

Leontyne Price and labor leader A. Philip Randolph. In 1965 Lena Edwards was forced to leave the mission and return to Washington, D.C. Her activities on behalf of poor children and the needy did not cease, however. Her interest in medicine and disease prevention continued. She lectured, served on committees, and received further honors. She also continued to use her own funds to pay for the education of needy students on the college and professional level, finally establishing a scholarship program for women at the Howard University Medical School. She was untiring in her service and in her dedication to God.³⁷ She died on December 3, 1986.

II

The middle years of the twentieth century saw the conversion of many blacks to the Catholic church, but the church itself did not play a leading role on the national level in the struggle of blacks against discrimination and segregation until the period of the Second World War. In 1931 Thomas Wyatt Turner addressed a letter to the American hierarchy asking them to see that "none of the doors of our schools, colleges, universities, or seminaries will be closed to us because of the color of our skin."³⁸ The following year he seems to have addressed another letter asking for more direct action against racial segregation in the church, "that every bishop shall see to it that no Catholic institution in his diocese, school, hospital, protectory, orphanage, college, university or seminary, shall be closed to colored Catholics." The letter went on to ask the bishops to apply sanctions to those in the church who bar black Catholics from activities in their respective dioceses to which other Catholics have access. The bishops were asked to speak out against lynching and the "driving out of the colored residents from a town."³⁹

In 1939 Turner wrote again in the name of the Federated Colored Catholics of the United States, noting that some changes for the better had occurred but that not enough had been done. The letter closed with the statement: "We are conscious of the fact that attitudes may not immediately be changed by a fiat, but we believe that an authoritative word from Your Excellencies concerning this question, which is so deeply rooted in justice and morals, will go far toward stimulating a larger number of the clergy to become aware of the changed conditions in the progress and life of the Negro."⁴⁰

The change in the American church came about in a large de-

gree because of the activities of white clergy and religious, working alongside of African Americans and at times working independently. Despite the rift between LaFarge and Turner regarding strategy and basic philosophy of interracial cooperation, the Catholic Interracial Councils provided an arena for change. LaFarge in a private communication to Archbishop (later cardinal) Spellman,⁴¹ who had just been named to the see of New York, spelled out the activities of the Catholic Interracial Council in his archdiocese. He outlined the scope of the works accomplished: publication of the *Interracial Review*, a speakers' bureau that addressed parish organizations like the Holy Name Society and college students in various Catholic colleges and universities, and the organizing of allied groups such as the Clergy Conference on Negro Welfare, the Catholic Laymen's Union, and the De Porres Interracial Center in New York City.⁴²

One of the outstanding leaders in the struggle for racial justice in the middle years of this century was a white layman, George K. Hunton, whose maternal grandparents had been close friends of Bishop James Augustine Healy. George Hunton, who was born in New Hampshire in 1888, became associated with LaFarge in 1931 and the Laymen's Union, an organization of black Catholic laymen who were professional and business men, who met for an annual retreat and bimonthly Mass and communion breakfast. It was this organization that helped form the first Catholic Interracial Council in 1934. Hunton became editor of the *Interracial Review* and was LaFarge's right-hand man in interracial affairs; Hunton devoted himself to this cause with heart and soul. He was a worker and a fighter. He became a force in the Catholic Interracial Council and enabled it to take what was then considered radical positions regarding the passage of antilynching laws, support for the young black men in the famous Scottsboro Trial of 1934, and the Fair Employment Practices Committee.⁴³ Hunton was perhaps most important in that he formed close alliances with the black leaders of the time, such as Roy Wilkins of the NAACP. Hunton died in 1967.

The Catholic church in mid-twentieth-century America acquired a reputation for racial fairness among African Americans (a reputation often compromised at the local level). A dramatic incident on the part of a Catholic priest or religious often made an impression. Such an incident occurred at Manhattanville College, a liberal arts college for women operated by the Religious of the Sacred Heart.⁴⁴ The college was a Catholic counterpart of Smith or Vassar. It was at Manhattanville that George K. Hunton spoke on several questions of

racial justice and Catholic teaching. At Manhattanville in 1938 the president of the college, Mother Grace Dammann, accepted a young black woman into the freshman class for the following year. Mother Grace was confronted by a wave of opposition from some alumnae. On Class Day at the end of the school year, she addressed the alumnae on the topic "Principles versus Prejudices."⁴⁵ She acknowledged that "for some years we have known that the racial problem in Catholic education would have to be met by us not in theory only but in practice"; and the student body had been prepared through education for this fact. She explained that the applicant in question had met all of the requirements, that the college was not lowering its standards — in fact, the college was seeking to live up to the teachings of the church. "A Catholic colored girl who meets the requirements of a Catholic college and applies for a Catholic education has a right to it and in consequence the college has a duty to give it to her."⁴⁶ She concluded with words that were prophetic. "The day has gone by when we can blithely live as compartmental Catholics, with our political, business, intellectual, social activities in air-tight compartments functioning separately like parts of a well-behaved machine. Catholicism is nothing if it is not a *life*, unified, coordinated to its end."⁴⁷

In the middle years of this century, Mother Katherine Drexel continued the work discussed in earlier chapters for the evangelization of blacks. Not only did the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament continue to open schools for the education of blacks, but Blessed Katherine continued to disburse funds for church and school building in the black community. What is not well known is the financial contribution that she and her sister, Louise Drexel Morrell, made to the NAACP and to the campaign for congressional legislation to curb lynching in the South. In 1934 she encouraged many of the Blessed Sacrament Sisters in responsible positions to write letters to President Roosevelt in support of antilynching legislation pending in Congress.⁴⁸

The most significant action of Blessed Katherine was the establishment of the only black Catholic institution of higher learning in the United States: Xavier University of Louisiana at New Orleans. In 1915 a high school was opened for black students in New Orleans by the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament at the request of Archbishop Blenk of New Orleans,⁴⁹ with the idea of an eventual college. In 1925 a teachers' college and a college of liberal arts was added. In 1931 the new complex of buildings was dedicated as Xavier University. Two years later a graduate school was established.⁵⁰

III

After the Second World War the United States confronted once again the issue of racial segregation. This time, however, things were different. American society was now forced to confront a new determination and resolve among black Americans. This confrontation now took place in a world in which colonialism was dying and new nations were arising amid wars of liberation. In America it was the beginning of a social revolution that would have enormous — indeed revolutionary — consequences in all sectors of American society. The story of this revolution has been often told, so the present book will discuss it primarily in its Catholic dimension.

In 1955 the blacks of Montgomery, Alabama, began a boycott of buses because of segregated seating. A young black Baptist clergyman, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., became the leader of the movement. The boycott was successful, and the African American community was galvanized across the nation. Three years later, in 1958, the American bishops addressed racism as a moral issue and finally took an unequivocal stand. They stated for the first time that racial discrimination was immoral and unjust.

The heart of the race question is moral and religious. It concerns the rights of man and our attitude toward our fellow man. If our attitude is governed by the great Christian law of love of neighbor and respect for his rights, then we can work out harmoniously the techniques for making legal, educational, economic, and social adjustments. But if our hearts are poisoned by hatred, or even by indifference toward the welfare and rights of our fellow men, then our nation faces a grave internal crisis.⁵¹

They went on to point out that "discrimination based on the accidental fact of race or color... cannot be reconciled with the truth that God has created all men with equal rights and equal dignity."⁵² Furthermore, they went on to say, from the Christian point of view segregation can in no way be justified. But they injected a note of timid caution by seeking to create a balance between what they saw as "a gradualism that is merely a cloak for inaction" and a "rash impetuosity that would sacrifice the achievements of decades in ill-timed and ill-considered ventures."⁵³ What the bishops did not know was that the situation had reached a point that a deliberate and well thought out series of measures was no longer possible.

It is often stated that the bishops made powerful statements but

too
timid

that little was done to change the situation on the local level. Maybe forgotten is the fact that the task of bishops is to preach and to teach and to recall the principles and the teachings of the gospel in order to create a climate where concerted action is possible. Of course, some bishops were more directly insistent that the church's teachings on racial justice be implemented on the local level. Joseph Ritter, the archbishop of St. Louis,⁵⁴ ended racial segregation in the city's Catholic schools in 1947, despite loud protestations from many of the city's white Catholics. The archbishop of Washington, Patrick O'Boyle, did the same shortly after he was named to the see of Washington in 1947. Vincent Waters, bishop of Raleigh,⁵⁵ ended segregation in the parishes and other church institutions in his diocese in 1954. The courageous action of these bishops took place before judicial decisions had overturned the pattern of racial segregation in the public schools or the Congress had been prodded into the enactment of civil rights legislation.

By and large Catholics, either black or white, were not in the forefront of the civil rights movement or among the leadership of the protest organizations. Black priests, unlike many black Protestant clergymen, were not in the vanguard of grass-roots leadership that supported and followed King on the local level. One reason for this, of course, was that few black priests were in leadership positions of any kind in the early sixties. In general, they were neither pastors nor religious superiors. Moreover, the notion that it was unseemly for either clergy or religious to engage in public spectacles like demonstrations was especially strong among Catholics in general. The massive demonstration by whites and blacks at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., on August 28, 1963, did, however, include some Catholics of diverse backgrounds as well as some Catholic organizations, including religious communities. Archbishop O'Boyle was on the platform with civil rights leaders and delivered the invocation just before Martin Luther King began his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. For the first time, the Catholic church was significantly present at a massive public demonstration under the leadership of black civil rights leaders. But this was a demonstration with official, governmental support.

The real change in Catholic attitudes came with the clarion call by Martin Luther King, Jr., to all of the nation's clergy to come to Selma, Alabama, in March 1965. The response of white Catholic priests and sisters was enormous, despite the disapproval of the bishop of Mobile-Birmingham.⁵⁶ That same year Harold Perry, S.V.D., provincial of the southern province of the Divine Word Missionaries, was named

auxiliary bishop of New Orleans by Pope Paul VI, the second black Catholic bishop in American history.⁵⁷ By the mid-sixties the nonviolent stance of Martin Luther King yielded in some places to violence in response to the growth of desperation among blacks, displayed in riots and burning, and in response to the new sense of black nationalism represented by the cry of "Black Power!" In 1965 Malcolm X was assassinated in New York City. Three years later, on April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. The black community erupted in fury, frustration, and despair. Riots broke out in areas already ravaged by fire and in areas never before touched by black frustration.

The Catholic Clergy Conference on the Interracial Apostolate had its scheduled meeting in Detroit at the Sheraton-Cadillac Hotel, April 16-18. Before the meeting, Father Herman Porter, black priest of the diocese of Rockford, Illinois,⁵⁸ and vice-president of the organization, circulated a letter to all black priests in the country inviting them to a special caucus. The invitation was in response to the police order of Chicago's mayor Richard J. Daley "to shoot to kill" all those engaged in looting. The caucus took place on April 16, with the program for the Catholic Clergy Conference to begin that same evening. While many of the white clergy were registering for the conference, whose theme that year was "Black Power and the White Church: The Christian Ministry in the Ghetto and the Suburb," some sixty or more black priests were meeting as a group for the first time in American history. In that meeting, which went on through that day and night, black priests of all ages and backgrounds dealt with the question of their personal and corporate responsibility in a time of racial crisis. In order to determine such responsibility, the individual priests had to look at their respective sense of racial identity. Ultimately, this meant a look by each one at his own personal history as an African American cleric in the American Catholic church. For many it was a time of painful discovery and sometimes bitter revelation. For all it was either a time of anger or of deep-seated unease.

The discussions eventually settled upon certain objectives. Very clearly the ad hoc caucus wished to form itself into a permanent organization of black priests that would include permanent deacons and religious Brothers. For the immediate future the decision was made to deliver a statement to the American bishops, to let them know the seriousness of the situation facing the church in the black community. The result was a lengthy statement with some highly charged phrases critical of the American church. The wording of the statement was adopted after prolonged discussion and argument. The participants

were pulled between a real sense of loyalty to the church and a sense of responsibility to the black community in a time of struggle and increasing militancy.⁵⁹

The statement began with a confrontational assertion. "The Catholic Church in the United States, primarily a white racist institution, has addressed itself primarily to white society and is definitely a part of that society."⁶⁰ The statement called for the church to heed the new spirit that was sweeping through the black community in the wake of the civil rights movement and the Black Power movement. It called for the church to look again at the issue of militancy in the matter of rights for black Americans. It called for greater control by blacks themselves of the Catholic institutions in the black community, and warned that the church "is rapidly dying in the black community . . . In many areas there is a serious defection . . . on the part of black Catholic youth . . . The black community no longer looks to the Catholic church with hope." The caucus then made nine demands of the American bishops.⁶¹

The demands were that black priests be placed in decision-making positions in their dioceses and in the black community; that black priests be given the opportunity to work directly within the black community; that in areas where black priests were nonexistent, efforts be made to bring them in or that white priests who were "black thinking" be chosen for ministry; that greater efforts "to recruit black men for the priesthood" be made; that formation in black ministry be established for white priests chosen to work within the black community; that a department be established in the United States Catholic Conference under black leadership for the affairs of African Americans; that black religious also be employed in the foregoing positions; that black men, including married men, be chosen for the permanent diaconate; and that each diocese set aside funds on a permanent basis for leadership training of black laypersons.⁶²

^{ne} The calling of the Black Catholic Clergy Caucus was a milestone in the history of the black Catholic community. It created a solidarity among the black Catholic clergy that had never previously existed. It was a return to the tradition of black Catholic initiative that had marked the black Catholic lay congresses and the Federated Colored Catholics. The one significant change was that this time it was the clergy that had seized the initiative. The demands of the clergy became a program that was implemented or has been in the process of implementation. It was, finally, the beginning of a change of direction on the part of the American Catholic church. No matter how one may view the assertion that the Catholic church in the United

States was "a white racist institution," it is remarkable that the church as an institution opened itself with a minimum of resistance to the needs of its black members in most areas. How this was done and the part that black Catholics themselves played in the American Catholic church in the second half of this century must be the subject of another historical study.

IV

We can, however, draw some conclusions as we look back over the history of the black Catholic presence in the United States for the last three hundred years. First of all, it is clear that the Catholic church in the United States has never been a white European church. The African presence has influenced the Catholic church in every period of its history. More than this, the Catholic church was as much affected by the issue of slavery and its aftermath as any other American institution. The issue of slavery affected the American episcopate in its own understanding of what freedom, justice, and human dignity really mean; the issue of slavery and the evangelization of the African American affected the relationship between the American episcopate and the Roman Curia.

Too often black Catholics have been ignored in conventional assessments of American Catholicism. In the light of history, they cannot be ignored. They add another essential perspective to the meaning of the word "Catholic" and to the understanding of the American Catholic church.

The story of African American Catholicism is the story of a people who obstinately clung to a faith that gave them sustenance, even when it did not always make them welcome. Like many others, blacks had to fight for their faith; but their fight was often with members of their own household. Too long have black Catholics been anonymous. It is now clear that they can be identified, that their presence has made an impact, and that their contributions have made Catholicism a unique and stronger religious body.

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