

The Role of Archbishop Joseph F. Rummel in the Desegregation of Catholic Schools in New Orleans

by John Smestad Jr.

"We are still convinced that enforced racial discrimination inflicts incalculable mental and emotional cruelty and pain, physical and social privations, educational and economic restrictions upon 16 millions of our fellow citizens, and that these discriminations are unjustifiable violations of the Christian way of life and the principles of our American heritage" (Rummel, "Blessed" 1). These words of Most Reverend Joseph Francis Rummel, the Archbishop of New Orleans from 1935 through 1963, reflect the beliefs which guided him in directing the racial integration of all Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of New Orleans. An historical analysis of Rummel's role in the civil rights struggle shall be made through the presentation of the background of Catholic school segregation in New Orleans, a brief biography of the man, and the events between 1953 and 1963 which led to the actual racial integration of the Catholic schools.

The Background of the Struggle

The background of the education of Black Catholics begins with the aftermath of the Civil War. In 1866 the Plenary Council of Baltimore decreed that American bishops should take steps to formally institute Catholic education in their dioceses. Archbishop John M. Odin, C.M., who was ordinary from 1861 to 1870, began the effort by inviting the Oblate Sisters of Providence to teach in New Orleans. Due to inadequate funding and post-Civil War racial discrimination this effort proved to be a failure. Odin's next two successors also were ill-equipped to provide meaningful education for Catholic Blacks. In 1888 Francis Janssens became Archbishop of New Orleans and set about expanding the Church's role in education. "Although more than twenty years had elapsed since the Second Plenary Council of Baltimore had issued its appeal in behalf of the Negro race, provisions meager in comparison with the need had been made for the colored in Louisiana" (Hill 36). Archbishop Janssens, with the financial backing of Thomy Lafon, a wealthy Black Catholic, directed the Sisters of the Holy Family to expand their ministry to Black Catholics. Also, Mother Katherine Drexel, noted for the establishment of Xavier University, was enlisted to assist in these projects (Hill 37).

The next major push for "colored Catholic" education came during the episcopate of Most Reverend James Hubert Blenk (1906 - 1917), an archbishop especially noted for his interest in fostering a Catholic school system in New Orleans. Blenk worked to establish an organized, well-financed parochial school system, and he actively sought to include education for Blacks in the overall plan (Hill 95). "His solicitude for the spiritual and educational betterment of the Negro may be called the crowning glory of his administration. In their interest exclusively, he called to the Archdiocese the Fathers of the Society of the Holy Ghost, the Josephite Fathers, and the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament for Indians and Colored" (Hill 160). The parochial school system continued to grow throughout the early 1900's, through World War 1, and up to the Great Depression.

However, this growth and success was not equal for the races. In fact, the segregated Catholic school system in New Orleans suffered from many of the same inequalities that afflicted the public school system. Following World War II, the movement towards racially integrated schools began in earnest. Joseph F. Rummel oversaw that integration in the Catholic schools of the Archdiocese of New Orleans.

Joseph Francis Rummel was born in 1876 in Baden, Germany where he lived until the age of six. At this time his family immigrated to the northeastern United States; the future archbishop attended Catholic schools in New York and Pennsylvania, and eventually was ordained in Rome on May 24, 1902. Rummel served in various parishes of the Archdiocese of New York from 1903 through 1928. In that year Pope Pius XI named him bishop of Omaha. After only seven years in Omaha, Rummel succeeded John W. Shaw as archbishop of New Orleans on March 9, 1935. His expertise in organization and administration came to the fore during his episcopates; he reorganized diocesan accounting procedures, established new lay groups, and directed the Eighth National Eucharistic Congress of 1938. He led the New Orleans Catholic Church during the Depression and World War II, and oversaw a great period of growth in the Archdiocese; over forty new parishes were formed during his tenure (Bezou, "Rummel"). "By 1961 the population had increased 66%, the number of parishes by 43%, and the priests by 25%... Archbishop Rummel's record in favor of Catholic education is even more impressive. In twenty-five years, the school population has more than doubled..." (Bezou, "New Orleans" 46,52). Rummel led the movement towards the integration of the parochial school system. It is for this work that many remember Archbishop Rummel (Bezou: Rummel 46, 52).

Desegregation in New Orleans

In 1954 the United States Supreme Court handed down its decision in *Brown v Board of Education*. The ruling held that segregation, as espoused in the "separate but equal" doctrine of 1896, was unconstitutional. Following that sweeping decision, Archbishop Rummel began formulating plans for the racial integration of parochial schools. At this time, the Louisiana Legislature, in opposition to the Supreme Court ruling, passed laws reaffirming and requiring segregation in all schools (McCulla 63). Rummel protested these actions, but "promised that desegregation of Catholic schools would not be rushed into" (McCulla 66).

However, in 1953, the archbishop issued what would become one of his most famous pastoral letters. In "Blessed Are the Peacemakers," Rummel declared "the unacceptability of racial discrimination" (Bruns 94).

Ever mindful, therefore, of the basic truth that our Colored Catholic brethren share with us the same spiritual life and destiny, the same membership in the Mystical Body of Christ, the same dependence upon the Word of God, the participation in the Sacraments, especially the Most Holy Eucharist, the same need of moral and social encouragement, let there be no further discrimination or segregation in the pews, at the Communion rail,

at the confessional and in parish meetings, just as there will be no segregation in the kingdom of heaven (Rummel "Blessed" 5).

After the letter was read in all parishes, prominent local Catholic politicians began an organized fight against Rummel's policies, a fight that would eventually lead to divisions within the Catholic population of the area and to several excommunications.

In 1955 Rummel appointed a committee "to study the problem of integration of schools and its application to the schools of the Archdiocese" (McCulla 66-67). The letter recommended the earliest possible integration of the Catholic schools, beginning with the first grade. However, opposition among Catholic parishioners and lay leaders grew (McCulla 66-67). "Catholics had not advanced in their thinking about integration. Many parish school boards and parent groups voted by clear majorities to go on record against integration on any level in their local parochial schools" (McCulla 68). With some reservations, therefore, Rummel delayed immediately implementing the committee recommendation, but in February 1956, he published another pastoral letter unequivocally denouncing racial segregation as morally bankrupt. "Racial segregation as such is morally wrong and sinful because it is a denial of the unity and solidarity of the human race as conceived by God in the creation of Adam and Eve" (Rummel "Morality" 1).

The reaction from prominent segregationist Catholics was predictable. With outrage at the archbishop's forthrightness with his plans, some in the Louisiana Legislature introduced more bills seeking to maintain segregation in the parochial school system. A writer in *Catholic World* stated that "It is to be hoped that these Catholics of Louisiana will wake up to the gravity of what they are planning to do. They are cooperating with a plan... whereby the State can interfere in the Church's mission of education" (Sheerin 4). In response to accusations of abuse of power "State Representative E.W. Gravolet, Jr., one of the Roman Catholic backers of the proposed segregation bill, promptly announced that 'we intend to go ahead with it, certainly'" ("Archbishop's Way" 80). Rummel in turn threatened to take drastic action: excommunication.

Other segregationist Catholics formed the Association of Catholic Laymen of New Orleans which "asked the Pope (Pius XII) to stop Rummel from taking further steps to integrate white and Negro Catholics and to decree that racial segregation is not 'morally wrong and sinful'" ("Morals" 36). The Vatican's response was to remind all that "the Pope had condemned racism as a major evil, asserting 'that those who enter the Church... have rights as children in the House of the Lord'" (McCulla 68).

The next few years saw much fighting between prominent segregationist Catholics and Archbishop Rummel and the Archdiocesan School Board. Actions taken by segregationists included speeches, rallies, letters to the major local newspaper, and withholding of church contributions. On his part, Rummel issued pastoral letters to the clergy and lay Catholics of the Archdiocese reminding them of church teaching on the sinful nature of segregation. On March 27, 1962, Rummel announced that segregation would end in the parochial school system as of the 1962-63 school year (McCulla 70).

After ten years of tumult, the Catholic schools were going to integrate, but not without one last battle between Rummel and the segregationists. State Senator E.W. Gravolet threatened to cut off state support to Catholic schools. Leander Perez, the political boss of Plaquemine Parish, called for the withholding of financial support from the Church. With growing opposition, Rummel and Archbishop-Coadjutor John P. Cody sent out letters to the most vocal opponents warning them of excommunication. Most of those who received warnings ceased their activities. However, Leander Perez, Jackson G. Ricau, secretary of Citizens Council of South Louisiana, and Mrs. B.J. Gaillot, Jr., president of Save Our Nation, Inc., became even more vocal in their opposition to Archbishop Rummel. On April 16, 1962, Rummel excommunicated all three for continuing "to hinder his orders or provoke the devoted people of this venerable archdiocese to disobedience or rebellion in the matter of opening our schools to all Catholic children" ("Church" 1). They were barred from the Mass and sacraments as well as Catholic burial. The following day, on April 17th, Rummel emerged from his home for a meeting with a group of Catholic pilgrims, and was confronted by Mrs. Gaillot who knelt in front of him and declared "I am not apologizing for anything I have done in the past . . . Satan is interfering with my efforts to talk to you" ("Satan" 66). The pilgrims surrounded her and dragged her away from Rummel. Such a scene indicates "the ordeal that the Catholic Church has faced in cracking segregation in Southern parochial schools" ("Satan" 66). Most Catholics in the area seemed to lend little support to Perez, Gaillot and Ricau while the excommunicants seemed stunned by the action.

With this battle won, Archbishop Rummel's Catholic schools desegregated in the fall of 1962. Ricau and Perez were eventually reinstated into the Church following public retractions. "When Archbishop Rummel died on November 8, 1964, the Catholic Schools of the Archdiocese of New Orleans were, for all practical purposes, completely integrated" (McCulla 75). Registration did not drop and no violence was reported during the integration years. "'There's been a lot of grumbling down here,' said one New Orleans observer last week, 'but the majority of Catholics will go along; no one is kicking over the traces. Catholics still regard the archbishop as top man'" ("Satan" 67).

Archbishop Joseph Rummel succeeded at a task in New Orleans which in other parts of the country was causing protests, violence, and destruction. As can be seen in the formative year of Archdiocesan education, Rummel faced a tough battle against an entrenched institution called segregation. However, his methodological approach, emphasis of teaching as opposed to commanding, and his determination and fearlessness in the face of state police power, all led to the remarkably peaceful integration of the Catholic schools in New Orleans. In *Cross, Crozier, and Crucible*, a book published this year to commemorate the bicentennial of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, writer J. Edgar Bruns sums up Rummel's role quite well: 'He is an unsung hero of the civil rights movement'" (51).

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[Back to the 1993-4 Table of Contents](#)