7, copy in OSP Archives.

<sup>47</sup> Sister Mary Paraclete Young and Staff of Saint Frances Academy to the Oblate Sisters of Providence, December 2, 1971, OSP Archives.

preserve black Catholic education. However, individual sisters from black congregations continued to keep up the pressure. Working within the burgeoning black Catholic movement and in alliance with white-led sister organizations opposed to white flight, black sisters rallied to keep inner-city and black Catholic schools open by any means necessary. As the seventies progressed, this increasingly meant turning their full attention to the struggle for community control.

### **The Struggle for Community Controlled Catholic Education**

By 1970, remedying the crisis of inner-city and black Catholic education was a top priority for African Americans struggling for equity and justice in the U.S. Church. Across the country, black Catholics mounted impressive campaigns to keep inner-city and predominantly black schools open in the wake of the Church's financial crisis and declining commitment to reform. Black sisters, priests, brothers, and lay Catholics held public protests, picketed archdiocesan and diocesan offices, seized control of Churches, and demanded positions of power on every committee and task force created to close and merge schools. Long frustrated by the racism and paternalism of many white priests and sisters assigned to black parishes and schools, black parents demanded the assignment of black priests, brothers, and sisters to head their schools and churches. They also called for radical changes in school curricula that promoted European culture while denigrating African and African-American heritage. Instead, they demanded classes and materials that instilled racial pride and encouraged excellence in their children. As one parent-leader of the black Catholic movement eloquently declared in 1974, "Most Black Americans, including Nuns and Priests, have begun to look inwardly, and in so doing,

have discovered a long submerged sense of self-appreciation and racial pride, the attainment of which is considered an important prerequisite to correcting social and economic ills. With appreciation and accomplishment, comes the self-assurance to overcome the defeatist attitude that has contributed so much to the Black American's plight. We look to our schools to assist in the basics leading towards those goals."<sup>48</sup>

Because Catholic schools had historically served as the primary vehicles of evangelization for African Americans and long provided viable alternatives to unequal public education, many loyal black Catholics feared that the Church would cease to be relevant in their communities if schools closed. Unable to look to black congregations, then facing declining numbers and increasing pressure to purge militant black sisters from their ranks, activists turned to newly-formed priest, sister, and lay organizations to lead the fight for inner-city and black Catholic schools. One of the first priorities of the Washington, D.C.-based National Office for Black Catholics, organized in 1970, was to establish a department of educational services to gain a more accurate statistical profile of black Catholic school enrollment and those historically black and inner-city schools facing closure and merger.<sup>49</sup> In 1971, the Holy Family sisters released sisters from their duties to join the NOBC's education staff.<sup>50</sup>

Discussions at regional and national board meetings of the National Black Sisters' Conference also prioritized the crisis of inner-city and black Catholic education by 1970. Speaking at the third annual NBSC meeting at the University of Notre Dame in August of

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<sup>48</sup> Richard W. Saxton, Concerned Black Catholic and Parent, to the Very Reverend William W. Baum, Archbishop of Washington, D.C., November 2, 1974, OSP Archives.

<sup>49</sup> Joseph M. Davis and Cyprian S. Rowe, "The Development of the National Office for Black Catholics," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 7 (1988): 269-75.

<sup>50</sup> "A Celebration of Faith," 33. See also "Focus: Department of Educational Services," *Impact* 2(July 1972): 1.

that year Oblate Sister of Providence Mary Marcellina (Shirley) Brooks, outlined the future of the nascent conference and pointed specifically to the field of education as an “open arena” for NBSC members. “New areas of education need to be explored,” Brooks declared. “Black sisters should be developing curricula, programs, and innovative projects that are positive examples of black leadership and cultural understanding.” Sister Marcellina also encouraged greater NBSC attention to “community action programs... aimed at the achievement of social, political, and economic black power.” “Our membership in these programs should be more than just the possession of a membership card,” Brooks insisted. “We can be a tremendous influence in organizing sessions on understanding the dynamics and implementation of community action and control.”<sup>51</sup>

Believing that black sisters, most of whom were professional educators, had to take the lead in the future of black Catholic education, NBSC sought specifically to assess the state of integration in the parochial school system and its administration.<sup>52</sup> From April 13 to 15, 1971, a delegation of seven NBSC members attended the annual convention of the National Catholic Educators’ Association in Minneapolis, Minnesota. There, the delegation, which included Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey, staffed an exhibit booth to promote the NBSC’s publications in order to “promote the image of black religious women deeply involved and concerned with Catholic schools in the black community.”<sup>53</sup> While NBSC members felt that they made positive gains circulating their black-oriented educational materials, they ultimately concluded the NCEA functioned

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<sup>51</sup> Sister M. Marcellina Brooks, OSP, “The Future of the National Black Sisters’ Conference,” in *Celibate Black Commitment: Report of the Third Annual National Black Sisters’ Conference*, 11 (Pittsburgh: NBSC, 1971).

<sup>52</sup> “NBSC Central Committee Meeting Minutes,” August 20, 1971 in NOBC Papers.

<sup>53</sup> “Black Sisters Exhibit at the NCEA Convention,” *Signs of Soul*, 3 (May 1971): 5.

most like a “peer-group operation.” Specifically, they cited the fact that there were no African Americans and only three women on the NCEA board as demonstrating the organization’s inability to address the crisis of Catholic education effectively.<sup>54</sup>

Two days after the NBSC’s participation at the NCEA convention, the organization’s Board of Directors met at the OSP motherhouse in Baltimore and endorsed the black struggle for community control. “The most viable survival strategy presently operative in the black community is the community controlled school,” the NBSC press release declared. “The survival of the 400 black Catholic elementary and secondary schools in the U.S. will only exist with and under total black control.” The NBSC Board specifically rejected the NCEA’s push for integration and instead called for a “redistribution of black religious women educators and administrators.” Black sisters working in predominantly white Catholic schools were especially urged to resign so that they could serve in predominantly black schools, in direct conflict with the NCEA’s suggestion urging that “qualified minority teachers” be employed in the Church’s predominantly and all-white schools.<sup>55</sup> For NBSC leaders, black educational excellence could only be ensured in black controlled institutions that emphasized racial pride.

At the fourth annual NBSC held in Pittsburgh in August of 1971, Sister Sylvia Thibodeaux hosted an institute on black education, during which her 50-plus workshop members adopted the NBSC’s statement calling for black control of all Catholic schools in predominantly black communities and those serving a predominantly black student body.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> “Minutes of NBSC Board Meeting,” ca. April 19, 1971, NOBC Papers.

<sup>55</sup> “Press Release: Black Nuns Opt for Community Controlled Schools,” in NBSC Papers.

<sup>56</sup> “Blacks Must Control Black Schools.”

The following January, the NBSC launched Project DESIGN to “facilitate the emergence and stabilization of community controlled schools.” The brainchild of Sister Sylvia and Sister Dolores Harrall, S.N.D.de Namur, another black nun principal in Boston, Project DESIGN offered in-service teacher training for educators working in black institutions, develop black studies curriculums, and administer programs designed to foster parental involvement and leadership in schools. An acronym for the “Development of Educational Services in the Growing Nation,” DESIGN also sought to halt the ongoing exodus of black sisters from religious life by providing a host of spiritual retreats and an institute for black women’s leadership development and by establishing more formal networks with black congregations.<sup>57</sup>

In mid 1972, Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey resigned as the president of the National Black Sisters’ Conference in order to become the Executive Director of DESIGN.<sup>58</sup> Then a Ph.D. candidate in Education at the University of Pittsburgh, Sister M. Martin de Porres immediately began fundraising for DESIGN. Although unsuccessful in gaining support from Catholic philanthropic organizations, she received substantial support for DESIGN from black women’s organizations and Protestant-leaning foundations. In late 1972, the board of the Irwin-Sweeney-Miller Foundation in Columbus, Indiana voted to fund DESIGN’s first year operational budget of \$117, 261.00 and fifty percent of the second-year’s projected budget, “with the expressed hope that the Catholic hierarchy would absorb the remainder.”<sup>59</sup> This enabled the NBSC to incorporate DESIGN as a separate entity devoted specifically to the “development of educational

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<sup>57</sup> “Development of Educational Services in the Growing Nation,” *Signs of Soul* 4(January 1972): 4. See also Copeland, “A Cadre of Women Religious,” 139-40

<sup>58</sup>Sister Helen M. Christian, R.S.M. to Sisters, October 9, 1972, NBSC Papers. Christian introduces herself as the new NBSC President.

<sup>59</sup> “DESIGN,” *Signs of Soul* 5(Jan. 1973): 13.

excellence in the black community.” The NBSC also received a \$10,000 grant from the Black Women’s Community Development Foundation to finance programs to assist in recruiting and retaining black female vocations to the Church.<sup>60</sup>

As the first agency organized explicitly to facilitate the transition of inner-city non-public schools to community-controlled institutions, DESIGN received an enthusiastic welcome from parents, administrators, and community organizations invested in the survival of black Catholic education. In its first year, the DESIGN office received scores of requests for assistance from parents and faculties of inner-city and black Catholic schools threatened with closure. In response to these requests, DESIGN administrators, under the leadership of Sister M. Martin de Porres, organized a Training Laboratory, which introduced teachers and administrators to more effective teaching methods and innovative curricula designed to foster black academic excellence. The Training Laboratory program consisted of two four-week sessions held during the summer and included on-site observation and academic-year supervision by DESIGN’s all-black professional staff, made up of national educational specialists in curriculum development, politics, and psychology. Successful matriculation through DESIGN’s training laboratory required the participation of a team of three to five teachers, including the respective school’s principal. In its first year of work alone, DESIGN was able to prevent the closures of two inner-city Catholic schools.<sup>61</sup>

Nonetheless, DESIGN faced challenges from the very beginning. Its full-time staff, which consisted of only three people, consistently received more requests than their resource-stretched office could answer. Declining numbers of black sisters, financial

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<sup>60</sup> “Minutes of the (NBSC) Central Committee Meeting, 6 January 1973,” in NOBC Papers. See also Grey, interview by author.

<sup>61</sup> Copeland, “A Cadre of Women Religious, 140. See also Grey, interview by author.

uncertainty, and increasing African-American frustration with the Church also limited DESIGN's efforts. Nonetheless, from 1972 to 1974, DESIGN's Training Laboratory graduated 34 participants from fourteen different schools. However, the initiative did not survive its second year, which saw the abrupt departure of Sister M. Martin de Porres from religious life. Following a brief fight over control of the initiative from 1974 to 1975, DESIGN collapsed.<sup>62</sup>

While many of the former Catholic schools that were transformed into community schools remained open and black Catholic school enrollments rebounded as the seventies progressed, black-administered schools continued to close. Among the most devastating of these school closures was the OSP's St. Frances Academy for Girls. Citing financial difficulties, OSP superior Mother Mary of Good Counsel announced the congregation's decision to close St. France in early January 1974.<sup>63</sup> Although the archdiocese had subsidized the institution for the previous three years, the congregation determined that the costs needed for the restoration of the institution far exceeded the proposed subsidy.<sup>64</sup> White clerics also surreptitiously continued their efforts to thwart the fulfillment of the Brentwood-Forrest Community Center and Sister Mary Paraclete's leadership at St. Frances. In a confidential memo apparently sent to the OSP Leadership Council prior to the congregation's December vote to close St. Frances, Father Henry J. Offer, a white Josephite and a "professed" proponent of black power, wrote that he did not think St. Frances should continue as it then existed. Specifically, he stated that although he had "a great respect for Sister Paraclete and her dedication to the school and to the girls," he

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<sup>62</sup> Copeland, "A Cadre of Women Religious Committed to Black Liberation," 140. See also Sister Nathan Marie Adams, SSND to Attorney Ricardo Calvin Jackson, March 20, 1975, NBSC Papers.

<sup>63</sup> Mother Mary of Good Counsel to Every Oblate Sister of Providence, January 21, 1974, OSP Archives.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

nonetheless felt that she should be removed as St. Frances's principal. Offer, who noted that his relationship with the principal had been "strained in the past," also took the opportunity to criticize Sister Mary Paraclete's proposed community center, characterizing it as "grandiose" and "too unreal." Mindful of how his suggestions might be perceived, the Josephite priest instructed the OSP leadership council to keep his memo "very confidential," noting that he would not be keeping a copy and that "all other evidence will be destroyed."<sup>65</sup>

While it is unclear if Sister Mary Paraclete was aware of Father Offer's covert opposition to her activism and leadership, the decision to close St. Frances devastated the 49-year old nun. Less than one month after St. Frances officially closed, Sister Mary Paraclete, a 29-year member of the congregation, requested and received an Indult of Exclaustration from the OSP.<sup>66</sup> One year later, she left the congregation permanently. However, she did not abandon religious life. Instead, Sister Mary Paraclete became a consecrated virgin in the archdiocese of Denver in Colorado, where she labored until her death in 2004.<sup>67</sup>

Although several OSP successfully mobilized to reopen St. Frances Academy (as a coeducational institution) in 1976, the black-administered Catholic educational system

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<sup>65</sup> Henry J. Offer, "Strictly Confidential Memo Regarding Sister Paraclete," in "St. Frances Academy Closing, 1974" File in OSP Archives. See also Henry J. Offer, S.S.J., "Black Power—A Great Saving Grace," *The American Ecclesiastical Review*, 49 (September 1968), copy in Josephite Archives.

<sup>66</sup> Sister Mary of Good Counsel Baptiste, O.S.P. to Most Rev. George R. Evans, JCD, May 1, 1974, OSP Archives.

<sup>67</sup> Sister Mary Paraclete Young to Revered Mother Mary of Good Counsel Baptiste and General Council, April 18, 1975, OSP Archives. Also see email correspondence between author and Jim Spurlin of Blessed Sacrament Church in Denver, CO, Jan. 13-14, 2010 and between author and Sister Sharon Young, Jan. 13 and 19, 2010 and "Obituaries and Memorials: Sister Mary Paraclete Young," *The Denver Post*, June 27, 2004, A-31, [http://nl.newsbank.com/nl-search/we/Archives?p\\_action=doc&p\\_docid=10382CD81F344...](http://nl.newsbank.com/nl-search/we/Archives?p_action=doc&p_docid=10382CD81F344...), accessed on January 25, 2010.

lay largely in ruins after twenty years of school integration.<sup>68</sup> Although black student enrollments in Catholic schools rebounded in the last half of the seventies, schools operated by the OSP and SSF closed or merged at a frightening pace. Between 1965 and 1975, 29 OSP and SSF-administered Catholic schools closed or merged, leaving thousands of African-American students displaced.<sup>69</sup> Because the merger of black Catholic schools with white ones generally did not include the merger of the faculties or guarantee black admission into those white schools, black students often found themselves marginalized and targeted for grade demotion by white school administrators despite their academic abilities.

Such was the case when the OSP-administered Immaculate Conception High School was forced to merge into Bishop England High School in Charleston, South Carolina in 1968. Opened in 1933, Immaculate Conception was the state's first Catholic high school accessible to African Americans, and it experienced substantial growth during its tenure. In 1951, Immaculate Conception added a third level to accommodate its increasing enrollment, which between 1953 and 1957 reached over 700 students. Prior to the merger, Immaculate Conception was Charleston's premier black high school with over 80 percent of its graduates matriculating at colleges and universities, including Harvard, Xavier College of Louisiana, Columbia, New York University, the University of Detroit, Howard, Duquesne, South Carolina State, and Fisk. By 1965, Immaculate Conceptions alumni were represented in a host of professions including medicine, law,

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<sup>68</sup>Frank P.L. Somerville, "State's Oldest Black School Reborn," *The Sun*, July 1979, n.p. and "12 Nuns, 6 Houses Form An 'Oasis in the Ghetto,'" *Boston Sunday Globe*, December 16, 1979, 90. Copies in OSP Archives. See also Sister Mary Reginald Gerdes, interview by author, March 23, 2010.

<sup>69</sup> Statistics gathered from OSP and SSF Archives.

dentistry, nursing, pharmacy, education, business, and religious life.<sup>70</sup> Nonetheless, the white administrators at Bishop England initially demoted Immaculate Conception transfer students by one or two grades, stating that the students were likely ill-prepared to meet Bishop England's rigorous standards. Only after the protests of Sister Mary Immaculate (Naomi) Smith, IC's principal who briefly served on Bishop England's staff, did administrators reverse their decisions.<sup>71</sup>

Despite such blatant opposition to African-Americans' pursuit of Catholic education, black parents continued to invest in parochial schools, which they argued were viable alternatives to the disproportionate number of failing public schools located in their communities. While black Catholic school enrollments experienced a brief decline during the first half of the seventies, they quickly rebounded and stood at over 110,000 in 1976.<sup>72</sup> A study produced by the National Office for Black Catholics in the same year revealed that African-American parents, regardless of class background, consistently paid higher Catholic tuition rates than their white counterparts in the same class levels. For example, black working-class parents paid an average annual tuition rate of \$400 for one child, while their white counterparts paid \$160. The NOBC study also found that African-American parents often paid more for one child's education than whites paid for five children, underscoring how high African Americans valued Catholic education as opposed to their white counterparts.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Sister Mary Emma Hadrick, O.S.P.'s "Contribution of the Oblate Sisters of Providence to Catholic Education in the United States and Cuba, 1829-1962," M.A. Thesis, The Catholic University of America, 1964, 66.

<sup>71</sup> Sister Naomi Smith, O.S.P., interview by author, May 5, 2010.

<sup>72</sup> Typed report of *Annual Negro and Indian Missions*, 1976, Josephite Archives.

<sup>73</sup> NOBC, "The Crisis of Catholic Education."

Believing that all Catholic schools could be made to work, the NOBC cited the ongoing closing of black and inner-city Catholic schools as a failure “by the total Catholic community, not just the particular parish concerned.” The organization also pointed out that ecclesiastical opposition to non-Catholics attending Catholic schools (another prominent justification for closing inner-city schools) was in direct conflict with the Decree on Bishops’ Pastoral Office proclaimed by Pope Paul VI during the Second Vatican Council.<sup>74</sup> The decree specifically called the world’s bishops to “manifest the Church’s maternal solicitude for all men, whether they be believers or not” and “to attend upon the lower classes to whom the Lord sent them to preach the gospel.”<sup>75</sup> As such, the ongoing devaluation of black and inner-city Catholic education by ecclesiastical authorities and the Church’s waning commitment to racial justice reform eventually forced many black Catholics to ponder their future in a Church still bent on ignoring its moral responsibilities.

### **Devastating Departures and Steady Decline**

During the 1970s, thousands of black Catholics openly questioned whether or it was possible to be black and remain in the U.S. Church. In 1974, the National Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, the largest Klan organization in the nation, voted to admit (white) Catholics for the first time in its history. Once reviled and targeted by America’s first domestic terrorist group, white Catholics became worthy of Klan membership as a result of their widespread opposition to racial justice during the civil rights era. When the U.S. hierarchy failed to immediately condemn the Klan’s newfound interest in white Catholic

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<sup>74</sup> NOBC, “The Crisis of Catholic Education.”

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

membership, many black Catholics considered the Church's silence a clear indication of its stand on racial justice.<sup>76</sup> As a result, thousands of black Catholics left the Church.

Although Church defections were not restricted by race or sex, the exodus of black Catholics, especially religious men and women, was especially stark. A study published in 1980 estimated that between 1970 and 1975, 250 black seminarians withdrew from their studies, 125 black sisters left their congregations, and 25 of 190 black priests left the ordained ministry. Some observers estimated that as many as 20 percent of black Catholics stopped practicing during the same period.<sup>77</sup> Because black Catholics had historically only represented a marginal percentage of the national population of Catholics, these departures were searing. This was especially true for black sisters, who first made religious life possible for African Americans and founded the nation's earliest black Catholic schools.

Despite the efforts of the National Black Sisters' Conference and a few religious congregations open to structural and ideological change, the exodus of black sisters from religious life increased at a steady pace during the seventies. While resurging opposition to racial justice and expanded opportunities for women in the public sphere were key factors driving black sisters' exodus, white and black congregational leaders also failed to make the necessary ideological and structural changes needed to promote retention within their ranks. While the history of racial segregation and exclusion left many white congregations woefully ill-equipped to promote black retention, black congregations also failed to muster the necessary courage to keep their members in religious life and to

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<sup>76</sup> Edward P. Jones, "Baum Repudiates KKK, Kathlix," *Impact!* 7 (April 1977): 1, 3.

<sup>77</sup> Studies cited in Ochs, *Desegregating the Altar*, 447.

attract new vocations. As the NBSC executive director lamented in 1975, “To our shame, black religious congregations are fully capable of repressing black religious women.”<sup>78</sup>

Despite the NBSC’s documented success of promoting black sisters’ retention in religious life, black leadership councils never fully endorsed the organization. Indeed, most black leadership councils, even the Oblate Sisters of Providence, were uncomfortable with the formation of the National Black Sisters’ Conference in 1968.<sup>79</sup> Faced with declining numbers and the closings of several of their longstanding schools, black superiors initially opposed their members’ engagement with the NBSC if it required them to neglect their teaching duties. Nonetheless, the organization gained strength and became the prominent voice of black sisters in the Church. As a result, however, some members of black congregations perceived the increasingly militant NBSC as a threat to their standing in the Church. One anonymous sister from a black order writing to the *St. Anthony’s Messenger* in 1974, for example, clearly sought to distance herself and her congregation from the NBSC and its foundress. “Sister Martin de Porres, founder of the black sisters movement and self-appointed spokesman for black sisters, has often expressed views and attitudes concerning black sisters that many of us *do not* agree,” the sister stated.<sup>80</sup> Undoubtedly, the willingness of NBSC members to testify publicly about their mistreatment and to protest openly about racism made many older members of black congregations uncomfortable. Moreover, since many of these same black congregational members remained unwilling to publicly condemn white Catholics, who violently opposed racial justice, it is likely that their willingness to

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<sup>78</sup> Copeland, “Black Nuns,” 9.

<sup>79</sup> Chineworth, interview by author. See also Blau, “Black Nuns Seek Community Rule in Schools,” 18 and Fiske, “Finding Identity,” 22.

<sup>80</sup> Karen Katafiasz, “A New Voice for the New Black Sister,” *Saint Anthony Messenger* 81(April 1974): 42.

condemn the NBSC was not simply the product of ideological differences, but was also rooted in the fear and self-hatred that NBSC members sought to contest.

While white clerical opposition to black Catholic militancy played a significant role in black congregations' ambivalence to the NBSC, the intransigence of such political conservatism in the face of resurging racism in the Church was also the product of years of forced acceptance such behavior. However, young members of black congregations, especially those who had come of age during the civil rights movement, proved unwilling to accept such deference to Church authority and authorities. As a result, scores of young black sisters defected from religious life in explicit protest of the conservatism of black congregations.<sup>81</sup>

Despite their uneasy relationship with black superiors, NBSC leaders still sought to maintain strong ties to the black congregations, especially since they contained over 75 percent of the nation's black sisters and were losing their younger members at a rapid pace.<sup>82</sup> As President Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey explained in 1970: "The NBSC is a radical movement. A radical movement does not incorporate every person in its course. Every black religious woman has not chosen to belong to the NBSC: every black member will never belong to the NBSC. Most black religious do not understand the NBSC; some black religious women do not want to understand the NBSC. But all black religious

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<sup>81</sup> Rose Vernell was one such sister. In 1969, she defected from the OSP in explicit political protest to the congregation's racial conservatism. See Peter Steinfelds, "Black Catholics in Splinter Sect Ordain Woman," *New York Times*, September 9, 1991, <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/09/09/us/black-catholics-in-splinter-sect-ordain-woman.html> (accessed on November 26, 2012).

<sup>82</sup> A study conducted by the NBSC in 1971 found that while the dropout rate for black sisters in the previous five years was approximately 12 percent, the dropout rate for NBSC members was only about 8 percent. They also noted that 6 ½ percent of those women were still affiliated with the organization. "Information Sheet," 23.

women will have the option of enjoying the differences the NBSC will hopefully make.”<sup>83</sup>

Members of black congregations who belonged to the NBSC initially worked to build bridges between their respective congregations and the conference. They also encouraged their congregations to experiment with their apostolates as mandated by the Second Vatican Council. For Holy Family Sister Theresa Perry, an active NBSC member, religious life still contained the potential for radical transformation and change even in the midst of conservative retrenchment. “Christianity has been the arm of oppression since early times and that is the way blacks have experienced it,” Perry proclaimed at the third annual NBSC. “But the Word of God can also be used as a force of liberation.”<sup>84</sup> She and many other activist-oriented sisters resolved to remain in religious life and as members of black congregations. However, it proved to be a difficult task.

In the early seventies, Holy Family Sister Judith Therese Barial became especially disgusted with the racial conservatism of her congregation’s leaders. Barred from attending the first NBSC gathering by her superior general, Barial joined the federation a year later, in 1969, and quickly ascended into NBSC leadership ranks. Emboldened by the black consciousness movement and the spirit of community and activism fostered within the NBSC, Barial began to challenge the political conservatism of her SSF peers. For example, after repeatedly witnessing some of her lighter-skinned Creole peers chastise and publicly humiliate their students who wore Afros and expressed admiration for black power, Barial cut her hair into a short Afro in order to demonstrate her support

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<sup>83</sup> Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey, RSM, “The National Black Sisters’ Conference Is Because,” in *Celibate Black Commitment*, 97.

<sup>84</sup> Fiske, “Finding Identity,” 22.

for her students and the black revolution at large. Although her act of protest engendered a significant backlash within the congregation, Barial did not retreat. She also did not leave the congregation. Instead, she remained and hoped to be able to work for change within the SSF, incorporating black studies into her curriculum and continuing to challenge the retrogressive elements within the congregation.<sup>85</sup>

Sister Sylvia Thibodeaux also opted to remain a Holy Family Sister despite her congregation's increasing opposition to the black revolution. While working with the Association of Urban Sisters in Boston, Thibodeaux found her community's increasing resistance to the black Catholic movement and her activism in the struggle for community control almost unbearable. In 1974, she resigned her position as the principal of the Saint Joseph Community School.<sup>86</sup> Although Thibodeaux remained fiercely committed to the fight for community-controlled schools and the African-American Catholic freedom struggle, the conservative Holy Family leadership council left her disillusioned with the radical potential of religious life. Thus, in order to "save her vocation," she accepted an offer in 1974 to relocate to Benin City in Nigeria to assist in the formation of an indigenous community of women.<sup>87</sup> Although Thibodeaux and Barial managed to remain in the SSF, many could not. Scores of young activist-oriented Holy Family Sisters, including prominent NBSC leader Theresa Perry, defected from the order in the 1970s.<sup>88</sup>

For those still committed to religious life, transferring to a different congregation proved a suitable alternative to defection. In these cases, sisters generally left

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<sup>85</sup> Barial, interview by author.

<sup>86</sup> Thibodeaux, interview by author.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. See *Annual Catholic Directory* statistics.

congregations hostile to their participation in the black Catholic movement. For example, in 1970, Sister Yvonne Tucker, a member of the Order of St. Francis and a teacher stationed in Green Bay, Wisconsin, left her community after several years of service to become a full-time staff member for the NBSC. In that same year, Tucker, a native of Chicago, became an affiliate member of the Pittsburgh Sisters of Mercy. In 1972, she professed her vows as a Religious Sister of Mercy, becoming the order's second African-American member after NBSC foundress Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey.<sup>89</sup>

In 1973, Sister Teresita Weind, another NBSC founder, completed a canonical transfer into the Ohio province of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur (SNDdeN) based in Cincinnati. Originally a member of the Sisters of Mary of the Presentation and stationed in Bottineau, North Dakota as a public health nurse in the mid to late sixties, Weind experienced a “conversion and an awakening of consciousness in [her] African-American roots” after King’s assassination in 1968.<sup>90</sup> The following year, Weind relocated to Chicago, where she began a parish ministry among the residents of the predominantly black and economically impoverished Cabrini-Green housing projects. Soon thereafter, she decided to switch communities in order to continue her ministry in the African-American community. Although barred admission to the SNDdeN in 1960 due to its racially restrictive admission policies, Weind reapplied in 1970 and was welcomed into the community of her former educators.<sup>91</sup> They were in the process of substantial structural and ideological change, which was prompted by the abrupt

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<sup>89</sup> “Asante Yvonne!” *Signs of Soul*, 4(Jan. 1972): 12. See also Blance Linden-Ward and Carol Hurd Green, *American in the 1960s: Changing the Future* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993), 190.

<sup>90</sup> “Founding Board Member Teresita Weind, SNDdeN,” on Mary Pence’s Blog, <http://www.maryspence.org/blog/2012/03/16/founding-board-member-teresita-weind-snden/>, accessed July 10, 2012.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.* See also “Sister Teresita Weind, SNDdeN: Provincial of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur,” in *Ministries in African American Catholic Communities*, 176, <[http://www.catholiccincinnati.org/wpcontent/uploads/2011/01/Section\\_IV\\_2008.pdf](http://www.catholiccincinnati.org/wpcontent/uploads/2011/01/Section_IV_2008.pdf)>

defections of the SNDdeN's first African-American members, Sandra Willingham and Violet Marie Dennis, in 1968 and 1970, respectively. Their decision resulted from individual and structural anti-black racism in the order.<sup>92</sup>

NBSC Executive Director Sister Mary Shawn Copeland also switched congregations in order to maintain her public commitment to the African-American struggle for freedom and justice. Originally a member of the Michigan province of the Congregation of Sisters of St. Felix (CSSF), or the Felician Sisters, in Livonia, Michigan, Copeland increasingly found her community unreceptive to her desire to participate fully in black liberation struggles. Following her public role in the sit-in protests of several Detroit Catholic churches whose schools were threatened with closure, Copeland opted to transfer to a congregation more accepting of her public activism. In 1974, she joined the Adrian Dominicans, a Michigan-based congregation whose African-American members had been visible and very active in the black Catholic movement from its earliest stages.<sup>93</sup>

Although securing a canonical transfer into a socially progressive congregation offered an alternative to defection from religious life for some sisters, others ultimately found the constraints of religious life incompatible with their public and community activism. In most cases, this was an extremely emotional and difficult decision, especially for sisters in communities with radical founding ministries. For Oblate Sister of Providence M. Kathleen (Elizabeth Ethel) LaVergne, this was certainly the case. A native of Opelousas, Louisiana, LaVergne entered the OSP in 1963 at the age of eighteen. Intelligent, hard-working, and endowed with a deep commitment to service, Sister Mary

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<sup>92</sup> Willingham, interview by author. See also Willingham, "Why I Quit the Convent."

<sup>93</sup> Copeland, interview by author.

Kathleen routinely received outstanding evaluations from her formation directress and teaching supervisors during her early years in the community.<sup>94</sup> A member of the “Emmett Till” generation, Lavergne also enthusiastically responded to the activist-oriented mandates of Vatican II and increasingly sought to participate in public battles for racial justice. Even as her peers began defecting from the congregation in explicit protest against their leadership’s conservatism, LaVergne, a NBSC founder, chose to remain. However, she increasingly challenged the limitations placed on her. For example, Sister Kathleen abandoned her habit and sought greater interaction with seculars despite strict orders not to do so. LaVergne also increasingly challenged the authority of her superiors who opposed her engagement with the freedom struggle. As a result, Sister Kathleen was threatened with dismissal if she continued in her disobedience.<sup>95</sup>

Facing a congregation that was increasingly willing to purge itself of its radical members no matter the cost, Lavergne remained firm, seeking to bridge the divide between the militants and conservatives in the OSP. In a position paper addressed to OSP superior general Mother Mary of Good Counsel and circulated widely within the congregation in early 1972, Sister Kathleen sought to explain her actions and garner support for her desire to work outside of the congregation’s traditional apostolate. “I committed myself to the service of God’s people when I made my vows,” Lavergne wrote. “I committed myself because I believe in Christ and his revolution and I believe in people and in complete service to people. Our constitutions affirm this belief and this commitment.” Citing examples of spirit-driven women from history, including Harriet

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<sup>94</sup> “Character and Religious Progress Report,” for LaVergne, January 19, 1964, in LaVergne Congregational File, OSP Archives.

<sup>95</sup> Mother Mary of Good Counsel Baptiste, “The Case of Sister Mary Kathleen Lavergne,” ca. 1973, OSP Archives.

Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and OSP foundress Mother Mary (Elizabeth Clarisse) Lange, Lavergne argued that she committed herself to “a life of risk and revolution,” affirming that her commitment was to God and people first, not the congregation. Nonetheless, Lavergne wanted to remain an OSP. However, she sought a release from her duties in order to obtain a teaching position at a local black college or coordinate a parent course at the Martin Luther King Parent Child Center in Baltimore; administer a child development program for parents in connection with the survival programs at East Baltimore’s St. Francis Xavier Church; and live in an community setting in a house open to single women and their children in need of living quarters.<sup>96</sup>

Despite LaVergne’s clear desire to remain in religious life and minister to Baltimore’s most vulnerable, OSP superiors remained firm in their ultimatum. In 1973, Sister Mary Kathleen was dismissed from the Oblates. Unable to convince OSP superiors of her commitment to the basic principles of religious life and service, Lavergne returned to the secular world to continue her ministry as a lay woman.<sup>97</sup>

Undoubtedly, the most devastating and telling sister departure of the 1970s was that of NBSC foundress Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey. Since 1968, she had been a leading force in the black Catholic movement and the most prominent sister active in the struggle for racial justice. With the blessing and enthusiastic encouragement of Mercy superior Mother Thomas Aquinas Carroll, Grey had established the NBSC headquarters in Pittsburgh and served as the face and force of the “new black nun” in the late sixties and early seventies. As a consequence, Grey was also the most prominent target of NBSC

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<sup>96</sup> Sister Kathleen LaVergne, “Statement of Position of Commitment and Proposal for an Apostolate,” to Mother Mary of Good Counsel, Jan. and Feb. 13, 1972, OSP Archives.

<sup>97</sup> Most Reverend T. Austin Murphy to Sister Mary Kathleen (Elizabeth E. LaVergne), September 30, 1973, OSP Archives.

opponents. Although she had pressed forward with the organization, the physical, emotional, and psychological labor of leading the NBSC began to take a major toll by 1973, and those closest to Grey witnessed that toll firsthand. They also witnessed Grey's budding relationship with another black community activist, whom Grey met while fundraising for DESIGN in 1973. Grey eventually fell in love and decided to marry the man in 1974. Reflecting on it years later, the former nun noted, "If I had had some sort of sabbatical or break, I would have likely remained in religious life."<sup>98</sup> Upon deciding to marry, Grey left the Pittsburgh Religious Sisters of Mercy, cutting its African-American membership in half. Soon after her departure, Sister Yvonne Tucker also defected from religious life, ending the community's long experiment in racial integration. The Pittsburgh Religious Sisters of Mercy would not accept another African-American sister in the twentieth century.<sup>99</sup>

Grey's departure from religious life had an especially devastating impact on the NBSC. For many, Grey had been the living blood of the NBSC and the indisputable face of the new black Catholic sister. Oral testimonies from those who labored with the spiritual leader in the Religious Sisters of Mercy and the black Catholic movement all describe her as a force of nature, deeply intelligent, articulate, and passionate.<sup>100</sup> Reflecting on Grey in 1996, M. Shawn Copeland wrote: "At the time I knew and worked with Patricia Grey, she was one of the most intellectually talented, charismatic, and forceful women religious of our generation."<sup>101</sup> As such, Grey's defection from religious

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<sup>98</sup> Grey, interview by author.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> See author's interviews with Copeland, Gemperle, Barial, Thibodeaux, Madigan, and Felice. See also Joseph M. Davis and Cyprian S. Rowe, "The Development of the National Office for Black Catholics," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 7 (1988): 269-75.

<sup>101</sup> M. Shawn Copeland, "A Cadre of Women Religious Committee to Black Liberation," 128, n.17.

life in 1974 was especially difficult to bear for those who had tirelessly worked beside her since the NBSC's founding. The rapid collapse of Project DESIGN after Grey's departure left the NBSC struggling to find direction in the face of declining numbers and the Church's visible retreat from racial reform as the seventies progressed.

Faced with an uncertain future, NBSC leaders began to reflect on the organization's accomplishments and failures. Like other activist-intellectuals, black sisters also began to dig up their past in search of a blueprint for survival in a Church bent on maintaining white supremacy and women's subordination. Writing for the *National Catholic Reporter* in 1975, for example, NBSC Executive Director Sister M. Shawn Copeland proclaimed: "The saga of America's black women who have dared to be poor, chaste, and obedient is largely untold. It is an uneasy story not only because it is rooted in the American dilemma—racism—but also because the position of woman in an oppressed group is traditionally delicate and strategic."<sup>102</sup> Charting the long and complicated history of black female religious life in the U.S. Church, Copeland specifically blamed resurging racism and the conservatism of white *and* black congregations for declining vocations and the ongoing exodus from religious life. "The young black women who are potential candidates for these congregations enter adulthood in an era when demands for commitment to the liberation struggle are stronger than ever before," she wrote. Yet, Sister Mary Shawn argued that these candidates and other sisters had "few religious congregations to turn to."<sup>103</sup> Despite these challenges though, Copeland remained hopeful, pointing to the NBSC's recent involvement in the founding

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<sup>102</sup> Copeland, "Black Nuns," 9.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart, an indigenous congregation in Nigeria, as perhaps a “significant contribution to religious life.”<sup>104</sup>

In November of 1973, Bishop Patrick E. Epku, an ordinary of the diocese of Benin City, contacted the NBSC for assistance in the development of an indigenous congregation to minister to the educational, catechetical, and medical needs of the local community, especially women. Citing the inadequacy of white congregations active in the diocese, the increased desire among Nigerians for Nigerian sisters, and the diocese’s own desire “to comply with papal encouragement for native religious and priests,” Bishop Epku believed the NBSC could provide the community’s prospective candidates with a healthy spiritual model which celebrated rather than denigrated Nigerian cultural traditions.<sup>105</sup> Enthusiastic about the opportunity, the NBSC agreed to oversee the spiritual formation of the diocese’s prospective candidates and quickly began fundraising and soliciting the support of prominent Church leaders in the United States. In 1974, NBSC leader Sister Sylvia Thibodeaux relocated to Benin City to assume the role of formation directress of the Sacred Heart Sisters.<sup>106</sup> One year later, the NBSC donated 3,000 naira (the equivalent of 4, 870 U.S. dollars) to the Sacred Heart Novitiate located at Atani, Uromi, in the Mid-West state. In April of 1975, NBSC Executive Director Sister Mary Shawn Copeland traveled to Nigeria to observe the order’s first procession ceremony. There, Copeland praised the congregation’s new novices for their “courage in giving up the pleasures of this life in order to devote their lives entirely to the Service of

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<sup>104</sup> Copeland, “Black Nuns,” 9.

<sup>105</sup> “A Proposal for the Organization and Formation of an Indigenous Religious Congregation in Nigeria, West Africa,” 1974, NBSC Series 2.4, Box 3, Folder 4, MUSCA.

<sup>106</sup> Thibodeaux, interview by author. See also Jones, “Holy Family,” 1.

God and humanity.” Copeland also made a moving appeal to Nigerian parents to encourage their sons and daughters to become priests and nuns.<sup>107</sup>

Although diasporic at its founding, the NBSC initially focused its efforts on the survival of religious life and Catholic education in the African-American community. However, the declining number of black sisters and the rising dearth of vocations in the United States forced NBSC leaders to shift their gaze to the African continent, where vocations to female religious life remained plentiful. NBSC leaders also suspected that their presence among hundreds of African female congregations might ultimately prove pivotal, especially if fledgling U.S. congregations began turning to Catholic Africa in search of female vocations. In 1969, Jesuit theologian John C. Haughey had considered as much when pondering the contributions the newly-organized NBSC could make to the Church. “At a time when vocations of service are growing impressively in the black community, black vocations to religious life are critically few in this country,” he wrote. “Africa, by way of contrast, has many more young people who desire to follow a religious vocation than available facilities or trained personnel can cope with. Wouldn’t it be one of history’s ironies if black American nuns became an important factor in the reaping of that African harvest?”<sup>108</sup>

By 1975, NBSC leaders and black Catholics in western and eastern Africa had certainly recognized the possibility. In April of 1975, Reverend Dr. Peter Sarpong, Archbishop of Kumasi in Ghana, requested the assistance of the NBSC in the training of “four young [Ashanti] women...seeking to serve God as sisters” in his archdiocese. Impressed with the development of the Sacred Heart Sisters in Benin City, Bishop

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<sup>107</sup> Ignatius Ohi, “Gift from U.S.,” *Independent*, April 27, 1965, 8. Copy in NBSC Papers.

<sup>108</sup> Haughey, “Black Sisters Become Soul Sisters,” 67.

Sarpong hoped that the NBSC's labors could be replicated in Kumasi.<sup>109</sup> That July, Benedict A. Karaimu, a Kenyan student studying at Saint Mary's College in Winona, Minnesota, also contacted the NBSC expressing hope that the organization could begin missionary work in Nairobi and eventually establish their headquarters there.<sup>110</sup> Although the lack of personnel and finances prevented the realization of these proposed initiatives, the NBSC remained committed to building and sustaining partnerships in Catholic Africa. In the case of the Sacred Heart Sisters, Sister Sylvia Thibodeaux, initially committed to assisting the congregation for three years, ultimately remained in Nigeria for the next nineteen years as a guiding force and superior of the Sacred Heart Sisters.<sup>111</sup>

Although the demand for African-American sisters remained high as the seventies came to an end, dwindling numbers, decreasing Church support, and exhaustion began to take its toll on the National Black Sisters' Conference. In 1976, executive director Mary Shawn Copeland, exhausted and devastated by the losses of the previous decade, resigned from the organization. Although she remained a prominent figure in fight for racial, gender, and educational justice in the Church, Copeland chose to do so outside of the organization she helped to build. Twenty years later, Copeland joined thousands of her peers in exile from religious life, capping a quarter of century of devastating losses for the Church and the nation's community of black Catholic sisters.<sup>112</sup> Although the NBSC would survive the seventies, the vacuum created by the loss of so many talented and young sisters left the organization refocusing its energies and scaling back its inaugural agenda as it pressed forward into the Reagan era.

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<sup>109</sup> Sister Mary Shawn Copeland, OP to Right Reverend Dr. Peter Sarpong, April 24, 1975. See also Peter Sarpong to Sister Mary Shawn Copeland, O.P., May 9, 1975, NBSC Papers.

<sup>110</sup> Benedict A. Karaimu to Sister Copeland, July 4, 1975, NBSC Papers.

<sup>111</sup> Thibodeaux, interview by author. See also Jones, "Holy Family," 1.

<sup>112</sup> Copeland, interview by author.

## **Conclusion**

As the nineteen seventies came to a close, the future of African-American female religious life was uncertain. In the previous two decades, the national community of black sisters underwent monumental changes. Beginning with revolutionary reforms initiated by the Second Vatican Council and the Church's entry into the civil rights movement, African-American sisters came of age politically. Following the assassination of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968, black Catholics launched their greatest revolt in American history. First with black priests and sisters in 1968 and soon followed by the laity and seminarians in 1969 and 1970, respectively, black Catholics built an impressive national movement to demand justice and equity within their Church. Yet, white Catholics, religious and lay, proved ever-resilient in maintaining the status quo. As the some of the most virulent foot soldiers and leaders of the massive resistance campaign to integration and racial justice, white Catholics repeatedly proved unwilling to adhere to the Church's social teachings and its mandates on Christian love. Even progressive white Catholics proved unreceptive to black demands for self-determination and community control in the Church. Combined with the financial crises of the late sixties and seventies, white resistance to the black Catholic movement proved devastating to the nation's marginal population of black Catholics.

Not only did the era witness the tragic unraveling of the nation's famed black Catholic educational system, but also the defection of hundreds of black religious men and women from the their communities as they became disillusioned with the Church and the radical potential of religious life. For the nation's black sisterhoods, the vocational

and educational crises of the late sixties and seventies were shattering. From 1965 to 1975, black congregations lost a combined total of 230 sisters, or roughly 30 percent of their membership, as the result of a combination of deaths and community departures.<sup>113</sup>

The case of Harlem-based Franciscan Handmaids of the Most Pure Heart of Mary was especially stark. During this period, the nation's youngest black sisterhood lost nearly half of its membership, dropping from a total of 76 sisters in 1965 to 45 sisters in 1975.<sup>114</sup>

Although black sisters' departures from predominantly white congregations were also devastating (those white congregations who had African-American members lost all or most of them in this period, the departure of black sisters from black congregations was especially searing and telling. Since the nineteenth century, black sisterhoods had served as African-American Catholics' chief spiritual representatives and racial ambassadors to the all-white U.S. hierarchy, helping to secure critical religious and educational resources for their largely-neglected community. At the same time, black congregations had served as havens for black women and girls rejected by white communities solely on the basis of race. Indeed, at the peak of black sisters' population in the United States in 1965, over three-fourths of these sisters belonged to the nation's three black congregations. Thus, the inability and unwillingness of black leadership councils to make ideological and structural changes necessary to insure retention and growth in their communities at such a critical moment sealed the fate of African-American female religious life in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Tragically, many of the pioneering black sisters who forced open the doors of U.S. Catholic higher education and kept the fight for black religious life alive during the Jim Crow era

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<sup>113</sup> Numbers gathered from the *Annual Catholic Directory*, 1965 and 1975.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

witnessed the failure of the Church to muster the courage and innovation necessary to keep their would-be successors in religious life in the post-civil rights era.

For the nation's first successful community of black nuns, it was an especially difficult lesson to bear. In 1965, the Oblate Sisters of Providence reached the pinnacle of their success. The community operated 40 schools in 16 states, the District of Columbia, and Costa Rica, including the nation's oldest black Catholic school.<sup>115</sup> In the same year, OSP membership peaked at 337 sisters.<sup>116</sup> Among the order's international network of superiors were a cadre of distinguished black women, who had courageously pried open the doors of several of the nation's most venerable Catholic colleges and universities. In 1966, the OSP broke the higher educational barrier, when they established Mount Providence Junior College, the first and only Catholic institution of higher education to be founded by a black congregation. Two years later, the Oblates sent the largest delegation of sisters to the first National Black Sisters' Conference, and OSP members were among the first to bring critical NBSC attention to the mass closings of black Catholic schools and the need for community control.

Yet, in the same moment that scores of OSP found a public protest voice and posture in the U.S. Church, white ecclesiastical authorities began to backtrack on their professed commitment to racial justice. Retreating into a language of color-blindness while simultaneously encouraging white Catholic suburbanization, Church leaders increasingly accused Catholics who promoted black consciousness of racial division and separatism while ignoring the institution's longer history of white segregation. In the case of the OSP, white clerical leaders also exerted pressure on black superiors to remove

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<sup>115</sup> "The President's Address," in *The Oblate* (December 1966): 4.

<sup>116</sup> *Annual Catholic Directory*, 1965.

“militant” black sisters from leadership positions in their schools. Although the OSP leadership eventually acquiesced to such racist and paternalist demands, it did not save the order or the majority of their schools as it had decades before. Instead, it hastened the exodus of young sisters from the congregation and comprised the order’s legacy of racial justice. Between 1965 and 1975, over 100 Oblates defected from the order, many in explicit protest to the rigid and conservative stance of the congregation’s leadership.<sup>117</sup> During the same period, eleven Oblate-administered schools, including Mount Providence Junior College, closed or merged, displacing well over 1,000 students.<sup>118</sup>

On July 21, 1978, the Oblates received yet another devastating blow. Although the OSP leadership council had grown accustomed to receiving vow dispensation requests, the letter received from forty-one year old Sister Mary Josita (Mary Frances Cecelia) Colbert was especially difficult to bear. Indeed, Sister Mary Josita’s request to depart the OSP was a searing testament to the congregation’s failure to bear witness to the demands of a changing world and remain relevant. Like many black women religious, Sister Mary Josita had elected to persevere in religious life in the midst of the great exodus of the late sixties and seventies. As a former OSP pupil and boarder, Colbert had also specifically fought to remain an Oblate Sister of Providence. “This is indeed one of the most difficult letters I have ever had to write,” Sister Mary Josita began. “[But] I seriously believe the results of such a change will benefit and both strengthen the Oblate Sisters of Providence as well as myself spiritually and mentally.”<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Numbers gathered from the *Annual Catholic Directory*, 1965 and 1975.

<sup>118</sup> Statistics gathered from the OSP Archives and the *Annual Catholic Directory*, 1965-1975.

<sup>119</sup> Sister Josita Colbert, O.S.P. to Sister Marie Infanta, O.S.P., July 21, 1978, in Congregational File on Sister Mary Josita (Mary Frances Cecelia) Colbert, Cong. Box 84, Folder 9, OSP Archives.

In the previous ten years, Sister Mary Josita, like many thousands of religious men and women, had experienced a political awakening. Inspired by the black revolution and enraged by King's assassination, Colbert had joined the OSP's historic delegation to the founding meeting of the National Black Sisters' Conference in 1968 and returned to her community ready to become active in the larger fight for racial justice. By 1970, Colbert was a prominent leader in the burgeoning black Catholic movement, serving on the NBSC's eastern regional board, helping to organize the Black Catholic Lay Caucus of Washington, D.C., and serving on the planning committee of the first National Black Catholic Lay Caucus. In the fall of 1973, Sister Mary Josita joined the faculty of the St. John School, a former inner-city parochial school turned community school, in the Roxbury neighborhood of Boston. The following year, she became the institution's principal, joining three other black nun principals in Roxbury.<sup>120</sup>

Despite facing growing pressure from her superiors to return to her traditional apostolate, Colbert increased her community activism in Boston and requested the OSP leadership council's support for her new apostolate.<sup>121</sup> In 1977, Sister Mary Josita moved to St. Francis de Sales parish in Boston, where she helped to train the institution's teaching personnel and parents. In the same year, Colbert assumed the presidency of the National Black Sisters' Conference.<sup>122</sup> However, by then, Sister Mary Josita understood that she could no longer do the work that she felt called to do in the changing African-American apostolate and remain an Oblate Sister of Providence. Instead, Colbert chose to journey forward as a member of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur in Fairfield,

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<sup>120</sup> "Black Sisters' Leader." See also "Planning a National Black Caucus," n.d., n.p. in Colbert Congregational File, OSP Archives.

<sup>121</sup> Mother Mary of Good Counsel Baptiste to Sister Mary Josita Colbert, July 1, 1976, OSP Archives.

<sup>122</sup> "Black Sisters' Leader."

Connecticut, a predominantly white congregation open to ideological and structural change.<sup>123</sup> “I pray that God will continue to show His blessings on those of us in His service [and] that our purpose, direction, and identity as Black Religious Women, regardless of the structure in which we find ourselves, will be such that our people will benefit and profit in God’s Name,” Sister Mary Josita wrote.<sup>124</sup>

Despite her painful break with the OSP in 1978, Sister Mary Josita continued to champion the order’s founding mission and ministry of service to society’s most vulnerable. After all, it was the Oblates’ pioneering service to the Church and the African-American community that had first inspired Colbert, a St. Frances alumna, to become a sister.<sup>125</sup> Colbert knew too that without the OSP’s pioneering fortitude and faith, there would be no African-American religious women or men, no National Black Sisters’ Conference, and no black Catholic educational system for which to fight. Thus, despite the OSP’s inability to assume leadership in the next stage of the freedom struggle, Sister Mary Josita refused to be angry or disappointed with her former congregation. Instead, to her former educators and sisters in the struggle, Sister Mary Josita could *and* would only remain “ever grateful.”<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Sister Mary Alice Chineworth to Sister Eileen Sullivan, SND de Namur, September 25, 1978, OSP Archives.

<sup>124</sup> Colbert to Gonzales, July 21, 1978.

<sup>125</sup> “Black Sisters’ Leader,” *Our Sunday Visitor*, July 16, 1978, n.p., copy in Colbert Congregational File in OSP Archives.

<sup>126</sup> Colbert to Gonzales, July 21, 1978.

## Epilogue:

### Forgotten Prophets

“Women can’t preach in the Catholic Church. But I can preach in the streets. I can preach in the neighborhood. I can preach in the home. I can preach and teach in the family. And it’s the preaching that’s done in the home that brings life and meaning to the Word your priest proclaims in his official ministry in the pulpit.”<sup>1</sup>

-Sister Thea (Bertha Elizabeth) Bowman, F.S.P.A.

On the sunny but somber afternoon of Tuesday, April 3, 1990, hundreds of mourners packed into St. Mary’s Catholic Church in Jackson, Mississippi for the funeral Mass of Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration Thea Bowman. Though the home-going celebration was originally slated to be held at Bowman’s native Holy Child Jesus Catholic Church in nearby Canton, the great crowds that gathered there the previous day for her memorial service prompted organizers to relocate her funeral to the larger church in Jackson. After all, hundreds of people had traveled from across the country to pay their final respects to the Magnolia state’s most famous Catholic nun, and organizers wanted to ensure that no one was excluded from participating in the service. Indeed, Sister Thea, one of the Church’s most ardent and celebrated champions of inclusion and diversity, would not have had it any other way.<sup>2</sup>

Broadcast live on Jackson’s local NBC affiliate station and subsequently rebroadcast on EWTN, the Catholic cable channel, Thea’s African-American inspired funeral Mass was a national event. Attendees came from all walks of life though most were members of groups long neglected, abused, and/or marginalized by the U.S. Church. They were black, white, Latino, and Asian. Old and young. Catholic, Protestant,

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<sup>1</sup> Celestine Cepress, F.S.P.A. ed., *Sister Thea Bowman: Shooting Star: Selected Writings and Speeches* (Kansas City, Mo.: Sheed and Ward, 1991), 76.

<sup>2</sup> Smith and Feister, *Thea’s Song*, 282-3. See also Mary Queen Donnelly, “In Memoriam,” *America* (April 28, 1990), 420-21.

Jewish, and Muslim. Despite their great diversity, those present shared at least one thing in common. All had been touched by Sister Thea's radical grace and her courageous ministry of love, justice, and multiculturalism in the face of ongoing exclusion and discrimination in the white-dominated, male-controlled Church.<sup>3</sup>

In his eulogy, Father John Ford, an African-American Missionary Servant of the Most Holy Trinity, urged attendees to reflect passionately on the life and suffering of his late friend. "Who was Sister Thea?" Ford rhetorically asked. "Who was this granddaughter of a slave?"<sup>4</sup> At the time of her death, Sister Thea Bowman was arguably the most famous Catholic nun in the nation. For those who knew her best, she was also nothing short of a modern-day saint.

In the two decades prior to her death, Sister Thea emerged as one of the greatest evangelists to ever labor on behalf of the Catholic Church. An immensely gifted educator, preacher, and gospel singer, Thea was also one of the U.S. Church's most ardent critics. At the center of her critique was the institution's failure to be a living witness for *all* people and its ongoing retreat from evangelization and educational ministries in African-American communities. "It pains me to see the decline of Catholic schools in some areas of the country," Thea wrote a few months before her death. "Because the Catholic schools gave me a chance, I am who I am. So many of my contemporaries have achieved success as doctors, nurses, preachers, teachers, social workers, business men and women, politicians, and leaders in their communities."<sup>5</sup>

Born Bertha Elizabeth Bowman in Yazoo City, Mississippi in 1937, Sister Thea was a member of the pioneering generation of black women and girls who forced open

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<sup>3</sup> Smith and Feister, *Thea's Song*, 282-3. See also Donnelly, "In Memoriam," 420-21.

<sup>4</sup> Donnelly, "In Memoriam," 420.

<sup>5</sup> "She Inspires Thousands, but Who Inspires Her?" *CUA Magazine* (Winter 1990): 7-9.

the gates of scores of all-white congregations after World War II. A founding member of the National Black Sisters' Conference in 1968, Thea was also a member of the small cadre of progressive religious women and men who elected to persevere in their congregations rather than defect in the wake of the massive white resistance campaigns in the late sixties and seventies. For Bowman, resurging racism and discrimination in the nation could not be halted effectively without dedicated religious men and women fighting against it both within and outside of Catholic boundaries. Thus, after earning her Ph.D. in English from the Catholic University of America in 1972, Bowman turned her full attention and energy to the fight for racial, educational, and gender justice in the Church.<sup>6</sup>

Although formally barred from the Catholic priesthood because of her sex, Sister Thea developed a spiritual ministry that masterfully combined African-American storytelling, preaching, dancing, and singing. Through her innovative religious practices, she became what one contemporary called a “priest to the People of God.”<sup>7</sup> Over the next fifteen years, Thea’s traveling ministry took her into a diverse array of religious and educational institutions across the country and around the world. As Thea would frequently tell her audiences, “Women can’t preach in the Catholic Church. But I can preach in the streets. I can preach in the neighborhood. I can preach in the home. I can preach and teach in the family. And it’s the preaching that’s done in the home that brings life and meaning to the Word your priest proclaims in his official ministry in the pulpit.”<sup>8</sup> And central to Thea’s ministry was championing the cultural, intellectual, and spiritual

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<sup>6</sup> Smith and Feister, *Thea’s Song*, 135-281.

<sup>7</sup> Brigid Johnson, R.S.M., “Thea Bowman: Priest to the People of God,” in *Thea Bowman: Handing on Her Legacy*, edited by Christian Koontz, R.S.M. (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1991), 51.

<sup>8</sup> Cephess, *Sister Thea Bowman*, 76.

gifts of the African-American community, which she believed would help breakdown barriers and heal racial divisions in the Church.

By 1987, Sister Thea was widely known in Catholic America. After her ministry was featured in a segment on the popular news program, *60 Minutes*, Thea gained celebrity status in the secular world as well. In perhaps one of the liveliest moments of the episode, which first aired on May 3, 1987, Sister Thea got CBS correspondent Mike Wallace to say “Black is beautiful” on air despite his resistance.<sup>9</sup> Two years later, Bowman received an unprecedented invitation to address a semi-annual meeting of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, the leadership body of the Church, held at Seton Hall University in New Jersey. There she gave what many consider to be her most memorable presentation on the history of the black community and its gifts to the Church.<sup>10</sup>

Wheelchair bound and stricken with terminal bone cancer, Sister Thea, then fifty-one years old, was fearless in her delivery and almost divine in her presence. She began by singing the African-American spiritual, “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child,” using it as a metaphor to describe the experiences of black Catholics in the U.S. Church. Thea then transitioned into her formal address, in which she challenged her predominantly white and all-male audience to see her and the black Catholic community in the same ways that she saw them: unashamedly black, authentically Catholic, and above all uncommonly faithful to their beloved Church. “What does it mean to be black and Catholic?” she asked. “It means that I come to my church fully functioning...I bring myself, my black self, all that I am...I bring my whole history, my traditions, my

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<sup>9</sup> Smith and Feister, *Thea's Song*, 199-203. See also Donnelly, “In Memoriam,” 420-21.

<sup>10</sup> Smith and Fesiter, *Thea's Song*, 260.

experience, my culture, my African-American song and dance and gesture and movement and teaching and preaching and healing and responsibility as gift to the Church.”<sup>11</sup> Sister Thea also scolded the prelates for routinely failing to include African Americans in decisions affecting their communities, dismissing the importance of black culture and history, and making their black constituents feel like second and even third class citizens in the universal Church.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, the ever-optimistic Thea remained hopeful. At the conclusion of her presentation, Thea (like she had done so many times before) asked the bishops stand up, take each other’s hands, and join her in singing, “We Shall Overcome.”<sup>13</sup>

Reflecting on Thea’s rich legacy in the Church, her eulogist Father Ford urged emulation:

Even in the face of human suffering and anguish and death we must, this day, not only renew our belief that God will come, but we must also find ways to imitate this irreplaceable woman. There is no other Thea. None other will come in our lifetime. We must recognize that, even as we come to celebrate her new life. We must...find a way, somehow, to imitate Thea who took the psalmist’s words literally. “Wait for the Lord with courage. Be stouthearted and wait for the Lord.”<sup>14</sup>

Cardinal Bernard Law, who was visibly moved to tears during Thea’s historic speech to the U.S. bishops in 1989, similarly urged emulation. For Law, Sister Thea had been the hope of the U.S. Church and its ongoing struggle to live up to the Catholic creed of universal Christian brotherhood—especially in the wake of the controversial formation of an independent congregation of black Catholics in Washington, D.C. in July of 1989.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Cephess, *Sister Thea Bowman*, 32. See also “To Be Black and Catholic,” *Origins* (6 July 1989): 114-8.

<sup>12</sup> Cephess, *Sister Thea Bowman*, 34-5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Smith and Feister, *Thea’s Song*, 284.

<sup>15</sup> In early 1989, Father George Stallings, a popular black priest in the archdiocese of Washington, issued a call for a separate, semiautonomous status for black Catholics in the United States specifically through the formation of an African-American ecclesiastical jurisdiction. On July 2, 1989, Stallings established the Imani Temple African-American Catholic Congregation in D.C. in defiance Cardinal James

“At a time of much division in the Church, Sister Thea possessed the charismatic gifts to heal, to bring joy to the church,” Law stated. “She was poet, preacher, master teacher and blessed with an extraordinary voice. She challenged us to own our individuality, yet pleaded for us to be one in Christ. This was her song, and no one sang it more eloquently than Sister Thea Bowman.”<sup>16</sup>

At the conclusion of the funeral Mass, Sister Thea’s body was escorted out of St. Mary’s as the crowd sang an African-American spiritual, one of the many black cultural gifts that Thea long championed in the Catholic Church. On the following day, Thea’s body was transported to Memphis, Tennessee and laid to rest next her parents in the city’s historic Elmwood Cemetery. Engraved in her headstone, per her request, were two simple words, “She tried.”<sup>17</sup>

Like so many of her foremothers and peers in the long fight for racial and human justice in the United States, Thea had tried, even after many black women religious had become frustrated and left religious life. While she did not fit the popular mold of a civil rights or black power leader, Thea played a critical role in the African-American struggle for liberation. As a member of the Western world’s oldest sorority of black women, she dared to challenge the U.S. hierarchy and the wider Church to abide by its social teachings and welcome all persons equally into their fold. “Be woman. Be man. Be priest.

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A. Hickey to protest racism in the Church. In 1990, Stallings was formally excommunicated from the Catholic Church after the Imani Temple announced that it would separate from Rome and Church mandates, such as priestly celibacy, prohibition of abortion and birth control, and the exclusion of women and married men from the priesthood. The Imani Temple also allowed remarriage without formal Church annulment and adopted a progressive position on homosexuality. See “D.C. Priest Splits from Catholic Church, Black Bishops Decry the Act,” *Jet*, July 10, 1989, 12. See also Davis, *Black Catholics*, 260 and Peter Steinfeld, “Black Catholics in Splinter Sect Ordain Woman,” *New York Times*, September 9, 1991, <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/09/09/us/black-catholics-in-splinter-sect-ordain-woman.html> (accessed on November 26, 2012).

<sup>16</sup> Donnelly, “In Memoriam,” 240-41.

<sup>17</sup> Smith and Fesiter, *Thea’s Song*, 284.

Be Irish-American, be Italian-American, be Native-American, be African-American, but be one in Christ,” Thea frequently stated.<sup>18</sup> Yet, her ministry of multiculturalism had mixed results in the white-dominated Church. Moreover, Sister Thea paid the ultimate price for her radical vision of freedom in a rigidly close-minded world: unspeakable suffering and an untimely demise. At least one of her contemporaries publicly expressed the belief that Thea’s ministry in the face of intractable bigotry and exclusion in the Church killed her and several other activist black nuns, who died in their late forties and early fifties.<sup>19</sup>

Whether Sister Thea should be considered a martyr for racial justice is debatable. What is clear is that in the weeks following her death, newspapers and magazines across the country printed obituaries and articles championing Thea’s life and legacy in the Church. *America*, the prominent weekly Jesuit magazine, for example, ran a full-page sketch of Sister Thea on April 28, 1990. It marked the first time in the magazine’s 81-year old history that a black woman had graced its cover.<sup>20</sup> A few weeks later, Sister Thea became the first African American to be awarded (posthumously) the Laetare Medal from the University of Notre Dame, the oldest and most prestigious service award given to American Catholics.<sup>21</sup> In 1992, Academy-award winning actress Whoopi Goldberg starred in the smash hit film *Sister Act*, which was very loosely based on Thea’s life and contributions to the church.<sup>22</sup> (In the hands of Hollywood *however*, Bowman was radically transformed into Dolores Van Cartier, a black Reno lounge singer forced to

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<sup>18</sup> Smith and Feister, *Thea’s Songs*, 283.

<sup>19</sup> Sister Marie Augusta Neal, “She Made the Bishops Dance,” in *Thea Bowman: Handing on Her Legacy*, 56.

<sup>20</sup> Smith and Fesiter, *Thea’s Song*, 283. See also Donnelly, “In Memoriam.”

<sup>21</sup> To date, Sister Thea remains the only African American to have been awarded the prestigious medal, whose previous recipients include President John F. Kennedy and noted Catholic historian John Tracy Ellis.

<sup>22</sup> Smith and Feister, *Thea’s Song*, 207-9, 269.

pose as a nun in an all-white convent, while hiding from her white married mobster boyfriend.<sup>23</sup>) In 1993, the U.S. Church began closely examining Bowman's life in order to assess her candidacy for sainthood.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the widespread praise heaped on Bowman after her death, it did not lead to the institutional changes needed to foster justice and heal the longstanding divisions in the Church. Ironically, the movement to celebrate and preserve Thea's legacy actually helped to limit the actualization of her dreams and efforts. Specifically, as many of her supporters and admirers mobilized to canonize (and thus iconize) Thea rather than the struggle that she personified, the long history of black sisters in the fight for racial, educational, and gender equity in the United States was marginalized, disregarded, and eventually forgotten. Thus, in its most devastating consequence, Thea's death also signaled another critical turning point in the history of African-American sisters and their long struggle for equity and justice in the United States—one that left the fate of black sisters' once-indisputable place within the spiritual leadership of the African-American Catholic community uncertain.

In a controversy that rocked the U.S. Church one year after Thea's death, Sister of Notre Dame de Namur Teresita Weind, a NBSC charter member and contemporary of Bowman, was forced to resign as a pastoral associate at St. Catherine-St. Lucy Parish in Oak Park, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago. In the preceding twelve years, Sister Teresita had been a charismatic member of the church's leadership team, where she instructed converts, prepared liturgical services, visited the sick, counseled the troubled, and

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<sup>23</sup> Such a gross departure from Sister Thea's actual identity suggests that mainstream America popular culture was still not ready embrace the idea of a real black nun in the 1990s.

<sup>24</sup> Ervin Dyer, "Black Nun Being Examined for Sainthood," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, November 28, 2010, 4.

preached once a month. In the three years prior to her departure, Weind also led Mass on Good Friday, during which she wore priest vestments and was assisted by two male priests.<sup>25</sup> However, after witnessing Sister Teresita lead the Good Friday service in 1991, Father Edward K. Braxton, an ambitious African-American priest seeking to become a bishop, issued a series of complaints to Chicago Cardinal Joseph Bernardin in which he stated that Weind's "preaching alarmed [him] as a violation of canon law."<sup>26</sup> Soon thereafter, Cardinal Bernardin ordered Weind to cease her preaching at St. Catherine-St. Lucy and appointed Braxton as the parish's new pastor. After instituting a series of political maneuvers designed to strip Weind of her previously-held spiritual duties, Braxton forced Weind to leave the parish that November—less than eight months after he launched his first complaint.<sup>27</sup>

For many observers, Sister Teresita's removal was emblematic of the Catholic Church's archaic position on the role of women in society and a direct attack on the movement for women's ordination. For black sisters, Braxton's actions also represented a deep betrayal. For so long, there had been the hope that once black men ascended into the leadership ranks of the Church, they would serve as effective advocates and spokesmen for African-American Catholics and articulate the unique trials, concerns, and needs of the black community. This hope was especially poignant for black sisters, who had been the earliest and fiercest champions of black priests in the United States and whose

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<sup>25</sup>Robert McClory, "A Silenced Woman," *Chicago Reader*, January 2, 1992, <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/a-silenced-woman/Content?oid=878903> (accessed on August 1, 2012).

<sup>26</sup>Sister Agnes Arvin, SP, Sister Barbara Batista, SP and Sister Judith Birgen, SP, "Show Nun Charity," *Chicago Tribune*, September 21, 1991 [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1991-09-21/news/9103110743\\_1\\_cardinal-bernardin-catholic-church-jesus-christ](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1991-09-21/news/9103110743_1_cardinal-bernardin-catholic-church-jesus-christ) (accessed on August 1, 2012).

<sup>27</sup>McClory, "A Silenced Woman." Braxton was installed as an auxiliary bishop in the archdiocese of St. Louis in Missouri on March 28, 1995, the Second Bishop of the diocese of Lake Charles in Louisiana on February 22, 2011, and the Bishop of the diocese of Belleville in Illinois on March 15, 2005. See "About the Bishop," [http://www.diobelle.org/bishop\\_db.aspx](http://www.diobelle.org/bishop_db.aspx) (accessed on March 30, 2013).

pioneering efforts had first made embracing the religious state possible for African Americans. However, the historic ascendancy of sixteen African-American men into the U.S. episcopacy in the last quarter of the twentieth century did not bear full witness to the dreams and hopes of their most loyal advocates. Indeed, some of these men repeatedly proved that their desire for power within the white-dominated, male-controlled Church superseded the needs and best interests of the black Catholic community—a fear first realized and articulated by NBSC leaders in the late sixties and seventies.<sup>28</sup>

Despite continued losses, disappointments, and setbacks during the 1990s, black Catholic sisters continued to push their agendas forward in the Church. They also continued to break racial and gender barriers. In the last two decades of the twentieth century, black sisters were elected into the leadership ranks of a handful of the nation's predominantly white congregations, serving as local and national superiors as well as on their respective congregational leadership councils. In 1985, Sister Juliana Haynes, the first professed African-American Sister of the Blessed Sacrament, became her congregation's first black president.<sup>29</sup> Three years later, Sister Juliana read at the beatification ceremony of her congregation's foundress, Mother Katharine Drexel, in Vatican City. Despite evidence from black nuns to the contrary, the white Mother Drexel was officially declared the saint of racial justice in the Roman Catholic Church in 2000.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Perhaps the most devastating scandal that rocked the African-American Catholic community in 1990 involved Archbishop Eugene Marino, S.S.J. of Atlanta. Two years earlier, on May 5, 1988, Marino became the nation's first African-American Catholic archbishop. However, 56-year old Marino resigned his position on June 1, 1990 after he admitted to a two-year sexual relationship with 27-year old Vicki Long, an African-American Catholic woman. See "Archbishop Eugene Marino Resigns after Relationship with Young Georgia Woman," *Jet*, August 20, 1990, 4-6. See also Ochs, *Desegregating the Altar*, 1.

<sup>29</sup> Dr. Stephanie Morris, SBS archivist, to author, August 3, 2012. Sister Juliana Haynes served as the SBS president from 1985-1990.

<sup>30</sup> Michael D. Schaffer, "Mother Drexel Beatified by Pope," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 21, 1988, [http://articles.philly.com/1988-11-21/news/26246171\\_1\\_mother-katharine-drexel-beatification-ceremony-pope-john-paul-ii/3](http://articles.philly.com/1988-11-21/news/26246171_1_mother-katharine-drexel-beatification-ceremony-pope-john-paul-ii/3) (accessed on November 25, 2012). See also David O'Reilly, "Decreed A

In 1990, black sisters had major breakthroughs in the ongoing struggle for visibility and leadership in the Church. That fall, three black nuns (Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament Mary Norbert Moline and Marilyn Hopewell and Sister for a Christian Community Barbara Boyton) assumed the leadership of three predominantly-black Catholic schools in the archdiocese of Philadelphia. Prior to 1990, no black sister had ever served as a principal of a Catholic elementary school in the 182-year old history of the archdiocese.<sup>31</sup> That same fall, Religious Sister of Mercy Cora Marie Billings, Philadelphia's first black Religious Sister of Mercy, became the first black nun to lead a Roman Catholic parish in the United States. Installed by the diocese of Richmond, Virginia to serve as the pastoral administrator of the priest-less St. Elizabeth's Catholic Church, Billings's official duties included delivering the liturgy, handing out Communion consecrated by a priest, and leading the parish's daily business affairs.<sup>32</sup> In 1991, ex-Oblate Sister of Providence Rose Vernell became the first woman ordained as priest in the breakaway Imani Temple African-American Catholic Congregation.<sup>33</sup>

Black sisters also continued to forge new pathways in female religious life. In 1995, 72-year old Oblate Sister of Providence Wilhemina (Mary Elizabeth) Lancaster left her congregation after 53 years of service in order to found the Benedictines of Mary, Queen Apostles. An interracial contemplative community, whose primary duties center on praying for the sanctification of priests, the Benedictines of Mary were first

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Saint: Phila.'s Katharine Drexel Canonized," Philadelphia *Inquirer*, October 2, 2000, [http://articles.philly.com/2000-10-02/news/25585875\\_1\\_mother-drexel-new-saints-canonization](http://articles.philly.com/2000-10-02/news/25585875_1_mother-drexel-new-saints-canonization) (accessed on November 25, 2012).

<sup>31</sup> Martha Woodall, "Hailing Black Nuns as Principals: Appointment of 3 Sets Archdiocese Mileston," Philadelphia *Inquirer*, November 9, 1990, [http://articles.philly.com/1990-11-09/news/25928319\\_1\\_black-nuns-archdiocese-mother-katharine-drexel](http://articles.philly.com/1990-11-09/news/25928319_1_black-nuns-archdiocese-mother-katharine-drexel) (accessed on November 25, 2012).

<sup>32</sup>"Cora Billings Named 1<sup>st</sup> Black Catholic Nun to Pastor Church in the United States," *Jet*, October 15, 1990, 8. See also Billings, interview by author.

<sup>33</sup> Steinfels, "Black Catholics."

established in the diocese of Scranton in Pennsylvania. However, the Benedictines of Mary transferred to the diocese of Kansas City-Saint Joseph in Missouri in 2006, where they continue to grow.<sup>34</sup>

In the early twenty-first century, black Catholic sisters, despite their ever-declining numbers, continue to push an inclusive human rights agenda in the U.S. Church. They also turn greater institutional attention to issues of specific importance to black Catholic women, religious and lay. In 2001, for example, the National Black Sisters' Conference organized and sponsored the first National Gathering for Black Catholic Women, which drew more than 800 participants from across the country. There, attendees were encouraged to make their voices heard on issues such as racism and exclusion in the Catholic Church, the paucity of black priests and nuns, the ongoing closings of black Catholic schools, disproportionately high black imprisonment rates, poverty, and the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS in the African-American community.<sup>35</sup>

Black sisters also continued to break racial and gender barriers in the Church. In 2003, for example, Sister Constance Phelps, a Sister of Charity of Leavenworth in Kansas, became the first African American president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, the nation's leading organization of women religious.<sup>36</sup> In 2006, Sister

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<sup>34</sup> Sister M. Wilhelmina Lancaster, "Starting Over," in *The Good Sisters*, n.p., ca. March 1996, copy in Sister M. Wilhelmina Lancaster OSP Congregational File, OSP Archives. See also John Heuertz, "'Wondrous Love' Moves Five Sisters to Next Step in Vocation," *The Catholic Key*, January 16, 2009, [http://catholickey.com/index.php3?gif=news.gif&mode=view&issue=20090116&article\\_id=5479](http://catholickey.com/index.php3?gif=news.gif&mode=view&issue=20090116&article_id=5479) (accessed November 25, 2012). To date, the Oblate Sisters of Providence have given birth to three religious communities of women in the United States. Ex-OSP Mother Theresa Maxis Duchemin founded the historically-white Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Monroe, Michigan in 1842. Ex-OSP Mother Mary Theodore (Eliza Barbara) Williams founded historically-black Franciscan Handmaids of the Most Pure Heart of Mary in Savannah, Georgia in 1916.

<sup>35</sup> Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice: African-American Women and Religion* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 485.

<sup>36</sup> See list of "Leadership Conference of Women Religious Presidents," <https://lcwr.org/about/officers> (accessed on August 1, 2012). Sister Constance, who holds a Ph.D. in sociology from Washington University, also served as an advisor to the popular *Women & Spirit: Catholic*

Teresita Weind was elected the superior general of the worldwide Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur. Weind is the first African-American woman to head a global congregation of women religious.<sup>37</sup> In 2011, former NBSC President Sister Patricia Chappell, a member of the Connecticut province of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, assumed the executive directorship of Pax Christi USA, the leading Catholic peace organization. In pledging to make anti-racism work central to Pax Christi's efforts, Chappell stated, "People really have to acknowledge that racism is a deep integral sin in our country and we have to admit it continues to be an institutional sin." Specifically, Chappell argued that racism continued to undermine society's ability to combat and overcome violence and economic injustice.<sup>38</sup>

Perhaps the most significant endeavor in which black sisters have played leading roles in the twenty-first century has been the Jubilee Schools Revitalization Project in the diocese of Memphis. Writing in the *West Tennessee Catholic* on October 23, 1997, Bishop James Terry Steib, S.V.D., one of eleven active black prelates in the United States, articulated a longstanding frustration of the African-American Catholic community: the Church's lackluster investment in minority Catholic education. "I am tired of some of our schools struggling in places where they are most needed," Steib wrote. "I am equally tired of schools which for too many people are havens for a social system rather than sanctuary for all of God's children!...I am tired of a system that is fast

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*Sisters in America* exhibition showcased across the nation from 2009-2011. See <http://www.womenandspirit.org/lcwr.html> (accessed on August 1, 2012).

<sup>37</sup> "Local Sister Elected Leader of Worldwide Sisters of Notre Dame," *The Catholic Telegraph*, August 22, 2008, [http://www.catholiccincinnati.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Section\\_I\\_2008.pdf](http://www.catholiccincinnati.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Section_I_2008.pdf) (accessed on November 25, 2012).

<sup>38</sup> Dennis Sadowski, "Sister Patricia Chappell Named Executive Director of Pax Christi," *Catholic News Service*, October 24, 2011, <http://www.chnonline.org/news/nation-world/10739-sister-patricia-chappell-named-executive-director-of-pax-christi-usa.html> (accessed on August 1, 2012).

becoming affordable to only a few!”<sup>39</sup> Two years later, two anonymous and *Protestant* businessmen donated \$12 million to help revitalize Catholic education in inner-city Memphis. Deemed a “miracle” in the press, the Jubilee Schools serve as the most successful model for sustaining Catholic education in urban communities in the twenty-first century.<sup>40</sup>

Since 1999, eight previously-shuttered Catholic schools located in Memphis’s most economically-impooverished neighborhoods have re-opened. One additional Catholic school has been built in the inner city as a part of the Jubilee School Project.<sup>41</sup>

Unsurprisingly, black sisters were among the first representatives of the Church to offer their educational services and talents to the Jubilee Schools. Since 1999, six black nuns (5 African-American and one African) have served as principals, teachers, and health service providers in the Memphis Jubilee Schools. For former NBSC president and Sister of the Blessed Sacrament Donna Banfield, the opportunity to be a part of the “miracle in Memphis” was just too good to pass up. “So often you hear about Catholic schools closing in urban areas,” Banfield stated. “I wanted to be a part of something different.” Banfield served as the principal of Holy Names of Jesus and Mary Catholic School from 2006 to 2010.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Michael Humphrey, “Miracle in Memphis: Reopened Catholic Schools Bring Life Back to Inner-City Neighborhoods,” *National Catholic Reporter*, April 4, 2008. [http://natcath.org/NCR\\_Online/archives2/2008b/040408/ss040408a.htm](http://natcath.org/NCR_Online/archives2/2008b/040408/ss040408a.htm) (accessed November 25, 2012). See also Bishop J. Terry Steib, interview by author, October 19, 2009.

<sup>40</sup> Humphrey, “Miracle in Memphis.”

<sup>41</sup> David Waters, “Inner-city Miracle ‘Safe and Learning’: Anonymous Donors Behind the Revival of Memphis Catholic Schools Are Not Ready to Declare Victory,” *The Commercial Appeal*, April 24, 2011, <http://www.commercialappeal.com/news/2011/apr/24/inner-city-miracle-safe-and-learning/> (accessed on November 25, 2012).

<sup>42</sup> Sister Donna Banfield, S.B.S., interview by author, digital recording, October 27, 2009. See also Barbara Bradley, “Quiet Revolution: New Research Spotlights Role of Black Catholic Nuns in Desegregation,” *The Commercial Appeal*, May 22, 2011, <http://www.commercialappeal.com/news/2011/may/22/quiet-revolution/> (accessed November 25, 2012).

Although support for the Jubilee Schools, which received a special citation from the White House in 2004, has been widespread, there has also been significant opposition to the endeavor from the very beginning. This opposition generally emanated from affluent and suburban white Catholics, including women religious, who argued that the millions of dollars donated to the Jubilee Schools should instead be used to support the diocese's existing and overwhelmingly white Catholic school system. Those same individuals also oppose the venture on the grounds that most of the students being served are not Catholic.<sup>43</sup> Jubilee students are also overwhelmingly African-American, Latino, and economically poor.<sup>44</sup> However, the central mantra of the Jubilee Schools has provided the most effective response to its opponents. "We don't teach...students because they are Catholic," proponents say. "We...teach them because we are Catholic."<sup>45</sup>

Despite ongoing opposition to their mission, the Jubilee Schools continue to grow. Since the initial \$12 million contribution in 1999, individual, corporate, and nonprofit donors have given \$60 million to support the institutions. Operating on a \$30 million endowment in 2012, the Jubilee Schools served over 1,400 students pushing the total number of students enrolled in Memphis Catholic schools to 8, 275, the highest since 1976.<sup>46</sup>

Despite the clear success of the Jubilee Schools, U.S. archdioceses and dioceses continue to close Catholic schools in urban and poor neighborhoods at an alarming rate.

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<sup>43</sup> Ashley Fantz, "A Gift from God?" *Memphis Flyer*, August 19-25, 1999, <http://www.memphisflyer.com/backissues/issue548/cvr548.htm> (accessed on November 25, 2012).

<sup>44</sup> In 2008, Jubilee Schools served 86 percent African-American students, 6 percent Latino/Hispanic, 5 percent Caucasian, and 3 percent Asian. See Humphrey, "Miracle in Memphis."

<sup>45</sup> Humphrey, "Miracle in Memphis."

<sup>46</sup> David Waters, "Mary McDonald to Resign from Memphis Catholic Schools," *The Commercial Appeal*, May 3, 2012, <http://www.commercialappeal.com/news/2012/may/03/dr-mary-mcdonald-step-down-superintendent-memphis/> (accessed November 25, 2012).

Between 2000 and 2008 alone, almost 1,200 Catholic schools located in inner-city communities closed, displacing over 400,000 students.<sup>47</sup> Only time will tell if the Memphis Jubilee School model will be replicated across the country. However, what can be said is that as long as they are present and able in the United States, black Catholic sisters will continue to serve, educate, and lead for the sake of the survival of the African-American Catholic community and the *true* mission of the global Church.

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<sup>47</sup> Donald W. Wuerl, "How to Save Catholic Schools," *America: The National Catholic Weekly*, December 22, 2008, [http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article\\_id=11311](http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=11311) (accessed November 25, 2012).

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 Marquette University Archives and Special Collections  
     National Black Sisters' Conference Papers  
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 Chambers, Sister Vicki, S.S.N.D., November 16, 2009  
 Chineworth, Sister Mary Alice, O.S.P., February 1, 2010  
 Clyburn, Elaine, March 27, 2012  
 Copeland, Dr. Shawn (formerly Sister M. Shawn Copeland, C.S.S.F. and O.P.), March 5, 2007  
 Davis, Father Cyprian Davis, O.S.B., July 9, 2009  
 Ebo, Sister Mary Antona, March 26, 2007  
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 Gemperle, Rosemary, August 1, 2010  
 Gerdes, Sister Mary Reginald, O.S.P., March 23, 2010  
 Glenn, Sister Rose Martin, S.S.p.S., November 20, 2009  
 Goudeaux, Sister Doris, S.S.F., August 18, 2009  
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Honors Diploma. Craigmont High School, Memphis, TN. Salutatorian.

### PUBLICATIONS

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"Black Catholic Sisters in the United States: A Historical Reflection," *In A Word: A Publication of The Society of the Divine Word, Southern Province* 30 (March 2012): 2-3.

#### Edited Volume

Editorial Assistant, *The Selected Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony*, vol. 5, *Their Place Inside the Body-Politic, 1887 to 1895*, ed. Ann D. Gordon. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009.

#### Encyclopedia Entries

"Free African Americans" in *Encyclopedia of U.S. Political History*. Vol. 1. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2010.

"Rosa Parks" in *Encyclopedia of U.S. Political History*. Vol. 6. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2010.

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