

50 years after crisis, Church reflects on silence

written by Tara Little |



Fifty years ago, segregation was just "understood" in the South. It was not only a part of the culture; state laws enforced it.

Under the Jim Crow "separate but equal" laws, public facilities were maintained for both black and white citizens. This included schools, bathrooms, even water fountains. On buses, blacks sat in the back. In movie theaters, they sat in the balcony. Even churches were segregated.

This month marks the 50th anniversary of the "Central High Crisis" in Little Rock. Though the Catholic Church in Arkansas was not directly involved, this shameful event, like so many others of its time, challenged the Church to take a long, hard look at her "silent acceptance" of segregation.

Segregation confronted

John Gillam, 88, said everyone knew where blacks could go and what they could say or do. "Your parents told you what your place was," he said.

Gillam, a lifelong parishioner of St. Bartholomew Church in Little Rock, said at stores "you were probably going to get waited on last" if at all.

Fear of violence maintained this practice until the court system began to step in. In its 1954

Brown v. Board of Education decision, the U.S. Supreme Court declared segregated public schools unconstitutional.

In the Diocese of Little Rock, Bishop Albert Fletcher saw the landmark decision as an opportunity for change. In an Aug. 3, 1954, letter to all the state's Catholics, he wrote that even though Catholic schools are private, it is "a mistaken idea" to think that they would stay segregated.

He explained that the diocese had operated separate churches and schools because of the state's laws. The court's decision "clears the way legally for the Church to act more freely in giving to all races the same benefits."

The bishop did not indicate a timeline for the integration of schools. "It is practically impossible for such a change to be made effective immediately in all places," he wrote.

However, "the goal of the Church in the diocese will be that 'no Catholic student is refused admission to a Catholic school on account of race or color.'"

On May 21, 1954, *The Guardian*, now *Arkansas Catholic*, reported there were 900 black Catholics in Arkansas. Eight elementary and two high schools operated in black parishes. Of the 964 enrolled, only 197 were Catholic.

In response to the court's decision, many Arkansas public school districts, such as Little Rock, stalled by writing integration plans and filing legal motions, while others proceeded with integration.

In August 1954, Charleston (Franklin County) became the first public school in the former Confederacy to admit black students. Fayetteville followed the next month, while Hoxie (Lawrence County) ended segregation in July 1955. The school closed in August because of white opposition but reopened in October after a federal court barred opponents.

Plans to desegregate schools in North Little Rock, Fort Smith, Ozark (Franklin County) and Van Buren were set for the fall of 1957, along with Central High School in Little Rock.

Crisis erupts

By September, efforts to prevent the integration of Central High failed, so Gov. Orval Faubus deployed the Arkansas National Guard "to keep peace" as the world's attention turned to Little Rock.

Outside the school, thousands of protesters turned into an angry mob and troops turned away black students on Sept. 4. The federal court ordered the governor not to interfere. By Sept. 24, President Dwight Eisenhower federalized the Arkansas National Guard and sent in members of the 101st Airborne Division to assist. On Sept. 25, all nine black students were finally allowed to enter the school. A military presence remained for the rest of the school year.

All Little Rock public schools were closed for the 1958-59 school year and reopened in August

1959 when the federal court declared the closings unconstitutional.

Father Thomas Keller, 74, pastor of St. Rose of Lima Church in Carlisle and Holy Trinity Church in England, was among the crowd when the National Guard escorted the "Little Rock Nine" into Central High on Sept. 25, 1957. He was in his final year at St. John Home Mission Seminary. He said he and other seminarians went because of the historic significance. "We knew it was a very important event because it was the first time (a state) had defied the federal government since the Civil War."

Church reacts, slowly

The Church in Arkansas was not quick to respond. The first mention of events at Central High appeared in *The Guardian*, Sept. 20, with a front-page editorial blasting the press for its use of "scare headlines" to escalate the crisis. It went on to state: "Integration is the law, and it is wrong to interfere with its peaceful integration."

The Providence Visitor, the Diocese of Providence, R.I., newspaper, ran two articles Sept. 12, 1957, from the National Catholic Welfare Conference, now Catholic News Service, run by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

One article reported that *L'Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican's newspaper, sharply criticized Gov. Faubus for defying a federal court order to integrate schools. The other article said Bishop Fletcher had not issued a statement regarding the crisis. An anonymous Arkansas priest was quoted as saying, "Look, we number less than one-half of one percent of the population. If we stick our neck out right now, we'll accomplish exactly nothing, except to get it chopped off."

At the time, the Diocese of Little Rock had 85 parishes with 45,000 Catholics. The article also explained that the diocese had long struggled with anti-Catholicism among its mostly European immigrant population.

The next month, Bishop Fletcher asked Little Rock Catholics to attend prayer services to pray for a peaceful resolution to the crisis, according to an Oct. 11 issue of *The Guardian*. The services were planned after a conference with area Jewish and Protestant leaders.

"I join wholeheartedly with the leaders of the other churches in this effort to find a peaceful solution to our problems. Violence breeds only hatred and injustice, not peace and mutual understanding," the bishop said.

Not a religious issue

Msgr. John O'Donnell, 79, now retired, had only been a priest for three years in 1957. He was teaching at Catholic High School in Little Rock.

The Church's response, he said, was the same as other churches: The feeling was that it was a political issue and not a religious one.

"The whole religious body — and that means across the board, all denominations — stayed away from this thing like it was a disease. There was no response from the churches at all," Msgr. O'Donnell said. "And most of the preachers, frankly, were in favor of segregation."

Msgr. O'Donnell, a Pennsylvania native, said the Catholic Church like many other churches had a habit of keeping to itself, a kind of "ghetto mentality" that didn't really get involved in the outside world.

"When we were in school as kids, the biggest sins were missing Mass and (having) sex. We never heard anything about justice, about blacks, about Jews."

Father Keller, who grew up in Little Rock, said, "We maintained separate churches, there were no blacks that came to the white churches and vice versa, we just silently approved of segregation."

"Down under we knew better, something was wrong," he said. "We didn't know the answer to it."

Bringing about change

After the "Central High Crisis," Gillam and his wife Louise were raising 15 children, most of whom were attending St. Bartholomew School, as their parents had. At that time the school served grades 1-12.

St. Bartholomew was a good school, he said, but it wasn't fully equipped and was very expensive to maintain. "And the main thing for me was there was no liaison between the school and Catholic colleges for scholarships to be offered for our graduates."

Gillam said he and two other men from the parish joined Msgr. O'Donnell and other priests in forming a Catholic Interracial Council in 1960.

The council "felt that the bishop didn't do enough during the crisis to help and as a religious leader he should have said something," Gillam said. "And maybe that was the thing that pushed us a little bit. ... We couldn't understand a Church that says it's universal and that it's a Church of all people, and yet it had its rules and regulations in the South."

The council wanted to desegregate the all-boys Catholic High and all-girls Mount St. Mary Academy in Little Rock, he said.

Gillam was labeled a "rebel" and even faced opposition in his own parish. The council, he said, was even under observation by the Federal Bureau of Investigation as a suspected "communist" group.

"I doubt any of us knew what communism meant," Gillam said with a laugh. "All we talked about was religious things."

Msgr. O'Donnell said the fear was that "integration was a communist tactic to break down American civilization and to unite all the races."

"You have to understand the climate in the United States at that time," he said. "It was a great witch hunt all over the place. There were 'communists' everywhere."

The council arranged to meet with Bishop Fletcher about integrating the schools, Gillam said.

"He was a wonderful bishop. He sort of had his hands tied," Gillam said.

Catholic High had just built a new school in 1961 and there was a concern that integration might hurt financial support, he said, so the council determined not to push the bishop if he wasn't ready.

"We didn't demonstrate. We did it all in private discussions with him. In fact, when he told us he would integrate Catholic High, it caught us off guard," Gillam said. "When we went to the meeting, the first thing out of (the bishop's) mouth was, 'We will integrate Catholic High this fall.'"

By 1962 both Catholic High and Mount St. Mary accepted black students. Five of Gillam's six sons graduated from Catholic High and six of his nine daughters graduated from Mount St. Mary.

The Catholic Interracial Council "did a lot of work," Gillam said. In addition to the schools mentioned, the group brought about the integration of St. Vincent Infirmery, the Catholic Daughters of America and the Knights of Columbus.

Speaking out

In 1960 Bishop Fletcher wrote "An Elementary Catholic Catechism on the Morality of Segregation and Racial Discrimination." The booklet includes 72 questions and answers. It was designed for all parishes to study and discuss during Lent. *Time* magazine, among others, wrote about the catechism. In it the bishop wrote, "Segregation as we know it in Arkansas is immoral. ... The Church condemns racism as contrary to its teachings that all men are inherently and naturally equal."

Throughout the 1960s, religious groups formed in Little Rock to discuss race issues. The Greater Little Rock Conference on Religion and Human Relations met to promote education in solving racial problems. Through this group, Bishop Fletcher joined other religious leaders in issuing, "A Pastoral Letter on Race and Conscience" in 1963.

Father Warren Harvey, 53, the diocese's first black priest, said it is easier now to second-guess Bishop Fletcher, "but if you're living at the time, things are different, you have take it a day at a time, an issue at a time, and at least he stood his ground. He couldn't force the people to change their minds, but he was at least exhibiting moral leadership in how we ought to be thinking, how we ought to be acting."

50 years later

Father Harvey, liaison for the Diocesan Council of Black Catholics, said it is important "to remember where we've been" to appreciate how far the Church has come.

He observed that today he is pastor of the predominately white St. Joseph Church, while a white pastor, Father Donald Murrin, SVD, leads the predominately black St. Peter Church. Both are in Pine Bluff.

And "the fact that we've got a lot of African priests in white parishes says that we have grown, we have learned something," Father Harvey said. "People are very respectful of their priests ... (they) are just happy to have a priest."

Currently 15 African priests serve in diocesan parishes. Father Harvey remains the only black diocesan priest.

"The Church has grown infinitely in Arkansas and all over the South in terms of race relations," Msgr. O'Donnell said. "I think the whole notion of social justice in the Catholic mind has grown."

These days the Church often speaks out for human rights, particularly in the areas of abortion, euthanasia, the death penalty and advocating for the poor and immigrants.

Though great strides have been made, Msgr. O'Donnell said today's racism is more subtle and systematic. "The system is so pervasive and so steep and so subtle that it works against black people."

In the Church, Father Harvey said, especially with the influx of Hispanics, more efforts should be made to be culturally sensitive.

"After 2,000 years, we're never done. The Church is never done. She is always perfectible. The Church is reformable. The Church is in need of redemption always and to do that is a hard job," Msgr. O'Donnell said.

"We got to keep going. We're not there yet, but we got to keep going until we get there. That's the Promised Land that Dr. (Martin Luther) King talked about," Father Harvey said. "We as Catholics will get to that point when we realize that we're sisters and brothers. We're a long, long way from sitting in the back of a church."

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