

# Catholic Nursing Sisters and Brothers and Racial Justice in Mid-20th-Century America

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This historical article considers nursing's work for social justice in the 1960s civil rights movement through the lens of religious sisters and brothers who advocated for racial equality. The article examines Catholic nurses' work with African Americans in the mid-20th century that took place amid the prevailing social conditions of poverty and racial disempowerment, conditions that were linked to serious health consequences. Historical methodology is used within the framework of "bearing witness," a term often used in relation to the civil rights movement and one the sisters themselves employed. Two situations involving nurses in the mid-20th century are examined: the civil rights movement in Selma, Alabama, and the actions for racial justice in Chicago, Illinois. The thoughts and actions of Catholic sister and brother nurses in the mid-20th century are chronicled, including those few sister nurses who stepped outside their ordinary roles in an attempt to change an unjust system entirely. **Key words:** *civil rights, historical research, social justice*

**T**HIS ARTICLE explores activists for social justice in the 1960s civil rights movement

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through the lens of Catholic nursing sisters and brothers who advocated for racial equality. What were the conditions that moved them to advocate for social justice and what were the conditions that did not? How did they make their voices heard? How did they balance the restrictions of their religious roles with their growing social consciousness of racial injustice? The article describes how the coming together of 2 epochal events, the civil rights movement and the Second Vatican Council, affected a sample of Catholic sisters' and brothers' work for social justice in Selma, Alabama, and Chicago, Illinois. Two patterns of activism for racial injustice are delineated in differing circumstances and by different religious orders: the few nurses who marched in the streets against racial discrimination to change the system, and the sisters and brothers who used their hospital work as a context to support social justice. At the same time, others opposed their work, including members of their own congregations.

The article adds to debates about nursing activism. The impression is often created that people can be activists for social justice only by stepping outside of their ordinary

professional and occupational roles and that they can change an unjust system only as an outsider to society.<sup>1</sup> As D'Antonio argues, however, while visible and vigorous actions meant to bring about substantive political or social change may be conventional views of activism, they may not be the only way to think about how nurses brought about meaningful change.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, she calls for "unpacking the trope of activism" and wonders "about the ways in which the more ordinary nurses theorized (or thought about) the social and political implications of their own actions."<sup>2</sup> The thoughts and actions of the Sisters of St Joseph (SSJs) in Selma and the Daughters of Charity in Chicago are examined, with references to other religious orders for comparison. Their activities provide a prism for viewing the social dynamics and complex interactions involved as religious institutions responded to injustices during the decades of the mid-20th century.

Historical methodology is used within the secondary literature on race, religion, and nursing. Primary sources in the Archives of the Sisters of St Joseph, Rochester, New York; the Alexian Brothers Archives, Chicago, Illinois; the Archdiocese of Chicago, Illinois; and the Chicago Historical Museum, Chicago, Illinois, were chosen that revealed correspondence among sisters and clergy; professional publications; newspapers on Catholic hospital discrimination and protest marches; Catholic organization minutes of meetings; chancery correspondence; and hospital chronicles and ledgers. Oral histories of 4 SSJs who were in Selma were also used, as was a Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) documentary, *Sisters in Selma: Bearing Witness for Change*.<sup>3</sup> A historical perspective is important for the development of nursing knowledge that can contribute to the elimination of healthcare disparities.

Data have been evaluated and interpreted within the broader framework of "bearing witness," a new language nuns employed at the time to justify their decisions in relation to the civil rights movement. Kurasawa theorizes

that an examination of practices that constitute social justice begins with bearing witness, or the willingness to speak out against abuses. By bearing witness and giving voice to injustices aimed at African Americans and communicating their experiences to receptive audiences, the sisters cultivated public empathy for those suffering from structural inequities.<sup>4</sup> As history is not an exact science, however, "bearing witness" does not explain all of the sisters' actions. Studies suggest that women often have used the resources of religious institutions to work as activists for social justice.<sup>1</sup> This article examines such groups.

## SEEDS OF CHANGE

Catholic sisters and brothers have a long history of nursing. Bullough and Bullough noted the predominance of religious orders of men in medieval nursing, in both Western and Eastern institutions. The Alexian Brothers, for example, organized to care for victims of the Black Plague in the 14th century in Germany and the Low Countries. It was not until the 17th century when St Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac challenged this model in France that religious women became more prevalent.<sup>5,6</sup> At that time, most religious orders were "contemplative" and stayed within their convent walls. Engaging in ministry was irrelevant to their primary goal of personal sanctification through asceticism or prayer.<sup>7</sup> When de Paul and de Marillac founded the Daughters of Charity in 1633, they established it as an "apostolic" or "active" order with ministerial works as essential missions. Many other women, including the sisters in this study, followed this framework, which joined humility, obedience, and simplicity to good works, and they practiced nursing as an act of charity.<sup>8</sup>

The years after World War II were important in the development of American Catholic sisters' work as growth in the number of Catholics created unprecedented demands for new institutions, and they needed sisters

to run them. But this contested with the need to educate the sisters for their work in order for schools and hospitals to be accredited. A central factor that caused changes in sisters' working lives occurred in the 1950s with the Sister Formation Conference that focused on the need for additional education, or formation, for the specific works of the communities. The few sisters who participated were unique in their preparation, however. The progressive reforms they pushed caused a painful self-examination in their religious communities and dismay on the part of many lay Catholics.<sup>9</sup>

Widespread misunderstandings among sisters, brothers, clergy, and the laity similarly occurred in the 1960s after the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) met from 1962 to 1965. At the same time, a heightened level of social awareness for nursing sisters and brothers began with the civil rights movement. This article situates their nursing and hospital work within Vatican II, which served as a catalyst for the civil rights movement within the Catholic church. In the 1960s, Catholicism's exclusiveness and its intellectual tentativeness appeared to Pope John XXIII to be less open to the modern age than it should be, and he convened Vatican II to bring the church up to date.<sup>10,11</sup> Vatican II's emphasis on justice, as opposed to charity, and human dignity prompted a worldwide reassessment of Catholic social thought. This significantly affected how religious congregations viewed their healthcare missions.<sup>12,13</sup> Congregations held meetings during which they redefined their governance and ministry and renewed their commitment to the poor and oppressed. Religious communities recruited new candidates who, rather than simply accepting social and religious inequities, asked why they occurred. As McGreevy argues, the civil rights movement and Vatican II "combined to place the Catholic struggle over race and religion at the center of the nation's cultural turmoil."<sup>13(p5)</sup>

Vatican II brought what Gleason calls a "religious earthquake" to world Catholicism, and it coincided with the social and political

upheavals in the United States over human rights.<sup>14(p84)</sup> Women working through their religious congregations were especially affected. Congregational superiors struggled to implement organizational changes that had begun after World War II in the way they recruited and educated women for their ministries. Nuns wrestled with the concept of authority as they tried to balance 2 worlds: the diminishing seclusion, safety, and protection of the past and a future influenced by a highly secularized environment. Some sisters such as the SSJs and Daughters of Charity left their traditional vocations among white Catholics in favor of working among African American communities. Yet, as these white sisters renegotiated their roles among their new constituents, they developed conflicts within their own congregations, with their male superiors, and with the laity as they battled over new terrain.<sup>9</sup>

#### **HOSPITAL WORK AS A CONTEXT FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE: SELMA, ALABAMA, 1965**

In 1944, the SSJs from Rochester, New York, began operating the Good Samaritan Hospital in Selma, Alabama, for African Americans. Their goal was to minister to the sick and poor in the socially segregated black community; and while they provided good nursing care, they also offered adequate wages and independence for a number of African Americans. They advocated for full integration of African Americans into society through their provision of healthcare, education, and the Good Samaritan Hospital School of Practical Nursing. Since the 1940s, approximately 100 sisters from Rochester came to Selma, and a third were nurses. The others were teachers, community liaisons, and social workers. They did not agree with the existing system of segregation, but they worked within it. Although these nurses did not march in the streets to change the system of racial segregation, through their hospital work for African Americans, they believed that they were helping to

promote racial justice. As the white nursing sisters trained and worked side by side with African Americans, they opened doors of acceptance and opportunity for Selma's black community.<sup>15</sup>

Whereas most Catholic nursing orders maintained registered nursing schools for whites, the Good Samaritan Hospital School of Practical Nursing was for African American students, although the sisters advertised that it was open to all. In establishing such a school, the sisters followed the philosophy of Booker T. Washington, founder of Alabama's Tuskegee Institute in 1881. He encouraged blacks to focus on practical issues of life and to obtain training that could be immediately used. Although Washington was criticized for sacrificing a broad education, he believed that building a strong economic base for advancement was a key to obtaining racial equality.<sup>15,16</sup> In the mid-20th century, the sisters worked with predominantly poor blacks in Selma. As such, the nuns designed a program geared to help this population—one that would enable students to enhance their employability and earning power in a relatively short span of time. The students and graduates also helped staff the growing hospital. Eventually, many of the licensed practical nurses from Good Samaritan went on to obtain baccalaureate degrees and become leaders in their fields.<sup>15</sup>

In 1963, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, a principle organization of the civil rights movement, began efforts to register voters in Selma and surrounding counties. White harassment of blacks often led to violence, and the SSJs at Good Samaritan Hospital cared for African Americans who had been injured afterward. The sisters themselves experienced discrimination. For example, Sister Mary Paul Geck, superior of the SSJs in Selma, stood up to the voting superintendent when he tried to prevent the sisters from voting, due to their association with blacks; she was successful in getting her nuns registered (Sisters Mary Paul Geck, Barbara Lum, Josepha Twomey, and Catherine Teresa Martin, oral communication, April 11, 2008). Then on February 18, 1965, a trooper shot a

young, unarmed civil rights protestor, Jimmie Lee Jackson, as he tried to protect his mother from police during a demonstration in nearby Marion, Alabama. He was taken to Good Samaritan where he died a week later. His death and the demonstrators' hopes of bringing attention to their civil rights violations led to a planned march to Montgomery.<sup>15</sup>

The SSJs' participation in the southern civil rights movement culminated on March 7, 1965, or "Bloody Sunday," when Selma authorities attacked 600 marchers who were crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge in route from Selma to Montgomery as a protest against voting restrictions. Having the only hospital in the area for African Americans, the SSJs nursed the injured marchers in the Good Samaritan Hospital throughout the afternoon, and the workers tended more than a 100 people. Not only did the nursing sisters participate, but also did the teachers of St Elizabeth's School (run by the SSJs for African American children), who worked in admissions and central supply departments. The hospital admitted 15 people with head injuries and fractures, including John Lewis, one of the leaders of the march, who had suffered a concussion. In the sisters' views, their hospital work was a form of bearing witness. As one nursing sister recalled, "Little did we realize the morning of Monday, March 8, that our exhausting labors in 'bearing witness to Christ' were just beginning and would continue without respite for the month, and even beyond."<sup>17</sup> The televised images of violence directed against the demonstrators infuriated people throughout the country. Following a call by Dr Martin Luther King, political and religious leaders, including Catholic sisters, congregated in Selma with Dr King to show their solidarity with African Americans.

Some clergy and laity attempted to thwart the demonstrators' actions, including Selma's Mayor Joe Smitherman and Sheriff Jim Clark. In addition, Mobile's archbishop Thomas Toolen forbade the priests and nuns in his diocese from marching. He threatened to send anyone back to his or her home state if he or she did so, and he had the authority to do it.<sup>18</sup> Church edicts dating back to the 16th

century and the Council of Trent had given bishops the right to sanction enterprises in their dioceses, a classic example of problems women religious faced with ecclesiastical control.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the SSJs were still subordinate to a patriarchal hierarchy that could disempower them. Not only was Toolen concerned about Ku Klux Klan reprisals against the area's Catholics, he also feared that if the clergy incited the local people, it would affect Selma's white Catholics' financial support of Church programs, which was crucial for their success. In his view, Martin Luther King was "dividing the people" and the demonstrations were "not helping things at all. . . . There are crazy people on both sides. As good citizens we should try to control them." He asserted that the place of sisters and priests was "at home doing God's work."<sup>18</sup> Despite his disapproval, Catholic clergy and sisters from other parts of the United States converged in his diocese. Although it was customary for visiting priests and sisters to defer to the local bishop, this group did not.

### **"You don't have to be white to be holy"**

The SSJs were familiar with white supremacy, and they prepared for the inevitable arrival of violence as more demonstrators came to Selma. As they readied themselves to care for the injured, they watched apprehensively as 54 priests and nuns from the Midwest, including 6 sisters from the Loretos, the Sisters of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Sisters of St Joseph of Carondelet, and the Franciscan Sisters of Mary, chartered a plane and arrived in Selma on March 10. Two of them were nurses. Most religious nursing orders were segregated and thus discriminatory in whom could be admitted to their congregations and where they could live or work. One of the sisters on the plane was Sister Ann Benedict from St Joseph's Hospital in Kansas City, and she was the first African American to enter the Sisters of St Joseph of Carondelet.<sup>3</sup>

The other nurse was Sister Mary Antona Ebo, one of the first African American members of the Franciscan Sisters of Mary. Although she had been accepted into the

congregation, she still felt like an outsider, having gone through a segregated novitiate program to take her vows. She also had graduated from one of the few nurse training schools for African Americans in St Louis. After graduation, her work assignment included the "blacks only" part of St Mary's Infirmary in St Louis.<sup>3,19</sup> At the time of the march, Sister Mary Antona was working as a medical librarian at St Mary's. After other employees informed her of the attack in Selma, she said to herself, "If I wasn't a nun, I'd be there." She remembered, "One side of me said, 'I don't want to be a martyr,' but the other side said, 'put up or shut up.'" Fortunately for her, the Archbishop of St Louis, Joseph Cardinal Ritter, gave his full support to those from his diocese who wanted to respond to Dr King's call for help, and Sister Mary Antona went to Selma along with another sister from her congregation.<sup>3</sup>

When the sisters arrived in Selma, they went to Brown's Chapel where the organizers congregated to make plans for the day. At seeing Sister Mary Antona, Andrew Young, who was at the podium, said, "One of the great moral forces of the world has just stepped in through the door." The pastor of Selma's Tabernacle Baptist Church remarked, "For the first time in my life, I am seeing a Negro nun. . . . It is a message for Mayor Smitherman, for Sheriff Clark, and for Governor Wallace . . . that you don't have to be white to be holy." When asked to address the group, Sister Mary Antona stated, "I am here because I am a Negro, a nun, a Catholic, and because I want to bear witness."<sup>3</sup> While Vatican II spurred an ecumenical movement, religious leaders from all faiths were reestablishing their social relevance in contemporary society. The civil rights marches provided an opportunity for increased religious involvement in the secular world. As one commentator stated, "One has fed on the other."<sup>18</sup>

When the protest march began on March 10, the sisters walked in the front lines and caught the media's attention. *The New York Times* headlined the demonstration with a photograph of Sister Mary Antona on the front page.<sup>19</sup> Representatives from the Southern

Christian Leadership Conference had briefed the protesters on what to do during the march. As they gathered outside Brown's Chapel, one of the priests suggested that the nuns should be in the middle with men on either side. The presence of the 2 African American nursing sisters among the laymen, clergymen, and other sisters captured people's imaginations across the country. Although the mayor and police halted the protesters less than a block from where they began, several clergymen and Sisters Mary Antona and Ernest Marie of the Sisters of St Joseph of Carondelet began "bearing witness" and telling the police why they came to Selma.<sup>3</sup>

Dr King eventually led a peaceful march from Selma to Montgomery, and Congress responded by passing the Voting Rights Act that President Lyndon Johnson signed on August 6, 1965. King was impressed with the massive display of religious leaders working and protesting together. Thus, not only were racial boundaries blurred during this time but religious walls also crumbled.

Rather than direct confrontation, the local SSJs employed different strategies to promote racial justice. While remaining obedient to their bishop, their activities also remained within the norms of the segregated South. Yet, as they lived and worked in the black neighborhood, they expressed their solidarity with African Americans by encouraging them to register to vote, participating in their boycotts, and caring for those injured in racial violence at Good Samaritan Hospital.<sup>15,20</sup> Together, they mourned the death of Jonathan Daniels, an Episcopalian seminarian who died when a local gunman shot him after he was protesting segregated businesses. Father Richard Morrisroe, a Catholic priest from Chicago, also was shot and seriously wounded. The sisters and their African American friends also grieved when a white mob clubbed James Reeb, a Unitarian Universalist minister, on March 9. Suffering massive head injuries, he died in a Birmingham hospital 2 days later. The sisters dedicated their stained glass window in Good Samaritan Chapel to his memory (Sisters Mary Paul Geck, Barbara Lum, Josepha Twomey,

and Catherine Teresa Martin, oral communication, April 11, 2008).

As they worked in their hospital, the SSJs continued their subtle protests. On August 20, 1965, John Wright, Assistant Administrator and Director of Public Relations for Good Samaritan, wrote to the superior general of the SSJs that he had taken John Crear and another African American woman to a workshop on hospital financing sponsored by the Alabama Chapter of the American Association of Hospital Accountants. This was one of the few times African Americans had ever attended a meeting of this group.<sup>21</sup> John Crear eventually became administrator of Good Samaritan.

#### **MORE VIGOROUS ACTIONS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE: CHICAGO, ILLINOIS, 1950s AND 1960s**

On June 12, 1965, 3 months after "Bloody Sunday," nuns once again made headlines. Clothed in their religious habits, 6 Daughters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul from Marillac [Settlement] House stepped outside their professional roles and marched in the streets of downtown Chicago to protest the city's segregated public school system and the retaining of Benjamin C. Wills as superintendent. The nuns were among 150 white and black protesters who were arrested, put in a police van, and held in detention for sitting or standing in the streets against police orders.<sup>22</sup>

Among the marchers was a nurse, Sister Jane Breidenbach, the oldest of the 6 Daughters of Charity at age 59. Sister Jane was born in Sterling, Colorado, in 1905, and trained as a nurse at Mary's Help Hospital in San Francisco. She then went to Charity Hospital in New Orleans and eventually earned her bachelor's degree in nursing education from Louisiana State University. In her estimation, however, her most significant experience was her 2 years as a nurse in an orphanage and clinic in Poyang, China. Because of trouble with the Communists, she had to leave in 1948, but her memories of China remained with her all her life. She then worked at

Marillac House for the next 35 years as an agency nurse and neighborhood worker, caring for children, nursing the terminally ill in their homes, and providing teen and adult programs to African Americans.<sup>22</sup>

## DISCRIMINATION IN CATHOLIC HOSPITALS

The drama of the Daughters' arrest can be better understood against the backdrop of the more typical situation of racial segregation in Chicago hospitals owned by Catholic religious orders of men and women in the first half of the 20th century. Large numbers of African Americans had migrated to Chicago in the 1940s. At that time, only Cook County General Hospital and Provident Hospital admitted them, even though there were 25 Catholic hospitals in the city. Many of these operated in changing neighborhoods that had seen a flight of white Catholic European immigrants to the suburbs and more and more African Americans moving in to take their place.<sup>23</sup> Several voices rose in protest against hospital segregation, including Mrs Maude Johnston, a prominent black Catholic. In 1944, she wrote a letter to Samuel Cardinal Stritch, Chicago's Archbishop, regarding her experience at the Catholic Mercy Hospital. This letter is especially useful in showing the patient's viewpoint, often absent in historical repositories. On January 29, she had a serious myocardial infarction, and the physician over the phone advised her to go to Mercy Hospital. But when she arrived, the doctor apologized and said he thought she was someone else and that the hospital did not accept "colored [*sic*] people." Although she protested that she was able to pay for her room, he persisted. In her letter, she expressed dismay at the nuns and the near-fatal consequences of their decision:

And the sister attending in the office, when asked about it,

said that the question of accepting Negroes was being taken

up by the board, and that the board had not as yet made any

decision! In the meantime, my husband and two relatives put

me back in the car. And upon arriving at Cook County Hospital

I was given Extreme Unction, not being expected to live.<sup>24</sup>

"It is very difficult for me to talk to my relatives about the Catholic Church when things like this happen," she concluded. Her faith had been shaken by the experience, and her husband had stopped going to church.<sup>24</sup>

Discrimination against blacks continued well into the next decade. In 1950, an African American physician was even blunter about Catholic hospitals. Dr A.M. Mercer, president of the Cook County Physicians Association for black physicians, asserted that Catholics' opposition to a national health program was primarily to bar African Americans from Catholic hospitals. They did not want any chance of the government interfering with their segregation patterns. According to Mercer, African Americans could not enter a Catholic hospital like other Catholics. "They *can enter* [*italics original*] provided they submit in humility to segregation and discrimination. . . . A white Atheist doctor has a much better chance of joining their staffs than a qualified Catholic Negro doctor."<sup>25</sup>

A mounting number of voices against racial discrimination occurred in the late 1950s, led by the Catholic Interracial Council of Chicago (CIC) and another interracial group at Friendship House, both active in educational activities for nuns, priests, and the laity on issues of race. One research study on racial segregation in Catholic hospitals indicted administrator superiors for their lack of courage in fighting racial norms of the day. It noted that the segregation of black patients in separate rooms was a submission to pressure from white doctors, who did not want blacks in the same room as their white patients. In addition, some Catholic hospitals were reluctant to accept African Americans because of a general suspicion that they could not pay their bills.<sup>26</sup> These institutions relied on white doctors to bring in patients, and many of the physicians were not willing to treat African

Americans. Because of their financial dependence on the doctors, the sisters believed they were unable to challenge them. As hospital owners, they had committed themselves to a ministry. Without financial support from entering patients, they believed they could not maintain their work. The sisters thus learned to be strategically silent as they acquiesced to white power structures.<sup>20</sup>

Cardinal Stritch successfully pressured the Sisters of Mercy to lift their racial ban, but African Americans were relegated to the oldest section of the hospital.<sup>23</sup> Then in 1955, the Cardinal took a more aggressive stance against discrimination in Catholic hospitals. Most of these institutions were not owned by the Archdiocese of Chicago, however, and they made their own admission policies. Stritch supported a study on race issues sponsored by the CIC and Friendship House that found only 1 hospital, the Alexian Brothers, that admitted patients regardless of race.<sup>27</sup> Stritch personally attended a conference on the issue, and he delivered a strong speech on racism in Catholic hospitals. He decried the "ugly distinctions" that nuns justified "on the grounds that the privately controlled hospital, has to have patients in order to enable it to do its charity, and it cannot so extend its charity that it will become impossible to do any charity." The sisters' assertions were getting less and less support. Only "courageous action will make that argument entirely ineffective and without weight," Stritch concluded.<sup>28</sup> In 1956, influenced by growing condemnation of hospital discrimination, a city ordinance forbade racial exclusion in all hospitals, and, to ensure compliance, a group from the CIC visited each Catholic facility in the Archdiocese.<sup>29</sup>

Unlike other Catholic hospitals, the Alexian Brothers eliminated segregation in their facility in 1953 by abolishing their 2 all-black wards and agreeing to assign patient rooms solely on diagnosis. In 1955, Brother Constantine Krohn, administrator, explained to 22 Catholic hospital representatives from the Archdiocese of Chicago that nonsegregation enabled them to better fulfill the objectives

of their hospital: "to care for the sick regardless of color, race, creed, or financial status." It also helped them give better patient care, since patients were placed in nursing units with similar diagnoses. Significantly, Brother Constantine noted that there had been a few complaints by the patients, but the grievances were settled by diplomatically stating their policy and stressing the Christian attitude against segregation. Furthermore, the Alexian Brothers followed a nondiscrimination policy in hiring physicians and nursing instructors.<sup>30</sup>

Their decision to desegregate met with some opposition. Although Brother Constantine played down a few complaints from patients, the brothers, in fact, had received criticism from physicians who objected to the policy, fearing the reaction of their patients.<sup>30</sup> The doctors tried to get the hospital administration to reverse the decision and almost succeeded. As one historian has written, "One morning before Mass, Father Clement walked to the front of the chapel and delivered a passionate plea that the brothers stick to their guns and not abandon this basically just plan. Whether or not his words were responsible, the plan went through and worked."<sup>31(p169)</sup>

### THE "ALLEY SISTER": SISTER JANE BREIDENBACH

The Daughters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul had different views of their work when they opened their settlement house, Marillac House, in 1947 in an African American section of the city. Living in the same neighborhood with blacks helped the sisters to identify with their needs. Like the SSJs in Selma, the Daughters were especially aware of the poverty and racial discrepancies that handicapped their neighbors. In addition to her nursing activities, Sister Jane Breidenbach was known as "the Alley Sister," because she organized neighborhood cleanups to make playgrounds safe for children.<sup>32</sup> Sister Jane also attended the White House Conference on Aging in 1961.<sup>33</sup> By the 1960s, more and more



sisters and church leaders were embracing the cause of civil rights. Not only was Vatican II well underway, but a movement for racial reform was growing in Chicago through the leadership of the CIC. In 1965, the Daughters of Charity joined the ranks of demonstrators who had marched in Selma just a few months earlier.

On June 12, 1965, a priest notified Sister Jane that a civil rights meeting would be held that afternoon to protest public school segregation. She made the decision to participate in the march because she wanted to represent the people in her neighborhood who were unable to attend, "and because I myself believe that the Negro children are not given equally good educational advantages in this city. . . . And I believe there is a need for religious to support their cause." After joining the group at Buckingham Fountain, she locked arms with another woman and marched directly behind the leaders, including a representative from the Congress of Racial Equality. They sang freedom songs, but at the intersection of Madison and State Streets, a policeman told them that unless they got back on the sidewalk, they would be arrested. After going about 50 ft on Madison Street, the leaders of the march instructed the demonstrators to kneel or sit. Sister Jane knelt and promptly was arrested. She and the others went to police headquarters and were fined \$200. Sister Jane considered the demonstration and the fine to be a small price to pay for the privilege of representing the needs of the poor (personal statement of Sr. Jane Breidenbach, June 12, 1965, Marillac House papers, CHM).

After the Daughters were freed, Sister Mary William, the superior at Marillac House, defended their actions as American citizens, Christians, and representatives of the Daughters of Charity.<sup>34</sup> Hoy effectively argues that Sister Mary William believed this public demonstration matched the vision of the Daughters' founder, St Vincent de Paul, who had advised the first sisters 2 centuries earlier to have "no cloister but the streets of the town."<sup>35</sup>(p125) Yet there was no consensus among the sisters in the congregation about

the marchers. Whereas conflicts were less visible among members in the course of their hospital and teaching duties, their work with African Americans often put them in conflict with each other. When the Daughters were called to appear before their provincial council in St Louis, Sister Mary William and Sister Jane faced a superior who was sympathetic to their actions but unhappy about the publicity. Other sisters saw the march as scandalous.<sup>34</sup>

Beyond religious congregations, other Catholics were also critical. Local Catholic newspapers attacked the Daughters of Charity. In *The New World*, the Chicago Archdiocesan paper, the editor called for common sense in response to the demonstrators, asserting that the religious personnel had a right to join peaceful demonstrations.<sup>34</sup> Another responder, however, opined that although the Chicago school system was problematic, it was not a second Selma. "It is going to be pretty hard for the civil rights organizations participating in the demonstrations to convince the great uncommitted middle that the situations are comparable." Two conservative Chicago priests wrote, "We all are happy that you identify with your people and with the cause of social justice, be we regret if this has clouded your judgment on what is really right and wrong in this issue. There is a question of justice on both sides."<sup>36</sup>

Showing further intolerance toward the sisters who demonstrated in public, one writer regretted "these peacemakers stirring up trouble because they have to follow their conscience—God forbid . . . . I have all I can do to keep my faith in God the way things are going in this world." This reflected the image that nuns were supposed to be obedient and subservient. When they spoke out in a public forum through demonstrations, they violated that circumscribed role, which caused real tensions. Another woman was chagrined at the example the nuns set for children: "I feel a public reprimand is certainly in order . . . . How else are we parents to explain to our children that the nuns can break the law and they cannot?" Yet another writer stated,

"How dare these so-called religious go back to the class rooms and hypocritically instruct their students in love of God, respect for country! . . . I hesitate to use the word 'sister'—it somehow doesn't appear appropriate for them." Other responses were more positive. One African American wanted to see demonstrations by members of the Catholic church, believing that it should assume a leadership role in the civil rights movement.<sup>36</sup> Still, the criticism stung the sisters, and the demonstrations were costly to Marillac House. Many of their contributors cancelled their support as an objection to the sisters' militancy.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, the nuns' new roles as activists were often contested and had to be negotiated among a skeptical public. Several weeks later, a priest reported on a speech by Sister Mary William at another demonstration in Chicago. She commented on the ambiguity of sisters' work for social justice, revealing how difficult it was for them to march in Chicago. "On every other street corner along the line of march is a nice, big policeman who has either a daughter or aunt or cousin who is a nun." The policemen frequently apologized to the sisters as they arrested them. "Why are sisters like Negroes?" Sister Mary William asked. "Because they, too, are segregated, ghettoed, and because leadership is not encouraged in their ranks."<sup>37</sup>(pp89)

## ACTIVISTS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

The narratives presented here are notable in part because they were anomalous for their time. They also present nursing activism at different levels, including hospital work to improve the health and welfare of patients along with public demonstrations to change the system of social injustice. Indeed, sisters and brothers took a 2-fold approach to social justice. For some, justice was something they did, while for others it was primarily the questions they asked about the underlying causes of injustice. Some administered hospitals and provided access to direct healthcare services for African Americans. As they reevaluated

their roles in society after Vatican II, they included a special concern for poor and vulnerable persons, with the poor including, but not limited to, those with economic and racial disparities.<sup>38</sup> Others brought attention to the ways in which social, economic, and political forces produced health disparities by participating in direct protests in the streets, even as they bristled at criticism from their own church members.

The history of these individuals who stretched beyond the norms of their congregations and risked opprobrium is important. Yet, despite the nuns' activism and witness, many Catholic hospitals and religious communities maintained segregation, both in patient care and in training, just as religious orders themselves were typically discriminatory in who they admitted to their ranks. At the same time, work with African Americans put these white sisters in conflict with their own superiors, congregation members, and the laity over what was appropriate work for women dedicated to religious service.

It must be pointed out that while only a few of the sister demonstrators were nurses, they did not identify themselves as such; hence, the problem of trying to write about nursing activists for social justice. For example, Sister Mary Antona saw herself as "a Negro, a nun, and a Catholic."<sup>3</sup> Sister Jane Breidenbach identified herself as a neighborhood worker rather than a nurse. One interpretation is that demonstrators obscured their nursing identities because they thought that the general public might be uncomfortable with the idea of nurses—who were largely seen as subordinate service workers—speaking out so forcefully on matters of social injustice. It is true, of course, that nuns also were seen as subordinate religious women called to a life of service; as such, their demonstrations received criticism from the Catholic laity, clergy, and other sisters. Their religious identities, however, also provided them with a sense of legitimacy to speak out on matters of social justice. In the 1960s, the collaboration of some clergy and sisters, with their moral influence, brought a new element of

respectability to the protest movements. Nurses were not granted those same freedoms by virtue of their occupational roles. These are areas of study that call for greater attention by nursing historians.

Regardless of the aforementioned assertions about the professional identities of the protest marchers, the demonstrations themselves often proved effective. Mullings notes that the civil rights movement for greater racial equality had positive effects on the health of African Americans. At least a segment of the black population benefited as political, occupational, and educational segregation lessened and policies developed to make healthcare more accessible.<sup>39</sup> When the SSJs provided large numbers of African Americans with decent wages in their Selma hospital, and Sister Jane Breidenbach marched in Chicago to represent the people in her neighborhood, they called attention to the existence of racial injustice and hoped to empower whole local communities.

## CONCLUSION

In the mid-20th century, social and religious changes were destabilizing society as well as Catholic religious institutions. As cities experienced racial strife in the North and South, religious congregations responded with mixed results. Most Catholic hospitals in Chicago, for example, had racially exclusive practices through the 1950s; it required the action of civic and religious authorities to undo segregation. By the 1960s, however, many of the sisters in this study were primed for the changes ushered in by Vatican II with its emphasis on social justice and human dignity for all people. Their activities, however, took place amid an air of institutional discord and unrest. Significantly, as African American nuns of the Catholic church, which had long been perceived as a white institution, joined the civil rights struggle, they transformed themselves and the church.<sup>3</sup> After her march in Selma, for example, Sister Mary Antona helped establish the National Black Sisters' Conference and later served as President.

In 1976, when she was named administrator of St Clare Hospital in Baraboo, Wisconsin, she was the first black woman religious to head a hospital.<sup>40</sup> Yet, as in the past, sisters' work for social justice was contested by the general public. As a 1990 SSJ newsletter noted, "The sisters help out first, then stick their necks out to ask the important questions—to the point of being unpopular like the bishop who said, 'If I feed the poor, I'm called a saint; if I ask why, I'm called a communist!'"<sup>41</sup>

To undo entrenched racism, the topic must be brought into public consciousness and not forgotten. Kurasawa points out that bearing witness includes "public commemorative performances [that] challenge temporal and spatial distancing from past situations of mass suffering."<sup>4(p50)</sup> In 1985, a crowd of some 1800 people, mostly black, gathered in front of Brown's Chapel in Selma for an anniversary march that reenacted the 1965 demonstration, and Sister Mary Antona again walked in front. Then in 2003, director Jayasri Hart reunited the nuns who visited Selma in 1965 in a PBS documentary titled *Sisters in Selma: Bearing Witness for Change*.<sup>3</sup> The program provided a spiritual take on the voting rights protests, showing the sisters who marched as well as the SSJs who did not but who cared for African Americans in their hospital. Each clearly saw herself as working for social justice, but through her own means. The anniversary march and the DVD allowed nuns and others who bore witness in 1965 to reacquaint later generations with the historical record so that the past would not be discarded. By restaging their experiences, the sisters could help present-day audiences to make sense of the causes and consequences of injustice.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, whether it was the Alexian Brothers diplomatically stating their hospital's policy against segregation, or the SSJs working behind the scenes caring for patients with injuries from racial violence in Selma, or the Daughters of Charity and other sisters marching in Chicago and Selma to directly challenge the law to bring about changes in political and

educational segregation, their bearing witness played a key function. For some it was sub-

tle; for others, more overt, but the witness remained.

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