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“Righteous Discontent:” Black Catholic Protest in the United States of America, 1817-1941

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In this essay, based on a paper delivered at the 2009 Annual Meeting at the Atlanta University Center, Morrow shows the awareness of black Catholics about their position within the Catholic Church between the years 1817 and the 1940s and their struggle to improve their situation. Black Catholics from this period show a strong desire to function as agents of positive change in their Church, and to challenge discrimination within their parishes.

Black Catholics in the United States have traditionally advocated their own cause in an essentially Euro-centric institutional Roman Catholic Church, because, as Fr. Cyprian Davis, O.S.B., has aptly observed, “...as was the case with so many of the Catholic clergy at that period, there was little respect for people of African descent, either for their history or for their humanity.”¹ Other esteemed scholars of the black Roman Catholic experience have further delineated the problem. Dr. Jamie Phelps, OP has noted:

“The spiritual traditions of the Catholic church, for example, were transmitted to the sons and daughters of Africa without any consciousness of the cultural-specific ways--Spanish, Irish, German, English, French, or Italian--in which they were being transmitted. In addition, these ministers of God’s good news sometimes maintained a disdain for the natural religious expression of blacks. For them blacks needed to be elevated and rescued from their immorality by their

¹ Cyprian Davis, O.S.B., *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (New York: Crossroad, 1990),133.

participation in what was perceived to be a universal spirituality that was, in fact, a particular cultural-ecclesial spirituality and way of life.”²

Albert J. Raboteau has explained:

“...black Catholics knew all too painfully that race did matter in the church in America. Though they might praise the church’s universality in one breath, they actively protested discrimination with the next. The experience of black Catholics in the United States, then, has been an experience of alternating tension between the pull of universalism and the demands of racial particularism.”³

The preceding scholars’ astute observations outline a climate of obdurate cultural exclusion toward black Catholics within the mainstream American Roman Catholic Church. Nevertheless, functioning within this inhospitable context, black Catholics have consistently articulated their concerns about the institutional American Church’s attitudes and policies toward them. This essay examines the thoughts a sampling of black Catholics expressed in petitions, correspondence, essays, and reviews which they wrote between 1817 and the 1940s, to demonstrate the deep historic roots of black Catholic consciousness of the frequently dialectical relationship they have experienced with their Church.

The first two examples date from the antebellum period and document the “righteous discontent” black Catholics felt who lacked access to Catholic education for their children. In 1817 six black signatories presented a Petition from the Catholic People of Color Residing in Philadelphia to a meeting of the Board of Trustees of St. Mary’s Church in that city. Identifying themselves as

² Jamie Phelps, OP, “Black Spirituality,” in *Spiritual Traditions for the Contemporary Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 346 cited in Thaddeus Posey, OFM Cap, “An Unwanted Commitment :The Spirituality of the Early Oblate Sisters of Providence, 1829-1990” (Ph. D. diss., Saint Louis University, 1993), 176.

³ Albert J. Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 136.

destitute but determined to resist the encouragement of the “different Sectarrians” to send their children to Protestant schools, the men pleaded:

“We tremble for the fate of our children, some of whom have already been seduced from our religion. Therefore we sincerely hope that your charitable board will take them under your protective wing as you have the poor of your own color and to have ours also instructed in a common English education [and catechism and prayers].”⁴

The Board ultimately took no action on this petition.

In 1853, Harriet Thompson, a black Catholic woman living in New York City, wrote a personal letter to the reigning Pontiff, Pope Pius IX. Concern “for the salvation of the black race in the United States who is going astray from neglect on the part of those who have care of souls” prompted Thompson to write her letter, shortly before the anticipated visit of the papal representative to the United States. Disclaiming any disrespect of clergy, “for which I would deserve punishment From god [*sic*] and From your Holiness,” she nevertheless asserted that most bishops and clergy in the United States were ethnic Irish or Irish descent, “and not being accustom [*sic*] to the black race in Ireland, they can’t think enough of them to take charge of their souls.” Thompson continued, “Hence it is a great misstake [*sic*] to say that the church watches with equal care over every race and color, for how can it be said they teach all nations when they will not let the Black race mixt [*sic*] with the white...?”⁵

Thompson objected that black Catholics in the archdiocese of New York had no access to a Catholic education to counter the influence of the blatant anti-Catholic bias of public school

⁴ M. I. J. Griffin, “Petition of the Catholic People of Color in Philadelphia, 1817,” in *American Catholic Historical Researches* VII (Philadelphia, 1890), 186.

⁵ Harriet Thompson to Pope Pius IX, 29 October 1853, MPRF, Congressi: America Centrale, vol. 16, fols. 770 rv, 771 rv, 773 rv, 774 rv, 775 r, University of Notre Dame Archives.

education. She contended that “the Catholics teach the pure word of god [*sic*] and gave learning at the same time; the Protestants gave learning and teach the word of god adulterated.” Thompson then exposed the racist double standard of education operative in the archdiocese of New York. She asserted that “the church does remedy these evils for the white children by providing schools where they can learn the pure word of god and how to keep it and be educated at the same time, but the church do [*sic*] leave the colored children a prey to the wolf.”⁶

Thompson recalled that in protest, “we the colored people of the cathedral congregation of the city of new york [*sic*]” had approached John Loughlin, Vicar-General of the archdiocese of New York, in 1849 to establish a school for black Catholic children. Racial consciousness and a strong Catholic identity, which had galvanized the Philadelphia petitioners to action previously, also motivated the black members of the Cathedral congregation of New York to mobilize and petition Loughlin. Although sympathetic to their cause, Loughlin lacked the authority to require the Sisters of Charity to integrate their schools, because Archbishop Hughes had refused to endorse the plan. Harriet Thompson understood that:

“in new york nothing cannot [*sic*] be done because the Most Rev. Archbishop Hughes does not recognize the Black race to be a part of his flock...moreover it is well known by both white and black that the Most Reverend Archbishop Hughes do [*sic*] hate the black Race so much that he cannot bear them to come near him.”

She further observed of Hughes’s attitude, “this is very Hurtful indeed to think that the greatest Light the church has in America should dislike any creature Because it is the will of god that we should be of a darke Hue [*sic*].” Thompson appealed directly to the Pope to intercede: “I only write to pray your Holiness to take charge of our souls in your Holy Authority.”⁷

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

Occasional misspellings and peculiarities of grammar and capitalization notwithstanding, Harriet Thompson's letter proved the work of a knowledgeable and perceptive community-oriented activist. She sought from Pope Pius IX a just resolution of the ecclesially-sanctioned racial discrimination confronting "the colored Catholics in most of the United States."⁸ As if to verify that her personal voice represented more than an individual position, Thompson submitted to the pontiff the names of the seven married couples and thirteen individuals--eleven of them women--who had signed the petition to Rev. Loughlin.

Politically astute, Thompson further emphasized the critical condition of New York City's black Catholics by raising the spectre to the pope of "many Familis [*sic*] with the parents Catholics and the children protestants - overwhelmed with the belief that the name of Catholic amongst the black race will in a few years pass away." She also provided examples of the protestant "word of God adulterated" inculcated in black Catholic children in public schools: "the BLESSED EUCHARIST is nothing but a wafer; that the priest drinks the wine Himself [*sic*] and gives the bread to us; and that the Divine institution of confession is only to make money; and that the Roman Pontiff is Antichrist." Vatican authorities submitted Thompson's letter to the pope with the note "will be kept in mind when writing to American bishops."⁹ Harriet Thompson's singular act in 1853 epitomized the exercise of black female Catholic agency in the antebellum United States.

After the abolition of slavery in 1865, the American Catholic hierarchy reluctantly addressed the prospect of four million freedmen as a vast mission field. Refusing to devote their own resources and manpower to this herculean task, the American clergy delegated this responsibility instead to the English St. Joseph's Society of the Sacred Heart, Mill Hill, a fledgling missionary band formed under the direction of Rev. Herbert Vaughan in 1871. The Josephites had vowed to serve black people exclusively in their

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

American missions and Vaughan enjoined his priests strictly not to minister to white people. A series of letters black Catholics wrote to Vaughan between 1872 and 1878 document not only their assertions of themselves as American citizens and Roman Catholics, but also their keen awareness of the feelings of racial difference--if not revulsion--which plagued some of the English missionaries. In 1872 Rev. Vaughan embarked on a tour of New York City Roman Catholic churches to promote the Mill Hill Mission to the Colored and to solicit funds. Flyers announcing his visit exhorted the white public, "But after all, the present appeal is for the education of priests, whose lives will be spent in America; it is for a foreign race at your very doors--For the 5,000,000 Africans who will never become good Catholics and industrious citizens without your cooperation." New Yorker Charles L. Reason earned distinction as an educator, abolitionist, and political activist. In his letter to Vaughan, Reason identified himself as "a colored citizen and an attendant at St. Peter's," where Vaughan was to lecture, before stating his objections to the flyer language referring to the freedmen as a foreign race and as Africans. Reason explained:

"Of all the inhabitants in that section of our country, they are the very native of the natives. Generation after generation for the last 250 years, have been born on the once slave plantations of the South....To plead for them, then, on the ground that they are a foreign race, is, it seems to me, not only violating facts, but it is a consenting to a weakening of what otherwise would be a powerful argument.--To me the whole strength of any appeal for the colored people of the South lies mainly in the truth that they are natives...and to represent them as a foreign race, Africans...is to foster a prejudice against them...whose malignity they have felt in no more bitter manner than from those who, coming from foreign lands, have found these despised people objects on whom they could vent their spite, - naturalization turning these latter into Americans, while slavery and untold suffering only kept the others 'Africans'."¹⁰

¹⁰ Charles L. Reason to Fr. Herbert Vaughan, 7 April 1872, 3 Mill Hill Transcripts 13 [hereinafter MHT], Josephite Fathers Archives, Maryland, [hereinafter JFA].

The absurdity of *bona fide* foreign priests ministering to imputed “foreign” freedmen marginalized by race in America, undoubtedly did not escape Reason. His apt reference to the syndrome of European immigrants internalizing racism as part of their Americanization identified a malignancy which ensnared even some of the Mill Hill missionaries, as the following letters from black Catholic parishioners of St. Francis Xavier Church in Baltimore, Maryland, revealed.

After gratefully acknowledging the successful conversions the missionaries had accomplished in an 1873 letter to now Bishop Vaughan, an anonymous church member revealed:

“Yet, my Lord, for the past three or four months there has been considerable dissatisfaction among the leading members of the Church. They feel as though our present Rector [Noonan] is not in sympathy with them, he like many foreigners who come to this country is fast imbibing the American prejudice against our race and has grown above the position he now occupies. It appears as though he has become disgusted with both Church and people. We pray you, most Noble Lord, to change our Rector and give us one... who is keenly alive to the interest of our people, one who is ever ready and always willing to do and suffer with us and is not ashamed to be identified with the Colored people or to be called their Priest....”

Noting that during the previous rectorship of:

“our lamented and beloved Fr. Dowling, on all occasions of business pertaining to the Church the most intelligent male members were called together and consulted as to the best method of raising and expending money to meet the current expenses of the Church. Now...no one is consulted or asked any questions concerning the Church affairs and no one knows what is to be done until it is over. If there is a dissatisfaction, we have to bear it in silence....”¹¹

¹¹ An Anonymous Church Member to Bishop Vaughan, 6 July 1873, 4 MHT 24, JFA.

Black indignation at the white missionaries' palpable disrespect toward and thwarting of agency in their black parishioners resonated in other correspondence to Vaughan.

In 1875 Rector Noonan's reassignment of the universally loved Fr. James Gore to Charleston engendered significant dismay within St. Francis Xavier's congregation and prompted two letters to Vaughan from female parishioners. Although minimally literate, these women managed to convey their thoughts most effectively. Celestia Cook characterized "the lose of our holy Father Gore" as "a Cross that we can no longer stand and without your help we must fall in dispare...." Speaking "in behalf of all his distress Children and Converts wich are Coming into the fould onder Our dear Farther Gore instrouctin [*sic*], Cook feared "three third of the Congregation will leave the Church" and "our Beutifull Sodality will be broke of." Cook's letter proves a study in contrasts. At times she employed the reverential tones of the supplicant in pleading, "holy father have mercy on his Poor Convert" or "O holy Bishop have mercy on your Poor Children [who] call epaint you for mercy as the thief Call Jesus when he hung on the Cross." At times she assumed the reproving tone of a challenger warning, "O Bishop dont you remember the Promise that you made us in the Pasts that our Priest should never be Separated from us untill death Separated us and if this is to be the case how can we place Confordence any more?"¹² This duality of supplicant and challenger Cook assumed in her letter characterized the approach Black Catholics would continue to use in their quest for inclusion in their Church for at least a century.

The second anonymous female correspondent confirmed the congregation's deep affection for Fr. Gore and elaborated upon their dissatisfaction with Rector Noonan. She stated, "Father Gorr is bin tru to ous and never brokin his vouw since he has been hear he has saft a maney Soll from being lost for he goss in alles and plasis wher Father Nunnen said he would not go for when he coms out he

¹² Celestia Cook to Bishop Herbert Vaughan, 25 November 1875, 8 MHT 21, JFA.

has to have the Grippers taken of er him for the sak of saving poor Solls from being lost.” She further revealed the role ethnic antipathies played in their dissatisfaction, saying of the Irish, “In tim of the Mishin we could hardly get in our Puy for the Parish. Father Nunnen hear thear Confashen so thay thing they have the best insight of the schursh is to good fore Niggros.” She continued, “Father Nunnen dont take intrust in us as Father Gorr and other Preast as Father Nunnen came hear for ous our derector and the Irrish is trying to taing him from ous. In stet we rutting them out they ar rutting ous out. Father Nunen invited them to come [*sic*].” Finally, this author revealed a judicious blend of the spiritual and the practical in her problem solving method. She acknowledged, “We are all praying very hard but by a few words you Say will do more good than praying, alldo we will never rest to pray....”¹³ As these two letters demonstrate, supplication, challenge, and practicality remained proven weapons in the black Catholic arsenal.

The urgent pleas of James Gore’s devoted black parishioners did not prevent Rector Noonan from reassigning him to Charleston. However, Noonan himself corroborated the validity of his black congregation’s articulated grievances against him. In his own correspondence with Bishop Vaughan between 1872 and 1877, Noonan confessed to, “the repugnance which I first felt on coming among the blacks.”¹⁴ His Josephite colleagues concurred in Fr. Gore’s assessment that Noonan “has no vocation for the colored people...it is with great difficulty that he can speak a kind word to these poor outcast down-trodden people - Many a time my heart has bled at the harsh rough unkind way in which he has treated them - he does not cannot love them...[emphasis his]”¹⁵ In 1877 James Noonan left the Josephite Society.

Successful resolution of the problems presented in the preceding petitions and correspondence proves less historically

¹³ A Negro (Negress) to Bishop Herbert Vaughan, 26 November 1875, 8 MHT 22, JFA.

¹⁴ James Noonan to Bishop Herbert Vaughan, 24 April 1873, 4 MHT 13b; 23 June 1873, 4 MHT 23a, JFA.

¹⁵ James Gore to Bishop Herbert Vaughan, 22 June, 1873, 4 MHT 21, JFA.

significant than the fact that positive senses of themselves as black people and their fervent internalization of and adherence to Roman Catholicism both impelled and empowered such nineteenth-century black Roman Catholics-- whether female or male, well-educated or barely literate, impoverished or prosperous, northern or southern--to inform Church authorities of their concerns and to expect redress of their problems.

Two examples of individual black Catholic protest from the twentieth century conclude this essay. In her doctoral dissertation, "A Brilliant Possibility: The Cardinal Gibbons Institute, 1924-1934," Dr. Cecilia Moore describes the influence of the indomitable Constance E. H. Daniel. Daniel, a graduate of Atlanta University, converted to Roman Catholicism after marrying her husband, Victor Daniel, in 1916. From 1924 until 1934, he served as the principal; she, the assistant principal and matron of the Cardinal Gibbons Institute (CGI) in Ridge, Maryland. Conceived as an experiment in Catholic vocational education for black people, the Institute proved a battleground for control between black and white constituencies as well as conflicting theories of education.

Constance Daniel never minced words. She once boldly observed to Archbishop Michael Curley of Baltimore, "You and I understand each other very well. You are very imperious and I am very tenacious."¹⁶ A white male opponent to Daniel on the CGI Board confided to the archbishop, "he [Daniel] is governed almost entirely by his wife, who is a very strong character, and who, I fear, has the idea that the Negro is not only as good as the White man, but a little better...."¹⁷

¹⁶ Constance Daniel to Archbishop Michael Curley, 14 April 1934, Curley Correspondence, D144, Archives of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, cited in Cecilia A. Moore, "A Brilliant Possibility: The Cardinal Gibbons Institute, 1924 -1934" (Ph. D. diss., University of Virginia, 1997), 297.

¹⁷ Admiral William S. Benson to Archbishop Michael J. Curley, 17 October 1927, Curley Correspondence, B732, Archives of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, cited in Moore, "A Brilliant Possibility," 147.

In 1930 Constance Daniel reviewed Rev. John T. Gillard's controversial book, *The Catholic Church and the American Negro*, in the Urban League's organ, *Opportunity, A Journal of Negro Life*. She duly gave him "all credit for having made available much needed data on the Negro missions" and "making some very pertinent and sane comments on certain phases of Negro development." However, Daniel devotes most of the review to lambasting Gillard's "tactless blunderings of a young and overzealous priest...unable apparently to see his subject without the aid of someone else's glasses--which happen to be out of focus." Gillard frequently incorporated racial stereotypes uncritically in his study. References to "the childlike mentality of this infantine race," and such assertions as "the high intellectual requirements of the priesthood immediately eliminate the majority of the race," or "There can be little room for doubt that his view of religion as an emotional experience only has had a detrimental effect upon the character of the Negro [so] that the emotions predominate at the expense of that clear, calm judgment so necessary for the proper evaluation of moral standards" fueled the fire of Daniel's indignation. She also excoriated Gillard for accepting current Catholic practices of racially segregated education from the primary levels through college--"in face of the fact that scores of Negro students matriculate yearly without difficulty at Northern and Mid-Western universities." Daniel concluded her scathing review presciently, "Some day when he has independently searched for the truth and made it his own, we hope that more consistent, more mature, and more courteous Father Gillard will write again."¹⁸

In 1941 Gillard wrote *Colored Catholics in the United States*. While still maintaining that "[t]he Southern attitude requires tact and patience...", Gillard now insisted that "[o]utside of States which have segregation laws, all parochial, high, college, and university educational facilities must be made available to Negroes if they are

¹⁸ Constance E. H. Daniel, review of *The Catholic Church and the American Negro* by Rev. John T. Gillard, SSJ, in *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life* (August, 1930): 247-48; internal citations from John T. Gillard, SSJ, *The Catholic Church and the American Negro* (Baltimore: St. Joseph Society Press, 1929), 82, 88, 244.

able to meet the same requirements as those demanded of white pupils.”¹⁹ His active involvement in the Catholic Students’ Mission Crusade (CSMC) contributed substantively to the eventual integration of Catholic higher education.

In 1941 Lois Sherer, a young black Catholic alumna of and future lay teacher at St. Frances Academy, the historic institution under the direction of the Oblate Sisters of Providence in Baltimore, published an essay, “Let’s Be Honest With the Negro,” in *The Shield*,²⁰ the official organ of the CSMC. She had delivered this essay the previous June at the CSMC convention, at which Gillard had delivered the keynote address. The piece definitely reflected Sherer’s own thoughts and experiences, but Gillard had clearly edited the essay. In being Gillard’s protégé, Sherer also became his avatar, giving voice to some of his thoughts interpolated through a black, female persona. Perhaps Gillard had complied partially with Daniel’s stipulation that “he independently search for the truth and make it his own.

The essay began with the statement, “I am a Negro. I do not think it necessary to apologize because I am a Negro.” She defended Negro history and culture as sources of pride, “even though my forebears did not go so far in culture as did yours” and declared herself an American because of the horrors of enslavement and the contributions of the enslaved to the building of the American nation. As if to reassure a skittish white audience--perhaps at Gillard’s insistence--Sherer included the following enigmatic passage:

“But this is all history. I am willing to forget it. I am proud to be an American because in spite of the fact that as a Negro I may not be entirely free in this land of the free, I can be brave in this land of the brave. I am proud to be an American because, in spite of the fact that I am deprived of the exercise of many of the rights guaranteed by the

¹⁹ John T. Gillard, *Colored Catholics in the United States*, (Baltimore: The Josephite Press, 1941), 244, 260.

²⁰ Lois Sherer, “Let’s Be Honest with the Negro,” in *The Shield*, October 1940: 9-10, in John T. Gillard Papers, F 50 A, Box 2, JFA.

Constitution, I still have those rights and can hope for their full attainment.”

Sherer continued, “I am a Catholic” and explained that Fr. Gillard had baptized her, her mother, and sister eight years before.

“Father Gillard taught me that the Catholic Church wants all the Negroes, that the Catholic Church welcomes all races and all peoples, and that the Negro Catholic is as much a Catholic as any Catholic in the world. I believe all these things that Father taught me because I know that the Catholic Church, being the true Church cannot be wrong. But I am not so sure that some Catholics are so sincere as their Church...I have been a Catholic for eight years, yet in all that time I have never had the courage to venture into a white Catholic Church, because I was afraid that I would not be welcome.

“Take the matter of Catholic schools. I have Catholic friends who must go to public schools simply because the Catholic schools will not take colored pupils, although they welcome Protestants and Jews. I am fortunate in having had a Catholic high school education and in being enrolled already in a Catholic college for the fall opening; but how many colored Catholics there are who are denied these blessings just because they are colored.

“Now, let’s be honest with the Negro. Do you want us in the Catholic Church or don’t you? Is your love of the Blessed Sacrament strong enough not to faint if you have to hear Mass sitting in a pew with a Negro Catholic?...Is your love for souls sincere enough to sit in a classroom with a Negro as well as with a Protestant or a Jew? Let’s be honest with the Negro, or rather let’s be honest with Christ...I would make a distinction between the Catholic Church and Catholics. I would say that the Catholic Church is the greatest Church in the world because it is the only true Church in the world. But white Catholics--some of them have frightened me to death.”²¹

²¹ Ibid.

Significantly, Sherer's challenge to white Catholics reiterated all the themes black Catholics had expressed over time in the documents examined in this essay: explicit self-identification as black people, Roman Catholics, and Americans; access to Catholic education; respect of black personhood, history, and culture from white Catholics; and greater inclusion of people of color in the Mystical Body of Christ.

As contemporary scholar Albert Raboteau has perceptively observed, "Unless we recognize cultural particularism, universalism becomes another word for the cultural hegemony of the dominant group. Black Catholic history reaffirms an old truth: the Church must never be confused with any particular ethnic group, race, culture, or period. The Church does indeed transcend race, but only by including all races within its embrace, as equally valuable children, whose differences and unique contributions help us to build up the body of Christ."²²

²² Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones*, 137.

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