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Catholics and the Meredith March in Mississippi

by Mark Newman

On June 16, 1966, civil rights activist Stokely Carmichael, chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), told a rally after his release from jail in Greenwood, Mississippi: “This is the twenty-seventh time I have been arrested. I ain’t going to jail no more. We been saying freedom for six years and we ain’t got nothin’. What we get to start saying now is Black Power!” Spoken to participants in the Meredith Mississippi Freedom March (sometimes called James Meredith’s March Against Fear), Carmichael’s oft-repeated call ensured the march’s lasting association with Black Power, which many white journalists, who seized on Carmichael’s more sensational comments about burning down Mississippi courthouses rather than his emphasis on black voter registration and collective political mobilization, typically associated with anti-white racism and violence. Black Power and the Meredith March seemed in stark contrast to the Selma, Alabama, protests of a year earlier for voting rights that had helped achieve the Voting Rights Act. In response to an appeal from Martin Luther King Jr., hundreds of mostly white clergy and laity of all faiths, including more than nine hundred Catholics, had gone to Selma in 1965, mostly from the North, and march organizers had placed some of the fifty-six nuns who participated conspicuously toward or in the front ranks of the protesters. By contrast, far fewer whites participated in the Meredith March, and the march organizers did not appeal to people

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of conscience to converge on Mississippi in a public display of sympathy and support until its final day.¹

Catholics, however, played a supporting role throughout the Meredith March. Their contribution received brief or, more usually, no acknowledgement from contemporary reporters, or later historians of Catholicism, despite a growing body of work (especially since the millennium) about Catholic support for, and participation in, efforts to achieve racial equality. Historians of Catholicism and civil rights have concentrated on the North, Selma, and a few other southern locales, including studies by Danny Collum and Paul T. Murray on Natchez and Greenwood, Mississippi, respectively. Their focal point has often been the contributions of exceptional Catholic individuals, mostly clergy but also some laity, acting, or exercising leadership, on their own initiative. By focusing on the Meredith March, this article provides further evidence that Catholic participation in the southern civil rights movement continued beyond Selma and what historian Peniel E. Joseph calls the “heroic period” of the movement that ended in 1965. It also demonstrates that Catholic involvement in the Mississippi civil rights struggle was greater and more connected than historians have recognized, and it explores the complex response of the Catholic Church to that struggle. The Diocese of Natchez did not endorse the march, but it did not try to stop religious priests (members of religious orders which operated some churches, missions, and charitable institutions in the state) from assisting the march. They, like the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice (NCCIJ), played a supporting role, along with members of the Memphis and Little Rock Catholic interracial councils and a few other priests from outside Mississippi. Some diocesan priests and nuns also attended the march’s final rally in Jackson, along with some Catholic clergy and a nun from

¹ Aram Goudsouzian, *Down to the Crossroads: Civil Rights, Black Power, and the Meredith March Against Fear* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), 94-97, 133-34, 142-44 (quotation on pp. 142-43), 147, 150-51, 155-57, 162, 182-3; John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 396-7; *New York Times*, March 21, 1965, June 17, 18, 1966; Amy L. Koehlinger, *The New Nuns: Racial Justice and Religious Reform in the 1960s* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2007), 53; “Nuns ‘inspire’ Selma marchers,” *Texas Catholic Herald*, March 18, 1965; Cornelia F. Sexuauer, “A Well-Behaved Woman Who Made History: Sister Mary Antona’s Journey to Selma,” *American Catholic Studies* 115 (Winter 2004): 50; Carmichael had also told the crowd in Greenwood, “Every courthouse in Mississippi ought to be burned down to get rid of the dirt.” *New York Times*, June 17, 1966.

outside the state.²

As it had done earlier in Selma, the NCCIJ took the major responsibility for organizing and coordinating Catholic involvement in the Meredith March. Operating from its headquarters in Chicago, the NCCIJ, an organization of Catholic clergy and laity established in 1960 with the approval of the American Catholic hierarchy, was committed to desegregation and racial equality. Although not an official Church agency, the conference received support from many bishops, including some in the South. At their annual meeting just two years earlier, the American Catholic bishops had condemned racial discrimination and segregation and called for their gradual elimination. However, the statement issued on their behalf by the administrative board of the National Catholic Welfare Conference did not discuss segregation in Catholic schools, churches, and other institutions, and it was not binding on ordinaries, that is, bishops who exercised authority over a diocese and were virtually autonomous. To further the achievement of its goals, the NCCIJ encouraged the formation

² David W. Southern, *John LaFarge and the Limits of Catholic Interracialism, 1911-1963* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996); John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Michael V. Namorato, *The Catholic Church in Mississippi, 1911-1984* (Westport, Conn., and London: Greenwood Press, 1998); Gregory Nelson Hite, "The Hottest Places in Hell: The Catholic Church and Civil Rights in Selma, Alabama 1937-1965" (Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 2002); R. Bentley Anderson, *Black, White and Catholic: New Orleans Interracialism, 1947-1956* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2005); Mark Newman, "The Catholic Church in Mississippi and Desegregation, 1963-1973," *Journal of Mississippi History* 67 (Winter 2005): 331-55; Cyprian Davis, O.S.B., "Black Catholics in the Civil Rights Movement in the Southern United States: A.P. Tureaud, Thomas Wyatt Turner, and Earl Johnson," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 24 (Fall 2006): 69-81; Cecilia A. Moore, "'To Serve Through Compelling Love': The Society of Christ Our King and the Civil Rights Movement in Danville, Virginia, 1963," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 24 (Fall 2006): 83-103; Koehlinger, *New Nuns*; Andrew S. Moore, *The South's Tolerable Alien: Roman Catholics in Alabama and Georgia, 1945-1970* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007); Justin D. Poché "Religion, Race and Rights in Catholic Louisiana, 1938-1970" (Ph.D. diss., University of Notre Dame, 2007); Katrina M. Sanders, "Black Catholic Clergy and the Struggle for Civil Rights: Winds of Change," in *Uncommon Faithfulness: The Black Catholic Experience*, eds. M. Shawn Copeland, LaReine-Marie Mosely and Albert J. Raboteau (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2009), 78-93; Danny Duncan Collum, *Black and Catholic in the Jim Crow South: The Stuff that Makes Community* (New York and Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2006); Paul T. Murray, "Father Nathaniel and the Greenwood Movement," *Journal of Mississippi History* 72 (Fall 2010): 277-311; Paul T. Murray, "'The Most Righteous White Man in Selma': Father Maurice Ouellet and the Struggle for Voting Rights," *Alabama Review* 68 (January 2015): 31-73; Dittmer, *Local People*, 389-407; Goudsouzian, *Down to the Crossroads*, 96; memorandum, Jim McGuire to Matt [Ahmann], "Southern Field Service and the Meredith Freedom March," June 29, 1966, 1-8, folder 11, box 8, series 34, National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice Records, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin (hereinafter cited as NCCIJR); Peniel E. Joseph, "Reinterpreting the Black Power Movement," *OAH Magazine of History* 22 (July 2008): 5 (quotation).

of Catholic interracial councils in dioceses across the country. By 1965, there were 112 councils, twenty-four of them in the South. By supporting the Meredith March in Mississippi, the NCCIJ was helping to fulfil the direction for the Church outlined by the Second Vatican Council, held in Rome between 1962 and 1965, of alerting Catholics “to the demands of social justice” and engaging with the world’s problems.³

In 1961, the NCCIJ’s Southern Field Service (SFS) was established in New Orleans, and like the NCCIJ, the SFS preceded the council but took inspiration from it. The SFS sought to persuade Catholic bishops in the South and Southwest to overturn racial discrimination and segregation in Catholic churches, schools, hospitals, and other Catholic institutions that were prevalent in many dioceses, especially, but not exclusively, in the Deep South. The SFS fostered the growth of Catholic interracial councils, which could be established only with the consent of the local bishop, and it urged councils to pressure their prelates to work for racial equality in both Church and secular society. A few southern bishops, such as Archbishop Thomas J. Toolen of Mobile, a diocese that encompassed Alabama and the Florida panhandle, refused to work with the SFS, but several others, among them Archbishop Robert. E. Lucey of San Antonio, were supportive.⁴

The NCCIJ and SFS took inspiration from rejections of racism and racial discrimination by the Vatican and the American Catholic hierarchy. The Vatican had accepted the establishment of separate black Catholic institutions in the South in the late nineteenth century and in the first half of the twentieth century by ordinaries and religious orders, operating in dioceses with the permission of their bishops, as a practical means of evangelizing and serving African Americans within a segregated society. However, responding to Nazi and Fascist racism, Pope Pius X condemned racism in the 1930s, and the Vatican began appointing ordinaries in the United States vetted to ensure their opposition to racism and segregation. His successor Pope Pius XII issued an encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi*

³ National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice, “A proposal to the Commission for the Catholic Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians,” n.d., folder 719.78, Archives of the Diocese of Charleston, Charleston, South Carolina; *New York Times*, March 20, 21, 1965; “Discrimination and the Christian Conscience,” folder 3, box 2, series 21, NCCIJR; John T. McGreevy, “Racial Justice and the People of God: The Second Vatican Council, the Civil Rights Movement, and American Catholics,” *Religion and American Culture* 4 (Summer 1994): 223 (quotation), 234.

⁴ “Summary Proposal for Maintaining Southern Field Service Project,” September 1962, folder 7, box 4, series 30; Henry Cabirac, Jr. to James Devitt, May 9, 1962, folder 18, box 3; “Southern Field Service Report, November, 1963 through September, 1964,” 1-12, folder 8, box 4, series 33, NCCIJR.

(Mystical Body of Christ) in 1943 that referred to the Church's "divinely-given unity – by which all men of every race are united to Christ in the bond of brotherhood." The pontiff declared that God "has taught us not only to have love for those of a different nation and a different race, but to love even our enemies."⁵

Despite these teachings, Rome recognized local conditions and permitted ordinaries to desegregate Catholic institutions when and as they saw fit, leading to variations among dioceses. While some southern Catholic dioceses outside the Deep South began parochial school desegregation in the 1950s, it did not begin in the Deep South until 1962, when the archdioceses of Atlanta and New Orleans acted after public school desegregation had already begun in their dioceses under federal court order. Other Deep South ordinaries tied parochial school desegregation to the beginning of federal court mandated public school desegregation in their dioceses between 1963 and 1965. They were also encouraged to act by Pope John XXII's encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (Peace on Earth), issued in April 1963, which declared that "racial discrimination can in no way be justified" and affirmed the duty of people to claim their rights.⁶

In common with many other Deep South Catholic bishops, Bishop Richard O. Gerow of Natchez-Jackson, whose diocese covered all of Mississippi and included 60,329 white and 7,097 African American Catholics in 1963, took a guarded, cautious approach and had a strained and sometimes fractured relationship with the SFS. Born in Mobile, Alabama, in 1885, Gerow had grown up in a segregated society. Installed as bishop in 1924, he presided over the growth of separate white and African American Catholic schools, churches and other institutions. He believed that separate institutions, especially schools, were essential to reach and convert African Americans, but he was also acutely conscious that most whites in the state, including most white Catholics, were segregationists. Until 1963, he avoided public discussion of segregation

⁵ Charles Harbutt, "The Church and Integration," *Jubilee* 6 (February 1959): 8; John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 50-52; "Mystici Corporis Christi," *Catholic Mind* 41 (November 1943): 1-44 (first quotation on p. 3; second quotation on p. 37).

⁶ Reed Saratt, *The Ordeal of Desegregation: The First Decade* (New York and London: Harper and Row, 1966), 278-81; *Pacem in Terris: Encyclical Letter of Pope John XXIII, April 11, 1963* (Washington, D.C.: National Catholic Welfare Conference, 1963), 12 (quotation), 22; On Catholic desegregation in the South see Mark Newman, *Desegregating Dixie: The Catholic Church in the South and Desegregation, 1945-1992* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2018).

and racism, but he, nevertheless, disciplined white Catholic churches that refused African Americans admission to services, although most black Catholics attended black Catholic missions and churches.⁷

Clergy and nuns from religious orders, mostly based outside the South, operated and staffed black Catholic churches, missions, and schools in the diocese. The orders were mostly white, such as the Society of St. Joseph of the Sacred Heart (Josephites), the Missionary Servants of the Most Holy Trinity (M.S.S.S.T.), the Franciscan Friars (O.F.M.) and the Holy Ghost Missionary Sisters, but they also included the Oblate Sisters of Providence, a black order of nuns based in Baltimore, and the Society of the Divine Word (S.V.D.), which had a seminary, St. Augustine's, in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, that accepted black applicants. An inherently cautious man, Gerow was unwilling to desegregate Catholic schools ahead of secular desegregation, fearful that either action would arouse white segregationist opposition, divide white Catholics, and reinvigorate engrained anti-Catholicism in Mississippi.⁸

Soon after its formation, the SFS's director Henry Cabirac Jr., a white former New Orleans businessman, established contact with Auxiliary Bishop Joseph B. Brunini of Natchez-Jackson and sympathetic black and white clergy and laity in the state. A Mississippian, born in Vicksburg in 1909, Brunini introduced Cabirac to other interested Catholics. Cabirac also wrote to African American Catholics in the state, mostly on the Gulf Coast, where their numbers were most concentrated. He made contact as well with the civil rights movement in Mississippi and met Aaron Henry, state president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), who was a Methodist. Despite interest from Brunini,

⁷ Charles Carruth, "Interesting View, Words of Hope in Jackson, Miss.," *Clarion Herald*, August 29, 1963; "Bishop Richard O. Gerow," *Mississippi Methodist Advocate*, October 14, 1964; *Our Negro and Indian Missions: Annual Report of the Secretary of the Commission for the Catholic Missions among the Colored People and the Indians*, January 1946, 12-13, January 1947, 11-13, January 1949, 9-13, January 1957, 7-11, January 1958, 7-11, Archives of the Society of St. Joseph of the Sacred Heart, Baltimore, Maryland (hereinafter cited as ASSJ); Richard O. Gerow to Joseph F. Rummel, February 12, 1946, folder 4, box 7, Archbishop Joseph F. Rummel Papers, Archives of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, New Orleans, Louisiana; Wilson Minor, "In Mississippi: Rigid Segregation," *Sign* 35 (July 1956): 16-17.

⁸ "Mississippi," *Our Colored Missions* 32 (November 1946): 162-63; Minor, "In Mississippi," 16-17; "All-Negro Town in South Gets Catholic School," *Alamo Messenger*, May 14, 1954; "Holy Ghost Sisters Active in Negro Education," *Interracial Review* 29 (February 1956): 34; *Our Negro and Indian Missions*, January 1960, 7-12; Only one African American parish in Mississippi had a diocesan priest; Memorandum, Jim McGuire to Matt [Ahmann], "Southern Field Service and the Meredith Freedom March," June 29, 1966, 8.

Cabirac was unable to generate sufficient support among Mississippi Catholics for establishing a Catholic interracial council. Instead, at Brunini's request, Cabirac launched "a quiet educational program [on race relations] among a few people" of "good will" in Jackson. In keeping with Brunini's caution and concern not to bring down segregationist wrath on the Church, Cabirac conducted the program without publicity.⁹

Unknown to the chancery, Cabirac engaged in a letter writing campaign in which he encouraged sympathetic white and African American Catholics to urge black Catholic parents to seek to register their children at white Catholic high schools and, if refused, to complain to Gerow. Unable to generate a response from black Catholic parents, in 1963 Cabirac, who had joined the NAACP, enlisted Medgar Evers, field secretary of the Mississippi NAACP, to ask Catholic NAACP members along the Mississippi Gulf Coast (where a black Catholic high school had been closed) to meet with Cabirac about desegregating Catholic high schools. Whether through Evers's intercession or by his own efforts, Cabirac eventually made contact with Gilbert R. Mason, president of the Biloxi NAACP and a Missionary Baptist, who arranged a meeting in Biloxi with black Catholics on June 16, during which "two or three" of them agreed to try to register their children at a white Catholic school.¹⁰

⁹ "Biographical Sketch – Henry A. Cabirac, Jr.," folder 1, box 7, series 34; Henry Cabirac, Jr. to Aaron E. Henry, October 25, 1961, June 13, 1962; Henry Cabirac, Jr. to Mark Figaro, November 16, December 27, 1961, February 27, May 21, 1962; Henry Cabirac, Jr. to Mrs. Louis J. [Marjorie R.] Baroni, December 7, 29, 1961; Henry Cabirac, Jr. to John Scanlon, March 8, 1962; Henry Cabirac, Jr. to John McGough, March 12, 1962; Henry Cabirac to Medgar W. Evers, January 8, 1963, folder 8, box 10; Henry Cabirac, Jr. to Joseph B. Brunini, November 2, 1961; Joseph B. Brunini to John LaFarge, March 5, 1962, folder 11, box 11; Henry Cabirac, Jr. to Josiah G. Chatham, December 22, 1961; Josiah G. Chatham to Henry Cabirac, Jr., January 15, 1962, folder 12, box 11; Henry Cabirac, Jr. to John Scanlon, October 16, 1962 (quotations), folder 14, box 11; Henry Cabirac, Jr. to Charles P. Greco, February 27, 1963, folder 9, box 6, series 33; "Southern Field Service Report of Activities, 1962-63; Program Goals 1964," 7, folder 7, box 4, series 30, NCCIJR; "Bishop Joseph Bernard Brunini," consulted April 11, 2018, at <<http://jacksondiocese.org/about/diocesan-history/growing-1853-1977/1900s/bishop-joseph-bernard-brunini/>>; "Oral history with Dr. Aaron Henry, prominent civil rights worker," 1, consulted April 17, 2018, at <<http://digilib.usm.edu/cdm/ref/collection/coh/id/15303>>.

¹⁰ Cabirac to Figaro, December 27, 1961, February 27, 1962; Cabirac to Baroni, December 29, 1962; Cabirac to Henry, June 13, 1962; Henry Cabirac to Mr. and Mrs. Philip S. Ogilvie, January 8, 1963; Henry Cabirac, Jr. to Medgar W. Evers, January 8, April 30, 1963; Medgar W. Evers to Henry Cabirac, January 15, 1963, folder 8, box 10; Henry Cabirac to Gilbert R. Mason, June 3, 20, 1963; Henry Cabirac to Matt [Ahmann] (quotation) typed on to Henry Cabirac to Gilbert R. Mason, June 20, 1963, folder 2, box 12, series 33, NCCIJR; "Gilbert's Obituary: Dr. Gilbert R. Mason Sr.," consulted April 5, 2018, at <<http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/name/gilbert-mason-obituary?pid=18422446&view=guestbook&page=2>>. On Mason's civil rights activism see Gilbert R. Mason, *Beaches, Blood, and Ballots: A Black Doctor's Civil Rights Struggle* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000).

The meeting occurred four days after Evers's assassination outside his Jackson home by segregationist Bryon de la Beckwith. Evers's murder led Gerow to speak out publicly on race relations for the first time. The bishop deplored the murder and called on "our leaders and men of good will of both races to find some common ground on which to build a civic order based on human dignity and a concept of justice under God's law" and for recognition of "the legitimate grievances of the Negro population." On June 19, Gerow wrote to his pastors in recognition of the increasing number of civil rights protests in the country that seemed to embody the call by the papal encyclical *Pacem in Terris* for the oppressed to claim their rights: "This race problem which now confronts our state and our country is . . . fundamentally a moral problem. The question is not one of granting concessions but of recognizing rights." Gerow's newfound willingness to speak out on race seemed to offer an opportunity for the SFS.¹¹

However, Gerow reacted angrily after Cabirac held a meeting with fifty African American Catholics in Mississippi City on the Gulf Coast a week later, leading between fifteen and twenty to try unsuccessfully to register their children at white Catholic schools. In July, Gerow wrote to Cabirac, "I resent your coming into the Diocese and giving talks without consulting myself" and instructed him "to stay out of Mississippi." Although Cabirac complied, initially he continued to write to African American Catholic leaders urging them to ask black Catholics to try to register their children in white Catholic schools and to pressure Gerow to act. The bishop remained unwilling to desegregate Catholic schools ahead of secular integration or to attempt the formation of a Catholic interracial council. Gerow explained to NCCIJ executive director Mathew Ahmann that he favored a "wise policy" between what he considered to be "two extremes – one extreme speaking of the mixing of the races as 'never'; the other extreme says 'everything now.'" After meeting with Ahmann and later Cabirac, in January 1964, Gerow lifted his ban on Cabirac and the

¹¹ "Statement of the Most Reverend Richard O. Gerow, Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Natchez-Jackson, June 14, 1963 (first and second quotations), folder 11, box 11; Richard O. Gerow to "The Pastors," June 19, 1963 (third quotation), folder 12, box 11, series 33, NCCIJR.

SFS working in the diocese.¹²

In September 1964, Gerow desegregated the first grade of Catholic schools to coincide with the beginning of federal court-ordered desegregation of the first grade of public schools in Biloxi, Carthage, Clarksdale, and Jackson. As desegregation applied only to Catholic students and 65 percent of black children in Catholic schools were not Catholic, Gerow's order had little impact. Three black Catholic children registered in two formerly white Catholic schools. Token change continued a year later, when the bishop desegregated all grades. Acting with his usual caution, Gerow instructed his diocesan priests not to participate in the civil rights movement or comment on racial issues, and, in 1964, he ordered six Oklahoma priests who had volunteered for the civil rights movement's Mississippi Summer Project, a program of voter registration, freedom schools, and community centers, to return home.¹³

Although Gerow remained wary of the SFS, there seemed to be a promise of a fresh start in 1964 when John P. "Jack" Sisson replaced Cabirac, who had resigned to become director of the Human Relations Department in Phoenix, Arizona. Although born in Milwaukee in 1926, Sisson had been raised in the South, mostly in Pensacola, Florida. Sisson

¹² Henry Cabirac to Sid W. Sicotte, July 2, 1963; Henry Cabirac to Matt [Ahmann] (quotation) typed on to Henry Cabirac to Sid W. Sicotte, July 2, 1963; Henry Cabirac to J. O. Tate, July 23, 25, 1963, folder 2, box 12; R. O. Gerow to Henry Cabirac, July 7, 1963 (first and second quotations); Mathew Ahmann to R. O. Gerow, August 19, 1963; Mathew Ahmann to Henry Cabirac, August 19, 1963; "Report on September 23rd [1963] Meeting with Father Law and Bishop Gerow," memorandum; Henry Cabirac to Matt Ahmann, "January 23, 1964 Visit to Jackson, Mississippi," memorandum; Jack Sisson to Matt Ahmann, "Meeting with Bishop and others in Diocese, May 21, 1964," May 26, 1964, folder 11, box 11; Henry Cabirac to Bernard Law, January 28, 1964, folder 16, box 11; Henry Cabirac to Paul J. Hallinan, August 5, 1963, folder 5, box 4, series 33; R. O. Gerow to Matthew Ahmann, July 25, 1963 (third and fourth quotations), folder 4, box 6, series 11, NCCIJR.

¹³ Neil R. McMillen, "Development of Civil Rights, 1956-1970," in *A History of Mississippi*, ed. Richard Aubrey McLemore (Hattiesburg: University and College Press of Mississippi, 1973), vol. 2, p. 162; *Hearings Before the United States Commission on Civil Rights*, volume II: *Administration of Justice*, Hearings Held in Jackson, Miss., February 16-20, 1965 (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1965), 403; "Southern Field Service Report for November 1963 through September 1964 - A Survey of Activities; and General Observations," 11, "Southern Field Service Report Interim Report, October 1964/January 1965," 6, folder 8, box 4, series 30; R. O. Gerow, pastoral letter August 9, 1964, issued August 6, 1964, folder 11, box 11; Benjamin Muse to John P. Sisson, July 13, 1964, folder 16, box 11, series 33, memorandum; Jim McGuire to Matt [Ahmann], "Recommendations from the Chancery Meeting in Jackson, Mississippi 7-7-66," August 4, 1966, folder 5, box 6, series 11, NCCIJR; *New York Times*, August 10, 1964; *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, August 22, 1965; "Diary of Bishop Gerow," vol.: 1960-1966, 1735, Archives of the Catholic Diocese of Jackson, Jackson, Mississippi; "School Mixing in Mississippi," *Alamo Messenger*, August 27, 1965; Gordon A. Martin, "The Church in Mississippi," *Ave Maria* 100 (December 12, 1964): 15.

attempted to forge a new relationship with the chancery, but he noted in November 1965 that Gerow still remained “suspicious of us.”¹⁴

Neither Gerow, Sisson, the NCCIJ, nor the race relations agencies of Protestant denominations responded when James Meredith, the man who had desegregated the University of Mississippi in 1962, announced in May 1966 that he would soon begin a 220-mile march from Memphis, Tennessee, to Jackson, Mississippi. A maverick, unaffiliated with any civil rights organization, Meredith hoped his quixotic march would encourage hundreds of thousands of eligible but unregistered African Americans in Mississippi to overcome “fear” and register to vote. Although intended as a solo march, Meredith indicated that he would allow other men to join him independently if they wished to, although few did and the major civil rights groups ignored the march.¹⁵

On June 6, the march’s second day, Aubrey James Norvell, an unemployed white man from Memphis, shot and wounded Meredith south of Hernando, Mississippi. A member of the Catholic Human Relations Council of Memphis (CHRCM) was among the reporters who were present when the shooting occurred, after which Meredith was hospitalized in Memphis. Floyd McKissick, the national director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), Stokely Carmichael of SNCC, and Martin Luther King Jr., president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), went to Memphis, visited Meredith, and with his consent, promptly resumed the march. They also established a headquarters in south Memphis at Centenary Methodist Church, which was pastored by James Lawson, who had written SNCC’s founding statement in 1960 and also

¹⁴ “Henry A. Cabirac Jr.,” consulted April 5, 2018, at <<https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/azcentral/obituary.aspx?n=henry-a-cabirac&pid=95046912>>; John P. Sisson, untitled resume, folder 26, box 3, memorandum; Jack [Sisson] to Matt [Ahmann], “Visit with Msgr. Kourey, Superintendent of Schools, Diocese of Natchez-Jackson 11/8/65,” November 11, 1965 (quotation), folder 14, box 11, series 33, NCCIJR; “New Director Appointed for Southern Field Service Project of the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice,” press release, May 15 [1964], folder 3, box 25, Archives of the Diocese of Savannah, Georgia, Savannah, Georgia.

¹⁵ *New York Times*, May 12 (quotation), June 1, 5, 12, 1966; *Washington Post*, June 6, 1966; Goudsouzian, *Down to the Crossroads*, 7-8, 17-18; Meredith claimed that 450,000 eligible black Mississippians were unregistered, but the figure was more likely to have been around 300,000 because of 120,000-130,000 registrations in the first eight months after the passage of the Voting Rights Act in August 1965. *New York Times*, June 1, 21, 1966.

worked with the SCLC.¹⁶

The SFS contacted the CHRCM soon after the shooting, and the CHRCM sent flowers to Meredith's hospital bedside. On June 8, Sisson went to Memphis and "set up headquarters in the Lorraine Motel where all the march leadership was staying." Sisson reported to the NCCIJ that he was "at the Memphis March headquarters when it was established at Centenary Methodist Church, and attended the early strategy meeting at the Lorraine Motel," where he "was one of the few white persons present." Roy Wilkins, executive director of the national NAACP, and Whitney M. Young Jr., executive director of the National Urban League, arrived in Memphis willing to add their organizations to the list of march sponsors. They also joined the other national leaders in addressing a mass meeting at Centenary Methodist Church.¹⁷

A contingent of the Deacons for Defense and Justice, an armed group founded in Jonesboro, Louisiana, in 1964, arrived in Memphis ready to protect the marchers. Carmichael, supported by McKissick, wanted the Deacons involved, and he also wanted to emphasize black participation in order to keep whites from controlling the march. King, for his part, sought to ensure that the march would be nonviolent, interracial, and welcoming to white participation. The three leaders reached a compromise under which the Deacons provided protection, and the march was open to whites. Supported by Young, Wilkins argued that the march should focus on supporting passage of President Lyndon B. Johnson's next civil rights bill, which prohibited racial discrimination in the sale or rental of housing, included measures to end racial discrimination in state and federal juries, widened federal jurisdiction regarding crimes of racial violence, and broadened the U.S. Justice Department's authority to instigate school

¹⁶ *Washington Post*, June 7, 8, 11, 1966; *New York Times*, June 8, 1966; Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Bantam, 1968 [1967]), 27-31; Goudsouzian, *Down to the Crossroads*, 20-33, 46-48; memorandum, Matt Ahmann to [NCCIJ] Board of Directors, "Conference Involvement in the Meredith Mississippi March," June 30, 1966, 1, folder 7, box 16, series 20, NCCIJR; Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1981), 207; At his trial in November 1966, Norvell plead guilty to assault and battery with intent to kill and received a five year sentence. *Washington Post*, November 22, 1966.

¹⁷ Memorandum, Jack [Sisson] to Matt [Ahmann], "Meredith Mississippi Freedom March, June 6-26, 1966 (Jim McGuire sent a separate report of his activities from June 22 to June 28)," June 30, 1966, 1 (first quotation), folder 11, box 8, series 34, "Report of the Director of the Southern Field Service August, 1966," August 3, 1966, 2 (second quotation), folder 2, box 5, series 30, NCCIJR; memorandum, Jim McGuire to Matt [Ahmann], "Southern Field Service and the Meredith Freedom March," June 29, 1966, 1; Goudsouzian, *Down to the Crossroads*, 35.

desegregation lawsuits. Carmichael proposed a march manifesto that attacked the Johnson administration's civil rights record, and he also wanted the march goals to include voter registration. Carmichael launched into a vituperative verbal attack on Wilkins and Young, dismissing them as Johnson's lackeys. Sisson reported to the NCCIJ that "tensions over the March's direction were very severe." Wilkins and Young refused to sign the manifesto or to participate in the march.¹⁸

King, Carmichael, McKissick, Charles Evers (who had returned to Mississippi from Chicago in 1963 and replaced his slain brother as the state NAACP's field secretary), the Delta Ministry (a National Council of Churches project to alleviate poverty and assist Mississippi's African American poor primarily in the Delta), and the Madison County Movement in Mississippi signed the manifesto of what they now entitled the Meredith Mississippi Freedom March. The manifesto indicted Lyndon Johnson for failing to enforce "existing federal law to protect the rights of all Americans." It also called for the strengthening of civil rights laws to ensure African Americans' fair representation on southern juries and in law enforcement, the dispatch of federal registrars to "all 600 Deep South counties to register disenfranchised Negroes," and the adoption of a federal budget that would enable impoverished African Americans to make "their own destines [sic]." Claiming his name had been forged on the document, Evers repudiated the manifesto, which he said, echoing Wilkins, was "too critical of President Johnson."¹⁹

¹⁸ Goudsouzian, *Down to the Crossroads*, 37-41, 90-91; Dittmer, *Local People*, 392-94; Carson, *In Struggle*, 207-208; Peniel E. Joseph, *Stokely: A Life* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2014), 107-108; King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 31-32; *New York Times*, June 8, 12, 1966; "Report of the Director of the Southern Field Service August, 1966," August 3, 1966, 2 (quotation); Historians disagree about Carmichael's position. Goudsouzian claims that Carmichael sought only to ensure that African Americans controlled the march, Carson that Carmichael thought that "white participation should be deemphasized," and Dittmer that Carmichael wanted to exclude whites entirely from the march. Joseph's biography of Carmichael does not address the issue. Recollections are more in agreement. According to King, Carmichael thought "that the dominant appeal should be made for black participation." SNCC staff member Cleveland Sellers similarly recalled that Carmichael "argued that the march should deemphasize white participation, [and] that it should be used to highlight the need for independent, black political units"; Goudsouzian, *Down to the Crossroads*, 38; Carson, *In Struggle*, 207; Dittmer, *Local People*, 393; King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 32; Cleveland Sellers with Robert Terrell, *The River of No Return: The Autobiography of a Black Militant and the Life and Death of SNCC* (Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1990 [1973]), 162.

¹⁹ "Manifesto of the Meredith Mississippi Freedom March," June 9, 1966 (first, second, and third quotations), folder 11, box 8, series 34, NCCIJR; *New York Times*, June 11, 1966 (fourth quotation); On the Delta Ministry, see Mark Newman, *Divine Agitators: The Delta Ministry and Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2004).

Sisson noted, "At first, national leaders did not consult Mississippi leaders; eventually, because of local pressure, it was agreed that national staff persons would enter towns off the March route to hold rallies, stimulate voter registration and promote participation in the march." The Delta Ministry, in particular, pressed for the march to emphasize voter registration and divert its path through part of the Delta, which had a large, mostly unregistered African American population. Sisson reported, "Many Catholics who had marched at Selma last year (or who wished they had) inquired about whether they should come to Mississippi." Although King had made "a national call for people to come" to the state soon after his arrival in Memphis in the wake of Meredith's shooting, Sisson observed that "The joint March leadership did not want them [white clergy and laity] 'on the road' and would not accept an offer even to bring in experienced voter-registration workers." King succeeded in ensuring that the march was interracial, but Carmichael and McKissick had, for their part, made sure that the Meredith March would not replicate the Selma protests and bring in hundreds of whites from the North and the major faiths.²⁰

Historian Adam Goudsouzian estimates that "Between towns on Highway 51, whites composed somewhere between 15 and 30 percent of the marchers." Most of them stayed for short periods, and some were clergy, who came on their own initiative. For example, the Reverend Duncan Howlett, pastor of All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church, Washington, D.C., marched and arranged for some other clergy to participate. A small number from the Catholic Interracial Council of Little Rock also marched, and an integrated group of CHRCM members, including Father Edwin J. Wallin, C.S.P., a chaplain at Memphis State University who was originally from New York City, marched intermittently at the outset. The CHRCM worked with Sisson to provide office help for the march headquarters, rooms for the protesters, and cars to ferry marchers between their accommodations and the march route. Sisson "spent some time marching" during the first week "but worked mainly to support the headquarters staff, scout the march area, judge the temper of local officials, and exchange information with newsmen and the few U.S. officials on the scene." Mississippi Governor Paul B. Johnson Jr. promised to protect the marchers and deployed the state's Highway

²⁰ *Washington Post*, June 16, 1966; "Report of the Director of the Southern Field Service August, 1966," August 3, 1966, 2-3 (first quotation on pp. 2-3; second and fourth quotations on p. 3); *Jackson Daily News*, June 8, 1966 (third quotation); Newman, *Divine Agitators*, 118.

Patrol. The federal government sent John Doar, an assistant attorney general in the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department, to observe and mediate between local enforcement and march leaders. As well as keeping in touch with federal officials in the U.S. Justice Department and the Community Relations Service, Sisson kept the chancery of the Diocese of Natchez-Jackson informed about the march.²¹

Although there was still no Catholic interracial council in Mississippi with which he could work, Sisson established a working relationship with Monsignor James McGough, the chancellor of the Diocese of Natchez-Jackson. Gerow, however, maintained his customary caution and kept a public silence about Meredith's shooting and the march. CHRCM members tried to contact Coadjutor Bishop Joseph A. Durick of the Diocese of Nashville, which covered all of Tennessee, to ask him to send condolences to Meredith, but they were unable to reach the bishop who was on a retreat. Sisson believed that had Durick sent a message, the circumspet "Gerow would have sent a similar message." In contrast to Toolen, who had told clergy and nuns not to come into his diocese and join the Selma protests in 1965 and then condemned those who did, McGough told Sisson that Gerow "had given his approval for clergy and religious to come in from outside the diocese to join the march but wanted them to check in with the Chancery," which by June 23 gave "blanket permission for all outside priests." In all, between ten and fifteen Catholic priests eventually participated in the march. However, Gerow remained "undecided about . . . permitting his own priests and religious orders in the march proper."²²

Some members of religious orders who worked among African Americans in Mississippi were sympathetic and keen to help the march when contacted by Sisson. Within days of its resumption under national civil rights leadership, Father Luke Mikschl, M.S.S.S.T., a Minnesotan

²¹ Goudsouzian, *Down to the Crossroads*, 77-79, 94-98 (first quotation on p. 94); *Jackson Daily News*, June 8, 1966; "Report of the Director of the Southern Field Service August, 1966," August 3, 1966, 3 (second and third quotations); memorandum, Jack [Sisson] to Matt [Ahmann], "Meredith Mississippi Freedom March, June 6-26, 1966 (Jim sent a separate report of his activities from June 22 to June 28)," June 30, 1966, 1; Mathew Ahmann to Edwin J. Wallin, July 1, 1966, folder 11, box 14; Kathleen Woods to James McGuire, December 5, 1966, 4, "Minutes of CIC [Catholic Interracial Council of Little Rock]," July 17, 1966, 1, folder 6, box 2, series 33, NCCIJR; *New York Times*, May 4, 1956, June 8, 16, 17, 26, 1966, November 12, 2014.

²² Memorandum, Jack [Sisson] to Matt [Ahmann], "Meredith Mississippi Freedom March, June 6-26, 1966 (Jim sent a separate report of his activities from June 22 to June 28)," June 30, 1966, 1 (first quotation), 4 (second and fourth quotations); memorandum, Jim McGuire to Matt [Ahmann], "Southern Field Service and the Meredith Freedom March," June 29, 1966, 1 (third quotation); "Report of the Director of the Southern Field Service August, 1966," August 3, 1966, 5.

who, along with the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, St. Rose Convent, La Crosse, Wisconsin, operated the Holy Child Jesus Mission in Canton secured Gerow's permission to host the marchers when they arrived in the town. Father Walter (Meinrad) Smigiel, O.F.M., a Detroit native who pastored St. Benedict the Moor Church in Indianola and had established the biracial Indianola Improvement Association in 1964, also obtained the bishop's agreement to invite King to speak on his church's grounds.²³

On June 14, Ahmann wrote to the leaders of the NCCIJ's interracial councils seeking to raise funds for the Meredith March, which he requested, in the spirit of ecumenical cooperation encouraged by the Second Vatican Council, that they send to the NCC's Commission on Religion and Race, which was also supporting the march. He urged councils to support the march manifesto by contacting "Congress by wire, letter and in person to strengthen and get the pending [civil rights] bill passed." Ahmann approvingly quoted the NCC's view that Black Power was "not a rejection of white people or white support" but rather "a conviction that the Negro must present his own concerns, programs and plans for his own economic, political and social relationship to his inheritance in our nation."²⁴

Ahmann's appeal demonstrated that the idea of Black Power preceded Carmichael's famous rallying cry for it in Greenwood two days later. Some SNCC workers had already begun to adopt Black Power, and Carmichael, elected as SNCC's chairman in May 1966, had worked with the Lowndes County Freedom Organization in Alabama that had called for "Black Power for Black People" and run candidates for local office. Working in advance teams along the march route, SNCC worker Willie Ricks used Black Power to generate interest and support. Ricks informed Carmichael that black Mississippians had enthusiastically embraced the slogan and

²³ Memorandum, Jack [Sisson] to Matt [Ahmann], "Meredith Mississippi Freedom March, June 6-26, 1966 (Jim sent a separate report of his activities from June 22 to June 28)," June 30, 1966, 3; Father Luke Mikschl, M.S.S.S.T., "Holy Childhood Mission and the Mississippi Freedom March," *Divine Word Messenger*, 43 (July-August 1966): 106; Father Luke Mikschl, M.S.S.S.T., "Holy Child Jesus Mission and 'The March,'" folder 11, box 8, series 34; "Let's Work Together for Progress," attached to Sister M. Thea [Bowman] to John P. Sisson, May 27, 1967, folder 7, box 10, series 33, NCCIJR; Dorothy Day, "On Pilgrimage - December 1956," *Catholic Worker*, December 1956, 1, 6-7; *Delta Democrat-Times*, October 13, 1960; *Carroll Daily Times Herald*, January 16, 1967; *Our History: Truths, Tales and Tidbits: Assumption Province Franciscans* 51 (January 10, 2010), consulted April 12, 2018, at <http://www.assumptionprovince.org/History/No._51_-_January_10,_2010.pdf>.

²⁴ Memorandum, Matt Ahmann to "Council Presidents and Chairmen and Chaplains; Board of Directors; Key Contacts," "Meredith Mississippi March," June 14, 1966, folder 11, box 8, series 34, NCCIJR.

urged him to proclaim it.²⁵

When the marchers reached the Delta town of Greenwood, Father Nathaniel R. Machesky, O.F.M., who had pastored the St. Francis of Assisi mission for African Americans since its opening in 1950, offered them his grounds to pitch their tents. Like many other of the priests from religious orders who staffed black Catholic churches in Mississippi, Machesky was a northerner and had been raised in Detroit. Sympathetic to racial equality, he served as the spiritual adviser to Pax Christi, an interracial secular institute of Catholic women (mostly from the North) who ran the St. Francis Center that had opened in 1952. The St. Francis Center provided its 2,000 African American members with a dispensary, education programs, affordable clothing, a credit union, and a newspaper. In March 1963, Cabirac contacted Machesky to enquire about conditions in Greenwood, and in November, Machesky invited him to conduct a workshop for staff at the mission and with Pax Christi. Cabirac asked Machesky to obtain Gerow's permission, which the bishop, maintaining his ban on Cabirac, refused. After succeeding Cabirac, Sisson maintained the SFS's contact with Machesky and visited him in 1964.²⁶

Sisson also consulted Father Machesky in Greenwood on June 13, 1966, three days before the Meredith March arrived in the town. Machesky warned Sisson that racial tensions were very high. Sisson "relayed this information to [the] Community Relations Service and the Justice Dept., who sent men over in advance of the march reaching Greenwood." Preferring to pitch their tents at Stone Street Elementary School in the center of a black community, the march leaders declined Machesky's offer to use his mission's grounds. Long resistant to the civil rights movement, and emboldened further by Governor Johnson's decision to reduce protection for the march when it entered the Delta because, he said, it had "turned into a voter registration campaign," the town's authorities

²⁵ Carson, *In Struggle*, 200, 208-209; Goudsouzian, *Down to the Crossroads*, 142 (quotation).

²⁶ Memorandum, Jack [Sisson] to Matt [Ahmann], "Meredith Mississippi Freedom March, June 6-26, 1966 (Jim sent a separate report of his activities from June 22 to June 28)," June 30, 1966, 5; Henry Cabirac Jr. to Wiley A. Branton, March 5, 1963, folder 9, box 5, series 21, Henry Cabirac, Jr. to Nathaniel Machesky, March 8, November 20, December 9, 1963, Nathaniel Machesky to Henry Cabirac, Jr., November 3, December 3, 5, 1963, folder 1; Nathaniel Machesky to R. O. Gerow, December 3, 1963; John P. Sisson to Hyman Bookbinder, December 14, 1964 and attachment; Mathew Ahmann to Charles Merrill, February 8, 1965 and attachment, John P. Sisson to editor, Harper's Magazine, December 12, 1967; memorandum, John Sisson to Mathew Ahmann, "Report on Greenwood, Mississippi," May 25, 1964, folder 1, box 12; John P. Sisson to James McGough, May 22, 1964, folder 14, box 11; John P. Sisson to Sherrill Smith, July 15, 1964, folder 6, box 17, series 33, NCCIJR.

refused to let the marchers use the school. On June 16, police arrested and jailed Carmichael and two others from an advance team for trespass as they attempted to pitch a tent at the school in defiance. Concerned by rising tension after the arrests, the police allowed the marchers to put their tents up in a public park. Machesky paid Carmichael's bail and that of those arrested with him in the belief, Sisson wrote, that "the tensions would be less with Carmichael out of jail than in." Local resident Bill Virden concurred and recalled that "If he [Machesky] hadn't done it, it [Greenwood] would have burned to the ground." After his release from jail, Carmichael, encouraged by Ricks, called for Black Power at a night rally in Broad Street Park. Local whites subsequently harassed Machesky and other members of his parish because he had provided bail.²⁷

After Greenwood, the march continued on through the Delta. However, King, a SCLC contingent, and a group of twenty people from the Meredith March went to Philadelphia in Neshoba County for a march and a memorial to mark the second anniversary of the murder of three civil rights activists by Ku Klux Klansmen in the county on June 21. They joined two hundred others in a march to the Neshoba County courthouse, where a white mob of three hundred hostile whites awaited them. Deputy Sheriff Cecil Price, who had been indicted for the federal crime of depriving the murdered civil rights workers of their civil rights and had remained in his post pending trial, was at the courthouse. King made a speech in which he declared: "I believe in my heart that the murderers are somewhere around me at this moment." Someone in the crowd of whites responded, "They're right behind you." Price, who would be convicted a year later for involvement in the murders, smirked as he stood behind King, who finished his speech among jeers from whites who threw firecrackers and cherry bombs. As the marchers retraced their steps down Main Street, the white crowd launched a barrage of objects at them. Fist fights broke out between whites and blacks, but the police did not intervene to stop the violence until a large group of whites appeared carrying a range of weapons. Appalled by the violence, King vowed to return.²⁸

²⁷ Memorandum, Jack [Sisson] to Matt [Ahmann], "Meredith Mississippi Freedom March, June 6-26, 1966 (Jim sent a separate report of his activities from June 22 to June 28)," June 30, 1966, 3 (first quotation), 5 (third quotation); *Washington Post*, June 17, 1966; *New York Times*, June 17, 1966 (second quotation); Goudsouzian, *Down to the Crossroads*, 133-34, 136, 139-43; Murray, "Father Nathaniel and the Greenwood Movement," 286 (fourth quotation); Mathew Ahmann to Nathaniel Machesky, June 21, 1966, folder 1, box 12, series 33, NCCIJR.

²⁸ *New York Times*, June 20, 22 (first quotation), 1966; *Washington Post*, June 22, 1966; Goudsouzian, *Down to the Crossroads*, 169-70, 171, 174-76 (second quotation on p. 174), 207.

Although Carmichael and McKissick had successfully resisted King's attempt at the start of the Meredith March to transform it into a Selma-style mass protest with a nationwide appeal to clergy and sympathizers from across the nation, they now supported King in making a "call for clergy and citizens in all walks of life" to come to Mississippi for the last stage of the march, an eight-mile walk from Tougaloo College to the state capitol grounds in Jackson for the closing rally. Mathew Ahmann responded by sending a wire endorsing the appeal to all of the NCCIJ's member councils. During the march's final week, Sisson "spent a good bit of time talking with priests all over the country (Minneapolis, Washington, Memphis, San Antonio, Pittsburgh, etc.) about coming to the March."²⁹

King rejoined the Meredith March in Indianola. With Father Smigiel's agreement, St. Benedict the Moor Church in Indianola hosted a large night-time rally, but by this time King had already left for a rally in Yazoo City, where he followed Willie Ricks's call for self-defence with an appeal for nonviolence. After Greenwood, King later recalled, "there was fierce competition between those who were wedded to the Black Power slogan and those wedded to Freedom Now," the usual call of the civil rights movement. "Speakers on each side," King remembered, "sought desperately to get the crowds to chant their slogan the loudest." Concerned by "this widening split in our ranks," King called a meeting with Carmichael and McKissick in an effort to resolve the issue. The meeting occurred on June 22 in the parish house of St. Francis of Assisi, a Catholic church in Yazoo City.³⁰

As Yazoo City was on the march route, Sisson had earlier contacted the church's pastor, Father John W. Kist, S.V.D., who offered to let the marchers pitch their tents on church grounds. After the events in Greenwood, Kist withdrew his offer because Sisson reported, "he felt that the parish would suffer or that the pressures on him would be more than he could stand." However, Kist reconsidered and "the marchers stayed on his grounds." The SFS "arranged for someone to go and stay with him

²⁹ Goudsouzian, *Down to the Crossroads*, 167, 227 (first quotation); memorandum, Matt Ahmann to [NCCIJ] Board of Directors, "Conference Involvement in the Meredith Mississippi March," June 30, 1966, 2; memorandum, Jack [Sisson] to Matt [Ahmann], "Meredith Mississippi Freedom March, June 6-26, 1966 (Jim sent a separate report of his activities from June 22 to June 28)," June 30, 1966, p. 5 (second quotation); *New York Times*, June 26, 1966.

³⁰ King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 34-35 (first quotation on p. 34; second quotation on pp. 34-35; third quotation on p. 35); Goudsouzian, *Down to the Crossroads*, 179.

if trouble developed.”³¹

The march’s leaders and their staffs conferred in Kist’s parish house living room for five hours. While in agreement that blacks needed political power, King called for abandoning the Black Power slogan, which he told Carmichael and McKissick, “would confuse our allies, isolate the Negro community and give many prejudiced whites, who might otherwise be ashamed of their anti-Negro feeling, a ready excuse for self-justification” and imply “black domination rather than black equality.” Carmichael and McKissick were not persuaded by King’s arguments, but they accepted King’s compromise suggestion that the march leaders avoid chanting either Black Power or Freedom Now during the remainder of the march to Jackson. Nevertheless, marchers and supporters continued to chant their favored slogans.³²

The NCCIJ had responded positively to Black Power before Carmichael’s rallying cry for its adoption on his release from jail in Greenwood brought the slogan widespread media attention. The conference and the SFS subsequently became concerned, like King, by Black Power’s divisiveness and by its more militant, and increasingly vocal, exponents during the march. Militants supported black nationalism, objected to the presence of white marchers, and sometimes chanted “Hey hey, what do you know, honky got to go.” The NCCIJ shared King’s vision of building an interracial society, shorn of racism. In response to Carmichael’s championing of Black Power, Ahmann explained that “we tried to work so as to strengthen Dr. King’s leadership,” and the NCCIJ began to raise money directly “to help SCLC meet the March expenses.”³³

Less than two months after the march, Sisson wrote approvingly that “it was Dr. King’s charisma, the SCLC organization and a willingness to accept financial responsibility that kept the march together, gave it direction, maintained its non-violent character and assured its full impact, nationally and in Mississippi.” Sisson also claimed that most African

³¹ Memorandum, Jack [Sisson] to Matt [Ahmann], “Meredith Mississippi Freedom March, June 6-26, 1966 (Jim sent a separate report of his activities from June 22 to June 28),” June 30, 1966, 5 (first and second quotations); memorandum, Jim McGuire to Matt [Ahmann], “Southern Field Service and the Meredith Freedom March,” June 29, 1966, 1 (third quotation).

³² King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 34-36 (quotations on p. 36); Goudsouzian, *Down to the Crossroads*, 182-83.

³³ Goudsouzian, *Down to the Crossroads*, 161-62 (first quotation on p. 162), 178-81; memorandum, Matt Ahmann to [NCCIJ] Board of Directors, “Conference Involvement in the Meredith Mississippi March,” June 30, 1966, 2 (second and third quotations); Mathew Ahmann to William J. Fleming, June 27, 1966, folder 7, box 16, series 20, NCCIJR.

American Mississippians rejected Black Power. He reported to the NCCIJ: "Another factor contributing to the orderly nature of the March was the generally negative reaction of Mississippi Negroes to the 'black power' cry of several March leaders. Local Negro leaders had experience enough to know that they did not have the power to challenge white structures and that they would be thrown back on their own resources when the March ended."³⁴

The response of black Mississippians to Black Power was more enthusiastic and complex than Sisson believed. Accustomed to working with those committed to the integrationist goal of creating a beloved community and, like the NCCIJ, sharing their vision, Sisson seemed unable to appreciate the appeal of Black Power for many African Americans. Sisson and the NCCIJ largely worked with middle class white and African American leaders and Catholics and had limited exposure to, and understanding of, the interests and aspirations of many African American Mississippians from outside of those ranks. Focused primarily on a support role for the march and interacting with the chancery and federal officials, Sisson also spent little time marching and observing the response of African Americans along its route.

Despite being a seasoned civil rights organizer in the Deep South, Carmichael had himself at first disbelieved Ricks when told that African Americans workers along the march route were readily joining in with Ricks's call for Black Power. After observing their enthusiastic response to Ricks himself, Carmichael had decided to incorporate Black Power into his Greenwood speech. Historian John Dittmer explains that "many blacks along the march route were drawn to the slogan and to Carmichael's fiery denunciations of a caste system that had oppressed them for generations. Yet they also revered Dr. King and continued to flock to the roadsides to catch a glimpse of their hero. Black Mississippians did not want to be forced to choose between the two men."³⁵

In 1967, Joyce Ladner, who had grown up in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, and joined SNCC while a sociology student at Tougaloo College, found "varying degrees of acceptance of the slogan among Mississippi Negroes," although she acknowledged that some of them rejected it altogether. Ladner found that "many Negro activists in Mississippi had immediately

³⁴ "Report of the Director of the Southern Field Service August, 1966," August 3, 1966, 3-4 (first quotation on p. 3; second quotation on pp. 3-4).

³⁵ Carson, *In Struggle*, 209-210; Goudsouzian, *Down to the Crossroads*, 142-43; Dittmer, *Local People*, 397-98 (quotation).

embraced the black power slogan — because of the already widely-held belief that power *was* [emphasis in the original] an effective tool for obtaining demands from the ruling elite in Mississippi,” and because they believed that efforts to achieve integration had failed to bring significant change in black lives.³⁶

Ladner interviewed thirty Black Power activists in the state. She differentiated between two-thirds of those activists, who were “local,” meaning “long-term residents” and generally “uneducated, unskilled adults” and the remainder, half of them from the North, who were “cosmopolitan” and mostly young “urbane, educated” newcomers. Cosmopolitans, Ladner argued, “conceived of black power in highly philosophical terms — as an ideology” of blackness that connected them with “other colored peoples of the world.” Although no less militant, locals were “committed to concrete economic and political programs.” The difference between them was that “cosmopolitans — to varying degrees — endorse such programs but actually have made little effort to realize them.” Unaware of, or unconcerned by, differences among the march organizers, many black Mississippians in the Delta enthusiastically welcomed the march and attended its rallies when it reached their localities.³⁷

Following the violence in Philadelphia, Mississippi, and conscious that the Meredith March was about to reach Canton, where authorities had taken a hard line against the local civil rights movement, the NCCIJ attempted, with the chancery’s permission, on June 23 to contact fifteen priests from outside the Diocese of Natchez-Jackson to “come in as mediators.” The conference was able to recruit only three: Father Edwin J. Wallin, who had participated at the start of the Meredith March; Father Sherrill Smith, a Chicago native who was the Archdiocese of San Antonio’s director of social action and pastor of St. Peter Claver Church in San Antonio; and Father William M. Lewers, C.S.C., a Kansas City, Missouri, born law professor at the University of Notre Dame, who was spending the summer in Jackson as a supply pastor at Holy Family Church. Sisson diverted Wallin and a group of Protestant clergy, who had come down with him from Memphis for the Meredith March, to Philadelphia. The

³⁶ Joyce Ladner, “What Black Power Means to Negroes in Mississippi,” in *The Transformation of Activism*, ed. August Meier (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1970), 131-54 (first and second quotations on p. 133).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 132-54 (first through fifth quotations on p. 135; six quotation on p. 139; seventh quotation on p. 140; eighth and ninth eleventh quotations on p. 144).

NCCIJ sent Smith and Lewers to Canton, along with James J. McGuire, the SFS's associate director.³⁸

Father Luke Mikschl and Father Patrick Moran, who pastored a white Catholic church in Canton, offered their assistance to the local authorities regarding the march but received no response. Mikschl told the NCCIJ that he, nevertheless, did not expect any trouble in Canton, and he remained willing to allow the marchers to camp on his church's grounds if they requested it. On June 23, King arrived in Canton ahead of the marchers. Hosted by Mikschl and Brothers Maurus and Aaron, M.S.S.T., from Camden, Mississippi, King visited Holy Child Jesus Mission, which hosted one of the eighteen centers in Mississippi for Operation STAR (Systematic Training and Redevelopment), an adult basic education, vocational training and job placement program sponsored by the Diocese of Natchez-Jackson with \$458,000 of diocesan and \$6,963,800 of federal funds. Although open to the poor regardless of race, most STAR trainees were African American.³⁹

When two hundred marchers arrived in Canton later that evening and marched to the courthouse, over one thousand local African Americans awaited them. Although local officials had earlier refused permission for the marchers to camp at McNeal Elementary School for Negroes, Carmichael led a march to the school from the courthouse, during which the crowd swelled to thirty-five hundred. Although the police did not intervene to stop tents being delivered, the Mississippi Highway Patrol appeared, heavily armed and wearing riot helmets. Some of the crowd dispersed, but twenty-five hundred people remained as organizers began laying out the tents. Standing on top of a truck, Carmichael announced

³⁸ "Mississippi Riot Averted," *Alamo Messenger*, July 1, 1966; memorandum, Jack [Sisson] to Matt [Ahmann], "Meredith Mississippi Freedom March, June 6-26, 1966 (Jim sent a separate report of his activities from June 22 to June 28)," June 30, 1966, 6-7; memorandum, Jim McGuire to Matt [Ahmann], "Southern Field Service and the Meredith Freedom March," June 29, 1966, 1 (quotation); James J. McGuire to Sherrill Smith, July 2, 1966, folder 7, box 16, series 20, NCCIJR; John P. Nelson Jr. unaddressed letter, July 21, 1966, folder 3, box 4, John P. Nelson Papers, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana; *New York Times*, May 5, 1997; Abe Levy, "S.A. to Selma, priest answered 'calls for protecting the weak,'" *mySA*, October 19, 2012, consulted April 11, 2018, at <https://www.mysanantonio.com/news/local_news/article/S-A-to-Selma-priest-answered-calls-for-3959914.php>.

³⁹ Mikschl, "Holy Childhood Mission and the Mississippi Freedom March," 106; memorandum, Jim McGuire to Matt [Ahmann], "Southern Field Service and the Meredith Freedom March," June 29, 1966, 1, 2; "Operation 'STAR,'" May 1965, folder 7, box 12, series 33, NCCIJR; "Mississippi Launches STAR – Two-Year Anti-Poverty Program," *Mississippi Register*, August 13, 1965; "Antipoverty Effort Backed by Diocese," *Catholic Week*, August 13, 1965; "Mississippi's Anti-Poverty Program Boldest in Nation, Declares Shriver," *Clarion Herald*, August 19, 1965.

“The time for running has come to an end.” King followed him by appealing for nonviolence and vowed that “If necessary, we are willing to fill up all the jails in Mississippi.” When officials announced that anyone erecting tents would be arrested, Carmichael led the crowd in chanting “Pitch the tents.” As the tents began to go up, highway patrolmen donned gas masks. Father Richard T. McSorley, S.J., a professor at Georgetown University, who was one of the marchers, asked the watching John Doar, “Isn’t there something you can do?” Doar replied, “What can I do? Neither side will give an inch.” The troopers fired tear gas into the crowd and clubbed people at random with rifles and nightsticks until the school grounds were cleared. Those attacked included Father John Pader, a Catholic priest from Chicago, who was hit by a state trooper’s shotgun butt. In response to the attack, Mikschl went to the school with Brother Aaron. They arrived as the tear gas was lifting and those who could were reassembling to march to Asbury Methodist Church, a black church located across the street from the Holy Child Jesus Mission. Mikschl recalled:

At this point, I decided we must become directly involved. The injured were brought to the convent while Mr. [James] Draper of the Community Relations Service asked if all could use our grounds. I readily consented. We checked with Dr. King, Rev. J. McCree, Madison County’s ‘Mr. Civil Rights,’ and others, and all agreed this was most necessary, as hundreds were already outside the small church.⁴⁰

Staff from the Medical Committee for Human Rights and nuns from the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration looked after twenty-one injured people in the convent. Between four hundred and five hundred slept on the auditorium floor of the Holy Child Jesus Mission and others outside on its lawns. In the early hours of the morning, arson destroyed St. Joachim’s School in Carthage, a STAR center that had been subject to a dynamite attack in April. Later that morning, Father John Prater, a Servite based in Chicago and Father McSorley, who had slept at the rectory along with some of the male demonstrators, celebrated Mass with

⁴⁰ *New York Times*, June 24, 1966 (first, fourth and fifth quotations); Goudsouzian, *Down to the Crossroads*, 195-201 (second quotation on pp. 198-99; third quotation on p. 199); The *New York Times*’ report refers to Father John Pader of Chicago being attacked. Father Mikschl noted that Father John Prater of Chicago was among the marchers in Canton. These may be different spellings of the same priest’s last name. Mikschl, “Holy Childhood Mission and the Mississippi Freedom March,” 107.

a few of the marchers and the Sisters.⁴¹

McSorley, a Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, native, had marched at Selma in 1965. He had driven down with some students to join the Meredith March after hearing King's early appeal for volunteers on television. He recalled, "We walked twenty miles a day and then slept overnight in two large tents, one for men and one for women." When King asked the day after the troopers' attack at Canton for people to accompany him to Philadelphia, sixty miles away, McSorley was among the one hundred volunteers, who drove across the state in a convoy of twenty cars.⁴²

Wallin also arrived in Philadelphia, Mississippi. Although there is no evidence that his efforts at mediation were responsible, on this occasion, unlike three days before, the march passed off largely peacefully because, warned of possible federal intervention by John Doar if violence occurred, state and local authorities deployed highway patrolmen and police to contain a crowd of between fifteen hundred and two thousand jeering whites and to protect the marchers. McSorley participated in a mile-long march to the courthouse, where King and Carmichael addressed the marchers, who sang "God Bless America." King ended with a prayer and led the marchers back through town. Law enforcement officers lined the route. McSorley saw a policeman ram his club into the ribs of an African American man, who was marching next to him. The priest dissuaded the man, who swung his arm at the policeman, from further retaliating by saying "Remember what King asked of us, nonviolent response." As the marching columns spread more widely on entering the black neighborhood, a white man tried to drive his car into the marchers, who hurriedly divided into two columns and escaped injury. Police stopped the car and arrested the driver and his passenger. The driver of the car that McSorley was travelling back to Canton in decided not to wait for the convoy because one of the passengers needed to make a flight. A group of whites pursued them in what became an eighty-mile-an-hour car chase, until their pursuers eventually gave up, unable to catch them. Back in Canton, McSorley told Mikschl, "Father, I was ready to die. A better way,

⁴¹ Mikschl, "Holy Childhood Mission and the Mississippi Freedom March," 106-107 (quotation on p. 107; "'Bombs Can't Kill Ideas' Rural Missioner Says," press clipping dated July 1, 1966, folder 13, box 29, series 20, NCCIJR; On the Medical Committee for Human Rights see John Dittmer, *The Good Doctors: The Medical Committee for Human Rights and the Struggle for Social Justice in Health Care* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017).

⁴² Richard T. McSorley, S.J., *My Path to Peace and Justice: An Autobiography* (Eugene, Oreg: Wipf and Stock, 2010 [1996]), 37, 100-101 (quotation on p. 100).

I can't think of — a priest witnessing for justice.”⁴³

While McSorley was in Philadelphia, Prater was one of forty-five volunteers who followed Albert Turner of the SCLC in an eight-mile march from Canton along Highway 51. Prater did not walk any further, but many decided to march a further ten miles to Tougaloo College before taking cars back to Canton that evening.⁴⁴

By then, Smith, Lewers and McGuire had arrived in Canton, where they concluded that Mikschl had “helped save the town” from a riot by allowing the demonstrators to use his mission’s facilities and grounds. While Mikschl’s action certainly aided the marchers, the decisions of the march leaders played a far greater role by managing and positively channeling black anger. Between seven hundred and eight hundred people crowded into the auditorium of Holy Child Jesus Mission that night, where march leaders announced there would be a boycott of downtown businesses and a work stoppage for one day. King also announced a night march, in which six hundred people paraded through Canton peacefully.⁴⁵

According to Goudsouzian, the march leaders also decided that the demonstrators would return to McNeal Elementary School for Negroes and pitch their tents. However, Catholic sources tell a different story. Mikschl’s contemporary account stated that march leaders had not reached a decision on the night of June 23. Jim McGuire noted that during the early evening of June 24, Jim Draper asked for a meeting with the NCCIJ mediating team, who suggested a compromise with city officials in which “the marchers be permitted to use the school grounds without pitching the tent[s].” Draper called Doar who accepted the idea and contacted Mayor Stanley Matthews. Lewers sat in on a strategy meeting of march leaders and state and local civil rights leaders in the home of local merchant George Washington and concluded that most

⁴³ Memorandum, Jim McGuire to Matt [Ahmann], “Southern Field Service and the Meredith Freedom March,” June 29, 1966, 1; memorandum, Jack [Sisson] to Matt [Ahmann], “Meredith Mississippi Freedom March, June 6-26, 1966 (Jim sent a separate report of his activities from June 22 to June 28),” June 30, 1966, 5; *Washington Post*, June 25, 1966; *New York Times*, June 25, 1966; McSorley, *My Path to Peace and Justice*, 101-102 (first and second quotations on p. 102); Mikschl, “Holy Childhood Mission and the Mississippi Freedom March,” 108 (third quotation); Goudsouzian, *Down to the Crossroads*, 207-11; Goudsouzian’s account, unlike McSorley’s autobiography, has the priest driving the car. Goudsouzian, *Down to the Crossroads*, 211.

⁴⁴ Mikschl, “Holy Childhood Mission and the Mississippi Freedom March,” 107; Goudsouzian, *Down to the Crossroads*, 207.

⁴⁵ “Mississippi Riot Averted” (quotation); Mikschl, “Holy Childhood Mission and the Mississippi Freedom March,” 107; Goudsouzian, *Down to the Crossroads*, 203-204.

“were looking for a compromise.” However, Carmichael wanted to pitch the tents at the school, although the tents remained under the control of highway patrolmen who guarded the school ready to repel any attempt to enter its grounds. King sided with local civil rights leaders who favored negotiating with the city to avoid further violence and had declared that they would not accept march leaders telling them what to do.⁴⁶

The agreement reached with the city, which Goudsouzian credits to city authorities, was based on the compromise originated by the NCCIJ team. Under its terms, the marchers would hold a meeting at the school grounds that night but make camp elsewhere. Under pressure from boycotted merchants, state officials, and Justice Department staff, at 9:15 p.m. city leaders accepted the deal negotiated by a delegation of local black leaders. That night, the Highway Patrol withdrew from the school and permitted a rally on its grounds at 10:00 p.m., at which Ralph Abernathy, Sr., vice president of the SCLC, told the demonstrators that the tents had been sent to Tougaloo College. After the rally, the marchers, who had not been notified beforehand of the agreement and had expected to pitch their tents at the school, returned dejectedly to stay a second night at Holy Child Jesus Mission. Back in the mission’s auditorium, Carmichael ripped into the compromise. James Lawson told him that putting tents up at the school would only have brought another vicious attack and that Carmichael had to respect the wishes of local black leaders.⁴⁷

Governor Johnson phoned Gerow the next day to thank him for the Catholic Church’s help in preventing another tragedy in Canton. The NCCIJ sent Mikschl \$250 for costs incurred in feeding the marchers and later sent additional funds to cover other expenses. Mikschl reported that “the Sisters and girls teaching summer school here fed literally hundreds – milk, coolade (sic), sandwiches and soup. It made a deep impression on

⁴⁶ Goudsouzian, *Down to the Crossroads*, 204, 212-13; Mikschl, “Holy Childhood Mission and the Mississippi Freedom March,” 107; memorandum, Jim [McGuire] to Matt [Ahmann], “Group Dynamics of the March Leaders’ Meeting on Friday, June 24, Canton, Mississippi,” June 30, 1966, folder 7, box 16, series 20; James J. McGuire to Robert E. Lucey, July 2, 1966, folder 11, box 8, series 34, NCCIJR; memorandum, Jim McGuire to Matt [Ahmann], “Southern Field Service and the Meredith Freedom March,” June 29, 1966, 2-5 (quotations on p. 4); *New York Times*, June 25, 1966; Goudsouzian does not mention the NCCIJ’s mediators. He argues that Highway Patrol chief Charles Snodgrass invited some local black leaders to the police department and by indicating that “the authorities were reasonable” helped pave the way for negotiations with the city. Goudsouzian, *Down to the Crossroads*, 212-13.

⁴⁷ *Washington Post*, June 26, 1966; *New York Times*, June 25, 1966; “Mississippi Riot Averted”; memorandum, Jim McGuire to Matt [Ahmann], “Southern Field Service and the Meredith Freedom March,” June 29, 1966, 5; Goudsouzian, *Down to the Crossroads*, 216-18.

all as they worked long into the morning hours.”⁴⁸

The marchers left Canton on the morning of Saturday, June 25, and walked to Tougaloo College, their final staging post before the march ended in Jackson. That night, African American and white celebrities entertained a crowd of ten thousand at the college, with soul singer James Brown generating the greatest response. Mikschl recalled, “Father McSorley and I attended the rally that night again. Sitting on the grass that night, one felt very close to the masses of humanity struggling for racial justice.” The team the NCCIJ had sent to Mississippi also went to the evening rally and were joined by Sister Mary Peter (Margaret Ellen) Traxler, S.S.N.D., a Minnesotan on the staff of the NCCIJ’s Department of Educational Services, and Curtis Heaston, the NCCIJ’s associate director of employment services. Sister Mary Peter, who had marched in the Selma protests in 1965, wanted to join the next day’s march to Jackson, but Gerow opposed the idea.⁴⁹

At 11:00 a.m. Sunday, about seventeen hundred people began the march from Tougaloo College, including Father Sherrill Smith, who had also marched at Selma, and at least eight other priests from outside the diocese. Evincing his customary caution, Gerow decided at noon that none of his diocesan priests should march or go to the rally. However, the bishop’s decision, McGuire later reported, “was not communicated officially to diocesan personnel,” probably because it came too late to be disseminated. Four priests and eight nuns based in Mississippi attended the rally, along with five seminarians who were working in the state for the summer. After “delicate negotiations with the diocese,” Sister Mary Peter joined the march when it reached the outskirts of Jackson and became the only nun to have marched. Sisson joined the march for the

⁴⁸ Memorandum, Jim McGuire to Matt [Ahmann], “Southern Field Service and the Meredith Freedom March,” June 29, 1966, 2, 5; James J. McGuire to Luke Mikschl, July 2, 1966, memorandum, Jim McGuire to Matt [Ahmann], “Father Luke, Canton, Miss. – Freedom March Expenses,” September 9, 1966, folder 11, box 8, series 34, NCCIJR; Mikschl, “Holy Childhood Mission and the Mississippi Freedom March,” 107-108 (quotation).

⁴⁹ Mikschl, “Holy Childhood Mission and the Mississippi Freedom March,” 108 (quotation); Memorandum, Jim McGuire to Matt [Ahmann], “Southern Field Service and the Meredith Freedom March,” June 29, 1966, 5, 6; *New York Times*, June 22, 26, 1966; Goudsouzian, *Down to the Crossroads*, 224-26; Koehlinger, *New Nuns*, 80; Nelson, unaddressed letter, July 21, 1966; Sr. Mary Peter Traxler, S.S.N.D., “After Selma, You Can’t Stay Home Again!,” folder 11, box 2, series 8, NCCIJR.

final three blocks.⁵⁰

The Holy Child Jesus Mission maintained its association with the march. Mikschl wrote, "Sunday, four Sisters, the four girls [who taught in the mission's summer school], and one of our own [African American] Catholic girls, and myself attended the Jackson rally of 16,000." Reminiscent of the media in Selma a year earlier, "Again," Mikschl observed, "the TV camera 'zoomed in' on the Sisters in the white habits in the crowds." More than 90 percent of those at the rally, estimated at between ten thousand and sixteen thousand people, were African American Mississippians, which made the presence of the white nuns even more conspicuous. By contrast, most of the Selma marchers had come from outside Alabama and overwhelmingly from the North.⁵¹

Although the attendance in Jackson was impressive, the march did not persuade either President Johnson or Congress to strengthen the civil rights bill, which later fell victim to a filibuster in the United States Senate, or to meet the other demands in the march's manifesto. Stung by the manifesto's criticisms and increasingly preoccupied with Vietnam, the Johnson administration had been indifferent to appeals for federal protection following the violence in Philadelphia and Canton, even though the latter, Dimmer notes, "equaled in ferocity the assault on the marchers at the Selma Bridge a year earlier."⁵²

The Meredith March both revealed and exacerbated fissures within the civil rights movement. Overriding King's objections, the other march leaders denied Charles Evers's request to speak at the final rally because he had maintained his refusal to sign the march manifesto, despite his joining the march in Greenwood, and his calling on NAACP branches to assist it, as well as working with Jackson officials to determine the march's route to the state capitol. After he agreed to sign the manifesto, march leaders permitted Whitney M. Young Jr. to speak at the closing rally.

⁵⁰ *Washington Post*, June 27, 1966; *New York Times*, June 27, 1966; memorandum, Jim McGuire to Matt [Ahmann], "Southern Field Service and the Meredith Freedom March," June 29, 1966, 6-7 (first quotation on p. 7); "Report of the Director of the Southern Field Service August, 1966," August 3, 1966, 5 (second quotation); memorandum, Jack [Sisson] to Matt [Ahmann], "Meredith Mississippi Freedom March, June 6-26, 1966 (Jim sent a separate report of his activities from June 22 to June 28)," June 30, 1966, 6; Levy, "S.A. to Selma, priest answered 'calls for protecting the weak.'"

⁵¹ Mikschl, "Holy Childhood Mission and the Mississippi Freedom March," 108 (quotations); *New York Times*, June 27, 1966; *Washington Post*, June 27, 1966; *Lexington Advertiser*, June 30, 1966.

⁵² Taylor Branch, *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-68* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 495-96, 529-30; Dittmer, *Local People*, 398-99, 400-401 (quotation on p. 400); *New York Times*, June 23, 24, 25, 26, 1966.

King concluded after the march that he could not work with SNCC again. Carmichael continued to alternate between calm, reasoned expositions about the need for independent black political mobilization and power, and more incendiary rhetoric that was seized upon by a largely hostile white media, accentuated divisions within the movement, and alienated some white supporters and sympathizers. Both SNCC and CORE adopted Black Power, and later, under new leadership, they expelled or sidelined whites.⁵³

The final rally in Jackson had again seen rival SNCC and SCLC groups engage in competing chants of Black Power and Freedom Now, but as Dittmer notes, “the overwhelmingly black audience cheered all the speakers,” especially James Meredith who remained as enigmatic as ever and who was far less concerned about ideological differences among the march organizers. Ten thousand African American Mississippians had walked for part of the march, which along with federal registrars, had succeeded in registering 4,007 African Americans along its route. White supremacy remained entrenched in Mississippi politics, but in subsequent years, a growing black electorate resulting from implementation of the Voting Rights Act elected African Americans to office, ended race-baiting in elections, and exerted some influence on state and local politics.⁵⁴

The Meredith March benefitted the SFS and the NCCIJ. By maintaining contact with the chancery, Sisson helped to overcome Gerow’s reservations about the SFS and the NCCIJ, which for their part, appreciated the bishop’s acquiescence in their efforts to assist the march. Four days after the march ended, Ahmann, who estimated that fifteen Catholic interracial councils had been “directly involved in [supporting the March in] some official way” with donations or volunteers, wrote that “officials in the Diocese of Mississippi [Natchez-Jackson] were most understanding of our role. In addition in contrast to Alabama [meaning Toolen during the Selma protests of 1965], priests calling the Chancery Office to check on the feeling there, were told that whether or not they entered the state to take part in the March ‘was a matter of their individual

⁵³ *Washington Post*, June 22, 1966; *New York Times*, June 17, 27, 28, 29, 1966; *Lexington Advertiser*, June 30, 1966; David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow, 1986), 487, 489; Carson, *In Struggle*, 236-42; August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement, 1942-1968* (Urbana, Chicago and London: University of Illinois Press, 1973), 417-20.

⁵⁴ *Washington Post*, June 27, 1966 (first and second quotations); *New York Times*, June 26, 27, 1966; *Northside Reporter*, June 30, 1966; Dittmer, *Local People*, 402 (third quotation), 415-17, 425-28.

conscience' and that the Bishop would be glad if they would just notify him if they were coming."⁵⁵

Sisson built on his frequent contacts during the march with Monsignor McGough, whom he now considered to be "a strong ally," to organize a meeting on July 7, 1966, at the chancery "to evaluate the diocese's involvement and NCCIJ's involvement in the Mississippi March." Twenty priests attended, most of them based in Mississippi, along with members of religious orders that served African Americans. However, the diocese had no African American diocesan priests and only one of the priests from a religious order at the meeting, Father Charles Dixon Burns, S.V.D., a native Mississippian, was black. Gerow was present for the first half of the meeting. After his departure, the Mississippi-based priests voted in favor of recommendations that would permit priests in the diocese "to participate in protest marches" and nuns "in direct action programme exclusive of marches;" the holding of conferences and a workshop for clergy on race relations; the establishment of a Diocesan Human Relations Commission; pulpit exchanges between black and white pastors; and, more realistically, given that Burns was the sole black priest in the state, also between pastors of African American parishes and pastors of white parishes.⁵⁶

The recommendations were subject to Gerow's approval, but the elderly bishop relinquished the running of the diocese to Brunini as apostolic administrator on July 11. In August, McGuire visited Brunini and found him "favorably inclined" toward the recommendations but unwilling to "commit himself in any way on them." McGuire informed Ahmann that Brunini's "attitude regarding race relations and the Church's witness in this regard is not as firm or as deep as that of Bishop Gerow." McGuire believed that it was Brunini's "native Mississippi background" that made him "paternalistic" toward African Americans. However, Brunini partially implemented the recommendations, such as holding a Human Relations Institute for clergy in African American parishes, and he maintained cordial relations with the SFS. When

⁵⁵ Memorandum, Matt Ahmann to [NCCIJ] Board of Directors, "Conference Involvement in the Meredith Mississippi March," June 30, 1966, p. 3.

⁵⁶ Jim McGuire and Jack Sisson to James McGough, June 28, 1966; memorandum, Jack [Sisson] to Matt [Ahmann], "Evaluation of Mississippi March, Jackson, July 7, 1966," July 19, 1966 (first and second quotations), folder 7, box 16, series 20; memorandum, Jim McGuire to Matt [Ahmann], "Recommendations from the Chancery Meeting in Jackson, Mississippi, 7-7-66," August 4, 1966, (third and fourth quotations), folder 5, box 6, series 11, NCCIJR.

the NCCIJ considered closing the SFS in 1967 because of financial difficulties, Brunini made a donation and praised the SFS's involvement in the Meredith March, which had "enabled the Chancery to have a clear assessment of the situation." The SFS survived on this occasion, but two years later continued budgetary problems brought its closure and ended an important source of encouragement and support for Catholics in the state who were sympathetic to, or engaged in, the civil rights struggle.⁵⁷

Their involvement in the Meredith March encouraged some priests to take a more active role in the civil rights movement, providing further evidence of the contribution of Catholic priests to the civil rights struggle in Mississippi. In August, Mikschl joined the Canton NAACP and became a board member. Kist spent two and a half months helping to organize the NAACP in Yazoo County, which soon recruited 150 members. In December, Evers presented a charter to the Yazoo City branch. Kist served as membership chairman and, within a year, the county had 1,004 NAACP members. In December 1967, Machesky, serving as "chief tactician," worked with two African American Methodist ministers to organize a two-year boycott of Greenwood that led to the hiring of black clerks and other improvements. However, these white Catholic priests were all members of religious orders, which gave them greater freedom to act than diocesan priests who were answerable to the diocese's bishop rather than an order's superiors, and they ministered to African Americans, not segregationist whites.⁵⁸

White priests of white Catholic churches in Mississippi generally did not become involved in civil rights activities. They were deterred by, if they did not share, the segregationist convictions of most of their parishioners and were anxious not to alienate or divide their flocks, or be reprimanded by their cautious bishop. Sympathetic priests may also have

⁵⁷ "Bishop Joseph Bernard Brunini"; memorandum, Jim McGuire to Matt [Ahmann], "Visit with Bishop Brunini, Jackson – Trip Report," August 18, 1966 (first through fifth quotations), Joseph B. Brunini to Mathew Ahmann, March 27, 1967 (sixth quotation), John P. Sisson to Bernard Law, September 28, 1967, Mathew Ahmann to Joseph B. Brunini, October 6, 1967, folder 14, box 11, series 33; memorandum, John P. Sisson to "Staff," "SFS Report to Staff, July 16-September 30, 1969," 1, folder 5, box 5, series 30, NCCIJR.

⁵⁸ Memorandum, Jim McGuire to Matt [Ahmann], "Father Luke Mikschl, M.S.S.T., Canton, Mississippi – Phone conversation 8/17/66," James J. McGuire to Luke Mikschl, September 7, 1966, John M. Kist to John P. Sisson, December 13, 1966, folder 14, box 11, series 33, NCCIJR; "Freedom News," *Crisis* 75 (January 1968): 25; *New York Times*, April 29, 1968 (quotation); Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1995), 324-28; Murray, "Father Nathaniel and the Greenwood Movement," 277-78, 287-308.

feared ostracism. After the Greenwood boycott ended in December 1969 and the Greenwood civil rights movement declined, Machesky continued to suffer rejection from a white community with which he had once been close. Consequently, he avoided downtown and retreated to his mission before being transferred in 1981 to Charleston, Mississippi.⁵⁹

Although far fewer in number and less conspicuous than in the Selma protests of 1965, Catholics played a supporting part in the Meredith March that was part of a wider Catholic contribution to the southern civil rights movement and racial change in Mississippi and the region, which historians are beginning to recognize. The march, and the wish of some Catholic clergy to participate, posed particular problems for Bishop Gerow, just as the Selma protests had done for Archbishop Toolen a year earlier. But Gerow proved more amenable than Toolen. Gerow was well aware that most white Catholics in his diocese, like other white Mississippians, were segregationists, who were not reconciled to racial change. At the same time, the bishop sought to bring his diocese into line with Catholic teachings on race. He took a cautious approach to desegregating Catholic institutions and caution also informed his approach to the Meredith March. Gerow quietly sanctioned Catholic clergy coming into the state to support the march and, also without publicity, he permitted priests from religious orders and nuns who worked in African American parishes in Mississippi to assist the marchers. But, after some indecision, he would not countenance diocesan priests, who served the diocese's white churches, marching, because he was concerned that such a public stand would alienate white Catholics, divide the Church, and bring segregationist retribution from those outside it. The march was Gerow's last involvement with the civil rights movement. Soon after, he handed over the administration of the diocese to Brunini, who would succeed him as Bishop in December 1967 at a time when Mississippi was still only beginning to be changed by the black struggle for equality.⁶⁰

Influenced by a series of annual summer riots by African Americans in urban areas outside the South that began in 1964 and by the advent of Black Power, the NCCIJ increasingly concentrated on urban poverty, mostly in the industrial North. At its annual convention in 1967, the NCCIJ focused on "The Church and the Urban Crisis" and a year later on "Black Power and the White Church." The development of Black Power,

⁵⁹ Murray, "Father Nathaniel and the Greenwood Movement," 307-308.

⁶⁰ "Bishop Joseph Bernard Brunini," consulted April 29, 2018, at <<http://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/bishop/bbrunini.html>>.

which maintained that black people needed to speak for themselves and determine the course of their struggle for justice, likely contributed to Mathew Ahmann's decision in July 1968 to resign from the NCCIJ. His wife Margaret later recalled, "I think basically he thought, 'A black man needs to run this.'" The appointment of an African American successor, James T. Harris Jr., who had no previous connection to the organization, suggested that the NCCIJ had also reached that conclusion.⁶¹

In Mississippi, widely acknowledged as one of the most resistant states to desegregation and where Black Power first received national attention, several white Catholic priests from religious orders continued to work with, and were often at the center of, NAACP chapters. Besides Kist and Mikschl in the Delta, they included Josephite priests Philip J. McLoone on the Mississippi Gulf Coast and Father William J. Morrissey, who was vice president of the Adams County NAACP. Their efforts bear testimony to the longevity of the civil rights movement that continued beyond 1965 and also, like the Meredith March, to the underappreciated contribution of Catholics to the movement in Mississippi.⁶²

⁶¹ Mark Newman, *Black Nationalism in American History: From the Nineteenth Century to the Million Man March* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 123-24; Mathew Ahmann, "The Church and the Urban Negro," *America* 118 (February 10, 1968): 181-85; "National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice Report of Mathew Ahmann Executive Director April, 1968," folder 1, box 85, Louis J. Twomey Papers, Special Collections and Archives, Loyola University Library, Loyola University New Orleans, New Orleans, Louisiana; Mathew Ahmann to Robert E. Lucey, December 27, 1968," folder "Social Problems Project Equality Natl. Cath. Conf. for Interracial Justice (1961-1969), Archives of the Archdiocese of San Antonio, San Antonio, Texas; Paul T. Murray, "From the Sidelines to the Front Lines—Mathew Ahmann Leads American Catholics into the Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 107 (Spring 2014): 104-105 (quotation on p. 104).

⁶² "Gulf Coast, Josephite Dies," *Josephite Harvest* 79 (Summer 1977): 24; "25th Jubilee," *Josephite Harvest* 73 (July-August 1971): 20-23.

