The Changing Parish: Catholics and the Urban Crisis in Twentieth-Century Brooklyn

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THE CHANGING PARISH: CATHOLICS AND THE URBAN CRISIS IN
TWENTIETH-CENTURY BROOKLYN

by

CASSIE P. MILLER, B.A., M.A.

DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

“The Changing Parish: Catholics and the Urban Crisis in Twentieth-Century Brooklyn”

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Once solid supporters of the New Deal, by the mid-1960s Brooklyn’s working-class Catholics stood at the forefront of a movement to halt the perceived excesses of liberalism. Their political realignment was inextricably tied to the postwar urban crisis, which left New York City with a shrinking tax base and a population increasingly in need of social services. White working-class Catholics watched with resentment as the city distributed resources to non-white New Yorkers, whom they blamed for rising crime rates, their growing tax burden, and the physical decline of formerly-white neighborhoods. For these Catholics, liberalism came to be seen not as the extension of government welfare to those who had historically been denied access, but as a force of dispossession that was both political and spatial. In response, they moved toward the nascent conservative movement.

This occurred alongside an equally resolute progressive movement in the Church spearheaded by black Catholics and their liberal allies. Liberal Brooklyn Catholics used their parishes as spaces for political activism, and built a network of organizations to act as intermediaries between the city and its neediest residents. The postwar urban Catholic world was thus defined by a political rift that predated Vatican II, but was publically exposed by the Council. For liberal Catholics and clergy, the Second Vatican Council legitimated their efforts to become more involved in secular and overtly political affairs, including the Civil Rights Movement, the War on Poverty, the welfare rights movement,
rent strikes, and even the embrace of Black Power – issues, they argued, Catholics were morally obligated to support. For the conservative members of the Church, the Council’s mandate to empower the laity meant restraining the authority of the hierarchy. They renounced the clergy’s meddling in issues they deemed political, contributing to the erosion of Church authority in the lives of lay Catholics. The interplay of religion, race, and public policy, this study contends, shaped the political sensibilities of Catholics as well as their relationship with the Catholic Church.
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Introduction

In September of 1959, Rev. Archibald McLees, a pastor at Holy Rosary Church in Bedford-Stuyvesant, wrote to the chancellor of the Diocese of Brooklyn concerning New York City’s impending plan for school integration. In reaction to the Supreme Court’s 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision, school superintendent John Theobald approved the transfer of 364 black children from overcrowded schools in Bedford-Stuyvesant to five underutilized elementary schools in Glendale and Ridgewood, Queens. The two communities had large Catholic populations who were, according to the New York Times, “intensely conservative.”¹ Fearing the busing plan would incite protests from Catholic laity, Rev. McLees suggested that the local priests advise their flocks on the principles of interracial justice. Though the American Bishops had released a statement condemning racial segregation just a year before, the chancellor was reluctant to discuss racial issues with white parishioners. “I do not feel it necessary to ask our pastors to advise their people in advance to behave themselves in this particular instance,” he told the Bishop McEntegart. “They get that advice quite frequently throughout the year on general principles.”² The bishop concurred.³

When six busloads of Bedford-Stuyvesant students arrived at their new schools on September 14, they found that nearly half of their fellow pupils remained at home in a

³ Bishop McEntegart to Rev. Archibald McLes, September 1, 1959, Chancery Office, Canon Law Subject Files, c. 684-G (Catholic Interracial Council), ADB.
parent-organized protest. At two of the schools, mothers picketed outside with signs reading “Stop Transplanting Neighborhoods,” and “Our Vote Counts Too!” Protestant ministers circulated among the crowd, urging mothers to remain peaceful and to return their children to school.\(^4\) Catholic priests, however, were notably absent. Rev. John Powis, only months removed from his ordination, had attempted to reach out to the local clergy, but, much like Rev. McLees, received an apathetic response. “They didn’t really want to get too involved,” he recalled. “They thought it was better to let the situation be.” Rev. Powis took it upon himself to aid the integration measure, and chaperoned the children on their short trip from Bedford-Stuyvesant. The priest was not greeted by the usual reverence Catholics reserved for men of the cloth. Instead, when they emerged from the bus, the priest and young students were met by a crowd of “old Italian ladies” who yelled obscenities and hurled tomatoes and eggs in their direction. The women, Rev. Powis told an interviewer, “looked like they had just come from church.”\(^5\)

The city’s integration measures inspired a variety of responses from Catholics, including righteous indignation, apathy, and fear. This study explains this fragmentation, and argues that cleavages over how to handle “the race problem” in Brooklyn translated into a breakdown of Catholic support for the New Deal welfare state. It places Catholics and the Catholic Church at the center of the story of the urban crisis, a period in which American cities were dramatically reshaped by deindustrialization, the drainage of capital from the urban core, the flight of the white middle class, and the migration of hundreds of thousands of African Americans to the urban North. Its effects were especially profound in Brooklyn, where these forces converged to concentrate poverty, diminish public

\(^5\) Msgr. John Powis Oral History, 28 July 2008, Office of the Archivist, Interviews on DVD, Box 1, ADB
resources and services, limit employment, and, by the late 1960s, create what the press
deemed the “largest ghetto in America.”6 The urban crisis also inspired a period of
political mobilization among Brooklyn residents. They drew on their religious institutions
to support political goals, whether those included furthering racial justice, equality, and
integration, or to push back on the Black Freedom Movement and insist upon the rights
of whites to control the barriers of their communities.7 The disparate impact of the urban
crisis pulled the Catholic Church in conflicting directions. While, doctrinally, the Church
supported racial equality and the creation of programs aimed at its attainment, white
Catholics – who made up an overwhelming majority of parishioners – drifted toward the
nascent conservative movement, fought to halt the expansion of liberalism, and attempted
to slow the movement for black equality and integration.

   This study examines Catholics at the diocesan and parish levels, demonstrating
how they responded to the urban crisis and fit into the shifting American political
landscape between the Second World War and the early 1970s. During this period,
Brooklyn’s white Catholics became increasingly conservative, leading political analyst
Kevin Phillip to claim that, by 1969, “More than any other Northeastern religious group,
Catholics tend to inhabit the socioeconomic ‘combat zone,’ confronting the Democratic
Party with the cruel dilemma of aborting its ideological thrust or alienating the loyalties
of its largest bloc of longtime supporters.”8 The roots of their resistance to liberalism
stretch back to the 1930s, when Catholics developed a vehement opposition to

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6 Renewal Magazine, 1968, 9. I refer to Bedford-Stuyvesant, which journalists regularly described as the
nation’s largest ghetto.
7 I use the term Black Freedom Movement to refer to the period Jacquelyn Dowd Hall defined as the “long
civil rights movement,” while remaining sensitive to the varying iterations that developed within the
movement. See Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” The
communism based on its perceived atheistic orientation. Catholic anticommunism generated suspicion of any expansion of state power well into the 1970s. It also caused Catholics to question and even discredit the Black Freedom Movement because of its alignment with leftists and Communists.

More than anything else, however, white Catholics rejected liberalism because they saw it not as the extension of resources and opportunities to groups that had historically been denied equal access, but as a way of offering non-whites an unfair advantage at the expense of the white working and middle classes. Many Catholics insisted that they were the victims of black advancement. As the social scientists Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Nathan Glazer observed in 1970, “The 1960s brought the issue of race to the city as it had not existed before. In New York, as elsewhere in the North, this created a range of conflict situations in which Negroes confronted Catholics.”\(^9\) Spatial proximity meant it was often Catholics who were “defending” their neighborhoods against black encroachment, their schools against integration, and who routinely contended with the increasing problem of street crime. Their growing conservatism was also deeply influenced by their position in the working and lower-middle classes. Unlike their suburban counterparts, Brooklyn’s Catholics were not members of the affluent society. As their wages stagnated and work became more difficult to find and maintain, Catholic men and women saw their taxes rise as welfare and anti-poverty programs expanded. This engendered a nebulous sense of displacement, resentment, and unfairness.

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“Sociopolitical upheaval in New York City,” Phillips concluded, “was turning Catholic voters into the vanguard of conservatism.”

Burgeoning Catholic conservatism occurred alongside an equally resolute progressive movement in the Catholic Church, which was spearheaded by black Catholics and their liberal allies. In the immediate postwar years, most black Catholics were Caribbean immigrants, though conversion efforts brought an increasing number of former Protestants and “the unchurched” into the fold during the 1950s and 1960s. The number of black Catholics within the diocese was always small, but they had an outsized impact on the political orientation of the Church. Black Catholics – along with white liberal Catholics and the overwhelmingly white clergy – built a network of organizations to address the persistent failure of the city bureaucracy to meet the needs of Brooklyn’s poorest residents. Drawing on Catholic doctrine, they turned their parishes into sites of social activism and organization and, in turn, pushed an often resistant and complacent diocese to embrace a more progressive stand on racism and poverty.

For Brooklyn Catholics, parishes were multifarious spaces – synchronously secular and sacred. Within them, the Catholic faith imbued followers with belief and, together, Catholics worshiped using a set of sacred rituals. Yet parishes were also urban institutions that played a vital role in the secular city. They provided education, distributed social services, bought and sold real estate, and created a supportive network for activists with both liberal and conservative leanings. They could be rallying points for Christian brotherhood and incubators of bigotry. This study examines Brooklyn’s local parishes in their many iterations, and argues that the forms they took were profoundly

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shaped by social movements and the people who worshiped within their churches and used their services. This conception of the Catholic Church allows the study to highlight the conflicts that emerged within individual parishes and the larger diocesan structure over the Church’s proper mission. Was the Church primarily a space for worship, service, or activism, and could these purposes be balanced? Did the Church and its clergy have authority to speak on political matters, or should they stick to the anodyne and ambiguous topics of ethics, morals, and decency?

Despite diocesan leaders’ attempts to portray the Catholic Church as a unified and unwavering institution, it was plagued by internal conflict throughout the postwar period, and the reforms of the Second Vatican Council brought them to the fore. The diocese performed a delicate balancing act. It espoused a social doctrine that emphasized brotherhood, community, and social justice while never fully endorsing the actions of “militant” liberal priests like Rev. Powis. As Rev. McLees found in 1959, diocesan leaders were reluctant to stake a clear position on matters of race for fear of offending white parishioners. If the diocese spoke forcefully on issues perceived to be political, or chastised white parishioners for their failure to further racial justice, they risked losing financial contributions from the laity. Individual parishes largely became a reflections of their parishioners’ political beliefs, impairing the Church’s ability to be a potent force for social change.

Race is the focus of this study, and a constant concern of the historical actors who fill its pages. Several chapters highlight the experiences of black Catholics, but black voices are often obscured by those of white members of the hierarchy. This study relies heavily on diocesan sources, and the Catholic Church was – and remains – a
fundamentally white institution. As a result, I raise more questions than answers about black Catholic life in the urban North.\textsuperscript{11} Additionally, despite the fact that the diocese contained a large Puerto Rican population that was predominantly Catholic, their experiences remain outside the purview of this study. Significantly, for white Catholics, Puerto Ricans and other Spanish-speaking immigrant groups did not inspire the same fears as African Americans. As John McGreevy has pointed out, “in contrast to the transition to an overwhelmingly Protestant population,” the movement of Catholic Mexican and Puerto Rican immigrants into a neighborhood “did not automatically portend a crisis to parish finances or the potential collapse of the parish school.”\textsuperscript{12}

Language differences allowed parishes to offer separate Masses for Spanish speakers, thereby limiting contact with white parishioners.\textsuperscript{13}

This study is, consciously, largely limited to the study of white religious and lay Catholics, their conceptions of race, and how the changing racial dynamics of New York City impacted their political sensibilities and relationship with their Church. It aims to make several historiographical interventions. First, this study places Catholic men and women within the larger social and economic context of American society, and reconceptualizes how their encounters with race shaped their politics. Second, it complicates the history of the urban crisis. Examining this period from the perspective of the Catholic Church highlights the ways people and their intuitions experienced the large,


\textsuperscript{13} There is a burgeoning literature on Latino Catholics. See Timothy M. Matovina, \textit{Latino Catholicism: Transformations in America’s Largest Church} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).
structural changes of deindustrialization, urban renewal, and suburbanization. The conservatism of many Brooklyn Catholics also suggests that we reassess the geographic barriers that tend to perforate histories of the urban crisis and conservatism: the political movement’s roots developed not only in the crabgrass frontiers of the suburbs, but also urban spaces. Finally, this study aims to further our understanding of the impact of Vatican II on the laity, and argues that, while political divisions already existed within the Church prior to the Council’s conclusion in 1965, it legitimated the actions of liberal Catholics while allowing conservatives to disavow Church teaching on matters they deemed “political” and therefore outside the authority of the Church.

The Politics of Catholicism

It would be a stretch to claim that New York was a Catholic city; it is more accurately defined by its religious plurality. By the conclusion of the Second World War, Brooklyn was nearly evenly trifurcated between Catholics, Jews, and Protestants (who were, significantly, predominantly black).¹⁴ In fact, as part of its total population, New York City actually had a lower proportion of Catholics than most northern cities because of its large Jewish community. Despite the impressive Catholic presence in the urban North, they appear infrequently in our histories of these spaces, and, when they do, their religiosity is often merely noted but ignored. Catholicism is subsumed by whiteness. In his seminal study of the urban crisis in Detroit, for instance, Thomas Sugrue made frequent reference to the Catholicism of the whites fighting against black encroachment.

¹⁴ *New York Times*, 29 September 1946. A survey conducted by the Brooklyn Church and Mission Federation in 1946 reported that 32% of Brooklynites were Catholic, 29% Protestant, and 37% Jewish.
in working-class neighborhoods, but failed to assign much significance to this fact.\textsuperscript{15} As Kevin Schultz and Paul Harvey wrote in a recent essay, “Religion is everywhere in history, but nowhere in mainstream historiography.”\textsuperscript{16} It factors into significant events like the Civil Rights Movement, but its continuous influence and relevance in the lives of historical actors seem to escape those composing their histories. Religion, Jon Butler argued, is a “jack-in-the-box,” appearing sporadically throughout our post-1870 histories but “seldom followed by an extended performance, much less substance.”\textsuperscript{17} It is the contention of this study that religion and religious institutions contoured the lives of urban Americans in the twentieth century, and to ignore their influence, as Schultz and Harvey concluded, “is simply to write bad history.”\textsuperscript{18}

Though Sugrue has rightly complained that much of twentieth-century Catholic history “remains trapped in the Catholic ghetto,” a small but significant contingent of scholars have inserted Catholics into the larger cultural, political, and social processes in American society.\textsuperscript{19} In our understanding of Catholics and race, the works of Gerald


\textsuperscript{16} Kevin M. Schultz and Paul Harvey, “Everywhere and Nowhere: Recent Trends in American Religious History and Historiography,” Journal of the American Academy of Religion 78, no. 1 (March 2010): 129. Schultz and Harvey argue that, “despite much recent work on the topic, Catholicism remains the most understudied tradition in American history, particularly in work that engages Catholicism with the greater story of American history.”


\textsuperscript{18} Schultz and Harvey, “Everywhere and Nowhere,” 132.

Gamm and John McGreevy have been invaluable. Both demonstrate that Catholicism played a major role in how Catholics conceived of urban spaces. Parishioners invested – both spiritually and financially – in their immovable, geographically defined parishes and therefore more vehemently opposed racial integration than other whites. “When a neighborhood changes from white to Negro,” Saul Alinsky pointedly observed, “the Catholic church is in a different position than Protestant and Jewish churches. It has a bigger investment.” For historians studying urban race relations in the twentieth century, the arguments put forth by Gamm and McGreevy have become gospel, and this study is consciously built on the foundation they constructed.

While Gamm and McGreevy have brought Catholics to the city, historians have yet to insert the state into the history of urban Catholics. Catholics are, in our histories, largely people without politics. Or, more precisely, conservative politics. Though historians are beginning to assess the dramatic American political realignment that occurred in the latter half of the twentieth century, Catholics have been left out of the

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21 Quoted in McGreevy, Parish Boundaries, 116.


23 Liberal Catholics make frequent appearances in the history of twentieth-century American Catholicism, but these studies are often limited to biographical portraits. See James Terence Fisher, The Catholic Counterculture in America, 1933-1962 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989). There is a more robust literature on the role of Catholicism in shaping politics and identity in the early part of the twentieth century than in the postwar era. Two excellent examples include Paula Kane, Separatism and Subculture: Boston Catholicism, 1900-1920 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994) and Mary Lethert Wingerd, Claiming the City: Politics, Faith, and the Power of Place in St. Paul (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).
story, usually in favor of Evangelicals. Once solid supporters of the New Deal-style welfare state, by the mid-1960s Catholics were at the frontline of a movement to halt the perceived excesses of liberalism. Patrick Allit’s *Catholic Intellectuals and Conservative Politics in America, 1950-1985*, now more than 20 years old, is one attempt to insert Catholics into the conservative movement. However, as the title suggests, his study was limited to the world of intellectuals and the pages elite publications like *National Review* and *Ramparts*. Like Allit’s work, Todd Scribner’s recent examination of neoconservative Catholics focused on biographical portraits, though his scope was limited to the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Joshua Zeitz’s *White Ethnic New York: Jews, Catholics, and the Shaping of Postwar Politics* is the best (and, currently, only) history of grassroots Catholic conservatism. Zeitz relied primarily on religious culture to explain political differences between Catholics and Jews, arguing that Jews embraced secularism and dissent while Catholics emphasized obedience, hierarchy, and respect for authority. These attributes, he demonstrated, led a small majority of Catholics away from the Democratic Party as Jews continued to embrace liberalism. While he is certainly correct that race fails to explain *everything* about postwar politics, his work downplayed its importance in driving Catholics to conservatism. Significantly, he ignored their resistance to integration and how – as this study argues – urban Catholics came to see liberalism primarily as a

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26 Joshua Zeitz, *White Ethnic New York: Jews Catholics, and the Shaping of Postwar Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007). Zeitz’s work was an attempt to address the field of whiteness studies that emerged in the 1990s and, for Catholic historians of the twentieth century, its main strength lies in the reminder that ties to ethnicity persisted into the 1970s. “Whiteness,” he showed, “did not equal sameness.”
political and economic philosophy premised on providing an unfair advantage and favoritism to undeserving minorities at the expense of the white working and middle classes. Zeitz also leaves the relationship between the laity and Church largely unexplored, and employed Catholicism simply as a set of beliefs rather than an institutional structure. Tellingly, he cites only one document from the Archives of the Diocese of Brooklyn, and nothing from the Archives of the Archdiocese of New York.

Race was the defining issue in the politics of postwar New York, and it fundamentally shaped Catholic conservatism. In 1970 the New York Times captured this conservative spirit in a profile of Joe Kelly, a thirty-one-year-old, outer-borough, blue-collar New Yorker. Kelly participated in the Manhattan “hardhat” protests that became emblematic of white working-class backlash. He was the product of parochial school education, devoutly Catholic, proudly deferent to authority, and patriotic. He cited Senator Joseph McCarthy as one of his greatest political influences and expressed concern that communism was gaining a hold both in Vietnam and among American youth. He was worried that society had become too permissive, tolerating and even encouraging dissent among hippies and the “antiwar generation.” Kelly was also deeply concerned that his hard-won comfort and new $40,000 house were under attack by liberal policies that created overly-generous public assistance programs, promoted integration, and failed to take seriously the city’s rising crime problem. Liberal Mayor John Lindsay, he argued, was turning New York into a “welfare city.” He was perturbed by the presence of a black family on his street. “I had to bust my backside for five years to get that down payment for that house,” he told the reporter. “I am not interested in seeing all that go down the drain.” To register his discontent, Kelly voted for William F. Buckley and John
Marchi, both conservative Catholics, in the mayoral elections of 1965 and 1969, and for Richard Nixon in the 1968 presidential election.  

In *Parish Boundaries*, McGreevy argued that, by the 1960s, a cultural divide existed between “two ‘Catholic’ peoples:” those who supported the Civil Rights Movement, and those who perceived supporters of racial equality “as threats to a painfully established local moral order.” This dissertation contends that the divide went deeper: it was not simply about racial equality, but the very role of the state, which, significantly, the Great Society made far more visible. As Joe Kelly’s politics showed, Catholics’ evolving relationship with the state was intimately connected to the issue of race. White urban Catholics saw policies that liberals supported – integration, welfare, social services, public housing, and anti-poverty measures – as a means of catering to minorities. Their rising tax burden supported these programs, and, by the late 1960s, they felt they had less to spare. Many urban Catholics worked in blue-collar professions, and their existence was precarious. “I’m an ironworker, a connector; when I go to work in the mornin’, I don’t even know if I’m gonna make it back,” a man in an Irish bar in Brooklyn told reporter Pete Hamill in 1969. He was blunter than Joe Kelly: “Who feeds my wife and kids if I’m dead? Lindsay? The poverty program? You know the answer: nobody. But the niggers, they don’t worry about it. They take the welfare and sit out on the stoop drinkin’ cheap wine and throwin’ the bottles on the street.” Liberalism, he argued, was not working for white men like him, and thus Catholics increasingly moved to put a halt to liberal program and reign in the welfare state.

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Beyond Suburban Warriors: Catholics and the Urban Crisis

In order to understand the anger Pete Hamill found in that Brooklyn bar, historians must examine how the urban crisis impacted Catholics and their church. By the 1960s, the term “urban crisis” came to describe the interrelated problems of crime, blighted housing, underperforming schools, deficient infrastructure, and chronic unemployment in black urban communities. Social and political commentators – particularly those of a neoconservative bent who staffed an emerging institutional infrastructure of think tanks and policy institutes – argued that these problems were the result of cultural deficiencies, family breakdown, and government programs that encouraged dependency.30 Sociologists like William Julius Wilson struck back, arguing that capitalism, which created deindustrialization and joblessness, produced the black urban “underclass.”31 While sociologists introduced structural forces as an explanation for concentrated black poverty, the debate lacked a historical perspective. Building on the “ghetto synthesis model” developed by Gilbert Osofsky and his contemporaries to explain the rise of segregated black neighborhoods in the early twentieth century, historians found the roots of the urban crisis in the 1940s and 1950s.32 Thomas Sugrue’s 1996 work, The Origins of the Urban Crisis, was pioneering. Sugrue argued that

30 For an examination of New Right intellectualism and the creation of a cultural and institutional infrastructure for promoting conservative ideology, see Alice O’Connor, “The Privatized City: The Manhattan Institute, the Urban Crisis, and the Conservative Counterrevolution in New York,” Journal of Urban History 34, no. 2 (January 2008): 333-353.
structural forces moved capital and opportunity to the suburban periphery, mapping economic inequality onto American cities and hardening racial barriers. Over the course of decades, deindustrialization, workplace discrimination, and residential segregation birthed the urban crisis of the 1960s.

Despite its utility in explaining the historical, structural forces behind concentrated urban poverty, the early scholarship on the urban crisis failed to examine black political development. African Americans were not simply acted upon, but organized to resist urban decline and fight for social services.\(^{33}\) Robert O. Self shifted the discussion of the urban crisis to political development among both black and white actors. In *American Babylon*, he argued that Black Power and conservatism emerged out of a competition over resources, capital, services, and jobs. He was particularly cognizant of how space organized politics, and framed his examination of the urban crisis in Oakland as a “municipal history.” California’s history, he insisted, “is postwar America’s story – black and white, urban and suburban, rebellion and backlash – narratives that are inextricably linked and deserve to be told as one.” His cleanly bifurcated view of city (black, rebellious) and suburb (white, backlash) came to dominate the historical exploration of conservatism. Other historians writing about conservatism, including Lisa

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McGirr, Becky Nicolaides, and Kevin Kruse, have also portrayed it as a suburban phenomenon.34

This suburbanization narrative is too simplistic, and fails to take account of the reality that white people – and their institutions – remained within the city limits during and after the 1960s. This study argues that conservatism was not simply a suburban development. The movement to halt liberalism had a vocal and robust urban outfit, and it was dominated by working- and middle-class Catholics. For urban Catholics, far more than their suburban counterparts, liberalism came to be seen as a force of dispossession that was both political and spatial. As African Americans moved to cities in ever larger numbers – drawn, whites contended, by overly-generous welfare programs and housed in publically-funded projects – this sense of dispossession gained an overtly racial character. The urban crisis was thus not simply an urban-suburban divide; it created discord within the city itself, and divisions were largely drawn along racial lines.

While historians have paid little attention to this urban conservatism, sociologist Jonathan Rieder delivered an exceptionally thorough and nuanced ethnography documenting the rejection of liberalism among Jews and Italians in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Canarsie during the mid-1970s. Middle America, he contended, existed within the borders of Kings County. Not only did Rieder capture a politically significant moment, but he suggested that the conservatism of his subjects was locally-rooted. They were responding to local political and spatial realignments – the changing racial makeup of their former neighborhoods, a growing tax burden, their experiences with crime on the

street and the subway, their declining representation within New York City politics – and were not simply pawns of Nixon’s overtures to identity politics or the Reagan Revolution. He drew a comparative portrait of Jews and Catholics, and demonstrated that Catholicism lent itself readily to conservatism, while Jews possessed more ambivalence and continued to cling to their leftist roots. His work suggests there is rich ground for historians to mine, and this study, while borrowing many of Rieder’s rich anecdotes, attempts to historicize his findings.35

This study also brings a much needed institutional lens to the urban crisis. The urban crisis was something that happened to people, and was mediated by the institutions to which they belonged. Examining its impact through established organizations reveals how urbanites interpreted structural changes, and how the urban crisis altered their relations with the city, its institutions, and each other over time. This approach is informed by Wendell Pritchett’s study of Brownsville, Brooklyn, which examined the community’s transformation from predominantly Jewish to overwhelmingly black and Puerto Rican from the turn of the century through the 1970s. While the power of “nationwide social and economic forces in shaping America’s cities cannot be disputed,” Pritchett argued, “the response of local communities and public and private institutions to these changes deserve analysis, because the actions of these groups have defined the contours of neighborhood change.”36 Despite being the largest private institution in the urban North, historians have omitted the Catholic Church from their studies of the urban

35 Jonathan Rieder, Canarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn Against Liberalism (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985). In White Ethnic New York, Zeitz historicizes the shifting political alliances of Jews and Catholics, and arrives at a similar conclusion. Namely, that by the early 1970s, Catholics were more comfortable defining themselves as conservatives, while Jews – though becoming more conservative – were still more likely to identify as liberal.

crisis. It deserved inquiry not only because of its sheer size, but because of its role in the
distribution of (increasingly federally-funded) resources and in the governance of urban
space. It was a witness to the urban crisis, and deployed its resources – both spiritual and
material – to bring comfort to city residents and address urban problems.

For the Catholic Church, the urban crisis raised fundamental questions about its
purpose and obligations. When large swaths of urban dioceses became both non-white
and non-Catholic, the Church was forced to ask not only to whom they should minister
but how to minister to the people within their parish boundaries. Were churches
responsible only for the souls of Catholics? What was more important to alleviating the
suffering of those souls: providing spiritual guidance or addressing their material needs?
Were picket lines, demonstrations, and City Hall appropriate places for the Catholic
religious, or should they remain behind the altar, and in rectories and convents? There
was no consensus on these questions, and their existence caused a fissure within the
Church.

The urban crisis also altered the relationship between the Church and its laity,
mirroring their shifting relationship with the city’s government. As the Black Freedom
Movement raised protests over public accommodations, voting rights, economic equality,
employment discrimination, and residential segregation, the American Catholic Church
and the Brooklyn Diocese addressed racial issues with an increasingly progressive voice.
They were pushed to do so both by public pressure and a liberal contingent of religious
ministering in poor, non-white parishes. Focused largely on conversion efforts in the
1940s and 1950s, by the 1960s these priests and nuns – sometimes derisively called the
“radical religious” – operated at the forefront of efforts to improve public housing,
increase city services, expand welfare, and develop anti-poverty programs. At the same time, Brooklyn’s lay Catholics began insisting that the Civil Rights Movement had gone too far and was moving too quickly, especially as it entered the more militant Black Power phase. They were critical of the same social and economic programs the liberal religious were attempting to expand, and others, like open housing, for which the diocese had offered its public support. The urban crisis produced discord among Catholics and, by the end of the decade, the Church was visibly divided into conservative and progressive wings.

**Rethinking Vatican II and the Crisis in Authority**

For all New Yorkers, the Great Migration and the Black Freedom Movement altered life more significantly than any other developments from the interwar period through the 1970s. Along with changing the demographic makeup of the city, black migrants forced New Yorkers to examine and alter how they defined rights and distributed resources. For Catholics, these debates occurred alongside the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), an ecumenical meeting held to address and reassess the Church’s relationship with the modern world. Popularly known as Vatican II, the Council significantly altered the way the Church interacted with the secular world and, in turn, how the laity related to the Church. Church leadership encouraged the religious and laity to become more involved in secular affairs, interpret the world in light of the Gospel, and bring improvement to modern society. Catholics, they insisted, should act as servants to those who were most in need. The Council imbued the laity with greater authority,
eschewing the traditional hierarchical image of the Church and instead framing it as a body composed of the “people of God.”

The findings of the Council felt like a major disjuncture to Catholic parishioners. Its most immediate effects were felt at the Mass, where liturgical reforms altered modes of worship. The changes distressed parishioners, and letters of protest filled the pages of the Brooklyn Diocese’s nationally distributed newspaper, the Tablet. One letter writer complained about the rise of the “Hootenanny Mass,” which he defined as “a divine spiritual ritual debased by beatnik music.”37 But the Council’s significance went beyond changes to ritual. Examining the impact of Vatican II fourteen years after its conclusion, historian Philip Gleason wrote that the Council was nothing less than a “spiritual earthquake.” “No single term can adequately capture the sense one has of a great social movement while it is in progress, but the predominant impression I can recall,” he explained, “was the impression of disintegration.”38

Seized by this impression, Catholic commentators produced narratives emphasizing discontinuity between pre- and post-Conciliar American Catholicism.39 These works focused predominantly on the liturgical experience. More recently, however, historians have reassessed the Council, concentrating less on the negative experience of disintegration and more on its role empowering the laity through a renewed emphasis on Catholic Action.40 They have also recognized and stressed the continuity

37 Brooklyn Tablet, 16 September 1965.
between Catholicism in the 1950s and in the post-Conciliar period.\textsuperscript{41} Timothy Kelly’s examination of the religious belief and practices of the Catholic laity in Pittsburgh is illustrative. “The Council did not represent a shock to a complacent laity,” he argued, “so much as a reform necessary to keep pace with the laity’s changing religious and broader social and cultural sensibilities.” Devotional practice had been on the decline for a decade before the Council, he showed, and cannot be held solely responsible for waning religiosity.\textsuperscript{42}

Thus, even our most recent histories of Vatican II remain concerned largely with devotions, ritual, and worship, and have little to say about how the Council impacted perceptions of Church authority.\textsuperscript{43} More specifically, we have not studied how the reforms of Vatican II interacted with the politics of the laity, and thus have not placed them within a larger political and societal context. This study attempts to correct that oversight, and argues both for continuity and disjuncture. A rift between liberal clergy and the increasingly conservative laity had been growing since well before Vatican II, but the Council publically exposed this fissure. For liberal Catholics and clergy, the Second Vatican Council legitimated their efforts to become more involved in secular and overtly political affairs, including the Civil Rights Movement, the War on Poverty, the welfare


\textsuperscript{43} The impact of Vatican II on perceptions of the Church’s ability to speak authoritatively on birth control and sexuality are exceptions to this generalization. See Tentler, \textit{Catholics and Contraception}. A recent edited volume focuses on the question of authority, but does little to locate Vatican II reforms within the larger secular context of American history. See Lucas Van Rompuy, Sam Miglarese, and David A. Morgan, \textit{The Long Shadow of Vatican II: Living Faith and Negotiating Authority Since the Second Vatican Council} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).
rights movement, rent strikes, and even the embrace of Black Power – issues, they argued, Catholics were morally obligated to support. For the conservative members of the Church, empowering the laity meant restraining the authority of the hierarchy. “One of the meanings of the Vatican Council,” William F. Buckley, Jr. argued in 1965, “is to stress the freedom within the church, which encompasses men of many political faiths now as before.” Conservatives drew a stark line between “morality” and “politics,” or areas for which the Church possessed authority and areas which it did not. They renounced the clergy’s meddling in issues they deemed political, contributing to the erosion of Church authority in the lives of lay Catholics. For Brooklyn Catholics raised in the shadow of the Depression, the church of the early 1970s was almost unrecognizable.

**Sources and Chapters**

This dissertation is built on extensive archival research conducted in both diocesan and non-church archives. The Archives of the Diocese of Brooklyn provide the bulk of my archival source material, and my research there focused predominantly on 63 parishes I selected using demographic data from annual reports housed in the archive. These parishes had either undergone rapid racial change during the twentieth century or were located adjacent to these parishes. The internal reports, memos, correspondence, church bulletins, and oral histories contained within the diocesan archives reveal the Church’s anxiety over racial change, reflect concerns over financial matters, document real estate transactions, and expose internal disputes among the religious over the mission and duties of the Church. These sources also give some insight into the lives of

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parishioners, who frequently expressed their ideas and concerns in letters to the bishop and their local pastors. The *Tablet*, the diocesan newspaper, allows me to further explore Catholic life in Brooklyn. In addition to documenting events and printing pastoral letters, its “Readers’ Forum” highlights the issues of greatest concern among the laity and reveals a divergence on questions of race, politics, and church reforms. Significantly, among Catholic journalists, the *Tablet* was widely described as *the most* conservative Catholic newspaper in the country, largely because of the tutelage of Patrick Scanlan, who served as editor from 1917 to 1968. It therefore provides crucial insight into a specifically Catholic (and urban) brand of conservatism.

This dissertation relies on a wide variety of printed sources. In addition to the *Tablet*, I use a number of local newspapers, including the *New York Times, Brooklyn Eagle, Amsterdam News*, and *Daily News*, to place Catholics in the larger context of New York City and, on occasion, to find a local priest at a protest, commenting on urban renewal, or attending an event at City Hall. In order to gain a sense of New York City life and politics, I rely on the insightful words of journalists like Pete Hamill, Jimmy Breslin, and Nicholas Pileggi in the pages of *New York Magazine*. Small neighborhood newspapers provide a crucial perspective on the everyday lives of the Catholic laity. At the Brooklyn Public Library, the *Greenpoint Weekly Star* and *Kings County Chronicle* document the actions of local political leaders in largely Catholic Greenpoint, East New York, Williamsburg, and Canarsie. The library’s holdings also include *Black News*, a newsletter published in Bedford-Stuyvesant that highlights the tension between black residents and local Catholic churches in the late 1960s. I also examine nationally-circulated print sources. *National Review*, with its overwhelmingly Catholic staff,
provides a conservative intellectual perspective on developments within the Church and on New York City politics. For a glimpse into the Catholic interracial movement, I rely on *Interracial Review*, the monthly journal of the Catholic Interracial Council of New York. The journal, housed in the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, documents the Church’s shifting position on racial justice and highlights the voices of black Catholics and the priests who staffed black parishes.

Two institutions are fundamental to understanding the beliefs and political views of the Catholics who occupy the pages of this dissertation: the Catholic Church and the New York City municipal government. While the Archives of the Diocese of Brooklyn provide insight into the inner workings of the diocese and individual parishes, Catholics and their diocese were also profoundly influenced by the larger national structure of the Church. The archival collections at the Catholic University of America document the perspective of national leadership on issues of race, poverty, and the state of American cities, particularly the papers contained in the Catholic Charities USA collection. Using the New York City Municipal Archives, I examine how the city interacted with Catholic groups, implemented programs and policies of greatest concern to Catholics, and attempted to quell the growing unrest among “white ethnics” in the late 1960s and early 1970s. I rely most heavily on the mayoral papers of John Lindsay, who served during the crucial years immediately following the Second Vatican Council that coincided with the height of New York City liberalism.

In addition to institutional records, a number of contemporary published sources provide context for this study. In Chapter Four, for example, I make heavy use of the autobiographies of Catholic men and women who grew up in Brooklyn. Though often
refracted through the lens of nostalgia, these sources provide insight into the texture of daily life in the borough. I also employ the work of social scientists from the 1960s and 1970s. The studies of Andrew Greeley, Jonathan Rieder, Nathan Glazer, and Daniel Patrick Moynihan provide insightful statistical information, as well as examination of the shifting class, ethnic, and religious identities of New York Catholics. Dissertations, generally written by sociologists, and the published studies of community groups provide similar evidence.

This dissertation contains eight chapters, and is divided in half between the pre- and post-Conciliar periods. Chapter One, “Constructing a Christian Social Order,” relies heavily on the pages of the Tablet to provide an introduction to Catholic life in Brooklyn in the 1930s and early 1940s. I argue that Catholics constructed a Christian Social Order that was both physical – manifested in its churches, recreation centers, schools, hospitals and more – and spiritual. Catholics adhered to a strict moral code and fought against the destructive forces of secularism. No force in American society, however, was more damaging than communism, which was growing in strength both domestically and abroad. “Bolshevistic and atheistic communism,” Pope XI declared in a 1937 encyclical, was fundamentally aimed “at upsetting the social order and at undermining the very foundations of Christian civilization.” Catholic opposition to communism influenced the faithful’s political sensibilities into the 1970s, and became a crucial component of later Catholic conservatism. To demonstrate the strength of Catholic anti-communism, this chapter uses FBI files to examine the rise of the anti-communist Christian Front, a

group of Catholic men in Brooklyn who took up arms to defend against a future communist coup.

Chapter Two, “Fortifying Parish Boundaries: Black Catholics, White Resistance, and the Birth of Interracialism,” moves to an examination of race and the Catholic Church in the 1940s. It provides background on the establishment of St. Peter Claver, the first black church in Brooklyn. Like other northern dioceses, Brooklyn chose to embrace segregation, arguing that, like the Irish, Poles, Italians, and Germans, blacks should be permitted to form their own congregations. While black Catholics were never banned from other parishes, reports of white priests telling black Catholics to go to “their” church were not uncommon. Faced with the prospect of this humiliation, or of being directed to the back pews during services, many black Catholics expressed a preference for separate spaces of worship. This chapter also examines the emergence of the Church’s conflicting response to the changing racial makeup of the borough as the Great Migration and a new subway line connecting Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant generated an exponential increase in Brooklyn’s black population. Fearful that racial change would drive away white parishioners, the diocese began carefully monitoring the presence of African Americans within parish boundaries. Some priests, like Msgr. John Belford of Our Lady of Nativity, joined with local community groups to vocally oppose the presence of blacks within their churches and communities. Others, including Rev. Raymond Campion of St. Peter Claver, joined with an emerging Catholic interracial movement built on the unifying notion of the Mystical Body of Christ.

In Chapter Three, “The Urban Mission Field: Racially-Transitioning Parishes after the Second World War,” I examine parishes that came to serve a predominantly
black laity between the end of World War II and the early 1960s. Faced with declining
Mass attendance as white parishioners moved to the outer reaches of Brooklyn and to the
suburbs, local priests focused on converting the largely Protestant and Baptist residents of
their parishes. Operating in the most disadvantaged Brooklyn neighborhoods, these
parishes fostered the growth of a young, liberal cohort of priests who challenged the
diocese to take a more progressive stand on racial justice.

Chapter Four, “Resisting Liberalism: Catholics and Race in Postwar Brooklyn,”
concentrates on white Catholics during the same time period. This chapter argues that
vehement anti-communism painted Catholics’ views of the emerging Civil Rights
Movement, allowing white Catholics to dismiss complaints of racial discrimination as a
mere communist ploy. This created a tense relationship with the growing liberal
contingent of the clergy. White Catholics also articulated a growing objection to city
programs like welfare and public housing, which, they argued, would expand the city’s
slums and threaten white neighborhoods. The Church was also implicated in attempts to
fortify the boundaries of white parishes. As this chapter documents, during the 1950s and
early 1960s, Brooklyn parishes that bordered non-white neighborhoods used their real
estate holdings to prevent “undesirable” elements from entering the parish. Both the
Church and its parishioners built physical and political barriers to black advancement.

The fifth chapter, “Radical Religion: Bringing the Gospel to the Streets in Post-
Conciliar Brooklyn,” examines the religious working in predominantly black parishes in
the years immediately following the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council. Spurred
by the Council’s mandate to become involved in worldly affairs, a “militant” contingent
of priests and nuns, along with their parishioners, white liberal Catholics, and community
activists, formed a number of organizations aimed at expanding access to welfare, increasing the stock of affordable housing, and ensuring social services were delivered to needy residents. Their efforts, however, were limited by inadequate public funding and only token support from the diocese. This chapter argues that these new roles – where priests found themselves acting more as social workers than spiritual leaders – caused members of the clergy to question their choice to join the priesthood and contributed to the vocational crisis that emerged in the late 1960s.

Chapter Six, “Law and Order: Crime and the Decline of Liberalism,” documents the Catholic response to the turbulence of the 1960s, and, in particular, their increasing insistence that politicians take a hard stance on “law and order.” This chapter focuses on 1966, when Mayor John Lindsay attempted to implement a Civilian Complaint Review Board charged with impartially investigating complaints of police misconduct. The CCRB effectively became a plebiscite on civil rights. Though many in the hierarchy supported the board, Catholics in Brooklyn overwhelmingly voted to dissolve the CCRB and, in effect, to halt the movement toward racial equality. The episode is emblematic of the larger “crisis in authority” that plagued the Church after Vatican II and, as this chapter argues, led Catholics to draw a stark division between matters deemed “moral” – for which the Church had the authority to speak – and those considered “political.”

In Chapter Seven, “Black First and Catholic Second: Black Power and Community Control in the Post-Conciliar Church,” I focus on the relationship between the clergy, black Catholics, and black neighborhood residents who used the services of the Church during the late 1960s and early 1970s. For many black Brooklynites, the Catholic Church was no longer a space of spirituality and community-building, but a
white institution colonizing black neighborhoods while stifling the growing consciousness of black people. As a result, they demanded that the Catholic churches and schools in their neighborhoods be placed under community control. The Church, militant activists argued, should serve as a place for political activism and black liberation. Using the language of Black Power, Brooklyn’s black Catholics attempted to push the spirit of Vatican II to its most extreme: from a church completely controlled by the hierarchy to one in the hands of the community. This pressed the limits of the diocese, which, despite its shuffle to the left, was not interested in radical change.

Chapter Eight, “‘There is a white working-class revolt going on in New York’: Backlash among Brooklyn Catholics,” shifts the lens back to white Catholics who, by the early 1970s, felt marginalized within the city and their Church. The white-working class, they argued, was finding it more difficult to live in New York City, but liberal elites ignored their grievances to focus on the more pressing concerns of minorities. In response, Catholics articulated an “ethnic” identity, and argued that their status as “minorities” entitled them to the same sources of funding and legal protections as blacks and Puerto Ricans. The city’s response was limited by the apathy of liberal elites toward the white working class, as well as its increasingly dire financial circumstances. The result, I argue, was a backlash not simply against the advancements of African Americans, but to a form of liberalism that appeared to offer little to white Brooklyniters.

The concluding chapter summarizes the study and briefly examines the political orientation of the Catholic Church since the early 1970s. I also offer a short examination of black and Catholic relations in other American cities to assess the ways this Brooklyn case study is both representative and unique.
Chapter One

Constructing a Christian Social Order

In 1931, Pope Pius XI penned the encyclical Quadragesimo Anno, or “On Reconstruction of the Social Order.” Written in the midst of a global depression, the document was largely an assessment of the social and economic order of the day. The picture looked grim: increasing class divisions, poor working conditions, and the steady growth of communism. The time had come, Pius insisted, for Catholics to develop, “with the Church as their guide and teacher, a social and economic science in accord with the conditions of our time.”¹ In other words, as the title of the pope’s encyclical suggested, Catholics had a duty to construct a specifically Christian Social Order.

For Catholics in Brooklyn and Queens, building a Christian Social Order meant creating an insular Catholic sphere. This was, in essence, a self-imposed cultural ghetto where Catholics could separate themselves from the modern, secular world. This space was physical – composed of churches, recreational centers, schools, universities, hospitals, and libraries – but it was also social and cultural. Parish societies and clubs allowed parishioners to maintain Catholic social circles, while Catholic newspapers and radio programs helped define their cultural references and politics. Catholics were not only inward-looking, however. By the 1930s, due to decreasing immigration and the consolidation of Church leadership, a more confident American Catholic Church emerged. Spurred by the words of their pope, Catholics took it upon themselves to

¹ Pius XI, Encyclical Letter, Quadragesimo Anno, 15 May 1931.
regulate the social and economic spheres in which they functioned, infusing society with Christian morality.

Anti-communism was the most important feature of the Christian Social Order and, throughout the course of the twentieth century, would come to define the way Catholics viewed politics, the state, and race relations. This was not inevitable. During the 1930s, Catholics were highly critical of laissez-faire capitalism, and liberal Catholics forcefully argued for an expansive welfare state and equitable distribution of wealth. The New Deal aligned with Catholics thought and, the faithful contended, would remedy the problems outlined in Pius XI’s encyclical. By the 1940s, though, the Catholic critique of unfettered capitalism was overshadowed by a zealous battle against communism. The two schools of thought were intimately related: Catholics argued that an unregulated economic system created the conditions that gave rise to communism. While liberal Catholics continued to stress the importance of state regulation, a growing contingent of Catholic religious and laity focused their attention on destroying the forces of communism and preventing any expansion of state power that might provide fertile ground for a communist takeover. This fervent anti-communism was especially pronounced in Brooklyn, which possessed a particularly conservative clergy and the most militantly anti-communist diocesan newspaper in the nation.

While Catholics in the 1930s and 1940s were united in their disapproval of communism, not all were consumed by rabid opposition. However, it was this strand, more so than the liberal critique of unfettered capitalism, which came to dominate Catholic social thought in Brooklyn. Significantly, as Colleen Doody argued in her study of Cold War Detroit, Catholic traditionalism and anti-communism were “crucial elements
of modern conservatism” that made Catholics an important component of the conservative movement. Thus the roots of Catholic conservatism lie in the late 1930s and early 1940s, when anti-communism came to define Catholic political thought. This chapter will examine the Christian Social Order that emerged in the 1930s and 1940s, which would, during the postwar years, contribute to a rightward political realignment among Brooklyn Catholics.

Building a Catholic Ghetto

The Archdiocese of New York built the first Catholic Church in Brooklyn in 1822, and it was not until 1853 that the Vatican decided to separate Long Island into its own diocese. The newly formed Diocese of Brooklyn contained Kings, Queens, Nassau, and Suffolk counties. On June 19, 1853 by Pope Pius IX appointed John Loughlin, a native of County Down, Ireland, the first Bishop of the Brooklyn Diocese. During the early years of the diocese, the Irish dominated the churches on Long Island. Of the eight churches built in the first three years of the diocese’s existence, six catered predominantly to Irish immigrants, while two others served as German parishes. Of the 25 priests who ministered to the needs of Catholics in the diocese’s first years, 18 were either Irish or Irish American. Despite the large influx of eastern European immigrants – and especially Italians – beginning in the late-nineteenth century, the Irish remain in the

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3 These new churches include Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary (1853), St. Joseph (1853), St. Benedict (1853), St. Boniface (1854), Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary (1854), St. Malachy (1854), St. Patrick (1854), and St. Mary Star of the Sea (1855). All but St. Benedict and St. Boniface were territorial parishes, meaning they ministered to all Catholics within a designated territory. In practice, these were often English-speaking parishes that ministered to Irish and Irish-American Catholics.
majority in the 1930s and would continue to dominate the diocesan hierarchy throughout the twentieth century.

Though these Catholics were united within the diocesan structure, they were divided into separate geographically- or ethnically-defined parishes. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) determined that the parish served all those living within its demarcated boundaries, but also recognized that communities of a distinct ethnic character required priests who could minister to their specific needs. Thus the Council established both “territorial” and “national” parishes. In America, territorial parishes were English-speaking and tended to serve immigrant Irish communities. National parishes ministered to non-English-speaking Catholics, allowing them to hear the Mass in their native tongue and retain many of their distinct national traditions. Of the 121 parishes established in Brooklyn by 1920, 82 were territorial and 39 national. In Queens, 28 of the 47 parishes were territorial, and 19 national.5

The geographically permanent nature of the parish, as John McGreevy argued in Parish Boundaries, is crucial to understanding twentieth-century urban Catholics, as well as the interactions between white Catholics and other racial and religious groups in American cities. Catholics were invested both spiritually and financially in their parishes; both the physical church structure and the surrounding community held significance for parishioners. Even national parishes, which did not necessarily have fixed boundaries,

tended to draw parishioners from the territory immediately surrounding the church. Jews and Protestants, in contrast, were not beholden to their physical building and its surroundings, and their congregants were not commanded to attend a particular church or synagogue. As a result, Protestant and Jewish congregations were mobile and could follow their flock if they relocated. Because their parishes were immovable, Catholics remained long after factors like racial transition had driven non-Catholics from urban neighborhoods.6

Homeownership was crucial to maintaining parish stability and permanency. “Parish histories,” McGreevy noted in his study of Catholics in the urban North, “report with numbing regularity pastors commanding parishioners to purchase homes within the parish.”7 A 1933 Brooklyn Eagle article suggested that the presence of a Catholic church made a community attractive to real estate agents:

In real estate circles, the establishment of a Catholic Church is looked upon as a sure indication that enhancement of values in real estate in the vicinity, can be counted upon for a certainty. This is because Catholics always prefer to live by their church, and consequently it forms no surprise when vacant property adjacent to a Catholic Church becomes the scene of much building of residential and business structures. A further reason for this is the fact that once a Catholic Church is erected, it always remains, and is not abandoned, because of a change of population.8

The ability to invest in property was a point of pride for Catholics. In Brooklyn and Queens, the Tablet, Brooklyn’s diocesan newspaper, conducted a survey among its

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6 Gerald Gamm, Urban Exodus: Why the Jews Left Boston and the Catholics Stayed (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999). Gamm argued that, beginning in the 1920s, “Jewish neighborhoods began their long unravelling” while Catholics stayed in their neighborhoods, resisting suburbanization and racial change. His work placed an important emphasis on urban institutions – churches, synagogues, community centers – and their role in explaining why certain populations were more mobile than others. Catholics were invested in large parish complex that, unlike synagogue, could not relocate, and thus tended to remain in their urban neighborhoods far longer than Jews.


8 Brooklyn Eagle, 5 March 1933.
50,000 subscribers regarding homeownership. It found that 56.5% of Tablet-reading families owned their own home, in contrast to the 31.9% average rate of homeownership in Brooklyn and Queens. Tablet readers, the survey concluded, “are the cream of the Brooklyn-Queens population.”

The Tablet itself made efforts to increase homeownership among the Catholics of the diocese by sponsoring new residential developments. When Fred C. Trump, a real estate developer who began building middle-income single-family homes in the 1920s, built a development of 500 five- and six-room brick homes in Flatbush in 1940, the Tablet sponsored the project and adopted one of Trump’s model units. The development, Trump explained, was located “in the heart of Flatbush, the church center of the Borough of Churches,” and “literally hemmed in by churches of all denomination.” Full page ads in the Tablet boasted that the homes, with Federally Housing Administration-backed mortgages, were only a two- to five-block walk from three large Catholic churches and two parochial schools. The area, the ad explained, was ideally suited to become an “all-Catholic community.” The weekend it opened, 2,000 people visited the Tablet model home – most after Mass concluded on Sunday morning – and 37 purchased homes in the development.

In addition to anchoring Catholic communities, churches influenced how New Yorkers, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, imagined the map of their city. Instead of referring to their neighborhood, many Catholics described where they lived with the name of their parish. Msgr. William Flood, who grew up in Brooklyn during the 1930s

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9 *Brooklyn Tablet*, 24 November 1934.
10 *Brooklyn Eagle*, 19 May 1940.
11 *Brooklyn Tablet*, 8 June, 1940.
12 *Brooklyn Eagle*, 26 May 1940.
and 1940s, recalled that if he told someone he was from Jackson Heights, they might respond “Oh, Joan of Arc?” “No,” he would correct them, “Blessed Sacrament.”

Housing advertisements in the Tablet also often defined the location of rental properties by parish. One advertisement listed the property as “Opposite Our Lady of Victory Church.” Another simply read “BOARDERS WANTED: Lady can accommodate two men with room and board, in private house. St. John’s Parish.”

Even for non-Catholics, parishes were central features of the urban landscape. Alfred Kazin, a Jewish writer who grew up in Brownsville, described Our Lady of Loreto on East New York Avenue as “the boundary…between us and the Italians stretching down Rockaway and Saratoga to Fulton.”

Catholic parishes thus defined invisible borders between the city’s various ethnic groups.

The church building was only one component of the physical Catholic world. Catholics in Brooklyn and Queens, like those around the United States, created Catholic counterparts to nearly every secular institution. Each parish plant usually contained a church, parochial school, convent, rectory, and space for recreation or socialization. Catholics also created institutions that operated at the diocesan level, including hospitals, charities, libraries, high schools, and more. Others, like Catholic colleges, were run by religious orders. These institutions provided Catholics with both services and socialization, financed through the generosity of parishioners. In effect, Catholics created a world that was physically, socially, and economically separate from the rest of the city.

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13 Msgr. William Flood Oral History, 14 July 2008, Office of the Archivist, Interview Transcript, Cabinet 4, Drawer 1, ADB.
14 *Brooklyn Tablet*, 20 April 1929.
Parochial schools were generally considered the most important Catholic institutions and, based on Canon Law, parents were required to send their children to the local parish school. A parochial education, the church reasoned, would imbue children with the knowledge necessary to lead a Christian life while protecting them from the dangers of public schools. The Vatican’s Propaganda Fide, an office that issued directives for U.S. Catholic Churches, instructed American Bishops to “use every means in their power to keep the flocks committed to their care from all contact with the public schools.” In these public institutions, they argued, children’s “morals are not properly safeguarded” and thus they “are fearfully exposed to the danger of losing their faith.”

Stories in the *Tablet* regularly accused public schools of spreading paganism, and encouraging vice and crime because of their failure to instill students with Christian morality. Those who went to college were also expected to stay in Catholic institutions because secular universities were “directly responsible for the spread of atheism among the youth of this country” thanks to “the anti-Christian teaching of pagan professors.” It was not appropriate for Catholics, a Tablet column warned, “to attend non-Catholic colleges,” just as it was not right “for Catholic patients to enter non-Catholic hospitals. Our place, sick or well, is with our own.” The diocese created a vast education infrastructure and, by 1938, there were 148 elementary schools with 98,919 pupils in

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16 “Instructions of the Propaganda Fide Concerning Catholic Children in American Public Schools,” 1875, in *American Catholic History: A Documentary Reader*, eds. Mark Stephen Massa and Catherine Osborne (New York: NYU Press, 2008), 56, 55. The Propaganda Fide was missionary office of the Vatican that practiced authority over the U.S. Catholic Church. It issued this set of instructions because many American parishes failed to meet the requirements laid out by the First and Second Plenary Council of Baltimore (1852 and 1866) – namely, that Catholic parents support Catholic schools and send their children there.

17 *Brooklyn Tablet*, 12 April 1930.

18 Ibid., 30 September 1933.
Brooklyn and Queens. The diocese’s 36 high schools contained more than 10,000 students.  

Parishes also provided spaces for socialization and a wide variety of recreational activities. St. Joseph Patron of the Universal Church in Bushwick, for example, purchased a brewery, laundry, and garage and converted the buildings into a parish youth center. It included a large auditorium, four bowling lanes (used by the diocesan bowling league), a billiards room, a playroom for Ping-Pong, and a nursery. Outside, there were handball courts, a field for softball, and a space for bocce ball. A number of parishes, such as St. Therese of Lisieux in Flatbush and St. Kevin in Flushing, had parish tennis courts. St. Boniface in Downtown Brooklyn created the Diocesan Free Library that, by 1954, had 10,000 volumes and 4,000 active users annually. The library contained a large vocation exhibition each spring and space for meetings and social events. St. Brendan’s Gaelic Society, the Rosary Society of the Internal Revenue Office, The Holy Name Society of the Department of Water Supply, Gas and Electricity, the Postal Anchor Club, the Shipbuilders Anchor Club, the Telephone Communications Men, and the Parish Sodality and St. Vincent De Paul Societies all used the space to hold meetings.

The large number of parish societies that made use of the Diocesan Library point to the importance of these groups in the life of a parish. Many of the largest parish-based societies emerged out of the mid- to late-nineteenth century immigrant church and, by the early twentieth century, had become an essential component of parish life.

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19 Brooklyn Tablet, 5 November 1938.
20 “St. Joseph Patron of the Universal Church Golden Jubilee,” 1971, 17-18, Parish Files, Parish Journals, Box 2, ADB.
22 “One Hundredth Anniversary of St. Boniface Parish, 1854-1954,” Parish Files, Parish Journals, Box 1, ADB.
were segregated by sex and fulfilled a variety of missions and functions. The Holy Name Society, which encouraged obedience to the Second Commandment (“thou shalt not take the Lord’s name in vain”), was, by the 1920s, the most popular organization for laymen in American Catholic parishes. Many men were also members of the popular, but more demanding, St. Vincent DePaul Society, which drew its name from the seventeenth-century French priest known for his charitable work among the poor. The St. Vincent DePaul men reached out to those in need in the parish, often with gifts of groceries, fuel, clothing, or money. Their work was especially important during the Depression, and, in 1933 alone, the Brooklyn chapter provided $444,175 in assistance throughout the diocese. The Knights of Columbus, which functioned predominantly as a mutual benefit organization, was usually the most visible parish-based society in Catholic churches. By the mid-twentieth century there were more than one million members of the Knights and close to 1,000 local councils under the control of the national office in New Haven, Connecticut.

Women’s parish societies differed from their male counterparts in a number of ways. Most significantly, they were more overtly focused on devotional practice. Parish rosary societies, for example, met to pray the rosary and devoted themselves to the Virgin Mary. Priests often argued that women were more religiously inclined and could convince men, who were more aloof, to embrace Catholicism. Rev. John B. Kelly, chaplain of the New York Catholic Writers’ Guild, argued that it was the responsibility of every Catholic woman “to use her feminine influence over men to bring them to the feet

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24 *Brooklyn Tablet*, 16 December 1933.
of Christ.” Women’s parish societies were also charged with physically maintaining the parish, and women’s altar societies assisted the men and women religious with cleaning and decorating the church sanctuary. Whereas the societies of laymen focused on spreading their faith through morality or acts of charity, women’s parish societies were tasked with the more “feminine” work of cleaning and beautifying the church.

In addition to devotional practices and parish maintenance, women’s societies, and female parishioners in general, planned parish social events. Younger women and girls were often encouraged to create activities for young people, especially parish dances. “The Catholic Girl,” a weekly column in the Tablet, frequently emphasized young women’s responsibility for “promoting parish social life and thus keeping Catholic young people together.” It included instructions on how to form a dance committee, issue invitations, decorate, and encourage mingling and dancing during events. Moreover, the column explained, dances were just the start; girls should “follow up – say once every month – with a supper, or another dance, or both, always in the hands of girls who understand what they are doing, and with the endorse[ment] of their pastor.” Women, too, were encouraged to make the parish the “hub of social activities” and “nucleus for recreation.” Every issue of the Tablet included a vast list of parish social activities taking place each week – including card parties, dances, smokers, fundraisers, and fashion shows – demonstrating just how much effort women put into the creation of a vibrant parish social life.

27 O’Toole, The Faithful, 148-149.
28 Brooklyn Tablet, 2 November 1929.
29 Ibid., 26 March 1932.
The goal of these parish activities was not just to create a lively social scene, but also to protect the Catholic community from the danger of mixed-religion marriages. “The Catholic Girl” column informed its young readers that “it is up to you to establish upon the right kind of footing Catholic friendship for Catholics – to see to it that Catholic men and women, boys and girls, meet each other and not once, but time after time, until we do away finally with this mixed marriage business.” Priests also did their part to discourage parishioners from marrying non-Catholics. They were known to “mount the pulpits and ‘raise cain’ about the number of our young people who are contracting mixed marriages.” Much of the fear over mixed marriages grew out of the fact that an increasing number of women were working outside of the home. A Tablet reader expressed concern about “daughters who are the sole support of their families, or who are helping younger brothers or sisters through schools.” “How many of them,” she wondered, “work in a Catholic atmosphere? How many of them come into contact with people of their own faith from the moment that they go out to work?” Catholics feared their coreligionists in mixed marriages would fall away from the Church. One Tablet article featured the story of a young male doctor who married a non-Catholic nurse. Without consulting him, the man’s wife pulled the children out of parochial school and sent their eldest son to an Episcopal school where he would be trained as a minister. “The doctor’s beautiful home became a hell to him,” and, to deal with his pain, he “took to

30 *Brooklyn Tablet*, 2 November 1929.
31 Ibid., 9 November 1929.
32 Laura Hapke, *Daughters of the Great Depression: Women, Work, and Fiction in the American 1930s* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1997), xvi. By 1930, women’s labor force participation had more than doubled since the 1890s. While the First World War encouraged many women to begin working outside the home in order to aid the war effort, the Depression also forced many women to work out of necessity.
33 *Brooklyn Tablet*, 30 September 1933.
drugs and became an addict – a most hopeless act.” Catholic social life was essential, the column argued, not only to perpetuate the Catholic faith, but also to protect Catholics from the “danger of wretched unhappiness.”  

**Reaching Outside the Fold: Catholic Action in the 1930s**

While creating a self-contained Catholic world was an important component of Catholic life, church followers also attempted to bring the influence of Christianity to secular society. The notion that Catholics had a responsibility to spread Christian morality, however, was a rather new concept in the late 1920s and early 1930s. This period saw a growing confidence and stability among the Catholic community that allowed the church to become a more potent force in American society. This newfound poise grew out of a number of factors. First, a Catholic middle class emerged in the last three decades of the nineteenth century and continued to grow as Catholics moved away from their immigrant origins. Many gained social mobility through the vast network of Catholic colleges and universities. Second, as their flock became more economically stable, the church moved to create a greater degree of organization at the national level in order to coordinate an American Catholic social program. This resulted in the 1919 founding of the National Catholic Welfare Council (NCWC), a permanent body tasked

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34 *Brooklyn Tablet*, 7 December 1929.
35 Deirdre Moloney, *American Catholic Lay Groups and Transatlantic Social Reform in the Progressive Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 4. This is not to suggest that the American Catholic Church was not still a largely immigrant organization during the 1930s. As John McGreevy rightly argues in *Parish Boundaries*, until the 1940s, the primary “race” problem for the church was the integration of various European groups into a single religious body. However, the church made an obvious effort to emphasize the American identities of their parishioners over their immigrant origins. Chicago Archbishop George Mundelein’s “Americanization plan,” which discouraged the creation of national parishes and encouraged parochial school teachers to use only English, is one of the more obvious examples of this trend.
with advancing Catholic interest in society. The NCWC, Jay Dolan argued, typified the “boosterism and confidence that permeated Catholic life in the first half of the twentieth century.” Third, prior to the 1920s the church largely relied on Europe to staff its clergy. However, during the 1930s the church cultivated native leadership. There was also tremendous growth in the number of vocations. Lastly, and most importantly, the immigration restriction quotas implemented in 1921 and 1924, which targeted southern and eastern Europeans, drastically curtailed Catholic immigration to the United States. By checking the constant flow of immigrants, the church population, which had experienced tremendous growth since the 1880s, stabilized, allowing the church leadership to shift their attention away from the problems that plagued immigrant communities and instead focus on creating a unified American church. In effect, by the 1930s, a confident Catholic Church emerged prepared to leave its mark on American society.

A call from the Vatican spurred this more assured and organized Church to action. In 1931, in response to the global depression, Pope Pius XI issued the papal encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, which rested heavily on the foundation of Pope Leo XIII’s 1891 *Rerum Novarum*. In his 1891 encyclical, Leo affirmed the rights of workers, argued that the state was responsible for promoting social and economic justice, and urged the Church to speak out on social issues. Forty years later, Pope Pius echoed these ideas, but he also introduced the concept of Catholic Action, defined as “the participation of the laity in the apostolate of the hierarchy.” In effect, the pope held Catholics responsible for

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spreading Christian influence to all of society. The encyclical acted as a call for the laity to bring the teachings of Christ into “every other field where moral questions are involved.”

Heeding the call to Catholic Action, Pius’s followers devised ways to spread Christianity throughout American society. Christianity, church officials insisted, was the only protection against the degradation of American society, which they feared was becoming increasingly secular and materialistic. In an address made to mark the inauguration of a Catholic Action program at the Columbus Club, Rev. Ignatius W. Cox, professor of ethics at Fordham University, told the nearly 1,000 audience members that the “principles of the Anti-Christ” were “responsible for all our social and economic evils.” Catholic Action was a “necessary step to fight the sophisticated sons of darkness with the weapons of knowledge, science and a sound and integral philosophy of life.”

Writing in the Tablet, a Brooklyn Catholic echoed the notion that Christianity was a necessary component of a thriving and just society. “History proves that no nation can survive without it, and you find Godlessness in the ruins of every nation that once was great.” Religion, he argued, was the “moral force that makes life and property safe. Destroy that and nothing remains except the dog-eat-dog rule of the jungle.”

Sermonizers easily slipped into abstraction, but Catholic Action took concrete form in the perpetual campaign against “indecency.” In a number of coordinated efforts, Catholics policed media, and criticized literature and films that took the Lord’s name in vain, described sexual activity, portrayed vice or crime, or depicted behavior considered

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38 Pius XI, Encyclical Letter, Quadragesimo Anno, 15 May 1931.
39 Brooklyn Tablet, 3 February 1934.
40 Ibid., 1 December 1934.
sinful. Films were most often the source of Catholic ire. In the *Tablet* column “Your Child’s Problems,” Mary Spencer warned parents that “the ‘movies’ are one of the biggest factors today in the life of the average American child,” and “the effects of the motion picture on the child’s mind is often unwholesome.” A 1934 cartoon demonstrated that “bad movies,” represented by an octopus with long, menacing tentacles, imparted “animalism” upon Catholic children, teaching them to overemphasize sex, scorn their family, belittle honor and virtue, and to use slang. As a result of the immoral behaviors learned through film, young people would be driven to a life of crime. The *Tablet* opined in 1929 that “something is developing a disregard for law and order throughout the world today.” Twenty years ago, the author noted, “we would have been justified in believing immigration to be the cause of this bad situation.” But with the dramatic decrease in immigration and the spectacular popularity of motion pictures, movies, the author argued, were clearly “the basic cause of the crime waves of today.” “When one considers about ten million people (largely young people) in the United States alone attend the movies every week, their tremendous influence in all ways must be admitted,” he wrote.

In order to combat indecent films, the hierarchy of the American Catholic Church created the Legion of Decency, headquartered in New York City, in 1934. The Legion

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41 *Brooklyn Tablet*, 20 April 1929.
42 Ibid., 27 January 1934.
43 Ibid., 27 April 1929. The Hollywood Picture Production Code (popularly known as the Hays Code) was a largely Catholic creation. Martin Quigley, a Catholic layman, and Father Daniel A. Lord, a Jesuit priest, produced the code that would remain in use in Hollywood from 1930 through 1968. It had deeply Catholic undertones. For example, in addition to images of “suggestive nudity,” miscegenation, and childbirth, films were not able to use the words “God,” “Lord,” “Jesus,” or “Christ” in a profane manner, nor were they allowed to ridicule the clergy. For an in-depth examination of early Catholic intervention in the film industry, see Gregory D. Black, *Morality Codes, Catholics, and the Movies* (Oxford: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
formed to “combat the production and display of obscene motion pictures and lewd advertising.” Membership required only that one sign a pledge condemning “salacious motion pictures” that were “corrupting public morals and creating a sex panic,” as well as those that “portray vice as a normal condition of affairs.” “I hereby promise,” they declared, “to remain away from all motion pictures except those which do not offend decency and Christian morality.” The organizations Brooklyn outfit, which a borough newspaper described as “Perhaps the most aggressive branch of the Legion of Decency,” included 150,000 members only four months after its creation. In an effort to remind Catholics of their vow, parishioners were required to resign the pledge each year. The Archdiocese of New York and the Diocese of Brooklyn coordinated a day each year in which all churches in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Queens heard a pastoral letter from their respective bishops warning against the dangers of immoral films before they were asked to recite the Legion pledge.

The Legion of Decency provided a guide to films, which the Tablet published each week. Since Catholics viewed women as the moral guardians of society, the Motion Picture Bureau of the International Federation of Catholic Alumnae chose 32 women, including one from Queens, to review films. Patrick Scanlan, the Catholic weekly’s editor, described the women as “broad-minded, intelligent, and tolerant. They fight only sex appeal and bad taste. If the only appeal a picture has is its sex appeal – it doesn’t deserve to get by.” The Legion broke films into four categories: A-I (morally unobjectionable for general patronage), A-II (morally unobjectionable for adults), B (objectionable in part for all), and C (condemned). This action, the church argued,

44 *Brooklyn Tablet*, 2 June 1934.
encouraged self-regulation. The Legion repeatedly insisted that it was not in favor of censorship, but instead hoped to encourage Hollywood to produce family-friendly and morally acceptable films, which, the hierarchy maintained, would broaden each film’s appeal. Catholics did not, Brooklyn’s Bishop Thomas Molloy insisted, wish to be thought of as “cranks, reformers and killjoys.” Rather, they were simply furthering the “public demand for better pictures.”

The Legion of Decency had a great impact on both the film industry and the Catholic conscience. “If the Legion of Decency condemned a film,” Alexander McGregor argued in his study of Catholicism and Hollywood, “some 20 million US Catholics (not to mention the world-wide Catholic population) would be forbidden, under penalty of mortal sin, from seeing it.” They also risked the ridicule of their pastor. In one instance, Rev. James A. Smith of St. Lawrence Church on Long Island stood outside of the local movie theatre playing Mae West’s “Belle of the Nineties.” “No member of my parish shall attend this show,” he explained. “I am going to keep a close watch on all films shown here and advise my parishioners accordingly.” Filmmakers, too, feared the wrath of the Church. Films that received a C rating risked denunciations from the pulpit, boycotts, and organized efforts to prevent local theatres from showing the film. The industry found it difficult to ignore such a highly-centralized institution with 20 million members. From just October of 1938 to November of 1939, the Legion reviewed 590 major films, 324 of which received an A-I rating, 207 an A-II rating, 50 a B rating, and 9

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46 *Brooklyn Eagle*, 21 September 1934.
48 *Brooklyn Eagle*, 11 December 1934.
C rating.\textsuperscript{50} While its influence began to wane in the 1950s, the Legion of Decency remained in existence until 1975.

The Church was not simply interested in controlling lewd or sexual images in film, but also in preventing behaviors the institution considered indecent. These lessons were nearly always aimed at women. The \textit{Tablet}, for example, advised women on appropriate conduct and dress. To combat the short skirts and skin-exposing fashions heralded by the flappers of the 1920s, the weekly column “Appropriate Fashions” featured sewing patterns deemed suitable for modern Catholic women. Stories and letters often appeared chastising women for inappropriate dress; a front page 1929 headline declared “Women Lessening Men’s Respect by Immodest Dress” and went on to issue a “plea for temperance.”\textsuperscript{51} Certain columns, such as “The Catholic Girl” and “The Catholic Woman,” regularly addressed questions about dating, dances, relationships, and marriage. Some of the most serious discussions focused on physical intimacy: was it a sin to kiss a boy? What about “petting”? Highlighting the importance of the local pastor in the lives of Catholics, one writer to the column took her question about kissing to the parish priest. “He said it was not sinful unless absolutely done with the intention to commit sin, and such a thought had never entered my head,” she wrote. She continued: “my girl friend also asked her confessor and he said it was quite natural and was not sinful, although it could be made so.” While the columnist welcomed the letter, she warned that kissing could be “an occasion for sin for some people…The impulses involved are so varied and so complex that it is always difficult to discuss this problem in a satisfactory manner.”\textsuperscript{52}

\textsuperscript{50} \textit{New York Times}, 9 December 1939.
\textsuperscript{51} \textit{Brooklyn Tablet}, 29 June 1929.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 18 November 1933.
She was sure, however, that so-called petting was strictly off-limits, both due to its sinful nature and the damage it would do to a girl’s reputation.53 Young women also heard these warnings from the pulpit. At a communion breakfast for the Ladies Auxiliary of Brooklyn, Msgr. T.A. Hickey of St. Brendan’s assured the group that “the modern young girl need not resort to ‘petting’ in order to have a good time.”54

While both the church and parish priests were loath to discuss sex in any manner, by the 1930s discussions of birth control regularly entered Catholic discourse. Condoms and diaphragms became available in the in 1920s and, in 1930, five religion denominations publically endorsed their use among married couples.55 The Catholic Church, nevertheless, remained unalterably opposed. Birth control, New York Archbishop Patrick Hayes wrote in a pastoral letter, “is a diabolical thing,” in which “an immortal soul is denied existence in time and eternity.” “Children troop down from heaven because God wills it. He alone has the right to stay their coming,” the Archbishop insisted.56 Pope Pius XI underlined the Church’s position in a Casti Connubii, a papal encyclical issued on the last day of 1930 in response to the growing support for birth control among both the public and other religious organizations.57 Catholics would be hard-pressed to claim ignorance regarding the Church’s position on birth control. Pius XI’s encyclical – which was taught in parochial schools until the 1960s – not only clearly stated the Church’s position, but charged priests with enforcing Catholic teaching on the topic both in the confessional and from the pulpit.

53 Brooklyn Tablet, 11 November 1933.
54 Brooklyn Eagle, 13 April 1931.
56 New York Times, 18 December 1921.
57 Pius XI, Encyclical Letter, Casti Connubii, 31 December 1931.
True to the tenets of Catholic Action, the Church and its followers did not simply aim to influence the actions of Catholics on the issue of birth control. Pius XI’s encyclical insisted that “Governments can assist the Church” for, “as it is, there are those who think that whatever is permitted by the laws of the State, or at least is not punished by them, is allowed also in the moral order, and, because they neither fear God nor see any reason to fear the laws of man, they act even against their conscience.” Catholics boycotted publications that contained articles approving of birth control, such as The Nation. In the pages of the Tablet, Patrick Scanlan, the paper’s editor, encouraged the Catholics of Brooklyn and Queens to write letters opposing any amendments to the Federal Comstock Act, which made the sale of obscene material and contraceptive devices illegal. In 1933, for example, acting under clerical guidance, Scanlan requested that the heads of diocesan organizations, Catholic colleges, parish-based conferences of the St. Vincent DePaul Society, and Tablet readers send a statement to congressional leadership opposing amendment to the law. The request was also made during Mass in each church in the Brooklyn diocese. Though public, professional, and legal opinion turned against the Catholic position on birth control (the American Medical Association endorsed its use for married women in 1937), Catholics continue to condemn the use of contraceptives and instead tout “natural family planning.”

59 Brooklyn Tablet, 6 February 1932.
60 Tentler, Catholics and Contraception, 125.
**Protection for the Home and Nation: The Growth of Catholic Anti-Communism**

As Catholics registered their discontent with the nation’s moral life, no issue animated them more than the battle against communism. The roots of Catholic anti-communism lie in the late 19th century, when the Church began to worry about the rise of Marxism among American and European workers in an increasingly industrial society. Pope Pius XI’s 1931 *Quadragesimo Anno* (the same encyclical that called for Catholic Action) was heavily critical of totalitarian communism and socialism. “Communism,” Pius XI argued, “teaches and seeks two objectives: Unrelenting class warfare and absolute extermination of private ownership,” both of which went against Catholic social teaching. “Man, endowed with a social nature,” the encyclical explained, “is placed on this earth so that by leading a life in society and under an authority ordained of God he may fully cultivate and develop all his faculties unto the praise and glory of his Creator.” This was in direct opposition to socialism, which, “wholly ignoring and indifferent to this sublime end of both man and society, affirms that human association has been instituted for the sake of material advantage alone.” While the document was highly critical of socialism and communism, it did, at the same time, condemn the social conditions which made these ideologies attractive. Unfettered capitalism, Pius XI argued, bought about the global depression. “Free competition has destroyed itself; economic dictatorship has supplanted the free market; unbridled ambition for power has likewise succeeded greed for gain; all economic life has become tragically hard, inexorable, and cruel,” he wrote.62 The solution was a system of “social justice” in which labor, capital, and the state worked toward the common public interest. Laborers had the right to a living wage and

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reasonable working conditions, while the state had a responsibility to ensure capital
worked for the greater good of the people and that wealth and power did not reside only
in the hands of a small elite.

*Quadragesimo Anno*, with its call for Catholic Action, served as a mandate to
become involved in the nation’s social and economic problems. Left-wing Catholic
publications like *America* and *Commonweal* voiced their opposition to unregulated
capitalism. An editorialist in *America* wrote in 1932 that “Suppression of the corporation
or business by the state is not merely permissible, but the state’s duty.”63 Catholic
intellectuals like Rev. John D. Ryan, professor of moral theology at the Catholic
University of America and Director of the Social Action Department of the National
Catholic Welfare Conference, spoke frequently about the encyclical. “Every sincere
observer,” he told a Catholic audience in New York City, “is conscious that the vast
differences between the few who hold excessive wealth and the many who live in
destitution constitute a grave evil in modern society.” Every effort, he insisted, must be
made to ensure workers received a just share of the fruits of production.64 Catholics also
became increasingly critical of the Hoover administration. In 1933, Rev. Ryan charged
that Hoover’s actions were “utterly insufficient” and argued that at least $5,000,000,000
should be put forward for public works projects in order to create job opportunities for
the nation’s 5,000,000 unemployed.65 Rev. James R. Cox, a Pittsburgh priests with a
popular radio following, led a jobless army of 20,000 to Washington in January of 1932

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63 Quoted in Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression.*
(New York: Knopf, 1982), 129.
64 *Brooklyn Tablet*, 19 March 1932.
to demand relief measure from Hoover and Congress. Both men were avid supporters of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, both as a candidate and president – Rev. Ryan even earned the nickname “Right Reverend New Dealer.” Catholic social activists, as well as Catholics more generally, became a major bloc of support for the New Deal. “All Catholics who desire to give practical effect to the principles of social justice laid down by Pope Pius XI,” the editors of *Commonweal* wrote, should support the New Deal because its programs “make the teachings of Christ apply to the benefit of all.” Most Catholics followed the advice. From 1933 to 1935, historian David O’Brien noted, there was nearly unanimous support for the New Deal among the nation’s Catholics.

Catholics registered their support for New Deal programs with their votes, but they also worked to implement social justice on a more local level through their support of unions. Both *Quadragesimo Anno* and *Rerum Novarum* praised unions for their efforts to bring about just working conditions and fair compensation for laborers. Many Catholics reasoned that if unions succeeded in addressing grievances, workers would be less attracted to communism. Speaking to the Knights of Columbus in Brooklyn, Rev. Wilfred Parsons, editor of *America*, argued that unorganized employees, who had no means of collectively bargaining with their employer, were “prey to radical agitators, an open field for Communist organizers.” In 1937, spurred by the rapid unionization that took place after the passage of the Wagner Act and formation of the CIO, the diocese

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68 Quoted in Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 130
70 *Brooklyn Tablet*, 8 November 1930.
established the Crown Height School of Catholic Workmen in order to teach Catholic principles and encourage their followers to join unions. Students could take classes on labor relations, the history and progress of unionism in New York, and the labor encyclical of Pope Leo XIII and Pope Pius XI. These schools sprang up around the country and throughout New York City: by 1948 over 40 dioceses had labor schools or similar programs. In effect, these schools put Catholic social principles to work in the economy.

Though the Church rallied in support of unions, it also helped to stifle a great deal of organizational efforts. The campaign to organize New York transit workers, the majority of whom were Catholic, provides the most concrete example. In 1934, subways workers established the Transit Workers Union (TWU) in New York City. Catholics were split in their opinion of the union. While the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists (ACTU), an offshoot of the Catholic Worker Movement, supported the TWU, much of the Brooklyn Diocese distrusted the organization. As Joshua Freeman deftly described in his study of the TWU, for many Catholics, the new unionism of the 1930s represented a real step toward achieving social justice. For others in the Church, however, the fact that the Communist Party had a presence in the labor movement made unions appear suspect. Rev. Edward Lodge Curran, chaplain of the Brooklyn branch of the Ancient Order of the Hibernians and one of the founders of the American Association Against Communism (AAAC), led the opposition to the TWU in Brooklyn. In an attempt to steer Catholics away from the TWU, he would personally visit transit workers in order

to elicit their opposition to the union. He was not alone in his hostility. On Sundays, parish priests denounced the union during Mass. The Knights of Columbus and Holy Name Societies, too, discouraged members from joining the TWU. Catholics entered the fray relatively late in the union’s organizing campaign, and their attempts to suppress organizational efforts were largely unsuccessful. Catholics like Rev. Curran, however, were undeterred, and shifted their focus to ridding existing unions of any communist influence. Even the ACTU, which was aligned with the left-wing of the Catholic Church, focused less energy on helping to form new unions and instead set its sights on chasing communism out of existing ones. By stifling the growth of Communist Party membership and influence and forcing the union to take a more conservative path, the Catholic Church played a decisive role shaping the character of the TWU.73

The role Catholics played in the formation of the TWU shows just how powerful Catholic anti-communism had become in the 1930s, particularly in the latter half of the decade. While the left-wing of the Church continued to focus on the un-Christian nature of laissez-faire capitalism, for most Catholics, communism came to be seen as a larger threat to both Christianity and the United States, especially in the face of increasing American radicalism in the 1930s. In response to the Great Depression, communism emerged as a social and political force, and was particularly pronounced within the labor movement. Though the number of card-carrying American Communists was always modest, Catholics were nevertheless wary of what they viewed as the emerging “Red Menace.”

73 Joshua Freeman, *In Transit: the Transport Workers Union in New York City, 1933-1966* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 148, 155, 104-106. In the TWU, Communist Party members only made up 1 to 2% of membership, though they represented a much larger percentage of the leadership.
While Catholics had domestic concerns, international events – specifically in Russia, Spain, and Mexico – were chiefly responsible for the Catholic obsession with fighting communism. Since the Russian Revolution in 1917, Rome focused an enormous amount of energy on documenting and publicizing the attacks on religion in the Soviet Union. Beginning in March 1930, in fact, the pope asked Catholics in America to pray each Sunday for the reconversion of Russia. In Brooklyn, the Tablet frequently ran stories about life in the Soviet Union, emphasizing the lack of religion and individual rights. The weekly also inundated readers with stories of anti-clericalism in Mexico during the 1930s. However, no issue animated Catholics more than the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). The Tablet declared the conflict “a fight between the pagan and Christian philosophies of life.” The front page of the paper regularly contained stories of priests and nuns murdered by Loyalist forces, as well as the ransacking and burning of Catholic churches. This was true for Catholic newspapers around the country. As Donald F. Crosby pointed out in his 1971 article on Boston’s Catholics and the Spanish Civil War, during the first two years of the war, the Boston Pilot devoted more space to the physical and political assaults on the Spanish Catholic Church than to any other topic. For the period of 1934 to 1938, the Catholic Periodical Index listed 838 stories under the heading of “COMMUNISM,” four times more than the topic appeared between 1930 and 1933. The increase was largely due to the focus on events in Spain.

75 Brooklyn Tablet, 15 August 1936.
Among these news stories, the overwhelming focus was on the threat communism posed to the Catholic Church. Christianity, Catholics insisted, was essential to an orderly and free society. Catholic churches and schools were “civilizing institutions” without which society would descend into mayhem. In a 1936 story covering the Spanish Civil War, the *Tablet* insisted that

> The Church is always the great champion of morality, of individual rights, and of national peace. Once she is struck the engines of destruction attacking the home, personal liberty, private property, freedom of the press, the right to assembly and national decency are set in motion. No one is any longer free; no one has any rights; men become beasts; chaos is the order of the day.\(^78\)

The *Tablet’s* coverage of these events echoed the tone of Pope Pius XI’s 1937 encyclical *On Atheistic Communism*. According to the encyclical, the battle between Christianity and communism was one of good versus evil. As evidenced by the horrors of life in Russia, Spain, and Mexico, the pope insisted, communist forces were “working for the overthrow the Christian Social Order.”\(^79\)

The papal encyclicals of the 1930s, as well as the attention Catholic newspapers focused on communism in Russia, Mexico, and Spain, demonstrate that Catholic anti-communism predated the Cold War. While American Cold War anti-communism arose out of the strategic threat posed by the Soviet Union, Catholic anti-communism grew out of the belief that communism would lead to the secularization of American society. Conversely, the growth of secularism in the United States would leave the country ripe for communist control. Thus anything Catholics perceived to threaten the Christian Social Order was assumed to be a communist plot. Many of the alleged insidious social forces that Catholics condemned in the early 1930 – including profanity, obscenity, immorality,

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\(^78\) *Brooklyn Tablet*, 1 August 1936.  
lack of respect for the law, and disdain for traditional family life – would be allowed to run rampant in a communist, secular society. It was the Church, they insisted, that kept these forces at bay and therefore removing Christianity from society would lead ultimately to chaos. For Catholics, communism became a catch-all term to describe behaviors and policies they deemed un-Christian and immoral. In effect, it embodied all the evil forces at work in the world.

By the latter half of the 1930s, Catholic Action campaigns became intimately linked to the anti-communist movement. Catholic groups monitored film, literature, and music for any sign of communist influence. The Legion of Decency, for example, accused Hollywood organizations such as the Screen Actors’ Guild and Screen Writers’ Guild of being communist front organizations. Catholics regularly wrote into the *Tablet* to warn their coreligionists to avoid communists or communist idea. One writer, for example, insisted that the Musicians Union 802 was a “hotbed of Communism and Communistic propaganda.” “Why are corporations and rich people,” he asked, “who alone support good music, blind to the fact that they are financing their own destruction in supporting Red musicians[?]” On the same day, another warned readers that a new mural in the subway was imported from Moscow. The “vulgarization of art” proved that Americans were living in a period of “complete ethical and moral degradation” as communists made inroads into American society.

In addition to their concern over the cultural influence of communists, Catholics focused on keeping communists out of public office. The *Tablet* and Catholic groups carefully scrutinized civil service appointments and were quick to condemn candidates

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81 *Brooklyn Tablet*, 12 February 1938.
they deemed dangerous. When Manhattan Borough President Stanley M. Isaacs
appointed Simon W. Gerson, a Communist Party member, as Confidential Examiner in
1938, the Tablet wrote that the emerging “‘Left’ control made many wonder if Russia or
Barcelona was gradually being transferred to New York City.”82 The Kings County
Chapter of the Catholic War Veterans, as well as other Catholic anti-communist
organizations, led the fight to oust Gerson and to ban communists, or anyone suspected of
having communist ties, from working in public service. In parishes throughout the
diocese, priests encouraged their parishioners to read pamphlets, handed out at the end of
Mass, which instructed them to write the borough president, Mayor La Guardia, and
Governor Lehman to demand Gerson’s removal.83 Catholics also supported the
McNaboe-Devaney bill, which dictated that “No person shall occupy any office or
position” who “by word of mouth or writing advocates, advises or teaches the duty,
necessity or propriety of overthrowing or overturning organized government by force or
violence or assassination.” To the dismay of the Catholic War Veterans and the Tablet,
Governor Lehman vetoed the bill after it passed both State Houses.84

“It us either Christian social justice or pagan social decay!”: Father Charles

Coughlin and the Christian Front85

No one typified the shift away from a critique of laissez-faire capitalism and
toward virulent Catholic anti-communism more than the immensely popular Father

82 Brooklyn Tablet, 19 March 1938.
84 Brooklyn Eagle, 10 April 1938.
Lodge Curran, The Challenge of the Pact and the Challenge of Social Justice (Royal Oaks, MI: Charles E.
Coughlin, 1939).
Charles Coughlin, a Detroit priest whose radio broadcasts filled Catholic homes around the country. In the early 1930s, he was a harsh critic of Hoover and eager supporter of FDR. Coughlin insisted the New Deal was “Christ’s deal,” and the slogan “Roosevelt or ruin!” rang out repeatedly during his show.86 His broadcasts chiefly focused on bringing the Catholic ideals encapsulated in papal encyclicals to the American economic system. The sixteen-point program he outlined for America in 1934, for example, emphasized an annual living wage, labor’s right to organize, the protection and maintenance of private property for the public good, and absolute government control of currency.87 These reforms, he insisted, would bring Christian social justice to America. The appeal of his ideas was so broad, and his style so engaging, that in February of 1934, 30 networks carried Coughlin’s show and listeners of New York’s WOR radio station voted the priest – after the president – “the most useful citizen of the United States politically in 1933.” A Hollywood studio even offered him $5 million to produce and star in a film titled “The Fighting Priest.” He refused.88

Coughlin’s vision of social justice, however, shifted as the decade drew on. He increasingly focus on the issue of currency reform, and inundated his listeners with complex (if confused) arguments against the gold standard and in favor of immediate monetary reevaluation. While his opinions on these issues were vague and often changing, his support for FDR was clearly wavering, especially after it became apparent the president would not support Coughlin’s monetary policies. By 1935, the priest was openly critical of FDR; he accused the president of receiving support from the American

86 Brinkley, Voices of Protest, 108.
87 Charles Tull, Father Coughlin and the New Deal (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1965), 64.
88 Brinkley, Voices of Protest, 120.
Communist Party and charged that his administration had communist leanings. The New Deal, he argued, did not go far enough, paid workers too little, and was part of a pagan industrial order that denied man the true value of his labor. His views found support in Brooklyn not only in the Tablet, but also at well-attended appearances in the city. In 1935 he filled the 20,000 seats at Madison Square Garden, where the crowd cheered his theories of social justice, but at the mention of “bankers, New Deal wages, etc., the throng would let out vociferous jeers.” In 1936, when Coughlin supported William Lemke of the short-lived Union Party for president, he drew over 20,000 Brooklynites to Ebbetts Field. Coughlin argued that the upcoming election was not one “of two presidential candidates of two parties, but between Christianity and the old paganism. The pagan conception was ‘Work, eat, and die,’ but the modern feeling is that the laborer must receive an annual living wage.” The New Deal, he insisted, was not consistent with a Christian social order and thus the president who implemented it represented paganism and, by extension, put American at risk of succumbing to communism.

Bishops around the country, as well as Catholic periodicals like Commonweal and America, openly criticized Coughlin, but the Brooklyn Diocese continued to maintain support for the radio priest. By 1936, Patrick Scanlan, editor of the Tablet, emerged as Coughlin’s soldest supporter in the Catholic press, and regularly published his broadcasts in the weekly. The diocese even supported its own Coughlin-like figure: Rev. Edward Lodge Curran, whom critics deemed “Coughlin’s Man Friday.” The Brooklyn

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89 Tull, Father Coughlin and the New Deal, 134.
90 Brooklyn Eagle, 23 May 1935.
91 Ibid., 12 September 1936.
92 Ibid., 25 January 1940.
priest was the president of the International Catholic Truth Society, which purported to spread Christian doctrine, though in practice was nearly wholly consumed with sounding the alarm on communist intrusions into American society. He also founded the American Association Against Communism, Inc. The group printed pamphlets that insisted “American Communists would destroy all religion in the United States, close all churches and make every boy and girl an atheist,” which were handed out by youth on street corners around Brooklyn. Curran’s warnings were not limited to the street; in the late 1930s, he was one of the most popular speakers at Catholic gatherings in the diocese. His voice also regularly appeared in the secular press, the Tablet, and Father Coughlin’s Social Justice. During the same period, he produced a number of pamphlets that were distributed throughout the diocese, including the notable “Facts About Communism,” dedicated to all Americans “WHO BELIEVE AND KNOW THAT COMMUNISM IS THE DEADY ENEMY OF ALL THAT WE AMERICANS HOLD DEAR.”

Historians have drawn on Fathers Coughlin and Curran to illustrate the frustration felt by Americans during the 1930s. According to Alan Brinkley, who places Coughlin alongside Senator Huey Long, the popularity of these figures was a manifestation “of one of the most powerful impulses of the Great Depression, and of many decades of American life before it: the urge to defend the autonomy of the individual and the independence of the community against encroachments from the modern industrial state.” While they certainly illustrate these desires among the American public, they

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94 Tull, Father Coughlin and the New Deal, 192.
96 Brinkley, Voices of Protest, xi.
also highlight a facet of Catholicism frequently written off as an aberration by many Catholic historians. Coughlin and his supporters, according to historian Colleen Doody, in fact “expressed some key elements that would later be apparent in postwar Catholic conservatism,” namely “hatred of Communism as a materialistic and atheistic philosophy that was incompatible with Christianity, anger at Communist persecution of Catholics overseas, and belief that subversives within the American government conspired to weaken the nation’s resolve to fight Communism abroad.”

Though the vast majority of Catholics in Brooklyn and Queens were not as militant as Coughlin or Curran, they would be hard-pressed to avoid their messages, which were widely circulated on the radio, from the pulpit, and within the pages of the Tablet.

Perhaps no event encapsulates the fierce anti-communism, commitment to a Christian social order, and conservatism of Brooklyn Catholics than the dramatic events surrounding a group known as the Christian Front, an organization created by Father Coughlin in the summer of 1936 as a “defense mechanism against Red activities and as a protector of Christianity and Americanism.” The New York City contingent of the organization officially formed on August 11, 1938 and attracted members from a variety of anti-communist groups in the city. The organization originally met in Manhattan in the rectory of St. Paul the Apostle Church on 61st Street, and a Paulist priest, Father Burke, gave lectures during the meetings.

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97 Doody, Detroit’s Cold War, 78.
98 Quoted in Tull, Father Coughlin and the New Deal, 212.
The Christian Front did not last long in Manhattan, however. By the spring of 1939, the Chancery Office of the New York Archdiocese advised the Paulist Father to cease their affiliation with the organization because of its growing anti-Semitism. The group reflected the increasingly-vociferous anti-Semitism Father Coughlin adopted in the latter half of the decade. Coughlin began to make frequent allusions to Jews degrading American institutions by failing to operate under the teaching of Christ, and he firmly declared himself an anti-Semite in 1938 by serializing *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a fraudulent document purporting to reveal plans for Jewish global domination, in *Social Justice*. Coughlin repeatedly warned listeners of a “Judeo-Bolshevik threat,” insisting that the entirety of Soviet leadership was made up of Jews. “By their own failure to use the press, the radio and banking house, where they stand so prominently, to fight Communism as vigorously as they fight Nazism,” Coughlin argued in 1938, “the Jews invite the charge of being supporters of Communism.”

His message filtered down to the Christian Front rank and file, who were known to shout anti-Semitic slogans while selling *Social Justice* on New York street corners. “This is not Moscow. Buy Social Justice before the Jews get a hold of City Hall and the United States,” one vendor shouted before being slapped by a passing Jewish man. Others were documented carrying signs that simply read “All Jews are Communists.”

Coughlin’s anti-Semitism appealed to Catholics in Brooklyn largely because of the socioeconomic tensions between the borough’s Jews and Catholics. As Ronald Bayor pointed out, many of New York’s Catholics, especially the Irish, remained in the lower

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101 “Memorandum on the Street Disturbances in New York City,” n.d., 18, 3, American Jewish Committee Digital Archive (hereafter AJC).
and middle classes in the 1930s, despite immigrating to the country two to three generations prior. Jews, however, tended to achieve a comparable, if not higher, class status in a shorter period of time. Patrick Scanlan expressed frustration that “In 1890, or even 1900, this race amounted to little in New York,” but “Today they have large numbers, great influence, fill the businesses and professional ranks, and own tremendous real estate.” Additionally, Jews challenged Irish domination of the local Democratic machine. Mayor LaGuardia, an Italian Republican, brought more Jews into his government’s administration, shifting power away from Irish Catholics. Jewish economic power inspired resentment from the men in the Christian Front, who insisted that Jews were in control of practically all banks, schools, and governments in the United States. Christian Fronters yelled anti-Semitic slogans on the subway, boycotted and vandalized Jewish businesses, used brass knuckles to assault those who looked Jewish, and calculatingly sold Social Justice outside of Jewish department store.

No longer welcome in the New York Archdiocese, the Christian Fronters moved their meetings to Brooklyn, where they often held meetings at Prospect Place. Unlike the New York leadership, the Brooklyn Diocese openly embraced the anti-communist efforts of the Christian Front while quietly accepting their anti-Semitism. Priests like Rev. Curran became visible supporters. The Christian Front also reached out to the priests of

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the diocese, circulating letters to the clergy that requested their help in defending America against communism and asking that they encourage their parishioners to read *Social Justice*.\(^{107}\) The platform of Brooklyn’s Christian Front was largely in harmony with the diocese: they emphasized the importance of fighting secularism, promoting Christianity, upholding labor’s right to organize and to a fair wage, fighting communism and atheism, cleaning up the immoral influence of the press, radio, and screen, and combatting “all attacks on the Christian Social Order.”\(^{108}\) The leadership also encourage Christian Front rank and file to join the Crown Heights School of Catholic Workmen. The organization included approximately 3,000 members, who were mostly men aged 20 to 40. While any Christian could join the organization, participants were overwhelmingly Catholic. One leader estimated the membership was 45% Irish, with Germans and Italians comprising the remaining 55%.\(^{109}\)

Christian Front members generally busied themselves with meetings, street corners orations, selling *Social Justice*, and even speaking at diocesan communion breakfasts.\(^{110}\) However, some of the leadership was involved in more insidious activities, which prompted an FBI investigation in 1939. Through the involvement of a confidential informant, the FBI learned that the Christian Front had organized paramilitary squads, known as sports clubs, within the membership. There were ten squad leaders in New York City, each of whom were in charge of 15 to 20 men. The Christian Front, the FBI

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\(^{107}\) *New York Times*, 1 May 1940.

\(^{108}\) Report, E.J. Connelley, New York City, 1/18/1940, WILLIAM GERARD BISHOP with aliases; SUBVERSIVE ACTIVITIES, SEDITIOUS CONSPIRACY; THEFT OF GOVERNMENT PROPERTY, FBI File no. 61-537.


\(^{110}\) *New York Times*, 32 May 1940.
learned, believed a communist revolution was inevitable, and thus created the sport clubs to put down the coming insurgency and implement a Christian government. The Front claimed that the plans to defend the country against a communist revolution were the “meat of the entire idea” behind the group. In order to prepare for a possible military conflict, the members of the sports clubs procured rifles and ammunition, and practiced drills at a fire arms range in Narrowsburg, New York. They likewise received instructions on military tactics in weekly meeting. The clubs also had more immediate plans. At one meeting, the men made arrangements to bomb the *Daily Worker*, a communist newspaper. One member was to throw dynamite through the window of the newspaper building, while another Christian Fronter, disguised as a New York City police officer, would direct traffic and aid the getaway car.

The FBI agents investigated the Christian Front became increasingly concerned throughout their months-long investigation. After discovering that some of the group’s leaders possessed several bombs, the Bureau took legal action. In January of 1940, the FBI charges 18 men from the Christian Front with plotting to overthrow the Government of the United States. When the FBI raided the homes of these men, they found 18 cans of cordite, 12 Springfield rifles, 3,500 rounds of ammunition, and an assortment of other arms. Over half of the men charged were either members of the National Guard or had

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112 *New York Times*, 1 May 1940.
served in another branch of the armed forces – positions they used to steal arms and ammunitions from National Guard armories.\textsuperscript{115}

While the Christian Front made up only a very small portion of the Catholic population in Brooklyn, this episode nevertheless reveals a great deal about the Brooklyn Diocese and its parishioners. Even before the leaders of the Christian Front were charged with crimes, the Brooklyn Church and Mission Federation, which represented nearly every Protestant congregation in the borough, warned their follower to stay away from the organization, which it criticized for its “destructive influences.”\textsuperscript{116} In contrast, the Brooklyn Diocese never publically condemned the activities of the group. When a reporter from the \textit{Brooklyn Eagle} called Bishop Molloy for a statement, the Chancery Office informed him that the Bishop could not be reached.\textsuperscript{117} The \textit{Tablet}, too, stood by the accused. The Brooklyn weekly was so friendly to the group that the editor of \textit{Commonweal} wrote that “its letters, news stories, editorials and managing editor’s column have consistently encouraged the organized development of a ‘Christian Front’ type of suspicious, inflammatory, combative mentality.” In reply, Scanlan merely stated that the \textit{Tablet} represented a variety of opinions.\textsuperscript{118}

Many of the diocese’s Catholics also sided with the Christian Front. “It would be an excellent idea to crush the Reds who are the real menace,” one Brooklyn man wrote to the FBI. “This so called ‘plot’ is merely a desperate re-action to the do nothing policy of your Bureau against the Reds.”\textsuperscript{119} Brooklynites also attended rallies in support of the

\textsuperscript{115} \textit{New York Times}, 15 January 1940.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 6 December 1939.
\textsuperscript{117} \textit{Brooklyn Eagle}, 25 January 1940.
\textsuperscript{118} \textit{New York Times}, 23 June 1940.
\textsuperscript{119} Letter, “American” to FBI, Brooklyn, 19 January 1940, FBI File 61-537.
accused men. One demonstration, sponsored by a committee raising funds to support the parents’ of the accused, drew roughly 6,000 people to Prospect Hall. Rev. Curran, the main speaker, praised the men for standing up against communism, which he described as the most “blasphemous enemy of our American Democracy” He applauded the accused men and their supporters who were willing to, “if need be, die for the preservation of Christian democracy.”

Unable to convince the jury that the Christian Front was capable of carrying out their plans, all the men put on trial were eventually acquitted. Many Catholics saw the acquittals as a victory. In July of 1940, Catholics held an “Independence Rally” for the Christian Front at Prospect Hall, and the 2,000 persons in attendance cheered eight of the accused as the guests of honor. Patrick Scanlan, as well as multiple priests, attended and spoke at the rally. The unwavering diocesan support for the Christian Front epitomized the extreme opposition to communism among Brooklyn’s Catholics and their clergy. By the Second World War, anti-communism dominated Catholic discourse and overshadowed liberal critiques of unfetter capitalism, especially in Brooklyn. This political orientation remained dominant in the Brooklyn Diocese until the mid-1960s, effectively marginalizing liberal Catholics.

Conclusion

The Catholic world of the 1930s was built on a foundation of community, adherence to tradition, and fierce opposition to communism on the basis that it threatened the Christian Social Order. Maintenance of this space required strict discipline; Catholics

120 Brooklyn Tablet, 9 March 1940.
121 New York Times, 14 July 1940.
were expected to obey to a stringent moral code dictated from Rome and their local parish priest. This Catholic milieu was constructed not just to promote community, but also to protect Catholics from outside, insidious forces. In the 1930s, in the eyes of Catholics in Brooklyn, communism posed the largest threat to the Christian Social Order. Fierce anti-communism, as demonstrated by figures like Rev. Curran and the members of the Christian Front, was an essential component of Catholic life and belief.

While the forces of communism were mysterious and enigmatic, a more tangible threat to the Catholic enclave would appear later in the decade. As Catholics were strengthening their urban enclaves, Brooklyn underwent large demographic changes as African Americans settled throughout New York City. While Catholics continued to focus on the dangers of communism, much of their attention shifted to protecting their parishes from racial change. The next chapter will examine attempts to defend Catholic spaces from black encroachment, as well as the growing divide over how to interpret Catholic Action. For many, it meant continuing to insist upon a strict moral code and weeding out communist influence, while a more progressive band of Catholics insisted Catholic Action meant seeking out racial justice. By mid-century, a more fractured Catholic community emerged.
Chapter 2

Fortifying Parish Boundaries: Black Catholics, White Resistance, and the Birth of Interracialism

In 1941, a small group of Catholic women in Brooklyn met for a series of informal talks to discuss “the Negro question.” These women were part of the National Council for Catholic Women’s newly-formed committee of interracial justice. Their chairperson, Mary Riley, prepared for their meetings by devoting “every free moment to the study of the so-called Negro question in order to be personally equipped to go forth and interest the Catholic women of Brooklyn in the cause of interracial justice.” Riley asked George K. Hunton, Secretary of the Catholic Interracial Council, to lead the committee’s meetings. The “tiny group of courageous women” peppered Hunton with questions. “How are you going to stop intermarriage?” they asked. “Would you want a Negro family to move into your apartment house? Won’t the Negro want social equality as soon as you give him economic equality?” Others raised concerns about the possibility of black neighbors. “It is all very well for Mrs. So-and-SO but she has not lost money on her property because of the influx of Negroes in her neighborhood.”

By the early 1940s, the notion of “interracialism” had entered Catholic discourse, especially among the Church’s liberal contingent. Encouraged by the interracial movement, these Catholic women were willing to broach the topic of racial justice, but their conversation quickly turned toward their own material concerns. The women reflected the influence of two strands of

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Catholicism that emerged by the end of the Second World War: one, spearheaded by liberal clergy, emphasized interracial cooperation based on Catholic theology and another, to which the vast majority of both white priests and parishioners subscribed, that nodded to Church teachings on race while nevertheless resisting integration based on socioeconomic and political considerations.

This chapter explores the Catholic encounter with race in Brooklyn prior to 1945, and begins by examining Brooklynites who were both black and Catholic. As the Great Migration dramatically increased the city’s black population, a small group of black Catholics organized to petition the diocese for recognition. Though their experience was initially defined by official neglect, the diocese determined it was preferable for black Catholics to have their own space of worship after white priests and laity complained about the presence of black coreligionists in their parishes. In 1922 the diocese dedicated its first and only black parish. The early expansion of the black apostolate thus occurred within strict parameters set by the diocese, white Catholics, and black Catholics themselves. White Catholics and the diocesan leadership preferred separate spaces for black Catholics, both to avoid social interaction and to limit the influx of African Americans into predominantly-white neighborhoods. Black Catholics, looking for a place to socialize and worship free from white prejudice, also expressed a preference for separation. As a result, though efforts to reach blacks expanded through the 1930s and 1940s, black Catholics remained segregated from their white counterparts.

The growth of a segregated diocesan structure ironically occurred alongside the development of interracial movement in the Catholic Church. Based on the notion that all people, regardless of race or nationality, were united in the literal body of Christ,
interracialism attempted to create a colorblind Catholicism. This doctrine emphasized the equality of all races, but it also provided a way for the white hierarchy to limit black leadership within the Church. In the late 1920s, Revs. John LaFarge and William Markoe took over the Federated Colored Catholics – an exclusively black organization – ousted its leadership, and implemented an interracial membership policy. Through its refusal to allow all-black organizations or ordain any black priests, the diocese stifled black leadership and mandated that black spaces of worship be placed under the control of white clergy.

The diocese also had an economic interest in relegating black Catholics to their own, racially-defined churches. The white laity feared black movement into their parishes would lead to physical deterioration, increasing crime, and declining property values, and they registered their fear and discontent by abandoning parishes in racially-changing areas. As a result, Mass attendance and financial contributions would plummet. Diocesan officials implemented a series of parish inspections aimed at monitoring the racial and ethnic makeup of their parishes, and parishes that appeared to be experiencing an influx of black residents were often warned not to take on new financial burdens. But the diocese also allowed members of the hierarchy to vocally and militantly express their opposition to the presence of blacks in their parishes without fear of censure. Msgr. John Belford, the pastor of Our Lady of Nativity, articulated his preference for segregation on both the steps of his church and in the pages of local newspapers. His bigotry largely overshadowed liberal Catholic calls for interracial cooperation, and the diocese’s refusal to censure the priest in his decades-long battle to protect the whiteness of his parish spoke volumes.
St. Peter Claver: Creating Brooklyn’s Black Catholic Spaces

There were few black Catholics in Brooklyn in the late nineteenth and very early twentieth centuries, and thus the Church felt little pressure to address their needs. During and after World War I, however, the first Great Migration rapidly increased the black population of New York and other northern cities. African Americans travelled northward for a variety of reasons, most related to economic consideration. Black Americans were eager to escape the stagnant southern economy, which generally limited black workers to low-wage agricultural work. The North’s expanding industrial sector provided both better-paid jobs and an escape from Jim Crow discrimination, though northern cities possessed their own set of racial restrictions. In search of expanded opportunities, about 500,000 black southerners migrated to the North from 1916 to 1919, and nearly one million more migrated during the 1920s. In Brooklyn, the black population rose from 18,376 in 1900, to 31,912 in 1920, and 68,921 in 1930. The rate of growth from 1920 to 1930 was more than four times that of the white population.

Though they came to New York City in smaller numbers, immigrants from the Caribbean were more likely to belong to the Catholic Church than southern African American migrants. Between 1899 and 1937, the United States admitted approximately 150,000 black aliens. Annual immigration peaked at 12,243 in 1924 before being sharply curtailed by immigration restrictions, though a steady stream of immigrants from the colonial Caribbean did continue to enter the United States through the underutilized

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British quota. Most of these migrants settled in New York City and, by 1930, 65% of the foreign-born black population of the United States resided there. The majority of these immigrants belonged to the Episcopal and Catholic Churches, and they formed a sizeable portion of the city’s black Catholic population. In 1940, one New York City pastor estimated that “About 75 per cent of our Negro [Catholic] population is American, principally from the seaboard States; the other 25 per cent are from the Island and West Indies.”

As the black population in the urban North rose during the early decades of the twentieth century, members of the hierarchy argued that the changing makeup of their cities presented both obligations and opportunities for the Church. According to Josephite priest Rev. John Gillard, preventing black Catholics Southerners and black foreigners from “falling away” from their faith as they settled in northern cities was the Church’s first priority, but the migration also “opened up to the Church a veritable goldfield of souls to be ‘panned’ for Christ.”

Spurred by a desire to help migrants retain their faith and to convert new Catholics, the Church began to gradually engage in “special activity for Catholic Negroes” in the North. By 1928, 22 northern dioceses and archdioceses ran exclusively black parishes or missions. The hierarchy easily justified the creation of separate black churches. Ethnic Catholics, the Church argued, had always been given separate national churches. Rev. Francis J. Gilligan, a man who asserted that racism was a grave sin, nevertheless argued:

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7 Reid, *The Negro Immigrant*, 85, 125, 244.
10 Ibid., 32.
It is proper that in every section where large groups of Negroes dwell that separate parishes should be established for them. Many of the colored just as the French, Germans, and the Polish prefer to worship by themselves. When racial groups in a nation differ strikingly the Church has always permitted them to form separate congregations.\(^{11}\)

While it was certainly true that ethnic Catholics were frequently given separate churches, this practice was often necessary because new immigrant groups needed priests who spoke their native language. However, these divisions tended to fade as newer generations learned English and moved out of ethnic enclaves. By the 1930s, many parishes in Brooklyn, even those originally established as national parishes, listed a mixture of Irish, Germans, Poles, and Italians among their parishioners. Parishes and parish schools generally accepted all Catholics from European backgrounds; only African American Catholics were frequently denied access.\(^{12}\)

White parishioners tended to favor racially segregated parishes in order to prevent socialization between blacks and whites. Even those who claimed to accept racial equality were critical of parish integration. In a Catholic publication, a Fordham University student wrote that while a black Catholic should be given “good living conditions, and every opportunity to save his immortal soul; that is, all the benefits derived from membership in the Catholic Church,” he did not deserve to be integrated into a white church. Social equality would result in “interrmarriage and a mingling of

\(^{11}\) Rev. Francis J. Gilligan, *The Morality of the Color Line: An Examination of the Right and the Wrong of the Discrimination Against the Negro in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 1928), 20. While black Catholics were “permitted” to have their own parish, it should be pointed out that they petitioned their bishops to create exclusively black parishes not because the necessarily favored separation, but because it was preferable to facing constant discrimination in white Catholic Churches.

\(^{12}\) John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 34. This is not to suggest that national parishes were completely out of fashion by the 1930s. There were still a number of parishes in Brooklyn where Polish, German, Italian, or Lithuanian was spoken, and thus tended to cater exclusively to a single immigrant group. A handful of Italian and Polish parishes continued to give Mass in the native language of their parishioners into the 1960s.
races,” which would be “revolting” to both races. The Fordham student was of the opinion “that Negroes should be segregated, especially in large cities, so that they cannot interfere in the affairs of the white man, and so that the white man cannot interfere in the affairs of his colored fellow-creatures.” Preferably, he wrote, “let both white and black man, under a fair and competent system of segregation, work out their own happiness and eternal salvation.”

Black Catholics also frequently expressed a preference for separate spaces of worship, if only to avoid the discrimination they experienced in white churches. Some parishes tolerated a small number of black Catholics, who were usually from a middle- or upper-class backgrounds. Frequently, however, pastors and ushers asked black parishioners to sit in designated pews at the side or rear of the church, and were not to take communion until after white parishioners had arisen and departed. In other instances, black Catholics were simply turned away. Rather than face the humiliation of rejection, many chose to attend Mass at St. Benedict the Moor in Manhattan, established by the Archdiocese of New York in 1883 as the first exclusively black Northern parish. Catholics from the outer boroughs and New Jersey regularly travelled to the parish on Sundays to attend Mass.

In Brooklyn, a small group of black Catholics began petitioning the bishop for their own parish in 1915. Under the direction of Rev. Peter Burns, they formed a

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13 “As Youth Sees It,” *Interracial Review*, September 1934, Volume 7, no. 9, 114. Even writers in the *Interracial Review* who called for the integration of the church were firmly against mixed marriages. The first article to suggest a ban on interracial marriage might be unjustified did not appear until the June 1953 issue.


catechetical class at St. John the Baptist in Stuyvesant Heights, and the group quickly evolved into a formal organization aimed at forming their own parish. Sixteen people attended the first official meeting of the Colored Catholics Club (CCC), but they attracted an additional 100 members within several months. The CCC met bi-monthly in the basement of Nativity of Our Blessed Lord, which the pastor, Msgr. John L. Belford begrudgingly let them use. In a petition to Brooklyn Bishop Charles McDonnell, the members asked him to consider forming a black parish for two reasons. First, they hoped to “enjoy the social pleasures and entertainments that were to be found in all the parishes in this diocese.” Second, they argued that creating a space to build social relationship and community would induce “many Colored Catholics, who have drifted away from the fold for just this lack of social atmosphere” to return to the Church.16 Their petition received no response from the Bishop McDonnell. Dismayed but undeterred, they contacted the Office of the Bishop to make an appointment, but were directed to Monsignor Joseph McNamara, the Vicar General. Monsignor McNamara met with representatives of the CCC in November of 1915 and assured them he would discuss their concerns with the bishop but, again, they were not contacted. When the Club asked the Office of the Bishop about their petition, an official told them it had gotten lost. Realizing his superior had little interest in making the requests of the CCC a reality, Msgr. Belford decided he no longer needed to accommodate their meetings at his church.17 After facing continual rejection, the Club disbanded in 1916.18

16 Jervis, *Quintessential Priest*, 60-61. Though today Bedford-Stuyvesant is the name of a single neighborhood, the area was considered two separate communities – Bedford and Stuyvesant Heights – until the early 1930s. Throughout most of this chapter, I will refer to two distinct areas, as did neighborhood residents in the early twentieth century.
Black Catholics did find one advocate within the Brooklyn hierarchy. In 1914, two years after his ordination, Rev. Bernard J. Quinn helped prepare two black women for baptism at St. Gregory in Crown Heights. The experience convinced him the diocese should undertake a black apostolate. But when he approached diocesan officials with his proposition, the bishop, who was clearly eager to rid himself of the vexatious priest, suggested Rev. Quinn would better aid his church by volunteering to be an army chaplain. The priest served as a First Lieutenant of the 334th Machine Gun Infantry in Alençon, France from June 1918 to June 1919. Upon his return, Rev. Quinn again requested permission to start a mission for black Catholics, but the bishop turned him down and instead shuffled him through three parishes in 11 months. It was only after Nativity’s Msgr. Belford asked the bishop to establish a black parish – for the explicit purpose of convincing black Catholics to stop attending Mass at his church – that the priest received permission to begin his apostolate.

Rev. Quinn began his work in early 1920. While he was sincere in his desires, his methods were woefully directionless. Rev. Quinn did not know how many black Catholics resided in the diocese, nor did he know where he might find them. He began his black ministry simply by wandering the streets, approaching any black person he saw, and inquiring about their religious beliefs and church membership. “To tell the truth,” the priest later explained, “I didn’t know where to look to find the first Colored Catholic.” During one of his daytime jaunts, he met a man who put him in touch with Jules De

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19 Program for Centennial Birthday of their Founder Pastor Right Reverend Monsignor Bernard J. Quinn, January 15, 1988, Donna Leslie Collection, Box 1, Folder 5, ADB. An apostolate is a group of persons within the church dedicated to the propagation of faith among a certain group or of a certain religious doctrine.
20 “A Historical Sketch of St. Peter Claver Church,” 1996, Donna Leslie Collection, Box 1, Folder 6, ADB.
21 Jervis, Quintessential Priest, 87.
Weever, the president of the defunct CCC. After reaching out to former members, the two men resurrected the organization, which spread the word about the new parish.

Marion Myers, a Jamaican man who immigrated to Brooklyn in 1919, remembered being approached by an usher at St. Joseph’s in Prospect Heights. “He stopped and asked me, ‘are you a Roman Catholic?’” Miffed, Myers replied, “of course I am, why do you think I am at Mass?” “You people are going to have a church of your own,” the usher explained. Myers said he “immediately contacted Fr. Quinn and became involved with his work.”

After a fundraising campaign, which involved touring a number of Brooklyn churches with a ventriloquist and a large choir, Quinn and his followers purchased an express depot in Bedford that formerly housed horses and mechanical equipment. This was a unique practice necessitated by limited funding; traditionally the diocese provided loans to build a new church, but financing was not extended to the new black parish. The congregation faced other difficulties. During its renovation, the church suffered some minor acts of vandalism, but organized volunteers, who watched the building at night, prevented any larger incidents. St. Peter Claver, the diocese’s first black parish, was finished in early 1922 and blessed by the newly appointed Bishop Thomas Edmund Molloy on February 26.

St. Peter Claver offered black Catholics the social life and services they were denied in white parishes. The parish school, composed of converted brownstones and finished in September of 1922, was among its most impactful amenities. Parents welcomed the school not only because it allowed their children to receive a parochial

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22 Jervis, *Quintessential Priest*, 87-88, 92.
23 Ibid., 92-94.
education, but also because it offered an alternative to New York’s public schools where students often dealt with overcrowding and a shift system that only allowed students to attend classes on a part-time basis. St. Peter Claver also offered black students access to the diocese’s largely Irish and Italian high schools. One of the church’s pastors, Rev. Cullen, secured places for a small number of St. Peter Claver pupils at Bishop Loughlin and Bishop McDonnell Memorial High Schools, and the parish covered the students’ tuition. Black Catholics also created a vibrant parish social life. A Men’s Club, Altar Society, the Guild of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the Women’s Club all began in 1922. The recreation center, completed in 1931, provided space for entertainment and political organizing. Lena Horne, Ella Fitzgerald, Lester Young, and the Harlem Globetrotters all performed at St. Peter Claver, and the parish hosted the annual meeting of the Urban League. According to parishioner, St. Peter Claver became “the heart of social as well as spiritual life to the African Americans in Brooklyn.”

The Belford and Blackshear Affair

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, a handful of black Catholic churches formed in the North and a small cohort of Catholic intellectuals began examining the role of the Church in American race relations, but these actions went largely unnoticed by Catholic parishioners and diocesan priests. If Brooklyn Catholics

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25 “A Historical Sketch of St. Peter Claver Church,” 1996, Donna Leslie Collection, Box 1, Folder 6, ADB; Wendell Pritchett, Brownsville, Brooklyn: Blacks, Jews, and the Changing Face of the Ghetto (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 26. New York City addressed the issue of overcrowding between 1924 and 1929, when the Board of Education oversaw the construction of 130 new schools. This expansion eliminated the shift system and, for the first time, allowed all students to attend school full-time.
27 Jervis, Quintessential Priest, 113.
28 Davies, “St. Peter Claver’s,” 41; Fr. Jervis, Quintessential Priest, 106.
concerned themselves at all with African Americans in the late 1920s and early 1930s, it was usually to express concern over their movement into previously white, middle-class neighborhoods. As Brooklyn’s black population grew, so did the anxiety of the borough’s white residents. By 1930 Brooklyn contained only about one-fifth of the black population of the entire city, but the percentage of black people as part of the total population nearly doubled from 1.5% to 2.7% between 1920 and 1930.\textsuperscript{30} The black population also grew increasingly concentrated in the Bedford and Stuyvesant neighborhoods, as well as the “St. Mark’s district” between Bedford and Prospect Park. A survey conducted by the Bedford and Stuyvesant Ministers’ Associations and the Brooklyn Church and Mission Federation found that, while black families made up 6% of the total population of the area in 1920, they composed 20% ten years later.\textsuperscript{31} In his study of Brooklyn, Harold X. Connolly argued that, by 1930, “there developed a degree of racial concentration hitherto unknown in Brooklyn.” “Given hindsight,” he wrote, “one can see in skeletal form by 1930 the outline of the future Brooklyn ghetto.”\textsuperscript{32}

Msgr. Belford, whose church was located at Classon Avenue and Madison Street in Bedford, provided the most vocal Catholic opposition to church integration. In 1929, he became embroiled in one of Brooklyn’s most widely-publicized instances of racial discrimination during that decade when he declared support for Rev. William Blackshear, an Episcopal Minister who announced he would no longer welcome black worshippers in his congregation. The episode began at a September 15 service, when Rev. Blackshear, a

\textsuperscript{31} George H. Hobart, \textit{Survey: Bedford-Stuyvesant Area} (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Church and Mission Federation, Commission on Comity and Christian Centers, 1938), 1, Brooklyn Collection, Brooklyn Public Library (BPL).
\textsuperscript{32} Connolly, \textit{A Ghetto Grows in Brooklyn}, 55.
rector at St. Matthew’s Protestant Episcopal Church in Bedford, informed his congregation that “The Episcopal Church provides churches for negroes. Several of these churches are within easy reach of this locality.” These parishes, he insisted, “are in need of the loyal support of all true negro churchmen, therefore the rector of this parish discourages the attendance or membership in this church of the members of that race.”

The NAACP condemned Blackshear’s “un-Christ-like practice of Jim Crow Christianity” almost immediately. The reverend defended his position as a matter of “church policy.” “St. Matthew’s in a white church,” he argued, “and it is desirable that only white persons should attend its services. We have a few Negro members, however, who may remain, if they wish.” In fact, he asserted, he had acted as “a friend of the negro race.” In black congregations, “negroes can develop their power of leadership, whereas in white congregations they are bound to be subdued.” In any case, he argued, “I believe that I have the right to maintain the integrity of my church as a white church, despite the fact that there is a fast-growing colored community in this neighborhood.”

Though many black organizations and religious representatives displayed shock and anger, Rev. L.C. Dade, rector of St. Barnabas’ Protestant Episcopal Church at Belmont Avenue and Elton Street, one of the two black Episcopal churches in the neighborhood, expressed little surprise. “Mr. Blackshear,” he said, “has indicated his attitude toward the colored churchman on previous occasions.” Rev. Dade also likely presupposed the Protestant Episcopal Church’s support of Blackshear. In reference to the NAACP’s

34 Ibid., 19 September 1929.
35 Ibid., 17 September 1929.
36 Ibid., 18 September 1929.
37 Ibid., 17 September 1929.
requests for the church to disavow Blackshear, Bishop Ernest M. Stires stated that “No organization outside the Church has the right to call upon a Bishop to rebuke one of his clergy.” The vestry of St. Matthew’s Church, too, issued a statement that they were “in harmony” with the reverend’s policy and would make no further comment on the matter.

Many of those who condemned Blackshear’s actions pointed to the fact that he was a Texan, suggesting his southernness might account for his behavior. James Weldon Johnson, secretary of the NAACP, stated: “It is regrettable that such an action as this of the Rev. Mr. Blackshear must follow the engagement by a Northern congregation of a Texas clergyman. The brand of Christianity which establishes the ‘Jim Crow’ line in churches is a laughing stock to all civilized people. The Rev. Mr. Blackshear fits in badly with the enlightened attitude here in the North.” U.S. Congressman Hamilton Fish Jr. agreed, arguing it was “inconceivable that any Episcopal congregation north of the Mason and Dixon line should permit such bigotry and intolerance to be transported into the Borough of Brooklyn.”

Msgr. Belford’s response to Rev. Blackshear suggests that the attitude of the North was less “enlightened” than his opponents assumed. Rev. Blackshear, he argued, “deserves applause for his honesty” and “did just what he should have done.” The Catholic priest insisted that he had “never believed in separate churches...But when there are separate churches, let them be separate.” “Negroes love to make their way into white neighborhoods, white schools and white churches” he wrote in The Nativity Mentor, and

39 Ibid., 22 September 1929.
40 Ibid., 18 September 1929.
“When people intrude they deserve exclusion.” He conceded that African Americans could be “tolerated” if they were few in number, but when they become more numerous, he suggested, they are “noisy, impudent, arrogant and abusive.” “Should we see symptoms of an invasion or should strange negroes become numerous,” he told his congregants, “we would not hesitate one minute to tell them to go to their own church and to exclude them if telling them was not effectual.”\(^42\) Besides, he wrote “our people do not want negroes. If they were to come here in numbers our people would leave.”\(^43\)

That Msgr. Belford could publically make such statements without rebuke from the Bishop of Brooklyn suggests that the opinions of the priests and his diocese were largely in harmony. The NAACP did contact Cardinal Patrick Joseph Hayes, the Archbishop of New York, asking if he approved of Msgr. Belford’s decision to exclude black Catholics from his church. Msgr. Thomas M. O’Keefe, who answered the letter on the archbishop’s behalf, was quick to point out that Msgr. Belford “belongs to Brooklyn,” and was therefore not under the direction of the archbishop. Nevertheless, he condemned the priest, stating that his position did “not represent the attitude nor the spirit of the Catholic Church,” and was in fact the “opposite not only of that attitude and spirit but of the very doctrine of the Catholic Church.” Msgr. Belford, however, only had to answer to his Brooklyn’s Bishop Molloy, and conceded that “if my Bishop were to take an opposite view I would carry out his orders.”\(^44\) The bishop never publically condemned his actions. If Msgr. Belford was privately scolded, his punishment was limited. He served at Nativity for the next two decades, where he continued to carry out his practice of telling black

\(^{42}\) New York Times, 8 October 1929.
\(^{43}\) Ibid., 13 October 1929.
\(^{44}\) New York Times, 13 October 1929.
Catholics to go to “their” church. The actions of Msgr. Belford and lack of action on the part of the diocese point to the unfortunate fact that doctrine and practice often did not align.

**The Birth of Catholic Interracialism**

By the 1930s, Brooklyn’s diocesan leadership, clergy, and white parishioners stood firmly in favor of separate churches for black and white Catholics. However, on the national and state levels, black and white Catholics were beginning to question not only the ethics of segregation, but the church’s general apathy toward African Americans. As a result, a movement emerged calling for the Catholic Church to reach out to blacks and address not only their spiritual needs, but also their temporal concerns. While this movement was small and largely confined to conversations among Catholic intellectuals (chiefly Jesuits and Josephites), it would, over time, filter down to the diocesan level and impact the way some of Brooklyn’s progressive priests approached the borough’s growing black population. Encouraged by the growing Catholic interracial movement, these priests successfully encouraged the Brooklyn Diocese to expand their apostolate among the city’s black population. Though the African Americans these priests attempted to convert lived within an extremely large diocesan structure, clergy saw their actions as missionary efforts – a distinction that strengthened the already formidable barriers separating black and white Catholics.

Efforts to fight racism within the American Catholic Church began largely thanks to Thomas Wyatt Turner, a black Catholic botanist who received his doctorate from Cornell in 1924. In 1917, Turner founded the Committee Against the Extension of Race
Prejudice in the Catholic Church, which he modeled after the NAACP. The organization sought to raise the status of black Catholics while documenting and publicizing acts of racism within the Church. In 1925, the organization re-formed as the Federated Colored Catholics (FCC). Both groups were open only to black members; Turner insisted that only black Catholics could articulate their own needs. But the FCC experienced a major organizational shift in the late 1920s when two Jesuit priests, Revs. John LaFarge and William Markoe, both of whom had worked closely with African American Catholics, managed to infiltrate the group. The two priests reengineered the organization under the model of Interracialism, which sought to remove racial discrimination from the Church. In order to fulfill their vision of a colorblind Catholicism, Revs. LaFarge and Markoe modified the membership policy and forced the FCC to accept white members. By 1933 they had ousted Turner from the presidency and, because, Rev. Markoe insisted, the organization’s name emphasized “at least by implication, the idea of separation,” renamed the organization the Catholic Interracial Council of New York. The group’s periodical, *The Chronicle*, also received a name change, becoming the *Interracial Review*.

The moment highlighted a general feeling of frustration among black Catholics. Turner and his supporters resented the white clergy for tamping down on their attempts to create black leadership within the Church. He accused Rev. LaFarge of being a paternalist and described the shift in the FCC as “an insidious assault…on Negro

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leadership.” The Afro-American featured the events on the front page and accused Revs. LaFarge and Markoe of attempting to dictate how black Catholics should think and feel. Even W.E.B. DuBois weighed in on the controversy, insisting that the Jesuits had taken over the FCC because the members had not acted in the manner expected of them. Instead, they “stood up and talked like men and not begged like supplicants.” DuBois portrayed the takeover as a case of white clergy attempting to suppress the voices of black Catholics: “Don’t segregate yourselves! Let’s all get together, whites and blacks, and let the wise whites lead you.”

Revs. LaFarge and Markoe’s actions were a misguided attempt to improve the spiritual welfare of black Catholics. The Church, Rev. Markoe insisted, did “practically nothing” to address the religious needs of blacks or to show that the Catholicism was, in fact, their “sacred inheritance.” Building an interracial community, these priest felt, was the most direct way to erase racial prejudice among parishioners and bring black Catholics into the fold. However, the Church’s use of the interracial doctrine to justify the white takeover of a black organization also revealed its discomfort with black leadership, and its unwillingness to accept black seminarians did little to dissuade critics. In 1932, there were only three black priests in the entire United States. Though the hierarchy’s meddling was understandably unwelcome by Turner and other black Catholics, interracialism did provide a platform to build understanding between black Catholics and

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48 Southern, John LaFarge and the Limits of Catholic Interracialism, 139, 136-137. For an in-depth examination of the FCC split, see pgs. 105-146.
49 McGreevy, Parish Boundaries, 41.
50 H.C.E. Zacharias, “Church and Caste in the Land of Liberty,” The Chronicle, February 1930, Volume 5, no. 2, 32. Father Augustus Tolton, ordained in 1888, was the first black priest in the United States. He was a former slave who spent most of his career in the Archdiocese of Chicago. Between his ordination and 1932, only eight other black priests were ordained in the United States. By 1932, five had died, and one left to become a member of the African Mission Society of Lyon, leaving only three. The Diocese of Brooklyn would not ordain a black priest until 1949.
white clergy – a bond that would lead liberal member of the hierarchy to become vocal advocates for black civil rights struggles later in the century.

This shift toward interracialism was related to larger development within the social thought of the Church during the 1930s, namely a renewed interest in the Pauline notion of the Mystical Body of Christ. The doctrine, which was especially popular among Jesuits, stressed that the Church was a living entity, and that all Catholics were united through Christ’s literal body and blood during the Eucharist. It was the focus of a 1935 book by Msgr. Fulton Sheen, and became the subject of Pope Pius XII’s 1943 encyclical. The pope reminded his followers that “Our Saviour shed His Blood precisely in order that He might reconcile men to God through the Cross, and might constrain them to unite in one body, however widely they may differ in nationality and race.”

“Two marks of the Catholic Church,” the editors of Interracial Review insisted, “are universality and unity. The very name Catholic signifies world-wide, and under the Mystical Body of Christ all souls are members of one body. Yet, by our discrimination against the Negro, we practically drive him away from the Church. How can we say we are true Catholics if we act in this manner?”

Catholic interracialists focused their efforts on converting African Americans in urban dioceses. American Catholics, an Interracial Review writer suggested, “especially in the North, are beginning to see there is at their very doors a mission field as important as any throughout the world.” “Twelve million souls at our very door grope for the light of Truth,” another insisted. “We can hardly be said to be Catholic at heart, hardly be said

51 Pius XII, Encyclical Letter. Mystici Corporis Christi. 29 June 1943.
52 Interracial Review, January 1941, Volume 14, no. 1, 11.
to love our fellowman, if we are deaf and dumb and blind to the spiritual needs of some twelve millions of souls who live at home in our own beloved America where charity should begin.”

This “great Negro harvest,” argued supporters of the interracial movement, would be aided by African Americans’ perceived natural aptitude for religion. “The Negro, by nature, is intensely religious,” a Catholic activist insisted. Another contended that African Americans were “remarkably gifted with the religious sense.”

White clergy saw the push for black conversion as a missionary effort. While most mission work took place in regions of the world largely untouched by the influence of the Catholic Church, blacks in Brooklyn and other cities in the North lived in the midst of a massive Catholic population and institutional structure. Liberal Catholics criticized the laity and clergy for not considering African Americans to be part of the regular religious body and instead as a “separate ‘problem’ for the Church,” but white interracialists were often guilty of this mindset themselves.

The fear of communism was one of the largest factors motivating the Church to pursue black conversion. Supporters of interracialism viewed communism and the Catholic Church as opposing forces fighting to win the allegiance of African Americans. Catholics were genuinely concerned that communists would bring African Americans into their fold, especially after the well-publicized involvement of the Communist Party in the 1931 trial of the Scottsboro boys. “The Communist,” Rev. LaFarge argued in a radio address on the Catholic Interracial Hour, “is aggressively interested in the Negro’s

daily needs, economic, social, legal. He is concerned with the trials of the family that is on the point of being evicted for inability to pay its rent; in the relief worker who is in danger of losing his job; [and] the workman who finds himself barred from membership in the A.F. of L. because of racial discrimination.” The most effective way for Catholics to fight communism, he argued, was to combat racism, promote social justice and charity, and convince African Americans that the Catholics Church was interested not just in their souls but their temporal existence. “If our Catholic laity as a body, in their daily lives in the school, in the workshop, the business office, the church, show that they respect their colored fellow citizens as men and as brothers,” Rev. LaFarge continued, “they will do more to eliminate the occasions for Communism than any amount of denunciations and exposures.” The urban priest, the editors of Interracial Review argued, must recognize that “[t]he spiritual progress of his parishioners, is related to their social, industrial and economic well-being.”

St. Peter Claver was the only exclusively black parish the diocese ever established in Brooklyn. The Church’s subsequent outreach and conversion efforts were carried out in missions. These were small chapels, often in storefronts, where a small number of people could attend Mass. After the establishment of St. Peter Claver, Father Quinn worked tirelessly to organize missions for black Catholics throughout the diocese. Many of these parishioners were too far from the diocese’s only black church to travel there regularly, and these outposts provided a place to worship and seek out the resources of the Church. The missions included St. Martin de Porres Chapel in Brownsville, the Seamen’s Mission near the waterfront in Cobble Hill, and the Mission in Crown Heights,

as well as 15 centers of instruction where convert classes were held. Missions expanded the Church’s reach among non-whites, but, by creating spaces that were oriented almost exclusively toward black – and, increasingly, Puerto Rican – Brooklynites, they maintained the Church’s racial barriers.

The Church and the Emerging Ghetto

As the diocese expanded the black apostolate, a small number of white Catholics showed an interest in interracialism. The Brooklyn Catholic Action Council, for example, created an Interracial Committee in 1934 and adopted a resolution to “become articulate in the cause of justice for the Negro.” Drawing on the notion of the Mystical Body of Christ, they issued a report titled “All Men are Equal: A Brief for the Black Man,” which they sent to all 162 Catholic colleges in the country. Despite these gestures, and the discussions that filled the pages of the Interracial Review each month, these strains of Catholic thought impacted only a small part of the Church. These discussions were largely an intellectual exercise, and the vast majority of Catholics expressed minimal (if any) concern for the plight of African Americans. While these examples hint at the more robust Catholic movement for racial equality that would emerge in Brooklyn later in the century, throughout the 1930s and early 1940s white Brooklyn Catholics were largely content with separate black and white parishes.

The diocese, too, was highly invested in maintaining church segregation. If white Catholics fled their parishes to escape racial change, their contributions would also

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61 “Brooklyn Catholic Action: Council Calls Upon Catholic Students of Nation to Express Themselves in Favor of Good Will to the Negro,” Interracial Review, May 1934, Volume 7, no. 5, 60, 69.
disappear. Segregation was thus socially and economically motivated. The diocese’s fears were legitimized and exacerbated by federal policies that codified racial enmity into the nation’s mortgage lending industry. In 1933, as part of the New Deal, the federal government created the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation (HOLC), which aimed to prevent foreclosures by refinancing existing loans and regularizing the use of long-term, self-amortizing mortgages. In order to determine what areas were safe for investment, HOLC created a rating system, which assigned neighborhoods with an A to D grade. D-rated areas, which the agency deemed most undesirable, were colored red on HOLC maps. The practice of labeling these neighborhoods unfit for mortgage investment came to be known as “redlining.”

Lower ratings were based on a number of factors, including limited housing, lack of space for development, or unattractive industrial sites. However, the presence of “undesirable” ethnic mixing was one of the most likely causes for a neighborhood to be rated unfavorably. HOLC maps awarded higher rating to neighborhoods with residents of British, Irish, and German ancestry, while downgrading those where Jews, Italians, and other new immigrant groups lived. In their map of Brooklyn, completed in 1938, HOLC agents only awarded an A rating to heavily-Irish and British Bay Ridge; most neighborhoods received a C or D, like Kensington, which HOLC described as a “very undesirable neighborhood of mixed races.”

However, no factor was more detrimental than the presence of African Americans. With the exception of Crown Heights, which only a handful of black families called home, none of the eighteen neighborhoods that received a B rating contained any black residents. In

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63 Wilder, *Covenant with Color*, 192.
contrast, roughly half of those neighborhoods that received a D rating contained an African American population. The real estate agents who contributed to HOLC’s maps benefitted from their effects, profiting off of white residents in redlined areas looking to quickly sell their homes. Many middle-class whites were able to move to more desirable neighborhoods in the suburbs, Queen, or the outskirts of Brooklyn. Catholic Churches, however, were tied to their geographic parishes, where they were left to manage the effects of disinvestment and depopulation that were generated by the government’s mortgage-lending policies.

The nearly inevitable decline that followed the entry of “undesirable” elements into a parish created a great deal of anxiety in the diocese. Diocesan officials revealed their concerns in their bureaucratic attempts to monitor, assess, and control the racial makeup of their parishes. During the 1930s, the diocese implemented multiple forms of inspection that were conducted by representatives from the Office of the Bishop (Canonical Visitation Reports), and by the bishop himself (Personal Inspection Reports). The Canonical Visitation Reports provided information on general parish concerns and minutia, including the number of vestments in the parish or the condition of the church’s organ, while the Bishop’s reports were more narrowly focused on parish attendance, the ethnic and racial background of parishioners, and finances. Reports covered a wide variety of issues, and parishes were only visited at irregular intervals, but the inspections nevertheless reveal near-constant concern about the racial, ethnic, and religious background of community residents, and what impact this might have on the financial health of the parish. Their assessments tended to mirror those codified in HOLC maps.

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64 Wilder, *Covenant with Color*, 193.
The movement on Jews into Catholic parishes repeatedly elicited concern in parish inspection reports. At the turn of the century, the construction of bridges and subways encouraged many immigrant Jews living in Manhattan’s Lower East Side to move to across the East River. By 1923, 740,000 Jews lived in Brooklyn, more than any other New York borough, and, by the outbreak of the Second World War, it was home to nearly one million Jews.\textsuperscript{65} Though they were especially concentrated in Brownsville, Jewish residents also constituted large part of the population in Flatbush, Bedford, Stuyvesant Heights, East New York, Williamsburg, and Canarsie, and inspection reports frequently noted increases in the Jewish population in these neighborhoods.\textsuperscript{66} At Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Williamsburg, for example, Bishop Molloy reported in 1939 that Jews were “increasing in number,” and thus “No new financial burdens” should be assumed.\textsuperscript{67} The Canonical Report of Holy Innocents in Flatbush simply stated: “Jewish increase is a real problem. Low type Hebrew beginning to predominate. Parish will eventually deteriorate owing to Jewish residents. Last five years this has become very obvious.”\textsuperscript{68} Parishes in Bedford and Stuyvesant Heights also produced anxiety among diocesan officials. At St. Ambrose, where the bishop first noted that the neighborhood seemed to be “going Jewish” in 1926, the ‘problem’ escalated quickly. By 1933, the bishop reported that the population was “rapidly changing. Catholics leaving. Maintenance a grave problem.”\textsuperscript{69}

\textsuperscript{65} David Kaufman, \textit{Shul with a Pool} (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 99), 248.
\textsuperscript{67} Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Bishop’s Personal Inspection Report, October 1, 1939, Office of the Bishop, Parish Visitation Files, Box 1, ADB.
\textsuperscript{68} Holy Innocents, Canonical Visitation Report, December 12, 1944, Office of the Bishop, Parish Visitation Files, Box 3, ADB.
\textsuperscript{69} St. Ambrose, Bishop’s Personal Inspection Report, Office of the Bishop, Parish Visitation Files, Box 1, ADB.
Unlike Jews, the form for the Canonical Visitation Report specifically asked about the presence of blacks within the parish boundaries. The form expressed the dual concerns of the diocese: inspectors were asked to determine how many black people lived in the parish, but the form also required them to answer the query, “What is being done for them?” If there were any black parishioners, their numbers were usually small. St. Mary of the Sea in Carroll Gardens reported that there were five black families in the parish who received “regular religious instruction.” At St. Ambrose in Bedford, 15 black families attended services, and five black children were enrolled in the school. There were ten black families at St. Matthew in Crown Height, including one family of “exemplary Catholics.”

While the diocese expressed some interest in ministering to black Catholics, their concern for the spiritual wellbeing of African Americans was outweighed by an overwhelming anxiety that racial change would drive away white parishioner. The racial makeup of a parish could quickly shift, leaving churches with a greatly diminished number of parishioners. Bedford’s Catholic churches were the first to feel the impacts of racial changes. In his 1933 inspection of Our Lady of Victory, Bishop Molloy noted the area was experiencing “inroads of negroes,” but he predicted the parish would “hold up ten or fifteen years.” Only five years later, though, the neighborhood was “almost completely colored” and parish income was “diminishing.” The Canonical Visitation

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70 St. Mary Star of the Sea, Canonical Visitation Report, February 4, 1945, Bishop’s Office, Parish Visit Files, Box 1, ADB.
71 St. Ambrose, Canonical Visitation Report, November 9, 1944, Office of the Bishop, Parish Visitation Files, Box 1, ADB.
72 St. Matthew, Canonical Visitation Report, November 13, 1944, Office of the Bishop, Parish Visitation Files, Box 3, ADB.
73 Our Lady of Victory, Bishop’s Personal Inspection Report, Office of the Bishop, Parish Visitation Files, Box 1, ADB.
Report of 1944 noted that 70% of parishioners at Our Lady of Victory were black and that the congregation was also one-fifth of its former size. With so few parishioners, many of whom were quite poor, the parish found it difficult to finance regular repairs and maintenance. The church fell $68,000 into debt. To try and manage their finances, the parish instituted a secret bingo night, which raised $80 to $100 a week.\textsuperscript{74} Holy Rosary experienced a similar loss of parishioners. In 1934, Bishop Molloy noted that the parish population was “seriously affected by negro people,” and, as a result, there were many “white people leaving.”\textsuperscript{75} Over the next three years, 1,000 white Catholics left the parish and, by 1944, the parish was one-fifth of its former size.\textsuperscript{76} A diocesan representative reported that, of the 1,300 parishioners who attended Mass each Sunday, two-thirds were Irish Americans and one-third were black. The school, however, was 80% black. The parish income slowly diminished, and the parish staff attempted to creatively cut spending. They fired the school janitor and placed students in charge of cleaning the school and tending to the altar and sanctuary. They also came to depend on the religious for regular maintenance. When a diocesan representative came to inspect the parish, he found the curates repairing the broken furnace.\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{74} Our Lady of Victory, Canonical Visitation Report, November 9, 1944, Office of the Bishop, Parish Visitation Files, Box 2, ADB. Bingo was a point of contention between Catholics and politicians. The New York State 1938 Constitutional Convention placed restrictions on bingo, which had become popular during the Depression. Churches and fraternal groups, however, were still allowed to play the games for charitable purposes. Mayor LaGuardia, to the dismay of the New York Catholics, announced in 1942 that bingo would be banned in all locations, including churches. “If a game is unlawful, the ultimate disposition of the funds, or the auspices under which the game is operated, or the place where the game is operated, does not make the unlawful game lawful,” he reported to the \textit{New York Times} on November 30, 1942. Many Brooklyn churches, like Our Lady of Victory, continued to hold bingo parties in defiance of the law.

\textsuperscript{75} Holy Rosary, Bishop’s Personal Inspection Report, Office of the Bishop, Parish Visitation Files, Box 1, ABD.

\textsuperscript{76} Holy Rosary Parish History, 1938, Monsignor John K. Sharp Files, Parish Files, Box 1, Folder 51, ADB.

\textsuperscript{77} Holy Rosary, Canonical Visitation Report, November 10, 1944, Office of the Bishop, Parish Visitation Files, Box 1, ADB.
In effect, redlined areas were condemned to become black ghettos and their churches to erode into shells of their former selves. Faced with waning property values, white Brooklymites in declining areas could sell their properties and move to more “secure” neighborhoods, generally along the perimeter of the borough, and receive government-backed mortgages. This shifted Brooklyn’s middle class population and municipal services to the south, and pushed poorer people, usually of color, into the spaces the white middle class abandoned in the center and north of the borough. The white Catholic population, too, began to flow out of central Brooklyn as parishioners attempted to escape declining property values. As a largely black and non-Catholic population took their place, Catholic churches in redlined areas found they no longer had enough parishioners to support their large edifices. The movement of black resident into central Brooklyn thus left the area’s Catholic churches with a smaller number of parishioners, limited financial support, and a parish population many priests found, at best, bewildering, and, at worst, undeserving of their services. In order to stem the flow of money and white residents out of Bedford-Stuyvesant, church administrators focused on keeping blacks out of the neighborhood, retaining their white parishioners, and restricting black Catholics to St. Peter Claver and its missions.

Msgr. Belford and the Midtown Civic League: The Church Resists Racial Change in Bedford-Stuyvesant

The HOLC map of Brooklyn reflected trends that were already well underway by the time it was produced in 1938. Though it made official the public and private disinvestment in Bedford and Stuyvesant Heights, money and white residents had been
vacating the area since the early 1930s. Those who could left the older neighborhoods of Brooklyn Heights, Fort Greene, Park Slope, Bedford, and Stuyvesant Heights and followed the expanding subway and elevated lines to the outlying areas of Brooklyn.

They moved to Dyker Heights, Bay Ridge, Bensonhurst, Midwood, and Sheepshead Bay, which experienced construction booms in the 1920s and 1930s. Families were lured to these outlying neighborhoods by a larger percentage of one- and two-family detached homes, better services, and more space for recreation. During the decade of the 1930s, the populations of Bensonhurst, Midwood, and Sheepshead Bay grew 8.5%, 25%, and 35%, respectively. The Catholic Church shifted its focus to the southern portion of Brooklyn, as well. Of the 19 new churches built in Brooklyn between 1920 and 1940, 12 of them were in the southern section of the borough. The residents of these neighborhoods were also overwhelmingly white; by 1950, the black population in these areas made up no more than 0.9% of the total.

As private investment shifted to the south of Brooklyn and the city worked to expand services in these growing areas, money drained out of Bedford and Stuyvesant.

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78 The notion that race and ethnicity determined the value of a neighborhood existed before HOLC. The idea that the introduction of ‘undesirables’ would lower real estate values was accepted within the University of Chicago’s Department of Sociology in the 1930s, and was particularly prominent in the work of Robert Park. It also appeared in real estate appraisal texts like Stanley L. McMichael’s Appraisal Manual (1931) and Frederick Babcock’s The Valuation of Real Estate (1932). The creation of HOLC merely made these ideas part of public policy.


80 The Community Council of Greater New York Bureau of Community Statistical Services, Community Population Characteristics and Neighborhood Social Resources, vol. II (New York: Bureau of Community Statistical Services, Research Department, Community Council of Greater New York, 1959), 107, 212, 235. Berman Jewish Policy Archive (hereafter BJP). The black populations of Bensonhurst, Midwood, and Sheepshead Bay in 1950 were 0.4%, 0.3%, and 0.9% of the total, respectively.
The two neighborhoods came to be seen as a single, declining, and increasingly black area, and by 1931 the *Brooklyn Eagle* began referring to the neighborhood in the hyphenated form of Bedford-Stuyvesant. As the African American population increased, aided by the completion of a subway line between Bedford-Stuyvesant and Harlem in 1936, developers profited by subdividing large brownstones into apartments and charging black tenants high rents. Many apartment owners were absentee landlords who failed to adequately maintain their properties while renting to a large number of tenants, resulting in deteriorating living conditions. With minimal new construction through the 1930s, overcrowding became increasingly common. A 1938 report from the Brooklyn Federation for Better Housing found that, in a 22 block area of Bedford-Stuyvesant, 4,807 families lived in just 3,421 dwellings. Ninety-one percent of these dwellings lacked central heat, 85% were without hot water, and 26% lacked a tub or shower. Absentee landlords owned 80% of the property in the neighborhood. The State Temporary Commission on the Condition of the Urban Colored also found that black Brooklynites paid 10 to 58% higher rentals than their white neighbors due to the artificial scarcity of housing. Reverend Theophilus Alcantara, a member of the Federation, argued that animals in the city zoos “are living in much better condition than the colored.” While the borders of the Bedford-Stuyvesant’s black area expanded, African Americans remained concentrated in a single area. By 1938, roughly half of Brooklyn’s

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84 *Brooklyn Eagle*, June 29 1938.
black residents lived in the area bounded by Atlantic, Lafayette, Stuyvesant, and Grand Avenues. Following the influx of black residents, the city decreased Bedford-Stuyvesant’s public services, leading the *Brooklyn Eagle* to describe it as the “Copless, City ‘Stepchild.’” By 1941, over 20 borough and city-wide agencies had cited the neighborhood as the area in the city most deficient in basic services and resources.

As the black population grew, the neighborhood’s white residents organize to prevent a further influx of African Americans. The Midtown Civic League, which had more than 900 members in 1937, led the effort to curb the growth of the black population in Bedford-Stuyvesant. Founded by Sumner Sirtl, the organization aimed to preserve “the dignity and desirability of the Bedford and Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn.” The group urged the city to make general improvements to the area, including the removal of the Fulton Street elevated line, construction of new playgrounds, and modernization of the local schools. But the Midtown Civic League was predominantly concerned with a crime wave Sirtl claimed had gripped Bedford-Stuyvesant, though evidence suggests the dramatic increase in crime was largely illusory. In a 1934 study for the New York City Housing Authority that identified and examined “slum” areas with the highest rates of adult and juvenile delinquency, Bedford-Stuyvesant never elicited a mention. Surveys regularly identified Brownsville, a largely immigrant neighborhoods and the center of mob activity in the borough, as the most dangerous neighborhood in Brooklyn. 

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86 *Brooklyn Eagle*, 29 June 1938.
87 Ibid., 4 June 1937.
88 Quimby, “Black Political Development,” 112.
89 *Brooklyn Eagle*, 8 July 1937.
groups like the New York Teachers Union blamed Sirtl, the Hearst press, the *Daily News*, and the *Post* for inventing the crime wave and conducting a “Negro smear.” His critics became more agitated when he began urging Midtown Civic League members to purchase firearms. Black organizations charged that the group was using its “pistol practice” to frighten black residents, but Sirtl countered that their actions were “just for protection of our homes and businesses, because crime has increased greatly in the area in recent years.”

Local priests and churches became actively involved with Midtown Civic League. Rev. John W. Byrnes, who served as a pastor at Our Lady of Victory in Bedford-Stuyvesant in the 1940s, remembered that the “parish priests would use the auditorium in the school to have the ‘keep the blacks out’ meetings.” But it was Nativity’s Msgr. Belford who fashioned himself into the Church’s spokesman for bigotry. In 1938 he celebrated his golden jubilee anniversary as a priest, marking, according to the *New York Times*, 50 years of hammering “home to American Catholics his opinions on almost every question that has stirred religious, political or social interest.” The movement of African Americans into his parish had long been a favorite topic, and he found a kindred spirit in Sumner Sirtl. By the late 1930s, Msgr. Belford became, after Sirtl, the Midtown Civic League’s most vocal member.

Sirtl and Msgr. Belford blamed the neighborhood’s deteriorating conditions on the influx of black residents, and one of their earliest plans to remedy the area’s ills

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94 Rev. John W. Byrnes Oral History, Office of the Archivist, Interview Transcripts, Cabinet 4, Drawer 1, ADB.

95 *New York Times*, 13 May 1938.
proposed moving black Brooklynites to their own “settlement.” “Violations of fire, housing and sanitary laws are frequent in the one-family houses that are occupied by three to five Negro families,” Sirtl explained.\(^96\) Property in the area was losing value and “white people can’t raise money on their homes….Why? Because of the changing character of the neighborhood.” He proposed getting black residents “away from rat-infested holes” and placing them in a “model settlement” built on black labor. A city-owned 1,700-foot tract of land on Jamaica Bay, he argued, would suit this purpose.\(^97\) Msgr. Belford added his own specifics to the plan. “Quit teaching Negroes biology and instead teach them how to use modern home conveniences, how to live in a civilized community,” he told the \textit{Amsterdam News}. “Perhaps the best remedy,” Msgr. Belford explained, “would be to ‘colonize’ the Negroes in an agricultural area somewhere in New York where they could learn how to live and act like other people.”\(^98\)

The Midtown Civic League focused its immediate efforts on demanding greater police protection for Bedford-Stuyvesant. In 1941, Msgr. Belford wrote to Mayor Fiorella LaGuardia to describe the neighborhood’s condition and request that the mayor dispatch police officers to Bedford-Stuyvesant’s Catholic churches. He complained that the tenement house across the street from his church slept five or six people to a room, and that rooms were being rented in eight-hour shifts to three sets of roomers. Dilapidated housing was breeding crime, and four area churches, including Nativity of Our Lord, Our Lady of Victory, Holy Rosary, and Our Lady of Good Counsel, had to discontinue evening services because parishioners were too afraid to travel the streets at night. He

\(^{97}\) \textit{Brooklyn Eagle}, 29 June 1938.
\(^{98}\) \textit{New York Amsterdam News}, 27 November 1943.
also stated that children attending parochial schools in Bedford-Stuyvesant had “been attacked by Negro children attending the near-by public schools.” His parishioners, Msgr. Belford argued, were driven out by the changing neighborhood conditions, and as a result his congregation decreased from 8,000 to 4,000 parishioners in the last five years. His parish needed “not only protection but salvation.”

Many of the problems of the black community, Belford and his supporters argued, were brought on by what one supporter described as “a weakening of the moral fiber resulting from relief handouts.” Sirtl claimed “outsiders” who “come in here by the thousands” filled the city’s relief roles and created higher taxes for “our legitimate citizens.” Taxes were rising in New York City, but this was largely a consequence of the general expansion of municipal government rather than an overly-generous welfare policy. Nevertheless, the Midtown Civic League placed the blame squarely on the city’s increasing black population. “The Negro problem is a serious question locally because it affects our tax structure,” Sirtl argued. “We’re wailing and moaning at the new tax rate here and hundreds of Southern Negroes are being attracted to Brooklyn every

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99 *New York Times*, 8 November 1941. Despite Belford’s insistence that churches were stopping Sunday night Mass to protect churchgoers from “thugs” who were “attacking members of congregations on their way to and from evening services,” Dr. J. Henry Carpenter of the Brooklyn Church and Mission Federation, an organization focus on aiding African Americans in Brooklyn, disagreed. Rather, “The great Negro influx into the territory…caused white persons to leave the neighborhood.” Evening services were simply not necessary due to reduced attendance. See *New York Times*, 26 February 1939; *New York Times*, 18 November 1943.

100 *New York Times*, 8 November 1941.

101 *Brooklyn Eagle*, 25 May 1938.

102 Beginning in 1937, New Deal projects were scaled back. In response, New York City began assuming financial responsibility for projects that had previously utilized labor operated under the Works Progress Administration. Thousands of former WPA workers were absorbed into the Civil Service. As a result, municipal spending increased in many areas where the WPA had been particularly active. Spending on parks, libraries, and museums in the 1939-1940 fiscal year, for example, represented a 60.4% increase over 1937 spending, and funds devoted to public works rose 44.6%. Overall, the city budget increased 9.7%. Property taxes rose as a result; from 2.64% in 1937 to 2.84% in the 1940-1941 fiscal year. See Mason B. Williams, *City of Ambition: FDR, LaGuardia, and the Making of Modern New York* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), 265-266.
week because of our liberal relief laws.”103 Southerners, “using every facility the city has, are responsible for the enormous figures in our 1938 budget.”104 Supporters of tightened relief laws also argued that welfare bred laziness and greed. “Government handouts for the past decade have been all this new generation has ever seen,” suggested Thomas H. Doyle, president of Bedford-Stuyvesant’s Midtown Real Estate Association. “They know nothing of the strength and independence derived from working for a living.”105 Belford echoed these ideas in the Nativity church bulletin. Those who support increasing welfare programs, he wrote, argue that “‘Social policy justifies this.’ Would that he would tell us what he means by ‘social policy.’ To an ordinary mind, it would appear to be complete socialism. That is, distribute among the needy what industry and prudence have saved; see that everyone, the loafer and drone, may live on the fruits of the worker and saver.” Those who seek relief, he argued, “desperately cry for crumbs, hoping they will get loaves…The vultures are greedy.”106

In 1943, the Midtown Civic League petitioned the city to appoint a grand jury to investigate conditions in Bedford-Stuyvesant, which, thanks largely to Sirtl and Msgr. Belford agitation, the press regularly called “Little Harlem.” The city complied, and tasked the jury with describing the conditions in Bedford-Stuyvesant, pinpointing reasons for the area’s deterioration, and proposing solutions to the neighborhood’s social problems. The all-white grand jury interviewed over 100 witnesses they described as “representative citizens.” They spoke with judges, lawyers, area home owners, and

103 Brooklyn Eagle, 27 June 1938.
104 Ibid., 25 May 1938.
105 New York Times, 8 November 1941.
106 Nativity Mentor, December 1949, Vol. LIV, no. 11, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 10, ADB.
clergymen of different faiths, including Msgr. Belford, but only a handful of black stakeholders. The conditions in the neighborhoods, the jury concluded, were a “disgrace to the city of New York.” “A most unusual and extremely deplorable state of lawlessness” reigned in Bedford-Stuyvesant. The jury suggested that police should be taken from other parts of the city and stationed in the area. The police “had not adopted sufficiently the ‘muss ‘em up’ attitude that this kind of lawlessness deserved and required,” and suggested that a greater show of force would help solve the problem. Though the jury insisted that “this is in no sense a race problem,” the racial undertones were obvious. “A great influx of people from out of the State and other areas into this district,” they wrote, “requires more stringent supervision by the public authorities. Relief roles should be vigorously investigated.” Though people were required to live in New York for two years before they were eligible for relief, the jury argued that a “longer period of waiting time should exist than now prevails in order to eliminate the tendency to live off relief.”107 After the finding were made public, Walter White quickly issued a statement describing the jury’s allegations as “shocking.”108 An interracial committee of Bedford-Stuyvesant residents, representing 35 civic, labor, religious, and social service groups, declared that its members “have not noted any sharp increase in crime in the section, and are at a loss to understand the motivations of the grand jury.”109

The administration’s response to the grand jury disappointed those on both sides of the issue. Robert Moses, the Park Commissioner whose job title belied the extent of

107 New York Times, 16 November 1943. By 1941, almost 40% of New York City’s black population was dependent on relief or a temporary government job. This was largely due the fact that the city’s black residents were hurt most by the Depression and that they faced economic discrimination in the private sector and in New Deal employment programs.
108 Ibid., 18 November 1943.
109 Ibid., 22 November 1943.
his power within the administration, declared that the area was never neglected by the city. The problem, he insisted, was racial. “The urban negro problem exists all over the country,” he wrote to LaGuardia. “It has been aggravated by the war. It is not confined to New York City or to the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood. The City can’t do everything. Individual families, churches and social organizations must do their part.”

LaGuardia echoed Moses’ arguments when he spoke to reporters at the Hotel Astor. The conditions in Bedford Stuyvesant, he insisted, were typical of sections not adequately served by Catholic, Jewish, or Protestant welfare organizations. In effect, Moses and LaGuardia maintained that the city had no way to address racial problems and communities would have to deal with these issues on their own. They also placed most of the burden on private local religious and social institutions.

The Catholic Church, however, was divided by the issue of race. After the grand jury’s pronouncements, Msgr. Belford continued to criticize the city for failing to protect white citizen and attended a rally calling for Mayor LaGuardia’s removal based on his refusal to increase police protection in the area. The priest also publically defended an off-duty police officer who, during the rally, declared that crime was the result of an “influx of sunburned citizens who come up from the deep South mistaking liberty for license.” But the grand jury were also criticized by members of the clergy. Rev. Raymond Campion, who became pastor of St. Peter Claver when Msgr. Quinn died in 1940, commented on the pronouncement in a measured tone. In a statement issued days after the jury’s issued its findings, Rev. Campion wrote that “the general public is very

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110 Wilder, A Covenant with Color, 197.
112 Ibid., 22 November 1943.
apt to conclude from the report that the colored people from this area are responsible for the conditions that exist,” but “such a hasty conclusion is not true and would do more harm than good.” “Colored people,” he argued, “are just as much victims of the lawless activities of hoodlums as white people. They resent and fear the depredations of the lawless elements.” Rev. Campion argued that the issues facing Bedford-Stuyvesant could not be solved by an increased police presence on its own. The underlying issues leading to lawlessness – “the poor and overcrowded housing facilities, lack of recreational opportunities and the economic injustice and unfairness to which so many colored people are exposed” – needed to be addressed.113

In an interview with the *Brooklyn Eagle*, Rev. Campion assured readers that there was “no Negro problem. There is only an interracial problem.” “Interracial understanding must be developed. Prejudice must be dispelled on both sides in the light of revealed religion and the common sense logic of truth,” he argued.114 To push the interracial agenda, Father Campion founded the Brooklyn Catholic Interracial Council in 1944. The council, he hoped, would “arouse the interests of the borough’s 1,000,000 Catholics,” both black and white, “to bring influence, prestige and power to bear in securing justice for the Negro.”115 Its weekly meetings at the Brooklyn Law School featured a variety of speakers, including members of the Catholic hierarchy, as well as politicians, lawyers, and representatives from community groups. During the first meeting, Rev. Campion,

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113 *Brooklyn Eagle*, 18 November 1943. Ten thousand people attended the funeral services of Msgr. Bernard Quinn, who died after abdominal surgery at the age of 53, which serves as a testament to the great impact he had on Brooklyn Catholics. The majority of the mourners were black, though many white Catholics, who attended the novenas in honor of St. Therese of the Little Flower, were also in attendance. The Diocese of Brooklyn opened a canonical inquiry into the cause of sainthood for Msgr. Quinn in 2010 and the investigation is ongoing.
114 Ibid., 20 December 1944.
115 Ibid., 20 December 1944.
Rev. Michael J. McLoughlin, assistant pastor of St. Peter Claver, George K. Hunton, editor of *Interracial Review*, Archibald Glover, member of the New York Interracial Council, and Frank J. Crosswaith, chairman of the Negro Labor Board, gave speeches. Meetings consisted of as many as 200 to 350 attendees. The council’s approach, according to the *Brooklyn Eagle*, was “a realistic one, appealing to the intellect rather than emotions. Prejudice is ‘debunked’ by an appeal based on the teachings of Christ, an analysis of scientific findings and the authority of anthropology.”

“In destroying of discrimination,” Campion asserted at a Catholic Interracial Council meeting, “the Catholic Church has very definite and clear-cut directions and advice. Whoever does not love his neighbor commits mortal sin. The Church teaches and insists, that we treat the Negro with justice and not charity not because he is a Negro, but because he is a human being, belonging to the brotherhood of man under the Fatherhood of God.”

**Conclusion**

By the conclusion of the Second World War, two Catholic responses had developed to the growth of the black community in Brooklyn. Liberal Catholics like Rev. Campion embraced the notion of interracialism and urged the Church to expand its black apostolate and extend education efforts among white Catholics. Though black leadership was stymied, the work of white priests among the growing black population contributed to the development of a small, progressive movement within the hierarchy. White priests witnessed the many hardships facing the black community, which prompted many to

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117 *Brooklyn Eagle*, 20 December 1944.
118 *New York Amsterdam News*, 28 October 1944.
become vocal advocates for racial equality both in the Church and the City of New York. Their initial actions were limited, and they did, in some instances, engender resentment from black Catholics who were more interested in establishing black-led organizations that could articulate their needs without the interference of the white clergy. Though the liberal laity stifled black organization, their interracialism laid the groundwork for a later, more potent effort within the Church to fight for black civil and economic equality.

In contrast to Catholics who joined the Interracial Council, most member of the laity were apathetic or openly hostile to African Americans. They frequently refused to accept black parishioners in their churches and fled neighborhoods with increasing black populations. In order to appease white parishioners, the diocese institute a system of separate parishes and mission centers for black Catholics. They also allowed Msgr. Belford to vocally air his prejudices against Brooklyn’s black residents without any form of reproach. The arguments made by the Bedford-Stuyvesant priest – namely, that black New Yorkers unfairly leeched off of the welfare system, and that their presence inevitably led to an increase in crime and physical deterioration – would be accepted and repeated by a growing number of white Catholics who occupied the neighborhoods that bordered the borough’s black enclave. In the postwar years, as liberal priests pushed the diocese to and its parishioners to embrace and promote racial equality, white Brooklyn Catholics devised ways to halt the physical and political advancement of their black neighbors.
Chapter 3
The Urban Mission Field: Racially-Transitioning Parishes after the Second World War

In 1947, John W. Byrnes, an Irish-American Catholic raised in Queens Village, prepared for his ordination and pastoral assignment in the Diocese of Brooklyn. His entry into the urban priesthood coincided with the beginning of American suburbanization. After the war, the construction industry awoke and newly-built houses, made accessible by the federally-funded highway system, drew the white middle-class beyond the borders of New York City. At the same time, Southern blacks, Puerto Ricans, and Caribbean immigrants streamed into the city to reconnect with family members, secure manufacturing jobs, and access decent housing. The demographic shift had a profound impact on the Catholic Church. Formerly white parishes became predominantly black and Puerto Rican, and many local priests were ill-equipped to handle plummeting Mass attendance or to minister to the non-white and largely non-Catholic residents who now lived within the borders of their parish. The diocese struggled to find priests who were interested in this challenging form of ministry. Youthful idealism, diocesan leaders concluded, would be necessary for these assignments, and they instituted recruitment efforts at the Seminary of the Immaculate Conception. Byrnes, along with two other men, volunteered to work in Bedford-Stuyvesant. When he arrived at Our Lady of Victory, the newly-ordained priest knew nothing about the church, except that the pastor “didn’t really enjoy being there” because his parish, a diocesan report revealed, was becoming
“Primarily Colored…with a dwindling white membership.”¹ The new religious quickly took over: the parish nuns walked the streets to establish connections between the church and the community and Rev. Byrnes and others from his seminary class instituted courses in Catholic teaching. With the eventual goal of conversion, the parish held classes for adults three night a week. “I would say that maybe we would baptize over 50 adults, sometimes closer to 100, every year,” Rev. Byrnes remembered. The priests also encouraged parents to send their children to the parish school. “We never said you HAD to come to Catholic Church,” the priest recalled, “but that’s how it began to build.”²

Declining Mass attendance in racially-changing parishes was a major source of anxiety for priests in the urban North. “Our concern, increasingly,” the Executive Director of Catholic Charities explained in 1952, “is what steps are being taken to conserve what can be conserved in these areas to make it possible to develop more stable communities.” Priests needed “to make it possible for the older communities to remain in a more competitive position with the new areas that are being developed on the outskirts.”³ At the national level, Catholic Charities held a series of discussions on the topic of parish “conservation,” a vaguely-defined program aimed at halting the exodus of white parishioners and “educating our Catholic people to accept the colored.”⁴

Church leader encouraged priests to implement education initiatives to sensitize white

¹ Our Lady of Victory Canonical Visitation Report, November 9, 1944, Bishop’s Office, Parish Visitation File, Box 2, ADB.
² Rev. John W. Byrnes, Interview by Patrick McNamara, June 24, 2008, Office of the Archivist, Interview Transcripts, Cabinet 4, Drawer 1, ADB.
³ “Meeting of the Priest and Neighborhood Planning and Conservation,” September 12, 1952, Cleveland, OH, Hotel Hollenden, Box 124, Folder 21, National Conference of Catholic Charities, American Catholic History Research Center and University Archive at the Catholic University of America (hereafter CUA).
⁴ “Special Meeting for Priests,” September 10, 1952, Cleveland, OH, Hotel Statler, Box 124, Folder 21, National Conference of Catholic Charities, CUA.
parishioners, and to build interracial coalitions that could fight the decay increasingly creeping into urban neighborhoods.

At the local level, these programs were implemented in a largely improvised fashion, as Father Byrne’s experience illustrates. Young white priests were assigned to financially-strapped parishes in transitioning areas with little more than a working knowledge of the Church’s still nascent commitment to interracial justice and a fresh sense of enthusiasm. They quickly found that the educational efforts had a minimal impact, and were insufficient to overcome economic realities. Rather than fight the departure of white Catholic from the city, priests in racially-changing areas used proselytization and conversion to stabilize parish populations. They took to the street, petitioning newly-arrived residents to visit the church, meet with the religious, and send their children to the parish school and recreation center. As a result of these on-the-street efforts, black conversion increased dramatically. Some parishes, like Our Lady of Victory, reported upwards of 100 converts per year, compared to the handful that usually occurred in white parishes. By 1960, there were 19,500 black Catholics in Brooklyn.\footnote{“Interesting Statistics,” \textit{Interracial Review}, March 1960, Volume 33, no. 3, 83. The Diocese of Brooklyn had the tenth-largest population of black Catholics in the country. The New York Archdiocese was second, with 49,604 black Catholics. Nationally, there were 595,155 black Catholics in 1960.} These Catholics, together with their priests, formed the basis for a progressive movement within the diocese that would push the Church to take a more liberal position on racial justice during the turbulent 1960s.
The Urban Crisis in the Diocese of Brooklyn

As Americans settled into peace following the end of the Second World War, they also prepared for one of the largest demographic upheavals of the twentieth century: suburbanization. With servicemen returning home, and marriage and birth rates increasing, Americans found themselves in the midst of an unprecedented housing shortage. The government responded quickly with the creation of a new housing program to underwrite new construction. In the decade after the war, the government approved billions of dollars in mortgage insurance through the Federal Housing Administration (FHA). Housing benefits were also included in the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944, popularly known as the G.I. Bill. In addition to funds for medical care, higher education, and unemployment insurance, the bill created a Veterans Administration (VA) mortgage program that allowed men returning from the war to secure low-cost mortgages.6

As a result of these federal mortgage guarantees, the nation experienced a massive housing boom. While in 1944 there were only 114,000 single-family housing starts, by 1950 there were 1,692,000.7 Nowhere was the explosion of housing more pronounced than on Long Island. Once a sprawling rural collection of potato farms, estates for the elite, and fishing villages, the counties of Nassau and Suffolk underwent enormous changes during the war and in the decades following. Beginning with wartime aircraft factories, industry made its way to the island. Soon, farmers realized they would make a larger profit selling their land to home developers than by farming. By the early 1950s,

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7 Ibid., 233.
the counties of Nassau and Suffolk constituted America’s busiest home building area. A large portion of those buying homes were returning veterans; by 1952, veterans in Brooklyn, Queens, and Long Island had purchased more than 116,000 homes, worth at least $853 million, through loans guaranteed by the VA. A survey during that same year found that more than 70% of Long Island home buyers relocated from the nearby city.\(^8\)

While single-family homes also increased in Queens and in southern Brooklyn, the building in Long Island far outpaced that of the city. Between 1940 and 1970, housing units in Nassau rose 332% – nearly double the increase in Queens.\(^9\)

Long Island’s Levittown was the quintessential American postwar suburban development. Using techniques they learned while producing smaller developments, Abraham Levitt and his sons, William and Alfred, mass produced more than 17,400 separate homes.\(^10\) The development offered curvilinear streets, nine swimming pools, sixty playgrounds, ten baseball diamonds, and seven “village greens.” Levittown and similar developments were advertised as family-friendly, safe, and clean alternatives to the big city. “Do trees surround you? Is the air cool, clean and healthful? Are the schools beautiful, ideal scholastically? If not, SWITCH TO A SUBURB, where the living is easy, in a town that has everything but the Dodgers!” one New Jersey homebuilder insisted.\(^11\)

The suburbs were also racially homogeneous. In Levittown, blacks were banned from purchasing homes. FHA standards, which encouraged builders to create socially, economically, and racially homogeneous developments, reinforced these practices. By

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\(^8\) *Brooklyn Eagle*, 3 February 1952. I use “Long Island” to refer to Nassau and Suffolk counties, as most residents do, despite the fact that Kings and Queens counties are also part of the island.


\(^10\) Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 235.

1960, there were still no black residents in Levittown and, in Nassau County as a whole, African Americans made up only 3% of the population.\textsuperscript{12} New private developments in Brooklyn, too, were largely limited to the city’s white residents. Of the 200,000 units of new private housing built in the borough between 1946 and 1955, only 0.45% were sold to non-white buyers.\textsuperscript{13}

A decade after the war ended, suburbanization had made a conspicuous impact on Brooklyn. In 1955, the \textit{New York Times} offered an assessment of the city’s shifting demographics in a series titled “Our Changing City”:

What happened to North and Central Brooklyn was this: As residential dwellings began to deteriorate, the enterprising and those with good enough incomes moved to newly built homes in Bay Ridge, Bensonhurst and elsewhere southward in the borough. They moved also to Queens and Long Island. Quality department stores and luxury retail establishments deserted the area with them.\textsuperscript{14}

The city bled much of its middle class, causing capital to shift to the suburban periphery. A 1948 survey of Levittown determined that 84.4% of wage earners in the community earned between $65 and $100 a week or better.\textsuperscript{15} Most held professional jobs. In 1950, 15.2% of those employed in Nassau County worked in professional and technical fields, 26.2% in clerical and sales, and 16.7% as craftsman and foreman. Only 5.1% worked in either farms or as non-farm laborers.\textsuperscript{16} These wages contributing to the growing tax bases in Nassau and Suffolk and supported a budding business community. After the end of the

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{12} Jackson, \textit{Crabgrass Frontier}, 241; “Nassau County Comprehensive Plan.” Nassau-Suffolk Regional Planning Board and Nassau County Planning Commission, December, 1971, 19, Planning and Development Collection, Box 4, Hofstra University Special Collections (hereafter HUSC).


\textsuperscript{15} “Levittown – Your Growing Market,” \textit{Hempstead Merchants Association Monthly Bulletin}, October 1949, 7, Planning and Development Collection, Box 1, HUSC. In 2014 dollars, 84.4% of Levittown’s wage earners made between $641.99 and $987.68 a week, or $33,366.32 to $51,359.36 annually.

\textsuperscript{16} “Master Plan: Village of Floral Park, New York,” Volume I, December, 1959, prepared by Edwin S. Voorhis & Son, Planning and Development Collection, Box 4, HUSC.
\end{flushleft}
war, retail sales in the suburban counties increased enormously, soaring from $4,195 in 1939 to $48,466 in 1959 in the Suffolk County village of Hempstead.\textsuperscript{17} Long Islanders were also encouraged to shop locally. In 1949 the Hempstead Merchants Association established an “Opportunity Day” in which local establishments encouraged Hempstead residents to shop within their own community rather than in New York City. “IT IS OUR JOB TO SELL HEMPSTEAD,” read the Association’s bulletin, “and make it a more desirable place to shop for the ‘average’ Long Islander who incidentally is far above average considering the number of telephones, automobiles and homes he owns.”\textsuperscript{18}

Though Levittown and central Brooklyn might have felt like separate worlds – despite that the fact that the suburb was only slightly over thirty miles from Downtown Brooklyn via Robert Moses’ parkway system – the suburban fringe and urban core were intimately connected. The massive relocation from the urban center required the support of government, which it offered through low-cost mortgages, highway construction, and the expansion of social services. Private capital and tax dollars also flowed to the suburban periphery. As these resources shifted to the newly-built residential neighborhoods in southern Brooklyn, northeastern Queens, and Long Island, the central region of Brooklyn faced increasing neglect. The processes that began in Bedford-Stuyvesant in the 1930s were accelerated and an ever larger swath of the boroughs began to decline both physically and economically.

\textsuperscript{17} “Master Plan 1960: Village of Babylon, NY, Volume I,” Edwin S. Voorhis & Son, Inc., 32, Planning and Development Collection, Box 3, HUSC. While much of this increase is due to an increasing population, it should also be noted that Babylon’s total share of retail sales within the county also grew during this period – from 4.7% to 7.2%.

\textsuperscript{18} “Hempstead Opportunity Day To Stress Family Values,” \textit{Hempstead Merchants Association Monthly Bulletin}, October 1949, Planning and Development Collection, Box 1, HUSC.
Considering the large white exodus from central Brooklyn, the population remained relatively stable, decreasing a modest 4% during the decade of the 1950s (Table 3.1).\textsuperscript{19} Between 1950 and 1957, the influx of black and Puerto Rican residents nearly made up for the loss of 344,000 white residents. Both groups came to New York City to escape limited economic opportunities and to take advantage of the demand for unskilled labor. Despite Puerto Rican industrialization following the Second World War, the new manufacturing jobs did not replace those lost in agriculture, agricultural processing, and needlework during the same period. In search of employment, and often aided by American contract labor programs, Puerto Ricans migrated in large numbers to the United States. The vast majority settled in New York: of the 301,375 Puerto Ricans in the country in 1950, 252,252 lived in the city.\textsuperscript{20} Between 1950 and 1957, an estimated 116,700 Puerto Ricans came to Brooklyn (Table 3.2). Most of those migrants settled in Williamsburg, Brooklyn Height, Fort Greene, Red Hook, Bedford-Stuyvesant, and Brownsville.\textsuperscript{21} By 1960, there were also substantial Puerto Rican populations in Greenpoint, Sunset Park, East New York, Bushwick-Ridgewood, Crown Heights, and Park Slope.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{21} The Community Council of Greater New York Bureau of Community Statistical Services, Community Population Characteristics and Neighborhood Social Resources, vol. I (New York: Bureau of Community Statistical Services, Research Department, Community Council of Greater New York, 1959), xix-xx, BJP. Of all the Puerto Ricans in Brooklyn in 1950, 34.8% lived in Williamsburg, 17.5% in the Brooklyn Heights-Fort Greene area, 15.6% in Red Hook, and 11.8% in Bedford-Stuyvesant. They made up the largest percentage of the population in Williamsburg (8.3%) and Brooklyn Heights-Fort Greene (8%). Though only 1.8% of the borough’s Puerto Rican population lived in Brownsville in 1950, by 1957 it was home to 13% of Puerto Ricans in Brooklyn.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., xvi-xvii.
Table 3.1
Population of Brooklyn Neighborhoods, 1940-1957

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>1940</th>
<th>1950</th>
<th>1957</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Greenpoint</td>
<td>75,579</td>
<td>68,316</td>
<td>60,104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williamsburg</td>
<td>177,234</td>
<td>168,039</td>
<td>149,143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bushwick-Ridgewood</td>
<td>129,830</td>
<td>123,606</td>
<td>115,016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooklyn Height-Fort Greene</td>
<td>77,910</td>
<td>87,848</td>
<td>86,863</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bedford-Stuyvesant</td>
<td>256,388</td>
<td>269,588</td>
<td>235,015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crown Heights</td>
<td>160,064</td>
<td>160,689</td>
<td>148,990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brownsville</td>
<td>202,352</td>
<td>185,108</td>
<td>172,613</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East New York</td>
<td>168,604</td>
<td>159,333</td>
<td>147,751</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red Hook</td>
<td>104,059</td>
<td>98,389</td>
<td>94,332</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Park Slope</td>
<td>125,995</td>
<td>128,197</td>
<td>118,990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunset Park-Gowanus</td>
<td>116,208</td>
<td>110,437</td>
<td>98,368</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flatbush-East Flatbush</td>
<td>218,087</td>
<td>239,669</td>
<td>239,104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canarsie</td>
<td>31,523</td>
<td>38,611</td>
<td>47,033</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 3.2
Percentage Distribution of Brooklyn Population by Race, 1950 and 1957

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Racial Group</th>
<th>1950</th>
<th>1957</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>90.8</td>
<td>82.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puerto Rican</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Non-White</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


As whites chased government subsidies to the suburbs, African Americans moved into newly available housing and expanded beyond the border of Bedford-Stuyvesant. The shift was rapid: in 1950, 66% of black Brooklynites lived in Bedford-Stuyvesant, but by 1957 only 54% of the borough’s black population resided within its boundaries. Contiguous neighborhoods absorbed the growing black population, particularly Crown Heights and Brownsville, whose residents were, by 1957, 24.7% and 22.2% African
American, respectively. They nevertheless remained highly concentrated. By the end of the decade, 90.5% of Brooklyn’s black population lived in Bedford-Stuyvesant and its surrounding communities.23 Neighborhood borders were tightly patrolled, making the city’s predominantly-non-white areas among the most densely populated and crowded in Brooklyn.24 Blacks and Puerto Ricans, desperate for housing and restricted from purchasing or renting homes in much of the borough, were often forced into small, subdivided properties rented at inflated rates. Walter Thabit, a city planner who was intimately involved in housing development in East New York, described the situation in the 1950s thusly:

As blacks began to move into the tenement area in the late 1950s, the banks redlined the area. Tenement landlords could neither refinance nor sell their buildings to legitimate buyers. Many began to milk their buildings, harassing their white tenants to get out in order to get rent increases from blacks and Puerto Ricans. They then cut back on services to their minority tenants. Others sold to slumlords or leased to opportunists who milked both buildings and tenants; banks followed the same routes with their foreclosed properties. Physical conditions rapidly deteriorated; vandalism, crime, and violence multiplied, and abandonments, fire, and burned-out buildings followed.25

The same process played out in changing neighborhoods throughout central Brooklyn.

By 1952 the problems of deterioration had become so pronounced that the Brooklyn Eagle ran a 25-part series on the “Horror Story of Brooklyn’s Housing.” The paper invited readers to “explore the veins of decay which are eating Brooklyn’s insides,”

24 Ibid., xv; The Community Council of Greater New York, Community Population Characteristics and Neighborhood Social Resources, vol. II, 106, BJP. In 1957, the three most densely populated areas were Williamsburg, Brownsville, and Bedford-Stuyvesant, with densities of 337.2, 304.3, and 271 people per square acre, respectively. Comparatively, Bensonhurst, an overwhelmingly white residential neighborhood in south Brooklyn, had a population density of 161.7 people per square acre. In 1957, 0.4% of Bensonhurst’s population was black, and 0.1% Puerto Rican.
within the “darker regions of our darkening borough.” The Eagle’s readers were unlikely to miss the double entendre. While the series featured many white Brooklynites struggling to live and raise families in substandard housing, the reporters admitted that the problem was much more pronounced among non-white residents. In one Brownsville apartment the reporters visited, the ceilings and plumbing were so poor that a tenant said she was forced to cover her head with a raincoat each time she used the bathroom.

Another women recalled that, as she was bathing, her ceiling collapsed and both she and the bathtub dropped down to the floor below. Rat bites also plagued neighborhood residents. According to one women, no mother in Brownville “hears a cry at night…without the thought flashing through her mind that her child has been attacked.”

The Brownsville Neighborhood Council found that victims of rat bites included infants, children, and adults; some required up to two weeks of hospitalizations.

Physical deterioration was most pronounced in Bedford-Stuyvesant. “Here you can count as many as sixteen store-front Pentecostal churches in some blocks, separated here and there by a bar or liquor store,” a journalist observed in 1958. “Here you can see the prowl cars slowly moving down the streets, the refuse spilling into gutters, the gleam of flattened beer tins on the pavement, the rotten smell of decaying buildings, the vacant store windows blindly facing dingy street. No area of New York,” he wrote, “has more need of public facilities than Bedford-Stuyvesant. No area has fewer.”

The overcrowding and general neglect were a dangerous combination, leaving the area

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26 Brooklyn Eagle, 13 November 1952.
27 Ibid., 21 November 1952.
vulnerable not only to decay but to deadly fires. As a result, Bedford-Stuyvesant earned the moniker “Firetrap Row.”

Brooklyn’s Catholic churches, bound to their parish territory, were witnesses to the changing character of the borough’s central neighborhoods. After the war, many watched as their more affluent parishioners left the city for the suburbs and were replaced by parishioners who were unable to support the church as generously. Often, this meant Irish and German parishioners left the parish and Italians took their place. At Our Lady of Presentation in Brownsville, for example, the parish staff complained that the “Old Irish American element [is] almost gone and present congregation,” made up largely of Italians, was “not as numerous or generous.”

St. Joseph Patron of the Universal Church in Bushwick noted that their parishioners were “leaving for better locations,” and St. Blaise in Crown Heights reported that many of the “young folks” were moving out of the neighborhood. For many of these parishes, however, there were few Catholics to take the place of their former parishioners. St. Anne in Fort Greene reported massive depopulation “almost to a vanishing point” in 1950. At St. John the Baptist in Bedford-Stuyvesant, where 5,000 parishioners regularly attended Mass every Sunday in 1944, only 2,000 filled the pews in 1959. “So these neighborhoods changed,” recalled Msgr. Robert McCourt, “in just a few years, and in the late 50’s or early 60’s, African American

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29 Brooklyn Eagle, 11 November 1952.
30 Our Lady of Presentation, Canonical Visitation Report, November 13, 1944, Office of the Bishop, Parish Visitation Files, Box 2, ADB.
31 St. Joseph Patron of the Universal Church, Canonical Visitation Report, November 14, 1944, Office of the Bishop, Parish Visitation Files, Box 3; St. Blaise, Canonical Visitation Report, December 5, 1944, Office of the Bishop, Parish Visitation Files, Box 1, ADB.
32 Rev. Reginald McKernan to Thomas Molloy, January 1, 1950, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 1, ADB.
33 St. John the Baptist, Canonical Visitation Report, November 13, 1944, Office of the Bishop, Parish Visitation Files, Box 3; St. John the Baptist, Personal Inspection Report, September 1, 1959, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, ADB.
people began to move out here in fairly large numbers. And the other people ran. And then the white flight out to Long Island, and eventually anybody who could, seemed to be getting out of Brooklyn.”Pastors, particularly in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brownsville, and Crown Heights, watched Mass attendance plummet as largely nonwhite and non-Catholic people moved into their parishes.

Civil Rights and the Catholic Church

While the Church found itself in the midst of an urban demographic shift, it also existed within a changing political landscape. After the Second World War, African Americans returned with heightened expectations; having fought for freedom abroad, they expected to find the same ideals embraced at home. It was with a great sense of disappointment that black Americans found much unchanged: racial discrimination in employment, housing, education, and government representation all remained. In the South, African Americans began offering overt challenges to Jim Crow segregation through highly organized, premeditated actions. Activists also used the court system to begin the slow and complex process of dismantling codified segregation. The situation in the North, where segregation was technically illegal, produced its own distinct movement. In New York City, civil rights activists directed their efforts toward fighting for fair employment practices, and opposing discriminatory union, housing, and education policies.35

34 Msgr. Robert McCourt, Interviewed by Patrick McNamara, June 5, 2009, Office of the Archivist, Interview Transcripts, Cabinet 4, Drawer 1, ADB.
For the majority of New Yorkers, civil rights for non-whites were of little interest or concern. Whites were able to move to racially homogeneous neighborhoods, removed from the expanding black ghetto. At the same time, because they were far more tolerant of day-to-day interactions with African Americans than whites in the South, white New Yorkers were able to assure themselves they possessed a cosmopolitan attitude when it came to race relations. In a private poll conducted for Mayor Wagner in 1959, “minority and race problems” registered little interest among the city’s residents. In fact, it was rated the tenth-most-important issue out of a total of fourteen. As historian Brian Purnell argued, “one of the main challenges activists faced in the Jim Crow North was convincing elected officials, newspaper editorialists, and the masses of citizens that racial discrimination existed, and that discriminatory treatment of black individuals and communities created enclaves of second-class citizenship throughout America’s liberal cosmopolitan cities.”

The city’s Catholics, too, felt largely removed from the unfolding Civil Rights Movement. While their fears concerning African Americans and neighborhood integration will be explored in detail in the next chapter, they were, in the abstract, generally in favor of civil rights legislation, largely because many of the major battles that played out in the late 1940s and 1950s – the integration of schools, public spaces, and the expansion of voting rights – were focused on the South. By the 1950s, most Catholics in Brooklyn would have been aware that the church was sympathetic to the


plight of African Americans. Those who attended Catholic colleges in the city would have been taught the principle of interracialism, readers of the *Tablet* would see an occasional article praising civil rights victories in the South, and some may have even heard members of the Interracial Council speak at church functions.\(^{38}\) Segregation, most Catholics would concede, was un-Christian. In fact, in a study conducted by the National Opinion Research Center from 1940 through the early 1960s, researchers Paul Sheatsley and Herbert Hyman found that white Catholics in the North were actually less likely to oppose integration than Northern white Protestants.\(^{39}\) However, criticism of segregation did not necessarily mean Catholics in American cities were ready to welcome African Americans into their own neighborhoods. The situation was often the opposite – when it came to the integration of their own neighborhoods, interracialists consistently complained that Catholics were guilty of “the worst discrimination and racial prejudice.”\(^{40}\)

Fear of alienating white parishioners kept the Church silent on the issue of civil rights through most of the 1950s. But by the middle of the decade, when efforts to desegregate southern schools began in earnest, the American bishops felt forced to comment. In 1958 they released “Discrimination and the Christian Conscience,” a statement that condemn segregation. The race question, they insisted, was both “moral and religious.” They acknowledged that segregation, both de facto and de jure, led to “oppressive conditions and the denial of basic human rights.” Segregation, they argued,

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could not be reconciled “with the Christian view of man’s nature and rights.” “In itself and by its very nature,” segregation “imposes a stigma of inferiority upon the segregated people.” While the bishops’ statement received a largely positive reception from Catholics, it was a rather shallow response to what had become an intense national conversation. Significantly, the document offered no specific plan for how to address racial discrimination and segregation besides an insistence that Catholics act “quietly, courageously, and prayerfully.”41 Compared to Protestant statements, which called for the extension of black voting rights and condemned those who violently attempted to uphold segregation, the Catholic position appeared far from concrete. The belatedness of the Catholic response was also noteworthy. By early 1957, 21 other American Christian denomination had already issued statements on segregation and civil rights. 42 Indeed, it seems that the American bishops were very reluctant to offer any statement at all, and only did so when Pope Pius XII secretly demanded that the statement be “issued at once.”43

Though the Church’s national leadership was reluctant to ally itself to the emerging Civil Rights Movement, there were Catholics who chose to join the struggle for equality. Many of these were academics and left-wing Catholics who belonged to the Catholic Interracial Council, and whose writings filled the organization’s monthly periodical, Interracial Review. Unlike the American bishops, the Interracial Council staked a clear position on civil rights issues as early as 1950. “Christ’s teachings apply to

43 McGreevy, Parish Boundaries, 91.
the political and social world as much as the lives of individuals,” the editors wrote. Legislation provided the most appropriate way to implement these teachings. Though they conceded they could not “legislate brotherly love into the human heart,” laws were “aimed at the hand, not the heart. Legally, if not morally, any person has the right to be prejudiced. But the moment his prejudice takes the form of action and thus discrimination, that is no longer a private affair. At that point, it becomes a public matter, subject to regulation.” Drawing on the papal encyclicals of Popes Leo XII and Pius XI, they insisted that, while they rejected socialism, “so, too, we believe that interracial justice cannot flourish in a world governed by unlimited competition, by laissez-faire economic liberalism.” Legislation was required to safeguard against discrimination and violence, to manage relations between labor and management, and ensure fair access to housing and employment.

The Interracial Council worked within the political arena to support the passage of federal civil rights legislation – most notably through their efforts to implement a permanent Fair Employment Practices Commission, which, though successful at the New York State level, failed to pass at the federal level – while also advocating for an interracial agenda within the Church. Lay organizations like the Interracial Council were highly critical of the Church’s record on integration. Though segregation within vocations and church societies was never the official policy of the Church, it often happened in practice. The Interracial Review, for example, published the story of an experiment conducted by a white Kansas women who “selected at random four names of

44 “Where We Stand,” Interracial Review, November 1950, Volume 23, no. 11, 163.
46 “Where We Stand,” Interracial Review, November 1950, Volume 23, no. 11, 163.
Catholic religious congregations for women, wrote to the proper superior a letter of application, and at the close of each letter hinted that she had colored blood.” She only received one response, which informed her that the “congregation did not permit the acceptance of non-whites.”47 Through publication of such stories the group forced the Church to at least make token admissions to their ranks. As a result, the number of black priests increased, and totaled 82 by 1958.48 In Brooklyn, the diocese ordained their first black priest, Rev. William J. Rodgers, in 1949.49 Black women, too, began joining religious orders within the region. In 1949, two black women from Brooklyn gained admission to the Motherhouse of the Sisters of the Dominican Order in Amityville, and one joined the Sisters of the Precious Blood of the Brooklyn Diocese.50 The Knights of Columbus Chapter in Brooklyn, despite “many dire warning,” accepted their first black member in November of 1950. By 1954, they had admitted 43 more black candidates.51 Four years later, the same council elected James L. Pierce, a black man and Vice President of the Brooklyn Catholic Interracial Council, Grand Knight of St. Columba Council.52 Catholics also helped to integrate secular organizations. When the American Bowling Congress denied membership to two black Catholic Youth Organization (CYO) bowling teams, Rev. Charles Carow of the Brooklyn CYO began a five year effort the integrate the organization. After several attempts to amend the Congress’s constitution failed, Rev. Carow enlisted the aid of New York State Attorney General Nathaniel L.

49 “Negro Priest’s First Mass,” Interracial Review, June 1949, Volume 22, no. 6, 93.
50 “Negro Postulant Received by Two Brooklyn Converts,” Interracial Review, September 1949, Volume 22, no. 9, 143.
52 “First Negro Elected K. of C. Grand Knight,” Interracial Review, July 1958, Volume 31, no. 7, 123
Goldstein, who fined the organization and threatened to bar it from operating in the state. Finally, in 1950, the Bowling Congress integrated.\textsuperscript{53}

\textbf{The Pastor and the “Conservation” of the Parish}

Integrating black and Puerto Rican parishioners into formerly white ethnic parishes was the most complex problem facing pastors in racially-transitioning parishes. As historians have repeatedly noted, while the work of integrating non-whites into social organizations and workplaces was difficult, housing and neighborhood integration were often met with the most vocal and sometimes violent protests.\textsuperscript{54} Priests in changing neighborhoods were quick to recognize that without some sort of action on their part, aimed at easing neighborhood transition, their parish might be doomed to closure as a result of plummeting Mass attendance and financial support. Thus aimed their efforts at conservation – both of the parish population and the physical parish itself. They had two reasons for doing so. One was financial: without a sufficient number of parishioners it would be too difficult to support large parish plants. The second was moral. “There is something terribly wrong socially with the penning of people into steadily expanding solid ghettos,” James C. Downs, a lay Catholic and Housing and Development Coordinator for Chicago, explained. “Most white parishioners believe they must flee from the incoming Negroes. They fear their property values will decline; that unless they act at once when the first Negro families move into their neighborhoods, they will take heavy losses,” he wrote in \textit{America}. These fears, he acknowledged, were often “fanned

\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Brooklyn Tablet}, 20 May 1950.
by professional speculators and exploiters;” it was the duty of the neighborhood priest to allay these worries and, in turn, stabilize the neighborhood. As Downs concluded: “The priest in the parish and the Church in the civic community are in natural positions of leadership. They have the strongest of reasons – social, moral, supernatural – for exercising that leadership to promote the welfare of many hundreds of families, many thousands of souls.”

Attempts to define a program for conservation occupied liberal Catholics in the decade following the Second World War. Beginning in 1951, the National Conference of Catholic Charities held a series of conferences on the “The Pastor and the Conservation of His Parish” focused on halting the “process of deterioration that is laying waste to so many of our neighborhoods.” The conferences attracted a small cohort of priests from the urban North – predominantly based in Chicago – who witnessed the toll suburbanization and urban renewal took on their parishes. In these meetings, participants never defined “conservation,” but they did agree that any conservation program necessarily involved maintaining a delicate racial balance. “When we think of conserving a neighborhood,” Monsignor John O’Grady, Executive Director of Catholic Charities, explained, “we don’t think of just conserving it as a white neighborhood; we think of normal movement of newcomers, whether they be colored or white, so that it is not merely just a question of keeping out Negroes of any other group.”

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56 “The Pastor and the Conservation of His Parish,” 1951, p. 3, Box 124, Folder 9, National Conference of Catholic Charities, Catholic Charities USA Files, CUA.
57 “Discussion of Planning Meeting on Neighborhood Conservation,” Cosmos Club, Washington DC, June 4, 1953, Box 124, Folder 34, National Conference of Catholic Charities, Catholic Charities USA Files, CUA.
Father Galley of Chicago insisted, “is to make people realize that blacks and blight do not necessarily go together.”

In some cities, conservation programs were formalized. Chicago was the center of liberal Catholic organization thanks largely to the efforts of Saul Alinsky, a Jewish community organizer. Alinsky’s Back of the Yards Council (BOYC), organized in an area that was 90% Catholic, required the cooperation of local parishes and their pastors, some of whom assumed leadership roles in the council. With the support of lay Catholics, they petitioned the city for better housing and services, but the working-class neighborhood remained resolutely opposed to integration. Alinsky managed to export his program to New York City and became involved in efforts to preserve working-class communities in Chelsea and the Upper East Side, but, again, encountered difficulty convincing largely Irish Catholic parishes to align with Puerto Ricans to oppose urban renewal programs. Alinsky’s later efforts with The Woodlawn Organization (TWO) successfully organized blacks in opposition to the University of Chicago’s attempt to displace low-income residents, but the area was less than 5% Catholic. TWO garnered the backing of the Catholic religious and substantial financial support from the archdiocese, but there was little participation from lay Catholics in surrounding communities.

In Brooklyn, as in most dioceses throughout the urban North, efforts in the name of conservation were implemented on a largely ad hoc basis. The intentions, but lack of specific training or curricula, were clearly on display in a Catholic Interracial Council of

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58 Report of Meeting on “The Pastor and the Conservation of His Parish,” September 1, 1951, Hotel Statler, Detroit, Box 124, Folder 9, National Conference of Catholic Charities, Catholic Charities USA Files, CUA.
59 For an in-depth examination of Alinsky’s organizing efforts and the involvement of Catholics, see McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries*, 111-132.
New York (CICNY) program outlining the appropriate parish response to “The Changing Neighborhood.” The CICNY program noted that change followed a recognizable pattern: “Minority Group Move-In,” followed by the exodus of older residents and resulting real estate “panic,” and, finally, the “adjustment” period in which minorities and remaining whites – usually the working-class – would settle into a pattern of interaction, which typically involved whites attempting to retain control of their churches. The CICNY argued that neighborhood change was an opportunity for the Church to “emphasize the embodiment of principles in everyday policies and practices,” communicated both through education and disciplinary sanction for those who failed to uphold Church teachings on race. Catholics, they argued, needed to see themselves as members of a large, interracial community in order to “confront [the] problem constructively and stimulate community responsibility.” However, they admitted that while organizing efforts were taking place at the national level through Catholic Charities, the lay apostolate on the parish level required the construction of a “Machinery for parochial training” that remained “largely undeveloped.” The religious, too, were given little formal guidance regarding interracial cooperation. The training they called for, including field work in “up-to-date techniques of inter-group Relations,” remained the realm of social workers, not priests.60

While the Church publically condemned segregation and celebrated the Mystical Body of Christ, priests in changing parishes were ill prepared to move beyond rhetoric and implement a concrete program aimed, in the words of Msgr. O’Grady, at “controlling

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the flow of population.” Some priests were simply uncomfortable, and felt ill-equipped to deal with new, non-white residents. When Rev. Lawrence Hinch arrived at Sts. Peter and Paul in Williamsburg in 1962, he found the pastor “was in over his head, unfortunately,” but “it wasn’t his fault. His whole priesthood had been in middle-class or well-to-do almost suburban-like parishes and all of a sudden he found himself in this poverty-stricken, drug-ridden, gangster-ridden neighborhood.” At Our Lady of Victory, Rev Staiger, too, found himself unprepared to deal with a largely black parish. According to Msgr. Byrnes, Rev. Staiger’s brother George, who was also a priest, “thought, ‘my brother is not safe there,’ [and] in a year, he talked to someone in the chancery and he got his brother transferred out to the end of Long Island.”

Others simply refused to welcome non-white people into their churches. As Rev. Hinch recalled, at one parish in Williamsburg, which he declined to name, the priest would not accept Puerto Ricans in the church. At Our Lady of Presentation in Brownsville, where Rev. John Powis arrived in the mid-1960s, he found that “the pastor wasn’t anxious to have this…big influx of Hispanics.” While he never overtly refused to minister to Puerto Ricans, because, according to Rev. Powis, “You’re really not supposed to do that,” his parish “conservation” plan consisted of ignoring the non-white residents of the community. Other priests made more overt efforts to maintain the whiteness of

61 “Discussion of Planning Meeting on Neighborhood Conservation,” Cosmos Club, Washington DC, June 4, 1953, Box 124, Folder 34, National Conference of Catholic Charities, Catholic Charities USA Files, CUA.
62 Msgr. Lawrence Hinch, Interviewed by Patrick McNamara, July 15, 2008, Office of the Archivist, Interview Transcripts, Cabinet 4, Drawer 1, ADB.
63 Rev. John W. Byrnes, Interview by Patrick McNamara, June 24, 2008, Office of the Archivist, Interview Transcripts, Cabinet 4, Drawer 1, ADB.
64 Msgr. Lawrence Hinch, Interviewed by Patrick McNamara, July 15, 2008, Office of the Archivist, Interview Transcripts, Cabinet 4, Drawer 1, ADB.
their churches. At Nativity of the Blessed Lord in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Rev. John Krieg had to confront dropping attendance in both the church and school as white residents moved out of the parish. Rather than welcome black children into the school in large numbers, Rev. Krieg commissioned four or five buses to bring white children from other parishes to the school each morning. By the end of the 1950s, most of the children in the school were from other parishes. Notably, Nativity was a territorial parish tasked with serving those who resided within its boundaries – a directive it ignored when those souls did not belong to whites.

Recognizing that some priests were having difficulty in their pastoral assignments, the diocesan leadership began recruiting seminarians specifically for work in central Brooklyn’s changing neighborhoods. In 1947, at Seminary of the Immaculate Consumption at Huntington, the rector asked if any of the seminarians were interested in working in Bedford-Stuyvesant. Three men volunteered. The diocese assigned two of them – Revs. John Byrne and Bill McCarren – to Our Lady of Victory, and the other, Rev. Joe McGuire, to St. Peter Claver. This became a common practice in the seminary; those who expressed interested in working in black neighborhoods were groomed to do so while completing their education. The diocese also created a training program at the Catholic University at Ponce, Puerto Rico, where they sent interested seminarians and priests to learn Spanish. Thus, those who worked in black and Puerto Rican parishes often did so on a voluntary basis – a significant and uncommon practice. Prior to the

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66 “Church of the Nativity of Our Blessed Lord Centennial, 1871-1971,” 1971, Parish Files, Parish Journals, Box 3; Report on Nativity of Our Blessed Lord, 1959, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 10, ADB.
67 Rev. John W. Byrnes, Interview by Patrick McNamara, June 24, 2008, Office of the Archivist, Interview Transcripts, Cabinet 4, Drawer 1, ADB.
Second Vatican Council, there was no Personnel Board for priests and seminarians to express a preference for parish work and many were subject to the whims of the bishop. These changing parishes were an exceptional case, however, and Bishop Bryan McEntegart made special efforts to ensure those who served in central Brooklyn wanted to be there. In effect, the diocese created a cohort of liberal, social justice-minded priests and concentrated them in the neediest parts of the borough.

In the early years of transition, this cohort of priests attempted to create interracial parish organizations in order for black and white Catholics to build a base of friendship and cooperation and, they hoped, to stem the tide of fleeing white parishioners. At Holy Rosary in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Rev. Thomas Conerty proposed the creation of a parish co-op, run by members of the parish to serve the whole community. He gathered a group of parishioners and asked, “You know this parish is almost half Negro and one of the co-op principles is that there must be made no distinction of color, race, or creed. What are you white people going to do about the Negro?” “Some,” he learned, “were absolutely opposed to the Negro….Others were willing to have them as members, pointing out that the neighborhood was becoming more and more colored, and it was the only reasonable thing to do.” Under Rev. Conerty’s direction, parishioners set up study groups on cooperative movements and, after some deliberation, agreed that no distinction should be made based on race within the co-op. The result was the Stuyvesant Heights Cooperative, which opened in November of 1939. Membership was $10, and, by 1941, there were 115 members. The parish also established the Chauncey Federal Credit Union – the first parish credit union in New York City. While the Interracial Review praised the co-op and credit union as examples of “racial and religious cooperation,” they noted that the vast
majority of those who patronized the store and utilized the credit union were black and largely non-Catholic. “Undoubtedly,” they wrote, “there would be an even larger representation of members from among white residents, if so many of them did not feel that the co-op was isolated from their future since they expect to move out of the neighborhood.”

Despite their efforts to build interracial cooperation, parish priest in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brownsville, and Crown Heights could not escape the reality that their white parishioners were ready to move out of neighborhoods they assumed were doomed to become slums. While these pastors certainly never ceased efforts to minister to white parishioners, many shifted their attention to bringing new members into the Church. Conservation, in practice, often simply meant conversion. As Andrew Greeley, a Chicago priests and sociologist, remarked in 1959, a “whole new mission field opened up in the back yard of the big city.” The hundreds of thousands of new migrants, “cramming into the slums,” were “potential converts” for the Church. Even the Brooklyn Catholic Interracial Council noted that “this is the ‘harvest time,’” and Msgr. Byrnes of Our Lady of Victory explained that work in black neighborhoods was viewed “as a sort of missionary” effort.

Organized campaigns to convert non-Catholics, the “unchurched,” and non-whites into the fold developed in transitioning parishes. This was generally an informal processes, consisting of priests and nuns traversing the neighborhood, or entering newly-

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70 Brooklyn Tablet, 8 November 1952; Rev. John W. Byrnes Oral History, Office of the Archivist, Interview Transcripts, Cabinet 4, Drawer 1, ADB.
built public housing projects, acquainting themselves with the new residents, and encouraging them to attend services. During the mid-1940s at Our Lady of Victory in Bedford-Stuyvesant, the parish priest hired a group of nuns to visit every house and apartment in the parish. The sisters conducted brief interviews during their visits, inquired about the number of family members, their origins, and religious backgrounds, and encouraged non-Catholics to attend service at the church. The project took the nuns three years to complete, but had an evident impact on the parish. Though in 1945 there were only 1,000 parishioners at Our Lady of Victory, the second half of the decade saw the parish population stabilize at roughly 2,500. Conversion rates rose, too. In 1945, the parish had 18 converts, but 84 in 1947. These trends continued throughout the 1950s and into the early 1960s. Other parishes carried out a “perpetual census,” wherein church leaders continuously visited neighborhood residents because the neighborhood was in a nearly constant transition. Racially-changing parishes carried out similar programs throughout the urban North and, by 1952, blacks accounted for 13% of all Catholic converts.

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71 Rev. John W. Byrnes, Interview by Patrick McNamara, June 24, 2008, Office of the Archivist, Interview Transcripts, Cabinet 4, Drawer 1, ADB.
72 Our Lady of Victory Spiritual Reports, ADB. Each year, every parish in the diocese filled out a “spiritual report” in order to create a record of the current state of the parish. These diocesan documents asked priests to report the number of parishioners, converts, baptisms, first communions, marriages, etc. While they can provide reliable statistics on the number of conversions and sacraments, the reported number of parishioners are often estimates. Priests were wary of reporting too bleak a picture to the diocese, so it can be assumed these numbers are often inflated. It is also unclear what priests mean by “parishioners” – some report the number of people who associate with the parish while others include all the Catholics living within the parish boundaries. At Our Lady of Victory, it is reasonable to assume that the number of parishioners attending Mass and associating with the church did increase rather significantly, especially as large number of Caribbean Catholics moved into the area.
73 “Queen of All Saints,” (Hackesack, NJ: Custombooks, Inc., 1979), 10, Office of the Bishop, Parish Files, Box 1, ADB. At Queen of All Saints in Fort Greene, Monsignor Conway and his curate were known to periodically visit houses in the neighborhood and gather information about the Catholic population.
Fresh from seminary, many young liberal priests arrived at transitioning parishes ready to implement conversion programs. When Rev. John Powis arrived at Our Last of Presentation in Brownsville in the early 1960s, he found the church had made few efforts to reach out to the non-white residents of the neighborhood. The parish “was not really on top of it,” he recalled; “the church was living as if it was fifteen years back.” For the first three months of his assignment at Presentation, Rev. Powis explained that he “did nothing but walk the streets.” Out of the rectory and in the urban mission field, he met “thousands of people,” living in “big buildings, small building…people crowded, living in horrendous conditions.” Rev. Powis, who had some command of Spanish, met with both black and Puerto Rican residents of Brownsville, encouraging them to join the church. As a result of outreach efforts, mass attendance rose from 1,500 in 1957 to 2,200 in 1964. Conversions also increased dramatically, from just six converts in 1957 to 110 in 1964. During that same year, priests at Presentation performed 1,114 baptisms and 178 marriages.75 Father Powis recalled that some days he would perform seven or eight weddings – at one point he even forgot the names of the couple he was marrying.76

Some parishes embraced more systematized efforts to reach out to non-Catholics, including the use of invitation cards. At Our Lady of Good Counsel in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Father Francis McCabe organized the nuns and mothers of schoolchildren into a visitation committee charged with delivering these cards throughout the parish. The women visited homes and public places like subway stations where they distributed invitations to attend instruction courses. Those who were interested returned the cards,

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75 Our Lady of Presentationn, Spiritual Report, ADB.
76 Msgr. John Powis, Interviewed by Patrick McNamara, July 28, 2008, Office of the Archivist, Senior Priests Oral History Project DVD, Box 1, ADB.
along with their personal information, and were contacted by the parish. In 1960, the parish reported it had received requests for follow-up information from 250 non-Catholics, who they subsequently asked to attend the twice-weekly classes in instruction.\textsuperscript{77} Our Lady of Victory, Holy Rosary, Our Lady of Presentation, and St. Peter Claver all created convert classes.

Despite the importance of street corner proselytizing, Catholic schools were the primary means for bringing new black and Puerto Rican residents into the Church. When white Catholics moved out of transitioning neighborhoods, school rolls dropped precipitously. Empty desks became a conversion opportunity, and priests and nuns in central Brooklyn encouraged the neighborhood’s new residents, who were largely non-Catholic, to send their children to parochial school. When the nuns at Our Lady of Victory visited the homes in their parish, they sold the school as one of the benefits of joining the church, though conversion was not required.\textsuperscript{78} In only a few years, the number of children attending the parish school doubled, reaching 400 students in 1948 – 90\% of whom were non-Catholic.\textsuperscript{79} The situation was similar at Holy Rosary. In 1939 the school served 550 students, only 35 of whom were black. The public schools in the area were “crowded with colored children” while Holy Rosary reported a large number of surplus desks. As the parish leadership reached out to black parents, school enrollment increased, and the parish reported an enrollment of over 900 pupils by the early 1960s. Nearly all of the students were black and a large proportion were non-Catholic.\textsuperscript{80}

\textsuperscript{77} Rev. Matthew P. Kelly to Bishop Bryan McEntegert, November 23, 1960, Our Lady of Good Counsel, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 11, ADB.
\textsuperscript{78} Rev. John W. Byrnes, Interview by Patrick McNamara, June 24, 2008, Office of the Archivist, Interview Transcripts, Cabinet 4, Drawer 1, ADB.
\textsuperscript{79} Our Lady of Victory Pastoral Visitation, November 14, 1948, Office of the Bishop, Parish Visitation Files, Box 4, ADB.
\textsuperscript{80} Holy Rosary Profile, June 1963, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 7, ADB.
The local religious used the parish school to reach both children and their parents. Providing access to education was the primary means through which priests attempted to dispel the perception that the Catholic Church was a fundamentally white institution. Especially in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Msgr. Byrnes of Our Lady of Victory recalled, the opinion of the church was “very poor, because the example that went before was terrible.” Specifically, he recalled, the black residents of the neighborhood had become familiar with Msgr. Belford of Our Lady of Nativity Parish, who would “stand on the stoop and tell people, ‘Your church is around the corner, go over there…you’re not welcome here.’” The school became a link between the overwhelmingly white religious institution and black residents. “You see, everybody’s interested in the children,” Msgr. Byrnes explained; “The focus was to get the children, and by structuring the children and helping them, that convinced…the parents that the parish is helping.” While never required to do so, parents of parochial school children were highly encouraged to attend instruction classes at the church with the goal of eventual conversion.

Priests and sisters were also conducted youth outreach through recreation centers, which fulfilled the dual purpose of bringing non-Catholics to the Church and addressing the problem of juvenile delinquency. Frequently, Catholics and the diocesan leadership blamed delinquency on a lack of religious training and dearth of moral fortitude. In 1955, Rev. Vincent J. Powell, director of the Brooklyn CYO told the Temporary State Commission on Youth and Delinquency that “Our firm conviction is that basically and fundamentally delinquency is the absence of high moral standards.” “Morality depends on religion,” he went on, “You cannot have the one without the other.” Only by accepting

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81 Rev. John W. Byrnes, Interview by Patrick McNamara, June 24, 2008, Office of the Archivist, Interview Transcripts, Cabinet 4, Drawer 1, ADB.
God and his Ten Commandment, and submitting to priestly and parental authority, could youth hope to avoid falling into the trap of delinquency.\footnote{Brooklyn Tablet, 27 August 1955.}

The religious working in impoverish perishes, however, recognized that preventing delinquency required more than religious education. “As you know,” a concerned parishioner of St. Fortunata wrote to Bishop McEntegert in 1961, “we are located in the East New York Section of Brooklyn and, with the population shift, our neighborhood is, for the most part, on the downgrade.” As a result, teenage gangs formed and “rumbles” broke out in the neighborhood.\footnote{Frederick W. McPhilliamy, Jr. to Bishop Bryan McEntegert, 1 November 1961, St. Fortunata, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 5, ADB.} In response, pastors provided spaces for youth to recreate. “No father, conscious of his obligations, would let his children play in the streets if he could afford a good healthy playground,” a pamphlet from St. Michael in East New York read, “Likewise, no pastor is permitted to sit back and watch his spiritual children seek recreation and happiness in places of dubious or ill repute, when the parish can afford to supply a center of healthy social life.”\footnote{“The Picture that Doesn’t Fit! The Picture that Does,” 1948, St. Michael, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 10, ADB.} At Holy Rosary parish, the Sisters of Mercy established a recreation center where the children in the neighborhood could engage in monitored and structured activities. The nuns organized and participated in games of baseball and jump rope, held craft classes, and formed a youth jazz band. When they were able, the sisters took groups of children to the CYO Day Camp pool, the movie theatre, and entered them in track meets at a nearby high school. Roughly half the children who attended the center were non-Catholics. The center, the sisters hoped, would provide the children with recreation, prevent delinquency, and, perhaps, bring
them into the Church. “When children see that religion and real fun are not contradictory,” the Tablet wrote, “they become more disposed toward the teachings of Christ and His Church.”

**Conclusion**

Black men and women, of course, cited a variety of reasons for choosing to convert to Catholicism. In a study of black Catholics on the South Side of Chicago, Matthew Cressler found that religious instruction classes were instrumental in encouraging conversion, but that there was no single reason black urbanites chose to attend these courses. Relationships played an important role, particularly marriage. Those who were engaged to Catholics were often encouraged – either by their future spouse or the priest tasked with marrying them – to attend instruction courses. Others were drawn to Catholicism by its “quiet dignity,” which was a stark contrast to more emotive strands of religiosity frequently practiced in black Evangelical congregations. Some reasons were more elusive, such as the sense that this was the “One, True Church,” or, more simply, that there was something compelling in Catholicism. Schools and outreach efforts created a connection between the Catholic Church and black urbanites, but the choice to become a Catholic was a result of the complex spiritual connection black men and women formed with the Catholic form of devotional practice and worship.

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85 *Brooklyn Tablet*, 26 July 1958.

86 Matthew J. Cressler, “Black Catholic Conversion and the Burden of Black Religion,” *Journal of Africana Religions* 2, no. 2 (2014): 280-287. There is still a great deal of work to be done on the topic of black Catholic conversion, particularly for historians. Sociological examination produced a functionalist explanation that insisted blacks converted because they felt less comfortable in lower-class Protestant churches as their own class status rose, though sociologists do acknowledge that access to Catholic-run services might have also encourage conversion. For an example of this analysis, see Joe R. Feagin, “Black Catholics in the United States: An Exploratory Analysis,” *Sociological Analysis* 29, no. 4 (1968): 186-192.
Conversion programs also fundamentally altered the pastoral orientation of local pastors. “The Catholic priest in a Negro parish is acutely conscious of the disabilities his people labor under,” Father Raymond Campion of St. Peter Claver wrote in *Interracial Review*. “He sees their suffering, their hardships,” he continued:

…he knows they are denied education opportunities. He sees them brutalized by the unfairness, the insults and the degrading housing situations in which they are forced to live. His people, because of racial discrimination and inequality, find it extraordinarily difficult to obtain a job in keeping with their abilities and needs.\(^{87}\)

Msgr. Byrnes described a similar realization during his time at Our Lady of Victory. While Bedford-Stuyvesant and its churches were largely still white, “Mass and Holy Name Societies and Novenas to some saint were basically the structure.” But as these churches welcomed non-white members, priests found that the lives of parishioners encountered problems that were often more secular than spiritual, and required an adjustment in their pastoral role. Msgr. Byrnes’ goals became “getting kids to learn to live with each other…getting teenagers to envision a future that is bigger than what they had imagined at the moment…” Priestly conceptions of their “flock” also underwent revision. We don’t “do this for Catholics,” he explained, “We do this for human beings.”\(^{88}\)

Between the end of the Second World War and the early 1960s, the local parish focused predominantly on converting non-whites as a means of stabilizing parish populations, but this laid the groundwork for a later, more profound transformation. By the time the Second Vatican Council convened, this cohort of young liberal priests constituted an essential element of the Northern civil rights vanguard, and – following the


\(^{88}\) Rev. John W. Byrnes, Interview by Patrick McNamara, June 24, 2008, Office of the Archivist, Interview Transcripts, Cabinet 4, Drawer 1, ADB.
lead of their parishioners – demanded that the Brooklyn Diocese and City of New York confront the injustice of racial inequality beyond warm platitudes.
Chapter 4

Resisting Liberalism: Catholics and Race in Postwar Brooklyn

In 1959, John A. McDermott, a liberal Catholic layman living in Philadelphia, issued a plea to his coreligionists in the pages of *Interracial Review*: “The nature of the racial problem in the North,” he wrote, “has special significance for Catholics.” This went beyond their moral obligation to treat people of all races with justice and charity. Due to economic constraints and their attachment to the parish, white Catholics were slower to move to the suburbs than Protestants and, as a result, the proportion of Catholics in Northern cities was rising. “Thus it is that race relations in these cities to an increasing degree is [sic] a matter of Catholic-Negro relations,” he explained. “While it is unrealistic to expect any one parish to bring about a perfect solution,” he acquiesced, “we should expect and hope for at least an authentic Christian response on the part of the parish, a response aimed at the suppression of violence, hate and panic, and at the promotion of acceptance and genuine racial harmony.” But McDermott lamented that Catholics often failed to take a progressive stand on race, especially in the areas of housing and neighborhood integration. “Tragically,” he wrote, “there have been more than a few parishes in many cities which have not only failed to give Christian leadership, but actually thrown their weight on the side of the bigots in a weird and unworthy effort
somehow ‘to keep the neighborhood white.’” This was a “shocking travesty on the mission of the Church.”

As McDermott’s article underscored, rather than take up the call for Christian leadership, white working-class Catholics strongly resisted the encroachment of nonwhites into their neighborhoods. In Brooklyn, Catholics built physical and political barriers that hindered the goals of the emerging Civil Rights Movement. While they supported racial equality on principle, they downplayed and even dismissed the impact residential segregation and discrimination had on African Americans seeking more equitable access to jobs, resources, and housing. To many of Brooklyn’s Catholics, the entire movement for civil rights appeared suspect because of its close alignment with New York City’s political left and, by extension, the Communist Party. Catholic anticommunism reached its peak in the Cold War years, and during Sunday Mass, in parish schools, and on the pages of the diocesan newspaper, they were constantly warned about the ever-present communist threat. Conservative Catholics were at the least incredulous toward the Civil Rights Movement, and some wholly dismissed it as a product of Communist agitation.

Working-class Catholics also failed to see discrimination against blacks as exceptional. In response to complaints of racial discrimination, Catholics attempted to point to evidence of anti-Catholic bias in public institutions and in the distribution of resources, especially school funding. They also began to argue that the city – through its expansion of the welfare state – discriminated against the white working and middle classes. Liberal social programs and regulatory reforms, including public housing, rent

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control, open housing legislation, and welfare, limited the ability of whites to control the borders of their neighborhoods, which some popular local politicians explicitly argued was a right. White Catholics resented that their tax dollars were used to support integration that, they contended, would lead to the decline of their communities and decrease the value of their investments. As homeowners, wage earners, and taxpayers, Catholics organized behind politicians, homeowner groups, and citizens councils to oppose the expansion of the city’s traditionally liberal city government.

Local Catholic churches were also implicated in efforts to fortify parish boundaries against the threat of racial encroachment. It was rare for a priest in Brooklyn to publically oppose integration, but pastors commonly used the Church’s vast real estate holding to control who lived in the immediate vicinity of the church. As an official from the Office of Property Administration for the diocese explained, the pastors of parishes that bordered black neighborhoods regularly purchased property to “guard against acquisition by undesirables.” Local pastors worked with diocesan officials and local real estate agents to secure properties, including houses, apartments, banks, funeral parlors, and defunct businesses, in order to prevent them from falling into the possession of blacks, Puerto Ricans, or speculators who would subdivide the property and rent to non-whites. This practice appears to have diminished after the diocese declared its support for open housing in 1966, but white Catholic parishioners nevertheless continued to oppose liberal programs aimed at integration and economic development in black communities. The Catholic community was increasingly split: liberal Catholics aggressively promoted

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2 Memo to Bishop McEntegart from the Office of Property Management for the Diocese of Brooklyn, November 17, 1961, Bishop’s Office, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 10, ADB.
the Church’s progressive positions on race, while white Catholics and their priests flouted Catholic interracial doctrine.

**The Postwar Urban Catholic World**

Despite the postwar suburban exodus, Catholics remained a relatively stable portion of Brooklyn’s population and, because they were less likely than their Protestant neighbors to move to the suburbs, increased as a proportion of the population in the decades after the Second World War. Between 1900 and 1946 Catholics accounted for roughly one-third of borough residents, but, according to the New York Department of Commerce and Economic Development, made up 48.8% of the city’s population by 1960. Their population was also stabilized by a high birthrate, which was 40% higher than that of Jews or Protestants. The other major religious groups experienced more dramatic population shifts. Protestants made up a far smaller proportion of Brooklyn residents than they had at the turn of the century and, significantly, the Protestant population was also becoming increasingly African American. A Brooklyn Church and Mission Federation study found that more than one-quarter of Protestant church members resided in Bedford-Stuyvesant, and that more than one in four Protestants was black. A 1952 study of all of New York City found that, among whites, Protestants made up only

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3 James Graham, “Backlash in Brooklyn: Why the Review Board Failed,” *Commonweal*, December 9, 1966, 288. Notably, just over a decade after the war, the Catholic populations of Nassau and Suffolk Counties had become so large that the Pope placed the two counties under their own diocese. In 1957, he announced the creation of the Diocese of Rockville Centre, and appointed Most Rev. Walter P. Kellenberg as its first bishop. The Diocese of Brooklyn was limited to Kings and Queens Counties, making it to only completely urban diocese in the country.


16% of the population. As white Protestants declined, the Jewish population grew rapidly from 13.8% of the borough’s population in 1900 to more than one-third of Brooklyn’s residents by the conclusion of the Second World War (Table 4.1). The estimated 1,000,000 Jews in Brooklyn made up the largest concentration of Jews in the world.

<table>
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<th>Protestant</th>
<th>Jewish</th>
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<td>34.2</td>
<td>51.9</td>
<td>13.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>33.8</td>
<td>41.5</td>
<td>23.8</td>
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<td>1920</td>
<td>33.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>1946</td>
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In effect, Brooklyn was composed of three different, and often conflicting, groups: Catholics and Jews, who were overwhelmingly white, and black Protestants. While members of all of these groups encountered each other on a daily basis as they traversed the city’s public spaces, there remained a large degree of residential separation. In 1960, sociologist Nathan Kantrowitz found that there had been an only “minimal decline in interethnic segregation (e.g. Irish from Italian immigrants) in U.S. cities since 1930.” Using the Index of Dissimilarity to measure the degree of separation between ethnic and racial groups in the New York-Northeastern New Jersey Consolidated Area and New York Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area, Kantowitz found, unsurprisingly, that blacks and Puerto Ricans experienced the highest degree of segregation (Table 4.2).

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7 *New York Times*, 29 September 1946
But the city’s white residents – even those who belonged to the same church – also experienced a moderate degree of separation from each other.\(^8\)

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Ireland</th>
<th>Italy</th>
<th>USSR</th>
<th>Black</th>
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<td>79.0</td>
<td>76.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>48.0</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>60.5</td>
<td>78.9</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>USSR</td>
<td>57.1</td>
<td>59.4</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>81.1</td>
<td>78.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>80.3</td>
<td>80.5</td>
<td>81.8</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>66.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puerto Rico</td>
<td>76.5</td>
<td>77.8</td>
<td>78.1</td>
<td>63.8</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Institutional barriers reinforced the geographic divisions that separated Brooklyn’s ethnic, racial, and religious groups. Though the Church embraced the ideal of interracialism, parishes were, in practice, essentially racially segregated. Aside from the few largely black parishes in Bedford-Stuyvesant, black and Puerto Rican Catholics and converts usually worshipped in the diocesan missions. White parishes had their own internal divisions. They increasingly counted a variety of ethnic groups among their parishioners, but many still delivered Mass in Italian, Polish, or Lithuanian – a practice that effectively maintained the ethnic divisions the Church erected in the mid- to late-nineteenth century.

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\(^8\) The New York-Northeastern New Jersey Consolidated Area contains 17 counties, while the New York Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area contains the five counties that compose New York City, as well as Nassau, Rockland, Suffolk, and Westchester Counties. Those included in the table are defined as “foreign stock,” which includes those born in a foreign country, as well as those whose parents were born in a foreign country. A score upwards of 70 represents a “high” degree of segregation, and one lower than 30 shows a “low” degrees of segregation.
Jews, Catholics, and blacks also attended different schools. In 1954, the Diocese of Brooklyn reported that 219,992 students attended the diocese’s Catholic schools.\textsuperscript{9} For Catholic children of elementary age, this meant roughly 40\% attended parochial schools.\textsuperscript{10} Because a large portion of Catholics filtered their children through parish schools, public schools in white neighborhoods were often heavily Jewish. Author Vincent Panella, who grew up in Queens in the 1940s and 1950s, described the Catholic Church and its schools as an “Irish bastion,” while the public schools were “the catch basin for the rest of us, Jews and Eastern Europeans, a few Italians, and the few Irish who didn’t attend Catholic school.”\textsuperscript{11} Jews also dominated teaching positions in the New York Public School system largely because, as a group excluded from much of the private sector, they were drawn to the stability of civil service employment. Between 1940 and 1960, 60\% of all new public school teachers in New York were Jewish. Black children, due to residential segregation, attended schools where the majority of students were black. By 1960, Jerald Podair argued, New York City had created a “dual public school system” in which white pupils students were taught by experienced teachers and achieved at or above the national level, while black students were subjected to overcrowding and poorly prepared teachers, and, as a result, often lagged far behind the city’s white students in metrics such as reading comprehension.\textsuperscript{12}

Neighborhoods, too, could be distinguished by their ethnic populations: Brownsville was heavily Jewish, Greenpoint Polish, Sunset Park Scandinavian, and

\textsuperscript{9} \textit{Brooklyn Tablet}, 6 November 1954.
\textsuperscript{11} Vincent Panella, \textit{The Other Side: Growing Up Italian in America} (New York: Doubleday, 1979), 31.
Canarsie, Bushwick, and Williamsburg Italian. Residents in these Brooklyn neighborhoods were not far removed from the immigrant experience. In central Brooklyn, neighborhoods still had sizeable foreign populations (Table 4.3), and in 1950, foreign-born whites (which included both the first and second generation) made up 50% of the population in New York City.¹³ Even by the 1970s, sociologist Andrew Greeley argued that the experiences of Catholics in America were heavily influenced by their foreignness.¹⁴


While New Yorkers remained divided along ethnic and religious lines, it is important not to exaggerate these divisions. The position of Catholics within urban landscape, and American culture more generally, had shifted. As Joseph Chinnici argued, “Whereas previously strict boundaries of faith, immigrant neighborhoods, and ethnicity had bound the community together in a hostile world, in the post war period, as the social, cultural, and religious boundaries lessened, the pressure of outside hostility moved the Catholic community not inward toward separation but outwards towards a deeper desire to bridge whatever boundaries continued to remain. The energy source for the community’s social identity shifted away from highlighting the differences between Catholics and their neighbors and more towards finding similarities, compatibilities between Catholicism and American culture.” While ethnic and religious differences generated less hostility, these nevertheless remained important identity markers that continued to drive cultural and spatial separations. See Chinnici, “Ecumenism, Civil Rights, and the Second Vatican Council: The American Experience,” U.S. Catholic Historian 30, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 24-25.
Table 4.3
Percentage of Foreign-Born White Population by Brooklyn Neighborhood, 1950

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Neighborhood</th>
<th>Percentage of White Foreign-Born</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Greenpoint</td>
<td>21.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williamsburg</td>
<td>26.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bushwick-Ridgewood</td>
<td>21.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooklyn Height-Fort Greene</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bedford-Stuyvesant</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crown Heights</td>
<td>22.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brownsville</td>
<td>32.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East New York</td>
<td>26.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red Hook</td>
<td>21.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Park Slope</td>
<td>20.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunset Park-Gowanus</td>
<td>28.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flatbush-East Flatbush</td>
<td>19.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canarsie</td>
<td>19.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


New Yorkers tended to think of themselves in terms of their ethnic and religious associations. Norman Podhoretz, a Jew who grew up in Brownsville and later became a political pundit, wrote that he never thought of himself “as an American. I came from Brooklyn, and in Brooklyn there were no Americans; there were Jews and Negroes and Italians and Poles and Irishmen. Americans lived in New England, in the South, in the Midwest: alien people in alien places.”[^15] Pete Hamill, a Catholic raised in Prospect Park, repeated this sentiment. During his schooling in the 1940s, “kids kept asking: What are you? I thought I was American, but in those days in Brooklyn, when you were asked what you were, you answered with a nationality other than your own. Since my parents were from Ireland, I was from a group called ‘Irish.’”[^16] Vincent Schiavelli explained that in the Italian neighborhood of Bushwick people described themselves as “Polizzani, or

Palermitani, or Calabrisi or Napolitani, to name just four of hundreds of microethnic identities. But when asked our nationality by outsiders, we said Italian-American, simplifying the issue.” 17 Catholicism was also a part of this identity. In fact, the Catholic milieu was so strong that sometimes children had trouble comprehending a world outside of their own church. When Hamill’s teacher, a nun, had his class pray for the Dodgers to win the 1941 World Series, he assumed God was both a Catholic and a Dodger’s fan.

“But then a Dodger catcher named Mickey Owen dropped a third strike, the Yankees won the World Series, and we all had to wonder if God was a Yankees fan,” he recalled.

“That couldn’t be possible. God was a Catholic, wasn’t he? And since the Dodgers were from Brooklyn, they must be Catholics too. Or so we thought.” 18

Of course, while one ethnic group might dominate a community, they were never homogeneous, and a variety of ethnic enclaves and commercial districts existed within a single neighborhood. But even when various ethnic groups lived amongst each other, their social interactions were limited. In Podhoretz’s Brownsville, where “Jews from East Europe lived side by side with Italian immigrants from Sicily, and Negroes from the rural American South,” they nevertheless “had as little to do with each other as physical contiguity permitted.” 19 Jerry Della Femina, an Italian Catholic who grew up in Gravesend, described his neighborhood similarly: “The Italians in my neighborhood were consistent: they were as bigoted about ‘the Jews’ as they were about the Protestants and anything or anybody who wasn’t Italian Catholic.” 20 Schiavelli described how Italians

18 Hamill, Drinking Life, 8.
carved out separate physical and social spaces within Bushwick – a place he called “Bruculini.” His grandfather, he explained, spent most of his days with other Sicilian men at the La Società di Polizzi Generosa, while his grandmother’s kitchen served as the meeting space for Sicilian women to swap advice and gossip. Maria De Marco Torgovnick described a similarly insular world in Bensonhurst, where Italian Americans were “notable for their cohesiveness and provinciality.” In the evenings, she explained, neighbors would “congregate on ‘stoops’ that during the day serve as play yards for children…to supervise children, to gossip, to stare at strangers.”

Both Schiavelli and De Marco Torgovnick describe cultures in which family came first, followed closely by neighbors from the same ethnic and religious background.

White ethnic neighborhoods were also overwhelmingly blue-collar. Despite the gains Catholics made in education in the postwar years, they were slow to advance out of the working class. In 1950, 67% of second-generation Italians and 53% of second-generation Irish in the New York-Northeastern New Jersey Standard Metropolitan Area worked in blue-collar professions. By 1960, very little had changed: 64% of second-generation Italians and 56% of second-generation Irish still worked in semiskilled or unskilled occupations. Brooklyn was a heavily industrialized borough, and nearly half of all acreage occupied by industry was located along the waterfront in the largely

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22 Andrew Greeley carefully documents the rising number of Catholics attending college. In the 1920s, for example, only 9% of Polish Americans attended college, while during the Cold War 34% did so. For Italians, the proportion rose from 9% to 21%, and for the Irish, from 26% to 38%. For Catholics as a whole, the proportion of those attending college rose from 14% to 29%. Comparatively, 71% of Presbyterians and 69% of Jews attended college during the Cold War year, thus, despite their sizeable advancement, Catholics were still well behind other groups in terms of higher education. See Greeley, *The American Catholic*, pgs. 41-44.
Catholic communities of Williamsburg, Red Hook, Greenpoint, and Gowanus. Red Hook, as dramatized by Arthur Miller in *A View from the Bridge*, was home to many Italian longshoreman. Those who lived in Greenpoint and Williamsburg worked in the factories that filled the space between the waterfront and Kent Avenue, including the Domino sugar factory that dominated the neighborhood’s view of the East River. In Fort Greene, workers labored in the bordering Navy Yard. Even as New York City’s economy became increasingly professional and white-collar, Catholics in Brooklyn remained a defining component of the city’s working class.

**Catholic Anti-Communism**

The Catholic subculture, nurtured in ethnically- and religiously-defined neighborhoods and within the walls of Catholic churches and parochial schools, shaped the way parishioners viewed New York City’s political landscape. For Brooklyn Catholics, and the Church at large, communism defined their worldly outlook. This imbued Catholics with a bicameral view of political culture: there were those who sought to preserve a traditional Christian Social Order, and those who either sought to destroy it through communism outright or, through their support of liberal policies, to create an atmosphere amenable to communists that would result in its eventual demise.

Communism was a constant topic of discussion in Catholic churches and schools. Jerry Della Femina remembered that in his Brooklyn church in the 1950s, “Every Sunday we said a prayer for the conversion of Russia…The priests was constantly sending out letters about atheists, communists, Godless atheists, Godless communists, and

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24 The Community Council of Greater New York, *Brooklyn Community Population Characteristics and Neighborhood Social Resources*, vol. 1, xi, BJP.
occasionally a socialist, although nobody could figure out the distinction.”

Hamill recounted reading a Catholic comic book, titled “Is This Tomorrow?,” that depicted a communist mob attacking Manhattan’s St. Patrick’s Cathedral. It featured an image of Cardinal Spellman nailed to the Cathedral’s door, where he watched helplessly as the mob set it aflame. The anti-communist message extended throughout the Catholic and Catholic-friendly secular press. The *Journal-American*, Hamill remembered, regularly featured Cardinal Spellman, “chubby and pink-skinned…warning about how America was in danger of destruction at the hands of the communists, those in Russia, those at home.” The *Tablet* was perhaps the strongest anti-communist voice not only in Brooklyn, but in all of New York City. Throughout the 1950s, the weekly’s international, domestic, and local news coverage evinced an intense preoccupation with communism. As required reading in all diocesan high schools, the *Tablet* helped shape the political views of the borough’s young Catholics.

The Catholic Church did not limit its criticisms to communists. American liberals, too, seemed to be too closely aligned with communist doctrine. In school and at Mass, priests warned Hamill not just about “pinkos,” but their “fellow travelers, New Dealers, and liberals.”

Catholics were becoming increasingly skeptical of the central tenets of the New Deal – legislation Catholics overwhelmingly supported when FDR introduced it in the early 1930s – largely because they feared that liberal politicians and their policies were tinted red. According to historian Patrick Allitt, the New Deal and Fair Deal, which

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27 Zeitz, *White Ethnic New York*, 132. The Tablet’s paid circulation was about 160,000.
rested on the assumption that the state had a duty to address a growing number of social problems through legislation, appeared to “exemplify creeping socialism that would erode the outward distinctions between American freedom and Soviet statism” to more conservative Catholics during the Cold War years. Additionally, they were critical of American politicians who attempted to create peaceful and amicable relations with the Soviet Union. “By underestimating the mendacity and determination of the Communists and by failing to grasp that the conflict was ultimately a spiritual struggle,” Catholics charged, “liberals were paving the way for the defeat of Western civilization.”

The local political scene also contributed to the Catholic aversion to liberalism. According to Joshua Freeman, while the Communist Party all but disappeared by the mid-1950s, former members and sympathizers continued to influence working-class politics for decades to come. In fact, “Nowhere did left-wing and left-leaning ex-Communists have more influence than in New York.” For Catholics, the existence of ex-Communists in the city’s left-wing marred the entire political coalition, and distinctions between the various factions of the left blurred. “Very few ‘Liberals’ are Communists but all Communists are ‘Liberals,’” the former dean of the University of Notre Dame told the members of a Catholic anti-communist group in Garden City. “Not all Atheists are Communists but all Communists are Atheists,” he continued, “Internationalists are not all Communists but all Communists are Internationalists. Very few Pacifists are Communists but all Communists pretend to be Pacifists.”

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were nearly impossible to parse out within the liberal-left, he concluded, which was “literally crowded with the forces of the enemy.”\textsuperscript{31}

Distinction between ‘communists’ or ‘liberals’ mattered little to Catholics. Liberals, whether they intended to or not, would place America on the path to communism through policies that expanded the power of the state. One editorial in the \textit{Tablet} asserted that “Today’s ‘liberal’ believes in the mastery of the state. He wants the government to own public-power enterprises and believed the Federal Government is authorized to own or control every line of business,” leading to the erosion of the rights of the American people.\textsuperscript{32} Father John Flynn, president of St. John’s University in Queens, warned that for “the present government program of nationalizing things like credit, education, agriculture, medicine, and welfare organizations, a great amount of federal tax dollars is required.” These policies were placing America “on the road of totalitarianism and nationalization that we are apparently bent on following.”\textsuperscript{33} In an editorial titled “The Face of Extreme Liberalism,” Rev. Richard Ginder argued that “liberalism means the gradual takeover of our lives by the Holy Mother the State. It is drifting inevitably toward Total Government.”\textsuperscript{34}

Liberals were also on the receiving end of Catholic ire because of their tendency to criticize Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy. As the leader behind a series of hearings aimed at rooting communists and socialist out of American government, McCarthy became the public representative of Catholic anti-communism. According to Femina, “the salad days of 1947, 1948, and into the 1950s,” were “the days of the hero of the

\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Brooklyn Tablet}, 3 June 1961.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 21 January 1956.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 22 April 1950.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 4 July 1959.
Church, Senator Joseph McCarthy. McCarthyism was on its way and if we didn’t heed the message, Godless Russia was going to swallow us up.” The Tablet filled its pages with articles and editorials supporting the Wisconsin senator, and continued to publish odes to McCarthy and his work for years after his death in 1957. McCarthy’s Brooklyn supporters wrote off the senator’s critics as misguided, “liberal Catholics” who failed to fully appreciate communism’s true, imminent threat to American society. But their anti-communist commitments were rarely doubted; according to Allitt, “the major disagreement in the Catholic population was between anti-Communists who supported McCarthy and anti-Communists who criticized him.” Even the editors of Commonweal wrote that although the contributors to “this magazine tend to be ‘liberal’…We are deeply concerned with genuine measures to fight Communism – moral, economic, military, and psychological.” They were, nevertheless, “completely uninterested in ‘anti-Communist crusades.’”

As the defining political issue for Catholics in the 1950s and early 1960s, anti-communism heavily influenced the laity’s voting patterns. Sociologists Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Nathan Glazer noted in their seminal study Beyond the Melting Pot that, during the McCarthy era, “a great many New York Irish began voting Republican. Certainly a majority voted for Eisenhower,” largely because they concluded Adlai Stevenson “was soft on communism.” In the 1960 presidential election, commentators often assumed Catholics would unquestioningly support John F. Kennedy, a Democrat.

35 Femina and Sopkin, An Italian Grows in Brooklyn, 150.
36 Allitt, Catholic Intellectuals and Conservative Politics in America, 23.
and Catholic. However, as one Catholics New Yorker insisted, “If Jack Kennedy thinks he has the Catholic vote in his back pocket, he’s wrong.” “Nixon’s kitchen debate with Khrushchev, the Hiss case, Lodge in the United Nations, the way the Democrats attacked Senator McCarthy, the talk about recognizing Red China – they all add up,” a Democratic assemblyman explained, “to a picture of Republicans who are tough on Communists and Democrats who are soft.” Catholics had many concerns about both candidates; Kennedy’s wealthy Harvard-educated background led some to fear he would be unable to identify with ordinary Americans, and Nixon’s Quakerism made many Catholics uneasy. The candidates’ stands on communism, however, concerned them most. “Khrushchev is the anti-Christ as far as many Catholics are concerned,” one Catholics editor told the *Times*. Any indication that either was soft on communism “will be sure to turn Catholics against that candidate. And it won’t make any difference what his religion is.”\(^{39}\) While Catholics favored Kennedy in the election, their support was by no means guaranteed. Even Al Smith announced he was voting for Nixon.\(^{40}\)

**The “tolerance racket”: Catholics, Communism, and the Case for Civil Rights**

Virulent anti-communism also painted how Catholics perceived race relations and the emerging Civil Rights Movement. Despite the Church’s official opposition to segregation, racial discrimination was never widely discussed outside of black churches or more intellectual Catholic circles, and the inward-looking working-class Catholic enclaves shielded white Catholics from the expanding black slums. For Catholics in Gravesend, Femina remembered, “the blacks simply didn’t exist. We had no maids

\(^{40}\) Glazer and Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, 272.
coming into our neighborhood in the morning and then leaving at night. We had no black laboring class working for the store owners on Avenue U. We didn’t see blacks. They were from a foreign country.”⁴¹ Pete Hamill wrote that, besides an occasional encounter on the subway, he rarely came into contact with African Americans in his Park Slope neighborhood, and the Church never pushed him to consider the racial discrimination that surrounded him. As he entered high school, Hamill realized he “never heard about such matters in school. Masturbation was a sin; but hatred?” These issues were not far removed from his parish; discrimination was “right there in the Neighborhood, where people still called Jackie Robinson a nigger and other talked about kikes and yids.”⁴² On Sunday mornings in church and during daily lessons in the classroom, however, priests and nuns kept mum on the issue of racial discrimination.

When the Civil Rights Movement entered Catholic consciousness, it was refracted through the lens of anti-communism. Catholics saw the rising protests against racial discrimination, largely led by the left, as the work of Communists bent on destroying American unity and sowing the seeds of class warfare. “Much of the shouting about discrimination against one or another racial [or] religious group is deliberately instigated and encouraged by Communists and others who seek to further their own ignoble ambitions by creating disunity and conflict,” Patrick Scanlan, editor of the Tablet, wrote in the weekly. Catholics, he insisted, should “recognize the ‘tolerance racket’ as a snare,” used to “promote distrust and hatred among neighbors.”⁴³ The Brooklyn laity echoed Scanlan’s argument in the Tablet’s “Reader’s Forum.” “Is it possible,” one man wrote,

⁴¹ Femina and Sopkin, An Italian Grows in Brooklyn, 161.
⁴² Hamill, A Drinking Life, 109.
⁴³ Brooklyn Tablet, 31 July 1948.
“that the just and understandable aspirations of some of our fellow citizens for fuller participation in all areas of American life may be serving as mere camouflage for a cynical endeavor to impose a degree of federal control over every aspect of our lives and, in effect, greatly curtail the liberty of all men while pretending to increase it for some?”

People would be happier, a woman in Flushing insisted, “if there were fewer reminders of ‘racial prejudice,’ ‘class hatred,’ and ‘anti’ this or that. The condition is greatly exaggerated,” she insisted. “What is the real motive behind this never-ending campaign to remind us that we are failing in brotherly love?” she asked. “Are there those who want brother pitted against brother? Of course, there are, and their name is COMMUNIST!”

In the eyes of Catholics, the political associations of those aligned with the Civil Rights Movement were suspect. In New York City, activists speaking out against racial discrimination were nearly always on the political left, and were often members of the American Labor Party or the Liberal Party. While many civil rights groups publically condemned communism in order to legitimize themselves in an increasingly tense political atmosphere, this failed to allay suspicion during the Cold War years. In her study of the postwar civil rights struggle in New York, Marth Biondi argued that because of the close association between civil rights activists and the left-wing leaders, “Virtually every leading activist suffered persecution, investigation, repression, and censorship.”

Catholics were among the most hardline anti-communists, and tended to characterize the entire movement as a communist-backed assault on America’s democratic institutions.

The Tablet pushed readers to draw these conclusions, and regularly published articles that

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44 *Brooklyn Tablet*, 10 October 1963.
linked civil rights groups, such as the Civil Rights Congress, with the Kremlin. One story described the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, a Birmingham-based organization that sought to expand the franchise to blacks in the South, as “perhaps the most deviously camouflaged Communist front organization.” Though Catholics were firmly opposed to Jim Crow segregation, by linking civil rights groups with communism the Tablet contributed to delegitimizing their message.

Catholics failed to see discrimination against African Americans as exceptional, and frequently drew parallels between racial discrimination and anti-Catholic bigotry. A small group of Catholic teachers caused an uproar in 1959 when they accused Queens College of denying them promotions because of their religious affiliation. The Brooklyn Catholic Teachers Association and Brooklyn Holy Name Societies brought the teachers’ complaints before the Board of Higher Education and the State Commission Against Discrimination (SCAD), but the state’s investigation failed to uncover any discriminatory practices. “These persons, unable to convince colleagues of their qualifications for advancement, have over a period of years, deliberately charged religious discrimination to explain their lack of academic success and to obtain promotion,” the Queens College president insisted. “It is time the College made this clear.” The editors of the Tablet called the investigation a “whitewash.” “It is unfortunate,” they wrote, “in a day when bigotry against other groups is so loudly condemned,” that bias against Catholics was allowed to continue. A Catholic in Queens lamented the fact that “When a 15-year-old boy is excluded from a private sports club because of his race, Queens Borough President

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47 *Brooklyn Tablet*, 5 June 1948.
50 *Brooklyn Tablet*, 4 April 1959.
John Clancy calls it a disgrace ‘to the good name of the United States,’” but when it came to the complaints against Queens College, “Mr. Clancy has evidenced not the slightest interest in discrimination against Catholic teachers at this college, nor has this condition existing for many years in his borough provoked a word of protest from Mr. Clancy.”51 Catholics also criticized black leaders for failing to respond to the discrimination case. In the Tablet, the editorial board insisted that they had long “championed the rights of Negroes. Is it too much to expect a Negro leader…will support our claims for justice?”52 They also took the opportunity to criticize the American Civil Liberties Union, a favorite target of the Tablet. “If Jews or Negroes had been thus discriminated against,” an article in the weekly charged, “the ACLU would of course have exhausted its bounteous annual budget in fighting the case. But anti-Catholic discrimination has no ‘liberal’ value.”53

When President Kennedy proposed a civil rights bill in 1963, Catholics reacted with reluctant approval. Because it only covered racial and not religious discrimination, Catholics contended that the scope of the president’s bill was too limited. “What does this mean? That a Catholic excluded from a local municipal college because of his religion (not an unheard of situation) could get help from the Attorney General only if court action would further racial desegregation? Big deal,” a Queens Catholic dismissively jeered.54 They were more concerned, however, by its failure to protect parochial schoolchildren, whom Catholics argued were discriminatorily denied funding for their education. Congressman Hugh Carey, a Catholic who represented a congressional district that stretched from Park Slope to Bay Ridge and was heavily populated by his working-

51 Brooklyn Tablet, 18 July 1959.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid., 22 April 1961.
54 Ibid., 27 June 1963.
class coreligionists, criticized the civil rights bill in a keynote address at the national convention of the Citizens for Education Freedom. “The debate now centers on every tenth American, the Negro, and equality,” he explained, “Let us also extend to the individual and parental right of every seventh child in American education.” “Subject to economic forces, the Negro stands stagnated due to growing affluence of middle class society which has moved away from him, creating an insufferable living gap.” Drawing equivalence, Carey insisted that “the seventh child stands in economic isolation due to the economic restrictions imposed upon him by unfair and illogical selectivism in school finance.”

The Tablet editorial board echoed Carey’s position. They welcomed the new bill, but were “disturbed by the distinction that it may be all right to take action to protect the civil rights of Negro school children but not of Catholic school children.” “For many years,” the editorial explained, “we have had two classes of second-class junior citizens. Negroes and those in church-related schools.” The board expressed disappointed that the civil rights bill would not be expanded to “assist both, and the Administration only wants to help the Negros.”

Catholics were distressed to find lawmakers failing to understand, as they insisted, that their position was akin to that of black Americans. If protections could be extended to one group, why not others who faced discrimination? They were skeptical of the state’s expanding power, but were in favor of regulation when it offered protections for Catholics. The civil rights bill could be made acceptable if it created protections against religious discrimination, and tax burdens would elicit fewer complaints if those dollars could be spent on parochial schools. It was when funding or regulatory measures

55 Brooklyn Tablet, 15 August 1963.
56 Ibid., 24 October 1963.
appeared only to support black Americans – whose burdens failed to prompt much sympathy from Brooklyn Catholics – that they elicited indignation.

“Civil Rights for the Tax Paying Public”: Vito Battista and the Politics of Brooklyn’s Working-Class Catholics

On the local stage, Catholics watched with trepidation as the city expanded its role in the social, cultural, and economic life of New Yorkers. New York politics generally functioned left-of-center, but in the years following World War II, the city’s laborites and leftist groups pushed the city to embrace a new set of liberal programs. New York City, Joshua Freeman argued, “became a laboratory for a social urbanism committed to an expansive welfare state, racial equality, and popular access to culture and education.” Public institutions, such as the municipal college system and municipal hospitals, expanded. In the world of culture and the arts, the city created two radio stations, two television stations, and a quasi-public arts center. New York also became the national leader in public housing. By 1950, the city had 36 housing projects, and it added 75,403 more housing units over the next decade. It extended its aid to the poor and working classes through expanded welfare measures and the creation of permanent rent controls.57

Though New York liberals hailed these achievements, not all residents embraced the city’s newly expanded role. Many white, working-class Catholics were undoubtedly helped by these programs, especially increased access to a college education. However, a large contingent concluded that the social programs widely extended in the postwar years

57 Freeman, Working Class New York, 55, 63-67.
represented a threat to the stability and racial homogeneity of their communities. White working-class New Yorkers argued they had a right to patrol the borders of their neighborhoods and to determine who could and could not reside within them. The city’s liberal social and economic programs, including open housing, public housing, rent control, expanded welfare programming, and the taxes used to support them, infringed on protections white communities assumed they had been afforded. In short, working-class Catholics reasoned, these city programs hastened the expansion of urban slums. Moreover, they represented a frightening increase in state power, which strongly anti-communist Catholics found difficult to swallow. As a result, they became increasingly distrustful of the traditionally liberal city government.

The center of this growing dissatisfaction was in the working-class and heavily-Catholic neighborhoods that sat along the border of Queens in northern and eastern Brooklyn. In Greenpoint, Williamsburg, Bushwick, Canarsie, and the easternmost portion of East New York, white residents organized homeowners groups and civic organizations to oppose city programs they believed threatened to devalue their neighborhoods. Catholics dominated these communities and their organizations. Greenpoint, for example, is one of the smallest neighborhoods in Brooklyn, covering an area of less than two square miles. Despite its small population, it supported ten Catholic churches and eight parochial schools. In 1958, Greenpoint Catholic schools reported 5,300 pupils in comparison with 3,155 who attended public schools. The community newspapers, including the Greenpoint Weekly Star and Kings County Chronicle, were strongly oriented around activities in the local parish, and reported the activities of neighborhood

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civic groups alongside communion announcements, diocesan high school graduations, and CYO game outcomes.

These neighborhoods were the nexus of activity for Vito Battista, a Catholic and vocal political organizer. Battista was born in Bari, Italy and moved to East New York as a child. He trained as an architect, and earned degrees in architecture and urban planning at Carnegie Tech, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Columbia University before establishing his own school of architecture, the Institute of Design and Construction, in Downtown Brooklyn. But Battista’s true passion was politics. With a famously colorful and flamboyant personality, he fashioned himself into the representative of the “little fellow” – the small property owner, small landlord, and working-class people of Brooklyn. In 1956, he organized the United Taxpayers Party to represent the “little people” he felt were being cheated by an expanding City Hall.59 The party favored lowering taxes, abolishing the New York City Housing Authority, and implementing more stringent restrictions on welfare. Beginning in 1957, under the United Taxpayers banner and later as a Republican, Battista became a perennial mayoral candidate. Early in his political career, he gained notoriety for his gimmicky political antics. In 1958 he appeared at the Federal Hall National Memorial in a wooden barrel to demonstrate the impact of high taxes on the people of New York City and, on another occasion, set up a guillotine outside of City Hall as a metaphor for what the city’s government was doing to its taxpayers.60 His most famous act of political theatre involved parading a camel through lower Manhattan. “If those guys inside pass one more

59 Kings County Chronicle, 3 July 1962.
bill against us taxpayers, it will break this camel’s back,” he told a reporter. Battista was stout, loud, mustachioed, and he had a knack for riling up his fellow white ethnics in Brooklyn.

Battista appealed to white, lower- and middle-class Brooklynites, a demographic that was heavily Catholic. He was essentially written off by newspapers outside of the hyperlocal community weeklies. Many journalists simply saw him as an angry, unhinged rabble-rouser, and failed to understand his wide appeal, especially in a city as liberal as New York. Only in the late 1960s – when a working-class backlash was painfully apparent and Battista had secured a Brooklyn Assembly seat – did the media suddenly take stock of his allure to outer-borough whites. In a 1969 New York Magazine piece, Pete Hamill wrote that the East New York politician, as well as Councilman Matt Troy (Battista’s counterpart in Queens), were “usually covered in the press as if they were refugees from a freak show.” “I’ve been guilty of this sneering, patronizing attitude toward Battista and Troy myself,” he admitted. In the late-1950s and early 1960s, Battista was not a prominent New York politician, but he represented an inchoate outer-borough frustration that would come to define the politics of white-working class Catholics in the next decade.

Battista, like his working-class supporters, was critical of the city’s public housing program. To many Brooklynites, public housing represented not only the demise of their community, but also served as a signal that the city had turned its back on

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63 In a review of the work of Arnold Hirsch and Thomas Sugrue, Gary Gerstle summarily argued that “Discriminatory federal housing policies had led white homeowners to believe they had a right to live in racially exclusive neighborhoods.” See Gary Gerstle, “Race and the Myth of the Liberal Consensus,” The Journal of American History 82, no. 2 (September 1995): 584.
white working-class residents in favor of New York’s increasing non-white populations. It was, of course, not simply the establishment of public housing nor the housing residents themselves that brought about neighborhood decline, but the discriminatory manner in which policies were enacted. When the first units of public housing were completed in Manhattan’s Lower East Side in 1935, New York’s housing program represented a progressive response to the city’s housing shortage and aging housing stock. Many of Brooklyn’s neighborhood leaders worked tirelessly to secure public housing in their neighborhoods, but the program largely failed to fulfill its early promises. Though after 1948 the vast majority NYCHA buildings were integrated, reversing an earlier strict segregation policy, they were purposely placed in either majority-black or “changing” neighborhoods like Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brownsville, and Fort Greene. As a result, even those that that had a racially-mixed population when the project opened often quickly lost most white residents who had greater opportunity to move elsewhere. HYCHA employees frequently steered blacks and Hispanics to housing in places like Brownsville; an Urban League official discovered prospective black tenants were told they could move into Brownsville’s Van Dyke Houses immediately, but would have to for a year or longer for housing in a predominantly white areas like Red Hook or Williamsburg. Thus, while two-thirds of the NYCHA tenants were white in the 1940s, they only made up one-half of project residents by 1955. By the end of the decade, only one-quarter of tenants were white.64

The press tended to present a pathologized image of destitute and antisocial public housing residents. In reality, the majority of residents consisted of stable families, very

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few of whom relied on assistance. In 1948, 10% of tenants in New York’s developments received welfare, and that number only rose to 15% by 1962. Rents were generally too high for the city’s poorest residents. In places like Brownsville, the vast majority of tenants were employed and lived in two-parent households. Nevertheless, because the creation of public housing resulted in massive dislocation and forced urban renewal refugees into already declining neighborhoods – often where new projects were built – they did hasten the deterioration of neighborhoods like Brownsville and Fort Greene. The large influx of low-income, largely non-white residents resulted in overcrowding, worsening housing stock, and overburdened schools. The result, according to a local paper, was “increased juvenile delinquency, lowered health conditions, institutional erosion and high community instability.”

For white residents of Brooklyn, NYCHA developments were increasingly associated with racial change and physical deterioration of the neighborhoods in which they were built. Three of Greenpoint’s state representatives went on record opposing public housing in their community in 1956. “I am unalterably opposed to low-income housing for Greenpoint,” State Senator Harry Gittleson told the Greenpoint Weekly Star. All agreed that these developments would “not add to the area but would be harmful to both the town and its existing real estate values.” Battista criticized public housing as a botched experiment. “It’s socialistic in concept, and I don’t think it’s a good thing. We’ve had it for 25 years and we’ve seen that it’s failed,” he told local college reporters. “The City,” he argued, “has found that it has become the biggest slum landlord.”

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65 Pritchett, Brownsville, Brooklyn, 119, 117.
68 Kings County Chronicle, 9 August 1960.
Battista focused his critiques on the character of NYCHA residents. “Rather than alleviating a housing situation,” he argued, New York public housing, “has instead been a breeding place for violent crime, has created new slums, has destroyed the initiative of its tenants and has encouraged middle-income families to move from the city.” Projects become slums, he claimed, “the day they’re built because some of the people you put in there – they aren’t even housebroken.” In these conditions, crime became rampant and placed stress on the already overstretched police department. “In fact,” Battista told a reporter, “I’ve spoken to police officers and they’ve told me ‘we can’t give you policeman up in your area.’” “I pay $1,000 in real estate taxes,” he told the reporter as he pointed to his tax bill. But, he claimed, his heavy tax burden did not provide his East New York neighborhood with adequate police protection “because they have to send them to public housing.”

Residents in Brooklyn’s white, working-class Catholic neighborhoods felt increasingly powerless in the face of the city’s immense bureaucracy. They, of course, still held enormous political sway – there was a reason very few units of public housing were placed in white neighborhoods. But as the city’s reach extended, and the borders of non-white neighborhoods inched closer to white working-class enclaves, Catholics became concerned the city would force their communities to assent to its “socialistic” agenda. At a 1960 Planning Commission meeting to discuss amendments to the city’s zoning regulations, several representatives from local homeowners and civic associations attended to register their opposition to public housing, even though subsidized

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developments were not necessarily germane to the zoning changes at hand. Grace Liotta, an Italian Catholic woman the local paper described as “4 feet 11 inches of fury” and head of the Greenpoint Property Owners Civic and Protective Association, attended as a representative of Greenpoint’s small homeowners. “We in Greenpoint,” she told the Commission, “are looking forward for new housing in Greenpoint, not public but private housing.” Greenpointers were fearful, she explained, that

we the smallfry [sic] will get a kick in the pants and out we will go…We feel that one of these days in a community…like Greenpoint…where the conditions are on the downtrend, somebody will come into the City Council and start its condemnation – you know, the usual prosaic language, the health and welfare and well-being and so on, and start the wholesale condemnation procedure and out we go.

Battista was also in attendance, and described the situation as a herculean battle in which communities like Greenpoint were pitted against the city and private developers who wanted to build large-scale public housing. “What I’ve noticed about this Zoning Law,” Battista told the Commission, “is that…it’s a fight between the small and the big; the vertical towers that we’re trying to plan in New York City versus the residential, low spread-out communities. Now, what your proposal in many areas is, is the destruction of the character of the community.” Battista and Liotta’s aims, he explained, were “preserving the character of these communities so we don’t get these vertical slums.”

Battista was critical of any government interference in the local housing market, and rent control became a particular source of indignation. In 1943, the Office of Price Administration, created by President Roosevelt under the Emergency Price Control Act,

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capped New York rents at their March 1, 1943 levels in order to prevent wartime inflation. Unions, tenant groups, and the American Labor Party waged campaigns to make wartime rent controls permanent – a victory they won in 1950 when New York State took over for Federal rent regulation and froze rents throughout New York City. These were sweeping measures; the state regulated 96% of rental units and 80% of all housing in the city.\(^72\) As a result, rents in almost all building constructed before 1947 could only be raised under strict procedures. In the following years, the rest of the state abolished rent controls, but regulations in New York City persist to this day.

Though rent control provided affordable housing for working-class New Yorkers, it was unpopular among Battista’s supporters who lived in neighborhoods where the vast majority of housing was built before prior to the Second World War. Battista argued that by placing a “low, fixed income on his property,” areas landlords found it difficult to maintain their holdings.\(^73\) As a result, rent control led to the deterioration of residential buildings and the spread of slums – a possibility that concerned not just landlords, but area renters. His argument was not unfounded. Many landlords, either because of limited finances or simple greed, allowed their properties to decline. Additionally, small property owners did seem to face more hardship that those with large holdings. In 1958, the city issued its first luxury decontrol order that ended rent control on approximately 600 apartments that rented for $416.66 per month unfurnished, or $500 a month furnished.\(^74\) These high-priced rentals were nearly non-existent in neighborhoods like Greenpoint and Williamsburg, or even in Brooklyn at large. “It’s high time that the small property owner

\(^72\) Freeman, Working Class New York, 107, 65.
\(^73\) Kings County Chronicle, 22 January 1957.
\(^74\) New York State Division of Housing and Community Renewal, Office of Rent Administration, Rent Regulation After 50 Years: An Overview of New York State’s Rent Regulated Housing, 1993 (n.d., n.p.).
stopped getting kicked around by the Rent Commission that seem to favor the large realty moguls,” Battista argued in 1961. “The result is that the little fellow does not stand the remotest chance of getting a fair deal, while the large owner finds clear sailing with immediate rent increases.”

In addition to restrictive regulations, Battista and his Catholic supporters argued that the city’s spending was out of control and oppressive to working- and middle-class families. While New York City would experience debilitating budget crises beginning in the mid-1960s, some residents already felt the squeeze in the late 1950s. Like most cities in the United States, New York relied most heavily on local property taxes to support its budget; in 1961 property taxes supplied nearly two-thirds of local revenue. The city also increasingly relied on intergovernmental funding. In 1960 it received more than $150 million in federal grants, in addition to a special infusion of state funds required to balance the budget. State and federal sources supplied one-quarter of the city’s budget, and that percentage continued to grow over the course of the decade. Nevertheless, the city’s increasing budget, which grew to support massive renewal, construction, and social programs, led the City Council to continually raise property taxes during the late 1950s and early 1960s. In 1952, the city’s basic real estate tax rate was $3.08 per $100 of assessed value, but by 1963 the tax rate for Brooklyn had been raised to $4.41, an increase of over 43%. Catholics found the increases particularly onerous because they saw homeownership as crucial to the health of a parish. “Homeowners are the backbone

75 *Kings County Chronicle*, 3 January 1961.
of every parish,” a Tablet reader insisted. “Anything that would discourage homeownership is harmful to parishes. Yet, the city administration is apparently doing all in its power to make homeownership difficult by increasing budgets and taxes.” Rising tax rates angered working- and middle-class Catholics. Greenpoint’s Grace Liotta called the city’s realty tax rates “fantastic” and “the result of wasteful spending.” “Real estate taxes wouldn’t be so high,” she contended, “if the city didn’t waste a lot of money on uneconomical projects.”

Working-class Catholics were most frustrated by the city’s welfare spending, which dramatically changed New York’s City’s spending patterns in just a few decades. According to Robert Murray Haig, an economist charged with investigating the city’s finances, by the 1950s New York City’s “primary function, judging from the amount of money spent, is the care and rehabilitation of those who have been stranded economically through unemployment, illness, physical and mental, or old age.” Welfare accounted for a larger percentage of the budget than traditional municipal services like police, fire protection, and maintenance, and costs continued to rise throughout the decade. In 1961, the city spent over 50% more on welfare than it did in 1951. Significantly, the majority of those who received assistance were non-white. Denied access to skilled and

79 Brooklyn Tablet, 2 June 1956.
80 Greenpoint Weekly Star, 4 June 1958.
81 Keith D. Revell, Building Gotham: Civic Culture and Public Policy in New York City, 1898-1938 (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2003), 179. In 1952, welfare expenses amounted to $309 million, or about 31% of the city’s annual budget. By contrast, municipal services like police, sewage, fire protection, street construction, and maintenance amounted to $294 million.
82 Felicia Ann Kornbluh, The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 92-93. In 1960 only 4.9% of city residents received a form of public assistance, representing a rise in welfare rolls of 16% over the course of the previous decade. Thus, while those receiving assistance did not rise dramatically, the amount of assistance recipients collected became more substantial. Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, “The Welfare Explosion of the 1960s,” in Welfare and the State: The Zenith of Western Welfare State Systems, eds. Nicholas Deakin and Catherine Jones Finer (New York City: Routledge, 2004), 330.
high-paying jobs, blacks and Puerto Ricans were forced to rely more heavily on welfare than white New Yorkers.83

In the pages of the Tablet, Brooklyn Catholics complained that they were unfairly burdened by New York’s welfare program. “City politicians have bribed thousands of free loaders to converge on cities by offering them tax-paid handouts,” one letter-writer complained, while “self-reliant, freedom-loving citizens (the backbone of any government) have voted with their feet to get away from confiscatory taxes.” The city government, they contended, was turning into a “socialistic welfare state.”84 Battista, too, demonized welfare recipients, insisting that the presence of the poor who depended on assistance contributed to the destabilization of neighborhoods. Rent stipends, he claimed, were “overcrowding decent housing with welfare cases consisting of large families, to a point where the buildings were turned into slums and a blight cast on surrounding houses.” “The tenants of the good houses move, businesses suffer, church and synagogue membership plunges and the neighborhood is ‘busted.’” The Welfare Department, instead, should sequester those on relief: “put them in public housing and save the City millions of dollars in the excessive rentals they are paying – and at the same time they can keep these cases under close supervision.”85 During his initial mayoral bid, when an interviewer asked Battista about the concentration of Puerto Ricans in New York who collected welfare, he suggested that the Federal Government “come in and redistribute these people throughout the United States” to relieve the city’s relief rolls.86

84 Brooklyn Tablet, 2 July 1960.
85 Kings County Courier, 9 April 1962.
Battista also came into conflict with the liberal city government over the issue of open housing. New York City and State were at the forefront of the open housing movement and, during the early 1950s, both passed bills banning racial discrimination in multiple dwellings that received federal mortgage insurance. By 1957, the Sharkey-Brown-Isaacs law extended those protections by prohibiting racial discrimination in the selling or renting of housing units in dwellings with three or more units, as well as in one- and two-family homes in developments with ten or more lots.\textsuperscript{87} The bill covered almost all new private housing, which, according to politicians like Battista, constituted an illegal interference in property rights. When a reporter asked how he could support school integration, but oppose integration in private housing, Battista responded: “Because I think in private housing the people that own the house, or own the building, also have constitutional rights. They also have rights for the pursuit of happiness and they also have rights in order to select their neighbors. Now, if you want to eliminate that right of property and you want to completely destroy the Constitution, that’s something else.” “You cannot legislate the minds and heart of people by law,” he added.\textsuperscript{88}

By the latter half of the 1950s, Battista and his followers were a viable, if nascent, political force in New York politics. They positioned themselves in opposition to the city’s liberals, laborites, and civil rights supporters, but drew on their rights-oriented language. Mimicking the tactics and language of black activists, Battista held rallies to support the “civil rights” of “small property owners and the average taxpayer.” The rallies, sponsored by the United Taxpayers Party and local homeowners groups, regularly


drew impressive crowds in both Brooklyn and Queens. A 1956 mass meeting at the
Brooklyn Academy of Music drew upwards of 2,000 attendees.89 The “subsidized
citizen,” Battista told crowds of Brooklynites, lived at the expense of the property owner
and the wage earner.90 Greenpoint’s Grace Liotta, often a featured speaker, condemned
the “various abuses” carried out against taxpayers by the “gigantic socialistic program of
the Harriman-Wagner axis.”91 The homeowners, renters, taxpayers, and wage earners
who made up the Catholic white working class felt suffocated by the city’s expanding
bureaucracy, but they found understanding in politicians like Battista and Liotta. The
“little fellow,” Battista declared, “is tired of being pushed around.”92

Real Estate Acquisitions and Attempts to “Safeguard” the Parish

Parishioner concerns about housing and neighborhood stability were not lost on
local parish priests. They were less vocal about their opposition to integration, but pastors
were also invested in maintaining the whiteness of their communities in order to retain
their congregants. As their parishioners organized in homeowners and civic groups to
assert their perceived right to regulate the borders of their neighborhood, Catholic
churches quietly but effectively took measures to control who lived within their parish
boundaries. The Catholic Church was the largest private landowner in northern cities, and
it used its real estate holdings to provide “protection” for parishes in racially-changing
area. Real estate transactions were executed specifically to keep property out of the hands
of non-whites, as well as speculators who might subdivide property and rent to black or

89 Kings County Chronicle, 16 October 1956.
90 Ibid., 3 March 1959.
92 Kings County Chronicle, 16 October 1956.
Puerto Rican tenants. This was a common practice in the 1950s and early 1960s: a parish priest would consult the diocesan Office of Property Administration on the purchase of a property and, if the diocese approved the purchase, would then retain control over who inhabited the building or how it was used, thereby allowing the priest to prevent the property from falling into the hands of “undesirables.” More often than not, parishes lacked the capital to acquire all the properties that piqued their interest. Nevertheless, the real estate negotiations between local priests and the bishop are revealing. The prospect of racial transition was an ever-present source of anxiety for parish priests who, like their parishioners, were interested in maintaining a stable, and therefore racially and economically homogeneous, community.

Parishes often owned single properties or small parcels of property that they rented to tenants. Rents paid on these properties gave the parish a source of revenue, but also allowed priests to have some degree of control over who lived near the church. Nativity of Our Blessed Lord, located in the largely black Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood, managed to create an island of whiteness well into the 1960s through its property holdings. In 1957 Rev. John Krieg wrote to Bishop McEntegart asking for permission to purchase a two-story family house at 36 Madison Street, one lot removed from the school. “I firmly believe that this would be a very fine investment for the future,” he wrote, because the “neighborhood might change.” He also feared that the Catholic family who rented the home would be lost to the parish if another buyer forced them to move. Rev. Krieg received permission to purchase the property, giving the parish ownership of the homes at 30, 32, and 36 Madison Street, which, collectively, had five
At St. Michael’s in East New York, Rev. Godfrey Luechinger acted on a similar strategy. He asked, and was given permission, to purchase a home at 236 Jerome Street, located across the street from the convent and next to the girls’ high school. In a letter to the bishop, Rev. Luechinger explained he was “concerned about what kind of people might want to purchase that property. If the Church would own that house, we could have control over that transaction.” Effectively, Revs. Krieg and Luechinger could determine who should be allowed to live in the area surrounding their churches and schools, giving them another tool to maintain a white parish in racially transitioning areas.

Priests were also conscious of how the sale of property owned by the church might impact the parish. At St. Gerard Majella in Hollis, Queens, a neighborhood the diocese noted was experiencing a “slow influx of better class of Colored” in the early 1960s, the local pastor hoped to sell a parochially-owned house. A diocesan representative from the Office of Property Administration told Bishop McEntegart that the pastor was “very fearful of having it fall into the wrong hands. Results would be that the whole parish would be disturbed by the Church’s actions.” The pastor decided to sell the house for “a known quantity which he has in mind, even though he might be able to get a few thousand more the other way.” Presumably the “other way” referred to selling the property to black family, who were often forced to pay higher prices when moving

93 Rev. John A. Krieg to Bishop McEntegart, 13 September 1957, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 10; Rev. William Rickert to Bishop McEntegart, 18 March 1966, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 10, ADB.
94 Rev. Godfrey Luechinger to McEntegart, 26 April 1962, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 10, ADB.
95 Memo to McEntegart from Office of Property Administration, 6 February 1963, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 19, ADB.
into predominantly white neighborhoods. The parish eventually sold the property to John and Anne Riches, a white couple, on June 28, 1963.  

The priests at Our Lady of Sorrows in Corona, Queens expressed similar concerns when debating what should be done with a parish-owned property that sat diagonally across from the church, which had originally been purchased to “protect the environment of the parish buildings.” After consulting with the pastors, Revs. Amesse and Saunders, the Office of Property Administration sent a memo to the bishop that reflected the priests’ preoccupation with the racial makeup of the parish. They estimated that one out of every four or five parishioners attending Sunday Mass was black and that school enrollment was “down in the 800’s from 1000-1,200 when pastor first arrived. About 250 of the 800+ are negro.” Rev. Amesse also reported that Puerto Ricans and Cubans were buying houses in the “39th Ave. portion of the parish – one long block up from the Church.” As a result, Rev. Saunders felt the parish was “going steadily down,” and saw “no hope or need of expansion.”

Those involved in the decision disagreed over what should be done with the property. Rev. Saunders seemed resigned to the fact that the parish would decline, and was generally uninterested in reaching out to the new non-white residents of the community. The property, he argued, should be sold. However, selling the property created new problems. The most interested buyer was a black Caribbean-American man who planned to restore the property to a two-family home and occupy the first floor. This, according to the priest, was at least preferable to “having the property get into the hands of speculators, who would fill it with at least 20 negroes or Puerto Ricans.”

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96 Memo to McEntegart from Office of Property Administration, 24 October 1963, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 19, ADB.
The disagreement over how to handle the property was representative of a larger struggle occurring within the diocese: should parishes in changing neighborhoods focus on reaching out to new members of the community or to retaining established parishioners? Local priests, it seems, were often more interested in taking the latter path. Many were simply not prepared to face the challenges of a racially changing parish and, like Rev. Saunders, saw little room for the Catholic Church in non-white neighborhoods. Diocesan leadership tended to be more optimistic and cognizant of the need to attract new parishioners in order to survive. As a result, they generally adopted a “wait and see” attitude in areas that were still predominantly white. Thus, Bishop McEntegart decided that “optimism for the future successes of our proselytizing efforts with all classes of people, makes me feel that the property out to be retained.”\footnote{Memo to McEntegart from Office of Property Administration, 14 June 1963, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 25, ADB.} In the end, little changed: the parish continued to rent out the property and Rev. Saunders remained at the parish until the late 1960s.

Like the pastors at Our Lady of Sorrows, many priests expressed concern about speculators buying property near their churches. At Our Lady of Lourdes in Bushwick,
Rev. Raymond Neufeld wrote to Bishop McEntegart in 1962 regarding a property that consisted of a funeral parlor, two apartments, and three brick houses. “We do not need the property for any expansion of buildings or parochial use,” Rev. Neufeld admitted. “My only interest in purchasing stems from an effort to safeguard that property directly opposite the church.”99 The Office of Property Administration noted that three houses on the same block had recently been sold to speculators. “Then the question arises,” the official wrote to the bishop, “what will you have directly across from the Church?”100 At Our Lady of Loreto in East New York, Rev. Scipio Iacini voiced his interest in purchasing two houses across the street from the church. “To be completely honest,” he wrote to the bishop, “the need for this property for present use is of no value except that there is the possibility if sold to speculators the property might fall into the hands of undesirables.”101 In both instances, the bishop advised against purchasing the properties, which he felt were overpriced, and because the parishes simply did not have the available funds.102 Despite the concerns of local pastors, parish maintenance had to be weighed against the constraints of parish finances.

Other parishes were interested in purchasing property solely to secure its demolition. This, pastors reasoned, provided a buffer to protect the church property. Though Bishop McEntegart cautioned Rev. Iacini at Our Lady of Loreto against purchasing property across from the church in 1960, property values quickly declined

99 Rev. Raymond Neufeld to McEntegart, 10 September 1962, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 12, ADB.
100 Memo from Office of Property Administration to McEntegart, 8 February 1962, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 12, ADB.
101 Rev. Scipio Iacini to McEntegart, 11 October 1960, Office of the Bishop, Parish Visitation Files, Box 1, ADB.
102 McEntegart to Rev Raymond Neufeld, 11 September 1962, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 12; McEntegart to Rev. Scipio Iacini, 22 October 1960, Office of the Bishop, Parish Visitation Files, Box 1, ADB.
and, by 1965, the parish had acquired five properties on Atlantic Avenue. After removing the properties’ tenants, the parish demolished all the buildings, laid down blacktop, fenced in the area, and used it as a space for children to play during recess.\textsuperscript{103} In East New York, St. Michael’s acquired several properties on Warwick Street in 1961 in order to “guard against acquisition by undesirables.”\textsuperscript{104} “In acquiring these houses and yards,” a representative of the Office of Property Administration explained, “the parish never had anything in mind except to demolish them. At worst, their purchase affords the parish additional protection and playground-parking space; at best, they provide a nice piece of property for possible future expansion.”\textsuperscript{105}

Priests worked closely with local realtors and businessmen, who knew the Church possessed the capital reserves necessary to quickly purchase vulnerable properties. At St. Mary Star of the Sea in Red Hook, a largely Italian-American parish, Rev. Patrick McGrath wrote to Bishop McEntegart when he discovered that a “Negro-Baptist group from the Bedford-Stuyvesant section” was interested in a building that formerly housed the Hamilton Saving and Loan and converting it into a church.\textsuperscript{106} Two businessmen connected to the saving and loan contacted Rev. McGrath to notify him of the possible transaction. “On informing me of this,” he wrote he bishop,

I told both it would certainly be a detriment to the parish to have them playing cymbals and hooting and hollering opposite the church door. I also informed them that the parishioners who account for over 90% of their business would resent such action on their part. I parted with them to take the matter up with Father Scott who called me. He was of the opinion if it was to be a detriment to the

\textsuperscript{103} Memo to McEntegart from Office of Property Administration, 31 March 1965, Office of the Bishop, Parish Visitation Files, Box 1; McEntegart to Rev. Scipio Iacini, 2 September 1965, Office of the Bishop, Parish Visitation Files, Box 1, ADB.

\textsuperscript{104} Memo to McEntegart from Office of Property Administration, 17 November 1961, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 1, ADB.

\textsuperscript{105} Memo to McEntegart from Office of Property Administration, 29 November 1961, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 10, ADB.

\textsuperscript{106} J.S.S. to McEntegart, 8 October 1963, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 9, ADB.
parish, it might be well to purchase the building as a safeguard. The building is assessed at $20,000.00 and we can buy it at $13,500.00. I am at present trying to entice the Clavin Undertakers to rent the space as a funeral parlor and it would be a protection to them. I feel if this opportunity is passed over it may lead to a general breakdown for everyone on the block is a Catholic. By purchasing the building as a safeguard, I feel there would be no difficulty of selling it later on to a more desirable outfit.107

Several weeks after writing the bishop, Rev. McGrath received permission to purchase the property, but diocesan officials cautioned him to “try to find some good parochial use for the building, and not to contemplate alienating it quickly, lest it appear that the Church purchased merely to prevent another religious group’s locating there,” despite the fact that this was precisely why the building was purchased.108 Roughly a month after the pastor began the transaction, he removed his bid when a new prospective purchaser took an interest in the property. The buyer was thought “not to represent a threat.”109 After the principle motivation for purchase disappeared, Rev. McGrath quickly conceded the parish had no need for the property.

**Conclusion**

While using real estate holding to fortify parish boundaries against the encroachment of black residents was a relatively common practice, it appears to have largely ended by 1966. Prompted by a proposed housing provision in the 1966 Civil Rights Act – and nearly ten years after the City of New York passed the Sharkey-Brown-Isaacs Law prohibiting discrimination in privately owned housing – the diocese finally

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107 Rev. Patrick McGrath to McEntegart, 3 October 1963, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 9, ADB.
108 J.S.S. to McEntegart, 21 October 1963, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 9, ADB.
109 J.S.S. to McEntegart, 20 November 1963, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 9, ADB.
came out in support of open housing laws. Despite the bishop’s insistence that “we welcome in our midst the uneasy and wary stranger” by dint of Christian charity, white parishioners continued to oppose open housing as well as the expansion of public housing.\textsuperscript{110} This placed pastors in the difficult position of supporting the diocesan commitment while attempting not to alienate their white parishioners.

The pastors at St. Cecilia’s in Greenpoint were confronted this impasse shortly after the bishop issues his pastoral letter on fair housing. St. Cecilia’s was a large parish made up predominantly of working-class Irish and Italian Catholics that bordered a growing non-white enclave centered in the Williamsburg Cooper Park Houses. Most of the parishioners, the curate told Bishop McEntegart, “are unwilling to accept Negroes or Puerto Ricans in their immediate neighborhood or, even in their parish.” “The Negroes, for the most part, do not relate to the Catholic Church,” the curate wrote. This was largely “caused by the feeling that their presence is resented.” Some Puerto Ricans entered the church, “but suffer a good deal from the animosity that exists among their fellow-Catholics.” He noted that attempts to bring blacks and Puerto Ricans into the church were almost always met with resistance. “In the past there have been attempts to include Cooper Park teen-agers in our parish Teen-Age Program (CCD, CYO, etc.),” he explained, but “Most of these have failed because of the animosity that exists on the part of the white teen-agers.”\textsuperscript{111}

Racial hostilities increased in 1967 when the city announced it was constructing a new housing project, which would, much to the dismay of the parishioners, be located

\textsuperscript{110} \emph{Brooklyn Tablet}, 12 March 1966. This provision did was not included in the final bill, but became the basis of the Fair Housing Act in 1968.

\textsuperscript{111} Curate of St. Cecilia’s to Bishop’s Office, [1966?], Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 4, ADB.
across the street from the church and its rectory on Meeker Avenue. Msgr. Joseph Reagan, St. Cecilia’s pastor, noted that his parishioners “feared that this sort of housing would lower real estate values in the area,” and, searching for a remedy, many asked the priest to “do something to prevent the erection of the building.” Despite their appeals, the pastor felt morally obligated to support the diocesan position on open housing. As a result of his refusal to oppose construction of the NYCHA project, Msgr. Reagan told the bishop that “a good many of these people have tried to ‘get back at me’ by going to other churches and cutting down on the support of ours.” “Collections have fallen off considerably during the past several months,” he reported.112

St. Cecilia’s parishioners also brought their concerns to Bishop McEntegart. In July of 1967, Helen Credidio, president of the Community Civic League in Greenpoint, pleaded with the bishop to act on behalf of his parishioners at St. Cecilia’s. In a letter, Credidio complained that although her group had been granted interviews with numerous city officials, including Brooklyn Borough President Abe Stark and Deputy Mayor Timothy Costello, the bishop had refused to meet with the Civic League. The group members, “of which most are members of St. Cecilia’s Parish, are overwhelmingly disappointed.” Civic matters that impact parishioners, she insisted, should be of interest to the bishop. “It is and has been our opinion that our immediate environs have absorbed sufficient low-income housing and the choice of this location for an additional project was just not suitable, being so close geographically to the Cooper Park Project,” Credidio explained. The project “could well be the death knell for St. Cecilia’s as a truly great parish.” It was the bishop’s duty to protect the parishes of his diocese, and thus “some

112 Msgr. Joseph W. Reagan to McEntegart, 11 April 1967, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 4, ADB.
influence could have been extended and could still be by the Brooklyn Diocese regarding a change of site” for the housing project. Edward Hawkins, an 18-year-old parishioner at St. Cecilia’s, also wrote to the bishop concerning the “very upsetting and unjust situation” confronting the Catholic residents of Greenpoint. He argued that the new housing project would result in “an evacuation of the community by its white residents…The situation described – a ghetto.” Anyone condoning the construction of public housing in Greenpoint would thus “be promoting the creation of another ghetto. Certainly a group favoring measures which will lead to ghettos must also favor segregation…. Do you feel that it is desirable in the least, for the Bishop and the Diocese of Brooklyn to be known as Pro-Segregation?”

Of course, Hawkins’ letter was a thinly-veiled attempt to hide his real complaint: that the diocese was neglecting the concerns of white working-class Catholics in favor of non-whites. The “average person,” Credido wrote, “represents the backbone of your parishes and…you have an obligation to us as responsible adults.” But there were others “to whom all clergy, today do appear to be anxious to please: minority groups. What happens if we do not all fit into this category?” As the diocese embraced a more aggressive civil rights agenda, liberal clergy found themselves increasingly at odds with their white parishioners. Priests were tasked with saving souls, but bringing non-whites into the fold could mean sacrificing the Church’s reach among whites.

113 Helen N. Credidio to McEntegart, 14 July 1967, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 4, ADB.
114 Edward Hawkins to McEntegart, 21 July 1967, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 4, ADB.
115 Helen N. Credidio to McEntegart, 14 July 1967, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 4, ADB.
The St. Cecilia’s curate devised a creative solution to the racial quandary. Many non-white residents in NYCHA housing were interested in the Church and in sending their children to parochial school, but “to start an active Parish-Rectory type Apostolate would deeply trouble the white residents and would give rise to even more problems.” In order to extend the reach of the parish without provoking the ire of white parishioners, the curate asked to create a new ministry within the Cooper Park Houses, which would be associated with St. Cecilia’s parish but would not operate within any of the church buildings. The curate would “live and work in Cooper Park,” where he would operate the ministry on his own.116 While the bishop and his consultors were apprehensive about allowing a priest to live outside of the rectory, they approved the experimental ministry for a period of two years.117 The situation at St. Cecilia’s was emblematic of the directions Catholics and their Church would take in the latter half of the 1960s: as the Church declared its commitment to remit laws and practices that impaired equal access to housing and other resources, white Catholics grew increasingly opposed to these efforts. As a result, priests in white working-class parishes did little to pursue the progressive elements of the Church’s agenda for fear they would antagonize parishioners. In effect, the diocese created a dual doctrinal system. Priests in black and Puerto Rican parishes engaged in progressive – and often very public – activism aimed at remedying racial and economic disparities, while priests in white parishes downplayed or ignored the Church’s teachings on race. These divisions would be exacerbated by the reforms of the Second Vatican Council.

116 Curate of St. Cecilia’s to Bishop’s Office, [1966?], Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 4, ADB.
117 Board of Consultors to McEntegart, 7 December 1966, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 4, ADB.
Chapter 5

Radical Religion: Bringing the Gospel to the Streets in Post-Conciliar Brooklyn

In 1970, James Graham, a white liberal Catholic, described a typical Sunday Mass at St. Ann’s Church in Fort Greene. At the old church near the defunct Brooklyn Navy Yard, blacks, Puerto Ricans, and a handful of white parishioners worshipped together. Behind the altar, there was a mural of Martin Luther King and a depiction of a black Christ lying next to the cross. Grayson Brown, a black Catholic layman and liturgical composer, led an audience in renditions of “Kumbaya” and Bob Dylan’s “Blowin’ in the Wind.” The typical sermon, preached by one of the priests in the three-man pastoral team, “might extol the positive aspects of Black Power, or suggest how diocesan funds could be utilized to achieve open housing.” The parish announcements might include an appeal from Cesar Chavez not to buy California grapes or a reminder to pray for those who died in Vietnam “on both sides.” A closing hymn insisted, “Yes, you will know we are Christians by our love.”¹

The scene Graham described was a product of the post-Conciliar Catholic world. The Second Vatican Council not only changed the forms of worship practiced in the church – allowing Brown, for instance, to play a guitar and perform contemporary folk songs – but also encouraged Catholics to become more engaged in worldly, secular affairs. In this atmosphere, an outburst of political activity arose in central Brooklyn’s

predominantly poor and non-white Catholic churches. These churches fostered the growth of a “radical” contingent of priests and nuns, who were both inspired by the reforms of Second Vatican Council – which encouraged Catholics to bring Christian belief to bear on secular affairs – and frustrated by the persistent failures of the city’s bureaucracy to address the needs of Brooklyn’s poorest residents. These religious leaders, aided by a collection of liberal white Catholics, black and Puerto Rican Catholics, community activists, and likeminded organization, spearheaded a number of progressive programs that were inspired by the Gospel but performed in the streets of the city. Catholic activists founded organizations that fought to improve the lot of welfare recipients, formed non-profit corporations to build and rehabilitate housing, and expanded social services. As a result, priests and nuns came to understand housing laws, municipal code, human service programs, and the city’s bureaucratic hierarchy as well they understood Catholic doctrine.

In the moment of experimentation that followed the Second Vatican Council, the religious operating in the diocese’s poorest parishes attempted to reorient the structure of the Church. According to their vision, in addition to providing spiritual support, the diocese would address the materials needs of the poor and – by acting as an institutional linkage between the city and its underserved residents – empower them to improve their communities by increasing their financial and political resources. The Brooklyn Diocese offered support through its own diocesan version of the War on Poverty in 1966. Like the Great Society initiative, though, the diocese’s anti-poverty program faced limitations that fundamentally hampered its ability to achieve its lofty goals. Most importantly, it could only offer meager financial assistance. The diocese’s capital was already dedicated to
other programs—especially hospitals—and, like the city, it faced increasingly dire fiscal constraints as wealthier parishioners fled to the suburbs. The diocese was also reluctant to champion a program that directly challenged the political sensibilities of the majority of the borough’s Catholics, who were calling for the contraction of the city’s social services at the same moment the radical religious demanded their expansion. While the diocese placed greater emphasis on solving the problem of poverty, the leadership never fully endorsed the activism of the radical religious. The diocese, Graham lamented in 1970, was most invested in preserving “the sanctity of the status quo.”

The radical religious were limited by other political realities. Despite their efforts to mobilize the poor, myopic urban policies prevented priests and nuns from achieving impactful, structural change. Without much financial support from the diocese, church-led initiatives were increasingly funded with public dollars made available through the Great Society’s Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO). That funding, however, drew more elusive as the nation shifted its focus away from efforts to alleviate domestic poverty and toward fighting communism in Vietnam. Catholic social programs suffered as a result. But they were most hindered by federal policies that undermined community development efforts in America’s central cities. The Great Society funneled money into urban, community-led interventions, but, at the same time, the federal government subsidizes mortgages, highway-building, and suburban commercial development that transferred capital and tax revenue outside of urban boundaries. The Church’s voluntary efforts were not enough to counteract or overcome urban policies that encouraged

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2 Graham, *Enemies of the Poor*, 152.
disinvestment and deindustrialization in the urban core, and thus the religious could provide little more than palliatives.

Despite the constraints they were forced to work within, the men and women religious who served in central Brooklyn labored tirelessly to address the material and spiritual deprivations of the city’s poor, and these actions fundamentally altered the role of Catholic parishes and their staff within these communities. The church itself became less a space for spiritual worship and more an extension of the city’s social service agencies. Priests and nuns became the intermediaries between the city and its poorest residents, and they increasingly viewed themselves as religiously-tinged social workers and political lobbyists. Though they embraced this activism, many priests found themselves frustrated by their secular role. Why, some wondered, be a priest at all? When it became unclear how their worldly contributions were tied to their identity as members of the clergy, many men left the priesthood. By altering the demands placed on priests and nuns, the urban crisis contributed to the crisis in vocations. It also, more broadly, created a profound sense of discontent and impotence among liberal Catholics. By the latter half of the 1960s, this contingent of religious and lay Catholics was openly critical of both the diocese and the city for their failures to adequately address the needs of the poor.

**Vatican II and the Emergence of the “Servant Church”**

In the first half of the 1960s, two transformative events occurred concurrently. December 1965 marked the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, convened by Pope John XXIII in October of 1962 and held in St. Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican. When
asked why he had assembled the council, the pope reportedly opened a nearby window and said, “We are going to let some fresh air into the Church.”\textsuperscript{3} The council had two broad goals: to create a greater understanding of the church itself and to clarify the role of the church within the world. By the council’s conclusion on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, the bishops had approved a number of sweeping changes that would have not only an enormous impact on liturgical and ritualistic practice, but also on the relationship parishioners had with their church.

For most Catholic laypersons, changes to church ritual were the most immediately obvious outcome of the council. During Mass, vernacular replaced Latin and priests were instructed to face their congregants. Women were no longer required to cover their heads during Mass. While Sacraments themselves were not changed, their performance was altered. Confession, for instance, could now be made face-to-face in a “reconciliation room” rather than a private confessional where a screen separated the priest and penitent. Music also underwent revisions. Contemporary musical arrangements were allowed during Mass, giving rise to the “folk Mass,” or what one vexed priest called “the banjo Mass.”\textsuperscript{4}

While these changes had a great impact on parishioners – especially due to the heavily ritualistic nature of the Mass – the Council’s renewed vision of the church altered Catholic life far more dramatically. Vatican II redefined the Church: it was not simply an institution governed by the hierarchy, but a body made up of all of its members. In the texts that emerged from the Council, the Church was repeatedly described as a body

\textsuperscript{3} Hans Küng, televised interview, n.d., included in The Faithful Revolution, Vatican II (Vatican II Production, Lyrick Studios, 1997).

\textsuperscript{4} “St. Therese of Lisieux 50th Anniversary Volume,” 1976, Parish Files, Parish Journals, Box 4, ADB.
composed of “the people of God.” Emphasis shifted from hierarchy toward community.

This modification was evidenced in the creation of consultative bodies made up of parishioners and clergy – a development that was nearly unthinkable prior to Vatican II. Priests’ senates formed to provide members of the clergy with representation in the diocese and to communicate collectively with the bishop, while parish councils provided laypersons some say in the governing of programming and services in individual parishes. These were radical revisions for a church that had produced a body of followers taught to not to question hierarchical authority.

The Council reimagined the church as a ‘servant’ institution interested in addressing people’s temporal needs, and especially those of the most disadvantaged. The Church, conciliar documents insisted, was first concerned with “those who are especially lowly, poor, and weak. Like Christ, we would have pity on the multitude weighed down with hunger, misery, and lack of knowledge.” The Church thus encouraged Catholics to engage wholeheartedly with the world around them. The faithful, the Council instructed, should seek to improve rather than reject the modern world and “scrutinize the signs of the times” in order to interpret them “in the light of the Gospel.” According to the final document produced during the Council, like Christ, who “entered the world to give witness to the truth,” Catholics needed to “rescue and not to sit in judgement, to serve and not to be served.” The Council also accepted that this might require partnership with other religious bodies, and encouraged an enhanced spirit of ecumenism. In practice, this

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5 Bernard V. Brady, ed., Essential Catholic Social Thought (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 114
meant Catholics were allowed to work with believers of different faiths toward common goals.

Vatican II lent legitimacy to Catholic reformers and liberals, who used the Council’s reforms as justification to increasingly become engaged with contemporary society and to participate in what one priest called “applied Christianity.” Significantly, these shifts within the Catholic Church appeared alongside a growing national focus on racial issues, and the emerging Civil Rights Movement gave progressive Catholics a venue to put the Church’s new principles into action. Aided by the Catholic Interracial Council, an emphasis on interracial justice began to appear in Catholic discourse in the mid-1940s, but it largely remained an undercurrent – subsumed under issues like communism – until the early 1960s. The Civil Rights Movement encouraged the Church to more vocally register its opposition to southern Jim Crowism, and to remind northerners of the Christian belief in racial equality. The Tablet endorsed civil rights legislation in 1963, and, by 1964, the paper insisted it was “hardly necessary” to remind readers of “the importance of a thoroughly Christian attitude toward race relations.”

While these articles served as a reminder of the Church’s position on civil rights, nothing made that so visible to Americans as the busloads of Catholic religious arriving in the South to aid organizing efforts, especially those who heeded Martin Luther King Jr.’s call for northern supporters to assist him in Selma in 1965. The Brooklyn Diocese sent two priests to the march and, when participants met violent resistance from segregationists

8 Brooklyn Tablet, 20 February 1964.
and local authorities, sisters and laymen from the diocese participated in a sympathy rally in Harlem.⁹

The political climate in New York City was also shifting. In 1965, New Yorkers elected liberal Republican John Lindsay, ending Robert F. Wagner’s three-term mayoral rule. Mayor Wagner oversaw massive changes in the city that significantly impacted the lives of black New Yorkers, including the expansion of public housing, the creation of the City University of New York system, and the barring of housing discrimination based on race, but he was highly reluctant to aggressively confront issues of race. His largely flaccid maneuvers to address racial disparities were highlighted in his attempt to remedy job discrimination. Rather than challenge white dominance in the labor market, reinforced through white-led unions, Wagner brought a record number of non-white workers into municipal government, but confined them to the lowliest positions. Most non-whites toiled in clerical and service positions and were not given access to better-paid skilled work. “However cowardly,” historian Craig Steven Wilder concluded, the policy placated many reformers and allowed the administration to “invent a progressive political tradition, while never confronting white control of the most powerful unions.”¹⁰ According to one of Lindsay’s aides, “‘When in doubt, don’t’ was the advice which Mayor Wagner had received from his father, the late Senator from New York, and, as one of his critics pointed out, he ‘didn’t’ during his twelve years as Mayor.”¹¹

⁹ Brooklyn Tablet, 18 March 1965.
Lindsay took nearly the opposite approach. Rather than engage in what one commentator termed Wagner’s “passive liberalism,” Lindsay seemed to dive headfirst into contentious issues, often staking hardline, uncompromising positions with little regard for the feelings of the public – a tendency that would alienate many white working-class Catholics, especially when it came to policies concerning matters of race.\textsuperscript{12} Lindsay made consistent efforts to reach out to the city’s poor and minority residents, who historically felt ignored by city officials. When racial tensions broke out between blacks, whites (mostly Jews and Italians), and Puerto Ricans in East New York in 1966, Lindsay made a point of making impromptu walking tours through the neighborhood. “I think it’s important for the people in the ghettos to see their mayor,” he explained; “They’ve got to feel somebody is interested in them. You can tell from the double-takes how much the visits are appreciated.”\textsuperscript{13} He did the same in Harlem, Flatlands, and Brownsville. Perhaps the most famous images of Lindsay are those of the patrician mayor in shirtsleeves walking the streets of the city’s black ghettos.

Lindsay’s election coincided with the emergence of a newly galvanized – and newly financed – movement of community development organizations. Urban renewal bulldozed poor urban neighborhoods and hastened their deterioration, but it also gave rise a network of activists and organization focused on rebuilding the economic base of their communities, empowering neighborhood residents, and increasing the political representation of the poor. Federal policy also shifted to prioritize neighborhood-based

\textsuperscript{13} New York Times, 19 July 1966. There is debate over whether the events that took place in East New York in 1966 constitute a “riot”; while there was violence, unrest, and violence, it was nowhere near the scale of Watts or Newark. For a journalistic recapping of what transpired that summer, see selections from Nora Sayre’s essay “New York for Natives,” published in August 1969, included in Sixties Going on Seventies (Newark: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 208-213
initiatives and, more broadly, favored programs aimed specifically at aiding the urban poor rather than remodeling American cities. The Community Action Program (CAP), funded by the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act that was the centerpiece of President Johnson’s War on Poverty, funneled federal money into local efforts in order to encourage the “maximum feasible participation” of the poor in improving their own communities. CAP issued funds in 15 designated poverty areas throughout New York, including the Brooklyn neighborhoods of Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brownsville, East New York, Fort Greene, South Brooklyn, and Williamsburg. It supplied funding to organizations with deep neighborhood roots, like the Brownsville Community Council, that worked to build livable communities and aid integration. Community organizations also received antipoverty funding through the Special Impact Program (SIP), which was more consciously oriented toward job training and building alliance between community groups, philanthropic foundations, and the private sector. Brooklyn’s Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation was the first organization in the nation to receive SIP financing.

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The Catholic War on Poverty: Brooklyn’s Experimental Parish Program

In the mid-1960s, the Catholic Church’s charitable efforts began to mirror federal anti-policy initiatives. Fueled by an emerging national conversation about poverty – largely initiated by Catholic Michael Harrington’s influential work *The Other America* – and by the Second Vatican Council’s insistence that the church focus its efforts on aiding the poor, the diocese drew attention to the rampant poverty plaguing non-white communities in Brooklyn and implemented community-driven development efforts. In 1966, Bishop McEntegart announced the creation of a diocesan War on Poverty. It was an informal program, but its central tenets – grassroots organization and the development of initiatives aimed at addressing the social and economic needs of Catholics and non-Catholics – guided the actions of parishes in high-poverty areas of the borough in the years following Vatican II. In his formal announcement, Bishop McEntegart encouraged the formation of “area associations” among proximal churches and, in the spirit of Vatican II, instructed Catholics to ban together with other religious and community groups. While parish priests would serve as central organizers, the bishop instructed priests to include laypeople not only as volunteers, but as planners and supervisors of anti-poverty initiatives. He charged parishes with creating and maintaining a variety of programs, including community organizations to field housing complaints, credit unions, welfare clinics, family planning clinics (to teach the rhythm method), and teen outreach.¹⁷

The diocesan War on Poverty, as it turned out, was more rhetorical than organizational. While it did precede a general outburst of activity in the borough’s poorest neighborhoods, this was more the work of young, hardheaded activist priests than

¹⁷ *Brooklyn Tablet*, 3 February 1966.
evidence that the diocese had fundamentally shifted its focus. Financial support for anti-poverty programs was limited; the most obvious effort to support priestly work in poor neighborhoods was not an appreciable increase in funding, but a parish wealth redistribution plan. A letter sent to more affluent parishes explained: “During the past two decades certain sections of our Diocese have witnessed considerable flux in their population and a transition in the economic condition of their parishioners.” This often meant that “a parish is no longer in the midst of a predominantly Catholic neighborhood and, consequently, must orient its services and appeal to a largely non-Catholic and frequently non-Church affiliated community.” The bishop asked that these parishes contribute $10,000 to a fund that would assist needy parishes with long-overdue repairs and operational costs. Most responded quickly with the requested funds. However, financially-strapped parishes were still expected to contribute to more traditional diocesan programs. When instructed to contribute the Propagation of the Faith, which funded missionary efforts, Rev. Charles Diviney acrimoniously replied, “Dear Moneybags, The enclosed checks represent the contributions of the poor, downtrodden working people of St. Charles.” He signed the letter “Priest from the Ghetto.”

Maintaining large parish plants was an ever-present concern for the diocese, especially in high-poverty areas. However, in the eyes of an increasingly progressive group of clergy, the physical church was becoming less important. In 1967, six priests from Our Lady of Presentation in Brownsville proposed the creation of a liturgical and ministerial experiment that hinged on these priests removing themselves from the rectory

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18 Bishop McEntegart to Msgr. Bracken, March 7, 1966, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 3, ADB.
19 Rev. Charles E. Diviney to “Moneybags,” February 6, 1968, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 4, ADB.
and from the traditional pastoral responsibilities of maintaining the church. Driven by a conviction that “we must share, to the greatest degree possible, in the lives[.] joys and sorrows – the hopes and disappointments of the people to whom we have been sent,” the priests asked for permission to move out of the rectory and live in a Brownsville apartment where they could live among their parishioners. The proposal also included implementing liturgical changes that, they argued, would make the Gospel more relevant to the lives of Brownsville’s poor black and Puerto Rican residents. All six priests hoped to live in a single apartment at 541 Saratoga Avenue. Four of the six would focus their efforts on working with the black and Puerto Rican residents in two defined city blocks, while two others would work in a factory with the aim of “eliminating entirely all support from the Church.” “As a result,” they explained, “we hope to share intimately in the economic pressures that our people feel daily and to experiment with a modern expression of evangelical poverty.”

The emphasis on communal action and the insistence that the church did not need to be contained within a building or structure, but exist throughout a community, informed the priests’ proposed liturgical changes. Confession, for example, would become a communal activity. The sacrament was traditionally an intimate exchange between a penitent and priest. In this experimental parish, the community would come together and hold a Bible service, “during which time there would be a public communal acknowledgement of sin, asking forgiveness of the community, [and] communal penance and prayer of Thanksgiving.” The priests also proposed moving services outside of the church buildings. “Since our primary concern will be in-depth work with small groups,

20 “Brownsville Group,” n.d., Chancery Files, Parish Files, Box 3, Folder 99, ADB.
our major emphasis in the area of liturgical reform will be in **home liturgies** developing from committees of committed Christians,” which, they explained, would “phase out” Masses at the local mission centers.\(^{21}\)

As he reviewed the typescript of the proposal, Msgr. James P. King, the chancellor of the diocese, cited Canon Law that conflicted with the priests’ plans. Next to the explanation of “home liturgies,” however, he simply wrote “**NO**.”\(^{22}\) In a letter Msgr. King later sent to Rev. Edward Burke at Presentation, he explained that “no one, not even a priest, may add, remove or alter any part of the prescribed rite on his own authority….the priests at Presentation cannot experiment with the liturgy and the rites of conferral or any of the sacraments or sacramental, much less the Mass.”\(^{23}\)

Msgr. King’s marginalia and letter reflected the continuing intransigence of the Church. Vatican II introduced a *spirit* of change – or *aggiornamento* – into the Church, but its basic structure and practices remained unchanged. It was not a wholesale revolution, and the Church remained a thoroughly hierarchical and unhurried institution.

The priests acquiesced to the diocesan leadership in terms of liturgical changes, but continued to insist that they should be allowed to live and work outside of the rectory. After long negotiations with the diocese, Bishop McEntegart finally relented; the priests behind the proposal were so stalwart that the diocese thought they might go ahead with their plan even without diocesan approval. The bishop, however, narrowed the size and scope of their plan: the program was limited to two priests who would not be allowed to engage in paid work. They were also required to wear religious garb. These priests,

\(^{21}\) “Brownsville Group,” n.d., Chancery Files, Parish Files, Box 3, Folder 99, ADB.
\(^{22}\) Ibid.
though, would not have any parish obligations and were relatively free to design their own programs as long as they related to education, ecumenism, housing, youth, welfare, or employment. The geographic focus also shifted. Rather than Brownsville, the two priests would take up residence in Bedford-Stuyvesant where they would work under the supervision of Rev. John Kean at St. Peter Claver.24

The dramatic curtailment of the priests’ original vision revealed the diocese’s general reluctance to support the work of “rebel priests.” They were, after enough badgering, allowed to carry out what came to be called the Experimental Parish, but they did little to change the status quo of the diocese at large. A diocesan War on Poverty was, after all, a relatively uncontroversial notion for a charitable organization to embrace, especially when the directives outlined in the Tablet were vague enough so as not to offend more conservative Catholics. The diocese showed that it was willing to support the work of a handful of young priests who wanted to try unconventional methods of ministry, but they did not provide a blanket endorsement of their social vision – to do so, as a later chapter will explore, would alienate the increasingly frustrated white ethnic Catholics of the diocese.

In May of 1968, a reporter from the Daily News caught up with Revs. John Hyland and William Duncan, the priests chosen to carry out the Experimental Parish, at their shared walkup apartment on Jefferson Avenue on one of the most crowded blocks in Bedford-Stuyvesant. He found the two priests thoroughly embedded in the community and engaged chiefly in work aimed at bettering the material, rather than spiritual, wellbeing of Bedford-Stuyvesant’s residents. “The Brooklyn experiment seemingly has

24 Archbishop’s Statement on the Bedford-Stuyvesant Proposal, 20 May 1967, Office of the Bishop, Subject Correspondence Files, “Bed-Stuy Program,” Box 1, ADB.
no religious orientation in the sense that the priests are not trying to make better Catholics of the people they are living among,” the paper reported. “For the most part they are not even dealing with Catholics,” and, unlike earlier Catholic efforts in the neighborhood, they were “certainly making no attempts to win new recruits to their faith.” The reporter described their work as “racial rather than religious ecumenism.”

Revs. Hyland and Duncan epitomized a new orientation among priests working in concentrated areas of poverty away from traditional pastoral care and toward what had conventionally been considered the realm of social workers. A 1967 Fordham University dissertation, written by a priest and a social worker, described the shifting responsibilities and interests of these men. Every day, they insisted, priests in Brooklyn were confronted by the failures of the city and its social work agencies to “treat adequately the welfare recipient, the multi-problem family, adolescents, the unwed parent, and many other people in need.” To address these deficiencies, “numbers of priests have integrated into their pastoral role the thinking and activities which were more or less the sole domain of the community organizer, the group worker and the caseworker.” This led to a general reassessment of their roles as priests; their theological functions were no longer as pressing in the face of the problems wrought by poverty and racism. “The priestly role is coming to be viewed, especially by younger clergy” the Fordham students wrote, “more in terms of involvement, community, ‘I-Thou’ relationships, and personalism. They feel that they should be more involved in this world, not only for their own sakes but in virtue of their priestly role in pastoral care.” The Gospel became not “an abstract intellectual

exercise but something relevant to the concrete matter of life, to the psycho-social order.”

Women religious, too, were eschewing the isolation of the convent to bring the living Gospel to the streets. In Brownsville, following the lead of Rev. Hyland and Duncan, three Daughters of Wisdom and two Sisters of St. Joseph moved into an apartment at Hopkinson Avenue in an extension of the Experimental Parishes program. Proximity, they argued, was essential to truly understand the lives of Brownsville’s poor and to provide witness. As the sisters explained in a *Tablet* editorial, “being present as neighbors means being involved in areas of life often labelled ‘secular’ by the Church and ‘off-limits’ for Sisters.” It also meant changing the way they communicated with laypersons; theological pronouncements would only serve to alienate non-Catholics and were replaced by secular language. “We must recognize,” they wrote, “that religious language often becomes a jargon which no longer conveys the concern of God for renewal in the midst of secular structures.” While personal, on-the-street encounters continued to be means of outreach for the Church, the sisters in Brownsville argued that this could not be the only means of caring for the poor. “Most of our 200,000 neighbors in Brownsville,” they explained, “cannot be reached by personal encounter, but must be reached and changed through our involvement in the causes which shape and mold their lives.”

For the priests and sisters living in experimental parishes, this involvement took

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27 *Brooklyn Tablet*, 22 February 1968.
28 Ibid., 22 February 1968. These religious were no strangers to protest. In fact, Rev. Duncan’s prisoner identification card from a jail in Long Island City, a memento earned for participating in an overnight sit-in at the Brooklyn Welfare Center, hung on the wall of the priests’ apartment. During the January 1968 protests, both priests were booked on a number of charges, including disorderly conduct, obstructing government administration, and criminal trespassing. *New York Daily News*, 17 March 1968
the form of direct action, both in social welfare agencies and in non-violent
demonstrations.

**Christians United for Social Action**

The priests and sisters who participated in the Experimental Parish program were
part of a larger, organized effort to remedy central Brooklyn’s intolerable living
conditions wrought by decades of institutional neglect. Problems were especially dire in
Brownsville. Shortly after John Lindsay took office, the mayor’s administration identified
the neighborhood as one of New York’s eight potentially “flammable” areas.29 The city’s
negligence was obvious on the streets, which were lined with vacant and neglected
properties. The *New York Times* reported that buildings were “gutted and half
demolished” and that “Smashed, vacant storefronts spilled their litter onto the sidewalk.”
The neighborhood, once an overwhelmingly Jewish community, had become “a garbage-
and-beer-can-littered slum for 160,000 Negroes and 90,000 Puerto Ricans.” The *Times*
compared it to “a scene from a war zone,” while the *Tablet* ran a headline that declared
the neighborhood Brooklyn’s “Local Death Valley.”30 The prevalence of derelict
structures led to frequent fires. Brownsville’s 44th Fire Battalion reportedly responded to
7,000 calls a year and, as a result, an official from the Uniformed Fireman’s Association
reported that firefighters were “terribly, physically tired and there’s no relief in sight.”31
“What the hell kind of a place is this to ask a kid to grow up in?” Father John Powis once
asked a reporter.32

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31 Ibid., 7 July 1966.
32 Ibid., 1 December 1968.
Crime became a devastating problem; homicides climbed from ten in 1960 to more than thirty in 1966. Police reported that they were “just trying to keep up with this nightmare.” Much of the violence was attributable to gangs that tended to organize along geographic boundaries, leading to clashes over control of neighborhood “turf.” Rev. David W. Parker of Our Lady of Mercy Chapel reported that gang violence was so pervasive it had even made its way into the church. In one instance, gang members entered the church, were priests were holding confession, to drag “a kid out and cut him up in the church’s vestibule.” Within the same month, a gang interrupted catechism classes and beat a man until they “split his head open.” Neither victim pressed charges for fear of retaliation. Rev. James Regan, who ministered from Brownsville’s Good Shepherd Center, explained, “People here can be vicious because they have nothing to lose.”

Brownsville’s priests regularly dealt with other social ills that accompanied concentrated poverty. Heroin use became a widespread issue in the neighborhood, and fueled the twin problems of violence among gangs who battled to control the drug trade and an increase in addiction. When a reporter visited Rev. Regan, the priest recounted that, within the past week, he had taken addicts to Manhattan General Hospital three times for “drying out.” “I know that three hours after they’re released they’ll be back on drugs,” he said. “But at least we persuaded them the cure might help.” He also showed the reporter four .22 caliber bullets wrapped in a handkerchief in his pocket. They were from a Puerto Rican woman who asked him to take them from her for fear she might

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34 Ibid., 17 July 1966.
shoot her husband. Other priests in the area described similar problems. “Delinquency, dope addiction and illegitimacy are widespread. The breakdown of family life is evident. Many of our children are growing up in broken homes,” two priests wrote to the bishop.

The priests who worked in Brownsville had a great deal of contempt for the city and its bureaucratic structures; Rev. Regan called it “that machinery that has completely forgotten about people.” The city’s efforts in the area were largely ineffective, and others only exacerbated existing problems. In February of 1966, the Lindsay administration was so distressed by conditions in the neighborhood that Deputy Mayor Robert Price declared a 30-day “crash cleanup program,” which brought inspectors and other municipal officials to the area. But the program was too short lived to make any real or lasting improvements. Additionally, the city zoned large parts of Brownsville as an urban renewal site, guaranteeing that buildings were set for demolition. This gave already negligent landlords few incentives to maintain their properties. “What sense is there in trying since the whole area is up for urban renewal and the people will probably be dumped in East New York?” Rev. Regan asked.

The priests were cynical but not apathetic, and they remained hopefully that the city could be made more responsive. In an attempt to broker relations between the city and its poorest residents, priests and nuns helped residents navigate bureaucratic structures and secure social services. Rev. Regan said he spent the majority of his time on what he called “Mr. Fixit, or finger-in-the-dike operations.” He called housing inspectors,

35 New York Times, 17 July 1966
36 Rev. Thomas A. McCabe and Rev. Gerard M. Gannon to Bishop McEntegert, February 24, 1966, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 1, ADB.
38 Ibid., 23 July 1966.
the Sanitation Department, and the Welfare Department in attempts to bring city workers in to provide necessary services and inspections. When several black tenants refused to sleep in their building after seeing a strange animal, Rev. Regan called numerous city departments and officials – including the mayor – but failed to find anyone who could offer a solution. “Nobody could make a decision,” he remembered. “Nobody in the whole power structure could cope with the problem.” Left without other options, he chose to spend the night with the frightened tenants. Priests were routinely asked to respond in situations when the city failed to do so. Many reported being asked to inspect buildings when tenants and city officials were too afraid to enter dwellings themselves.

Local churches also formed formal organizations aimed at fighting City Hall. In Brownsville, priests, nuns, and laypeople established Christians United for Social Action (CUSA), part of Brooklyn’s robust welfare rights movement. Inspired by Frank Espada’s Welfare Recipients League in East New York, an organization that sought to implement minimum standards for welfare recipients and increase relief measures, CUSA aided welfare recipients and focused the majority of their efforts on housing issues. In addition to the 30 priests and 30 nuns who staffed the organization, welfare recipients themselves compiled minimum standards forms, made social service referrals, and recruited members. “The so-called powerless people are on the move,” a CUSA public

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41 Brooklyn Tablet, 13 January 1972.
42 The organization eventually adopted the name Christians and Jews United for Social Action after picketing a Jewish landlord’s house in the predominantly Jewish neighborhood of Manhattan Beach. While Jews were active in the organizations, they also worried about the political implications of a group that identified solely as Christian protesting against a large number of Jewish landlords. James Graham, Enemies of the Poor (New York: Random House, 1970), 268.
43 Brooklyn Tablet, 10 February 1966; Felicia Kornbluh, The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 55-56. Minimum standards refers to the guarantee that welfare recipients would be given funds to purchase basic, necessary items like furniture and clothing. However, welfare recipients were often unaware that they were entitled to
statement declared. “They have found that they are not alone, that together they have strength, that non-violent, direct action gets results.”

Significantly, though CUSA originally relied solely on private contributions, it was able to secure federal anti-poverty funding through the OEO. By the summer of 1966, the majority of its budget came from public money. The War on Poverty allowed activists Catholics to expand their efforts to a degree not granted to them by the Church.

CUSAn members – aided by federal funding – forced a sometimes-resistant diocese to contend with the problems of the late 1960s. Many of its members – both priests and liberal laypersons – were frustrated by what they perceived as the church’s growing irrelevance in the increasingly volatile urban political climate. “It is one of the paradoxes of Christianity in this country and especially, perhaps, among Roman Catholics,” James Graham, a white CUSA lawyer living in Park Slope, wrote, “that the young believer is instructed in the minutiae of Church ritual and dogmas, then spends the rest of his life waiting in vain for guidance from the pulpit in resolving the tortured and more important moral issues of the day.” Brooklyn’s Irish and German Catholics, he argued, believed in a “dehumanized Christ” that spoke only in platitudes. If priests in Brooklyn’s white churches truly brought Christ to life, “they might find themselves conjuring up the image of a Semitic-looking son of a Hasidic tailor in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, who got a job with VISTA and is now organizing welfare recipients, who

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44 Brooklyn Tablet, 10 February 1966.
45 Graham, Enemies of the Poor, 270.
wears his hair full and sandals in the summertime, hates the war and believed in civil disobedience.”

This was the Christ that CUSA members attempted to emulate.

The organization opened its doors in December 1965, and operated out of a Brownsville storefront at 1823 Strauss Street. A sign in the front window read: “Are you getting heat? Are you paying too much rent?” They broadcast their mission through flyers and sound trucks that drove the streets of the neighborhood encouraging tenants to visit their center, as well as door-to-door visits by priests, nuns, and other volunteers.

Within the first month, CUSA received roughly 50 complaints of negligent landlords who failed to maintain or heat their properties. Even the CUSA office lacked heat during its first winter. The organization found that many of the tenants seeking their aid were welfare recipients whose landlords used their source of rent as a means of intimidation and discrimination. In response to tenant complaints, landlords often threatened to call the Welfare Department and report them for improperly using their rent stipend. Tenants remained silent in order to preventing risking the loss of badly needed relief. The “City of New York – its Welfare Department actually subsidizes the prison keeper – the slum landlord,” Ray Williams, CUSA’s vice president, explained to a reporter.

With few other forms of recourse, these tenants reached out to CUSA. Despite the organization’s work compiling complaints and submitting them to the city’s central complaint department, a CUSA coordinator lamented that they were “not getting results.”

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46 Graham, Enemies of the Poor, 295-296, 154.
47 Ibid., 265-266.
49 Brooklyn Tablet, 10 February 1966.
The government most visibly provided relief for tenants in substandard housing through emergency measures. In January of 1966, when temperatures in New York City dropped to eight degrees, Governor Rockefeller ordered three National Guard Armories, five YMCA locations, and several hotels to accommodate residents without heat. CUSA took around 300 people to the Bedford Avenue Armory over a period of four nights, with at least four of their members staying overnight with the displaced tenants. That summer, when violence broke out between black, Puerto Rican, and Italian residents of Brownsville and East New York, forty black tenants were moved out of their homes on Alabama Avenue and given shelter in area hotels that were paid for by the Welfare Department. Rev. Regan assisted the families in their retreat from the continued street violence, which included several stabbings and one shooting. “They were so full of fear they begged me to get them out,” Rev. Regan said.

While emergency measures provided relief in the direst circumstances, the day-to-day duties of city government — inspections, maintenance, citations, and exterminations — were distressingly underperformed. CUSA found their goals required more direct and confrontational strategies. Inspired by tactics deployed by civil rights groups, the organization began to depend heavily on rent strikes and protests. In August 1964, Brooklyn’s Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) formed a Rent Strike Committee that relied on grassroots mobilization to remedy the deplorable range of housing problems black tenants faced in Brooklyn’s slums. By October, they organized the borough’s first rent strike among five buildings in Bedford-Stuyvesant and Brownsville, withholding

rent and picketing the homes of landlords. From this first strike until the spring of 1964, the entire Brooklyn CORE chapter was devoted to the work of organizing rent strikes that successfully brought about building repairs.\textsuperscript{55} When CORE’s attention turned elsewhere, CUSA stepped in to continue organizing tenants. In February 1966, they held their first protest, which brought together more than 100 families from two dozen apartment buildings in Brownsville. They carried signs that read “Slumlord, Where Do You Live?” “No Heat, No Rent,” and “Slumlord, Where Is Your God?”\textsuperscript{56} Two CUSA members rode behind the protestors in a sound truck exhorting community residents, in both English and Spanish, to “come join a March of the People.”\textsuperscript{57}

A newly-enacted rent strike bill aided CUSA’s efforts. It allowed tenants to pay their rent to an account set up by the Civil Court, and this withheld rent would be used by an appointed administrator to ensure necessary repairs were made to properties. The bill required tenant organization: one-third of tenants had to petition the court and prove that the offending landlord had violated the lease by failing to perform required repairs and maintenance.\textsuperscript{58} CUSA organized tenants and solicited the services of volunteer lawyers – often through ads placed in the \textit{Tablet} – who petitioned the Brooklyn Civil Court to accept the rent payments of tenants. CUSAs made its first suit on behalf of the tenants of four Brownsville buildings, comprising 110 families. Rev. John Payton of Our Lady of Presentation Church testified on behalf of the tenants, and the court named him custodian of the $500 in withheld rents. When the judge ruled in favor of the tenants, she insisted

\textsuperscript{55} Brian Purnell, \textit{Fighting Jim Crow in the County of Kings: The Congress of Racial Equality in Brooklyn} (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 2013), 241-244.
\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Brooklyn Tablet}, 10 February 1966.
\textsuperscript{57} Graham, \textit{Enemies of the Poor}, 267.
\textsuperscript{58} \textit{New York Times}, 4 August 1965. The first test case for the law was, somewhat surprisingly, brought by tenants of a luxury apartment on the Upper East Side against Chase Manhattan Bank, which had recently acquired the building in a foreclosure proceeding.
that “There must be a club over the head of landlords to get them to repair their buildings.”59 With their success, CUSA expanded and soon operated five storefronts in Brownsville, East New York, and Bedford-Stuyvesant.

Five years after CUSA’s founding, Graham wrote that the organization “survived into 1970, but barely.”60 It suffered from internal problems familiar in all democratically run organizations, including personality clashes and disagreements over strategy, especially after its president, Thelma Hamilton, left to work for the Brownsville Community Council in December 1966.61 But the major problem was a lack of funding. CUSA secured federal financing in 1966, but, by that year, funding for poverty programs was already on the decline, cut from $3.4 billion to $1.75 billion. Congress continued to slash domestic spending to provide more funding for the war in Vietnam while also distributing those limited funds to a larger number of anti-poverty programs. By the early 1970s, the War on Poverty was largely dismantled. “Losing the Great Society was a terrible thought,” Johnson later explained, “but not so terrible as the thought of being responsible for America’s losing a war to the Communists. Nothing could possibly be worse than that.”62 Indeed, Daniel P. Moynihan described the Great Society as “undersold and underfinanced to the point that its failure was almost a matter of design.”63 Organizations like CUSA were gutted. “Disconnected telephones and dark

60 Graham, The Enemies of the Poor, 271.
storefronts lit by candles became, in New York, symbols of the War on Poverty,” Graham wrote. They were left “fighting a war with slingshots.”

The program also suffered because of the limited financial support of the Brooklyn Diocese. While the diocese increased its funding for anti-poverty measures from $32,017 in 1966 to roughly $120,000 in 1967 – much of which went to programs supporting welfare recipients – this amount was still less than 1% of the $37 million the diocese spent in 1966. Additionally, the diocese was reluctant to do more than pay lip service to groups like CUSA. When Graham asked Rev. Duncan how he replied to politicians asking if he represented the Bishop of Brooklyn, he replied, “I have to tell him no.” The diocese acknowledged their work while downplaying its divisiveness. “Many of the reforms advocated by the younger members of the priesthood amount to little else than an acceleration in the tempo of implementation within their own diocese of the provisions enunciated in Vatican Council II,” the editorial board of the Tablet insisted. “They are simply approaching new problems with new views,” and “ought not to be generally cast by eager journalists in the role of ‘rebels.’”

Six years after the declaration of the War on Poverty, and five years after CUSA began its work, Brownsville assuredly remained, Graham wrote, “a festering slum.” Distraught by the impotence of groups like CUSA who, despite their best efforts, were severely limited by their lack of material resources, Graham concluded that the real legacy of the group was its ability to change the attitudes of participants and foster interracial dialogue. “True social contact between the races – not the polite encounters at

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65 Ibid., 167-168.
communion breakfasts and midtown luncheons that characterized traditional civil rights activities – seemed to occur in CUSA as a matter of course,” he wrote. Young white law students could be found not only in CUSA storefronts, but attending birthday parties in the slums they were attempting to eliminate. Black and Hispanic militants went to fundraising parties in Park Slope. The group promoted cooperation that bled into other organizations, helping to create a network of both religious and secular activists in neighborhoods like Brownsville and Bedford-Stuyvesant. But partnership and goodwill could not dismantle the structural problems that plagued these neighborhoods. “In retrospect,” Graham dolefully concluded, “it was naïve to believe that direct action could make more than a slight dent in the enormous socio-economic problems of a place like Brownsville.”

Urban Renewal and the Development of Church-Sponsored Housing

From the outset, urban renewal in Brooklyn was a flawed program laden with inefficiencies; a postmortem study of Brownsville’s program described it as a “case study of planning delays, postponement of deadlines, unclear lines of communication and diffused authority.”

Just as the Church stepped in to provide a linkage between the city’s bureaucracy and those it was meant to serve, the priests and sisters of central Brooklyn worked within the city’s policy framework to develop housing for residents in desperate need of safe, affordable shelter. They succeeded in creating new developments,

67 Graham, Enemies of the Poor, 248, 274, 279.
but – in the face of the numerous and overlapping problems tenants faced – they added up to largely palliative efforts.

The loss of middle-income families was an implicit problem in the city’s urban renewal program. With few incentives to maintain properties, landlords let properties decay, and those with the means to do so quickly left. With the city doing little to persuade middle-income families to stay in the central city, community members stepped in. In 1968, Olivette Thompson, a black mother of nine, backed by the Rev. Francis Ricigliano of St. Edward’s and Rev. Juan Velezquez of Church of the Open Door, pursued the creation of a middle-income cooperative in Fort Greene. When the group heard that the city was transferring the Wallabout Houses – two building complexes originally built in 1941 to house the naval officers and personnel of the Navy Yard – to the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), they inquired about how the property might be converted into a cooperative. That portion of Fort Greene was already dominated by several large housing complexes and few options were available for middle-income residents. “Those are the families we need to keep, the kind we can’t afford to lose,” Thompson insisted. Their pursuit triggered a complicated bureaucratic procedure that required the assistance of several volunteer lawyers. The group needed to secure a mortgage backed by the Federal Housing Authority (FHA) that would allow them to pay for the $875,000 property. In order to do so, they needed to sell 90% of the units in the two apartment buildings and to secure tax abatement from the city. Thompson and the two priests formed their own non-profit housing company with Thompson serving as president, Rev. Ricigliano as treasurer, and Mr. Velezquez as secretary. Through word of mouth and the help of circulars printed on Rev. Ricigliano’s
mimeograph machine, the group ended up overselling the buildings and, within months, the Board of Estimates granted 100% tax abatement. With the FHA mortgage secured, they arranged $1.373 million in financing for their modernization plans through the Central State Bank and National Bank of North America. After arranging financing, they were also able to acquire the required 10% down payment from the State Division of Housing and Community Renewal and close the contract. It was quite a feat for an originally moneyless group of two pastors and a public housing resident with nine children.\textsuperscript{69}

Provisions in the National Housing Act, which allowed the group to secure low-interest financing, rendered the Wallabout project financially feasible. The fact that the city’s Housing and Development Administration (HPD) was already completely overextended, and therefore gladly willing to recommend full tax abatement, also contributed to the success of the project.\textsuperscript{70} When properties in the city were tax delinquent in excess of three years, HPD took them into possession. In 1976, the period of delinquency was shortened to one year. As a result, landlords eagerly abandoned unprofitable buildings and forced the city to take ownership. In order to relieve pressure on the budget, the city created a number of programs to hand off building ownership to private, non-profit groups.\textsuperscript{71} The Ocean Hill-Brownsville Tenants Association, created originally as a tenant complaint and referral service, was one of the groups that eventually took over management for a number of buildings. After working together in

\textsuperscript{69} New York Times, 14 April 1968, 17 May 1968; Brooklyn Tablet, 18 April 1968.
\textsuperscript{70} New York Times, 14 April 1968.
\textsuperscript{71} For an overview of some of these programs, see Frank P. Braconi, “In Rem In Rem: Innovation and Expediency in New York’s Housing Policy,” in Michael Schill, ed., Housing and Community Development in New York City: Facing the Future (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 93-118.
the 1968 Ocean Hill-Brownsville school crisis, Rev. John Powis and a group of black activists formed the organization. Rev. Powis became a designated 7A administrator, which gave him authority to take over buildings after a landlord repeatedly ignored requests to make repairs. “I used to go to court, and a judge would say to me ‘Father, you want another building?’” he remembered. The association quickly took over control of 12 complexes, which it managed from a central office housed in a church-owned building adjoining Our Lady of Presentation Church. They employed local community members in management, repair, and rehabilitation of the buildings.72

A number of parishes formed non-profit housing corporations to sponsor the creation of low- and moderate-income housing.73 Housing corporations received federal subsidies, but were able to generally manage building programs on their own. In true ecumenical spirit, churches reflecting a variety of denominations joined with local community organizations to form these non-profits. The Brownsville Housing Corporation, for example, consisted of Father Joseph B. Judge of Our Lady of Mercy, St. Luke’s Community Church, St. John’s Church and the Salvation Army, while the Williamsburg Housing Association included Father Bryan J. Karvelis of Transfiguration parish, St. John the Evangelist Lutheran Church, United Jewish Organizations, and the Council of Brooklyn Organizations. Similar corporations formed in Bedford-Stuyvesant and Fort Greene. Bushwick served as the home of one of the largest and most productive housing corporations, Better Living Ecumenical Realty. Organized by clergy of thirteen

72 Msgr. John Powis Oral History, 18 March 2009, Office of the Archivist, Interviews on DVD, Box 1, ADB; Robert Schur and Virginia Sherry, “Communities in New York” (New York: Association of Neighborhood Housing Developers, January 1977), Donna Leslie Collection, Box 1, Folder 3, ADB.
Bushwick churches, Better Living purchased, rehabilitated, and sold buildings to local families after helping them to secure mortgages – a notoriously difficult task in the neighborhoods of central Brooklyn. The organization also owned and managed more than ten buildings and turned several others into cooperatives. According to one profile of the neighborhood, the churches in Bushwick were the “most active and most trusted agencies” operating in the community.

As with all renewal efforts, the creation of housing through non-profit housing corporations produced its own set of problems. Many developments were a mixture of units priced for low- and moderate-income tenants. While the latest planning theory supported mixed-income developments – they deconcentrated poverty and produced a higher tax base – they could not produce enough units for central Brooklyn’s poorest residents who were in desperate of housing. While they might be a boon for the neighborhood, these developments left many behind. One development in particular became the site of a heated protest that pitted East New York residents, led by a Catholic priest, against a housing corporation run by a Baptist minister. Grace Tower was a low- and middle-income housing complex established by Grace Tower Development Association, a housing corporation founded by Rev. Jacob N. Underwood of Grace Baptist Church. Families in the neighborhood believed they would be able to secure apartments in the 83-unit building, but were dismayed when they learned that only 20% of the units would be available to low-income residents. “They promised us that it would be for low-income housing,” one woman reported, “We watched and we waited in our

75 Toby Sanchez, “Bushwick Neighborhood Profile” (Brooklyn: Brooklyn In Touch Neighborhood Center, 1988), 16, Brooklyn Collection, BPL.
places that had no heat or hot water and are condemned.” Out of desperation, some people gave up to $200 in bribes to the housing corporation in an attempt to secure units for their families.76

In a protest aimed at creating a greater proportion of low-income units, nearly 200 people moved into the property before it was opened. When the police evicted families from the premises after squatting for three weeks, Rev. Powis offered them shelter at Our Lady of Presentation. Thirty-three families (including 100 children) moved into the church recreation center, rectory, and CCD classrooms. The sisters who staffed the parish managed to feed all guests three times a day with only an 18-inch fridge and two small electric burners using donations made by the sisters at St. Gregory in Crown Heights and Sacred Heart in Fort Greene. “If it weren’t for the church, I don’t know how we would have survived,” Inez Padilla, who helped lead the protest, remembered.77 The events came to a head about two weeks after the eviction when Rev. Powis led the protesters on a march from Presentation to the site of the apartment complex. The march turned violent when police attempted to wrest Puerto Rican flags from two women. When other protesters intervened, they were beaten and later had to be treated for head wounds. As they returned to the church, the police, according to Rev. Powis, “arrested everyone wearing a leader’s red arm band.” Police arrested fifteen people and charged them with a range of offenses, including disorderly conduct, resisting arrest, and harassment.78 More than two months after the protest originally began, the families achieved success: the Housing and Development Association confirmed that many of the families would be

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76 Brooklyn Tablet, 13 April 1972.
accepted as tenants to Grace Towers, while the remainder would be given spots in public housing or other federally-funded projects.\(^79\)

The fate of one Brownsville development highlights the shortcomings of urban renewal efforts in Brooklyn, as well as the limited capacity of institutions like local parishes to remedy these problems on their own. In June of 1971, Bishop Francis Mugavero dedicated the Riverdale and Osborn Towers, a development composed of two nine-story buildings intended for middle-income families. Our Lady of Mercy, St. John Cantius, St. Luke’s Community Church, and the Salvation Army all sponsored the project. The nearly $18 million development, which displaced about 500 people during its construction, was financed with a 40-year, FHA-backed mortgage. But just four years later, in an area in desperate need of housing, many units remained unrented. The building was burdened with many of the problems endemic in Brownsville: infestations of rats and roaches, persistent muggings, and a lack of security that residents addressed by forming a tenant security organization. Rev. Michael Breslin of Our Lady of Mercy conceded that the building was “designed mainly for middle income people who do not live in the Brownsville area.” “There are no middle class people in this area, they are all ordinary workers and the rent is too high for them,” he added. “This is a perfect example of what they should not do in Brownsville. It is a disaster,” Rev. Powis concluded.\(^80\)

How did the project become such a failure? In essence, the development was simply created too late to address the problems it was meant to solve. The towers were not built until ten years after Brownsville had been designated an urban renewal zone,

during which time the community underwent rapid deterioration. When the city compiled its Survey and Planning Application in 1961, it determined that 50% of the area’s buildings had deficiencies. But by 1964 that proportion had grown to 89%. The frustratingly slow pace of the city’s renewal program revealed its reluctance to implement any meaningful action: the city did not submit the “Preliminary Final Plan” until 1966, which it rushed through to prevent the loss of federal funding, and property acquisition did not begin until April 1968. Deterioration was so rapid and widespread that areas the city first slated for renewal were later designated as clearance sections. In 1973, the State Study Commission concluded that “The total picture 12 years after the start of the urban renewal process is one of delay at every step…These delays, moreover, have not simply permitted normal deterioration in the project area. These delays have actually stimulated deterioration.”

Perhaps if the Riverdale and Osborn Towers had been built before Brownsville’s urban renewal designation had time to take effect, or if the city had not allowed bureaucratic inefficiencies to derail the program, the project may have ended differently. But during the 1970s, 25,000 residents left the neighborhood, resulting in a 35% overall decrease in population. Those who had the means to leave migrated to better neighborhoods, leaving Brownsville without a stabilizing middle class. Despite the best intentions of local parishes, their efforts were not enough to counteract policies that drained the central city of its tax base and precipitated rapid deterioration. Looking back

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81 “Urban Renewal in Brownsville,” 11.
82 Ibid., 18.
83 Ibid., 20.
84 Pritchett, Brownsville, Brooklyn, 243-244.
on the period, an observer in the 1980s concluded concisely, “the problems were too big for voluntary efforts.”

“What did I do today as a priest?”: Vatican II and the Shifting Roles of the Religious

Both the advent of Vatican II and the increasingly dire problems of the central city changed the fundamental role of the church and the religious who worked in its service. “You know, we don’t have a traditional parish structure as they would have in a normal middle class (Flushing, Bay Ridge) type of operation,” Rev. Vincent D. Foley of Fort Greene St. Michael-St. Edward’s explained to a Tablet reporter. “You couldn’t operate that way because you just don’t have that many Catholics. You just have a few Catholics, and the Catholics that you do have, for the most part, just don’t think along traditional lines.” The normal duties of a priest, such as distributing Communion, teaching religion classes, hearing confession, instructing converts, and performing novenas were deemphasized in churches like Rev. Foley’s. “Well, you can’t do much of that in an area like we have,” he said. “There is no school, there are few Communions. I spend more time visiting the Housing Authority or the Welfare Department, or sometimes a Protestant church or a political club to get some civic cooperation. What did I do today as a priest?” he wondered.

Many priests began to reassess the fundamental function of the church and question how the organization distributed its resources. Spending became the subject of one of the early meetings of Brooklyn Priests’ Senate, a body composed of 25 delegates.

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85 Sanchez, “Bushwick Neighborhood Profile,” 7.
86 Brooklyn Tablet, 30 March 1967.
tasked with addressing personnel matters, passing resolutions, and advising the bishop. In the wake of the Kerner Report, which famously warned “Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal,” the senate reproached the diocese for its excessive building campaigns. The priests called for a moratorium on all new building plans and insisted that the diocese make available “presently unused Church property for use in alleviating some problems of poverty.”87 After neighborhood boys burned down his church, Rev. James Tahaney of St. Mary Mother of Jesus suggested that it was time the church correct its “edifice complex.” In his discussion with the bishop regarding the construction of a new church, he insisted that the diocese invest in a modest structure. “I am reluctant,” he explained, “to construct a church which would perhaps be a monument but not really a house of God.” A simple church would be “one way of showing our determination to be in the forefront of the battle for God’s poor.”88 To replace the scorched church, the diocese constructed a small edifice in the round, a popular style in the post-Conciliar era, which was dwarfed by the large parish school built half a century earlier.

The cost of addressing poverty was far more expensive than the diocese could manage on its own. With President Johnson’s War on Poverty expanding access to federal funding, the Brooklyn Diocese increasingly came to rely on public money to run its programs. In the summer of 1966, the Catholic Youth Organization Neighborhood Youth Corps served nearly 1,300 young people in its summer programs with the


88 Father James Tahaney to Bishop Mugavero, September 19, 1968, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 9, ADB.
assistance of anti-poverty funds, and the OEO supported a number of social programs run out of parishes in Bedford-Stuyvesant. The diocese started Arriba Juntos, a program that worked with young people in Williamsburg to prevent the spread of gang violence, with federal money, and the St. John’s the Baptist Center was the only federally funded anti-poverty program in the nation that was operated by a single parish. The diocese also expanded health services, moving two existing clinics into larger facilities, building two new clinics in Queens, another in the Rockaways, establishing a mobile psychiatric team, and building three senior citizens community centers. The city eventually began to look to the diocese to take over public services. In the late 1970s, the diocese acquired several daycare programs, two senior centers, a Head Start program in Coney Island, and seven programs for the mentally disabled from the City of New York. By 1973, an astonishing 90% of the Catholic Charities budget came from government funding. As an historian of Catholic Charities argued, “The steady advance into the communities of Brooklyn and Queens was inspired by the Gospel but fueled by public money.”

In many ways, the parishes of Central Brooklyn were simply an extension of the city’s social service network, whether they assisted in navigating bureaucratic structures or used public money to provide services. Echoing the language of Vatican II, Rev. Foley of St. Michael-St. Edward’s noted that, “in a way, you are operating a different kind of parish. It comes down, I guess to what they call the service church.” Aiding the community through job placement, health services, and housing reform was “the first function of the church. It isn’t to proselytize. At least it isn’t our conception.” The new

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90 *Brooklyn Tablet*, 30 March 1967.
mission of the church was clear at Rev. Foley’s parish, where a 1971 commemorative publication noted that the church had recently “shifted from the traditional sacramental work to include…involvement in poverty programs, drug rehabilitation and various ecumenical ventures.”

Fort Greene’s St. Michael-St. Edward’s was one of the most politically-engaged parishes in the diocese. Each of the six sisters and priests served on at least two local boards, including the Atlantic Terminal Housing Co-op, Brooklyn Hospital, Fort Greene Credit Union, Fort Greene Coordinating Committee for Senior Citizens, and Cumberland Hospital’s Mental Health Advisory Board. Rev. Anthony Failla became most directly involved in the government process, largely through his work as Chairman of the Community Planning Board #2, which included Downtown Brooklyn, Fort Greene, Clinton Hill, Atlantic Terminal, and the Navy Yard Industrial Park. Rev. Failla attempted to extend his influence in 1974, when he ran in the Democratic primary for District Leader of the 57th Assembly. Members of the parish formed the backbone of the campaign: they gathered signatures on petitions, raised funds, distributed literature, and canvassed. Though the priest lost the election by less than 800 votes, the campaign demonstrated the increasingly public role of priests in the political arena.

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91 “In the Shadow of the Myrtle Avenue El: Fort Greene – Past and Present,” St. Michael-St. Edwards, 1971, Parish Files, Parish Journals, Box 3, ADB.
92 New York Times, 19 June 1977; “The State of the Parish of St. Michael-St. Edward, 1973,” 1973, Catholic Information Center, Rev. Robert Hurley Collection, Box 2, Folder 1, ADB. In 1996, Sisters Sally Butler, Sheila Buhse and Georghianna Glose, who served at St. Michael-St. Edward, reported that the parish’s three priests had molested adolescent boys in the 1970s. By the time they brought their accusations to the bishop in the 1990s, one of the priests was dead. Another denied the charged, but the third – Rev. Failla – admitted to at least one incident of abuse. Eighteen months after the nuns came forward, Failla abruptly left St. Finbar, where he was serving as a pastor, and moved to Florida. He later denied the allegations of abuse when questioned by a reporter. See Daniel J. Wakin, “Bitterness in Brooklyn Diocese Over Abuse Case,” New York Times 15 March 2002.
By 1974, a New York Times article noted that “Clerical collars and skull caps are no longer rarities in City Hall.” While priests had long worked as political representatives of their parishioners – acting as the political liaisons between political machines and their congregants, for examples – after Vatican II their actions became more overt and, in some ways, more formalized. Though Rev. Failla’s campaign ended in defeat, other priests did manage to win elections. In the Bronx, Rev. Louis Gigante became a Democratic district leader and a Councilman. “If I deal or bargain,” Rev. Gigante explained, “I am always careful not to violate my principles. I am a political boss. And I think more and more clergy who move into politics will have to be involved in clubs. But we do not have to compromise our religious principles.” In Brooklyn, the bishop selected Rev. Robert P. Kennedy to organize Catholic voters in the diocese. “I don’t have a hobby of politics,” he explained, “It is my job. I interrelate with city administrative and legislative officials.” Politicians were well aware of the important role priests played in electoral politics. “When I first got elected,” Council President Paul O’Dwyer remembered, “one of the first letters I got was from a Monsignor, who was interested in better housing. This is the sort of thing that could never have happened ten years ago.”

The priests’ shift from spiritual guide to provider of social services and political arbiter played a role in the vocational crisis of the late 1960s, when seminary enrollment plunged and men left the priesthood in record numbers. In Brooklyn, 96 priests defected between 1965 and 1970. This was part of a larger breakdown in priestly contentment.

93 New York Times, 28 January 1974. Notably, the increasingly political role of priests, as well as other religious representatives, was largely influenced by the actions of black ministers. For an examination black ministers, and their move from the role of “power brokers” to a coalition of militant and oppositional community activists, see Clarence Taylor, The Black Churches of Brooklyn (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).
94 Memo from Father James Watzke to Rev. Anthony Bevilacqua, February 27, 1970, Chancery Files, Subject Files – Old Cannons, 1927-1995, National Opinion Research Council, Box 9, ADB.
and confidence in their roles, especially among young priests. If they were predominantly concerned with secular, worldly matters, why sequester themselves in the otherworldly confines of the rectory and celibacy? Many had already moved out of the rectory and traded their collars for street clothes. Celibacy, which was touted as a means of distancing a man from worldly concerns and relations in order to fully immerse himself in spiritual life, appeared less convincing in the face of the new priestly reality that accompanied the reforms of Vatican II. It became such a large question that, in 1967, Pope Paul VI issued the encyclical Sacerdotalis Caelbatus reaffirming the church’s stand on celibacy. But many priests in Brooklyn remained incredulous. In 1969, 31 priests held a press conference to issue a statement on celibacy, and declared marriage to be “a real option” for themselves. “The celibacy rule that we once embraced as a permanent condition, we now hold to be open to change.” More startlingly, they insisted that compulsory celibacy was “doing violence to the gospel of Jesus Christ…without their being one solid substantial argument in favor of the compulsory nature of the priestly celibacy.”

Though the bishop issued a pastoral letter reminding the priests that rule of celibacy was still binding, it continued to fuel disagreement between priests and the Church. In an informal poll of Brooklyn’s priests conducted in 1970, Rev. Edward Nolan found that nine priests believed there should be no change in the present structure and two wanted no more discussion of the matter, while three believed the priesthood should take married men and eighteen thought celibacy should be optional.

97 Ibid., 27 April 1969.
Many men working in poor churches questioned the utility of their priestly role. As a study of priests in Brooklyn noted, some felt that “their people’s problems in the natural order are so intense and extensive that their ministry of grace is largely ineffectual for want of a suitable base.”

John Drew, a man who left the priesthood in 1972, summarized what many priests felt: “I saw the poverty, the depression; people not getting decent educations or decent jobs. And you’re in a church in the midst of all that; it’s pretty hard to be satisfied with just preaching eternity. Telling them, ‘Shoulder your cross,’ isn’t enough anymore.” After leaving the priesthood, Drew worked as the director of a work program for ex-convicts, ex-addicts, and ex-alcoholics. Of course, most priests remained in their vocations, but there was no denying that their roles, and the larger function of the church, had undergone a massive transition. Rev. Foley noted that priests discussed the topic “plenty or times” among themselves. “…where does religion fit in?” they asked. “How are you specifically different from a social worker? You’re doing job placement and counseling, you’re involved in civic changes. That’s all marvelous, but why be a priest? What’s the function?”

Conclusion

By the mid-1970s, the Catholic churches of central Brooklyn had been transformed from spaces of spiritual worship and conversion to providers of social services and incubators for activism. The Gospel also extended outside the walls of the church as men and women religious moved out of their rectories and convents and into

101 Brooklyn Tablet, 30 March 1967.
the communities they served. Roman collars, habits, and zucchetti became common sights at protests, sit-ins, and in the halls of city buildings. Priests became well-versed in housing law and in navigating the welfare system. In the ecumenical spirit of Vatican II, they joined with other religious groups and community organizations to bring social justice to the street of Central Brooklyn.

These priests and nuns became powerful symbols of Christian witness, and their work was invaluable in fostering interracial dialogue and spurring political engagement in their parishes. They were, however, aberrations within the massive diocesan structure. The bishop and other religious in the Brooklyn diocese could praise the work of the radical religious while nevertheless doing little to induce white parishioners in wealthier parishes to change their ways. As Graham wrote in his account of the CUSA, “They can defend the sincerity of these young men who give witness for the whole crowd without, and this is important, disturbing the order of things outside the welfare ghetto area.” “Laymen in the Brooklyn diocese,” he continued, “seeing no sign of clerical revolt outside of the ghettos are content to dismiss the few militants as further evidence that the Church is big enough to contain numerous aberrations.” Despite their tenacity and persistence, the religious in the inner city faced both a constrained diocese and ineffectual city bureaucracy. As Graham concluded, “While poor people and their allies have gained a better knowledge of themselves and their potential, the status quo has been threatened but only slightly impaired.”

102 Graham, Enemies of the Poor, 167-168, 280.
Chapter 6

Law and Order: Crime and the Decline of Liberalism

In 1968, journalist A. James Reichley noted that the nation’s police were in a “rebellious mood.” The policemen, he wrote, “feel both their lives and their moral values are in danger.” Reichley’s Fortune article captured the overwhelming sense that America’s urban areas had descended into bedlam; the police were losing confidence in their ability to maintain order, which was compounded by the feeling that their roles were no longer valued by more liberal-minded segments of society. A problematic “permissiveness” had infiltrated urban culture: civil rights demonstrations continued despite the passage of legislation, a more militant strand of black protest emerged, urban riots engulfed American cities, and college students were engaging in increasingly aggressive activism. But the police had their defenders, particularly among white Catholics. These blue-collar whites who, Reichley observed, “generally live in the same neighborhoods and spring from the same ethnic background as the police, also feel threatened by civil disorder, student unrest, and crime in the streets.”

In New York City, as crime rates rose and riots broke out in Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant, law and order became the defining political issue for the city’s white Catholics. Despite its race-neutral expression, law and order was effectively a call to halt civil rights progress and silence vocal activists. Though Catholics continued to claim support for racial integration, they grew critical of the black movement for equality. As

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they watched civil rights marches and riots on television, they also witnessed their former
neighborhoods descend into disrepair and disorder. “The colored people made it that
way!” one woman remarked in reference to the increasingly dilapidated state of
Brooklyn’s Eastern Parkway neighborhood. “That was malicious behavior, they made a
slum out of it, they infested it with vermin. We had such a lovely childhood there, there
was no reason it had to go like that,” she insisted. There was also a sense that black New
Yorkers had not effectively used their newly-legislated rights, and whites took rising
crime rates as proof that the movement toward equality was, at the least, moving too
quickly and, at worst, undeserved. “Back in 1960 I was for civil rights and love of all.
But they threw out the literacy test and gave the animals a vote and they voted for the guy
who gives them the most welfare,” one Italian man argued. Black New Yorkers, he told a
sociologist, were “nicer back then, more relaxed and if you bumped into one of them by
mistake, it would be okay. But now? A hustler stabbed a Greek friend of mine in Times
Square.” The man was defensive: “I’m not a racist ‘cause I don’t want to live with them
who cause the rapings and stabbings. These people enjoy the blood pouring out of a white
man.”2

The call for law and order framed New York City’s 1965 mayoral election, and it
revealed two competing views of how the city should control its climbing crime rates.
John Lindsay, a blue-blooded Republican, represented the liberal stance. In the vein of
reasoning that birthed the Great Society and dominated social and political theory in the
first half of the decade, Lindsay argued that a more robust anti-poverty agenda would
remedy the problems that bred crime. But a conservative voice challenged that thinking.

2 Jonathan Rieder, Canarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn against Liberalism (Cambridge: Harvard
University Press, 1985, 92-93.)
William F. Buckley, Jr., the Catholic editor of the *National Review*, ran against Lindsay as the candidate for the newly-formed Conservative Party. Buckley argued that liberal social policies contributed to the permissiveness criticized by the police in Reichley’s article. Anti-poverty spending should be reduced and respect for institutions of authority – including the police and the Catholic Church – renewed. While Lindsay did manage to secure an estimated 50% of the New York Catholic vote, a substantial number were attracted to Buckley’s conservative message and, significantly, marked an emerging rejection of traditional New York liberalism.

Nothing demonstrated Catholic defense of the police and adherence to the ethos of law and order more than their rejection of Mayor Lindsay’s Civilian Complaint Review Board (CCRB) in 1966. Though the city already had a police-run review board to investigate complaints against their department, Lindsay implemented a “mixed” board that included four civilians and three police officials in order to create a fairer review process. The CCRB met immediate resistance from both the police department and the city’s Catholics, who contributed a far larger proportion of officers than any other religious group. Like the police, Catholics overwhelmingly felt the board would hamper the ability of officers to act effectively against the city’s growing crime problem. They also resented the mayor’s interference with the traditionally Irish-controlled department, and charged him with political meddling. Lindsay’s actions, they insisted, were an attempt to appease vocal minority groups who, in the eyes of white Catholics, complained unjustifiably about police brutality. In a referendum on the CCRB, Brooklyn Catholics voted against the board by a five-to-one ratio.
For Catholics, the debate over law and order occurred alongside the massive changes wrought by the Second Vatican Council. Within Catholic liberal circles the Council gave permission to act more visibly in the battle for racial equality, but it had a vastly different impact on most parishioners. After Vatican II, Church teaching suddenly appeared mutable. Catholics tended to think of the Church as existing outside of time; in the words of Catholic commentator Gary Wills, “History was a thing it did not have to undergo.” Despite the fact that the church adapted to new developments in society (the Catholic position on birth control had not always existed, but was determined in the 1920s and 1930s, for instance), Catholics tended to accept church authority largely without question and saw its teaching as static. But Vatican II altered Catholic obedience. The Council, Wills wrote in his assessment of Vatican II, “let out the dirty little secret. It forced upon Catholics, in the most startlingly symbolic way, the fact that the church changes.” It introduced the notion that Catholicism was somehow up for interpretation, and that Catholics could pick and choose which teachings they adhered to, or at least choose to emphasize, and which they did not. It also meant that the Church simply appeared to have less authority. What emerged was a stark division between matters deemed “moral” and those deemed “political” – or, those for which the Church had authority to direct parishioners and those for which it did not. Parishioners became more willing to challenge the pronouncements of the Church and their priests and, in turn, the Church spoke with increasing apprehension.

Occurring immediately after the conclusion of the Council, the 1965 election and the referendum on the CCRB revealed a growing political schism among Brooklyn’s

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Catholics. Division, rather than accord, came to define Catholic discourse. As the liberal segment of the Church vocally supported anti-poverty programming and the CCRB as a means advancing civil rights, a growing number of Brooklyn’s Catholics argued that these policies were ineffective when it came to addressing crime. Safety and order, they insisted, were the truly pressing issues of the day. Worried they would upset their white parishioner, the Brooklyn Diocese – and the Church more generally – shied away from taking a stance on these issues. The vague and innocuous realm of morality came to be seen as the appropriate dominion of the Church, leaving issues of politics up to the interpretation of individual parishioners.

**Fear City: Interpreting New York’s Crime Problem**

Though the Civil Rights Movement evoked little interest from white Brooklynnites at the beginning of the 1960s, their attention shifted by the early years of the decade as the movement gained steam. Abstractly, the diocese and its parishioners were strongly in favor of integration, and sympathy for the movement peaked in 1963 after the Birmingham campaign. In July of that year, after President Kennedy gave an address calling for civil rights legislation, Bishop McEntegart issued a pastoral urging parishioners “to work wholeheartedly, both within the Church and with our friends and brothers from other faiths, in the cause of racial justice.”4 The New York Archdiocese’s Cardinal Spellman was often more forthright in his insistence that Catholics lead the fight on integration. “There is simply no reason – there never was and there never can be – why the color of a man’s skin should limit his opportunities in a society that boasts of

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4 *Brooklyn Tablet*, 18 July 1963.
freedom,” he declared at the dedication ceremony of a public housing development in Harlem. “We need civil rights measures enacted into law.”

Though Catholic supported civil rights legislation, they were suspicious of the tactics deployed by activists, especially after the movement made legislative strides. Their apprehension partially stemmed from Catholic respect for hierarchical order and authority, which inspired a wariness of all forms of civil disobedience – even the non-violent variety. As Joshua Zeitz argued in his study of Jews and Catholics in postwar New York City, by midcentury, “American Catholicism enforced a hierarchical religious culture that promoted obedience of authority, rather than skepticism of it, as a virtue.” This sense of deference distinguished them from their Jewish neighbors, who were much more willing to accept dissent as part of the democratic process.

Catholics in the Tablet “Readers’ Forum” expressed puzzlement at the “strange view abroad today that this ‘civil disobedience’ (also called ‘non-violent resistance’ and ‘passive resistance’) is sanctioned by Christian tradition, and that those who engage in it are but ‘bearing witness’ in the best Christian tradition.” “Nothing could be farther from the truth,” one man argued. “Christianity is the friend of law and of social order,” he insisted, “not of civil disobedience and anarchic personalists enthusiasm.” He also noted that these ideas were rooted not in American tradition, but in Gandhian India. “You may indeed follow Gandhi. But we you choose his company, you must realize that you are parting company with St. Paul and the teachings of the Christian tradition.”

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5 Brooklyn Tablet, 18 July 1963.
7 Brooklyn Tablet, 25 June 1965.
Catholic misgivings about protests and demonstrations were also a product of their rigid anti-communism, which would continue to influence their views of the movement through the late 1960s. “Only commies use this way of pressure as a means to gain an end,” one Brooklyn Catholic wrote in the Tablet; another insisted it was time to accept that “the entire civil rights movement is part of a Communist blueprint. Their main object is to stir up trouble and keep it at a high pitch.” For some, suspicions of communist infiltration in civil rights organizations delegitimizing the entire movement: “We are now beginning to understand the ‘phony issues’ of Negro oppression in the United States,” the same reader insisted. Not all Catholics were so dismissive, but some argued that the continuation of marches after political action had been taken served as evidence that activists were only interested in rabblerousing. “It seems to me that what was claimed as the reason for the marches originally was taken care of by the speedy action of the President when he asked Congress for immediate legislation guaranteeing voting rights. Why are the marches still going on?” a Brooklyn Catholic asked. Other expressed shock that the Catholic religious – especially Catholic sisters – would participate in marches alongside men like Bayard Rustin (“a well known Communist and homosexual”) in a Selma sympathy march in Harlem.

These criticisms were indicative of the growing rift between the liberal religious, who were largely sympathetic to the Civil Rights Movement, and Brooklyn’s increasingly conservative white working-class laity. A Tablet writer from Jackson Heights accused the nuns marching in Harlem of being “misguided and ill informed.”

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8 Brooklyn Tablet, 18 March 1965. 
9 Ibid. 
10 Ibid., 8 April 1965. 
11 Ibid., 18 March 1965.
“The religious are fast losing respect among their own brethren who are so generously contributing to their support,” she contended.\(^\text{12}\) There was also a growing insistence that, once members of the religious entered public debates, they were no longer representatives of the Church. “Some of them as individuals,” a Brooklyn man wrote to the *Tablet*, may “choose to join in purely political parades and demonstrations,” but their presence should not “be committing the rest of us to their personal convictions, or misleading the public into believing they represent the Church.”\(^\text{13}\) The debate over whether or not the participation of nuns in civil rights marches was appropriate dominated the *Tablet’s* “Readers’ Forum” for weeks. Many spoke out in support of the religious. “Were Christ to walk among us today, who can imagine that He would refuse to ‘become involved!’” one Brooklyn woman wrote.\(^\text{14}\) However, the voices of civil rights supporters were balanced by skeptics.

Letters poured into bishops and Catholic newspapers condemning the participation of the clergy in civil rights activism, and the outcry was loud enough for Rome to take note. Though the Vatican publically demonstrated its support for the Civil Rights Movement (Pope Paul VI met with Martin Luther King in 1964), privately, Rome’s officials worried about alienating the American laity. In the summer of 1965, Rev. Egidio Vagnozzi, the Vatican’s Apostolic Delegate to the United States, wrote to Rev. Francis Mugavero, then serving as the head of Catholic Charities in Brooklyn, to ask his opinion on the participation of the religious in public demonstrations. Though Rev. Mugavero noted that most protests took place in the South, this was nevertheless a

\(^{12}\) *Brooklyn Tablet*, 18 March 1965.  
\(^{13}\) Ibid., 25 March 1965.  
\(^{14}\) Ibid., 1 April 1965.
question that concerned all American Catholics. His letter identified the fundamental problem facing Catholic leadership: approval of the participation of priests and nuns in civil rights activism could result in “retaliation against the Church,” while condemning these actions would allow the press to suggest Catholic opposition or indifference toward civil rights. Rev. Mugavero suggested that each American diocese create a Council for Human Rights and Interracial Affairs, which would be made up of both clergy and laity. Members would be required to register for each particular demonstration and prohibited from engaging in “such extraordinary measures such as blocking traffic, or interfering with the rights of other people to enter public buildings and public conveyances.” He was also insistent that nuns be explicitly banned from demonstrations. He cited the danger to their personal safety as his paramount concern, but was doubtlessly influenced by the particularly strong outcry that the sight of women religious operating outside the convent elicited from the laity. While Rev. Mugavero’s suggestions were never adopted, they demonstrated the diocese’s desire to clamp down on the political activities of the religious in order to stave off an incipient parishioner backlash.\footnote{Rev. Francis Mugavero to Most Rev. Egidio Vagnozzi, July 1, 1965, Chancery office, Canon Law Subject Files, c. 684-G (Catholic Interracial Council, ADB.)}

Diocesan concerns were not without merit. In 1964, remaining sympathy for civil rights among white working-class Catholics began to wane precipitously when both Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant broke out in riots. Like the riots of 1943, an episode of police brutality ignited the events of 1964. On July 16, a group of black students gathered outside of their summer school on East 76\textsuperscript{th} Street in the affluent Yorkville neighborhood on the Upper East Side. A scuffle ensued between Patrick Lynch, the building superintendent, and one of the students, a 15-year-old boy named James Powell. After
Lynch hurled racial epithets at the students and sprayed them with a hose, Powell briefly chased the superintendent into the apartment building. When Powell emerged from the vestibule, he was confronted by Lieutenant Thomas Gilligan, who had been shopping nearby when he heard the commotion. Gilligan fired three shots, hitting Powell twice and killing him. The officer claimed Powell lunged at him with a knife, though witnesses testified that a knife was later planted on the boy.

Powell’s murder occurred in an atmosphere of pent-up frustration wrought by unmet civil rights demands and regular police misconduct in black neighborhoods. Events in the South, and particularly in Birmingham, served as persistent and televised reminders of the mercilessness with which the police interacted with civil rights activists. In New York City, CORE was increasingly turning its attention to police relations after many of their non-violent protests aimed at school desegregation, rent control, and equal employment resulted in hundreds of arrests. Unease also grew after several high-profile cases of police beating black suspects, including a Bronx man who had come to report his car stolen only to find himself the subject of a five-hour interrogation in which he was hit repeatedly and doused in hot coffee. The six days of rioting in Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant, which resulted in 465 arrests, one death, and more than 100 injuries, were not a random outburst of violence, but rooted in the long denial of equality. In a survey of Bedford-Stuyvesant residents conducted after the riots, most respondents blamed the violence on “the white establishment,” citing their failure to address the growing...
problems in black communities. In a later assessment, the sociologist Daniel J. Monti argued that “violence followed unsuccessful efforts by minority actors to alter the behavior of non-minority and government actors toward them through peaceful and non-violent strategies.” “Far from occurring in a social void,” he wrote, the riots were the result of the city’s consistent denial of political, economic, and social equality to its non-white residents.

It was difficult for white Catholics to grasp the complex and deeply-rooted circumstances that produced the riots, and many were quick to condemn the outburst of violence. Rev. Joseph McGroarty, a white priest who worked in the black St. Peter Claver parish for 22 years, chastised rioters in a Tablet editorial. “If the courageous policy of nonviolence advocated by Dr. Martin Luther King, for one, has not accomplished to date all that the Negro people of this Country might have wished for in redressing the social indignities and economic inequalities that for so long have been their common lot, certainly rioting and pillaging in the streets will not correct them,” he wrote. “What of a constructive nature can possibly be gained by violent disorders that disrupt the very forces that are best suited to guarantee the attainment and free enjoyment of civil rights for all?” His article dismissed claims of police brutality, insisting that, during his years in a black parish, he “never once knew of an instance where the report [of misconduct] had been verified.” He also argued that citizens had to accept that, in police department as large as New York City’s, “there are bound to be from time to time some who will abuse that power.” Those who participated in the riots, he concluded, “revealed themselves to

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be lawless and shiftless elements of society who are interested in violence and destruction for their own sakes.”

Their escalating fear of crime also influenced Catholics’ response to the riots. For white New Yorkers, the riots in Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant were not discrete events, but part of a growing trend of lawlessness in black communities. Their concerns arose from their everyday experiences on the street and in the subways. There was a noticeable uptick in crime, and New Yorkers felt less secure in their city’s public spaces. Homicides rose from 435 in 1960 to 743 in 1966. The increase in street crime was even more dramatic: robberies rose from 6,600 in 1962 to 78,000 by 1972. In 1966 alone, many crimes against property nearly doubled. Burglaries increased by 96.4% and robberies by 89.9%. During the same year, the number of rapes increased by 22.1%. Minorities were responsible for a disproportionate number of crimes. Though blacks accounted for 10% of the population, they made up 30% of arrests. Likewise, Puerto Ricans made up 6% of the population and 10% of arrests. Nurtured by the media, riot coverage, and their own experiences with street crime, white New Yorkers came to associate blackness with criminality. Many whites failed to consider the decades of economic discrimination, geographic segregation, and social and political alienation to which black people were subjected and instead focused only on their antisocial effects. According to an Italian

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20 Brooklyn Tablet, 30 July 1964.
21 Johnson, Street Violence, 245.
23 Zeitz, White Ethnic New York, 155.
25 The association of blackness and criminality was not a new construct in the 1960s, but was solidified, as Khalil Gibran Muhammad has shown, during the Progressive era when a statistical discourse emerged that allowed social scientists to paint blacks as more prone to criminality than foreign-born Americans. Much like white New Yorkers were wont to do in the 1960s, early twentieth century social scientists insisted that
politician in Brooklyn, the white crime victim “doesn’t philosophize why it was a Negro mugger. His experience is being mugged by blacks, so all blacks are muggers or potential muggers.”

As a result of rising crime rates, white New Yorkers exhibited strong fears of their city’s streets. In a 1966 survey, almost half of white Brooklyners reported feeling unsafe when they walked alone at night. Many also chose to avoid the subways. Between 1962 and 1972, there was a loss of one Brooklyn subway rider out of five; out of fear, many Brooklyners chose to drive rather than take public transit. In the summer of 1964, the police department requested that religious groups ask their followers to limit worship activities to daylight hours. In response, the Brooklyn Diocese issued an appeal to Catholics – to be read at every parish and parochial school in Brooklyn and Queens – to “make every possible effort to confine church meetings and family socials to the daylight and afternoons, even on Saturdays and Sunday.” Priests instructed the laity to travel in groups, not to wander away alone on subway platforms, and to quickly report any signs of crime. They also encouraged their congregants to “strive always to foster and to improve the vanishing virtues of self-discipline, maturity of personality and obedience to all lawful authorities.” The Police and the Church were the foremost figures of authority in Catholic life, and their warnings would have had an immense impact on the psyche of parishioners. “I’m just sorry for our children, and our children’s children, who will never


26 Rieder, *Canarsie*, 75.


29 Ibid., 17 October 1964.
be able to walk the streets,” Brooklyn Borough president Abe Stark told a *New York Times* reporter when asked about rising crime rates.\(^{30}\)

Even those who used to count themselves as strong supporters of civil rights were starting to turn their backs on the city’s black population. One Catholic doctor, who joined the NAACP in 1943 and considered himself a “friend of the Negro,” insisted that something had gone awry after his car was rocked and spat upon by group of black teens in Jamaica, Queens. “Appalled is an understatement. I was shocked,” he insisted. Had the black youth “forgotten what this country stands for or did they never learn?” he wondered.\(^{31}\) “I didn’t have such hatred before,” an older Catholic women in Canarsie told sociologist Jonathan Rie~der. “I started disliking the blacks about ten years ago, in 1967. I was on a subway and got mugged. I still don’t know why they slashed my face with a razor. It was a black girl and a Puerto Rican that done it. That finished me feeling sorry for them.” During the Depression, the woman stood in solidarity with black tenants in protests against negligent landlords. “I felt so bad about how they were treated,” she recalled. “I didn’t mistreat them, so why do they mistreat me?”\(^{32}\)

Adding to their fear, the media reported grisly murders with alarming regularity, like the 1964 murder of a crippled 84-year-old white woman who was bound and killed in her apartment. The homicide occurred just days after a white supermarket owner was fatally stabbed in his store. Both took place in Harlem.\(^{33}\) With crime rates rising, images

\(^{30}\) *New York Times*, 1 November 1966.

\(^{31}\) *Brooklyn Tablet*, 12 November 1964.

\(^{32}\) Rie~der, Canarsie, 78.

\(^{33}\) *New York Times*, 17 October 1964. The 1964 murder of 28-year-old Catherine “Kitty” Genovese in Kew Gardens, Queens was the most well-publicized homicide of the era. Genovese’s murder shocked the city. Not only had it happened in what was considered a safe residential areas of Queens, but, as the subsequent *New York Times* story reported, “For more than a half an hour 38 respectable, law-abiding citizens in Queens watched a killer stalk and stab a woman in three separate attacks in Kew Gardens.” Despite the fact that there was only one eyewitness, the idea planted by the *Times* story – that so many had done so little –
of black criminality came to replace those of peaceful and respectable civil right
protesters. When the Tablet featured a picture of the Selma march on its front page, one
man responded:

I could suggest a more appropriate picture for the front of next week’s ‘Tablet.’
How about a picture of two punks who knifed a young white boy to death in the
subway only last Friday night – by then perhaps they will have been apprehended
by the police of New York where most of our sympathy belongs. Perhaps a
picture of the mobs who ran rampant through Jamaica only a few months ago and
threatened the life of a white doctor answering a sick call. Or better still – a
picture of that animal who raped and killed an 80-year-old woman a short time
ago. Or perhaps a picture of decent people bolting and baring their doors at night
to keep the punks out of their very homes. Or the night devotions being cancelled
in many churches where good women are afraid to go out of their homes. 34

“It is unfortunate that the sins of a few should be attributed to a whole class,” one woman
wrote to the Tablet, “but isn’t it understandable?” 35

Catholics aired their grievances with a sense of nostalgia, as well as a substantial
amount of rage directed toward blacks who “ran” them out of their old neighborhoods.
An Italian man, who used to live in East New York, reported that “The neighborhood was
totally destroyed as soon as the blacks moved in. Buildings started burning down, and we
had more crime.” 36 “We’ve run from neighborhoods that changed overnight. How do we
know Canarsie will be viable five years from now? We’re scared to death,” another told
Rieder. 37 In a letter to the Tablet, one Queens Catholic lamented that black residents had
“made a Harlem out of Hollis in just a few years because they did not appreciate what it
means to live in a nice neighborhood.” Crime, he insisted, increased dramatically, and

further fueled the notion that a sense of apathy had seized the city and, in the face of such rampant crime,
New York was coming apart at the seams. For an account of the Genovese murder and its receptions, see
Marcia Gallo, “No One Helped”: Kitty Genovese, New York City, and the Myth of Urban Apathy (Ithaca:
34 Brooklyn Tablet, 18 March 1965.
36 Rieder, Canarsie, 24.
37 Ibid., 84.
“the nice white people like myself moved, not because we object to the color of their skins but because they objected to the low class of people who moved in.” An Italian man in Canarsie reminisced about his childhood in Flatbush. “It’s all black on Flatbush Avenue now. I used to walk Flatbush Avenue when I was dating my wife. It was all white then. I remember joyous occasions,” he recalled. “But now? Ninety-five percent of them have been mugged and moved away.” A sense of longing for the mythical, more wholesome Brooklyn of the past was apparent in the “I Remember Old Brooklyn” column that began running in the Daily News. One letter, from a woman living in Bay Shore in Suffolk County, was typical: after returning to visit her childhood home in Brownsville, she wrote that she “was sick all day. I couldn’t believe what I saw. It looked like a tornado had gone through that area. All the houses were burned down or boarded up. I couldn’t get over it for days. Yet, those were the good old days when we were not afraid to go out in the evening and did nothing but play games and laugh.”

In an attempt to restore the order they felt was slipping away, many white Brooklynites formed citizen safety patrols. In East New York, a group of men began recruiting community members to patrol the streets after dark. “Are you going to wait around until someone is KILLED or RAPED as in Crown Heights and Flatbush? We HOPE NOT FOR YOUR SAKE!” they wrote in a Kings County Chronicle editorial. Even clergy – despite the disapproval of the Police Department – became involved in safety patrols. In Crown Heights, a rabbi, Catholic priest, and Protestant minister formed

38 Brooklyn Tablet, 17 August 1967.
39 Rieder, Canarsie, 93.
40 New York Daily News clipping, Reverend Hurley Collection, Parish Files, Box 2, Folder 24, ADB.
41 Kings County Chronicle, 24 November 1964.
the Citizens Community Patrol in response to a noticeable increase in street crime.\textsuperscript{42}

Desperate circumstances, it seemed, encouraged clergy to embrace the spirit of ecumenism.

**Who Can Save New York?: Law and Order in the 1965 Mayoral Campaign**

This sense of decline and disorder served as the defining issue for the 1965 mayoral campaign, and would continue to dominate New York City politics well into the 1990s. In the months leading up to the election, the *Herald Tribune* ran a series entitled “New York City in Crisis” that helped solidify the image of failure. The reports provided a pessimistic summary of the urban crisis, and captured the gloomy state of New York City in 1965:

> For the poor, the aged, the Negro, the Puerto Rican, and the blue-collar worker who is unemployed because of automation and the exodus of business, New York today is a nightmare – a hopeless city whose administration offers promises and handouts but little in the way of rehabilitation and retraining.
> For the young and the middle-class white and Negro, New York has become a terrible place to live because of unsafe streets, poor schools, and inadequate housing. They have been driven out to the suburbs just when the city needs them most.\textsuperscript{43}

The “nation’s greatest city,” an accompanying editorial declared, “cries out for a greatness of civic vision, translated into reality by get-it-done performance.”\textsuperscript{44} The election thus became a contest over who could save New York City. Voters were presented with three choices: the handsome and charismatic liberal Republican John Lindsay, Jewish Democrat Abraham Beame, and the erudite Catholic, conservative National Review editor William F. Buckley.

\textsuperscript{42} *New York Times*, 4 June 1964.

\textsuperscript{43} *New York Herald Tribune*, 25 January 1965.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 26 January 1965.
Lindsay’s appeal lay in his charm, ambition, and youthful energy. He was the son of a prosperous Protestant family, and served Manhattan’s affluent seventeenth congressional district, also known as the “silk stocking” district. Lindsay saw himself as part of the Republican Party’s progressive legacy, stretching back to Lincoln’s presidency. He identified strongly with the traditions of Theodore Roosevelt, Fiorello LaGuardia, and Robert LaFollette. For Lindsay, progressive Republicanism meant finding government solutions to economic problems while standing in opposition to the corruption of urban Democratic machines. This was also Lindsay’s way of separating himself from Beame, who, the comptroller’s rather lifeless campaign suggested, hoped his Democratic connections would outweigh his blandness. It also meant being at the forefront of liberal social policy. Lindsay spearheaded progressive legislation and, as a U.S. Congressman, he was a leading member of a small group of liberal Republicans who voted in support of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964. Indeed, much of his opposition to the Democratic Party stemmed from their unwillingness to purge Southerners who opposed civil rights legislation. At the same time, Lindsay was hostile to the conservative faction of his party that led the disastrous 1964 Goldwater presidential campaign. As a growing novelty within the Republican Party, running in a city where Democrats outnumbered Republicans three-to-one, Lindsay downplayed his party affiliation. He secured both the Republican and Liberal Party nominations and chose to advertise himself as a “fusion” candidate.45

Lindsay promised to rescue a city he repeatedly described as one in crisis, and he identified rising crime as the most pressing issue facing New York City. Lindsay’s plan to fight crime focused on modernization. He promised to add 2,500 patrolmen to the force, outfit officers with walkie-talkies, create a citywide police network to transmit photographs and fingerprints between stations, and increase radio patrol cars. But he also saw crime as part of a larger structural problem. Any real anti-crime initiative would have to encompass, he said, “a broad program which will go to the roots of the problem as well as its manifestation.” He argued for increased anti-poverty measures and better communication between the administration and non-white, high-poverty communities. During his campaign, he proposed establishing field offices in “ghetto areas” to build relations in these communities, expanding summer employment for the city youth, keeping more schools open during the summer, and expanding the Police Department’s human relations program to include informal meetings with officers and the communities they patrolled. Lindsay said he could not estimate how much his plans would cost, but that they would be “substantially less” expensive than the $2,500,000 in property damage caused by the 1964 riots.

His plan suffered from a drawback that plagued liberal legislators during the era of law and order politics. Lindsay argued that greater spending – in the form of anti-poverty programs – would eliminate poverty and unemployment, which would, in turn, solve the crime problem. However, as Michael Flamm demonstrated in his study of law and order politics, this argument was becoming increasingly unconvincing to much of the

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48 Ibid., 27 June 1965.
white electorate.\textsuperscript{49} By the mid-1960s, the white working class was feeling the squeeze of deindustrialization at the same time they watched welfare rolls and other social services increase. While stable, well-paying, blue-collar jobs made up 41\% of all employment in New York City in 1946, that proportion fell to only 27\% in 1970. White workers increasingly competed with black workers who, thanks to the Civil Rights Movement and the work of local organizations like CORE, were gaining more economic opportunities. As the wages of white workers stagnated, the proportion of New Yorkers receiving assistance rose. This was partially due to the urban crisis – poor people moved into the city as wealthier whites escaped to the suburbs. It was also due to the Black Freedom Movement, which in northern cities encompassed the fight for welfare rights. Organizations like the National Welfare Rights Association organized to dramatically increase welfare rolls and spending. Welfare grants to women and children in New York City, for example, increased 37\% between 1961 and 1967. By the end of the decade, over one million people received assistance, compared to 568,000 in 1966.\textsuperscript{50} White New Yorkers wondered: if the War on Poverty was already in full swing, why was crime continuing to increase?

Buckley, running under the banner of the Conservative Party, offered an alternative to Lindsay that appealed to many working-class Catholic voters. Buckley was a devoted Catholic, and his religious beliefs were inextricably tied to his politics. In 1955, he launch\textit{National Review}, which, though not officially a Catholic organ, generally came to be seen as the voice of Catholic conservatism. Under Buckley’s direction, with

\textsuperscript{49} Flamm, \textit{Law and Order}, 2-4.
Catholics contributors L. Brent Bozell, Harry V. Jaffa, and Garry Wills, the magazine sought to be the bastion of intellectual conservatism, producing strongly anti-communist articles that vaunted the Church as the keeper of American traditionalism. It also offered a conservative counter-narrative to traditionally liberal Catholic outlets like *Commonweal* and *America*. Buckley claimed to follow the principles of subsidiarity outlined in *Quadragesimo Anno*, which, he explained, held that “no political agency should undertake a job which can be performed by a private agency; and that no political agency of higher instance should undertake a job which a lesser political agency can undertake.” Buckley believed the state was a “divine institution” that maintained the natural law. The state was necessary, though its reach should be limited.

Unlike Lindsay’s vision of an expanded welfare state, Buckley called for scaled-back government programming and increased community autonomy. New York City, he argued in a *National Review* editorial, had become “Unpleasant and costly. It is unpleasant to have to pay such a high cost for unpleasantness.” The editorial laid out a ten-point program that reigned in the government’s regulatory powers by decriminalizing narcotics, legalizing gambling, and allowing anyone without a police record to operate their vehicle as a taxi. He also proposed limits on welfare. Except for the handicapped and women with children fourteen and younger, all welfare recipient would be required to perform labor for the city. “No workee, no dolee,” he gibed. Buckley also argued for community control in policing. Civilian crime patrols, like those in East New York,

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51 William F. Buckley, “The Strange Behavior of America,” *National Review*, August 26, 1961, 114. Buckley frequently cited papal encyclicals to defend his political positions, though he also insisted that an encyclical was “not a pronouncement of a dogmatic character,” and therefore “must be studied and understood in context of historical and other developments, and that it is wrong and rash to dogmatize an any encyclical merely because it appears to give temporary succor to one’s own political or economic leanings.”

would be granted _pro tanto_ tax relief sufficient to fund their operations. “New Yorkers will, in a word,” he wrote, “be encouraged to look after their own protection, relieving the municipal police force of an almost impossible job.”

Buckley was highly sympathetic to the city’s police officers, whom he portrayed as stoic and heroic enforcers of order in an increasingly chaotic city. In a speech to the 6,000 members of the New York City Police Department Holy Name Society, Buckley argued that society had come to embrace troublemakers, while the custodians of morality – including both the police and the Catholic Church – were under attack. “My friends, we live in a world in which order and values are disintegrating,” he told the audience. In an age “in which values are distorted…the wrath of the unruly falls with special focus on the symbols of authority, of continuity, of tradition.” Despite the noisiness of protestors, activists, and those “infatuated with revolution and ideology,” Buckley assured the officers that “sensible men and women” looked upon them with gratitude.

He was also critical of the liberal tendency “to diffuse the responsibility for human aberration out among the veins and capillaries of the whole society,” rather than blaming individuals for their crimes. In this way, he reasoned, liberals fashioned criminals into the victims of societal failures, while police were condemned for punishing those who broke the law.

Buckley also censured civil rights protesters for contributing to the breakdown in law and order. The Selma march, he argued in his speech to New York City’s Catholic officers, had been misrepresented by the press. Protestors provoked the police; Bull Connor’s officers acted “excessively yes, and their excesses on that day have been

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criticized, but were ever the excess criticized of those who provoked them beyond the endurance that we tend to think of as human?”

His remedies for addressing racial animosity also put the onus on African Americans, rather than the society that had continually practiced discrimination against them. “We cannot help the Negro by adjourning our standards as to what is, and what is not, the proper behavior for human beings,” he wrote in the *National Review*. Black leaders, he reasoned, were principally responsible for the continued problems in their community. Men like Harlem’s Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., who “refuse to deplore misconduct among their own people, who feed on the demoralization of the Negro race, ought to be publically and explicitly disavowed by the political leaders of the city.”

Despite being lambasted by the press for his race-baiting rhetoric, Buckley clearly appealed to Brooklyn Catholics – which both surprised and appalled liberal commentators. Even Buckley appeared not to take his campaign particularly seriously. When asked, for example, what he would do if elected, Buckley responded, “Demand a recount.” Nevertheless, his presence in the race created major problems for the Lindsay campaign. During his frequent walking tours, the Republican candidate often confronted protestors when he ventured to heavily-Catholic neighborhoods in the outer boroughs. In Bay Ridge, which had a large Irish Catholic presence, residents heckled him with “Lefty, Lindsay” chants. In Queens, Irish teenagers shouted, “Fake,” “Traitor,” and “Communist,” and carried signs that read “SUPPORT YOUR LOCAL POLICE.” At a

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56 Buckley, “The Police: Choice Scapegoats for Intellectuals’ Brave New World.”
58 John B. Judis, *William F. Buckley, Jr.: Patron Saint of the Conservatives* (New York: Touchstone, 1990), 250. The press tended to view Buckley’s campaign an elaborate plot to exact revenge on Lindsay for his disloyalty to the Republican Party and, specifically, for his refusal to support Barry Goldwater in the 1964 presidential election.
block Party in Coney Island, a protestor ripped Lindsay’s shirt with a sharp post that held a Buckley sign. Jim Carberry, Lindsay’s speechwriter, recalled “An Irish-looking kid,” coming to shake Lindsay’s hand, before the candidate noticed that the child – who was wearing a Buckley pin – had concealed a thumbtack in his palm. Police accompanied Lindsay on his tours, but many were Buckley supporters whose presence offered little solace to the candidate and his staff. Sid Davidoff, one of Lindsay’s aides, remembered many police officers wearing “Buckley for Mayor” pins and even booing Lindsay along with the crowds.59

With his patricians airs, Lindsay always had a problem appealing to New York’s working-class Catholics. “The Irish as a group are basically politically conservative and opposed to Lindsay’s liberal image,” a Lindsay campaign memo noted.60 But the hostility was mutual, and baldly revealed when a when a Lindsay volunteer leaked a tape of a campaign manager making disparaging comments about Irish Catholics. On the tape, Elliot Saron, the manager of Lindsay’s Inwood campaign storefront, asked Walter Swift, a Democrat who lived in the neighborhood, to encourage Irish Catholic Democrats to vote for Buckley. It was not clear whether Lindsay was going to be able beat Beame, and a vote for Buckley, Saron contended, was likely one less vote for the Democratic nominee. While it was a detestable campaign strategy, Saron’s characterizations of the Irish drew the most criticism from the press. He described the Irish in Inwood as “from the shanties.” Swift could easily sway the Irish to vote for Buckley, Saron reasoned, because they were “sufficiently unsophisticated – because, you know, they’ve got such

60 Ibid., 59.
blinded mentality.” Saron went on to mock Irish drinking habits, noting that although they “don’t exactly have wakes in the old style,” they were wont to “bring their children to the tavern at one o’clock in the afternoon.” After Swift brought the tape to the Beame campaign, the Democratic candidate’s chairman said that Lindsay was “stirring up hatred among all kinds of ethnic groups,” and that he doubted anyone “of Irish or Italian extraction” could vote for the Republican candidate.

Buckley’s presence in the election also exposed the political schism within the Catholic Church, which sharpened after the Second Vatican Council. Just weeks before the election, Dr. Timothy Costello, a fellow Catholic who was running on Lindsay’s Republican-Liberal fusion ticket for City Council President, insinuated that a vote for Buckley was anti-Catholic. “It is time we ripped the sneering clown’s mask from William Buckley and reveal his negative, divisive preachings as the threat they really are to peace on earth, to the progress of the nation, the uplifting of our city, and the propagation of the social doctrine of the Catholic Church itself,” he bellowed to a crowd of students at Fordham, his alma mater. He criticized Buckley for his attacks on the War on Poverty and his lack of empathy for the city’s downtrodden, which he said were “in direct conflict with the teachings of our church and its work in this city.”

Costello chiefly based his critiques on Buckley’s ridicule of Pope John XXIII’s 1961 encyclical Mater et Magistra (“Mother and teacher”). The document, released on the seventieth anniversary of Rerum Novarum, offered guidance on social questions and, in many ways, echoed Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical: it endorsed cooperation between

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61 Buckley, The Unmaking of a Mayor, 167-169, 173.
63 Ibid., 16 October 1965.
64 Cannato, The Ungovernable City, 57.
workers and management, encouraged workers to unionize, urged developed nations to assist poor nations, and reiterated that the state possessed a duty to create regulations in the name of economic and social justice. While *America* and *Commonweal* greeted the encyclical warmly, Buckley’s *National Review* excoriated the pope’s pronouncement. Conservatives, the *National Review* wrote, were “shocked and disappointed at the Encyclical, both for what it said and what it apparently did not find it necessary to say.” The editors of the magazine, who viewed the church and the Papacy as “a mighty bulwark against the totalitarian subversion of Western freedom and culture,” were appalled to see the “Pope virtually ignoring Communism.” Buckley responded by repeating an expression jokingly fashioned by *National Review* contributor Gary Wills: “Mater, sí; Magistra, no” (literally, “Mother, yes; teacher, no”). The phrase, which parodied Fidel Castro’s slogan “Cuba sí, Yanqui no,” reflected increasing conservative discomfort with the church’s teachings on economic issues. The matter brought the levity of all encyclicals into question and prompted Wills to write *Politics and Catholic Freedom*, which explored the infallibility of encyclicals with regard to economic and political questions. Wills’ book largely vindicated Buckley’s position, and concluded that encyclicals could not be taken as the single ‘Catholic position’ because they were, in fact, fallible.

The squabble over *Mater et Magistra* was significant because it solidified – quite publically – the growing division between liberal and conservative Catholics that came to

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play out in the 1965 mayoral election. To defend himself against Costello’s attacks, Buckley drew a stark division between “moral” and “political” issues – an opportunity afforded him in the post-Vatican period. While he was obligated to follow the Church’s teachings on faith and ethics, Buckley argued, he did not have to adhere to messages he deemed partisan. “One of the meanings of the Vatican Council,” he argued, “is to stress the freedom within the church, which encompasses men of many political faiths now as before.” For example, he insisted in a televised interview, “A pope can direct me to love Mr. Khrushchev in the abstract sense, but he can’t direct me to love the United Nations or the World’s Fair.” “If I am a bad Catholic, I shall be punished by Someone I fear far more than the New York Catholic voter,” he concluded facetiously.68

In the end, voters chose Lindsay’s reform platform over Beame’s implicit promise to continue Wagner’s clubhouse politics. Lindsay scored 1,149,106 votes (43.3%), Beame 1,046,699 (39.5%), and Buckley 341,226 (12.9%).69 The election revealed three emerging trends among Catholic voters: they were more highly fractured than in previous elections, more willing to vote for Republican candidates, and increasingly drawn to a conservative strand of Republicanism. While Catholics were once a reliable part of the Democratic Party, they split their votes in the 1965 election. Lindsay won roughly 50% of the German vote, 40% of the Irish vote, and 40% of the Italian vote.70 Pollster Oliver Quayle noted that the Republican mayor had done “surprisingly well among Catholics generally.”71 It would be incorrect to assume that this was a new phenomenon, however. As political strategists Kevin Phillips noted, Catholics began shifting toward the

69 Ibid., 4 November 1965.
70 Cannato, The Ungovernable City. 71-72.
Republican Party during the 1952 presidential election, and Catholics were largely responsible for increasing Republican support in the Northeast. John F. Kennedy, he argued, had actually been an aberration. While Kennedy recouped the Catholics votes ceded to the GOP in the previous two elections (he earned about 60% of the New York City Catholic vote), the Catholic shift toward the Republican Party would continue after his presidency.  

Historians tend to define Lindsay by his liberalism, but he was first a Republican. The mayor, one journalist wrote, toed the “Republican line on the need to decentralize city government and the school system, improve local neighborhood participation, make social welfare programs more productive and efficient, and involve the private sector – business and civic groups – in anti-poverty and urban renewal work.” His focus on reform, fiscal responsibility, and modernization appealed to Catholics who felt the city had become unresponsive to their needs. And, as Joshua Zeitz, rightly points out, “it may not have been apparent to [Lindsay’s] Irish and Italian supporters that he was farther to the political left than virtually any other politician in New York.” When that did become apparent early in his tenure, Catholics relinquished their support.

Catholic voters were also taken by Buckley’s conservatism. Though the candidate did not manage to win any assembly districts, he came second to Lindsay in northern Staten Island, Bayside and Ridgewood Queens, and Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. His top twelve assembly districts were in outer borough neighborhoods that were heavily Catholic.

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75 Cannato, *The Ungovernable City*, 70-71.
Bay Ridge, for example, he secured the support of an estimated 26.7% of voters. Overall, according to a WCBS-TV poll, Buckley won 12.7% of votes in Brooklyn (compared to 7.2% in Manhattan), and 17.8%, 21.9%, and 26.2% of Italian, Irish, and Central European Catholic votes, respectively.\textsuperscript{76} Notably, these were not voters shifting from Lindsay’s moderate Republicanism to Buckley’s conservative brand; rather, Buckley’s Catholic supporters were traditional Democrats who chose the conservative candidate over Beame. Among Irish voters, Quayle estimated, Beame lost 5 to 10 percentage points to Buckley. In conservative Irish, German, Polish, and Italian districts, another pollster noted, Buckley had done “very well at the expense of Beame.”\textsuperscript{77}

Buckley’s popularity among Catholics was a sign of things to come. The votes Lindsay earned among Catholics showed they were increasingly comfortable voting for a Republican, but their confidence in the mayor was quickly shattered when his liberal politics began to outshine his Republicanism. The 1966 fight to reform the Civil Complaint Review Board (CCRB), an impartial city agency charged with investigating complaints of police misconduct, revealed the growing lack of confidence white Catholics held for the mayor and his liberal administration. The CCRB, Catholics contended, was Lindsay’s way of catering to vocal minority groups while ignoring the grievances of the city’s white working class – namely their fears surrounding public safety. While roughly half of Brooklyn Catholics voted for Lindsay, by the end of 1966, 75.4% disapproved of his performance. The review board was overwhelmingly to blame for their turn against the mayor.\textsuperscript{78}

\textsuperscript{76} Buckley, \textit{The Unmaking of a Mayor}, 334, 327, 333.
\textsuperscript{77} New York Times, 4 November 1965.
\textsuperscript{78} Abbott et al., \textit{Police, Politics, and Race}, 13, 20.
The Politics of Civilian Review

In 1950, the Permanent Coordinating Committee on Police and Minority Ethnic Groups, a coalition of eighteen community groups and civil liberty organizations, made the first call for the establishment of a civilian review board. The organization formed to address the problem of police “misconduct in their relations with the public generally and police misconduct in their relations with Puerto Ricans and Negroes specifically.”79 The Coordinating Committee launched a large media campaign, popularizing the term “police brutality” and eventually pressuring the Police Department to create the first review board in 1953. The staff of the board, however, consisted of three existing Deputy Commissioners and could hardly be considered impartial. Additionally, complaints were only investigated by the accused police officer’s colleagues who, undoubtedly, had a vested interest in his exoneration.80 Mayor Wagner revamped the board in 1955 when he appointed Francis W. H. Adams, a liberal lawyer, as police commissioner. Adams pushed professionalization and efficiency in the complaint process, but the board nevertheless remained staffed with police representatives.81

The mostly impotent review board operated quietly until 1964, when the Civil Rights Movement again drew attention to the issue of police brutality. In April, City Councilman Theodore Weiss, a reform Democrat, introduced a bill to create a review board with nine mayorally-appointed civilians. Though Weiss’ bill died after its committee hearing, the murder of James Powell and subsequent riots in Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant revived the issue. After the riots, State Senator Constance Baker

80 Ibid., 86.
81 Ibid., 93.
observed, “Harlem believes that the police are their enemy. They have no confidence in impartial action with respect to any police action or complaint.” Seizing on the increasing pressure for police reform – as well as the opportunity to appeal to black and Puerto Rican voters – Lindsay proposed the creation of a “mixed” review board during the first major speech of his mayoral campaign. Lindsay’s version of the board included four civilians, chosen by the mayor, in addition to the existing three police representatives chosen by the Commissioner. It was time, he argued, for “all of the people of our city [to] feel and believe that they are being treated fairly, equally and courteously and, if they are not, that they have a fair opportunity to have their complaints heard.” He also appealed to the law and order ethos that defined the campaign: a police department, he insisted, “cannot succeed if it does not have all the law-abiding people on its side. And I fear that a part of our failure to deal successfully with crime in New York is a result of the unfortunate breakdown in the relationships between the police and a substantial part of the people of our city.”

Lindsay set about implementing the new review board immediately upon entering office. It was not a standalone project, but the centerpiece of a larger restructuring of the city’s police department. Lindsay convened a Law Enforcement Task Force, headed by the former Federal Judge Lawrence E. Welsh, to conduct a “thorough reevaluation” of the department. Delivered in February 1966, the Walsh Report revealed “many practices that are either outmoded, inefficient or undesirable.” The Task Force called for modernization, and heavily criticized the nepotism endemic in the police department. It also lent its support to Lindsay’s mixed review board. By providing impartial

investigations of uses of excessive force and police abuse of authority, the board would protect against the “whitewash” treatment complaints theretofore had received.\textsuperscript{84}

Although voters elected Lindsay based on his promise of reform, they swiftly criticized his attempts to alter the Police Department as political meddling, and the city’s Catholics reacted with especial resentment. By the mid-1960s, the Irish political machine had been largely dismantled, leaving the police force as the last bastion of Irish power in New York City. Since the late nineteenth century, the force had been run by the so-called “Irish Mafia.” “Everybody knows the New York City police department is and always has been heavily Irish, next heavily Italian and thus overwhelmingly Catholic,” Richard Dougherty, a journalist and ex-Deputy Police Commissioner of New York City for community relations, explained.\textsuperscript{85} Nearly two-third of the entire police force – roughly 17,000 men – belonged to the Holy Name Society of the New York Police Department, and another 8,500 held membership in the Emerald Society.\textsuperscript{86} According to a contemporary sociological study, the force was “very much part of the historic group experience of Irish and Italian Catholics in New York,” and consequently “a strong positive reference symbol for these Catholics.”\textsuperscript{87} Catholics thus viewed Lindsay’s shakeup as a threat to the already waning political power of the city’s Irish and Italians.

Within weeks of being sworn in, Lindsay began to reshuffle the department’s high-ranking officers, which did little to conceal his desire to dismantle Irish domination. Police Commissioner Vincent Broderick was the first to go. The initial tiff between

\textsuperscript{84} New York Times, 7 February 1966.
\textsuperscript{86} Arthur D. Wright to Subcommittee – Civilian Review Board, September 20, 1966, Box 55, Folder 10, Records of the Catholic Interracial Council of New York, CUA.
\textsuperscript{87} Abbott et al., Police, Politics, and Race, 30.
Lindsay and the Commissioner occurred when Deputy Mayor Bob Price attempted to stop Broderick from filling six detective positions out of fear that he would only appoint Irish Catholics from Queens, making the department too “homogeneous.” But the real break between Broderick and the new administration took place after the release of the Walsh Report. In response to the Task Force and its call for a civilian review board, Broderick publically released a seven-page letter to the mayor in which he charged that the board would “depress the morale of your Police Department and hence impair its capacity to prevent crime.” The tone of the letter was deeply resentful. Broderick criticized Lindsay for refusing to acknowledge the professionalism of the force, and for failing to place any members of the police department on the Task Force (this choice was “surprising, at best”). The board, he charged, was simply an attempt at political expediency aimed at securing minority votes. Broderick argued that black and Puerto Rican poverty was the most pressing issue of the day, but the board was merely a “bromide” and “cruel hoax” that would “solve no problems.” “Is it not time for us to stand up and say we intend to deal with substance and not with shadow?” he asked.

Lindsay reacted by replacing Broderick with Howard Leary, the Police Commissioner of Philadelphia and a supporter of civilian review. Though Leary was of Irish and German descent, he was the first New York City Police Commissioner brought in from another city and therefore an outsider in the force.

New Yorkers widely believed that Leary was merely a pawn in Lindsay’s plan to dismantle the heavily Catholic Police Department stronghold, and the new

88 Cannato, *The Ungovernable City*, 159.
89 Vincent Broderick to John Lindsay, 8 February, 1966, “Police 1966-7,” Box 85, Folder 1613, Subject Files, John Lindsay Papers, NYCMA.
commissioner’s first two high-level appointment did little to quell those accusations. Leary named Sanford Garelik, a twenty-five-year veteran on the force, Chief Inspector. There were two problems with the appointment. First, Leary had not been in his own position long enough have vetted Garelik, making it clear that the administration had most likely made the choice for him. Garelik was a close friend of Liberal Party leader Alex Rose, suggesting that his appointment was Lindsay’s way of thanking Rose for this party’s support. Second, Garelik was Jewish, breaking the tacitly-accepted rule that high-ranking post were reserved for the Irish. Leary next appointed Lloyd Sealy to Assistant Chief Inspector. Sealy was black.\textsuperscript{91} One analyst argued that the appointments would “double [Lindsay’s] vote in the Negro and Puerto Rican communities and will increase his appeal to the Jewish voters as well.”\textsuperscript{92} But he did so at the expense of Catholic support. As another commentator concluded, “No matter how adroitly the Mayor handled this there would have been shouts of political interference and dark analogies to Tammany Hall control of the force. But it is difficult to believe that Mr. Lindsay could have done a clumsier job of it if he had tried.”\textsuperscript{93}

The core piece of Lindsay’s reform, as he indicated during his mayoral campaign, was the creation of the civilian review board. Sensing he would face difficulty moving his board through the City Council, Lindsay created the CCRB by executive order and, after consulting an eleven-person selection committee, named the four civilian members of the board. On May 17, Commissioner Leary formally issued the order and Lindsay’s CCRB became functional by August.\textsuperscript{94} In comparison to the Weiss bill, Lindsay’s was

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{91} Cowan, “The New York Civilian Review Board Referendum,” 256-257.
\item \textsuperscript{92} \textit{New York Times}, 11 March 1966.
\item \textsuperscript{93} \textit{New York Times}, 20 March 1966.
\item \textsuperscript{94} Cowan, “The New York Civilian Review Board Referendum,” 262-263.
\end{itemize}
In addition to including police representatives, the board’s findings would be submitted to the Police Commissioner. He, rather than the board, possessed the authority to discipline members of the police force. While spokespersons for black interest groups sought a “completely independent” board, they were willing to accept Lindsay’s version over nothing at all.\(^{95}\)

Despite the leniency built into Lindsay’s board, the CCRB faced opposition even before it was fully operational. The Policemen’s Benevolent Association (PBA), a 20,000 member fraternal organization of police, headed the obstructionist campaign. Under the leadership of President John Cassese, the PBA launched a multi-pronged attacked in the board. They first attempted to kill the board legislatively: they introduced a bill into the New York State Legislature that would block civilian review and later went to court to prevent the board’s implementation. When both strategies failed, they set about putting the board up for referendum in the 1966 election, which required the signatures of 30,000 New Yorkers.\(^{96}\) In June, Cassese announced that the PBA was launching an “all-out campaign” to stop the board, and that the organization was “prepared to spend its whole treasury” – estimated to be $1.5 million – on their crusade against the CCRB.\(^{97}\) By early July, with the help of “friends and family,” the PBA collected 51,852 signatures referendum to bar the review board earned its place on the ballot.\(^{98}\)

^{97} Ibid., 3 June 1966; 16 October 1966.  
^{98} Ibid., 8 July 1966. In addition to the PBA’s efforts, the Conservative Party collected 40,383 signatures. The PBA was clearly irritated by the gesture, though Buckley insisted that “It makes sense that a group not formally identified with the police should also do this.” The Conservative Party ended up withdrawing its application to avoid the confusion that would inevitably result from multiple referendums on the same issue.
Cassese’s arguments against the CCRB appealed to Brooklyn’s Catholic population. The PBA President was himself a product of this milieu, born in Greenpoint in 1913 to two immigrants from Naples. He spent 18 years stationed at Bushwick’s 83rd Precinct station house, where he spent the majority of his time of foot patrol, and lived at 10 Oceanside Parkway on the southern edge of Prospect Park. Like Brooklyn’s Catholics, Cassese expressed a fear that New York City was crumbling under the weight of crime. The review board, he insisted, would lower the morale of those on the force. More insidiously, though, it would cause police officers to second guess themselves before acting out of fear of reprimand by the CCRB. According to Cassese and the PBA, the civilian board could only hamper the police and contribute to the decline in law and order.99

This message was hammered out to the public in a massive ad campaign carried out by the Independent Citizens Committee Against Civilian Review Boards, a group of businessmen led by former Police Commissioner Michael J. Murphy, State Senator Martin J. Knorr, and Rodney Ettman, the president of a wallpaper company. Their projected $500,000 budget – largely acquired through fundraising efforts – provided financing for television ads, 370 billboards, at least 20 storefronts, and other educational materials. Their first advertisement set the tone of the campaign. A print ad showed a white woman in a white coat nervously exiting a subway station in the dark. “The Civilian Review Board must be stopped!” it declared. “Her life…your life…may depend on it!” A police officer, the ad suggested, “must not hesitate. If he does, because he fears

the possibility of unjust censure; or, if he feels his job, pension or reputation is threatened, the security and safety of your family may be jeopardized.”

Vito Battista, the Catholic conservative who headed the United Taxpayers’ Party and held strong support in Catholic working-class neighborhoods, aped the PBA’s sentiments. “Lindsay made a terrible mistake in establishing this Board,” he wrote to Cassese. “Crime will be on the rise. Law breakers, muggers and rapists will have a ‘ball field’ to themselves and the law abiding citizens will be the victims.” The result would be a “jungle society.” “The honest citizen will suffer and the gangster will ride high. Why don’t our officials support the policeman?” he asked. The editorial board of the Tablet also insisted that the real brutality was committed against the police, not by them. Their article listed the dangers men faced while on duty: in 1965, one Brooklyn patrolman was slain while on the job, 13 were shot, 153 were punched, 58 were kicked, and 71 were struck by thrown objects. After considering these statistics, “how can anyone conclude: ‘Therefore we need a review board to investigate police brutality.’” What was needed instead, the Catholic weekly insisted, was a review board to investigate the abuses carried out against the police.

In his public appearance, Cassese frequently slipped references to communism into his invectives against the CCRB. Though they were presumably aimed at ultra-conservative groups like the John Birch Society, they held appeal for Catholic audiences who still feared the communist menace. Communists, Cassese insisted, were “somewhere mixed up in this fight. If we wind up with a review board, we’ll have done a great service

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102 Brooklyn Tablet, 19 May 1966. There were 28,000 police officers in the NYPD.
to Russia.” This was part of a larger plan to create societal disorder: “The doctrine of the Communist Party is to knock out religion and break the spirit, as well as create confusion in the Police Department, cause chaos and interrupt the police function.”103 Similar conspiracy theories circulated among Catholics. One writer to the Tablet argued that the riots engulfing American cities were coordinated by communists, who purposely disobeyed police in order to then resist arrest and “Yell ‘police brutality,’ while obliging press photographers to take pictures.” “Few people realize that we see here a classic example of a Communist technique which has been successfully used in every country behind the Iron Curtain,” the writer insisted. Communists, he indicated, were behind the calls for civilian review.104

For most Brooklyn Catholics, though, the referendum on civilian review was really a plebiscite on civil rights. Despite vast support for civil rights legislation in the early 1960s, a 1968 poll found that 59% of New York’s Irish respondents and 62% of Italians believed the drive toward racial equality was moving “too fast.”105 The referendum on civilian review was a concrete way the city’s Catholics could register their discontent with – and attempt to halt – the growing power of the city’s black residents. For Cassese, the CCRB served as evidence that politicians were catering to the needs of vocal minority groups. “I’m sick and tired of giving in to minority groups with their whims and their gripes and shouting,” he complained.106 Catholic groups also expressed concerns about “the minority” dictating terms to the law-abiding majority. Greenpoint’s St. Stanislaus Memorial Post of the American Legion, for instance, issued a statement

104 Brooklyn Tablet, 26 May 1966.
105 Zeitz, White Ethnic New York, 147.
supporting the PBA. “The Legion will never stand for the masses pushing the minority and we will never stand for the minority trying to force their wills upon the majority as it is in this case. The Legion would be fighting the Civilian Review Board if the P.B.A. were not,” Richard Fitzgerald, the post’s chairman, explained. The relationship “between the people of Greenpoint and our police has been excellent,” he concluded.107

The makeup of the CCRB drew particular ire from critics. The four civilian members were Algernon Black, the leader of the New York Ethical Culture Society and strong civil rights activist, Thomas Farrell, a lawyer and the former President of the Catholic Interracial Council, Walter Murray, a black Brooklyn College professor, and Manuel Diaz, the Chief Consultant and Acting Director of the Puerto Rican Community Development Project.108 The board, Cassese complained, “was so pro-civil rights and Lindsay-thinking, I think Lindsay went out of his way to get these four.”109 It was Farrell, the Catholic, who faced the most abuse from members of the public, presumably most of whom were his coreligionists. Within a month of his appointment, Farrell received ten anonymous letters. “There was a lot of talk not having to do with the review board at all,” he told the New York Times. “It was just a lot of anti-Negro talk.” After motorist began driving by his Bronx home shouting “Nigger lover!” the police started patrolling Farrell’s street. “It is quite clear,” he said, “that the people doing this regard the review board as an opportunity or an excuse for attacking Negroes.”110

Those who campaigned in favor of the board never expected to win the support of New York’s Catholics. When a reporter asked one campaigner for the CCRB about

110 Ibid., 16 August 1966.
courting the Irish and Italians, he responded that “we have largely written them off.” He pointed out that the Irish identified strongly with the police because of their large ethnic representation on the force, and that many Italians would back the PBA because Cassese was an Italian-American. John J. Thornton, editor of *The Irish Echo*, noted that it was “a safe assumption” the Irish would oppose the board. Leo DeStefano, an Italian-language columnist, said Italians would follow suit. Those who would vote to preserve the board, he insisted, “aren’t really against the police, they just hope that the board will be an element of pacification” – presumably for minorities crying out against police brutality. “Italians have never complained about the police.” Catholic priests concurred. In a letter to Bishop McEntegart, Rev. Archibald McLees pointed out “(1) that a great proportion of the opposition to the Board comes from Catholics; (2) that much of the opposition seems to be racially motivated; and (3) that the Church is very likely to be blamed for the abolishment of the Board should the referendum be passed.”

The Catholic Church itself never expressed its position on the board, despite Lindsay’s personal request for the Church’s support. In the New York Archdiocese, Lindsay offered Archbishop Spellman a position on the CCRB. The Archbishop told the mayor he would gladly serve on the board, but only if Lindsay also named the Episcopal Bishop of New York cochairman – an arrangement that was simply politically impossible. “You didn’t really want me to violate the ecumenical spirit of Vatican II,” Archbishop Spellman told Lindsay. The New York Catholic Interracial Council also

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112 Rev. Archibald McLees to Bishop McEntegart, October 5, 1966, Chancery Office, Canon Law Subject Files, c. 684-G (Catholic Interracial Council), ADB.
114 Cannato, *The Ungovernable City*, 170.
encouraged the Diocese of Brooklyn and the Archdiocese of New York to support the board. In a letter to the Auxiliary Bishop of New York, the president of the council insisted that the PBA’s campaign had become overtly racist, “which is itself immoral and divisive of the Family of God.” “With every realistic estimate of voting tendencies indicated through mail received in our office, the office of the Mayor, Senator Kennedy’s office, etc.,” he warned, “it appears that many Catholics are going to disregard the moral principles and vote against the Board.” The council even went so far as to draft a statement for the Bishop of Brooklyn and Archbishop of New York, which asserted that the “right of every citizen to impartial review of his grievances cannot be questioned.”\textsuperscript{115} The statement, however, was never publicly released. To support the review board, diocesan officials understood, would alienate the majority of parishioners.

By failing to take a position, the diocese gave the religious the opportunity to speak with their own voices and, in turn, reveal the growing political cracks in the Church. For many priests and nuns, the CCRB was the next step in securing racial equality in New York City. On November 7, the day before New Yorkers would vote on the referendum, 200 religious and laypersons took out a large advertisement in the \textit{Daily News} calling the board “vital to the democratic process.” This Ad Hoc Committee of Catholics in Support of the Civilian Complaint Review Board, which included 18 religious from Brooklyn, distanced themselves from the Church, noting that they acted “as individuals.”\textsuperscript{116} The same day, 86 priests from throughout the diocese held a televised


\textsuperscript{116} \textit{New York Daily News}, 7 November 1966. The committee was organized by the New York Catholic Interracial Council. The council distributed a statement in support of the board, making a particular effort to argue that the board was in no way a communist plot. Those who signed and returned the statement were
conference outside of St. Peter Claver in Bedford-Stuyvesant to support the board and, in
the words of one Queens priest, “to show that the problems of one section are the
problems of the whole church.” But not all clergy were so eager to support the board.
An unsigned advertisement from the “Roman Catholic Priests’ Committee Against
Civilian Review Board” appeared in the same issue of the Daily News. The ad featured a
cartoon of a man yelling “Brutality, Chairman!” as he dragged a beaten policeman before
the CCRB.118

The pro-CCRB advertisement, as well as the general involvement of priests in the
referendum issue, provoked a hostile response among the white parishioners of the
diocese. Msgr. James King, the chancellor of the Diocese of Brooklyn, wrote to several
priests who had come out in support of the board to notify them that the Chancery was
“besieged by letter and telephone” with “complaints regarding the participation of the
clergy in the recent controversy over Civilian Review Boards.” While most, he admitted,
could be dismissed as “quite irrational,” there were a number of complaints that charged
the priests with wrongfully involving themselves in what was a “completely political
action,” and thus not the appropriate realm for the clergy. The complaints focused on the
clergies’ involvement in the Northern Queens Committee of 100+ for Civilian Review,
which, the accusers insisted, was aligned with the North-Shore Democratic Association
(that had supported the Democratic-Liberal candidate in the Assembly election). Though
the letter-writers were themselves against the CCRB, their foremost complaint centered

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117 Rev. Jerome Murphy to Msgr. James King, November 24, 1966, Chancery Office, Canon Law Subject
Files, c. 684-G (Catholic Interracial Council), ADB.
on the implication that the clergy were acting politically and “in sympathy with radical
groups.”  

William Hostek, a parishioner of St. Andrew Avellino in Flushing, contended
that it would be “in the best interest of the community as a whole if the Clergy were
restricted from using their office for political purposes.”

The priests’ responses to the complaints were laced with frustration, and each
released a litany of grievances against his parishioners who, the priests charged, failed to
uphold the true values of the Church. For liberal-minded priests operating in
overwhelmingly white parishes in the divisive atmosphere of the mid-1960s, fielding
accusations of political meddling became a regular part of their ministry. Rev. Jerome
Murphy of St. Luke’s in Whitestone, Queens told the Chancellor that the “entire area is in
need of evangelization.” Reading the Bishop’s letter on fair housing, for example, caused
a small uproar. After the sermon, “people were complaining to the pastor that he was
talking politics, and turning in their envelopes – ‘please discontinue.’” Another sermon
calling for respectful discourse on the Vietnam War resulted in “letters and phone calls,
full of emotion and a cry to keep out of politics.”

Rev. Ernest Fiorello felt he was
fighting a battle against the “vociferous, fearful, determined, and conservative voices,”
who were doing a great deal to halt “the advances of a reasonable, Christian movement
toward racial harmony.” The review board, each insisted, was one step in erasing racial
discrimination. They saw the CCRB not as a political issue, but a moral one, and thus

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119 Msgr. James King to Msgr. Francis Fitzgibbons, November 21, 1966, Chancery Office, Canon Law
Subject Files, c. 684-G (Catholic Interracial Council), ADB.
120 William Hostek to Msgr. Francis Fitzgibbons, November 8, 1966, Chancery Office, Canon Law Subject
Files, c. 684-G (Catholic Interracial Council), ADB.
121 Rev. Jerome Murphy to Msgr. James King, November 24, 1966, Chancery Office, Canon Law Subject
Files, c. 684-G (Catholic Interracial Council), ADB.
122 Rev. Ernest Fiorello to Msgr. James King, November 24, 1966, Chancery Office, Canon Law Subject
Files, c. 684-G (Catholic Interracial Council), ADB.

In the November election, the CCRB met an overwhelming defeat: 1,313,161 (63%) of the electorate voted to abolish the board, while 765,468 voted for its retention. But the proportion of Brooklyn Catholics who came out against the board was even more astounding. In a post-referendum study of 374 Brooklyn voters conducted by David Abbot, Louis Gold, and Edward Rogowsky, the researchers found that 83% of Catholics opposed the CCRB – representing a far greater Catholic consensus than in the 1960 presidential election (73% voted for Kennedy). Jews were defined by division rather than dissent: 40% voted in favor of the board and 55% against it. This held true when other factors were considered. Education, for example, had a cumulative impact for Jews, whose support for the board increased with their level of educational attainment. For Catholics, though, the impact of education was less pronounced: 17.6% of those with a grade school education supported the board, while 25% of college-educated Catholics did so. The same pattern defined occupational categories. Twice as many professional Jews (62.5%) supported the board as those who worked in blue-collar professions. This occupational jump only increased Catholic support from 11.8% to 16.7%. Catholic support was also high because of their relationship to the police. Fifty-four percent of Catholic respondents, compared to 21% of Jews, had relatives or close friends on the force, and those with personal ties were far more likely to oppose the board than those

123 Rev. Benito Perri to Msgr. James King, November 26, 1966, Chancery Office, Canon Law Subject Files, c. 684-G (Catholic Interracial Council), ADB.
without. “Religious identification,” the researchers concluded, “proved to be the group factor that most clearly distinguished” opponents and supporters of the CCRB. 124

Conclusion

In his forward to the Brooklyn study, Daniel Moynihan rejected the charge that racism contributed to the defeat of the CCRB. “The opposition comes through as nothing more than that of decent enough Brooklyn voters who had become concerned about crime because there appeared to be more of it,” he concluded.125 Fear of crime, however, cannot be so cleanly separated from the issues of race and civil rights. By 1966, white Catholics perceived a growing sense of lawlessness among the city’s black population; they conflated civil rights activism, riots, and street crime. In fact, Abbot, Gold, and Rogowsky found, 62% of whites felt civil rights leaders were pushing too fast, and 68% saw the actions of blacks as generally violent. Additionally, those who voted against the CCRB, as most Catholics did, overwhelmingly felt that black New Yorkers had the same opportunities as other groups, suggesting that civil rights activism was perceived as at least unjustified and, at most, frighteningly violent.126 For the city’s white population, then, the CCRB only served to further permit lawlessness and violence, no matter what its aim. In contrast to Moynihan, who seemed more interested in protecting the repute of white ethnics, the researchers concluded that whites – and Catholics in particular – “responded viscerally to Negroes and to the civil-rights movement. Their behavior at the

124 Abbott et al., Police, Politics, and Race, 8, 13-16, 27, 13. The findings from the study apply to white Catholics. Too few Puerto Ricans were polled to draw meaningful conclusions about these Catholics. However, other polls and analysis of voting returns showed that Puerto Ricans were overwhelmingly in favor of the board, as were African Americans.
126 Ibid., 35, 39.
polls reflected these feelings: they voted to support the police – the symbols of order and the defender of life and property – against the threat to their way of life which they believed the Negroes posed.\textsuperscript{127}

The CCRB referendum was a unique moment in the political history of New York City. Referenda rarely produced much notice, but the review board prompted an uncommonly high voter turnout.\textsuperscript{128} More significantly, though, it was not defined by party politics. Voters were not drawn to a particular stance because of party loyalties, but because of their experiences with and perceptions of crime, race, and civil rights. It therefore revealed that the defining political issues were shifting. Catholics saw civil rights less as a moral right and more as favoritism for vocal and unruly minority groups. For the first time, traditionally-liberal New Yorkers voted to halt civil rights advancement, revealing the perceived consensus on civil rights to be largely illusory. In addition, as the CCRB episode demonstrates, law and order was – for Republicans and Democrats, as well as liberals and conservatives – the defining issue of the day. The Catholic refusal to endorse civilian review and to, in turn, support the police, revealed both a concern for personal safety and an increasingly cynical view of the civil rights movement. In rejecting the CCRB, Catholics were also registering their disapproval of Lindsay. But, more significantly, they were revealing their displeasure not just with the man himself, but the liberalism for which he stood.

\textsuperscript{127} Abbot et al., \textit{Police, Politics, and Race}, 44.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 9. Nearly 85\% of those who voted for governor also voted on the CCRB referendum, in comparison to the 57\% who voted on a lottery referendum that was also on the ballot.
Chapter Seven

Black First and Catholic Second: Black Power and Community Control in the Post-Conciliar Church

Rev. Lawrence Lucas was one of the first black priests ordained in the New York Archdiocese. One morning in the mid-1950s, when he was still a seminarian, Rev. Lucas encountered Malcolm X on 126th Street and Seventh Avenue in Harlem. The Muslim leader stopped and asked what he was doing. “I’m going to school,” he replied. When asked what he was studying, Rev. Lucas told him he was training to become a Roman Catholic priest. “I’ll never forget his expression,” he later recalled. “In those days most Negroes would have salaamed twice; here was an exceptional Negro whom white folks had accepted.” Malcolm X lacked this reverence; he “stood in his tracks, looked me straight in the eyes, and said, ‘Are you out of your God damned mind?’”1 Though Rev. Lucas was initially perplexed by Malcolm’s reaction, more than a decade later he could see “the full, horrible truth.” In 1970, he published Black Priest/White Church, a bitter indictment of the racism of the Catholic Church. To be black and Catholic, he wrote, was to be plagued by internal tensions. The American Catholic Church “is a white racist institution: It looks white; it thinks white; it acts white.”

Rev. Lucas was a cradle Catholic; he was born in Harlem and raised by a devout mother who had come to New York City from the West Indies. When he was a child, the pastor at All Saint School, located across the street from his family’s home, told his

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mother that the school “was not taking colored.” Only when white parishioners began to flee the neighborhood did the school finally accept black pupils. In Catholic school, Rev. Lucas was constantly made aware of his blackness. “While all my white friends would say with pride, I’m Irish or German or Italian or Polish, I would keep my mouth shut.” “I’m colored or Negro,” he learned, was something he could not say “unless it was with much apology.” Despite the alienation he felt as the “cutest little Negro Irishman or Irish Negro in All Saints history,” he continued with his Catholic education and entered the seminary of St. Joseph at Dunwoodie in Yonkers in 1953. He was ordained in 1959.2

The encounter with Malcolm X was transformative for Rev. Lucas: how could he – a black man – serve an institution that attempted to “transform black people into black-faced white people?” Despite its pronouncements on racial equality, the Catholic Church consistently upheld the status quo: “Unlike the Christ Whom it is supposed to be, it does not challenge, disturb, or rock the boat.” The Church, he insisted, was beholden to whites who made up the vast majority of congregants. The mentality that insisted, “We paid for it – it’s ours,” dominated the church; “And they call this Church Jesus Christ. He belongs to whoever pays for Him.”3

The New York priest was not alone in his critiques. As Rev. Lucas’ parochial school experiences make clear, the American Catholic Church had always had a problem with race, but tensions remained largely under the surface. The Church was hesitant to take a progressive stand on race relations and alienate white parishioners; as Rev. Lucas insisted, the Catholic Church “always manages to be part of the society in which it is.”4

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2 Rev. Lucas, Black Priest/White Church, 16, 28, 26.
3 Ibid., 12, 16, 18.
4 Ibid., 16.
But by the late 1960s and early 1970s, to be part of American urban society meant contending with the emerging ideology of Black Power, which emphasized self-reliance and black institution-building. Perceptions of the church began to shift. For many black Brooklynites, it was no longer a space of community-building, but a white institution colonizing black neighborhoods and attempting to stifle the growing political consciousness of black people. Brooklyn’s black Catholics, as well as non-Catholics who used the church’s institutions, called for control of Catholic churches and schools in their neighborhoods. This was a particularly potent idea in the post-Conciliar years when the church billed itself as an institution of the people. But this was not simply a battle that pitted black laypersons against a white hierarchy; it also revealed tension among black men and women who belonged to the church, used its resources, and sent their children to its schools. As militants demanded the church fully embrace the tenets of Black Power, others remained wedded to the idea that the church was solely a space for spiritual reflection. Churchgoers thus questioned whether the Catholic Church was truly a church of the people, as well as the capacity in which it should serve them.

Like their parishioners, some white priests and nuns embraced the ideology of Black Power. Their reasons varied. Some were genuinely supportive of the black desire to foster racial consciousness as a means of creating political power, while others accepted the ideology as a means of remaining “relevant” in a religious landscape where the Catholic Church increasingly competed with other religious sects (Islam, in particular) for believers. With the exception of a handful of “radical” priests and nuns, the power structure of the Church pushed back against black control or, more often than not, simply chose to ignore the critiques made by black Catholics. As the 1970s marched on,
the church only fueled the sense of rejection felt by Catholics in Central Brooklyn. With Catholic movement to the outer reaches of the borough and the suburbs continuing apace, and school costs skyrocketing as sisters were increasingly replaced by lay teachers, the diocese closed dozens of schools and churches in an attempt to ease their financial burdens. By the close of the decade, Black Power activists were able to change little about the church: it remained, as it had for centuries, a hierarchical institution. And that hierarchy remained white.

**Competing for Converts**

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, an increasing number of urban African Americans were drawn to Islam. White Americans were introduced to black Muslims largely through the media, and the televised documentary “The Hate That Hate Produced,” in particular. The piece, which appeared on New York’s *News Beat* in 1959, portrayed the Nation of Islam (NOI) as a hate group whose rhetoric, according to producer Mike Wallace, and “would have set off federal investigation if it were preached by southern whites.” The documentary failed to explain the legitimate allure of the NOI: the promise of dignity, manhood, economic power, and racial pride so often denied to African Americans. From Harlem to Bedford-Stuyvesant, Malcolm X preached the redemptive teachings of Elijah Muhammad while eloquently denouncing America’s white supremacy. Other strands of Islam also spread in the streets of New York City. Darul Islam, founded in Brooklyn in 1962, preached racial separatism but was more

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firmly rooted in Sunni Islam than the NOI. In some mosques, black and Arab Muslims mixed.

Whatever its theological and political underpinnings, the spread of Islam among black Brooklynites became a major concern for the Catholic Church. Somewhat ironically, as priests in Central Brooklyn became less concerned with conversion and the spread of religious doctrine, they became increasingly anxious about the allure of Islam. “This happens to be an Anti-Christian, Muslim, and Black Racist movement,” a Crown Heights priest explained to the bishop. Ecumenism, it seems, had its limits. While Catholics could coexist with Jews and Protestants, Islam was perceived as fundamentally antagonistic to Catholicism, and viewed more as a dangerous political ideology than respectable religious choice. “With so little Christian tradition to hold them and so little identification with the aspirations of the Black People in the American Catholic Church, many young Blacks are being lost to anti-Christianity in many forms,” the Crown Heights priest continued. “The Black Muslims,” a St. Cecilia’s curate warned, “are working hard to lure the Negroes away from Christ.”

Islam was not the only religious competition – Jehovah’s Witnesses were also making inroads in Brooklyn’s black neighborhoods. Their looming Brooklyn Heights headquarters, with the word “WATCHTOWER” emblazoned above the building, were a testament to their success in the borough. Built in the late 1960s, the building set off an irate response among neighborhood residents who resented not only the large façade that

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7 “About Our Parish,” 196[9]?., Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 9, ADB.
8 Letter from Curate at St. Cecilia’s, 196[8]?., Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 4, ADB.
obstructed views of Manhattan, but the organization’s increasingly large real estate holdings in the community. Priest's in Brooklyn's poorer neighborhoods, though, were more concerned with souls than real estate. A curate at St. Cecilia's in Greenpoint expressed concern that the Jehovah's Witnesses were creating converts in the Cooper Park Houses, a nearby public housing project. “They visit families several times a week. They invite them to their Kingdom Hall...They give instructions to many small groups in the apartments of the Project itself,” he explained. The sect was “making considerable head-way among the Negroes and some of the Puerto Ricans.” Despite the absence of black representatives in the higher ranks of the religious hierarchy, their strong condemnations of racial discrimination appealed to Africans Americans, who made up an estimated 20 to 30% of membership in the 1960s. The curate warned that Witnesses were bent on destroying “the small amount of true Christianity that exists in the hearts of these simple people.”

Parishes in non-white neighborhoods became religious battlefields where various sects competed over souls. Urged by the Second Vatican Council’s prescription to reach out to the poorest among them, and by the increasingly dire problem of remaining “relevant” in black communities, priests reassessed their apostolate. In the case of some parishes, this result was an increase in social programs. For the curate at St. Cecilia’s, this meant moving out of the rectory and into the Cooper Park Houses where he could

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11 Letter from Curate at St. Cecilia’s, 196[8]?, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 4, ADB.
actively participate in the Tenants’ Council while also teaching scripture. “There is a real possibility that the Catholic influence, if not developed, will die,” he wrote the bishop.12

**Black Power and Community Control at Our Lady of Victory**

Perceived as a fundamentally white institution, the Catholic Church would need to do more than lead readings on scripture to remain relevant in increasingly politically-conscious black communities. Stokely Carmichael’s call for “Black Power!” in 1966 marked a shift away from the non-violent civil disobedience of the so-called “classic” Civil Rights Movement and toward a militant stand that emphasized black community control, self-determination, and racial and cultural consciousness. In 1966, the New York Catholic Interracial Council arranged a meeting between Floyd McKissick, director of CORE, with representatives of the Catholic press to explain the fundamentals of Black Power. “It is singular that Black Americans, in the midst of their own revolution, have been made the subject of a new kind of ridicule and hatred, emanating from our desire to do, at last, what the white community has always asked us to do – grab our bootstraps, consolidate our political power and act in the framework of this democracy to change our own lives,” he lamented. “This is Black Power – a concept as old as the first American immigrant who sought to share in the government of the land.” For Black Power activists, self-reliance became a defining goal: “Black Power is the instrument of people in the crossroad of change – psychological, economic, political change – which can result only in the freedom to develop themselves fully in every area of human activity.”13

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12 Letter from Curate at St. Cecilia’s, 196[8]?; Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 4, ADB.
As Matthew Cressler pointed out in a study of Chicago, when black Catholics “engaged the *aggriornamento* of Vatican II, they did so in an urban environment influenced by the racial and political consciousness of Black Power.” Vatican II did not provide a rigid set of reforms, but unleashed an elusive reformist “spirit” within the church that, according to Timothy Kelly, allowed the laity to alter their religious practice to incorporate their “broader social and cultural sensibilities.”

For black Catholics, this provided an opportunity to marry Black Power and Catholicism. Cressler argues that this led to a movement to produce an “authentic black” Catholic form of worship, but efforts to insert Black Power into the church went beyond debates over how to celebrate Mass. It also fundamentally altered the role Catholic churches played in black communities. In the late 1960s, as black Catholic churches increasingly functioned as sites of political and social organization, they also became spaces in which blacks could raise their racial and cultural consciousness. And, ironically, this nearly always occurred under the direction of white priests and nuns.

In 1969, an article appeared in the *New York Times* with the somewhat alarmist title “Panthers Indoctrinate the Young.” The article described a Black Panther Liberation School, one of the many social programs created by the revolutionary Black Nationalist group as it shifted toward what Peniel Joseph called a “softer, more practical side of revolutionary politics.” An offshoot of the Panther’s breakfast program, the school’s main objective was to feed children aged four to fourteen while also fostering a

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revolutionary consciousness. The reported described an exchange between a young student and a teacher:

Teacher: “What is a pig?”
Student: “A pig is a low-down person who can be any color who beats us up and tells lies.”
Teacher: “How many types of pigs are there?”
Student: “Four kinds.”
Teacher: “Name them.”
Student: “The avaricious business man pig [“who may be a landlord or a store owner,” the teacher interjected], the police pig, the president pig and the National Guard pig.”

The curriculum revolved around the 10-point Panther program, which the students were taught to memorize. “We want freedom and the power to determine our own lives,” a six-year-old girl recited for the reporter. They also practiced the chants “Free Huey!” and “Free All Political Prisoners!” What was perhaps most remarkable about the story – which, apparently, did not interest the reporter enough to elicit more than a mention – was that this school was operated out of the Good Shepherd Mission attached the Our Lady of Presentation in Brownsville.17

After Vatican II, parishes in Central Brooklyn were granted a degree of experimentation in their outreach efforts heretofore unseen in the diocese. As long as priests did not alter the liturgy, they were largely allowed to design their apostolate without interference. As a result, the Liberation School was never explicitly discussed or approved by the diocese. A week after the New York Times published the article about the school, the chancellor wrote to Rev. James P. Regan. “I am sure you realize that the Chancery has received many calls about the article which appeared in the New York Times of August 18th regarding the Black Panthers ‘school’ at Good Shepherd Mission,”

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he wrote. “I would be grateful if you would give me some information so that I will be prepared when questioned about this again.”18 While a degree of consternation was palpable in the exchange, the parish was nevertheless allow to carry on with their program.

Not only were the Black Panthers welcomed by the church; priests and nuns, too, took up the call for Black Power. The white religious were aware of the inherent tensions of teaching black self-reliance in an overwhelmingly white institution. “We are a racist Church in the sense that we belong to a white priests’ Church. There have never been that many Negro vocations and, consequently, there have been few situations for Negro priests to operate out of a position of authority,” Rev. Conlon of Our Lady of Victory explained. The Church, and white society more generally, failed to see Black Power as a legitimate political position and thus tended to dismiss the militancy of its adherents. Too many in the Church “regard the concept of Black Power as sinister and dangerous.” “If we deny this concept,” Rev. Conlon explained, “we are denying the Negro what he needs most, a sense of responsibility and an opportunity to achieve leadership among his own people. Of course there is a Black Power and if we try to stifle it or ignore it or condemn it, we are…pleading for continued suppression, continued unrest, continued violation of the Negro as a human person.”19 Sister Frances Dillon, a Josephite nun and the principal of Our Lady of Victory, insisted Catholics needed to bridge the “cultural chasm” between the Church and black communities. “For us to be ‘relevant’ and ‘meaningful,’” she wrote

19 Brooklyn Tablet, 30 May 1968.
in a Tablet editorial, “there must be complete re-examination of our goals in every field of endeavor in which we are engaged.”

In 1970, the Daily News featured a story on Our Lady of Victory that demonstrated the extent to which the “spirit” of Vatican II had shaped the Church. “A picture of Malcolm X alongside a crucifix; a black nationalist flag in every classroom beside the figures of the Madonna and Child; Black Panther leaders’ pictures hung in the gymnasium; children with bushy Afro hairdo and dashikis listening avidly to a white nun teaching them black history. Sound impossible?” the reporter asked, “Well it’s happening everyday at Our Lady of Victory School in the heart of the black ghetto in Bedford-Stuyvesant.” The 700-pupil school was nearly all black; only three white students – all from a single family – were enrolled. Along with a group of parents, Sister Frances, a Josephite nun, fronted an effort to bring black history and literature courses to the parish school. The curriculum emphasized both a traditional Catholic grade school education and black awareness. “When I first came here three years ago, I thought my whole mission would be simply to tighten up a loose structure. But outside events made me aware of the necessity for black control of this school,” Sister Frances explained to a reporter.

The “outside events” Sister Frances mentioned changed the landscape of race relations in New York City. Despite the city’s promises to desegregate schools, by the late 1960s, parents in black neighborhoods saw little progress. If the educational bureaucracy could not educate black children, they argued, black communities should be allowed to control the schools. Rev. John Powis, a priest at Our Lady of Presentation,

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20 Brooklyn Tablet, 23 January 1969.
was one of the foremost advocates of the movement for “community control.” The priest was a veteran activist who first cut his teeth in school reform in 1959 when the school superintendent ordered that black students from Bedford-Stuyvesant be bused to underutilized and overwhelmingly white schools in Ridgewood and Glendale. Rev. Powis chaperoned the children to Queens where they were met by “old Italian and Jewish ladies…throwing eggs at us, and tomatoes at us, and screaming and yelling obscenities.”22 When the busing plan failed to ignite a larger effort on the part of the city, Rev. Powis and the other reformers adopted more militant techniques. In December of 1966, he and five other education activists temporarily took over the Board of Education and declared themselves the “People’s Ad Hoc Board of Education.”23 While Mayor Lindsay’s administration was attempting to implement a plan for “decentralization” – a bureaucratic reorganization that would allow some degree of local control – the “People’s Board” called for a system of complete community control over personnel, policy, a curriculum that would leave the Board of Education largely powerless.

Rev. Powis and his reform allies were given their chance at community control in 1967 when the Ford Foundation provided funding to support three experimental, independent school districts. The city established one of the districts in Brownsville and its neighboring Ocean Hill, where residents elected Rev. Powis to the governing board that would oversee the schools. The district quickly took far greater control than the Lindsay administration had anticipated, and the governing board’s removal of thirteen

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22 Msgr. John Powis Oral History, 28 July 2009, Office of the Archivist, Interviews on DVD, Box 1, ADB.
teachers and six administrators in May 1968 set off a bitter dispute between the board and the largely white and Jewish United Federation of Teachers (UFT). When negotiations between the UFT and the governing board failed to reach an agreement, 350 teachers in the district went on strike. The conflict became a citywide event when, at the beginning of the 1968 school year, 93% of the city’s teachers walked out in solidarity. The UFT would call two more strikes – bringing the total to three over a two month period.24

The conflict escalated racial tensions not only in Ocean Hill and Brownsville, but across the city. The governing board and its supporters accused the UFT of racism and, in the words of Rev. Powis, of “forcing their way in there to screw up the work.” “I never saw racism like I saw...during that school strike,” he remembered. The UFT struck back with accusation of anti-Semitism, which gained considerable traction after anti-Semitic flyers were anonymously posted throughout Brownsville. Though the origin of the flyers was undetermined, it provided bad publicity for the governing board.25 After months of tension and virtually constant police presence in the neighborhood to quell the near-riotous conditions, Mayor Lindsay, UFT President Albert Shanker, and state Commissioner of Education James Allen reached a settlement on November 17, 1968 that resulted in the suspension of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville governing board.26

The Ocean Hill-Brownsville conflict, according to historian Jerald Podair, revealed that the city’s black and white populations “were speaking different languages.”27 The strike shook the core beliefs of the city’s white liberal establishment,

24 Cannato, *The Ungovernable City*, 312-317.
who assumed a basic consensus existed in favor of integration. The strike exposed how skeptical black New Yorkers were of these values, and instead favored the opportunity to build political power through the establishment of their own institutions. White reformers like Rev. Powis viewed the experiment as a means of empowering minorities and the poor. “We weren’t into Black Power, or Hispanic Power, or anything like that – we just thought it would be nice if, in this thing, there was a couple of black principals,” Rev. Powis explained.28 Even Brooklyn’s Bishop Mugavero supported the experimental district as “the legitimate and noble effort of the people of Ocean Hill-Brownsville to achieve self-determination.”29

The strike reverberated throughout the city, and it revealed similar fault lines in its Catholic schools. Trouble started at Bedford-Stuyvesant’s Our Lady of Victory in the year following the conclusion of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville strike. At the behest of parents, students, and sister working in the school, Rev. Joseph Buckley, the newly appointed pastor, implemented an experimental curriculum aimed at “developing a strong self-image of the black student, a sense of pride in his cultural heritage, an understanding of the evils of racism and dedication to serve the black community in an effective leadership role.” However, unlike the curriculum of Ocean Hill-Brownsville’s experimental schools, Victory’s courses would be thoroughly embedded in Catholic theology. “What is needed here is a carefully developed Christian Theology of black awareness if the school is to preserve and promote Christian values,” Rev. Buckley wrote Rev. Vincent Breen in the Catholic schools office. “Therefore the fully developed

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28 Msgr. John Powis Oral History, 28 July 2009, Office of the Archivist, Interviews on DVD, Box 1, ADB.
proposal should present a course of study in religion closely related and coordinated with the programs developing black awareness.”

Rev. Buckley’s religiously-oriented program for black studies was not enough to appease parents and students who, ignited by the events in Ocean Hill and Brownsville, wanted a larger degree of control in the parish school. With the assistance of Sisters Francis and Nancy, a group of parents formed an advisory council designed to prepare proposals on curriculum and personnel, but Rev. Buckley was reluctant to negotiate with the group. The council, according to a later assessment by the diocese, was composed of “radicals” who sought complete control of the school and resented what the parents called Rev. Buckley’s “take-it-or-leave-it” attitude. Unlike in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, where community members sought freedom from the Board of Education, parents at Our Lady of Victory wanted to wrest control of the school from the Catholic hierarchy. The parents, using the language of Black Power, attempted to push the spirit of Vatican II to its most extreme limits: from a church completely controlled by the hierarchy to one in the hands of the community.

Rev. Buckley’s solution was to offer a degree of lay participation in the management of the school, but not in the hands of the “radical” parents. The priest formed a separate advisory school board composed of elected members of the Parish Council and elected officers from the Fathers’ and Mothers’ Guild to advise the principal and pastor on matters of curriculum, discipline, and staffing. The two bodies from

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30 Father Joseph F. Buckley to Father Vincent D. Breen, November 11, 1969, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 13, ADB.
31 Father Vincent Breen to Father Fitzpatrick, May 19, 1971; Elwood Johnson to Father Joseph F. Buckley, April 26, 1970, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 13, ADB.
32 Father Joseph F. Buckley to parents of Our Lady of Victory Students, April 23, 1970, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 13, ADB.
which the new board drew members were composed of older members of the church who has been resistant to many of the efforts to implement a black studies program, which had been spearheaded by the principal, Sister Frances. Since Sister Frances became principal, they wrote to the bishop, “Our parish is being destroyed before our eyes.” Many of the parishioners, they explained, had “removed their children from the school, because they were becoming moral cripples due to the unhealthy attitude fostered by the teachings of the so called ‘Black Power’ in its [sic] worse form, at the expense of religious training.”33

Effectively, Rev. Buckley replaced the militant, largely non-Catholic parents’ council with a more moderate, all-Catholic advisory board. “The Parish Council is not qualified to run the school,” the parents insisted in a letter to the pastor. Only one member of the advisory board was the parent of a pupil and, while 40% of the children in the school were non-Catholics, there were no non-Catholics on the board. “You are using religion and your position as a pastor to pit Catholics against non-Catholics,” they argued. The parents were also opposed to the laypersons who composed the board, particularly a Mr. Neptune who had recently pulled his own children out of the school because he opposed the inclusion of black studies in the Catholic curriculum.34 To register their opposition to these changes, a group of parents formed the Ad Hoc Committee of Concerned Parents.35

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33 Fitzgerald Duncan (President of Holy Name Society), Gertrude Byers Guidry (President of Rosary Society), and Edith Levell (Secretary of Legion of Mary) to Bishop Mugavero, June 7, 1969, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 13, ADB.
34 Carolyn Conyers, “Dear Christ, Please Give Us Some Students from Our Lady of Victory, Black News, April 27, 1970, Box 7, Folder 3, Civil Rights in Brooklyn Collection, BPL.
35 Elwood Johnson to Father Joseph F. Buckley, April 26, 1970, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 13, ADB.
While Rev. Buckley ostensibly supported a black studies program, his insistence that it be steeped in Catholic doctrine and designed by the moderate members of the parish council gave parents the sense he was uncomfortable with the curriculum. “You fear that Black history taught to Black children will promote awareness and truth and will develop Black Nationalism,” the parents charged. “You want a censorship of everything taught in the school.”36 Rev. Buckley only provided fuel for their accusations when he sent a letter – without consulting the principal or faculty – to all of the lay teachers informing some of their probable dismissal and others that their employment was being terminated.37 “He does not want black teachers in the school: what he really wants is to give the jobs to some white pigs who don’t care anything about the children,” an eighth grader wrote in a letter to the editor of Black News, a local, militant newspaper. “Could you imagine the black teachers who are fired would be out all summer looking for a job? While that racist pig Buckley gave their jobs to some honkies.” The students, she wrote, intended to see the black teachers reinstated.38

Parents and students were also troubled that both the principal and the black studies instructor were white nuns. “We feel that as black students in a black community we should have black teachers to teach us about our heritage and a black principal,” a student insisted.39 The Committee of Concern Parents asked to meet with the two nuns to discuss their concerns. In an awkward gesture of solidarity, the nuns hung a photo of a black Christ in the classroom where they met with the parents. Interpreted more with rage

36 Elwood Johnson to Father Joseph F. Buckley, April 26, 1970, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 13, ADB.
37 Brooklyn Tablet, 7 July 1970.
38 Black News, April 27, 1970, Box 7, Folder 3, Civil Rights in Brooklyn Collection, BPL.
39 Ibid.
than appreciation, the parents’ asked “Who told them Christ was black when everybody knows that he is white?” The nuns insisted that Christ could be any color you wanted him to be, and therefore a black school could have a black Christ.\(^{40}\) Infuriated by the gesture, which they felt was an attempt at appeasement, the parents demanded to meet with Rev. Buckley to call for the dismissal of the nuns, the hiring of the black principal, and the reinstatement of the original parents’ advisory council and the fired black teachers.

The meeting pitted the militant parents’ advisory council against Rev. Buckley and the moderate Parish Council school board. Students, the Parish Council insisted, would not be allowed to attend the meeting. Parents and students disagreed, and the schoolchildren arrived early to stage a sit-in. When the Parish Council board passed a motion requiring students to leave, none abided. Carolyn Conyers, a seventh grader present at the meeting, reported that one of the parents threatened to fight a member of the board. “When the parents saw this they thought there was going to be a fight or some kind of riot. The president closed the meeting and everybody started for the door.” While the board fled to a hold a private meeting in the home of one of its members, Abu Bakr, the gym teacher, calmed the parents and told them to remain at the school. Rev. Buckley, Conyers recounted, “ran all the way to [the] rectory because he thought he was going to get lynched.” After Bakr attempted to retrieve Rev. Buckley, he reported that the priest told him he wanted nothing to do “with rowdy people.” Incensed by his comment, the parents marched to the rectory and demanded to see the priest. “Father Buckley, or whatever you want to be called, I don’t like being called rowdy,” a parent protested. The priest denied making the remark, but the parents were not swayed. “I am not going to

\(^{40}\) Carolyn Conyers, “Dear Christ, Please Give Us Some Students from Our Lady of Victory,” *Black News*, April 27, 1970, Box 7, Folder 3, Civil Rights in Brooklyn Collection, BPL.
start name calling, but in the streets jack that is called a lie,” Bakr said. The meeting finally came to an end when Father Rev. agreed he would resign as pastor of the church.  

The meeting failed to resolve the concerns of the parents, and Rev. Buckley – because his pastoral assignment was controlled by the diocese – remained as pastor in the immediate aftermath of the outburst. But the parents and students continued to air their grievances, and did so publicly through *Black News*. A student referred to the black studies curriculum as an attempt to “placate the Blacks enough so that they could get on with the lessons about J.C. But the students prefer to talk of the Panthers over Jesus Christ.” “Instead of speculating on virgins having babies,” they wrote, “they’d prefer to talk of Black Liberation.” Another argued that “the Catholic religion and its holy men are nothing but a racist institution, the priests are all racist.” “They care nothing about the black people,” but were simply “in the parish and in the church doing whatever has to be done because it is their job.”

The press picked up on the story and, as the school year came to a close, the *Daily News* ran a feature on the school in its Sunday edition. By the time the article appeared, Rev. Buckley had hired a black principal, but it did little to appease militant parents. The new principal, Clarence Kenney, hailed from Queens and was a former teacher at Tri-County High School. “Man, that cat might be all right out there in Long Island at that private school,” Bakr told the reporter. “But how will he relate to this situation where 75% of the kind of junior high age are junkies[?]” Two of the sister who staffed the school were also skeptical of the decision. Sister Frances insisted that Kenney was

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41 Carolyn Conyers, “Dear Christ, Please Give Us Some Students from Our Lady of Victory,” *Black News*, April 27, 1970, Box 7, Folder 3, Civil Rights in Brooklyn Collection, BPL.

42 *Black News*, April 27, 1970, Box 7, Folder 3, Civil Rights in Brooklyn Collection, BPL.
handpicked “by the priest and the parish council to be a rubberstamp for their policies. If that’s true,” she speculated, “then we’re in for a rough time here.” “Sure, we wanted a black, male principal for the school – and we’ve got one,” Bakr explained, but he felt the parish denied parents input in the decision. Rev. Buckley “has on more than one occasion told us that we are not capable of knowing what we wanted and we should leave the running of the school to those who know better. That’s the same kind of paternalistic junk we black people have been hearing for 400 years in this country.” Bakr had another reason to be bitter: the church closed the recreation center he directed and fired him the week before the article was published. He called the actions “vindictive,” and argued that the closing hurt children who had few other available resources. “The center can’t undo all of the harm the streets have done to these kids, but it at least offers them a chance, and some are actually helped by it,” he argued. Bakr speculated that the parish closed the center because it was not interested in serving non-Catholic children.43

Before the next school year, the diocese removed Rev. Buckley as pastor of Our Lady of Victory and replaced him with Rev. Edward J. Nolan. Three of the nuns working in the school, whom a diocesan school official later referred to as “the nub of the problem,” left the religious community for a year to teach in black schools in Milwaukee. “The activities of the radical who were so much in evidence last year,” the official wrote in a 1971 report to the superintendent of schools, “have completely subsided.” Kenney, the new principal, had been an essential part of calming the militant parents. The school

had also hired new lay faculty, and most of the new teachers were black. While the parish council and the parents’ association continued to bicker, calm returned to the school.44

“…we are black first and then Catholic”

The Victory school episode was not the result of a few angry parents, but the explosion of tensions that existed in black Catholic churches for decades, both between black parishioners and white priests and among the parishioners themselves. Parishioners disagreed over the role the church was to play in their lives: was it to function as a spiritual organization, serving predominantly to build fellowship among parishioners while providing an escape from the profane through a rich spiritual and mystical world? Or should it be, as Black Power activists insisted, present and concerned with the temporal needs of its parishioners and community? Black Catholic churches had long tried to fulfill both roles. In the charged atmosphere of the late 1960s, though, it was nearly impossible, as Rev. Buckley found, for these efforts to coexist. Militants resented the spiritual aspects of Catholic social program as an attempt to mollify the growing political and racial awareness of black communities, while moderates, predominantly interested in their parish as a space for worship, saw no place for politics in the church.

In an *Interracial Review* piece that assessed the state of the Church in Black America in 1970, William Broderick, the Director of Caribbean Affairs at the US Department of State, polled black and white Catholics about the question of race. In one of his interviews, a black inner-city priest argued that several divisions – which became clear in the case of Our Lady of Victory – existed among black Catholics. Older black

44 Father Vincent Breen to Father Fitzpatrick, May 19, 1971, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 13, ADB.
Catholics, he maintained, were generally traditionalists, “disturbed over changes in the Church and over black militancy just as whites are.” They could not admit that the Church was a racist institution, as militants insisted; to do so was as “admission of failure” on their part. The second group was predominantly made up of middle-aged parishioners who had less faith in the racial progressivism of the church, but remained involved in the institution to keep their children in the parochial school and to instill in them the main tenets of Christianity. The militants at Victory were representative of the youngest Catholics, who believed the church was a thoroughly racist organization; many of these men and women chose to stop practicing Catholicism.45

Those who insisted on the fundamental racism of the church had statistics on their side. By 1970, only 2% of the total American Catholic population was black, and 20% of those black Catholics lived in Louisiana. In 1967, there were only 169 black priests in the church, which accounted for only 0.3% of all priests in the United States. Fifty-one of those were diocesan priests. The remainder belonged to religious orders, and just over half of those in religious orders belonged to the Society of the Divine Word.46

In his study of the church and race, Broderick found that “Almost no one believed the hierarchy, as a body, was providing any significant leadership on the race question.” Despite the American Bishops’ declarations of commitment to racial equality in both 1958 and 1968, Catholics – and black Catholics in particular – were skeptical of the church’s true commitment. They might pay lip service to the cause, but their actions spoke more loudly. In addition to the shamefully low number of black vocations, the

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46 Ibid., 7.
Church did little to influence the opinions of white Catholics in regards to race. In 1967, for example, a parishioner at St. Kevin’s in Flushing wrote in to the parish newsletter to complain that they had “never heard any priests at St. Kevin’s speak from the pulpit on the problems of the Negro and poverty, which surrounds us, for the purpose of waking us up.” To do so, he conceded, may “open a ‘pandora’s box’ within the parish.”47 Broderick concurred: a drop in parish contributions would “almost certainly accompany a forthright episcopal stand on many controversial issues.”48 Black Catholics could thus conclude that church declarations on race were purely rhetorical and not backed by tangible efforts.

Those who were both black and Catholic felt the two segments of their identity grow increasingly oppositional. While the Church’s lack of leadership on racial issues was partially to blame, race relations in New York City had also fundamentally shifted over the course of the 1960s. Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan noted this change in the 1970 introduction their seminal book *Beyond the Melting Pot*. When Glazer and Moynihan first released their work in 1963 – as the Civil Rights Movement was beginning to pick up steam – there was still some debate over “what kind of group Negroes would form.” The two sociologists argued that African Americans might prove to be another ethnic group, that would, over time, achieve a degree of opportunity commensurate with older immigrant groups. But by 1970 this notion was no longer viable as the pluralism that defined New York City gave way to a black-white dichotomy. The religious split between Jews and Catholics was fading; post-Conciliar Catholics grew closer to the liberal Jewish position on sex and authority, while Jews – especially after the

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47 St. Kevin’s Newsletter, October 1967, Volume 1, Issue 6, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 21, ADB.
Ocean Hill-Brownsville crisis – came to embrace traditionally Catholic working- and middle-class conservatism. “Thus,” Glazer and Moynihan concluded, “religion as a major line of division in the city is for the moment in eclipse. Ethnicity and race dominate the city, more than ever seemed possible in 1963.”

If the Catholic Church was a fundamentally white institution, and one that existed in a society where, as Moynihan and Glazer wrote in 1970, “race has swallowed up all other distinctions,” how could one be both black and Catholic? This was the problem faced by the 350 delegates to the first national convention of black lay Catholics hosted by the Black Lay Caucus of the Washington Archdiocese in 1970. The delegates established the National Office of Black Catholics (NOBC) to serve as “an effective vehicle to unify all black Catholics in destroying the overt racism prevalent in today’s American Catholic Church.” After considering the “non-responsive role of the American hierarchy,” the NOBC wrote in a letter to Archbishop Luigi Raimondi, Apostolic Delegate to the United States, “we can hardly call the Catholic Church in America Christian and there is certainly little resemblance between it and the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

“The question of whether we can be black, Christian, and Catholic is such an important question that many blacks are leaving the church because they cannot reconcile the difference. Therefore,” they wrote, “we resolve that we are black first and then Catholic.”

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50 Brooklyn Tablet, 27 August 1970.

The NOBC presented the church with a number of demands that clearly reflected the influence of Black Power, specifically their insistence that the church establish four regional black dioceses. Each diocese would be served by black bishops elected by the black Catholics of that region and, within each parish, all policy decisions would be made by an elected lay council. The liturgy would also be adapted to the needs of black parishioners, and made “reflective of our Afro-American heritage.”

The NOBC also made demands in regards to Catholic schooling that were largely in line with those made by the parents at Our Lady of Victory in Bedford-Stuyvesant. No black child who desired a Catholic education should be excluded from a parochial school because of financial difficulties, they insisted. The curriculum should also be shaped to include units on African heritage and the achievement of black Americans. They also argued that black parents and community members should have a far more leadership in the schools: the diocesan school board must contain black members chosen by the community, black personnel should be included at all administrative levels of the National Catholic Education Office, and, though they conceded that most instructors would be white nuns, they should be “volunteers of specific educational competence, screened by and accepted by the appropriate parish groups.”

Black Catholic anxiety over their role in parochial schools – both among NOBC members and the parents of students at Our Lady of Victory – was inextricably tied to a larger crisis in Catholic education. One of the areas of concern for NOBC was school closings; they demanded that “the voice of the black community will be the deciding factor in any decision to close a black parochial school,” which were becoming an

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52 *Brooklyn Tablet*, 27 August 1970.
53 Ibid.
As vocations decreased in the 1960s, the diocese recruited more lay teachers who required higher salaries than the nuns they replaced. In the Brooklyn Diocese, lay teachers accounted for 54% of staff in the 1969-1970 school year – a marked increase from five years prior, when they composed 36% of the staff. As the diocese raised tuition to meet higher expenses, fewer parents could afford to send their children to parochial schools and, as a result, enrollment in Brooklyn’s Catholic schools fell 13% between 1961 and 1971. Rising expenses also contributed to school closures. In Brooklyn, four high schools, including Bishop McDonnell in Crown Heights, All Saints in Fort Greene, the New School in Bedford-Stuyvesant, and St. Francis Prep in Williamsburg, closed in 1973. All were in low-income areas with high minority populations. The impact on grade schools was more dramatic: during the 1970s, 26 parochial schools closed – 12 of which occurred in 1973. Black Catholics were rightfully concerned that they might lose an important community asset.

Despite the NOBC’s insistence that parochial education be made available to all black children regardless of their ability to pay tuition, economic realities made this largely unfeasible. The financial situation had become so dire that in 1973 the Brooklyn

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54 *Brooklyn Tablet*, 27 August 1970.
55 “Analysis of Data Sheets – New York City Catholic Schools,” Memo from Marge Benjamin to Jay Kriegel, April 1, 1970 Parochial Schools Catholic Problems, 1970-1972, Box 83, Folder 1565, Lindsay Subject Files, NYCMA. In elementary schools, the teaching salary for a sister was $1,800, while the minimum salary for a lay teacher was $5,000. In high schools, sisters received $2,000 and lay teachers $7,300 to $14,500.
Diocese issued its first public financial statement in its history in an attempt to explain the large number of school closing to frustrated parents. The report, Bishop Mugavero wrote in an accompanying letter, “underscores the critical nature of the fiscal situation of the Diocese, created by the escalating cost of operating elementary and secondary schools and the increasing amount of diocesan support to needy parishes in Brooklyn and Queens.” Between January 1 and September 30 of 1972, the diocese loaned $2,801,552 to needy parishes – all of which was offered at very low interest rates and, much of it, the diocese assumed, parishes would never pay back. During the same period, the gap between expenditures and revenue was $832,473, which the diocese addressed through property sales and loans from restricted funds that would eventually need to be repaid. Education and social services – comprising 21.76% and 45.15% of the budget, respectively – were the largest diocesan expenses. Closing schools, the diocese concluded, was the most efficient means to address their financial problems.

School closing were the result of a diocesan “cluster” program that consolidated schools within a defined area. This cut costs while attempting to ensure children stayed in the Catholic school system. However, clustering often created transportation problems as parents as the schools contended with moving students to far-away parish schools. Due to the hierarchical nature of the church, parents were largely powerless to prevent these school closings. While many sourly accepted the changes, others saw the closings as evidence of prejudice against non-whites and non-Catholics. When the diocese announced that it would be closing St. Martin de Porres East, the largely black elementary school connected to Holy Rosary in Bedford-Stuyvesant, several hundred

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parents picketed the bishop’s home and the Chancery Office. Their pastor, Rev. Dino Zeni, as well as several white sisters, accompanied them. The spokesman for the parents committee, We Want Our Schools, told a reporter, “Decisions about black schools should be made about blacks, not whites.”60 Vincent Simon, the black chairman of the Bedford-Stuyvesant cluster coordinating council, insisted the parents were causing a “false racial issue.”61

Soon after, the diocese announced it would also be closing St. Martin de Porres West, Our Lady of Victory’s elementary school. “It’s simply a matter of economics,” Simon insisted, “We can’t afford to keep a school open with five classrooms empty unless we charge $600 or $700 in tuition. By closing one we keep tuition at $300.” Rev. Zenni, however, saw it as a move made by representatives of largely white, northern Brooklyn parishes that did not understand the needs of Bedford-Stuyvesant’s residents. Most of those who attended the school were non-Catholics, but “the non-Catholics work very, very hard for the school and the parish,” he insisted. “They see the church as having done a lot for education. They equate the Catholic Church with education, really, and want to send their children to our school.” In fact, he explained, “Some of the non-Catholics are my best parishioners.” Despite these protests, the diocese closed both schools at the end of the school year.62

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60 *Brooklyn Tablet*, 2 May 1974.
62 Ibid.
Conclusion

In 1970, Grayson Brown, a black Catholic and accomplished composer, wrote an article in the Tablet examining the Catholic Church’s relations with the black community. The question facing the church, he argued, was “can a person who becomes aware of his blackness still be a member of the Catholic Church?” He conceded that he did not know, but there was evidence to suggest that blackness and Catholicism were incompatible: in the last year over 50 black sisters left their religious orders, four black priests who he knew personally left the priesthood, a large number of black seminarians stopped studying to be priests, and there were no black men studying to enter the priesthood in the Brooklyn Diocese. “There is something wrong with the relationship between the Church and black people. The sad truth is I don’t see things getting better in the future,” he wrote. In order to stem the tide of defections, the Church would have to “do something that it never seemed to do in the past, the Church is going to have to listen. And it’s going to have to listen like it never listened before.”63

To some extent, the church did listen. By the late 1970s, black people had pushed their churches to adopt a distinctively black liturgy. At Our Lady of Charity in Bedford-Stuyvesant, the priests and sisters preached a message of “liberation, unity, self-determination.” “We realize as a Black Church of liberation we must confront our Black condition,” their pastor wrote in Black News. “We must teach a Black theology, and we must pave the way for a Black perspective in our Catholic faith.” The physical structure of the church spoke to their black heritage: murals of a black Christ and black Madonna were surrounded by depictions of other black leaders, including Sojourner Truth, Harriet

63 Brooklyn Tablet, 22 October 1970.
Tubman, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Perhaps the surest sign that something had shifted was that a black man, Rev. James Goode, stood at the pulpit.64

While the existence of a black priest preaching a black liturgy of liberation was certainly a mark of progress and testament to the ability of parishioners to shape their spaces of worship, black Catholics retained a sense of alienation. They remained part of an overwhelmingly white church. Though they secured liturgical changes, by the late 1970s, black Catholics were operating with fewer churches, schools, and resources than they had at the beginning of the decade. But the Church’s real failure was to its nearly complete unwillingness to challenge the perceptions of its white parishioners. Black liberation could be preached in black spaces, but those messages rarely, if ever, made their way into Masses attended by white Catholics. The church continued to be a reflection of the society in which it existed, rather than a force for racial progress as black Catholics demanded.

64 Father James Goode, “Charity: A Black Church with a Mission,” *Black News*, Kwanza 1977, Box 10, Folder 5, Civil Rights in Brooklyn Collection, BPL.
Chapter 8

“There is a white working-class revolt going on in New York”: Backlash among Brooklyn Catholics

In the mid-1970s, sociologist Jonathan Rieder observed the meeting of a “backlash group” of Jews and Italians in Canarsie, a Brooklyn neighborhoods situated along Jamaica Bay. The group was meeting with other civic and homeowners organizations to discuss the preservation of “white middle-class ethnic rights.” They planned to form a coalition, and even floated the idea of establishing a National Association for the Advancement of White People. “We’ll use the NAACP bylaws word for word, except for the black to white change. If we have to go to court, we will make sure they can’t hurt us or they will have to invalidate the NAACP,” an attendee explained. The courts, he insisted, must “abide by the concept that a Jew, Italian, Irish, Polish are minorities, and come under the same claims and benefits as ethnic American minorities.” “He’s an Italian,” he explained, “so he’s a minority. And we want these benefits, not as whites but as a Jew or as an Italian, as ethnics.” The distinctions confused another man in attendance, who rebutted, “It’s a black-white issue.” “No,” one of the group’s leaders corrected, “We’re minorities.”

The exchange showed the group’s attempt to place their experiences on par with those of non-whites, claim a place as marginalized minorities, and, in turn, garner services and rights they believed white ethnics had been denied. Groups like this one

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organized throughout New York City. The Italian-American Civil Rights League, Italian-American Anti-Defamation League, Congress of Italian-American Organizations, and the Polish and Slavic Center organized Catholics along ethnic lines, and some counted members in the tens of thousands. To an extent, these groups acted as cultural and political defense organizations, created to counteract the dismissive and even contemptuous attitude of liberals like Mayor John Lindsay toward the city’s middle- and working-class whites who occupied outer-borough neighborhoods. This condescension came through readily in the 1969 mayoral election that pitted Lindsay against the Bronx-born Italian Mario Procaccino, who faced near-constant ridicule for his folksy working-class demeanor. Lindsay’s dismissal of Procaccino’s law-and-order-focused campaign as merely “an indirect appeal to bigotry” was reflective of his general attitude toward working-class Catholics. They were – to the mayor and other liberal elites – defined by intolerance and parochialism. Upper-class WASPs often deployed their generalization along ethnic lines. “If Italians aren’t actually an inferior race,” a professor tellingly quipped, “they do the best imitation of one I’ve seen.” Michael Lerner, recalling the incident in The American Scholar, observed: “He could not have said that about black people, if the subject had been H. Rap Brown.”

White Catholic resentment extended beyond a few off-color jokes. Life in New York City was becoming more difficult for the working and middle classes as the cost of living rose and manufacturing and unskilled jobs departed to the suburbs, sunbelt, and

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abroad. But, much to the consternation of white Catholics, the city only appeared interested in addressing the privations of non-whites who occupied formerly Catholic and Jewish working-class neighborhoods. Many of these men and women, journalist Pete Hamill wrote, “saw the whole thing as hopeless: Brooklyn, which in their youth had been the city of trees and free spaces and security, was being torn apart by drugs and gang wars. The *Eagle* was gone, the Dodgers had departed: *Take the money and get out while you can.*” His piece captured the complicated factors leading to white working-class resentment: “There was racial fear involved, of course, but it would be too easy to explain it all away that way. It was race plus despair plus insecurity about money plus desires for the betterment of one’s children plus – the most important plus – the loss of a feeling of community.”

The nebulous notion of eroding community was given more tangible form in the changing relationship Catholics had with their church. The reforms of Vatican II meant that the Church now spoke with a bifurcated voice: the “militant Catholics” working in poor, non-white neighborhoods chastised whites for their apathy in the face of rampant poverty, while the religious serving in white ethnic communities preached only a vague “social doctrine” that was limp enough not to offend their parishioners. Despite their priests’ careful theological negotiations, white ethnic Catholics – who watched the Church extend its ministry in non-white, predominantly non-Catholic communities – came to feel that the Church was no longer their own. “Our families have been loyal and generous to the church for generations,” one woman insisted, and though white ethnics held “no objections to the Bishop extending Christian Charity to our non-Catholic and

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separated brithern [sic],” they felt the diocese did so at their expense. The white ethnic Catholics, she wrote, “are being treated so shamefully.”\(^5\) As if to make their sense of neglect more palpable, the diocese began consolidating parishes, which predominantly impacted churches that were built to serve Irish and Italian communities. The closures, an Italian parishioner wrote, reflected the diocese’s “callous indifference to their needs as Christians.”\(^6\) Once the most dependable source of sanctuary and brotherhood, the Church appeared to be turning its back on the Americans it was originally established to serve.

The diocese performed a delicate balancing act: as it defended and ministered to the non-white poor, it also attempted to draw attention to the plight of the white working class. “If we are to develop and expand support for programs for the minority poor, especially in our cities,” Father Robert P. Kennedy of the Brooklyn Diocesan Social Action Department wrote, “we will need to elicit support from the white working class by paying attention to their concerns.” Their communities required housing rehabilitation, job training programs, day care centers, and, most pressingly, services for the elderly.

“Almost none of the Office of Economic Opportunity programs are related towards the needs of the working class white except for a few in South Brooklyn and Sunset Park,” the priest pointed out.\(^7\) Other ethnic organizations pressed the city to address white working-class poverty, which, they charged, was rendered nearly invisible by the formula the city employed to determine the distribution of federal antipoverty funding. Despite their growing conservatism, white Catholics were not fundamentally opposed to social welfare programs, but they did feel they were unfairly distributed.

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\(^5\) Rev. William M. Helmick to Rev. Msgr. James P. King, March 1, 1975, Chancery Files, Parish Files, Box 3, ADB.

\(^6\) Robert Ficarra to Bishop John Snyder, July 1, 1976, Chancery Files, Parish Files, Box 3, ADB.

\(^7\) *Brooklyn Tablet*, 3 September 1970.
The conscious construction of an ethnic identity was a strategic response to a system where communities were forced to compete over limited resources. By claiming they were minorities, ethnics attempted to distance themselves from the privilege conferred by whiteness and, in turn, communicate their own disadvantaged status. Though their grievances were largely a product of their class position, Brooklyn’s working-class white Catholics differentiated themselves based on the markers available to them – their “Irishness” and their “Italianness” – to distinguish themselves from the undifferentiated mass of the “white working class.” Like the Canarsie group Rieder described, Catholics tended to use the language of class and ethnicity interchangeably. “The cues of felt ethnicity,” Brooklyn College professor Colin Greer wrote, “turn out to be recognizable characteristics of class position in this society.” In declaring themselves minorities, white ethnics hoped to achieve the same recognition and, in their minds, “privilege,” that the city granted to black New Yorkers.

The city’s response was limited: hamstrung by both generally apathy toward the plight of the white working class and an impending budgetary crisis, the city provided little in the way of real political action. Catholics were aggravated, and took out their frustration by rejecting the welfare state that’s impact they failed to feel in their communities. The result was what commentators called “white backlash,” a term the New York Times simplistically characterized as the “defection of whites from support of Negro grievances.” But its origins and aims were more complex. There was undoubtedly a racial component to white backlash, but it was also a way of critiquing a form of

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liberalism that no longer appeared to be working for many in the white working class. Catholics – at the forefront of this backlash – rejected liberalism and provided ripe ground for the growth of a full-fledged conservative movement.

**White Ethnics and “Limousine Liberals” in the 1969 Mayoral Election**

Within the first year of his mayoralty, John Lindsay garnered palpable enmity from Brooklyn Catholics. The 1966 referendum on the Civilian Complaint Review Board had been a decisive moment. From the perspective of white Catholics, the board demonstrated Lindsay’s lack of respect for the largely Irish police department, as well as his tendency to cater to minority interests over those of the city’s white working class. Thus, in addition to being an unnecessary intrusion into police work, Catholics reasoned, the CCRB afforded black and Puerto Rican New Yorkers special treatment. By gaining the ability to yell “police brutality!” and bring officers in front a sympathetic board, minorities were essentially given the right to disobey the law. It would be the police – the enforcers of law and order – who would face scrutiny, rather than criminals. Despite the rejection of the referendum, Catholics retained their distrust of the new mayor.

Lindsay’s actions during his first term did little to dissuade Catholics that he was fundamentally disinterested in their welfare. To their consternation, Lindsay regarded his mayoralty an opportunity to correct the injustices of the past, and specifically to address minority grievances Mayor Wagner had largely ignored. He articulated his position in the report of the Kerner Commission, where he served as Vice Chairman. The Commission’s report, which investigated the causes of the 1967 urban riots, insisted that the “decisive role for the urban mayor” was “to develop a new working concept of democracy within
the city.” For the Lindsay administration, implementing a new democratic structure meant carrying out its own informal affirmative action program. A special effort was made in the police department, where African Americans were troublingly underrepresented. In 1966, out of roughly 28,000 officers, an estimated 1,500 were black. Lindsay reasoned that bringing more officers of color onto the force would ease tensions between police and minority community, and thus, with the aid of the federally-financed Manpower Training Program, launched an initiative to recruit men from the city’s disadvantaged neighborhoods. By 1968, the administration had six officers on full-time recruitment duty charged with attracting young men to the force. The city’s recruitment efforts, one memo revealed, were targeted “almost exclusively at the minority community.”

While the administration’s efforts sought to remedy discriminatory hiring practices, the methods employed were often less than honest. In one instance, Lindsay asked Chief Inspector Sanford Garelik to expedite the applications for black candidates for the police force. The faster they could recruit black officers, the sooner those officers could hit the streets to convince other black young men to join the force. Accelerating their examinations and applications was “a method of getting Negroes and Puerto Ricans into the force,” and would, Lindsay explained, “be enormously helpful in [abating] the continuing tensions and pressures that exist.” The administration also recommended changing requirements in order to attract minority officers. Commissioner Howard Leary

11 Ibid., 3 April 1966.
12 “Preparations Department Has Made, From September 1, 1967 to March 1, 1968, And Will Make in the Forthcoming Months, To Cope With Civil Disturbances,” n.d., Police, Box 86, Folder 1621, Lindsay Subject Files, NYCMA.
13 Confidential memo from John Lindsay to Sanford Garelik, September 19, 1967, Police, Box 86, Folder 1620, Lindsay Subject Files, NYCMA.
suggested that lowering the height requirement for officers, for example, would help more Hispanic men qualify for the force.14

These kinds of practices were not limited to the recruitment of police. In the New York Times, journalist Richard Reeves reported that even the mayor’s aides admitted the administration engaged in “both sloppy and corrupt management practices.” Multiple city employees acknowledged that their superiors showed them how to falsify applications in order to “dress up” those of black and Puerto Rican applications for positions on antipoverty task forces. In another instance, a detective found that the headquarters of the Neighborhood Youth Corps – a War on Poverty program providing employment for disadvantaged youth – were stocked with blank checks signed by Administrator Mitchell Ginsberg. City officials agreed that they wanted to see blacks and Puerto Ricans represented in government, but, one asked, “do we have to go through another Tweed era?” The mayor’s intentions were honorable, his strategies were politically destructive and fueled accusations of corruption and favoritism. “This is why the Mayor’s name is being booed and why one repeatedly hears the complaint: ‘Lindsay’s turning the city over to the Negroes,’” Reeves concluded.15 A Village Voice article summarized the perspective of angry white working-class New Yorkers: “Lindsay’s plan was to appoint numerous black ‘leaders’ to the City bureaucracies, spread boodle among black hustlers in the ghettos, and build a private political machine on the backs of the black people of the City....Lindsay’s plan, of necessity, left virtually everyone out who is neither a black

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14 Howard Leary to Hon. Solomon Hoberman, August 29, 1967, Police, Box 86, Folder 1620, Lindsay Subject Files, NYCMA.
man or a white middle-class liberal, namely the majority of citizens outside the borough of Manhattan.”\textsuperscript{16}

Lindsay consistently and spectacularly failed to bridge the cultural chasm that separated Manhattan from the outer boroughs. The mayor, essentially, had a class problem. The white working-class considered him an elitist who failed to appreciate – or even attempt to understand – the city residents who lived outside of Manhattan. “Lindsay just hasn’t got the neighborhood style. He’s too upper class,” one journalist observed. “He doesn’t know what our life is like,” a storekeeper told reporter Gloria Steinem.

“Look at that Wasp – could he know?”\textsuperscript{17} “There was a whole world out there that nobody at City Hall knew anything about,” Nancy Seifer, one of Lindsay’s assistants, recalled. “The guys around Lindsay didn’t know what a neighborhood was. If you didn’t live on Central Park West, you were some kind of lesser being.”\textsuperscript{18}

One of Lindsay’s major political blunders came in February 1969, the year he was seeking reelection. On a Sunday, 15 inches of snow fell and paralyzed New York City, resulting in 42 deaths and 288 injuries. For three days, roads and railways were largely unusable and schools remained closed. By Wednesday most of the city had returned to normal, with the exception of Queens. Out of immense frustration, Ralph Bunch, United Nations Undersecretary General and Queens resident for 17 years, telegrammed the mayor. Since the storm began, “no slowplow has appeared on our street or in our vicinity. There are no buses, no taxis, no milk, newspapers or other deliveries, and there has been no trash or garbage collection since last Friday.” “As far as the United Nations is

\textsuperscript{18} Cannato, \textit{The Ungovernable City}, 391.
concerned,” he sneered, “I may as well be in the Alps.” He called Lindsay’s actions “shameful,” and remarked that the city should “condone no second class boroughs.” When Lindsay visited the immobilized borough, he incurred the wrath of stranded residents. Shouts of “Lindsay, you’re a bum,” and “You should be ashamed of yourself. It’s disgusting” met him as he walked the streets. Lindsay did little to acknowledge their valid anger. “I didn’t put the snow there,” he remarked. The episode heightened the ill-will that already existed between the mayor and white outer-borough residents. His decision to plow them out last reflected his priorities more generally. “No one gives a damn about us,” the president of the Bayside Hills Civic Association concluded. Lindsay treated white outer-borough residents, the Village Voice insisted, “with something worse than contempt; he has treated them as if they didn’t exist. That they detest him passionately is understandable enough…”

The 1969 mayoral election further revealed the antipathy between Lindsay and the city’s white Catholics. Like the 1965 election, the theme of law and order dominated campaign rhetoric. However, in this election, Lindsay did not appear on the Republican ticket. As the Lindsay team geared up for the primary, they found that nearly 70% of Republicans disapproved of the mayor. Large blocs of registered Republicans, an internal study found, were composed of Catholic groups opposed to Lindsay: 30 to 40% were Italian, 15% Irish, and 15% German. As he campaigned, boos and jeers consistently greeted the mayor in Brooklyn’s largely Catholic neighborhoods. Lindsay was painfully aware of his unpopularity in these communities, and did little to hide his unease. In a

20 Ibid., 20 February 1969.
21 Quoted in Coyne, “New Politics and Old,” 1111.
speech to the State Republican Committee, Lindsay made reference to Nelson Rockefeller’s recent trip to South America before making a crack at Brooklyn. “I know that everyone in this audience is deeply sympathetic toward the man who in recent weeks was shunned, vilified, and shamefully treated during a goodwill mission to what proved to be hostile turf,” he said, “and believe me, that’s the last time I’m going to visit Bay Ridge.”

Lindsay lost the Republican nomination to John Marchi, the Italian New York State Senator from Staten Island, and was forced to run on the Liberal Party ticket. The primary was representative of the larger trends in the Republican Party: Marchi, who also secured the Conservative Party endorsement, epitomized the rightward movement of the party, while Lindsay’s ouster demonstrated the growing irrelevancy of the Republican liberal contingent. Marchi was the favorite of William F. Buckley Jr.’s conservative National Review, which deemed him the representative of the “New Conservatism.” The candidate, John Coyne Jr. wrote, “understands and speaks to the best of those qualities which have always defined America’s blue-collar class.” Marchi was stoic and, as a result, led a relatively respectable but dull campaign. He won Nixon’s endorsement, but the president declined to do any campaigning on Marchi’s behalf.

Mario Procaccino, the Democratic contender, was a product of “neighborhood” New York. The Italian-born lawyer received his training at Fordham and worked his way through the city bureaucracy to become comptroller in 1966. Procaccino possessed an engaging folksiness, which invited nearly relentless ridicule from Lindsay supporters and

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22 Cannato, The Ungovernable City, 401-402.
24 Cannato, The Ungovernable City, 412.
journalists. He was prone to verbal gaffes, like when he insisted, in front of an audience in Harlem, that “My heart is as black as yours!” or claimed that his running mate “grows on you like a cancer.” But he also provided a constant stream of pithy phrases that resonated with the disillusioned white working class. He famously referred to Lindsay and likeminded politicians as “limousine liberals.” He once remarked, in response to the derision he received, that “those who fear Mario will smear Mario.” What elites wrote off as provincialism resonated with fellow outer-borough Catholics. These voters, Nicholas Pileggi wrote in *New York Magazine* “are tired of Camelot.” White ethnics had,

Stepped back from the New Frontier and the Great Society; they have withdrawn from the borders of social change and retreated from the black invasion. New York’s regular Democrats have sought out the safety of semi-detached, two family houses in Bensonhurst, their stucco bungalows in Throgs Neck and their Ming living rooms on Queens Boulevard. These are the working class Democrats who have had enough of civil rights, of long-haired sons and mini-skirted daughters they don’t understand, of being afraid in the streets, of high taxes, of *Daily News* stories about welfare clients living in swank hotels.25

While Marchi was the most conservative of the contenders, Procaccino blended his traditionally-Democratic positions with those that appealed to the rightward-shifting Catholic electorate: he wanted to stop “coddling criminals and pampering punks,” cut back on welfare, and to make government work for the “little guy.” His voters were, the *National Review* explained, those who “find themselves torn between traditional New Deal loyalties and strong conservative instincts.”26 Procaccino saw himself as a representative of the “average man,” who worked hard, paid his bills, took the subway, and simply wanted to educate his kids and to keep his neighborhood clean and peaceful.

“He tries to play the game by the rules,” Procaccino explained, “and for that he’s getting

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pushed into a corner.”

Procaccino not only appealed to Catholics on campaign issues; his style and demeanor were comfortably recognizable and relatable. “His ready-made, nondescript clothes, his pencil-thin mustache and his neatly clipped hair are all refreshingly familiar neighborhood characteristics in a city the bulk of whose voters are tired of being dazzled by stylish and handsome men,” Pileggi wrote in his profile of the candidate.

Ethnicity was at the fore of the 1969 campaign. While Lindsay was devoid of any ethnic marker, Procaccino was “Ethnic in the extreme.” The election was characterized by a palpable mocking contempt for Italian-Americans, voiced not just by Lindsay but by New York’s cultural elites. At a Lindsay fundraiser, Woody Allen told his audience that Procaccino was most likely spending his evening “in his undershirt, drinking beer, and watching Lawrence Welk on television.” Jokes circulated that lampooned the stereotypical aesthetic of Italian-American outer-borough homes. “Do you know that Mario is so confident he’s going to be elected mayor,” one joke went, “that he’s bought a giant flamingo for the front lawn of City Hall?” Others insisted that the candidate had plans to replace the rugs in Gracie Mansion with linoleum.

Though Lindsay and other liberals mocked Procaccino on the basis of his ethnicity, these jabs were, at heart, about class. The subjects of their derision – linoleum, lawn flamingos, cheap canned beer – were understood as class markers as much as the fulfillment of Italian stereotypes. Italians, and the white working class more generally, already felt rejected by the Lindsay administration, and now they were being openly

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29 Ibid., 34.
30 Cannato, *The Ungovernable City*, 431.
insulted as provincial simpletons with poor taste. Buckley described Lindsay’s relationship with white ethnics concisely. When asked what issue drew voters to his conservative camps, he replied, “Mr. Lindsay’s pretentiousness.”31 This was, of course, only one issue among many. “John Lindsay’s taxes, minority group identification, welfarist policies and political anti-Catholicism (his antagonisms towards Irish, Italians, policemen, labor leaders, civil servants and parochial school),” political analyst Kevin Phillips wrote, made him “highly unpopular” among New York Catholics.32 Not only did Lindsay reject the grievances of white Catholics as all but illegitimate when compared to those of black New Yorkers, he was an elitist who saw anyone from the working class as, in the words of Procaccino, “a foreigner or intruder in this city.”33

On the eve of the election, the National Review identified a “restlessness in the electorate.” “New Leftism-liberalism, essentially, is up against the New Conservatism.”34 The conservatives would be disappointed. With the support of wealthy whites and poor African Americans and Puerto Ricans, Lindsay won reelection. Catholics, however, overwhelmingly rejected Lindsay’s liberalism. Only 15% of Italians and 26% of the city’s Irish voted for the mayor, compared to 80% of black New Yorkers. Lindsay carried Manhattan and – somewhat surprisingly – Queens, while Procaccino managed to win Brooklyn and his home borough of the Bronx (see table 8.1). Marchi won Staten Island. There were clear ethnic preferences at work in the race. Brooklyn’s Italian assembly districts, including Canarsie, Bensonhurst, and Greenpoint, heavily favored Procaccino.

31 Cannato, The Ungovernable City, 39.
33 Lizzi, “‘My Heart is as Black as Yours,’” 47.
34 Coyne, “New Politics and Old,” 1106.
Marchi did equally well in Irish-dominated areas like Bay Ridge. While Italians identified more readily with Procaccino’s candid appeals to the “little guy,” the Irish took a harder turn toward Marchi. Brooklyn’s Catholics, the election suggested, were moving rightward.

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Table 8.1
1969 Mayoral Election Results by Ethnicity (in percentages)


Declining Catholic Political Power and White Victimization

White Brooklyn Catholics were disillusioned and, in many cases, manifestly angry. Lindsay’s victory – at the expense of two Catholics – was only one moment in a longer history of eroding clout among the city’s once politically dominant religious group. In fact, Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan wrote in 1970, “Among the most notable events in New York City during the 1960s was the decline, almost the collapse, of Catholic political power.”

This was chiefly the result of changing demographics: Catholics represented a far smaller proportion of the electorate than they had in the past. In 1969, pollster Louis Harris estimated that Italians made up 13% of the population and the Irish 6%. In contrast, Jews and African Americans made up 25% and 20% of the city’s residents, respectively. Though Jews were politically divided, they composed 30%......

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of the electorate and were therefore a critical political bloc, and one that proved decisive in Lindsay’s victory.\(^{36}\) The makeup of state and city political apparatus reflected the weakening Catholic power. By the end of the 1960s, there was only one Catholic – Lieutenant Governor Malcolm Wilson – elected in state and city-wide elections. The composition of the powerful Board of Estimates also changed dramatically. In 1963 the Board contained five Catholics, two Jews, and one black Protestant, but by 1970 it had realigned, and consisted of five Jews, one black Protestant, one white Protestant, and one Catholic, Robert T. Connor. Significantly, both Connor and Wilson were Republicans – Catholic power was eroding in the Democratic Party, too.\(^{37}\) Once the party of blue-collar Catholics, the Democratic Party, Kevin Phillips wrote, was on the rise in the “fashionable sections of New York.” It was no longer the bastion of “Carmine DeSapio or the Irish bosses, but a (Reform) Democratic Party led by Protestant socialites and Jewish intellectuals.”\(^{38}\)

A marked shift in attitude toward Catholics accompanied the group’s declining electoral importance. In essence, it became socially acceptable to dismiss the concerns of the Catholic white working class, whose grievances were less penetrating than those of the city’s non-white residents. New York liberals, epitomized by Lindsay, focused nearly exclusively on remedying the hardships of black and Puerto Rican New Yorkers. When white Catholics failed to get on board with these programs, they were seen as intolerant. “Liberalism’s special enthusiasm for the poor fortified the belief that is worked against middle-class survival,” Jonathan Rieder wrote in his study of Canarsie’s Italians and


\(^{37}\) Glazer and Moynihan, “How the Catholics Lost,” 39. The Board of Estimates is composed of the mayor, the controller, the president of the City Council, and the five borough presidents.

Jews. In “Deriding lower-middle-class nervousness as racism,” he argued, reformers like Lindsay came to view white ethnics “as a defiant stumbling block to an enlightened society.”

Indeed, Lindsay insisted that his difficulties in the election were the result of the “built-in bigotry…reaction…fear…backlash” of the electorate.

In *New York Magazine*, Moynihan and Glazer offered their own version of New York’s political drama:

[There were] the five player groups: Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians and Irish, and, in addition, an elite Protestant group. The play went something as follows. The Protestants and better-off Jews determined that the Negroes and Puerto Ricans were deserving and in need and, on those grounds, further determined that these needs would be met by concessions of various kinds from the Italians and the Irish (or, generally speaking, from the Catholic players) and the worse-off Jews. The Catholics resisted, and were promptly judged to be opposed to helping the deserving and needy.

They painted a simplistic portrait, but the social scientists nevertheless distilled the essence of the complex ethnic political realignment that took place in the 1960s. To the mayor, building an apparatus to raise the social and economic status of non-whites was beyond debate. White New Yorkers, no matter their class position, possessed a certain degree of privilege and were therefore expected to readily support his efforts to address the needs of the black and Puerto Rican poor. When residents of heavily-Catholic Bay Ridge asked why taxes collected in their neighborhood were being used to support blacks, Lindsay replied, “We have three hundred years of neglect to pay for.”

The mayor completely failed to consider the resentment this might engender.

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41 Glazer and Moynihan, “How the Catholics Lost,” 42.
42 Cannato, *The Ungovernable City*, 215.
White Catholics did not possess Lindsay’s same sense of guilt, and could not see why they should be asked to make up for the injustices of the past. The slums were not created by “the urban white middle class families – who bear the brunt of state efforts to advance racial integration in their neighborhoods, schools, unions and whose immigrant ancestors were too impoverished to engage in slave ownership, slave trading, slum property or sweatshop operations,” a Brooklyn Catholic contended. An Italian cabby concurred: “I didn’t even have anything to do with slavery. What’s past is past. Nobody can give them what they owe them.” They dismissed charges of racism. “Racist?” Catholic theologian and writer Michael Novak asked in his 1972 bestseller *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics*. “Our ancestors owned no slaves. Most of us ceased being serfs only in the last two hundred years.”

White Catholics encountered accusations of guilt not just from the liberal establishment, but from their religious leaders. Much of this implied culpability came from the *Tablet*, which, by the late 1960s, was increasingly progressive on issues of race, both thanks to the reforms of Vatican II and the push within the diocese from militantly liberal members of the clergy. A response to a 1967 editorial by Rev. William Duncan, who ministered in Bedford-Stuyvesant, epitomized Catholic defensiveness. In the priest’s offering of a “Voice from the Ghetto,” he described the destitution of his parishioners. “Daily I deal with the despair of a poverty needlessly inflicted on the people of Bedford-Stuyvesant,” he wrote. “For reasons that are as obscure as they are predictable thousands of people are kept at a level of subsistence beneath any human dignity.” His piece

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43 *Brooklyn Tablet*, 17 August 1967.
44 Rieder, *Canarsie*, 120.
excoriated the welfare system for its hopelessly inadequate allotments and inhumane treatment. “I have seen mothers of small children wait seven and eight hours only to be given a dollar at the end of the day and told to come back tomorrow. These are not isolated incidents but happen day after day in center after center.” His article listed a number of other barriers the neighborhood’s poor encountered: intolerable housing conditions, inadequate schools, high unemployment, and insufficient health facilities. He also offered a defense of recent rioting. “The destruction of property is no more reprehensible than the indifference that caused it,” he wrote, “The looting of Nostrand Ave. is no more criminal than the systematic fraud by merchants on that street every day.”46

Response to the article was indignant and defensive. Rev. Duncan’s piece, a Brooklyn Catholic wrote, “made me rub my eyes because it actually suggests that New Yorkers villainously designed the plight of the Negro.” Rioting, another argued, was not a frustrated response to exploitation and poverty, but “the criminal element looting liquor, clothing and television stores and other places of business to get things they were to [sic] lazy to work for.” Several Tablet readers demanded the discontinuation of their subscriptions. “Please cancel our subscription to your periodical forthwith,” one reader requested, “Your front-page article ‘Voice from the Ghetto’ by Rev. William J. Duncan was direct from the ‘Daily Worker’ editorial room.”47

Many readers relayed their own bootstrapping narratives, insisting that African Americans were solely to blame for their hardships. One man recalled encountering “Protestants only” disclaimers in classified ads. He was “bitter since I was raised in the

46 Brooklyn Tablet, 10 August 1967.
depression, my father was unemployed for years…but I never thought I had a right to riot or loot.” Other dismissed Rev. Duncan’s piece as youthful naiveté. “Father, I am afraid you are so young that you do not know the hardships of people like myself who were
born during world War 1,” a Floral Park man wrote. He fought in the war, survived the Depression, and his family “never received a penny of unemployment insurance, home relief…I did it myself. I never looked to society to solve my problems. I never want to be a burden on society.” These letter-writers insisted that they were deserving of their successes, while Rev. Duncan’s parishioners lacked the fortitude to pull themselves from poverty.48 Like the Tablet writers, most Catholics denied that blacks faced larger obstacles than whites. A poll conducted in 1969 found that 60% of Irish and Italian Catholics in Brooklyn believed that blacks had not been denied equal opportunities, compared to 45% of all borough residents who denied the existence of discrimination.49

Among white Catholics, there was a pervasive sense that they were victims of a system that charged responsible, hardworking citizens with lifting the underserving poor out of poverty. “Father Duncan speaks of the rights of the welfare clients. What rights should they have? They are receiving charity from me, the taxpayer, and so they have no right to demand anything when they don’t work and earn it,” one Catholic wrote. “I should think people would be ashamed to accept money for doing nothing, and instead their attitude is ‘why should I take a job that pays so little when I can get so much a week on relief for doing nothing.’ Unjust welfare? How can anything for nothing be unjust?” another asked. “It has gotten to the point where people seem to think the world owes

48 Brooklyn Tablet, 17 August 1967.
them a living, while the middle-class people have nothing to look forward to but work, work, work…”

There was certainly a degree of bigotry among the Catholic white working class that went beyond mere class anxiety. But it would also be wrong to write their defensiveness off as simple, unexamined racism. These Catholics were expressing a profound sense of unfairness. What Lindsay and other liberals failed to recognize was that life was trying – and, often, becoming more precarious – for white working-class Catholics. No one captured this more poignantly that Pete Hamill, a self-described “son of the white working class.” His parents were Catholics who immigrated to Brooklyn from Belfast and raised Hamill and his six siblings on limited salaries; his father worked as an electrical wirer and his mother as a nurse’s aide. Hamill straddled two worlds: he lived and worked in Manhattan, where he had come to study art as a young man, but remained at home in the working-class taverns of neighborhood Brooklyn. Grasping the profound alienation of the group he called the White Lower Middle Class, Hamill stepped in as their defender and interpreter.

What was the White Lower Middle Class? “Say that magic phrase at a cocktail party on the Upper East Side of Manhattan and monstrous images arise from the American demonology,” Hamill wrote in New York Magazine. “Here comes the murderous rabble: fat, well-fed, bigoted, ignorant, an army of beer-soaked Irishmen, violence-loving Italians, hate-filled Poles. Lithuanians and Hungarians (they are never referred to as Americans).” In the eyes of its detractors, this overwhelmingly Catholic throng was defined by its bigotry: “They are the people who assault peace marchers, who

50 Brooklyn Tablet, 17 August 1967.
start groups like the Society for the Prevention of Negroes Getting Everything (S.P.O.N.G.E.), the people who hate John Lindsay and vote for George Wallace, presumably because they believe that Wallace will eventually march every black man in America to the gas chambers, sending Lindsay and the rest of the Liberal Establishment along with them.” Most often, these people were simply described as "the ethnics" or "the blue-collar types." But what was often left unsaid was that these men and women composed New York’s working class. “That is, they stand somewhere in the economy between the poor—most of whom are the aged, the sick and those unemployable women and children who live on welfare—and the semi-professionals and professionals.” They worked in unskilled manual labor, earned between $5,000 and $10,000 a year, and, while they did not live in destitution, they were too poor to afford the suburbs. The White Lower Middle Class, he insisted, “can no longer make it in New York.”

Hamill visited places like Farrell’s, a working-class Irish bar in Park Slope, where ironworker Eddie Cush claimed he was “going out of my mind.” “I average about $8,500 a year, pretty good money. I work my ass off. But I can't make it. I come home at the end of the week, I start paying the bills, I give my wife some money for food. And there's nothing left,” he explained over a beer. “But every time I turn around, one of the kids needs shoes or a dress or something for school. And then I pick up a paper and read about a million people on welfare in New York or spades rioting in some college or some fat welfare bitch demanding – you know, not askin', demanding – a credit card at Korvette's... I work for a living and / can't get a credit card at Korvette's...You know, you see that, and you want to go out and strangle someone.” "Look around," a man sitting at Mister Kelly's told Hamill, "Look in the papers. Look on TV. What the hell does Lindsay care
about me? He don't care whether my kid has shoes, whether my boy gets a new suit at Easter, whether I got any money in the bank. None of them politicians gives a good goddam. All they worry about is the niggers. And everything is for the niggers.” The system, he contended, was iniquitous and set up for New York’s black residents to loaf at his expense. “They take the money outta my paycheck and they just turn it over to some lazy son of a bitch who won’t work. I gotta carry him on my back. You know what I am? I'm a sucker. I really am.”

The working-class white man viewed himself as a victim of a society that no longer valued his contributions. As the budget stretched thin and priorities shifted to the most disadvantaged areas of the city, social services in white working-class neighborhoods declined. These streets were the last to be plowed during the 1969 snowstorm, and marked with “trenches that could only be called potholes by the myopic.” For this he was expected to pay rising taxes, often at a dangerous job. He was also more likely to be asked to fight in Vietnam than college-bound men who could get a deferment, only to return and have those same college kids write him off as a killer rather than a patriot. It was difficult to explain to these men, Hamill wrote, that “more than 600,000 of those on welfare are women and children; that one reason the black family is in trouble is because outfits like the Iron Workers Union have practically excluded blacks through most of their history; that a hell of a lot more of their tax dollars go to Vietnam or the planning for future wars than to Harlem or Bed-Stuy.”

Hamill’s portrait was extremely sympathetic; the White Lower Middle Class, he insisted, had legitimate and unmet concerns. They perceived the city as the holder of a number of finite resources, a portion of which they were rightfully owed. Instead,
services and funds were withheld and distributed to black New Yorkers. The “stereotyped black man is becoming the working-class white man’s enemy,” Hamill wrote, but the “working-class white man is actually in revolt against taxes, joyless work, the double standards and short memories of professional politicians, hypocrisy and what he considers the debasement of the American dream.” As a result, he was angry. But this situation was not inevitable. “If the government were more responsive to the working-class white man, if the distribution of benefits were spread more widely, if the government’s presence were felt more strongly in ways that benefit white communities, there would be a chance to turn this situation around,” Hamill argued. “I mean it; I know these people, and know that they largely would not care what happens in the city, if what happens at least has the virtue of fairness.”

White Ethnics and the Church

In addition to feeling disregarded by the liberal Lindsay administration, the Catholic working class felt ignored by their church. The breakdown in institutional confidence occurred alongside the reforms of Vatican II; for many Catholics, historian Philip Gleason wrote in a personal account, the period was defined by feelings of “demoralization and collapse rather than renewal and revitalization.” Things that once seemed constant began to change: vocations plummeted, schools closed, parishes were consolidated, and rituals underwent a profound transformation. More influential, though, was the breakdown in ecclesiastical authority. The Church no longer spoke with a unified

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voice, and many Catholics doubted the Church’s ability to offer guidance in the rapidly shifting social and political climate – particularly in relation to moral norms and sexual conduct. But Catholics were not simply rejecting Church authority. Many Catholics wanted the Church to remain a steady pillar in their lives, but felt the Church was, in fact, rejecting them. White ethnic Catholics, who historically composed the body of the Church, no longer believed the hierarchy was concerned with their wellbeing. They felt replaced – by non-whites, liberals and activists, and the non-Catholic poor.

In the late 1960s, the Brooklyn Diocese experienced two significant changes that contributed to the alienation of more conservative white Catholics. On March 20, 1969, Patrick Scanlan, who had served as editor of the Tablet since 1917, announced his resignation. Scanlan was rabidly anti-communist, skeptical of the expansion of federal power, and, in the words of Esther Yolles Feldman, functioned as a “one-man Anti-Defamation League.”\(^5\) Like many conservative and traditionalist Catholics, Scanlan found the reforms of Vatican II troubling. Though he tried to maintain a unified Catholic voice, he saw Catholic accord disintegrating. Since the Council, Scanlan wrote, “a small group of Catholics…foster controversy, attack dogma, publicize scandal and either directly or indirectly injure the Faith by crude and cruel writing.” Undisciplined Catholics created a “theological cafeteria” where followers could choose from varied doctrines and ideological perspectives.\(^6\) His retirement – and the subsequent appointment of Don Zirkel, a liberal Catholic – marked a sea change in the Tablet’s content, and editorials on women priests, the wisdom of celibacy, and divorce began to appear regularly in its


\(^{6}\) Quoted in McNamara, “‘Catholic Journalism with Its Sleeves Rolled Up,’” 106.
The paper also struck a more militant tone on racial justice, which, Zirkel wrote, Catholic editors would continue to push “despite circulation difficulties attributed to their strong stand.”55 Along with a more liberal newspaper, the diocese welcomed a new bishop, Msgr. Francis J. Mugavero. He was the first Brooklyn native to head the diocese, and previously led the office of Catholic Charities. His background in charity rather than canon law imbued him with liberal sensibilities and, according to a former priest, “made him a very pastoral bishop.”56 New leadership in both Brooklyn’s Catholic press and in the hierarchy created a wider space for liberal Catholics – both lay and religious – to influence the direction and discourse of the diocese. The result was not a wholesale endorsement of Catholic “radicals,” but did allow for a far greater plurality of voices than could ever had occurred in the pre-Conciliar Church.

The widening gulf between the liberal hierarchy and increasingly-conservative white ethnic laity filtered down to the parish level. The problem was particularly acute in parishes with racially-mixed congregations. Although parishioners might share the same space of worship, white and non-white congregants often attended separate Masses. In Park Slope’s St. Augustine, for example, there was one Sunday Mass for Spanish-speakers, one in French for immigrants from the French West Indies, and another in English. For the diocese, the difficulty lay in selecting a priests who could minister to such a diverse flock. When the diocese supplied these parishes with liberal-minded priests – often groomed from their time in seminary to serve the black and Puerto Rican

55 Brooklyn Tablet, 23 May 1968.
56 New York Times, 13 July 1991. Mugavero had a reputation as one of the most progressive and charitable American bishops. For example, he allowed Dignity, an organization for gay Catholics, to meet in the diocese’s churches until he was chastised by the Vatican in 1987. He was also one of the driving forces behind the Nehemiah Project, which funded and developed single-family homes for the poor in Brooklyn.
poor – white Catholics became embittered. Why, one St. Augustine parishioner asked the bishop, was their parish supplied with such a “far out” priest? “Can’t you find a priest in ‘Bedford-Stuy’ or Brownsville who could say the 10 O’Clock Mass here,” she requested, and provide a more traditional priests for the other Masses? “Give us some contentment and peace before we all leave the Church,” she warned. She also complained that white parishioners were faced with an unfair financial burden. “The poor whites who support the church get the drag,” while “These people who are being catered to let the basket pass.”

Seemingly routine actions like priestly transfers assumed a new significance. White parishioners perceived these staff changes as a judgement on their value to the diocese. At St. Cecilia’s in Greenpoint, the bishop received a number of letters after the parish underwent their third transfer in just over a year. “I can’t conceive what rationale was used in making these ridiculous changes,” a parish trustee wrote to the bishop. He complained that many parishes were “finding the going a little rough these days…and yet, you are making our task much more difficult.” “You don’t care what happens to the people of St. Cecilia’s,” he charged, “You, the shepherd of God, are forsaking us.”

White Catholics felt pitted against the non-white poor, whose needs the diocese seemed to find more compelling. “I fall into that forgotten group of middle class,” another St. Cecilia’s parishioner wrote to the Episcopal Vicar, “working, bill-paying, keeping head a bit above the water. Remember us?” “What gives?” she asked in reference to the transfers. “Is our Parish too conservative – do we pay our yearly increases in assessments

57 Marie Worne to Bishop Francis Mugavero, November 1972, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 2, ADB.
58 Patrick R. Fiscina to Bishop Francis Mugavero, May 11, 1977, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 4, ADB.
too promptly – are you giving up on St. Cecilia’s?” she wondered. Her disillusionment was part of a larger sense of institutional alienation. The people of Greenpoint, she insisted, “are trying to stay in the City,” but it “continues to patronize and ignore us. Unfortunately, I am beginning to feel the same vibrations from the Diocese.”

White ethnics were also upset by a string of parish closings. During the 1970s, the diocese closed the doors to eight parishes that had historically served white immigrant populations - three in Bedford-Stuyvesant, two in Bushwick, and one each in Cobble Hill, Park Slope, and Fort Greene. The diocese merged proximal congregations. These were parishes the diocese deemed financially unstable after a vast exodus of white parishioners. At St. Ambrose in Bedford-Stuyvesant, for example, mass attendance fell from 1,000 parishioners in 1968 to 250 when it closed in 1978. In the nine years before its closure, the parish received $1,035,000 in diocesan subsidies.

Closings could be an emotional experience for parishioners. At St. Lucy in Fort Greene, after 15 months of negotiations between parish representatives and the diocesan office of Episcopal Vicars, the diocese decided to close the parish and move parishioners to St. Patrick, located just two blocks away on the same street. The parish population dropped precipitously from 4,000 parishioners in 1957 to just 1,000 in 1972. After a letter of appeal sent to 6,000 former parishioners failed to produce the funds required to save the parish, about 100 parishioners took over the church in protest, refusing to leave after the 12:30 Mass. For weeks, the parishioners remained in the church and several dozen spent the night sleeping on pews and on the floor. Lucretia Lucivero, leader of the

59 Olga Riccio to Rev. Msgr. James A. Hunt, May 15, 1977, Office of the Bishop, Parish Correspondence Files, Box 4, ADB.
60 Brooklyn Tablet, 14 September 1973.
61 St. Lucy Spiritual Report, ADB.
Committee to Save St. Lucy, told a reporter that, “Through prayer we are hoping to change Bishop Mugavero’s mind. We can’t do it by ourselves but we’re hoping that the Holy Spirit will work through us.” After the Blessed Sacrament was removed, a sign reading “Jesus is Not Here, He Has Been Taken Away,” was erected in the church. Despite their protests, the diocese closed the parish 1974. As a testament to the dramatically shifting racial makeup of Central Brooklyn, the newly consolidated parish of St. Lucy-St. Patrick, which once served Italian and Irish Catholics, began a search for a black priest who could also speak Spanish.

Parishioners interpreted these closures specifically as an affront to ethnic Catholics. In 1975, after the first of two waves of closures, parishioners initiated a letter-writing campaign aimed at saving the remaining vulnerable churches. “We ethnic Catholics,” a form letter explained, “are bewildered and hurt by this action of the Bishop,” particularly because the closure came “at a time when people are becoming more conscious of their ethnic heritage.” They were especially chagrinned to see the bishop extend Christian charity to “Protestants, Jews and even army deserters and draft dodgers,” while Catholics who provided financial support to the Church were “treated so shabbily.” “Shouldn’t the Bishop be rebuilding his churches and christian [sic] community before running off to embrace others?” the letter asked. “Shouldn’t he first reconcile himself with his Catholics – brothers and sisters and reopen their churches before laying his gifts on the altar?”

63 Bishop Francis Mugavero to Cardinal, April 21, 1975, Chancery Files, Parish Files, Box 3, ADB.  
64 Rev. William M. Helmick to Rev. Msgr. James P. King, March 1, 1975, Chancery Files, Parish Files, Box 3, ADB.
White ethnics did find their champions within the Church. Their primary proponent was Msgr. Geno Baroni, a civil rights activist and founder of the National Center for Urban Ethnic Affairs at Catholic University (NCUEA). Baroni established the NCUEA to bring attention to the plight of the urban working class, provide assistance to white ethnic groups working to improve and revitalize their neighborhoods, and to promote the growth of a multicultural social movement. “If we are to develop a new agenda for the 1970s, we must go beyond the civil rights struggles of the 1960s,” he argued. “We must stop exploiting the fear of the ethnic middle American and consider his legitimate needs.”

In 1971 he organized a conference titled “New Directions in Urban America – Workshop on Ethnic and Working Class Priorities,” premised on the notion that the white working class – which was overwhelmingly urban and Catholic – was ”one of the most neglected segments of American society.” The “central issue,” a conference policy statement declared, “becomes that of redistribution of rewards, goods and services…the change in distribution must be toward the needs of a multi-racial pluralistic society.”

Baroni was conscious of how his message might be received by the civil rights establishment. "Before 1968 I was considered 'liberal' if I advocated more assistance for housing, healthcare, and education for minority groups,” he noted. “Since 1968 some of the very same foundations would call me 'divisive' because I have tried to sensitize public and private institutions to the legitimate need of heavily ethnic communities." The

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65 Dennis Deslippe, “‘We Must Bring Together a New Coalition’: The Challenge of Working-Class White Ethnics to Color-Blind Conservatism in the 1970s,” International Labor and Working-Class History, no. 74 (Fall 2008): 148. The NCUEA was affiliated with the U.S. Catholic Conference and funded by the Ford Foundation.


67 Deslippe, “‘We Must Bring Together a New Coalition,’” 159.
priest argued that this “new urban populism” was interracial: “We must bring together a coalition to press for new goals and new priorities for all the poor and the near poor. Including the Blacks – the Appalachians – the Indians – the Spanish-speaking – and the white ethnic urban groups.”68 White ethnic racism, he insisted, was the result of a system that pitted different racial groups against one another in the distribution of resources.

While white ethnics complained that minorities were the beneficiaries of the service paid for by white tax dollars, they were not fundamentally opposed to programs aimed at addressing poverty. “I always knew that working-class people like my family, were not negative when it came to social programs,” Baroni stated. “Go ahead and put everybody’s grandmother on healthcare; just don’t leave [mine]…out.”69

Baroni laid out his demands in the 1970 Annual Labor Day Statement of the United States Catholic Conference, which he drafted with Msgr. George Higgins of Chicago. Despite the massive mobilization of resources to fight poverty, few of these funds reached the Catholic white worker, the “Forgotten American.” “Public and private agencies devoted to the restoration of urban America have largely ignored working class whites in designing programs to eliminate poverty, substandard housing, racial discord, declining schools, and physical deterioration,” the statement read. In an appeal to politicians, the priests insisted it was “difficult to rationalize neglect of these citizens, given their number and strategic location in our urban areas.” The statement called for a major effort from both private and public institutions to address “the varied social, economic, and cultural problems existing in working class white ethnic communities.” This would require new research on the problems facing these workers and greater

69 Deslippe, “‘We Must Bring Together a New Coalition,’” 160.
assistance accessing federal programs. More pressingly, all levels of government needed to undertake a larger examination of how programs and funding were deployed, and to consider how they might more effectively reaching the working class. White urban workers were not part of “affluent America,” but this went unrecognized by government agencies. The Brooklyn Diocese registered their support for Baroni’s message, issuing a statement that parroted his assessments while reinforcing the importance of ethnic cohesion. “Ethnic communities are a social asset as they provide security and stability which help people take part in our society,” Father Robert P. Kennedy of the Diocesan Social Action Department wrote. “From these ethnic groups come the workers who are the backbone of the labor force. Yet they also have socioeconomic problems which have been neglected.” Both statements pointed to the futility of continuing to blame the white working class for generating the racial crisis confronting American cities. Instead, politicians and urban institutions should be “considering how to assist the people in those communities which are situated on the racial frontier.” The continued neglect of this portion of society, the priests wrote, “is bound to bring disastrous results in its wake.”

“*We’re minorities*”: White Ethnics Look for Recognition

With the support of the Church (though largely discursive) but little from the city, white ethnics organized on their own. Many of their campaigns focused on remedying the ethnic discrimination that was overtly displayed during the 1969 mayoral campaign. But they also sought to prove that, although they possessed whiteness, the white working-class still faced a number of economic challenges. While white poverty was nearly

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70 *Brooklyn Tablet*, 3 September 1970.
invisible to Lindsay, working-class Catholics did find some sympathizers within his administration. With limited funding and little political support, however, they could only make modest efforts. They were not substantial enough to overcome the profound alienation of Brooklyn’s white Catholics, which laid the foundations of a powerful rightward political movement.

Grassroots organizational efforts were most pronounced among the city’s Italians, who made up half of all Catholics in the Diocese of Brooklyn.71 “Sometime within the last two years New York’s Italians, after seventy-five years of benign residence in their own neighborhoods,” Nicholas Pileggi declared in New York Magazine, “have become restive.” It was Joseph Colombo, a Brooklyn-born real estate salesman with strong Mafia ties, who “stepped into the leadership vacuum that has long existed among New York’s low-income white working class.”72 Colombo organized the Italian-American Civil Rights League on April 30, 1970 after his son was arrested and charged with conspiring to melt down United States currency. The FBI, Colombo contended, was unfairly targeting Italian Americans for their perceived connections with organized crime – an association that reentered the public imagination with the revival of mob films like The Godfather.73 The League’s leader arranged pickets at the FBI headquarters, where marchers shouted “Italian power!” and denounced J. Edger Hoover. During one of these

71 Brooklyn Tablet, 3 September 1970.
73 The trope of the Italian mobster can be traced back to Prohibition. For an examination of Italians and crime in the early twentieth century, see Thomas Guglielmo, White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color and Power in Chicago, 1890-1945 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 76-92.
demonstrations, more than 1,000 picketers marched from the FBI headquarters to St. Patrick’s Cathedral.  

The Italian-American Civil Rights League gained organizational momentum from the demonstrations, and by May 1971 reported a membership of 46,000 across nine cities, half of which was in New York City. They emerged alongside a number of other defensive organization, such as the Italian-American Anti-Defamation League, which was consciously modeled on the Jewish Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith. Colombo had clearly tapped into a profound sense of indignation among the city’s Italians who, Richard Severo wrote in the *New York Times*, were rebelling against the stereotyped image of “garbage collectors who adorn their lawns with plastic flamingos and who sit behind aluminum storm windows in Queens and talk about how Negroes and Puerto Ricans must wait until they are qualified before they get good jobs.” Why, many Italian New Yorkers wonders, was it not objectionable to use pejorative language in reference to blacks and Puerto Ricans, yet the terms “wop” and “dago” were acceptable and, in some circles, fashionable? No event demonstrated this frustration more than Colombo’s Italian-American Unity Day demonstration, held on June 29, 1970 at Columbus Circle. An estimated 40,000 Italian Americans gathered to protest the FBI’s use of the terms “Mafia” and “Costa Nostra,” as well as the media’s linkage of Italians with criminality. “If there are criminals, let them be tried by the courts, instead of by newspapers that create fantasies of this Costa Nostra,” a statement declared. A priest

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participating in the demonstration noted, “I’ve waited 41 years to hear these things.”

Their efforts were successful: in a gesture of appeasement, the FBI announced they would change their terminology, replacing ethnically-tinged identifiers with “the syndicate” and “organized crime” in their press releases.78

Italian Americans also attempted to harness the legal system to fight perceived ethnic discrimination. Titles II and VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 – which banned discrimination in public accommodations and employment, respectively, based on race, color, religion, or national origin – were cited as protections for white ethnics.79 This strategy garnered limited success in 1970, when the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) delivered a favorable ruling for a Polish immigrant’s charge of employment discrimination based on national origin. Illinois Congressman Frank Annunzio argued that “Italian-Americans across the nation must be alerted to this decision…because the immigrant who has long been the butt of ridicule, exploitation, or discrimination…has the door open to him.”80 The Columbia Coalition, representing New York Italians, drew on this precedent to bring a discrimination suit against City University of New York (CUNY). In 1971, Italians had few representatives within the university system: though they made up nearly one-quarter of CUNY freshman, only 6% of instructors and 8.5% of deans were Italian. None of the administrative leadership,

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78 Weed, *The White Ethnic Movement*, 51-54. The Italian-American Civil Right League also focused their efforts on the media. They successfully convinced Paramount to remove “Mafia” and “Costa Nostra” from the script of *The Godfather*, and carried out campaigns against companies that included Italian stereotypes in their advertisements. This included Alka-Seltzer’s “datsa soma spicy meatball” commercial, and a canned tomato sauce commercial in which the announcer insisted, “datsa nice.” The League also targeted the *New York Times*, which hesitantly agreed to more sensitively handle crime stories. Pileggi, “Risorgimento,” 123.

79 Title VII also banned discrimination on the basis of sex.

80 Deslippe, “‘We Must Bring Together a New Coalition,’” 154-155.
including the chancellor, vice-chancellor, or university presidents, was of Italian origin.\textsuperscript{81} Two Italian-American professors, they contended, were unfairly denied full professorships, and the presidency of Baruch College remained vacant while there were several qualified Italian-American candidates. “We consider the failure of your department to fulfill its responsibilities to Americans of Italian origin a blatant discriminatory affront,” the president of the Italian-American Civil Rights League wrote to New York State Commissioner of Education.\textsuperscript{82} None of the charges received an affirmative ruling.

In yet another confrontation between Lindsay and outer-borough ethnics, Italian Americans in Queens contended that the city had discriminated against them when attempting to construct a new high school and athletic field in Corona. “Almost everyone in Corona was Italo-American,” Mario Cuomo, the representative of the affected homeowners and future Governor of New York, recounted. “Practically all of them had a yard with a fig tree or a grape arbor or both.” The Site Selection Board operated under the pretense of sincerity; many board members simply did not attend hearings in which homeowners raised objections. In 1969, they condemned 69 homes and five businesses to make way for their 12.5 acre plan. A number of Italian Americans came to the aid of the aggrieved homeowners, including Vito Battista, the “fiery assemblyman from East New York.”\textsuperscript{83} Citing the public accommodations clause of the Human Rights Law of the State

\textsuperscript{81} Pileggi, “Risorgimento,”126.
\textsuperscript{82} S. Samuel DiFalco to Dr. Frederick Burkhardt, February 5, 1971; Vincent Nassetta and Nat Marcone to Commissioner Ewald B. Nyquist, January 27, 1971, Human Rights Commission Discrimination, Box 54, Folder 965, Lindsay Subject Files, NYCMA.
\textsuperscript{83} Mario Cuomo, Forest Hills Diary: The Crisis of Low Income Housing (New York: Random House, 1974), 7-10, 16. After the 1966 \textit{Gatreaux v. Chicago Housing Authority} decision, which determined that cities receiving federal housing funding must devote a reasonable portion of that funding toward integration, Lindsay moved to place approximately 7,500 low-income units in predominantly white and middle-class neighborhoods. Some of this housing was originally going to be placed in Corona, but the
of New York, Battista and ten other Italian Americans charged the City of New York, Mayor Lindsay, the City Planning Commissioner, and the Chancellor of the Board of Education with discrimination based on national origin. Though the State determined it did not have jurisdiction to pursue the claims, Battista and his followers – aided by a media campaign initiated by journalist Jimmy Breslin – pressed on. After four years of fighting the city, the homeowners achieved the so-called “Corona compromise.” For the first time since 1800, land taken by the state was returned to private owners, though 14 homes remained condemned. In a surprising concession, the city moved these houses – piece by piece – one block away, to what had previously been Parks Department land.

When white ethnics faced problems proving they were the victims of discrimination, they instead attempted to demonstrate they fit the amorphous category of “the disadvantaged.” State statistics, however, were not gathered based on ethnicity, rendering poverty among white ethnics largely invisible. White ethnics thus set about finding their own statistics to prove their disadvantaged status. The Brooklyn-based Congress of Italian-American Organizations, Inc. (CIAO) conducted a survey to find census tracts where large percentages of persons of foreign stock overlapped with designated poverty areas, which were entitled to the majority of funding made available through the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO). “We know from our own staff’s experience that all Italian-Americans did not live in two-family houses with gardens, that

residents successfully convinced the city to move the development to Forest Hills. However, since the land had already been set aside, the city decided to move forward creating an athletic field predominantly for use by the tenants of the LeFrak City apartment complex.

86 For an excellent examination of how white ethnics attempted to expand the definition of “disadvantage” as part of a political strategy, see Deslippe, “We Must Bring Together a New Coalition,” 148-170.
all Italian-Americans did not exist on incomes above poverty level,” their reported noted.

“We were aware of the shocking absence of Italian-Americans as recipients of many
government-funded programs, and of the lack of awareness on the part of the Italian-
American communities that such programs exist.” CIAO found that, in 1970, seven of the
ten designated poverty areas in Brooklyn, including Brownsville, Bushwick, Coney
Island, East New York, South Brooklyn, Sunset Park, and Williamsburg, each contained
tracts where first- and second-generation Italians made up at least 20% of the population.
Bushwick, Coney Island, South Brooklyn, and Williamsburg contained tracts where these
populations made up at least 50% of residents. They also found that in predominantly
Italian Americans non-poverty designated areas, residents only averaged 9.5 years of
schooling; drop-out rates in Coney Island and Bushwick were 31.9% and 35.5%,
respectively. “Remedies need to begin now,” the report urged.87

The criteria used to designate the city’s poverty areas tended to favor those
inhabited largely by blacks and Puerto Ricans, and to discount the problems faced by
white ethnic communities. Poor white senior citizens, in particular, tended to be
overlooked. The New York Council Against Poverty, assisted by the Administrator’s
Office and the Youth Board of the City Planning Commission, chose to heavily weigh the
percentage of welfare recipients, number of juvenile offenses, and number of live births
when determining poverty areas – all indicators that were highest among non-whites.
“Such indicators may be a measure of the social disorganization of a neighborhood,” a
survey conducted by the Polish and Slavic Center, Inc. (PSC) noted, “but they are
inadequate for measuring the poverty of an ethnic group such as Polish-Americans, a

87 Josephine Casalena, A Portrait of the Italian-American Community in New York City, Volume 1
group which generally has a fairly low rate of juvenile delinquency, a strong aversion to welfare, a willingness to make sacrifices in return for private health services, and where poverty is particularly severe among the elderly.” Their study found that, in 1969, one-third of senior citizens living in heavily-Polish Greenpoint lived below the federal poverty line.\(^8\) The problems associated with aging were also acute among Italian Americans. CIAO reported that within census tracts where at least 50% of residents were of Italian stock, 60% of people in non-poverty designated tracts and 66% in poverty tracts were 65 years and older.\(^9\)

Both the CIAO and PSC studies noted that even when white ethnics qualified for social services, programs remained underutilized. In fact, overall white welfare participation rates in New York City were low compared to non-white residents. A 1974 study found that 57.3% of eligible white persons received welfare, while 64.9% of qualified black and 74.3% of qualified Hispanic persons did so.\(^9\) In predominantly Italian areas, CIAO reported, the percentage of families living below the poverty line and receiving aid was “phenomenally low.” Among those in non-poverty tracts, 13.9% received assistance, while only 23.1% of qualified families in poverty areas took advantage of these programs. Less than one-third of seniors in predominantly Italian census tracts received Social Security. CIAO argued that low utilization rates were due to a lack of awareness, in addition to the fact that many of these men and women spent the bulk of their working years in Italy.\(^9\) However, there was also a stigma attached to public

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aid. The PSC insisted that, “In Polonia there remains a dislike and even suspicion of public agencies or anything suggesting public dependence,” while CIAO recorded a “reluctance to accept public assistance.”\(^92\) Both organizations recommended studying ways to address this averseness, and to consider hiring more Polish- and Italian-speaking staff members to social service agencies. The PSC also endorsed a new distribution mechanism. “If the services are provided by a Polish agency – especially one with community, recreational, or advocacy functions as well – the attitude is different,” the Center insisted. “It is ‘we,’ not ‘they’; it is part of our community, our tradition of mutual help. There is no shame attached to receiving help from a Polish organization.”\(^93\)

White New Yorkers’ growing ethnic consciousness and demands for recognition – often, specifically on the basis of ethnicity – rattled city bureaucrats, who saw it as evidence of a growing backlash. But a small contingent of city officials pressed the mayor to assess and legitimate the concerns of white ethnics. Within Lindsay’s administration, the Human Rights Commission (HRC) took up the task of addressing the increasingly vocal ethnics. The HRC generally dealt with policy regarding racial discrimination, gender equality, and the burgeoning question of gay rights – issues much closer to Lindsay’s heart than the problems of outer-borough whites. But HRC Director Eleanor Norton, who served as an organizer for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee before earning a degree from Yale Law School and working for the American Civil Liberties Union, emphasized the political importance of addressing the concerns of white ethnics. The administration, she wrote in a memo to the mayor, needed to work on

\(^{92}\) Polish-Americans in the City of New York, 58; Casalena, A Portrait of the Italian-American Community, 48.

\(^{93}\) Polish-Americans in the City of New York, 58.
the “strengthening of liaison efforts with emerging protest groups: emerging white ethnic groups (Italians, Jewish, etc.); homosexuals; the handicapped; women’s rights organizations, etc.”

The concerns of white ethnics must be deemed as valid as those of other interest groups. Nancy Seifer, an aide to the mayor who worked closely with the HRC, insisted more forcefully: “As these groups become conscious of their problems to the point of discussing them publicly and asking for help, despite their former disdain for Welfare or any other hand-outs tantamount to an admission of failure, the city agency heads must also become aware of them and begin to respond.” “They are asking at this point,” she wrote to Lindsay’s press aide, “but are threatening to threaten if their requests are ignored.”

While Norton insisted that the city needed to reach out to ethnic communities, she expressed concern that granting funding or creating programs on the basis of ethnicity would foster ethnic and racial competition. “I believe we are courting disaster by handing out resources to each community on an ethnic basis,” she wrote in a memo to Lindsay and his aides, “and that the likely result will be Italians comparing the ‘Italian’ share to the ‘Jewish’ share and right on down the line for a dozen or so ethnic groups – so that it will all ultimately come back to haunt City Hall.” While Poles and Italians insisted that distributing services through ethnic channels would make them more palatable to white communities, Jews sided with Norton. Jewish New Yorkers were fundamentally opposed to anything that resembled a quota system, both because of their historical experience.

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94 Eleanor Norton to Mayor Lindsay, nd., Human Rights Commission, Box 53, Folder 955, Lindsay Subject Files, NYCMA.
95 Nancy Seifer to Tom Morgan, July 7, 1971, Ethnics, Box 37, Folder 658, Lindsay Subject Files, NYCMA.
96 Eleanor Norton to Mayor Lindsay at al., September 15, 1972, Human Rights Commission, 1972, Box 53, Folder 953, Lindsay Subject Files, NYCMA.
with discrimination and because they represented only about 3% of the population nationwide. “The granting of benefits to persons on the basis of their race or ethnic origin would amount to discrimination against equally meritorious persons who are of a different grouping,” the chairmen of four prominent Jewish organization wrote to the mayor.97

The realities of the fiscally-strained welfare state helped the administration largely avoid this potential issue. With limited federal aid already tied up in existing programs, the Lindsay administration resorted to symbolic efforts in their attempts to reach white ethnics. In 1972, the Office of the Mayor and the HRC jointly hosted a conference titled “The Emergence of Ethnic Group Identity.” The conference brought together 100 organizations and human relations experts, including representatives of Catholic ethnic groups and those working in black, Puerto Rican, and Jewish organizations. The conference served as a vehicle for creating cooperation among interests groups, though there were few resources to divide between them. In her opening remarks, Norton communicated her objectives and concerns: in this “time of chronic budget squeezes at all levels of government, coupled with escalating demand for increasingly hard-pressed city services,” she reminded the attendees, “we face the danger of competition among neighborhoods which must not be allowed to deteriorate into racial or ethnic conflict.”98

The city was able to selectively issue small grants and project funding, targeted at organization that shared their interest in building interracial and interethnic coalitions.

97 Walter A. Seymour et al. to Mayor Lindsay, March 7, 1973, Human Rights Commission, 1973, Box 53, Folder 955, Lindsay Subject Files, NYCMA.
CIAO was especially successful in winning funding from the city, chiefly due to Executive Director Mary Sansone’s ability to network and court city officials. Sansone, a social worker, established CIAO in 1965 to bring badly-needed social services to the Italian communities of Brooklyn. “The appalling number of narcotics addicts, school dropouts, suffering old people, and new immigrants from Italy, disadvantaged by language handicaps and very limited resources, were all in desperate need of help,” CIAO literature explained.\textsuperscript{99} The organization was originally run out of Sansone’s Borough Park apartment, but it quickly expanded to several Brooklyn storefronts where teenagers received help on schoolwork and vocational training.\textsuperscript{100} In 1971, with a grant from the city, CIAO’s five staff members established their headquarters near City Hall. With convenient access to city administrators, Sansone was able to open two community resource centers in Brooklyn. In Borough Park, CIAO sponsored a multipurpose center with a daycare, after school program, and senior citizen programming, and in South Brooklyn they opened the Court Street Day Care Center.\textsuperscript{101} CIAO soon expanded their services to Manhattan, where they opened a senior center in Little Italy. When Sansone met with elderly Italians and announced plans to open the center, they responded with astonishment. “They couldn’t believe they were getting anything. This was the first time,” Seifer wrote in a memo to Lindsay’s press aide.\textsuperscript{102}

The relationship between CIAO and the Lindsay administration was mutually beneficial. Sansone’s projects received funding and Lindsay was able to tout the group’s

\textsuperscript{99} Casalena, \textit{A Portrait of the Italian-American Community}, 63.
\textsuperscript{100} \textit{Brooklyn Tablet}, 14 November 1968.
\textsuperscript{101} Casalena, \textit{A Portrait of the Italian-American Community}, 63-65.
\textsuperscript{102} Nancy Seifer to Tom Morgan, June 25, 1971, Ethnicos – Mayor’s TV Show with Geno Baroni, Box 37, Folder 657, Lindsay Subject Files, NYCMA.
achievements in order to court favor with white ethnics. “Now, many ‘white ethnic’
community groups are working with city government to bring programs and services they
once viewed as solely for Blacks and Puerto Ricans into their neighborhoods,” Lindsay
wrote in a 1972 essay for the volume *Pieces of a Dream: The Ethnic Workers’ Crisis with
America.*

He listed the programs offered by CIAO, as well as that of a “Polish-
American organization in Brooklyn [that] won the promise of [a] job training program.”

But the Polish organization complained that, in fact, the city’s contributions were paltry.
After years of fighting for funding, the city distributed $600,000 in ‘special project’ funds
between six white ethnic organizations for social programming. “But by the end of
1974,” they complained, “this funding had lapsed. Some of the programs were picked up
by the Human Resources Administration (HRA), under a different source of funding.
Even if we consider this ‘poverty’ money, the total for all white ethnic poor outside the
poverty areas was about $800,000 in fiscal 1975.” This was only a “miniscule portion” of
the Council Against Poverty (CAP) funding distributed by the city.

Symbolic overtures and small grants, designed to communicate the
administration’s concern for all ethnic and racial groups, were unconvincing to white
Brooklyn Catholics, especially when more overt efforts were made on behalf of non-
white New Yorkers. In Canarsie, just months after the conference intended to heal ethnic

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103 John Lindsay, “New York’s Ethnic Boom,” August 4, 1972, Ethnics, Box 37, Folder 658, Lindsay
Subject Files, NYCMA. The city later ran into a number of problems with CIAO. By 1978, the
organization had a $1.6 million budget – gained almost entirely from public funds – and controlled over $1
million worth of the city’s jobs earned under the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA).
Sansone filled the organization’s payroll’s with family members, and an investigation by CIAO’s board of
directors revealed many questionable accounting practices. Sansone was fired by the board. When the city
“contracted out” to CIAO – which, in the 1970s, became an increasingly common practice that was touted
as a cost-saving measure – they lost much of the ability to oversee the how its resources were being used.

104 *Polish-Americans in the City of New York,* 42.
and racial divisions, disorder broke out over the issue of school integration. Working- and middle-class Italians and Jews dominated the neighborhood’s residential makeup. Residents saw their community as a haven: “Many of them were raised elsewhere—Brownsville, East New York, Williamsburg—and view with a mixture of disgust, anger, and sadness the gradual deterioration of those neighborhoods,” a journalist noted. “Above all else, they want to feel certain that, by having been able to afford the move to Canarsie, they have outrun the disintegration.”105 Their sanctuary was threatened by Lindsay’s school decentralization scheme, which in 1969 broke the city schools into 32 districts. Each district had its own elected board, but the Board of Education retained broad control over all the city schools. Problems arose when Schools Chancellor Harvey Scriber decided to send 32 children from a Brownsville housing project to Canarsie’s J.H.S. 211. Canarsie parents charged that the interference was a violation of the decentralization plan.

In response to Scriber’s orders, parents organized a two-week boycott of the district’s public schools, and nearly 90% of the 97,000 pupils remained home. They also demonstrated outside of J.H.S. 211 to protest the arrival of the 32 black and Puerto Rican children, attracting upwards of 1,500 parents and community members.106 Journalists from both local and national media outlets lined up outside the school to deride the protestors, who reported the events with a palpable sense of class antagonism. A Chicago Tribune reporter described the scene that played out each morning of the protest: “First the cops set up the horses, then the women”—who made up the vast majority or protestors—“came out of the chintzy row houses with fiberglass awnings.” They wore

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106 Cannato, The Ungovernable City, 460.
slacks and “fluffy coats without buttons so they must keep their arms crossed to stay warm. Their faces are without makeup and their hair looks as if it had been set and lacquered and then slept on that night.” Many of the women donned an Italian-American Civil Rights League cloth patch, featuring a gold “1” superimposed over a green map of the United States. “You get the feeling that it’s the league’s capos who are running this operation,” the reporter noted. The women borrowed tactics from civil rights activists – picketing and chanting. At one point, they attempted to sing “We Shall Overcome,” but were unable to remember the words.  

The media gave little sympathy to the protestors. “I gave a beautiful interview and then they put me on for five seconds and I sounded like a raving maniac,” Judy Koretz, president of the J.H.S. 211 PTA complained. But organizers insisted they were not motivated by racism. Though Canarsie was 95% white, 30% of J.H.S. 211 students were black and Puerto Rican. Increasing the number of minority students, parents contended, put the school in danger of “tipping,” or reaching the undefined percentage of minority students that would induce whites to leave the community. The school was already integrated, they reasoned, and bringing in more non-white students threatened that status. 

There was also the question of rights. “The thing about what happened here,” Rev. Genarro Simoneti told a reporter, “is that there is right on both sides. On the one hand, the black people have a right to have their children educated. On the other hand, the white people have a right to preserve their community.” The threat of the children from Brownsville was more symbolic than real. They represented the many ills Canarsians feared would destroy their community: deteriorating housing, crime, poor schools, 

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107 Von Hoffman, “Another Nasty Face-Off in Brooklyn.”
108 Ibid.
decaying infrastructure, and drug addiction. “They saw the youngsters,” one journalist concluded, “as the advanced guard of an onslaught of blacks who ultimately would transform Canarsie into yet another slum.” The concerns expressed by Ed Rosenthal, a department store clerk participating in the protest, were typical: “For three years I worked two jobs, 18 hours a day, just so I could raise the money to buy a house here. I worked one job during the day and drove a cab at night. My wife and I put off having kids all these years so she could work, too. Now I have my house. I grew up in Brownsville and went to school there. I know what happened to Brownsville. I don’t want it to happen here.”\textsuperscript{109} While Rev. Simoneti expressed sympathy for men like Rosenthal, the \textit{Tablet} editorial board insisted that the “implied purchase of control over the local school that goes with purchase of a house” was “nonsense.” “The God of all races, creeds and colors seems relegated to the back pew while too many of His people worship at the altar of real estate values and bank accounts.”\textsuperscript{110}

There was a cavernous gap between the message the Lindsay administration attempted to communicate – that the city did, in fact, care about the welfare of white ethnics – and what white Catholics in neighborhoods like Canarsie experienced in their daily lives. “White ethnics received token, discursive political attention but ultimately not policy recognition,” historians Thomas Sugrue and John Skrentny concluded.\textsuperscript{111} Their successes were largely cultural. In popular discourse, as Matthew Frye Jacobson demonstrated, white Americans replaced the “Plymouth Rock” narrative, which equated

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{109} Mae roff, “The Tragedy of Canarsie.”
  \item \textsuperscript{110} \textit{Brooklyn Tablet}, 26 October 1972.
\end{itemize}
WASPs with normative whiteness, with the “Ellis Island” origin story that celebrated the United States as a “nation of immigrants.” The state recognized the embrace of ethnic multiculturalism with the 1972 Ethnic Heritage Studies Program, a $2 million annual investment in ethnic studies courses and histories.\(^{112}\)

Beyond fueling a sense of patriotism, these programs did little to address the economic circumstances of white ethnics, who saw their declining economic and political power not as a function of the urban crisis, but the fault of non-whites who preferred to absorb white tax dollars rather than work their way out of poverty. The Church pushed back against its parishioners. On the First Sunday of Advent in 1969, the Bishops of New York State issued a pastoral letter on poverty. “What is most disturbing to us is that rather than address ourselves to the root causes of poverty to direct our energies to a just and equitable distribution of the goods of creation we tend to engage in invectives about the poor and the maligning of their moral character,” they wrote. The bishops drew on the Ellis Island ethos, celebrating New York as the “gateway to the new life of our forebears. The immigrants [who] were poor and had to struggle and sacrifice for their livelihood.”

Their own familial roots, the letter insinuated, should imbue Catholics with a sympathetic view of today’s struggling poor. “Every man is my neighbor by reason of my compassion,” they reminded their followers.\(^{113}\) But in a world where institutional pillars appeared to extend little compassion to them, Brooklyn’s Catholics resisted the call of Christian brotherhood.


\(^{113}\) *Brooklyn Tablet*, 5 March 1970.
Conclusion

“Unquestionably, there is a white working-class revolt going on in New York today that is more economic than ethnic,” Pileggi wrote in 1971.\footnote{Pileggi, “Risorgimento,”131.} For the Catholics who composed the majority of the white working class, mimicking the identity-based politics of African Americans became a way of seeking political recognition and remedying their class-based grievances. In the early 1970s, constructing an ethnic identity was a means for whites to distance themselves from their whiteness, deny their racial privilege, and claim a place among the disadvantaged. Their efforts centered on remedying the unfairness they argued was endemic in the city’s political structure. They paid their taxes, worked hard, and obeyed the law. Why were their streets the last to be plowed? Why should they be forced to confront integration, while the white upper class remained shielded in the suburbs and Upper East Side apartments? Where were their antipoverty funds, day care services, senior centers, and job training programs? The Catholic men and women of Brooklyn’s white working class were undoubtedly the beneficiaries of a great deal of government largesse, in the form of advantageous mortgage lending practices, political clout that gave them the ability to control the borders of their neighborhoods, and policies that created and sustained white-dominated unions, but these privileges became invisible as they began to feel the “squeeze” of the 1970s.

In 1974, immediately after Abe Beame replaced John Lindsay as mayor, the New York Times conducted a survey designed to measure the political pulse of New York City residents. The Times concluded that New Yorkers had taken an “ideological swing to the right.” In a city famous for its liberalism, one-third of those surveyed considered
themselves conservative, while 31% saw themselves as moderates and only 25% as liberals. Brooklyn was the most rightward-leaning borough, where 37% of residents identified as conservative and only 20% as liberal. Catholics were considerably more conservative than Jews (39% compared to 28%), and the Irish were the most conservative group recognized in the survey, with over half identifying as such.115 New Yorkers deemed crime and the rising cost of living the most pressing political topics. When asked to identify two or three issues of greatest concern, 63% of those surveyed mentioned crime and 28% noted the interrelated drug problem. Twenty percent cited the high cost of living and inflation. Racial discrimination was last on the list; only 3% of respondents identified it as a pressing concern.116 Just over half of New York City residents thought too much attention was paid to minorities, and the Irish, Italians, and those who lived in the outer boroughs felt most strongly that this attention was undeserved. Brooklynnites and the Irish were also most likely to agree that the city had become a “welfare dumping ground for the rest of the nation” – a sentiment with which 63% of New Yorkers agreed.117 As the survey showed, by the mid-1970s the white working-class backlash was in full swing. Crime and economic concerns were the most pressing issues for Brooklyn Catholics, but, from their perspective, the city only appeared interested in providing for blacks and welfare loafers. Lindsay’s brand of liberalism – which stressed the expansion of the welfare state and remedying racial discrimination above all else – faded from the New York political landscape.

Conclusion

In their 1970 annual Labor Day statement, the American Catholic Bishops took stock of the Church’s position in the nation’s urban centers. Their portrait of American cities was grim: confidence in public and private agencies had substantially eroded, class and racial antagonisms were high, and people were struggling economically. These problems, they contended, were wrought by the failures of urban institutions that had ignored the needs of working-class whites. The Church, too, had failed to act as a bulwark to the white backlash. “In the present vacuum of concern by government, the foundations, the universities, and the Church, the danger is terribly real that the demagogues of hate will prey on the anguish of these communities,” they wrote, “and will further divide those who should be natural allies in rendering the priorities of our society in the interest in human needs.” As they had done for decades, the hierarchy insisted that the Church had a special obligation to address America’s urban ills. “The urban crisis,” they wrote,

At its core, is a human and moral crisis. Thus the importance of the Catholic Church in helping to relieve it. The Church in this country has traditionally been an urban church. Its institutions represent a crucial force that might well be decisive in restoring our cities and determining the future life-style of urban Americans.¹

The Catholic Church provided essential social services such as housing, health care, education, and programs aimed at fulfilling people’s most basic needs, including food and clothing. These programs were indispensable in the lives of many urban Catholics. The Church’s efforts, however, were largely ameliorative. They could not halt or reverse

¹ Brooklyn Tablet, 3 September 1970.
the larger structural mechanisms – suburbanization, deindustrialization, and the movement of capital over the city’s municipal borders and abroad – that crippled American cities.

While its institutional strength could not overcome the capital drain in American cities, the Catholic Church’s calls for unity, justice, and brotherhood were not enough to surmount their parishioners’ economic and social realities. The profound sense of neglect and alienation white urban Catholics felt would be decisive in the growth of the conservative movement that eventually led to Ronald Reagan’s election as president in 1980. At the beginning of 1970, neoconservative Norman Podhoretz made a prediction.

“The 1970s are going to be a different period,” he wrote in the *Washington Post*.

Just as the black assertion set the climate of the 60s, I think you’ll find a comparable Catholic, white-ethnic assertion in the 70s. You have 40 million Catholics in the United States. They’ve never been organized as a political bloc around their resentments. Black assertion demystified political processes. But you can’t stop there. You have an enormously potent force here, in this Catholic minority.

“This Catholic assertion,” he concluded, “will set the agenda for the 1970s.”²

Podhoretz’s inklings were prescient, and politicians moved to capitalize on the resentment of the Catholic working class. Indeed, it became a chief focus of Richard Nixon’s tactics. Kevin Phillips, his political strategist, argued that “Given the considerable 1960-1968 Nixon trend among Catholics in and around New York City, together with the sizeable majority given Nixon and other conservative candidates, there can be no doubt that the New York City Catholics – the Irish in particular – are joining the new Southern and Western conservative Republican coalition in its struggle with

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liberal Northeastern Democrats.” And it was Pete Hamill’s 1969 *New York Magazine* piece, “The Revolt of the White Lower Middle Class,” which featured Hamill’s candid conversations with working-class men in a number of Brooklyn’s Irish bars, that helped solidify Nixon’s strategy. Though the tavern dwellers in the article expressed palpable anger toward the city’s black residents, Hamill concluded that they were actually in revolt against high taxes, stagnant wages, and declining opportunities for social mobility. “Any politician who leaves that white man out of his political question,” Hamill warned, “does so at very large risk.” Nixon, who read the piece only months after entering office and circulated it widely among his staff, heeded Hamill’s words. The article reinforced what the president already suspected: the white working class felt slighted, and they were looking for a voice. It also identified specific sources of antagonism the president could exploit. While the men Hamill interviewed in Brooklyn’s Catholic enclaves expressed concern about bread and butter issues, Nixon chose to focus on their intense feelings of alienation. He resorted to identity politics, railing against elites, intellectuals, and the counterculture, while encouraging a return to true “American values.” The discontent of the white working-class man – who was often Catholic and living in a deindustrializing city – became the basis upon which the New Right was built.

This dissertation is an attempt to understand this political shift, and argues that while Church teachings are important in forming Catholic political beliefs, so are the ways these beliefs mingle with the lived experiences of the laity. The origins of the racial enmity and political decoupling examined in this study stretch back to the early decades.

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of the twentieth century, when the North’s industrial economy and more liberal racial attitude encouraged a massive northward migration of black southerners. Between 1900 and 1940, the black population of Brooklyn grew from 18,367 to 107,263, and it nearly doubled over the next decade.\(^6\) This engendered mixed responses from the borough’s Catholics. The diocese began carefully monitoring and recording the racial makeup of their parishes, and white parishioners and priests who lived and ministered in racially-transitioning neighborhoods created ways to defend their parish boundaries. Priests like Msgr. John Belford relegated worship services for black Catholics to the church basement and, after the diocese created a parish exclusively for black Catholic in 1922, he began directing his non-white coreligionists to attend services at “their” parish. As Msgr. Belford provided vocal opposition to the movement of African Americans into his parish, a number of other priests – influenced by the Church’s growing interracial movement – encouraged Catholics to accept the city’s new residents. The actions of Catholics who joined the local chapter of the Catholic Interracial Council were aimed at enhancing Christian brotherhood, but also preventing the growth of communism among the city’s African Americans.

After the conclusion of the Second World War, the Church also had to contend with the forces of suburbanization, which drew large numbers of white parishioners beyond Brooklyn’s diocesan and municipal boundaries. As Mass attendance and parish collections plummeted in northern urban dioceses, the Church’s national leadership struggled to produce a prescription for racially-changing parishes. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Charities encouraged parish priests to institute education programs aimed at...

increasing interracial understanding but, as priests in areas like Brownsville and Bedford-Stuyvesant found, these were ineffective in the face of plummeting real estate values and the decline in city services that followed. Priests in these Brooklyn neighborhoods were forced to create largely improvisational parish “conservation” programs. They focused their efforts on converting non-whites to the faith, using parish schools, recreation facilities, and on-the-ground outreach campaigns to build a bridge between the white-led institution and the black residents who now lived within their parish boundaries.

Developments in these parishes were crucial to the later political direction of the diocese. The increasing number of black parishioners brought the spirit of the Black Freedom Movement to the Church and their contact with the clergy who staffed the parishes fostered the growth of a progressive, social justice-oriented cohort of priests and nuns.

In neighborhoods like Greenpoint, Williamsburg, and Canarsie, which had large white working-class Catholic populations and bordered non-white neighborhoods, parishioners and their priests took steps to fortify their parish boundaries against the threat of black encroachment. Catholics in these neighborhoods had little contact with African Americans, and tended to downplay the negative impact of discriminatory housing practices. Their preoccupation with communism also blinded them to the legitimate grievances of Brooklyn’s black population, and they often dismissed the emerging civil rights struggle as communist-backed agitation. The threat of black movement into their neighborhoods, however, loomed large. The city’s expansion of postwar housing, social, and welfare programs, they charged, unfairly benefitted non-whites, hastened the expansion of slums, and endangered white working-class neighborhoods. Politically, they were drawn to candidates and organizers who rallied
against these city programs and asserted that whites had the right to control the borders of their neighborhoods. Local parishes, too, attempted to slow integration by purchasing and retaining property in the vicinity of the church to guard against its acquisition by “undesirables.”

By the time the Second Vatican Council concluded in 1965, there were already ideological fractures within the Church, but the reforms of the Council made them public. It encouraged Catholics to become more involved in worldly, secular affairs, and lent legitimacy to the political activities of the religious working in predominantly-black parishes in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brownsville, and Fort Greene. These nuns, priests, and their parishioners – who daily contended with the city’s failures to provide adequate social services in the borough’s poorest neighborhoods – spearheaded rent strikes, built and rehabilitated housing, and fought for the rights of welfare recipients. Their actions were sanctioned by the Second Vatican Council, inspired by their Christian faith, and overwhelmingly funded by public money. That the initial outburst of activity in the years immediately following the Council proved to be short-lived was not a result of dispiritedness, but a consequence of cuts to the Great Society’s anti-poverty funding. While Catholic hospitals, for example, continued to receive large funding streams, smaller, locally-oriented programs like Catholics United for Social Action barely survived into the 1970s.

Black parishes were sites of activism, but they also became spaces of tension. As the laity became increasingly militant, especially in their embrace of Black Power, the Church remained a white-dominated institution. Some black Catholics, like Rev. Lucas, argued that the Catholic Church was attempting to turn its black parishioners into
politically-impotent “white-faced black people.”

Inspired by the events in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, as well as the increased sense of power bestowed on the laity by Vatican II, black Catholics and other community residents called for control of Church-run facilities. Despite the diocese’s embrace of a progressive social justice-oriented agenda – supporting open housing and the expansion of welfare, for example – local pastors and diocesan leaders were unwilling to cede control of their schools and churches to Black Power militants. Much of the black laity, who wished to see their parishes function simply as spaces of spiritual worship, also pushed back. Political battles within individual parishes demonstrated the contested nature of parish spaces in the post-Vatican II Church. They were simultaneously places of worship, militancy, and activism, and while these purposes could overlap, they often clashed.

The increasing militancy of black Catholics and the white liberal clergy occurred alongside the growing conservatism of the borough’s white working-class laity. Disturbed by an increase in crime, and by a mayor who seemed more interested in catering to criminals, protestors, and minorities, Catholics began voting for conservative politicians who stressed the importance of law and order, opposed the expansion of welfare and anti-poverty funding, and argued for greater protections for police officers. They also forcefully registered their discontent with civil rights by overwhelmingly voting to dismantle Mayor John Lindsay’s Civilian Complaint Review Board, which, they contended, was merely an attempt to appease vocal minority groups. The CCRB episode also revealed the Church’s apprehension to speak out on controversial and racially-charged issues. After Vatican II, conservative Catholics were less willing to

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accept the Church’s pronouncements on issues they deemed “political.” The Church could tout a vague social doctrine, but issues of politics were left up individuals to determine. Progressive clergy treaded careful, and admitted that they often spoke from personal conviction rather than as representatives of the Church.

By the early 1970s, fueled by a deep sense of frustration, a palpable backlash exploded among white working-class Catholics. These men and women felt culturally marginalized and, increasingly, politically powerless. The City of New York and its liberal establishment refused to recognize or address their legitimate grievances, which included inadequate city services, exorbitant taxes, unstable work, and stagnant wages. Even the Catholic Church, which they loyally supported with their heard-earned contributions, appeared to be more interested in ministering to the borough’s poor blacks and Puerto Ricans. In an attempt to separate themselves from the privilege of whiteness that politicians like Mayor Lindsay suggested delegitimized their complaints, Catholics embraced an ethnic identity. They, too, were disadvantaged minorities and deserving of government support. The construction of an ethnic identity was revealing: Catholics were not necessarily opposed to an expansive welfare state so long as they received access to its programs and services. When the city failed in adequately extend political and economic power to Brooklyn’s white working-class men and women, they vehemently rejected the liberalism that no longer appeared to support them.

The twentieth-century Catholic political realignment – from New Dealers to a crucial part of the conservative coalition – was inextricably connected to larger economic, political, and social forces in American society. The urban crisis and its attendant social upheavals, which shifted many Catholics to the suburbs and left those in
the city center with fewer resources and a growing sense of disaffection, played a crucial role in driving Brooklyn Catholics toward their opposition to liberalism. This also cannot be understood apart from race. The Great Migration altered the racial demographics of New York City, and activists in the northern Black Freedom Movement won expanded access to resources and opportunities for those who faced social, economic, and political discrimination. Despite the Catholics Church’s increasingly supportive stance on civil rights legislation and persistent calls to extend Christian brotherhood to those of all races, the white laity grew progressively more resentful of black advancement. They fortified the parish boundaries to stop the physical encroachment of African Americans while slowly abandoning their support for the liberal welfare state. By the 1970s, Brooklyn’s working-class white Catholics were united more by their feelings of resentment and dispossession than a coherent political agenda, but this attitude would nevertheless have a major impact on both New York City and the nation.

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This study is an attempt to illuminate relations between African Americans and Catholics and, more specifically, to understand Catholic reactions to the desegregation movement. New York City is an exceptional place, and its unique political, economic, and social dynamics colored black-Catholic relations. It is, and remains, arguably politically farther to the left than any other American city. New York retained a viable and influential cohort of Communists, ex-Communists, and liberals that influenced its political landscape well into the postwar era. This liberal, cosmopolitan attitude, coupled
with a large and politically-engaged black community, nurtured the strong (and, at times, militant) Black Freedom Movement in New York City. The Brooklyn Diocese – perhaps the most hardline anti-communist urban diocese in the nation – existed somewhat uneasily in this setting. The movement appeared politically suspect to Brooklyn Catholics, and the borough’s deindustrialization compounded their skepticism of black advancement and integration. The fall of the industrial order created an economically insecure Catholic working class at the same time black New Yorkers made social and political advances, thereby increasing tension between the two groups. Brooklyn is a case study in extremes: it combined a leftist political establishment with an exceptionally conservative Catholic working class in a space that was particularly hard-hit by industrial decline.

Historians have only tentatively begun to explore how black-Catholic relations played out in other American cities, and much work remains to be done to determine to what degree Brooklyn is both atypical and representative. Understanding this relationship is especially important in the North, where Catholics composed between one-third and nearly two-thirds of urban residents. In *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, Thomas Sugrue provided glimpses into Catholic-black relations in Detroit, where the working-class was perhaps even more strongly defined by its Catholicism than its counterpart in Brooklyn. In the mid-1950s, Catholics likely made up 75 to 80% of the Detroit’s white population. A survey conducted in the early 1950s found that the city’s Catholics were significantly more likely than Protestants to harbor unfavorable feelings towards blacks, and Sugrue outlined particularly vehement and violent opposition to black movement into Catholic
neighborhoods. Chicago, too, witnessed degrees of violence that far exceeded anything that followed desegregation measures in Brooklyn, and Arnold Hirsch’s work illuminated the “massive resistance” the city’s Catholics mounted against integration efforts. He showed, for example, that despite the efforts of the city’s Catholic Interracial Council, black residents who integrated the all-white Trumbull Park housing project in the early 1950s suffered nearly ten years of violence. Black Catholic women who attempted to attend the local Catholic Church required police escort and, when they attended Mass on their own, a white parishioner attacked one of the women as she exited the church after Mass.

Violence broke out between black and Catholic Brooklynites, as in 1966 when Italians, blacks, and Puerto Ricans in East New York engaged in a near-riot. But violence between Catholics and non-whites was sporadic and the points of contention ill-defined. In cities like Detroit and Chicago, however, outburst of violence emerged specifically out of attempts to further neighborhood integration. Significantly, Catholics in these cities were far more likely to be homeowners than their coreligionists in Brooklyn, and this produced a greater propensity for violence. In Detroit, Sugrue noted, Catholics played an important role in homeowners’ organizations, which were oftentimes promoted by priests. The neighborhoods that mounted the fiercest resistance to racial integration tended to be “ethnically heterogeneous, with sizeable Roman Catholic populations.” These neighborhoods also had higher rates of homeownership than the citywide

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average.\textsuperscript{10} Hirsch, too, illustrated that in riots between blacks and whites in Chicago during the 1940s and 1950s, participants were largely working-class Catholics, and these Chicagoans were far more likely to be homeowners than non-Catholics.\textsuperscript{11} White Catholic New Yorkers indisputably attempted to control the borders of their neighborhoods, but they often lacked financial investment in property and, as a result, their conflicts with African Americans tended to focus on issues of political power and access to resources.

Black-Catholic relations also varied based on the activism of local priests, as well as the temperament of the diocese. Liberal Catholic wings emerged in dioceses throughout the North, especially after the Second Vatican Council, but the degree to which liberal Catholics engaged in civil rights activism was heavily dependent on the amount of freedom they were granted by diocesan leadership. Though Brooklyn fostered its own group of activist priests, their militancy was far more muted than in other cities. They were no strangers to protest, but activist priests in Brooklyn tended to focus their efforts on local community development initiatives like housing and access to welfare services. Nowhere was militant Catholic civil rights activism more apparent than in Milwaukee. “Although Milwaukee activists espoused many of the tenets of ‘Black Power’ – years before that slogan echoed across the Mississippi Delta – its most prominent leader,” Patrick Jones argued in his account of the city’s civil rights insurgency, “was a white Catholic priest, Father James Groppi.” Prominent figures like Father Groppi altered the way black urbanites viewed the Church. Catholics doctrine, he demonstrated, was wholly consistent with the movement for black liberation. However,

his presence also created an especially vehement backlash from white parishioners. In one protest against housing segregation, angry white spectators hung an effigy of the priest, and others chanted “E-I-E-I-E-I-O, Father Groppi’s got to go.”\footnote{12} The racial and political fault-lines in Milwaukee were much the same as those in Brooklyn, but they were intensified by the presence of white priests on the frontlines of black activism.

Of course, black Catholic activism depended on more than a sympathetic diocese or the attention of white priests. In Detroit, while white Catholics mounted a defense against integration, black Catholics fought to achieve more power within the Church itself. According to Nancy Davis, their militancy was legitimized by the reforms of Vatican II and dependent on two factors: the sheer size of the black Catholic community – and the percentage of African Americans as a proportion of the population more generally – and the black political organization that developed out of the labor movement. Black Catholics formed powerful lay Catholic organizations and, by the end of the 1960, Archbishop John Dearden became “perhaps an unwilling leader of a loosely organized laity that permitted a moderate and classical black Catholic voice to assume some leadership while enabling more radical forms of black discontent to rise to the surface.”\footnote{13} Brooklyn had high rates of unionization, but, because manufacturing firms were limited by small land parcels and high real estate values, shops tended to be small and, therefore, did not foster the same forms of labor solidarity as Detroit. Additionally, New York City’s economy was more highly diversified than the Motor City’s.\footnote{14} The case

\footnote{12} Patrick D. Jones, \textit{The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 7, 2.
in Detroit suggests that historians need to examine how the Church’s sympathy to the labor movement intersected with its commitment to civil rights, how unions influenced black Catholic militancy, and how the labor movement might have built connections between black and white Catholics.

America’s western cities offer another lens to view black and Catholic relations. Their black populations tended to be smaller than that of Brooklyn and, as a result, there were far fewer black Catholics. In San Francisco in the early 1960s, for example, only 1.4% of the Catholic population was black. This fact, William Issel argued, meant the San Francisco Archdiocese did not have to contend with race to the same degree as those in northern cities, and that the city’s white Catholics “tended to minimize the seriousness of racism in their midst.” But, along with a robust leftist political tradition, California also produced a distinctive, property-right-based libertarianism that colored race relations. This was exemplified in Proposition 14, a 1964 ballot measure that sought to overturn the Rumford Fair Housing Act. Issel’s history of the Catholic Church in San Francisco highlighted the strong Catholic opposition to Proposition 14, evidence of the somewhat exceptional liberalism of San Francisco’s Catholics. Activism appeared to be strongest in parishes in the Haight-Ashbury and Western Addition neighborhoods, which were among the most racially-mixed in the city. In contrast, Catholics who lived in more racially homogenous and largely upper-middle class areas supported the measure. In the wealthy Richmond District, Catholics expressed hostility to integration-oriented legislation, and in Los Gatos, a town sixty miles south of San Francisco in Santa Clara County, Catholics from 60 parishes organized a group to support Proposition 14.15

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like this one offer historians a way to not only examine black and Catholic relations, but to highlight how those relations impacted the politics of lay Catholics.

Jim Crow created a different set of social and political customs that shaped black and Catholic relations in the South. A 2007 dissertation by Justin Poche illustrated the particularly vehement, violent, and public demonstrations of white Catholic opposition to integration in New Orleans and the rest of Louisiana. Unlike Brooklyn, many of these actions took place within the facilities of the Church itself, partially attributable to the fact that the state had a large black Catholic population. In Merrero, Louisiana in 1959, for instance, two high school students sat in the front pews of their church, rather than at the back where they were expected to sit. In response, several white parishioners severely beat the teenagers. Poche also showed that Catholics in the South created a “distinct theology of racial difference and social place,” arguing, for example, that black Louisianans possessed suspect moral standards and would thus expose white Catholics to moral relativism. Integration, they insisted, represented a spiritual danger and threat to natural law. In contrast, Catholic in cities like Brooklyn largely accepted the Christian insistence on racial equality while simply ignoring or dismissing Church directives to further integration. Jim Crow also contributed to the crisis in authority, and tension between priests and parishioners predated Vatican II. “Segregation should be no concern of yours!” a New Orleanian Catholic wrote to her interracialist priest in 1959. “It is hoped that you will forget all that unhappiness, and believe and love God more, and live as he wants you to do – ‘saving souls.’”

“The Church,” Rev. Lawrence Lucas’ astutely observed, “always manages to be a part of the society in which it is.” In postwar America, Catholics and their church reflected the nation’s patterns of racial turmoil and structural and persistent inequality. Since Vatican II, however, the Church has explicitly called on its followers to challenge society in light of the Gospel. “Our goal is not to amass information or to satisfy curiosity,” Pope Francis wrote in the 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si’*, “but rather to become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it.” Whether one acts as a reflection of society or challenges injustices in the name of the Gospel was – and remains – one of the central tensions in the lives of American Catholics.

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