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The Sources and Meaning of the Conversion of Claude McKay

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In this paper, delivered during the 2007 annual meeting at Saint Meinrad Archabbey, Moore discusses the conversion experience of the controversial Jamaican poet and novelist Claude McKay. An influential artist of the Harlem Renaissance, McKay was a troubled and complex man. The spiritual journey of this former agnostic is moving and inspirational.

Without a doubt, Claude McKay, Jamaica's own poet laureate and the United States' greatest protest poet of the Harlem Renaissance, was also the famous Black convert to Catholicism in the twentieth-century. This article seeks to explore the sources of his conversion and its meaning to him and the wider American Catholic community in the middle of the twentieth-century. McKay's conversion was big news in the Catholic world but even greater news was the steady conversion of African Americans to Roman Catholicism between 1920 and 1960. In this period of time Black children, teenagers, men and women, rich, middle class, poor, famous, ordinary, religious and non-religious, Northern, Southern, and Midwestern chose Catholicism in record numbers so much so that in 1957 *Ebony* magazine noted that the number of Black Catholics was 550,000 and

would by the year 2000 exceed a million. Claude McKay was part of this new Black Catholic community though he only lived as a Catholic for a little over three years before heart disease, high blood pressure, edema, and ultimately congestive heart failure called him from this world.

Claude McKay was a difficult and complex man. He detested capitalism with all his heart but was ever on the lookout for ways to best make the most out of his writing; he believed that “American Negroes” were more concerned with making themselves acceptable to white Americans but probably counted more Whites than Blacks as his true and trusted friends; he thought American democracy was a sham but ended his life working for a school whose primary goal was to “teach democracy”; he held women as whole in little regard but numbered individual women among his most true friends; he loved what he believed was the pure and true beauty of Black life and culture that he believed could only be found among the poor and working class Blacks but strived to be like his white Bohemian Socialist friends; he blamed Protestantism for a host of modern problems but would not come to trust his soul to Catholicism until his last and most painful days. How a man like this would ultimately find a home in Catholicism is certainly intriguing. But, he did find a home in Catholicism with support from Catholics like Ellen Tarry, the Baroness Catherine De Hueck Doherty, Tom and Mary Jerdo Keating, and Bishop Bernard J. Sheil, and most of all as his poetry of his “Catholic period” suggests he found God’s acceptance.

Ellen Tarry, an author of children’s books and Catholic biographies, was the original source of Claude McKay’s

ultimate conversion to Catholicism in 1944. Years before she met Claude McKay in Harlem, Ellen Tarry was well aware of his literary accomplishments. She was an admirer of his poetry but a stern critic of his fiction. In 1928 she wrote a scathing critique of his award-winning novel *Home to Harlem*. Tarry recalled that in a review of *Home to Harlem* she “had accused him of selling his birthright for a mess of pottage and labeled the book a ‘gross and debased exaggeration of life in a Negro community.’”¹ Tarry was not alone in her rebuke. W.E.B. DuBois, Marcus Garvey, and Mary Fleming Larabee all found *Home to Harlem* to be revolting, insulting, and a malicious act which damaged the image of African Americans as McKay presented a prurient and vile picture of black life in a major American city. While most African American critics hated the book white critics hailed as a true literary success.²

Ellen Tarry and Claude McKay’s friendship began in 1938 when McKay recognized promise in Ellen Tarry, who was working to establish herself as a writer of children’s books. McKay introduced her to major figures in the Harlem Renaissance such as James Weldon Johnson and his wife, Grace Nail, and welcomed her into the Negro Writers’ Guild.³ Tarry acknowledged that McKay did all these things for her in spite of his distain for her coloring (she was a very light skinned black woman) and her

¹Ellen Tarry, *The Third Door: The Autobiograpjy of an American Negro Woman* (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 1994), 127.

² Tyrone Tillery, *Claude McKay: A Black Poet’s Struggle for Identity* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 87.

³ Tarry, 129-131.

religion. Tarry wrote, “Despite my color and my religion, Claude opened closed windows for me and taught me the meaning of craftsmanship. I was grateful but he forbade me to say so. He always said, ‘Gratitude! I *hate* the word.’”⁴

McKay and Tarry sparred on many occasions and often about religion. Tarry recalled how she would prod McKay, “Claude, why don’t you become a Catholic? It is the only religion for a man like you who has traveled all over the world and seen everything.” He charged back that he was an agnostic and that “it is easier for an intellectual not to believe than to believe.” Later McKay acknowledged to Tarry that her questions did cause him to do some “thinking hard” and to reevaluate his belief that Christianity had “destroyed the glory of pagan life.” In his reevaluation, McKay discovered that there had been African popes and saints, that Catholicism embraced the dignity of all people, and that there were thousands of African Catholics.⁵ His investigations “flooded” him with the “True light. I discovered a little of that mystical world of the spirit that eludes the dictators, the agnostics, the pure materialists. I saw too, the Roman Catholic Church in a light different, indeed, from the many in which I had previously visioned it.”⁶

⁴ *Ibid*, 129.

⁵ Eddie Doherty, “Poet’s Progress,” *Extension* (September 1946), 46.

⁶ Claude McKay, “On Becoming a Roman Catholic,” in *The Epistle: A Quarterly Bulletin*, 11, no. 2, (Spring 1945) in *Stamped in the Image of God: African Americans as God’s Image in Black* edited by Cyprian Davis and Jamie T. Phelps, (New York: Orbis Books, 2003), 107.

Claude McKay experienced the “True Light” for the first time through the ministry of women at Friendship House. Both Claude McKay and Ellen Tarry credited Friendship House in Harlem, and the interracial apostolate directed by the Baroness Catherine De Hueck, as a direct influence on the conversion of Claude McKay. Finding Claude McKay “alone and ill in a rented room” and clearly in need of medical help, Tarry, who was a member of Friendship House, said she immediately turned to her friends at Friendship House for assistance.⁷ Tarry and other young women from Friendship House formed a nursing service for McKay and tended to him until they had him strong enough to be on his feet again. Ellen Tarry recollected, “Claude took his bad moods out on me, but I was grateful that he showed his charming side to others. He had done so much for me it was a privilege to be of small service.” Dr. Edward Best, Friendship House’s physician, attended to McKay during this crisis. According to Tarry, Dr. Best confided to her that McKay would never be truly well again.⁸ McKay did get better and well enough to want to do something nice for Friendship House. He thought he might thank them by giving a poetry reading for them one evening. He was true to his word and Tarry recalled that his reading was a great success. She was personally relieved that he did not give into making a “dramatic” exit as he was known to do in his usual poetry readings in Harlem’s literary circles.⁹ In his own conversion narrative, McKay recalled “towards the end of

⁷ *Ibid*, 187.

⁸ *Ibid*.

⁹ *Ibid*.

the nineteen-thirties I became interested in Catholic Friendship House and its work in Harlem.”¹⁰

Over the next several years Claude McKay’s circle of friends at Friendship House grew to include Tom and Mary Jerdo Keating. In 1943, Claude was deathly ill again. He pulled through but his physicians recommended that he convalesce and the Keatings offered their vacation home in Connecticut to McKay for this purpose. Of this retreat McKay remembered, “it was a lonely isolated place and I had plenty of time to read many pamphlets and books on Catholicism.”¹¹ This convalescence retreat was one of many, including a retreat at St. Meinrad Archabbey in Indiana in 1945 that eased and inspired him before his death in 1948.

While at the Keating’s country house in Connecticut, McKay indulged in a curiosity that he had had for some time. The curiosity was Catholic history. Upon returning to New York that fall, McKay made it his mission to learn as much about Catholicism as he could by reading books and encyclopedias about Catholicism in the New York Public Library. He explained, “mainly, I was interested in the history of Catholicism and intensely in the period of the early Fathers of the Church, that is the period embracing the lifetime of St. Paul to the Fourth century, in which the Bible was first translated into Latin by the Catholic Church.” While immersing himself in this history, McKay asked himself “why should I know so much about the Greek philosophers and so little about the Christian

¹⁰ Claude McKay, “Right Turn to Catholicism,” 1. Claude McKay Papers, James Weldon Johnson Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Fathers, when, even though a pariah in the United States, I was a son of Christendom?"¹² This marked a transition in McKay's thinking. While not yet a Catholic he was also no longer an agnostic. He had begun to regard himself as a Christian.

McKay's interest in this history of the Catholic Church did not begin with his engagement with Catholics at Friendship House but really during his European sojourn that began during his days as a Communist in the 1920s and that ended after he had rejected Socialism in the early 1930s. During this time, McKay spent over five years living in France but French Catholicism did not inspire his intellect or spiritual curiosity. Of French Catholicism he wrote, "in France when I visited a church or a cathedral, I saw women only worshipping." What he viewed as a feminized church did not appeal to him. It would be Spanish Catholicism that would intrigue McKay for in Spain's churches McKay said he saw as many men as women at worship. He continued, "it was Spain (not France where I had lived five years) which gave me an insight into the importance of life in a Catholic country and the significance of the Catholic faith."¹³ He felt spiritually indebted to Spanish Catholics who showed him that Catholicism was about much more than salvation. For the Spanish people, Catholicism was a way of life and McKay was looking for a way of life.

In the Catholic way of life he observed in Spain, McKay identified the principle virtues he thought

¹² *Ibid*, 2.

¹³ *Ibid*, 4.

Catholicism taught and its members practiced. Those virtues were humility, loving-kindness, compassion, obedience, and self-sacrifice.¹⁴ These were the foundation of the “Catholic way of life” and McKay argued that if these virtues were truly practiced then it would necessarily lead to a better world for all people. He also believed that these were the virtues most needed to combat aspects of American society and other countries as well that were dangerous and evil. He explained, “my study of the Catholic Church led to the discovery of important facts of which I was not formerly aware. For example, when Catholicism conquered Rome, in its infinite wisdom it abolished all the tribune and usury...as I continued to get enlightenment, it just flashed upon me that Agnosticism, Atheism, Modernism, Capitalism, State Socialism, and State Communism were all children of the Pandora Box of Protestantism.”¹⁵ Having felt completely betrayed by the Communists (McKay went to Russia as a guest of the Soviets in 1922 and spoke at the Fourth Congress of the Third International), the Roman Catholic Church’s unequivocal stand against Communism was very, very appealing to McKay.

McKay’s Catholic self-education certainly bolstered the religion in his esteem but what mattered most to him was that Catholicism could contain him and everyone else. No mean feat, especially considering that everything else he had tried in his life from Fabian Socialism to the Harlem Renaissance to Bohemianism confined him. McKay

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 4.

declared, “in Catholicism there was room for any individual, poor or rich, any people who had faith in Jesus Christ and His Church. In it there is freedom without license. And one could have faith and hope and still believe in humanity.”¹⁶ McKay was on his way to finding a home in Catholicism but it would take a move to Chicago to finally get him there.

Gravely concerned about McKay’s health and convinced that he had much to offer the Catholic Church, Mary and Tom Keating, who had moved to Chicago and begun to work with Bishop Bernard J. Sheil, encouraged Bishop Sheil to offer a position to McKay at the Catholic Youth Organization and the Sheil School of Social Studies in 1944. By all accounts McKay was elated with the offer and left New York looking forward to what this new life in Chicago working for the Catholic Church would bring to him. When Claude McKay left Harlem for Chicago, he was not yet a Catholic but that October he entered communion with Roman Catholic Church when he was baptized at Old St. Mary’s in Chicago on October 11, 1944.

Affectionately known under several titles such as “the labor bishop,” “the people’s bishop,” “The Bishop,” and simply “Benny,” Bishop Sheil and his multiple programs for social progress and democracy were well known and well respected throughout the United States.¹⁷ Probably best know for founding the Catholic Youth Organization, Bishop Sheil’s interests in social justice took many forms

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 3.

¹⁷ Steven M. Avella, *This Confident Church: Catholic Leadership and Life in Chicago, 1940-1965* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 115.

and he was always looking for people of note to engage in them and especially at his pet project the Sheil School of Social Studies. According to historian Steven Avella, Bishop Sheil was well known as an ardent anti-Communist but he was not a “red-baiter.”¹⁸ In a letter to Bishop John F. Noll of Fort Wayne, Indiana, Bishop Sheil described his attitude towards Communism thusly, “I have always believed that Communism is no danger in a society where justice and charity prevail. Communism, I believe, is no threat in a decent and human economic structure.”¹⁹ He believed that Catholicism had the “most far-reaching and radical (in the best sense of the word) plan for social reconstruction; we must, we are bound to put it into effect.” Sheil was convinced that he and all the men and women throughout the archdiocese and the country frankly that were working in cooperation with him were doing just this. Hence, it is not surprising at all that Bishop Sheil would have extended an invitation to engage in this grand work to someone like Claude McKay. According to McKay’s friend, Mary Jerdo Keating, “one day I discussed Claude’s problem with Bishop Sheil. The bishop in his quick, generous way suggested that Claude join the staff of the Catholic Youth Organization, and act as his personal advisor on European affairs. He came to Chicago and stayed with the bishop until his death.”²⁰

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 142.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 142-143.

²⁰ Mary Jerdo Keating, "Profile: Claude McKay, " unknown source, September 1951, Claude McKay Collection, JWW MSS 27, Box 13, Folder 432, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

Sheil's biographer contends that it was in 1938, the same year that Ellen Tarry met Claude McKay, that Bishop Sheil "discovered" the "social question" and that between 1938 and 1954 he and all those associated with him would work to bring aspects of the "social question" to the fore in Catholic and secular life in the United States. Aspects of the "social question" included race relations, labor organization, post-war reconstruction, liturgical reform, adult education, and the change realities of urban life in the United States.²¹ Sheil sought to do this by building a "brain trust" of scholars and writers who would "provide the fodder for the bishop's steadily increasing public speaking engagements."²² The vehicle for the dispersal of these ideas was the Sheil School which originated as an idea that the Baroness De Hueck promoted to Bishop Sheil in a 19 page proposal that outlined the purpose for creating a "school for social studies."²³ Sheil wanted his school to accomplish two things and they were to educate people for democracy and to do so by charging no tuition. So charging no tuition and admitting all adult students regardless of color or creed, The Sheil School commenced in February 1943. At the Sheil School ordinary Chicagoans could spend their evenings studying sociology, art, drama, current events, and foreign languages under the tutelage of some of the most famous Catholic and non-Catholic artists, scholars, and social activists of the day. "The Negro in America" was one of the first classes the Sheil School offered. They also could visit the St. Benet Library in the

²¹ *Ibid*, 115.

²² *Ibid*, 115-116.

²³ *Ibid*, 116.

basement of the Sheil School building and purchase the latest scholarship and popular spiritual books produced by Catholics. And, most of the teachers at the Sheil School dedicated their services without fee.

When Claude McKay came to work for the Sheil School in 1944 he assumed the duty of teaching of courses on African American literature, culture and history. In addition to teaching at the school, McKay did research for Bishop Sheil on Europe and on African American concerns.²⁴ McKay was one of the only Sheil School teachers who received a regular salary and Bishop Sheil continued to see that McKay received his salary and benefits from the Sheil School until McKay's death in 1948.²⁵ McKay offered a few courses in Black literature but his health was so poor by this time that his teaching duties were definitely circumscribed.

Ellen Tarry was pleasantly surprised when McKay wrote to her from Chicago to let her know that he had a job working for Bishop Bernard J. Sheil as a teacher in the Sheil School of Social Studies and that he was taking instruction and preparing for his baptism and reception in to the Catholic Church. He wanted Tarry to know that she had played a big role in his conversion but he also wanted it

²⁴ According to Sheil's biographer, Tom and Mary Jerdo Keating and the Baroness urged the bishop to hire Claude McKay in 1944 to work as a "consultant" on Black affairs.

²⁵ It is important to note that Bishop Sheil was very impressed by the work that the Baroness was doing in Harlem and that he wanted to have a Friendship House in Chicago, too. Tom and Mary Keating were Friendship House apostles and great friends of Claude McKay. Bishop Sheil started the Friendship House in Chicago in 1942 with Anne Harrigan and Ellen Tarry at the helm.

to be clear “I’m not a Catholic like the American Catholics, I’m more like the European Catholics – I still feel free. Guess I’ll have to say I owe my conversion to you.”²⁶ Tarry remarked she knew it was difficult for Claude to become one of “you Catholics” and to acknowledge that she a “mere female had anything to do with it.”²⁷

Once he entered the Catholic Church, McKay seemed willing to do whatever he was asked to do for the Catholic community. Not only did he embrace his work for Bishop Sheil but his biographer, Wayne Cooper, said this was McKay’s happiest time in life.²⁸ McKay also seemed quite amenable to make himself available to Catholic organizations who wished to be associated with him. A few weeks after his conversion, Catholics were already claiming him as a Catholic author and asking him to travel to speak as one. One of McKay’s first trips was to Milwaukee, Wisconsin to read his own poems and other poems by Black authors for the Catholic Poetry Society.²⁹ In addition to wanting to hear McKay’s reading, the Milwaukee Verse Speaking choir was hopeful that McKay

²⁶ *Ibid*, 250.

²⁷ *Ibid*.

²⁸ Cooper, Wayne, *Claude McKay: Rebel Sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance, a Biography*. (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 359.

²⁹ I do think it is important to note that McKay was more than ambivalent about being considered a Catholic author much as he was about being considered a black author. In a letter to his agent, Carl Cowl, McKay complained, “But I am not A Catholic Writer in the generally accepted sense any more than I am a Negro writer. I happen to be a Negro who is a writer and a converted Catholic, who is a writer.” Claude McKay to Carl Cowl, August 28, 1947, Claude McKay Papers, James Weldon Johnson Collection, Beneineke Library, Yale University.

would compose some poems for them.³⁰ Of his conversion McKay told his Milwaukee audience, “you might say that I came into the church by the back door, because I was interested in the people who were fighting communism. But I wanted greater strength to fight the enemies of decency. I wanted more light, more wisdom...the book *I, Claudius*, by Graves, showing the desire of the people for a real God, sort of gave me a key.”³¹ The article also noted that McKay was “happier than in earlier years, even two years ago, he is now writing sonnets.” McKay’s conversion to Catholicism inspired him and gave him the opportunity to focus on writing poetry again. In order to make his writing more profitable for himself in the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s, McKay focused on fiction-writing and never reached the critical acclaim with it that he did with his poetry. After his conversion, McKay had something new to write about, his faith, and a new publishing venue, the Catholic press.

A retreat at St. Meinrad Archabbey played a role in bringing McKay back to the art of poetry. Even before his conversion, McKay respected the monastic way. Of it he wrote, “if I were in search of true Communism, I would go to the monasteries of the Catholic Church, whose beginnings are older than the Church, more antique than the Republic of Rome, as ancient as Ancient Egypt.”³² Historian Cyprian Davis, O.S.B. has written insightfully about McKay’s “Catholic period” poetry and his time at St.

³⁰ Betty Maier, “McKay, Like His Poetry, Is Gentle, Simple, Candid,” Unknown Milwaukee newspaper, December 27, 1944.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² McKay, “Right Turn to Catholicism,” 14.

Meinrad.³³ McKay gifted the poem “St. Meinrad” to Father Placidus Kempf, O.S.B. The first stanza of the sonnet gives the hearer a very palpable sense of the beauty and grace of this place and the meaning the retreat at St. Meinrad had for McKay:

How excellently there among the hills
 Saint Meinrad sets her lovely self, and stands,
 A wonder to the land on which she spills
 The richness flowing from her active hands.

From far and near her children seek this place,
 And humbly sit them at their elder’s feet,
 To hear the story of Christ’s wondrous grace,
 And learn God’s wisdom in this blest retreat.³⁴

Another Catholic friend who had worked with McKay during his years as a writer and editor for the Socialist newspaper *The Liberator* helped McKay to publish the poems he was writing during his “Catholic period.” That friend was Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker House. Day published several of McKay’s “Catholic” poems and also his earlier poems in *The Catholic Worker* and she regularly sent him suggestions of other Catholic publications that she thought might like to have his work. McKay’s friendship with Day was especially important to him as his health quickly degenerated after 1945. The

³³ Cyprian Davis, O.S.B., *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (New York: Crossroads Publishing Company, 1990) 246-247.

³⁴ Claude McKay, “Saint Meinrad,” courtesy of Literary Representative for the Works of Claude McKay, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

Dorothy Day Papers at Marquette University and the Claude McKay Papers at Yale University have several of the letters they exchanged in this period.

In their correspondence, Day and McKay argued about Communism. He did not feel she condemned it harshly enough and she thought he needed to understand that Communists were not beyond redemption. They also talked about the work they were doing in their respective vocations--Day's a life dedicated to voluntary poverty and welcoming the poor as Christ and McKay's a life dedicated to writing. But, most of all they seemed to share their suffering. While McKay was battling to stay alive, Day was watching many dear friends, like Peter Maurin, decline and die. On top of all of this, her relationship with her only daughter was in shambles. Day seemed to find comfort in sharing this suffering with McKay, who also had a very troubled relationship with his only child, also a daughter whom he had never even seen. In one letter Day confided her daughter was not allowing her to see her grandchildren. She wrote, "it has been keeping me pretty heartsick because for the second time I have had to give up family. A grandmother is just as intent and attached to her grandchildren even more so, than a mother. So I have been doing some severe penance for the sins of my past life-for rejecting children in my radical day."³⁵ At the same time, McKay's daughter Hope was writing affectionless letters to her father seeking financial support as she pursued an advanced degree at Columbia in New York City. Both Day

³⁵ Dorothy Day to Claude McKay, Ember Friday, Claude McKay Papers, James Weldon Johnson Collection, Benecke Library, Yale University.

and McKay had deep regrets over the ways in which they had failed their children. Sharing a history in what Day called “my radical days” with McKay and now in the middle of their lives sharing a new way of life in Catholicism, they could write honestly and compassionately to one another. This renewed friendship with Day was one of the most important things that came of McKay’s conversion to Catholicism.

McKay also maintained his friendship with Ellen Tarry through the end of his life. In his last year of life, he increasingly looked to her to be his advocate in the publishing world and entrusted her with his poetry to find a publisher for it.³⁶ McKay also confided to Tarry that he was planning to come to New York to meet his daughter, Hope, for the first time. Tarry had no idea that he had a child much less a fully grown daughter who was studying at Columbia University. She asked him to give her his daughter’s address so that she might go meet her. Tarry recalled “I was amused when he answered and said he wanted to see his own child first, before anybody else saw her.” She continued that she knew the real reason he did not want to give her Hope’s address was because “he wanted to see how she looked before any of his close friends met her.”³⁷ Tragically, Tarry would meet Hope before McKay as she was called upon by Bishop Sheil’s office to find Hope and to inform her that her father had died. Tarry wrote, “it was difficult for me to talk with her about the death of the father she had never seen.”³⁸ Despite

³⁶Tarry, 268.

³⁷*Ibid*, 269.

³⁸*Ibid*.

the difficulty, Tarry, McKay's closest African American Catholic friend and also his compatriot in the Black literary world, took on the responsibility of bringing the various communities that converged in the life of Claude McKay together for his funeral.

Tarry recalled:

Harlem, the Black Metropolis about which Claude McKay had written so much, was saddened to learn of his death. Claude would have chuckled at the turn of events which resulted in his having a New York funeral after the solemn requiem Mass in Chicago at which Bishop Sheil presided and another Mass here at the Church of the Crucifixion. Boyish mischief would have played around the corners of his eyes and mouth and he would have sworn that 'the Reds' were responsible for his mortal remains arriving in New York late – four hours after the Mass had been said *in absentia*.³⁹

Somewhat sarcastically, Tarry also mused that it would have entertained McKay that many of his old friends and acquaintances were "aggrieved by his 'new religion'" and those who were trying to get in to the "good graces of his grief-stricken child" and those who arranged for his body to be received by a funeral home that only had Protestant ministers and who thought a memorial service would be sufficient.⁴⁰

³⁹ *Ibid*, 269.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 269-270.

In her autobiography *The Third Door*, Tarry wrote about her final farewell to her friend, Claude McKay. She along with other Friendship House disciples and Catholic Workers, who had come to know, respect, and care for Claude McKay in his last years gathered around his casket and prayed the Rosary for him. Of this experience Tarry wrote, “it was comforting to know that the angry, bitter McKay of past years was at peace when God called him home to that part of Heaven where the weary, battle-scarred writers go.”⁴¹ Perhaps only a friend such as Ellen Tarry was to Claude McKay could recognize and speak this truth about him. Being with him in his conversion from the beginning, Tarry could see and note for the historical record that Claude McKay’s conversion to Catholicism in 1944 had brought a peace and comfort to him in his last years that were marked by excruciating and debilitating physical pain but also by a renewed sense of hope and promise in his artistic vocation.

Though McKay’s life as Roman Catholic was very brief it was very meaningful for him and for the wider American Catholic Church. McKay found a true spiritual home and Catholic friends who were completely committed to him. Though there was little McKay could do for the Church after his conversion because of his very poor health, his Catholic poems and his willingness to serve his faith through his art were gifts that continue to intrigue, inspire, and add color to the ever-unfolding U.S. Catholic story and to remind us of the manifold ways the vocation of the artist blesses all.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 270.

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