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# The desegregation of New Orleans public and Roman Catholic schools in New Orleans, 1950-1962

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THE DESEGREGATION OF NEW ORLEANS PUBLIC  
AND ROMAN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS IN NEW ORLEANS, 1950-1962

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
In partial fulfillment of the  
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In

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by  
Kristina D. McKenzie  
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I would like to thank Dr. David Culbert for his patience, continued support, and wonderful sense of humor. I would also like to thank my parents who have supported me and my siblings in all of our various endeavors. Finally, I dedicate this thesis to my grandmother who, because of the color of her skin, was denied an education at Louisiana State University. However, because of her perseverance and the perseverance of people like her, her granddaughter is able to achieve the goal that she could not.

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## ABSTRACT

New Orleans has recently been called a “chocolate city” by its mayor. It is a curious choice of words, but resonates with anyone who knows anything about New Orleans, a city heavily populated by African Americans. The city is crime ridden and poor; consequently, New Orleans is ranked near the bottom in terms of education. Why does the city’s population remain uneducated? It would be presumptuous to suggest that there is only one reason; there are several. However, one of the most obvious reasons is the utter failure of desegregation in the city.

New Orleans has always experienced atypical race relations. Instances of slaves and masters cohabitating, or blacks and whites in the city living in each other’s neighborhoods and working with each other have been true of New Orleans for centuries. New Orleans also has the largest population of black Roman Catholics in the world. The fact that so many blacks were Catholic and that Louisiana is a southern state with a very large Catholic population inevitably raises one additional question: what was the Church’s moral and legal position on desegregation, segregation, racism, and other racial issues?

The public schools in New Orleans desegregated before the parochial schools. Why did this happen? The Archbishop failed to desegregate before the public schools; he did not silence racist laypersons in its ranks, nor did he control racist priests. The Church had a moral responsibility to support desegregation, yet Church support was limited. The Church failed in its moral obligation to New Orleans Catholics, both a product of uncertain local leadership, and a source of local African American disaffection from the Church. The results continue to be felt in New Orleans.

## CHAPTER I

### RACE RELATIONS IN NEW ORLEANS: AN OVERVIEW

For various reasons, many of which extend back to slavery, New Orleans was often considered progressive in its race relations. Although New Orleans was segregated and racism flourished, it retained a reputation of being city with little hostility between its black and white citizens. According to Gwendolyn Hall, Louisiana had a tradition of “racial openness.”<sup>1</sup> Adam Fairclough asserts that this reputation was largely-- but not entirely--undeserved. New Orleans, he claims, was a world unto itself. Its very culture seemed to discourage extreme racism. He cites integration during Mardi Gras as proof that the races did indeed mingle sometimes. Most blacks and whites lived in mixed neighborhoods, demonstrating that blacks and whites could interact peacefully.<sup>2</sup> William Ivy Hair, in Carnival of Fury is less sanguine: “Race relations in New Orleans ... had never really been much better than in other southern communities.”<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, New Orleans also had a history of labor solidarity that bridged racial divides. Alan Wieder reminds us that New Orleans was a “model southern city” because public transportation and the public library were integrated “without incident.”<sup>4</sup> New Orleanians were proud of their progressivism.

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<sup>1</sup> Gwendolyn Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 380.

<sup>2</sup> Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1971*, (Athens: University of Georgia, 1995), 9.

<sup>3</sup> William Ivy Hair, *Carnival of Fury: Robert Charles and the New Orleans Race Riot of 1900*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), 89.

<sup>4</sup> Alan Wieder, “The New Orleans School Crisis of 1960: Causes and Consequences,” *Phylon*, 48: 2 (Summer, 1987), 122.

This is also an opinion shared by Dale A. Somers. He explores the difference between race relations in Orleans, and surrounding rural areas and argues a progressive culture of race relations after the Civil War lasted until the end of Reconstruction in some cities.<sup>5</sup> The races in New Orleans made contact during leisure activities. Blacks and whites interacted in gambling establishments and at dances during the antebellum period, and even more during Reconstruction. The races also intermingled during the partying accompanying Mardi Gras.<sup>6</sup> He alludes to New Orleans' real or perceived sexual relations-- black women and white men often cohabitated together, although it became an issue when it appeared that white women were becoming infatuated with black men.<sup>7</sup>

Although much has been made of sexual liaisons between master and slave throughout the South, perhaps in no other city was the "color line" crossed sexually as much or as openly as in New Orleans after the Civil War. By the time that Reconstruction began, whites and blacks in New Orleans and Louisiana had more family members identified as the "other" race than did residents of any other state.<sup>8</sup> Assigning labels to many people in New Orleans became extremely difficult if not impossible. Silas E. Fales, a Union soldier, was quoted as saying "it is hard telling who is white here ...."<sup>9</sup> Many people of European descent possessed dark skins in part because of frequent contact with Africans in Europe for several centuries. Many blacks had skin so fair that they passed for white. As conditions for blacks worsened, in the years after

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<sup>5</sup> Dale A. Somers, "Black and White in New Orleans: A Study in Urban Race Relations, 1865-1900," *Journal of Southern History*, 40:1 (February, 1974), 19.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>8</sup> John W. Blassingame, *Black New Orleans*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 201.

<sup>9</sup> Silas E. Fales quoted in *Ibid.*, 201.

Reconstruction, more and more blacks passed for white and hundreds of blacks became “white” each year.<sup>10</sup>

Sexual liaisons between the races occurred frequently during slavery. However, in New Orleans, this practice continued after the war was over. Why did this continue in New Orleans? In a society that had so many color classifications (mulatto, quadroon, octoroon) one’s status in society was improved by white associations. Quadroons (a person with one black grandparent) continued to associate with white men in public settings. John Blassingame claims that white men chose black women during this period because they enjoyed the sexual contact that they had with them during slavery and because of the sexuality myths involving the black race. He states that white men were attracted to the black woman because of her beauty and the contrast in skin color.<sup>11</sup>

Blacks and whites interacted so intimately with each other in New Orleans (in sexual and non-sexual settings) that they seemed to be comfortable with the opposite race. Also, the death of many white men in the war made black men appealing to the white woman. Blassingame perhaps overstates the case by suggesting that such liaisons were generally acceptable socially. Historically, relations between the white woman and the black man were almost always socially taboo, and almost one hundred years after the Civil War ended, white segregationists’ claims that the barbaric black man-child would seduce the innocent white child strengthened deep-seated southern fear of miscegenation. New Orleans was no different than any other southern city; interracial marriage was strictly forbidden.<sup>12</sup> However, New Orleans’ reputation for somewhat relaxed sexual

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.



relations between the races suggests why New Orleans could have been a leader in the successful and non-violent desegregation of the South's institutions in a post-Brown v Board of Education New Orleans.

In one of the most important decisions that the Supreme Court has rendered, and certainly one of the most controversial, it was decided that "separate but equal" was not, and that Plessy v Ferguson was to be overturned. The cases are known as the Brown decisions. The first decision was decided on May 17, 1954. The court in a unanimous decision declared that,

Segregation of white and Negro children in the public schools of a state solely on the basis of race ... denies to Negro children the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment.... Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments .... It is the very foundation of good citizenship. Today it is a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment. In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms. We come then to the question presented: Does segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race, even though the physical facilities and other "tangible" factors may be equal, deprive the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities? We believe that it does.<sup>13</sup>

A year later, in Brown II, the Court mandated that desegregation was to occur with "all deliberate speed." Brown had a profound impact on the country, one that resonates clearly today in America.

Another plausible explanation for the assumption that New Orleans' schools could be desegregated with more ease than in other southern cities is that for a brief

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 202-204.

<sup>13</sup> Brown v Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483 (1954), [www.caselaw.lp.findlaw.com](http://www.caselaw.lp.findlaw.com).

period New Orleans schools were desegregated. The desegregation of William Frantz and McDonough 19 elementary schools was not the first in New Orleans. Louis R. Harlan documents that, for a brief time following the Civil War, schools were desegregated in New Orleans. The state Constitution of 1867 prohibited the creation of separate schools and required that no student be denied admission to a school based on race. Harlan is careful not to suggest that this was an easy process, or one to which there was no opposition. White-owned newspapers encouraged parents to remove their children from desegregated schools. There had been only ten private schools in the city in 1868; by 1871 this number was more than one hundred. In spite of this figure more than half of white schools escaped integration and some integrated while segregating classrooms within the school.<sup>14</sup> Though there were attempts to keep schools segregated, opposition eventually died down. Enrollment in public schools declined briefly as parents sent their children to private and parochial schools, but not for long, thanks to hard times. Eventually the number of children enrolled in New Orleans public schools surpassed the number of children enrolled when the schools were segregated.<sup>15</sup>

Some high schools were still segregated in the early 1870s, because for four years three high schools defied the desegregation movement; these high schools became symbolic to whites who resisted black civil rights. On December 14, 1874, black students marched, demanding enrollment. Predictably, chaos ensued, and the schools closed. When schools reopened after the Christmas break, they desegregated. More and more blacks ventured into previously segregated high schools. While some white students

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<sup>14</sup> Roger Fischer, "The Post-Civil War Segregation Struggle," in Hodding Carter, ed., *The Past as Prelude, New Orleans 1718-1968*, (New Orleans: Pelican, 1968), 297-298.

<sup>15</sup> Louis R. Harlan, "Desegregation in New Orleans Public Schools During Reconstruction," *American Historical Review* 67:3 (April, 1962), 665-667.

walked out, schools remained racially integrated.<sup>16</sup> Thomas Conway, Superintendent of Schools, was an ardent supporter of desegregation. He said:

I had fully concluded to put the system of mixed schools to a thorough, practical test, and I did. The white pupils all left ... this was the picture one day. What will you think when I tell you that before I reached my office that day, the children of both races who, on the school question, seemed like deadly enemies, were, many of them, joined in a circle, playing on the green under the shade of the wide spreading live oak. In a few days I went back to see how the school was progressing, and to my surprise, found nearly all the former pupils returned to their places; and that the school, like all the schools in the city, reported at the close of the year a larger attendance than at any time since the close of the war.<sup>17</sup>

Louis Harlan concludes that during Reconstruction, New Orleanians seemingly accepted the desegregation of their schools. Many of the schools were never desegregated, and the desegregation of New Orleans' schools led to an increase in attendance in segregated private and parochial schools. This increase was not sustained for long. Violence did not occur for two reasons: the way in which the schools were desegregated, and the political culture of New Orleans. Whites sought to get black support at the polls by granting voting rights. It seemed as if the desegregation of schools would survive the end of Reconstruction in 1877, as some blacks were appointed to the school board. However, when that school board voted to segregate the schools that is precisely what occurred. The state Constitution was re-written in 1879 to permit the creation of separate schools, made mandatory after 1898, thanks to Plessy v Ferguson.<sup>18</sup>

As black schools went virtually ignored after Plessy, New Orleans school officials attempted to improve white schools. The self-described "school mayor of New Orleans," Martin Behrman, fought to improve public education in New Orleans for white students.

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<sup>16</sup> Fischer, "Past as Prelude," 298-302.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Conway quoted in, Harlan, "Desegregation in New Orleans," 664.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 668-672.

He got new revenue for the schools by persuading the city council to assess a \$200 liquor license fee, and he persuaded city assessors to increase assessments on real estate. He oversaw the building of several new schools and increased teacher salaries. Not everyone agreed with Behrman's almost total control of the school system in New Orleans, so political bickering ensued. In 1909 a new study was released that showed that the American poor were not being educated properly, and New Orleans was not different than any other large city. New Orleans schools ranked at the bottom, statistically, in terms of children who actually finished elementary schools.<sup>19</sup>

As whites in New Orleans attempted to further solidify their dominance over blacks, the decision was made to limit black public education to the first five grades. Black leaders sought innovative ways to improve black educational opportunities, but they did not have the political power. Black leaders worked from the “bottom up.” They worked through churches and other civic black organizations in order to raise private funds.<sup>20</sup>

“Separate but equal” was inherently unequal. Black children went to school in deplorable conditions. Between 1910 and 1920, the city built seventeen new schools, and only two were for black students. A high school built for blacks for the purpose of preparing students for college endured endless challenges. Following Booker T. Washington’s instruction to “cast down your bucket where you are,” many black leaders felt that black students would benefit more from vocational training and that the school should “meet the larger needs of the community.” The reality was that black schools were

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<sup>19</sup> Donald E. Devore and Joseph Logsdon, *Crescent City Schools: Public Education in New Orleans, 1841-1991*, (Lafayette: University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1991), 120-141.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

failing black children. Inadequate facilities, filth, and overcrowding led to students performing below the national norm for black students.<sup>21</sup> A racist educational system did great damage to New Orleans schools. While considerably less money was spent educating black children, there was still two school systems to maintain--the white school system and the black school system. The parish could not afford this dual school system, and it eventually led to generations of New Orleanians, white and black, not receiving a good education. The city suffers today from the same problem. The schools are re-segregated, and neither black nor white children receive a quality education in the public schools.

Plessy v Ferguson was the case that made “separate but equal” the law of the land. In June 1892, Homer Plessy was arrested for violating section 2 of Act 111, passed by the Louisiana legislature in 1890. This law called for “separate but equal” accommodations for blacks and whites on interstate rail cars. The arrest was a planned challenge to this law. This Louisiana law was in effect because of the failure of Reconstruction in Louisiana.<sup>22</sup> Louisiana argued that the law was constitutional, as it reflected a state’s right to secure the public good and preserve peace. Plessy’s attorney, Albion Tourgee, argued that the law deprived Plessy of his Fourteenth Amendment right to equal protection, and that there were no health reasons to keep the races separate. Tourgee argued that the purpose of the law was to promote the happiness of whites, and that the law had nothing to do with preserving peace. He further argued that the racial mixing so prevalent in New Orleans, left unclear distinctions between the races, and that the

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 179-214.

<sup>22</sup> Brook Thomas, ed., *Plessy v Ferguson: A Brief History with Documents*, (Boston: Bedford Books, 1997), 3-5.

determination of race should not be left up to the whim of the individual railroad conductor. He claimed that belonging to one race or another was a form of property. In other words, it was valuable to be a member of the white race. Plessy, who could have easily passed for white, was having his “reputation as a white man” taken away from him without due process of law. Another of Plessy’s attorneys, Samuel F. Phillips, argued that the states had the right to regulate education and maintain segregation in schools, because education was an extension of marriage and family; since states had the right to regulate interracial marriage, they had the right to regulate education, an extension of the family. Segregation in railway cars and segregation in education were two separate things, however, and the future of the family had nothing to do with segregation in railway cars.<sup>23</sup> This argument is particularly ironic because the eventual overturning of Plessy v Ferguson overturned segregation in public schools in America, at least on paper. The Supreme Court argued that because social distinctions between blacks and whites were rooted in nature, Jim Crow was a logical reflection of societal feelings. The Court, with the exception of one Justice, decided that political and civil equality could be legislated but not social equality.

Plessy legalized segregation. Ultimately, however it was the failure of Reconstruction in New Orleans that effectively segregated the city. Public sector segregation was prohibited during Reconstruction. By the end of Reconstruction, segregation prevailed in the public sector. New Orleans always appeared to be a study in paradox: during Reconstruction some restaurants, clubs, and bars were segregated and

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 29-30.

remained so afterwards. Others remained racially integrated during Reconstruction and thereafter.<sup>24</sup>

New Orleans' race relations, for a moment after the Civil War, seemed as if they might improve. However, the outcome of Plessy and the failure of Reconstruction assured that the southern culture of racism would prevail in New Orleans. White feelings towards blacks, according to William Ivy Hair, were generally hostile:

Virtually all whites in the South, including New Orleans, were absolutely convinced that the mass of Negroes were innately inferior mentally and morally to most whites, and were perhaps even more certain that where ever two disparate races occupied the same soil one race must rule the other. Antebellum traditions and attitudes survived to the new century almost unchanged.<sup>25</sup>

The First Reconstruction Act, passed in 1867, gave blacks the right to vote. Politically-minded carpetbaggers realized that their success in New Orleans depended on black support. This point was not lost on black voters; many in favor of Reconstruction sought black voters. Black New Orleanians enjoyed civil rights unprecedented in New Orleans. Where segregation prevailed, in many public arenas, blacks employed types of civil disobedience similar to ones used in the 1960s. These means ranged from subtle challenges of de facto segregation to outright defiance. Civil disobedience and the desegregation of schools were not unopposed by whites; in 1874, a white supremacist organization led an insurrection that temporarily toppled the Radical government and restored Democratic rule in New Orleans. The revolt was crushed, but not without

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<sup>24</sup> Jerah Johnson, "Jim Crow Laws of the 1890s and the Origins of New Orleans Jazz: Correction of an Error," *Popular Music* 19:2 (April, 2000), 248.

<sup>25</sup> Hair, *Carnival of Fury*, 3-5.

leaving a legacy of discontentment.<sup>26</sup> Radical Reconstruction ended in New Orleans in April, 1877 when federal troops were withdrawn from Louisiana.

New Orleans was a city subject to racial violence. In a bloody riot, following an incident between one Robert Charles and white police officers, “commenced one of the bloodiest, most anarchic weeks in New Orleans’ history.”<sup>27</sup> This was hardly the first race riot in the city.

However, whites and black lived amongst each other peacefully at other times. This was another reason that it was believed that New Orleans’ schools could be desegregated with relative ease. There was not a strict pattern of housing segregation in New Orleans. If blacks and whites could live together, they could go to school together. Blacks and whites lived near each other during slavery. The limited land space in New Orleans, and masters’ desire to keep slaves nearby, led to residential integration.

Post-Plessy, every aspect of New Orleans’ life became more segregated, housing included. Two inventions led to an increase in residential segregation in New Orleans. The wood pump, invented in 1917, was the first effective means of draining swamp land. Whites took advantage of this new land; racial segregation increased. With the expansion of the streetcar, blacks no longer had to live in close proximity to their white employers. Whites had the luxury of moving away from blacks while still having the ability to commute into the city when necessary.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Fischer, “Past as Prelude,” 295-300.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>28</sup> Daphne Spain, “Race Relations and Residential Segregation in New Orleans: Two Centuries of Paradox,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science: Race and Residence in American Cities*, 441 (Jan. 1979), 86-90.



The complexity of New Orleans race relations includes prostitution. The evolution that occurred in this bastion of decadence reflects changing views on race in New Orleans that occurred post-Plessy. Storyville was a famous area of prostitution in New Orleans. Racial liaisons crossed the color line. Prostitutes identified themselves in several ways. Octoroons (persons who is one-eighth black), Quadroons (a person who is one-quarter black), French, and white were just a few of the racial categories in which prostitutes placed themselves.

A new moral consciousness extended to the “Big Easy.” City officials attempted to clean up Storyville, and at the same time establish distinct color barriers for prostitutes. Throughout New Orleans’ history white men had sexual relations with blacks and persons of mixed ancestry. This was continued after the Civil War in the area of prostitution. After 1900, prostitutes had to be segregated as well. The racial classifications synonymous with New Orleans cultures, and reflective of it, ended. Prostitutes who previously identified themselves as octoroons were now classified as black and ordered to segregate themselves. This was not good for business, as many of these women made their living because of white fascination with women of color. The Louisiana Supreme Court decided that the ordinance went too far in asserting its power, and it was revised. This decision made it impossible for the city to enforce this racist attempt to clean up of the city’s vice district.<sup>29</sup> However, this incident shows the changing attitudes about race in New Orleans. The color line was being distinctly drawn in a city that prided itself on racial ambiguity.

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<sup>29</sup> Alecia P. Long, *The Great Southern Babylon: Sex, Race, And Respectability in New Orleans, 1865-1920*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 119-221.

The belief that New Orleans was perceived as progressive in regards to race is supported by Robert Crain and Morton Inger. They maintain that the long history of racial mixture in New Orleans, the absence of tight residential segregation, and the Catholic culture, made some believe that New Orleans would be a leader in the peaceful integration of the South.<sup>30</sup> This was not true, but it was thought true by some professional optimists.

In reality, New Orleans remained a southern city dominated by a southern mentality in regards to race relations; segregation permeated most aspects of New Orleans life. Joseph Taylor cites the segregation of public recreational facilities, segregation in air terminals, and segregation of sporting facilities to show that, whatever air of “racial openness,” New Orleans was still very much southern, and still very much segregated on the basis of race.<sup>31</sup>

There was another reason that New Orleans was perceived as being progressive in its attitudes on race-- the Roman Catholic Church. While New Orleans is indeed southern, it is also Catholic. It is predominantly Catholic and is home to the world’s largest concentration of black Catholics.<sup>32</sup> What was the Church’s moral position on segregation? Did its moral position influence its actual one? The significance of religion was apparent by the opposition of Louisiana Catholics to the Ku Klux Klan in its

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<sup>30</sup> Robert Crain and Morton Inger, *School Desegregation in New Orleans: A Comparative Study of the Failure of Social Control*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1966), 16.

<sup>31</sup> Joseph Taylor, “Desegregation in Louisiana--One Year Later,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 24:3, (Summer, 1955), 260.

<sup>32</sup> Diane Manning and Perry Rogers, “Desegregation of the New Orleans Parochial Schools,” *Journal of Negro Education* 71:1 (Winter/Spring, 2002), 32.

powerful 1920s form. Blacks maintained a strict allegiance to the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>33</sup>

What was the Church's historical position in regards to segregation? While New Orleans was perceived as being progressive in regards to the question of race, the city and its Catholic parishioners were not only Catholic, but most definitively southern. R. Bentley Anderson claims that, "as a largely southern denomination, American Roman Catholics were forced to confront the issue of race, first in the form of slavery and later in the development of segregation."<sup>34</sup> Despite its African American members, the Catholic Church accepted both slavery and segregation with little protest. Anderson believes the reason Catholics accepted slavery was because of a desire to demonstrate loyalty to the region and to its white population. This loyalty extended beyond simply accepting the institution. Leading Roman Catholics, including lay persons and clergy, owned slaves.

Anderson contrasts the southern Catholic's position with the northern Catholic's position, noting that northern Catholics accepted slavery for different reasons. European Catholics were welcomed into the Democratic Party, which favored slavery. Also, the fear of black labor also influenced northern Catholic opinion, especially among Irish Catholics.<sup>35</sup> It is important to note that, unlike Protestants, Catholics experienced no sectional divide on the question of slavery. Catholics did not consider slavery to be evil and felt that the institution should be tolerated.<sup>36</sup> Southern Catholics accepted slavery readily because they were not only Catholic, but white and southern. The Catholic

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<sup>33</sup> Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 9-13.

<sup>34</sup> R. Bentley Anderson, *Black, White, and Catholic: New Orleans Interracialism, 1947-1956*, (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2005), 1.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

Church not only accepted slavery but sanctioned it. Anderson notes that the Church created small schools for free children of color; slaves could not be legally educated.<sup>37</sup>

We know that “separate but equal” institutions meant “separate and unequal.” Prior to Plessy v Ferguson, separate churches for blacks were acceptable as long as there were black facilities present in the Catholic Church. In 1895 Archbishop Francis Janssens of New Orleans established the first Negro Parish in Catholic Louisiana. While blacks resisted segregation for twenty years, in 1916 Archbishop James Blenk established Corpus Christi, the first segregated parish in downtown New Orleans. During the next ten years segregated churches were organized throughout the state. During slavery blacks and whites participated in Catholic ceremonies together. By 1900 segregation in all ceremonies became the rule of the Church.<sup>38</sup> Anderson claims that for more than 150 years, New Orleans Parish churches were integrated, though were segregated in seating. Joseph Kight also asserts that segregation in the Catholic Church was prevalent. He notes that black Catholics received the Eucharist after whites, and had to confess their sins in segregated confessionals. The Church provided separate parishes, schools, nursing homes, and hospitals.<sup>39</sup> It is clear that the Catholic Church advocated segregation and adapted to the accepted norms of white southerners.

In 1884 Catholic bishops began to examine the issue of education for parishioners. At the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore it was decided that every parish should build a parochial school and Catholic parents should send their children to these

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<sup>37</sup> Robert C. Reinders, “The Churches and the Negro in New Orleans, 1850-1860” *Phylon* 22: 3 (1961), 242-243.

<sup>38</sup> Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 5-7.

<sup>39</sup> Joseph A. Kight “How About September?: Archbishop Joseph F. Rummel and the Desegregation of the Roman Catholic Parochial Schools in New Orleans, 1962” (M.A. Thesis, University of New Orleans, 1994), 1-2.

schools as opposed to the public ones. The Council felt that “the establishment of parochial schools would hasten the separation of the races.”<sup>40</sup> The Church was not only accepting of the culture of segregation but promoting total segregation in every facet of life, including in the Church. The Catholic Church quieted its moral conscience by insisting, ingeniously, that by establishing separate churches, schools, and orphanages, black Catholics would have a more fulfilling Catholic experience. The Church was not only a powerful advocate of segregation, but a willing participant.

The 1890s saw blacks being removed from railroad cars, the integrated classroom, and the Church alike.<sup>41</sup> The creation of an all-black church in New Orleans was a major blow to black Catholics hoping that the Catholic Church would be the last bastion of integration. The absence of separate black parishes, prior to 1895, distinguished New Orleans from other cities with large Catholic populations. While separate schools were called for at the Third Plenary Council in 1884, black Catholics opposed the idea of black and white pupils being separated, even in private Catholic schools, from blacks and whites being separated in worship. The changing racial climate became apparent in the church: blacks and whites could worship together but had “assigned” seats in the church. Janssens claimed, “anyone might occupy any pew or any seat anywhere in the church ... but the feeling between the two races makes such an intermixture impossible.”<sup>42</sup> Basically, the negative feelings between the races made integration impractical. Rather

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<sup>40</sup> Anderson, *Black, White, and Catholic*, 3.

<sup>41</sup> James B. Bennett, *Religion and the Rise of Jim Crow in New Orleans*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 162.

<sup>42</sup> Francis Janssens quoted in *Ibid.*, 162.

than the Church being proactive and influencing its environment, the environment began to influence Church policies.

Blacks could no longer attend mass with whites in comfort; white priests began to discourage such attendance. Not wanting to lose black Catholics' loyalty, Father Janssens' solution was to establish separate churches, and St. Katherine's, the first church established for black parishioners, was established.<sup>43</sup> The opening of this church led to more black churches being opened and segregated worship becoming more and more commonplace.

White Roman Catholics did not want blacks and whites worshipping together, nor did they want black Catholic parishioners served by black priests. Perhaps this was a nod to southern paternalism, but the more likely reason was because whites in the church would be made uncomfortable by the thought of black men in the priesthood. John Plantevigne was a Creole priest born in Point Coupee parish and the eighth black priest in the United States. Plantevigne wanted to participate in ministry and conversion work in New Orleans, but he was not allowed to for fear that the sight of a black priest would upset white parishioners. Catholic leadership became more concerned with the appeasement of white Catholics than with the advancement of black Catholic interests.<sup>44</sup>

This anticipates the attitudes of many in Catholic leadership positions post-Brown.

Although segregation was not official church policy, there were more than one dozen black parishes when Archbishop Rummel arrived in New Orleans in 1935. Joseph Kight notes that Canon law provided for the establishment of different parishes in the same locality on the basis of diversity of language or nationality, not for parishes with

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 162-170.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 201-202.

persons of a different skin color. Any parishioner could choose a local church his or hers. Rummel disregarded Canon law and submitted to the southern culture of segregation.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, we must ask, what the Church's position on desegregation was when it became clear America was changing its attitudes, or at least its laws.

Archbishop Rummel was a tortured figure. While he was not prepared to desegregate parochial schools before public ones, he did have definite views on racism and race relations, expressed to his parishioners through his pastoral letters. He encouraged white Catholics to overcome their racist attitudes towards blacks, commented on the social and economic limitations of the black community, and expressed his wish that blacks be "integrated in every way into our Catholic life."<sup>46</sup> Rummel declared that blacks had feelings, rights, and dignity. He had been in the city since 1935, and understood the allegiance that blacks held toward the Church. In 1949 he canceled a Holy Hour service that was scheduled in City Park Stadium. Members of the City Park Commission required segregated seating at the event and insisted upon the exclusion of black Catholics from the Eucharistic processional. This demand was unacceptable to the archbishop; he canceled the service and censured the commission. He expressed his desire for no further segregation in pew benches, Communion, and the confessional because there would be no segregation in the Kingdom of Heaven.<sup>47</sup> The archbishop's words were put to the test one year later. In 1954, the Supreme Court declared that segregation was un-constitutional. The ruling was enforceable only in public schools but

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<sup>45</sup> Kight, "How About September?," 5.

<sup>46</sup> Archbishop Joseph Rummel quoted in *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8.

the Catholic Church was inclined to go along with the dictates of national law. Besides national law, there was moral law to consider.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 9.



## CHAPTER II

### THE DESEGREGATION OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN NEW ORLEANS

On November 14, 1960, four black first-graders integrated the New Orleans Public School System. Mobs of angry white citizens, hurling bricks and bottles, rampaged through the downtown business district. The city was near complete collapse.<sup>49</sup>

The children and their families were threatened daily. Ruby Bridges, one of the children who integrated the school system, was the sole black student at William Frantz elementary (one of the two schools chosen to begin the process of integration). The white that she wore symbolized the innocence of a six-year-old child participating in a process that she did not understand, enduring hatred that she should never have had to confront. She was escorted to school by United States federal marshals to ensure her safety; they drove her to school and accompanied her throughout the school day. Bridges was threatened daily as she entered her school, and many objects were thrown at her as she entered her assigned elementary school. Black dolls in coffins were waved in the air.<sup>50</sup>

Before these dramatic episodes, there was a lengthy legal battle to desegregate the public schools of New Orleans. However, in order to understand the process of desegregating the public schools in New Orleans, we must look at the cases preceding Brown, and we must even look at case law that preceded the cases specific to the integration of New Orleans schools.

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<sup>49</sup> Crain, Robert L., and Morton Inger, *School Desegregation in New Orleans: A Comparative Study of the Failure of Social Control*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1966), 15.

<sup>50</sup> Bridges, Ruby, *Through My Eyes*, (New York: Scholastic Press, 1999), 13-16.

We begin with Thurgood Marshall, who decided that educational facilities must be integrated. He felt that the place to begin challenging segregated educational facilities was at the collegiate level. Plessy made “separate but equal” the law of the land. Marshall decided that the way to begin the process of overturning Plessy was to prove that separate was indeed unequal, thus violating federal law. Marshall anticipated the response of individual states. The states would attempt to either prove equality of institutions or create token black institutions. Either way, this dual educational system would eventually collapse under its own financial weight.<sup>51</sup> The underlying fear of every segregationist was miscegenation; therefore it was logical for these lawyers to begin desegregation at the collegiate level with adults.

This process began with a prospective law student. Lloyd Gaines wanted to attend law school at the University of Missouri. However, the University of Missouri did not want to admit him because of his race. The policy of the state was to provide tuition for graduate education for blacks in other states. However, the Supreme Court decided that Lloyd Gaines had been refused admission to the on the basis of race and that, “This refusal constituted a denial by the State of the equal protection of the laws in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment of the Federal Constitution.”<sup>52</sup> The Court ruled that the University of Missouri must either admit him, or the state must establish a separate law school for blacks. This decision did not overturn Plessy, but it did set this relevant precedent.

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<sup>51</sup> Liva Baker, *The Second Battle of New Orleans: The Hundred Year Struggle to Integrate the Schools*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 125.

<sup>52</sup> State of Missouri ex rel. Gaines v Canada et al. (1938), [www.caselaw.lp.findlaw.com](http://www.caselaw.lp.findlaw.com). The state decided to establish a separate law school. Gaines chose not to attend and to further his education in Michigan. Gaines disappeared in 1939, before he could complete law school. The case remains unsolved.

This process worked similarly in Louisiana. When a black student attempted to gain admittance to Louisiana State University's law school, he was denied. However, the LSU Board of Supervisors decided that rather than desegregate LSU's law school, or send the student out of state, they would simply create a law school for black students at Southern University. In the meantime, the student could attend, at state expense, a law school out of the state.<sup>53</sup> Southern University was originally established for a similar purpose more than fifty years earlier--to keep black undergraduates out of LSU, and to make sure that LSU was in compliance with the mandates of Plessy.

This was not an unusual practice in Louisiana. My father, Don McKenzie, recalls that his mother, Ida Doyle, decided to obtain her Master's degree in education in the early 1950s. She received her undergraduate degree from one of two black colleges in Louisiana, Grambling State College. Grambling did not have a Master's degree program in education and neither did the other black college in the state, Southern University. LSU did have the program, and she applied to LSU. The university did not want to comply. Since there was no black institution for her to attend, the University's denial of admission violated her Plessy rights. Therefore, the state of Louisiana paid for her to obtain her Master's degree from the University of Wyoming, and even paid her train fare to and from the University of Wyoming.<sup>54</sup>

In June, 1950 the Supreme Court announced its strongest attacks on racial segregation in education yet. Two black students challenged the notion of "separate but equal" in Oklahoma and Texas, and the Court agreed with the two students. George McLaurin was admitted to the graduate school in Oklahoma; Herman Sweatt, was

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<sup>53</sup> Baker, *The Second Battle of New Orleans*, 125-126.

<sup>54</sup> Don McKenzie, interview by the author, March 10, 2008, Slidell, LA.

admitted to the University of Texas law school, after the Court found that the state's hastily constructed "black" law school was far inferior to the law school at the University of Texas. These cases gave A.P Tureaud and Thurgood Marshall the precedents they needed in order to desegregate public higher education in Louisiana.

Their suit was filed on behalf of Roy Wilkins, a student who had been denied admission to LSU's law school on the basis of his race. Lawyers representing LSU argued that the university should be allowed to restrict admittance on the basis of race to its law school because of the existence of a law school at Southern, a law school equal in quality to LSU's law school. Marshall challenged this, pointing out that institution's inferior library and poorly qualified faculty meant that the law school was not equal to the law school at LSU. The Court agreed that Southern's law school was inferior to LSU's and thus did not meet the mandates of Plessy. The Court, citing Sweatt and McLaurin, ordered Roy Wilson, the plaintiff, admitted to the law school on January 2, 1951. Wilson did not remain at LSU long, but the next semester three black students did enter into LSU's law school, one of whom would become the first black mayor of New Orleans.<sup>55</sup>

Tureaud filed a suit on behalf of Wilfred S. Aubert, Jr., a parent incensed because his children attended a dilapidated school. Tureaud argued that black children's facilities were inferior to the facilities for white children and the school board should immediately improve conditions, not desegregate the schools. The violation of the children's Fourteenth Amendment rights did not lie in the fact that they attended an all black school,

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<sup>55</sup> Baker, *The Second Battle of New Orleans*, 125-136.

but in the inferiority of the school buildings. The Orleans Parish School Board argued that improvements had been made, and Tureaud choose not to pursue the case.<sup>56</sup>

Tureaud felt the time had come to challenge the segregation of public schools. He appealed directly to the State Board of Education regarding the inequities of the Orleans Parish Schools. The State Board of Education, via its secretary, responded to Tureaud in a letter in which he said that the State Board did not feel that it had jurisdiction over the Orleans Parish School Board. However, the State Board's secretary claimed that he did see a problem with providing adequate facilities for all children and claimed that the petition was "being studied and considered"<sup>57</sup>

Nine days later, Tureaud filed suit against the Orleans Parish School Board. On September 5, 1952, Oliver Bush Sr. filed suit against the New Orleans School Board. First, Bush challenged the constitutionality of segregation itself. Should segregation's constitutionality be upheld, the second part of the suit demanded that Orleans Parish's dual system be made truly equal. This was a reference to the mandate in Plessy v Ferguson that separate was constitutional if equal facilities for blacks were provided. The purpose of this was to make the dual system of education so expensive to the state that segregation would collapse under its own weight. If the school system were forced to spend equal amounts of money on the black schools and upgrade them to the level of the white counterparts, it would bankrupt the school system.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 152-154.

<sup>57</sup> Shelby Jackson to A.P. Tureaud, Sr., August 27, 1952, Tureaud Papers, Reel 9, Folder 21, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University [hereafter T-ARC]. This letter is particularly ironic because later the state would claim that it should be allowed to control Orleans Parish schools to prevent desegregation from occurring.

<sup>58</sup> Kim Lacy Rogers, "Humanity and Desire: Civil Rights and the Desegregation of New Orleans 1954-1966" (Master's Thesis, University of Minnesota, 1982), 75.

Tureaud began his quest to desegregate the schools of Louisiana by starting at the graduate level, then by filing the Bush law suits in New Orleans. Shortly thereafter, and while the Brown cases were before the Supreme Court, Tureaud decided that the time had come to attempt to desegregate LSU's undergraduate classes. Tureaud knew that A.P. Tureaud, Jr., his son, would not be admitted to LSU's undergraduate department. However, in a letter dated June 4, 1953, he still wrote to Dr. John Hunter, registrar of LSU, and enclosed his son's application for admission. His son was "interested in the combination course offered at LSU leading to the degree of Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Laws."<sup>59</sup> On July 3, 1953, Tureaud wrote to the dean of Southern's Law School asking if there was a combined curriculum at Southern University similar to the one at LSU.<sup>60</sup> He was clearly laying out the legal strategy that was used in most of his civil rights cases that preceded it. Black institutions of learning, whether elementary schools or law schools, simply were not equal to white institutions; therefore such institutions violated the Fourteenth Amendment when they refused to admit black students. Tureaud did this before his son ever received a reply from LSU. On July 13, 1953, Lenoir informed Tureaud that while Southern did have a combined degree program, it was "unsuccessful in perfecting" the program, and that Southern's program was not comparable to the quality of LSU's.<sup>61</sup>

On August 6, Lenoir told A.P. Tureaud, Sr. that it really made no difference whether or not Southern had a particular program in Arts and Sciences and Law because the court had decided three years earlier that blacks had the right to attend LSU's law

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<sup>59</sup> A.P. Tureaud, Sr. to John A Hunter, June 4, 1953, Tureaud Papers, Reel 9, Folder 22, T-ARC.

<sup>60</sup> A.P. Tureaud, Sr. to A.A. Lenoir, July 3, 1953, Tureaud Papers, Reel 9, Folder 22, T-ARC.

<sup>61</sup> A.A. Lenoir to A.P. Tureaud, Sr., July 13, 1953, Tureaud Papers, Reel 9, Folder 22, T-ARC.

school. It was doubtful that LSU's law school would accept A.P. Tureaud, Jr.,'s credits from Southern's undergraduate program and that Southern's undergraduate program could provide "the selection for courses for a liberal educational background from law as could Louisiana State University." Therefore Southern's undergraduate program could not prepare one for LSU's law school, which legally could not discriminate on the basis of race.<sup>62</sup> In a letter to A.P. Tureaud, Jr., dated August 8, 1953, Tureaud was denied admission "in line with our policy of not admitting Negro students to that area."<sup>63</sup> A.P. Tureaud, Jr.,'s rights were being violated because while he could attend LSU's law school, he could not get proper preparation for law school at Southern. A.P. Tureaud, Sr., filed suit and won, and A.P. Tureaud, Jr., registered for courses at LSU in the middle of September, 1953 and was granted residency in the Stadium Dormitory.<sup>64</sup> The University predictably appealed this decision and won its case. Tureaud did not remain at LSU for long. Tureaud completed his studies at the only Catholic University established for blacks, Xavier University in New Orleans, Louisiana.<sup>65</sup>

There were several simultaneous suits occurring throughout the country that had direct influence on the desegregation of Orleans Parish schools. All of these cases provided precedents for cases that were to follow. The same arguments introduced in the Aubert and LSU suits would be the issues in the Bush cases. However, the issues in the suit were not immediately addressed because the NAACP and the school board's attorney persuaded A.P. Tureaud, Sr., and his colleagues to keep the Orleans Parish Suit from

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<sup>62</sup> A.A. Lenoir to A.P. Tureaud, Sr., August 6, 1953, Tureaud Papers, Reel 9, Folder 22, T-ARC.

<sup>63</sup> John A. Hunter to A.P. Tureaud, Sr., August 8, 1953, Tureaud Papers, Reel 9, Folder 22, T-ARC.

<sup>64</sup> Robert L. Carter to A.P. Tureaud, Sr., September 19, 1953, Tureaud Papers, Reel 9, Folder 23, T-ARC.

<sup>65</sup> Affidavit Dr. John A Hunter, Registrar of LSU, in the United States Fifth Circuit of Appeals, November 16, 1955, Tureaud Papers, Reel 53, Folder 1, T-ARC.

formal consideration until the cases, known as the Segregation Cases, were decided by the Supreme Court. These suits became the Brown decisions. The Court's decision in Brown I overturned Plessy v Ferguson fifty eight years after Plessy was decided. A year later, the Supreme Court later declared that the desegregation in public schools must proceed with "all deliberate speed" because segregation was inherently unequal. The Court gave federal judges the responsibility for determining the appropriate "deliberate" pace of desegregation for the citizens in their jurisdictions.<sup>66</sup>

The public schools in New Orleans were not desegregated until 1960, though the Brown decisions that declared that segregation was illegal were decided in 1954 and 1955. The stroke of the judicial pen was not enough to desegregate schools; legislation aimed at maintaining segregated schools continued after the Supreme Court overturned Plessy.

Tureaud's Bush suits were still pending, but he hoped that further Supreme Court action would not be necessary. The legislature made it clear that the federal courts would have to strike down their mandates one by one. The vagueness of language like "deliberate speed" gave hope that states could prolong desegregation for years. This, of course, was the goal of many citizens who were not in the legislature, and Tureaud was the recipient of an extreme volume of hate mail. One very curious letter was addressed to A.P. Tureaud, Negro. The letter told him that his "fears are well founded." The author then explained that whites would not stand for his attempts to "mongrelize the races."<sup>67</sup> This letter was not atypical of Southerner's responses to the Brown cases.

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<sup>66</sup> Baker, *The Second Battle of New Orleans*, 214.

<sup>67</sup> J.W. Mabry to A.P. Tureaud, Sr., June 1, 1955, Tureaud Papers, Reel 9, Folder 26, T-ARC.



On July 20, 1955, Orleans Parish School Board received petitions requesting that the School Board comply with the federal government. The petition notes that

anything less than positive intention to comply with the law of the highest court in the land would be equivalent to defiance of the law .... The basic fact is-segregation now is legally wrong. In addition to this, and not less important, segregation is morally wrong. It offends, it not actually defiles, basic ethical and religious teachings of the major religious bodies of the Catholic, Protestant and Jewish Faiths .... We respectfully urge the members of the Orleans Parish Board of Education to consider their position of trust carefully and to honor the laws of the United States ....<sup>68</sup>

The reluctance of the Orleans Parish School board to desegregate, plus various unconstitutional legislative acts, kept schools segregated. A class action suit was brought on behalf of black children in New Orleans in the United States District Court, Eastern District, on February 15, 1956. The complaint charged that the children had been denied admittance to white schools in New Orleans, and that this denial of admission violated their rights to attend white schools as stipulated in Brown I. The suit further charged that all law--federal, state, and local--must obey this decision. Three judges declared that the various amendments to Louisiana's constitution aimed at preserving segregation, and the legislative provisions made after Brown I were invalid. District judge J. Skelly Wright further issued a decree in which he ordered that,

Orleans Parish School Board ... and those in concert with them who shall receive notice of this order, be and they are hereby restrained and enjoined from requiring and permitting segregation of the races in any school under their supervision, from and after such time as may be necessary to make arrangements for admission of children to such schools ... with all deliberate speed ....<sup>69</sup>

The state quickly responded to the court's orders with another set of laws and amendments to the Louisiana constitution. In November, 1956 a constitutional

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<sup>68</sup> James Dombrowski to A.P. Tureaud, Sr., July 20, 1955, Tureaud Papers, Reel 9, Folder 26, T-ARC.

<sup>69</sup> Earl Benjamin Bush et al. v Orleans Parish School Board et al. in *Race Relations Law Reporter*, I:1 (February 1956), 306-308; published by Vanderbilt University School of Law; [hereafter *RRLR*].

amendment was passed that barred lawsuits against school boards. This amendment was later declared by Judge Wright to be unconstitutional, and the U.S. Court of Appeals upheld this decision.<sup>70</sup> The school board also attempted to get Judge Wright's injunction dismissed on the grounds that it was not the correct defendant in the matter because of a 1956 statute that transferred the board's control of racial classifications to a state agency. The School Board argued that it had no control over the racial classifications of the schools, so it could not be served an injunction. This motion is ironic because the state board of education previously declared that it had no jurisdiction over the New Orleans Parish School Board. This motion was denied as simply another legal maneuver to circumvent the ruling of the Brown cases.<sup>71</sup> The Louisiana legislature remained eager to maintain, or at least prolong, the segregation of schools in New Orleans. The legislature passed several acts and amendments to the constitution. In 1958, Act No. 256 (House Bill No. 942) granted the governor, Jimmie Davis, the authority to close "any racially mixed school or schools under court order to racially mix its student body."<sup>72</sup> Another statute proclaimed that "no child be compelled to attend any school in which the races are commingled." Act No. 258 (House Bill No. 944) provided educational grants for a child who "is assigned to a public school attended by a child of another race against the wishes of his parent."<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Davison M. Douglas . "Bush v. Orleans Parish School Board and the Desegregation of New Orleans Schools," Accessed 10 March 2008. Available at <http://www.fjc.gov/history/bushvorleans.nsf>

<sup>71</sup> Orleans Parish School Board v Earl Benjamin Bush et al. June 9, 1959, 268F.2d 78, in *RRLR*, IV:1 (Spring 1959), 581-582.

<sup>72</sup> Act No. 256 (House Bill No. 942) of the 1958 regular session of the Louisiana legislature approved July 2, 1958, in *RRLR*, III:1 (February 1958), 778-779.

All of these attempts to deny the children of New Orleans their constitutional right to attend school with whites were rejected by the federal courts. On July 15, 1959, Judges Hutcheson, Rives, and Tuttle ordered that the Orleans Parish School Board present a plan for desegregation by March 1, 1960. This date was later changed to May 16, 1960. This was an important ruling because it replaced the vague language of “deliberate speed” with an actual date in which the School Board had to have a viable desegregation plan on paper.<sup>74</sup>

We know what was occurring in the court system, but what was actually occurring in the public schools? Exactly what was the proof utilized that proved the inadequacy and inequality of black public schools in New Orleans? “A Study of Some Tangible Inequalities in the New Orleans Public Schools” outlined the tangible inequities in the school system. The study provided an in-depth look at the New Orleans public schools and the differences between the black and white schools. It also noted “intangibles,” such as the psychological injuries directly resulting from segregation. The study concluded that segregation led to feelings of black inferiority which affected the motivation of a child to learn-- arguments used to overturn Plessy. However, this study demonstrated that segregated schools were unequal in terms of physical facilities, student-teacher ratios, and length of the school day. The study found that black children attended schools that were overcrowded even though they were in walking distances of white schools that were “half empty.” The study also noted the occurrences of “platooning” and “utilization” in order to make its case for desegregation.

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<sup>73</sup> Act No. 258 (House Bill No. 944) of the 1958 regular session of the Louisiana Legislature approved July 2, 1958, in *RRLR*, III:1 (February 1958), 1062-1063.

<sup>74</sup> Orleans Parish School Board v Earl Benjamin Bush et al. in *RRLR*, IV:1 (Spring 1959), 581-584.

What do the terms “utilization” and “platooning” mean? Utilization simply means how classroom space is being utilized. The New Orleans Parish School Board calculated that the capacity of elementary schools at thirty-five students per classroom. In 1960, more than half of all black elementary schools were being used above capacity, while less than ten percent of white schools were being used above capacity. Almost half of the white schools were being used below seventy percent capacity. Several of those schools were within walking distance of the overcrowded black schools.<sup>75</sup> This fact is important because it was one of Bush’s core arguments--his daughter should not have to walk a mile to get to a bus stop when she passed a perfectly adequate white school on the way to her school.

Platooning describes the occurrence of black children going to school in shifts as a result of overcrowding. The statistics were alarming: 1,687 black children in elementary went to school in shifts; the children either went before noon or after noon. Since white schools were not overcrowded, white children did not go to school in shifts. This was only reduced by increasing class size, thus exacerbating already overcrowded black classrooms. This was clearly separate but not equal.

The study also pointed to the school system’s solution to the lack of space in black schools. Often, one teacher would teach two grades simultaneously in one classroom. These classrooms were referred to as “combination classrooms,” though it clearly prevented effective instruction. There were fifty-three combination classes in thirty-two black elementary schools; none in white elementary schools, clearly unequal. The study also illustrated that black classes were overcrowded and this overcrowding

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<sup>75</sup> “A Study of Some Intangible Inequalities in the New Orleans Public Schools” published by the New Orleans Improvement League, Tureaud Papers, Reel 33, Folder 7, T-ARC.

would only increase in the future. It was time to desegregate the schools and comply with federal law.

On May 16, 1960, the Orleans Parish School Board informed Judge Wright that no desegregation plan was in place because of legislative efforts to halt the desegregation of the schools. Judge Wright then created his own plan, allowing first grade students to attend the school closest to their home, regardless of whether the school was a white or a black school effective September, 1960. The School Board requested a stay. The Supreme Court was not in session at the time, but Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black denied the request. The Louisiana legislature, unsurprisingly, did not relinquish the fight to maintain the segregation of Orleans Parish Schools. The legislature granted the governor authority to take over the Orleans Parish School system; the legislature also gave itself the right to decide which children could attend which school. The legislature established a commission to consider invoking “interposition.” This doctrine “...of interposition held that a state had the authority to block or ‘nullify’ an action of the federal government if the state concluded that the federal government (including a federal judge) had acted in an unconstitutional manner.”<sup>76</sup>

On July 29, 1960, in the State of Louisiana v Orleans Parish School Board et al., segregationists found an ally in Judge Oliver P. Carriere, who agreed that Act 496, transferring the power of classifying and reclassifying public school facilities to the state legislature, was constitutional. Segregationists ironically used interposition to argue that the federal government had too much power over state affairs. They then argued for greater state control over local affairs. Carriere claimed that the United States

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<sup>76</sup> Davison M. Douglas . “Bush v. Orleans Parish School Board and the Desegregation of New Orleans Schools.” Available at <http://www.fjc.gov/history/bushvorleans.nsf>.

Constitution did not require integration. It simply stipulated that discrimination was illegal. This is an important distinction because it is very reminiscent of arguments used in Plessy. Carriere claimed that the New Orleans School Board had the right to not open schools.<sup>77</sup>

The federal courts disagreed that Act 496 was constitutional, noting the Act violated the Brown cases by giving the legislature the right to decide whether or not a public school would be segregated. The court declared that this right belonged to no one. The constitutional rights of New Orleans' children could not be violated by the state, the legislature, or any judicial officer. The federal court was not swayed by the arguments presented that gave the governor the right to close the schools. It was ordered that the desegregation plan's original date of May 16, 1960, be extended to Monday, November 14, 1960.<sup>78</sup>

On November 10, the court ordered that the governor, the attorney general, the superintendent of public education, the Orleans Parish School Board and its members, including ardent segregationist Emile A. Wagner, the adjutant general of the state, the treasurer of the state, and the comptroller of the state be restrained from enacting the statutes that the court had previously declared illegal. Persons violating the court's orders would be fined one thousand dollars.<sup>79</sup> In one last effort to maintain the segregation of

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<sup>77</sup> State Court Injunction in *RRLR*, V:1 (Spring 1960), 659-660.

<sup>78</sup> Benjamin Bush v Orleans Parish School board, Harry K Williams v Jimmie Davis, governor in *RRLR*, V:1 (Spring 1960), 666-668.

<sup>79</sup> Temporary Restraining Order, Civil Action No. 3630, United States District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana, November 10, 1960, Reel 36, Folder 18, T-ARC.

New Orleans Parish School Board, if only for one day, the state superintendent of education declared a state holiday on November 14, 1960.<sup>80</sup>

The court prohibited the state superintendent of education, Shelby Jackson, or anyone else, from taking any other action to circumvent the court's orders of desegregation. The legislature completed all these delaying tactics around 9 p.m. The court took further action to ensure that its orders were no longer interfered with, and forty five minutes after the state holiday was declared, Judge Wright issued a new order, ordering the state legislature to do nothing that interfered with the operation of the schools in New Orleans by the Orleans Parish School Board, which was under the desegregation order, or else find themselves in contempt.<sup>81</sup>

The legal maneuvering was over. On November 14, 1960, four black children were escorted to two elementary schools by U.S. federal marshals. The New Orleans Parish schools were integrated sixty-one years after Plessy v Ferguson, eight years after the first Bush suit, and almost six years after the United States Supreme Court declared that segregation in education was unconstitutional. New Orleans schools were technically integrated. The three black children who integrated McDonough 19 were the only children in the school for the first year, and Ruby Bridges, the only black child to integrate Frantz elementary, was kept in virtual isolation. Bridges had her own teacher and ate lunch alone; however the schools had technically been integrated.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Restraining Order Against Holiday rendered on November 13, 1960 in *RRLR*, V:1 (Spring 1960), 1004-1005.

<sup>81</sup> Davison M. Douglas. "Bush v. Orleans Parish School Board and the Desegregation of New Orleans Schools." [www.fjc.gov/history/bushvorleans.nsf](http://www.fjc.gov/history/bushvorleans.nsf).

<sup>82</sup> Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 248.

New Orleans faced sudden disaster. The children and their families were harassed daily and their lives constantly threatened. The elementary schools were boycotted, and white parents who dared to send their children to schools that black children attended were threatened daily.<sup>83</sup> Despite the volatile situation, opinions on the desegregation of New Orleans schools were divided. New Orleans station WDSU, offered an editorial broadcast over WDSU-TV and WDSU radio on August 18, 1960. The editorial noted the legal maneuvering that was occurring in the legislature, the courts, and in the governor's mansion. The station declared that the legal maneuvering was a good thing because it would not be long before the citizens of Louisiana learned whether or not segregation could be maintained, or whether or not they will have to choose between the closure of the schools or desegregation. The wording of the editorial implies the station's position.<sup>84</sup> The station clarified its position in a later broadcast--New Orleanians were against the desegregation of its public schools. The station claimed that it wanted schools to remain open but hoped that eventually the School Board would be able to place carefully-screened students.<sup>85</sup> The city's most prominent television station made its opinions known.

What was the opinion and influence of the religion that claimed the most followers in New Orleans--Catholicism? The Catholic Church is often referred to as a single entity, because it is so hierarchical, but the most effective way to examine the Church's opinion and influence on this whole process is to separate the Church into two groups, the clergy and the laity.

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 249

<sup>84</sup> WDSU Editorial, The Final Test on Integration, August 18, 1960, Reel 36, Folder 1, T-ARC.

<sup>85</sup> WDSU Editorial, Improved Changes for Public Schools, August 29, 1960, Reel 36, Folder 1, T-ARC.



Joseph Rummel became the Archbishop of New Orleans in 1935. The Supreme Court decided Brown I in 1954, and Rummel claimed that the ruling of the Court was in accordance with the principals and teachings of the Church but that he was not personally ready to desegregate parochial schools.<sup>86</sup> Public school desegregation should commence, he stated, but parochial schools were not ready to be desegregated. The archbishop felt that both the public schools and the parochial schools had a moral obligation to denounce segregation, but he opposed the immediate integration of parochial schools. Throughout his tenure as archbishop there was a sharp contrast between word and deed. On February 15, 1956, Rummel addressed a letter to the clergy, religious and laity in the archdiocese of New Orleans. He requested that his letter be read at all Masses on Sunday, February 19. He hoped that it would serve as a guide not only for the laity but also for the clergy of the Archdiocese. The Supreme Court's opinion was now the law of the land, but clergy wanted to know what the Catholic Church's position on segregation and the morality of it from the Catholic view point was, so they looked to their leader. Rummel told his followers that:

Racial segregation as such is morally wrong and sinful because it is a denial of the unity and solidarity of the human race as conceived by God in the creation of man in Adam and Eve .... Throughout the pages of the Old Testament and the New there is constant recurrence of this truth, that all mankind had in Adam and Eve one common father and mother and one common destiny ....<sup>87</sup>

The archbishop, anticipating the dissent by Southerners towards the Brown decisions, went on to explain why he had the authority to make such an edict:

In 1954 Pope Pius XII directed attention to the fact that Christ gave to all the Apostles the mandate to 'make disciples of all nations, baptizing them .... From this the Holy

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<sup>86</sup> Kight, "How About September?," 9.

<sup>87</sup> Archbishop Joseph Rummel to the clergy, religious and laity Archdiocese of New Orleans, February 18, 1956, The Catholic Council on Race Relations Collection [hereafter CCHR], Box 1, Folder 10, T-ARC.

Father concluded that Bishops too share the teaching authority of the Pope, the Successor of St. Peter, that all men, all truth, dogmatic, moral and social, fall within the purview of that teaching authority .... The Holy Father in the same document indicates that Christ sent his Apostles, as He had been sent by the Father, to teach all nations everything they had heard from Him....The Apostles are, therefore, by divine right the true doctors and teachers in the Church. In the same allocution Pope Pius XII also states that under the guidance of the Holy Father and the Bishops religious teachings may be worked out by capable priests, who as specialists apply the principles of Canon Law and Moral Theology to such questions.<sup>88</sup>

This was an eloquent argument that resonated with followers of such a hierarchical religion. The archbishop carefully laid out the position of the Catholic Church on the issue of segregation. According to Church doctrine it was clearly a violation of God's law. However, he did more than lay out Church doctrine in his letter; he asserted his ability to make such a judgment as a "disciple" to the Pope, who is the Vicar of Christ. By connecting himself to the Pope, who was directly connected to Christ, Rummel connected himself to Christ. He, indirectly, told his parishioners not to question his authority, the word of Christ. The Church's position on the issue was now clear. The archbishop had the support of his superiors, including, one might argue, Christ. Rummel's assertion that segregation was sinful transformed a legal issue into a moral one, and as a moral leader he had the responsibility to speak out on this issue.

What were the responses by other clergymen to Rummel's clear assertion that segregation was wrong and contrary to Church doctrine? There was a clear divide in the Church, extending into the upper echelons of parish leadership. Some clergy members were strong advocates of integration. Joseph Henry Fichter, a priest, was a professor of sociology at Loyola University during the desegregation of the public schools. He was an ardent supporter, and an outspoken one, for the integration of educational facilities, at all levels. The Rev. Louis J. Twomey, a priest and a sociologist on Loyola's staff, also

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

strongly believed in desegregation. Other priests were ardent racists and rejected all attempts by the Church at desegregation.

The archbishop's position could not directly influence the integration of public schools, but his position, as the leader of New Orleans Catholics, drew much attention to the issue, and provoked many political figures who were Catholic to speak out on the issue of public school and parochial school integration as if they were one entity.<sup>89</sup> Although the archbishop had no direct control over the integration of the public schools, he did have influence over the Catholics leading the fight for the schools to remain segregated. He spoke out against the legislature's many illegal actions taken to ensure that public schools would remain segregated. However, the archbishop missed an opportunity to, if not desegregate the parochial schools first, give definitive moral leadership to his clergy and laity. He opposed the idea of schools being closed, and in another pastoral letter urged prayer and a peaceful solution to the conflict. He proclaimed it to be a sin for children to be deprived of an education, particularly detrimental to black children, and urged Catholics to pray that the public schools would remain open. He acknowledged that he had no direct involvement in the public schools, but felt it his duty to speak out on the matter. He proclaimed that one day parochial schools would be desegregated but that the issue would not receive consideration until it was practical. It is unclear why he felt that parochial school integration was impractical but urged public schools to remain open. Furthermore, he acknowledged his penchant for writing letters to his members by proclaiming that he was committed to parochial school

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<sup>89</sup> John Wicklein, "Catholic Archbishop Backs New Orleans Integration," New York Times, July 8, 1959, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com).

integration and had said so many times in previous letters.<sup>90</sup> It seems that the archbishop believed in integration but was unwilling to do anything more than offer his opinions.

Not all priests were integrationists. Joseph Pyzikiewicz was an ardent racist. Pyzikiewicz readily referred to “niggers.” He resented Father Fichter’s liberal ideas on race. Pyzikiewicz said that Fichter was preaching “race sermons” and did not want them preached in “his” church. Fichter soon discovered that the subject of race was “so irritating to Father Joseph that he could not have an objective intelligent conversation about it.”<sup>91</sup> This was a racist priest who was freely vocalized his passionate beliefs, beliefs shared by other priests not so vocal. Pyzikiewicz and Fichter were hardly representative of the priests in New Orleans. Some were zealous segregationists, and some were ardent integrationists. However, most priests were quiet on race and race relations. Conversely, Fichter and Pyzikiewicz were very representative of the laity they served.

Lay Catholics played a much clearer and defined role in the integration, or the postponement of the integration, of public schools. In 1956, the Association of Catholic Laymen (ACL) was formed to combat integration. The group strongly disagreed with Rummel’s pastoral letter that deemed segregation immoral and sinful. The group appealed on August 8, 1957, directly to Pope Pius XII to overrule Rummel’s edict on segregation, and his order that the group disband. The Vatican, unappreciative of this blatant challenge of Church authority, issued a stern rebuke, which did little to silence the

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<sup>90</sup> “Keep City Schools Open Is Appeal of Archbishop,” *Times-Picayune*, August 21, 1960, copy in Fichter Papers, Series III, Box 52, Folder 10, Loyola University Special Collections, Loyola University [hereafter LUSC].

<sup>91</sup> Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 173.

leader of the group or his supporters.<sup>92</sup> The pope clearly articulated the Church's position on segregation and felt that this appeal challenged not only local authority, but the authority of the Vatican as well.

One of the Catholic laymen most eager to prevent school desegregation was school board member Emile A. Wagner. He was specifically named in Judge Wright's various injunctions because of his zealous commitment to the maintenance of separate schools. This specific reference to Wagner is a testament to the power that he held on the school board. While other school board members were simply referred to as such, Wagner was named specifically in Judge Wright's orders. Wagner was not only a force for segregation in the Catholic Church but in public schools as well. He did not base his position on actual church doctrine but on his personal opinions of blacks, whom he considered inferior. Wagner claimed that he wanted the public and the parochial schools segregated to keep them in proper balance. He argued that New Orleans, which had the highest percentage of children enrolled in parochial schools, should be kept segregated because if the parochial schools integrated while the public schools remained segregated, he insisted, many Catholic parents would shift their children to public schools. The reverse would occur if the public schools integrated and the private did not.<sup>93</sup>

Another Catholic lay person who loudly proclaimed her disgust with the archbishop's integration moral support for integration was B.J. Galliot, one of the most vocal New Orleanians on the issue of the desegregation of the public schools. She was

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<sup>92</sup> Crain, Robert L., and Morton Inger, *School Desegregation in New Orleans: A Comparative Study of the Failure of Social Control*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1966), 31.

<sup>93</sup> John Wicklein, "Catholic Archbishop Backs New Orleans Integration," New York Times, July 8, 1959, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com).

the founder of Save Our Schools (SOS); she rebuked Rummel for his pastoral letter, read on August 21, 1960, reiterating the Church's position, and appealing to Catholics to comply with the ruling to integrate the public schools. She replied in the Times Picayune, quoting biblical verses she claimed supported segregation.<sup>94</sup> Galliot was undeterred by the archbishop's admonition. She was extremely vocal in the fight to maintain segregation in the parochial schools and public schools. She sent a cardinal who appeared on the front page of the Louisiana Weekly, giving the NAACP a check for a lifetime membership, a letter that compared him to Judas.<sup>95</sup> She also sent President Kennedy, a fellow Catholic, a telegraph instructing him to reject integration, because if he did not, it would "cancel separation of church and states." She declared that, "We as Catholics know we should uphold segregation."<sup>96</sup>

Unquestionably, the Catholic who had the most influence in St. Bernard Parish, a neighboring parish of Orleans and one of the most powerful men in New Orleans and Louisiana, was "the judge." Leander Perez, not a member of the Louisiana legislature, was often seen patrolling the halls of the capitol in Baton Rouge, intimidating and threatening anyone who dared defy his wishes. He also had an office in the capitol. Perez was born in Plaquemine Parish, a neighboring parish, and attended Tulane Law School in New Orleans. By the age of twenty-seven he was a district judge, and later became a district attorney for Plaquemine and St. Bernard parishes.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> B.J. Galliot, "Reply to Archbishop Rummel, Proof that the Bible Demands Segregation," Times Picayune, August 29, 1960, copy in CCHR, Box 1, Folder 11, T-ARC.

<sup>95</sup> B. J. Galliot, "Open Letter to Your Eminence Cardinal R. Cushing," December 4, 1961, CCHR, Box 1, Folder 7, T-ARC.

<sup>96</sup> B. J. Galliot, Telegraph to President John F. Kennedy, December 18, 1961, copy in CCHR, Box 1, Folder 7, T-ARC.

Perez was a virulent racist who was determined to keep both public schools and parochial schools segregated. His influence in the legislature and in New Orleans helped maintain the segregation of the schools. The Catholic Church did little to silence him. One of the ways that racists in the Church like Perez and Galliot attempted to keep schools segregated was by linking the Civil Rights movement to Communism. Perez published a pamphlet, “The Unconstitutionality of the Fourteenth Amendment, and the Evils Resulting from Subversive use of its ‘Equal Protection’ Clause.” He called it a “treatise,” and he argued that the Fourteenth Amendment and the “equal protection” clause in the Fourteenth Amendment violated white rights because they “threaten basic personal freedom, private property rights and encroach upon and destroy more and more the constitution right of self-government by the people on state and local levels.”<sup>98</sup> The argument that the federal government was encroaching on state’s rights was not a new one, nor a particularly effective argument. Perez argued that the states had the right to govern themselves, but he was incensed that the federal government threatened to cut off federal funding from people who refused to comply with federal law. This was reverse discrimination, he claimed, because white children were being forced out of public schools and being denied educational opportunities.<sup>99</sup>

This “treatise” arguing that the Fourteenth Amendment was unconstitutional clearly has racial undertones, but does not fully indicate Perez’s antipathy towards blacks. He also gave a speech, “The Challenge to the South and How it Must be Met.” Here his

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<sup>97</sup> “Racist Leader.” *Time* 12 December 1960, www.time.com. Perez resigned as the district attorney in Plaquemine and St. Bernard parish to give the position to his son.

<sup>98</sup> Leander H. Perez, *The Unconstitutionality of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment, and the Evils Resulting from Subversive use of its “Equal Protection” Clause*. Sendker Printing, 1965, n.p., The Lower Mississippi Valley Collection, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2.

positions are clearer. He argued that the states were losing the right to enforce the law in their own states. He alluded to the Little Rock Nine who desegregated Central High School in Arkansas in 1957 and to the fact that federal guards were ordered by the president to escort the students to high school. These actions proved the federal government was taking over the control of law enforcement in the states. Perez talked about “Negro degenerates who rape white women.”<sup>100</sup> He insisted that the white man’s protection against the black man was the shot gun. Whites needed their guns and solidarity, according to Perez. He argued that desegregation caused whites to “turn over” public schools to blacks.<sup>101</sup> While it is clear that Perez’s sentiments were not shared by all New Orleans Catholics, his voice was taken as representative of New Orleans Catholics by the national media.

The Church’s members fought in the legislature, in the streets, and in the press to maintain the desegregation of public schools. The archbishop issued feeble statements indicating his intent to desegregate the parochial schools. After his pastoral letter condemning segregation as sinful was read in every Catholic Church in New Orleans, it appeared that the parochial schools would desegregate. The formation of the ACL prevented this. When it became obvious that, if parochial schools integrated, Catholic parents would withdraw their children from parochial schools, Rummel postponed desegregation yet again, this time until 1957. The desegregation of Catholic schools was then delayed until 1962. Delay suggests that the racist lay persons within the Church

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<sup>100</sup> Leander H. Perez, “The Challenge to the South and How it Must be Met,” speech delivered at Edgewater Gulf Hotel, Biloxi, MS, July 21, 1960, privately published, copy in The Lower Mississippi Valley Collection, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8.



were driving Church policy. They defied their pusillanimous leader, and took advantage of his fear of being first.<sup>102</sup>

The Church did little to silence virulent racists within its ranks. Not all Catholics felt the way that Wagner, Perez, and Galliot did. However, these three Catholics had great success in organizing other Catholics and postponing the desegregation of the public schools. They had power at all levels--state, parish, and local. While Archbishop Rummel made his personal feelings clear, he did little to aid in the cause of desegregation of the public schools, and nothing to silence Catholics who were hindering the process of desegregation. Perhaps the greatest moral lapse was the failure of the parochial schools to desegregate first, a lapse not lost on some lay Catholics. In a letter published in the Louisiana Weekly, a Catholic mother described herself as devout, but was appalled at the archbishop's failure to act. She reminded him of his pastoral letter that declared segregation morally wrong.<sup>103</sup>

Peaceful desegregation of the parochial schools would have led to more peaceful desegregation of the public schools. Catholics were southern, but they were also very much loyal to their Church; when their Church issued direct edicts, made deliberate decisions, and provided decisive leadership, they generally obeyed. The fact that the eventual desegregation, not the process, of parochial schools was relatively peaceful is evidence that Catholic New Orleanians generally followed their church leaders. The failure of the archbishop to desegregate the parochial schools and his failure to silence Catholics hindered that process. Archbishop Rummel had no legal obligation to desegregate parochial schools but certainly, according to his own edicts about the

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<sup>102</sup> "Postponement." Time August 20, 1956, [www.time.com](http://www.time.com).

<sup>103</sup> "Catholic Position on School Integration Appalls Mother," The Louisiana Weekly, August 12, 1961.

immorality of segregation, had an obligation to put an end to a practice that he deemed immoral and sinful. The Church laymen answered to the archbishop, who answered directly to the Pope, who was a successor to St. Peter. Yet it was the Church that really answered to racist Southerners within its ranks and priests who confidentially expressed racist sentiments. Catholics who shouted louder delayed the desegregation of public schools and postponed the desegregation of parochial schools. Winston Churchill famously said that nobody ever won a war with his mouth. In New Orleans, segregationists won a tactical victory with their vocal opposition to segregation.

## CHAPTER III

### THE DESEGREGATION OF ROMAN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS IN NEW ORLEANS

On September 4, 1962, Catholic schools in New Orleans were finally desegregated. As in the case with the desegregation of public schools, an intense battle ensued to prevent black and white children from attending school together. This battle was not only waged in the courtrooms, but also among the Church members. Though Brown had no legal bearing on the desegregation of parochial schools, both integrationists and segregationists within the Church realized that this decision eventually would have influence on the decision to desegregate parochial schools.

Segregationists within the Church loathed their archbishop's statements about the immorality of segregation. They sprang into action when Brown declared segregation legally wrong. Catholic leaders, at a rally held at Pelican Stadium by the Citizens' Council of New Orleans, declared the South had fought once before for "the causes and principles they thought were right," adding that "their valiant descendants are ready ... to battle side by side for those same sacred rights which are today threatened with destruction through ruthless decisions."<sup>104</sup> Fighting for what one's forefathers wanted was not an idea exclusive to the racists within the Citizens' Council. Livid parishioners, believing that the Church would desegregate, wrote letters to the priests that they saw provoking the integrationist movement within the Church. Catholics proclaimed that the Church was controlled by the Communist party. It was white people who supported the Church, they insisted, and it was white people to whom the Church must remain loyal.

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<sup>104</sup> "South Ready to Fight Again For Beliefs, N.O. Rally Told," New Orleans States, date unknown, Fichter Papers, Series III C, Box 52, Folder 11, LUSC.

Blacks were unclean, some Catholics claimed; they professed loyalty only to an America built by white people for white people.<sup>105</sup>

Catholic groups not as vocal as the Citizens' Council also made their opinions known. Members of the "Dads' Club of the Holy Name of Jesus School" proclaimed, in a resolution sent to Archbishop Rummel, their opposition to the integration of Catholic schools and petitioned him to defer integration for "an indefinite period." Their arguments were unoriginal; they claimed that there were powerful differences in the morality, culture, intelligence, and health of the two races and that integration would be detrimental to both. They insisted that more frightening than the integration of the races was the prospect of miscegenation.<sup>106</sup>

They were responding to the Brown decisions, but the fact that the rally was held two years later is germane to Catholic desegregation. 1956 was the year that the archbishop made his sweeping indictment of segregation in his pastoral letter. Catholic segregationists were reacting to attempts to desegregate the public schools and statements condemning racism made by Rummel. Integrationists in the Church reacted to the Brown decisions by noting the inevitability of Catholic school integration. Rev. Msgr. Henri Bezou, Superintendent of Schools for the Archdiocese of New Orleans, declared, in an address delivered at Loyola University, that forced segregation was morally wrong and sinful. He predicted that parochial schools would become integrated in God's time. He argued that voluntary segregation of the schools would occur. There would be no rush of black children to formerly all-white schools because blacks, for various reasons, would

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<sup>105</sup> L.E.S. to Father Fichter, March 3, 1955, Fichter Papers, Series III, Box 52, Folder 15, LUSC.

<sup>106</sup> "Dad's Club Hits at Integration." The Times Picayune, October 28, 1959, Fichter Papers, Series IIIc, Box 52, Folder 11, LUSC.

not want to go to school with white children (this was also an argument also used by segregationists).<sup>107</sup> Whites inside and outside the Church were out of touch with the blacks in New Orleans. It was ridiculous to claim that blacks did not want the opportunity to be afforded the best-possible education in New Orleans--the same education that white children received.

Integrationists, in the minority, also reacted to the Brown decisions. The race relations branch of the Catholic Committee of the South, an organization that claimed to operate in eleven states, passed a resolution urging unity between blacks and whites, and urged the integration of the parochial schools in New Orleans. Committee members acknowledged the complexity of the issue, but felt it feasible, if not just now, then certainly in the future.<sup>108</sup>

It is clear what Archbishop Rummel's personal views about segregation were; he was firmly against the segregation of the races, though unwilling to move from pious words to actual deeds. He adopted a policy of appeasement as he attempted to calm anxious Catholics, fearful that Brown meant the destruction of parochial schools. The archbishop assured nervous parishioners that the New Orleans parochial schools would continue to be segregated during 1954. While Rummel decried the efforts by the legislature to keep public schools segregated, he argued publicly that the reason that parochial schools must remain segregated, for the time being, was because of

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<sup>107</sup> Henri Bezou, "Desegregation and the Catholic School System," speech delivered at Loyola University, New Orleans, Louisiana, September 23, 1955, privately printed, copy in Fichter Papers, Series III, Box 44, Folder 21, LUSC.

<sup>108</sup> "Call for Integration in Parochial Schools." States Item, Fichter Papers, Series III, Box 45, Folder 3, LUSC.

overcrowding. The archbishop assured parishioners that reports that schools would be integrated in September 1954 were incorrect, terming such statements “unfortunate.”<sup>109</sup>

On February 18, 1956, the archbishop made clear the Church’s position on segregation. He declared racial segregation to be a sin. The Brown decisions and the archbishop’s words angered parishioners; angry Catholic segregationists reacted swiftly. On February 20, 1956, Catholic lawmakers, despite the archbishop’s words, renewed efforts to block legally parochial school integration.<sup>110</sup> The archbishop, bullied by members of his Church, promised in a pastoral letter, July 31, 1956, that integration of the parochial schools would not begin that year. He insisted that his edicts on segregation still held true, though “certain conditions and circumstances” made desegregation earlier than September 1957, impossible.<sup>111</sup> The division in the Church became more apparent with each proclamation and pastoral letter issued by the archbishop. Integrationists within the church became uneasy over the archbishop’s delays and empty words; segregationists began to concentrate both on preventing the integration of New Orleans’ public schools, and persuading Catholics that their schools must never be integrated, using Rummel’s inaction to bolster their arguments that integration was unnecessary. Each side supported action necessary to accomplish its particular goals. The warring factions in the Church were clearly influenced by federal law and by what was occurring or not occurring in the public school system.

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<sup>109</sup> “Prelate Denies School Change,” The Times Picayune, July 9, 1954, Fichter Papers, Series IIIc, Box 52, Folder 11, LUSC.

<sup>110</sup> “Dixie Catholic Group Spurns Church Plea for Integration,” New Orleans States, February 20, 1956, Fichter Papers, Series III, Box 45, Folder 2, LUSC.

<sup>111</sup> “Integration in Schools Is Postponed,” Catholic Action of the South, August 12, 1956, Fichter Papers, Series III, Box 52, Folder 10, LUSC.

Father Joseph H. Fichter, a priest who worked at Loyola University, saw the Supreme Court's 1954 decision as a chance for the Church to assert its moral authority by desegregating its schools first. Fichter was a priest with an extremely diverse background-- a background that gave him an insight into the situation in New Orleans that few had. Although Fichter was not born in the south, he developed an intense passion to see southern educational institutions desegregated. Fichter was born in Union City, New Jersey in 1908. When he was twenty two years old he became a Jesuit and received his B.A. and M.A. from St. Louis University. Fichter received a doctorate in sociology from Harvard University in 1947, and went on to teach at Loyola University for over forty four years.<sup>112</sup> Fichter's academic background had a profound impact on the approaches that he decided to take to achieve the desegregation of schools in New Orleans. He felt that this needed to be done with a combination of religious devotion plus research-based activism to convince fellow Catholics that desegregation was a moral obligation. He proposed a plan of instruction for New Orleans Catholics, hoping that scientific information would undermine myths about blacks and integration, long part of Southern beliefs. He organized a series of eight lectures to repudiate these racist values. These lectures were relevant, because they directly attacked the most commonly held beliefs among not just racist southerners, but amongst racist Catholic southerners. The lectures also made use of forty-two sympathetic panelists.

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<sup>112</sup> Ruth A. Wallace, "Joseph H. Fichter: Setting the Record Straight on His Legacies to Sociology and Social Justice," *Sociology of Religion*, 55:2, (Summer, 1994), 207-208. Fichter published thirty books and two hundred articles. He also held the Chauncey Stillman Chair of Catholic Studies at Harvard University. Fichter was a staunch advocate for the desegregation of schools at all levels and helped to desegregate Loyola University. Father Fichter was also a pioneering feminist, supporting the passage of the ERA. He supported the idea of women being allowed to enter the priesthood. Fichter died on February 23, 1994.

Father Fichter was a true believer when it came to integration. He cited expert testimony to counter the claim that that integration could not work. Father James Hoflich, superintendent of Catholic elementary schools in the St. Louis archdiocese, described how St. Louis' Cardinal Ritter instituted desegregation even before the St. Louis public school system desegregated its schools. Father Fichter disputed claims that black children would spread social diseases throughout the school system. A nationally-known expert, Dr. S. Ross Taggart, Chief of the Venereal Disease Division, U.S Department of Health, addressed fears of miscegenation and health problems allegedly made possible by the presence of black children among whites in school. Fichter also disputed claims that blacks did not want to attend white schools, and would only do so by force. A long-held argument of racist white Southerners was that blacks were happily segregated, and that they opposed forced integration as much as whites did. A fourth allegation, that black children were inferior and would "lower the intellectual standards" of all children in Catholic schools, was addressed by Benjamin Pasamanic, Professor of Psychiatry at Ohio State University. He summarized his extensive research concerning racial differences as to intelligence. A fifth speaker addressed claims that the Church was outside the realm of federal law and that Brown had nothing to do with parochial schools. William Hepburn, Dean of the Lamar School of Law, Emory University, addressed this matter, pointing out that private schools did indeed receive some state funding and that the legislature threatened to punish parochial schools that planned to desegregate, proving that church and state were indeed linked. The sixth lecturer dealt with racist Catholic claims that God himself was a segregationist. Archbishop Rummel, feeling a bit anxious about this subject, attempted to postpone this lecture, but it took place on March 25, 1956, as



scheduled. The seventh lecturer addressed the allegation that the admission of black children into schools with white children would raise the delinquency rates among white children. Vanderbilt Sociologist Albert Reiss presented research that countered these claims. The eighth lecturer addressed the claim that Rummel's integrationist musings were freshly-minted. Segregationists felt that they were under no moral obligation to obey new ideas. Segregation had long been practiced in the Catholic Church; why should the policy be altered? A black priest, Father Clarence Howard, from St. Augustine Seminary spoke about this matter. All of these panelists were experts, and all forty two panelists were familiar in Church circles. Thirty were Catholics, providing credibility by directly addressing issues important to the Church. On the other hand, all were from outside of New Orleans, allowing opponents to label them outside agitators.

The eight lectures were summarized in a booklet, *Handbook on Catholic School Integration*. These lectures noted the few Catholic academics that supported integration, and also the many Catholic academics and priests who opposed integration. No pastors or principals of elementary schools in white parishes were willing to have the forums on their premises, and few priests or nuns attended these forums. The Citizens' Council opposed these lectures and aimed their attacks at Archbishop Rummel, who had nothing to do with Fichter's campaign. Leander Perez was predictably outraged by these lectures, urging Catholics to protest by stopping contributions.

Most of the officers of the Citizens' Council were Catholic. These members saw Fichter's educational campaign as an affront to both segregated parochial schools and public schools. Catholic parents' clubs began to vote against the desegregation of their schools. The Citizens' Council requested that J. Edgar Hoover investigate Fichter as a

Communist and a leader of a “secret organization.” Catholic integrationists were also threatened by Act 15, passed by the Louisiana legislature, requiring that a graduate who wanted to attend a state college or university must have a statement of good moral character signed by a local school official. Fichter’s speakers were unsuccessful in making Rummel desegregate parochial schools before public ones; the lectures highlighted racism present in the Church. Lay groups within the archdiocese refused to help the efforts of those who organized the lectures; not only did they refuse to help; they refused even to acknowledge validity of the archbishop’s assertion that segregation was wrong. The archbishop appeared at these lectures, but did not participate in the campaign for integration, intimidated by church racists. 1957, the year that he said that the integration of parochial schools could begin, came and went. The archbishop’s inaction certainly contributed to the chaos and protest that ensued when public schools were eventually desegregated. Racists within the Catholic Church, who succeeded in intimidating the archbishop and keeping parochial schools from integrating in 1956, felt that if they could succeed in the Catholic Church, they could succeed in keeping the public schools from integrating in 1960--thus leading to the “crisis” of the public school system four years later.<sup>113</sup> If racists could shape policy in the Catholic Church, they could certainly do so in the public schools.

1959 was the next year that integrating parochial schools was considered by the archbishop. Racist factions within the Church worked hard to ensure that both the public and parochial schools within New Orleans remained segregated. Segregationists within the Church linked the integrationists within the Church to the Communist Party, hardly a

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<sup>113</sup> Joseph H. Fichter, *One-Man Research: Reminiscences of a Catholic Sociologist*, (New York: John Wiley and Sons), 1973, 82-110, copy in LUSC.

new charge, but one that began to appear more frequently. A group calling itself “A Committee for Catholic Truth” sent out letters to members of the Church outlining why the parochial schools should never be integrated. In an April 1958 letter, they insisted that a “Communist cancer” was taking over the Church. Many Catholics, they claimed, were being forced into integrated situations in which they were uncomfortable. They described an integrated talent show held at Jesuit High School. White Catholics left, demanding their money back. They went on to claim that,

It is an established fact that the Communists created and are continuing the integration movement. The integration movement, then, is purely and simply a Communist movement. The Communists, dedicated to the overthrow of America, have infiltrated the Churches through an ingenious propaganda movement of mass acceptance.<sup>114</sup>

The Church had no rebuttal to these charges.

Segregationists within the Church took the Church’s silence for victory; the archbishop gave them no reason to think otherwise. School board member Emile Wagner, a Catholic segregationist, proclaimed that since the archbishop began weakening his pronouncements about racial discrimination the threat of Catholic school integration had subsided. The segregationists claimed that the Church was right to denounce racial discrimination but that the races could be separate and blacks still enjoy equal rights. In response to this proclamation by Wagner the archbishop did what he had been doing for the past decade; he made a statement. The Archdiocese reiterated its belief that segregation was morally wrong and that the integration of New Orleans’ parochial schools would eventually happen. Instead of the leader of the Catholic Church in New Orleans being proactive, he was forced into a reactive role, constantly rebutting the racist

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<sup>114</sup> A Committee For Catholic Truth to members of the Catholic Church, April, 1958, Fichter Papers, Series III, Box 53, Folder 2, LUSC.

propaganda of his Church members. The Church succumbed to pressure from within, postponing a date for integration, though Rummel did say that segregation within the parochial schools would indeed come to an end and that that date, “will not be later than when the public schools are integrated.”<sup>115</sup>

As segregationists within the Church concentrated on keeping public schools segregated, Church leadership was quiet about integration. In 1961 an extremely influential and relevant organization was formed, The Catholic Council on Human Relations. All but one member resided in Orleans Parish. The group favored peaceful race relations in New Orleans. The articles of incorporation, dated March 23, 1961, did not explicitly state that the organization was attempting to foster integration of parochial schools, but this group would become visible in the fight to desegregate the parochial schools.<sup>116</sup>

As public school desegregation came and went, Rummel became increasingly silent, only responding to the segregationists within his Church-- the clear majority. After the desegregation of the public schools, the Church's inner division became more evident as people sensed the inevitability of parochial school desegregation. Catholic priests identified three basic areas of concern: the opinions of Catholic parents, the general opinion of Catholic laypersons, and the priesthood.

The first group studied was the Catholic parents. Priests estimated that twenty to twenty-five percent of Catholic parents were “avid segregationists” who would never voluntarily allow their children to attend integrated schools. Fifty to sixty percent of

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<sup>115</sup>John Wicklein “Catholic Archbishop Backs New Orleans Integration,” New York Times, July 8, 1959, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com).

<sup>116</sup>The Articles of Incorporation, The Catholic Council on Human Relations: Parish of Orleans of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, CCHR, Box 3, Folder 3, T-ARC.

Catholic parents preferred segregated schools and were segregationists, but were not willing to rebel against Church statements about the immorality of segregation; these parents were prepared to remove their children from integrated schools. Another twenty to twenty-five percent parents were willing to accept desegregation, should that be what the leadership decided. Some were integrationists, but some were Catholics willing to abide by Catholic principles, as determined by Church leaders. These studies show that almost seventy-five percent of Catholic parents whose children attended Catholic schools would not be willing to rebel against the Church. Had the archbishop decided to integrate first, most Catholics would have accepted this integration; the Church educated fifty percent of New Orleans children.

The second group studied was laypersons, besides Catholic parents, within the Church. They could be divided into five sub-categories. The first group was the political leaders. Many of these powerful political leaders were ready to do anything to maintain segregation. A second group, Catholic leaders who believed in segregation, feared the schools could not survive if desegregated. This group believed that black children simply were not morally, culturally, psychologically, or academically prepared to attend schools with white children. They felt that racial segregation to be “unchristian” but desegregation impossible to achieve; desegregation would be detrimental to all children involved. The third group simply did not understand “Negro life and culture.” They spent their entire lives in segregated white communities and saw no reason to change. A fourth group was desegregationist. They believed in the desegregation of the parochial schools, but few had any real power in Church decision-making. A fifth group, black Catholics, had been largely left out of the fight to desegregate the schools in New

Orleans--the notable exception being black lawyers fighting to desegregate schools all over Louisiana. This fight had largely been carried out in black Protestant communities. Black Catholics wanted integration, but were torn between loyalty to Church and loyalty to race--a conflict that should have never existed.

The third group that priests studied was the priests themselves. They were generally divided on the issue; their opinions often reflecting those of their parishioners. Every aspect of the Church was divided; most Catholics fell somewhere in the middle. Most priests did not favor integration but were unwilling to defy openly their leader's proclamations on race.<sup>117</sup>

The Church had run out of excuses. Public school desegregation in 1960 highlighted the hypocrisy of the Church; it was acceptable to decry racism but not acceptable for black students to attend parochial schools with white students. The Archbishop's proclamations that there would be no segregation in heaven highlighted the ridiculousness of segregation on earth. Archbishop Rummel's promise that parochial schools would be desegregated before the public schools was overtaken by events. Members of The Catholic Council on Human Relations urged the archbishop to stop pussyfooting around, but Rummel continued to procrastinate, now--conveniently enough--fearful of the violence that accompanied public school integration.

Henry Cabirac, Director, The Catholic Council on Human Relations, tried to prove that integration in southern and northern cities could be accomplished peacefully; members of the council corresponded with leaders in Archdioceses that had been integrated. Cabirac wrote a letter to Rev George E. Lynch, the Chancellor of Catholic

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<sup>117</sup> "Interpretation of Interviews conducted with selected Catholic Priests" by The Catholic Council on Human Relations, CCHR, Box 1, Folder 10, T-ARC.

schools in Raleigh, North Carolina, inquiring about the desegregation process there. Lynch replied that “no colored Catholic child is deprived of a Catholic education.” He stated that wherever schools for blacks were nonexistent, children were allowed to attend school with white children--integration in its most technical form.<sup>118</sup> The chancellor of Nashville parochial schools told Cabirac that Nashville experienced few problems when parochial schools desegregated, and there was little need for concern in New Orleans.<sup>119</sup> Archdioceses outside of the South were also asked about their desegregation experiences. All said it was relatively peaceful. Given the informal integration of blacks and whites in many areas outside of education in New Orleans, it was not unreasonable to assume that if those parochial schools elsewhere had been integrated peacefully, so could the parochial schools in New Orleans. Pusillanimous Rummel was hard-pressed to use the fear of violence as an excuse.

White integrationists were fed up with Rummel. Black Catholics, who seldom opposed the Church’s actions, were increasingly disenchanted. Blacks, who had followed the same religion as their French and Spanish masters, were leaving the Catholic Church. A survey conducted at Xavier University, the only college established in the United States for black Catholics, revealed disturbing trends within the black community. Blacks in New Orleans, committed to Roman Catholicism since the days of slavery, were increasingly disaffected. Some Catholic blacks were not leaving the Church, but were leaving New Orleans because of segregationist practices. Other black Catholics were beginning to question their faith. Some blacks leaving New Orleans were

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<sup>118</sup> Rev. George E. Lynch to Henry Cabirac, July 28, 1961, CCHR, Box 1, Folder 10, T-ARC.

<sup>119</sup> Rt. Rev. Msgr. Charles M. Williams to Henry Cabirac, May 9, 1961, CCHR, Box 1, Folder 10, T-ARC.

wealthy. It made a difference. If the Church was not ready to let their children attend integrated schools, it was not ready to lose the money that these Catholics contributed to the Church.<sup>120</sup> Black students, inspired by the spirit of the Modern Civil Rights Movement, contemplated leaving the Church because of its failure to act on its promises.<sup>121</sup> Ninety percent of blacks in New Orleans were Catholic in 1800, but only twenty-five percent were Catholic in 1961. They were frustrated by the refusal of the archbishop to integrate the parochial schools, and were frustrated with the lack of integration in Catholic life. Black doctors were not allowed to join the Catholic medical association, communion lines were still segregated, and blacks had a difficult time getting treatment at white Catholic hospitals.<sup>122</sup>

The Catholic Church is hierarchical by nature; its followers generally obey the orders of superiors within the Church. The laity and the clergy of the Church agonized over Rummel's vacillation. He issued statements and made his personal beliefs known, but it was yet again unclear when the Catholic schools would be desegregated. Part of the reason was the superintendent of parochial schools in New Orleans, Henry Bezou, who feared that integration might lead to retaliatory legislation. Racists in the legislature attempted to control the actions of the parochial schools, just as they attempted to control the actions of the public schools one year earlier. The people of New Orleans did not necessarily support the integration of black and white students but did not wish an end to the educational process. More liberal New Orleans legislators convinced Bezou that the

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<sup>120</sup> Minutes of the Public Relations Committee of The Catholic Council on Human Relations, June 7, 1961, CCHR, Box 1, Folder 7, T-ARC.

<sup>121</sup> Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 257-258.

<sup>122</sup> Rudolph Ehrensing, "New Orleans: Catholic City?" *The Scholastic*, February 24, 1961, copy in Fichter Papers, Box 52, Folder 19, LUSC.



state would not risk federal backlash, so he reluctantly agreed to support the integration of New Orleans' parochial schools. The agreement of the superintendent allowed the council to get a tentative agreement from Rummel. On November 29, 1961, the archbishop agreed that parochial schools, grades one through eight, would desegregate in the fall of 1962.<sup>123</sup>

Rummel asked the Catholic Council on Human Relations for recommendations to integrate parochial schools. The Public Relations Committee of the Catholic Council on Human Relations submitted a series of suggestions it felt would ease the transition. It recommended that desegregation take place in the fall of 1962 because few black students would transfer midterm. It also agreed that the desegregation be postponed until the fall, because the longer the period between the announcement of desegregation and actual desegregation, the less volatile the issue would be. Members of the council hoped that there would be enough time to get past tensions that such an announcement would create. The Church would have enough time to quell the “threat of punitive legislation, which is ever present.” The Church and the Council planned to provide legislators with statistical data to help deter punitive laws. The council told Rummel that the time had come to open all Catholic elementary schools to black children to alleviate some of the bad feeling in the black community towards the Catholic Church.<sup>124</sup> The council declared that with the desegregation of the parochial schools, “The Catholic Church would achieve an immediate status [sic] of moral leadership...”<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 256-257.

<sup>124</sup> “Proposed Statement of Policy with Regard to Desegregation of Catholic Elementary Grades,” CCHR, Box 1, Folder 10, T-ARC.

<sup>125</sup> Proposed Statement of Policy with Regard to Desegregation of Catholic Elementary Grades, CCHR, Box 1, Folder 10.

In 1961 Archbishop John Patrick Cody was transferred to New Orleans as coadjutor to assist Rummel, by now increasingly frail. Archbishop Cody, born in 1907 in St. Louis, Missouri, was an authoritarian figure with progressive ideals about race. Cody became a priest in 1931, and served as bishop in St. Louis and Kansas City before coming to New Orleans to serve as coadjutor. Many have speculated about Cody's reasons for coming to New Orleans. He may well have been sent to help Rummel do something he simply could not bring himself to do--desegregate the parochial schools. Rummel yet again tried to go back on his promise to desegregate the parochial schools, but two factors enabled the council to convince him to stick to his promise. Cody actively supported the integration of the schools, which strengthened Rummel's resolve. As well, Judge Skelly Wright, irritated by the slow pace of desegregation with public schools, assured the council and the people of New Orleans that he would order the integration of the first six grades in the public schools. September was the perfect time to integrate the parochial schools. If the public schools were further integrated and the parochial schools were also integrated at the same time, it would minimize the possibility of parents moving their children to avoid an integrated classroom. On March 27, Rummel announced, finally, that the first eight grades of parochial schools would be integrated in September, 1962.<sup>126</sup>

Monsignor Bezou read the official news release on March 29, 1962. He assured nervous Catholics that integration of parochial schools in other southern states had been peaceful, and that there was no reason to think it would be otherwise in New Orleans.

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<sup>126</sup> Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 258-259. Archbishop Cody did not remain in New Orleans long after Rummel's death. In 1965 he was named the Archbishop of Chicago, and two years later he was elevated to Cardinal. Shortly before his death evidence of financial misconduct, and giving a mistress Church funds, tarnished the Cardinal's reputation. Cardinal Cody died on April 25, 1982.

Black parishes would continue to exist, but black and white children would attend school in the appropriate districts. A child's transfer would be evaluated on the basis of intelligence, age, and residence; the racial component would no longer exist. Racists within the Catholic Church quickly reacted to the desegregation order. School board member, Emile Wagner, publicly declared his disappointment, calling it, "the most unjudicious [sic] decision that the hierarchy of this Archdiocese has ever made since its inception. I know that the feeling of the people is most bitter and I think there would be certain retaliatory measures undertaken." Wagner alluded to the possibility of the Church losing its tax-exempt status. State Senator Kelly Gravolet, vice chairman of the joint legislative committee on segregation, issued a dire warning. He noted out that while this was a church matter, the parochial schools received books, lunches, and transportation from the state. He warned the public that these "fringe benefits" would be examined in the upcoming session. Leander Perez again called for a boycott of Catholic schools and a financial boycott of the Church. He proclaimed,

I believe that the members of the Catholic Church who constitute the Catholic Church, must be mindful of the fact that the Hierarchy simply occupies the position of officials of the Church. They are not the Church. They are only the misdirected officials or managers of the church. The Church is composed of the membership, the Catholic members of the Church, and if the members of the Church would shut off their water and not contribute another dime to their support to fatten their bellies while they would destroy our children, they would soon learn that our people are determined not to sacrifice their children for the communistic forced regimentation experiments here.<sup>127</sup>

B.J. Galliot, along with other segregationists, publicly protested the desegregation order. Archbishop Rummel did not appreciate such disobedience, sending her a letter of "paternal admonition." This letter was also sent to Leander Perez, Emile Wagner, and

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<sup>127</sup> Transcript of "Today Program" WDSU 1, March 29, 1962, CCHR, Box 1, Folder 10, T-ARC.

Jackson G. Ricau, secretary of the White Citizens' Council, and the Association of Catholic Laymen. The letter told each to "render humble obedience" to the Church's teachings. The letter warned that segregationists who did not "render humble obedience" to the teachings and instruction of the Church would be excommunicated. The threat was sent by Rummel, but Cody provided the "impetus."<sup>128</sup> The Church was not concerned with them foregoing racist attitudes, but was only concerned with them becoming humble.

Perez, Ricau, and Galliot refused to obey Rummel's orders. Rummel then issued an order of excommunication, accusing each of disregarding his previous warning. This was a serious disciplinary action, as it barred the excommunicated from receiving any of the sacraments, including Catholic burial, unless absolved.<sup>129</sup>

The leaders of the Catholic Council on Human Relations contacted Archbishop Cody with additional concerns. The council noted that clergy, unwilling to disobey Rummel's orders, did not agree with them either. The Clergy needed to accept integration. The council also said that parochial teachers needed to accept black students. The council pointed to Catholic laypersons appearing in newspapers daily, urging the disobedience of the desegregation order.<sup>130</sup>

There was apprehension among Catholic officials that enrollment would plummet as schools desegregated. Some Catholic parents insisted that they would withdraw their

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<sup>128</sup> Joseph A Kight, "How about September?" 21-22.

<sup>129</sup> "No Enrollment Decline Evident as Catholic Schools Register," Schoolmen, CCHR, Box 1, Folder 10, T-ARC. Galliot never reconciled with the Catholic Church and never publicly rescinded her former segregationist views. Perez continued his segregationist views until 1968, but shortly before his death in 1969, he reconciled with the Church and received a Catholic burial. Ricau was barred from walking his daughter down the aisle at her wedding.

<sup>130</sup> C. Ellis Henican to Archbishop Cody, July 3, 1962, CCHR, Box 1 Folder 10, T-ARC.

children from any integrated parochial school. The Church urged parents to “pre-register” their children in April, something never done before. There was no significant decline in enrollment. Catholics in New Orleans failed to heed Perez’s orders to boycott the Church financially. There was no sharp decline in regular church activity, reception of sacraments, or church collections. Perhaps Catholics understood that this was inevitable change to which they would have to adjust. Perhaps Catholics realized that there was no alternative--public schools were ordered to end the “token” desegregation during the same school term. Possibly Catholics did not want to suffer the fate of Perez, Galliot, and Ricau. Whatever the reason, Catholics seemingly accepted change.

The lack of protest, similar to the protest that occurred with public school desegregation, tells us that Rummel’s obsessive fears were groundless. When the archbishop instructed his laity and clergy to obey his orders, most did. The Church’s own studies showed that most within the Church would not blatantly disobey Church orders, once they were given. Had the archbishop desegregated the parochial schools first, or even threatened Catholics with excommunication when public schools desegregated, the process would have been easier. New Orleans is as much Catholic as it is southern. Catholics, many of whom undoubtedly did not favor desegregation, complied, though their stony silence perhaps suggests a form of inward spiritual migration.<sup>131</sup> Racist vocal segregationists within the Church, once seen as wholly representative of Catholic thought in New Orleans, because of the failure of Archbishop to decisively act, retreated into relative silence.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Robert S. Bird, “New Orleans Catholic ‘Revolt’ Gets Nowhere,” New York Herald Tribune, May 8, 1962, copy in CCHR, Box 1, Folder 10, T-ARC.

On September 4, 1962, the parochial schools were integrated. Archbishop Rummel's words were replaced with deeds. Close to two hundred students integrated thirty-two schools. The numbers were not large, but more than the token integration of the public schools. Integration was peaceful. The archbishop's concerns about violence were unfounded.

The aftermath of parochial school integration lacked the drama, and legal battles, that occurred with the integration of New Orleans public schools. One of the largest parochial school districts in the country had successfully accomplished something quite remarkable. The lunch counters in New Orleans were also desegregated in the latter part of September 1962. The Catholic Council on Human Relations sent members to meetings of Catholic segregationist groups, but found them losing popularity. A meeting of the "Parents and friends of Catholic Children" drew but six persons. History had moved on.

C. Ellis Henican, president of the council, wrote to Archbishop Cody about progress made within the schools by December 1962. There, of course, were some problems. Parents had not withdrawn their children; they "accepted" integration (perhaps out of the fear of excommunication), but did not really accept black children. Parents urged their children not to become friends with black children. There were cases of clergy refusing to admit black children to white schools who met the qualifications for admittance. There were reports of nuns and teachers not treating black children equally in the classroom. Despite these problems of adjustment, integration was still relatively

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<sup>132</sup> Jo-Ann Price, "Hail Rummel's 'Winning Cause,'" New York Herald Tribune, April 8, 1962, copy in CCHR, Box 1, Folder 10, T-ARC.

peaceful.<sup>133</sup> The leaders of the Church indicated their desire to integrate Catholic hospitals and retreat houses. C. Ellis Henican wrote to other priests, out of state, inquiring about their integration experiences.<sup>134</sup> The Church indicated a desire to integrate all aspects of the Church, but not just yet. New Orleans churches were still relatively segregated. Meanwhile, black enrollment increased to approximately 1,200 in previously all-white parochial schools. The Church installed Harold Robert Perry as a black bishop in New Orleans, the first in almost one hundred years. The Catholic Church was now trying to be the clear moral authority that it had such trouble trying to be.<sup>135</sup>

In the end, Archbishop Rummel accomplished what he said that he would do when he first arrived in New Orleans thirty years earlier. He desegregated the parochial schools in New Orleans. However, the real catalyst for the eventual desegregation of the parochial schools in New Orleans was Archbishop Cody. Rummel was physically exhausted and intimidated by his flock. The archbishop had good intentions, but proved ineffectual as the moral authority in New Orleans. He was adamant about the sinfulness of segregation, but endlessly delayed integrating the churches, Catholic hospitals, and other Catholic facilities. His fear of retribution, from parishioners, not from God, resulted in him making a regrettable decision--a decision that drove black Catholics from the Church and significantly weakened the Church's moral authority. There is no way to definitively assert that parochial school desegregation would have led to peaceful public

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<sup>133</sup> C. Ellis Henican to The Most Rev. John P. Cody, S.T.D., December 15, 1962, CCHR, Box 1, Folder 3., T-ARC.

<sup>134</sup> C. Ellis Henican to Reverend James Stewart, February 8, 1963, CCHR, Box 1, Folder 3, T-ARC.

<sup>135</sup> Gene Roberts, "Negro is Installed as a Bishop in New Orleans," The New York Times January 7, 1966, Fichter Papers, Series III, Box 52, Folder 12, LUSC. Bishop Perry was born in Lake Charles, Louisiana on October 9, 1916. Perry was appointed Auxiliary Bishop of New Orleans on September 29, 1965. He died on July 27, 1991.

school desegregation. However, we can look at other models of southern integration, as integrationists within the Catholic Church in New Orleans did. Parochial schools in Nashville, Tennessee and in North Carolina desegregated before public schools, and the subsequent public school desegregation was much more peaceful than the process in New Orleans. Although these states were different from Louisiana, both still has significant civil rights activity, and thus were prone to significant backlash. Definitive moral leadership was the difference in the processes.

While Rummel punished disobedient Catholics once the desegregation order was issued, he did virtually nothing to control the members of his Church beforehand. It was not their racist attitudes that explained their excommunication, it was their disobedience, an important distinction. When Rummel's authority was challenged, he disciplined his members. The archbishop was a tortured and confused man who believed in the equality of people in God's eyes; he was an ineffective leader in New Orleans, at a time when clear and firm leadership was precisely what this Catholic city needed. It is perhaps ironic that New Orleans has a parochial high school named in honor of Rummel, but no school named after Cody. Perhaps it is true that the meek shall inherit the earth.



## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

Much has been written about the desegregation of the public schools in New Orleans. The legal cases have been endlessly examined; those involved, thoroughly discussed. Little has been said about the desegregation of the parochial schools. There is less information about the integration of the parochial schools, because, unlike in the case of the public schools, the desegregation of parochial schools was a battle waged within the Church and not in the courts. Furthermore, archdiocesan records are often difficult to access. People have not really examined the connection between the two, or perhaps even acknowledged the connection at all. The entity that links these two very different processes is the same entity that has linked blacks and whites in New Orleans since slavery--the Catholic Church.

Blacks are largely protestant. However, New Orleans is home to the largest number of black Catholics in the United States and has been for over one hundred years. As the nation faced questions of morality and struggled with questions of race, so did the Church. As the nation failed its black citizens time and time again, so did the Catholic Church. Americans largely accepted slavery; Catholics, eager to prove their loyalty to the south and the principles of the south, did as well. The loyalty of blacks to the Church did not escape Catholic clergymen; the Church created small schools for free blacks in New Orleans as blacks continued to be treated as second class citizens in their Church.

In every test the Church failed. As the nation continued to treat blacks as less than equal, so did the Church. Plessy determined that segregation was constitutional. The Catholic Church, not governed by the Constitution, was influenced by the then-

current laws in America. Separate Catholic churches were organized, and segregation became the rule of the Catholic Church. Church law, soon aligned with American law and southern culture, supported segregated parishes, schools, and hospitals.

The Civil Rights Movement tested Americans' character and judgment. One of the basic fundamental rights of an American is the right to receive an education. Plessy failed because blacks were not being educated equally. White children in New Orleans were being inadequately educated, and black children's educational opportunities were far worse. The Court overturned Plessy. The Catholic Church is not responsible for the inadequacy of black education in America, but the Church is responsible for not providing black children with the same educational opportunities as white children.

The virulent opposition to desegregation was not a unique phenomenon. Americans all over the country fought against desegregation at every level of education. What makes New Orleans different is the sheer number of blacks that consider themselves Catholic, and the fact that the Catholic Church was responsible for educating just as many children as the public schools. The Church had an opportunity to foster peace among its members. Had Church leadership been proactive instead of reactive the city could have maintained its calm. The panic that desegregation produced in the city, and the mismanagement of the process, sent New Orleans schools into a downward spiral from which they have yet to recover. The Church can not control the minds of its members, but it can control the message that it sends forth to its members. The Church had an opportunity to atone for past sins by desegregating its schools first, as a moral obligation. It failed to do so, lending credibility to the idea that blacks were inferior to whites, in all aspects, including in the eyes of God.

The Church taught its parishioners that blacks were inferior through its acceptance of southern mores and the implementation of segregation within the Church. This attitude, long embedded in southern thought, produced a panic in the city. As whites believed that their way of life was being threatened, they left inner cities, moving to the suburbs; New Orleans was no different. Desegregation speeded up this process. In 1960 blacks made up approximately sixty percent of the students in public schools. In 2005 blacks made up ninety-four percent of the students in public schools in New Orleans.<sup>136</sup> Whites in New Orleans took their students and their tax base to the suburbs. The percentage of blacks rose dramatically in New Orleans as a result of this “white flight.” Cities just outside of New Orleans--Metairie, Slidell, Covington, and Mandeville--flourished. These surrounding parishes, Jefferson and St. Tammany, have far superior educational systems than the one in New Orleans. St. Tammany was at one point the finest school district in the state. New Orleans schools became some of the worst in the country. Ironically, only twenty miles separates New Orleans from St. Tammany.

The culture of racism which led to the failure of desegregation in New Orleans had far-reaching ramifications which went beyond the subsequent re-segregation of the schools in New Orleans. This culture of racism that the Church encouraged for many years, and did nothing to quell in later years, produced a sense of inferiority in many black children in New Orleans. The city’s educational system collapsed.

What was the impact that the Catholic Church had on the process of desegregation? The Church leadership in New Orleans declared that segregation was

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<sup>136</sup> “New Orleans Public Schools History: A Brief Overview.”  
[www.tulane.edu/cowen\\_institute/documents/NewOrleansSchoolHistory.doc](http://www.tulane.edu/cowen_institute/documents/NewOrleansSchoolHistory.doc).

contrary to Church doctrine. However, Catholic leaders failed to desegregate. Churches, hospitals, and professional organizations remained segregated. The Catholic Church did little to stop ardent segregationists within the Church from postponing the desegregation of public schools. When Judge Skelly Wright finally issued the desegregation order, the Church did little to stop its members who were helping to inflame racial matters during the desegregation of public schools. Church leaders could have silenced their members. The Church only excommunicated members when they directly disobeyed authority--a crime against the authoritarian nature of the Church. Church leaders felt no need to silence these vocal Catholics, directly responsible for violence against other Catholics. Priests and the archbishop allowed Catholics to say and do what they pleased, often in the name of Catholicism. One must conclude that the Church was a great hindrance to the peaceful desegregation of public schools. Inaction helped justify racist attitudes among members of the Catholic Church.

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## VITA

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