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How Southern Jesuit Universities Handled Racism in the Past

By Justin Poché

As a U.S. historian whose research explores racial justice, I seek to offer students a long view of present conversations about race. Seeing the past from the vantage of the present, we may want to critique earlier civil rights leaders and social policies as limited and insufficient. We might also criticize debates about our individual and collective identities – racial, ethnic, cultural, religious, or national – as diversions from a more inclusive struggle for democratic and economic rights.

But if historical scholarship offers any lesson, it is to avoid condemning or venerating in retrospect what ought to be seen on its own terms. As we seek to engage in difficult, though necessary, conversations about race today, we ought to understand these terms – the ways people in the past sought to make sense of the moral and political challenges before them.

Both Loyola University of Louisiana and Spring Hill College in Mobile, Alabama, exemplified the challenges of advancing racial justice in the mid 20th century. While these campus communities,

often at the urging of the Jesuit province with which they were affiliated, provided important outlets for confronting Jim Crow, they also generated a fair amount of racism.

As early as the 1930s, for example, Spring Hill offered racially integrated Saturday extension education programs, and in 1954, well before other southern universities integrated, the first full-time African-American students arrived. While such developments won praise from Martin Luther King, Jr., in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” Loyola, which did not integrate undergraduates until 1962, experienced a more protracted struggle. Located in an elite New Orleans neighborhood, the majority-white Loyola community lived and performed racial injustice in multiple ways. Loyola’s Knights of Columbus-sponsored fraternity held black-face minstrel shows. Major donors funded anti-civil rights talk radio out of Loyola’s WWL station. Even those Jesuits who boldly confronted discrimination on campus faced as much hostility from members of their own Jesuit community as they did from the national business

leaders and local Klan and Citizens’ Council operatives who flooded their mailboxes.

Nevertheless, like Spring Hill, Loyola challenged barriers to racial equality. Like a number of northern Jesuit schools, it sponsored an Institute for Industrial Relations, through which its leader, Louis J. Twomey, S.J., brought local workers and managers together to collaborate in building a moral economy, including efforts at promoting racial justice. Twomey also worked with the Southern Tenant Farmer’s Union, which was majority African-American, to expose business leaders who used racism to stoke white prejudice to maintain low wages for their workers. His effort to cultivate an economy in which people were collectively responsible to one another, regardless of what distinguished them, was particularly noteworthy given that the drift of economic thought in the 1950s was toward celebrating individualism and consumerism.

Another Loyola Jesuit, sociologist Joseph Fichter, challenged Jim Crow by engaging students in

an early form of community-based learning, sending students and other community volunteers to document racism within local Catholic parishes. With Twomey, he sponsored the student-led Southeast Regional Interracial Commission and its counterpart in the wider community, the Commission on Human Rights. These organizations sponsored “Interracial Sundays” and hosted public lectures that countered white supremacist talking points with a balance of social data and theological teachings that emphasized the unity of all human persons.

At the same time, both of these Loyola groups shared an abiding sense of Catholic superiority that limited their ability to reach out beyond the campus community. Characteristically, one advertisement urged students to join the movement in order to “do something for Christ *and His religion* while getting an education” (emphasis added). At interfaith, city-wide gatherings of college students, student leaders lamented that non-Catholic attendees seemed immune to the Catholic theological principles that undergirded interracial efforts at Loyola. Others located the roots of segregationism in the teaching of 16th-

century reformer Martin Luther and an inferior Protestant mentality that, unlike Catholic doctrine, made religion “a purely personal... subjective thing.”

By the 1960s, new federal civil rights legislation, along with the Second Vatican Council and its affirmative emphasis on ecumenical engagement and social activism, fed a new wave of campus conversations about race and sparked new efforts to promote racial justice. In this moment, campus leaders testified, the limiting focus on Catholic doctrine melted away as the struggles for political and economic rights throughout the Deep South became vital sources of moral reflection and formation. Students joined other colleges in efforts to integrate local businesses through boycotts and sit-ins, and Loyola students demanded that the university add a section on civil rights to its required ethics course.

Though much has changed since then, such struggles can spark reflection and caution for students today. Past efforts to challenge the structural sources of inequality at the local level provide a history of collaborative efforts within which project-centered, community-based education can be understood today.

Additionally, it is important to remember that, then as now, students brought questions of identity – sometimes uneasy efforts to authenticate or challenge their own social, cultural, and ideological inheritance – into their encounters with racial oppression. Such reflective practice was and remains a central aspect of Jesuit higher education.

Yet as campus communities proceed from their contemplative roles, they must heed the warning of one past Loyola student, who lamented that “too much talking of principles instead of techniques” undermined collaborative efforts to advance justice by dividing people into ideological camps. Today, the “too much talking of principles” arguably takes the shape of what might be called an “outrage culture” that invites moralistic posturing in the place of concrete action. As another Loyola veteran admonished Spring Hill students in 1961, “Not only will they be required to preach justice and charity, but they will have to act it out in their daily activities.”

What we need today, as in the past, is for Jesuit colleges and universities to determine how they might, as institutions, foster techniques and practices that concretely advance racial justice. In doing so, they would be making more fruitful today’s difficult but necessary conversations on race.

Justin Poché is an associate professor of history at the College of the Holy Cross whose research explores how 20th-century U.S. Catholics engaged the problems of racism and environmental degradation.



“To create a society in which the dignity of the human person, in whomsoever found, shall be acknowledged, respected, and protected.”

- Fr. Louis J. Twomey S. J.