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## Black Liberation and the Catholic Church: The Louisiana Experience

### *Introduction*

The following pages discuss the role of religion, specifically the Catholic Church and its conduct during the long struggle of American black people for social and political liberation. Since the American South was the most active battle ground of this fight for human dignity, I have focused my study on Louisiana, a state which is surely a part of the South, but also one which is uniquely southern for a number of reasons, not the least of which is its large population of black and white Catholics.

Louisiana has been one of the most theoretically interesting of the American states to scholars engaged in the systematic analysis of state politics. Perhaps the best known reason is Louisiana's bifactionalism. A second, and for this study more important, aspect is the politically significant contrast between Anglo-Protestant north Louisiana and the French-Catholic parishes (counties) in the south.

### *The Two Louisianas*

Although distinguishing Protestant North Louisiana from the Catholic South presents some analytical difficulties because of the existence of a few French-Catholic communities in the northern areas, generally

the area of French culture can be visualized as a large triangle whose base consists of the Gulf of Mexico. One side is bounded by a straight line running from the southwestern tip of the state to the junction of the Red and Mississippi rivers, and the other side is bounded by a straight line running from the latter point through the city of New Orleans to the Gulf of Mexico.<sup>1</sup>

A study which attempts to connect empirically the teachings of a specific religious denomination with the secular activities and attitudes of

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<sup>1</sup> T. Lynn Smith and Homer L. Hitt, *The People of Louisiana* (Baton Rouge, L.S.U. Press, 1952), p. 49.

those adherents to that faith faces an enormous task. Recognition of this difficulty is not recent, and many authors of previous studies have had to confront this dilemma.

When trying to link racial tolerance with Catholicism, especially in the American South, this quandary is compounded, for depending upon the time considered, those who spoke in the Church's name owned, bought, and sold slaves; encouraged and helped to establish racially segregated Catholic Churches; and continued, for more than a decade and long after the Supreme Court's *Brown* decision of 1954, to administer racially segregated Catholic schools. While the canonical teachings of the Church have been consistent and monolithic, the means for putting these religious instructions into practice has not. The reasons for this incongruous pattern in Louisiana are varied, but are usually related to a particular bishop and his attitude toward his religious mission, and I suspect, black people.

In twentieth century Louisiana, the late Archbishop of New Orleans, Joseph Rummel, and Jules B. Jeanmard, the late Bishop of Lafayette, a diocese with more black Catholics than any in the nation, were considered social activists and religious spokesmen who accepted the Church's negative position on racism. They moved to eliminate racial injustice. Both men were progressives on social issues and are remembered even today for their early and courageous positions.<sup>2</sup> But an example of the inconsistent and independent manner in which Church leaders are able to lead is demonstrated by the stance and frequent lack of stance taken by Jeanmard's successor in Lafayette, Bishop Maurice Schexnayder. Recollection, published and otherwise, recall Schexnayder with considerably less admiration and reverence. Bishop Schexnayder is not believed to have been a man much concerned with social and racial justice.<sup>3</sup>

It is perhaps also worth noting that Catholic Clergymen and hence, Catholicism, had little influence in areas where Catholics were few in number. For this reason, a cleric such as Charles B. Greco, the former Bishop of the Alexandria diocese (all of north Louisiana) would have had an inconsiderable amount of sway in the northern parishes.

My effort at establishing the relationship between Catholicism and racial moderation and hence, freer access to the franchise rest with voter registration figures. These data clearly establishes that blacks were allowed to vote in much greater numbers in the Louisiana parishes with large proportions of Catholics. John Fenton and Kenneth Vines in 1957 wrote that the "Permissive attitudes toward Negro registration in French-Catholic parishes seem expressive of the basic value that the Ne-

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Becnel, *Labor, Church, and the Sugar Establishment: Louisiana, 1887-1976* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980) pp. 66-67.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

gro is spiritually equal in Catholic society."<sup>4</sup> An identical conclusion was reached by Margaret Price when she found that 1956 registration figures indicated that the ". . . French Catholic parishes of Louisiana are generally more tolerant toward their Negro citizens than are the other parishes."<sup>5</sup>

There is then ample evidence to support the position that ". . . Catholicism is independently and positively related to Negro voter registration."<sup>6</sup> Not wishing to rely solely upon the historical record, I have chosen to incorporate the beliefs and recollections of the persons interviewed for this study. A review of the pertinent literature also affords an impressionistic appraisal of the role of the Catholic Church. When however, I combined this superficial evaluation with the testimony of those who took the Church's pronouncements for its literal worth, then the conclusion is doubtlessly one which maintains that the Church, despite inconsistency and serious failings, was in the end, a major force in molding, for south Louisiana, a social environment where racial violence was a sin, and consequently rare; where racial segregation was unChristian, and hence its defense was muted; and where the vote belonged to all, and its denial constituted deceit and cheating.

The historical and continuing role of the Roman Catholic Church in Louisiana with regard to the welfare of the black man has been a role largely characterized by silent capitulation to the various social and political norms that have pervaded Louisiana history for well over two centuries. This quiet, however, has not always been complete, and occasionally an exception to this traditional reticence on the part of the Church made things considerably better for black Catholics, and because of the Church's influence, better perhaps for all blacks living in predominantly Catholic areas.

Not surprisingly then, almost a century ago there were reasons to ponder whether or not Catholicism, in Louisiana, might not have softened the anti-black movements which swept the South in the waning years of Reconstruction. Commenting on the large number of blacks in south Louisiana who continued to vote in several post 1877 elections, Perry Howard admitted that it was ". . . tempting to hypothesize that the lack of widespread Negro intimidation in South Louisiana [was] attributable to the French cultural background and the presence of the Catholic

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<sup>4</sup> John H. Fenton and Kenneth N. Vines, "Negro Registration in Louisiana," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. LIII (September 1957), p. 713.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Price, *The Negro and the Ballot in the South* (Atlanta: The Southern Regional Council, 1959), p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Donald R. Matthews and Majes W. Prothro, "Social and Economic and Negro Voter Registration in the South," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. LVII (March 1963), p. 39.

Church."<sup>7</sup> Some comments about the early decades of the Church in Louisiana seem appropriate at this point.

### *The Early Church*

As mentioned earlier the Church had proved its influence during periods of French and Spanish rule in Louisiana. Both the French and Spanish black codes provided for the religious well-being of slaves and free men of color. Obviously, that the Church would consent to provide spiritually for slaves in this manner meant that it compromised its own teachings. Charles Rousseve in a 1937 study of the black man in Louisiana recounts that as early as 1727 the Jesuits in Louisiana owned many slaves and used them to work on a Jesuit plantation in New Orleans.<sup>8</sup> The fact that racially segregated Catholic schools were still in operation in Louisiana during the mid-1960s indicates the continued historical compromising role of the Church.

Still, when compared to Protestant denominations, the Catholic Church (whether in the eighteenth or the twentieth century) was a moderating influence. The Church "sought to ameliorate the lot of the bondsmen; but it made no frontal attack on slavery as an institution, nor did it assert itself against social injustice to which free Negroes later became subjected."<sup>9</sup> That the Church in the eighteenth century did allow and even encourage slaves and free men of color to attend church services was an indication of moderation. Visitors to New Orleans prior to the Civil War noticed that the city had "a religious attitude which was decidedly liberal rather than narrowly conservative."<sup>10</sup>

Blacks in New Orleans in the 1860's "owned half of the pews in St. Augustine's Catholic Church and found in this and the several other Catholic Churches they worshiped in, that no distinction was made against them."<sup>11</sup> The Church fought against the establishment of segregated pews for blacks, and generally blacks in Louisiana continued to attend racially integrated religious services during and since the Reconstruction Era.

In the rural districts, the Church proved to be perhaps the only institution that sanctioned interracial activities of any sort. Church records in-

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<sup>7</sup> Perry H. Howard, *Political Tendencies in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971) P. 713.

<sup>8</sup> Charles B. Rousseve, *The Negro in Louisiana: Aspects of His History and His Literature* (New Orleans: Xavier University Press, 1939), p. 34.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>10</sup> Timothy F. Reilly, "Heterodox New Orleans and the Protestant South 1800-1861," *Louisiana Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of the South* 12 (Summer 1973), p. 541.

<sup>11</sup> John W. Blassingame, *Black New Orleans 1860-1880* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973), p. 16.

dicate for instance that “. . . in 1860, St. Francis Regis Parish in Arnaudville (St. Martin civil parish) had a first communion class that included seventeen white and ten black children. This same parish in April of 1980 gave Confirmation to a class of 92 white and 147 black children.”<sup>12</sup>

*“Jim Crow Comes to Church”*

In her excellent account of the establishment of racially segregated Catholic Churches in south Louisiana, Dolores Egger Labbe recounts that although the first black Catholic Church was not created until 1895, “complete separation of races into independent and autonomous organization [was] impossible, for according to canon law all Catholics within the geographical boundaries of a diocese are subject to the jurisdiction of the same bishop.”<sup>13</sup>

Canon law aside, after 1895 segregated churches for blacks increased rapidly. Their appearance oddly enough seems to have roughly coincided with the push in Louisiana and the South for enactment of Jim Crow legislation.<sup>14</sup> And, as Labbe points out, while blacks could not be forced to attend black Catholic churches, “By 1918 . . . segregated parishes were considered both normal and permanent and Negro Catholics were expected to attend them.”<sup>15</sup>

In 1907 St. Katherine’s parish was founded for blacks in New Orleans (Orleans Parish), as were St. Paul Parish (In Lafayette Parish) in 1911, and Sacred Heart Parish in 1919 (in Lake Charles, Calcasieu Parish). Catholic parishes for blacks were also started in 1920 for those who resided in St. Landry and Acadia Parishes.<sup>16</sup>

But black Catholic Parishes have never been able to serve the needs of all black Catholics in Louisiana, especially the rural ones. In 1940

. . . in the Diocese of Lafayette . . . there [was] hardly a parish which [did] not include in its congregation some colored communicants. While there [were] a couple of dozen parishes and missions professedly serving about 32,000 colored Catholics, the [remaining] 32,000 were scattered in ‘mixed’ parishes, a fact which seems to be corroborated by the number of schools for colored attached to parishes which [were] not professedly for Negroes.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Roger Baudier, *The Catholic Church in Louisiana* (New Orleans: 1939), p. 542.

<sup>13</sup> Dolores Egger Labbe, *Jim Crow Comes to Church: The Establishment of Segregated Catholic Parishes in South Louisiana* (Lafayette, Louisiana: University of Southwestern Louisiana History Series, 1971), p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 54.

<sup>15</sup> Labbe, pp. 3-4.

<sup>16</sup> Baudier, pp. 539, 540, 564.

<sup>17</sup> John T. Gillard, *The Catholic Church and the American Negro* (Baltimore: The Josephite Press, 1941), p. 6.

The decision to create segregated parishes seemed to have been reached for several reasons. Certainly many whites objected to the presence of blacks at church services, and some priests thought that black churches would enable black Catholics to create their own church-related organizations and consequently participate more fully in church activities. Additionally, some blacks felt that they were being treated less than equal and petitioned for permission to build their own churches.

The creation in 1842 of the Order of the Sisters of the Holy Family, a society of black nuns indicates both that most other existing orders would not accept blacks into their organizations and that these already existing religious groups were not providing adequate spiritual and secular aid to slaves and free men of color.

Despite segregation, many blacks in south Louisiana continued to cling to their faith. Perhaps it was examples such as the one provided by Bishop Francis Janssens in 1891 that reassured black Catholics in their religious choice. Bishop Janssens "During his confirmation tour [went to the] . . . chapel at Petite Praire . . . . Because of the absence of hotels in the area, he was forced to spend the night with a family in the neighborhood and chose to do so with a black family."<sup>18</sup>

Fittingly, Dolores Egger Labbe characterizes the role of the Catholic Church as a follower. "As an institution in society, the Catholic Church affects and is affected by society. Sometimes it leads, sometimes it follows. In the racial field, the Church of South Louisiana elected to follow. When society chose Jim Crow, the Church, too, chose Jim Crow."<sup>19</sup>

Comfortable and consistent in its role as follower, the Catholic hierarchy was not to move against racially segregated parochial schools in Louisiana until the 1960s; church officials waited until public school officials were forced to desegregate public schools.

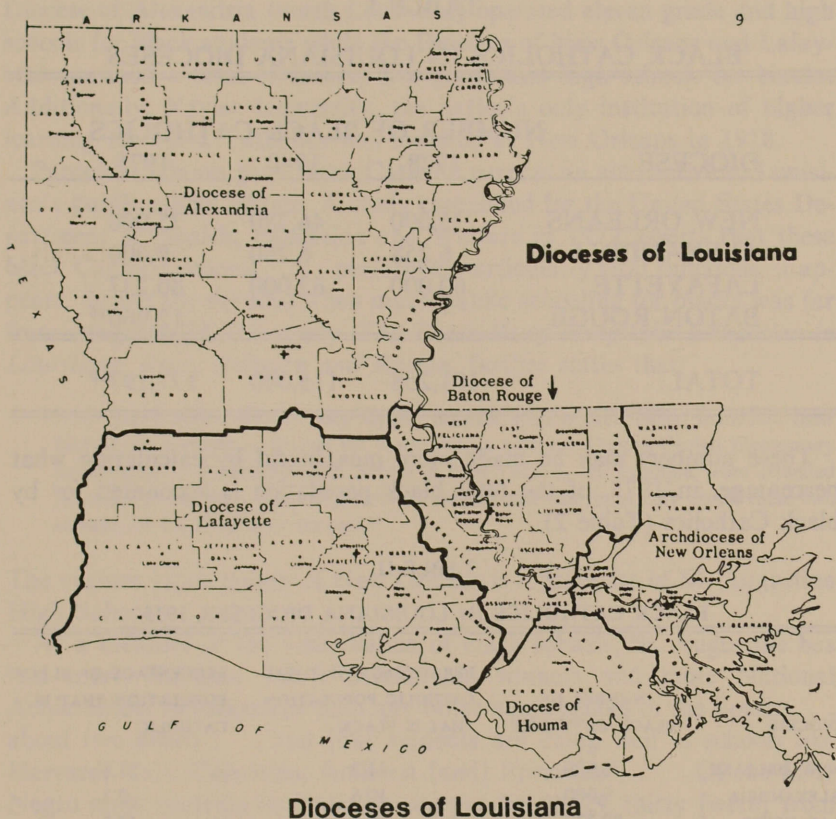
### *Black Catholics in Louisiana*

Louisiana is divided into five districts or dioceses by the Church (see Figure 1). One of these, the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux was created in mid 1977 out of the existing Diocese of New Orleans. The other three Dioceses are those of Alexandria, Baton Rouge and Lafayette. While diocesan boundaries do not correspond neatly with boundaries dividing north and south Louisiana, these church-made borders do give us a clue about the location of heavy Catholic populations.

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<sup>18</sup> Labbe, p. 30.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 69.



(FIGURE 1)

The Diocese of Alexandria, for instance, cares for the spiritual needs of most of north Louisiana where some creole influences remain). The Dioceses of Lafayette and New Orleans are almost exclusively within French-Catholic Louisiana. The Baton Rouge Diocese contains an unusual mix of parishes that are either heavily Protestant or heavily Catholic.

As might be expected, the bulk of the black Catholic population is in the Diocese of New Orleans and especially, Lafayette. Table I shows the number of black Catholics who lived in the existing dioceses of Louisiana in 1928, 1940 and 1975.

TABLE I  
BLACK CATHOLICS IN LOUISIANA DIOCESES

DIOCESE	NUMBER OF BLACK CATHOLICS		
	1928	1940	1975
NEW ORLEANS	35,000	46,780	75,000
ALEXANDRIA	6,258	6,260	9,000
LAFAYETTE	60,000	62,000	80,237
BATON ROUGE			12,960 <sup>20</sup>
TOTAL	101,258	115,040	177,197 <sup>20</sup>

These numbers may be made more meaningful by calculating what percentage, in 1975, of the total black population is accounted for by black Catholics (Table 2).

TABLE II  
BLACK CATHOLICS IN LOUISIANA DIOCESES, 1975

DIOCESE	NUMBER OF BLACK CATHOLICS	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL CATHOLIC POPULATION THAT IS BLACK	PERCENTAGE OF BLACK POPULATION THAT IS CATHOLIC
NEW ORLEANS	75,000	11.2	21.8
ALEXANDRIA	9,000	10.6	2.3
LAFAYETTE	80,237	20.2	47.2
BATON ROUGE	12,960	7.8	6.8 <sup>21</sup>

The "heavy concentration" of black Catholics in south Louisiana makes the area demographically unique and this uniqueness distinguishes much of southern Louisiana's black population from the black population in the northern parishes and in the remainder of the nation. The Dioceses of Lafayette and New Orleans rank first and third, respectively in the black percentage of the total Catholic population."<sup>22</sup>

Because the great bulk of Louisiana's black Catholic population lived in south Louisiana, it is in this section that the various orders of priests and nuns established schools for black Catholic children. In 1940 the

<sup>20</sup> Gillard, p. 15; pp. 48-49 (Diocese of Baton Rouge was not created until later). And George Shuster, S.S.J. and Robert M. Kearns, S.S.J., *Statistical Profile of Black Catholics* (Washington, D.C.: Josephite Pastoral Center, 1976) pp. 7-20.

<sup>21</sup> GEORGE SHUSTER, S.S.J. AND ROBERT M. KEARNS, S.S.J., *Statistical Profile of Black Catholics* (Washington, D.C.: Josephite Pastoral Center, 1976), pp. 7-20.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 7-20.



Diocese of Alexandria (north Louisiana) operated eleven grade and high schools for black students while the Dioceses of New Orleans and Lafayette operated a total of seventy-five grade and high schools for blacks. Additionally, Xavier University, the nation's only institution of higher learning for black Catholics was founded at New Orleans in 1918.

Parochial schools gave black Catholic parents an alternative to Louisiana's public school system. A study completed for the United States Department of Health, Education and Welfare in 1972 asserts that these black Catholic schools ". . . performed particularly vital functions, it appears, during the decades when much public schooling for blacks was far from adequate."<sup>23</sup> This study, *The Three Rs of Nonpublic Education in Louisiana: Race, Religion and Region*, further states that:

. . . many blacks display deep loyalty to these schools that helped them and their fathers when public education for blacks was a travesty. Corpus Christi Elementary School and St. Augustine High School in New Orleans, for example, were attended by many blacks who became prominent leaders and still reportedly credit these two schools for much of their success.<sup>24</sup>

The current black mayor of New Orleans is a graduate of St. Augustine High School.

As a measure of the contribution of black schools, St. Augustine has had more National Merit Scholarship winners and more National Achievement Scholarships than any other negro school in the South . . . about two dozen . . . and [its] students are doing well in schools like Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Amherst [and] Princeton . . . . Of the forty Negro male students on Tulane's campus (in 1972), thirty [were] from St. Augustine High School.<sup>25</sup> No doubt the experience of having received an education superior to that which was available in Louisiana's public schools provided many blacks (Catholic blacks for the most part) with something akin to high levels of self-esteem.

Mr. J. Carlton James of Lafayette Parish was among the first four blacks to register and vote in Lafayette civil parish since Reconstruction. He registered to vote in 1946, and recalls that he and others who sought to teach blacks how to register used to Immaculate Heart of Mary and the St. Paul Churches as classrooms. Mr. James maintains, however, that even after he and a few other blacks had broken the barrier, blacks

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<sup>23</sup> Donald A. Erickson and John D. Donovan, *The Three Rs of Non-public Education in Louisiana: Race, Religion and Region, A Report to the President's Commission on School Finance* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1972), p. 57.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> *Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana, Inc.*, Baton Rouge No. 141, March 1967, pp. 2-3. "The Impact of the Negro in Louisiana's Future, Motivating Negro Youth," Eugene P. McManus, S.S.J.

did not rush to place themselves on the registration rolls, at least not until the local Catholic bishop encouraged them to do so.

*The Episcopacy as Political and Social Enforcer*

Roger Shugg, in a study entitled *Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana*, states that in the early history of the state of Louisiana "the Catholic Church was a French state within an American state. The Cathedral of St. Louis meant more to Creoles in New Orleans and affected their lives in many more ways than the Capital at Baton Rouge."<sup>26</sup> And while the capacity of the Church to remain this important to its members has diminished considerably, it has still, through the twentieth century, retained some measure of its former role as social and religious overseer.

When Mr. James speaks of the local bishop encouraging blacks he refers to the late Bishop of Lafayette, Jules B. Jeanmard. Bishop Jeanmard, in a statement read to all Catholics in the Diocese of Lafayette in November of 1951, maintained that:

So important are the moral implications in the exercise of the franchise, and so grave the abuses that have crept in, that I deem it my duty to set forth the Christian principles that should govern our people in casting their vote whether in national, state, or local elections . . . Dishonesty, slander, detraction, and the defamation of character are as truly transgressions of God's commandments when resorted to by men in political office as they are for all other men . . . One and the same standard prohibits false statements about members of minority groups and races . . . In this connection, let it be said that the official who has recourse to subterfuge in order to rob a citizen, otherwise qualified, of his right to register and vote, because of the color of his skin, violates his oath of office and makes himself guilty of the sin of perjury.<sup>27</sup>

And while Bishop Jeanmard's letter was not as strong as it might have been, it was nonetheless a bold statement for a regional leader in the South to make in 1951. Mr. James' comments testify to the influence of the statement.

The excommunication of the Plaquemines Parish political boss, Leander Perez in April of 1962 received national attention, yet bishops in south Louisiana had taken positions to lessen the burden of black Catholics years before this. Joseph Francis Rummel, the bishop who ordered the Perez excommunication, had,

as far back as 1949 . . . branded racial segregation un-Christian. The next year he had ordered White and Colored signs removed from churches under his jurisdiction. In 1953 he had issued an order stating that blacks should no longer be required to

<sup>26</sup> Roger Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana: A Social History of White Farmers and Laborers During Slavery and After, 1840-1875* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1939), p. 63.

<sup>27</sup> "Buying, Selling and Voting" (reprinted) in *Southwest Louisiana Register*, Vol. VI, No. 5, p. 4.

take communion last, and in 1956 he had against labeled segregation sinful and announced plans to desegregate Catholic schools.<sup>28</sup>

Archbishop Rummel was a man with a strong social conscience. In 1955 after parishioners barred a black priest from saying mass at a chapel located at Jesuit Bend, in Plaquemines Parish, the Archbishop "subsequently suspended services at the mission."<sup>29</sup>

In the Diocese of Lafayette, Bishop Jeanmard maintained a stance similar to that taken by the New Orleans prelate, as was demonstrated on numerous occasions. In November of 1955, white parishioners of Our Lady of Lourdes Parish in Erath (Vermillion Civil Parish), physically assaulted a catechism instructor because she taught racially mixed classes. The Bishop excommunicated those involved. In a letter addressed to the members of the parish, Bishop Jeanmard noted that:

. . . For many years, it has been the custom for children from the two public schools, white and colored, to attend catechism classes [together] . . . Now, after all these years, it appears that there are some few dissatisfied persons who would demand that these children be even further separated from each other than they have been in the past . . . this would be a step backwards rather than forward in the delicate question of race relations.<sup>30</sup>

So strong was the bishop's reaction that he not only excommunicated those involved in the violence, but threatened the same for those who might engage in such activity in the future. Jeanmard also threatened to close the church if the violence persisted.

At death, it is customary for bishop to have his funeral mass held in the cathedral of his diocese. But Jeanmard was demonstrative even in the end. While he lived, he continually demonstrated his concern for those blacks under his spiritual tutelage, and even when dying he offered his pending death as symbolic evidence of his sincerity. "Part of his last request was an overnight vigil and a Requiem Mass in St. Paul Church (a black Catholic Church) in Lafayette. Ministers of the Mass were priests representing religious communities who worked among Negro Catholics in the Diocese."<sup>31</sup>

These actions of the leaders of the Church in Louisiana, important as they were, did not exempt blacks in south Louisiana from discrimination. Whites in that area were willing to resort to violence, and clearly, whites did try to frustrate the efforts of blacks and other whites to achieve any form of racial desegregation. Sometimes (as in the case in Plaquemines

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<sup>28</sup> Glen Jeansonne, *Leander Perez: Boss of the Delta* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1977), p. 264.

<sup>29</sup> *Southwest Louisiana Register* (Lafayette, La.), December 2, 1955, p. 1.

<sup>30</sup> Letter of Bishop J. B. Jeanmard to Parishioners of Our Lady of Lourdes Parish, Erath, La. November 26, 1955.

<sup>31</sup> *Southwest Louisiana Register* (Lafayette, La.), March 8, 1957), p. 2.

Parish) they succeeded. But more often than not, excommunication or the threat of its use, together with other punitive devices were sufficient to allow blacks in south Louisiana a somewhat wider degree of religious, social and political liberty than their black brothers in north Louisiana. For in south Louisiana, in the end, even a Leander Perez was forced to make his peace with Church officials in order to insure his own Catholic funeral and burial.

The extent of Church power as well as its limits, is shown in a 1964 case in which the successor to Bishop Jeanmard in the Diocese of Lafayette, Maurice Shexnayder, threatened to excommunicate several white men who had beaten a white priest who was the pastor of a black Catholic Church. In response to his warning, the bishop found "comfort" in the fact that "the men involved have given good evidence of sincere repentance and have made their apologies."<sup>32</sup> By contrast, however, this same bishop was not to order an end to racially segregated Catholic educational facilities until a year later, thus indicating perhaps that to have given such an order earlier would have been ineffectual and an invitation to violence.<sup>33</sup>

The Church's teachings and its centralized structure were able to provide a common body of religious beliefs and a commonly accepted standard of morality. By contrast the decentralized structural nature of the Southern Baptist Convention, and the independent structure of various other protestant denominations did not provide for this same type of experience among protestants. While an individual communicant in a protestant denomination was left to interpret for himself, his church's teachings, that choice was denied to Catholics. Priests translated doctrine for Catholics thus allowing for a significant role for Clergymen.

Catholicism in south Louisiana was unable to bring about an end to racism, racial segregation, and social and political inequality. But the Church was able to forestall the movement of whites, in south Louisiana, toward a violent and riotous defense of racism. The Church was a moral sentry, and its guardianship allowed a freer arena within which both black and white might transcend the changes made possible by national political institutions, particularly the United States Supreme Court.

### *North Louisiana*

In seeking to define the religious character of north Louisiana, Kenneth Vines looked at Ouachita Parish in the northeast and found "the area Protestant and dominated by the Baptist Church with only ten per-

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, August 6, 1964, p. 1.

<sup>33</sup> Letter to priests of the Diocese of Lafayette, from Maurice Shexnayder, Bishop of Lafayette, May 15, 1965.

cent of the population adhering to the non-Protestant faiths of Catholicism or Judaism." Vines says that "in a culture which can be characterized as basically a church-going one, the set of attitudes and values manifested by the churches are of some importance."<sup>34</sup> If Vines is correct here, and it appears that he is, then we may infer that the various clergy can exert various sorts of pressures upon their respective congregations with respect to a variety of kinds of behavior including, possible, political behavior.

In a 1957 study, Vines, with John Fenton, observed that Catholic southern Louisiana and Protestant northern Louisiana "are very nearly separate worlds."<sup>35</sup> The significance of this separation is somewhat better understood by noting that in 1955 the Catholic bishop of the Lafayette area, in the south, excommunicated several residents of a rural town in that diocese because they persisted in opposing interracial religious classes.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, at the height of the furor surrounding the desegregation of New Orleans' public and Catholic schools, then Archbishop Rummel publicly excommunicated several segregationists including the notorious and politically powerful Leander Perez. In contrast it is impossible to find evidence of Protestant denominations making any attempt to mediate the social crisis resulting from the Supreme Court's Brown decision of 1954 which ordered an end to racial segregation in the nation's public schools.

### *Black Registration in Louisiana*

The historical pattern of black voter registration in Louisiana is especially instructive. Blacks who at mid-century resided in the French-Catholic parishes were more likely to be registered to vote and consequently were more likely actually to vote than blacks who lived outside these parishes. Although the key explanatory variable appears to be religious-cultural, other factors complicate analysis, including percentage of black population, the nature of land tenancy, and presence or absence of a heritage of plantation society.<sup>37</sup>

More precisely, even when comparing the black belt parishes in north and south Louisiana, these parishes located in the south have since the 1940s allowed blacks to register and vote. By contrast, northern parishes with the largest proportion of Negro residents had few and occasionally no blacks registered to vote. And while urban centers generally afforded

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<sup>34</sup> Kenneth N. Vines in Margaret Price, *The Negro and the Ballot in the South* (Atlanta: The Southern Regional Council, 1959), pp. 35-36.

<sup>35</sup> John H. Fenton and Kenneth N. Vines, "Negro Registration in Louisiana," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. LIII (September 1957), pp. 704-713.

<sup>36</sup> *Southwest Louisiana Register* (Lafayette, La.), December 2, 1955, p. 1.

<sup>37</sup> Fenton and Vines, p. 707.

Negro's a better opportunity to register and vote, urban areas in north Louisiana were more likely to be targets of efforts to purge blacks from the registration rolls.

From this evidence, it is apparent that although widespread plantation agriculture, high tenancy rates, and proportionately large Negro population go far toward explaining Negro political participation, they do not wholly predict black political performance. The religio-cultural factor supplies an important supplemental explanation.

As Fenton and Vines notes:

The Catholic Negro enjoys religious and ethical training which is identical with that received by the white community, and from a well-educated priest. Therefore, the Catholic Negro's value system more nearly approaches that of the white community than does that of the Protestant Negro, and accordingly, he is more readily accepted by the greater community.<sup>38</sup>

If the above is correct then the presence of black Catholics plays a role in determining the acceptance and degree of resistance there will be to active participation in the electoral process.

#### *The Voting Rights Act—What Impact?*

With the advent of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, civil rights activists and advocates north and south predicted and awaited great change as a result of that legislation. In fact the Deep South experienced no great revolutionary political upheaval, and disappointment resulting from expectations about the Voting Rights Act is widespread.

For Louisiana, the enforcement of the Act has had some dramatic local consequences. Voter registration statistics changed radically in areas of north Louisiana where few and in some cases no blacks had been registered (previously). These northern parishes having the highest proportion of black population, the highest land tenancy rates, and a tradition of plantation economy, are now among the parishes exhibiting the highest rates of black voter registration. This amazing turnaround is due, in no small way, to the Voting Rights Act of 1965. For the most part, black registration in these areas generally approaches fifty percent of the total number of persons registered. While this figure falls far short of the total number of black adults, the figures do represent a striking change over the last three decades, especially since 1965. Louisiana currently has more black elected officials than any other state except Mississippi.

Legislation such as the Voting Rights Act offers a rare opportunity to weigh the effects of laws upon the dismantling of an historic posture that has worked to insure white political supremacy and forbid any black challenge to that condition. Of the nine Louisiana parishes eligible for

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., pp. 706-707.

federal observers and registrars, only one, Plaquemines Parish (in the extreme southeast) was in French-Catholic Louisiana. And this was the parish where arch-segregationist Leander H. Perez was political boss.

In spite of the tendency of the Voting Rights to reduce regional differences, Negro registration generally occurs in larger percentages in south Louisiana than in north Louisiana. Of the ten parishes where the percentage registered of the black voting age population is below the sixty percent mark, eight of those lie in north Louisiana.<sup>39</sup> And although the Voting Rights Act has increased the number of elected black officials across the state, there is a tendency for blacks to run for relatively safe offices, that is, positions guaranteed by the presence of a black electoral majority. All of the state's black legislators come from heavily black urban districts in Orleans, East Baton Rouge, and Caddo (Shreveport) Parishes. Since most of Louisiana's Negroes do not reside in these parishes, most are left with representation unresponsive to their needs and wishes.

### *Conclusion*

The role of the Catholic Church in Louisiana race relations must be viewed as a mixed one. The Church never launched a direct attack upon slavery while it existed (although credit must be given for the moderating influences that were a result of the Church's presence). Additionally, while bishops such as Rummel and Jeanmard could close the churches of belligerent congregations and even invoke the rare sanction of excommunication, they were unable or unwilling to incur the wrath that would have come with an order to end segregated schools. And while the church of South Louisiana seldom acted to demonstrate to black Catholics how they might go about securing for themselves the equality promised by both state and church, this institution did frequently move to protect blacks from the violent intentions of whites who tried to prevent the success of any blacks who tried to change the "closed society" that had been their prison for centuries.

The centralized structure of the Church did provide a sort of safety net for blacks in south Louisiana. The strength of this net however was not consistent and more often than not, the protection afforded blacks by Catholicism depended upon the social clock, and how specific Church leaders read the time.

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<sup>39</sup> Report of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *The Voting Rights Act: Ten Years After*, January 1975, pp. 366-369.

[The text in this section is extremely faint and largely illegible. It appears to be a long paragraph or two of text, possibly discussing the historical context of the church mentioned in the header.]

[This section contains several paragraphs of text, also very faint. The content is difficult to discern but seems to continue the historical or theological discussion from the previous section.]

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