Reaping the "Colored Harvest": The Catholic Mission in the American South

Megan Stout Sibbel
Loyola University Chicago

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

REAPING THE “COLORED HARVEST”:
THE CATHOLIC MISSION IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
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PROGRAM IN HISTORY

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MEGAN STOUT SIBBEL
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ABSTRACT

A central paradox marks the story of the Roman Catholic mission in the American South. On one hand, the Church committed itself to providing access to quality education in underserved southern black communities. The establishment of southern Catholic schools for African American children supported the nation’s traditional emphasis on education as a prerequisite for economic, social, and political advancement. Insofar as Catholic schools and sisters in the Jim Crow South offered opportunity in communities that otherwise lacked access to education, they demonstrated some of the best qualities traditionally associated with the United States of America.

On the other hand, Catholic institutions in the South maintained the color line through the mid-twentieth century. Schoolchildren attended segregated schools. Black women who sought admission to traditionally white sisterhoods were routinely denied entrance. Here, the paradox emerges in full force: within these Catholic institutions, in a religion whose very name claims the mantle of human universality and inclusivity, racial segregation and discrimination structured its schools and defined its sisterhoods. The history of Catholic schools in the American South evinces this contradiction. “Reaping the ‘Colored Harvest’ ” focuses on the origins and growth of the Church’s southern mission. From the highest reaches of the Catholic hierarchy to the humblest mission schools, a variety of perspectives and individual voices reflect the complicated nature of this story.
INTRODUCTION

A small group of Roman Catholic nuns sat among the throng gathered in Memphis on an April evening in 1968. These women belonged to the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVMs), a group of nuns based in Dubuque, Iowa. Soaring oration cut through the crowd congregated at the Masonic Temple. “We’ve got to give ourselves to this struggle until the end. Nothing would be more tragic than to stop at this point in Memphis. We’ve got to see it through,” urged Martin Luther King, Jr. The BVMs who listened to King’s speech that night were well-acquainted with the aims and activism of the civil rights movement. Indeed, the previous week the sisters had marched in support of Memphis’ black sanitation workers and, along with other peaceful protestors, encountered policemen wielding clubs and tear gas. The BVMs’ presence at the rally on April 3 illustrated the nun’s dedication to the civil rights movement and to the African American community in which they served. The speech was King’s last; he was assassinated the next day.¹

The sisters’ relationship with Memphis’ black community was considerable. Since the BVMs began teaching at St. Augustine’s Catholic School in the late 1930s, hundreds of African American students took advantage of the rigorous education offered by the nuns. One student was especially impressed by the sisters’ religious devotion and their dedication to St. Augustine’s students. “As children growing up in a segregated society,” the student remembered, “We had it in our minds that life was different in

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” April 3, 1968, archived at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Education and Research Institute, Stanford University, http://mlkkpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/i've Been_to_the_moutaintop/. The story of the BVMs in Memphis is discussed in detail Chapter VI.
this one place.” Consequently, when this student decided to become a nun herself in the mid-1940s, application to the BVMs seemed like the natural course of action. Yet, she was denied entry. The doors to this traditionally white congregation of Catholic sisters remained closed to her because this particular student was black.²

These two episodes embody the central tension and paradox within the story of the Catholic mission in the American South. On one hand, the Church committed itself to providing access to quality education in underserved southern black communities. Here, the establishment of southern Catholic schools for African American children supported the nation’s traditional emphasis on education as a prerequisite for economic, social, and political advancement. As Franklin Roosevelt once declared, equality of opportunity represented an essential component in maintaining the strength and health of democratic institutions.³ Insofar as Catholic schools and sisters in the Jim Crow South offered opportunity in communities that otherwise lacked access to education, they demonstrated some of the best qualities traditionally associated with the United States of America.

On the other hand, until the mid-twentieth century, Catholic institutions in the South maintained the color line. Schoolchildren attended segregated schools. Black women who sought admission to traditionally white sisterhoods were routinely denied

² The story of this student, Charlotte Marshall, and Alice Chineworth, who were both denied entry to the BVM congregation on the basis of their race, is discussed in more detail in Chapter IV. These events are also discussed in From There to Here: The Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary from 1942-1972 (Dubuque: Mount Carmel Press, 2010) by Kathryn Lawlor, BVM. In 1949, the BVMs revised their policies to allow “the acceptance of non-Caucasians into our Novitiate” (Lawlor, 33).

entrance. Here, the paradox emerged in full force: within these Catholic institutions, in a religion whose very name claims the mantle of human universality and inclusivity, racial segregation and discrimination structured its schools and defined its sisterhoods. The history of Catholic schools in the American South evinced the complexity of this contradiction.

Moreover, the significance of this story extends beyond southern Catholic schools. From the founding of the republic to the Civil War, the florid language of freedom existed uneasily alongside the shameful realities of slavery. This incongruity indelibly marked the nation and transformed its institutions in multiple ways. Work, citizenship, political participation, health care, economic opportunity, education, and even intimate relations between individuals were marked by race. In a similar manner, the Catholic mission in the South was profoundly shaped by the American creation of race. One must first reckon with the central paradox of the American experiment to understand the nature of the Church’s southern mission schools as they existed well into the twentieth century. Liberty and slavery, catholicity and segregation: the stain seeped its way through the fabric of the nation.

The southern mission was not only about education. Evangelization – the conversion of millions of black Protestants to Catholicism – was often the ultimate objective. The establishment of parochial schools represented the Church’s best hope for “reaping a colored harvest” below the Mason-Dixon Line in the eyes of many bishops and other prelates in American and in Rome during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Indeed, the term “colored harvest,” was used as a shorthand reference
to the millions of non-Catholic African Americans who, the hierarchy assumed, would snatch at their chance for salvation in the Mother Church. The term appeared frequently within Catholic documents and publications that addressed mission schools and churches in the South. Archbishop Martin J. Spalding, for example, suggested in 1866 that newly emancipated slaves represented “a golden opportunity for a reaping of a harvest of souls, which neglected may not return.”

Still, the story does not begin and end with the pronouncement of the American bishops who first conceived of a Catholic mission in the South. Beginning in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, many individuals and groups continually called the Church to account for its role in the continued separation of the races. These Americans presaged the activism of the modern civil rights movement by recognizing the inherent contradiction of claiming Catholicism while enforcing the disgrace of segregation. As the country came to grapple more intensely with these issues by the mid-twentieth century, students and sisters of the South defied the racial customs that had for so long structured the institutions of Church and state. A great distance, however, separated the sisters who listened in Memphis to Martin Luther King, Jr. deliver his final

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4 “President Johnson: His Visit at Baltimore,” *New York Times*, October 22, 1866, 4. Similarly, in 1890 the annual report from the Commission for the Catholic Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians noted that, “From St. Joseph’s Seminary have gone forth its first Missionary, the first fruits for the Colored Harvest of the South.” In that same report, the bishop of Nashville reported, “In the diocese of Nashville there are but 35 negro Catholics in a negro population that exceeds 500,000 souls…How long will this bountiful harvest remain ungarnered [sic]?” (“Our Negro and Indian Missions: Annual Report of the Secretary of the Commission for the Catholic Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians,” BCIM Records, Marquette University, Series 7/1, Reel 1, 1890). In his 1929 publication, *The Catholic Church and the American Negro*, (Baltimore: St. Joseph’s Society Press, 1929), John T. Gillard, S.S.J., drew upon this same language: “The low estate of our colored brethren is another social obstacle to a more flourishing Catholicity in the Colored Harvest,” p. 240.
speech in 1968 from the origins of the Catholic educational project in the American South.

For the nineteenth-century episcopal architects of the Catholic mission, the twofold aims of education and evangelization loomed large. The importance of Catholic education, which was of paramount importance within established Catholic communities, took on a new significance in the largely Protestant South. Parochial schools in northern urban parishes largely aimed to serve and maintain the faith of the flock in already-existing Catholic populations. In the South, however, the schools (and churches) established in largely Protestant areas were missionary in character. These institutions sought to convert students and their families to Catholicism. A few well-established Catholic communities in the South, such as New Orleans and Baltimore, had schools and churches that ministered to the African American faithful. Still, a significant number of schools founded after the Civil War were expressly missionary in character. Catholic schools would attract black students, who might then be drawn to the faith and convert. Then, ideally, the baptisms of parents and other family members would follow.

The full implications of a “colored harvest” extended beyond parochial schools and the parish walls for the American episcopate. The prospective power of millions of recently enfranchised black voters following the adoption of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870 also galvanized leading Church authorities. Through the late nineteenth century

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5 For instance, as early as 1852 American bishops “were exhorted to establish parochial schools whenever possible in their dioceses, since Catholic children were in grave danger in schools which were not directed by religious motives.” Francis P. Cassidy, “Catholic Education in the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore,” *The Catholic Historical Review*, Vol. XXXIV (Oct. 1948) p. 257.

6 For a detailed discussion of the Church’s evangelical operation in the South, see Chapter I.
and well into the twentieth century, Catholic leaders articulated the necessity of cultivating the black electorate. A Church publication in the early 1900s, for instance, intoned that, “From a temporal standpoint Catholics should realize that it will pay them to treat the Colored man in a Christian manner. The Negro is increasingly rapidly in numbers and he is making considerable progress in every trade and profession.” Catholics, then, ought to consider impacts of this prospective amplification of African American political power. “It may be that he will hold the balance of power in the future,” and, the report concluded, “we should use every individual and collective effort to draw the Negro towards the Church when persecutions arise we may have him for our friend.”

Thus, a third objective materialized: the mobilization of the black electorate in support of American Catholicism.

These overarching goals of evangelization, education, and the enlistment of African American political clout were framed by two historically contingent factors which shaped the Catholic project in the South. First of all, the concentration of the country’s black population in southern states offered a more or less captive audience. Regarding the geography of the Church’s southern mission, a prominent Catholic cleric stated that, “The practical organization and equipment of the colored missions has been

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7 “Our Negro and Indian Missions: Annual Report of the Secretary of the Commission for the Catholic Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians,” Commission Publications and Records, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI, Microfilm Series 7/1, Reel 1, 1924.

8 Importantly, however, the southern segregation machine effectively disenfranchised millions of black voters across the South, particularly after the end of Reconstruction in 1877 and well through the mid-twentieth century. For this reason, as well as the fact that the African American population did not embark upon wholesale conversion to Catholicism, resulted in the disappointment of the Church’s hopes of mobilizing the black vote on their behalf. Still, the American bishops’ preoccupation with the notion of commandeering African American electoral power is important in the context of the Catholic southern project. For an extended discussion of this topic, see Chapters I and II.
established and directed by the thought that by far the vast majority of the race would remain in the South." Some former slaves left the southern states in the years immediately following 1865, but the majority of freedmen, women, and their children remained. The Great Migrations of the twentieth century were half-a-century or more away. The Church’s southern scheme rested on a belief that the millions of former slaves and their families would remain indefinitely in the South. This presumably static population to which representatives of the Church would proffer salvation and education represented an essential variable in the calculus of conversion.

Second, Church authorities relied upon a vast reservoir of nearly unpaid labor to educate African Americans. Orders of women religious invariably provided the majority of teachers needed to maintain mission schools. While a male religious – a priest or brother – generally assumed responsibility for establishing a mission school and school within a black community, efforts were then made to secure the female religious necessary to staff the schools. Time and time again, reports from mission sites in the South remarked upon the necessity of the schools and sisters as portals to conversion first among students and then among their families. Most importantly, sisters represented low-cost labor because perpetually underfunded southern mission schools could not afford to pay for lay teachers. Nuns provided the solution. Through the first quarter-century of sustained evangelical effort, the combination of a ready-made black population

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and a ready-made workforce of women religious provided grist for the proposed Catholic conversion mills in the South.

However, developments of the twentieth century ultimately undermined the Church’s missionary methodology. The Great Migrations of the South’s rural black population to the urban North, precipitated by two world wars, diffused the effectiveness of the Church’s southern missions. The once-captive audience began to dissipate and reports from southern mission sites started to lament the annual loss of “good Catholic families” to the North. Furthermore, the great shift towards desegregation of schools across the country, beginning in the 1950s, destabilized a foundational element of the mission schools and churches. The decline in the numbers of nuns in the United States after the mid-twentieth century also reduced the pool of cheap labor upon which the Church’s mission efforts in the south relied. Southern schools were forced to pay for lay teachers to replace the dwindling supply of sisters. Attendant financial pressures put the existence of many schools and churches into jeopardy.

Other elements worked over time to weaken the founding goals of the Catholic mission schools and churches in the South. An emphasis on education, evangelization, and the black electorate epitomized the original aims of the southern mission schools, but the importance of these objectives for the women religious who taught in the South waned over time. Education as part of a broader commitment to social justice became many sisters’ driving motive. Gaining converts, the hierarchy’s original aim in the South, went by the wayside.
One factor outweighed the rest in accounting for the long-term impacts of the Catholic southern project. The so-called “colored harvest” never materialized because African Americans themselves shaped their encounter with the Catholic mission to fit their own needs. The hinge of this story rests upon the black communities into which representatives of the Catholic faith entered, often unbidden, and the experiences of the black students who attended these schools. The perspectives of students, their families, and members their local communities provide a fuller picture of the real impact of the Catholic mission project. White Catholics—from the pope to bishops to local priests to the sisters—brought certain expectations and assumptions to bear upon the southern mission schools. Catholic authorities often articulated the belief that black Americans remained unable to help themselves. In this interpretation, it was up to the Church, from a material and spiritual perspective, to “save” America’s black population, but this idea starkly contrasted with African Americans’ own expectations and interests.

Ultimately, for the students who attended the Catholic schools, the parents that sent them, and the community members who supported them, an already-present commitment to education represented the key motivating factor for participation in the mission project. African Americans’ emphasis on securing an education as the gateway to increased socioeconomic chances signified the preexisting condition which allowed for the relative success of some of the Catholic mission schools in the South. Time and time again, Catholic records from the southern mission schools recorded overflowing enrollment numbers. Children were turned away for lack of room. Parents at times even offered to supply the chair for their child to sit upon.
Given the complex, multiple perspectives that informed the different layers of the Catholic mission in the American South, how can it be fully assessed? If measured by the yardstick of the Catholic hierarchy, the southern mission was never particularly successful. Many bishops and other clerics from the late nineteenth century onward regarded the conversion to Catholicism of Protestant African Americans the southern mission’s primary objective, but the “colored harvest” never happened. Millions of Protestant African Americans remained Protestant. However, the interpretation of the mission’s impact changes considerably from other points of view. Most non-Catholic southern black students did not convert while attending a mission school, but they did receive access to an education of a quality often denied to them through the mid-twentieth century. The completion of junior high, high school, or college frequently stemmed from access to Catholic mission schools. A focus on aims and outcomes within southern black communities demonstrates their historical agency and provides a necessary counternarrative to the official Church narrative. The achievements of the southern mission project were considerable from this perspective.

The experiences of women religious represented another perspective essential in assessing the significance of the southern mission. Sisters taught and administered mission schools. They also lived within the communities in which they served. The nuns of the Catholic evangelical project, who often came from northern congregations, often built enduring relationships with local black communities. These ties to their African American students and neighbors sometimes gave sisters a front-row seat to the realities of the Jim Crow South. Women religious, through their students and communities in the
South, witnessed the great distance that separated the ideals of American freedom and Catholic universality from the actualities of racial discrimination in the country, the Church, and sometimes, even within their own congregations.

The shifting focus on women religious and local black communities in the context of the Catholic southern mission project in “Reaping the ‘Colored Harvest’” owes important debts to the work of previous historians. The intersection of Catholicism and race has proved fertile ground for many historians. Cyprian Davis’ *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (1993) provides an excellent overview of the origins of the Church’s mission project in the South in particular and African American Catholics in general. Drawing upon sources from the hierarchy of the United States and their Roman counterparts, Davis offers a thorough rendering of the ways that prominent clerics and lay Catholics addressed issues of race.11 Similarly, Edward J. Misch’s “The American Bishops and the Negro from the Civil War to the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore, 1865-1884” (1968) details the ways in which the United States hierarchy and issues of race in the late nineteenth century.12 Stephen Ochs’ *Desegregating the Altar: The Josephites and the Struggle for Black Priests* (1990) also provides a sense of the contradiction within the Church in its efforts to evangelize among African Americans while simultaneously denying them full inclusion.13

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The breadth of this scholarship affords valuable insights regarding the Church on issues of race and evangelization. Still, the roles of the Catholic hierarchy and prominent priests generally frame these studies and they tend to lack a sustained inquiry into the efforts of women religious and the agency of local black communities in the southern mission project. “Reapin ‘the ‘Colored Harvest”’ aims both to expand upon this work and to bring additional voices from the past into the conversation.

To this end, the work of other historians has provided invaluable models. Studies by Dana Lee Roberts and Mary J. Oates discuss women religious in the American mission field. Roberts’ *American Women in Mission: A Social History of Their Thought and Practice* (1997) discusses the efforts of Mother Katharine Drexel in both funding and supplying sisters for work in late-nineteenth century and early twentieth century black communities.¹⁴ Oates’ *The Catholic Philanthropic Tradition in America* examines the ways in which the American Church relied upon women religious in parochial schools, including mission schools for black children, because of the extraordinarily low costs associated with teaching sisters.¹⁵

A case study by Mary E. Best, entitled *Seventy Septembers* (1988) further narrows its focus to the experiences of the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters, who taught at mission schools in the South beginning in 1906. Best’s narrative offers a microhistory of one

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particular sisterhood in the context of southern mission work.16 “Reaping the ‘Colored Harvest’” draws upon these studies’ emphasis on the role of women religious in Church history and expands upon their work by situating sisters of the South among the competing aims of the Catholic hierarchy and the local black communities in which the women lived and worked.

The story of women religious in America, long neglected by mainstream scholarship, represents a topic increasingly taken up in recent years. Historians Ann Braude and Leslie Woodcock Tentler, for example, argued in the 1990s for the inclusion of sisters within the framework of American women’s history. They both emphasized the importance of recognizing the great contributions of Roman Catholic nuns’ work in the Church particularly and in the U.S. more generally. Tentler called historians of American women to task for eliding the enormous contributions of sisters to a range of educational, medical, and social services.17 This new approach to the history of women religious aimed to dismantle popular notions of nuns as cloistered beings immobilized within the patriarchy of the Catholic Church. Instead, historians sought to demonstrate sisters’ remarkable degree of historical agency.

Historians Carol Coburn and Martha Smith evinced this new approach in Spirited Lives: How Nuns Shaped Catholic Culture and American Life, 1836-1920 (1999). Smith and Coburn, using the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet as a case study, illustrated the

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16 Mary E. Best, Seventy Septembers (Techny, IL: Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters, 1988).

myriad ways in which women religious transcended gendered boundaries of the
nineteenth and early twentieth century. Moreover, the life of a sister also offered a route
to a remarkable degree of autonomy and opportunity for immigrant and working-class
women who were otherwise bounded by social, ethnic, and class conventions. Increased academic attention to nuns found parallel in the popular press. John Fialka’s
Sisters: Catholic Nuns and the Making of America (2003) offered an overview of the
history of women religious for a general audience. Chronicling a variety of different
orders and individual sisters through the nineteenth century and into the twenty-first,
Fialka’s account provided a largely celebratory rendering of American sisters.

The importance of reframing American women’s history to account for the
catholic sisters continues to mark academic work. Maureen Fitzgerald’s Habits of Compassion: Irish Catholic Nuns and the Origins of New York’s Welfare
System, 1830-1920 (2006) and Suellen Hoy’s Good Hearts: Catholic Sisters in Chicago’s Past (2006) continued the avenue of inquiry opened by Braude, Tentler, Coburn, and Smith. Fitzgerald’s focus on New York City’s Sisters of Mercy, Sisters of Charity, and the Sisters of the Good Shepherd put in dialogue women religious’ social welfare work with that of well-known Protestant reformers. Her work suggests how the religious life offered access to public power in ways usually denied to working-class Irish Catholic women.

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Suellen Hoy’s *Good Hearts* shifts focus to Chicago and to the labor of sisters from the nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century. Similarly, Hoy’s narrative retains the emphasis on reorienting scholarship that traditionally prized the work of secular or Protestant women over that of Catholic nuns. She also focuses on race in the context of Chicago’s sisters. A key element of Hoy’s interpretation of the role of nuns in the civil rights movement stems from her analysis of the presence of women religious in Chicago’s black communities years before the activism of the 1960s. Her book also articulates the importance of “home missions” for Catholic sisters. Although Hoy’s focus remains on nuns in Chicago, her argument, “For Catholic sisters, racial uplift and evangelization meant education. Above all else they were educators and their primary work was in the schools” insightfully captures the essence of many sisters of the South as well. Historians of Catholicism in the North, such as Hoy, provide valuable models for “Reaping the ‘Colored Harvest.’”

The impact of race and Catholicism in the urban North also comes to the fore with particular prominence in John McGreevy’s seminal *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North* (1996). McGreevy analyzes the vociferous and often violent reaction in northern Catholic urban enclaves to the arrival of southern African American migrants during the Great Migrations of the twentieth century. Locating the source of Catholics’ response in the context of “parish boundaries,” McGreevy argues that this encounter indelibly marked the development of

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race relations in the United States. Similarly, in a case study of St. Sabina’s parish in Chicago, Eileen McMahon describes the fraught juncture of race and religion in the twentieth-century city.

The work of Hoy, McGreevy, and McMahon share a similar emphasis on the impact of African American migration in the twentieth century. In general, their narratives locate the origin story of the Catholic encounter with race in the urban North of the 1900s. “Reaping the ‘Colored Harvest’” suggests in contrast that leading members of the American hierarchy, mission priests, teaching sisters, and local African American communities first negotiated relationships generations earlier, following the aftermath of the Civil War. Hoy, for instance, suggests, “It was not until the mid-twentieth century that Catholics in any number became concerned with the plight of African Americans.”

McGreevy also indicates that African American parents increasingly sent their children to Catholic schools only in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. Instead, “Reaping the ‘Colored Harvest’” offers an interpretation that gives the twentieth-century account of Catholicism and race in northern cities a “second wave” status. The first wave of encounters between the Church and African American communities occurred in the post-Civil War South.

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24 Hoy, 71.

25 McGreevy, 57-58.
well before the advent of the Great Migrations of the twentieth century.\footnote{See Chapter I.} Put differently, this study reframes the chronology of the Catholic intersection with race in America.

This reinterpretation applies to Amy Koehlinger’s *The New Nuns: Racial Justice and Religious Reform in the 1960s* (2007). Koehlinger’s narrative examines the activism of sisters in the civil rights movement and discusses the ways in which doctrinal evolution, particularly Vatican II, opened space for women religious to engage more deeply in activism. One case study included in her book examines St. Elizabeth’s parish in Selma, Alabama, and the work of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester, New York who arrived to teach at the parish school in 1940. Koehlinger rightly notes that these sisters were tied more closely to the local black community by the 1960s than were the northern sisters who travelled South to participate in that decade’s civil rights demonstrations. However, Koehlinger’s analysis of the “racial apostolate” – defined by the ways in which nuns engaged with issues of racism and their attendant activism and creation of social justice programs in the 1960s and beyond\footnote{Amy Koehlinger *The New Nuns: Racial Justice and Religious Reform in the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007). For her discussion of the “racial apostolate,” see page 3.} – also neglects the longer tradition of Catholic engagement in southern black communities that began in the late 1800s.

An array of sources illuminates the story of the Catholic project in the American South. Church documents and pronouncements from clergy offer a sense of the official, Catholic perspective. These sources also situate the narrative within the national conversation regarding the “Negro problem.” Other viewpoints leaven these declarations
from on high. Prominent African American individuals and private citizens, their voices preserved in print, often articulated positions that ran counter to the proscribed Catholic view. Records and oral histories from former students and sisters from these schools also ground the national story in the realities of lived experiences.

In “Reaping the ‘Colored Harvest,’” three mission sites provide a sense of what the Catholic project meant in the context of local communities. Established as southern mission schools and churches, St. Augustine’s in Memphis, Tennessee, St. Mary’s in Fairfield, Alabama, and Immaculate Conception in Clarksdale, Mississippi, bring individual experience to bear on the broader narrative. Two different congregations of women religious staffed and administered these schools. The Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the BVMs who marched with King in the 1960s, first arrived at St. Augustine’s in Memphis in the late 1930s. Beginning in the 1940s, BVMs also sent sisters to Immaculate Conception in Clarksdale, Mississippi. The Sisters of St. Francis of Mary Immaculate, or the Franciscans, from Joliet Illinois began teaching at St. Mary’s in Alabama in the early 1940s.

This narrative places the case studies of sisterhoods and schools within the wider context of the Church and American history. The story opens with a broad view of the Catholic hierarchy in the late nineteenth century, followed by an examination of the origins and official goals of the southern mission project. Next, the narrative focus shifts to include perceptions of Catholicism and its evangelical mission among prominent African American individuals and institutions. With these broad strokes in place, subsequent chapter of “Reaping the ‘Colored Harvest’” incrementally telescope down to
the level of local mission communities, the sisters who taught in them, and the students and parents who involved themselves at these schools. The chronological sweep of this story keeps pace with each chapter; the opening pages begin with post-Civil War America and the final pages close with the late twentieth century.

The tension between the original aims of Catholic authorities and the actual results of these mission schools suggests the difficulty in interpreting the historical significance of this story. On the one hand, the Church’s efforts among black communities in the South smacks of a sour combination of paternalism and cultural megalomania. Put differently, “it was up to Catholics” to “save” African Americans from themselves by converting them to the Catholic faith. Education, in this reading, becomes a cynical method of evangelization and a backdoor to political mobilization. On the other hand, a sincerity of purpose often emerged in letters, reports, and other documents from Catholic officials and sisters involved in the southern mission sites. For some involved in this work, education was not simply an expedient to evangelization, and America’s southern black population was not simply a group of people who needed saving. A sincere conviction to their faith and a religious devotion to ministry had a place among some Catholics who worked in these southern missions. Consequently, it would be disingenuous to write off the Church’s entire project in the American South as purely a ploy to swell the rolls of the country’s faithful and to increase Catholic political power via the black electorate. The reality lay somewhere in the space between a black and white interpretation of these events, and instead in the gray area within a tangle of competing interests, motivations, and outcomes.
CHAPTER I

THE CHURCH AND THE “NEGRO PROBLEM”

The conclusion of the grisliest war in American history provided the Catholic hierarchy with the chance to exert their ecclesiastical authority in the southern states. When the guns of North and South fell silent at Appomattox Courthouse in April 1865, the barbed and bloody questions of secession and slavery were finally settled. Robert Lee’s surrender to Ulysses Grant sounded the final death knell for the Confederacy and its most peculiar institution. The Thirteenth Amendment was adopted and became the law of the land in December 1865. “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude,” ran its text, “except as punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, nor any place subject to their jurisdiction.” The great exodus of freedmen and freedwomen from bondage in the South fundamentally reshaped the country.

Soon after the war’s end, both secular and religious authorities in the United States began a decades-long debate of the so-called “Negro problem.” What was to be done with the millions of newly-freed slaves and their families? What type of educational model ought to be implemented for the benefit of former slaves? Would state or federal governments, private aid organizations, religious groups, individual citizens – or a combination thereof – prove most effective in assisting freedwomen, men, and children in the transition from bondage?
Diverse individuals and institutions offered solutions. Colonization – shipping freed slaves from America to overseas locales – had long been a solution favored by some prominent individuals since the early nineteenth century. The American Society for Colonizing Free People of Colour of the United States, founded in Washington, D.C. in 1816, formally dedicated itself to that movement. Supporters included both slaveholders and some more inclined to challenge the institution of slavery.¹

Despite its powerful supporters, expatriation as a method of dealing with free blacks and former slaves attracted little support from the vast numbers of African Americans. Some of the most vociferous opponents of colonization were black abolitionists. The Society, from their perspective, “was not an abolitionist organization at all but a proslavery scheme to force free black people to choose between reenslavement or banishment.” Frederick Douglass disputed the entire premise of colonization and warned Lincoln against pursuing the plan.² Still, the idea of returning to Africa remained a powerful draw for some in the free black communities. A few individuals and groups continued to advocate for emigration after the war ended,³ but this particular approach to the “Negro problem” generally remained on the periphery of workable remedies.

¹ In conjunction with the federal government, the Society became involved in the eventual founding of a West African colony and the destination for free blacks. The country of Liberia, declared independent in 1847, represented the apogee of such efforts. For some, this scheme seemed a model approach to the thorny issue of slavery. Abraham Lincoln himself voiced his support of colonization as he grappled with the potential outcomes of emancipation during the Civil War. Darlene Clark Hine, William C. Hine, and Stanley Harrold, The African-American Odyssey, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2008), 199, 272.

² Ibid., 201.

³ For example, in 1878 the Liberian Exodus Joint Stock Steamship Company left South Carolina with over two hundred black passengers, headed for Liberia. Similarly, in the early twentieth century, Marcus Garvey’s United Negro Improvement Association and his Black Star Line advocated that people of African descent return to the land of their forbears.
Various groups and individuals posited other methods of aiding freedmen and women in the transition from slavery into citizenship within the United States. Aid groups funded by northern Protestant religious organizations worked to establish schools for the southern black population. The American Baptist Home Mission Society, the Episcopalians’ Freedmen’s Aid Society and others established a variety of educational institutions in the post-war South. Over time, the great philanthropists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century provided financial support for black schools in southern states. George Peabody, John Rockefeller, Julius Rosenwald, and Andrew Carnegie ranked among the best known of those involved in post-war charitable efforts in the South.4

Among this chorus of recommendations, one group in particular declared that it had solved the “Negro problem.” They claimed, strikingly, to possess the wherewithal to improve the lives of the country’s black population in this life and to save their souls in the next. The Roman Catholic Church asserted itself as the material and spiritual savior of the country’s African American men, women, and children. In the years following the end of the Civil War, officials in Rome and the United States increasingly sought to marshal the Church’s considerable resources with the aim of reaping the “colored

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harvest.” By the mid-1860s, American bishops and their Roman counterparts turned their attention to the South.

On an October morning in 1866, people gathered outside the archbishop’s residence in Baltimore. Drawn there by the chance to see the most powerful men in the American Catholic Church, the faithful crowded adjacent streets and rooftops hoping to catch a glimpse of the assembled Catholic luminaries. The opening of the Second Plenary Council, an assembly of prelates called to discuss matters of Catholic policy, was scheduled to begin later that day. A reporter from *The New York Times* reckoned that nearly forty thousand Baltimore Catholics gathered to watch the stately procession from the archbishop’s residence to the cathedral. ⁵

Following the display at the opening ceremony, the prelates of the Second Plenary Council settled down to business. Nearly two hundred and fifty members of the American Catholic hierarchy took part in the proceedings, including abbots, monks, priests, bishops, and archbishops. Over the next several weeks, Church leaders addressed a variety of issues. The Education of Youth, Aid for the Pope, the Relations of the Church to the State, the Sacrament of Matrimony, Books, Newspapers and the Press, and Religious Communities represented several of the major topics taken up by the assemblage. ⁶ Another topic appeared in the records of the 1866 Baltimore conference: “The Emancipated Slaves.” Less than a year after the Thirteenth Amendment was

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adopted, the American Catholic hierarchy formally discussed how the Church ought to apply itself to the “Negro problem.”

The term “Negro problem,” or “Negro question,” referred to the national debate regarding the place of African Americans in society and issues of race within the country. White commentators – Catholic, Protestant, and secular – expounded freely on the subject. African Americans weighed in as well. Frederick Douglass, for instance, argued in 1893, “Men talk of the Negro problem. There is no Negro problem. The problem is whether the American people have honesty enough, loyalty enough, honor enough, patriotism enough to live up to their own Constitution.”

Douglass’ view, unfortunately, remained in the minority. Through the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century, a variety of individuals took up the “Negro problem” with various solutions in mind. Catholic officials in the post-Civil War South believed newly-emancipated slaves represented a ripe opportunity for extending the reach of the Church in the United States. In so doing, the hierarchy believed, Catholicism would ultimately solve the “Negro problem.”

Catholic policy towards African Americans needed to change in order to accomplish this aim. Despite the presence of Catholics in the Americas since the earliest years of European colonization, the Church’s antebellum impact in the South in general – and among African Americans in particular – remained weak. Several factors accounted

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7 Quoted in Frederick Douglass: Oratory from Slavery by David Chesebrough (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood press, 1998), 79.

for this. First, the majority Anglo-Protestant European population of the United States tended to view Catholics with suspicion. Marked misgivings about the Church abounded in the mostly Protestant South. The core of this anti-Catholic sentiment stemmed from the belief that followers of the religion owed fealty to the pope and to the Church in Rome. Consequently, Catholics were seen as inherently un-American and antagonistic to the country’s republican traditions. Anglo-Protestant distrust of Catholic immigrants, termed “nativism,” ratcheted up in the 1840s and 1850s as thousands of Irish immigrants fled the ravages of the potato famine and settled primarily in the urban American north. This particular strain of nativism peaked with the emergence of the American or “Know-Nothing” Party in 1854. Among other things, the Know-Nothings promoted a staunch anti-Catholic plank. Elements of the American Party later dissolved into the emerging Republican Party. A deep suspicion of Catholicism remained within mainstream Anglo-Protestant America.9

The fear that American Catholics’ loyalty to Rome superseded their loyalty to Washington continued after the Civil War as successive generations of Catholic immigrants continued to settle in northern urban enclaves. Anglo fears of an injurious Catholic impact on the country continued apace. Catholic communities built parish complexes of schools, churches, and convents as they established themselves as a political, social, and economic force. Chicago, New York, Milwaukee, Philadelphia, Detroit and other cities saw the establishment of “parish boundaries” that defined the

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nature of northern Catholicism. Their increasing presence on the local, state, and national political stage also generated strong “anti-popery” reactions well into the twentieth century.

Nativist anxiety worked itself out in a slightly different manner below the Mason-Dixon Line. To be sure, anti-Catholic sentiment remained prevalent. Protestants represented an overwhelming majority of the population but the perceived menace of Catholicism remained strong. As such, it behooved southern Catholics – already viewed as a suspect population – to avoid rocking the boat. Many Catholic officials largely left slavery and racial injustice alone, as they were outnumbered, faced with suspicion by many local populations, and perceived as adherents to an alien creed. Some within the Church, including bishops, priests, and laypeople, remained tethered to the South’s way of life. As one historian suggests, “In neither teaching nor example did the Church create a moral climate conducive to manumissions or humane treatment of slaves.”

At times, tolerance of and participation in slavery emerged within the Church itself.

Here, the racialized paradox that defined the nation’s founding trenchantly marked the antebellum Church. The holding of human chattel and attendant prejudice manifested itself in a variety of ways among some Catholics in the pre-Civil War South. Individuals occasionally maintained the institution of slavery and some prominent

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Catholic families owned slaves. Some orders of male and female religious also engaged in human bondage. For example, by the first decades of the nineteenth century a community of Jesuits in Maryland possessed almost three hundred slaves. These slaves worked several large Jesuit-owned agricultural concerns in Maryland. The income from these lands provided financial support for the Jesuits. By the end of the 1830s, many within the community argued for a shift away from a reliance on agriculture for support, advocated for a focus on education, and challenged the morality of slaveholding. Two hundred and seventy-two slaves were sold away to various plantations in Louisiana by the Maryland Jesuits.

Other communities of male and female religious owned slaves as well. Historian Cyprian Davis’ excellent survey, The History of Black Catholics in the United States chronicles various Catholic slave-owning orders. The Vincentians in Missouri and the Sulpicians in Maryland and Kentucky represented two additional groups of male religious who held African Americans in bondage. Some communities of nuns also held slaves. The Ursuline sisters of New Orleans, the Carmelites of Maryland, the Daughters of the Cross in Louisiana, the Religious of the Sacred Heart in Missouri and Louisiana, the Visitation nuns in Washington, D.C., and the Dominican Sisters in Kentucky

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13 Hine, Hine, and Harrold, 158.

14 Davis, 37.
numbered among those who owned human chattel. The experiences of these slaves were particularly suggestive of “the Catholic church in chains.”\textsuperscript{15}

Not all bishops, priests, or laypeople, however, held slaves or supported the institution. Those arrayed against slavery found support from the highest echelons of the Church. In 1839 Pope Gregory XVI issued an apostolic letter in which he decried the traffic in “Indians, Negroes, or other men of this sort,” and enjoined Catholics from “exercise[ing] that inhuman trade by which Negroes, as if they were not men, but mere animals, howsoever reduced into slavery, are, without any distinction, contrary to the laws of justice and humanity, bought, sold, and doomed sometimes to the most severe and exhausting labours.”\textsuperscript{16} The pontiff’s decree resonated among some Catholic communities. Numbers of Catholics involved in abolitionist societies still remained few in comparison to their Protestant counterparts, although this did not necessarily stem from a lack of conviction. As one historian suggests, northern abolition groups remained too closely associated with Protestant strains of nativism for anti-slavery Catholics’ comfort.\textsuperscript{17}

The question of Catholic culpability in American slavery continues to excite partisans on either side of the debate. For some, the argument that Catholics supported

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 38-39.

\textsuperscript{16} Quoted in Davis, 40.

\textsuperscript{17} Miller, 157. Additionally, historian John McGreevy also suggests ways in which Catholics’ reticence regarding immediate abolition went beyond a simple reflection of nineteenth-century racism. He argues that, “Many Catholic intellectuals around the world accepted slavery as a legitimate, if tragic, institution. This acceptance rested upon the pervasive fear of liberal individualism and social disorder that so shaped Catholic thought during the nineteenth century, along with the anti-Catholicism of many abolitionists.” See Catholicism and American Freedom: A History (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2003), 52.
slavery represents a fallacious attempt to undermine the Church’s inherent moral authority. The pope’s 1839 condemnation of slavery and examples of abolitionist Catholics serve for these partisans as definitive, exculpatory evidence. For others, historical data that demonstrates Catholic involvement in slavery – such as wills, estate documents, bills of sale and personal papers – provide more than enough confirmation of the Church’s responsibility in the practice of slavery. Perhaps the most equitable assessment of this situation lies somewhere in between. Some Catholics supported slavery while others did not. Opinions and practices occasionally evolved over time. In the final analysis, however, the disgrace of slavery indicted the entirety of the United States in general, especially those who simultaneously claimed religious and moral authority for themselves in particular.

Despite the antebellum acquiescence among some white southern Catholics to the dictates of slavery, small populations of black Catholics existed in the South. Congregations of Catholic sisters had dedicated themselves to ministry on behalf of African Americans since the eighteenth century. For example, the Ursulines, a band of nuns from France, provided schooling for black children in New Orleans as early as

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18 McGreevy’s *Catholicism and American Freedom: A History* suggests as much. In Chapter Two, “Catholicism, Slavery, and the Cause of Liberty,” McGreevy’s discussion of a variety of Catholic individuals and groups demonstrates that one can easily point to examples of those who supported slavery, questioned the practice, or switched sides on the topic, all for a variety of reasons. What is clear is that American Catholics – in their interpretation of doctrine or their own personal beliefs – cannot be pigeonholed on one side of the slavery debate or the other. Historian William L. Portier suggests too that nineteenth-century bishops such as John England Francis Patrick Kenrick, and Martin J. Spalding “generally treated slavery as a political rather than as a religious question.” Further, he continues, “The Church had maintained its unity during the Civil War by remaining neutral on the question of slavery as a moral issue. In other words, slavery was not inherently immoral but, like war, had to be conducted in a moral way.” Anticipating McGreevy in *Catholicism and American Freedom*, Portier concluded that the debate over slavery “was left to the anti-Catholic abolitionists.” Willam L. Portier, “John R. Slattery’s Vision for the Evangelization of American Blacks,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* Vol. 5 No. 1 (The Black Catholic Experience, 1986): 24-25.
The first community of African American nuns emerged in Baltimore in 1829 when Mother Mary Lange, in conjunction with Father James Joubert, founded the Oblate Sisters of Providence. This congregation focused their ministry on teaching in schools for children of African descent. Similarly, in 1842 another community of African American sisters emerged, the Sisters of the Holy Family. Based in New Orleans, these sisters also directed their energies towards the education of black children. Still, outside of a few pockets of long-established African American Catholic communities in cities such as St. Augustine, Charleston, Baltimore, New Orleans, and Savannah, incidences of antebellum Catholic ministry among both slave and free black communities remained scarce.

The experiences of these African American Catholics varied widely. In New Orleans, for instance, and the low country of South Carolina where larger populations of black Catholics existed, these experiences sometimes included non-segregated seating in churches or other manifestations of spiritual equality in the context of the Church. The manner in which free blacks and slaves experienced Catholicism, of course, differed

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21 Gillard, 42.
considerably. In terms of numbers, one estimate places the number of black Catholics in
the South at approximately 100,000 by 1860. The estimated total population of African
American Catholics numbered at 138,213 out of a total of around seven million black
Americans, according to the Church’s own census which first appeared in 1889. The
collapse of the slave South after 1865 opened the door for the American Church to
reassess its policies regarding African Americans. Whereas slaves existed as the
property of rich white planters – a relationship which southern Catholic authorities
questioned at their peril – freedmen, women, and their families represented a potential
“harvest” of souls for the Church.

The question of conversion among African Americans already occupied the minds
of those inhabiting the highest positions within the Church prior to the opening of the
Second Plenary Council in Baltimore. Clergy in Rome wrote to the bishops of the United
States before the 1866 Council and pronounced, “It is the mind of the Church that the
Bishops of the United States…should take council together, in order to bring about in a
steady way the salvation and the Christian education of the lately emancipated
negroes.” The American bishops also discussed the “Negro problem” among

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22 Miller, 151,158.

23 “Our Negro and Indian Missions: Annual Report of the Secretary of the Commission for the Catholic
Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians,” Commission Publications and Records, Marquette
University, Milwaukee, WI, Microfilm Series 7/1, Reel 1, 1889.

24 A discussion of the Catholic mission in the South should include reference to the fact that the United
States itself was considered “mission territory” by the Roman Church until 1908. Thus, the mission to
proselytize African Americans should be considered something of a “mission within in a mission” until that
time.

25 Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of Baltimore, p. xxviii; quoted in Joseph Butsch,
themselves as well. Archbishop Martin J. Spalding of Baltimore, the host of the council, wrote to his colleague Archbishop John McCloskey of New York about the need to take up questions related to newly-freed African Americans. “I think it is precisely the most urgent duty of all to discuss the future status of the Negro,” Spalding advised his colleague. “Four million of these unfortunates are thrown on our Charity…It is a golden opportunity for a reaping of a harvest of souls, which neglected may not return.”

Despite this request, the prelates at Baltimore delayed the discussion of Church policy regarding the recently-emancipated slaves until after the Council officially closed in October, 1866. In this interim, the seven archbishops and almost forty bishops who participated in the Second Plenary Council addressed a variety of issues, ranging from the dangers of Protestantism to the logistics of handling Church-owned property. Catholic officials took up the issue of evangelization among freedpeople of the South the day after the Council formally closed.

Title X of the Council’s proceedings, entitled “Of Procuring the Salvation of Souls,” discussed African Americans. “Priests, both secular and regular,” declared the Council, “are exhorted to endeavor to further the conversion of the negroes within our midst.” Before addressing the specific actions about a potential ministry to African Americans, the report jabbed non-Catholics and also included some dubious remarks

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about the lately freed slaves. The bishops pontificated upon “the well-known fact that
Protestants have never converted a heathen people,” and then spent considerable time
“dwelling on the deplorable condition of the manumitted negroes, plunged into darkness
and Fetichism [sic].”

A pastoral letter released by the bishops after the conclusion of the Council also
cast a negative light upon the former slave population. The bishops suggested that
gradual emancipation might have been a better option for ending slavery, particularly
given the “peculiar dispositions and habits” of former slaves. This pastoral letter advised
all Catholics, both religious and lay, “to extend to them [African Americans] that
Christian education and moral restraint of which they stand in such need.”

The official
language that emerged from the Second Plenary Council suggested two themes that
would be repeated through the second half of the nineteenth century and into the
twentieth: the necessity of educating and converting southern African Americans and, at
times, a racialized denigration of their moral, social, and intellectual capabilities.

Despite the seeming accord among the bishops at Baltimore as reported in formal
proceedings, evidence uncovered by some historians suggests that the question of Church
policy towards emancipated slaves was by no means a settled issue. The major topic
upon which the American bishops could not agree involved diocesan sovereignty.
Spalding, in conjunction with officials in Rome, suggested the creation of a “prefect

Plenary Council of Baltimore, November 9-December 7, 1884 (Baltimore: The Baltimore Publishing
Company, 1885), 43.

30 Ibid., 43-44.
apostolic,” a person assigned to oversee Catholic outreach to emancipated slaves. The individual in this position would be responsible for coordinating and implementing Church programs across dioceses. Most of the bishops bristled at the notion of a prefect apostolic exercising authority within the bishop’s own jurisdiction. In the end, the Council decided to allow each bishop to independently pursue their own ministries to African Americans at the diocesan level. The lack of an overarching, agreed-upon approach to the black ministry was, according to historian Cyprian Davis, “one of the tragedies of American church history.”

An ad hoc arrangement consequently characterized the Catholic evangelical project in the South for the next twenty years. The few individuals and groups within the Church who took up this work remained essentially independent and lacked a centralized office to coordinate efforts across the region. Until the American bishops again took up the issue of mission work in southern African American communities in at the Third Plenary Council in 1884, only a few communities of religious attempted to gain a Catholic foothold south of the Mason-Dixon Line. A small collection of priests from England devoted themselves to the so-called “Negro apostolate” in the interim between the Plenary Councils of 1866 and 1884. Originally known as the Mill Hill fathers, this group of male religious was led by Herbert Vaughan, a British priest who worked his way up through the Church hierarchy.

In 1871, Vaughan travelled to Rome and met with Pope Pius IX. The pope directed Vaughan and his Mill Hill fathers to contact Bishop Spalding of Baltimore regarding ministry in the United States. Ultimately, upon a directive from the pope,

31 Davis, Black Catholics in the United States, 116-121.
Vaughan and his fellow priests “vowed themselves forever to the service of the Negro race.” In November of 1871, the Mill Hill fathers arrived in Baltimore. The Society of St. Joseph, or the Josephites, as this group of priests later became known, focused primarily upon training African American men for the priesthood and evangelization efforts among black communities.\textsuperscript{32}

The precise impact of these different congregations in southern African American communities after the end of the Civil War remains difficult to measure. To be sure, contemporaneous accounts suggested that the Church was making some headway in its southern project. The Josephites’ efforts, for instance, attracted attention beyond Catholic circles. Secular and Protestant publications commented on the arrival of this Catholic missionary order on American soil.

A leading nineteenth-century publication, \textit{Harper’s Weekly}, and one of the paper’s most well-known illustrators, Thomas Nast, printed a perspective of the Mill Hill fathers barely a month after their arrival in 1871 (See Figure 1). Nast’s image portrays a scene including Henry Edward Manning, the Catholic archbishop of Westminster from 1865 to 1892. Manning, under whose auspices Herbert Vaughan and the Josephites traveled to the United States, figures prominently in the cartoon. The archbishop sinisterly beckons a black family to follow him while holding shackles emblazoned with the worlds “PRIESTLY SLAVERY” behind his back. In the background behind Manning appears a boat under skull and crossbones. A clutch of Catholic clergy, arrayed


in episcopal attire, wait in the boat. Opposite the piratical prelates appears a public school, above which flies an American flag. This scene appeared juxtaposed against the spire of a presumably Protestant church and nearby, two young black children march determinedly towards the school.

Nast’s caption reads, “A ROMAN CATHOLIC MISSION FROM ENGLAND TO THE “HEATHENS” OF AMERICA.” A subheading further explains: “Dr. Manning. “Of all the Nations on Earth, England has been the most Guilty in regard to Slavery, and it was most fitting that the Reparations to the now Liberated Slaves should proceed from England.” The Heathen American. “No, thank you. We have just been Emancipated, and if England is responsible for Slavery in the United States, I don’t care to jump from the English Frying-Pan into the English Fire.” Harper’s accompanying article assured readers of its certainty that Manning and the other “Romish” interlopers would find little success among black Americans, who would be safeguarded from the specious influence of Catholicism by the republic’s public schools and Protestant churches.\(^3\)

Protestant religious publications also weighed in on the arrival of the missionary priests from England. The *New York Evangelist*, which began as an antebellum abolitionist publication and ran until 1902, sounded the alarm in 1871 to its readers regarding English archbishop Manning’s designs on converting Americans of African descent. Published within a month of the Mill Hill fathers’ appearance in the United States, the *Evangelist* called upon readers to counter the potential threat of Catholic influence. The newspaper urged a heightened attention on the part of Protestant proselytizers to African Americans. The Presbyterian church was singled out in particular out to “apply itself more vigorously to the evangelization of our colored people at the South, and furnish the means for the wide establishment of schools and churches. Let us learn even from an enemy. Archbishop Manning’s zeal may rebuke our
indifference.” 34 This reaction to the Catholic mission in the South trenchantly illustrated the nineteenth-century nativist fears of “popish” influence on African American populations.

Not all reflections on the Catholic evangelical project elicited such concern. In the spring of 1875, the New York Times lightly noted, “The Roman Catholics are making great exertions to gain converts among the colored people.” The author commented upon missionary efforts of the Josephites and the Jesuits and further intimated, “If the losses of “Mother Church” in Italy by apostacy [sic] are not more than counterbalanced by converts in the Southern States, who are zealously laboring in this new vineyard, we will be sadly mistaken.” 35 No further reflection on the import of this missionary effort appeared in the Times, but the fact of its existence suggested some awareness on the national, secular level of the Catholic mission in the South.

The “Negro problem,” as perceived by white authorities, continued to generate debate in through the 1870s and 1880s. Still, the Church maintained that its faith, rituals, and doctrines provided the answer. In early 1884 the monthly magazine, The Catholic World, posed the question, “Can the great church of the United States afford to ignore the negro problem?” The answer was a resounding “no.” First, as the only route to eternal salvation, the Church and her people must apply themselves to the deliverance of all people regardless of race. The “black skin” of some of God’s children ought not to dissuade good Catholics from extending to them the sacraments of the Church. Additionally, other matters should generate outreach to Americans of African descent.

The role of the black population in United States politics ought to be carefully considered as well. In this final analysis, the Church had no alternative but take up the “negro problem” with alacrity:

The true means of elevating the colored people is the same as will advance the whites – the influence and power of the Catholic Church. For she, by her priests and nuns, her churches and schools, her orphanages and hospitals, her asylums of all kinds and her care in life and respect in death, will answer fully the wants of the bodies and souls of her colored children. In her bosom alone will they find elevation, dignity, and perfect joy…On the score, then, of our common humanity, in the interests of divine truth, and in behalf of patriotism, our contention has been, and our conclusion is, that we cannot afford to neglect our colored brethren.36

Evangelization to African Americans through education for the purposes of salvation, political stability, and comprised the tent-posts supporting the Church’s southern mission through the final decades of the nineteenth century and the opening years of the twentieth.

A sense of urgency underpinned these efforts. The Protestant menace threatened to supersede the Catholic project. In the post-Civil War South, the Freedmen’s Bureau symbolized this pernicious influence. Established by Congress in the spring of 1865, the Freedmen’s Bureau was charged with assisting freedmen, women, and their families in the shift from slavery to citizenship. The Bureau’s mandate to provide extended aid to former slaves included the creation of schools. Congress allocated nearly half a million dollars in 1866 for this purpose. Three years later, almost three thousand educational

institutions created under the auspices of the Freedmen’s Bureau served nearly 150,000 students.\textsuperscript{37}

The problem with these seemingly laudable developments, from a Catholic perspective, stemmed from the Freedmen’s Bureau’s collaboration with Protestant groups. “It is a known fact that the schools built by the Freedmen’s Bureau passed over into the hands of the Methodists, who turned them nearly all into places for their religious worship,” declared the \textit{Catholic World} in 1884.\textsuperscript{38} Antebellum abolitionist groups comprised mainly of Protestant denominations frequently joined their efforts with the Bureau following the end of the war. The Congregationalists’ American Missionary Association, for instance, together with the Freedmen’s Bureau founded Fisk, Hampton, Tugaloo, and Avery.\textsuperscript{39} Leading authorities in the Catholic Church aimed to counter this creeping Protestantism with the mighty mother Church.

The potential for Protestant solutions to the “Negro problem” occupied the highest-placed minds in the American Church during the autumn of 1884 at the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore. The bishops of the United States again debated the best

\textsuperscript{37} Darlene Clark Hine, William C. Hine, and Stanley Harrold, \textit{The African American Odyssey}, 5\textsuperscript{th} ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2011), 302-307. Although the creation of these schools was a positive outcome of the Freedman’s Bureau, the organization continually lacked the funds and the personnel to make a significant, long-term impact in the post-Civil War South.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.

methods they ought to employ in the project of proselytizing among African Americans. This Council, which lasted from November 9 through December 7 included the entirety of the American hierarchy able to travel to Baltimore. The New York Times again provided extensive coverage of the event and estimated that eighty archbishops, bishops, and abbots attended the Council. Ten additional priests and around twenty-five leaders of religious orders took part in the proceedings as well. All told, over two hundred and fifty members of the episcopate, clergy, and theologians descended upon Maryland’s capital in the first week of November 1884.40

At 9:30 on the morning of November 9, 1884, the procession once again passed from the residence of the archbishop of Baltimore to the city’s cathedral. The Council attendees crafted policies related to canon law, catechism, the creation of Catholic newspapers, the relationship between clergy and laity, and the establishment of a Catholic university. The establishment of Catholic schools wherever feasible in all dioceses also preoccupied the prelates as the key to the cultivation of future generations of Catholics.41

Church officials appeared primed to reformulate the Church’s approach to the “Negro problem” as well. The American bishops seemed to realize that two essential elements were required for the successful evangelization and education of the southern black community. First on the list: money. The bishops at the Baltimore conference in 1884 indicated that “the generous cooperation of our Catholic people in more prosperous


localities” would be required to bankroll the Church’s missionary efforts in the South. The second item on the list: labor. Individuals were needed to live and work within the black population. In this regard, the bishops spoke in ringing tones: “Since the greatest part of the Negroes are as yet outside the fold of Christ, it is a matter of necessity to seek workmen inflamed with zeal for souls, who will be sent into this part of the Lord’s harvest.” The twin goals of evangelization and education of the country’s African American population would be driven by the twin motors of Catholic money and Catholic labor.

Additionally, certain Plenary Council attendees specifically addressed the Catholic project in the American South. On the third day of the Council, the Rev. William H. Gross, bishop of Savannah, Georgia, addressed this very issue. His sermon, delivered on November 11, 1884 and entitled “The Missions for the Colored People,” included observations on the general condition of about “eight millions of colored people” in the United States and recommendations for the Church’s policies towards them.

Two central themes framed Gross’s oration. First of all, he emphasized the potential for African Americans to exert significant political and social power in the post-Civil War United States. The continued growth of the country’s black population assured

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that their influence on the country would only increase. For Gross – and, presumably, the rest of the hierarchy – this fact led to an inescapable quandary. “What,” he asked, “is to be done with them?” This question dovetailed with the second main theme of his sermon: the holy mother Church provided the answer. “There is only one thing that will do any good,” Gross declared, “and that is to elevate them morally; make them honest men, chaste women, obedient, law-abiding citizens, having the real welfare of the State at heart.”

Here, the bishop from Georgia executed a neat trick. He simultaneously aligned this perceived moral mandate of the Catholic Church with the overarching political and social good of America. In this scenario, religious right made secular might. Certain assumptions couched explicitly and implicitly also undergirded Gross’s proposition. Rank racial stereotypes framed the preconditions for his rendering of the “Negro problem.” The bishop himself did not shy away from discoursing upon the “barbarism” of native Africans and the ways in which slavery “improved the condition” of bondspeople. Indeed, Gross assigned to black Americans a pronounced, inherent inclination towards dissipation. “Man has a fallen nature,” the bishop intoned, “and it is not necessary for me to state that the poor colored people do not stand very high in the scale of morality.” Following Gross’s version of reality, the sacraments and majesty of the Catholic Church could not help but save African Americans from themselves for the benefit of the entire nation.

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44 Ibid., 71.

The notion that Catholics were uniquely possessed of the answer to the “Negro problem” coexisted uneasily with the inclination towards anti-Catholicism that frequently emerged in mainstream nineteenth- and twentieth-century Anglo America. For many Protestants, Catholic designs on African Americans in this life and the next harkened the specter of the Church metastasizing in political and social power, distended by a surging black electorate. Gross’s sermon in particular suggested Catholic leaders’ awareness of potential Protestant backlash to this very proposition. As such, it behooved the American episcopate to frame their approach to ministry in black communities in terms of benefitting the nation at large.

As “proof” of the Church’s salutary effects on African Americans, Gross singled out black women as a particular demographic for whom Catholicism would provide great benefit. “Consider the influence the woman wields as wife, mother, and in society,” the bishop argued. “The Catholic Church can alone give to the colored woman her proper elevation and make her influence widespread for good.” As further demonstration of the special efficacy of Catholic women, Gross lectured briefly on the Oblate Sisters of Providence. This order of African American nuns validated Gross’s perception that Catholicism could not help but exert a wholesome influence on black women. These sisters, he insisted, proved that “the colored woman can be elevated to a place where she can bring blessings on her race equal to the beneficent influence which the white woman as a wife, mother, sister, and holy nun has conferred upon the white race.”

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46 Ibid., 72.
In this passage of his sermon, Gross’s words suggest a broader cultural, middle-class sensibility regarding the role of women in the nineteenth-century home and society. Notions of the “domestic sphere” and “municipal housekeeping” posited that women’s innate moral compass helped maintain morality in the home among men and children. Women’s engagement in the public sphere with issues such as temperance, child welfare, and other social problems, were seen by many reformers as the “natural” extension of women’s moral influence in the home. Because the cultural ideal of the women’s sphere and her influence outside the home remained generally associated with white, Protestant reformers, it appeared surprising that a Catholic bishop would draw upon similar language in the context of spreading Catholicism among African American women.

Still, the overarching message of Gross’ sermon and the Third Plenary Council centered on the belief that the generation of black Americans removed from slavery by 1884 provided an opportunity for the Church to gain a stronghold among them. According to the bishop from Georgia, during the era of slavery Catholic clergy had little interaction with slaves and, therefore, no chance to lead them to the true Church. “In Georgia and generally in the slave States,” Gross explained, “the slaveholders, with a few exceptions, were Protestants.” This rendering of the past glossed over the role of the

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Jesuits, among other Catholic orders and laypeople, who literally maintained the institution of slavery. Beyond his selective remembering of history, Gross’ sermon suggested the ways in which Catholic authorities more generally perceived an opportunity to evangelize among Americans of African descent in the post-Civil War decades.

The bishops of the Third Plenary Council thus established a funding mechanism for Catholic missions in the South. To a certain degree, the prelates recognized the stark financial realities faced by many African American families in the late nineteenth-century South. The practice of parishioners funding the establishment and maintenance of a parish complex – a common occurrence in the Catholic urban North – remained impossible in many southern black communities, particularly in those without a traditional Catholic population. In an effort to ensure the necessary funds for an increased Catholic presence in the South, the bishops in Baltimore in 1884 established The Commission for Catholic Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians (hereafter the Commission).

The Commission was charged with the responsibility of coordinating the distribution of tithes from Catholics across the nation for the benefit of the southern missions. This funding came directly from offerings made by the faithful in churches across the United States. First in 1887 and continuing annually on the first Sunday in Lent, a collection was taken up in all American parishes for the Indian and Colored Missions. These funds were then channeled to the Commission, which made decisions
regarding the dispersal of these monies among Indian and African American missions.48 The Commission and the annual collection represented an important source of funding for the Catholic churches and schools in the South. All this remained in the future for the prelates who attended the Third Plenary Council in 1884, however. The intent of the Commission, and of the southern evangelical project more generally, appeared in striking terms by the last years of the nineteenth century. A preoccupation with conversion, aimed towards the ultimate harnessing of the black electorate, animated much of the bishops’ discussion of the “Negro problem.”

Gross’s 1884 sermon at the Third Plenary Council encapsulated much of the tension that animated the Catholic missionary efforts among African American communities. On one hand, deeply problematic positions on race appeared. From suggesting that slavery was beneficial to asserting the barbarity of native Africans to wondering “what is to be done with them,” Gross recapitulated gross racist stereotypes in his sermon. Moreover, the way in which he elided the role Catholics played in the slave trade suggested a disconnect with historical fact. If the sermon stopped here, its interpretation might have remained an open-and-shut portrayal of typical racist, prejudicial language.

However, the concluding remarks of his sermon complicated matters. As Bishop Gross’s sermon drew to a close on that November afternoon in 1884, another theme emerged. Beyond considerations of the Church’s ability to harness African Americans’ potential political and social influence, he said, a higher call ought to motivate Catholics’

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evangelical efforts. “They [African Americans] were created by the same God, are children of the same common father and mother – Adam and Eve – and were destined to see God,” Gross reminded his audience. “Remember that Jesus Christ shed His last drop of blood to redeem their souls, and that they are, therefore, inconceivably dear in His eyes.”

A belief in the divine spark animating all humans should, at the end of the day, inspire Catholics in their ministry to African Americans.

Identifying the true aims of long-dead historical actors is a notoriously tricky business. Did Gross really believe in the “we are all children of the same God” argument, or was he simply seeking to gild the prejudicial pill? To broaden the terms of this debate, did the American Catholic Church as illustrated at these two major nineteenth-century councils undertake their evangelical efforts in the southern states from a belief in the spiritual and temporal equality of all? Or did more earthly concerns, such as increasing the size and political influence of the Church, always represent the penultimate goal? The extent to which religious considerations fundamentally shaped historical decisions and policies, particularly in the heated crucible of race, remains difficult to ascertain.

Charting a middle ground through these thorny issues may ultimately provide an answer. On one hand, some individuals and groups within the Church may have undertaken missionary efforts in black communities from a sincere desire to help their less fortunate brethren. On the other hand, some individuals and groups within the Church may have promoted missionary work for craven reasons of harnessing the potential political and social power entailed by the black vote. For them, the

discriminatory language used by Bishop Gross in his 1884 address may well have resounded.

Neither entirely pure nor inescapably prurient in its aims, American Catholics’ evangelical work within black southern communities reflected the country’s tangled relationship with matters of race. Racial contradictions embedded into the nation’s founding marked the American Church in variety of ways at different times in the past. The bishops’ apparent concern for the immortal souls of African Americans existed uneasily beside claims of the black population’s “barbarism” and general inferiority at these Plenary Councils. The United States’ racial paradox expressed itself within the very highest levels of the American Church. By this point, however, the Church portrayed itself as a force to be reckoned with in the national debate over the “Negro problem.”
CHAPTER II
THE COMMISSION

Plainly-wrapped pamphlets appeared in parish mailboxes across the country in late 1889. Initially sent only to local priests, by 1892 sufficient requests from individuals prompted the secretary of the Commission for the Catholic Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians to increase its printing run. The brevity of the first report in 1889 entitled “The Negroes and the Indians” was quickly superseded by increasingly verbose editions. Soon thereafter, “Mission Work Among the Negroes and the Indians: What is Being Accomplished by Means of The Annual Collection Taken Up for Our Missions,” with a thickness that reflected its weightier title, advised readers of the progress of the southern evangelical project. These booklets physically embodied the Church’s formulation of its answer to the “Negro problem” during the Third Plenary Council in 1884. Charged with overseeing the financing of the Church’s proselytizing efforts, the Commission for the Catholic Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians (he Commission) began working with alacrity. The small, bound leaflets from Baltimore heralded the increased purposefulness of the Catholic mission in the American South.

The Commission’s annual reports included appeals for funds and information regarding the growing number of religious orders – nuns, priests, and brothers – who provided the work necessary to establish Catholic missions in the southern United States.
The Church hierarchy cannily framed the import of the donations in terms that might particularly appeal to laypeople. Anticipating that the American bishops would, as suggested by Rome in the months and years leading up to the Third Plenary Council, take up mission work among Native and African American communities, Pope Leo XIII had issued the following directive:

A plenary indulgence to be gained by each and all the faithful of both sexes on the day when the collection is taken up for the erection and support of Catholic churches and schools for the Indians and Negroes, provided that they, having with contrite hearts approached the Sacrament of Penance and received Holy Communion, piously visit a church in which the alms is collected and pray for the spread of our holy Faith and for the intentions of the Sovereign Pontiff.\(^1\) Essentially, the pontiff declared that if laymen and women met the above-named conditions, they would receive a special consideration from the Church. If one went to Confession, attended Mass, received Communion, and prayed vigorously, one would be granted a plenary indulgence\(^2\) which resulted in “the remission of the entire temporal punishment due to sin so that no further expiation is required in Purgatory.”\(^3\) A donation to the mission fund put another way, added points to believers’ “get-out-of-Purgatory” card. Thus, with the mechanics of fundraising in place and backed up by the promise of eternity, the Commission for the Catholic Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians set about its work.

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2. Church-issued indulgences – the forgiveness of sins and/or reduction of time in purgatory obtained through a specified means – retain an interesting place in Catholic history. Indeed, a sort of “pay-to-play” indulgence scheme of the sixteenth-century Church, in which wealthy believers could purchase indulgences from the papal office, represented a chief criticism of Martin Luther which generated the Protestant Reformation.

A governing body was appointed to oversee the intake and distribution of funds. According to the Commission’s by-laws, no less than three Directors or Trustees would maintain their positions for one-year terms. The corporate office of the Commission was located in Baltimore, and an annual meeting on the first Thursday in November provided the organization’s directors the opportunity to attend to the group’s business. The first group of churchmen appointed to the Commission included James Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore, Archbishop Patrick John Ryan of Philadelphia, and Bishop John Joseph Kain of Wheeling, West Virginia. The Rev. E.R. Dyer became the Commission’s first secretary. Personnel numbers remained low: the by-laws allowed for the offices of president, vice-president, secretary, and treasurer, and included the caveat that the positions of secretary and treasurer could be held by the same individual. Indeed, the office of treasurer appeared the weightiest among those involved in the Commission. He was responsible for keeping accounts of the receipts from various dioceses, deposits, and sending disbursements back to mission schools and churches.

Bishops from dioceses requesting Commission funds applied directly to the treasurer and/or secretary. These reports often included brief reports on a mission’s progress, including numbers of baptisms, parishioners, and students in attendance at area Catholic schools. Such correspondence generally contained plans for mission projects either already underway or in the planning stages. The building of schools, residences for

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4 “Our Negro and Indian Missions: Annual Report of the Secretary of the Commission for the Catholic Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians,” Commission Publications and Records, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI, Microfilm Series 7/1, Reel 1, 1892.

5 By-Laws of the Commission for Catholic Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians, Commission Publications and Records, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI, Microfilm Series 7/1, Reel 1, 1889.
teaching sisters, or similar undertakings often emerged within the communiqués. Some bishops’ reports maintained a certain brevity, while others – notably, Bishop Thomas J. Toolen of Alabama, who became a lively correspondent with the Commission’s secretary/treasurer by the late 1920s⁶ – exercised their pens with considerable vigor.

Bishops from below the Mason-Dixon Line mailed yearly letters to the Commission’s secretary who compiled this information into the annual pamphlets sent out to the faithful. Contact between southern bishops and the Commission officials who tracked their progress illustrated important objectives that framed the first quarter-century of the Church’s stated vocation in the South. The necessity of raising funds, gaining converts, harnessing the potential political and social power of the southern black population, schooling African American children, and securing communities of sisters to teach at the schools emerged as essential to the Church’s mission project.

Nonetheless, these aims often ran up against intractable difficulties. Money – and a lack thereof – was a constant source of worry. Instances of anti-Catholicism encountered by involved in the Catholic missionary project also caused friction. Concern over the influence of Protestant aid groups in the southern states also animated the leaders of the Commission for the Catholic Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians. Yet, through these early years of the mission effort, southern bishops and the Commission continued to reiterate their view that the Catholic faith embodied the true answer to the “Negro problem.”

In 1896, leading members of the Commission articulated positions that echoed past approaches to African American evangelization and also set the tone for future

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⁶ Toolen and his impact on his Alabama diocese, appears in more detail in Chapters IV and VI.
efforts. Archbishops Gibbons of Baltimore, Ryan of Philadelphia, and Kain of St. Louis explained in their annual report the great need to which all good Catholics ought to respond. As the first Sunday of Lent drew near, the archbishops urged the faithful to meditate “upon these unhappy races” (Native and African Americans) and urged believers to respond with “charity to these unhappy millions among us, who are alien in race and color, as they are in religion.” The heads of the Commission reminded their flock that all Catholics were called to be advocates of the faith. Finally, echoing the language of Savannah’s Bishop William H. Gross at the Third Plenary Council, the episcopal triumvirate exhorted Catholics, “Think, too of the value of one of these souls. The case may be ebony or redwood, but the soul within it enjoys the God-given trinity of understanding, memory, and will.”

Bearing the sacred duty of bringing light unto the “benighted races,” parishioners across the United States should give generously to the collection taken up on the first Sunday in Lent.

The Commission also appraised readers of the progress achieved at different mission locations. Various reports sent in by bishops across the country were compiled into a variety of statistical information (see Table 1). This data offered a sense of the type of information deemed significant by the Commission in pursuit of its missionary goals. The estimated populations of African Americans in general and black Catholics in particular, followed by the numbers of mission churches and attendant priests within each diocese appeared first. Further, the Commission tracked the number of baptisms that took place in each diocese and separated this data into the baptisms of children and

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7 “Our Negro and Indian Missions: Annual Report of the Secretary of the Commission for the Catholic Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians,” BCIM Records, Marquette University, Series 7/1, Reel 1, 1896.
## Table 1. Southern Diocesan Statistics, 1889

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diocese</th>
<th>Negro Population</th>
<th>Catholic Negroes</th>
<th>Churches</th>
<th>Priests</th>
<th>Children (Baptisms)</th>
<th>Adults (Baptisms)</th>
<th>Schools</th>
<th>Pupils</th>
<th>Sisterhoods</th>
<th>Other Institutions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baltimore</td>
<td>210,230</td>
<td>35,000</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1,100</td>
<td>Oblates, Franciscans, Holy Cross, Notre Dame</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charleston</td>
<td>650,332</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>Lay teachers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covington</td>
<td>75,000</td>
<td>93</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>200</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little Rock</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lay teachers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisville</td>
<td>180,000</td>
<td>5,794</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>540</td>
<td>Sisters of Charity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile</td>
<td>618,000</td>
<td>2,500</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>77</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>135</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Nashville</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>200</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natchez</td>
<td>652,221</td>
<td>1,726</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>43</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>294</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natchitoches</td>
<td>150,000</td>
<td>15,000</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>115</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Orleans</td>
<td>271,603</td>
<td>75,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3,627</td>
<td>297</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1,330</td>
<td>3 Communities Colored Sisters</td>
<td>74 orphans; 24 aged women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>335</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richmond</td>
<td>700,000</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>Franciscans</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Augustine</td>
<td>126,690</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>50</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>350</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>San Antonio</td>
<td>175,000</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>115</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Savannah</td>
<td>850,000</td>
<td>1,200</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>375</td>
<td>1 orphanage</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilmington</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the Annual Reports of the Secretary of the Commission for the Catholic Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians, Commission Publications and Records, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI, Microfilm Series 7/1, Reel 1, 1889.
adults. Information regarding the number of Catholic mission schools, enrolled pupils, the sisterhoods who taught in the dioceses, and names of “Other Institutions” serving black communities rounded out the report.

Leaving aside the notable exceptions of New Orleans and Baltimore, the data indicated some important characteristics of the Church’s early missionary efforts. First, the starry-eyed enthusiasm evinced by the stolid American bishops of the Second and Third Plenary Councils over the potential import of the “colored harvest” made sense in the context of these numbers. Almost every southern diocese claimed black populations of 100,000 people or more. The potential mobilization of that many hundreds of thousands of converted black Catholics, as the bishops certainly envisioned, boded well for the influence of the American Church. Another important factor appeared by comparing the numbers of mission churches versus the number of mission schools in these southern dioceses. In every instance except Charleston, South Carolina, the number of schools outweighed the number of churches. Here, the Church’s emphasis on education as a portal to evangelization became clear. The number of adult baptisms versus the number of child baptisms also epitomized the Catholic aim of framing schools as entry points for broader proselytization in black communities.

Finally, the Commission’s careful tracking of the sisterhoods that served in the southern mission communities made clear the perception that nuns held key roles in the evangelical project. This information, judged by the Commission as important enough to structure its annual report to parishes across the United States, emphasized the Church’s key goals in the South and the means deemed necessary to achieve them.
However, one element loomed large in the creation of the southern mission field: money. In 1891, the Commission made its financial statement available to readers across the country. Accounts of funds received from the annual collection and disbursements to mission sites, each broken down by dioceses, provided a sense of the economics of the Catholic missions. From the very first, the bishops of the Commission impressed upon the faithful the necessity of their donations. Indeed, in 1889 Gibbons, Ryan, and Kain exercised their combined episcopal authority to this end. “As time rolls on,” the bishops intoned, “there is more or less of danger that the annual collection for the Negroes and Indians may begin to suffer.”

The specter of shrinking contributions was, in fact, all too real. A precipitous decrease in donations occurred over the first three years of the Church’s southern mission. The collection of 1887 totaled $81,898.01, but dropped the following year to $76,175.30. In 1889, the sum fell to $69,408.73\(^8\). After recounting these unsettling numbers, the Commission’s leaders urged Catholics not to become complacent and give in to “the feeling of having done our duty.”\(^9\) Nonetheless, for the next decade, the total annual collections remained uneven. Indeed, the high-water mark of nearly $82,000 reached in 1887 stayed unmatched until 1902 (See Table 2).\(^10\)

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\(^8\) Ibid.

\(^9\) Ibid.

\(^10\) The collection and disbursal totals as reflected in the Commission reports do not, unfortunately, clearly break down the numbers into the amounts that went to Indian missions versus the amount sent to African American missions. Nor does any information appear that articulates why some dioceses received more money than others. For example, in 1894 the dioceses of Mobile received $1,000, Nashville received $750, and Natchez received $2,250. “Indian Territory,” as described in this same report, received $2,000. The highest disbursal went to the St. Joseph’s Seminary in Baltimore “for the formation of Priests devoted to the missions among the Colored People,” which received $5,000. Interestingly, the next highest disbursal amount went to the “Expenses of the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions, Washington,” which
Table 2. Total Receipts, 1887-1902

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Annual Collection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1887</td>
<td>$81,898.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1888</td>
<td>$76,175.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1889</td>
<td>$69,637.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>$70,461.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>$63,386.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1894</td>
<td>$66,014.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1896</td>
<td>$58,001.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1898</td>
<td>$65,385.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>$59,274.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1902</td>
<td>$82,798.20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Enthusiasm for the southern mission project never seemed to fully translate into overwhelming financial contributions despite constant cajoling and stern talking-tos from the Commission’s prominent prelates. A specific explanation for the irregular contributions from the country’s Catholics to the southern missionary fund is not readily evident. Quite likely, just as the federal government and northern sentiment shifted away from the concerns of southern African Americans at the end of the Reconstruction, similar forces affected the Church.\(^{11}\) Catholics in the urban North, similar to most

totaled $3,800.00. “Annual Reports of the Secretary of the Commission for the Catholic Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians,” Commission Publications and Records, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI, Microfilm Series 7/1, Reel 1, 1889-1902.

\(^{11}\) The infamous “Compromise of 1877” marked the final demise of the Reconstruction Era. In a bargain that emerged out of the contested presidential election of 1877, the Republican candidate, Rutherford Hayes was declared president. In return, his party pledged to withdraw their support from the few remaining Republican state governments in the former Confederacy. Additionally, the remaining federal troops in the South were also removed. Consequently, white southern Democrats reestablished the racialized power structure that remained in place the modern civil rights movement.
Americans across the region, possibly spared little concern or currency for the black population of the South.

Another topic consistently marked the Church’s southern evangelical project. The entire venture was predicated on the desire to convert African Americans to Catholicism. Tracking the missions’ progress in this regard thus represented a key benchmark. The Commission monitored both anecdotal and quantitative information about baptisms among southern black populations. From Tennessee in 1889, for instance, the local bishop mused, “In the diocese of Nashville there are but 35 negro Catholics in a negro population that exceeds 500,000 souls…How long will this bountiful harvest remain ungarnered [sic]?”\textsuperscript{12} This type of commonly emanated from the southern sees.

In addition to anecdotal evidence regarding conversion, bishops from the South quantified baptisms within their dioceses (Appendix A). Catholic authorities reported the number of adults and children that had been baptized in their region and forwarded the information to the Commission. The inclusion of this data in their reports to the Commission clearly indicated that conversion – signified by baptism in to the Church – was a key metric within the southern evangelical project.

However, the data also indisputably pointed up the fact that the projected “colored harvest” was not materializing. With notable exceptions – New Orleans and Baltimore – the actual figures revealed that only a fraction of the southern black population actually converted to the Catholic faith. Baptisms often remained under one hundred through the

\textsuperscript{12} “Our Negro and Indian Missions: Annual Report of the Secretary of the Commission for the Catholic Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians,” Commission Publications and Records, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI, Microfilm Series 7/1, Reel 1, 1889.
entire calendar year. For all the rosy projections made by Church leaders at the Plenary Councils and the leaders of the Commission for the Catholic Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians, African Americans in the South did not acquiesce to the plans of the episcopate.

Despite the persistent evidence that Catholic proselytization was making little headway among the black southern population, the hierarchy continued to tout their faith as the answer to the “Negro problem.” The Church, in this interpretation, represented the best method of harnessing the potential political and social power of African Americans.

In 1904, the three archbishops who led the Commission spoke to this preoccupation at length. For Cardinals James Ryan, P.J. Ryan, and John M. Farley, whose respective episcopates included Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York, the Catholic faithful needed to act quickly in their support of the Church’s efforts to evangelize among the country’s black population. “For good or for evil the Negro will exert a commanding influence in this country in the not very distant future,” the archbishops cautioned. “To-day the menace has got well above the horizon and is discussed in newspapers and periodicals…and every means is being suggested and employed to minimize the power of the colored race against a coming day of danger.”

Then, having thus alarmed their audience, the archbishops reassured the faithful that the antidote to “the power of the colored race” was at hand. “There is only one influence that can control the Negro, make him amenable to laws, observant of the charities of Christian civilization, and docile to the best instincts of our nature,” the prelates continued, “and that influence is the faith of Christ.” Finally, again echoing the
mandate proclaimed by the Third Plenary Council, the archbishops neatly tied their Church-as-the-answer package up with a red, white, and blue-striped ribbon: “Hence an enlightened and far-seeing patriotism, apart from any higher motive, should be an incentive to everyman who loves his country to cooperate in bringing this population under control of the Church and thus avert or lessen a possible danger in the future.”

These were tall orders. Not only ought Catholic mission efforts aim to save the souls of black people from eternal damnation, the Church must marshal their political and social influence as well. Small wonder, then, that bishops assiduously tracked the numbers of converts to the faith within their dioceses and reported these numbers back to the Commission’s office. Although these bishops may have remained disappointed in the low number of baptisms, they might well have looked more optimistically upon the data that emerged out of the mission schools (Table 3). Considerably higher numbers characterized enrollment rates at the schools in comparison to baptism/conversion rates within the same diocese.

A comparison among three southern dioceses – Mobile, Alabama, Nashville, Tennessee, and Natchez Mississippi – revealed stark contrasts between the numbers of children who attended mission schools versus the number of school-aged converts (Table 4). In every year for which comparable data existed, the quantity of African American

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Table 3. Numbers of African American Students Enrolled at Catholic Schools in Southern Dioceses, 1889-1914

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diocese</th>
<th>1889</th>
<th>1890</th>
<th>1892</th>
<th>1894</th>
<th>1896</th>
<th>1898</th>
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Table 4. Comparison of African American Students and Baptisms in the Mobile, Nashville, and Natchez Dioceses, 1890-1914

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<td>Baptisms [Children]</td>
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<td>Mobile</td>
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<td>631</td>
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<td>61</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>59</td>
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students at diocesan schools dwarfed the number of baptisms of children. On one hand, the American bishops of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century may well have looked upon this data with keen interest, perhaps as an intimation that the “colored harvest” would soon materialize. These hopes would be disappointed, time and again. For the black communities, the most important facet of the mission schools was not, in fact, the opportunity to convert to Catholicism. Faith in the importance of education explained why many southern African American parents chose Catholic school for their children.\textsuperscript{14}

Belief in the transformative power of education brought mostly Protestant children through the doors of southern Catholic schools. Once the students arrived, however, the success of these schools often hinged on the availability of sisters as teachers and administrators. Indeed, the presence of women religious represented an overwhelming indicator of the viability of mission schools in the South.\textsuperscript{15} Reliance on nuns as the main labor force within the southern Catholic mission system mirrored wider Church practices, in which women religious operated hospitals, orphanages, homes for unwed mothers, and, of course, schools.

Historians have increasingly explored the ways in which nineteenth- and twentieth-century women religious anticipated broader Protestant movements tied to

\textsuperscript{14} The importance of education as a driving factor in the enrollment of largely Protestant southern black students in Catholic schools is taken up at greater length in the following chapter.

\textsuperscript{15} For comparative data on the numbers of pupils, schools, and sisterhoods within the southern dioceses through the early twentieth century, see Appendix B.
social work, such as the settlement house movement and others. These studies seek to overturn cultural stereotypes of Catholic nuns as merely cogs within the machinery of the male-dominated Church. Many historians instead demonstrate how nuns’ lives and work showed themselves as active agents of change within their, the Church and American society more generally. Far from leading cloistered lives, detached from the “real world,” Catholic sisters often pioneered approaches to social work, education, and health care in the United States.

The link between the presence of nuns at southern Catholic mission schools and the schools’ efficacy mirrored these broader trends. The cheap labor provided by the sisters enabled schools to operate with very little capital. As a result, the cost of attending parochial school remained quite low, a phenomenon that appeared in the urban North as well. At the turn of the twentieth century, teaching sisters generally received one hundred-fifty to two hundred dollars annually. Male religious teachers, however, usually earned two to three times that amount. Historian Kathleen Sprows Cummings suggests that teaching sisters’ “wageless work of paradise” dovetailed with their vow of

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17 Historian John McGreevy notes the link between low tuition and women religious at Catholic schools. In reference to schools in Chicago, McGreevy writes, “As in other Catholic parishes, the use of women religious as instructors kept tuition charges remarkably low” *Parish Boundaries; The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 57.

poverty and the necessity for Catholic administrators of maintaining low overhead. The affordable schooling model that depended on the nearly unpaid work of teaching sisters provided one prerequisite for the Catholic schools’ success in the South. Moreover, the earliest reports from bishops to the Commission for the Catholic Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians note the importance of the presence of women religious at mission schools.

In 1890, Bishop Anthony Durier of the Nachitoches diocese (currently the diocese of Alexandria in Louisiana) wrote to the Commission regarding the impact of mission schools in his territory. One circumstance was instrumental in his diocese’s ability to make inroads among Louisiana’s Protestant black population. “The success that has accompanied me in the past gives me not only a hope but a certainty for future successes as long as sisters stand by me,” the bishop declared. “If my sisters were to do away with the noble work it would put an end to the Catholic education of my colored people, that education to which the commission has given such a bright beginning.” Bishop Durier extolled the virtues of the hierarchy’s evangelical efforts in general and the nuns in particular. “Before the existence of the commission,” he added, “my diocese had no Catholic school for colored people; now it has four of them, all in flourishing states, directed by white sisters.”

Similar reports constantly cropped up within the

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19 Ibid., 123.

20 "Our Negro and Indian Missions: Annual Report of the Secretary of the Commission for the Catholic Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians," BCIM Records, Marquette University, Series 7/1, Reel 1, 1890.
Commission’s annual reports. 21 Across the South, bishops time and time again indicated that the presence of sisters represented a key condition for a mission school’s success in local communities.

Additional anecdotal evidence suggested the consequential role of sisters at mission sites. The relationships built among the students, their parents, and the local community with the Catholic nuns appeared related to the success of some schools. An 1894 report from the bishop of Nashville spoke to the developing affinity between the students and sisters at a local Catholic school for African American students. “The colored children are recovering from a certain distrust, which they entertained, owing to the frequent departure of teachers,” the bishop wrote, “and seem to place much confidence in the Sisters of St. Francis, who have now been with them two years, and who, I hope, will continue many more.” 22 Here, the stability of nuns as instructors in southern Catholic schools also contributed to the relative success of those institutions. Nearly all of the sisters at southern mission schools lived in or nearby the communities in which they worked. The presence of a well-established faculty at the schools, tied to

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21 In the Commission’s 1890 report Bishop Edward Fitzgerald of Little Rock discussed at length the efficacy of the Sisters of Charity in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. Bishop Thomas Heslin of the Natchez diocese in the 1892 and 1894 Commission reports noted the work of the “good sisters” in his territory and observed the “confidence” placed in the Sisters of St. Francis by local black children. Again in 1902 the Natchez bishop “greatly praised” the work of the sisters in the mission schools of his diocese. Bishop Edward Patrick Allen of the Mobile diocese noted in the Commission’s 1904 report that “one cannot too much praise the work done and have the constancy and zeal shown in doing it” by the Franciscan sisters and the Sisters of Mercy who taught in Mobile and Pensacola, respectively. Similar remarks appeared in the Commission reports with regularity. “Our Negro and Indian Missions: Annual Report of the Secretary of the Commission for the Catholic Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians,” BCIM Records, Marquette University, Series 7/1, Reel 1, 1890-1904.

22 “Our Negro and Indian Missions: Annual Report of the Secretary of the Commission for the Catholic Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians,” Commission Publications and Records, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI, Microfilm Series 7/1, Reel 1, 1894.
community life, likely contributed to the overall efficaciousness of the schools in which nuns taught.

The Commission for the Catholic Missions for the Colored People and the Indians, along with most southern bishops, clearly understood that sisters held the key to the long-term success of the southern mission. However, anecdotal evidence indicated that the processes involved in creating sustainable mission sites remained difficult. Money always remained tight. Most southern dioceses struggled to meet the basic needs of schools. The role of women religious remained important here yet again. In 1892 the bishop’s report from Natchez reflected this common trend. “The school at Natchez has so far paid one-half of the teachers’ salaries,” advised the bishop. “The other colored schools mainly depend upon the portion of the allowance we can spare them. This is insufficient, but the good sisters have received whatever was given them thankfully and uncomplainingly.”

The capacity of nuns to offset the operational costs of maintaining a school frequently appeared in these reports, and reflected the continual concern for both sisters and economics.

In addition to concerns regarding the long-term sustainability of the southern mission, other issues marked the early years of the southern Catholic mission. Articulations of anti-Catholic sentiment appeared fairly consistently during the first quarter-century of the Commission’s reports. Reportedly, after the bishop in Louisville, Kentucky, oversaw the opening of a Catholic school for African American children in 1889, local Protestant populations – white and black – voiced resistance. Soon thereafter,

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23 “Our Negro and Indian Missions: Annual Report of the Secretary of the Commission for the Catholic Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians,” Commission Publications and Records, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI, Microfilm Series 7/1, Reel 1, 1892.
the city opened a public school for black children. Then, the bishop reported, black Protestant ministers “urged and encouraged by others, notably the some New York Gospel Society, held weekly meetings and passed resolutions to the effect that the parents should be compelled to withdraw their children from the Catholic school.” The bishop noted that some parents withdrew their children as a result of this pressure. “But,” the bishop concluded, “on the whole, the colored parents hold out bravely. Only three of the children are Catholics, but forty-three attend Sunday catechism.”

During that same year, Bishop Edward Fitzgerald of Little Rock indicated that the efforts to establish Catholic schools for children of African descent in his diocese met with opposition from a variety of corners. Resistance came from, the bishop testified, “preachers, white and colored, from school-teachers, from the colored population, and in places from the whites; and, I am sorry to have to add, from white Catholics.”

Anti-Catholic sentiment regularly appeared from Protestant pulpits. Heated rhetoric could translate into violence against Catholics particularly during the late nineteenth century and into the first decades of the twentieth. At Little Rock in 1890, Bishop Edward Fitzgerald detailed his diocese’s experience with rancorous rhetoric. White and black Protestant clergy “leave no stone unturned to vilify and misrepresent Catholic doctrines and practices,” Fitzgerald fumed. “The colored people are seriously taught that Catholics wish to re-enslave them, and that Catholic schools are only a trap for the unwary.”

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24 Ibid., 1889.

25 Ibid. Racism among white Catholics towards African American Catholics is taken up in subsequent chapters.
Further, the bishop continued, in one town the local white population nearly mobbed a Catholic priest.\textsuperscript{26} Death threats and ominous rumblings from the local Ku Klux Klan harried the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters, a congregation out of Chicago, at a mission school in Meridian, Mississippi.\textsuperscript{27} The Klan of the nineteen-teens and nineteen-twenties, moreover, focused its malevolence on Catholics as well as African Americans and Jews. On this platform, the KKK increased its membership rolls to approximately two million members by 1924.\textsuperscript{28}

The nineteenth-century nativism of the Know-Nothings\textsuperscript{29} was reified during these first decades of the twentieth century. Harassment from local Protestant whites, which appeared in Commission reports from the missions’ earliest years, was repeated well into the twentieth century. Given this context, the fact that Catholic missionaries in southern black communities – two demographics deemed dangerous by the Klan and others – did not pack up post-haste seems remarkable. Sisters, priests, and African American students and parents who remained stalwart in the face of the ever-present racial discrimination and occasionally upticks in anti-Catholic violence indicated a high level of commitment to the southern missions.

\textsuperscript{26} “Our Negro and Indian Missions: Annual Report of the Secretary of the Commission for the Catholic Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians,” Commission Publications and Records, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI, Microfilm Series 7/1, Reel 1, 1890.

\textsuperscript{27} Mary E. Best, Seventy Septembers (Techny, IL: Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters, 1988), 66.


\textsuperscript{29} See Chapter I.
Negative commentary and actions against the Catholic evangelical effort in the South were often matched by the bishops’ concern about inroads made by Protestant denominations’ mission work. This subject, too, consistently appeared throughout the first twenty-five years’ of the Commission’s reports. Official Catholic concern about the prospect of successful Protestant evangelization among southern African Americans manifested early in the context of the Commission for the Catholic Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians.

Florida’s episcopate urgently requested funds from the Commission in order to offset a perceived Protestant menace to the African American population in that state. In 1889 Bishop John Moore, head of the Church in Florida, proclaimed that, “In order to attract the colored people I must have a better and handsomer church than any of those the Protestants have here now.”30 Two years later, the Commission’s annual report stated the problem in clearer terms. The following tabulation, published in the 1891 report, purported to “show what our Protestant friends are doing for the education of the colored youth of the South”:

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Freedman’s Aid Society (Methodist)</td>
<td>$2,225,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptist Home Mission</td>
<td>$2,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterian Home Mission</td>
<td>$1,542,746</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Missionary Association</td>
<td>$6,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The different Women’s Societies</td>
<td>$500,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John F. Slater</td>
<td>$1,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel Hand</td>
<td>$1,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Individual Gifts</td>
<td>$1,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quakers and others</td>
<td>$500,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>$15,767,746</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By way of comparison, the total receipts from the Commission’s yearly Lenten collection for the Native and African American missions totaled $70,330.81, with around $40,000 of that sum routed to the southern missions. Protestant groups’ efforts to maintain and extend their influence in the South represented a real threat from the perspective of the American bishops.

Anxiety regarding the efficacy of Protestantism among black populations extended beyond the United States episcopate. In the early 1900s, highly-placed Catholic officials in Rome again pressured American bishops to take up missionary work in black communities. Mother Katharine Drexel, renowned for her work on behalf of African American and Indian communities, also advocated for more ecclesiastical support for the Catholic mission in the South. The result of these various pressures prompted the

31 Ibid., 1891.
32 Ibid.
34 McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries*, 8. Drexel established the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, a community devoted to Indian and African American populations, in 1891. For more on Drexel, see
verdict articulated at the American archbishops’ yearly conference in 1905 that the southern evangelical effort needed another organization dedicated to converting blacks. The following, the creation of The Catholic Board for Mission Work Among the Colored People filled this directive. The organization, led by James Cardinal Gibbons, archbishops Patrick Ryan and John Farley, of Philadelphia and New York respectively, were joined by bishops Thomas Byrne of Nashville and Edward Allen of Mobile. These men oversaw mission efforts aimed at black communities in the United States. John E. Burke, a priest from the diocese of New York, was given the position of secretary general. The Catholic Board of Negro Missions’ main directive focused on providing an additional avenue of funding for the southern mission project. Donations were solicited through “Our Colored Missions,” the Board’s publication.

Scholarly assessments of this new Catholic Board for Mission Work Among the Colored People in conjunction with the long-standing Commission leave doubts about the organizations’ effectiveness. According to historian Stephen Ochs, the former failed to provide a centralized mechanism for the southern mission. Both organizations suffered from a lack of authority as decisions regarding black Catholics and evangelical efforts.


35 Davis, 308 n.13.


were left in the hands of local bishops.\(^{38}\) Collaboration between the new Catholic Board for Mission Work with the older Commission for the Catholic Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians, Ochs continues, “though frequently discussed, remained unclear, leading to unnecessary duplication and confusion.” In fact, Gibbons, Ryan, and Farley, who led the 1906 Catholic Board for Mission Work Among the Colored People, also served on the Commission for the Catholic Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians.

The organizational vagaries of both groups notwithstanding, an underlying conviction united their efforts. The leaders of the Commission and the Catholic Board for Mission Work (James Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore, John Farley of New York, and Patrick Ryan of Philadelphia) continued to tout the “superiority” of Catholicism as an answer to the “Negro question.” One startling passage from 1910 that appeared in the Commission’s annual report put a racialized, stereotypical comparison, typical of the portrayals of African Americans in the context of Catholic mission work.

The report identified parts of Maryland with high black populations. One area was primarily Catholic, the other Protestant. The resulting claims about these two groups of African Americans sought to shore up Catholic notions of superiority. “Among the Catholic Negroes,” so the Commission explained, “infractions of the law are almost unknown, the jails are empty, the judges very rarely have a prisoner brought before them.” A very different picture emerged of the other section of Maryland. “In the Protestant district the very reverse is the case,” their report continued, “crimes and numerous misdemeanors showing that Protestantism is not strong enough to control the

\(^{38}\) Ochs, 142.
evil tendencies of the Negro population.” 39 The sentiments articulated by the bishops suggested the ways in which the perception of Catholic superiority to Protestant sects and racial theories framed the Church’s mission efforts in the south from its beginnings in the late 1880s through the opening years of the twentieth century. Of course, the logic that underpinned these types of pronouncements stemmed from the belief in the Church as the answer to the “Negro problem.”

This interpretation of the purported role of Catholicism in the context of the black South, however, remained myopic at best and pernicious at worst. American bishops involved in the Second and Third Plenary Councils in 1866 and 1884, the Commission for the Catholic Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians, and the Catholic Board for Mission Work Among the Colored People in 1906 failed to take into account how many southern black communities viewed these missions schools and parishes. Perhaps if these clerical authorities had examined the reports collected from the southern missions from another perspective, an alternative analysis of the situation might have emerged. The number of black students enrolled in southern mission schools, which far outstripped the rate of conversions, reflected parents’ desires for their children’s educational futures and not a promise of the “colored harvest” to come. Though the evangelical project was conceived by an elite circle within the American Catholic Church, the reality of the mission among southern African American communities became something else entirely.

As the southern Catholic proselytization effort continued into the first decades of the twentieth century, this dynamic remained. As soon as American bishops established the missionary project, local black parents and students reshaped it to reflect their own needs. Moreover, during first decades of the 1900s, new individuals and groups within the United States began to weigh in on the Church’s aims for southern blacks. For some, the Catholic evangelical scheme appeared laudable. For others, the Church’s methods and motivation remained suspect. Prominent commentators increasingly began to question the legitimacy of a Christian organization that perpetuated the sin of Jim Crow within the confines of the classroom and the pews of the parish.
CHAPTER III
DEFENDING “THE RACE”

The Reverend John E. Burke earnestly addressed the crowded hall on a cold Chicago morning in November 1908. “O for a Catholic Tuskegee!” exclaimed the priest. “In my judgment Tuskegee Institute would be ideal if the light of the True Faith could be kept always burning there for all.”

Burke’s remarks at the First American Catholic Missionary Congress revealed the ways in which the Catholic mission in the South arrived on the scene in the thick of a heated debate over the future of education and

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2 The First American Catholic Missionary Congress was held under the auspices of the Catholic Church Extension Society (it was also this same year [1908] that Pope Pius X formally ended the United States’ status as a mission territory within the Catholic Church). James Quigley, archbishop of Chicago, and a small group of other American Church leaders, formed the Extension Society in 1905. The charter of the organization included the following description: “To develop the missionary spirit in the clergy and people of the Catholic Church in the United States. To assist in the erection of parish buildings for poor and needy places. To support priests for neglected or poverty-stricken districts. To send the comfort of religion to pioneer localities. In a word, to preserve the faith of Jesus Christ to thousands of scattered Catholics in every portion of our own land, especially in the country districts and among immigrants.” The aim of the Extension Society largely focused on support and retention of Catholics outside of the large urban enclaves. As for the 1908 First American Catholic Missionary Congress, an entry in the Catholic Encyclopedia from 1910 suggests that the meeting was “Perhaps the most important event in the history of the Catholic Church in America since the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore.” Francis Kelley, “The Catholic Church Extension Society,” The Catholic Encyclopedia Vol. 14 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912); Hugh O’Neill “Illinois,” The Catholic Encyclopedia Vol. 7 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910). Burke, quoted above, was the only speaker to address the African American mission effort. A selection of topics addressed by other speakers ranged from “The Religious Conditions in New Mexico,” “Home Missions in Cities,” “Settlement Work,” “Caring for Homeless Men,” The Appeal of the Death Mute,” and “The Apostolate in England” in The First American Catholic Missionary Congress, Francis Clement Kelly, ed. (Chicago: J.S Hyland and Company, 1909), Contents.
equality for African Americans. Two titans of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century America were typically believed to represent two sides of this discussion: Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois. The methods by which Catholic leaders established southern mission schools and churches reflected in some ways Washington’s approach to issues of education and inclusion for African Americans.

Booker T. Washington’s life and work have inspired an overwhelming amount of historical study. Born into slavery in Virginia in 1856, he became a fierce advocate for a

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3 The framing of this debate – Washington’s industrial-style education and gradualist approach to full inclusion for African Americans v. Du Bois’ emphasis on traditional, liberal-arts style education and immediate inclusion for African Americans – represents an important interpretive structure within a significant proportion of historical scholarship. However, some historians look to move beyond this assessment for a more complex rendering of both men. Pero Gaglo Dagbovie’s article cited in the following note is representative of this new approach to the Washington – Du Bois question.

particular model of education for African Americans. The achievement of economic and political equality for black men and women, he believed, ought to advance gradually by diligent application to industrial or manual labor. Washington’s philosophy, articulated most famously in a speech at Atlanta in 1895, argued, “No race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem. It is at the bottom of life we must begin, not at the top.” This vision called for a gradual approach to social equality and he looked askance at those who agitated for immediate equality. “The wisest among my race,” continued Washington in his Atlanta address, “understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest [sic] folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result and constant struggle rather than of artificial forcing.”

Washington’s beliefs emerged concretely at the Tuskegee Institute, a black college that he helped organize in Alabama in the 1880s. Industrial-style education, instead of a classic, liberal arts curriculum, was implemented at the school with the aim of turning out new generations of black working-class men and women. Some day in the future, ideally, their economic success would win them broader acceptance among white America.

Powerful white men responded favorably to the ways in which Washington framed the “race question.” According to historian James D. Anderson, a variety of competing interests emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century over the nature of African American education. Wealthy southern planters generally united

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against the establishment of quality public education for black children. An educated black population, they feared, would challenge the existing racial, social, and political status quo of the south. Northern industrial philanthropists also advocated for the creation of a certain type of school system for southern African Americans. Andrew Carnegie, Julius Rosenwald, the John F. Slater Fund and other prominent white northern philanthropists invested themselves ideologically and financially in Washington’s prescription for black America. However, Anderson argues, the philanthropists’ motivations did not stem from an unsullied sense of racial equality. The northern philanthropists conceived of an industrial-style education, such as those at the Tuskegee Institute, as an essential tool in creating and maintaining a capable labor force.6

A basic belief in the inferiority of African Americans shaped the planters’ and the industrials’ vision for black education. At the end of the day, “caste maintenance,” or preserving the racial status quo via inferior education, characterized the interests of many influential men and organizations who responded to Washington’s approach. The industrial model of education eventually gained traction throughout much of the south’s network of educational institutions.

Not everyone agreed with this approach. First of all, African Americans sought out education on their own terms. Belief in education as the key to socioeconomic advancement fired the enthusiasm of black families in pursuit of schooling. Particularly in the years immediately following the end of the Civil War, freedmen and women established their own schools whenever and wherever possible. For some Protestant missionaries who traveled to the South in the immediate aftermath of the war with the expectation that former slaves were “little more than uncivilized victims who needed to be taught the values and rules of civil society,” the reality of the situation proved them wrong. Rather, Anderson continues, “Many missionaries were astonished, and later chagrined to discover that many ex-slaves had established their own educational collectives and associations, staffed schools entirely with black teachers, and were unwilling to allow their educational movement to be controlled by the ‘civilized Yankee.’”

African Americans’ conceptions of life in the postwar South, particularly in regards to education, was never a monolithic vision and often existed alongside the efforts of mostly white northern reformers, philanthropists, and missionaries.

Some of the most pronounced tension surrounding the question of black education at the turn of the twentieth century stemmed from supporters of Washington’s industrial educational model versus the educational philosophy advocated by William Edward Burghardt Du Bois and his followers. Du Bois, born in Massachusetts in 1868, became the first man of African descent to earn a doctoral degree from Harvard University. His

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7 Ibid., 6.
achievements marked him as “perhaps the greatest scholar-activist in American history.”

A central tenant of Du Bois’ approach to securing equality for African Americans focused on the “Talented Tenth.” Du Bois meant that the select, upper ten percent of black Americans would lead the remaining masses towards full social, political, and economic equality. Further, Du Bois and his supporters eschewed the gradualist approach advocated by Washington. A sense of immediacy, of the need to insist upon civil rights for black Americans without delay, framed Du Bois’ approach.

In his 1903 book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois marked out his position in opposition to Washington. Although Du Bois praised some elements of Washington’s industrial-model ethos, he starkly opposed others:

> So far as Mr. Washington preaches Thrift, Patience, and Industrial Training for the masses, we must hold up his hands and strive with him rejoicing in his honors and glorying in the strength of this Joshua called of God and of man to lead the headless host. But so far as Mr. Washington apologizes for injustice, North or South, does not rightly value the privilege and duty of voting, belittles the emasculating effects of caste distinction, and opposes the higher training and ambition of our brighter minds…we must unceasingly and firmly oppose them.

Despite the fact that both leaders ultimately sought the same goal – equality for African Americans – their differences over the means and methods deemed necessary for achieving this aim caused an irreparable breach. While Du Bois went on to lead the nascent National Association for the Advancement of Colored People during the early twentieth century, Washington shunned the group. Nonetheless, Du Bois’ vision for black Americans won out over Washington’s gradualist approach. In the end, the

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“aggressive campaign for civil and political rights” envisioned by Du Bois and embodied in the NAACP, “replaced Washington’s strategy of progress through conciliation and accommodation.”

The Catholic evangelical and educational project in the black South entered into these fraught waters during the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century. To a certain degree, the Washingtonian approach to the “Negro problem” resonated with the American Catholic hierarchy. The Reverend John Burke’s remark, “O for a Catholic Tuskegee!” in Chicago in 1908 was mirrored elsewhere by Church leaders.

Bishop John Edward Gunn of Mississippi’s Natchez diocese also called for the establishment of a Catholic Tuskegee in 1920. Gunn voiced frustration that the mission effort remained stymied, particularly given the demography of his state in which African Americans representing over half of the total population. “Owing to the fact that 56.3 per cent of the entire population of Mississippi is negro and that the Church is making little headway in harvesting the ‘Colored,’” Gunn fulminated, “it may be no harm to call your attention again to our difficulties.” He postulated several different methods which the Church ought to employ in pursuit of the “colored harvest.” Notably, Gunn called for “More Team Work.” He suggested, “Why not let some of the big flourishing dioceses of the North and East adopt the Southern darky problem.”

Aside from these proposals,

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10 Hine, Hine, and Harold, 423. This interpretation represents the current, mainstream interpretation of the relationship between Du Bois and Washington. However, as noted above (see footnotes 4 and 5), some scholars have raised questions about the Washington-Du Bois binary.

Gunn returned to the idea of a Catholic Tuskegee and articulated his plan with remarkable detail.

A religious order, the Society of the Divine Word, was poised to provide the male and female religious necessary to staff the proposed institute. Gunn estimated that land could be acquired for fifteen dollars an acre and reckoned that the enterprise would require around one thousand acres. African American men and women would attend the school and the curriculum ought to focus on various trades and agricultural work for the former and “domestic sciences” for the latter. The bishop’s enthusiasm for this proposed institute appeared boundless. “A Catholic Tuskegee [sic] in the heart of the Colored belt could open with 500 pupils,” Gunn exclaimed, “and in a few years these would populate the States with at least something like near-Catholics and become the best of missionaries and propagandists everywhere.”

Although Gunn’s hopes remained largely unrealized in Mississippi, his whole-hearted embrace of the Washington model further reflected the popularity of Tuskegee-style education among the Catholic hierarchy.

By the mid-1920s, the Catholic hierarchy in the United States tangibly solidified its support of Booker T. Washington’s educational methods. In 1926, the Commission for the Catholic Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians discussed the Cardinal Gibbons Institute in Baltimore. The school had been in operation for two years. African American students from across the country took part in a curriculum based on “practical training,” and took classes in “agricultural, industrial, and mechanical pursuits.” Further, the Institute aimed to “turn out graduates who will be fitted to assume

12 Ibid.
leadership in moral, educational, civic, and industrial advancement among their own people.” The school maintained an explicit connection to Tuskegee and the Washington model of education. Described as “working along the same lines as the famous and successful Negro institutions, the Tuskegee Institute and the Hampton Institute,” the school in Baltimore chose as its first principal a man by the name of Victor Daniel, who had taught at Tuskegee for several years.13

For his part, Washington seemed to maintain a positive relationship with the Josephites, Jesuits, and other Catholic leaders.14 Jesuit priests in the Mobile diocese, for instance, regularly visited Catholic students at the Tuskegee Institute15 which suggested the positive relationship between Washington and the Jesuits. The correspondence of Washington further indicated that he bore no ill will towards Catholics. Writing in 1911 to Father William McGinnis16, a parish priest from Westbury, New York, Washington

13 Ibid., 1926.

14 Stephen Ochs’ Desegregating the Altar: The Josephites and the Struggle for Black Priests 1871-1950 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990) also discusses the cordial ideological and personal relationships that often existed between Catholic priests and Washington. For example, see pages 87-90; 146-150.

15 “Our Negro and Indian Missions: Annual Report of the Secretary of the Commission for the Catholic Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians,” BCIM Records, Marquette University, Series 7/1, Reel 1, 1908. The report, penned by the bishop of Mobile, indicated that “They [the Josephites] also visit regularly Tuskegee Institute, over which Booker Washington presides, where there are 1,500 young colored people of whom 100 are Catholics.”

16 Interestingly, Fr. McGinnis also spoke at the First American Catholic Missionary Congress at Chicago in 1908, the same meeting where Rev. John Burke praised Tuskegee. McGinnis gave a lecture entitled “The Truth Society and Its Influences” [in The First American Catholic Missionary Congress, Francis Clement Kelly, ed. (Chicago: J.S Hyland and Company, 1909): 174-183]. This Truth Society, of which McGinnis was a founder and main leader, aimed to counter anti-Catholic bias in the American press by printing pamphlets and other materials that portrayed the “true” nature of Catholicism, its works, and its leaders. Additionally, the Society sent out free articles to newspapers in twenty-five major cities twice a month that provided positive accounts of Catholic action in the United States and abroad. McGinnis also encouraged the faithful to petition local public libraries to stock Catholic authors. A main goal of the Society also included providing intellectual stimulation for Catholics from a Catholic perspective. Indeed,
plainly articulated his position: “Personally, I have no prejudice whatever against the Catholic Church, or individual members of that church. We have here at this institution [Tuskegee] nearly one hundred Catholic students. Aside from that, a number of our teachers are Catholics. We make no difference whatever.”

The Catholic hierarchy’s support of Booker T. Washington’s vision for African Americans extended beyond the hopes of Bishop Gunn and the establishment of the Cardinal Gibbons Institute. Washington’s accession to racial segregation in pursuit of economic advancement also found expression in Catholic educational institutions across the South. When the Wizard of Tuskegee framed the issue – “In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the finger yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress” – the Catholic mission reflected this sentiment in its maintenance of the color line in southern mission schools.

The Church’s evangelical project was segregationist in nature from its very beginnings and maintained this structure well into the twentieth century. Indeed, even fifteen years after the Brown v. Board of Education decision ended segregation in public schools and paved the way for overturning similar laws, some Catholic officials

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bemoaned the impact of desegregation on the Church’s “dual school systems.” The ideological justification for the racial segregation of Catholic schoolchildren pointed up the Washingtonian model of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century.

Legal segregation in the Jim Crow South also influenced the nature of Catholic education in that region. Apologists may have justified the racial separation of schoolchildren by deferring to law or custom, but the stark reality of American racism pierced through the window-dressings of the “southern way of life.” The racial paradox upon which the country’s foundations rested – liberty and freedom existing alongside the institution of slavery – had worked itself out in the institutions of the United States. Some might mouth the worn-out excuse, “But that’s just the way it was” in seeking to explain away the culpability of the nation’s founders in the perpetuation of slavery. In this rendering, the statesmen of the Revolutionary era – and, by extension, the American Catholic hierarchy – simply existed in the context of their own time in which acquiescence to racial segregation and prejudice was the only “natural” course of action. In reality, since the founding of the republic, men and women consistently pointed out the hypocrisy of a country that lionized the ideals of liberty while simultaneously denying freedom and equality to people of African descent.

W.E.B. Du Bois represented one such voice. Known for his activism on behalf of African American equality in general, he also weighed in on Catholic issues in particular.

19 In 1968, the bishop of the diocese of Charleston in South Carolina offered these remarks: “Due to Federal regulations, it has become necessary for us to hasten our program to eliminate dual school systems. The problem is a serious one; how not to have schools for Negroes specifically in order to elevate and instruct them, yet at the same time maintain an active and successful apostolate among the Negroes.” “Our Negro and Indian Missions: Annual Report of the Secretary of the Commission for the Catholic Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians,” Commission Publications and Records, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI, Microfilm Series 7/1, Reel 1, Reel 2.
A decision by the Catholic hierarchy in Chicago during the 1920s, for example, prompted him to address the attitude of the Church towards black Americans. Archbishop George Mundelein had proposed the creation of “national” parishes for African Americans Catholics in Chicago. Although national parishes had been a prominent feature of American Catholicism among European immigrant groups, many of the city’s black Catholics viewed Mundelein’s measure as plainly in support of segregationist policies. Du Bois agreed. “Because Catholicism has so much that is splendid in its past,” he wrote in the NAACP’s *The Crisis*, “it is the greater shame that ‘nigger’ haters clothed in episcopal robes should do to black Americans in exclusion [and] segregation…all that the Ku Klux Klan ever asked.” The idea of segregated parishes for black Catholics in the North offended Du Bois in a manner that reflected his response to myriad instances of racial discrimination in the United States.

Others also took up issues at the intersection of Catholicism, race, and education in the early twentieth century. The *Chicago Defender* took its place among those

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20 “‘National’ churches in this context referred to separate parishes being formed for different nationalities of Catholics. A parish for Poles, for instance, Italians, Germans, or Irish Catholics was the norm into the early twentieth century. Timothy Walch’s *Immigrant America: European Ethnicity in the United States* (New York: Garland, 1994) points out that by the late nineteen-teens, over twelve hundred parishes existed in the United States that practiced the faith in a language other than English. Additionally, over three thousand relied on both English and a foreign language within these national parishes. This practice, however, came to an end in 1918 due to worries over “division and dissension” among the faithful separated by nationality and language, but these types of parishes remained strong for at least another generation (142-143). For more on national parishes, see Patrick W. Carey, *Catholics in America: A History* (Westport, Conn: Praeger Publishers, 2004); Eileen McMahon, *What Parish Are You From? A Chicago Irish Community and Race Relations* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1995); John McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth Century Urban North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); James T. Fisher, *Communion of Immigrants: A History of Catholics in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

individuals, groups, and institutions that consistently called for Americans to root out the evil of racial segregation and discrimination. The publication further often called upon the Catholic Church in the United States to live up to the ideals of its faith and its country. At times, the Defender lauded Church outreach efforts to “the Race.” Other articles denounced the “Jim Crowism” that usually characterized Catholic schools and churches. More broadly, newspaper ensured that an African American perspective remained strong within the national conversation about the “race question.”

Although printed in the City of the Big Shoulders, a significant portion of the Defender’s readership lived far away from Chicago. Founded in 1905 by Robert Abbott, the publication quickly found the South a fertile field for subscriptions. Indeed, circulation for the Defender outstripped all other black newspapers in southern black communities. With nearly two-thirds of its readers residing outside of Chicago, the newspaper regularly addressed issues germane to the daily lives of people beyond the urban North. Abbott and his staff reported on lynching and other violence perpetrated against Americans of African descent. The Defender also ran stories about Pullman porters, segregation, and consistently urged readers to seek respite in Chicago from the Jim Crow South. Far more than simply a source of news, historian James Grossman argued, “The Defender transmitted information through the black South on a scale hitherto unknown.”

One might easily imagine, then, the weekly arrival of the Defender at the homes of southern black families who wondered about the advisability of sending their children to a newly-opened Catholic mission school. If such parents looked to this newspaper as barometer regarding the prudence of such an endeavor, the Defender offered mixed reviews. Through the nineteen-teens and the interwar years, the Chicago publication weighed in about a variety of issues related to “the Race” and Catholicism. Articles often minced no words in calling out the Church for its complicity in “Jim Crowism.” Time and time again, the Defender focused squarely on the central paradox of the Catholic encounter with race in America: the great contradiction that paired protestations of catholicity alongside the practice of racial segregation.

Occasionally, articles lauded the Church for its efforts in combating the country’s endemic prejudice and discrimination. One of the first articles that discussed Catholicism vis-à-vis African Americans appeared in the Defender in 1912. The author, D.W. Johnson, lauded the Church’s missionary outreach to black communities. Johnson cited the increasing number of Catholics of African descent as evidence of the Church’s growing foothold among members of “the Race.” For Johnson, the gains made by Catholic missionaries in black communities stemmed from the “hearty welcome and freedom from prejudice and discrimination” found within the Church.23

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After citing a variety of statistics regarding the number of Catholic individuals and groups who served in black communities, Johnson concluded his article with an earnest recommendation. “This work is very commendable,” he wrote, “and must be a convincing appeal to those inclined towards the Catholic faith.”

That same year, another article appeared in the Defender’s pages which spoke highly of the opportunities afforded to African Americans by the Catholic Church. The editorial article commented in particular upon the Oblate Sisters of Providence, a traditionally black congregation of women religious in Maryland. The author extolled the decision made by the Church to “place upon the colored girl the mantle of the white sisterhood, and proclaimed to the world that they [the Church] believed in their purity.” For the writer, this decision not only demonstrated the munificence of the American Church, but also indicated the great potential within black women and men. “Give us not sympathy,” the author urged, “but an opportunity.”

Although this type of laudatory language would wane in later years, these pieces suggested a positive view of the Catholic Church from the Defender’s perspective. For those parents in the South contemplating for the children a Catholic education at a mission school, these articles may well have exerted an affirmative influence. Another article published three years later further drove this point home. A Georgia man named Bloomfield Bergen penned a commentary entitled “South to Save the Nation.” He made the case that the fate of the country was inextricably tied to the fate of “the Race.”

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24 Ibid.

In language that would have struck cold fear into the hearts of nativists and Ku Kluxers, Bergen suggested that the Catholic Church stood in a position to influence future generations of black Americans. The Church and its members of African descent might one day yield considerable influence. Although Bergen allowed that black adults tended to circumvent the evangelical efforts of the Church, the situation for the younger generation appeared much differently. “With her [the Church’s] free schools and the little difference she makes in the color of a man’s skin,” Bergan predicted, “she will have a greater following when the next generation comes around to control the affairs of the United States than today.” 26 For black parents in the early twentieth-century, the Defender’s endorsement of Catholicism in these articles probably made the Church seem a welcomed beacon in the storm of southern segregation.

Still, despite these positive portrayals, the Defender did not embark upon a campaign of wholesale support. Newspaper articles often caustically reported on instances of “Jim Crowism” 27 within the American Church. The publication did not shy away from confronting the hypocrisy of “Christian” segregation. An article emblazoned with the headline “CATHOLICS MUST NOT SEPARATE RACES IN SCHOOLS” appeared on Page One when the Defender’s April 5, 1913 issue hit newsstands and mailboxes across the United States. “Treachery is rampant,” the author warned, “and that, too, under the guise of the cloth.” At issue was the recent decision to install a mission school for black students in Chicago. The implications of this segregated


27 The Defender constantly used the term “Jim Crowism” to describe occurrences of segregation. The term will be used in discussion of Defender articles about the subject, though for the sake of a cleaner page the use of quotation marks will hereafter cease.
school system, the writer exhorted the reader, were dire. By not standing up to creeping Jim Crowism in the urban North, the black community might well find itself swept into the maelstrom of segregationist mores. This 1913 article called the Defender community to action.28

The rhetoric and aims of this early appeal echoed through the pages of the newspaper for the following decades. Reports of segregation in Catholic institutions consistently prompted strong denunciations from the Defender staff and readers. Jim Crowism at schools in particular generated swift censure. In the South, for example, the establishment of a seminary, segregated for black priests, compelled quick condemnation. At issue was not the elevation of African American men to the priesthood. Rather, the segregated manner of their training and future apostolate came under sharp criticism in 1920. The seminary, slated to open in Greenville, Mississippi, under the auspices of the Fathers of the Divine Word, encountered opposition from many black Catholics.

A quotation from a layman named C. Marcellus Dorsey from Baltimore aptly summed up the position: “It [the seminary] was but a Jim Crow School for the purpose of educating Jim Crow priests to work in Jim Crow Catholic Churches.” Another black Catholic layman, Royal G. Addison, voiced a similar feeling. “It is a shame and disgrace to Christianity that a great church like the Roman Catholic Church should become so impregnated and debased by American race prejudice that its so-called Ambassadors of Christ [priests] refuse to sit in a classroom with colored students.”29 Like many other

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28 “Catholics Must Not Separate Races in Schools,” The Chicago Defender, April 5, 1913.

similar articles, the piece pointed up the contradiction that a “universal” Church denied the equality of its constituent members.

Maintaining a clear view of this reality continued in the Defender into the 1920s. Three years after publishing the article about the proposed segregated seminary in Mississippi, the Defender again advised its readers of another example of racial separation in seminaries. On one hand, the basic premise of training African American men and women as priests and nuns met with approval. On the other hand, the insidious reach of segregation into the seminary served to undermine its very existence. Only one conclusion could be drawn from this Jim Crowism: “The fact that separate institutions for the purpose are used shows that the members of the Race who take the step are either looked upon as inferiors or are deemed unfit as associates by the heads of the Catholic church.”

Similarly, Defender readers were also apprised of the segregation that impacted the lives of African American nuns. In the early 1920s, the newspaper ran an article emblazoned with the caption, “Catholic Nuns Feel Sting of Jim Crowism.” The piece reported that the African American Oblate Sisters of Providence bore segregation at Church-organized summer schools for women religious across the country. Calling attention to an “ecclesiastical conspiracy to deny them participation in any part of the Catholic system of education,” the Defender refused to let this treatment of the Oblates go unremarked. Both of these articles submitted to readers the paradox of segregation within a “catholic” institution, but also the inherent inequality, sanctioned by the

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30 “Priests stand by Jim Crowing in Church Work: Catholics Have Separation in Schools Where Old Custom is Taught,” The Chicago Defender, September 29, 1923.
Supreme Court’s 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, of the legalized separation of the races. The hypocritical morass which choked the intersection of race and religion in the United States emerged plainly in the pages of the *Chicago Defender*.  

Other issues framed both the *Defender’s* pages and the Church’s southern evangelical project. The twentieth-century Great Migration of African Americans from the agrarian South to the urban North fundamentally reshaped the country. Its impact was felt on a variety of social, economic, and political levels. Indeed, the *Defender* played an important role in urging its readers to take advantage of the northern jobs that became available as a result of both world wars.

The migratory pattern took hold during the nineteen-teens and continued through the 1940s. From 1915 to 1919, for instance, around half a million African Americans left the southern states for new homes and jobs in the under-employed wartime industries of the urban North. During the 1920s, almost one million individuals of African descent departed the South. The following decade of the Depression saw a decrease to around

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31 “Catholic Nuns Feel Sting of Jim Crowism: Sisters Refused Admission to Schools Conducted by Churchmen,” *The Chicago Defender*, October 15, 1921. The treatment of black women religious within the Catholic Church is discussed further in Chapter V.

400,000 migrants. However, the outbreak of World War II caused the number of black migrants from the South to surge to nearly 1.5 million which represented almost fifteen percent of the southern black population.33 The Defender played a central role in urging African Americans to leave the South for new opportunities in the North.34

While the sheets of the newspaper consistently advised its readers to relocate to northern climes, the general reaction on the part of the Church to this egress was dismay. The annual reports published by the Commission for the Catholic Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians consistently bemoaned the departure of converted black Catholics. In 1922, for instance, Bishop Edward Patrick Allen of Mobile, Alabama, commented upon the impact of migration on his diocese. Despite the fact that the mission schools and churches in his region reported growing numbers of converts, these gains were offset by departures. “Were not for the number that leaves us every year to settle in the North and West,” Allen explained, “we would be able to show an increase in the colored Catholic population.”35

Two years later, Bishop Allen lamented again that “the best colored families” were leaving the dioceses and relocated in the North and Northwest.36 The Church and


36 Ibid., 1924.
the *Defender* both keenly recognized the process of migration underway but diverged dramatically in their portrayal of its import. For the newspaper and its readers, migration northward “rivaled emancipation as a liberating experience.”³⁷ For the Catholic Church, however, the Great Migrations threatened to undermine its entire southern mission project.

By the mid-1920s, leaders within the Church were discussing how they ought to respond to the exodus. The leaders of the Commission in 1924 examined the issue at some length and noted that almost half a million black southerners left for the North during the previous year.³⁸ As a result, “This fact makes the Negro question country-wide and the Church must decide on the proper handling of the situation.” Immediately, the Commission made clear to its readers that the issue extended beyond mere leakage from southern missions. “From a temporal standpoint Catholics should realize that it will pay them to treat the Colored man in a Christian manner,” urged the Commission in its annual pamphlet. “The Negro is increasingly rapidly in numbers and he is making considerable progress in every trade and profession. It may be that he will hold the balance of power in the future.” In this scenario, it behooved Catholics to cultivate positive relationships with their African American brethren. “We should use every


³⁸ Here, the Commission’s arithmetic seems inflated. Historian James Grossman places the number of migrants during the entirety of the 1920s at around one million, so the Commission’s estimate of 500,000 during 1923 alone seems inaccurate. Still, despite this apparent inaccuracy, the larger significance stems from the Church’s dismay over black southerners’ migration in general.
individual and collective effort to draw the Negro towards the Church,” resolved the Commission, “and when persecutions arise we may have him for our friend.”

From the 1920s through the 1940s, reports from the Commission frequently noted the adverse impact of migration on the southern missions. A major premise of the Church’s southern evangelical project had rested on an implicit assumption of a more or less captive audience to receive the Catholic Word. When the pressure of two world wars loosed a tide of black migration from the South, the Catholic plan to proselytize Americans of African descent required adjustment. For example, the Commission urged the establishment of Catholic missions, schools, and churches in the urban North. If the objects of evangelization – southern African Americans – left for the North, the Church would seek them there. By 1940, the America hierarchy had established fifteen missions in the northern United States for just that purpose. The Commission’s report for that year emphasized the need for such measures. “Their establishment has been imperative,” ran the report, “for the great industrial cities have found themselves with large and growing Negro populations. These newcomers from the South not only presented a missionary challenge, but many of them are Catholics to be provided for.”

The arrival of southern black migrants in the urban North posed a number of challenges for the Catholic Church. Not only did this mass departure place the southern evangelical project on shaky ground, the reaction of white northern Catholics to the

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40 “Our Negro and Indian Missions: Annual Report of the Secretary of the Commission for the Catholic Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians,” Commission Publications and Records, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI, Microfilm Series 7/1, Reel 1, 1940.
arrival of these migrants further complicated the Church’s mission. Opposition to the “intrusion” of African Americans into traditionally white, Catholic communities in the urban North often degenerated from resistance to threats to violence.\textsuperscript{41} Early on, Church authorities recognized that the potential hostility of white Catholics to African Americans in general and black Catholics in particular might well derail proselytization entirely.

In 1930, the Commission for the Catholic Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians reported on this very trend. Catholic prelates in St. Louis, a major destination point for black southern migrants, witnessed a heightening of racial tensions in their city.\textsuperscript{42} Indeed, the bishop of St. Louis noted that “friction is caused by the migration of the colored people intro what are called white areas in the cities. Generally their points of contact are with white Catholics and the result is that men of the latter, opposing what they call the intrusion of the black people, impede their conversion.”\textsuperscript{43}

The baleful truth behind this elegantly-worded phrase revealed that the racial customs of the North tended to mirror the segregation laws of the South. The Commission, as an organ of official Church policy, clearly worried about the prospect of racial antagonism

\textsuperscript{41} John T. McGreevy’s Parish \textit{Boundaries}, cited above, offers a landmark study of the impact of southern, black migration to northern, white Catholic communities.

\textsuperscript{42} Timothy Neary’s “Crossing Parochial Boundaries: African Americans and Interracial Catholic Social Action in Chicago, 1914-1954,” (Loyola University Chicago, 2004), does complicate the story of white ethnic reaction to the arrival of southern black migrants. By focusing on the Catholic Youth Organization, founded by Bishop Bernard J. Sheil in 1930, Neary demonstrates the ways in which “Catholic-sponsored interracialism” existed well before the advent of Catholic involvement in the 1960s civil rights movement (12). Neary’s attention to this “largely forgotten” (14) story of race in the context of Catholicism in early twentieth-century Chicago complicates the relationship and chronology generally assigned to Catholic race relations.

\textsuperscript{43} “Our Negro and Indian Missions: Annual Report of the Secretary of the Commission for the Catholic Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians,” Commission Publications and Records, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI, Microfilm Series 7/1, Reel 1, 1940.
in northern Catholic communities lessening the potency of their evangelical aims. Aware
of the country’s shifting demographics, still, the Catholic hierarchy continued to focus on
proselytizing among southern African Americans.

To some degree, their efforts were aided by individuals and groups within the
Church who sought to move the Church in new directions on matters of race. Some of
the impetus for such changes came from black Catholics themselves. As early as 1889,
the first Colored Catholic Congress met in Baltimore. Organized by Daniel Rudd, a
prominent lay black Catholic, the Congress was originally envisioned as a forum for
Catholics of African descent to gather and to make their presence known within the
Church in particular and the country in general. For Rudd, the Catholic Church
represented “the great hope for black people in the United States.” Firm in this
conviction, Rudd published newsletters in support of the faith and the faithful and
arranged for the first national meetings of black Catholics to show their presence and
solidarity within the American Church.

The importance of education for African American Catholics also represented a
key component for delegates to the 1892 Congress. William E. Easton, the main speaker
at the event, made clear his view regarding the need to establish schools, even at the
expense of building churches: “Although the importance and necessity of establishing
churches are apparent,” Easton suggested, “the greatest need of Colored Catholics at

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present is more schools and better educational facilities for their children.”45 The Congress continued to meet during the last years of the nineteenth century, through the twentieth, and into the twenty-first century.

Others within the black Catholic community undertook similar efforts in the early twentieth century. In 1917, Dr. Thomas W. Turner, founded the Federated Colored Catholics, an organization devoted to racial issues within the Catholic Church. Prominent white Catholic clerics also began to address issues of race within the Church during the early 1900s. Two white Jesuits, John LaFarge and William Markoe became well-known for addressing themselves to the problems of racial prejudice within the American Church.46

Historian Marilyn Wenzke Nickels articulates important differences among people who took up the problem of racial inequality within the early twentieth-century Church. In a comparison between Turner, the black layman who founded the Federated Colored Catholics, and Markoe and LaFarge, two white Jesuit priests, Wenzke Nickels argues that different priorities fueled their efforts. For Turner, the racial prejudice and discrimination experienced by many black Catholics was the most pressing issue that Church leaders ought to address. For the two Jesuits, however, gaining African


American converts and convincing white Catholics to set aside racial prejudice to further this goal of conversion remained the predominant objective. Markoe’s and LaFarge’s views of racial issues in the Catholic Church mirrored, in some ways, the tension that appeared within the missionary schools in the South. Winning converts among black Protestants represented the highest priority. Importantly, for black Catholics like Dr. Thomas W. Turner and, perhaps, Daniel Rudd, the words and deeds of white Catholics were less important than papal decrees and documents that could be marshaled in support of black Catholics’ place in the universal Church.

Beyond the American context, by the 1930s broader issues related to race were taken up at the uppermost levels of the Church. The emerging extremism of Nazi Germany prompted Pope Pius XI to address race from the Church’s highest pulpit. By 1937, emissaries of the pope managed to smuggle into Germany material to be read from Catholic pulpits that denounced Nazi concepts of racial superiority. American prelates such as John LaFarge found common ground with the pope on issues of race. Reportedly, LaFarge drew parallels between the emerging racial radicalism in Nazi Germany with the existing racial structures of the United States. Prejudice in the United States, according to the Jesuit, represented “a pale but venomous older cousin” of the

47 Wenzke Nickels, 295.
48 Wenzke Nickels, 314.
ascendant Nazi racial ideology.\textsuperscript{50} During the summer of 1938, just over a year before Germany’s invasion of Poland plunged the world back into the abyss of world war, Pius XI invited LaFarge to Rome to begin work on an encyclical that explicitly took up questions of race. Though the encyclical was never published,\textsuperscript{51} the import of evolving Church stance on racial issues, particularly in the global crucible of an ascendant Nazi Germany, was not lost on many black Catholics.

A similar dynamic emerged in the pages of the \textit{Chicago Defender} by the 1930s. An increasingly clear line divided Catholic doctrine from the discriminatory actions of individual Catholics. African American supporters of the Church looked to theology for support. In 1932, the \textit{Defender} ran its weekly column, “What Do You Say About It?” which posed a question to its readers. Then, the following week, the publication ran a variety of reader responses to the query. For the week of September 17, 1932, the \textit{Defender} included the following inquiry: “Is there any reason, in your opinion, why such a strong and influential religious body as the Catholic church should tolerate or countenance Jim Crowism and discrimination in the promotion of Christianity in this country?”

One week later, responses appeared. Six individuals’ replies appeared, and the respondents hailed from all over the country: two from Louisiana, and one each from New Mexico, Georgia, Illinois, and Nebraska. Almost without exception, each writer


\textsuperscript{51} As detailed in McGreevey’s \textit{Parish Boundaries}, Pius XI died before the encyclical could be published (p. 51).
thoroughly condemned the Jim Crowism that frequently characterized Catholicism in America. As Boyd S. Sinclair from Omaha, Nebraska wrote, “I did at one time have hope that the Catholic church would improve on religious conditions in this country as far as our Race was concerned. I have been disappointed.” Frank H. Carey from Chicago agreed, and extended the critique of the Catholic acquiescence to segregation to other Christian denominations. “All churches under the white man’s guidance are guilty of this sin,” argued Carey. “It is puzzling to me how a white man believes so much in the fatherhood of God and then practices the separation of man.” 52

One respondent, Lester Mahoney from Shreveport, Louisiana, leavened this critique of Catholicism. Jim Crow within the Church, he maintained, reflected not so much a rot within the institution itself and instead evidenced something else entirely. “The Catholic church is law-abiding,” Mahoney wrote. “Why expect them to openly violate the established customs of countries? America is a land noted for discriminatory practices and no one can cure it in a day or a decade.” 53

A letter to the editor printed the following week voiced a similar position. Cassius J. Foster, who identified himself as a member of the Executive Committee of the National Catholic Federation for Promotion of Better Race Relations, aimed to counter the majority of respondents to the Defender’s original query. Instead of writing off the Catholic Church as merely another Jim Crow-riven institution, Foster offered a different perspective. First of all, he wrote, “the laws and doctrine of the Catholic church are

52 “What Do You Say About It? This Week’s Question,” Chicago Defender, September 24, 1932.
53 Ibid.
tolerant and free from racial discrimination.” Further, Foster cited pronouncements from Pope Pius XI to demonstrate the Church’s inclusivity. The pope, in Foster’s view, “admonishes all communicants of the Catholic faith, regardless of country, race, or color, to be fair, just and peaceful in their dealing with all mankind.” Foster’s letter also pointed out that segregation laws in the South existed outside of papal power and the Church had no real jurisdiction over such legalized discrimination. On the other hand, he continued, the existence of Jim Crowism in northern Catholic institutions was absolutely inexcusable. Ultimately, for Foster, the encompassing doctrines of the Church trumped individual instances of racial exclusivity. “I am proud of the fact that I am a Catholic,” he concluded, “and have an opportunity to fight for a cause that will eventually raise the economic status of the American Negro, and most important of all is the salvation of their immortal souls.”

These two articles suggested implications regarding the Defender’s portrayal of Catholicism. First of all, the newspaper consistently pointed out the inherent contradiction of claiming the mantle Christianity while clinging to the mandates of segregation. In this, Catholic institutions frequently came in for sharp criticism. On the other hand, the Defender also noted indications of racial progressivism within Church doctrine and, sometimes, on the part of white Catholic individuals and groups. The Defender successfully portrayed the deep complexity of these issues within its newsheets. By the end of the 1930s, further developments within the Catholic Church prompted the newspaper to print additional assessments of the faith.

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Following the death of Pope Pius XI in early 1939, his successor, Pope Pius XII, used the sesquicentennial of the establishment of an American ecclesiastical hierarchy to again broach Catholic outreach to individuals of African descent. In his encyclical *Sertum Laetitiae* of November 1939, the Pope recommended the efforts of the American Church’s various missionary associations. The Holy See noted in particular the efforts of the “Indian and Negro Missions, an association approved by the Third Council of Baltimore…which We confirm and recommend because it is imposed by a very particular charity towards your fellow citizens.” The encyclical continued on in a similar vein. It framed the relationship between the Catholic Church and African Americans in a way that echoed the paternalistic underpinnings of the entire southern evangelical project and harkened back sixty years or more:

> We confess that We feel a special paternal affection, which is certainly inspired of Heaven, for the Negro people dwelling among you; for in the field of religion and education We know that they need special care and comfort and are very deserving of it. We therefore invoke an abundance of heavenly blessing and We pray fruitful success for those whose generous zeal is devoted to their welfare.

Less than a month later, the *Defender* addressed itself to racial issues within the Church and remarked upon the papacy’s recent encyclical. The newspaper’s examination of Catholic policy, however, did not lead with an analysis of the recent pronouncement from Rome. Another matter appeared first. The *Defender’s* editorial writer condemned in no uncertain terms the recently-announced plan to open a high school and community center on Chicago’s South Side designated specifically for the African America

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56 Ibid.
community. St. Elizabeth’s parish, located at Forty-First Street and Wabash Avenue, had made clear that the new facilities were to be “for Negroes.” The significance of such an action was clear: “The indefensible, malicious practice of segregating the races on social, educational, and even religious matters has been indulged in so long by the Roman Catholic hierarchy that it has become a fixed, immutable law.”

Despite the fact that many Catholics decried segregation, the editorial continued, some Church leaders adhered to the mandates of Jim Crow even in the urban North. The plan for this segregated high school contrasted sharply with Pope Pius XII’s latest decree in the perspective of the writer. The article lavished high words of praise on the pontiff, commending his “denunciation of the satanic effect of racism,” and described him as “one of the most enlightened and liberal of all Pontiffs….we believe that the Pope is both wise and sincere in his effort to establish interracial justice.” Still, regardless of the papacy’s intentions, the Defender resolved to maintain its advocacy against Jim Crowism in any form, and said so in ringing tones: “The glaring, obvious incompatibility that exists between Christian teachings and racial injustice must be recognized and admitted by the entire Catholic church. The Defender will continue to beat upon the anvil of racial equality until the purveyors and advocates of racial segregation learn the true meaning of Christianity and democracy.”

By continually calling the Catholic Church to task for failing to act in a manner congruent with articles of Christian faith, the Chicago Defender illustrated itself as a voice to be trusted in the national conversation on race and religion. The newspaper

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represented an African American perspective that otherwise might have been lost amidst the voices powerful white interests, including the Catholic Church. Indeed, by calling racial prejudice by its name, the Defender cemented its position as a voice of authority among African Americans nation-wide.\textsuperscript{58}

For southern black communities in which Catholic missionaries appeared, the newspaper’s unflinching portrayals of the religion provided a sense of the Church’s potential as both an augury of positive change and a harbinger of the same, old segregated ways. The Defender continued to address issues related to race and Catholicism through the mid-twentieth century. As in previous decades, the publication sometimes commented favorably on certain individuals’ and groups’ efforts to challenge segregation and discrimination. The Defender also wasted no time in calling attention to instances when the Church failed to live up to its Christian ideals. This newspaper, among a variety of individuals and institutions, weighed in on issues of race, education, and Catholicism after the turn of the twentieth century. These were fraught waters, already plumbed by people as prominent as Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and the most exalted among the American Catholic hierarchy. All the while, however, the voices and actions of everyday individuals encountered the experiences of education and faith on their own terms.

\textsuperscript{58} Additionally, as historian James Grossman notes, “Presenting material that southern white papers would not – and southern black papers dared not – publish, the Defender came to be regarded as the final authority on racial matters.” “Blowing the Trumpet,” 90.
CHAPTER IV
SISTERS OF THE SOUTH

Newspaper editorials, papal decrees, and ecclesiastical announcements all weighed in on the Catholic Church’s plan to educate, evangelize, and harness the political and social power of African Americans. Beyond these myriad voices, however, lay the experiences of those individuals who actually lived and worked in the “mission field.” Shifting focus away from official and institutional sources of memory provides this story with a sense of the human experience of the southern mission project. Catholic nuns represented the primary labor source in the Church’s southern project and they also signified the major point of contact between the Church and local black communities.

The origins and development of two southern communities – St. Mary’s in Fairfield, Alabama and St. Augustine’s in Memphis, Tennessee – and the perspective of the women religious who staffed and administered the schools illuminates the realities of life in the Catholic mission project. The Sisters of St. Francis of Mary Immaculate (Franciscans) from Joliet, Illinois and the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVMs) from Dubuque, Iowa, who worked in Alabama and Tennessee respectively, represented the generations of nuns in the South. Despite their different geographic locations, the experiences of the Franciscans and BVMs at St. Mary’s and St. Augustine’s
shared many similarities. The founders of both congregations were European immigrants who focused on teaching as their primary work. The two orders were approached by men in the Catholic hierarchy about sending some of their teaching sisters to southern mission schools. Upon arrival in the South, the Franciscans and BVMs also encountered similar experiences. High enrollment rates and enthusiasm among local students and parents appeared in their schools.

Both orders emphasized the primacy of providing a rigorous education for the benefit of their students, implemented novel education techniques, and viewed education as more than simply an expedient to conversion. In this, the sisters from Joliet and Dubuque departed from the Catholic hierarchy’s original aim in the mission project. The congregations also built relationships with other groups of women religious in the area. Finally, the Franciscans and the BVMs developed a social intimacy with their black students and the local communities, which taught the sisters about the realities of race in the Jim Crow South. The experiences of the white Catholic sisters from the North who moved into black Protestant neighborhoods in the South bring the lively, complex nature of this story to light.

**Fairfield, Alabama: St. Mary’s School and the Joliet Franciscans**

For the Franciscans, sending members of their congregation to St. Mary’s school in Alabama represented a significant shift in terms of their ministry’s focus. The sisters hailed from Joliet Illinois, a city located about forty miles southwest of Chicago. The order was founded in the nineteenth century by two sisters from Luxembourg, Catherine and Maria Moes. They were moved to take up mission work by a rousing speech
delivered in their home country by a traveling priest from Milwaukee. The sisters migrated to the United States to take up their vocation in 1851 and became Franciscan sisters in the summer of 1863. Catherine and Maria took the names of Sister Alfred and Sister Barbara. Eventually, Sister Alfred went on to found the Sisters of St. Francis of Mary Immaculate in Joliet in 1865. ¹

Traditionally trained as teachers, by the mid-twentieth century the Franciscans had established schools in different locations across the country. Joliet Franciscan sisters spread out in different locales across Illinois, Ohio, Missouri, Tennessee, and Wisconsin. Through the first few decades of the twentieth century, the sisters mainly lived and worked in European immigrant communities.² Importantly, these schools and communities tended to be populated by already-Catholic populations of people of European descent in the urban North. The decision to send Franciscans to teach in a largely Protestant locale populated by people of African descent – a mission community – signified a significant change in the sisters’ ministry.

The roots of the Franciscans’ new ministry originated in 1937 when the Passionist Fathers of the Western United States undertook the creation of a mission community in Alabama. The Passionists, a group of male religious founded in Italy in the eighteenth century by St. Paul of the Cross, first sent members of their order to the United States in the 1850s. Pittsburgh became the base from which the Passionists expanded their

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² Ibid.
ministry over the following decades. Then, in 1937, the Roman hierarchy approached the Passionist fathers about exploring new mission territory.³

By this point, Pope XI began pressuring the American bishops to increase their mission work among African Americans. Leading members of the Church hierarchy communicated the Pope’s wishes to the American clerics. In late March of 1937, Father Boniface Fielding, the leader of the Passionists in the United States, received a letter from a prominent Roman cleric. “I am sending this letter to you with great assurance because the Passionist Fathers are ever zealous to heed the voice of the Holy Father,” observed the cleric, “and he has spoken in no uncertain terms regarding this Apostolate amongst the Negroes.” The missive continued in this vein, noting that the pope’s “paternal heart would be gratified,” should the Passionists take up the pope’s directive with alacrity.⁴ If a personal directive from the Pope were not enough to galvanize the Passionists, a few weeks later, Bishop Thomas Joseph Toolen of Mobile, Alabama, approached the Passionist fathers about establishing a Catholic presence in Birmingham’s African American neighborhoods.

Toolen, who become a larger-than-life figure in American Catholicism, led the Mobile diocese since 1927. He charted a course through Catholic schools and universities during his youth and early adulthood, as befitted the first-generation son of Irish immigrants, and officially entered the priesthood in the autumn of 1910. During his early years as a cleric, Toolen worked at Baltimore diocese’s Society for the Propagation

⁴ Giovanni Cicognani to Boniface Fielding, Mar. 20, 1937, quoted in Clancy, 12.
of the Faith. His position at the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, which was charged with spreading the Catholic gospel among unchurched lands, anticipated his eventual assignment to the overwhelmingly Protestant diocese of Mobile in 1927.

For Toolen, the Mobile diocese represented “mission territory”: at the time of his arrival, barely one percent of his bishopric claimed themselves Catholic. The newly-anointed bishop sought to change this. The conversion to Catholicism of his diocese’s African American population framed much of Toolen’s efforts in his jurisdiction of Alabama and northwest Florida. For some, he represented all that was good and right in his outreach to the black community. To others, he personified the worst paternalistic and accommodations impulses that ever seized a would-be reformer. Toolen himself was big enough to embody any assessment of his character. Standing just under six feet and displaying an impressive girth, Toolen’s considerable physical presence personified his vast influence upon the episcopate, as he remained bishop for forty-two years.

The impact and legacy of Toolen’s policies, particularly those in regards to racial issues, were made manifest throughout the diocese. Even the humblest parishes felt the weight of his influence and his desire to convert African Americans in his territory to Catholicism. To achieve this goal, he reached out to various clergy, including the Passionist fathers in 1937, and urged them to increase the Catholic presence in his diocese.

After Toolen’s initial invitation to the Passionist fathers to establish a mission school and church in Birmingham, the order took the matter under advisement. Fielding

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wrote to his superior in Italy in March of 1937 about the proposed Birmingham mission. “It is the unanimous consent of our Provincial Curia that we accept this invitation and start a foundation in his diocese in the City of Birmingham,” he advised the Passionist General Superior. Lest any ambiguity creep into his correspondence, Fielding expounded upon his intentions in remarkably precise terms. “We wish to state that our purpose in accepting this invitation is to establish mission churches for the Negroes in order to convert them to the Catholic Faith,” wrote Fielding. “The method followed - and which we would be required to follow - is this: a small school is opened for Negro children. Sisters or lay teachers are employed to do the teaching in the school; the priest catechizes or gives religious instruction.” With the logistics of the division of labor firmly in place, Fielding turned his attention to the nuts and bolts of conversion and parish-building. “Through the children contact is made with the parents and friends of the children. Afterwards religious instruction classes are started for adults, and thus converts are made to the Catholic Faith,” Fielding explained. “When the number of converts increases, a church is built and a regular parish started.”

In a few short sentences, Fielding articulated the basic template that had informed the foundation for most of the Church’s mission schools in the South. This correspondence between Passionist fathers in the specific context of a mission in Birmingham, Alabama, demonstrated broader continuity with the earliest goals of the Catholic aim of evangelizing African Americans in the South. This determination, made

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7 Ibid.
clear in the late 1930s, also reflected the dictum from Rome which declared that America needed “More schools. More churches. More Apostles for the Negroes.” The Passionists speedily moved forward with their plans. A month after Fielding’s decision to open a mission in Alabama, the Passionist Father Cornelius McGraw arrived in Birmingham. Tasked with locating a neighborhood most in need of a mission, he stayed until late June in order to familiarize himself with the city’s segregated districts. McGraw departed in late June, and the city was left without a Passionist presence until early 1938.

The next Passionist assigned to Mobile, Father Arnold Vetter, arrived on January 10, 1938, and took up where his predecessor left off. Vetter also sought a suitable location for a mission school in Birmingham’s African American neighborhoods. He decided upon an area known as Ensley at the suggestion of a Trinitarian nun, Sister Anthony Leonard, who was familiar with the city’s districts. More particularly, the “infamous Tuxedo Junction…in the heart of the colored slums of Ensley,” was deemed “the most neglected and therefore the most needy” locale in the area. Here, the Passionists began their mission.

Their first mission school in Birmingham welcomed its inaugural class of students in August 1938. Holy Family School, as it was known, was eventually staffed by the Felician Sisters of the Chicago Province, who arrived at the school in the fall of 1938. The Passionists’ efforts in Birmingham soon extended beyond this first mission school.

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8 Cardinal Rafaello Rossi, September 1936, quoted in Clancy, 11.


10 Ibid., 46.
The Holy Family Clinic, which provided basic health care services to the African American residents of Ensley, opened in 1940. In this relatively short span of time, the Passionists seemingly achieved their goal of establishing a Catholic presence in one of Birmingham’s African American neighborhoods. Their efforts continued. According to one account, the friars of Tuxedo Junction came to wonder, “Why stop with one mission when the harvest was so large and ready for reaping?” In this spirit the Passionists decided to open another mission school in the city’s district of Fairfield. By early 1943, an invitation to teach at the newly-built St. Mary’s school in Fairfield had been sent to the Mother General of the Sisters of St. Francis of Mary Immaculate in Joliet, Illinois.

Three Joliet Franciscans arrived for the start of classes in September 1945. Despite a delay in the construction of the St. Mary’s convent, due the general shortage of building materials precipitated by World War II, the school’s first three Franciscans, Sisters Tharsilla, Alma, and Donula soon settled into their duties at the school. Fairfield’s largely black population appeared to respond enthusiastically to the opening of the little Catholic school. The parents of kindergarten, first, second, and third grade pupils arrived at St. Mary’s with their children in increasing numbers during the late summer of 1945. Within a few years, the schooled expand to include all grades from kindergarten through eighth grade.

For the incoming classes in 1945, ten cents secured a student’s place at the school for the semester. Soon, enrollment exceeded capacity. At seventy-six pupils, registration

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11 Ibid., 47
12 St. Mary’s Annals, 1945-1946, Joliet Franciscan Archives.
for the 1945-1946 school year closed. The Franciscan Mother General, who visited the new mission school during its opening weeks in September 1945, appointed Sister Tharsilla principal and kindergarten teacher. Sister Alma took on the tasks of assisting Sister Tharsilla in her duties as principal and instructing the first and second grades. Finally, Sister Donula concentrated her energies on housekeeping for the three nuns.\textsuperscript{13} Father Edmund Drake, the Passionist pastor charged with the care of St. Mary’s church, rounded out the little Catholic community in Fairfield.

A variety of challenges presented themselves to the first Franciscan sisters at St. Mary’s. Resources – money, books, classroom materials, even space – were hard to find. Occasional donations to the little mission school helped with the basics. A thirty-dollar donation from an anonymous donor provided the wherewithal to furnish the Franciscans’ new convent. Still, such gifts were few and far between.

Lack of proper schoolrooms also beset the sisters. For a time during the first term of school, all seventy-six students attended class in the same large room. Moisture produced by gas radiators thickened the classroom’s air. Droplets of this soggy haze accumulated on walls and blackboards and slowly dripped down into puddles on the floor. All anticipated the addition of new classrooms and heating systems, forecasted for completion in the spring of 1946. Despite these less-than-desirable conditions, the sisters and their pupils soldiered on. Attendance rates for the first, second, and third graders remained high. “They liked school,” the sisters commented, “especially our school so

\textsuperscript{13} St. Mary’s Annals, Sept. 11 1945, Joliet Franciscan Archives.
very much, they cried if they had to miss a day on account of illness or any other reason.”

Turnout among the school’s kindergarten students proved a bit spotty, particularly over the winter months. “[This was] due, no doubt,” judged the nuns, “to their tender ages (4 or 4 ½ years) and also, to the inclemency of the weather and the severe cold spells we had in December.” Nonetheless, parents of St. Mary’s students appeared enthusiastic about the educational opportunities provided by the little school. The high rates of attendance by largely Protestant black population of Fairfield demonstrated again the importance of securing a quality education, regardless of its association with a differing religious sect.

Other manifestations of local support for the little Catholic school appeared as well. In late November 1945, Fr. Drake suggested that Sisters Tharsilla, Alma, and Donula create a Parent Teacher Association. Letters went out to all of the students’ households, with an invitation for all those interested to convene at the school at seven o’clock on the evening of November 27. Nearly fifty parents attended this inaugural gathering. A vote among those present determined that regular PTA meetings would commence on the first Tuesday of every month.

The meetings continued throughout the rest of the school year and remained reasonably well attended – with one exception. In the spring of 1946 only five parents appeared at St. Mary’s for the March P.T.A. meeting. Regretfully, the sisters remarked,

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14 St. Mary’s Annals, Sept. 10, 1945, Joliet Franciscan Archives.
15 Ibid.
16 St. Mary’s Annals, Nov. 27, 1954, Joliet Franciscan Archives.
“No formal meeting or work was done this evening. [The parents] played cards awhile after the Sisters went home.” Soon, the Franciscans hit upon a likely explanation. “The failure was due, most probably,” they deduced, “to the Religious Revival the Baptists were having during that whole week.” The conflicting dates of a Catholic school P.T.A meeting and a Baptist revival notwithstanding, little friction in terms of religious affiliation emerged in Fairfield during St. Mary’s first year.

For their parts, Sisters Tharsilla, Alma, and Donula eventually settled into their new neighborhood. The Franciscans found company with the other Catholic religious men and women already living in the Birmingham area. The Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, Kentucky, who ran the Holy Family Hospital established by the Passionist fathers, frequently exchanged hospitality with the Franciscans. Indeed, the sisters from Joliet recorded glowing praise of the Sisters of Charity. “Their name is truly all that it signifies – Charity Itself!!! – a sweeter, kinder, and more self-sacrificing group of Nuns would be hard to find,” Sisters Tharsilla, Alma, and Donula agreed. “May God bless for their kindness to others, and especially to us in our pioneer days at St. Mary’s.”

The sisters from Joliet also established relationships with other nuns in the area. In the spring of 1946, the Catholic women religious living and working in north-central Alabama arranged a “supper-party.” The nuns who attended hailed from a variety of orders. Sisters of Charity from Kentucky, Felician Sisters from Chicago, nuns of the Order of the Most Holy Trinity (Trinitarians), the Sisters of Notre Dame, and the Joliet

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17 Ibid.
18 St. Mary’s Annals, Sept. 8, 1945, Joliet Franciscan Archives.
Franciscans all gathered at the Holy Family Hospital in Birmingham for the event. All told, nearly forty sisters attended. Frequent accounts of smaller rendezvous among the Catholic nuns in the broader Birmingham area attested to the networks formed among these women religious in the south.

Occasionally, the Catholic hierarchy looked in from above. One afternoon in February 1946, the sisters were tidying up after school had been let out for the day. Outside, a car drove up to the school and parked. Two men emerged, one wearing a floor-length cassock and religious accoutrement which marked off the man as no ordinary priest. Bishop Toolen had dropped in, unannounced, at the little mission school in Fairfield. Covering their surprise with effusive greetings, the Joliet Franciscans welcomed the bishop and his accompanying priest to St. Mary’s. “He [Toolen] was very humble and genial, sympathetic and fatherly,” the sisters later reported. “He was most gratefully pleased with our little “set-up” at St. Mary’s, and praised our grand and noble work for God’s Colored Poor.” Bishop Toolen offered the Franciscans more than praise. He left them with one hundred dollars, intended for use in the sisters’ convent. “I always like to help the Sisters out,” Toolen commented affably.

The nuns from Joliet also built relationships within Fairfield’s largely black community. By April of 1946, the sisters’ new convent at St. Mary’s finally reached completion. A few weeks later, Sisters Donula, Tharsilla, and Alma threw open the doors of their new home to the community. “Over one hundred guests were present,” the

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19 St. Mary’s Annals, Mar. 24, 1946, Joliet Franciscan Archives.

20 St. Mary’s Annals, Feb. 20, 1946, Joliet Franciscan Archives.
sisters exulted. “Very few Whites were among them. Most of the pupils’s [sic] parents came. They were shown every nook and corner of the home.” After the open house concluded, the three nuns concurred that “the day was ideal in every way.”

Community involvement in Fairfield was a two-way street. The sisters also visited their students’ homes. On one warm spring afternoon towards the end of this first school year, Sister Donula and Sister Tharsilla took Fr. Edmund up his offer of a drive around Fairfield and the surrounding area. During their drive, the sisters asked to stop off at the home of a first grade student. After visiting with the student and parents for a time, Sisters Donula, Tharsilla, and Fr. Edmund continued on their way. “Then the grade pupils were a bit jealous,” the sisters later learned with amusement, “and wanted their teacher to come to see their homes and parents also.”

In addition to visiting the homes of their students, the women religious of St. Mary’s also fostered connections with professionals in Birmingham’s African American community. In March of 1946, Sister Tharsilla contracted an acute case of the flu. She called a Sister of Charity at the Holy Family Hospital, who recommended a black physician from Fairfield. Dr. Drake, the “Colored Doctor,” examined Sister Tharsilla and ordered prescriptions for her. “He is a grand, good doctor,” remarked Sister Tharsilla, “all business and no fooling around when he treats his patients.” Again, the fact that a white woman in Alabama sought out the services of an African American doctor in 1946 seems astonishing and speaks to the myriad ways in which Fairfield’s black community and the

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21 St. Mary’s Annals, May 5, 1946, Joliet Franciscan Archives.

22 St. Mary’s Annals, April 2, 1946, Joliet Franciscan Archives.

23 St. Mary’s Annals, Mar. 15, 1946, Joliet Franciscan Archives.
Joliet Franciscans stood racial custom on its head. More broadly, the records from the Joliet Franciscans’ first years in Fairfield indicated a high degree of community interaction. From taking part in gatherings of other Catholic religious working in the Birmingham area to reaching out in a variety of ways to students, parents, and other local community members, the Franciscans’ experiences appeared remarkable for the time and place.

The Joliet Franciscans in Alabama continued to build up St. Mary’s and the educational opportunities offered to their students. Moreover, the realities they faced as teaching sisters and administrators at the mission school in Fairfield diverged from the decrees articulated by American bishops. The emphasis placed on a Tuskegee-style education, which had figured so prominently for many within the Church hierarchy’s plan for the southern mission schools, had little place among the sisters who actually taught in the South.

The Joliet Franciscans generally transplanted their teaching methods and curriculum into the southern mission schools. Their pedagogy did not include industrial or vocational training. Consequently, the bishops’ plans for “Catholic Tuskegees” across the South ran up against the reality of education as provided by sisters. In addition to emphasizing a regular classroom curriculum, many women religious involved in the southern project constantly sought to improve the educational opportunities they provided to their students. The Joliet Franciscans’ focus on the importance of providing a quality education for their students framed their work in Fairfield for the generations of students who attended St. Mary’s school.
In the late nineteen-sixties, the nuns in Fairfield wrote to their sisters in Joliet of their work and lives in Alabama. Their correspondence provides a sense of how the sisters themselves and the local community perceived the school. “Alabama ranks 50th in the nation's educational status - you can't get any lower than that!” the Franciscans exclaimed. “The public school system here is very poor and many professional people send their children here to St. Mary's because they realize the public school's lack. As a result,” the Franciscans continued, “Our school is about 73% non-Catholic.”

The sisters also articulated their goals for the school. The primary goal, they wrote, “is to spread Christian love and show the people we care.” Not a word about conversion appeared. This epistle went on to describe the socioeconomic status of St. Mary’s students. Pupils generally came from middle-class backgrounds but, the sisters noted, “We do have a few poor families – these are usually Catholic.” Differences in income notwithstanding, a unity of purpose bound St. Mary’s parents together. “All these parents see a real value in our school and support our efforts to give their children an equal opportunity for education,” the Franciscans observed.

Individual sisters also spoke to the emphasis placed on education during their years in the South. Indeed, nuns who spent time in southern mission schools from the late 1950s and onwards underscored their commitment as classroom instructors first and foremost. While Bishop Toolen, the Passionist fathers, and many in the Church hierarchy

25 Ibid.
viewed mission schools such as St. Mary’s as vehicles for conversion, generations of
women religious regarded the situation very differently.

Sister Rosemary Winter and Sister Janet Tucci were two such women. Both
arrived in Fairfield, Alabama, a place that seemed far removed from their Midwestern
roots, by the late 1960s. Tucci, who was born in 1934 and entered the Joliet Franciscan
order in 1952, was herself from Joliet. Winter, on the other hand, grew up in Toledo,
Ohio, and joined the Franciscans at the age of seventeen in 1957. After teaching in
schools in the northern states, such as Ohio and Illinois, both women were assigned to
teach at St. Mary’s in Fairfield, Alabama. They arrived within a year of the other: Tucci,
in 1966 and Winter in 1967. Both stayed until the late 1970s.26

When they began teaching in Fairfield, the traditional emphasis of the Catholic
project in southern black communities as conceived by the hierarchy – education and
evangelization – had altered. The importance of their work as educators far outweighed
any consideration of winning converts to the faith for Tucci and Winter. Indeed, if local
residents inquired at the school about joining the Catholic Church, the sisters would send
them next door. “We did get some converts,” Tucci remembered. “We got adult
converts too, just because the church, where it was, and they’d come to school and some
said could we be Catholic too? I said, certainly, go see Father and take instructions.”27

However, the original aim of providing an education in southern black communities as an
avenue to conversion which was so central to the hierarchy’s founding aims for the

26 Janet Tucci and Rosemary Winter, interview with author, Joliet, IL, April 28, 2011.

27 Janet Tucci, interview with author, Joliet, IL, April 28, 2011
schools was abandoned. “It was about education, primarily,” emphasized Tucci. “I mean, if some good happened along that they got a convert, so be it.”

Winter and Tucci also articulated the importance of rigorous standards of education at St. Mary’s in Fairfield, Alabama. At times, this meant circumventing the strict diocesan policies regarding student advancement through the grades. After they arrived in Fairfield in the late 1960s, Tucci found that these diocesan guidelines regarding students’ grade levels were strictly implemented. If a student’s age indicated he or she ought to be in seventh grade, for example, that student – regardless of actual ability – would be placed in seventh grade. Tucci however, perceived the ways in which this policy did not address those students who performed below grade level. She resolved to introduce instruction that would more effectively address her students’ needs and administered tests to each student to determine their actual grade level. When she found that some students’ development needed serious attention, Tucci took action. “I had four boys who tested on second grade level and they were seventh graders,” she explained. “So I covered their books with brown paper so no one could see what they were reading and gave them assignments you know, and things like that.”

Tucci broke the educational mold mandated by the diocese by providing remedial instruction for students. The higher powers of the diocese, however, had yet to weigh in. A supervisor from Birmingham visited each Catholic school to observe lessons and, sure enough, the supervisor sat in on one of Tucci’s classes. Although the supervisor was generally known to be less than attentive during the observation of lessons, Tucci remembered that

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28 Janet Tucci, interview with author, Joliet, IL, April 28, 2011

29 Janet Tucci, interview with author, Joliet, IL, April 28, 2011.
the amount of activity in her classroom kept the supervisor awake. In order to address the remedial instruction that her students needed, she split the class into two different groups and assigned to each their own work. “So she [the supervisor] got up and that was like unheard of, you know, and she started walking about and she stops at my one kid who had the book with the brown paper on it,” related Tucci. “And she looked, and I’m like, “Don’t you dare [call attention to the students’ lower-level books],” you know. I wouldn’t humiliate those kids, I would die, I would just die. But, she didn’t. Then, she’d start writing in her book, writing and writing, and then sat down.”

Tucci suspected that the supervisor was recording unfavorable comments about her classroom instruction. Soon, her suspicions were confirmed. “Well anyway, to make a long story short, afterward she called me out into the hallway and I thought well, here it comes, you know, whatever happens, happens,” Tucci recalled. “And she said – my name was Alan, my religious name – and she said, ‘Sister Alan, she said that it was a very interesting lesson. However, you were not using the proper text.’” Tucci went on to explain to the supervisor why her students were using texts that differed from the diocesan guidelines. The supervisor then intimated that Tucci’s departure from diocesan policy would not go unremarked. However, no further action was taken. Tucci laughed, remembering the tempest in the diocesan teapot caused by her new methods of instruction.30

The proverbial proof, though, was in the pudding. Another Joliet Franciscan, Sister Lauren Weigman, who shared Tucci’s innovative approach to education soon

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30 Janet Tucci, interview with author, Joliet, IL, April 28, 2011.
became the principal of St. Mary’s School. For a time, the school underwent a period of transition as Tucci, Winter, and the other sisters from Joliet implemented new techniques. After a period of adjustment, however, enrollment rebounded and the sisters kept a waiting list of students who wanted to attend St. Mary’s. The sisters’ disciplinary emphasis and high academic standards in the classroom ultimately increased recognition of the quality of a St. Mary’s education.

While the sisters from Joliet grounded their students in rigorous learning inside the classroom, incidents beyond the schoolyard taught the nuns about the racial realities of their students’ lives in the South. Tucci and Winter remembered that their own identity as white women was seen differently by their students. One incident in particular demonstrated the mutual affection and respect that characterized Winter’s relationship with her students. “I had to laugh – I felt so honored because one day we got to talking and one of them said, ‘Well Sister, we don’t like white people.’ And I said, ‘Well, then, you don’t like me.’ Winter’s students quickly responded, “Oh no, no, we like you, you’re not one of them!” She proceeded to point out an inescapable fact to her students. “I said, ‘Look at my skin, it’s not like yours.’” However, the St. Mary’s students quickly countered. “Sister you’re just like one of us, only you’re just a little lighter.”31 Winter’s students appeared to view her as fundamentally different from the whites they generally encountered in Fairfield.

31 Rosemary Winter, interview with author, Joliet, IL, April 28, 2011. Interestingly, this type of incident has been remarked upon by different sisters in the context of different African American neighborhoods. As discussed in the following chapter, the BVMs in Memphis reported a similar conversation. More broadly, Amy Koehlinger explores the unique racial positions occupied by white nuns in black communities in Chicago and the ways in which the nature of their work allowed sisters to “cross borders that other whites could not.” The New Nuns: Racial Justice and Religious Reform in the 1960s (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 196.
As the sisters from Joliet navigated the complex racial situation in the South, difficulties appeared even within the context of the diocese’s Catholic school system. When Tucci and Winter first arrived at St. Mary’s, the area’s black Catholic schools were not allowed to take part in diocesan athletics. In the early 1970s, however, Sister Janet Tucci resolved to see this situation changed. St. Mary’s lacked the financial resources to hire a coach so she undertook to coach the students herself. Meanwhile, Tucci approached diocesan authorities about the situation. “Well, it took a while to get in,” Tucci allowed. “I had talked to Monsignor.” She approached the diocesan administration and demanded to know why St. Mary’s, a Catholic school in the diocese, was not allowed to take part in diocesan activities. In response, Tucci heard an echo of traditional racial policies in the diocese: ‘Well, sister you’re new here and you don’t understand.’”

Undaunted, Tucci secured a place for St. Mary’s teams within the diocesan athletics system. Traditionally white Catholic schools, however, sometimes looked askance at Tucci’s teams. Students from other schools occasionally took advantage of St. Mary’s students’ inexperience though, as Tucci fondly remembered, it was not long before her students excelled. “I wish I had a picture of the trophies and all that we got!” she exclaimed. Despite – or perhaps because of – her students’ successes, Tucci recalled, other schools reacted badly. “A lot of the schools then – some of them didn’t participate. And these are Catholics! I was like, “I can’t believe this!” These types of experiences,

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32 Janet Tucci, interview with author, Joliet, IL, April 28, 2011.
33 Janet Tucci, interview with author, Joliet, IL, April 28, 2011.
among white Catholic schools in the diocese and the white population in Birmingham more generally, reinforced the sisters’ commitment to their students.

Stark examples of the discrimination faced by their student lives also emerged during class field trips. A trip to a local movie theater, for instance, demonstrated the impact of race in a seemingly mundane situation. When Tucci and her seventh and eighth grade students arrived at the movie theater in downtown Birmingham, she noticed immediately her pupils’ hesitance to enter the theater. Soon, the reason for their reticence became clear as the students quietly pointed out something that she had overlooked. Tucci’s students said to her, “‘Sister, we ain’t never been here before, it’s white.’ Tucci thought, “Oh my God, I forgot all about that because it was right after the Civil Rights Act was passed around that time that I came down there.” There was nothing to do, however, but to reassure her students, pay for the movie, and go sit down in the theater. The day’s lesson in the racial realities of downtown Birmingham, Alabama was not over. Tucci noticed two white women looking at her. “These white ladies looked at me and called me ‘ni---er-lover,’ and I said thank you very much.” The women also looked askance at Tucci’s attire as a Catholic nun. “And of course with the habit and everything, they were looking at me like I was from Mars,” she remembered.34

Despite this type of incident, the Joliet Franciscans at St. Mary’s in the late 1960s and 1970s continued to give their students access to different educational venues. Movies and museums represented common forays into the community. For their black students, however, such trips were fraught. “Our students were petrified of mixing with white people because they were afraid,” Tucci explained. “And I told them, ‘I am not

34 Janet Tucci, interview with author, Joliet, IL, April 28, 2011.
afraid.’” However, the students, fearing that Tucci might get into legal trouble, frequently told her, “But sister you might go to jail, you might go to jail.” Tucci responded matter-of-factly, “If I go to jail I go to jail.” Other students brought humor to bear on the extraordinarily difficult situation. “And I had one little fella,” Tucci related, “he said ‘I’m going with sister from now on cause it’s exciting!’ I thought, oh dear God,” Tucci laughed, as a moment of humor briefly lightened the story.

However, despite such moments, the grim realities of her students’ lives were never far away. Tucci remembered the daily insults thrown at her students during trips outside of school. “Right away you’d hear the comments,” she soberly recalled. “Ni--ers. Ni--er, here come the ni--ers,” Tucci related. “And they heard it and I would feel so badly. But I’d say, ‘Keep your head up, keep your head up.’ I said, ‘You are wonderful people,’ I said, ‘And you show them that you could be better than they are.’ And they would.”

Memphis, Tennessee: St. Augustine’s School and the BVMs from Dubuque

Almost four hundred miles to the northwest of St. Mary’s in Fairfield, Alabama, another mission community emerged during the first half of the twentieth century. Memphis, Tennessee, became home to the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVMs) from Dubuque, Iowa. Similarities marked the paths that led the Franciscans from Illinois and the BVMs from Iowa to the South. Both orders were founded by European immigrants to the United States, both traditionally trained their members as

35 Janet Tucci, interview with author, Joliet, IL, April 28, 2011.
teachers and worked among European Catholic immigrant communities, and both were approached by Catholic bishops about teaching at mission schools in the southern states.

Teaching was always central to the work of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The community’s foundress, Mother Mary Francis Clarke, had herself been a teacher. In 1833, Clarke, an immigrant from Ireland, established the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Philadelphia. By the mid-1840s the bishop of Dubuque, Iowa extended an invitation to the sisters to move to his territory. The BVMs provided educational opportunities for the area’s increasingly large Catholic immigrant population and eventually established their mother house, called Mount Carmel, in 1893 on a high bluff in Dubuque overlooking the Mississippi River. From there, the BVMs sent an ever-increasing number of sisters out to teach at schools around the country during the first decades of the twentieth century. These schools, however, remained primarily in the northern and western states. Only an invitation from a southern diocese prompted the community to explore the possibility of sending their sisters below the Mason-Dixon Line.

The path that led the BVMs from Iowa to Tennessee traced back to Bishop William L. Adrian. Long before his elevation to the office of the bishop of the Nashville diocese in 1936, Adrian had grown up in Sigourney, Iowa, a small town in the southwestern part of the state. He began a teaching career at St. Ambrose College in Davenport following his ordination into the priesthood in 1911. During his tenure at St. Ambrose, he worked alongside the BVMs from Dubuque. Adrian left St. Ambrose in

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36 Mary DeCock, BVM, “The BVM Sisters and Selma,” History TN 110 folder, BVM Archives, Dubuque.
1936 for his newly-appointed bishopric in Tennessee. He did not forget the nuns from Iowa.

One year later, Adrian contacted the BVM General Superior, Mother Mary Gervase Tuffy, and invited the order to administer and teach at a newly established Catholic school for black children in Memphis. When Adrian approached Tuffy about the possibility of the Sisters of Charity taking over the instruction at a school in Memphis, he drew upon an order of women religious that had long been associated with the education of youth. Up to this point, however, it had been almost entirely Catholic youth. Both the missionary character of the Memphis school and its largely black and Protestant population represented new ministries for the BVMs. How would the sisters respond to this invitation?

In July of 1937, Tuffy put the request to her congregation. “We have been invited to undertake the work of teaching negro children in the city of Memphis, Tenn.,” ran her announcement. The mission character of this new ministry – the mandate to save souls – also emerged. “This new opportunity of securing the special end of our Institute, namely the salvation of our neighbor,” Tuffy continued, “will be another channel for the grace of God which has been bestowed upon us so abundantly.” The school’s location in the South presented a novel locale for the BVMs, as did the method by which the sisters would be selected for the new ministry in Memphis. Sisters’ appointments, or the location and job to which they were assigned, occurred on a unilateral basis: the superiors of the congregation usually designated positions for most members of the order. This

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new school in Memphis was different. Tuffy called for volunteers and mandated that
“each Superior place in the Community room a paper headed ‘Volunteers for the Negro
Mission.’ The Sisters who care to do so will sign their names thereon, and the Superior
will forward the list to me.” In a display of remarkable enthusiasm, more than six
hundred BVMs volunteered for the new mission.

In August of 1937, the first group of BVMs traveled from Iowa to Tennessee.
Out of the initial six hundred women religious who volunteered, Tuffy selected only four.
Sister Mary Thomas, Sister Mary Christine, Sister Mary Anita Esther, and Sister Mary
Paraclita represented the first BVMs to arrive in Memphis. Bishop Adrian, in addition to
securing the Sisters of Charity as the school’s teaching staff, also invited the Franciscan
Fathers of the Sacred Heart Province to send a priest to take charge of the mission
church. In fact, six months prior to contacting the BVMs, Adrian communicated with
Father Peter Volz who headed the Franciscans’ Sacred Heart Province. The bishop
indicated that he hoped to expand the Catholic presence among Memphis’ black
community and asked that the Franciscan fathers establish a mission in the city. A week
and a half later, Volz informed Adrian that the order had acquiesced to his request.

After the BVMs also agreed to Adrian’s invitation, plans were made for the sisters to

38 Mother Mary Gervase Tuffy, Letter to all BVMs, July 25, 1937, in History, TN 110 folder, BVM Archives, Dubuque.

39 “The History of St. Augustine,” 1939 Bulletin “Dedicated to the many generous friends benefactors
and patrons of St. Augustine Parish” in History, TN 110 folder, BVM Archives, Dubuque.

40 “In the Beginning – 70th Anniversary Booklet, St. Augustine Church and School,” History TN 110
folder, BVM Archives, Dubuque.
depart Iowa for Tennessee. On August 24th, 1937, the four BVMs and Mother Mary Gervase Tuffy arrived in Memphis.\footnote{Ibid.}

Their new home was located at 903 Walker Avenue, which was an address that might have raised some eyebrows among Memphis natives. Until 1936, just a year before the arrival of the BVMs, the three-story brick building on Walker Avenue had been the Ella Mae Oliver Home and Hospital for Unwed Mothers. The structure, however, was remodeled in anticipation of the arrival of this entirely different segment of single women.\footnote{“Our New Mission: St. Augustine, Memphis,” Our Herald Vol. XX, No. 2, October, 1937, History TN 110 folder, BVM Archives, Dubuque.} For those unaware of the transition, the sight of Roman Catholic sisters occupying a site formerly inhabited by “fallen women” must have surely caused some confusion. Those curious souls who chose to visit St. Augustine’s Church would have found that the sanctuary occupied the first floor of the building. The second floor, an intrepid visitor might discover, had been converted into classrooms. Any attempts to foray into the third floor, however, would have been firmly rebuffed. The upper story of the building, instead of housing wailing newborns, was now a convent for the sisters.

On September 2nd, 1937, the doors to St. Augustine’s school opened to students for the first time. Students from the first through the eighth grades registered for classes. Enrollment, which stood at seventy-eight after the first day of school, continued to climb over the next two weeks and topped out at one hundred and twenty-four. Records indicated that only twenty of these St. Augustine’s students were Catholic, or
approximately 16 percent. As in most other Catholic mission schools across the South, the majority of students did not belong to the faith. In terms of tuition, students who registered as Catholics were charged one dollar, while their Protestant counterparts paid a dollar more.

Sisters Christine, Anita Esther, Paraclita, and Mary Thomas lost little time in getting down to business. Despite a lack of classroom resources – indeed, for the first couple of weeks, the rooms were outfitted only with desks and a hand-made book rack – the sisters provided instruction as best they could. Sister Anita Esther, who kept records of this first year, noted that during these opening weeks “the class rooms became scenes of review work in ordinary subjects, but real foundational work in religion.” Work progressed and by the third week of school, Sr. Anita Esther reported, more classroom necessities emerged: every room in St. Augustine’s school included a blackboard, pencil sharpener, and a crucifix.

Assistance from the local community during the BVMs first months in Memphis emerged as well. In particular, the BVMs noted their indebtedness to Dr. J.W. Hose. The sisters described him as “A splendid Negro Catholic Doctor” of Memphis, and who had given the sisters the use of his automobile upon their arrival. They also reported that the doctor was deemed “one of the greatest lay apostles in the United States,” and credited with more than three hundred converts to Catholicism during an eleven-year

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43 Ibid.


Hose assisted the new school in a variety of ways. To the seeming relief of the sisters, he arranged for signs that read “St. Augustine Church and School” to replace the previous “Women’s Christian Association – Ella Oliver Home” sign.

As the first few weeks melted into the first few months in Memphis, the sisters from Dubuque recorded the joys and challenges of their new mission. Material goods were few. Indeed, missing window shades, a single clock for the entire building, and the substitution of a milk bottle for a potato masher numbered among the challenges of life in the new mission school. Still, Sr. Anita Esther faithfully recorded, “Little privations and very full days are the routine. Happiness and peace recompense. The children are responding to order, an orchestra has begun, ten children take music lessons, and St. Augustine’s School is numbered among the schools participating in the diocesan centennial celebration.”

Beyond the positive elements of the relationships that were forming during the earliest days of the little mission school, the sisters quickly learned about the racial realities of life in Memphis. In October of 1937, barely two months after Sisters Mary Christine, Anita Esther, Paraclita, and Mary Thomas arrived in the city, they were invited to participate in a diocesan-wide Convention of the National Council of Catholic Women. The Sisters of Charity later discovered, however, that meetings had already taken place and they were purposefully left out. Soon, the reason became clear. The BVMs learned that their exclusion stemmed from the fact that the sisters lived and worked in a black community. “Here in Memphis, antipathy for the Colored and for Whites who are helping

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46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.
the Colored, is strong among many of the influential and wealthy Whites,” the BVMs recorded.

Prejudicial behavior extended to the children of St. Augustine’s as well. This emerged particularly in 1937 when the question of St. Augustine’s black students would be allowed to participate in Mass with students from the city’s white Catholic schools. Ultimately, Bishop Adrian was called in to settle the question. According to the sisters’ records, Adrian decreed that the BVM’s black students would attend the service and take part in singing the Mass. This particular incident prompted the Sisters of Charity to examine the nature of the Church in America. “Does the question ‘what is Catholicity’ arise?” the nuns wondered. “The word catholic means universal. To our shame, we catholics [sic] have not been universal.”

The nuns soon learned of other ways in which the Memphis Church remained divided over issues of race. Five months into their inaugural year at St. Augustine’s the sisters commented upon the “deplorable” conditions at the hospital serving the city’s black community. One of the BVMs had visited an ill parishioner at a privately owned hospital in Memphis and came away horrified at the unsanitary conditions of the institution. The sisters further noted that Dr. Hose, who continued to support their educational efforts at the school, planned to open a Catholic hospital for Memphis’ African American population and had started to search for an order of women religious to staff the institution. Although a Catholic hospital already existed in the city, the reason

48 Memphis Annals, 1937-1938, BVM Archives, Dubuque.

49 Ibid.
for Dr. Hose’s efforts became clear. The racial realities of Catholic Memphis dictated
that people of African descent were not allowed to seek care at the Catholic St. Joseph’s
Hospital. 50

Sometimes, the Catholic religious population of Memphis attempted to transcend
the city’s racial codes. In 1939, the sisters of St. Augustine received an invitation from
Brother Theodore and Brother Michael, two Christian Brothers who taught at St.
Thomas’ Catholic School in Memphis, for St. Augustine’s students to attend a play
performed at the school. On the face of it, this invitation was perhaps not unusual – one
Catholic school extending an invitation to another Catholic school in the same city.
However, as the sisters noted, “This…might be termed “extraordinary” from the point of
view that Colored people in Memphis are never invited to attend anything that is given by
white people.” The BVMs chalked up the impetus for the invitation to the brothers’
“spirit of Christian charity and democracy.” 51 While this particular occasion suggests that
the Catholic community in Memphis sometimes transcended racial prejudices, still, the
reverse remained true more often than not.

The tentacles of Jim Crow sank deeply into the Memphis Catholic community. In
the spring of 1939, Memphis hosted a convention for Catholic Boy and Girl Scouts.
During its two years of existence, St. Augustine’s School instituted its own Catholic Boy
Scouts program. Outfitted in regulation Boy Scout uniforms, the boys of St. Augustine’s
troop attended the convention. The students and the sisters soon realized, however, that

50 Memphis Annals, 1937-1938, BVM Archives, Dubuque.
51 Memphis Annals, 1938-1939, BVM Archives, Dubuque.
the boys were not allowed to take full part in the day’s events. St. Augustine’s Boy Scouts, as the only African American troop, were told they could not march into the convention with the other schools. The sisters also learned that their troop could not sit alongside the other Catholic Boy Scout troops at the front of the convention auditorium.52 The BVMs quickly confronted the racial realities of the southern city and witnessed discrimination leveled at their students as they continued their work at St. Augustine’s.

Despite myriad challenges, the sisters from Dubuque conducted the school as they would any ordinary Catholic school in the urban North. The historical record suggests that many Catholic women religious who taught at schools for Protestant African American children across the South simply transplanted teaching methods and curricula applied in northern schools. Certainly, the rhythm of the academic and liturgical calendar at St. Augustine’s appeared virtually indistinguishable from any other Catholic school in the nation. The Mass, rosaries, and celebrations of feasts and holy days regularly appeared in the BVMs’ records of the school year, as was the case for similar schools across the country. Moreover, baptism was not a precondition for attendance at the school. If the sole aim of schools such as St. Augustine’s was blanket conversion of local schoolchildren, a simple tool for achieving that end would have been to require baptism prior to enrollment. No evidence indicates that this was the case. Records kept by the sisters also indicated that children attended Mass every morning and learned the rosary.

Anecdotal evidence further demonstrated that the nuns from the North essentially transplanted their teaching methods and curriculum into the schools in the South. Sister Kathryn Lawlor, a BVM who arrived in Memphis in 1953, remembered this distinctly.

52 Memphis Annals, 1938-1939, BVM Archives, Dubuque.
“They [her students at St. Augustine’s] went to daily Mass, and on Tuesdays we not only had daily Mass, we also had a novena that they attended,” she recalled. “There was absolutely no difference between white Catholic children and teaching black children who weren’t Catholic. So it was just a continuation of what we had done in the white schools.”

For the Sisters of Charity, a commitment to education defined their work more strongly than evangelization. The school was explicitly characterized as missionary in character, but the sisters themselves articulated the importance of education as a means of “racial uplift” within a year of their arrival in Memphis. One passage from their 1938 Annals indicated, “It is very definitely felt and realized after one year’s work among the Colored, that the greatest good to the Colored people must come through the school.” The sisters’ records continued, “Higher standards and ideals must be taught to the little ones – who, in their generation will raise the norm of society.” While the BVMs likely rejoiced – and made note in their records – when their students or other members of the African American community joined the Catholic faith, little suggests that baptism was the sole aim of St. Augustine’s curriculum. For Lawlor, who taught at St. Augustine’s from 1953 to 1959, winning converts to Catholicism was simply not the aim. “It was about education,” she explained. “As I say, until I read that question [in the interview


54 Memphis Annals, 1938-1939, BVM Archives, Dubuque. Historian Suellen Hoy indicates that sisters who taught in Chicago’s black neighborhoods articulated a similar sentiment. This congruity also points to the ways in which Catholic sisters, teaching in North or South, conceived of their work in similar ways. Suellen Hoy, Good Hearts: Catholic Sisters in Chicago’s Past (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 95.
guide provided by the author], I hadn’t even thought about it. That – did we have any converts? Gosh, I couldn’t think of any.”

The BVMs implemented a number of measures in pursuit of providing not necessarily a path to conversion but access to a quality education for their students. After the inaugural class of nine eighth-grade students graduated from St. Augustine’s in June of 1938, the sisters announced plans to open a ninth grade the following school year. Over the next two years, the school added additional high school grades. When the 1941 school year opened, St. Augustine’s included classes from the first through the twelfth grade. School activities and curriculum expanded at a commensurate speed.

Beyond regular instruction for the grade school students, in 1938 the sisters provided music, English, and Latin classes for the burgeoning high school. Twenty-three younger students also registered for music lessons, and during this year enrollment increased to two hundred and four students. The BVMs also worked assiduously to build a library for St. Augustine. By the spring of 1939, the school’s collection of fiction grew to over three hundred titles. An additional library which contained “books suitable for spiritual reading or reference work in religion, and reference materials in many other branches of study” included around five hundred books as well. Early 1939 also saw the inaugural performance of St. Augustine’s orchestra.

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56 Memphis Annals, June 1938, BVM Archives, Dubuque.
57 Memphis Annals, 1941-1942, BVM Archives, Dubuque.
58 Memphis Annals, 1938-1939, BVM Archives, Dubuque.
With enrollment at two hundred and ten students in eleven grades in 1940, the Sisters of Charity in Memphis made substantive changes to the layout and resources of the school. Accordingly, the fiction library on the second floor of the brick building on Walker Avenue was converted to a typing room. The third-floor library, which contained the school’s reference materials, was called into service as a music room as well. An enclosed side porch on the building became the science room. Indeed, a state school inspector examined the St. Augustine science room and its equipment and informed the sisters that their science room and equipment “far exceed[ed] the equipment for General Science required by the State of Tennessee.” Similarly, in the spring of 1941 an inspector from Memphis’ main library visited St. Augustine’s collection of books and advised the BVMs that their library appeared “one of the most complete smaller libraries in the city.” The St. Augustine library had expanded at an exponential rate, and by this time numbered around two thousand titles. Records indicated that the sisters assigned the typing class the task of cataloguing the extensive – and growing – library.  

The 1941-1942 school year included a number of “firsts” for the fast-developing St. Augustine’s School. The sisters instituted the twelfth grade in the fall of 1941 and graduated their first class of high school seniors, which numbered seven, in June of 1942. The school also held its first high school dance. Father Bertrand, the pastor of St. Augustine’s Church, reportedly pledged to the high school students that when St. Augustine’s School included a full complement of high school grades, a high school dance would soon follow. True to his word, under the sponsorship of Sister Mary Clara,

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59 Memphis Annals, 1940-1941, BVM Archives, Dubuque.
the high school grades enjoyed a “happy, well-conducted and successful affair…the boys and girls are courteous and refined toward each other and the Sisters.”

To a large extent, the rhythm of the school year at St. Augustine’s in Memphis mirrored any average school in the Catholic urban north. Still, the fact remained that life at a Catholic mission school and church in the south differed markedly from counterparts in the north. Matters of race came to the fore in novel ways for the Sisters of Charity in Tennessee. For instance, in February of 1943 St. Augustine’s School first celebrated “Negro History Week.” This annual event first emerged under the auspices of black historian Carter G. Woodson in 1926. The BVMs’ records from this particular week detailed the extent to which the sisters dedicated themselves to the event.

It was the first time St. Augustine School was ready to note this [the celebration of Negro History Week]. An exhibit of new books, pictures, and magazines of and about Negroes was held in the front hall of the school. Catholic magazines devoted to Negro Mission work were prominently displayed. In the classrooms, the Sisters called attention to Negro Saints: St. Augustine, Blessed Martin, the Martyrs of Uganda, St. Benedict the Moor… Sam Qualls, Jr. came to the school on February 9th and gave a very interesting lecture on the great Negro scientist, George Washington Carver, to whom Sam had been personal valet for two years at Tuskegee Institute. The Negro National Anthem, “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing” was sung daily during the week. To the boys and girls, the song was “old,” but to our Sisters, it was part of an ever-growing education.

In many respects, the honoring of “Negro History Week” at a Catholic school in the South during the early 1940s was extraordinary. Here was a school created, administered and staffed by white Catholics for African American children which implemented black history into the school’s curricula decades before it appeared elsewhere in the United States. The incorporation of Negro History Week at St. Memphis Annals, 1941-1942, BVM Archives, Dubuque.

61 Memphis Annals, 1942-1943, BVM Archives, Dubuque.
Augustine’s, in addition to its curriculum and resources as outlined above, suggested the great lengths to which the Sisters of Charity went to provide a quality education for their students in ways that were remarkable for the point of time in American history.

Outside of the classroom, the sisters’ connections to other Catholic groups and institutions often benefitted their students. Upon their arrival in the South, the sisters from Dubuque forged connections with other groups of women religious in the area. The first example of the utility of Catholic networks for the BVMs’ students at St. Augustine’s emerged in May 1939. Two sisters who hailed from St. Louis stayed with the BVMs at the convent on the third floor of the brick building on Walker Avenue. These St. Mary’s sisters traveled to Memphis to attend the National X-Ray Convention; their order trained as nurses and worked at Catholic hospitals across the country. By chance, the sisters from St. Louis found the Sisters of Charity in the Catholic directory and arranged to stay with them. According to the BVMs’ records, after the sisters from St. Louis departed, the two communities of nuns stayed in contact with each other and their friendship developed. The girls from that year’s graduating class at St. Augustine’s already had their applications to St. Mary’s sisters’ training school for black nurses in St. Louis. In this instance, students from St. Augustine took advantage of the relationship that developed between the nuns in the South and their counterparts in the Midwest.

This practice continued in later decades as well. Sister Kathryn Lawlor, herself a teacher at St. Augustine’s in the 1950s, remembered the connections that developed among the different communities of women religious. The BVMs, sisters from the

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62 Memphis Annals, 1939-1940, BVM Archives, Dubuque.
Nashville Dominican order, and a group of Mercy Sisters grew to know each other in Memphis. Lawlor also remembered the importance of broader Catholic networks that directly benefitted her St. Augustine’s students. “Because of our connections, we were able to place students who wanted to go on to college and mostly they never had the means to go to college, so it was important to have these connections because they would give them scholarships and take care of them, really,” she detailed. “So that too, those connections, were very important.”

Further, education at St. Augustine’s was a two-way street. Not only did the BVM sisters provide instruction, they also received important lessons regarding the racial realities faced by their students in Memphis. Sister Kilian Pollard, who arrived at St. Augustine’s in 1952, described herself as arriving at St. Augustine’s as relatively inexperienced in the ways of the world, particularly in terms of racial discrimination. Upon arrival in Memphis, however, her education began. “In 1952, I discovered black children couldn’t even to into a public library. Can you imagine that?” Pollard exclaimed in a 1988 interview. Other manifestations of prejudice from various corners became evident as well. She also recalled an incident in the early 1950s when a student from St. Augustine’s won an essay contest that was held under the auspices of the National Council of Christians and Jews for Brotherhood. However, the student did not receive his award at the appointed time and place. “The group couldn’t give him his

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award at its dinner because blacks weren’t allowed in! They came later to school and
gave it to him. Wasn’t that the height of ridiculousness?” recalled Pollard. She remained
in Memphis for the duration of her career, which she spent tirelessly working on behalf of
equal rights for African Americans. 65

The BVMs could not mitigate, however, the second-class status of black students
in Memphis’ Catholic school system. The practice of segregating students, like those
from St. Augustine’s, at diocesan events featured prominently in Lawlor’s recollections
of her years teaching in Memphis in the 1950s. “They would have some kind of diocesan
conferences for the children, and the children would go, and we always had to march at
the end after the white children, because when I was down there it was very much the Jim
Crow days and it was very much segregation,” she remembered. “So the little black
children always had to march behind the white children in whatever was the procession
or the occasion we were attending.”66

The memory of the racial discrimination leveled against their students often
depthly affected the sisters, even years after they had left the South. For Lawlor, the
memory of the treatment endured by her students, remained deeply painful nearly sixty
years later. Even something as seemingly innocuous as a class field trip was riven with
potential hazards in Jim Crow Memphis. “Well, actually, we kept them away from white
people,” explained Lawlor. “They could go to the zoo on Thursdays, which was for
black folks, so that’s when we went to the zoo. They could go to the library, I forget

65 Ibid.
What day, that’s when we’d go to the library.” The sisters aimed to guard their students against activity that might put the students in negative situations. “We – we tried to be as protective as possible because, just in ordinary life they had enough problems without us bringing them into worse problems,” she remembered. “And so we followed, we followed those segregation rules with our students. Just to avoid any kind of conflict.”

In addition to the racial minefields that accompanied the students and the sisters of St. Augustine’s when they ventured out into Memphis, the city’s public transportation also brought home the terrible reality of everyday life in the Jim Crow South. First of all, Lawlor explained, the color line was demarcated on Memphis busses by a bar across the seats. As the number of white and black bus riders fluctuated, the bar moved either forward or backward to mark the color line. St. Augustine’s students had to navigate this particular experience on a daily basis. As Lawlor recalled, the sisters would accompany St. Augustine’s students to the bus stop. There, they would witness the same heartbreaking scene, day after day. “It was – we took them to the corner to get on the bus and it was always very sad – it was heart-rendering, even now I’m having a hard time,” Lawlor said quietly, with tears in her eyes. “We – the little kids particularly, they would get on the bus and you know, they were loud and full of life, and they would sit on the first seat on the bus. And the bus driver would say, “Get to the back of the bus.”

This particular cruelty, located within the seemingly innocuous act of getting on a bus, bookended the school day for St. Augustine’s students. “They didn’t know that’s how they were supposed – they didn’t know that was going to happen. Oh, it was like – they would quietly go to the back of the bus because this white man had said… “Go to

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the back of the bus.”68 The BVM sisters stood witness to this daily scene in which the innocence of children was slowly stripped away by the realities of the segregated South.

For the Catholic sisters who taught at southern mission schools towards the middle of the twentieth century, a sense of continuity and change characterized their work. On one hand, their presence in the South harkened back to the Church’s earliest determination to educate and evangelize southern African Americans. The route that took sisters like Kathryn Lawlor, Janet Tucci, and Rosemary Winter from their respective northern religious communities to the South stretched back through the decades to the Second and Third Plenary Council of the 1860s and 1880s. However, by the time these sisters arrived in the South, much had changed. Education, not evangelization, became the sole focus of their work. The BVMs and Franciscans also forged connections with other communities of religious in ways that often benefitted their students as well. As these sisters became deeply involved with their students and the local black communities, they recognized the daily horrors visited upon their students in the Jim Crow South.

When events surrounding the modern civil rights movement gained momentum, many nuns – Franciscans and BVMs among them – supported African American calls for civil rights. Ultimately, however, these communities of women religious also had to reckon with racial prejudice within their own midst.

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CHAPTER V

STUDENTS AND SCHOOLS OF THE SOUTH

The story of the Catholic mission in the American South began among the highest ranks of the Church. The work of education and evangelization was then largely delegated to women religious. However, the reality of the Catholic mission in the American South was defined in large part by African Americans themselves. Local black communities were not simply passive recipients of the Church’s efforts. They were not the faceless, nameless “colored harvest.” African Americans students, parents, and other stakeholders defined the arrival of a Catholic school or church in their community on their own terms.

Mission schools emerged against a multifaceted backdrop that often consisted of efforts driven by Catholic authorities and the enthusiasm and support of local black communities. To a large degree, interest from predominantly Protestant African American parents for Catholic education originated from the perceived quality of the schools and the care and attention paid by many sisters to the needs of the students. Though some individuals supported the mission schools because of its religious affiliation with the Catholic Church, the majority of black students and parents viewed the schools as superior educational alternatives to area public schools. Paying attention
to the perspective of black students also relays a sense of the deeply complicated racial situations that often existed at mission schools. The shame of segregation, even within the sisterhoods of a “universal” Church, profoundly affected the lives of individual students of the South.

**Clarksdale, Mississippi: Immaculate Conception School**

Mission churches and schools in the South sometimes originated from more than just a local bishop inviting religious brothers and sisters to set up shop at a church and school in his diocese. The story Immaculate Conception parish in Clarksdale, Mississippi, demonstrates how historical actors and events at the local level encountered and interpreted the Church’s southern mission project. During the late 1940s, a remarkable series of events led to the founding of Immaculate Conception school and church.

The original impetus for the Catholic school and church in Clarksdale reportedly stemmed from an encounter between Claude Newman, an African American man convicted of murder and sentenced to death in Vicksburg, Mississippi and Father Robert O’Leary. While awaiting his execution, which was scheduled to take place in the winter of 1944, Newman scuffled with another inmate. During this confrontation, the other inmate threw a small medal at Newman. The medal, it turned out, was of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Newman placed the medal around his neck. That night, he had a vision of the Virgin Mary in which she said to him, “If you would like Me to be your Mother, and you would like to be My child, send for a priest of the Catholic Church.” That priest
turned out to be Father Robert O’Leary, who provided instruction in Catholic catechism to Newman and other inmates at the prison.

In another extraordinary episode that took place during one of these catechism lessons, Newman reportedly explained the process of Catholic confession to O’Leary after hearing of this sacrament from his vision of the Virgin Mary. To counter the priest’s disbelief, Newman then relayed to O’Leary another part of his vision. “She told me that if you doubted me or showed hesitancy, I was to remind you that lying in a ditch in Holland, you made a vow to Her which She’s still waiting for you to keep.”

Seemingly, O’Leary had vowed to build a church in honor of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary. Newman himself converted to Catholicism prior to his execution, and O’Leary was transferred to Clarksdale, Mississippi in 1945.¹

Upon arrival in Clarksdale, O’Leary set about the establishment of Immaculate Conception church and school. The town’s small black Catholic population was instrumental in the successful establishment of the parish and church.²

Immaculate Conception was first reported by O’Leary to the Commission for the Catholic Missions

¹ This story was included in a brief, informal history of Immaculate Conception written by Lois Jones, who attended Immaculate Conception from kindergarten through her junior year of high school. Interestingly, in October 2012 the National Catholic Register reported that a play based on the O’Leary/Newman story was slated to premier in Santa Monica, California. The article quoted the archivist for the Society of the Divine Word Chicago Province, the order to which O’Leary belonged, as saying that O’Leary’s account remained “controversial.” However, after contacting this archivist for the Society of the Divine Word in Chicago, Marcia Stein, I learned that the application of the term “controversial” in this article was somewhat misleading. Stein relayed to me that the archives had very little information at all about O’Leary, as most SVD records about him would have been kept at the order’s southern province. However, those records were destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. Stein indicated that she had described the Marian apparition story as “controversial” because almost no available source material exists on the subject at all as a result of Katrina. “Play Tells Story of Death-Row Inmate’s Marian Visions and Catholic Conversion,” National Catholic Register, October 16, 2012, http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/play-tells-story-of-death-row-inmates-marian-visions-and-catholic-conversion/.

Among the Colored People and the Indians in 1947. His efforts first appeared in the Natchez diocese’s report to the Commission in which indicated that he had rented space at building in town to hold Mass. By the following year, the diocesan report to the Commission noted that Immaculate Conception School had opened in a new structure which also served as the mission church in Clarksdale.³

O’Leary next turned to an order of women religious to provide instruction at the mission school. He was apparently familiar with the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, an order that traditionally trained its sisters to teach, and arranged a visit to the motherhouse in Dubuque.⁴ So deep was O’Leary’s desire to have BVMs in Clarksdale that he reportedly refused to leave his chair until he had secured a promise from the Mother General that she would send sisters to his mission school in Mississippi. In September 1947 O’Leary welcomed a pair of BVM sisters to Clarksdale. During this first year, the school included only first, second, and third grade. On the first day of class, twenty-two students filed into the temporary classroom located in O’Leary’s parlor. Soon, however, a school building was erected and Immaculate Conception school began to grow.⁵

By 1948, Immaculate Conception represented one of sixteen schools in the diocese “for the special use of Negroes.”⁶ Bishop R.O. Gerow, however, who had been

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⁴ For more on the BVMs of Dubuque, see Chapter IV.
⁵ Diary of Sister Mary Rosarita Donnelly, Clarksdale Records, BVM Archives, Dubuque.
at the helm of the diocese for over twenty years, believed his territory remained woefully lacking in terms of a Catholic presence. For example, Gerow sent in 1946 an extraordinary pamphlet along with his annual report to the Commission. The pamphlet proclaimed in bold-face type, “The Cross Casts a Weak Shadow OVER MISSISSIPPI: An APPEAL from the heart of the SOUTHERN HOME MISSIONS.” The remainder of the pamphlet continued in a similar, exclamatory vein. “53 PRIESTLESS COUNTIES! 33 CHURCHLESS COUNTIES! CATHOLIC EDUCATION BLACKED OUT IN 67 MISSISSIPPI COUNTIES! ONLY ONE OF EVERY 200 MISSISSIPPI NEGROES IS A CATHOLIC!”

The bishop concluded by appealing directly to the leaders of congregations of women religious for their assistance in Mississippi. He urged, “A wonderful missionary work can be accomplished particularly through Catholic hospitals and schools…Of the approximately 5,000 students in our Colored Catholic schools, 60% do not belong to the Catholic Church.”7 The establishment of Immaculate Conception in Clarksdale, Mississippi took place on the fertile soil of local African American enthusiasm, the efforts of Father O’Leary, and Bishop Gerow’s insistence on raising the profile of Catholicism in the state.

The inaugural school year at Immaculate Conception in 1947 included two sisters and twenty-four students. Two years later, in 1950, the staff of sisters had doubled and the number of students increased to one hundred and thirty-five. By 1958, five sisters,

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7 Reports and Applications for Aid, Diocese of Natchez-Jackson, 1909-1974, BCIM Records, Marquette University, Series 5/2, Reel 8, 1946.
two lay teachers, and three hundred and four students rounded out the school. The Clarksdale mission site continued to receive close attention in Bishop Gerow’s annual report and application to the Commission for funds. A sense of the community’s growth and its need for additional Commission money emerged as well:

At Clarksdale we badly need an extension to the school building of the Immaculate Conception Mission in order that we may be able to accommodate the growing number of students. This mission at Clarksdale was started a little over a decade ago. It had nothing to start with…At first a rented room was used as a center where the priest might gather a group for the purpose of instructions – today we have there a nice plant consisting of a church, rectory, school, and convent, and a nice little congregation of Catholics.

By 1959, the school included all grades through high school and had just been given accreditation and a high scholastic rating based on the academic achievements of the students.

Students who attended Immaculate Conception from the late 1940s into the 1970s recalled various ways in which Clarksdale’s black community supported the fledgling school. Golden Sharpe, who was born in 1947, started at the school in kindergarten in 1953 and graduated in 1965. His parents originally hailed from Jonestown, Mississippi and had moved to Clarksdale in the early 1940s. Sharpe’s mother, who received her B.A. from Tennessee State University and a Master’s degree from Delta State University in Mississippi, taught at a public school in Clarksdale. His father was a World War I veteran and a businessman in Clarksdale. As a student at Immaculate Conception, which

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9 Ibid., 1960.

10 Clarksdale Annals, 1958, BVM Archives, Dubuque.
was often shorthanded as “IC,” Sharpe remembered the sense of community that sprang up around Immaculate Conception and the positive reception of the BVM sisters within the African American neighborhood surrounding the school. “They [the BVM sisters at Immaculate Conception] were well-received and accepted. There was never really any issue,” he recalled. “The Catholic church during that time, it was a complete community.”

Thomas McDaniel attended Immaculate Conception from 1947 to 1959. He voiced a similar remembrance. McDaniel’s parents moved from Missouri to Mississippi in the mid-1940 and enrolled him in Immaculate Conception’s inaugural kindergarten class in 1947. His father worked as a wholesale distributor in Clarksdale and his mother ran a small neighborhood grocery store. McDaniel also remembered that the local black community strongly supported the school and the nuns, though he also wondered, “Why would these people come from up north or wherever they were coming from, to come to IC to teach black kids?” McDaniel later came to a realization. “And over a period of years I came to understand why. They were trying to help people.”

The relationships that developed among the first generation of Immaculate Conception students and parents with O’Leary and the BMVs were an important component in the community from the very first. Former student Lois Jones, born in 1942 in Pace, Mississippi, spoke to this dynamic. She was the daughter of a World War II soldier and an English teacher. After the end of World War II, her father returned to Clarksdale and worked as in the post office and later as an instructor in Lyons School,

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just outside of town. Jones’ mother taught elementary education at a public school in Pace and later went on to earn a master’s degree in English literature at Delta State in Cleveland, Mississippi. A kindergartner in Immaculate Conception’s first class in 1947, Jones attended the school through her junior year. She too recalled the supportive relationship that generally characterized the Immaculate Conception community. Jones’ mother, Lucretia, was involved in the original effort to open a Catholic school for black children in Clarksdale. “Even the place where the school was located, I have a feeling that she might have been instrumental in helping him [Fr. O’Leary] find the spot to house us, to house the students until the school, until an actual building, was actually built,” explained Jones. She also remembered the positive reception of the BVM sisters among Immaculate Conception’s African American students and parents. “I think they [the sisters] were readily accepted. I think the introduction of the school and the church in our community was so welcome that they were readily accepted. They could go anywhere they wanted,” Jones recalled. “They would visit our homes, they had dinner with us.”

The enthusiasm of Clarksdale’s largely Protestant African American population for the establishment of this Catholic school ran up against the official goals of the Church’s mission project. In the eyes of most local parents, evangelization was never the school’s primary aim, although some students did convert. Golden Sharpe, who graduated from Immaculate Conception in 1965, was baptized into the Catholic faith in first grade. However, the decision did not stem from his experiences at school. The impetus for conversion instead originated from the relationship that developed between Sharpe’s family and their Catholic neighbors who lived across the street.

13 Lois Jones, telephone interview author, October 29, 2012.
Sharpe’s parents, who were both Baptist – in fact, his father had founded a church, Chapel Hill, in Clarksdale – ultimately turned to the Church as their friendship with their Catholic neighbors grew. As a result of this relationship, Sharpe’s parents determined to send him to Immaculate Conception. Conversion to Catholicism in Clarksdale, nonetheless, remained the exception rather than the rule. “That was something [conversion] that just – it wasn’t – it was there, it was religion classes, but there was never any initiative for conversion, it was totally left up to you whether or not you wanted to convert,” remembered Sharpe. “There was never any pressure or any type of evangelism [from the sisters or local priest].”\(^\text{14}\)

Angela Cousin, an Immaculate Conception student from 1962 to 1975, shared this view as well. Her mother had attended the school for a couple of years in the mid-1950s and had herself converted to Catholicism. Cousin’s family had moved to Clarksdale from southern Mississippi well before she was born in 1957 and, once settled, her mother worked as a cook. Her father, after retiring from the Air Force, worked for the Internal Revenue Service and as an electrical engineer, and also earned Master’s degrees in electrical engineering and mass communications.

One of the few “cradle Catholics” at Immaculate Conception, Cousin also remembered that conversion was not emphasized at school. For those who did convert, she suggested, the sense of community at Immaculate Conception played an important role. “You know I think that during the time, we wanted to be a part of it, they were kind and it was such a sense of community at that time,” Cousin explained. “Now this is what

\(^{14}\) Golden Sharpe, telephone interview with author, October 25, 2012.
I’m looking back and saying because I can’t – the nuns didn’t say, ‘Oh you oughta be Catholic’ or the priest wouldn’t say, ‘You need to be Catholic.’ No, that wasn’t said, I don’t recall that. But I do remember it just being a big sense of community.”

A belief in the quality of education offered at a private, Catholic school provided the motivation for many of Clarksdale’s Protestant parents to send their children to Immaculate Conception. As in other Catholic mission schools across the South, the promise of rigorous instruction and discipline, not necessarily the opportunity to convert to Catholicism, underpinned enrollment. Angela Cousin’s mother felt this way and chose to send all seven of her children to Immaculate Conception. Golden Sharpe also recalled that a perception existed within the community that one would receive a better education at a Catholic school. Thomas McDaniel agreed. Indeed, one of the things he remembered most about his years as a student in the late 1940s and 1950s was the time and care that the BVM sisters took with the students. “The nuns spent a lot of time with you,” McDaniel commented. “If you were having problems with the stuff, you could go in the afternoons and they would give you some extra help, whatever you needed.” For Lois Jones’ mother, the reputation of Catholic education was one of the major reasons she sent her children to Immaculate Conception. Jones remembered, “She definitely recognized the quality of the education and so she just at that point, whether it’s a legitimate assumption or not, she just assumed that a Catholic education would better for her children.”

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15 Angela Cousin, telephone interview with author, October 26, 2012.

16 Lois Jones, telephone interview with author, October 2012. Angela Cousin also commented that, “I remember at that time, my mom said she always wanted better for her children and she felt that, you know,
Still, drawbacks existed. As a small school, Immaculate Conception was unable to offer a full complement of extracurricular activities to students. This absence caused some students to transfer to the Clarksdale public school. A few of Thomas McDaniel’s classmates chose to leave for public school because there was neither a band nor a football team at Immaculate Conception. Angela Cousin, too, recalled that the lack of electives, including athletics and music, was a downside to the school.17

Other difficulties emerged as well. Occasionally, tensions arose between the sisters and the students. Cousin called to mind a couple of negative experiences that she remembered from her years as a student at Immaculate Conception. Once, in first grade, she was slapped by one of the nuns, an act that remained fresh in her mind nearly fifty years later. She also recalled feeling that some of the sisters tended to favor more affluent students. “I came from a poor family,” Cousin explained, “We were the family – we cleaned the school up in order to help with our tuition. You know, my mama didn’t have a lot of money, she had a lot of children, didn’t have a lot of money.” Later, she continued, “I felt that one of the nuns in a situation that I had just favored one of the children whose parents were more affluent.” Still, Cousin was quick to point out that these were isolated incidents and did not indicate a broader trend. In the end, she

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17 Angela Cousin, telephone interview with author, October 2012.
concluded, "But other than little instances like that, I can’t say but overall they [the sisters] were good to us. To me.”\textsuperscript{18}

Lois Jones recalled an experience at Immaculate Conception that exerted a pronounced, negative impact on her educational goals. By the time of her junior year in 1958, Jones had achieved an A average which, under state law, allowed her to take an exam that would exempt her from taking senior year classes. She could instead enroll directly into college after her junior year. Students had to have at least a B average to take the exam at all, though Jones’ grades easily surpassed that benchmark. Jones passed the exam, was accepted to Tugaloo University in Jackson, Mississippi, and was preparing to begin college life.

Then, she received a letter from Tugaloo. The correspondence advised her that her official transcripts, sent to the university from Immaculate Conception, showed that she did not have a B average and was therefore ineligible to matriculate after her junior year of high school. Two of Jones’ classmates who also planned to graduate early and attend Tugaloo received the same letter. Then, Jones explained, “My parents took my report cards, and not just my parents but the parents of the other girls, my friends, took their report cards there [to the admissions office at Tugaloo]. And it still didn’t matter because the official transcript that she sent was changed.” The only explanation for the discrepancy was that the principal of Immaculate Conception at the time, a BVM sister, had changed the grades in their official transcripts.

Why had this happened? As far as Jones and her friends could tell, the grades were changed because the principal was upset about the students leaving school early.

\textsuperscript{18} Angela Cousin, telephone interview with author, October 26, 2012.
without finishing their high school degrees. The principal apparently wanted the first graduating class from Immaculate Conception – the class of 1959 – to graduate together. In response to this situation, Jones’ mother withdrew all of her children from Immaculate Conception for the next school year. Jones and her two friends finished their high school degrees at a nearby county school and ultimately did attend Tugaloo, but the entire experience was deeply upsetting.\textsuperscript{19}

Despite these isolated incidents, Cousin, McDaniel, Sharp, and Jones generally believed that the BVM sisters who taught at Immaculate Conception cared deeply about the students and aimed to provide the best education possible. A particular memory stayed with Cousin, as she recalled in later years: “It’s just been the warmth – I think I remember the warmth – I think I just remember them just wanting us to be good students.” McDaniel also looked back on his school years in a positive light, commenting, “I thought it was very, very good school, it was exceptional. And the nuns were – they just spent a lot of time with you.”\textsuperscript{20}

Golden Sharpe also recalled the care with which the sisters approached their position as educators. “Some of the things I remember mostly, just good conversations that, the nuns, they always encouraged you and motivated you,” he explained. “And the main thing, you knew they were genuine. It was just, you know how some teachers, they just go through the motions but you could just sense that natural concern.” Even for

\textsuperscript{19} Lois Jones, telephone interview with author, October 29, 2012.

\textsuperscript{20} Golden Sharpe, telephone interview with author, October 22, 2012.
Jones, leaving aside the situation with her transcript, remarked, “I actually enjoyed all of my years...I definitely think my education there – it’s carried me a long way.”

The experiences of students at Immaculate Conception in Mississippi suggested important ways in which the Catholic evangelical project in the South was interpreted by those at the local level. Sometimes the support among local lay Catholics intersected with southern bishops’ plans for the establishment of schools and churches in largely Protestant communities. A common denominator, though, appeared in the broad-based support of these schools by local African Americans students and parents, often regardless of religious partisanship.

Outside the school, however, the racial realities of southern life presented difficulties for members of the Immaculate Conception community, including students, parents, and the BVM sisters. A constant portent of violence hung over the South well through the mid-twentieth century. After fourteen-year-old Emmett Till was brutally murdered in Money, Mississippi in 1955, Jones remembered the profound impact the event had on Clarksdale’s African American community. “We were terrified. We were literally terrified. We were scared to go anywhere,” she recalled. “We kind of froze. We definitely, we were used to Jim Crow, we were used to not being able to try on clothes in certain stores and things like that, but that was such a blatant act that we were definitely scared.”

Clarksdale’s fifty-mile proximity to Money, Mississippi, where the murder took place, also increased the shock and horror within Clarksdale’s black community. “At that

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time I was going into ninth grade,” explained Jones. “For a while we didn’t go to the movies, we stopped going to the movies, stopped doing things – parents wouldn’t let you out of their sight.”

Eight years later, when Jones as a student at Tugaloo University in Jackson, Mississippi civil rights leader Medgar Evers was assassinated. For Jones, a connection closer than geography increased the horror of the event. Evers, too, lived in Jackson, and often took Tugaloo students along with him when he visited other towns in the course of his work on behalf of the civil rights movement. Only a month before he was murdered, Lois Jones had ridden along with Evers on a trip to Clarksdale.

Sister Therese Frelo, a BVM who arrived in Clarksdale in 1959, also observed the realities of the Jim Crow South. For Frelo, the daily cruelties of the Jim Crow South affected Immaculate Conception students with a grim consistency. A school trip to Jackson for a science fair stuck in her mind with particular clarity. During the bus ride to Jackson, the sisters and their students stopped in Yazoo City for lunch at a café and for a bathroom break. Frelo asked a waitress in the café about access to the restrooms. A response came in no uncertain terms. “And they told us, ‘Well, coloreds go out in the back,’ Frelo said, “so we went out in the back and there was a sign pointing to the field.” Frelo and the other BMVs immediately made other arrangements for the annual trip to the Jackson science fair so as not to put their students in that situation again. After contacting the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth in Yazoo City, the BVMs arranged for the

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22 Lois Jones, telephone interview with author, October 29, 2012.
Immaculate Conception students to stop at the Sisters of Charity’s school on their way to the annual Jackson science fair.\textsuperscript{23}

To a certain degree, nuns occupied a unique racial position. Living and working within black communities often resulted in students and parents perceiving them as different from the average white southerner. Indeed, Frelo believed, “They didn’t think of us as white. They thought of us as sisters.”\textsuperscript{24} Lois Jones remembered viewing the white BVMs who taught in Clarksdale as different from most white people she encountered in Mississippi. “The relationship between the white sisters and the black students was comfortable,” explained Jones, “in the fact that they were white people who we were not afraid of. I’ll say that, because at that time, you were afraid of a lot of white people. But we were not afraid of them.”\textsuperscript{25}

\textbf{Fairfield, Alabama: St. Mary’s School}

Another marked example of local support from local African Americans for a mission school appeared in Alabama in the mid-1940s at St. Mary’s in Fairfield, Alabama. The school was staffed by Franciscan Sisters from Joliet, Illinois.\textsuperscript{26} The Franciscans, who first arrived at St. Mary’s in 1946, witnessed a remarkable level of support from Fairfield’s local black community from the very first. One gentleman, a Baptist minister by the name of Reverend Nicholas H. Hicks, wholeheartedly encouraged

\textsuperscript{23} Therese Frelo, interview with author, Joliet, IL, July 27, 2011.

\textsuperscript{24} Therese Frelo, interview with author, Joliet, IL, July 27, 2011. A similar sentiment was also articulated by Sister Rosemary Winter’s students in Memphis, as discussed in Chapter IV.

\textsuperscript{25} Lois Jones, telephone interview with author, October 29, 2012.

\textsuperscript{26} See Chapter IV.
his granddaughter, Constance Kelley, in her studies at St. Mary’s Catholic school. “Reverend Hicks,” the sisters reported, “is a very grand character. He is one of the oldest and most prominent Baptist ministers in Fairfield.”27 Despite the theological differences that separated Reverend Hicks from the Joliet Franciscans, the nuns from Joliet recounted, “his co-operation with the faculty and school projects was 100 percent in every way.”28 At times, the Reverend Hicks’ support of his granddaughter’s school extended to his pocketbook. As a fundraiser for the school, the Franciscans hit upon the scheme of holding elections for May King and Queen. One cent equaled one vote. In support of Constance’s bid, the Reverend Hicks spent nearly fifty dollars. His granddaughter was crowned St. Mary’s first May Queen.29

The minister supported Constance and her Catholic education in other ways as well. In the spring of 1946, six-year old Constance converted to Catholicism. Though she was raised as a Baptist by her parents and grandparents, little in the historical records suggests this first-grade convert met with opposition from her family. Indeed, both of her parents and Reverend Hicks attended Constance’s First Communion that spring. “[Reverend Hicks] was present for the ceremony and was intensely interested,” noted the nuns. “But he thinks he is too old to change his Religion. Yet, he is very happy Constance is a good Catholic.” The fire of conversion seemingly burned brightly within Constance. She advised the Franciscans that “she will not be happy till she has converted

27 St. Mary’s Annals, March 19, 1946, Joliet Franciscan Archives.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
all her people.”

The zeal of six-year-old Constance Kelly, though filtered through the mediating pen of the Franciscans’ record-books, suggested an extraordinary enthusiasm for the Catholic faith.

Similarities marked the experiences of the students, parents, and sisters at St. Mary’s school and Immaculate Conception. The positive interest with which the Baptist minister Hicks viewed his granddaughter’s conversion to Catholicism echoed the support found among the Immaculate Conception community in Clarksdale for their local mission school, church, and the sisters. Negative elements appeared as well. At Immaculate Conception, as discussed above, individual tension between students and sisters sometimes emerged. At St. Mary’s in Fairfield, Alabama, problematic institutional policies added another layer of complexity to the story of the Catholic mission in the American South. In particular, institutional policies among congregations of traditionally white sisters that barred women of color was one of the most deeply troubling facets in the history of American sisterhoods.

During the Joliet Franciscans’ first years in Alabama, their counterparts back in Illinois were faced with the question of the color line. An inquiry into the feasibility of African American girls joining the Joliet Franciscans’ congregation provided a glimpse into the order’s perspective on racial matters. During the spring of 1947, the three Joliet Franciscans in the South neared the end of their second year at the little mission school in Fairfield. Back north in Joliet, a letter with a return address of New York arrived at the motherhouse. The correspondence, penned by a Father Emil Kapusta, a Catholic priest in Harlem, put an unprecedented question to the Joliet congregation. Fr. Kapusta was

30 Ibid.
curious. With a growing congregation at his parish in Harlem, he was increasingly approached by young African American girls interested in becoming nuns. However, he remained uncertain about different congregations’ policies regarding applicants’ race.

Fr. Kapusta, clearly no fool, perceived his letter was on a touchy errand. “Please do not misunderstand my letter,” he urged the Mother General. “My intention is not to cause trouble, but simply to have a clear picture, so that if girls do come in to inquire, I will be in a position to hand the girls a list of convents to choose from.” Frankly, Fr. Kapusta continued, “There is a suspicion that all convents will not admit Negro girls and so to avoid scandal, I want to compile this list.” He closed with a basic request. “Would you simply tell me whether or not your Order will accept Negro girls? If it does, would you send me a catalogue or tell me what your requirements are?”

A few weeks later, he received a response. The Franciscan Mother General and her Councilors had discussed the issue and reached a decision. “The general opinion is,” ran the answer from Joliet, “that our Congregation is not ready at this time to accept Negro girls.” Hints of a gradualist approach to Fr. Kapusta’s inquiry appeared next. “This question has not been considered previously, and would require time to study it from all angles, and especially so from the standpoint of the Negro herself who might be admitted.” Unfortunately, the letter contained no further explanation of this last point. “For the present at least,” the correspondence concluded, “our Congregation is not ready to admit them, and therefore we should not be included in the list you have in mind.”

Perhaps seeking to gild the pill, the letter closed with a final reflection. “We have a

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31 Fr. Emil Kapusta to the Franciscan Mother General, April 24, 1947, Correspondence folder, Franciscan Archives.
colored school in Alabama, and the Sisters there enjoy their work very much. It is a promising school, opened only two years ago.” Fr. Kapusta surely received many, many similar responses to his query from communities of women religious across the United States.

At the time of this exchange in 1947, the Joliet Franciscans response reflected the common approach to the question of integration among traditionally white congregations of women religious. Still, elements of the Franciscans’ response suggested that the “race question” remained somewhat ambiguous for this particular order. First of all, because the Mother General and her advisors had to first discuss the request among themselves, a policy on race had not been clearly defined. As far as the historical record extended, no individual of African descent was turned away from the Franciscans. One wonders, however, if their 1947 response – “our Congregation is not ready to admit them” – would have been the same if Fr. Kapusta had been writing from a predominantly Italian, Polish, Irish, or other parish with a population of European descent. Other congregations, however, faced this question from their own mission school students in the South.

**Memphis, Tennessee: St. Augustine’s School**

In the autumn of 1937, Charlotte Marshall set off for her first day of fifth grade at St. Augustine’s school. After attending public school in Memphis since kindergarten, her parents were thrilled that St. Augustine’s had been established to serve the city’s African


33 This distinction within Franciscan policy was pointed out to me by Sister Marian Voelker, the archivist for the Joliet Franciscan congregation. Sr. Marian also indicated that in 1954 an African American woman from Illinois joined the Franciscans.
American population. Other Catholic schools existed in Memphis, but segregation prevented black children from enrolling. Marshall attended her new school until she graduated in 1944. One of the highlights of her years at St. Augustine’s, she later remembered, were the relationships that developed between the students and the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVMs), the order of sisters who taught at the school.

Indeed, by her junior year, Marshall had determined that she herself wanted to become a BVM. “I wanted to enter the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary from Dubuque because they were our teachers and I thought the world of them,” Marshall explained. “We had no sign or hint of any prejudice from them and they were totally inculcated in giving us a good education, and they did.” Marshall approached a BVM sister with whom she had a close relationship. “At the time,” remembered Marshall, “she listened and encouraged me.” Her dream of entering the order of women religious she so deeply admired, however, was not to be. “She came back to me crying,” Marshall recounted, “telling me that it would not be possible for me to enter the BVMs. That was my first hint of what racism and prejudice was.”

This story illustrates contradiction that sometimes characterized Catholic mission schools in the South. On one hand, the schools and the sisters who staffed them often developed close ties with their students and local communities. On the other hand, issues related to race and discrimination appeared as well. More broadly, Marshall – and other students who attended southern mission schools – offered valuable demonstrations of the ways in which African Americans themselves viewed the Catholic evangelical

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project. Far more than simply passive observers in the southern evangelical project, African Americans approached the mission schools and parishes on their own terms and for their own purposes.

When Charlotte Marshall entered St. Augustine’s as a fifth grader on that autumn morning in 1937, the building she walked into symbolized more than mere brick and mortar. Many Catholics in Memphis’ African American community were instrumental in providing the impetus for the establishment of St. Augustine’s. Here, the creation of a mission school and church did not stem solely from the Church’s mandate to “save” southern black souls. Rather, local African Americans themselves had also sought out the founding of St. Augustine’s.

J.W. Hose, a staunch Catholic and a prominent black doctor in the city, was a key advocate for the establishment of St. Augustine’s. Hose had campaigned for the establishment of a Catholic parish and school in his community. When Bishop Adrian contacted the fathers of the Franciscan Sacred Heart Province in regards to their order staffing the proposed mission church, Hose urged the Franciscans to accept the invitation. Other local black parents and community members also lobbied for the church and school as well.35 After the founding of St. Augustine’s Hose continued to support the school and the BVM sisters who staffed the school in multiple ways.36

35 Author unknown, “Salt: A Publication of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary” (Winter 2003): 24, History, TN 110 folder, BVM Archives, Dubuque. Additionally, Charlotte Marshall spoke to the action taken with Memphis’ black community for the establishment of a Catholic church and school. As she remembered, “Encouragement came from our parents and another, Dr. J.W. Hose, who was one of the ones who had gone to the Bishop of Nashville asking for a Catholic Church and a Catholic school” (interview with author, November 8, 2012).

36 See Chapter III.
In addition to the indefatigable Dr. J.W. Hose, Louis Hobson, a man of African
descent from Memphis and a history teacher at Manassas High School, urged others of
his race to explore the benefits of Catholicism. He had himself converted to the faith on
December 24\textsuperscript{th} 1937. A year later, Hobson zealously sought to bring other African
Americans into communion with the Church. Accordingly, he wrote, printed, and
distributed a pamphlet that vaunted the Church as the source of “the salvation of the
American Negro, not only spiritually but also socially.”\textsuperscript{37}

For Hobson, myriad elements within the faith informed his decision to convert to
Catholicism and to advocate others of his race to follow. Pope Pius XI came in for
special praise. In Hobson’s view, the pope’s “keen interest in American Negroes”
indicated the viability of the Church as an avenue to the “true and satisfactory solution”
to the country’s racial issues. Indeed, the pope was only the beginning. Hobson singled
out particular American Catholic leaders, such as the Reverend John Gillard, the chaplain
for the Oblate Sisters of Providence. Located in Baltimore, the Oblates were the
country’s first African American sisterhood. Rev. James Murphy, who edited the
\textit{Catholic World} newspaper and Bishop William L. Adrian of Nashville, who presided
over Tennessee’s flock, also favorable found mention in Hobson’s pamphlet.
Congressional Catholics, particularly those who stood in support for the Wagner-Van

\textsuperscript{37} Louis Hobson, Untitled pamphlet, 1938, in folder entitled “History TN 110,” BVM Archives,
Dubuque, Iowa.
Nuys Anti-Lynching Bill, further bolstered Hobson’s argument in support of the Church’s racial politics.  

Hobson aimed to do more than merely inform his readers. He also provided them with the tools for their possible conversion. For those interested in learning more about Catholicism, Hobson directed them to an instructional class about the faith held on Monday evenings at 7:30. “These instructions are made very interesting,” he noted, “by means of a stereopticon, a machine that illustrated the lectures with pictures shown against the screen.” Attendees would be under no obligation to convert, Hobson continued, and were free and open to the public. The instructional courses were offered at St. Augustine’s Church located at 903 Walker Avenue in Memphis.

The enthusiasm of African American Catholics for the faith, though, sometimes ran up against the realities of racial discrimination even within their own Church. Charlotte Marshall was profoundly affected by her rejection from the Sisters of Charity. When asked how the BVMs’ decision had been explained to her, Marshall remembered that, in the end, the explanation was clear. “She [Marshall’s BVM teacher] simply told me that she had contacted their superior general at the time and was told that it would not be possible for me to enter their community,” recalled Marshall. “She didn’t try to

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38 This particular legislation passed the House in April 1937 but was killed by a Senate filibuster in February of the following year. If passed, the bill would have allowed for federal prosecution of state officials who did not act to stop lynching from occurring. Additionally, the bill would have included a mechanism to allow for the family of a lynching victim to seek monetary restitution from the county in which the lynching took place. A *New York Times* article reported that NAACP secretary Walter White, upon hearing of the bill’s demise, issued a statement in which he said that, “The incredibly bigoted attitude of the filibusterers should be a warning to all Americans who believe in democratic government.” “Filibuster Ended as Senate Shelves Anti-Lynch Bill,” *New York Times*, February 22, 1938.

explain it because I guess she knew that people in Memphis knew what racism was, so she simply just told me what the superior general had said and that she was sorry about that. That was the end of the conversation.” Marshall was devastated. “That blew my mind, that I would not be accepted with the community that had taught me.” Beyond her own feelings of shock, she was also struck by the contradiction of BVMs’ racial policy. “Why would they come to teach us at St. Augustine in the Bible belt in a totally African American group of people, if they did not want us in their community? It’s totally contradictory…that they could be there and working with us and yet I was not able to enter that community.”

Marshall initially believed that the Sisters of Charity’s refusal to admit her meant that she would not be allowed to enter any congregation of women religious. However, not long after hearing of the BMVs’ decision, Marshall was approached by a white woman named Victoria Chineworth who volunteered at St. Augustine’s. Chineworth urged Marshall to consider the Oblate Sisters of Providence, an order of nuns in Baltimore. The Oblates were one of the few traditionally African American sisterhoods in the United States, though Marshall was unaware of this at the time. Marshall later learned that Chineworth’s late husband was African American and her daughter, Alice, had herself joined the Oblates. Marshall agreed to have Chineworth write to the Oblates about the possibility of her joining the order.

Soon, she received a response, indicating that she was accepted into their order. “I showed the letter to my father,” Marshall recollected, “and he said, ‘I don’t know if

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this is going to work so I’m going to give you a round-trip ticket. And you can return whenever you want.’ Well, I did not return.” Her father, who was also not aware that Victoria Chineworth’s late husband had been African American and her daughter was an Oblate, expected that his own daughter would continue to be turned away from sisterhoods. Indeed, Marshall herself realized that the Oblates were a traditionally black congregation only when she arrived at their motherhouse on September 5, 1944.41

Charlotte Marshall was not the only young African American woman to encounter the color line that defined so many white sisterhoods. Victoria Chineworth’s daughter, Alice, had found her way to the Oblates a decade before via a similar experience. Alice Chineworth did not attend a southern mission school, but she, too, adored her BVM teachers at St. Joseph’s school in Rock Island, Illinois.

Born in 1917, Chineworth’s mother, a woman of German heritage and her father, a man of African descent, raised their four children in a thoroughly Catholic household. Although interracial couples often encountered verbal abuse, threats of violence, or worse in early twentieth-century America, Chineworth remembered that she and her family never faced any difficulty in Rock Island. Indeed, every weekday her mother drove her father to his downtown shoe-repair and shine shop. Before getting out of the car, she recalled, her father would always kiss her mother before going into work. When she picked him up at the end of the day, they always kissed hello. “Nothing was ever done to

make us feel like anyone resented that or would have harmed us,” Chineworth made clear. “It was a very unique situation.” 42

When Chineworth began kindergarten in 1921, she was immediately drawn to the Sisters of Charity who taught at St. Joseph’s Catholic School in Rock Island. One sister in particular stood out in young Alice Chineworth’s mind. Sister Mary Fidelus had helped Chineworth with a crafts project in class, an act of kindness that deeply impressed her. “I was so grateful for the help she gave me, when I got home that day I said to my mother and father, ‘I want to be a sister, just like Sister Mary Fidelus when I grow up,’” Chineworth remembered, laughing. “And they said ‘Oh that’s nice,’ you know. I was four, what did I know about life? I never changed. I never varied. Kept that desire all the way through.” As far as Chineworth could tell, the BVM teachers at the school also remained aware of her dream to join their order.

During her junior year, Chineworth’s counselor at school, Sister Mary Leonella, approached her about her future plans. Almost immediately, the sister asked Chineworth if she had given up her long-cherished dream of becoming a sister. “And of course I was shocked, I said ‘Oh, I’ve never given up the idea of being a sister, why do you ask?’” recalled Chineworth. “And she said ‘Well, I wondered what order you were going to enter.’ And I said, ‘Well I only know one order [the BVMs].’ And she began to cry,” Chineworth remembered. “And with tears running down her cheeks, she said, ‘You cannot be a BVM because you’re a woman of color.’ I was simply crushed.” The rejection was a profound shock, compounded by the fact that joining the Sisters of Charity had been Chineworth’s desire for so long. “It was just an overwhelming thing. I

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42 Alice Chineworth, telephone interview with author, November 6, 2012.
had no other ambition at all except to be a BVM and when that one ambition that you have collapses, that’s difficult. It was terribly hard.”

When Chineworth returned home that day, she relayed the news to her parents. “I said to my mother, ‘I can’t be a BVM and that’s all I ever wanted to be.’ And my mother said, ‘Well that’s all right, the Lord will show you the way.’ She was a woman of great faith.” Chineworth soon learned that although the color line shut her out of the BVMs, other congregations remained open as possibilities. Sister Mary Leonella recommended that Chineworth write letters of inquiry to three African American congregations. During her junior year in 1934, Chineworth sent letters to the major superiors of the Franciscan Handmaids of Mary, the Holy Family Sisters in New Orleans, and the Oblate Sisters of Providence. After learning more about each order, she remained most impressed with the Oblates’ status as the oldest congregation of African American sisters and the international reach of their ministry.

For Chineworth’s parents, however, one potential impediment to the Oblates tempered their support. As an interracial couple, her parents – and in particular her father – worried that visiting Chineworth in Baltimore would present serious difficulties. Chineworth, in the end, made the decision to join the Oblates in Providence. As it turned out, her parents always sent for her to visit them back in Illinois, so the potential problems that might attend her interracial parents a visit to her never materialized. Further, not long after Chineworth entered the convent in 1936, her father passed away.

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43 Alice Chineworth, telephone interview with author, November 6, 2012.

44 Alice Chineworth, telephone interview with author, November 6, 2012. After Chineworth’s father died, her mother, Victoria, offered herself as a volunteer at the BVM’s school, St. Augustine’s, in
After the rejection of Alice Chineworth and Charlotte Marshall, the BVMs addressed the policy that had prevented the women from joining the congregation at the community’s Seventh General Chapter in 1949. Delegates to the Chapter articulated the position that the BVMs now “favor[ed] the acceptance of non-Caucasians into our Novitiate.” In 1950, the decision was circulated among all BVMs and indicated that “non-Caucasians would be received into the Novitiate using the same criteria as were used in accepting Caucasians.”

This shift in BVM policy notwithstanding, the experiences of Alice Chineworth and Charlotte Marshall demonstrated the stark reality of race in twentieth-century American Catholicism. Their rejection from a traditionally white congregation of women religious illustrated the insidiousness of Jim Crowism in the Church in North and South. The fact of racial segregation in a “universal” Church – from schoolchildren to churches to sisters – can only be explained in the context of the nation’s tortured relationship with race. Writ small, the great racial contradiction of the United States worked itself out in the lives of Alice Chineworth and Charlotte Marshall. Though BVMs changed their policies to allow for the entry of “non-Caucasians” into their sisterhood in 1949, Chineworth’s and Marshall’s stories of rejection on the basis of race appeared distressingly similar to many other Oblate sisters. Indeed, Marshall estimated that about

Memphis. She arrived in Tennessee around 1939 and stayed until around 1950. It was during this period that Victoria Chineworth urged Charlotte Marshall to look into the Oblates after her rejection from the BVMs in the mid-1940s.

Kathryn Lawlor, BVM, From There to Here: The Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, 1942-1972 (Dubuque: Mount Carmel Press, 2010), 33-34.
half of the sisters who belonged to the Oblates had a similar experience of being turned away from traditionally white congregations.⁴⁶

Although many African American women found their temporal and spiritual home with the Oblate Sisters of Providence, their experience of discrimination within the Church did not necessarily end. Charlotte Marshall, who went on to serve as the Superior General of the Oblates during the 1980s, vividly recalled a number of instances of discrimination. “The sixties were really rough. I remember going to a meeting with the Daughters of Charity and at the meeting we were together,” Marshall described. “When it came time for dinner, all of the African American sisters were asked to go to a back room to eat. And of course the first thing we thought was, we ought to just walk out and not bother to eat.” Logistically, though, walking out of the meeting was not an option. “So we stayed but I’ll never forget that – that we were sent to a back room to eat. And the other [white] sisters were in the large dining room in the front.”

Prejudice against the African American sisters sometimes emerged from other corners. Marshall remembered that the Oblates sometimes received requests from Catholic priests who wanted the sisters, who traditionally served as teachers, to staff schools in different parts of the country. “Priests in many areas do not want sisters who are dark-skinned. They have the boldness to say that they want sisters but they want light-skinned sisters for a school. We didn’t accept that at all.”⁴⁷

Further insult was heaped upon injury. In some schools where Oblates taught, the sisters were required to sit at the back of the church. Marshall recalled hearing of one church in southern Maryland that took Jim Crow Catholicism to the furthest possible extent. “We had sisters who had been in schools that we had [charge of], and at the time of communion they had to wait because the priest had to go back to the tabernacle to get another ciborium to bring them the Eucharist and that, to me, is unbelievable.” To this day, Marshall refuses to cross the threshold of that particular church. She also commented that if she had had that experience – of being made to sit in the back of the church and received communion from a Jim Crow ciborium – she probably would have left the Church. 48

Alice Chineworth also endured myriad instances of prejudice and indicated the extent to which discrimination was endemic within the Church. Even after many white congregations opened their doors to black sisters, racial issues remained. “There was a lot of ill treatment on the part of white orders that accepted one or two black girls. Black sisters now have the National Black Sisters Conference which arose from that situation,” explained Chineworth. “There was so many disgruntled and mad black sisters at white convents that they got into an affiliation.” Founded in 1968, the National Black Sisters’ Conference continues to work today to overcome racism within the Church. 49

The story of African American sisters pointed up not only the contradictions inhered within a “universal” Church. More broadly, in schools like St. Augustine’s in Tennessee, Immaculate Conception in Mississippi, and St. Mary’s in Alabama, the great


49 For more on the National Black Sisters’ Conference, see their website: http://www.nbsc68.com/.
complexity of the Catholic evangelical project emerged with particular force. Local African American communities sometimes sought out and enthusiastically supported the founding of mission schools and churches in their neighborhoods. At the same time, the Catholic hierarchy’s mandate for proselytization ran up against the realities of black parents’ and students’ desires for a quality education, not the opportunity to convert. Sisters who staffed these southern mission schools often built positive, enduring relationships within the black communities in which they lived and worked. Nonetheless, the cruelties of Jim Crow American extended even to the convent door of most traditionally white sisterhoods. As long as black Americans claimed Catholicism for themselves, however, they continually pushed back and called for the Church to live up to its highest ideals. By the mid-twentieth century, African Americans called with increasing intensity for the same from their country.
CHAPTER VI
CIVIL RIGHTS, VATICAN II, AND THE SOUTHERN MISSION

The advent of the modern civil rights movement profoundly affected the southern mission project. The relationships that had for decades tied the BVM sisters in Tennessee and Mississippi and the Joliet Franciscans in Alabama to the local black communities galvanized the sisters’ support of civil rights activism. Indeed, the modern civil rights era represented a time during which women religious were increasingly visible actors in challenging the country’s failings on civil rights.¹ The national attention focused nuns in the 1960s who, for instance, took part in the famous march from Selma to Montgomery, must be understood in the context of the much longer history of sisters in the South.²

While the official aims of the Church in the context of the African American South were specifically delineated, a disconnect between these stated goals and lived

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² My interpretation of sisters’ activism in the civil rights movement differs somewhat from that of historian Amy Koehlinger in *The New Nuns*. Whereas Koehlinger argues that certain reforms and developments of the 1950s and 1960s in particular laid the groundwork for the increasing activism of nuns, I argue that the activism of many nuns in the South ought to be understood in the context of the sisters who taught in the South for years before the emergence of the modern civil rights movement.
realities increasingly diverged during the twentieth century. Providing access to quality education in often-underserved communities was the primary focus for many women religious at Catholic schools for southern black students. Sisters’ long years of living and working in southern black communities oftentimes naturally extended into action on behalf of civil rights for African Americans by the mid-twentieth century. Further, the education in the realities of racial discrimination taught by black students to their teaching sisters from the north frequently translated into an increased awareness and activism from the 1950s.

These same fraught years, however, also saw the beginning of the end of American sisterhoods. Great changes wrought in Catholicism during the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s reshaped a multitude of traditions in the Church. The subsequent impact on communities of women religious remains difficult to overstate. A pronounced, prolonged decrease in the number of sisters in the United States remolded the contours of Catholicism in this country. As a result, the mission in the American South, so dependent on nuns’ labor from the late nineteenth century, changed fundamentally.

**The Joliet Franciscans in Fairfield, Alabama**

Sisters of the South increasingly faced the realities of racial issues in the United States as the modern civil rights movement developed after mid-century. The Franciscans from Joliet made a space for themselves in Fairfield’s black community during the first years of their foray into the southern evangelical project. However, transformations within American society during the 1960s influenced St. Mary’s mission school in a variety of ways. The sisters witnessed the incremental shift toward

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3 See Chapter IV.
integration of Catholic schools within the diocese, but also recognized the great distance that existed between calls for equality and the actual practices on the ground. They witnessed ingrained prejudice towards their black students from Catholic authorities. Further, the Franciscans were caught up in the swelling tide aimed at demolishing the bulwark of Jim Crow. The experiences of sisters who arrived at the schools in the South by the late 1960s also reflected fundamental changes happening within congregations of women religious, the Church, and the country in general.

The Franciscans from Illinois had a front-row seat to some of the most significant developments of the decade from their little convent outside of Birmingham. On an April evening in 1963, just few miles away from the mission church in Fairfield, a clergyman put pen to paper in the Birmingham jail. Soon, he finished one of the most eloquent and powerful appeals ever written to advocate for nonviolent protest in the pursuit of civil rights. Martin Luther King, Jr. cited Scripture, St. Augustine, and Socrates in his elegantly framed argument. From these rhetorical heights, he expertly brought things down to the realities of race in the South.

Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, “Wait.” But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim…when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six year old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children…then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair.⁴

For many, King’s masterful “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” distilled the essence of the African American freedom struggle. The urgency for action, the need to “combat the disease of segregation” galvanized his supporters and opponents alike. He appealed in particular to the religious communities in the South and called for increased support of civil rights for African Americans. King also praised Alabama’s Catholic hierarchy for integrating the Jesuit Spring Hill College in 1954 in Mobile. Still, he went on, “I must honestly reiterate that I have been disappointed with the church.” King then asserted, “I felt that the white ministers, priests and rabbis of the South would be among our strongest allies…Some have been outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its leaders; all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained glass windows.”

“Letter from a Birmingham Jail” addressed itself specifically to a claims made in a letter signed by eight Alabama clergy earlier in the week. Published in a local paper on April 12, 1963, the letter spoke against public demonstrations against racial injustice in Birmingham. The clergy warned readers to avoid the activists who, they intimated, were led “by some of our Negro citizens, directed and led in part by outsiders.” Calling the demonstrations “unwise and untimely,” the eight clergymen advocated a gradualist approach to questions of racial justice, and deemed the issue better left up to the courts. Bishop Joseph Durick, of the Catholic diocese of Mobile-Birmingham, was among the

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5 Ibid.
signatories. This gradualist approach to civil rights was also apparent among others within the highest ranks of the Church in Alabama. Although Archbishop Thomas J. Toolen’s signature did not appear alongside Durick’s and the other seven clergy in the spring of 1963, during this time he largely shared the same sentiments.

Not all southern bishops agreed with Toolen’s approach to racial matters. Some bishops supported integration in Catholic schools. For example, as early as 1956, the Chicago Defender praised Archbishop Joseph Francis Rummel of New Orleans for his declaration that segregation by race “was morally wrong and sinful because it is denial of the unity and solidarity of the human race as conceived by the God in the creation of man in Adam and Eve.” Rummel then planned to move ahead with plans to integrate Catholic schools in New Orleans. The work of this prelate, as far as the Defender was concerned, represented a beacon of hope for the Jim Crow South. “So far, at least, the Devil is in the saddle in Dixie and God’s only hope lies with men like Archbishop Rummel.” While this positive portrayal of Rummel’s work in New Orleans indicated support of the overall move towards integration by the late 1950s, the broader American Church continued to drag its feet.

Only under duress did Toolen slowly begin to unravel the twisted skein of segregation in the Mobile diocese. Diocesan policies that reinforced segregation began to

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ease in 1963 – almost a decade after the Brown v. Board of Education decision.\textsuperscript{8} The Joliet Franciscans occasionally remarked upon indications of segregation’s weakening grip. In late October of 1963, an annual diocesan religious celebration bore the marks of a shift in Toolen’s policies. “The children attended the annual Rickwood [a local park] celebration in honor of Christ the King,” noted the sisters. The most noteworthy aspect of the event was that the seating of white and black children from Catholic schools was not segregated.\textsuperscript{9}

The yearly Christ the King ritual in Rickwood Park outside of Birmingham was instituted by Toolen himself in 1931. According to one historian, the impetus for the Christ the King celebration stemmed from Toolen’s “attempts to impose unity [among Alabama’s Catholics] outward from a common center.”\textsuperscript{10} The annual gathering, which generally focused on themes of “anti-communism, and patriotism and the deleterious effects of modern secular society,” sought to unify Alabama Catholics into a fervent, cohesive whole. Thousands of area Catholics usually gathered for the celebration at the park outside of Birmingham. At this yearly gathering in particular and within Toolen’s dioceses in general, a sense of paradox emerged. On the one hand, Toolen aimed to project catholicity – that is, a sense of universality – among his flock. On the other hand,

\textsuperscript{8} Interestingly, Toolen reassessed his position on civil rights for African Americans by 1970. A publication no less than the Chicago Defender praised his efforts to this end. The article contrasted his well-known resistance to full, immediate integration in the early 1960s with his new position in 1970, saying that, “Last year, by contrast, the archbishop urged his flock to work for harmony and justice and permitted priests to follow their consciences in joining lawful demonstrations.” “Catholics Ousting Institutional Racism,” Chicago Daily Defender, Oct. 24, 1970.

\textsuperscript{9} Mary’s Annals, Annals, Oct. 27, 1963.

\textsuperscript{10} Andrew Moore, The South’s Tolerable Aliens: Roman Catholics in Alabama and Georgia, 1945-1970 (Baton Rouge: University of Louisiana Press, 2007), 53-54
at the annual Rickwood gathering in particular and within the Mobile diocese in general, the marking off of African American schoolchildren as inherently inferior to their white counterparts via segregation destroyed any notion of true unity or equality.

After the first integrated Rickwood celebration during the autumn of 1963 the Mobile diocese moved for the first time towards officially desegregating its Catholic schools in the spring of 1964. The effort to desegregate southern schools had been underway for a decade. Despite efforts by Alabama’s political elite, including Governor George Wallace notorious 1963 inaugural address in which he proclaimed, “In the name of the greatest people to ever trod this earth, I draw the line in the dust and toss the gauntlet before the feet of tyranny and I say, segregation now, segregation tomorrow, and segregation forever,” the Supreme Court-mandated desegregation of schools slowly gained headway in the state. By the spring of 1964, Toolen, according to one historian, finally began “bowing to the inevitability” of ending segregation in his diocese’s Catholic schools.11

On April 21, 1964 the diocesan’s superintendent of schools forwarded to all parishes a letter from Toolen regarding desegregation. Superintendent Rt. Rev. J. Edwin Stuardi cautioned diocesan school principals that, until the following Sunday when Toolen’s letter would be read from the pulpit in all parishes, the contents of the letter should remain “strictly confidential.”12 Additionally, Stuardi continued, “Students will ask questions [regarding Toolen’s announcement] on Monday. Please be as factual as

11 Moore, 122.

12 Superintendent of Schools Rt. Rev J. Edwin Stuardi to all principals of schools in the Mobile-Birmingham diocese, April 21, 1964, Correspondence folder, St. Mary’s Archives, Joliet, Illinois.
you can but also as brief as you can. Do not carry on long discussions of this.”

Interaction with the press by principals and teachers was also discouraged. “If there are inquiries from the local press, radio or TV News-service,” Stuardi advised, “refer these to [his office]. No statement should be given to the papers but refer them to [his office].”

Toolet’s letter to his flock, read in parishes across the diocese on Sunday, April 26, suggested a reluctant acquiescence to desegregation. “After much prayer, consultation, and advice, we have decided to integrate all the schools of our diocese in September,” he announced. “I know this will not meet with the approval of many of our people but in justice and in charity this must be done. I ask all of our people to accept this decision as best for God and Country,” continued Toolen. “No matter what personal feelings are, the common good of all must come first. In the diocese we have always tried to give our negro people everything that we have given to our white people especially in the way of education.”

Toolet’s remarks, when put in the context of the broader national story of desegregation, appeared somewhat disingenuous. Although schools across the nation lagged behind the Brown v. Board of Education decision, by 1961, only three states continued to enact strictly segregated school systems: Mississippi, South Carolina, and Alabama. In the case of the latter, it took President Kennedy’s 1963 federalization of the National Guard to forcibly integrate the University of Alabama, Governor Wallace’s display on the university steps notwithstanding. Toolen’s own resistance to integration in Alabama reflected this broader trend in the state. His assertion that his diocese had

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13 Archbishop Thomas Toolen to diocesan parishioners, April 22, 1964, Correspondence folder St. Mary’s Archives, Joliet, Illinois.
“always tried to give our negro people everything we have given to our white people especially in the way of education” rang hollow.

Following the dioceses’ official start of desegregation in 1964, the Franciscan sisters in Fairfield chronicled occasional flashes of integration. Two integration “firsts” occurred in the spring of 1965. Both cases demonstrated the pervasiveness of segregation within the Mobile dioceses’ Catholic school system. Furthermore, the fact that the nuns from Joliet felt compelled to remark upon these instances in their records underscored the dioceses’ break from the commonly-accepted practices of segregation.

The first episode took place at a high Mass in March at St. Paul’s Cathedral in Birmingham. The Franciscan sisters chronicled the day. “The Sixth Graders of the Birmingham Area sang a solemn Pontifical Mass at St. Paul’s Cathedral,” the nuns noted. “The Archbishop had the Mass. This participation of the Sixth Grade was an annual observance for the “white” Schools,” commented the sisters. However, 1965 represented the first year in which African American schools were included. The first day, the students from the diocese played in a band concert. “All Catholic school grade bands participated,” the sisters recorded, “this is another “first” for the colored schools.”

Another novel event occurred a month later. The eighth grade graduation was the capstone of the school year for St. Mary’s students and 1965 marked a significant change

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14 St. Mary’s Annals, March 27 1965, Joliet Franciscan Archives.

15 Ibid.
in the celebration. “For the first time, the colored Children are being permitted to
graduate with the white children,” remembered the sisters.  

Still, the head of the Mobile-Birmingham diocese continued to look askance at
perceived outsiders, particularly priests and nuns, who came into his diocese to agitate for
civil rights. According to one source, Toolen voiced his opinion regarding activist
Catholic religious following the march from Selma to Montgomery in March 1965. “We
are living in a strange age,” Toolen asserted. “They asked me why do the priests and
sisters come from other states and Canada to take part in the demonstrations. Certainly
the sisters are out of place in these demonstrations. Their place is at home doing God’s
work. I would say the same thing is true of the priests,” argued the archbishop. “As to
whether they have permission to come in, they haven’t asked for it…What do they know
about conditions in the South? I am afraid they are only eager beavers,” he concluded,
“who feel there is a holy cause.” Toolen’s accommodationist stance towards civil rights
provoked outrage among those who viewed civil rights issues with a sense of urgency
similar to Dr. King and other civil rights activists.

Not everyone in the diocese shared Toolen’s views. At St. Mary’s parish in
Fairfield, Sister Aloysius Marie Didier, a Franciscan from Joliet, became increasingly
unhappy with her archbishop’s attitude towards issues of integration. After police batons
and brutality broke up the march from Selma to Montgomery in the spring of 1965,

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16 St. Mary’s Annals, June 1, 1965, Joliet Franciscan Archives.

17 “Toolen Rips King, says priests, nuns should go home,” unnamed newspaper article, March 18,
1965, series 20, box 25, “Selma” file, National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice, Quoted in Amy
University Press, 2007), 269 n86.
Didier could no longer countenance Toolen’s lack of support for the cause of civil rights. She had arrived at St. Mary’s in Fairfield in the fall of 1963 and taught the first grade.

Barely a month after her arrival in Alabama, a bomb ripped the life from four African American girls at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. This harsh introduction to the realities of race in the 1960s South made a deep impression on Didier. She remained intensely interested in the black freedom struggle and grew increasingly disillusioned with the Alabaman hierarchy’s responses to calls for equal rights. Two weeks after the first attempted march from Selma to Montgomery ended in bloodshed in March of 1965, Didier wrote to the Franciscan Mother General about her profound disappointment in Toolen’s diocese and the volatile situation in Birmingham.

Immediately, a very real sense of the likelihood of violence in the city pervaded her correspondence. “Two police came to check all our buildings and the outside of our convent for bombs,” wrote Didier. “Tomorrow the buildings will be checked again before letting the children enter.”18 It was not only bomb threats, however, that set Sr. Aloysius on edge. She confided in her Mother General, “The cause of all the turmoil I feel within is our Archbishop and some of his clergy and laity.” Didier catalogued a few observations and incidents to demonstrate the source of her frustration. “As an ‘outsider’ in Alabama,” she explained, “I can’t help wondering why all the negro schools around here are taught by ‘outsiders.’ Last year – and again this year in our ‘integrated’ diocese,” continued Didier, “we were allowed to have one contestant in the Negro Spelling Bee. There is also a white spelling bee in the diocese.” Didier also pointed out

18 Sr. Aloysius Marie letter to Mother General Borromeo, March 21, 1965, Correspondence folder, St. Mary’s Collection, Joliet Franciscan Archives.
the distance between the Mobile dioceses’s purported policy of integration and the everyday realities of its implementation. “Last year our Diocesan Music Festival’s theme was Brotherhood although the only schools not invited to participate were the colored schools. Progress has been made,” she noted wryly. “We were invited this year.”

Didier also challenged the diocesan guidelines for admitting African American children into traditionally white Catholic schools. At the time of her letter, the diocese was only beginning the process of integration, despite the fact that ten years had passed since the Brown v. Board of Education decision. “The negro child must be Catholic,” she reported. This requirement did not apply to white students in the diocese’s schools. A further indignity of these regulations, Didier observed, appeared in the requirement that “the negro child must be able to meet our standards – implying of course that there are no white students below grade level.” Such policies received approbation from the diocese’s highest authority. The procedures were stamped with the approval of “‘our beloved Archbishop,’ ” she wrote, deploying an effectively acerbic use of quotation marks.

Within days of sending this letter to the Franciscan Mother General in Joliet, Didier decided she could no longer remain silent. Echoing Dr. King’s enduring epistle to Alabama’s clergymen two years earlier, the young Catholic nun felt compelled to press the prelate on the issue of race.

The decision by Didier to challenge the archbishop’s stance towards integration in a written letter, if viewed from a present-day perspective, may not seem all that

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19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
extraordinary. However, in 1965, although the sweeping changes instigated by Vatican II were fulminating in Rome, the Catholic Church still remained rigidly hierarchical. Gendered power structures in which male clerics generally retained total authority still permeated the Church. Thus, for a nun from the North to challenge the actions of a southern archbishop in his own diocese took more than a little pluck. According to one account, Toolen had even gone so far to warn that sisters who took part in protests against racial injustice “would be on the first bus out of Alabama.” Didier faced not only the traditional male power structure of the Church, but also the weight of this particular archbishop’s determination to rein in Catholic protest.

Didier focused her rebuke to archbishop Toolen on his reaction to the march from Selma to Montgomery. Pride in the Catholic clergy and women religious who participated in the march suffused her word, matched in equal measure with sorrow at the archbishop’s response. “Though Selma was tense,” she wrote earnestly, “it was filled with determination and hope both for our citizens and our Church. I was so proud of our Catholic witnesses and was sorry the Alabama clergy could not share their glory.” For her, “Gov. Wallace’s distortion of the truth” about the Selma march paled in comparison to the archbishop’s reaction. Toolen’s “condemnation” of the marchers, to Sr. Aloysius, was the deeper blow. The Church, in Didier’s view, ought to speak with one voice in support of activism for civil rights for all.

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22 Sr. Aloysius Marie to Archbishop Thomas Joseph Toolen, March 1966, Correspondence folder, Joliet Franciscan Archives.
Toozen promptly responded to her letter. His correspondence, dated March 26, 1965 contained a remarkable amount of ecclesiastical condescension. “I suppose you have been a few years in Alabama, and I know you are very interested in colored work, but were it not for me you would not have the school and church which now exists in Fairfield, nor be able to do work for these fine colored people,” he began. “For 38 years I have worked for them and with them. I have given them every opportunity for education and religion” continued Toolen, “so I suppose I have some right to claim that I have done some work for the negroes of Alabama.”

A basic difference existed between the sister’s and the archbishop’s interpretation of the march from Selma to Montgomery. Where Didier saw a gathering of determined, hopeful individuals, resolute in their challenge to racial injustice, Toolen saw a misguided horde beyond the bounds of Church sanction. “Everyone has a right to their own opinion,” he allowed, “but I still feel that in mobs such as were in Selma there is no place for a priest and especially for a sister.” Then, Toolen reiterated the gradual, accommodationist approach to racial justice that he had long advocated. “I feel and know that the negro people have been discriminated against and even persecuted, but mob rule won’t win them freedom from this and it has been mob work in Selma and on into Montgomery,” the archbishop declared. Citing his longevity in the diocese as the crux of his credentials on matters of race, Toolen reminded Dider, “I am acting on 38 years of close participation with colored and most of the colored people of the Diocese agreed with me.”

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23 Archbishop Thomas Toolen to Sister Aloysius Marie Didier, March 26th, 1965, Correspondence folder, Joliet Franciscan Archives.
Tooien closed his letter with a startling pronouncement. “There isn’t any doubt that Martin Luther King has been and perhaps still is associated with the Communists,” he inveighed. “I will always have the greatest sympathy for the colored people but there will never be any sympathy for priests and nuns who forget their place and their spiritual life as was at Selma and Montgomery.”24 Clearly, a significant breach separated the sister and the archbishop in regards to their thinking on race. The historical record does not indicate if Didier joined in marches or protests for African American civil rights during the 1960s. Tooien’s well-known condemnation of the protests, and the absence of any correspondence that references her taking part in protests, suggests that writing to the archbishop was as far as Sr. Aloysius Marie Didier dared go. Her extant correspondence with the Franciscan Mother General and the Alabaman archbishop ultimately suggests both the potential and limitations in the lives of women religious during the mid-1960s.

For his part, Tooien’s protestations regarding his great sympathy for the African Americans of his diocese appeared somewhat problematic. His thirty-eight years of experience as head of the Mobile diocese, he believed, afforded him an unimpeachable perspective on race. Nonetheless, the vast majority those thirty-eight years included adherence to southern traditions of segregation. Jim Crow stalked the aisles of Birmingham’s Catholic churches and haunted the hallways of the dioceses’ Catholic schools. By the second half of the twentieth century, however, a gathering momentum increasingly challenged the old racial traditions of the South.

24 Ibid.
The Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary

The story of the BVM sisters in Memphis converged with the civil rights movement during one of the most momentous weeks of late 1960s. In 1968, the city’s mostly-black sanitation workers, on strike since February, were on the radar of the country’s leading civil rights activists. Martin Luther King, Jr. came to the city to support the workers’ demonstrations. Encouragement for the cause was also swelled by the ranks of ordinary citizens who felt themselves bound to support the workers in particular and the city’s African American population in general. The Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary were among these citizens.

The BVMs had staffed St. Augustine’s, a mission school established for black students, since its founding in 1937. Sister Therese Frelo arrived in Memphis in 1967 and within a year of her arrival, the BVMs in Memphis took part in a variety of civil rights demonstrations. “It was only when we went to Memphis that we got involved,” she recalled, “And it was because our people were involved.” She emphasized that the BVMs’ connection to the local black community provided the impetus for their activism in Memphis. “And our parents, most of them were not garbage workers, but they were involved in the movement, see, and since they were involved, we were involved.” To show their support for the local black community, Frelo continued, the sisters took part in “Black Fridays,” in which schools, businesses, and other institutions closed on Fridays in a show of solidarity with striking workers. The Memphis BVMs’ roles as teachers
dovetailed with their support of the local black community. “We had to do that because if our people were doing it, and we felt committed to it,” she explained.25

During the “I Am A Man” rally in late March of 1968 in support of the garbage workers’ strike, Frelo explained, “I remember looking to the side and King was in the first row. We were in about the seventh row.” The BVMs were joined in the march by other Catholic religious as well. The march progressed peacefully for a time. Then, chaos broke out on the street. “The noise was horrendous,” she Frelo remembered. “The police then came and turned us all around and turned us back and told us to go back and pushed us, they took King, they bring him into a side alley and put him in a car and they pushed all of us.”26

As the situation spiraled out of control, Frelo and her companions sought shelter from the gathering violence. The sisters found their way into a nearby building. Their respite, however, was short-lived. “The police came and shot tear gas into the room,” Frelo continued. Mayhem ensued, but the sisters tried to calm the situation. “One of our BVMs, Sister Mary Carmelette, who was in habit, by the way, was up on the front of the church and she was saying the Our Father. She got everybody praying the Our Father to quiet them down a little bit, ‘cause everybody was real nervous.”27 However, the sister’s efforts to calm those inside the temple were soon rendered moot by the continued confusion. The sisters exited the building and fled the violence soon thereafter. Despite this incident, supporters of the striking workers continued their activism. King returned

26 Therese Frelo, interview with author, Joliet, IL, July 27, 2011.
to Memphis in early April to lead another march. The BVMs from St. Augustine’s, along with hundreds of others, gathered for King’s famous “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech on the night of April third. Less than twenty-four hours later, King was dead

Following the assassination in Memphis on April 4, 1968, the BVMs negotiated their responses in both the black and white community. Shock and grief characterized Frelo’s memories of the news within her community in Memphis. “Oh it was terrible. It was just terrible. It was such a let-down. It was unbelievable,” she remembered. “The people were just sick. So were we. It was the saddest day.” Frelo and her fellow sisters learned of the news while having dinner at the Christian Brothers’ college in Memphis. This order of male religious had taken part in several marches in the city alongside the BVM sisters. On the evening of April 4, six BVMs were at the Christian Brothers’ college when the news came in. One of the Christian Brothers, Tom McCarver, was called to the telephone. “He comes back,” Frelo recounted, “and we’re all eating and he says, ‘I have some terrible news to tell you. Martin Luther King was just shot.’ Well, we at our table went [gasp].”

However, not everyone in the room reacted in the same manner. “Everybody else, all the parents – not a thing,” Frelo remembered. “We were shocked.” McCarver, the Christian Brother who had first heard the news and passed it onto the other dinner guests, was also shocked by the news and the apparent apathy to which some responded to King’s murder. “Tom felt terrible and he couldn’t believe it, even his brothers, his
Christian Brothers, nobody reacted like this is terrible, and that affected him a lot,” recalled Frelo.

The activism of Frelo and her fellow BVMs during the modern civil rights movement spoke to the deep ties that existed between the sisters and the local African American community. For these nuns in Memphis, their support of equal rights emerged out of over a generation of sisters who lived and worked among southern black communities. The same commitment appeared in other cities across the South as well. Indeed, historian Suellen Hoy observed of Catholic sisters who worked in Chicago’s black communities that “What happened in the civil rights movement was the culmination rather than beginning of a longer history of nuns linking their lives to those of African Americans.”28 For Sister Therese Frelo and other women religious across the United States, activism in the 1960s and 1970s emerged out of decades-long relationships built within communities of African descent.

The actions of Frelo and other sisters during the modern civil rights movement suggested the shift that had taken place within the Catholic project in the South more generally. A more progressive stance in regards to race characterized some of these efforts, though the activism of sisters in the South remained within the context of the longer tradition of nuns living and working in these communities. As far as the on-the-ground realities of southern Catholic schools were concerned, by the 1960s and 1970s sister such as Therese Frelo were committed to their communities’ calls for civil rights. Nuns’ roles as educators often merged with their commitment to social justice. In the

end, evangelism – the Church’s original aim of converting the still mostly-Protestant black communities to Catholicism – had disappeared. Social justice ultimately superseded evangelization for these sisters of the South.

Civil Rights and the Southern Mission Since 1965

Eventually, the myriad levels of activism during the modern civil rights movement did make headway in the region. By 1970, the Chicago Defender, which had been calling the Church to account for its Jim Crowism since the first decades of the twentieth century, published a positive assessment of its progress on matters of race. A report from the Southern Regional Council, discussed in the Defender article, made plain that serious racial discrimination had marked the southern Church. Indeed, the institution “usually has remained behind national policy in matters of race but slightly ahead of other Southern institutions.” By 1970, however, progress had been made: “After a century of acquiescing to Southern racial prejudices that conflicted with its own doctrine, [the Church] has undergone substantial change to rid itself of institutional racism.” Chief among the changes included policies of racial inclusion among Catholic churches, hospitals, and schools across the South. The modern civil rights movement began to undo the paradox of the American experience of race, but much work remained to be done across the country.

By the late 1960s and 1970s, Catholic sisters had lived and worked in southern African American communities for nearly eighty years as part of the Church’s evangelical project. Their experiences within the particular context of southern mission schools also told the story of the country’s fraught racial past. At this same historical

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moment, however, nuns in the United States, who numbered almost 180,000 in 1965, began to disappear. This mass exodus indelibly marked the American Church, and continues to do so today. The great decline in the number of nuns within the United States had an enormous impact on the Church’s ability to maintain institutions such as schools, hospitals, and orphanages.

Sisterhoods across the country started to dissolve. Nuns – the Catholic worker bees – simply dropped away. One study indicates that during the four-year span between 1958 and 1962, just before the numbers of sisters began the precipitous decline, around 23,300 novitiates entered into various religious communities in the United States. Over the four-year span between 1976 and 1980, around 2,700 women entered religious orders. This represented a decline of over ninety percent.\(^{30}\)

Numbers were driven lower as more and more nuns left the religious life. Approximately 760 nuns departed from their religious congregations in 1965. The exodus hit its highest point in 1970 when another 4,300 sisters left their communities. Finally, the rising age of sisters in the United States suggests that some orders may all but disappear in the not-too-distant future. One study estimates that in 1966 almost 17 percent of sisters in the country were more than sixty-five years of age. By the early 1980s, that number increased to almost 40 percent.\(^{31}\)

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Diverse reasons accounted for this mass exodus. Increased opportunities for women in the secular world partially accounted for the decline of Catholic sisters. The life of a sister prior to the 1960s and 1970s sometimes offered an important channel for professional and personal fulfillment for working-class Catholic women, but this situation changed. As more occupational and educational opportunities became attainable for women, the appeal of a sisterhood may have diminished.

The sweeping changes to Catholicism initiated by Vatican II in the 1960s also had an enormous impact on communities of women religious. The Council opened in Rome in 1962 and lasted until 1965. This gathering of the world’s bishops aimed to renew the Church in a variety of ways. Among changes such as foregoing Latin as the language of the Mass in favor of the vernacular, Vatican II were general pronouncements related to the lives and work of women religious. Congregations of nuns were to engage in “adequate and prudent examination” of their orders and examine – even revise – their traditions.32 Coming within the turbulent cultural context of the 1960s, many younger nuns took this mandate as license to implement ministry in new ways. Historian Amy Koehlinger, for example, suggests that the “racial apostolate,” defined by the increasing numbers of sisters who took part in civil rights activism of the 1960s, emerged out of this new sense of purpose that initially seemed supported by Vatican II.33

Other congregations revised the rules that had governed their communities for generations. In some cases, the traditional habit worn by nuns was either significantly

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33 Koehlinger, *The New Nuns*. 
altered or discarded altogether. The changes wrought by Vatican II also precipitated a generational divide among nuns. Younger sisters, eager to explore new ways of living a religious life, were sometimes at odds with older members of their communities. At the same time, of course, American women in the secular world saw more and more doors opening to them after the 1960s in terms of jobs, education, and life options. Taken together, these developments help to account for the drastic, unprecedented decease in the numbers of American nuns after the late 1960s.

Therese Frelo experienced these very changes herself from within the Dubuque community of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The increased opportunities available to women in the United States by the late 1960s and into the 1970s impacted sisterhoods. “Say what you want, in society, women didn’t have that much of an opportunity to do things that we have today,” remarked Frelo. “When you became a sister, you automatically became a teacher and were a professional. Now that was never my reason, but it might have been for some people.”

This period of time impacted the BVMs in Iowa in ways that were similar to many other congregations across the country. “Our sisters were leaving at that point. Those were the years we lost people.” The entry rates of young women into the congregation dropped off markedly. In 1961, just over one hundred women entered the BVM community. Six years later in

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34 Therese Frelo, interview with author, Joliet, IL, July 27, 2011.
35 Therese Frelo, interview with author, Joliet, IL, July 27, 2011.
1967, only 15 new members joined. At the same time as the number of women entering the congregation decreased, the number of BVMs who left the sisterhood increased.

When asked further about the reasons for the decline in BVM membership, Frelo ruminated on the subject. “Well, you know I think there were lots of reasons. One reason was that in ’70 we had open application.” One outcome of Vatican II’s process of renewal was that sisters themselves would now participate in deciding upon their placement. While the nature of this new style of placement varied from congregation to congregation, the processes of open application allowed BVMs to explore employment opportunities on their own. They were no longer bound to take up whatever work was assigned to them. Frelo wondered if the momentousness of open application, in that it precipitated unprecedented decisions from the sisters themselves, played a role in the particular demographics of the BVMs. Many of the sisters traditionally entered the order straight from small-town high schools across the Midwest. Some of these women, Frelo explained, had not necessarily experienced life out in the secular world. “I think many people left because all of a sudden the world opened up to them that they never knew existed,” she said.

Other changes in the structures of the BVM community changed as well and may have also contributed to the decline in the community. By the late 1960s, the BVMs had moved away from the practice of requiring all sisters to don a uniform habit. According to their new regulations, “Sisters are free to choose the type of dress they see as suitable for their particular apostolate whether this be the traditional habit, a modified or

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contemporary habit, or completely modern dress.” 37 Frelo remembered that the change in habit likely precipitated some sisters struggling with issues of identity in the post-Vatican II world. Finally, the enormous scale of the departures imparted the sense of a tide that could not be staunched. In a period of seven or eight years, almost the BVMs lost almost five hundred sisters. 38

By the summer of 2011, the sisters in Dubuque numbered around four hundred and sixty-five. This represented a fraction of the community at its height in the 1960s, when around twenty-four hundred women belonged to the BVMs. A majority of the remaining sisters were over seventy years of age. 39 A similar picture emerges on a national scale. In 1965, the number of women religious in the United States was around 180,000. By 2009 the population of sisters had decreased to around 59,000. The average age of a nun in 2009 was seventy-five years old. 40 Frelo faced the reality of these numbers squarely. “It’s a dying community – it is. People find it hard to say that, I don’t find it hard. Twenty years from now it won’t be around.” Still, she continued, programs instituted by the BVMs and other congregations suggested a way forward in the future. “We now have what we call the BVM Associates,” Frelo explained,” and I think it’s a new form of religious life in which you have people coming together for the same

37 Lawlor, 154.

38 Therese Frelo, interview with author, Joliet, IL, July 27, 2011.


purpose: community and support.” All signs, nonetheless, point to the near-demise of the traditional communities of women religious in America within a generation.

The impact on Catholic institutions remains difficult to overstate. At Immaculate Conception in Clarksdale, Mississippi, the four original sisters who arrived at the school in the early 1950s, increased in the late 1960s and early 1970s with eight sisters at the school. Then, in the mid-1970s and into the 1980s, in contrast to national trends, the number of BVMs in Clarksdale continued to rise and stayed between eight and eleven sisters from 1978 to 1981. It should be noted, however, that the nuns were engaged in work outside of the Immaculate Conception School. The sisters also worked at Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman and at Mound Bayou Hospital and continued to serve the African American community. By 1985, only three BVMs remained at Immaculate Conception. In 2012, the school remained open and offered Catholic education from pre-kindergarten through sixth grade which was down from the K-12 education previously offered at the school. Of the twenty-two staff members, none were sisters.

For St. Augustine’s in Memphis, Tennessee, diocesan dynamics played a role in the life of the school beyond the broader impacts from the overall national decline in the numbers of women religious. The original three sisters who arrived in Memphis in the

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41 Therese Frelo, interview with author, Joliet, IL, July 27, 2011. The BVM Associate program, of which similar programs appear in other religious communities, involves laypeople – single or married – joining the religious congregation. The BVM Associate program explains the difference between a Sister and an Associate as follows: “Associates are women and men who wish to formally associate themselves with a religious community, their mission and spirituality. BVM Associates commit to living out the BVM core values of freedom, justice, education, and charity. They do so while continuing to live independently of their own life style of being single or married. Sisters take vows of poverty, celibacy, and obedience, live in community, sharing all finances, and share responsibility for the welfare of the members of their religious community” (BVM website, http://www.bvmcong.org/join_bvm_faq.cfm, Accessed August 20, 2012).
late 1930s increased to fourteen by 1948. Then, in the mid-1960s, St. Augustine’s elementary school and church were transferred to the traditionally white St. Thomas in Memphis. A new high school, Father Bertrand, was opened to serve the former students of St. Augustine’s as well. Five years later in 1970, a city-wide Memphis Catholic High School emerged, and the building that formerly housed Father Bertrand High School became St. Augustine Elementary School. In 1995, the pressures of decreasing enrollment and increasing overhead resulted in the closing of St. Augustine’s School, but the institution reopened in 2002 after a generous financial contribution.

The Joliet Franciscans at St. Mary’s School in Fairfield, Alabama, also underwent changes. Overall, the number of Franciscans in Fairfield peaked at seven sisters around the mid-1950s. From there, the number of sisters began to drop, one by one. Four Franciscans taught at St. Mary’s in 1970. Janet Tucci and Rosemary Winter, the Joliet Franciscan sisters who taught there in the late 1960s and 1970s, both stayed at the school for around a decade. Initially, both sisters were unilaterally assigned to their position in the South. The process of placement for the Franciscans, however, changed in a manner similar to the BVMs in Dubuque.

After Vatican II, sisters were included in the conversation about their placement. The Joliet Franciscans developed their Open Placement Policy In 1968 and 1969 during the course of the Special Chapters declared necessary by Vatican II. In early 1969, the Franciscans were advised of their congregation’s new procedures. The door was opened

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43 Ibid.
for sisters to “prayerfully discern which ministry she can best serve the Church.” Then, in consultation with the Governing Board and the institution at which the sister sought a position, the decision would be made. Essentially, the Open Placement Policy adopted by the Joliet Franciscans in 1969, which was further developed into the 1970s, allowed for sisters to take part in deciding where they would work. Against this backdrop, Tucci and Winter chose to stay in Alabama until the late 1970s. Two sisters remained in 1980. Then, on June 24, 1985, the last Joliet Franciscan left St. Mary’s School. In June of 2012, the doors to the school closed for the final time. Financial pressures, decreasing enrollment, and the declining physical plant of the school contributed to its demise.

The unprecedented decline in the number of American nuns during the second half of the twentieth century significantly impacted the Church’s southern mission schools. Sisters, the religious proletariat of the Church, left gaping holes in hospitals, orphanages, and, of course, schools. A large part of the American bishops’ plan for the original southern mission project rested on the inexpensive labor of nuns. However, as the population of sisters declined precipitously, Catholic schools were increasingly forced to rely on lay teachers, a move that required a substantially higher amount of overhead. The financial pressures on Catholic schools resulted in closings across the country during the final decades of the twentieth century.

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44 Statement outlining the Open Placement Policy included in the 1985 Constitution, given to the author by the Joliet Franciscan archivist, Sister Marian Voelker, OSF, October 10, 2012.

45 St. Mary’s Annals, 1943-1984, Joliet Franciscan Archives, Joliet.

46 Fran Lawlor, Superintendent of Schools for the Diocese of Birmingham, email to author, Oct. 18, 2012.
Other historical forces also ultimately worked to undermine the Church’s southern evangelical project. Catholic bishops and other leaders during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century assumed that southern African Americans would remain in the South indefinitely, but the demographic shifts of the Great Migration diffused the projected efficacy of the southern mission. Further, by mid-century, as the Brown v. Board of Education decision indicated the beginning of the end of legal segregation, Catholic mission schools aimed specifically at African American students became obsolete.

Charlotte Marshall, the African American sister whose long career at the Oblates of Providence afforded her a first-hand experience of these major twentieth-century developments, remembered the impact of integration on traditionally black Catholic schools. There was, she recalled, “A lessening of students at the black schools and that’s really what caused their downfall, is that many of the students were able to go to the white schools.” Further, Marshall explained, “Many of the parents felt that for their children to further their education they would put them in the white schools and hopefully that the children would get more education and be able to go to the greater colleges and all of that. That was the deterrent for many of the totally African American schools.”

Catholic mission schools in the South, once a central component of the Church’s plan for a “colored harvest,” slowly became superfluous. Arguably, beyond the impact of the Great Migration and desegregation, the poisonous reach of American racism into the Catholic Church had always made the “colored harvest” an impossibility. From

47 Charlotte Marshall, telephone interview with author, Nov. 8 2012.
segregated schools to segregated sisterhoods, the impact of the country’s racial paradox all but ensured that the vast majority of the Church in the United States would remain white.

For some black Catholics today, the religion still remains distant from its ideals and doctrines. Charlotte Marshall holds this view. Although she has spent sixty-eight years as a Catholic sister, the racial prejudice she encountered over almost seven decades in the Church has indelibly marked her life. Marshall recently recounted a conversation that she had with Cardinal James Stafford, a prominent American cleric. “He said to me, ‘I’m surprised that blacks are in the Church even today. It’s a job to be a Catholic.’ And I said it’s only because of God. If I had to deal only with humans I know I wouldn’t be in the church today,” Marshall continued, “I don’t know what I would have been but I wouldn’t be a Catholic, that’s for sure.”

The stories of women such as Charlotte Marshall and other students who attended mission schools highlight the best and the worse elements of the Catholic mission in the American South. On one hand, the warm relationships built with individual sisters and the rigorous education received at schools such at St. Augustine’s, Immaculate Conception, and St. Mary’s, demonstrate the positive characteristics of these schools. Additionally, sisters who taught in these schools also describe the affection and support that typically existed within each community. On the other hand, the realities of race in America profoundly affected many students of the Catholic mission in the South.

The reality of the southern mission project also emerges from behind the official mandates from the Catholic hierarchy by focusing on individual locales. Bishops and

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Charlotte Marshall, telephone interview with author, Nov. 8 2012.
other prelates in the United States and Rome viewed the African American population in the South as a “colored harvest”: a faceless, nameless, and dehumanizing term that encapsulated the worst of the paternalistic and racist tendencies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In pursuit of the “colored harvest,” the Catholic hierarchy instituted specific organizations and funding streams aimed at converting black Americans to Catholicism. The Commission for the Catholic Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians, established by the Third Plenary Council in 1884, illustrated their efforts and their aim. Not only would conversion “save” individuals of African descent, they believed, the black vote could also be marshaled in support of Catholic politics.

However, the hierarchy’s vision of a vast influx of African Americans into the Church was, from the start, a pipedream. Individuals within black communities always encountered the Catholic mission on their own terms. These African American students, parents, and other community members divorced the physical manifestation of the southern mission – Catholic schools for black Protestant children – from its ideological underpinnings. Places such as Immaculate Conception in Mississippi, St. Mary’s in Alabama, and St. Augustine’s in Tennessee were not seen as avenues to Catholicism. Rather, these schools represented educational opportunities.

The historical processes of the twentieth century fundamentally reshaped the Catholic mission in the South. The Great Migrations, desegregation, the modern civil rights movement, Vatican II: these myriad influences exerted a profound influence on the southern mission. Despite these drastic changes, however, Catholic evangelization
efforts continue in the twenty-first century. The Commission for the Catholic Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians is currently known as the Black and Indian Mission Office. A message in boldface type on the homepage of their website reminds visitors that “the 128th annual Black and Indian Mission Collection is scheduled for the First Sunday of Lent, February 17, 2013 (date may vary in your diocese).”49 The Catholic mission continues.

Ultimately, this narrative defies easy categorization. The difficulty in reckoning with the story of the Catholic mission in the South lies in the American paradox of race. The Church that segregated schoolchildren and drew the color line around its sisterhoods reflected the conflict imbued in the nation at its founding. Liberty and slavery, catholicity and segregation remain two sides of the same coin, minted in the crucible of race in the United States. As the Catholic hierarchy sought a solution to the “Negro problem,” racial contradictions were inhered in the southern evangelical project. Instead of creating truly catholic schools, sisterhoods, seminaries, and other institutions, the Church furthered the country’s racial contradiction. From the very first, though, individuals and groups resisted this vision and called instead for the nation and the Church to live up to their expressed ideals. Their voices continue today.

APPENDIX A

NUMBER OF BAPTISMS AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN AND ADULTS IN SOUTHERN DIOCESES.

1889-1914
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APPENDIX B

NUMBERS OF SCHOOLS, PUPILS, AND SISTERHOODS AT SOUTHERN DIOCESES,

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Appendix A and Appendix B:

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Archival Sources

Memphis Annals, Archives of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Dubuque, Iowa

Clarksdale Annals, Archives of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Dubuque, Iowa

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Primary Sources: Periodicals and Books

The Catholic World

Chicago Defender

Harper’s Weekly

New York Evangelist

New York Times


**Secondary Sources: Articles and Books**


VITA

Megan Stout Sibbel grew up in the small town of Coon Rapids, Iowa. She attended Simpson College in Indianola, Iowa from 2000 to 2004, where she earned a double major in History and English. Following completion of her undergraduate degree, Megan served in the Peace Corps for two years in Kyrgyzstan.

After her stint in the Peace Corps, she enrolled in the history graduate program at Loyola University Chicago. She received her Master’s degree in history in 2010 and served as treasurer for the History Graduate Student Association. Megan also enjoyed judging student essays for Chicago’s History Fair, interning at the Chicago History Museum, and working as a teaching assistant. Loyola’s Advanced Doctoral Fellowship for the 2011-2012 academic year and the Arthur J. Schmitt Fellowship for the 2012-2013 academic year aided her immeasurably in the completion of her doctorate.

Currently, Megan lives in Des Moines, Iowa.