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# Black Catholicism: religion and slavery in antebellum Louisiana

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BLACK CATHOLICISM:  
RELIGION AND SLAVERY IN ANTEBELLUM LOUISIANA

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
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in

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by  
Lori Renee Pastor  
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## ABSTRACT

The practice of Catholicism extended across racial boundaries in colonial Louisiana, and interracial worship continued to characterize the religious experience of Catholics throughout the antebellum period. French and Spanish missionaries baptized natives, settlers, and slaves, and the Catholic Church required Catholic planters to baptize and catechize their slaves. Most slaveholders outside New Orleans, however, were lax in the religious education of slaves. Work holidays did not always correspond to religious holy days, and the number of slave baptisms and confirmations on Catholic plantations often depended on the willingness of the local priest, or the slaves themselves, to attend the parish church.

Despite these limitations, enslaved persons in the river parishes of Louisiana integrated Catholic rituals into their expressions of spirituality. Slaves' uses of herbs, medicinal practices, Voodoo, ghostlore, and folk stories combined their experiences as enslaved persons and their contact with Catholic teachings to inform their worldviews and the Catholic-Christianity of all parishioners in southeast Louisiana.

For free women of color, the Catholic Church offered particular opportunities to extend their religious, social, and economic standings. In the river parishes outside New Orleans, free women of color demonstrated their piety and their financial resources by engaging in economic exchanges with local churches. In New Orleans proper, a group of free women of color formed the Sisters of the Holy Family, the first order solely for women of African-American descent in the city, in order to aid ill and needy blacks. Although the Catholic Church had neither unqualified success nor absolute failure among African-American parishioners during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the

experiences of free women of color in Louisiana proved that some blacks found religious as well as social and economic identity in the Catholic Church. Ultimately, the Catholic Church provided some degree of spiritual agency for those who incorporated—and changed—Catholic practices to fit into their lives.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

In colonial Louisiana, the Roman Catholic religion fashioned the lives of natives and settlers, free and enslaved alike. From Indian and African slaves, to Jesuit priests, to free women of color in New Orleans, individuals often explained who they were or expanded their roles within their families and societies in religious terms. Eighteenth-century French missionaries baptized indiscriminate of race and sanctioned interracial Catholic unions, hoping to build a Catholic colony of settlers and natives. While some French leaders argued against French-Indian marriages, and even against the extension of sacramental rights to black slaves, many authorized interracial marriages as biologically solidifying French claims to the area and universal access to the sacraments as ensuring the peaceful acculturation of Native Americans and black slaves.<sup>1</sup> For the colonists in Louisiana, religion also provided a layer of identity that shaped their personal lives and their involvement in a wider, culturally and racially heterogeneous society.<sup>2</sup> Particularly, in the rural parishes of southeast Louisiana, Roman Catholicism provided a venue for religious, as well as social and economic, opportunities for enslaved and free African Americans.

Religious education played a vital role in establishing and maintaining a Catholic worldview among all genders and races. Within early colonial settlements, Jesuit and

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<sup>1</sup> Jerah Johson, "Colonial New Orleans: A Fragment of the Eighteenth-Century French Ethos," in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, ed. Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 19-23, 34-5. Although French Catholic missionary priests authorized interracial marriages, the practice remained controversial, especially among authorities in France. See Charles Edwards O'Neill, *Church and State in French Colonial Louisiana: Policy and Politics to 1732* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 72, 86, 248-55 for an example of Jean-Baptiste Le Mayne de Bienville's protest against such a marriage and for the Comte de Pontchartrain's distress over Louisiana as a "wifeless colony of mistresses."

<sup>2</sup> Glenn R. Conrad, "The Faces of French Louisiana," in *Cross Crozier and Crucible: A Volume Celebrating the Bicentennial of a Catholic Diocese* (New Orleans: the Archdiocese of New Orleans, 1993),

Capuchin priests and Ursuline nuns encouraged Catholic religiosity in the colony and taught settlers, sometimes even indiscriminate of race or gender. Catholicism offered European settlers and converted Indians common religious background, and it later afforded a degree of cultural continuity for the second and third generations of French, Spanish, African, and West Indian settlers as the territory passed from French and Spanish to American hands.<sup>3</sup> In the predominantly Catholic area, religion became a binding force, creating a community of people holding similar beliefs and attitudes toward suffering and pain as well as sinfulness and salvation.

Yet, of course, not everyone was Catholic, nor did all Catholics exhibit the same degrees of devotion. Few Protestants or Jews inhabited early Louisiana, but after 1803, the influx of English and Americans introduced large numbers of Protestants into Louisiana who formed communities with their own particular beliefs.<sup>4</sup> Slaves owned by Catholics during the colonial period, while nominally Catholic according to the *Code Noir* and the *Siete Partidas*, had little say in the matter. Many adapted the Catholic faith to fit native African religious beliefs.<sup>5</sup> Of those who did embrace Catholicism, only a very few left records of the role of faith in their lives. The varying levels of devotion and the individual beliefs of each Catholic, black or white, ensured that not all Catholics in Louisiana held the same tenets as important or participated in religious services with the

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6. Conrad asserts that the “only apparent cultural linkages” of many of the different groups of French, French Indian, and Acadian settlers were “their Roman Catholic faith and their language.”

<sup>3</sup> Johnson, “Colonial New Orleans,” in *Creole New Orleans*, 40-1; Charles E. Nolan, *A History of the Archdiocese of New Orleans* (Strasbourg: Editions du Signe, 2000), 10-12.

<sup>4</sup> For a close examination of Protestants in French colonial Louisiana, see O’Neill, *Church and State in French Colonial Louisiana*, 256-282.

<sup>5</sup> John Bernard Alberts, “Origins of Black Catholic Parishes in the Archdiocese of New Orleans, 1718-1920” (Ph.D. diss., Louisiana State University, 1998), 33-5.



same fervor (or at all).<sup>6</sup> Religious belief in Louisiana could not and cannot simply be reduced to a list of rules or characteristics. Official doctrine did not always translate into practice, and popularly-held beliefs often turned out to be subtle ingredients in a complex cultural soup. Religion in Louisiana proved a matter of self-identification varying from individual to individual, as well as a system of organizing reality and understanding the ways of life shared by communities of people. It was a worldview used to understand even as it shaped reality, individually and communally.

By the nineteenth century, debate within the Catholic hierarchy over the support of slavery and the economic success of Catholic Louisiana planters, as well as the influx of Protestant Americans and Protestant slaves, further complicated the relationship between the Catholic Church in Louisiana and its non-white parishioners. The Church continued to require the baptism of Catholic-owned slaves and the proper burial of all baptized persons and reiterated that marriage between slaves, while not necessarily of any civil weight, was an unbreakable sacramental bond. Church requirements met with mixed results. Some slaves integrated Catholicism to varying degrees into their spiritual lives; others, finding Catholicism personally unsatisfactory, readily turned to black preachers for religious direction or converted to Protestant sects such as the African Methodist-Episcopal and Baptist Churches. For the most part, rural Catholic priests were too few in number to enforce requirements, and most Catholic slaveholders neither discouraged nor encouraged Catholicism among their slaves.

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<sup>6</sup> See Roger Baudier, *The Catholic Church in Louisiana* (New Orleans: By the author, 1939), 94-9, for a description of the religious condition of the settlement and the difficulties of eighteenth-century Catholic missionaries. As evidenced from the writings of Father Raphael de Luxemburg, Capuchin superior, many in Louisiana were prone to “excess” and lascivious living.

Surprisingly, some blacks, especially free women of color, and some slaves did, indeed, incorporate Catholicism into their daily lives. For historians endeavoring to tell the stories of the women, the slaves, or the settlers who had no means to record their histories and religious beliefs in written form, the work of discovering and recreating their world becomes a complicated task of sifting through church and court records. In particular, the stories of enslaved men and women, often told in the words of another party, sometimes contained implied meanings and social mores that now are difficult to uncover. Yet, in spite of the difficulties in recreating the lives of women and slaves through the words of their husbands or masters, their words often reveal that women and slaves helped to construct the development of Catholicism in rural antebellum Louisiana. Religion, especially during the early nineteenth century, became a venue for black women to express their identities and even create power where little seemed to be.

In New Orleans, the Sisters of the Holy Family offered the best opportunity for African-American women to obtain social and economic influence even as they embraced a religious identity. Formed in 1842 by several free women of color, the order espoused the missions of aiding impoverished and ill blacks and offering educational resources to young black men and women. These missions necessarily involved the members of the congregation in the politics and secular society of New Orleans. In order to purchase houses, acquire financial support, and provide schools for their mission, the women of the order came into contact with political and economic leaders in New Orleans, particularly several free black philanthropists, demonstrating their religious piety as well as their capacity to connect their mission to other prominent black actors in

the Catholic community. As the congregation—and the order’s economic connections—grew, so did the order’s religious and social influence in New Orleans.<sup>7</sup>

The religious, social, and economic opportunities for African Americans in the Catholic Church were not limited to New Orleans. In the rural southeastern parishes of Louisiana, free and enslaved men and women also adopted and adapted Catholicism to fit into their lives. Free women in St. Charles Parish, like the members of the Sisters of the Holy Family, utilized the role of the Church in their communities to expand their social identities and exhibit their economic resources. Several free women of color donated domestic goods to the local priest, for example, expressing religious sensibilities and financial wherewithal. Other free and enslaved Catholics in the river parishes aided priests during Mass as sacristans or assisted with the administration of sacraments in private homes, inviting the Catholic Church into the most intimate moments of their lives. Enslaved parishioners changed the nature of Catholicism in rural parishes by melding Catholic rituals with African and African-American spirituality. Slaves in St. Charles Parish shared their knowledge of medicinal herbs and folk practices with the local priest, changing the way that he and they approached the connections between spiritual and physical healing.

Most histories of black Catholicism in Louisiana focus either on the early development of French missionaries in the Mississippi River delta or on the relationships between Catholic officials, slaveholding parishioners, and enslaved persons in New Orleans. Both historians and nineteenth-century observers are prone to note how slaves and masters could sit in the same pews, receive communion from the same ciborium as

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<sup>7</sup> For a brief history of the Sisters of the Holy Family, see Sister Mary Bernard Diggs, *No Cross, No Crown: Black Nuns in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans*, ed. and with a preface by Virginia Meacham

confirmed Catholics with the same religious rights, then return to social, political, and economic relationships marked by inequality. Few ask, however, what the motives of Catholic officials were who administered sacraments to the slave and the slaveholder or if the relationship between the Catholic Church and enslaved members changed outside city limits. More to the point, no work has studied the real advantages and disadvantages that slaves experienced by participating in the Catholic Church. Did slaves incorporate the Catholic Church into their lives in the same way that white parishioners did? How did free people of color approach and define their commitment to the Catholic Church? Did opportunities change for slaves and free people of color outside New Orleans?

The purpose of this work is to explore the economic and social opportunities of free and enslaved blacks occasioned by their participation in the Catholic Church, especially in the river parishes region around the city of New Orleans. The sacramental and civil records of St. Charles, St. John the Baptist, St. James, and New Orleans parishes, reveal how African-American parishioners, especially free women of color, utilized their local Catholic churches as community centers to worship, to trade, and to communicate with fellow black and white parishioners. Enslaved men and women also engaged parish priests in meaningful spiritual and economic exchange, some attaining property and even freedom through their association with the Catholic Church. Their economic and social agency, to be sure, was not unlimited or unequivocally sanctioned by Catholic or local political officials: reception of communion on Sunday did not mean equal rights on Monday. Yet the Catholic Church, particularly in the river parishes outside New Orleans, proved a way for many African Americans to understand the world

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Gould and Charles E. Nolan, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), preface.

around them—whether they were enslaved or free—as well as a religiously contextualized vehicle to further economic and social objectives.

## CHAPTER 2 CATHOLIC OPINION ON SLAVERY

To most American visitors, interracial worship marked the Catholic churches of antebellum New Orleans as unique. Several visitors to the city during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries observed integrated seating arrangements, contrasting the Catholic churches in New Orleans to their experiences with segregated southern and northern congregations. One observer praised the conduct of priests and parishioners, writing that “the prince and peasant, the slave and master, kneel before the same altar in temporary oblivion of all worldly distinctions. They come in but one character, that of sinners.”<sup>8</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted agreed, noting that the interracial seating in Louisiana’s Catholic churches rendered some religious equality within the pews despite hierarchical social and economic relationships outside church walls.<sup>9</sup> On plantations and in towns outside the city, interracial worship was also common.<sup>10</sup> As early French and Spanish missionary priests administered sacraments to the free and the enslaved, the Catholic churches in the river parishes around New Orleans continued to serve both black and white parishioners. Apparent regard for the religious lives of all parishioners linked urban and rural Catholic churches in Louisiana.

Yet, while interracial worship certainly distinguished Louisiana Catholic churches during the first half of the nineteenth century, seemingly allowing slaves and free blacks

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<sup>8</sup> Alexander Hamilton, quoted in Liliane Creté, *Daily Life in Louisiana, 1815-1830*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 147; Robert C. Reinders, “The Churches and the Negro in New Orleans, 1850-1860,” *Phylon*, 22, no. 3 (1961): 241-248.

<sup>9</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom: A Traveller’s Observation of Cotton and Slavery in the American Slave States*, ed. and with an introduction by Arthur M. Schlesinger (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), 228. For a description and other comments by visitors and New Orleanians on the racial inclusiveness of the Catholic Church (at least in terms of seating and administration of sacraments), see John W. Bassingame, *Black New Orleans, 1860-1880* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 16.

<sup>10</sup> Pierre Landry, *From Slavery to Freedom* (unpublished memoirs) in Charles B. Roussève, *The Negro in Louisiana* (New Orleans: Xavier University Press, 1937), 39.

religious equality, the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church on the nature of slavery and the status of the slave were ultimately paradoxical. Catholic leaders in Rome and in New Orleans simultaneously emphasized slaves' religious rights as well as their necessary obedience to their owners in all religious matters. Slaves were property and people; while their souls belonged to God, their bodies belonged to their owners.<sup>11</sup>

Catholic moral teaching encouraged slaveholders to treat their slaves humanely and required that slaveholders make catechetical instruction and reception of the sacraments, including baptism and marriage, available. According to the Church, slaves, as rational human beings, were capable of understanding the teachings of the Church and preparing their souls for salvation. The *Code Noir*, issued by the Catholic King of France to ensure that French colonists in the New World practiced Roman Catholicism, reinforced Catholic teachings on slavery. The *Code* ordered that all slaveholders baptize their slaves and that slaveholders observe Sundays and holy days by forbidding slaves to work in the fields. All priests needed the permission of the owner for slave marriages, and colonial law required slaveholders to bury baptized slaves in ground consecrated by Catholic priests.<sup>12</sup>

Placing Louisiana under the specifications set forth in the *Siete Partidas*, Spanish officials in colonial Louisiana maintained the religious rights of slaves and extended the rights of free people of color. While continuing to follow the basic provisions of the

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<sup>11</sup> While much work has been done to compare slavery in the United States to Latin American slavery, few historians compare the conditions of slavery specific to Catholic Louisiana to Latin America. Their work, however, suggests that such comparisons could be made: Frank Tannenbaum asserted that Catholicism prevented slaves from being defined only as property in Latin America. I suggest that the same could be said for Catholicism in Louisiana. See Arnold A. Sio, "Interpretations of Slavery: The Slave Status in the Americas," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 7, no. 3 (April 1965): 289-308; Frank Tannenbaum, *Slave and Citizen: The Negro in the Americas* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947).

French *Code*, French and Spanish Capuchins could now perform interracial marriages between free people of color and whites. Marriages between slaves, though technically allowed by the *Code* and required by the *Siete Partidas*, remained a practical impossibility for most slaves: few slave owners encouraged slaves to marry in the Church. Marriages between slaves and whites and slaves and free people of color were prohibited.<sup>13</sup> In 1788, the complaints of Spanish Capuchins that slaveholders failed to follow the regulations set forth in the *Partidas* prompted the passage of new legislation emphasizing that newly imported slaves, as well as slaves born or traded within the colony, be catechized, male and female slaves separated unless married, and records kept of the type and daily duration of each slave's labor.<sup>14</sup>

Catholic officials in the colonial city of New Orleans generally followed the spirit of the *Code* and the *Siete Partidas*, allowing slave and slaveholder alike access to the sacraments. One rector of St. Louis Church in New Orleans, Antonio de Sedella, known as Père Antoine to local residents, seemed to have a “particular rapport with children, slaves and the poor”; Roger Baudier contends that Mass attendance during Père Antoine's tenure was marked by the inclusion of mostly African Americans and women. By all accounts, New Orleans residents were fond of Père Antoine—possibly due to his rather lax attitude about the fine points of Catholic sacramental requirements. Père Antoine seemed to have acquired a reputation for marrying Catholics to non-Catholics

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<sup>12</sup> Black Code, Articles II, III, V, VIII, and XI, in *American Catholics and Slavery: 1789-1866: An Anthology of Primary Documents*, ed. Kenneth Zanca (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1994), 23-4.

<sup>13</sup> L. Moreau Lislet and Henry Carelton, trans., *The Laws of Las Siete Partidas: Which Are Still in Force in the State of Louisiana* (New Orleans: Jame M'Karrah, 1820; reprint, Baton Rouge: Claitor's Publishing Division, 1978), with an introduction by Mitchell Franklin; Alberts, “Origins of Black Catholic Parishes,” 22-44; Baudier, *The Catholic Church in Louisiana*, 205-6.



without proper conversion procedures and providing a full Catholic burial for Freemasons who included Masonic symbols on their caskets.<sup>15</sup> Whatever his laissez-faire attitude toward religious practice may have been, Père Antoine also inculcated an atmosphere of acceptance for enslaved parishioners. Indeed, John Blassingame has argued that officials like Père Antoine, who married and baptized African Americans, encouraged faithfulness as well as a sense of stability in family life among black parishioners.<sup>16</sup> Sacramental records for New Orleans churches show significant numbers of black baptisms and marriages during Père Antoine's pastorate.

After the Louisiana Purchase, and through the 1850s, New Orleans Church officials continued to administer sacraments to free and enslaved blacks within their congregations even as they increasingly endorsed the institution of slavery and the right of parishioners to hold slaves. Catholic leadership, never having been centralized into a diocese in New Orleans during the eighteenth century, remained on unsure footing after Louisiana became a state. Bishop John Carroll of the Diocese of Baltimore, as head of the Catholic Church in America, appointed Louis William Dubourg the administrator of the Diocese of Louisiana and Florida. Dubourg and Père Antoine soon found themselves at odds. While Dubourg showed some concern about slave proselytization and the practice of Catholicism among the free blacks in Louisiana, political wrangling overshadowed large-scale religious efforts among African Americans.<sup>17</sup> Some free and

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<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Shown Mills and Gary B. Mills, "Missionaries Compromised: Early Evangelization of Slaves and Free People of Color in North Louisiana," in *Cross, Crozier, and Crucible*, ed. Glenn R. Conrad (New Orleans: Archdiocese of New Orleans and the Center for Louisiana Studies, 1993), 33.

<sup>15</sup> Crété, *Daily Life in Louisiana*, 145-47; Baudier, *The Catholic Church in Louisiana*, 268-80. New Orleans did not acquire a resident bishop until 1830; therefore, Père Antoine was technically rector of St. Louis Church and not bishop of St. Louis Cathedral.

<sup>16</sup> John W. Blassingame, *Black New Orleans 1860-1880* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 13-16.

<sup>17</sup> Gould and Nolan, introduction to *No Cross, No Crown*, xxix-xxx.

enslaved blacks took advantage of an American Louisiana by converting to Protestant churches. African Methodist-Episcopal and Baptist churches formed in New Orleans, some meeting clandestinely, offering African Americans new religious choices in Louisiana.<sup>18</sup> Generally, those Protestant churches in New Orleans affiliated with white national leadership, like the Catholic Church, did not view slavery and Christianity as incompatible.

Many blacks maintained ties with the Catholic Church. In New Orleans, blacks continued to attend integrated Catholic churches, but the relationship between slavery and Catholicism remained tenuous. At St. Augustine Church, for example, free blacks and whites rented about the same number of pews, parents and owners of African-American children watched while they were baptized, and young black catechism students were also regularly presented for confirmation there. Free blacks also helped raise funds for parish construction projects and sang in interracial choirs. The Sisters of the Holy Family worshiped with the congregation here and in other churches around the city. Yet even at the integrated St. Augustine Church, and in spite of the presence of the Sisters, the acceptance of enslaved parishioner meant the acceptance of slavery as an institution: slaves continued to sit in segregated aisle benches, sacraments administered to them in groups.<sup>19</sup> The Catholic Church could only provide slaves moral, religious, and spiritual identities; Church leaders could not transform sacramental into civil rights in American Louisiana.

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<sup>18</sup> For a treatment of the development of black Protestant churches in New Orleans, see Lila Rosamond Heymann, *The Black Religious Experience in New Orleans, 1840-1860* (M.A. diss., Louisiana State University, 1992).

<sup>19</sup> St. Augustine Parish Baptismal Records, Vol. 1A, 1842-50, Archives, Archdiocese of New Orleans; Reinders, "The Churches and the Negro in New Orleans," 242; M. Boniface Adams, "The Gift of Religious Leadership: Henriette Delille and the Foundation of the Holy Family Sisters," in *Cross, Crozier, and Crucible*, 368.

Marriage proved a prime example of the existence of religious freedom for slaves within the Catholic Church alongside the failure of Catholic lay and religious officials to extend religious into the civil realm. In French and Spanish Louisiana, slave codes drew on religious and civil authority for their strength; marriage between slaves, once performed, was technically legally binding. The tacit religious assumption in slave marriage was that slaves were at least capable of enough religious maturity to participate in the sacrament of marriage. Many Capuchin missionaries, however, complained of slaveholders marrying non-baptized and baptized slaves without the consent or knowledge of the clergy and the general lack of interest in marrying slaves in the Catholic Church at all.<sup>20</sup> After 1803, the state less dependent on obvious recourse to Catholic moral tradition, the civil and religious aspects of marriage became separate for slaves. Although the Church recognized the act of marriage between slaves as having moral and sacramental value, slaves could not enjoy the legal or civil effects of marriage.<sup>21</sup>

Slave marriages in the Catholic Church also indicated the dual nature of black Catholicism and the contradictions inherent in it for slaves. While Catholicism, like Protestantism in the United States, put slaves' suffering into the context of a salvation history, Catholic leaders never offered slaves a satisfactory explanation for involuntary servitude. Limiting themselves to the sacramental consequences of marriage and the spiritual lives of their parishioners, Catholic officials across North America saw slavery

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<sup>20</sup> Madeleine Hooke Rice, *American Catholic Opinion in the Slavery Controversy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944), 32-7.

<sup>21</sup> E. Franklin Frazier, "The Negro Slave Family," *The Journal of Negro History* 15, no. 2, (April 1930): 246. After the Civil War, the Supreme Court of Louisiana ruled that, for a slave marriage to have any civil merit, the two parties would have to have continued to live together after 1865. The marriages of slaves who died before emancipation were not legally valid, as were the marriages of slaves who separated after

as a civil matter and, as priests or religious, excused themselves on commenting on the morality of slavery at all. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese describes slave marriage as “an almost unbearable burden” for slaves who “were forced to defend their personal commitments without the assistance of enforceable conventions.”<sup>22</sup> Certainly, Catholic conventions for slave marriage existed in Louisiana; enforceable, they were not. Even when French and Spanish officials depended on the connection between Church and state in Louisiana to encode slave laws, missionaries’ complaints proved that the reality of slave marriage did not live up to the mandates that required it.

In Louisiana, slavery was never simply civil: several religious orders owned slaves, including certain black nuns involved with the Sisters of the Holy Family, and priests engaged in the slave trade in order to maintain mission posts and rectories.<sup>23</sup> As a result, officials in New Orleans and the surrounding parishes attempted to define the relationship between the Catholic Church and black slavery in America. They most often supported their opinions with Scriptural references. Paul’s letter to the Colossians sustained Catholic and Protestant pro-slavery arguments, especially in sermons during the decade before the Civil War:

Slaves, obey your human masters in everything, not only when being watched, as currying favor, but in simplicity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, do from the heart, as for the Lord and not for others, knowing that you will receive from the Lord the due payment of the inheritance; be slaves of the Lord Christ.

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1865. See Judith Kelleher Schafer, *Slavery, the Civil Law, and the Supreme Court of Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), 302-4.

<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 327.

<sup>23</sup> New York Evangelist (writer), “The Catholic Stand on Slavery,” *North Star* 27 (June 1850); Baudier, *The Catholic Church in Louisiana*, 89-202; Gould and Nolan, introduction to Part One, *No Cross, No Crown*, 5-6.

And in Ephesians as well as in Colossians, Paul exhorted masters to “treat your slaves justly and fairly, realizing that you too have a Master in heaven.”<sup>24</sup> For American Catholics, Paul summarized the Biblical teaching in favor of slavery—its divine sanction and its moral timbre. American Catholic slaveholders, like their Protestant counterparts, ignored the subtleties of Pauline theology (the fundamental point of the Colossians passage is obedience to God) in order to interpret Biblical descriptions of slavery and obedience as moral authorization. Even passages that downplayed slavery, like Galatians 3:28 (“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus”), also proved a Biblical sanction for the institution: Paul’s injunction for religious unity hardly made sense if human-created distinctions, like slavery, failed to exist.

While Catholic officials often argued that slavery was a civil matter, priests emphasized the duties of slaveholders to slaves as outlined by tradition and Biblical law and legally encoded in French and Spanish colonial Louisiana. Papal and priestly exhortations to slaveholders to be kindly masters, however, could not ensure that slaveholders would listen. As early as 1724, Capuchin missionaries complained of the reluctance of slaveholders to baptize slaves and to treat Sundays and feast days as days of rest.<sup>25</sup> The plantation journals for several properties owned by Catholics in Louisiana reveal only occasional, usually seasonal, allowance of rest on Sunday. Daily working hours for slaves on Mississippi River valley plantations made daily Mass attendance difficult if not impossible; William J. Minor, owner of Waterloo Plantation, planned

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<sup>24</sup> Col. 3:22-5, 4:1; Eph. 6:9 NAB (New American Bible); Reinders, “The Churches and the Negro in New Orleans,” 247.

<sup>25</sup> Baudier, *The Catholic Church in New Orleans*, 75. Some slaveholders recognized an advantage in allowing slaves free Sundays, however, and required slaves to provide for themselves on those days. See

workdays according to a ten-hour schedule. And the lack of priests, especially secular clergy, hindered the propagation of Catholicism among the enslaved and free. Their numbers low outside New Orleans throughout the antebellum period, priests usually recorded few black attendants at daily Mass in rural Louisiana.<sup>26</sup> Slaves often received sacraments in groups, even within the city, and the Capuchin superior in New Orleans estimated that as many as three-fourths of all slaves received no religious instruction at all.<sup>27</sup> Slave marriages performed by members of the clergy, while not unheard of, were rare on plantations throughout Louisiana.<sup>28</sup>

Pro-slavery Catholics emphasized the inherent necessity of slavery in America, both for white Americans and for slaves. Priests and religious in colonial Louisiana argued that slavery was “necessary for taming the New World” and that slavery as it existed in America coincided with a traditional Christian understanding of enslavement.<sup>29</sup> Some slaveholding Catholics claimed that the institution of slavery attempted to create a better family life for the enslaved. Within the context of Catholicism, slavery offered sanctified marriage to the slave and family life marked by seminal rituals, such as the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and last rites, for example.<sup>30</sup> Catholic journalists continually stressed that slavery, provided the master was kind and the servant a blank

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Jerah Johnson, “Colonial New Orleans: A Fragment of the Eighteenth Century French Ethos,” in *Creole New Orleans*, 42.

<sup>26</sup> Samuel McCutcheon Papers, Plantation Diaries and Vital Register, Mss. 1049, 1087, 1060, 1109, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, Louisiana State University Libraries, Baton Rouge (hereafter LLMVC, LSU); William J. Minor Letters, Plantation Diary and “Rules and regulations for the government of Waterloo Plantation,” Mss. 859, LLMVC, LSU; Valcour Aime, *Plantation Diary of the late Mr. Valcour Aime...* (New Orleans : Clark & Hofeline, 1878); Alfred E. Lemmon, “Spanish Louisiana: In the Service of God and His Most Catholic Majesty,” in *Cross, Crozier and Crucible*, 18-19.

<sup>27</sup> O’Neill, *Church and Slave in French Colonial Louisiana*, note 56, 270.

<sup>28</sup> Jerah Johnson, “Colonial New Orleans,” 40-1.

<sup>29</sup> Mills and Mills, “Missionaries Compromised,” *Cross, Crozier, and Crucible*, 32.

<sup>30</sup> Wilma A. Dunaway argues that in Louisiana, married couples with children made up about one-half of slave families in Louisiana, female-households were four times less likely and parentless households half as

slate for conversion and catechism, allowed Africans access to stable family life as well as Christianity. One Catholic newspaper editor claimed that the “mild servitude of Christian masters in America” saved Africans from “the worst kind of slavery in Africa,” cannibalism and idolatry.<sup>31</sup> The Catholic American slave, then, was freer than an African, having Christian and American law.

Slaveholding Catholics, like Protestant slaveholders, addressed the question of manumitting slaves upon their conversion. Papal bulls during the fifteenth century had approved of the slave trade because of its potential to Christianize non-Catholic nations en masse; if the purpose of enslavement was conversion, should the enslaved be manumitted once converted?<sup>32</sup> The short answer for most Catholic and Protestant officials in America was no. Bishop John Hughes told his congregation that the “condition of slavery is an evil,” but “not an absolute and unmitigated evil” since the Christianization of Africans through enslavement rendered slavery beneficial to the enslaved.<sup>33</sup> Conversion, moreover, could not guarantee freedom. The *Freeman’s Journal and Catholic Register*, based in New York, asserted that “the Catholic Church has never told a master to manumit a slave.” Editor James McMaster added that “we *dare* not, we *could* not, without violating our Catholic conscience, give them a liberty which we know they are not fit to use without harming themselves and others.”<sup>34</sup> Enslaved Catholics had the religious right to the sacraments, but conversion, baptism, and

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likely in Louisiana than in Appalachian regions. In *The African-American Family in Slavery and Emancipation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 63.

<sup>31</sup> *New York Herald*, 2 February 1861. All northern Catholic newspaper articles used herein come from Howard C. Perkins, “The Defense of Slavery in the Northern Press on the Eve of the Civil War,” *The Journal of Southern History* 9, no. 4 (Nov. 1943): 501-31.

<sup>32</sup> Marcus W. Jernegan, “Slavery and Conversion in the American Colonies,” *The American Historical Review* 21, no. 3 (April 1916): 505-6.

<sup>33</sup> Walter G. Sharrow, “John Hughes and a Catholic Response to Slavery in Antebellum America,” *The Journal of Negro History* 57, no. 3 (July 1972): 255-56.

communion did not necessitate manumission. In Louisiana, the very stipulation that slaveholders could prevent the administration of the sacrament of marriage suggested the limitation of the power of the sacraments; the enslaved person's status as a sort of perpetual religious child, unable to make sacramental decisions on his own; and the uneasy connection between religious and civil rights.<sup>35</sup>

Louisiana newspapers reprinted and echoed the opinions of Catholic publications like the *Freeman's Journal*. Founded by Father Napoleon Perche in 1842, *Le Propagateur Catholique*, the state's Catholic, French-language antebellum newspaper,<sup>36</sup> had no compunction against publishing pro-slavery arguments written by clergy and laymen. In 1862, *Le Propagateur* issued Bishop Augustin Verot's condemnation of abolition, and several readers responded to in order to elaborate on Verot's theme. Again, New Orleans subscribers were quick to acknowledge that Catholic tradition and Scripture supported slavery. One reader claimed that slavery did not depend on race: so consistent was the institution with Christian teaching that even whites (theoretically) could be enslaved.<sup>37</sup>

The *Southern Quarterly* repeated related themes on the benefits of slavery. One writer denounced Americans who had espoused the idea that "Slavery is a Sin," actually akin, in the writer's mind, to saying "*that the Bible is false.*" Because American masters ensured that slaves were treated with humanity and that the slaves "behave[d]

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<sup>34</sup> *Freeman's Journal and Catholic Register* (New York), 19 January 1861.

<sup>35</sup> O'Neill, *Church and State in French Colonial Louisiana*, 270; Mills and Mills, "Missionaries Compromised," in *Cross, Crozier, and Crucible*, 32.

<sup>36</sup> For a brief history of the Catholic press in Louisiana, including *Le Propagateur*, see Elizabeth Joan Doyle, "Mightier Than The Sword: The Catholic Press in Louisiana," in *Cross, Crozier and Crucible*, 249-61.

<sup>37</sup> "De la source légitime de l'Esclavage," *Propagateur Catholique*, 18 January 1862 and 1 February 1862.



themselves,” he explained, the American slave was actually a “freeman *de facto*.”<sup>38</sup> Expressions of Catholic support for slavery was in part a response to anti-Catholic abolitionism and the worries of Rome about the encroachment of European liberalism via abolitionism in America. New Orleans Catholics certainly picked up this anxiety, thus the *Propagateur* reader’s contention that anyone could be enslaved, despite race, and the *Southern Quarterly*’s argument that the institution of slavery made slaves truly free. Indeed, the *Southern Quarterly* worried about the influence of British abolitionism on Americans in northern states. Nonetheless, discussions of slavery in New Orleans’s Catholic newspapers were more pro-slavery than overt responses to “liberal” abolitionist sentiment.

Published advice abounded for the slaveholder, including the possible benefits and detriments of allowing religion in the slave quarters. De Bow’s *Review* ran an article by a Louisiana plantation owner listing sets of rules arranged by subject for the conscientious slaveholder. In addition to inspections to ensure cleanliness and regulations concerning travel away from the plantation, the writer suggested allowing only a “regularly appointed minister” during the day on Sunday (“no negro preachers but my own will be permitted to preach”) and no “night meetings” past ten o’clock.<sup>39</sup> By controlling the preacher, the slaveholder could presumably control his message, and by limiting the time for worship on Sundays, the slaveholder could hope to ensure that slaves would not be too fatigued for work on Monday. On a Catholic plantation, slave Mass attendance acted as a way to manage the religious and the social interactions of slaves, allowing slaves a venue for emotional and spiritual experiences within a

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<sup>38</sup> “Report of the House of Commons . . .,” *Southern Quarterly* 2 (Oct. 1842): 321-88.

controlled environment. Of course, many slaveholders realized that religious methods of control would not absolutely limit slaves' desire to gather, hence the *Review* writer's effort to at least set an hourly maximum for Sunday night meetings.

While some slaveholders argued that carefully controlled religious services could inculcate attitudes of obedience and timidity in slaves, others feared that religion in the slave quarters promoted revolts, as "extracurricular" religious gatherings could act as pretext for plotting rebellion. Identifying with the Old Testament narrative of enslaved Jews, slave preachers found messages of escape and freedom in Christian teaching. One black preacher prayed that Jesus, providing freedom from death and eternal damnation, could also make slaves "free from work, free from white folks, free from everything."<sup>40</sup> Enslaved persons were willing and able to equate Christian ideas of salvation and an omnipotent God with the possibilities for God-given earthly freedoms. Redemption had religious meaning that rebellion could realize.

Slave owners in southeast Louisiana had good reason to fear rebellious outcomes to slave gatherings, religious or otherwise. Some enslaved persons recognized specific advantages that slaveholders' Sunday Mass attendance could afford: a group of slaves in the New Orleans area used their knowledge of regular Sunday Mass to plan a revolt. One enslaved woman, informing a French official about the thwarted uprising that had been scheduled for June of 1731, admitted that area slaves had plotted to take the New Orleans church while everyone was attending Mass and to set fire to the rest of the town.<sup>41</sup> In 1811, a slave revolt shook several Catholic plantations along the Mississippi River in St.

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<sup>39</sup> From James O. Breeden, ed., *Advice among Masters: The Ideal in Slave Management in the Old South* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980).

Charles and St. John the Baptist Parishes. Four male slaves belonging to the Destrehan and McCutcheon estates, their plantations flanking the parish church, were killed in battle, executed, or imprisoned after the revolt.<sup>42</sup> Close proximity to the sacraments and regular Sunday homilies, in this case, did nothing to instill timidity or obedience to earthly masters in Destrehan's nominally Catholic slaves. .

Catholic slave owners, like their Protestant counterparts, fearing the possible consequences of uncontrolled slave meetings, carefully used Biblical references to obedience and appropriate slave-master relationships in religious addresses to their slaves. Their fear indicated that slaves were capable, at the least, of understanding potentially subversive interpretations of Christian teachings. Yet most contemporary Catholic commentators on the slavery issue ignored slaves as independent religious thinkers, even when coming to their defense. One side typically argued that slavery could be beneficial to the slave through their exposure to Christianity; one Southerner conceded that blacks in Louisiana "have been in a degree civilized and Christianized."<sup>43</sup> The other side held that slavery prevented the otherwise unthinking slave from being imprinted with the proper Christian precepts. Criticism against slaveholders largely centered upon their failure to instruct neither their children nor their slaves properly, both consequently remaining in a state of religious immaturity. A few religious and priests recognized slaves as human beings, body, soul, and mind. Mother Marie Hyacinthe Le

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<sup>40</sup> Henry Clay Bruce, *The New Man. Twenty-Nine Years a Slave; Twenty-Nine Years a Free Man: Recollections* (York, PA: 1895; reprint, New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 73 (page citation is to the reprint edition).

<sup>41</sup> Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, "The Formation of Afro-Creole Culture," in *Creole New Orleans*, 74-5.

<sup>42</sup> Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Afro-Louisiana History and Genealogy, 1719-1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina in cooperation with the Center for the Public Domain, 2000) [database online], [www.ibiblio.org/laslave](http://www.ibiblio.org/laslave) ; "Statement of Several Residents of Saint Charles Parish Regarding Their Losses in the Recent Slave Uprising," 7 March 1811, St. Charles Parish Original Acts.

<sup>43</sup> "Relations of Master and Slave in Louisiana and the South," *De Bow's Review* 15 (1853), 275-78.

Conniat reflected: “The first time I saw a *rational* human being exposed “For Sale,” in New Orleans, I was seized with horror...They are degraded...And yet, they are children of God!”<sup>44</sup> Mother Le Conniat admitted the humanity of the slaves she saw, remarking on their degradation rather than the guidance of Providence to bring them from Africa to a Christian country.

Nationally and internationally, not all Catholic officials uniformly advocated black servitude or its effects on the religious state of African Americans. In 1785, Father John Carroll, later the first bishop of the United States, reported to the Vatican that slaveholders required an excessive amount of labor from their slaves and effectively prevented them from receiving adequate religious instruction.<sup>45</sup> Pope Gregory XVI went even further, denouncing the international slave trade as “inhuman” and warning that domestic slavery was the result of “the lust of sordid gain.” Most American Catholics, however, interpreted his message as a condemnation of the international slave trade and not domestic slavery per se. The international slave trade threatened the humanity of Africans by forcing them into bondage; the domestic slave scene, however, could be made to conform to the Pauline ideal of good master, faithful slave. Bishop John England of Charleston wrote that as long as Christians avoided “treat[ing] one who is in servitude with cruelty or with undeserved harshness, oppression or injury,—and that not only in their physical but moral necessities,” slavery remained consistent with the Church’s teachings.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Dorothea Olga McCants, ed. and trans., *They Came to Louisiana: Letters of a Catholic Mission, 1854-1882* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970), 28. Italics added.

<sup>45</sup> Father John Carroll on American Catholicism in 1785, reprinted in Timothy Walch, *Catholicism in America: A Social History* (Malabar, Florida: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Company, 1989), 131-32.

<sup>46</sup> Pope Gregory XVI’s *In Supremo Apostolatus*, 1839, and Bishop John England, reaction to *In Supremo Apostolatus*, *Catholic Miscellany* (Charleston), 14 March 1840, reprinted in Zanca, *American Catholics and Slavery*, 27-9, 128-29, respectively.

At the heart of the relationship between Catholicism and slavery lay the paradox that Scriptural passages and Catholic tradition could not solve: slaves were people and property. Practical access to the sacraments, especially baptism and marriage, required the effort of the slaveholder, not simply the will of the slave or the regulations of the Catholic Church. Further, Catholic tradition in North and South America held that slaves could be bought and sold and subject to the will of the slaveholder. In the river parishes of Louisiana, the consequences of this paradox would allow freedom for enslaved persons even as parishioners and priests reinforced the institution of slavery. Enslaved men and women shaped Catholicism to understand their reality and created opportunities for religious, social, and economic expression even with the institution of slavery.

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In southeast Louisiana, sacramental records reveal the disconnect between the Catholic requirements for the baptism, instruction, and Christian burial of slaves, and the efforts of slaveholders to conform to these standards. Actual barriers to proselytization and conversion did exist: in areas of Louisiana where priests were especially scarce, the rate of the reception of the sacraments for any parishioner, black or white, dropped. New Orleans, as the seat of Catholic activity in the lower Mississippi river valley, had more priests and therefore more potential for contact between priests and slaves. The Sisters of the Holy Family also made it their mission to aid and educate black Catholics, but their efforts among African Americans in rural Louisiana were mostly confined to Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction. Rural enclaves in the river parishes struggled to attract priests and maintain religious facilities, even until the 1920s for St. Charles Parish,

lowering the likelihood that slaves or their owners were exposed to Catholic religious instruction at all.<sup>47</sup>

Many slaveholders followed some of the Catholic requirements, baptizing their slaves en masse, sometimes several months or years after they had been born. The number of slave baptisms, moreover, often outnumbered the number of confirmed slaves. Probably, as confirmation came later in a person's life, slaves either had more choice in participating in that sacrament or (more likely) the slaveholder considered confirmation less necessary for the spiritual development of their slaves.<sup>48</sup> Even on the plantations of the river parishes near missions, chapels, or churches, the number of African Americans who had been confirmed was low. From 1795 to 1796, the number of white confirmations made was ninety-six in St. Charles, St. James, and St. John the Baptist Parishes; no blacks were confirmed at that time. Not only do these numbers reflect the possible attitude of slaves and free blacks toward Catholicism—obviously, no African American was forced into *or* chose confirmation during this year, although it is possible that some were forced not to participate—but also the view of Catholic slaveholders toward the missionary churches among their communities. Like the enslaved and free blacks who interpreted Catholic religious teaching in the contexts of their social, economic, and political worlds, so, too, did Catholic masters adapt “their own religion to fit personal and community needs.”<sup>49</sup> Just because a missionary priest told slaveholders to baptize and confirm slaves and themselves did not mean they were going to, especially

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<sup>47</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1978), 113.

<sup>48</sup> Confirmation marks the descent of the Holy Spirit on the confirmand and does not necessarily mark the occasion of first Communion; a person can take Communion if baptized and properly catechized but not confirmed. Slaveholders possibly thus deemed Confirmation an unnecessary exercise—as did many white Catholics who never bothered with their own confirmations, either.

<sup>49</sup> Mills and Mills, “Missionaries Compromised,” in *Cross, Crozier, and Crucible*, 44-5.

if the priest was not a well-liked member of the community or if the slaveholder was disinclined to pay much attention to his own spiritual well-being.

In order to compensate for their low numbers, missionary priests in small towns along the Mississippi transferred frequently between posts, usually serving large areas. Often, priests who had served one of the river parishes had served them all. In St. Charles and in St. John the Baptist Parishes, conflicts between parishioners and the New Orleans hierarchy over priest selection and land ownership meant periods of absence of any local clergy.<sup>50</sup> The lack of constant clerical presence heightened the role of laity in shaping regional religious practices, such as Lenten devotions unique to southeast Louisiana, and a general laxity about observing the letter of the Canonical law.<sup>51</sup> Simply, the limited practical access to Mass and the sacraments created a relationship between Catholics and slavery that was unique to the regions outside New Orleans. Unlike in New Orleans, where majority black congregations began developing in the years before the Civil War, and priests were easier to come by, no such resources were available to free and enslaved African Americans in the river parishes—or anywhere in the state outside New Orleans.

The limited access to priestly instruction and the indifference of area slaveholders to religion did not mean that slaves had no contact with Catholic ministries. During the nineteenth century, priests in southeast Louisiana recorded their duties officiating baptisms, administering communion, and anointing sick and dying slaves. Some of the priests who owned slaves freed them, and some did not own slaves at all. In New

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<sup>50</sup> John F. Basty, Destrehan, to John R. Upton, New Orleans, 24 April 1920, vertical file, St. Charles Parish Public Library, Destrehan; Marcia G. Gaudet, *Tales from the Levee: The Folklore of St. John the Baptist Parish* (Lafayette: The Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1984), 34-5.

Orleans, enslaved persons usually received the sacraments in groups and on specified days, such baptism and confirmation during the Feast of the Pentecost or Holy Saturday (the day before Easter Sunday). Slaveholders, black and white, as well as free black family members, often acted as godparents to baptized Catholic slaves.<sup>52</sup> As segregated seating in Catholic churches was rare in New Orleans, so was interracial worship—but not necessarily equal worship—the norm for most antebellum Catholic churches in rural southeast Louisiana.

No matter how limited by slaveholders or geography to the sacraments, enslaved persons in the river parishes were free to adopt and shape Catholic Christianity to their experiences. Eugene Genovese argues that Christianity inculcated in the slave’s soul “an awareness of the moral limits of submission,” as “it placed a master above his own master and thereby dissolved the moral and ideological ground on which the very principle of absolute human lordship must rest.” The nature of Catholicism and a Christian Biblical tradition encouraged slaves to reconsider the hierarchy on which they found themselves the lowest rung: for them, St. Paul indicated that God held everyone accountable, that earthly service was secondary to serving God, whose rewards and punishments were eternal. The God who told slaves to obey their masters could also dictate the consequences of the actions of slaveholders. Rendering unto Caesar what was Caesar’s also meant rendering unto God what was God’s; a soul belonging to the Lord could not be bought or sold by earthly masters.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Mackie J. V. Blanton and Gayle K. Nolan, “Creole Lenten Devotions: Nineteenth Century Practices and Their Implications,” in *Cross, Crozier and Crucible*, 535.

<sup>52</sup> St. Augustine Parish Baptismal Records, Vol. 1A, 1842-50, Archives, Archdiocese of New Orleans.

<sup>53</sup> Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 165.



Religion in Louisiana was ultimately an individual choice. While French and Spanish codes required the adherence to Catholicism, mixing religious tradition with slave laws to define slavery during the eighteenth century, the actions of slaveholders on the upper and lower German Coast suggested that paper legislation held little sway over their religious decisions. Further, the restrictions and requirements of the Catholic Church reached slaves in filtered form. Debates over the legitimacy of slavery made the issue unclear for clergymen, slaveholders had their own religious beliefs and economic, social, and political agendas, and local priests may or may not have had particular interest in ministering to slaves.

While acknowledging that slaves had religious identities, most antebellum priests in Louisiana did not denounce the limitations on slaves' political, civil, economic, and social rights. Catholic teaching ensured a certain amount of religious-racial equality within the Church, but it did not guarantee that slaves receive rights that Catholic leaders simply did not believe were morally necessary or could be practically realized. Catholic priests and bishops throughout the United States could only entreat Catholic slaveholders to baptize and instruct their slaves and to discipline their slaves with kindness and mercy. And Catholic moral teachings, hardly enforceable, could not influence access to social equality, economic opportunity, or political rights for enslaved men and women.<sup>54</sup> Catholic leaders in Louisiana supported the civil law of the colony and state; while priests administered sacraments to some slaves, no priest purported that reception of the sacrament of marriage endowed that slave with any civil rights. Further, no enslaved man or woman with the knowledge of his owner received the sacrament of ordination or

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<sup>54</sup> Justin Labinjoh, "The Sexual Life of the Oppressed: An Examination of the Family Life of Ante-Bellum Slaves," *Phylon* 35, no. 4 (1974), 375-397.

took religious vows. Groups of free women of color in New Orleans and Baltimore founded religious orders during the nineteenth century, but no African-American man became a priest until after the Civil War. African Americans, free and enslaved, did not take influential Catholic positions in antebellum Louisiana, and therefore, none had the opportunity to transform their religious beliefs into claims for civil, social, political, or economic rights.

**CHAPTER 3**  
**THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC EXCHANGE AMONG SLAVES, FREE**  
**PEOPLE OF COLOR, AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN SOUTHEAST**  
**LOUISIANA**

In New Orleans, Catholic priests, nuns, and brothers worked to establish fundamental religious resources for settlers, natives, and slaves during the eighteenth century. While their numbers were never impressive in rural areas, priests ministered to missionary churches from New Orleans to Natchitoches in colonial Louisiana. Even more than those within the city itself, rural churches became the locations for seminal moments in individuals' lives: priests and congregations not only witnessed celebrations for births and liturgies for deaths, but also announcements of legal conflicts, denouncements of criminal behavior, and declarations of economic transactions. Although parishioners often choose to ignore certain Catholic precepts that proved inconvenient for them—such as slave confirmations and marriages—the Church maintained its position of centrality to rural communities through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

One measure of the Church's place of importance in southeast Louisiana was the economic exchange that linked priests with parishioners, free and enslaved alike. In and around New Orleans, particularly in St. Charles Parish, priests and slaveholding parishioners participated in transactions involving moveable and immoveable property, including slaves. Some priests, particularly Spanish Capuchins, avoided owning slaves personally or for the upkeep of the property held by their order; they did not, however, have sufficient recourse to earthly punishments to enforce Catholic requirements for proper slave catechesis. And no priest, whatever his personal belief on slaveholding, successfully persuaded parishioners—or the Catholic hierarchy in New Orleans—that

enslaving African Americans was legally, civilly, or morally wrong. Indeed, the Catholic Church in St. Charles Parish grew near large plantations, often the site of slave trades and the secular, economic exchanges of its parishioners.

Samuel McCutchon, a planter who lived alongside the St. Charles Parish church, saw the church as a religious and economic resource. On August 4, 1838, McCutchon noted in his plantation diary that the female hands of Ormond Plantation, his property thirty miles above New Orleans, had begun clearing the land of the nearby church. Over the next few months, groups of his male and female slaves hoed and planted the church land with sugarcane and corn. McCutchon meticulously recorded their progress, noting harvest times and weather conditions that related to planting the church land. With few exceptions, McCutchon recorded the daily work of Ormond slaves in his sugarcane fields as well as on the church property from 1838 through the 1840s. Much of their work over the next decade resembled the labor McCutchon described during 1838: in addition to trading livestock with the priest, McCutchon had his slaves remove brush, dig ditches, plant sugarcane and corn, and harvest produce on the sliver of land that abutted his.<sup>55</sup> McCutchon strengthened his involvement with the local priest when he married Adèle Destrehan, the daughter of a neighboring Catholic planter. The Destrehans, like the McCutchons, regularly supported the church by attending Mass there and participating in agricultural exchange with the priest in residence.

The church of the Destrehans and the McCutchons, dedicated to St. Charles Borromeo but familiarly known as the Little Red Church, had become of central importance to the predominantly Roman Catholic community of St. Charles Parish by the

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<sup>55</sup> Samuel McCutchon Papers, "Journal of the Transactions on Ormond Plantation, 1838," Mss. 1049, 1087, 1060, 1109, LLMVC, LSU, Baton Rouge.

early nineteenth century.<sup>56</sup> Although the church structure itself was less than forty years old in 1838, Capuchin missionaries had established St. Charles Parish more than one hundred years before. Several years prior to constructing a permanent church in New Orleans, Capuchins maintained a mission along the Mississippi River to serve the German and Swiss families lured by John Law to settle above New Orleans. Perhaps as early as 1721, the settlers of the German Coast attended a temporary missionary chapel called St. Jean des Allemands (St. John of the Germans) on the left bank of the river. A more permanent log church dedicated to St. Charles Borromeo was erected in 1740 on the opposite bank of the river, near the future site of McCutcheon's plantation. In 1806, about twenty years after the McCutcheon family built Ormond, a frame church, painted a dull red, replaced the original log structure. A series of French and some Spanish Capuchin priests served the parish throughout the antebellum period, and well into the early twentieth century, many of the priests of the Little Red Church were native French speakers.<sup>57</sup>

During its antebellum heyday, the Little Red Church acted as the primary place of worship and also a place for social and economic encounters. Families of sugar planters on both sides of the Mississippi River, including the McCutchons and the Destrehans,

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<sup>56</sup> The census of German villages located above New Orleans of November, 1724, records, of fifty-eight households, forty-three Roman Catholic and thirteen Lutheran, Calvinist, and Protestant heads of households (the remaining two, probably Protestant, do not indicate religious preference). Glenn R. Conrad, census in *First Families of Louisiana*, vol. II (Claitor's Publishing Company, Baton Rouge, 1970), 11-15.

<sup>57</sup> Father Francis Basty, the church's last native French speaker as well as the church's longest serving priest, oversaw the construction of the current St. Charles Borromeo Church and school complex in the 1920s and 1930s. *St. Charles Borromeo Church: 250<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration, 1723-1973*, (Hackensack: Custombook, 1973), 18-19; *Louisiana Today*, "Rev. John F. Basty," TM (photocopy), vertical file, St. Charles Parish East Regional Library, date unknown; Baudier, *The Catholic Church in Louisiana*, 69-71, 143.

were baptized, married, and buried at the church.<sup>58</sup> While the Mississippi River has long since swallowed many of the original burial sites, the cemetery still boasts some of the oldest tombs of German Coast settlers. In addition to the church as a place of worship, surrounding planters also saw the church as a place to trade, exchanging agricultural goods with the priests there, and the church land as an agricultural opportunity to tithe in kind. George Mather, like McCutchon, a sugar planter along the Mississippi River, recorded occasional trade with Father Jerome Blacé, a priest serving St. Charles and St. James Parishes.<sup>59</sup> In addition to revealing how planters traded with priests, McCutchon's diary demonstrated that the Little Red Church figured into the lives of the enslaved population of St. Charles Parish. Slaves came into contact with the church property and the parish priest in order to barter and exchange McCutchon's goods with the priest in residence. The Little Red Church, because of its geographical proximity to plantations along the river and its early establishment in the colony, was a religious, social, and agricultural point of reference for the people of St. Charles Parish.

The Little Red Church exemplified the relationship between early settlers and the Catholic Church throughout the river parishes of the lower Mississippi River valley. The origins of the first permanent church in St. John the Baptist Parish, a settlement on the upper German Coast, mirrored the formation and growth of the Little Red Church. The

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<sup>58</sup> An example of the involvement of the church in personal and family life, the Boucry family records contain a St. Charles Borromeo prayer card. Boucry Family Papers, 1814-1884, Mss. 790, 800, LLMVC, LSU; Isabel M. French, "St. Charles Borromeo Church: Its People, Its History, and Its Family," in *St. Charles Borromeo Church: Celebrating 250 Years with Our Patron Saint* (Destrehan: Mendola Bros., Inc., 1990), 32-4. In his 1770 description of settlements along the Mississippi River, Philip Pittman described the German Coast region as "a continuation of well cultivated plantations of near forty miles from New Orleans, on each side of the river." He also makes mention of "a church served by the capuchins," most certainly the Little Red Church. See Philip Pittman, *The Present States of the European Settlements on the Mississippi; with a Geographical Description of that River* (London: J. Nourse, 1770; reprint, Cleveland: Arthur C. Clark Company, 1906), 58 (page citation is to the reprint edition).

<sup>59</sup> George Mather Account Books, 1782-1845 (5 July 1802), St. James Parish, Louisiana [microform].

mission there began out of concern for the lack of priests to serve the area. When Spanish Capuchins arrived in 1770 to take stock of the colony's religious needs, Father Dagobert de Longuory, the French superior of the Capuchins in Louisiana, suggested as many as eighteen priests were needed to minister to the growing colony. Soon after their arrival, the Spanish Capuchins under Father Cirilo de Barcelona ordered the preparations for the creation of new parishes and church facilities in Louisiana.<sup>60</sup> By 1772, Church officials established St. John the Baptist Parish and sent a Capuchin priest, Father Bernard de Limpach, to minister to the congregation. As in the lower St. Charles settlement, the parishioners of St. John the Baptist participated in choosing the location and construction of the church, ensuring its centrality to the community. A landowner named DuBroc gave four arpents of land for the location of the church, and DuBroc provided the lumber for the church's construction as well.<sup>61</sup>

The earliest priests of St. John the Baptist Church found themselves in similar circumstances to the priests of St. Charles Parish. Indeed, as many plantation owners held property in both parishes, some priests served both areas during their lifetimes. Father Barnabé, one of the first French Capuchins to serve in New Orleans under Father Dagobert, later ministered to settlers in Natchitoches, Pointe Coupee, St. Charles Parish, St. James Parish, and St. John the Baptist. Father Prosper, a contemporary of Father Barnabé and also a French Capuchin missionary, served in New Orleans, St. Charles Parish, and St. James Parish. As the number of missionaries remained low throughout the eighteenth century, Fathers Barnabé and Prosper were not unique to transfer

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<sup>60</sup> Nolan, *A History of the Archdiocese of New Orleans*, 16-17.

<sup>61</sup> In return for his land, Governor O'Reilly ordered that parishioners arrange for DuBroc's remaining eight arpents of land to be cleared. Baudier, *The Catholic Church in Louisiana*, 192.

frequently between settlement churches or to find themselves in churches at the core of parish economic development.

Similar to the establishment of St. John the Baptist Church, the construction of the new church at Cahabanosse in St. James Parish began with the donation of the church land by Jacques Cantrelle, the *commandante* of the Acadian Coast. A succession of priests served the parish, and for a time in the 1770s, the church had no resident pastor.<sup>62</sup> By the turn of the nineteenth century, the St. James church had shared several priests with St. John the Baptist and St. Charles Borromeo Churches, further distributing the influence of a handful of Capuchin priests in the missions outside New Orleans. The establishment of a Catholic church on the property of a community leader also emphasized the connection between the Church in Louisiana and economic and political interests. Indeed, the priests of all three parishes connect themselves to one of the oldest institutions in Louisiana besides the Catholic Church—slavery.

The first Capuchin priests to the area, owning slaves themselves, also depended upon the slave economy for the maintenance of German Coast missions. Although the Catholic Church prevented priests from accepting slaves from bequests or receiving money from slave sales by 1743, early missionary priests collected taxes placed on slaves in order to cover the costs of building, provisioning, and visiting missions along the Mississippi River.<sup>63</sup> Later, priests owned slaves who maintained the church, rectory, and the farm and gardens connected to the church compound at St. Charles Borromeo and St. John the Baptist Churches. Father Barnabé, as curé of St. Charles Borromeo Church,

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<sup>62</sup> Baudier, *The Catholic Church in Louisiana*, 142-199.

<sup>63</sup> By 1772, the Spanish Capuchin leadership in New Orleans complained of the French Capuchins' use of slaves to work on their plantation, though little was done to correct the breach of the 1743 law. Baudier,



then St. John the Baptist Church until 1784, owned several slaves. They included Marie-Manon, possibly his housekeeper; Raphael, whom Father Barnabé manumitted in 1782 along with Marie-Manon; and two young men named Raphael and Barnabé, both manumitted in 1783 and the sons of the elder Raphael and Marie-Manon. The elder Raphael had been with Father Barnabé for thirty years, presumably having followed the priest during his transfers from one German Coast settlement to another. Father Barnabé justified the manumission as a reward for faithful service.<sup>64</sup>

Father Barnabé was by no means exceptional: at the Little Red Church, Father Pierre de Velles mortgaged two of his slaves in 1790 as part of an agreement to repay a local creditor.<sup>65</sup> According to an 1804 census, the church owned ten arpents of land, and Father Jérôme Blacé, then curé of St. Charles Parish, owned five male slaves and five female slaves. Three of the ten slaves were children, suggesting that the priests of St. Charles Parish regularly purchased one or two families of slaves to maintain the church property.<sup>66</sup> The priests of the Little Red Church bought, manumitted, and mortgaged slaves, taking their slaves with them as they traveled between German Coast missions,

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*The Catholic Church in Louisiana*, 118; Alfred E. Lemmon, "Spanish Louisiana: In the Service of God and His Most Catholic Majesty," in *Cross, Crozier, and Crucible*, 21.

<sup>64</sup> Father Barnabé may also have been effectively freeing and selling his effects before his death. In addition to freeing his slaves in 1782 and 1782, Barnabé sold his livestock before his death in 1785. At least one of his freed slaves, Barnabé, was present at the priest's estate sale. All civil records and censuses of St. Charles and St. John the Baptist Parishes cited herein have been published in Glenn R. Conrad, *St. Charles: Abstracts of the Civil Records of St. Charles Parish, 1700-1803* (Lafayette: University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1974); Conrad, *The German Coast: Abstracts of the Civil Records of St. Charles and St. John the Baptist Parishes, 1804-1812* (Lafayette: University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1981); and Conrad, *Saint-Jean-Baptiste des Allemands: Abstracts of the Civil Records of St. John the Baptist Parish with Genealogy and Index, 1753-1803* (Lafayette: University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1972). "Last Will and Testament of the Free Negro Named Marianne," 27 October 1774; "Manumission," 31 December 1780; "Manumission," 2 April 1783; "Animal Sale," 15 October 1783; "Inventory and Sale of the Effects of the Late Father Barnabé," 18 November 1785, St. Charles Parish Original Acts.

<sup>65</sup> "Obligation," 6 March 1790, St. Charles Parish Original Acts.

<sup>66</sup> General Census of St. Charles Parish, 1804.

making the church not only a place of worship but also an active part of the slave economy throughout the German Coast.

As slaveholders, the priests of St. Charles Parish strengthened the role of the local church in the local slave economy; they further emphasized the church's importance as a center for economic exchange by witnessing transactions and buying, selling, and trading movable and immovable property. Priests and curés, as recognizable authorities to their parishioners, combined civil and religious obligations to strengthen community structures in colonial Louisiana. Father Barnabé, for example, appeared as a witness to executions of wills and sales between parishioners. He also purchased goods during public land and estate sales, as did his freed slaves, the Raphaels, both father and son.<sup>67</sup>

Later priests at both churches followed Father Barnabé's example, effectively combining the roles of witness and priest, administrator and purchaser. Father Blacé, in addition to his priestly duties of baptizing, marrying, and anointing the ill and dying, attended estate sales as a buyer and a mediator. And like Barnabé, Blacé personally participated in the parish slave trade. In January of 1799, Blacé purchased four slaves from a planter of St. John the Baptist Parish. Nearly six months later, Blacé sold the same four slaves to Jean-Noël Destrehan, who paid Blacé the exact amount he had paid for them in January. Destrehan's presence at Blacé's slave purchase six months earlier suggests either that Destrehan seemed an obvious choice as a potential purchaser when Blacé became unhappy with his buy, or that Blacé was acting as a middleman of sorts for

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<sup>67</sup> "Inventory of the Belongings of the Late Vincent Reynard," 21 January 1771; "Receipt," 21 May 1780; "Inventory of the Community Property of Joseph Dusiau and His Late Wife, Thérèse Aufrère," 30 June 1774; "Public Sale of the Belongings of the Late Joseph Mouton," 29 December 1776; "Inventory of the Belongings of the Late Develle," 2 October 1776; "Public Sale of Items Belonging to Various Individuals," 27 May 1885, St. Charles Parish Original Acts.

Destrehan.<sup>68</sup> Whatever the case, Blacé's personal involvement in slave exchanges in St. Charles Parish connected the Little Red Church to these exchanges. He, like Father Barnabé, gave a religious face to the financial transactions and the slave economy of the German Coast.

In St. John the Baptist parish, Father Francisco Notario, a Spanish Dominican priest, also participated in economic exchanges among parishioners. A large gathering of parishioners marked his formal arrival as parish priest in 1784, and soon after, Notario was present at the public sale of the effects of the late Geneviève Borne Castan, a widow who had owned a considerable amount of local property.<sup>69</sup> Father Notario acted not only as witness but also a buyer in parish estate sales: in February of 1785, he appeared as a purchaser at the sale of the late Jean-Baptiste Lyon's property.<sup>70</sup> Notario, like the priests in St. Charles Parish, also purchased and sold slaves to parishioners, attaching the local church to the local slave economy. Further connecting the parishes of the German Coast region, Father Notario sold his forty-two-year-old slave Vinas to Nicholas Picou, an inhabitant of St. Charles Parish, soon before his death in 1787.<sup>71</sup>

Priestly involvement in civil affairs was not uncommon or limited to slave exchanges. Priests, of course, were responsible for recording the vital statistics of settlers—birth (baptism), marriage, death—that crossed religious and civil lines. But authorities also called for priests' specific involvement in the civil lives of their parishioners. As pastor of New Orleans and Capuchin superior, Father Raphael de

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<sup>68</sup> "Slave Sale," 28 January and 6 July 1799 and 6 July, St. Charles Parish Original Acts.

<sup>69</sup> "Presentation of Father Francois [Francisco] Notario as Parish Priest of St. John the Baptist Parish," 5 December 1784; "Public Sale of the Effects of the Late Widow Castan, Geneviève Borne," 17 March 1785, St. John the Baptist Civil Records.

<sup>70</sup> "Public Sale of the Effects of the Late Jean-Baptiste Durieu Dupre," 13 February 1785, St. John the Baptist Civil Records.

Luxembourg made numerous complaints against the immorality of the French settlers in colonial Louisiana. Father Raphael zealously protested the apparent lack of enthusiasm for Mass attendance and even the poor behavior within churches on Sundays and holy days of obligation. In 1725 and 1727, because of Father Raphael's complaints, Louisiana's Superior Council passed ordinances against talking during Mass and frequenting taverns or gambling during Mass hours and requiring pregnant women to record their pregnancy with local officials.<sup>72</sup>

Father Raphael supported a measure for the Church to aid civil authorities in finding stolen property or the arbiter of a crime—the *monitoire*. The *monitoire* required priests to announce local crimes in Mass, without mentioning the names of suspects or victims, and parishioners to report any knowledge of crimes under threat of excommunication. While priests did not have to read legislative and judicial decisions to parishioners during Sunday Mass, the charter of the Company of the Indies required that priests post royal decisions on the doors of the church, adding to priests' potential civil responsibilities. In French colonial Louisiana, priests also acted as notaries—important roles in the French legal system—in the absence of other qualified civil authorities and sometimes even after official notaries arrived from France. A further indication of the ties between Church and state in colonial Louisiana, parish voters or civil authorities would sometimes ask a priest to testify to an elected official's "Catholicity" upon their induction into office or in order for that official to obtain a promotion. Colonial courts

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<sup>71</sup> "Slave Sale," 21 September 1786; "Public Sale of the Effects of Father Notario," 29 April 1787, St. John the Baptist Civil Records.

<sup>72</sup> Carl A. Brasseaux, "The Moral Climate of French Colonial Louisiana, 1699-1763," in *The Louisiana Purchase Bicentennial Series in Louisiana History*, ed. Glenn R. Conrad (Lafayette: University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1995), 530-31.

could also call a priest to give an account of the trustworthiness of a civil or military official.<sup>73</sup>

In German Coast villages, the role of priest as civil and religious official solidified the centrality of the parish churches to the community: the church and rectory were meeting house, place of worship, and judge's chambers. Because of the concentration of significant transactions at the parish church, priests could add religious sanction to domestic slave trade by condoning or encouraging the economic and legal transactions attached to it. Slave auctions after Mass occurred throughout French colonial Louisiana, including in New Orleans, as priests could easily and legitimately transform from consecrator to local notary. In St. Charles Parish, area planters regularly bought and sold slaves on the steps of the Little Red Church.<sup>74</sup> Adding auction block to the resources the parish church provided, the Catholic Church in Louisiana consequently aided slaveholders in using churches for their own economic gain.

Not only were churches the home base of the priest-notary, but the locations of river parish churches were usually convenient for area slaveholders. The Little Red Church, for example, was located on the primary road along the Mississippi River, plantations and sugarcane fields surrounding the church on all sides and across the river. Some parishioners had to cross the river in order to reach the church, and many undoubtedly rarely made the trek at all. Nevertheless, the church's location was accessible to most slaveholders, including the McCutchons and the Destrehans, and the church's red steeple was a familiar marker, visible from the river and over sugarcane

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<sup>73</sup> O'Neill, *Church and State in French Colonial Louisiana*, 148, 235-36, 239.

<sup>74</sup> For one of the earliest slave sales at the church, see "Slave Sale," 15 August 1774, St. Charles Parish Original Acts.

fields.<sup>75</sup> Like the plantations of St. Charles Parish, the Little Red Church also faced the Mississippi River, its land holdings stretching beyond it toward Lake Pontchartrain.<sup>76</sup> The church, relatively easy to access, its arrangement of buildings and dependencies similar to nearby plantations, was a reference point for local parishioners and slaveholders. It was an obvious meeting place for agricultural and economic exchanges, including slave sales between parishioners.

The St. John the Baptist and St. James Churches conveyed the same sort of community centrality. Both churches were constructed on tracts of land belonging to residents that the parish deemed could afford to sell or donate land and materials. Not only did this connect the churches to parishioners of economic means, but it increased the likelihood of social and economic transactions at the churches. Small towns grew up around the church settlements. The towns of Edgard and Lucy, for example, developed around St. John the Baptist Church, and several small hamlets grew around St. James Church. While it is difficult to tell if Catholic officials anticipated growth around land associated with the wealthiest parishioners or if they meant for the churches to spark town centralization around their locations, parishioners used the churches as places of economic and social exchange. As towns grew in the nineteenth century, churches became located near parish centers, the wealthiest slaveholders, and the hub of economic and legal transactions. The priests of these churches were slaveholders and witnessed slave exchanges; Catholic churches in the river parishes, therefore, reinforced the institution of slavery in southeast Louisiana.

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<sup>75</sup> From all accounts, the church was visible to boats traversing the river. Throughout the nineteenth century, pilots steering riverboats to New Orleans used the church as a landmark that signaled the last thirty-mile leg to New Orleans. St. Charles *Herald*, 12 January 1978, reprint of “Land mark [sic] Now Gone from Destrehan,” *Goodhope News*, 12 October 1929.

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The objects of the economic interactions of priests and parishioners in the river parishioners were often slaves. As slaves were taxed in order to support early missions financially and bought to maintain church structures and land, priests and Church officials in Louisiana attached the Catholic Church to the institution of slavery. The central geographic location of the church, its ties to planters of note, and its claim to authority in the parish combined to make economic transactions there more likely and more significant to the economic actors. Planters certainly saw the advantage of using a centrally located building for economic transfers and the priests, as officials endowed with some degree of authority to collect taxes and organize parishes, as witnesses and partners to these transfers.

In St. Charles Parish, white, slaveholding parishioners were not the only inhabitants to realize the economic opportunities of the Little Red Church and its priests. Free blacks, especially free women of color, engaged priests and parishes in economic exchanges as well. By 1820, the Louisiana census shows that the free black population in St. Charles Parish numbered one-hundred forty-eight, the majority of that number women over the age of fourteen. It is this group of women that appears most often in parish civil records as economic actors engaged in exchange with St. Charles Borromeo Church. Free women of color, in particular, utilized the church and maintained relationships with the priests in residence, heightening their claims to economic and social viability in their community.

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<sup>76</sup> Marcel Boyer, *Plantations by the River: Watercolor Paintings from St. Charles Parish, Louisiana by Father Joseph M. Paret, 1859*, ed. Jay D. Edwards (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2001), 57-8.

Most of the transactions between free women of color and the priests of St. Charles Parish involved property given to or owned by the church; sometimes other women are included in the records. Occasionally the economic transactions of free black women involved enslaved women, allowing a glimpse into the lives of women bought by the priests of the Catholic Church in Louisiana. In 1774, a free woman of color named Marianne willed a parcel of land to Marie-Manon, a slave then owned by Father Barnabé. Marianne had purchased the property along the Mississippi River from an André Bourgeois, then bequeathed this land to Marie-Manon less than a year later.<sup>77</sup> The quick turn-around of the property suggests that Marianne always intended the purchase to go to Marie-Manon; perhaps the enslaved woman was a close friend or even a relative that Marianne wished to provide for in her will. No record exists if Father Barnabé allowed Marie-Manon to accept this bequest, but his later emancipation of Marie-Manon and her family would suggest that Barnabé did not contest the transaction. Raphael, Marie-Manon's husband, was fifty at the time of his manumission, and Barnabé might have seen Marianne's bequest as a convenient way to ensure their well-being after emancipation.

The priests of the Little Red Church, while often witnesses and middlemen for parishioners, were also directly involved in property transfers. The contest over the estate of Father Blacé revealed the complex relationship between religious authorities and their black parishioners in St. Charles Parish. During a serious illness that would prove fatal, Blacé recorded a statement to make certain that particular parishioners would benefit from his estate upon his death. Blacé, having never accepted a salary for his work at the church, wished the return of several household items parishioners had donated for

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<sup>77</sup> "Land Sale," date illegible (probably 1774); "Last Will and Testament of the Free Negro Named Marianne," 27 October 1774, St. Charles Parish Original Acts.



his use at the rectory over the years. Blacé mentioned a free woman of color named Emérante as the rightful owner of six porcelain vases displayed in the rectory. After his death, a parish justice of the peace, Judge Saint Martin, found a statement among Blacé's papers that Marguerite Dussieau, another free woman of color, owned his armoire. An unnamed free woman of color, possibly Emérante or Dussieau, claimed that Blacé intended to entail his property to her upon his death. Although she presented a notice signed by Justice of the Peace Louis Planchard guaranteeing her Blacé's effects, the two administrators of Blacé's estate contested her claim. Judge Saint Martin ruled that the money left by Blacé would be used to pay his debts and that the free woman of color would, indeed, receive Blacé's effects.<sup>78</sup>

Blacé's connections to Emérante, Dussieau, and the unnamed beneficiary are ultimately unclear. The three women could have been particularly pious, friends of the priest, or employees of the parish. Whatever their personal connections to Blacé were, all three, as free black women, solidified their economic and social status in their community by attaching their names to a well-known religious authority and place of worship. By donating furniture and household items to Father Blacé, Emérante and Dussieau indicated that they could afford to part with everyday and decorative articles. They displayed their property by making their donations to Blacé and they proved their capability of managing their property well enough to be able to give the parish priest household essentials. The free woman of color who claimed Father Blacé's effects exhibited a similar characteristic: she, like Emérante and Dussieau, believed that she was entitled to personal property. She might have given Blacé donations for the rectory, as Emérante and

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<sup>78</sup> "Testament of Father Jérôme Blacé," 20 January 1808; "Inventory of the Estate of Father Blacé," 25 February 1808; "Act Concerning the Succession of Father Jérôme Blacé," 26 April 1808, St. Charles Parish

Dussieau had, and Blacé then determined to return her goods through his will. Her determination to receive his effects from the administrators of his estate reinforced the message of Emérante and Dussieau. Free women of color in St. Charles Parish had property and status as well as a sense of propriety, displayed in their willingness to contribute to a worthy cause. They were economically viable actors in their community, and their involvement in the church both extended and demonstrated their financial and social capabilities.

The contest over Father Blacé's intentions not only emphasized the deep relationships between black parishioners and their priests but also the uneasy interplay between civil and religious authorities and white parishioners. The priests of the Little Red Church depended upon blacks and whites alike to fill pews and to contribute financially to its maintenance. Blacé acknowledged his indebtedness to Emérante and Dussieau, women and free people of color, stressing their religious claim to the church as well as the economic link between the priests of St. Charles Parish and the resources of black parishioners. Some white parishioners, however, displayed ambivalence about the relationship between black female parishioners and the French priests. The two administrators of Blacé's estate, Alexandre Labrance and François Piseros, dismissed the unknown free woman of color's claims as illegal and not binding. Yet Judge Saint Martin, in overturning their objections, supported the legality of the woman's demand. Saint Martin's ruling confirmed that free women of color could—and did—engage in religiously contextualized economic exchanges in St. Charles Parish. Even enslaved women, such as Marie-Manon, had the opportunity to gain property and their freedom through their association with the Catholic Church.

The priests of St. Charles Parish continued to maintain economic and personal exchanges with free and enslaved women in the years leading to the Civil War. While the Roman Catholic religion provided free women of color a chance to define their social and economic status, the relationships between priests and enslaved blacks allowed for few, if any, economic opportunities. The leaders of the Catholic Church in St. Charles Parish, in tandem with civil authorities like Saint Martin, both reinforced the legitimacy of slavery and the possibilities for free women to define themselves economically. Slavery existed both inside and outside church walls, and slave sales at the church perpetuated and gave religious legitimacy to the slave economy. Blacé left property to free women, but his household also depended upon the work of slaves. Priests like Barnabé manumitted their slaves, but many early missions depended upon taxes determined by slave ownership for their economic survival. In short, free black women were able to broaden their economic identities, but enslaved women were ultimately unable to change their economic or social status in a society that did not view slavery and Catholic Church teachings as inconsistent.

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The efforts of the Sisters of the Holy Family best characterize the Catholic religious expression of black female identity, and the social and economic opportunities for black women, in New Orleans. Established in 1842 as a religious confraternity dedicated to aiding the destitute and uneducated of New Orleans, the women involved in founding and shaping the order demonstrated their religious dedication as well as their abilities to make contracts, form schools and asylums, and deal with sophisticated businessmen to further their cause. In her journal on the origins of the congregation,

Sister Mary Deggs named Henriette Delille, Juliette Gaudin, and Josephine Charles as the three foundresses of the order, all free women of color seeking to dedicate their lives to the poor. Their particular calling, to aid and educate ill and impoverished African Americans, was an indication of their religious mission as well as the critical links between free women of color, enslaved and poor blacks, and Catholicism in Louisiana. Undoubtedly, by offering catechetical instruction to African-American children, the sisters helped offer Catholicism as a viable black religion in southeast Louisiana. Yet they also furthered the claims of African-American women to social and economic resources through their lives as religious.

The congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family was not the first Catholic organization to encourage slave proselytization or black religious devotion in Louisiana. Beginning with the eighteenth-century efforts of the Ursulines, religious communities had been catechizing enslaved women and children, as well as orphans and day scholars, since 1727. The Ursulines sent most of their students to St. Louis Church for baptism, including those slaves that belonged to the Ursuline convent in New Orleans.<sup>79</sup> Louis William Dubourg, the administrator of the Diocese of Louisiana and Florida, attempted to avoid conflict with Père Antoine during his tenure by traveling Europe in search of religious to aid the Ursulines in educating African-American women. Sister Ste. Marthe Fontiere, a Hospitalière Sister from France, worked with the order until 1823, inspiring Delille and Gaudin to the religious life by founding a school for young girls of color. Michael Portier, a priest who also followed Dubourg back to New Orleans, formed a

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<sup>79</sup> Baudier, *The Catholic Church in New Orleans*, 105, 183.

confraternity of young free people of color in 1820 to encourage them to “reach out to the slaves of the city, to catechize them, and to prepare them for baptism.”<sup>80</sup>

In 1847, the group of women officially incorporated as the Society of the Holy Family. Father Etienne Rousselon, as their spiritual and organizational advisor, helped them to develop as a confraternity and then an order. In 1851, Delille donated her inheritance to buy a permanent motherhouse on Bayou Road in New Orleans. The women continued to serve the poor and infirm in the city through the 1860s, coming occasionally upon resistance to their mission: other white religious orders complained about the Society of the Holy Family’s reserved seating in St. Louis Cathedral, and a few bad neighbors attempted to force them from their Bayou Road neighborhood.<sup>81</sup> Nonetheless, the Society grew over the years, the sisters expanding their convent to an old quadron ballroom on Orleans Street after the Civil War and beginning a school for the catechesis of women and children. Additional houses in New Orleans, Opelousas, and Donaldsonville also served communities of freed men and women throughout Reconstruction.<sup>82</sup>

Delille and the first Sisters of the Holy family, in shaping a new religious community, organized the first effort by Catholic African Americans to aid African-Americans in New Orleans. The religious zeal of the Sisters was undeniable; the history of the order, written by Deggs as a member of the congregation, emphasized the struggles of the women to form as a congregation, some against the wishes of their families. Many of the first sisters had opportunities to study abroad or marry wealthy men before taking

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<sup>80</sup> Gould and Nolan, introduction to *No Cross, No Crown*, xxix-xxx; Deggs, *No Cross, No Crown*, 10, 47-8.

<sup>81</sup> Deggs, 66-72, 89-91.

<sup>82</sup> Deggs, 32, 97, 153.

orders.<sup>83</sup> Obviously, those who joined the order abstained from such worldly triumphs. After taking vows, the sisters had to enter into economic contracts; negotiate with Catholic priests and prelates to open schools, house orphans, and build shelters; and manage houses across southeast Louisiana. Through helping those who needed financial or catechetical assistance, the sisters necessarily linked themselves to a well-established business community and Catholic educational system. In short, their efforts to aid blacks in New Orleans linked social, economic, and religious interests for the free women of color of their congregation and community.

While Delille and the sisters did not hesitate to make basic social or economic connections to found their order, they were also concerned with proving their worth as a religious organization. Judging by their choice of advisor—Father Rousselon not only was the founding pastor of St. Augustine Church in New Orleans but also served as the chaplain to the Ursulines—the Sisters sought to establish a certain degree of religious credibility as the first order to accept free women of color. Until ecclesial parish regulations changed during the 1880s, the sisters worshiped at St. Louis Cathedral and maintained their own on-campus chapel. Socially prominent, economically successful, and openly Catholic African Americans connected themselves to the order as well, adding merit to the sisters' cause. Thomy Lafon, for example, a wealthy free man of color and well-known philanthropist, donated money to build the Home for the Aged, the Home for Boys, and the Convent of the Holy Family.<sup>84</sup> The sisters did not shy away from his financial help or the importance his name implied for their order. Through

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<sup>83</sup> Deggs, *No Cross, No Crown*, 59-61.

<sup>84</sup> Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes, *Our People and Our History*, trans. Dorothea Olga McCants (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), 92-4.

connections such as these, the order solidified the roles of prominent free people of color, and their own socio-religious standing, in the Catholic Church.

The individual choices of the women also reflected efforts to renounce or reverse how free women of color were perceived in southeast Louisiana. Each woman's decision to join the order represented a choice counter to the stigma of free women of color as "naturally impious" or immodest.<sup>85</sup> Rodolphe Desdunes, in his history of creoles of color in New Orleans, gave Henriette Delille as an example of the virtue of free women of color: chaste and pure, the "Creole woman knew how to study, to think, to pray. She was generous, helpful, and pious. Her virtue, her charity, and her devotedness could never be doubted." Desdunes denounced any "minds today so vile as to try to blemish the memory of these noble women," suggesting that some New Orleanians were already doing just that.<sup>86</sup> Helping those less fortunate than they through an explicitly religious channel, the Sisters of the Holy Family demonstrated their piety and their propriety. Naturally, as religious, they proved their dedication to their religion and their God. But women such as Delille also suggested, through their actions, that they could afford to be poor in spirit—virtuous—giving of their social positions, educations, and their fortunes. A long-standing requirement of the order, in part to prevent the misuse of valuable resources, was for each novice to give her dowry to the community.<sup>87</sup> Like the free women in St. Charles Parish, who donated time and household goods to the parish church, the Sisters offered their economic resources to benefit their Church and to secure their religious connections. The donations of the families of wealthy sisters and

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<sup>85</sup> Gould and Nolan, introduction to *No Cross, No Crown*, xxxii.

<sup>86</sup> Desdunes, 98.

<sup>87</sup> Gould and Nolan, introduction to Part I of *No Cross, No Crown*, 5-6; Deggs, *No Cross, No Crown*, 158-61.

prominent African Americans also ensured their social standing as a legitimate, worthy religious order, and that free women of color be considered virtuous women.

As one of their primary vocations was to educate African Americans, the Sisters initially admitted women who had educations of their own and those who could teach their pupils. This requirement, of course, worked against most women who were freed slaves. Their students, moreover, tended to come from elite families desiring Catholic educations for their children rather than young men and women who had few economic or educational resources of their own. After the Civil War, families who sent children to the school voiced complaints that the sisters were teaching their children alongside the children of former slaves. Because they depended largely on their tuition for the maintenance of the house, the congregation capitulated to the families' requests to separate the children.<sup>88</sup> The sisters, despite their mission to catechize and minister to the poor, were nonetheless pressured by social and racial tensions in New Orleans between free and freed African Americans. During Reconstruction, the congregation began to accept more former slaves, and non-creole women, into the order; basic financial commitments, such as mortgage payments, food purchases, and building maintenance, however, bound the sisters to social conventions they had little power to change, even those who desired it.

The congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family was not without internal social or racial conflict. Several of the sisters owned slaves, including Delille, who was prevented from manumitting her slave, Betsey, because she was inherited. Many members protested the admittance of former slaves, both before and after the Civil War. Some were concerned that including freed women would tarnish the congregation's



reputation, based on the social standing of sisters who hailed from well-established creole families. Indeed, many sisters left, and the remainder split in two groups, over the admittance of Chloe Preval. Mother Superior Juliette Gaudin initially denied Preval entrance into the order as a reaction to her status as a freed slave and her role as Archbishop Odin's housekeeper. Sister Mary Deggs suggested that several sisters expressed anxiety over transforming their community's mission from helpers of the poor to servants of the hierarchy: they did not wish to be linked to prevailing notions about the proper occupations of women of African descent in New Orleans. Preval, however, did join the order, remaining Odin's housekeeper and caring for the orphans housed at the order's New Orleans facilities.<sup>89</sup>

From the 1870s through the 1890s, the Sisters of the Holy Family faced increasing difficulties in administering to black Catholics and a diminishing black Catholic population. Interracial congregations became less common. As an influx of German, Irish, and Italian immigration required the building of additional churches, catering to the new populations' different language needs, many black Catholics found themselves in Masses where they understood little of the homily or conversation. The efforts of then Archbishop Francis Janssens to cater to black parishioners, moreover, ended in separate churches developed for black Catholics. Investors and religious leaders such as Sister Katherine Drexel donated money only to black-majority congregations in order to ensure that donations would not be co-opted by white priests or parishioners for

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<sup>88</sup> Deggs, *No Cross, No Crown*, 12.

<sup>89</sup> Gould and Nolan write that skin tone played a role in the controversy over Preval, some of the sisters wanting only free and light-skinned women in the order; Gould and Nolan suggest, however, that the real controversy lay in the fact that Preval was a housekeeper, and less that she was freed and not light-skinned. Gould and Nolan, introduction to Part I of *No Cross, No Crown*, 5-7; Deggs, *No Cross, No Crown*, 197.

other parish projects. In New Orleans, increasing the money supply for African-American missions therefore ironically meant segregation.<sup>90</sup>

After the Civil War, the Sisters certainly played an important role in offering relief to freed slaves pouring into New Orleans for economic and educational opportunities. They developed houses in rural areas outside New Orleans near Baton Rouge and in Opelousas. The Sisters of the Holy Family continued their efforts in education, primarily catering to the daughters of well-to-do creole families, but they made few converts among the African Americans who had already renounced Catholicism because of increased congregational segregation or in order to espouse Protestantism.<sup>91</sup>

At the least, religious communities like the Sisters of the Holy Family, and other black parishioners throughout Louisiana, suggest that blacks did not always turn to American Protestant sects as religious systems of belief to understand the reality of slavery or the aftershocks of the Civil War. While many freed slaves certainly embraced the Baptist and African Methodist-Episcopal Churches, and many free people of color denounced Catholicism in favor of French Spiritualism or the comfort of black Masonic lodges,<sup>92</sup> not all left the Catholic Church. Catholicism shared many of the characteristics of Protestantism that appealed to blacks in the South, before and after 1865. The ideas of

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<sup>90</sup> Alberts, "Origins of Black Catholic Parishes," 192-271.

<sup>91</sup> Although beyond the scope of this paper, Albert J. Raboteau points out that the number of black conversions to Catholicism between 1940 and 1975 grew by 208 percent, due in part to African-American migrations to urban areas and increased exposure to Catholic parochial schools. He writes that "the desire for education and upward social mobility may have led some blacks to consider Catholicism," a desire mirrored in the motivations of the free women of color in St. Charles Parish and New Orleans. Albert J. Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 105, 133.

<sup>92</sup> Joseph Logsdon and Caryn Cossé Bell, "The Americanization of Black New Orleans," in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, ed. Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 234-5.

earthly suffering and eternal reward, in particular, were not limited for use by southern Protestants to reconcile faith with slavery or, later, religion with Jim Crow. Mary Deggs, a sister of the Holy Family, maintained in her history of the order that, if a person suffers no cross on earth, he is guaranteed no crown in heaven.<sup>93</sup> The black congregants who remained in churches throughout New Orleans, or who joined the black parishes that formed in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, suggest that Catholicism maintained an appeal for the black population of New Orleans.

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In the southeast Louisiana parishes outside New Orleans and along the Gulf Coast, free people of color utilized their connections with the Catholic Church to solidify their claims to social standing. Elizabeth Shown Mills and Gary B. Mills have demonstrated that in Mobile and the rural area around Natchitoches, free black confirmations began to outnumber white confirmations by the mid-nineteenth century. By becoming “more Catholic than whites themselves,” free blacks expressed how religious preference could supersede race in determining social status within their communities.<sup>94</sup> As in the rural parish of Natchitoches, the free women of color in the river parishes expressed social and economic identity through the Catholic Church. Unique to the rural areas outside the city of New Orleans, parish churches became the location for vital economic exchanges within the community and the setting for parishioners to express their social standing. Women in uncertain social situations, moreover, had the unique opportunity to take advantage of the centrality of the local

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<sup>93</sup> Deggs, *No Cross, No Crown*, 8.

<sup>94</sup> Mills and Mills, “Missionaries Compromised,” in *Cross, Crozier, and Crucible*, 43.

church to propel themselves into positions of importance to their parish priests and fellow congregants.

Free women in New Orleans proper also made choices to augment their social positions and demonstrate their religious sincerity. The similarities between the Sisters of the Holy Family and the free women of color in St. Charles Parish, moreover, reveal the real economic opportunities and limitations for African Americans in the Catholic Church in Louisiana. Catholic churches proved a place for economic exchanges linked to expressions of social status: these women not only demonstrated their religiosity but also their place in Louisiana society as active economic actors. At the very least, the use of the parish church in St. Charles Parish by free women of color suggested that they, too, had a stake in its position as a central place of exchange in rural Louisiana. As priests of the church acted as notaries, record keepers, witnesses, and pastors, with the capability to define religious, social, and legal roles within a community, free women of color used the church to identify their own positions within the parish. In the same way, the Sisters of the Holy Family defined their religious identities and their social status—as willing helpers of poor African Americans—through the Catholic Church. Although the Church could not guarantee its parishioners that religious prospects could create civil opportunities or legal equality, these women proved that the Catholic Church could be a venue for spiritual liberty and self-realization.

## CHAPTER 4 A DOUBLE CONVERSION: SPIRITUAL EXCHANGE IN THE RIVER PARISHES

That most priests in the American Catholic Church did little to advocate full religious or civil rights for African Americans in no way lessened the religious experiences of black Catholics in Louisiana. Many enslaved and free African Americans were involved in the sacramental life of their churches and proved active parishioners. In the river parishes as well as New Orleans proper, enslaved and free blacks participated in religious exchanges with the priests of the local churches, and many had day-to-day, personal relationships with the priests. Free women of color, in particular, cultivated vocations in the Church, utilizing local resources to form religious organizations in order to further their social, economic, and educational goals.

In the river parishes, personal religious observance often depended on the sugarcane season. Slaves and slaveholders made little time for Mass attendance during harvest times: McCutcheon, for example, noted no Sundays off for field hands during the busiest seasons at Ormond, even though the church was in easy walking distance of his property. Henry Catellanos described the rhythm of plantation life along the Mississippi as busy but idyllic. Sugarcane fields were the picture of

rural and agricultural beauty. At certain seasons, so sturdy, so thick, tangled and towering seemed the stalks, that one could hardly refrain from pitying the poor blacks who had to cut them down. And yet this task was to them a labor of love, and they appeared to enjoy the fun. Although the necessities of the crop demanded almost incessant exertion, and allowed no time for rest or recreation, the slaves preferred it to any other employment, and always looked forward to the grinding season as a pleasant and exciting holiday.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Henry C. Castellanos, *New Orleans As It Was: Episodes of Louisiana Life*, ed. and with an introduction by George F. Reinecke (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 278-80.

Castellanos, of course, assuaged readers' worries about the rigors of harvesting by assuring them that slaves actually enjoyed the most demanding work as they did a holiday. Beyond Castellanos's optimistic and paternalistic assertions of the pleasantness of sugarcane cutting, however, he also indicated the temporal demands of slaves' fieldwork as allowing no time for other pursuits. Slaveholders determined the daily labor schedule according to the season, and during harvests, the amount of work required of slaves, though not necessarily as pleasant as Castellanos suggested, gave slaves' little free time. Castellanos did not mention slaves' inclusion of religion in their day-to-day lives in the slave quarters, nor did he discuss whether any slaves managed to attend religious services during the busiest seasons. Castellanos's exclusion of a discussion of the religious lives of slaves is, in some ways, an accurate omission. Formal religion, practiced at a Catholic church, did not fit into harvest time.

The accounts of parish priests, plantation journals, and church and civil records support the assumptions about slaves' religious lives that Castellanos's observations inspire. While slave owners occasionally refer to the habits of a particularly religious slave, such as an enslaved sacristan that served the Little Red Church, most often, the religious lives of slaves bear little to no mentioning. Religious observances associated with time off, such as Christmas, have a featured place in plantation journals, if only to indicate the cost of the celebration or the comment on the rituals of slaves during those times. Similarly, records of births and deaths may make mention of slaves' religious habits surrounding those milestones. Again, however, religion often seemed incidental to

the life of the slave, and the slave owner, depending on the rhythm of plantation life instead of the shaper of worldviews or any understanding of reality.<sup>96</sup>

Yet, in spite of the demands of sugar planting and harvesting, slaves formed communities, built families, and expressed spirituality in their daily lives. Like many southern observers, Castellanos described the living conditions of slaves as rustic but comfortable, cabins in lines with white-washed walls and plots of land for the cultivation of vegetables and poultry. Slaves' housing and food provisions differed from plantation to plantation, and Castellanos's evaluation was in all likelihood either optimistic or romanticized.<sup>97</sup> Castellanos rightly noted, however, that slaves had houses to make homes and plots to translate into a sliver of economic freedom. Within cabins, slaves formed communities and shared religious practices that the slaveholder had little hope to control. Resources allowed slaves also provided them the opportunity to form social and economic connections outside the limits of the plantation. Many slaves in the river parishes took advantage of the opportunity to grow and hunt food, selling the excess for money. In the villages outside New Orleans, enslaved women brought homegrown and homemade goods to the Sunday markets in town—an economic advantage that slaves farther from centers of commercial activity had less chance to benefit from.<sup>98</sup>

Sometimes with the consent or help of a slaveholder, sometimes without or against the slaveholder's knowledge, enslaved persons also practiced religion. On plantations and farms along the Mississippi River, especially those nearest the parish

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<sup>96</sup> See, for example Samuel McCutcheon Papers, "Journal of the Transactions on Ormond Plantation, 1838," Mss. 1049, 1087, 1060, 1109, LLMVC, LSU, Baton Rouge; William J. Minor Letters, Plantation Diary and "Rules and regulations for the government of Waterloo Plantation," Mss. 859, LLMVC, LSU.

<sup>97</sup> Father Joseph Michel Paret depicted the living conditions of slaves in the river parishes in watercolors; for his paintings of slave cabins and the layout of local plantations, see Boyer, *Plantations by the River*, 77, 79, 81, 87, 103.

churches, slaves came into contact with the Catholic religion. Like the slaves on McCutcheon's plantation, many worked near the church or on the church property; others may have only experienced the religion of the slave owner as an explanation of Sundays off or the Christmas holiday. Of course, not all slaves or slaveholders were Catholic, even in southeastern Louisiana, though most of the largest plantation owners in the river parishes were at least nominally Catholic.<sup>99</sup> A few slaveholders discouraged the practice of formal religion, Catholic or Protestant, among their slaves. One plantation owner wrote that no one should "Expect to Preach morality [sic] among a set [of] ignorant beings—proper discipline may improve them and make them better." It is worth noting that Christmas on his property was celebrated with monetary gifts and did not include religious services of any kind.<sup>100</sup> In spite of the indifference or prohibitory regulations set by slaveholders, those slaves who experienced Catholicism to some degree adopted and adapted it into their lives, transforming the religion of their masters for themselves.

While few priests left personal records detailing the lives of their parishioners, much less their private ruminations on the practice of slaveholding, Father Joseph Michel Paret was exceptional in that he chronicled his twenty-year ministry among white and black Catholics in St. Charles Parish. From 1848 to 1869 the curé of the Little Red Church, Paret corresponded with family members in France describing his life and his duties at the small Louisiana outpost. Paret never explicitly denounced the institution of

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<sup>98</sup> Daniel H. Usner, Jr., *Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi Valley before 1783* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 197-202.

<sup>99</sup> Indeed, by the turn of the nineteenth century, the two largest slaveholders in the New Orleans area were the Destrehan family, major landowners in the river parishes (with 151 slaves) and the Catholic Church (the Ursulines and the Capuchins holding a total of 123 slaves). Figures from Thomas Ingersoll, *Mammon and Manon in Early New Orleans: The First Slave Society in the Deep South, 1718-1819* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 43.



slavery, but he certainly found fault with the religious practices of local planters. Paret resented the religious attitudes of the white slaveholders, commenting frequently on their neglect of regular attendance at Mass and their reluctance to provide adequate payments to meet baptism, marriage, and funeral expenses.<sup>101</sup> Enslaved men and women, however, though barred from becoming as economically active as free people of color, participated in economic and religious exchanges with Father Paret even more regularly than his white parishioners.

The Catholic Church required slaveholders to expose slaves to catechetical instruction and the sacraments, but slaves did not unthinkingly or unwillingly adopt the Catholicism of white slaveholders. According to Paret, some slaves attended Mass at the Little Red Church on a weekly basis, and he did not indicate that slaveholders forced or even encouraged Mass attendance. Paret most often noted the small numbers of communicants at daily Mass, white or black, chastising the poor religious habits of white planters and wondering how slaves could spare time to come at all.<sup>102</sup> Like the first priests in St. Charles Parish, more than one hundred years earlier, Father Paret struggled to serve parishioners, black and white. And like the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century black women who found economic and social advantages in a relationship with the local Catholic church, the slaves that came into contact with Father Paret actively engaged Catholic teaching to enlarge their own spiritualities.

Missionary priests, like Father Paret, contributed to the formation of black Catholicism in rural Louisiana. Similar to his predecessors, Father Paret interacted on

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<sup>100</sup> Bennet H. Barrow, quoted in Edwin Adams Davis, introduction to *Plantation Life in the Florida Parishes of Louisiana, 1836-1846, as Reflected in the Diary of Bennet H. Barrow*, by Bennet H. Barrow (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), 45.

<sup>101</sup> Boyer, *Plantations by the River*, 5-8.

economic and spiritual levels with African Americans in his community. Paret accepted presents of game, produce, and handicrafts from the slaves of the nearby McCutcheon and Destrehan plantations. Unlike the priests of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, however, Paret avoided commercial or agricultural exchanges with the free people of color in his parish. Suggesting that the intentions of free people of color wishing to donate goods to the church were more economic than spiritual, Paret indicated his preference to dealing with enslaved members of the Catholic community in St. Charles Parish.<sup>103</sup> In a series of watercolors of St. Charles Parish, Paret most often depicted slaves working in fields or gathering wood along the river; he did, however, also illustrate slaves attending at a baptism and write about their efforts to secure him homegrown or handmade gifts.<sup>104</sup> The slaves of St. Charles Parish, having few material possessions of their own, nonetheless engaged Father Paret in exchanges of goods for his spiritual services.

Paret generally administered sacraments to enslaved members of the parish at their own behest and not on the request of slave owners. Slaves called on Paret to anoint sick members of their communities as well as offer spiritual consolation to the dying. While yellow fever epidemics largely affected New Orleans proper, cholera and malaria swept through the slave populations on plantations along the Mississippi River throughout the antebellum period. New Orleans had at least two hospitals with wards exclusively for slaves, but on plantations outside the city, treatment for ill slaves was

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<sup>102</sup> Joseph Michel Paret, *Mon Journal d'Amérique*, trans. Marcel Boyer (Saint Etienne : Centre de Documentation Pédagogique, 1993), 123, 146-7, 165; Boyer, *Plantations by the River*, 62-3, 68.

<sup>103</sup> For a few of the many instances Paret records of slaves' gifts to him, see *Mon Journal d'Amérique*, 110, 114, 143, 150, 169, 193; and for his preference for dealing with slaves and his dislike of "les créoles," see 153-4, 142 ("parasites").

<sup>104</sup> Boyer, *Plantations by the River*, 58-9, 102-3, 108-9, 112-13.

confined to slave cabins and plantation hospitals.<sup>105</sup> Paret thus had many unfortunate opportunities to visit ill and dying white and black parishioners in St. Charles Parish and to witness slave spirituality during moments of spiritual crisis.<sup>106</sup>

In addition to seeking out Paret for anointing and consolation, some slaves also aided Paret in the administration of sacraments. A slave named Daniel St. Cyr served Paret as the church sacristan, and upon his death, was buried in the church cemetery.<sup>107</sup> Father Paret also did not shy from recruiting slave women to help in administering baptisms or last rites, usually to hold chrism, holy water, or cloths. Paret's willingness to include slaves in sacramental administration indicated an uncommon effort to reach enslaved persons as active parishioners. According to one slave on a Maryland plantation, slaves failed to understand local priests during Mass because they spoke in "Latin, or something we don't understand."<sup>108</sup> Paret undoubtedly administered sacraments in Latin as well, and black and white parishioners would likely have agreed with the Maryland slave's assessment of their comprehensions of the celebration of Mass. Yet, for a few slaves at least, Paret made the effort to extend Catholicism from the parish church to their everyday lives. From his own accounts, slaves recognized Paret's role as

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<sup>105</sup> William Dosite Postell, *The Health of Slaves on Southern Plantations* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), 130-9.

<sup>106</sup> Paret, *Mon Journal d'Amérique*, 115, 145, 181. For an example of yellow fever case and mortality statistics in New Orleans while Paret was in St. Charles Parish, see Erasmus D. Fenner, *History of the Epidemic Yellow Fever at New Orleans, Louisiana in 1853* (New York, 1854), 46-7; for a description of a cholera epidemic on a St. Charles Parish plantation, see excerpts from the letters of Mary Austin Holly, to her daughter, Nov. 10, 25, 1832 in Postell, *The Health of Slaves on Southern Plantations*, 74-8.

<sup>107</sup> Baudier, *The Catholic Church in Louisiana*, 350.

<sup>108</sup> David Charles Dennard, *Religion in the Quarters: A Study of Slave Preachers in the Antebellum South, 1800-1860* (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1983), 77-8. The slave was probably right; priests used Latin regularly in Mass and the administration of sacraments until the Second Vatican Council of 1963. For a pre-Vatican II explanation of why Mass was said in Latin, as well as a description of the ceremonies of extreme unction, see Rev. John F. Sullivan, *The Externals of the Catholic Church: Her Government, Ceremonies, Festivals, Sacramentals, and Devotions* (New York: P.J. Kennedy & Sons, 1918), 65-71, 117-21.

a religious leader, and at least a few considered him part of their own spiritual identities. A few slaves, indicated by Paret as “mes négresses,” even prayed for Father Paret.<sup>109</sup>

The slaves in St. Charles Parish participated in shaping their Catholic spiritual identities by offering Paret more than gifts for his household: they included Paret in spiritual practices inherited from African folkways and traditions. Despite the stereotype of the planter’s wife, armed with home remedies, treating slaves in cabins or plantation hospitals,<sup>110</sup> Paret indicated that enslaved parishioners had their own understanding of the cures and causes of common illnesses and usually treated themselves. On occasion, slaves shared with Father Paret their medicinal and spiritual uses of native plants, herbs, and roots. Paret commented on the efficacy of their remedies over the medicines offered to him by local slaveholders, noting that his “bons négres” displayed more knowledge and magnanimity than their white owners.<sup>111</sup> Unlike many of his antebellum contemporaries (and early historians of the antebellum South), Paret saw slaves’ home remedies as more than quackery or superstition.

The exchange between Paret and the local slave population, then, truly became part of a religious dialogue that involved social, spiritual, and medicinal interchange. For these slaves, giving Father Paret gifts was less tied to economic interests, and more connected to their understanding of spirituality. Historian Theophus Smith maintains that African Americans, like those enslaved in Louisiana, fused an African cultural attitude toward sickness and health and the Christian belief in a healing God. Forming a

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<sup>109</sup> Paret, *Mon Journal d’Amérique*, 188.

<sup>110</sup> This is not to say that some planters’ wives did not doctor ill slaves or that they did not take an interest in slaves’ illnesses; slaves were not, however, solely dependent on the administrations of the plantation mistress or even a visiting doctor. Postell, *Health of Slaves on Southern Plantations* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), 54-5.

<sup>111</sup> Paret refers constantly to his “bons nègres” as brave, having “coeurs d’or” (hearts of gold), and black women as better than “blanches” (white women). Paret, *Mon Journal d’Amérique*, 123, 153-4.

“pharmacosm” in which sacred meaning permeated everything, health and healing had spiritual as well as physical dimensions.<sup>112</sup>

For enslaved African Americans in Louisiana, this pharmacosm was consistent with many Catholic practices. During the anointing of the sick (roughly equivalent and usually referred to as extreme unction or last rites to nineteenth- and twentieth-century Catholics), the priest blessed the ill person with chrism, or blessed oil, reminding the communicant of God’s power to heal physical illness as well as spiritual sickness or sinfulness. Spiritual health and spiritual healing, in the face of serious illness or death, were consequently linked to the physical well-being of the patient. Paret’s administration of the sacrament of the anointing of the sick fit in to an African-American pharmacosm, and Paret’s visits to slave cabins created an ongoing mutual exchange of physically and spiritually beneficial gifts. His enslaved parishioners recognized this exchange by advising Paret on medicinal herbs.

Health and healing on river parish plantations took on characteristics unique to the area. Armed with specific sacraments for the spiritual needs of ill and dying patients, priests and religious along the lower Mississippi River fused the care of the soul and the body; the rural location of these plantations also encouraged particular means of handling sickness and death. Doctors, trained, untrained, and apprenticed, serviced several of the plantations. George Lanaux, who managed several properties in the area surrounding New Orleans and later served as president of the New Orleans Insurance Association, typified the southeastern Louisiana planter’s utilization of both doctor-prescribed and homemade remedies to care for his slaves. Lanaux referred serious illnesses and

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<sup>112</sup> Theophus Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formation of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 5; Sharla M. Fett, *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave*

surgeries to the local doctor, allowing slaves to manage on their own or with his minimal help for minor ailments.<sup>113</sup> In eighteenth-century Louisiana, some slaveholders had slaves trained to care for the ill as “surgeons” or attendants in lieu of hard-to-find and expensive white doctors.<sup>114</sup> Health and healing in colonial Louisiana was much like religious practice: convenience often determined the means to its practical application.

The healthcare of slaves throughout the South, including the lower Mississippi River valley, depended primarily on the ministrations of older women and young children. These groups usually tended to the sick, either by the slaveholder’s design or by default within the slave community, as the old and the young generally spent more time around the slave quarters and were less able to perform strenuous field or domestic duties. Sharla M. Fett describes “antebellum nursing” as “subsistence labor”; slaves assigned to plantation hospitals usually emptied chamber pots, bathed the ill, treated wounds, cooked special foods, made beds, cleaned soiled clothes, and, of course, administered medicines. No matter how menial or sophisticated the task in the cabin of the sick or the plantation hospital, healthcare was grueling and dirty work, very real and physical, notwithstanding its link to spiritual well-being.<sup>115</sup>

Enslaved Catholics recognized similarities between African spiritual rituals and Catholic rites. Alfred J. Roboteau writes that “liturgical ritual in African religions, as well as in Catholicism, culminates in moments of transparency between the worlds when the divine and the human touch and life is transformed.” Broad generalizations about rituals consistent to all African religions are risky to make, as is the correspondence

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*Plantations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 36-59.

<sup>113</sup> George Lanaux and Family Papers, Mss. 1318, LLMVC, LSU.

between one worldview and another: not all ritual is the same. Judging by the actions of slaves on St. Charles Parish plantations, however, many slaves who were exposed to or adopted Catholicism acknowledged both a link between the physical and the spiritual worlds and a connection between their personal spirituality and Catholicism. The slaves that Paret came into contact with shaped Catholic teaching and ritual to fit their own conceptions of spirituality through medicinal practices. Paret's willingness to learn about and act on African-American spiritual and medicinal customs illustrated just how much slaves were able to shape Catholicism without, or in spite of, the intervention of Catholic slaveholders.

Ghostlore and burial practices allowed slaves a way to explain their physical surroundings, their past and future, and the possibility of an unseen spiritual world as well. Slaves reported sightings of dead relatives or friends to assure themselves of the existence of life after death and the well-being of loved ones they could no longer see; some claimed that dead slaves haunted sights or particular people, willing to take revenge on a friend who betrayed them or a harsh master. On the graves of the dead, enslaved African Americans often placed objects in memoriam or to aid the deceased in the afterlife. While such actions could be interpreted as superstition, or the transference of African cultural practices to the New World, ghostlore ultimately provided another means for enslaved persons to express religious or spiritual beliefs and to connect an unseen world with the world they knew.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, "The Formation of Afro-Creole Culture," *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, eds. Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press), 77-8.

<sup>115</sup> Fett, *Working Cures*, 115-25.

<sup>116</sup> Elliott J. Gorn, "Black Spirits: The Ghostlore of Afro-American Slaves," *American Quarterly* 36 (1984), 549-53, 564.

Slaves often used tales about ghosts and spirits to comment on their own conditions. In St. John the Baptist Parish, one woman reported that ghosts of mistreated slaves haunted the gardens at Le Petit Versailles, Valcour Aime’s home. She would pass quickly by the house at night, afraid that she would see the ghosts “unhinge [the] horse” that had quartered a punished slave.<sup>117</sup> Other slaves reported that slaves killed or beaten to death would return to exact revenge on a master, an overseer, or possibly a family member or friend who did not pay his respects. Some feared that deceased masters would return to punish slaves who did not properly honor their memory.

Slaves also told stories of supernatural beings to explain seemingly inexplicable circumstances. Residents of St. John the Baptist Parish feared that the *feu follet*, or will-o’-the-wisp, caused infant lactation and infant death by sucking the breasts of babies. Only by placing a broom over the doorway or scattering mustard seed would the spirit not enter—it would have to count all the sticks on the broom or seeds on the floor first. Blacks also explained the mysterious and frightening appearance of a ghostly figure as the Gown Man. Accounts of the Gown Man made their way into St. John the Baptist Parish from New Orleans. In New Orleans, the Gown Man wore a black robe and terrorized black inhabitants; in towns along the Mississippi River, he wore a white robe and usually plagued black workers in sugarcane fields and processing houses. More than one slave believed that the Gown Man was a man-made apparition, thought up to scare black workers for fun or to limit blacks’ nighttime activity.<sup>118</sup> Whatever the origin of the Gown Man, or the truth behind the *feu follet*, ghostlore in the river parishes blurred the lines between story, faith and lore, explained strange incidents and worldly suffering, and

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<sup>117</sup> Quoted in Gaudet, *Tales from the Levee*, 64-5.

<sup>118</sup> Gaudet, *Tales from the Levee*, 87.



made sense of death and the afterlife. For some, a ghostly existence even meant the possibility of supernatural revenge.

Catholic veneration of saints and prayers for the dead also fit into slaves' conceptions of spirituality. At a basic level, practitioners of Voodoo and Catholicism shared the belief that the spiritual world could influence and change physical reality, an attractive tenet for enslaved persons, who had few, if any, opportunities to change the world they lived in. Indeed, nineteenth-century New Orleanians observed the attraction of Voodoo for both white and black Catholics because of its promise to shape aspects of reality—love, health, death—through spirituality. In New Orleans, Marie Laveau and her daughter popularized the practice of Voodoo. Henry Castellanos, recalling religion during the nineteenth century, described Voodoo as idolatrous, blasphemous, and especially appealing to black and white women, primarily society's "coquettes" who did not know "true religion."<sup>119</sup>

Central to Voodoo and hoodoo was a priest, priestess, or other figure who served as a human link between the spiritual and the physical. Paret, of course, could hardly have claimed such a role, but he certainly enabled the double connection evident to river parish slave spirituality—slaves' personal beliefs linked to Catholic religious tradition, physical linked to spiritual reality. At the least, priests like Paret complicate descriptions of the "priest" or "mediceman" of plantations. W.E.B. DuBois writes that the plantation mediceman acted as

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<sup>119</sup> In a description of a raided Voodoo ritual, Castellanos made a special note of the number of women who were present: authorities found "blacks and whites...circling round promiscuously, writhing in muscular contractions, panting, raving and frothing at the mouth. But the most degrading and infamous feature of this scene was the presence of a very large number of ladies moving in the highest walks of society, rich and hitherto supposed respectable, that were caught in the drag net." Castellanos, *New Orleans As It Was*, 97-8, 100.

the healer of the sick, the interpreter of the Unknown, the comforter of the sorrowing, the supernatural avenger of wrong, and the one who rudely but picturesquely expressed the longing, disappointment, and resentment of a stolen and oppressed people...as bard, physician, judge, and priest.

DuBois explained that the early African-American church was not Christian: association with Christian slaveholders and preachers merely gave the institution a “vener of Christianity.”<sup>120</sup> Yet the religious transactions between Paret and the enslaved parishioners indicate that DuBois may have underestimated how much slaves co-opted, reinterpreted, or accepted Christian tenets. Particularly, slaves with access to Catholic priests read into their actions a fundamental continuity with the folk religious practices of the slave quarters. Catholic-Christian theology and African spirituality per DuBois’s description shared the belief in a link between physical and spiritual realities and the potential for slaves’ use to understand a world in which their actions were limited.

Most importantly, however, Voodoo (and hoodoo), as religion based on spiritual and physical healing, further created the syncretic relationship between the “invisible churches” of the slave quarters and Louisiana Catholicism. Reinforced by priests like Father Paret, the healing spirituality practiced by slaves on Louisiana plantations proved both a “continuity of African cultural tradition” and an “ideological response” to the slave experience.<sup>121</sup> Father Paret, in other words, was not simply bringing Catholic tradition and rituals to slaves. As slaves shared their understanding of the spiritual benefits of physical health, and vice versa, they also proved this understanding by superimposing Catholic practices onto preexisting ideologies and using aspects of Catholicism to explain and understand slavery. Voodoo was a part of this double

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<sup>120</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. and with an Introduction by David W. Blight and Robert Gooding-Williams (Boston: Bedford Books, 1997), 152.

<sup>121</sup> William C. Suttles, Jr., “African Religious Survivals as Factors in American Slave Revolts,” *The Journal of Negro History* 56, no. 2 (April 1971): 97-104.

conversion. Slave religion, as a two-way conversion, did not take solely from either African or American religious traditions: enslaved persons shaped Christianity as much as Christianity shaped religion in the quarters.

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Within the slave community, religious ceremonies were used to mark milestones in community and individual life. Slaves imbued weddings with joyfulness, funerals with solemnity and sorrow. In spite of the amusement that slave celebrations may have afforded some whites—weddings, in particular, seemed to give slaveholders a chance to chuckle at a black preacher’s pronunciation or homiletic style—slaves instilled pleasure as well as dignity into these occasions. Simply, they celebrated their humanity.

Planters encouraged slaves to marry on weekends or during holidays. The Christmas holidays were the preferred time for weddings: slaveholders and slaves alike were already celebrating the holiday, and combining the holiday with a wedding could prevent the loss of too much work.<sup>122</sup> The wedding style depended on the slaveholder as well as the preferences of the enslaved. While priests could (and were in fact required) to officiate at the weddings of baptized slaves belonging to Catholics, weddings officiated by priests were not the norm. Far more commonly, slaves marked the occasion with an exchange of vows, some jumping the broom; slaves seemed to have preferred a black presider as well. Many whites in rural areas far from the parish church would mark the occasion with a brief ceremony, anticipating an official blessing the next time the priest was available. The lack of immediacy for marital blessings mirrored the attitude concerning baptisms. Many whites as well as blacks were not baptized immediately into the Catholic Church, their parents or slave owners waiting weeks, months, and sometimes

even years before baptizing their children or slaves (often, in these cases, en masse). While shortened or “unofficial” ceremonies were not limited to enslaved blacks or weddings, then, rural white Catholics usually expected such ceremonies to be a temporary, expeditious answer to the shortage of priests.

As with weddings, priests were required to officiate at the funerals of baptized slaves, and Catholic slaveholders also enforced this requirement rather infrequently. Hasty burials in unsanctified ground or without a priest occurred frequently during the eighteenth century for all races, as missions and missionaries were scarce in colonial villages.<sup>123</sup> During the nineteenth century, the exigencies of planting and harvesting seasons lowered the rate of church recorded slave burials: funerals, of course, were more difficult to plan very far in advance. Burial fees also limited church participation in slave funerals. Priests’ requests for inheritors to pay outstanding funeral costs dot estate descriptions in river parish civil records, evidence that these fees were not paid even by white parishioners for their friends and relatives.<sup>124</sup> And Catholic slaveholders had no obligation to afford unbaptized slaves a Catholic burial at all. Their funerals depended entirely on the preferences of the slaveholder or the efforts of their own family and friends. As with weddings, whites preached or attended, but slaves usually preferred to engage a black speaker or preacher to sanctify the occasion.<sup>125</sup>

Slaves’ preferences for nighttime funerals are well-documented, as is the tendency for slaves to inter the body immediately and hold a funeral days, or even weeks, later. John Blassingame and Eugene Genovese both attribute certain black funeral

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<sup>122</sup> Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 475-79.

<sup>123</sup> Mills and Mills, “Missionaries Compromised,” in *Cross, Crozier, and Crucible*, 43-5.

<sup>124</sup> And, conversely, priests acknowledged the receipt of funeral expenses; see “Papers Dealing with the Death and Estate of Louis-Alexandre Lolivret, 6 January 1805, St. Charles Parish Original Acts.

practices to an “African inheritance.” For enslaved persons in Louisiana and across most of the South, positioning the bodies in an east-west position, placing broken pottery or figurines on graves, and participating in “pagan” processions and dirges to the gravesite were fundamental to all funerals, with or without white participation.<sup>126</sup> In the humid climate of southeast Louisiana, immediate burials and delayed funeral services were as practical as they were a result of the African origins of slave spirituality. Funerals, too, tended to adopt and transform Catholic-Christian rites with slaves’ African heritage and responses to specific locales.

As discussed, slaves’ attendance at ceremonies representing religious rites of passage varied by slaveholders and location. Slave confirmations in New Orleans outnumbered the number of confirmations outside the city, even in an area as close to the city as the river parish region. A number of reasons could explain this phenomenon, the most likely being that slaves, like free whites and blacks, had less access to churches in less concentrated, rural parishes. Slaveholders were lax in confirming their slaves, perhaps because the rite signified a symbolic gesture of religious understanding. Confirmation was also unnecessary in order to receive communion with the Church: many whites were not confirmed, either.<sup>127</sup> And, of course, baptisms, though occurring on average during the antebellum period at a greater rate than confirmations, proved nonetheless an inconvenience for slaveholders outside the city. Slave owners were prone to baptize slaves in groups rather than individually. Even in New Orleans, church records

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<sup>125</sup> Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 194-202.

<sup>126</sup> Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 33-7, Genovese, *ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> Part of the low numbers of confirmed for all races was due to the absence of a bishop in Louisiana for some time during the eighteenth century. All confirmations not performed directly or blessed indirectly by a bishop were invalid; therefore, the “bad” confirmations reduced the number of actual confirmed. Mills and Mills, “Missionaries Compromised,” in *Cross, Crozier, and Crucible*, 41.

reveal that slave groups baptized during one ceremony was not uncommon; priests baptized adult and infant slaves en masse.<sup>128</sup> Admittedly, many whites in large parishes were baptized in a similar fashion, but again, mass white baptisms were seen as expedient measures, black slave baptisms as fulfilling a tedious obligation.

Slaveholders' accounts of slaves' holidays focused almost entirely on Christmastime, although the Fourth of July also served as a popular holiday, and rarely mentioned slaves' religious observations on holy days. While slaveholders' failure to discuss slaves' religious habits does not indicate that enslaved persons had the awareness or desire to acknowledge holy days, it does suggest that slaveholders seldom made allowances for slaves wishing to attend Mass on those days. Generally, the winter holiday around Christmas lasted from one day to several, allowing slaves time for rest and celebration. Most slaveholders across the South gave slave gifts, usually money, clothes, or extra or special food (such as eggnog). Slaveholders also used the holiday as a chance to inspect slave quarters and allow slaves time for housekeeping in addition to their celebrations. One slaveholder consistently gave slaves monetary gifts, sent them to town, and gave dinners and dances for the holidays. Punishment by taking away the holiday was considered severe by both slave and slaveholder. In 1838, a slave named Demp tried to prevent his wife from attending the annual holiday dance by locking her in their house; the slave owner locked in Demp instead and set the wife free to go to the dance.<sup>129</sup>

Beyond Christmas, weddings, and funerals, enslaved persons enjoyed religious and secular holidays depending on, or in spite of, the slave owners' particular religiosity,

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<sup>128</sup> St. Augustine Parish Baptismal Records, Vol. 1A, 1842-50, Archives, Archdiocese of New Orleans.

<sup>129</sup> Bennet H. Barrow, *Plantation Life in the Florida Parishes of Louisiana*, 104, 139.

slaveholding philosophy, or variations in planting and harvesting seasons. During poor weather, or if work was finished early, most slaveholders in the river parishes region allowed slaves time to spend freely. The reverse was also true: during periods of harvests or planting, slaveholders required time spent in the fields on Sundays or holidays. Again, though, slaves did not always depend on slaveholders' requirements to celebrate. Slaves held weddings, funerals, and other gatherings to celebrate their lives, their humanity and dignity. The slaveholder could enforce regulations for gathering and religious observance through a system of rewards and punishments, but slaves did not necessarily acknowledge their spiritualities or come to understand their lives according to their owners. Quite often, as Father Paret showed, slaves interpreted the world around them and the world to come through their own systems of belief, both influenced by and influencing Christianity.

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The religious exchange that occurred in slave cabins on Catholic plantations was two-fold. Slaves searched for meaning using the religious tools at hand, creating explanations for life and afterlife that was not wholly Catholic or African or usurped by visiting Protestant ministers. Further, slaves shaped the Catholic religion with which they came into contact. Father Paret's journal fundamentally demonstrates how enslaved African Americans could fuse traditions and religions in order to make sense of the world around them. Because slaves could not realize every aspect of Catholic religiosity in the United States—no nuns or priests were also slaves—the experience of slaves in the Catholic Church could never be equal to that of whites. They could not enjoy religious vocations. The personal practice of Catholicism in slave quarters, however, combined

medicine, ghostlore, Voodoo, Mass, and Christian priests and preachers, in order that slaves might understand the condition of slavery and the potential freedom of life after death.

Samuel McCutcheon's use of enslaved women as the primary planters of the church land indicated the nuances between the slaves and the Catholic priests of a Louisiana community. Free black women demonstrated their religious, social, and economic status through their involvement with the Catholic Church; enslaved women also embraced Catholic practices and religious relationships as a way to express identity. Unlike free women, however, the slave women who worked on the church land had an undeniably physical connection to the church and the property. Their labor was McCutcheon's tithe. While free women donated or loaned the priests their personal property to shape their economic identities, the enslaved women had no choice in giving their labor to the church. Laboring on the church property only emphasized their economic immobility and lack of social status as well as a very real physical connection to religious institutions in Louisiana.

In the river parishes, Father Paret's relationship with enslaved Catholics emphasize that slaves could, in fact, incorporate Catholic practices into their daily lives. Certainly, Paret's personality and his situation as a missionary priest mark him as exceptional. An educated man with few Louisianan confidants, Paret experienced the loneliness of being a mission priest every day. Writing of a nearly empty church, Paret's letters home often concluded with an apology for the lack of events occurring in the community. A typical day included a visit from his "bons négres," some bringing gifts, a few managing to attend daily Mass. On some days, Paret lamented that he had to keep



his voice down while saying Mass: no one had attended, and he did not want to appear as if he were talking to himself if someone passed by.<sup>130</sup> Paret's motivations to spend time with the slaves of surrounding plantations most likely came from his own longing for his family and a need for human contact. Disgusted and disappointed by most white parishioners, never an open proponent of the slave system, Paret related to his enslaved parishioners.

Yet, Paret also described slaves who sought him out without encouragement from their owners or from any Catholic authority. In St. Charles Parish, slaves recognized the priest as a spiritual guide and indicated an awareness of the links between physical being and a spiritual world. St. Charles Parish, moreover, exemplified the experiences of slaves of Catholic slaveholders in the lower Mississippi valley. Outside New Orleans, slaves did not adopt religion wholesale from white masters or an African past; whatever Father Paret's curiosity about slave life and his willingness to provide sacraments to enslaved parishioners, the double spiritual exchange near the Little Red Church was not exceptional. Paret's experiences give a window into the "invisible churches" of Louisiana plantations, those that visitors like Hamilton and Olmsted did not see. The churches of New Orleans displayed an obvious, and usually imperfect, integration of white and black parishioners; but seating was not everything. Catholicism most often and most intimately met slavery in slave cabins, and ultimately, slaves held the power of interpretation.

Although they were unable to shape their economic identities through their labor, enslaved men and women could express their spirituality and religiosity through personal

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<sup>130</sup> On 15 January, 1853, he wrote to his brother that "I usually preach only on Sundays, and sometimes I am forced to be quiet so as not to preach to the walls and the floor—because here during this season

encounters with priests. With Father Paret, for example, the slaves of the McCutcheon and Destrehan plantations explored the connections between Catholicism and African spirituality. The slaves responded to Paret's spiritual leadership by giving him glimpses into African-American medicinal folkways deeply linked to their sense of spirituality. As Paret offered spiritual guidance and console through the sacraments, so, too, did the slaves demonstrate their understanding of the connections between the physical world and spiritual well-being. The personal interchange between Paret and enslaved men and women revealed the similarities between Catholicism and slave spiritual traditions and the slaves' recognition of these similarities. Paret never directly expressed his own understanding of the spiritual exchanges with his enslaved parishioners. His reluctance or inability to admit to these religious transactions nonetheless does not suggest that the slaves of St. Charles Parish were unaware of their exchanges. Indeed, their mere participation suggested that they were willing to acknowledge and adopt a religious tradition that also belonged to their white owners.

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nothing would be more foolhardy than to count on any audience." Boyer, *Plantations by the River*, 68.

## **CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION**

Catholic priests mixed the physical with the spiritual when they administered sacraments, the tangible expressions of faith in oil, bread, water, and wine, or attended parishioners with remedies for illnesses. Sacramental validity ensured that a priest acted as a vessel of God's will—in consecrating the host, for example—and could potentially offer anyone the ability to participate in the sacramental life of the Church. Whether or not a priest advocated slavery or was a slaveholder, in other words, his ministrations still had validity, theologically and practically, no matter how repugnant his political views may have been to enslaved parishioners or anti-slavery Catholics. Similarly, parishioners were not empty vessels to be filled uniformly with Church teachings, nor did all Catholics express spirituality in the same way. In southeast Louisiana, this meant that slaves and slaveholders, whites and blacks, secular and religious expressed their spirituality in accordance to their perceptions of their relationships to the Church and to God as well as their social and economic standing.

Slaves on Catholic plantations and free people of color demonstrated that they were willing to go beyond a blind acceptance of Catholic teaching. Father Paret offered the most explicit examples of slaves embracing and shaping Catholicism to fit their lives. Some free blacks in New Orleans as well as rural parishes outside the city used connections to the Church in order to solidify their social and economic positions in the local community. Religion, moreover, was not a static presence in the lives of antebellum Louisianans. It did not only enter into the lives of black and white settlers during weddings, baptisms, and funerals, though some parishioners certainly experienced Catholicism primarily at these occasions. Religion shaped the formation of communities

in early Louisiana, economic transactions throughout the antebellum period, and the medicinal practices of free and enslaved Catholics. Religion changed and was changed by peoples' lives.

Most importantly, slave religion in Louisiana was a reciprocal relationship. E. Franklin Frazier writes that the lives of slaves and slaveholders were "intertwined," the "social interaction between masters and slaves" producing a "moral order" in which the slaves had "some degree of moral autonomy."<sup>131</sup> The slaves in Louisiana who incorporated Catholicism into their lives chose to do so. They could determine how they saw the world through inherited spirituality as well as practices adopted from local black and white Catholics. In adopting Catholic practices, slaves also adapted them to fit their own spiritual needs. While slaves participated in Voodoo ceremonies, the experience of religion on Catholic plantations was not limited to the sensational, often exaggerated, accounts of rituals or witchcraft that observers described. Assumptions that the only influence of Catholicism on slave religion was Voodoo, or that only Protestant religions appealed to slaves, are untrue.

The practice of Roman Catholicism in Louisiana did not stem paternalism or necessarily instill doubt in slaveholders' minds about the institution of slavery. Nationally and internationally, officials in the Catholic Church were at the most ambivalent about North American slavery, at the least advocates of slavery as a tool for African conversion. In the river parishes outside New Orleans, Catholic slaveholders maintained their slaves and their churches. French missionary priests held slaves themselves; later priests, such as Father Paret, privately insisted on the spiritual evils of

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<sup>131</sup> E. Franklin Frazier, "The Negro Slave Family," *The Journal of Negro History* 15, no. 2 (April, 1930): 199-200.

slavery while holding their tongue publicly about the institution. Simply, no great antislavery movement within the Church advanced the rights of enslaved Catholics before the Civil War, nor did Church leaders, with a few notable exceptions, succeed in maintaining or building a significant formerly enslaved Catholic membership after the war.

In New Orleans and the surrounding areas, the establishment of interracial churches, and the lag in determining official canonical parishes until after the Civil War, ensured that blacks and whites would worship together to a greater degree than in other Christian churches in Louisiana and possibly than in other southern cities. In rural areas, parish designations were used primarily to demarcate the boundaries of missions, and the large parishes encompassed populations undivided by race. Yet, this antebellum pattern of interracial worship did not guarantee equality outside church walls, prevent slavery, or ease the transition to postbellum worship practices in Catholic churches. Church officials, such as Archbishop Janssens, by all accounts intending to create greater opportunities for the conversion of newly freed slaves into the full sacramental life of the Church, made it more difficult for interracial churches to survive through Reconstruction. In an effort to siphon money to programs specifically for black parishioners, exclusively black parishes were created, segregating once interracial congregations.<sup>132</sup> The migration of black Catholics from rural areas, moreover, reduced the influence of Catholicism in the lives of river parish African Americans and exposed former slaves to the Protestant congregations, such as the African Methodist-Episcopal Church, of New Orleans.

The paradox of black Catholicism in Louisiana lay in the coexistence of spiritual, economic, and social opportunities for certain African-American Catholic communities

and the limitations of Catholic leaders to accurately assess the needs of enslaved and free black parishioners. National officials tended to ignore the contradiction between giving slaves access to most sacraments—acknowledging their human capacities to reason, choose, and believe—and denying that slavery prohibited slaves from exercising reason or choice. Those that expressed doubts about the spiritual and civil legitimacy of slavery felt bound by generally accepted interpretations of papal documents that supported the institution of domestic slavery. Slaves could certainly shape their spiritual lives when owners or priests offered them access to Mass and the sacraments, but traditional Church teachings about slavery and slaves’ rights, enforced by local and national officials, limited the agency of enslaved Catholics.

African-American women shaped their relationship with the Catholic Church most successfully in Louisiana, both in and out of New Orleans. Enslaved women, the most likely group to care for the ill on river parish plantations, helped to establish the belief in a link between the physical and spiritual worlds. Combining Catholic ritual with inherited African and new African-American beliefs, enslaved women doctored bodies and souls and permanently informed local Catholic folk traditions. Free women of color in rural parishes also benefited from their association with the Catholic Church, turning their material support for the Church into social status. In New Orleans, the free women of color of the Sisters of the Holy Family carefully adapted their association with the care of sick and impoverished blacks to mean a degree of religious, as well as social and economic, autonomy. They, like African Americans in the river parishes, were able to take advantage of perceived limitations to widen their spiritual, social, and economic identities.

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<sup>132</sup> Alberts, “Origins of Black Catholic Parishes,” 102-6.

Ultimately, the story of the Catholic Church and African Americans in antebellum Louisiana is neither one of unbridled success or failure. Certainly, the mass adoption of Protestant religions after the Civil War, even in Louisiana, suggests that former slaves found little in Catholicism appealing. Undoubtedly, the support that most local Catholic officials gave the institution of slavery did not endear former slaves to the Church. Also, for the historian considering antebellum Louisiana, it is difficult to measure the agency that enslaved men and women had in their lives when contemporary accounts often obscure their voices. Even to Father Paret, slaves were usually nothing more than his “bons nègres,” almost accidentally stumbling upon useful medicines or half-baked spirituality. But it is also clear that some African-American men, and to a greater degree, African-American women, defined themselves as Catholics in Louisiana. As Sister Mary Deggs wrote, their lives were often burdened by the limitations of their society and their religion, but their crosses guaranteed them crowns.

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## VITA

Lori Renee Pastor was born and raised in Luling, Louisiana, with a lifelong interest in her local heritage. After graduating from Ridgewood Preparatory School, she went on to attend the University of Dallas and to study for a semester in Rome, Italy. Ms. Pastor returned to her native state in 2003 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in American history and began work on the completion of a Master of Arts degree at Louisiana State University. She is currently a graduate student in the Department of History at Louisiana State University.