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The Southern Field Service of the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice, 1961-1969

Mark Newman

Established in 1961, the Southern Field Service (SFS) of the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice (NCCIJ) fostered interracialism and encouraged Catholic clergy and laity to work for the desegregation of Catholic schools, parishes, and organizations. It helped create Catholic interracial councils and provided them with direction and support. Although rebuffed by several prelates, the service worked closely with bishops and clergy in their desegregation efforts. With limited success, SFS urged clergy to participate in Project Equality, designed to ensure fair employment practices. Typifying its mostly behind-the-scenes approach, the service assisted participation in the Selma March, Meredith March, and other protests and provided an amicus curiae brief in Loving v. Virginia (1967), a United States Supreme Court ruling that outlawed anti-miscegenation laws. The SFS suffered from lack of funding, and its meager all-white staff sometimes struggled to understand or convey African American perspectives. Catholic interracialism declined amid a national declension from racial issues that terminated the funding on which SFS depended, forcing its cessation in 1969.

Keywords: Southern Field Service; National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice; desegregation; interracialism; Project Equality; civil rights movement

During the civil rights movement's Meredith March Against Fear in June 1966, the Southern Field Service (SFS) of the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice (NCCIJ) dispatched to Canton, Mississippi, the mediation team of associate director James J. McGuire, Father Sherrill Smith of San Antonio, and Father William M. Lewers, C.S.C. of the University of Notre Dame's School of Law. There, they successfully suggested a compromise that averted a clash following the brutal attack by highway patrolmen on marchers for pitching their tents at an African American public school. Under the agreement, marchers returned to the school without setting up tents and later resumed their march to Jackson unmolested. Unreported in the secular press, the SFS's intervention exemplified its behind-the-scenes approach that has rendered it

largely invisible to historians but fit the Catholic Church's emerging emphasis on social justice.¹

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) condemned racism, encouraged the laity to take a greater role in the Church, and endorsed ecumenical cooperation. The NCCIJ's founding in 1960 anticipated the council. Approved by the United States Catholic hierarchy, the NCCIJ was nevertheless "an independent agency, not subject to direct church control." Primarily composed of laity, with a few priests, and funded primarily by philanthropic foundations, the conference worked "for a just and racially integrated society." With no interest "in the extension of the Roman Catholic community, or converts," the NCCIJ fostered and encouraged "interdenominational work in race relations."²

Based in Chicago, a center of lay-led Catholic interracialism, the NCCIJ opened its headquarters in January 1961. Some of its attention focused on the South, where African American disenfranchisement and legal segregation were commonplace. Catholic dioceses in the Deep South, and to varying degrees other southern dioceses, segregated their institutions. The NCCIJ reminded Catholics that at its annual meeting in November 1958 the United States Catholic hierarchy had condemned "Legal segregation or any form of compulsory segregation" and called for its gradual elimination as prudence allowed. When sit-ins against segregated lunch counters spread from Greensboro, North Carolina, across much of the South in 1960, the NCCIJ expressed approval. In August 1961, the conference organized the SFS to encourage and help southern bishops desegregate institutions under their jurisdiction, establish and direct

¹ Jim McGuire to Matt [Ahmann], "Southern Field Service and the Meredith Freedom March," June 29, 1966, folder 11, box 8, series 34, National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice Records, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin (hereafter NCCIJR); Jack [Sisson] to Matt [Ahmann], "Meredith Mississippi Freedom March, June 6-26, 1966 (Jim sent a separate report of his activities from June 22 to June 28)," June 30, 1966, folder 11, box 8, series 34, NCCIJR.

² "The National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice Extension of Southern Field Service Project 1967-1969," 2, folder 2, box 5, series 30, NCCIJR.

Catholic interracial councils, and “engage the leadership and resources of the Roman Catholic community in cooperative work for civic desegregation in an effort to build an open and racially integrated society in the Southern United States.”³

Originally conceived to serve twenty-five dioceses in fourteen states (the old Confederacy’s eleven states plus Kentucky, Oklahoma, and West Virginia), by 1966 the SFS expanded to Arizona and New Mexico. Except for Kentucky, Florida, Texas, and Louisiana, the South’s Catholic population was often less than 2%. Based in New Orleans, the SFS sustained contact with bishops, clergy, and laity and supported local and major civil rights campaigns. It had considerable operational freedom, but in practice was highly dependent on the cooperation of southern prelates, who had broad latitude in leading their dioceses. While some ordinaries refused the SFS’s services, others were responsive to the organization and the pressure it generated from progressive laity.⁴

Catholic Interracialism

Scholarship about Catholic interracialism in the 1960s has focused on the urban North and Midwest. John T. McGreevy’s study of the postwar urban North contends that “the Catholic presence in the civil rights movement” was “minuscule” before 1962. In August of that year, nine Catholic laypeople were among a predominantly Protestant group from Chicago who briefly participated, with “little effect,” in the Albany, Georgia, desegregation protests. For McGreevy, “Catholic participation in the southern civil rights movement culminated at Selma in March 1965,” when “priests from fifty different

³ “National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice Summary Report for Maintaining Southern Field Service Project,” September 1962, 1, folder 7, box 4, series 30, NCCIJR; “Resolutions and Reports,” *Interracial Review* 33 (November 1960): quote at 280; “The National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice Extension of Southern Field Service Project 1967-1969,” quote at 1, folder 2, box 5, series 30, NCCIJR.

⁴ “National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice Southern Field Service Report Interim Report covering October 1964/January 1965,” 1, folder 8, box 4, series 30, NCCIJR; “The National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice Extension of Southern Field Service Project 1967-1969,” 1, folder 2, box 5, series 30, NCCIJR.

dioceses, laypeople, and nuns flocked to Alabama” to join voting rights protests. Karen J. Johnson claims that “Catholic activists in Chicago motivated other Catholics and also white Protestants and Jews to join black protestors in the South and the North” but cites the same examples as McGreevy. Amy L. Koehlinger’s study of religious women and racial justice in the 1960s discusses Selma and the NCCIJ’s Department of Educational Services (DES), which organized programs in the North and South to improve African American educational opportunities and educate white Catholic clergy, sisters, and laity about racial justice. Her brief mention of the SFS acknowledges that it provided the DES with “resources and contacts.”⁵

Historians of Catholicism and race relations in the postwar South have neglected the SFS, which began a year before Catholic involvement in the Albany protests and continued for four and a half years after the Selma campaign. Andrew S. Moore’s study of Catholicism and race in Alabama and Georgia omits the SFS. Cyprian Davis, O.S.B., and Katrina M. Sanders discuss the involvement of individual African American Catholics in the civil rights movement but not the SFS. My broad study of Catholics and desegregation in the South briefly acknowledges the service but without surveying its record.⁶

The SFS’s history demonstrates Catholic interracialism’s expansion in the South during the 1960s and augments a developing historiography that addresses Catholic

⁵ David W. Southern, *John LaFarge and the Limits of Catholic Interracialism, 1911-1963* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996); John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 142-143, 155-158, quotes at 142 and 155; Karen J. Johnson, *One in Christ: Chicago Catholics and the Quest for Interracial Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), quote at 6, also 190-192, 200-202; Amy L. Koehlinger, *The New Nuns: Racial Justice and Religious Reform in the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 106-108, quote at 107.

⁶ Moore, *South’s Tolerable Alien*; Cyprian Davis, O.S.B., “Black Catholics in the Civil Rights Movement in the Southern United States: A. P. Tureaud, Thomas Wyatt Turner, and Earl Johnson,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 24, no. 4 (Fall 2006): 69-81; Katrina M. Sanders, “Black Catholic Clergy and the Struggle for Civil Rights: Winds of Change,” in M. Shawn Copeland, ed., with LaReine-Marie Mosely, S.N.D., and Albert J. Raboteau, *Uncommon Faithfulness: The Black Catholic Experience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 78-93; Mark Newman, *Desegregating Dixie: The Catholic Church in the South and Desegregation, 1945-1992* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2018).

contributions to the struggle for racial equality.⁷ Although underfunded, understaffed, and sometimes lacking sensitivity to African American standpoints, the SFS helped facilitate Catholic desegregation and supported litigation, employment initiatives, and civil rights protests, leaving a lasting legacy through those it influenced. The SFS's history also reveals the reluctance of many Deep South Catholic prelates to desegregate ahead of secular change, the limitations of Catholic institutional reform, and the difficulties of realizing the Second Vatican Council's vision of a committed laity in a socially-conscious and engaged Church.

Catholics in the South traditionally faced suspicion and hostility as members of a religion that Southerners of both races considered alien. Secular adoption of segregation in the South during the 1890s and early decades of the twentieth century saw the region's Catholic prelates build separate (and usually inferior) churches, schools, and other institutions for African Americans, and segregate them in predominantly white churches. During the civil rights era, southern white Catholics were as supportive of segregation as other southern whites. A 1956 *Catholic Digest* opinion poll found that 76% of southern white Catholics, 75% of southern white Protestants, and 74% of all southern whites favored racial segregation. Given widespread anti-Catholicism and support for segregation, the SFS faced a formidable task. In choosing southern white laymen to lead the SFS and including "southern" in its title, the NCCIJ sought to pre-empt accusations that it was an imposition by Northerners, who did not understand southern race relations.⁸

⁷ Shannen Dee Williams, "Black Catholics were at the Forefront of the American Civil Rights Movement," *Catholic News Service*, November 8, 2018, <http://catholicphilly.com/2018/11/catholic-spirituality/black-catholics-were-at-the-forefront-of-the-american-civil-rights-movement/>.

⁸ Newman, *Desegregating Dixie*, 8-10; R. Bentley Anderson, *Black, White, and Catholic: New Orleans Interracialism, 1947-1956* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2005), 3-7, 10; "The White-Negro Problem," *Catholic Digest* 20 (June 1956): 2-4; Andrew S. Moore, *The South's Tolerable Alien: Roman Catholics in Alabama and Georgia, 1945-1970* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 1-2, 8, 9, 12-13, 25, 35-38.

Earlier efforts to foster Catholic interracialism in the South foundered when bishops withdrew their support amid mounting white opposition to the prospect of desegregation in the region. In the late 1930s, Paul D. Williams, a Virginia layman, worked with southern Catholic bishops and clergy to inaugurate the Catholic Committee of the South (CCS). Focused on the region's economic and social problems, the CCS convened ten times between 1940 and 1953, circumventing local segregation practices. At its May 1949 convention in Lexington, Kentucky, the CCS's race relations workshop called for Catholic churches and schools to desegregate, though with little impact.⁹

A month before the convention, Father Joseph H. Fichter, S.J., a sociology professor at Loyola University in New Orleans, organized the city's biracial Commission on Human Rights (CHR), which sometimes collaborated with the Southeastern Regional Interracial Commission (SERINCO), a student group Fichter had inspired. Small in membership, both groups organized interracial activities and called for Catholic integration. A handful of less vigorous Catholic interracial councils formed elsewhere in the South.¹⁰

At its 1951 convention in Columbia, South Carolina, the CCS called for "the ultimate integration of all members of our Church ... in the religious, economic, and cultural life of the nation." CCS General Chairman Father Maurice Shean welcomed the U.S. Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* public school desegregation ruling in May 1954. By September, some Catholic schools in Arkansas, North Carolina,

⁹ Katherine Martensen, "Region, Religion, and Social Action: The Catholic Committee of the South, 1939-1956," *Catholic Historical Review* 68 (April 1982): 250-260, quote at 258.

¹⁰ Anderson, *Black, White, and Catholic*, xiv-xvi, 15-18, 20-22, 24, 27-28, 38-43, 50-51, 53-62, 73-79, 87-89, 96-97, 112-113, 121-123, 143, 150, 191-192; "Catholic Interracial Councils," *Interracial Review* 28 (October 1954): 176.

Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia had desegregated and admitted a small number of African Americans.¹¹

With massive resistance to public school desegregation mounting in the mid-1950s, Archbishop Joseph F. Rummel of New Orleans repeatedly postponed plans to desegregate archdiocesan schools. Other Deep South bishops also continued school segregation. The CCS held its last convention in 1953 and gradually faded away. After launching an information campaign in 1956 to counter segregationist propaganda, CHR folded when the previously supportive but now beleaguered Rummel refused to support a follow-up effort. SERINCO and most Catholic interracial councils in the South soon disbanded.¹²

The Southern Field Service under Henry Cabirac, Jr.

When the NCCIJ opened its headquarters in January 1961, there were only thirty-five Catholic human relations organizations in the nation. Eager to assist their formation, NCCIJ in March 1961 helped organize the Catholic Council on Human Relations (CCHR) in New Orleans to “promote good relationships among peoples of all races” and disseminate Catholic teaching “on matters of interracial justice and charity.”¹³

CCHR hired as full-time executive director Henry A. Cabirac, Jr. (1924-2007), a white layman and member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored

¹¹ “The Catholic Committee of the South [Columbia, South Carolina, January 24, 1951 Resolutions],” 6-7, quote at 7, folder “Catholic Committee of the South,” Bishop Peter L. Ireton Papers, Archives of the Diocese of Richmond, Richmond, Virginia; Martensen, “Region, Religion, and Social Action,” 263-264; Newman, *Desegregating Dixie*, 32, 33, 146-148.

¹² Moore, *South’s Tolerable Alien*, 72; Anderson, *Black, White, and Catholic*, xv, 142-143, 153-187, 194, 196; Newman, *Desegregating Dixie*, 148-149, 150, 152-154; Martensen, “Region, Religion, and Social Action,” 263-265; Ed Marciniak, “Interracial Councils in Chicago,” *America* 99 (September 20, 1958): 641; Mathew Ahmann, “Catholics and Race,” *Commonweal* 73 (December 2, 1960): 248.

¹³ “National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice Proposal for a Southern Field Service,” 3, folder 7, box 4, series 30, NCCIJR; “National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice Extension of Southern Field Service Project 1967-1969,” 2, folder 2, box 5, series 30, NCCIJR; “Statement of Purpose,” for quotations, folder 3, box 3, Catholic Council on Human Relations Papers, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana (hereafter CCHRP); untitled “Report of the activities of the New Orleans Council on Human Relations,” undated, folder 3, box 1, CCHRP.

People (NAACP). A Tulane University graduate, Cabirac belonged to a long-established New Orleans family and had worked for his family's mechanical business. Father Louis J. Twomey, S.J., director of the Institute of Industrial Relations at Loyola University of the South, recommended Cabirac to Mathew Ahmann, the NCCIJ's executive secretary, as "zealous," "a hard worker, well-balanced and knowledgeable."¹⁴

After the SFSs launch in August 1961, Cabirac headed the SFS and the CCHR, dividing his duties "between work in New Orleans and work in the rest of the South." A \$30,000 grant from the Taconic Foundation underwrote the SFS's costs. He spent most of his first months as SFS director persuading Archbishop Rummel to desegregate parochial schools, succeeding after State Senator Maurice Landrieu of New Orleans (a Catholic) provided reassurances at the CCHR's request that the legislature would not "enact punitive measures" against the Church. In September 1962, archdiocesan schools began desegregation despite a boycott in Buras in Plaquemines Parish (county) and a partial boycott in Westwego in Jefferson Parish.¹⁵

During the SFS's first year, Cabirac visited Catholic clergy and laity in eleven states to liaise with or encourage the formation of Catholic interracial councils, resulting in the establishment of fifteen either "public or 'off-the-record'" groups. In August 1962, he spoke in Lafayette, Louisiana, at the annual convention of the Knights of Peter Claver (KPC), a self-governing Black laymen's Catholic fraternal and insurance organization headquartered in New Orleans. Individual Knights had participated in the civil rights movement as NAACP members, and in 1961 a KPC resolution condemned segregation.

¹⁴ "Biographical Sketch – Henry A. Cabirac, Jr.," folder 7, box 3, CCHRP; L.J. Twomey to Mathew Ahmann, February 22, 1961, for quotations, folder 7, box 21, Louis J. Twomey Papers, Special Collections and Archives, Loyola University Library, Loyola University New Orleans, New Orleans, Louisiana (hereafter Twomey Papers).

¹⁵ Mathew Ahmann to Henry Cabirac, September 26, 1961, for quotation, folder 10, box 3, CCHRP; "National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice Summary Report for Maintaining Southern Field Service Project," September 1962, 1, folder 8, box 4, series 30, NCCIJR; "Southern Field Service Report to the Directors of the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice, August 1962," 1-12, quote at 2, folder 8, box 4, series 33, NCCIJR; Newell Schindler, "Studies First Year of N. O. Integration," [Baton Rouge] *Catholic Commentator*, June 7, 1963, 9.

Cabirac urged the Knights to petition their ordinaries to desegregate, asking that contact occur through “personal visits, telephone calls, or perhaps in the majority of cases, most effectively by a respectful letter.” However, his hope of turning the KPC into a “militant organization to work for racial justice” went unfulfilled as the organization continued to pass resolutions against segregation without actively participating in the struggle.¹⁶

Cabirac achieved greater success with progressive Catholics in Pensacola, Florida, a city within the Diocese of Mobile-Birmingham. During several visits, he met with John P. “Jack” Sisson (1926-2019), a white Catholic layman who helped negotiate lunch counter desegregation after African American sit-in protests, and with African American Catholics. Encouraged by Cabirac, Black Catholic parents wrote to Archbishop Thomas J. Toolen of Mobile-Birmingham asking for their children’s admittance to white Catholic schools in the fall of 1962. Toolen refused, claiming that even token desegregation would cause the loss of “a great number of the white children.” Through the efforts of Sisson and African American Catholics, S.W. Boyd and C.F. Benboe, a biracial group of twelve Pensacola Catholics requested a meeting with Toolen. He did not reply but announced in June that Pensacola’s Catholic schools would open to all Catholics within two months— a year after public school desegregation in the city. Persistent local pressure from Catholics alongside the city’s peaceful public school desegregation probably influenced the archbishop’s decision since he did not order parochial school desegregation where public school segregation continued.¹⁷

¹⁶ “National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice Summary Proposal for Maintaining Southern Field Service Project,” September 1962, quote at 2, folder 7, box 4, series 30, NCCIJR; Henry Cabirac, Jr., “The Importance of Catholic Negroes Expressing Their Hopes and Aspirations To Their Bishop and The Manner In Which It Should be Done,” address to the 42nd Annual Convention of the Knights of Peter Claver, August 6, 1962, Lafayette, Louisiana, 1-4, quote at 3, folder 15, box 2, CCHRP; “Southern Field Service Report to the Directors of the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice, August 1962,” 19, quote at 21, folder 8, box 4, series 33, NCCIJR.

¹⁷ Henry Cabirac, Jr. to Frederick B. Routh, August 29, 1962, in author’s possession; Thomas J. Toolen to Simon William Boyd, May 30, 1962, for quotation, folder 26, box 3, series 33, NCCIJR; Henry Cabirac to S.W. Boyd, May 3, 1962, June 25, 1963, folder 26, box 3, series 33, NCCIJR; S.W. Boyd to Henry Cabirac, Jr., October 4, 1962, folder 26, box 3, series 33, NCCIJR; Ira Bascle, et al., to T.J. Toolen, January

Cabirac was less successful elsewhere. Although he persuaded African American Catholics on Mississippi's Gulf Coast to press Natchez-Jackson bishop Richard O. Gerow to inaugurate school desegregation, the bishop told him in July 1963 "to stay out of Mississippi." Unwilling to act ahead of secular authorities, Gerow began limited school desegregation in tandem with federal court-ordered public school desegregation in 1964. Toolen also did not respond to requests, stimulated by Cabirac, from African American Catholics in Birmingham and Mobile for parochial school desegregation. Even after desegregating all diocesan schools in 1964, a year later than token public school desegregation, Toolen and his chancery officials continued to spurn SFS efforts. Accustomed to running their dioceses without interference, some other prelates also rebuffed the SFS, including the conservative Archbishop Joseph P. Hurley of St. Augustine, Florida, and Archbishop John A. Floersh of Louisville, Kentucky, the latter having desegregated Catholic schools and diocesan institutions in the mid-1950s.¹⁸

Nevertheless, the SFS supported bishops amenable to school desegregation. After meeting in August 1962 with Bishop Thomas J. McDonough of Savannah, Georgia, Cabirac regarded him "as a man who was seeking guidance and felt a strong force of conscience to do something." McDonough had announced in January 1961 that he would desegregate Catholic schools no later than public schools, and he upheld that commitment when public schools desegregated in September 1963. Cabirac reported that Bishop Francis F. Reh of Charleston, South Carolina, "invited me to visit with him in August 1962 after his elevation to a Bishopric. He was extremely interested in moving

27, 1963, folder 26, box 3, series 33, NCCIJR; Henry Cabirac, Jr., to John Sisson, February 1, 1963, folder 26, box 3, series 33, NCCIJR; Wilhelmina Valcour to Henry Cabirac, Jr., September 10, 1963, folder 26, box 3, series 33, NCCIJR; "Southern Field Service Report of Activities, 1962-63, Program Goals 1964," 9, folder 7, box 4, series 30, NCCIJR.

¹⁸ "Southern Field Service Report of Activities, 1962-63, Program Goals 1964," 5, 7-9, quote at 8, folder 7, box 4, series 30, NCCIJR; "National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice Southern Field Service Diocesan Profiles," 1, 2, 3, 8, 11-12, 14, 21, 22, folder 2, box 5, series 30, **Error! Main Document Only.**NCCIJR.

with Bishop McDonough at my suggestion in order to obtain as much support as possible when he desegregated the Catholic schools. This Fall [1963] he began desegregation of his [elementary] Catholic schools” in the city of Charleston to coincide with public school desegregation beginning there.¹⁹

Cabirac also serviced Catholic interracial councils and encouraged their establishment. Because a council needed the bishop’s approval, its formation and continuance depended on each prelate’s disposition. Despite ordinaries like Floersch refusing to allow councils, in its first five years, the SFS helped develop twenty-six biracial human relations organizations of varying sizes, activities, influence, and longevity. Some made little impact, while others were more vibrant, such as the Catholic Interracial Council of Northern Virginia that sent a delegation of 130 to the civil rights movement’s March on Washington in August 1963.²⁰

Cabirac spent late 1963 and early 1964 organizing a SFS leadership conference in Atlanta, Georgia. Although the city’s Catholic population was only 37,000, the SFS chose it because Archbishop Paul J. Hallinan was outspoken on racial justice and had desegregated the archdiocese’s schools following his installation in 1962, two years after public schools in Atlanta desegregated under federal court order. Cabirac enlisted Hallinan’s support by explaining that the conference would “bring together the administrators of southern Catholic hospitals, retreat houses, schools, parish and diocesan organizations and those responsible for employment practices to give them the benefit of the experiences of those southern Catholic administrators who have successfully removed

¹⁹ “Southern Field Service Report of Activities, 1962-63, Program Goals 1964,” quotes at 5 and 6, folder 7, box 4, series 30, NCCIJR.

²⁰ “The National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice Extension of Southern Field Service Project 1967-1969,” quote at 3, folder 2, box 5, series 30, NCCIJR; “National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice Southern Field Service Report Interim Report covering October 1964/January 1965,” 1-4, folder 8, box 4, series 30, NCCIJR; “National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice Southern Field Service Diocesan Profiles,” 1-29, quote at 28, folder 2, box 5, series 30, NCCIJR; Bernard Wiesman, “Northern Virginians Attend Mass Prior to Demonstration,” [Richmond, VA] *Catholic Virginian*, September 6, 1963, 4.

the barriers and integrated their respective facilities” and also invite “the leading southern Catholic laymen to urge them to work for racial justice in their particular sphere of life.” Cabirac and Hallinan invited the ordinaries of fourteen states.²¹

Archbishop Joseph P. Cody of New Orleans, Bishop Reh of Charleston, Bishop McDonough of Savannah, and Archbishop Coleman F. Carroll of Miami, Florida, responded favorably, being well disposed towards the SFS and desegregation. The equivocal or cautious bishops accepted their invitations “with some degree of qualification,” including Bishop Albert L. Fletcher of Little Rock, Arkansas; Bishop William L. Adrian of Nashville, Tennessee; and Bishop Maurice Schexnayder of Lafayette, Louisiana. About half of the southern Catholic prelates did not respond, some having begun desegregation and others who were more cautious, of whom many were protective of their authority and wary of lay initiative. Although Ahmann visited Gerow seeking to improve relations, the bishop refused to attend. When hepatitis hospitalized Hallinan in 1964, the SFS postponed the conference.²²

The Southern Field Service under Jack Sisson

At Ahmann’s request, Cabirac submitted his resignation in April 1964. The sources do not reveal Ahmann’s reasoning. Their correspondence does not suggest rancor between them; Ahmann may have acted because Cabirac’s zealous approach alienated bishops like Gerow, and the more diplomatic Sisson was a desirable

²¹ Henry Cabirac to Archbishop Paul Hallinan, May 31, 1963, for quotations, July 15, 1963, July 30, 1963, August 5, 1963, folder 5, box 4, series 33, NCCIJR; Archbishop Paul J. Hallinan to Henry Cabirac, June 25, 1963, folder 5, box 4, series 33, NCCIJR; Henry Cabirac to “Southern Field Service Leadership Conference Planning Committee,” undated, folder 10, box 6, series 33, NCCIJR; Charles Carruth, “Reporter Sees ‘Heroic Story’ in South,” [Baton Rouge] *Catholic Commentator*, August 9, 1963, 6; Charles Carruth, “Archbishop Discusses Integration in Atlanta,” [Baton Rouge] *Catholic Commentator*, August 16, 1963, 8.

²² Henry Cabirac to Archbishop Paul J. Hallinan, August 5, 1963, September 16, 1963, folder 5, box 4, series 33, NCCIJR; Harold J. Rainey to Henry Cabirac, October 17, 1963, for quotation, January 8, 1964, folder 5, box 4, series 33, NCCIJR; Harold J. Rainey to Henry A. Cabirac, Jr., January 15, 1964, February 10, 1964, folder 5, box 4, series 33, NCCIJR.

replacement. Hired by the NCCIJ in June 1963 at Cabirac's suggestion, Sisson had worked closely with Ahmann when the NCCIJ co-sponsored the March on Washington. Born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1926, Sisson attended parochial schools in Pensacola and, after an itinerant career, returned to Pensacola and joined both secular and Catholic desegregation efforts.²³

Sisson found himself unable to "effectively cooperate" with Catholic institutions in the Archdiocese of New Orleans because Cody, Rummel's successor, sidelined the CCHR. In response, Sisson worked with the interracial New Orleans Community Relations Council, the NAACP, and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). When he learned that the high school science fair in New Orleans, which was part of a national competition, did not solicit African American entrants, Sisson and the New Orleans Community Relations Council ensured an integrated competition in 1965 by threatening a national publicity campaign, a picket of the venue in New Orleans, and a boycott of the fair's company sponsor.²⁴

In March 1965, when state troopers beat and tear-gassed voting rights protesters in Selma, Alabama, Martin Luther King, Jr., appealed to "clergy of all faiths" to join the protests. Ahmann responded with a telegram to the NCCIJ's 110 affiliated councils, asking them to accept King's invitation. Ahmann established a base in Selma at Father Maurice Ouellet's rectory at the St. Elizabeth Mission, which was operated by the

²³ Henry Cabirac to C. Ellis Henican, April 15, 1964, April 27, 1964, folder 26, box 3, CCHRP; "New Director Appointed for Southern Field Service Project of National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice," National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice press release, May 15, [1964], folder 3, box 25, Archives of the Diocese of Savannah, Savannah, Georgia (hereafter ADS); Henry Cabirac, Jr. to John Sisson, August 29, 1962, folder 26, box 3, series 33, NCCIJR; Henry Cabirac, Jr. to John Sisson, August 21, 1962, in author's possession; Mathew Ahmann to "Dear Jack [Sisson]," May 30, 1963, in author's possession; Mathew Ahmann to Henry [Cabirac], April 20, 1964, in author's possession; Jack Sisson, e-mail to Kathleen Domino, September 16, 2003, in author's possession; Paul T. Murray, "From the Sidelines to the Front Lines: Mathew Ahmann Leads American Catholics into the Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 107 (Spring 2014): 93-95.

²⁴ "National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice Southern Field Service Diocesan Profiles," 15-17, quote at 16, folder 2, box 5, series 30, NCCIJR; John P. Sisson, "Catholic Social Action in the South," *Social Digest* 8 (July-September 1965): 215.

Society of St. Edmund, a religious order that staffed several African American missions. NCCIJ staff at its Chicago headquarters “coordinated continuous movement of Catholics into Alabama” with Ahmann and his small team in Selma. Sisson had been in contact with Ouellet since 1963 and met with him and his parishioners, which prepared the way for Ahmann’s arrival. During protests, Sisson “directed traffic down from the north” and worked to ensure participant safety.²⁵

Catholic priests, sisters, and laity from over fifty dioceses were among the several hundred protesters, including participants Sisson recruited from the Dioceses of Oklahoma City-Tulsa in Oklahoma and Galveston-Houston in Texas. Archbishop Toolen criticized priests and sisters for entering his diocese without observing the custom of seeking his permission and declared, “Their place is at home doing God’s work.”²⁶

During the protests, Sisson went to Memphis, Tennessee, for a conference he organized with the Memphis Catholic Human Relations Council, inviting members of twenty-four south and southwestern Catholic human relations councils and others interested in improving race relations. It attracted 225 people from most of the South’s Catholic dioceses, including numerous Catholic laity, fifty priests, thirty sisters, and “a small number of Protestants and Jews.” Addresses from African American and white Catholic clergy exhorted Catholics to act against racism and were supplemented by “practical workshops on interfaith cooperation, poverty programs, desegregation of

²⁵ David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow, 1986), 397-400, quote at 400; Tom Gibbons to James McFadden, “National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice Report Involvement in Selma, Alabama,” March 26, 1965, for quotation, folder 18, box 26, series 20, NCCIJR; “National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice Report of the Director of the Southern Field Service August, 1965,” 3, folder 1, box 5 series 30, NCCIJR; “National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice Southern Field Service Diocesan Profiles,” 3, folder 2, box 5, series 30, NCCIJR; Murray, “From the Sidelines to the Front Lines,” 100-102; Jack Sisson, e-mail to Father Edward Arroyo, December 16, 2003, for quotation, in author’s possession.

²⁶ Tom Gibbons to James McFadden, “National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice Report Involvement in Selma, Alabama,” March 26, 1965, folder 18, box 26, series 20, NCCIJR; “National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice Southern Field Service Diocesan Profiles,” 23, 26, folder 2, box 5, series 30, NCCIJR; “Prelate Attacks ‘Eager Beavers’ in ‘Holy Cause,’” *National Catholic Reporter* 1 (March 24, 1965): quote at 1.

institutions of society [and] the formation and operation of human relations councils.”

Sisson told the attendees, “The brutality of Selma only emphasizes the tremendous work that lies ahead of all concerned men. The barriers of racial injustice still permeate our society.” Closing the conference, Coadjutor Bishop Joseph A. Durick of Nashville (the only bishop present) appealed to Catholics “not just to tolerate or submit to integration, but to promote it – to become involved personally and heartily in a modern Crusade of the Church, for the spiritual and temporal advancement of Negroes.”²⁷

The *New York Times* reported favorably on the conference as “the first time that such a group of Southern Catholics have met to discuss the racial problems of their area.” The SFS observed that “the workshop sessions enabled the participants to develop and to take home with them concrete plans for implementing programs in employment, poverty, mediation in crises, integration of church facilities, medicine, and the establishment of local human relations councils.” However, implementing such plans depended on local prelates’ approval, whose inclinations varied widely and without whose authority the conference could not formulate or impose a uniform southern-wide program of action. Neglecting lay Catholic segregationists, Durick told the conference that “the problem [of Catholic race relations] lies greatly with the conversion of the clergy.” However, apart from their bishop-appointed chaplains, the membership of Catholic interracial councils was self-selecting. Like the Memphis conference, they attracted sympathetic clergy, sisters, and laity, not those they needed to convert.²⁸

²⁷ “National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice Report of the Director of the Southern Field Service August, 1965,” quote at 1, folder 1, box 5, series 30, NCCIJR; Southern Field Service press release, March 12, 1965, 1-2, folder 1, box 3, series 30, NCCIJR; National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice newsletter, April 1965, folder 11, box 25, Diocese of Austin Records, 1876-2006, Catholic Archives of Texas, Austin, Texas; “Religion and Race in the South: Catholic Perspectives,” folder 4, box 25, ADS; Southern Field Service press release, March 19, 1965, quote at 1, folder 1, box 2, series 30, NCCIJR; Sisson, “Catholic Social Action In the South,” quote at 214; “Gospel Key to Race Justice, Bishop Tells Catholic Meet,” [Diocese of Nashville] *Tennessee Register*, April 2, 1965, quote at 1.

²⁸ Paul L. Montgomery, “Catholics Meet on Race in South,” *New York Times*, March 20, 1965, quote at 18; “National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice Southern Field Service Diocesan Profiles,” quote at

The conference ended the same day that Martin Luther King, Jr., led over 3,000 demonstrators, including a delegation from the Memphis conference, from Selma for the beginning of a three-day march to the state capitol in Montgomery. Sisson was among the 25,000 who joined the marchers at a rally in Montgomery.²⁹

In May, Sisson visited Bogalusa, Louisiana, sixty miles north of New Orleans, where he stayed with members of the Bogalusa Voters' League (BVL). Supported by CORE, the BVL protested against continued segregation, despite the passage of the Civil Rights Act (1964) that had outlawed the practice. Supposedly desegregated by the archdiocese in 1962, Bogalusa's only parochial school, Annunciation School, had no Black pupils, and the parish continued to segregate worshipers. Following unfavorable press coverage, Archbishop Cody officiated at an integrated confirmation service in the church and declared that "no Catholic child will be turned away from Catholic school because of race." Sisson took Cody's confirmation sermon to press agencies in New Orleans and arranged with Black parents to register their children at Annunciation. When public schools desegregated in September, the school admitted five African Americans.³⁰

The SFS's major focus that summer was organizing a conference on "Social Change and Christian Response," postponed from 1964. Co-sponsored by the Archdiocese of Atlanta, the conference was "open to all diocesan officials and Catholic leaders, lay and religious," with Hallinan personally inviting ordinaries from twenty-five dioceses. Held in July, the conference attracted 160 registrants. Coleman F. Carroll of Miami; Charles P. Greco of Alexandria, Louisiana; Victor J. Reed of Oklahoma City-

24, folder 2, box 5, series 30, NCCIJR; "Gospel Key to Race Justice, Bishop Tells Catholic Meet," quote at 1.

²⁹ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 411, 412-413; Sisson, e-mail to Arroyo.

³⁰ Roy Reed, "Race Riot Balked at Bogalusa, La.," *New York Times*, April 10, 1965, 1; "Negroes and Whites Attend Bogalusa Episcopal Church," *New York Times*, May 10, 1965, 27; John P. Cody, sermon at Annunciation Church, Bogalusa, May 16, 1965, for quotation, folder 1, box 7, series 33, NCCIJR; Jack [Sisson] to Matt [Ahmann], "Bogalusa visit, May 14 and 15," May 24, 1965, folder 1, box 7, series 33, NCCIJR; John Fahey, "Bogalusa Schools Integrated," [New Orleans] *Times-Picayune*, September 2, 1965; clipping attached to John P. Sisson to Hubert Bordenave, November 4, 1965, folder 1, box 7, series 33, NCCIJR; "Archbishop Calls for Peace in Racially Tense Bogalusa," [Miami, FL] *Voice*, May 28, 1965, 2.

Tulsa; and John J. Russell of Richmond were the only bishops who attended, indicative of many Catholic prelates' unwillingness to associate themselves with the SFS or the civil rights movement. Nevertheless, "Twenty-three dioceses were represented by chancellors and other officials, by hospital administrators, superintendents of schools, by presidents of interracial councils and presidents of diocesan councils of Catholic Men and Women." Four prominent civil rights leaders participated: Rudolph Lombard, CORE national vice president; Clarence A. Laws, a Louisiana Catholic and southwest regional director of the NAACP; and the Reverends Andrew J. Young and C.T. Vivian of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Their presence was illustrative, like the Catholic participation in the Selma demonstrations, of the Second Vatican Council's encouragement to address secular problems and cooperate with members of other faiths.³¹

Hearing the unvarnished views of African Americans was jarring for those white Catholics accustomed to Black Catholics being deferential to clergy and to whites in general. When Rev. Vivian declared that demonstrations were needed to exert pressure and secure better employment for low-paid African Americans, Monsignor Edward W. O'Rourke, executive director of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, objected. Ignoring the enforcement issue and entrenched job discrimination, O'Rourke claimed that the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed race-based employment discrimination, and the South's economic growth rendered protests unnecessary. He suggested that the races should instead cooperate in federal antipoverty programs; however, he failed to recognize

³¹ "Social Change and Christian Response," for quotations, folder 1, box 7, series 33, NCCIJR; Southern Field Service press release, July 3, 1965, folder 4, box 1, series 30, NCCIJR; "National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice Report of the Director of the Southern Field Service August, 1965," quote at 1, folder 1, box 5, series 30, NCCIJR; M.F. Everett, "Leaders Examine Race Issue," [New Orleans] *Clarion Herald*, August 5, 1965, 1.

that these were insufficiently funded and too localized to provide African Americans with well-paid and sustainable employment.³²

Although Hallinan urged participants to avoid “breast beating,” *Catholic Rural Life* reported that “several speakers and discussants pointed to the tardiness and tokenism of the Church’s efforts in behalf of Negroes. Repeated objections were raised to the continuation of Negro parishes.”³³ In his address, Clarence A. Laws called separate churches for African American Catholics “discriminatory and divisive.” “Negro Catholics,” Laws lamented, “have learned through sad and painful experience that the ‘separate but equal’ concept in the Church can be as cruel a myth as the ‘separate but equal’ concept in education, jobs, housing, hospitals, recreational facilities, and political self-determination.” He added, “If ever told, the story of the treatment of Negro priests and nuns by some of their non-Negro counterparts would constitute one of the most shameful chapters in the long and honored history of Catholicism.”³⁴

Whereas Laws excoriated Catholic religious, Hallinan’s address focused on the laity’s responsibility for rectifying racial discrimination, bearing the imprint of the Second Vatican Council in which he actively participated. Hallinan explained, “Catholic institutions as such must share responsibility for moral leadership in racial justice, but laymen in their own secular professions and trades and work, in their own homes and in their neighborhoods share an equal burden. Theirs is the work, as popes and council have clearly stated, of *consecratio mundi*, theirs is the consecration of the world.” However, as Catholic prelates desegregated schools and churches and African Americans migrated to urban centers, many white Catholics in Atlanta and other southern cities relocated to the suburbs, limiting Catholic desegregation. The lay initiative that the council

³² “Catholic Leaders of the South Discuss Changing Racial Issues,” *Catholic Rural Life* 14 (September 1965), unpaginated, folder 4, box 25, ADS.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ “Statement of Clarence A. Laws, Regional Director National Association for the Advancement of Colored People,” July 30, 1965, folder 5, box 84, Twomey Papers.

encouraged was often not expressed in the progressive direction that Hallinan hoped and envisaged. When racial pronouncements from Catholic prelates and the council conflicted with their own preferences, southern white laity largely followed their own wishes.³⁵

After the conference, Sisson noted a distinct change in Bishop Greco, who became “open to consultations with SFS.” In September, Greco and the similarly cautious Bishop Maurice Schexnayder of Lafayette became the South’s last Catholic prelates to inaugurate parochial school desegregation, which began like many other Deep South locations in tandem with public school desegregation.³⁶

As southern Catholic institutional desegregation proceeded, the SFS focused on its antipoverty efforts. Having improved relations with Bishop Gerow, Sisson liaised between the Southern Rural Training Project and the Diocese of Natchez-Jackson, which led to the 1965 creation of Systematic Training and Redevelopment (STAR), an antipoverty program funded with \$5.3 million from the federal Office of Economic Opportunity, \$1.6 million from the United States Department of Labor, and almost \$500,000 from the diocese. “We spent a lot of effort supporting the efforts of STAR,” Sisson recalled. Administered by the diocese in eighteen centers throughout Mississippi, STAR sought to provide 25,000 people with training and employable skills through an integrated vocational education program. However, racial paternalism and discrimination marred the program. Although STAR received another \$7.3 million of federal funding, by August 1971 only 5,000 of its 18,000 participants were employed.³⁷

³⁵ Paul J. Hallinan, “Church in Society,” quote at 8, folder 4, box 2, series 30, NCCIJR; Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

³⁶ “National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice Southern Field Service Diocesan Profiles,” quote at 12, folder 2, box 5, series 30, NCCIJR; Newman, *Desegregating Dixie*, 163.

³⁷ Office of Economic Opportunity press release, August 5, 1965, folder “CDGM – Minutes 1965,” box 5, Arthur C. Thomas Papers, Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia; “National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice Report of the Director of the Southern Field Service August, 1965,” 2, folder 1, box 5, series 30, NCCIJR; “National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice

The SFS urged dioceses to participate in Project Equality, a NCCIJ program in which religious bodies agreed to contract only with employers who upheld equal hiring policies and took affirmative action to hire minorities. It first began in the St. Louis and Detroit archdioceses during spring 1965. In August, the Archdiocese of San Antonio, which the SFS had persuaded in 1963 to adopt “a merit hiring clause in all ... church construction contracts,” became Project Equality’s first southern diocese. The archdiocese worked with nearly 450 businesses to ensure African Americans and Mexican Americans were treated fairly in employment and promotion. In the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, Project Equality became an interdenominational program, but despite vigorous efforts, the SFS struggled to engage southern Catholic dioceses because of the program’s administrative costs and difficulties enlisting other denominations. In 1967, the Diocese of Nashville became only the second southern Catholic diocese to join Project Equality. Setting up the program in Tennessee, Sisson reported, “required major SFS services for nine months.”³⁸

Recognizing Sisson’s heavy workload, in February 1966 the NCCIJ hired as associate director James J. McGuire, a former Marianist brother. In June, Sisson and the Memphis Catholic Human Relations Council helped the Meredith marchers find rooms and accommodation. Sisson also recruited some priests of parishes along the marchers’ route to provide hospitality. He invited Catholic mediators to Mississippi, where they and McGuire helped resolve a dispute in Canton that enabled the march’s continuation.

Southern Field Service Diocesan Profiles,” 19, folder 2, box 5, series 30, NCCIJR; H. Martin Huddleston to George Broussard, August 2, 1971, folder 1645, box 98, VI Sub Series P: STAR, Inc., Aaron Edd Henry Papers, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Tougaloo College, Tougaloo, Mississippi; “STAR, Inc. Fact Sheet,” August 12, 1971, in “STAR, Inc., Correspondence February 20, 1969-May 1, 1973,” Archives of the Catholic Diocese of Jackson, Jackson, Mississippi; John P. Sisson to Laura Bradley, March 5, 1987, for quotation, in author’s possession.

³⁸ “Detroit and St. Louis Use Vast Church Funds to Insure Fair Hiring,” *National Catholic Reporter* 1 (May 19, 1965): 1; “Interim Report of the Southern Field Services – 1963 Activities,” August 2, 1963, quote at 4, folder 7, box 4, series 30, NCCIJR; “Report of the Director of the Southern Field Service (SFS), September 1967,” 1, 3-7, quote at 3, folder 4, box 5, series 30, NCCIJR; Dick Meskill, “Archbishop Marshals Buying Power to Promote Employment Equality,” [San Antonio, TX] *Alamo Messenger*, August 13, 1965, 1, 18.

Sisson, Little Rock Catholic Interracial Council members, several priests, and Sister Mary Peter of the DES participated near the march's conclusion in Jackson.³⁹

In 1967, the SFS contributed to a notable success in *Loving v. Virginia*, by which the U.S. Supreme Court struck down state anti-miscegenation laws in eighteen states. At Sisson's request, Father William Lewers, C.S.C., wrote an *animus curiae* brief for the NCCIJ supporting an American Civil Liberties Union suit that challenged Virginia's interracial marriage prohibition. Sisson secured the signatures on the brief of sixteen Catholic bishops from the South and Southwest. As justification, signatory Bishop Ernest L. Unterkoefler of Charleston cited the Second Vatican Council's "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" (*Gaudium et Spes*). He explained, "As a pastor of both white and non-white people I am committed to the proposition that 'with regard to the fundamental rights of the person, every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, color, social condition, language or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God's intent.'" ⁴⁰

Despite *Loving's* success, by 1967 the SFS struggled to attract the foundation grants that had almost completely financed it. In response, Ahmann transferred McGuire to the NCCIJ's Chicago staff, and in March, Sisson announced, "We will continue to service existing councils, with small effort toward establishing new groups." He prevented the service's termination in late September by soliciting donations from

³⁹ Jack Sisson to Mathew Ahmann, et al., "Monthly Written Summary, Activities SFS," January 18, 1966, folder 3, box 5, series 30, NCCIJR; McGuire to Matt [Ahmann], "Southern Field Service and the Meredith Freedom March," June 29, 1966, folder 11, box 8, series 34, NCCIJ; Jack [Sisson] to Matt [Ahmann], "Meredith Mississippi Freedom March, June 6-26, 1966 (Jim sent a separate report of his activities from June 22 to June 28)," June 30, 1966, folder 11, box 8, series 34, NCCIJ.

⁴⁰ Jack Sisson, "Southern Field Service Program Report," February 18, 1966, 2, folder 3, box 5, series 30, NCCIJR; "Bishops Support Interracial Case," [Richmond, VA] *Catholic Virginian*, February 24, 1967, 1; "Statement on Case of Richard Perry Loving and Mildred Delores Jeter Loving, Appellants v. Commonwealth of Virginia. Appellee – Ernest L. Unterkoefler, Bishop of Charleston, Amicus Curiae," for quotations, folder 720.1, Archives of Diocese of Charleston, Charleston, South Carolina; Jack Sisson, e-mail to Toni Shrewsbury, October 5, 2007, in author's possession; Jack Sisson, e-mail to Mark Newman, February 5, 2008, in author's possession; Jack Sisson, e-mail to Carolyn Abshire, April 2, 2008, in author's possession.

supporters, including Bishops John L. Morkovsky of Galveston-Houston and Carroll of Miami. Apart from fundraising, Sisson focused on trying to persuade bishops to adopt Project Equality. He reported that the bishops' "interest in proceeding is geared to launching the program inter-denominationally. In some places, such as Atlanta, this is requisite if P[roject] E[quality] is to have effect, since the Catholic population there is less than 2%. The main impediment in every case is the necessity of diverting, or raising, \$35,000 to administer the program."⁴¹

Although the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston and the Diocese of Beaumont launched the Southwest Texas Project Equality program in February 1969, other dioceses continued to demur. Sisson noted that interest expressed in New Orleans and Virginia would "require constant bolstering, consultation and other assistance." He also observed that "Many of the CICs [Catholic Interracial Councils] have been very quiet, and the one in Fort Smith; Ark. folded." He cited the councils in Charleston, Atlanta, Memphis, Nashville, Little Rock, Oklahoma City, and Lafayette as "inactive for the most part for the past year." With desegregation underway in every southern diocese, albeit largely token, the number of councils declined. Many southern white Catholics believed them no longer necessary or lost interest as a growing number of African American Catholics either left the Church or opposed desegregation's closing of Black Catholic churches and schools. The NCCIJ itself struggled to maintain interest and funding amid the national

⁴¹ John P. Sisson to Archbishop Coleman F. Carroll, August 2, 1967, folder 19, box 3, series 33, NCCIJR; Edwin W. Tucker to John P. Sisson, August 22, 1967, folder 19, box 3, series 33, NCCIJR; John P. Sisson to "Staff," "SFS Report to Staff, March 12-31, 1967," March 31, 1967, quote at 4, folder 4, box 5, series 30, NCCIJR; John P. Sisson to "Staff," "SFS Report to Staff, July 19-September 7, 1967," September 7, 1967, 1, folder 3, box 5, series 30, NCCIJR; "National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice (NCCIJ), Report of the Director of the Southern Field Service (SFS) September 1967," quote at 1, folder 4, box 5, series 30, NCCIJR; Mathew Ahmann to John P. Nelson, Jr., January 23, 1967, folder 4, box 4, John P. Nelson Papers, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana (hereafter Nelson Papers); Matt Ahmann to Councils and Board of Directors, February 3, 1967, folder 4, box 4, Nelson Papers; John McCarthy to John L. Morkovsky, September 5, 1967, folder 7, box 4, Bishop John E. McCarthy Papers, Catholic Archives of Texas, Austin, Texas (hereafter McCarthy Papers).

declension from racial issues, and as Sisson reported, the organization “voted to discontinue SFS due to lack of funds,” terminating it in September 1969.⁴²

The Southern Field Service and African Americans

Given its limited resources, the task’s immensity, the meager southern Catholic population, and the Church’s hierarchical polity, the SFS may have achieved as much as circumstances permitted, but it was also circumscribed by a tendency under Cabirac to direct African Americans, rather than work as partners. Cabirac’s zeal and impatience for change partly influenced that approach as did assumptions he absorbed from the segregationist culture in which he was reared regarding supposed African American dependency and docility and the reluctance of many African American Catholics to pressure bishops they were taught to revere and obey. He also was formed by a Catholic Church dominated by white bishops and clergy, many of whom, in varying degrees, paternalistically viewed African Americans as dependants needing spiritual, moral, and material uplift. For decades, many Catholic seminaries severely limited and excluded African American admissions. The SFS thus had few Black clergy in the South with whom to work, and bishops, whether by preference or paucity of Black clergy, appointed white clergy as chaplains of Catholic interracial councils.

Cabirac and Sisson engaged with the few African American clergy they met. Sisson’s efforts focused on collaboration, but Cabirac’s encounters were characteristically judgemental. In 1963, for instance, Cabirac visited Abbeville,

⁴² Doug Williams, “Project Equality Success Depends on Commitments,” [Galveston-Houston] *Texas Catholic Herald*, November 29, 1968, 1-2; “National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice Report of the Director of the Southern Field Service (SFS) February, 1968,” 2, folder 5, box 5, series 30, NCCIJR; John P. Sisson to “Members of the Staff for Benton Harbor retreat,” “Southern Field Service Program,” June 6, 1969, quote at 1, folder 5, box 5, series 30, NCCIJR; John P. Sisson, “SFS Report to Staff, January 1-February 11, 1969,” February 11, 1969, quote at 2, folder 5, box 5, series 30, NCCIJR; John P. Sisson, “SFS Report to Staff, July 16-September 30, 1969,” September 30, 1969, quote at 1, folder 5, box 5, series 30, NCCIJR.

Louisiana, meeting with Father Albert J. McKnight, a Spiritan (Holy Ghost) Father from Brooklyn, New York, who a year earlier had founded the Southern Consumers Cooperative (SCC) to address poverty among Southern Blacks. Cabirac offered McKnight “business advice” and concluded that “he was on the Uncle Tomish side.” Although Cabirac admitted that he would “have to explore this at greater depth” to “form a more definite conclusion,” his mischaracterization illustrated Cabirac’s impatience for change, a tendency toward snap judgments, and an inability at times to understand African American perspectives. In fact, the “soft-spoken” but determined McKnight, *Ebony* magazine reported, had “garnered the support of more than 2,000 black farmers” before launching the SCC.⁴³

Father August L. Thompson, an African American diocesan priest active in the SCC and civil rights in Ferriday, Louisiana, and McKnight met with Sisson several times for advice when they encountered significant white opposition and persistent harassment. The SCC and CORE in Louisiana worked with Sisson to launch federally-funded Head Start programs in six civil parishes (counties) for preschool children from deprived backgrounds, and he helped the SCC obtain funding for “consumer co-op and credit union conferences.”⁴⁴

Along with meeting with African American priests, Cabirac and Sisson also sought to involve the Knights of Peter Claver directly in the struggle for racial equality, but their approaches differed. Incongruously, Cabirac, a member of a venerable white New Orleans Catholic family, admonished African American Catholics at the 1962 KPC

⁴³ Henry Cabirac, Jr., to James Oliver, March 4, 1963, folder 6, box 7, series 33, NCCIJR; Henry Cabirac to Mathew Ahmann, March 2, 1964, for quotations, folder 6, box 7, series 33, NCCIJR; “The Quiet Revolution of a Parish Priest,” *Ebony* 23 (May 1968): 52-54, 56-57, quotes at 53 and 54.

⁴⁴ “Quiet Revolution of a Parish Priest,” 57; “National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice Southern Field Service Diocesan Profiles, April 1966-November 1966,” 6, folder 2, box 5, series 30, NCCIJR; “National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice Southern Field Service Diocesan Profiles,” 13, 15, quote at 15, folder 2, box 5, series 30, NCCIJR; “National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice Report of the Director of the Southern Field Service August, 1966,” August 3, 1966, 19, folder 2, box 5, series 30, NCCIJR.

convention for not advocating integration to their bishops. Three years earlier, Ora Mae Lewis Martin, a Black Catholic from New Orleans, expressed dismay when Jesuit Father Harold L. Cooper, one of the city's few white priests who openly supported desegregation, called on the KPC to "get up and fight for your rights." Cooper also chided African American Catholics for failing to join the civil rights movement. When that was the case, and there were examples to the contrary, Lewis argued that the white priests serving African American Catholic churches were responsible because they insisted that African Americans be "docile, meek, and patient with wrongs." However well-intentioned, Cabirac, like Cooper, displayed a lack of awareness.⁴⁵

Sisson lacked success in engaging the Knights, but he developed a greater understanding, meeting with them regularly and addressing their national convention in 1964. Following his patient efforts, Sisson reported to the NCCIJ in 1966 that he found it "difficult to have any direct cooperative programming with the Knights or their auxiliary Ladies, since they just don't operate that way."⁴⁶

Despite the Sisters of the Holy Family's motherhouse being located in New Orleans, neither Cabirac nor Sisson seem to have contacted the Afro-Creole order that staffed Black Catholic schools in several southern states. Perhaps the SFS did not approach the order because it did not participate in civil rights protests, although that had not deterred Cabirac and Sisson from contacting the KPC. Historian Shannen Dee Williams provides a likely and more important reason in noting the "racial conservatism" of "the Creole-dominated Holy Family Sisters," whose members shared with other Afro-Creoles a sense of "identity exclusive of both whites and blacks" and exhibited colorism toward Black sisters. The SFS's action also reflected an ingrained tendency in the male-

⁴⁵ Justin D. Poché, "Religion, Race, and Rights in Catholic Louisiana, 1938-1970" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 2007), 219-221, quotations at 220.

⁴⁶ "National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice Southern Field Service Diocesan Profiles," 17-18, quote at 17, folder 2, box 5, series 30, NCCIJR.

led Catholic Church to view sisters, regardless of race, as secondary and subordinate, despite their staffing and leadership of some Catholic institutions.⁴⁷

Reflecting mainstream America's racial and gender assumptions of the early 1960s, the NCCIJ recruited white men to staff the SFS. Its personnel did not reflect the interracialism the organization sought to foster and support. Prior to joining the service, Sisson recognized difficulties when white people sought to articulate African American Catholics' aspirations and perspectives. When he tried to persuade white Catholics in Pensacola to join with African American Catholics in pressing Archbishop Toolen to desegregate local Catholic schools, Sisson admitted, "I've found that I cannot personally convey the needs – the presentation must come from the negroes themselves."⁴⁸

Matt Ahmann, who had built the NCCIJ, reached a similar conclusion. In 1968, he resigned as executive director because, as his widow Margaret Cunningham Ahmann recalled, "he thought, 'A black man needs to run this.'" The NCCIJ appointed James T. Harris, Jr., an African American, as his successor. According to historian Paul T. Murray, because Harris "lacked Ahmann's political and organizational skills," the NCCIJ declined quickly, resulting in Harris's "forced resignation" in April 1971. By then, the heyday of Catholic interracialism, which the SFS had encouraged and nurtured, was past.⁴⁹

In his study of Father John LaFarge, S.J., who founded the Catholic Interracial Council of New York in 1934, historian David W. Southern argued, "Instead of raising a cadre of black leaders, the Catholic interracial movement actually helped create a vacuum of black leadership in the church." In a reaction against LaFarge's white clergy-led interracialism and its emphasis on moral suasion, the NCCIJ and the SFS were led by

⁴⁷ Shannen Dee Williams, "Black Nuns and the Struggle to Desegregate Catholic America After World War I" (Ph.D. dissertation, Rutgers University, 2013), 169-171, 227, 228n71, 237, 305-306, quotes at 170 and 171.

⁴⁸ Jack Sisson to Henry [Cabirac, Jr.], August 17, 1962, folder 26, box 3, series 33, NCCIJR.

⁴⁹ Murray, "From the Sidelines to the Front Lines," 104-109, quotes at 105 and 106.

laity and emphasized action, but they did little to develop African American leadership. Although the NCCIJ's board of directors and Catholic interracial councils included some African Americans, their leadership was white-dominated, except for Harris's ill-fated appointment. Frustrated by both the intransigence of white racism in church and society and a largely one-sided integration process that closed Black Catholic institutions, some African American Catholic clergy, sisters, and laity left the Church in the late 1960s and 1970s. Influenced by these developments and inspired by Black Power, a growing number of those who remained sought to foster Black clergy and lay leadership, the retention of Black Catholic churches and schools, and a liturgy reflective of African American culture.⁵⁰

Conclusion

Although inaugurated before the Second Vatican Council, the SFS fit the council's emphasis on equality and justice, interdenominational cooperation, and an active laity, shaping both the Church and its engagement with the wider world's problems. Throughout its brief existence, the service lacked the funds and personnel to engage consistently and deeply with every southern diocese, and its efforts were severely limited in the Southwest. Some southern bishops rebuffed it. The SFS did not model the interracialism it sought to foster, and it sometimes lacked understanding of African American perspectives. Nevertheless, the SFS helped to link Catholics together in a progressive network, encouraged African American and white Catholics to challenge discrimination in the Church, and encouraged and exerted pressure on prelates to act against segregation and discrimination. The SFS played a supportive role in Catholic school desegregation, Catholic interracial councils, and diocesan participation in Project

⁵⁰ Southern, *John LaFarge and the Limits of Catholic Interracialism*, 361-362, quote at 361, 376-383; Newman, *Desegregating Dixie*, 192-199, 237-268.

Equality, while contributing to the Selma and Meredith Freedom marches and the Supreme Court's landmark *Loving v. Virginia* ruling. The SFS did not bring about sweeping change, but its efforts were neither inconsequential nor insignificant, leaving a legacy among those they touched. Houston priest (and later bishop of Austin, Texas) John E. McCarthy reflected that he and other clergy "developed knowledge and confidence in working in inter-group relations" mostly because of the SFS, which "meant so much to me and like-minded priests in the South."⁵¹

⁵¹ "National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice Southern Field Service Diocesan Profiles," 5-6, 21-22, 27, folder 2, box 5, series 30, NCCIJR; McCarthy to Morkovsky, September 5, 1967, for quotations, folder 7, box 4, McCarthy Papers.