

**“FOUGHT TOGETHER, FEARED TOGETHER, WITNESSED TOGETHER”: HISTORIOGRAPHY OF
WHITE CATHOLIC NUNS, LAYPEOPLE, AND AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE STRUGGLE FOR
INTERRACIAL JUSTICE**

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Abstract: As a historiographical paper, the six sources studied provide a broad cross-section of Catholic involvement in the Civil Rights struggles of the mid-Twentieth century. Beginning with a narrative account of Sister Judith Mary’s account of her involvement in Selma, Alabama and moving through the decades to the Black Power movement, we see that Catholic nuns, and laypeople mainly served in supporting roles during this struggle, however their involvement radically influenced the Catholic Church itself as national parishes were challenged by the need to adapt to new members and ways of expressing their faith. The triple forces of Civil Rights, Vatican II and the Black Power movement combined to transform individual nuns, African Americans and Catholic laypeople into the *Mystical Body of Christ*.

Evaluation: Researching this topic, Catholic involvement in the Civil Rights movement of the twentieth century, helped open my eyes to the complexities of this history. The strength of this paper comes from sources evaluated which provide a cross section of perspectives including those of the immigrant church, the migrated African American, Church response in the South, the post-Vatican II nun, and the empowered Black Catholic. Through this study, I have been inspired to continue to explore how religion and religious expression impacts and influences struggles for equality in American society. This theme is a strong current which runs through my capstone project.

In March 1965, a contingent of nine Sisters of Loretto and five priests travelled from Kansas City to Selma, Alabama to participate in the demonstrations which would culminate with the Civil Rights marches across the Edmund Pettis Bridge led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Undoubtedly inspired by the Catholic doctrine of the *Mystical Body of Christ*, the Second Vatican Council, Dr. King’s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, and the example provided by lay people and clergy who had been working to advance civil rights for African Americans for three decades, Sister Judith Mary wrote an account of her experiences of preparing for and

participation in the lead up to these demonstrations in Selma.¹ Sister Judith Mary's account of her involvement in Selma sparked my interest in Catholic involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. More specifically, I am fascinated by how clergy and nuns, and especially lay people became involved in the struggle. The scholarship in this field is relatively new and more study into the intersections between Catholic involvement and Civil Rights needs to be accomplished.

This historiography analyzes the approaches and compares and contrasts the scholarship of six historians who have written about Catholic involvement in the struggle for civil rights and racial justice and the intersections of race and gender within these movements. One scholar, John McGreevy argues that, for Euro-American Catholics, 'race' centered on national origin and ethnicity prior to the 1940s and that it was only after the Great Migration that a binary 'black' and 'white' system of parish and neighborhood segregation emerged in northern cities. Scholar, Karen J. Johnson builds on the work of McGreevy but focuses her study on lay involvement in the long civil rights movement through her bottom up approach. Like Johnson, Paul T. Murray's study focuses on the contributions made by Catholic laypeople; in his case, he focuses on civil rights activist, Matthew Ahmann. Jesuit historian, Bentley R. Anderson's article focuses on the policy discussions and decisions made by the New Orleans Province of Jesuits which rejected the dominant narrative of segregation two years before the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. While Anderson focuses on the institutional decisions of the Jesuits in New Orleans, historian Amy Koehlinger focuses on the contributions made by the 'new nuns' who experienced personal transformations which enabled them to move out of the isolated and protected world of religious life into the 'racial apostolate.' And finally, taking an entirely different perspective, Matthew J.

¹ G. S. R. Staff, "From the NCR Archives: On the Line in Selma with a Sister-Demonstrator," Global Sisters Report, 4:00am, <https://www.globalsistersreport.org/news/ncr-archives-line-selma-sister-demonstrator-21211>.

Cressler's work explores how African American Catholics developed a uniquely 'Black Catholic' experience as a result of their involvement in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements.

McGreevy, Koehlinger and Cressler all acknowledge the impact that Dr. King's *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* had on the hearts of Catholic clergy, religious sisters and lay people. In the letter, King commends the [Jesuit] Catholic leaders of Alabama "for integrating Springhill College several years ago," but he also expresses his frustration and disappointment with "the white ministers, priests, and rabbis of the South" as he thought that they "would be some of our strongest allies."² He pushed white ministers to not just follow desegregation orders because it was lawful to do so, but because "integration is morally right and the Negro is your brother."³ His words combined with television images of African Americans being beaten for peacefully marching through the streets galvanized the movement and transformed this struggle from a socio-political issue to an issue of morality.

John T. McGreevy's study, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North*, "traces the threads connecting religion, race and community in the nation's northern cities" issues which he argues, are too infrequently included in scholarly discussions.⁴ Through this volume, the author's "guiding principle...has been to understand Catholic racism, not simply to catalog it."⁵ During the early to mid-twentieth century, when northern cities were between twenty to seventy percent Catholic, neighborhoods were defined by parish boundaries. McGreevy illuminates how parishes served to strengthen and empower

² Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," 5.

³ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," 5.

⁴ John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North*, Historical Studies of Urban America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 3.

⁵ McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries*, 5.

individuals and the communities in which they lived, while at the same time promoted exceptionalism and even bigotry at times. As he points out, neighborhoods in northern cities became significantly more segregated between African-American and “whites” than southern cities.⁶ Racial violence and discrimination in the northern cities of the United States in the twentieth century centered on issues of housing. Clergy actively “commanded parishioners to purchase homes within the parish boundaries.”⁷ This practice helped parishioners achieve financial security, but also helped the local parish neighborhood maintain its ethnic purity as pastors would counsel parishioners to maintain the status quo and discourage people from other ethnic groups from moving into the parish territory. McGreevy argues that “the Catholic parish itself, because of its size and community base, helped define what neighborhood would mean.”⁸

To this end, McGreevy explores themes of discrimination in the early twentieth century between European ethnic groups. At a time when these groups fought to maintain their cultural integrity, Church leadership responded by establishing national churches to serve those communities. McGreevy captures the fears of Euro-Americans who had fought to achieve relative middle-class status through the purchase of their homes and their fears that African Americans moving into their neighborhoods would lower property values. This is evident in the statement by the Jesuit Superior, Fr. Love, from Philadelphia in a 1941 statement, “We have nothing against Negroes, but we cannot stand by and see property which represents the life-savings of some of our oldest parishioners become almost valueless or go to ruin [if African Americans move into the parish]”.⁹ It is into that environment that large numbers of African American enter during the Great Migration. McGreevy focuses his scholarship on how the

⁶ Ibid., 4.

⁷ Ibid., 18.

⁸ Ibid., 20.

⁹ McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries*, 252.

institutional church, clergy and lay people encountered and responded to race in northern parishes.

Building on the scholarship of McGreevy, who acknowledged that race and religion are inextricably linked, Karen J. Johnson chose to take the long view on the interracial struggle and focused her study specifically in Chicago. She begins *One in Christ: Chicago Catholics and the Quest for Interracial Justice* in the early twentieth century with a biographical narrative of African American Catholic and interracial activist, Dr. Arthur G. Falls. Using Falls' unpublished manuscript to offer a narration of his early experiences with discrimination and exclusion, we come to understand the pervasiveness of this systematic exclusion in neighborhoods and the Catholic Church. In 1919, Falls' family was one of only 600 African American families in Chicago. The family owned their home in a predominantly white neighborhood populated by Irish and German immigrants and their decedents. He lived through the riots "which were instigated by the Regan Colts, an Irish athletic club" and would remember, almost four decades later, that they were "roaming bands of youths looking for Negroes to beat up and kill."¹⁰ As he remembered, "for most colored people, the term Irish Catholic was synonymous with the word enemy."¹¹ This account exemplifies the racial divisions even amongst co-religionists.

White priests and laypeople didn't want African Americans, who were predominantly Protestant, moving into their neighborhoods as they perceived that this would disrupt the rhythms which structured their lives in terms of housing, race, and religion, which were inseparable. Johnson brings to light the racial policies of Archbishop George Mundelein who she opines, was most responsible for initiating a system which perpetuated the segregation of

¹⁰ Karen J. Johnson, *One in Christ: Chicago Catholics and the Quest for Interracial Justice* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 10.

¹¹ Johnson, *One in Christ*, 11.

coreligionists.¹² As McGreevy explained, in the early twentieth century, the Church had been divided into national churches based on ethnic identity, not on strict binary black and white lines. As this system of national churches was shifting to a territorial model based on neighborhood and parish boundaries for the Euro-American churches, Archbishop Mundelein established St. Monica's parish in 1917 for African American Catholics. Johnson explains that although the Archbishop didn't promote racist policies, and says that he "insisted that black Catholics could attend any parish" but, he would also "turn a blind eye when white diocesan priests outside 'Negro' parishes denied the sacraments, the very means of God's grace, to black Catholics."¹³

This continuation of a segregated model of parish life propelled Dr. Arthur G. Falls and other African Americans to reject this racial separation and seek a more meaningful and fulfilling experience of a racially integrated Catholicism. Johnson provides detailed analysis of the shift from a politically conservative approach to a more militant approach which involved both black and white lay Catholics and nuns collaborating in the organizations founded to work for equity. Through his involvement in the Federated Colored Catholics (FCC), an organization which had been founded in 1925 by Thomas Wyatt Turner, Falls "attacked the Catholic hierarchy in several *Chronicle* articles, signaling a new direction for the FCC."¹⁴ He argued that black people should not wait for whites to change their minds about interracial justice, but should counter power with power through organizing. This shift came nearly thirty years before King's activism and Falls said that what they will accomplish "will be the result of intelligent, co-operative efforts of colored and white friends."¹⁵ He used his position to create an Interracial Commission and

¹² Johnson, *One in Christ*, 20.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁵ Johnson, *One in Christ*, 39.

fostered collaboration and relationships within various community organizations to improve and strengthen networks of racial and religious groups.¹⁶

Whereas Johnson and McGreevy focused their scholarship in northern cities, Bentley Anderson's article *Black, White and Catholic: Southern Jesuits Confront the Race Question, 1952*, addresses the 'race question' in the South. He argues that the New Orleans Province of the Society of Jesus, at least officially, rejected the dominant racial narrative of segregation two years before the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and three years before the Montgomery bus boycott. Their decision to integrate the Catholic schools and institutions under their control was inspired by the doctrine of the *Mystical Body of Christ* and the necessity to demonstrate solidarity with workers out of fear that they would be attracted to secular doctrines like Communism. Their fear was well founded as seventy to eighty percent of black workers were classified as unskilled laborers in southern cities.¹⁷ Some Jesuits believed that there was nothing that could be done to change the long-established systems of segregation in the South, while others, including the superior general of the order, John Baptist Janssens, S.J., believed that Christ's love compelled them to examine and change society.¹⁸

Anderson focused on an institutional response to the 'race question' whereas, historian Paul T. Murray, like Johnson, focuses on an individual's contributions to the civil rights struggle. He highlighted the involvement of white Catholic layman Mathew Ahmann as the coalition builder who brought Catholic lay people and clergy into a national ecumenical Civil Rights movement in the 1960s. Ahmann had stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial next to Martin

¹⁶ Ibid., 41.

¹⁷ R. Bentley Anderson, "Black, White, and Catholic: Southern Jesuits Confront the Race Question, 1952," *The Catholic Historical Review* 91, no. 3 (2005): 485.

¹⁸ Anderson, "Black, White, and Catholic," 488.

Luther King, Jr. on August 28, 1963 when he delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech.¹⁹ Through his involvement with Catholic Action in Chicago, then his later work as secretary of the Catholic Interracial Council of Chicago, he urged for a more aggressive agenda in the arena of civil rights. As a white Catholic layman, he was able to enter into spaces with Catholic clergy and promote coalition building with Black community leaders and to build ecumenical alliances. Through his experience and relationships, he advocated for the establishment of a national Catholic civil rights organization which merged the Chicago and New York regional chapters. It was comprised of clergy, religious sisters and both Black and white lay people and was called the National Catholic Council of Interracial Justice (NCCIJ). When Ahmann received the call to create this new organization, he was told that it must be “lay controlled and lay operated and thus not subject to the immediate pressures confronting the various bishops.”²⁰ This directive both protected the bishops from parishioners who opposed integration and protected the organization itself from pressure it might have received from the bishops to curtail their action.

Like Anderson who focused on an institutional response to the ‘race question,’ Amy Koehlinger’s book, *The New Nuns: Racial Justice and Religious Reform in the 1960s*, chronicles the tensions, frustrations and triumphs experienced by religious communities and particularly, the ‘new nuns’ who were inspired by the documents of the Second Vatican Council and a desire to move out of the cloisters and into the streets to live the faith of their vocation. She seeks to trace “the historical origins of the racial apostolate, to outline some of its dominant features, and to discuss the effect racial-justice activism had on the individual women who engaged in it.”²¹

¹⁹ Paul T. Murray, “From the Sidelines to the Front Lines - Mathew Ahmann Leads American Catholics into the Civil Rights Movement,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* Vol. 107, no. No. 1 (Spring 2014), 77.

²⁰ Murray, “From the Sidelines to the Front Lines,” 82.

²¹ Amy L. Koehlinger, *The New Nuns: Racial Justice and Religious Reform in the 1960s* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2007), 3.

These ‘new nuns’ answered this call to a ‘racial apostolate’ by climbing in station wagons and heading south to join in civil rights marches, by teaching in local northern urban parishes, creating free summer programs for African American children, and by actively seeking relationships with African American neighbors and activists. Her study looks at the active and varied roles that nuns played in the civil rights movement and how those roles were sometimes in conflict with hierarchical structures.

Although the ‘new nuns’ contributions to the civil rights movement were insignificant, the individual sisters who participated experienced a profound sense of identification with black men and women which is evidenced by one sister’s testimony after spending the summer in inner-city Chicago. The sister wrote, “I feel black. I look at everything through Negro eyes – Negro emotions & Negro pain.”²² Although this may seem unexpected for modern readers, Koehlinger explains that “both [African Americans and nuns] were depicted as simple and childlike; the inexpensive labor of both was essential to economic expansion in the 1950s and 1960s that largely benefited others.”²³ This ability to ‘see through others eyes and walk in others shoes’ propelled the sisters’ personal and congregational reformation.

Koehlinger identifies three factors which contributed to this reform: racial activism, religious reform, and “an emerging feminist consciousness.”²⁴ In a 1969 letter to Sr. Margaret Traxler, another nun wrote, “I feel that our days of being male dominated have come to an end.” Another sister, who wrote about the “dictatorial decrees of the American bishops for women religious” opined, “it seems hard to get the idea into some of the episcopal minds that women are adults and able to manage their own affairs.”²⁵

²² Koehlinger, *The New Nuns*, 16.

²³ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁴ Koehlinger, *The New Nuns*, 234.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 234-235.

As Koehlinger explored the conversion experienced by some Catholic nuns as a result of the religious reformation, racial activism and an emerging feminine consciousness, historian Matthew Cressler's book *Authentically Black and Truly Catholic: The Rise of Black Catholicism in the Great Migration* traces the origins of a revolution which was started on the streets of Chicago by Black laypeople, sisters, and priests in the 1960s. Although built on the work of McGreevy and Murray, his approach is different from the previous historians' work surveyed in this paper in that Cressler focuses on how this revolution transformed the ways in which Black Catholics viewed themselves in the church and the world. Like white laypeople, religious and clergy, Black Catholics also drew inspiration from both the Second Vatican Council, and the *Mystical Body of Christ* doctrine, but he explains how they were also inspired by the Black Power movement. Cressler's conclusions about conversion experienced by African Americans is similar to the experiences of the nuns that Koehlinger studies, in that African Americans were powerfully transformed by their experiences with Black Power and Catholicism. He seeks to answer the question; why did so many African Americans become Catholic?

To answer this question, Cressler focuses his study on Black Catholics rather than white Catholic encounters with Black people or interracial encounters. He points to two factors; the Great Migration and the response of the institutional Church in Chicago. Prior to the 1940s, the numbers of Black Catholics in the United States were relatively low; approximately 300,000 African Americans were Catholic in the U.S.. But by 1975, their numbers had increased by 208 percent to almost 1 million, "and the Black Catholic center of gravity had shifted from the coastal South to the industrial North."²⁶ This influx of African Americans into the urban northern Churches of cities such as Chicago, dramatically remade Catholicism "into the image of Black

²⁶ Matthew J. Cressler, *Authentically Black and Truly Catholic: The Rise of Black Catholicism in the Great Migration* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 4.

Spirituality and the Black Church.”²⁷ Chicago’s Black Belt was considered “foreign mission territory” by the Archdiocese of Chicago and “missionaries...linked evangelization with education and re-imagined schools as convert-making machines.”²⁸ Schools were the catalysts for conversion and clergy knew that once children were converted, they would bring their parents and siblings along too. Through the parochial school system and limited empowerment provided by the Church, and the changes ushered in by the Second Vatican Council which opened the doors to more engaging forms of worship and greater involvement in the modern world, and as the Black Power movement advocated for greater self-determination and Black liberation, a group of Black activists attempted to transform “what it meant to be both Black and Catholic.”²⁹

Although the institutional Catholic Church became involved in the Civil Rights struggle relatively late and the contributions made were insignificant, the involvement of individual laypeople and religious sisters, especially was transformational. Through empowerment gained by individuals through parish involvement, the national media’s coverage of the Civil Rights struggle, the foundation of the National Catholic Council for Interracial Justice and the organizing efforts of Black Catholics, a uniquely Black Catholic experience was created and a shining movement in the history of American Catholicism is remembered. As Sister Judith Mary said, “we had fought together, feared together, [and] witnessed together.” She was shown a model of love and patience by the “Selma Negroes” which she prayed would be replicated in her home community of Kansas City.³⁰ This experience of activism may not have achieved full

²⁷ Cressler, *Authentically Black and Truly Catholic*, 4.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁰ G. S. R. Staff, “From the NCR Archives: On the Line in Selma with a Sister-Demonstrator,” *Global Sisters Report*, 4:00am, <https://www.globalsistersreport.org/news/ncr-archives-line-selma-sister-demonstrator-21211>.

citizenship rights for African Americans, but it transformed the way that Catholics related to each other, formed neighborhoods and worshipped together.

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