The Catholic Church and the Civil Rights Movement in the United States

On a recent visit to the campus of the University of Notre Dame, I saw in multiple places the reproduction of a black and white photo from a June 21, 1964, civil rights protest in Chicago. There, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., clasps hands with Fr. Theodore Hesburgh, CSC, then president of the university. This iconic photo, and its background, suggest the prominent yet complicated role of the American Catholic Church in the post-World War II Civil Rights movement. While soldiers of all races fought side-by-side on the battlefields of the Second World War, they found on their return that deep divisions remained in our nation, even as Hesburgh and King, by their grasp across the races, sought to express and bring about a state of more perfect equality among all persons of our nation.

The American civil rights movement of the second half of the twentieth century presented the Catholic Church with both an extraordinary opportunity and a profound challenge. The Church possessed a rich theological understanding of the dignity of every human person and the unity of the human family. Yet American Catholicism had also accommodated racial segregation, sometimes reproducing within its own institutions the injustices it was called to confront. During the civil rights movement, courageous bishops, priests, religious sisters, and lay Catholics helped dismantle racial discrimination, while others resisted integration or remained silent. The history of the Church during this period is therefore one of significant contributions to racial justice, but also of an unfinished struggle to embody its own teaching.

While in many ways the Catholic Church in the United States reflected a high level of segregation among the races, nevertheless, Catholic opposition to segregation preceded the great civil rights victories of the 1960s. Catholic interracial organizations, including the Catholic Interracial Council, challenged racial prejudice through education, interracial gatherings, and advocacy. Black Catholics themselves played indispensable roles, insisting that their Church honor the baptismal equality it proclaimed. One significant episcopal leader was Archbishop Joseph Francis Rummel of New Orleans. He ordered the desegregation of Catholic schools in his archdiocese in 1962, despite fierce opposition from some white Catholics. His actions demonstrated that ecclesiastical authority could be employed not simply to condemn discrimination but to dismantle it within Catholic institutions.

Among the most influential Catholic figures was Fr. Hesburgh, president of the University of Notre Dame. Appointed by President Dwight Eisenhower to the United States Commission on Civil Rights in 1957, Fr. Hesburgh served until 1972, including several years as its chairman. His work helped establish the factual and moral foundations for landmark civil rights legislation concerning voting, education, employment, and public accommodations. In 1964, he joined Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., at a Chicago civil rights rally, where the two famously joined hands while singing *We Shall Overcome*.

Catholic religious sisters offered particularly visible testimony to efforts at racial equality. Following the violent attacks on peaceful demonstrators in Selma, Alabama, in March 1965, sisters from several congregations answered Dr. King's call for religious leaders to come to Selma. Among them was Sister Mary Antona Ebo, an African American Franciscan Sister of Mary from St. Louis. Having personally experienced segregation within Catholic religious life,

she traveled to Alabama with the support of Cardinal Joseph Ritter. Her presence at the demonstrations, alongside other sisters and clergy, became a powerful symbol of Catholic solidarity with the struggle for voting rights.

These efforts coincided with a renewed emphasis on human dignity and solidarity in Catholic social teaching. The Second Vatican Council's 1965 pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* declared that every form of discrimination affecting fundamental human rights, including discrimination based on race or color, must be overcome as contrary to God's intention (GS 29). The Council grounded this teaching in the common origin of humanity, the creation of every person in God's image, and the universal redemption offered through Jesus Christ.

American bishops increasingly applied these principles to racial injustice. Their 1958 statement condemned segregation, while their 1979 pastoral letter, *Brothers and Sisters to Us*, acknowledged that racism persisted both in American society and within the Church. Importantly, the bishops extended their concern beyond legal segregation to economic inequality, inadequate education, discriminatory housing, and the experiences of Hispanic and Native Americans. The Church's growing understanding of racial justice thus emphasized more than the absence of discrimination. It called for genuine solidarity, equal opportunity, and the recognition that all people belong to one human family.

At the same time, the Church among its institutions and parishes was not always quick to apply these teachings. The Church also struggled to integrate its own leadership and institutions. Black Catholics frequently encountered discrimination in religious communities and seminaries, while their contributions to American Catholicism received insufficient recognition.

The civil rights movement therefore exposed a fundamental challenge to American Catholicism: whether the Church could make visible in its own life the unity it proclaimed in its teaching. The achievements of Father Hesburgh, Archbishop Rummel, Sister Mary Antona Ebo, and countless other Catholics demonstrated the transformative power of faith translated into courageous action. Yet the persistence of segregated congregations and unequal opportunities revealed that changing laws was easier than transforming hearts and communities. The lasting lesson of this period is that racial reconciliation was not simply a political or social undertaking. For Catholics, it is a demand of the Gospel itself, rooted in the conviction that every human being bears the image of God and that, in Christ, all are called to become members of one family.

Next month: Vatican II and the American Church (1960s–1970s)