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NOTHING LESS THAN AN ACTIVIST: MARGE BARONI, CATHOLICISM, AND THE
NATCHEZ, MISSISSIPPI CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Center for the Study of Southern Culture
The University of Mississippi

by

EVA E. WALTON

May 2012

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a religious and social history of the life of Natchez, Mississippi Catholic activist Marjorie R. Baroni (1924-1986). The study examines Baroni's Catholic faith-driven activism as a counter-narrative to the dominant Protestant narratives of religious motivations in the greater civil rights movement. In analyzing Baroni's story as a lived theological drama, I offer Baroni as a vessel for studying often overlooked Catholic influences in the movement: (1) The activist Catholic faith promoted by Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement (2) The effects of the more inclusive decrees of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) on the Catholic Church in the American South and (3) Catholic leadership, specifically Josephite priests, in local movement activities in predominantly Catholic southern cities like Natchez. In constructing this project, I conducted the bulk of my primary research in reviewing Baroni's correspondence and essays, Baroni family oral history interviews, personal journals, and *The Catholic Worker* newsletters in the Marge Baroni Collection at the Special Collections Library of the University of Mississippi. This thesis offers Baroni's story of Catholic activism in the Natchez, Mississippi civil rights movement as a substantial contribution to scholarship on the history of the Catholic Church in the South; the roles of women, Josephite priests, and African American parishioners of the southern Catholic Church in the civil rights movement; the hitherto unexplored connections between Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement and the civil rights movement; and the ecumenical religious motivations of civil rights activists.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the memory and legacy of Marjorie Rushing Baroni.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

AJIC	Adams-Jefferson Improvement Corporation
COFO	Council of Federated Organization
CORE	Congress of Racial Equality
LGBTQ	Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
SNCC	Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
STAR	Systematic Training and Redevelopment, Inc.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe the greatest amount of thanks to Marjorie R. Baroni. Without her bravery and willingness to serve God and her community with ceaseless zeal, and her presence of mind to document her experiences, this project would not have been possible.

Second to Marge, I must acknowledge the valuable work of Susan Stevenot Sullivan and archivists and staff of the Special Collections Library at the University of Mississippi. In the late 1990s, Susan and Father Tim Murphy were working on transcribing a collection of oral histories for a book on the Holy Family Catholic Church in Natchez, when they kept hearing a name repeated – Marge Baroni. On one of Sullivan and Murphy’s final trips to Natchez, they met with Louis Baroni, who gave them a small box of Marge’s papers, including handwritten notes from Dorothy Day. Intrigued by Marge’s connection to Day, Sullivan contacted the Catholic Worker Archives in Marquette, Michigan. When she began to explain that she had come into possession of some correspondence between Day and a “friend in Natchez,” the archivist volunteered, “Oh, Marge Baroni.” The archivist expressed his opinion that Marge was a significant figure whose papers should be in an archive.

After another trip back to visit Louis and to dig through Marge’s stacks of books, newspaper, and letters, Sullivan presented the papers to the University of Mississippi. In the twelve years since, the staff of the Special Collections Library at the University of Mississippi has carefully organized and catalogued the contents Sullivan salvaged from the Baroni home, and in doing so, have compiled a true gift for students of religion and the civil rights movement.

I owe a great deal of gratitude to Charles R. Wilson for the many hours spent encouraging and counseling me on this project. Thanks are also owed to Zandria Robinson, whose good humor and frankness both inspired and challenged me to strive for excellence throughout the course of this work, and William Hustwit, a great friend, fine editor, and encouraging colleague, for his careful consideration of this thesis.

To my mother, Terry, and my two sisters, Ally and Shelby, I offer a great many thanks for loving me through this process and for filling breaks from this work with an abundance of love and laughter. Thanks also to my father, Greg, for his continued enthusiasm and support of this work.

Finally, to my beloved Kathryn, for her constant support of this project through conversation, editing, and encouragement and for living out the convictions of her own faith in her work in Alabama. You are an inspiration and will one day certainly be someone else's Marge Baroni.

Any shortcomings in this telling Marge Baroni's story are admittedly my own.

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There is a great need for advocacy – out there are numbers upon numbers of people with problems. To some, their problems have them on the magnitude of the burden of the cross, or that of the old man and the sea. But another party, who will make the problem his own, can sometimes cut the bonds and free the sufferer.

-Marjorie Rushing Baroni, December 6, 1974.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

On a night in 1957, Marjorie Baroni and her husband, Louis, attended the performance of a “remarkable” concert pianist in their hometown of Natchez, Mississippi. As publicity chairwoman for the Natchez Community Concerts organization, Marge, as she was known by friends and family, had been responsible for promoting the event throughout the major social circles in the southwest Mississippi town. In attendance were Louis’s fellow members of the local Knights of Columbus chapter and the Cathedral Athletic club, Marge’s peers from the Business and Professional Women’s Club of Natchez, and members of the city’s numerous garden clubs and historic preservation organizations. By all appearances, Marge had been successful in attracting a full and established audience for the concert. Pleased with her efforts, Marge enjoyed the music until she noticed a member of the local black Catholic parish, Holy Family Church, tiptoe down the center aisle. Marge watched from several rows back as the man, whom she would later learn was making a sick call, approached two fellows she recognized as the Josephite priests at Holy Family. After a quick exchange, Father William Morrissey and his assistant immediately left their seats and followed their parishioner out of the auditorium.

As the light from the lobby cut the moment, Marge confronted herself with the moral and religious implications of the specific instance she had just witnessed, as well as the greater consequences of the system of segregation in the South. “It hit me like a club that these [priests], though belonging to an order founded to help the ‘poor, and particularly the Negro in the South,’

were present at an affair to which their people could not come,” Marge writes in reflection on the clarity of conscience she experienced in that moment. “With that flash came another. What was I doing there? How could I justify my belief in the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man if I had no qualms about enjoying privilege because of the color of my skin?”¹

Marge Baroni’s civil rights movement began that night in the crowded concert hall. In the days and months immediately following that evening, Marge’s life changed dramatically. Although she was the first female editor to work for the *Natchez Democrat*, for which she also wrote a column on local cultural and theatre events, she stopped attending segregated arts events and ultimately quit her job. “The fact that (concerts and plays) were segregated became too much for me...If everybody couldn’t go, if they couldn’t get a ticket, then I wasn’t going to go,” she writes of this decision. Similarly, Marge asserts, “I could no longer work for a newspaper that purposely overlooked one-half the population [of Natchez] unless there was a murder, rape or robbery implicating a member of that community.”² Turning her intellect and efforts elsewhere, Marge, an active member of the Catholic community in Natchez, began networking with Mississippi Catholic leaders, Josephite priests – Catholic clergy who led African American parishes – and members of the local NAACP chapter about how the Church might address issues of segregation, violence, and injustice. Although their actions were careful and calculated in the late 1950s, the following decade brought opportunities for the actualization of these early conversations as the direct nonviolent efforts of the civil rights movement made their way to Natchez.

As the tumultuous climate of the 1960s shook Natchez to its core, Marge could no longer keep her activities silent. She began bringing supplies for one of Natchez’s Council of Federated

¹ Marge Baroni, Draft of unfinished master’s thesis, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

² *Ibid.*

Organizations (COFO) Freedom Schools, participated in a local sit-in, attempted to integrate the white library in Natchez, attended Civil Rights Commission hearings, met with George Metcalf, the local NAACP president, and joined the Mississippi Council on Human Rights.³ Marge's most valuable activity in the Natchez movement was her work as an organizer at the Holy Family Catholic Church. Holy Family had been the quiet hub of movement activities in the city for years leading up to the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer, and its leader, Josephite priest Father William Morrissey, is one of the unsung heroes of the Natchez movement. Holy Family served to help members of the city's African American community deal with unjust arrests, organized interracial meetings for concerned citizens in the early movement years, and worked exhaustively to provide educational opportunities to African American children through the church's parochial school, St. Francis School. Marge had a role in each of these efforts. In this work with the Church, Marge felt her efforts were most effective because she worked with an earnestness that came directly from the religious convictions of her deep Catholic faith. For without the call to action she found in her readings of Catholic theology or the relationships she developed with activist priests and members of the radical Catholic Worker movement, she might never have joined the movement at all.

ON PILGRIMAGE

To be sure, Marge was an unlikely civil rights revolutionary, a figure on the periphery of dominant narratives of civil rights activity chronicled by historians. In a movement propelled by

³ Susan Sullivan, "Marjorie Baroni: Ordinary Southern Woman, Extraordinary Activist," delivered as part of the Brown Bag Lecture Series at the Center for the Study of Southern Culture, October 4, 2000, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

students, she was a middle-aged mother of six. In a primarily African American struggle, she was a white, native Mississippian. In contrast to the greater Mississippi civil rights efforts directed toward voter registration drives in the Delta region, Marge created a place for herself as a local activist for racial equality and social justice in the southwest river city of Natchez. Most importantly, in a movement Charles Marsh calls “saturated with religion” – predominantly Protestant-based leadership, movement-related rhetoric, and invocations that “God is on our side” – Marge, a convert from the Baptist tradition, felt called to action by her own readings of the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church.

In *God’s Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights*, historian Charles Marsh challenges the reader to reinterpret the events of the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer as a “theological drama,” with many players of varied denominational affiliations endeavoring, with God’s help, “to live the kind of life [they] wanted for the world in the midst of the struggle to change the world.”⁴ Marsh’s text highlights the faith-driven activism of individuals such as Fannie Lou Hamer, Ed King, and Cleveland Sellers; as well as the similarly faith-based actions of Sam Bowers, a High Priest of the Ku Klux Klan; and Douglas Hudgins, the deadly-neutral pastor of the First Baptist Church of Jackson, Mississippi. Marsh offers each individual narrative as an example of a lived theology at play in the greater religious culture of the civil rights movement.

Working from the framework of Marsh’s interpretation of individual theological dramas, I offer Marge Baroni’s story as a counter-narrative to the Protestant lived-theologies well-documented in historians’ studies of the civil rights movement.⁵ An analysis of Baroni’s own accounts of her journey into Catholic faith and the many ways it informed and directed her

⁴ Charles Marsh, *God’s Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), xiii.

⁵ Most significant are Marsh’s *God’s Long Summer* and David L. Chappell’s *A Stone of Hope*.

involvement in the Natchez, Mississippi civil rights movement allows for a more ecumenical composite narrative of the experiences of people of faith working for, or as Marsh offers, against, the struggle for civil rights in the American South. From her moment of conversion to Catholicism on forward, Marge Baroni's life and activism read as a theological journey, a pilgrimage. It was her faith that informed her direct participation in the local Natchez civil rights movement efforts, encouraged the development of relationships with liberal Catholic priests and members of the Catholic Worker Movement who shared her social and religious conscience, and endowed Marge with the boldness necessary in working for equal rights, racial equality, and educational opportunities in a changing American South.

In order to best situate Marge's individual narrative and relative topics in keeping with this idea of pilgrimage and a lived theological drama, I seek to tell Marge Baroni's story as a faith journey beginning with conversion and ending with benediction. Chapter 2, "Conversion: Exploration in Faith and Thought," is a primarily biographical account of Marge's childhood and young adult years. In this chapter, I explore the theological roots of Marge's later activism through her own writing on familial and religious influences leading to her conversion to Catholicism in 1947.⁶ Along with the theme of religious conversion, this chapter also addresses the phenomenon of a uniquely southern racial conversion experience and the many ways Marge's writings reveal a racial conversion journey in her own life. The value of this racial conversion is that it primes Marge to ask the tough questions about race and faith throughout her religious conversion journey. Exploration is a dominant theme in this chapter, as Marge indicates that it was her unquenchable desire to "become a reading Catholic" in order to "know

⁶ Marge Baroni, Interview with Peter E. Hogan, SSJ, February 11, 1977, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

what the Church taught about race” that encouraged her to become an activist.⁷ Her detailed accounts of her readings of the teachings of the Catholic Church offer the reader an opportunity to journey through conversion with Marge, to grapple with the same theological questions she asked herself as she began challenging and reconciling the conventional teachings of her Bible Belt upbringing with her new Catholic faith.

While Marge’s conversion to Catholicism in the 1940s was the most significant milestone on her theological journey, her 1954 encounter with *The Long Loneliness*, the autobiography of Catholic Worker Movement co-founder Dorothy Day, was the greatest turning point in her progression towards a faith of action. In Chapter 3, “Enlightenment: Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement,” I examine Marge Baroni’s relationship to Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker as a significant period of enlightenment on her pilgrimage. Beginning with a cursory overview of *The Long Loneliness*, which predominantly features Dorothy’s retelling of her religious journeys leading up to the establishment of the Catholic Worker Movement in 1933, I attempt to highlight the similarities between Marge and Dorothy’s stories of conversion to Catholicism and both women’s attempts to reconcile their faith in God and the Church with the injustices facing their neighbors in the 1930s and 1950s, respectively. I believe that these parallels were what caused Marge to be so moved by the text that she became an ardent advocate for the Catholic Worker and personal friend of Dorothy Day’s. Using correspondence between Dorothy and Marge, Catholic Worker newsletters from the civil rights era, and communications between Marge and activists in the Catholic Worker Movement, I attempt to illuminate the previously unexamined relationship between Catholic activism in the civil rights movement and the principles of personalist philosophy and teachings of the Catholic Worker Movement and newsletter.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Chapter 4, “Maturation: A Changing Church in a Changing South,” explores what it was like for Marge, and, more broadly, the Natchez Catholic community, to be both a Catholic in the South and a Southern Catholic in the greater climate of 1960s Catholic reform. In this chapter, I highlight the role of Josephite priests and black Catholic parishes throughout the South in advancing Catholic principles throughout the civil rights movement, as well as how the decrees of the Second Vatican Council and the social changes of the civil rights era affected the Catholic experience in the South. In examining Marge’s experiences in the Catholic Church of Natchez, Mississippi and the Holy Family Catholic Church’s significant place in the history of the city’s local movement, it becomes clear that Natchez’s uniquely-Catholic nature has been overlooked in greater examinations of the Catholic civil rights experience. Marge Baroni’s letters and writings can help fill this gap. This chapter also examines Marge’s activism throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s, demonstrating how the currents of transformation in both the Catholic Church and the South created a tipping point in Marge’s activism narrative, propelling Marge to act and speak publicly for integration and voting rights from 1962 to 1965, whereas she had previously worked covertly in behind-the-scenes efforts.

Chapter 5, “Actualization: Lived Theology in the Civil Rights Years,” is an account of Marge Baroni’s direct civil rights activism in Natchez during the prime movement years of 1962-1965. In this chapter, I highlight Marge’s own narrations of her relationships with the Natchez activist community, both Catholic activists and members of state and national organizations like the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). In this examination of Marge’s specific activities, what becomes apparent is how the compounding influences of her readings of Catholic teachings and the Catholic Worker newsletter, as well as her own navigation of how to

practice her Catholicism through activism, culminate in her on-the-ground efforts in the Natchez community. This chapter also highlights the societal and religious rejection and harassment the Baroni family faced in their hometown during the 1960s and beyond. Oral history interviews with Marge's husband, Louis, and daughter, Mary Jane, offer their unique perspectives on Marge's activism and the challenges that her social justice work created for their family.

Finally, in my epilogue, "Benediction: Marge Baroni and the Post-Civil Rights Years," I follow Baroni's own accounts of her continued work for human and civil rights in Natchez through her efforts with the Catholic Church-sponsored Systematic Training and Redevelopment, Inc. (STAR) Natchez Center, her work with the Adams-Jefferson Improvement Corporation, and her decade-long service as an assistant to Charles Evers, the brother of Medgar Evers and the first black man elected mayor of a biracial Mississippi town since Reconstruction.⁸ This chapter also highlights Marge's continued educational efforts for herself, as well as her reflections on the impact of her activism during the Natchez civil rights movement on her life.

In this study, I aim to establish Marge Baroni as a Mississippian, an activist, a Catholic, a woman, an intellectual, and a humanitarian deserving of a significant place in the history of the Natchez, Mississippi civil rights movement. Furthermore, by examining Marge's journeys of faith and activism as a lived theological drama, students of the religious motivations of the civil rights movement and the Catholic experience in the South are given a gift in Marge Baroni's story. Here is a woman whose life is an ideal vessel for studying the changing nature of Catholic identity and the Catholic Church in the American South, twentieth-century Catholic activist networks, religion and social activism, and the experiences of liberal white southerners in the civil rights movement.

⁸ Susan Sullivan, "Marjorie Baroni: Ordinary Southern Woman, Extraordinary Activist," delivered as part of the Brown Bag Lecture Series at the Center for the Study of Southern Culture, October 4, 2000, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

Marge Baroni's greatest gift to scholars is her own story, and her value as an historical figure begins with what her papers, housed at the Special Collections Library at the University of Mississippi, reveal. Marge Baroni is the first historian of the Natchez, Mississippi civil rights movement. Beginning with her weekly column in *The Natchez Democrat* entitled "Shall We Go Essaying," to her journal entries throughout the movement years and later reflective writings on her activism in Natchez, Marge's own words tell a history of the Natchez, Mississippi movement which has been overlooked by historians. Her papers reveal characters lost to a public memory now diminished and deceased. Her reflections open wide the doors of inquiry into the Catholic presence in Natchez, and the importance of Josephite priests and black Catholic parishes in bringing about change in the 1950s and 1960s. Her detailed correspondences between friends, priests, and Dorothy Day offer fresh and challenging perspectives on the nature of Catholic faith in arguably one of the most tumultuous decades in American history.

For all of these reasons and countless others, Marge Baroni is an exceptional character in the greater story of the civil rights movement. Marge has also become an exceptional character in my personal journeys of faith and activism. I found Marge Baroni by accident, or, I should say, by providence. When I began my graduate work at the University of Mississippi, I thought I would be smart and try to find a collection in the library that no one had yet worked through or published on. After a quick browse of the University's Special Collections holdings, the Marge Baroni Collection finding aid – detailing the holdings of her collection – sparked my interest. While her collection had been largely untouched, except for the important work of Susan Sullivan in compiling Marge's papers and presenting them to the University, I felt a bit daunted by the idea of studying a southern Catholic activist. I did not know the jargon or understand the structure of the Church. I felt I might never be able to reinterpret her story accordingly and

assumed that a brief overview of the collection would be the extent of my research until I came across this quotation, penned by Marge on a piece of notebook paper in 1974: “There is a great need for advocacy. Out there are numbers upon numbers of people with problems. To some, their problems have them on the magnitude of the burden of the cross, or that of the old man and the sea. But another party, who will make the problem his own, can sometimes cut the bonds and free the sufferer.”⁹ Those four lines rocked me to my core. I needed to investigate what this woman believed and accomplished in her lifetime. I needed to know what people and experiences brought her to this understanding of faith and advocacy. I needed her example in my own life.

Like Marge, I was raised Baptist in the South. Unlike Marge, I am the relative of thirteen Baptist and Methodist ministers and the daughter of a former minister and a mother who works for a Baptist mission’s resource organization. Religion has always been an omnipresent reality in my life, but I often felt the teachings of the Church muffled my desire to extend its advocacy of grace, love, and acceptance to greater groups than just those within the walls of the church sanctuary. Similarly, I never found the intellectual and ritualistic elements within the Baptist tradition that I spiritually craved. I wanted to know more than what I was being offered by Sunday School classes, in services, and at religious camps. I wanted to know why, in eighteen years of being a minister’s daughter, only one black congregant had been active in any of my family’s churches. I wanted to know what we did to help the poor beyond collections in the offering plates, why we would not welcome members of the LGBTQ community into the church family, why we had to politically pick sides – because for me, religious did not equal conservative. In many ways, I believe all of these inquiries led me to study the religious

⁹ Marge Baroni, Personal Papers, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, The Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

motivations of participants in the civil rights movement because I found parallels and resonance with their stories and my own desires to live a faith of justice, kindness, mercy, and activism. I found Marge, or Marge found me, as I began my conversion from the Baptist faith, which I left in my late teenage years, to the Episcopal Church. Although the Episcopal and Catholic traditions are nominally separate entities, they are also similar enough that I found myself seeing my own narratives of conversion and activism mirrored in Marge's story. Having her example, her wisdom, her humor, and her honesty in my life for the past eighteen months has been a true gift. I hope that this account of Marge Baroni's extraordinary life will do justice to her legacy and be an inspiration to all who read it to consider how individuals might all serve others through love, boldness, and kindness in order to cut ties of hatred and oppression, and free all who suffer from the effects of these realities in our world.

MARGE BARONI AND THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE SOUTHERN CATHOLIC EXPERIENCE

In order to best situate Marge Baroni's story in context to the greater narratives created by historians through their work on the religious nature of the South, the Catholic experience in America and the South, and the activism of Catholics in the civil rights movement, I think it best to present a brief historiography of these topics. As I aim to prove, Marge Baroni's addition to this history will fill a number of gaps in these great bodies of research and work.

Historians of the religious culture of the American South have long regarded the region's churches as peculiar institutions. Consequently, a great number of texts published in the last half-

century attempt to understand the nature of faith in the region. Reflecting the denominational imbalance of Protestant churches over congregations of other beliefs within the Bible Belt, the bulk of the historiography on religion in the South examines the experiences and influence of Protestant individuals and churches. The first scholar to explore southern religion was Kenneth Bailey in his *Southern White Protestantism in the Twentieth-Century* (1964). Bailey examines Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian responses to twentieth-century social issues in an effort to highlight southern Protestants' power in promoting a conservative social conscience rather than a social gospel.¹⁰ More recently, Christine Leigh Heyrman has illuminated the earlier roots of the evangelical Protestant tradition in the South in *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (1997), in which she explores the reasons why Anglicanism and deism failed to take hold in the nineteenth-century South, as well as how evangelical Protestantism became the dominant religious culture in the region. Ultimately Heyrman concludes that evangelicalism won out in the South because Baptist and Methodist clergy were able to reinvent their religious traditions, by emphasizing the need for conversion, to fit the whims of the people and peculiarities of nineteenth-century southern culture.¹¹

Samuel S. Hill, Jr. reached similar conclusions as Heyrman, although well before her time, in his *Southern Churches in Crisis*, published in 1966 in response to the civil rights movement. Hill argues that southern Protestantism was “unique and particularly shaped by secular society” in highlighting the “‘central theme’ of an overriding emphasis on the conversion experience and the need to be born again.”¹² In Hill’s understanding, the “‘practical fruits’” of

¹⁰ Kenneth K. Bailey, *Southern White Protestantism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964).

¹¹ Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 33-35.

¹² Andrew S. Moore, *The South’s Tolerable Alien: Roman Catholics in Alabama and Georgia, 1945-1970* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 2. As well as Samuel S. Hill, *Southern Churches in Crisis Revisited* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1999). *Southern Churches in Crisis* was originally published in 1966.

the conversion-oriented form of southern Protestantism promoted an absence of a Christian social ethic and little concern for social justice. Ultimately, southernness and Protestant Christian culture existed in contention with one another in the greater narrative of southern religious culture, so that with the advent of the civil rights movement, Protestant southerners had to choose one or the other, and, more often than not, they chose southernness. In addition to his aforementioned texts, Hill also published *Religion and the Solid South* (1972), *One Name but Several Faces: Variety in Popular Christian Denominations in Southern History* (1996), and *Southern Churches in Crisis Revisited* (1999). Hill also edited a number of collections on southern religious history, including *Religion in the Southern States: A Historical Study* (1983) and *Varieties of Southern Religious Experience* (1998).

Following Hill's work, a cadre of scholars of southern religion – including Paul Harvey, Charles Reagan Wilson, Donald G. Mathews, and Beth Barton Schweiger – published works exploring such topics as the diversity of congregations and worship styles of various Protestant churches in the South, religion and southern politics, issues of race in the southern Protestant traditions, and the religious justification for and civil religion of the post-Civil War “Lost Cause.”¹³ While these scholars' research and texts laid the groundwork for all Southern religious history to build on, very little of this work discusses minority religious experiences – specifically Catholicism – in the American South. Two of the first scholars to do so were Albert Raboteau and Randall Miller. Raboteau and Miller both addressed the Catholic Church's presence in the Old South, Raboteau focusing on the influence of Catholicism in the creation of religious

¹³ Beth Baron Schweiger and Donald G. Mathews, eds., *Religion in the American South: Protestants and Others in History and Culture* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Charles R. Wilson, ed. *Religion in the South* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1985); Charles R. Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865-1920* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2009); Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977); Paul Harvey, *Freedom's Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War through the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

identity in the South's black population in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and Miller highlighting the extent of Catholicism's influence in the South, which he argues is negligible because of the Catholic Church's willingness to fall in line with the region's Protestant status quo on issues like slavery and segregation.¹⁴ Since the 1980s, scholarship on the Catholic Church in the South has increased significantly.

While scholars like John Shea, whose four-volume *History of The Catholic Church* (1886-1892) began the canon of American Catholic history, Peter Guilday, *John Gilmary Shea: Father of American Catholic History, 1824-1892* (1926), and John Tracy Ellis, *American Catholicism* (1956), established a significant presence for Catholic historical studies in the United States. Sweeping works on the Catholic experience in the South were not written until later in the twentieth century. One of the first scholars to address Catholicism in the South was James L. Pillar in his 1964 case study *The Catholic Church in Mississippi, 1837-1865*. Pillar's comprehensive study of the history of the Mississippi diocese begins with an analysis of the influence of Spanish and French explorers in the Gulf Coast region and continued on through the end of the Civil War. Pillar approaches his study more from the perspective of the clergy – priests, bishops, and episcopacy leaders – than the people of the church, the laity.¹⁵ Jay Dolan was the first scholar to approach a Catholic historical study from the perspective of the laity. Michael McNally and Charles Nolan followed the lead of Dolan, both producing studies that document and analyze the uniqueness of Catholic parish life for both native southerners and their

¹⁴ Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Randall Miller and Jon Wakelyn, eds., *Catholics in the Old South: Essays on Church and Culture* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984); Randall Miller, "Roman Catholicism," in William Ferris and Charles Wilson, eds., *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989); see also Michael V. Namorato, *The Catholic Church in Mississippi, 1911-1984* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998).

¹⁵ James L. Pillar, *The Catholic Church in Mississippi, 1837-65* (New Orleans: Houser Press, 1964); Namorato, xv.

often foreign-born clergy in the American South.¹⁶ More recent work on the Catholic Church in the American South includes Jon W. Anderson and William B. Friend's ethnographic study *The Culture of Bible Belt Catholics* (1995), Michael V. Namorato's *The Catholic Church in Mississippi, 1911-1984* (1998), Andrew S. Moore's *The South's Tolerable Alien: Roman Catholics in Alabama and Georgia, 1945-1970* (2007), and James M. Woods' extensive project, *A History of the Catholic Church in the American South, 1513-1900* (2011).¹⁷

In assessing this overview of scholarly studies of the Catholic Church and lay experiences in the American South, two areas of interests are only given a passing reference and are void of thorough study – those of the experiences of women and blacks in the southern Catholic Church.¹⁸ Two studies – Stephen J. Ochs' *Desegregating the Altar: The Josephites and the Struggle for Black Priests, 1871-1960* and Cyprian Davis' *The History of Black Catholics in the United States*, both published in 1990 – help to fill the gap in regards to the history of black Catholics. Ochs' study focuses on the 1871 establishment and ministry of the Society of Saint Joseph of the Heart, the Josephite Fathers and Brothers, who serve African American parishes throughout the United States. Ochs' work is especially useful to this study of Marge Baroni in developing context for the influential relationships she developed with Josephite priests in Natchez. Unfortunately, Ochs' Josephite study ends in 1960; however, this omission does illuminate another element of importance to Marge Baroni's accounts of Josephite efforts in the

¹⁶ Michael J. McNally, *Catholicism in South Florida, 1868-1968* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1984); Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Doubleday, 1985); Jay P. Dolan, ed., *The American Catholic Parish: A History from 1850 to the Present*, vol. 1 (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987); Charles E. Nolan, *St. Mary's of Natchez: The History of a Southern Congregation, 1716-1988* (Natchez, MS: St. Mary's Catholic Church, 1992).

¹⁷ Jon W. Anderson and William B. Friend, eds., *The Culture of Bible Belt Catholics* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995); Namorato, *The Catholic Church in Mississippi, 1911-1984* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998); Andrew S. Moore, *The South's Tolerable Alien: Roman Catholics in Alabama and Georgia, 1945-1970* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2007); James M. Woods, *A History of the Catholic Church in the American South, 1513-1900* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2011).

¹⁸ The only text to thoroughly address the experiences of female Catholic laity is Karen Kennelly, C.S.J.'s edited collection, *American Catholic Women: A Historical Exploration* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1989).

civil rights movement, in so much that these documents now serve to further supplement the story of Josephite priests in the late-twentieth century South.¹⁹ Danny Duncan Collum's oral history of the Holy Family Catholic Church in Natchez supports Baroni's accounts of the Josephite efforts and the experiences of black Catholics in the Natchez, Mississippi community.²⁰

There is an incredible gap in the scholarship of the history of the southern Catholic Church in relationship to the American civil rights movement. Instead, this era of Catholic history is dominated by the importance of the Second Vatican Council, convened by Pope John XIII in 1962 for the purpose of studying the Catholic Church's role in the modern world, which was the catalyst for vast transformations in the approach of the Catholic Church to social issues.²¹ The only text to thoroughly address the Catholic Church and the civil rights movement is Andrew Moore's *The South's Tolerable Alien* (2007), in which Moore writes:

The civil rights movement drew southern Catholics into the public fray. Catholics' religious identity could not be separated from opposition to or support of racial reform and the black freedom struggle. On the one hand, ecclesiastical authority rooted in a pre-Vatican II hierarchy acquiesced to the southern social order and refused to challenge segregation... On the other hand, the modern, post-Vatican II Church was forced to sort out the moral implications of a relatively newfound social ethic that undermined racial discrimination. In place of hierarchical authority came the promise of racial equality for black Catholics – the Church as the “people of God” – a notion that many whites refused to acknowledge.²²

¹⁹ Cyprian Davis, O.S.B., *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1990); Stephen J. Ochs, *Desegregating the Altar: The Josephites and the Struggle for Black Priests, 1871-1960* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1990). See also, although unmentioned in the text, Jamie T. Phelps, O.P., ed., *Black and Catholic: The Challenge and Gift of Black Folk, Contributions of African American Experience to Catholic Theology* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1997).

²⁰ Danny Duncan Collum, *Black and Catholic in the Jim Crow South: The Stuff That Makes Community* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2006).

²¹ Moore, *The South's Tolerable Alien*, 5. See also Robert A. Burns, O.P., *Roman Catholicism after Vatican II* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2001); Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Revolution: New Wine, Old Wineskins, and the Second Vatican Council* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); and John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008).

²² Moore, *The South's Tolerable Alien*, 7.

One group of Catholics who had been interpreting their readings of the Catholic Church's teaching into a philosophy of social justice, and who are also nearly absent from the historiography of religiously-motivated participants in the civil rights movement, are members of the Catholic Worker Movement.

Most scholarship on the Catholic Worker Movement efforts during the 1950s and 1960s is limited to internal accounts, either through autobiographies or oral histories, of Catholic Worker efforts to address poverty and labor issues in the northeast region of the United States and in relationship to the Cuban Missile Crisis.²³ The lone piece of scholarship which touches at all on civil rights movement-related topics as they relate to the Catholic Worker Movement is Patrick G. Coy's article, "An Experiment in Personalist Politics: The Catholic Worker Movement and Nonviolent Action." Coy describes the relationship between the Catholic Worker and nonviolence, "To fight against violence with the spiritual weapons of prayer, fasting, and noncooperation with evil...[and] participation in nonviolent strikes and boycotts, protests, or vigils." Coy also describes the five basic principles of the Catholic Worker Movement that can be translated to Catholic participation in the civil rights movement: Biblical earnestness, personalism, solidarity with the poor through hospitality, living in community, and membership turnover.²⁴ A point worthy of further consideration, especially as it relates to Marge and the civil rights movement, is Coy's statement, "The Catholic Worker movement's commitment to nonviolent action includes the outwardly political sphere whenever and wherever the Worker

²³ See William D. Miller, *A Harsh and Dreadful Love: Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement* (New York: Liveright Press, 1973); Max Piehl, *The Catholic Worker and the Origin of Catholic Radicalism in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982); Eileen Egan, *Dorothy Day and the Permanent Revolution* (Erie, PA: Benet Press, 1983); Michele Teresa Aronica, R.S.M., *Beyond Charismatic Leadership: The New York Catholic Worker Movement* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1987); Rosalie Riegle Troester, ed., *Voices from the Catholic Worker* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993); and Marc H. Ellis, *A Year at the Catholic Worker: A Spiritual Journey Among the Poor* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2000).

²⁴ Patrick G. Coy, "An Experiment in Personalist Politics: The Catholic Worker Movement and Nonviolent Action," *Peace & Change*, Vol. 26, No. 1, January 2001: 79, 81.

movement intersects with the public commonweal.”²⁵ This is no doubt evident in the coverage of the civil rights movement offered by the Catholic Worker newsletters of the late 1950s and early 1960s, as well as through many of the letters sent between Dorothy Day, the Catholic Worker Movement co-founder, and Marge Baroni throughout the civil rights movement era.

Marge Baroni’s story of Catholic activism in the Natchez, Mississippi civil rights movement is primed to substantially contribute to the canons of scholarship on the history of the Catholic Church in the South; the roles of women, Josephite priests, and African American parishioners of the southern Catholic Church in the civil rights movement; and the unique and hitherto unexplored connections between the Catholic Worker and civil rights movements. This study of Marge Baroni will contribute greatly to the work being done on the religious motivations of civil rights activists, joining with Charles Marsh’s *God’s Long Summer* (1997) and David Chappell’s *A Stone of Hope* (2004) to advance scholars’ understandings of the roles of individual and communal faith and theologies in both the activism for, and the resistance against, local and national movements for civil rights in the 1950s and 1960s.²⁶

Marge’s contribution to the scholarship on the civil rights movement and individual activism will also advance conversations about white southerners’ efforts to aid in the African American freedom struggle. Although a number of significant texts have been published regarding southern whites’ efforts – including David Chappell’s *Inside Agitators* (1994), Gail S. Murray’s *Throwing Off the Cloak of Privilege* (2004), and the collaboratively written *Deep in Our Hearts: Nine White Women in the Freedom Movement* (2000) – these works are limited to a primarily political interpretation of activists’ desire to do social good without addressing the

²⁵ *Ibid*, 80.

²⁶ Charles Marsh, *God’s Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); David L. Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

topic of religious motivations.²⁷ G. McLeod Bryan's study of the religious motivations of twenty-nine white southern activists, whom Martin Luther King, Jr. pinpointed in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (1963) as allies to his civil rights crusade, attempts to fill this gap as thoroughly as possible. Bryan himself admits the difficulties of researching these activists' motivations and efforts, none of whom are Catholic, in his introduction, "It was not easy to uncover the names and histories of 'these few whites who also paid a price.' The reason is quite clear: during the time of their witness, the last thing they wanted was publicity, to have the glare of the media focused upon themselves."²⁸

An analysis of Marge Baroni's civil rights activism also falls in line with a number of recently-published texts that relay the stories of white female activists in the civil rights movement. In *Throwing Off The Cloak of Privilege: White Southern Activists in the Civil Rights Era*, editor Gail S. Murray highlights the "many routes to activism" white southern women took in entering the fray of movement activities in their local communities. Of these women, Murray writes, "These atypical white women contributed to the movement by working as journalists, propagandists, organizers, network builders, and advisors to young activists. No national script for activism dictated their interests and methods." Murray continues, "Rather, various factors, including religion, leftist ideology, pragmatism, and self-interest, led them to join with African Americans in challenging the social and political assumptions of the Jim Crow South."²⁹ Like Murray, Casey Hayden has also edited a collection of essays by white, female former civil rights

²⁷ David L. Chappell, *Inside Agitators: White Southerners in the Civil Rights Movement* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); Constance Curry and Joan C. Browning, et al., *Deep in Our Hearts: Nine White Women in the Freedom Movement* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2000); Gail S. Murray, ed., *Throwing Off the Cloak of Privilege: White Southern Women Activists in the Civil Rights Era* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2004).

²⁸ G. McLeod Bryan, *These Few Also Paid a Price: Southern Whites Who Fought for Civil Rights* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2001), 15.

²⁹ Gail S. Murray, ed., *Throwing Off the Cloak of Privilege: White Southern Women Activists in the Civil Rights Era* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2004), Foreword.

activists, *Deep in Our Hearts: Nine White Women in the Freedom Movement*. Although these texts, composed of both primary and secondary essays relaying the experiences of activism from the perspectives of white women – young and old, elite and working class – who labored in the South during the movement, are valuable for understanding how Marge Baroni might have viewed her involvement with the Natchez-area movement activity, neither text takes the Catholic experience into perspective.

This project would be nothing without the wealth of resources offered in the Marge Baroni Collection at the Special Collections Library at the University of Mississippi. Marge kept impeccable records of her journeys of faith and activism, documenting each step of the way through journal entries, letters, fiction, essays, and autobiographical writings. I worked through this collection over the course of eighteen months from Fall 2010 to Spring 2012. The majority of my primary research consisted of working through the extensive contents of the twenty-one box collection, beginning with thirty years' worth of correspondence, from 1955 to 1985, between Baroni and friends, family, and fellow Catholic activists. In the majority of these letters, friends addressed Baroni, and Baroni addressed herself, as "Marge." As I read through the letters and gleaned a greater sense of who Marge Baroni was as a woman, friend, believer, mother, wife, and activist, I became certain that, despite best practices, it would be most fitting to address her as Marge throughout this work on her exceptional story.

In addition to this correspondence, the Marge Baroni Collection offered numerous resources for this project. Some of the most valuable were Marge's own essays on her experiences in the civil rights years, "1964: Some Memories of Freedom Summer in Natchez, Mississippi" and "Whatever Happened to Joseph Edwards." Both of these essays were penned by Marge as part of her master's level work at the University of Southern Mississippi. Oral history

interviews with Marge, her husband, Louis, and daughter, Mary Jane, also contributed significantly to my research. So, too, did the many boxes containing correspondence between Marge and Dorothy Day. Along with being an incredible help to my own work, Marge's collection of documents is a priceless source for members of the Natchez, Mississippi community who desire to learn more about their city's civil rights movement, for students of the religious motivations of activists from both within and outside of the South during the movement years, for her family, and for any person desiring a captivating tale of a woman who never backed down from intimidations, nor weakened her witness and work for the betterment of the lives of all people of God in the face of communal rejection. Instead, she chose to stand on the side of equality, challenged the status quo, and did it all because of her belief that her Catholic faith required she be nothing less than an activist.

In an interview with Josephite priest Father William Morrissey, Marge reflects on her decision to translate her deep faith into a decades-long campaign of action. "I think, you know, you grow older, you grow stronger, you go through things that you look back and wonder how in the hell you ever went through it. Because you don't just get your toe in the water. There is no way you can just stick your toe in. You go in, if you are identified, you are in the water all the way."³⁰ Marge Baroni knew the risks of her action, but she also knew the certainty of the moral authority upon which she stood. Marge Baroni also knew how valuable her story would one day be to students of the movement, that is why, I suppose, she wrote down so many thorough accounts of her activity, retained innumerable letters, newsletters, and pamphlets, and told her story through an oral history interview. As a graduate student at the University of Southern Mississippi, Marge sought to tell her own story of faith and activism in her master's thesis.

³⁰ Marge Baroni, Interview with Peter E. Hogan, SSJ, February 11, 1977, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

Unfortunately, her untimely death in 1986, in the middle of her graduate work, meant her story was never published.

This is my attempt to see to it that Marge Baroni's story never remains unfinished again, and that she receives the recognition she deserves for the invaluable gift of activism she offered her community and the similarly powerful lessons she has to offer students of faith and civil rights.

CHAPTER II

CONVERSION: EXPLORATION IN FAITH AND THOUGHT

When one considers the notion of a religious conversion, often the most easily-accessible image is that of the proverbial moment of conversion. Whether it be the biblical scene of Saul on the road to Damascus, the quintessential Protestant moment of salvation in the act of baptism, or a significant enlightenment moment of an intellectual, moral, or relational coming-of-age story, conversion is almost always related to a singular moment when an individual makes an immediate change, moving from blindness to sight, or, in Marge Baroni's case, "hit...like a club."³¹ The 1957 evening at the piano concert, as described in the introductory anecdote, was a distinct moment of conversion for Marge; however, the weight of this specific instance in Marge's life is not strictly religious. Rather, as she watched the Holy Family Josephite Priests leave the concert hall with their parishioner, who would not have been welcome in the concert as a patron, Marge witnessed the instantaneous and unexpected collision of the two journeys of faith and thought that had been driving her entire life – the convergence of race and religion.

From the earliest accounts of her childhood, Marge clearly documents the dominant roles that her search for the presence of the divine and her quest to connect to and understand the racial disparities of the segregated Jim Crow South played in directing the course of her life. Both of these journeys, as multi-faceted as each was, were in no way instant or without struggle. Instead, as is revealed in Marge's accounts, these journeys of religious and racial conversion

³¹ Marge Baroni, Draft of unfinished master's thesis, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

were extensive processes, spanning decades, transcending physical boundaries, filled with unexpected and powerful characters, all of which served to mold Marge Baroni into the woman she was that night in the concert hall. In 1957, at the age of 31, Marge Baroni was a well-read, opportunistic, Catholic, activist-minded woman of great faith and greater conviction. In her statement about that night, “How could I justify my belief in the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man if I had no qualms about enjoying privilege because of the color of my skin?” Marge reveals the inextricable connection between these journeys of religious and racial conversion in her life. Understanding the journeys that brought her to that pivotal moment of conversion to activism is an essential aspect of Marge Baroni’s narrative of faith and civil rights. The following chapter will explore both of these journeys of conversion in Marge’s life, through her own words and the words of others, revealing how these conversions laid the groundwork for a lifelong pursuit of social justice in the name of God.

CHILDHOOD JOURNEYS OF FAITH AND RACE

Born to Hiram “Percy” and Clementine Lofton Rushing on August 16, 1924, Marge grew up the daughter of an alcoholic sharecropper father and a “hard-shell Baptist” mother. As the oldest of the five Rushing children, Marge had to learn to endure the everyday challenges of the Jim Crow South’s sharecropping system quite early in childhood. The family’s livelihood depended solely on the year-to-year successes or failures of her father’s crops, and all family members were expected to help in the fields as soon as they could be useful. Percy Rushing moved his family often in search of “the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow,” creating a

tenuous home environment for his wife and children. The Rushing family lived in a succession of rental houses in Natchez and a number of tenant shacks on farms throughout Adams County, Mississippi during Marge's formative years. The China Grove Plantation was the final farm on which the Rushing family lived and worked. At China Grove, the Rushings – who were the only white family working one of the plantation's many tracts of land – farmed 100 acres of land where they grew cotton, corn, sugar cane, sorghum, field peas, and sweet potatoes.³²

While toil and hardship were the dominant themes of Marge's childhood, she never quite fit the mold of the hard-laboring Baptist life her family led. In response to the stresses of family life and sharecropping, Marge chose to find solace in ways her family considered unconventional – through intellectual pursuits and her vivid imagination. In the following passage, Marge writes of her work on the farm and the creative ways she found to escape its confines. “My brother and I, as the eldest children in the family...were expected to do the work of farm hands. I remember picking cotton, sticking sweet potato slips into the ground, laying stalks of seed cane along the furrow for them...It was a hard life at times, especially for an adolescent, but in the hot days between the laying of crops and harvest time, I was able to read for many hours. I always daydreamed, no matter what the chore, and had to be reprimanded often.”³³ In an oral history interview, Mary Jane Tarver, Marge Baroni's eldest daughter, recounts a story her grandmother Clementine often told about Marge's childhood desire to read and learn constantly. “She was always reading and Nanny, my grandmother, told me that one day she asked her to keep an eye on the horse. There were several horses there and momma looked at her and said, ‘Momma which one is ours?’ Cause she didn't know with her nose in the book all the time. She thought that kind of summed up her attitude toward helping out at the farm. She would do what she had

³² Marge Baroni, Draft of unfinished master's thesis, “Whatever Happened to Joseph Edwards,” Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

³³ *Ibid.*

to do, but she's going to get that reading in."³⁴ This unquenchable desire for knowledge and love of reading was the key to many of Marge's greater journeys of conversion in faith, thought, and activism throughout her life.

As a teenager, Marge excelled in both academics and music. She played the trumpet in the school band and, later in life, would combine both interests in the weekly music and arts column she wrote while the first-ever Woman's Page Editor at *The Natchez Democrat*. In her younger years, however, these talents made her quite the curious character – the little professor of the peanut patch – on the China Grove Plantation. In a vivid passage from one of her shorter unpublished memoirs, Marge writes about her early attempts at existential inquiry during this time in her life:

In the crisp fall evenings, and the mellow spring ones, I played "O, Evening Star" from Tannhauser, on my horn, the real evening star hanging full and golden over the darkening pine forest at the back of the house. I drew water from the cistern for bathing in the backyard at dusk, and stood in the wash tub watching the dark come down around the farm. Most of all though, I loved the September afternoons, with school over and the bus ride done, I would rush to the peanut patch – it was on the highest land we had – and lie among the peanut vines, flat on my back. There I wondered what the world was about. As clouds assumed shapes of animals and strangely sculpted battlements, I pondered my role on the planet. I tried to figure out how I got here, why I was here, and what the future would be like. Although I loved the physical beauty around me, thrilled to the sound of the wild geese going further south in the autumn nights, and to the sound of the hounds baying across the hills and in the bottom lands as they treed possum and coon, I sensed that I was merely stopping over here. Life was "out there" somewhere and somehow I would go to meet it.³⁵

It is important to note that Marge is recounting these memories later in life, most likely in her forties. Regardless, the poetic nature of her childhood memories reveal the depths of introspection to which Marge's explorations of thought allowed her to reach. One of her most poignant passages from these accounts reads, "It is this spirit of exploration that has motivated

³⁴ Mary Jane Tarver, Interview with Susan Sullivan and Tim Murphy, Ridgeland, MS, February 9, 2000, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

³⁵ Marge Baroni, Personal Papers, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

my entire life. This and the search for evidences of love – the love of man for man, for woman, for child, for every growing thing, every created thing....I wanted to know about life and people, but I lacked the equipment to get into the door.”³⁶

Although Marge claims to have lacked the tools necessary for knowing more about life and people, a close analysis of her childhood accounts shows that she searched for these tools in two specific areas of inquiry – faith and race. In many of her autobiographical passages it is nearly impossible to distinguish between these two themes, as they flow inter-connectedly throughout her narrative. Beginning with accounts of her mother, who could be a harsh and “hard-shell Baptist,” Marge explains that throughout her childhood, the language her mother used to teach her and her siblings lessons related to the topics faith and race was uniquely similar. Although she did not follow the Baptist faith her mother espoused, Marge was challenged by her mother’s admonitions about recognizing the “humanity of Christ, and our...brother [and] sisterhood with Christ.”³⁷ Similarly, Marge recounts a theologically-based response to racial injustice taught to her by her mother when she was a child. “A long time ago my mother used to sing a hymn. ‘Brighten the corner where you are...’ this is the line I remember,” recalls Marge. “Children do believe what their mothers tell them – or their fathers – whoever talks to them most. And I believed mine when she told me God made no distinction of persons. She put it in words from the Gospel when she talked about Jesus.”³⁸ This theological grounding – recognizing the humanity in each individual as innately given them by God – later became the dominant theme of Marge’s writings about the many ways her conversion to Catholicism informed her role in the civil rights movement.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Marge Baroni, Personal Papers, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, the University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

While Marge did internalize her mother's lessons about faith and race, she chose not to embrace the Southern Baptist heritage her mother espoused because there was no "strong intellectual content in the Southern Baptist churches."³⁹ Instead of attending church on Sunday mornings and afternoons, which she writes "were the loneliest times of the week," Marge spent the greater part of her Sundays "in the crotch of the big chinaberry tree that shaded [her] dirt front yard" reading texts like Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* and Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* and *A Tale of Two Cities*.⁴⁰

While Marge was not a member of a church within the white community throughout her young adult years, she writes intensely about the valuable influence of the African American church in her childhood. As the only white family on the China Grove Plantation, the Rushings lived near a number of African American churches in the Natchez and greater Adams County, Mississippi communities. On special Sunday nights, a neighbor of the Rushings, Riley, who also helped the family with their crops, would ask Marge and her brother to join him in going to church. In the following passage, Marge describes her experience of attending church with Riley on these particularly powerful evenings and the perspective she gained on these nights as an adult in the civil rights movement:

Riley asked my brother and me to go with him to church. He didn't really mean "to church" proper – he meant that we would go across the road to the John the Baptist B.C. (Baptist Church) and stand among the young pines to hear the singing. Riley always avoided the preacher if he could because, as he told us, "the Reverend wants me to go to the mourners' bench." Riley was having too much fun in life to give it up and become a sedate deacon. The music I heard on those nights was unlike any I had heard before. The harsh dissonances, the shrill sopranos and deep basses contending with each other – this music was foreign. But there was something about it that drew me, and I never refused to go with Carlton and Riley on these second Sunday nights. Years later, in Beulah Baptist Church in Natchez, I heard "Amazing Grace" sung a cappella, every soul in the church

³⁹ Marge Baroni, Interview with Peter E. Hogan, SSJ, February 11, 1977, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

⁴⁰ Marge Baroni, Draft of unfinished master's thesis, "Whatever Happened to Joseph Edwards," Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

singing to his own rhythm and from his own deep need. I understood then what it was I had heard among the pines on Liberty Road, outside John the Baptist. The “Amazing Grace” in white Protestant churches had nothing in common with this wild and strange music.⁴¹

Like this passage on her experiences with black churches, Marge writes eloquently, albeit retrospectively, about her childhood understandings of the Natchez black community and race relations during her childhood.

When the Baroni family moved back to Natchez permanently in 1940, race became a dominant theme of thought and exploration in Marge’s life. In an essay entitled “Whatever Happened to Joseph Edwards,” penned in the 1980s as part of her unfinished master’s thesis, Marge describes her childhood predisposition to notice the discrepancies of race relations in Mississippi. “I knew when I was a little girl that something stood in the way of free intercourse among people. Before I recognized differences in skin pigment and came to know what it meant, I knew there was a barrier.” Marge goes on to say that she learned these lessons not as a direct witness of the violence and prejudice so rampant in the Jim Crow South, but through observing the curious subtleties of southern racial etiquette. “I had noted the high, strained pitch of the shopkeeper’s voice when he spoke to a black customer,” she notes. “In the department stores I had seen handsome, dark women poised and austere, their faces closed against the loud questioning of the clerk.”⁴²

Explaining that she “wanted to see the world, meet people, share excitement and adventure... [and] most of all...to know people,” Marge describes that throughout her teenage years in Natchez she spent most of her time outside of school or band practice observing and, in

⁴¹ Marge Baroni, Draft of unfinished master’s thesis, “Whatever Happened to Joseph Edwards,” Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

⁴² *Ibid.*

what she would later learn was a strictly limited sense, interacting with members of the black community. Considering the Rushing family's limited financial resources and lower social standing in the greater Natchez white community, Marge's accounts of her explorations in the city's black neighborhoods also reveal the level to which class similarities allowed for greater access to this closed society. "I haunted the alleys and backstreets in our neighborhood. Negroes lived there, and some of the women employed my mother to sew for them," she explains. "When I took back their completed garments, I noticed smells coming from the houses: fat meat and greens, wood smoke, coal oil, and hair pomade all mingled their scents to make an indefinable one that appealed to my sense of the unfamiliar, the esoteric – the other."⁴³

Later in adulthood, Marge reinterprets these days spent wandering through the black neighborhood as adventures in which she naively romanticized the lives of African Americans in Natchez. In her accounts, the details she admits she failed to see as a child reveal the extent to which her conversion of thought towards race changed her worldview. Of the physical evidence of the challenges facing the black community, Marge writes, "I failed utterly in that 1940 year to note the significance of the single water tap at the end of an alley. Or the grey, unpainted and leaning toilet behind every shack. I romanticized the begonias and peppermint lilies in the painted molasses pails on the front porches." She is even more forthcoming as she describes her reassessment of her interactions with African American Natchezians on these days. "Neither did it sink in upon me that the men and women on these porches stopped talking as I came along the alley. The men did not look at me, but instead fixed their eyes upon the ground, or gazed into the distance, while the women murmured, 'Evening, Miss,' as I strolled along, and the children

⁴³ *Ibid.*

stopped playing to stare curiously at me. I never dreamed that I was somehow a hated, feared presence, or at least represented as much.”⁴⁴

These lessons on race and community from her childhood became a dominant theme during her conversion to Catholicism in her young adult years. This close reading of Marge’s writings on her adolescent perception of the power of race in southern society demonstrates that one of her first and most meaningful conversion experiences was indeed a transformation of thought, a rejection of the dogmatic white southern ideas on race.

This type of racial conversion narrative has been closely studied by Fred Hobson in his 1999 text, *But Now I See: The White Southern Racial Conversion Narrative*. In the preface to the text, Hobson explains that his project developed as he worked through readings on the Puritan conversion narratives of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and throughout the research for his book, *Tell About the South: The Southern Rage to Explain*. Hobson notes that during this process, he “noticed that a number of white southerners in the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s had written books, either autobiographies or very personal social commentaries (or both), in which they attempted to come to terms with racial guilt – their own and their region’s.”⁴⁵ Hobson coins the phrase “white racial conversion narrative” to describe this phenomena, in which these writers – he is referring here to southerners like Lillian Smith, Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin, James McBride Dabbs, Sarah Patton Bole, Will Campbell, Willie Morris, Larry L. King, Pat Watters, and others – “confess racial wrongdoings and are ‘converted,’ in varying degrees, from racism to something approaching racial enlightenment.”

In describing these experiences, Hobson notes the parallels in the language used by these writers about such conversion with that used to describe religious conversion. “Indeed the

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Fred Hobson, *But Now I See*, xiii.

language of most of these white southerners is the language of religious conversion – ‘sin,’ ‘guilt,’ ‘blindness,’ ‘seeing the light,’ ‘repentance,’ ‘redemption,’ and so forth.” Hobson continues in explaining these parallels as a result of the inundation of Calvinist religious thought on the Southern religious and cultural landscape, while also clarifying that, in his findings, many of the writers who note such a racial conversion experience “had left the church – at least the church of their fathers – but all seemed to have retained the habit of seeking redemption, even if of a secular variety.”⁴⁶

Marge’s own narrative of her journey of racial conversion, though parallel in many ways with Hobson’s analysis, does not align with Hobson’s racial conversion narrative framework on one specific point – Marge Baroni never left the church, or the church of her parents, because she never joined the church. At the time of her journey toward racial enlightenment, especially during her youth, Marge had been a pilgrim without a faith. The story of how she found her faith and her way into the membership of the Roman Catholic Church is the greatest of her lifetime. For without her conversion to Catholicism, Marge Baroni’s story, while inspiring, would not carry the historical weight that the role of her Catholic faith in directing her path to activism has in creating new ways to talk about faith narratives and civil rights activism. Marge Baroni’s conversion to Catholicism is the defining moment in her life. Her choice to join the Church and learn from its teachings opened wide the doors of enlightenment and activism, allowing Marge to surge ahead on new paths formerly unimaginable to the young sharecropping girl who became the activist Catholic woman. Much like her maturing understanding of race and the South, the young adult Marge stood on the cusp of an entirely new maturation of thought and exploration when she began her inquisition and instruction into the Catholic Church, and, rather than being a “moment of salvation,” Marge’s faith journey was a decades-long pilgrimage of conversion.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 1-2.

PILGRIMAGE OF CONVERSION

Marge's inquiry into the Catholic Church began as her childhood ended, when she married her high school sweetheart, Louis, in 1941, at seventeen years old and only a few credits shy of earning her high school diploma. Louis's family, a first-generation Italian Catholic immigrant family, came to the Natchez area with the deluge of Italian laborers brought into the state to clear the Mississippi Delta and work on sharecropping plantations in the late nineteenth century. Attilia and Antonia Baroni settled their family in Adams County, Mississippi on a farming cooperative known as "Little Italy" before moving into Natchez city center, where Louis met Marge at a local high school football game. Their courtship progressed quickly and within a year the couple had married. After the wedding, in an attempt to help the World War II effort, Louis took a job as a welder in the submarine yard at Groton, Connecticut and the young couple moved north.

There is very little documentation of the Baroni family's time in Connecticut. What is known is that during their six-month stay, Marge became pregnant with their first child, Neil. While Marge's papers omit any details of the daily life the Baroni's experienced in Connecticut, she is careful to record stories dealing with the issue of race. For a native southerner who had never lived outside of the South, the move to the North and its unknown culture of race relations challenged Marge to reinterpret her southern mores on race in context to the realities of race in another region. In one specific passage, Marge writes about an instance in which her southernness and skin color provoked an individual to treat her with contempt, much like she had seen countless whites do to blacks in the South.

"When Louis and I moved to Connecticut in the first year of World War II...I had my first experience of what I thought was simple bad manners from a Negro. At that time, to get

from New London across the Thames River to Groton, one had to go to the Greyhound bus terminal and wait for the city bus that crossed the bridge.” Marge recalls that she was curious to see a black man behind the bus ticket counter. When Marge asked the man if the bus to Groton stopped “here,” as she simultaneously pointed at the ground, the clerk replied, mimicking her southern accent and pointing to the floor, “No, it doesn’t come right *hyeah*. It comes outside and you all can catch it *theah!*” Marge stared at the man indignantly as she moved her very-pregnant self toward the exterior door. “As I left, I could hear his delighted laughter,” Marge remembers. “This was far different from the grocery clerks making me ask for grits over and over so they could enjoy my accent. When I told my husband about it that night, he said, ‘Well, Marge, you know they don’t do things up here like we do at home.’”⁴⁷

What is most interesting about this story is that, from the thousands of pages of Marge’s personal papers, this is the only documented story of the Baronis’ time in Connecticut and from this tumultuous time of the beginning of World War II. That of all the social and personal changes occurring around her, from being newly-wed, to pregnant for the first time, to living in a foreign environment at the outset of a worldwide war effort, Marge remembers and highlights a moment of racial tension is revealing. Marge’s use of the phrase “what I thought was simple bad manners” in her retelling also demonstrates that she had experienced some progression of thought or understanding towards this man and this moment. Marge later penned a passage that adds a bit more context to her retelling this particular story:

Southern women have a double handicap – they are objects the black men and women have been conditioned to fear and avoid. I believe black women despise white women as a group and though there are exceptions, personal friendships, by and large it seems a fact of life and one we white women had better not forget... This comes from the fact that in the South white women thought they should be untouchable and the attitude was handed down from generation to generation by both mother and father... This attitude still prevails... Every once in a while, when I experience instant rejection by a new black

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

acquaintance, I know the closed face, the expressionless mouth and cold eyes are a reaction to my colour and not my personality. I have had to tone down the warmth of my response in these situations. It took me a while to learn to do this. We white women have been betrayed and sold short... The tragedy is that so many of us believe it is ordained, natural.⁴⁸

Marge's passage here is reminiscent of an argument of Lillian Smith's, the pioneering and prolific southern writer, that the real tragedy of segregation in the South was the damage it did to the minds and souls of white southerners.

"It began so long ago, not only in the history books but in our childhood," Smith writes. "We [white] southerners learned our first three lessons too well." Smith continues, "I do not think our mothers were aware that they were teaching us lessons... we were spectators entranced by the bright and terrible images we saw there... We were taught in this way to love God, to love our white skin, and to believe in the sanctity of both... we were learning also to fear a power that was in our body and to fear dark people who were everywhere around us, though the ones who came into our homes we were taught to love... Our minds had split: hardly more than a crack at first, but we began in those early years a two-leveled existence which we have since managed quite smoothly."⁴⁹ It took moving to the North for Marge to seriously grapple with her own southernness and whiteness beyond the borders of the region that had instilled a certain level of racial blindness in each of its white children. This evolution of thought and awareness towards racial relations outside of her home region created in Marge the desire to find an institution within the South in which she could discuss and attempt address issues of segregation and racial injustice. When she requested to move back to Mississippi to be closer to family, Louis agreed.

⁴⁸ Susan Sullivan, "Marjorie Baroni: Ordinary Southern Woman, Extraordinary Activist," delivered as a 'Brown Bag' Lecture at the Center for the Study of Southern Culture, October 4, 2000, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

⁴⁹ Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1949, 83-84).

The Baronis' return to the South was a crucial turning point in Marge's racial and spiritual conversions and signaled the beginning of her instruction into the Catholic faith. Although she was married to a Catholic – Louis was non-practicing – Marge had not been a part of any strong communities of Catholic parishioners until the family relocated to New Orleans, Louisiana in 1942, where Louis took a job as a welder at Delta Shipyards. While Louis spent his days at work, Marge stayed home to care for their infant, Neil, to read, and to socialize within their Italian Catholic community. This dominant Catholic presence in New Orleans became a powerful force in convincing Marge to inquire, through relationships and personal research, how to become a member of the Church. “[When] we had lived in New Orleans, all our friends had been Catholics,” Marge remarks in an oral history interview from 1977. She describes her early days of conversion to Catholicism. “We lived in [New Orleans] in World War II for three years, and everybody I knew was Catholic...I guess I just picked up a lot of things about Catholicism by... reading, not ever any apologetics, or anything like that, but I found out that you could take instructions.” “When we came back to Natchez, a [friend], who was desperately struggling to save her marriage to a Catholic was taking instruction from Father Harris. So, she told me that there was such a thing, [and] I said, ‘Can anybody do that?’”⁵⁰ When she learned that classes on Catholicism were based on individuals' own readings of the literature on the beliefs and tenets of the Church and that she was eligible to participate, the ever-curious and knowledge-seeking Marge seized the opportunity to begin her instruction.

In order to best understand the journey of conversion Marge experienced in joining the Catholic Church, it is important to briefly describe the Catholic instruction process for adult converts. The process by which the Catholic Church welcomes adults in baptism or confirmation

⁵⁰ Marge Baroni, Interview with Peter E. Hogan, SSJ, February 11, 1977, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

is known as “The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA).” The RCIA is “based on the principle that the process of conversion proceeds gradually, in stages.” Liturgical celebrations with the greater parish community mark the pilgrim’s progress from one stage of the RCIA to the next. Precatechumenate, or “the period of inquiry,” is the first stage of RCIA. In this stage the believer expresses an interest in becoming a Christian or Catholic, and begins to discern, with instruction from clergy and the support of the parish, “what his or her relationship with Christ might be and how that might be enriched and deepened by joining [the] Christian community.” The second stage of RCIA is the catechumenate, in which the believer becomes known as a “catechumen.” This stage of the process is marked by two liturgical services – the Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens and the Rite of Welcoming. Catechumens are challenged with a curriculum drawn from the Lectionary, the Catholic prayer book used in church services throughout the year, and the Word, the Bible. This process may last anywhere from a few months to a number of years, depending upon the clergy’s judgment of the catechumen’s readiness to become a full member of the Church.⁵¹

When the catechumen is acknowledged by his or her clergy and parish as ready to receive the sacraments of initiation in the Church, the convert begins the third stage of RCIA – Purification and Enlightenment. This stage always coincides with the Lenten season – the forty days after Mardi Gras or Shrove Tuesday ending on Easter Sunday – and “the elect,” as catechumens become known during this stage, begin their final preparations for baptism or confirmation in the church. Purification and Enlightenment begins with two services – the Rite of Election and the call to Continuing Conversion – and ends with the celebration of the elect’s baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist at the Easter Vigil, the end of the Lenten season. The final

⁵¹ “Becoming a Catholic,” *Catholic Online*, <http://www.catholic.org/prayers/become.php> (accessed February 21, 2012).

stage of RCIA is Mystagogy, the period of post-baptismal catechesis and continued inquiry, in which the newly initiated believer continues to explore their experience of being fully initiated into the Catholic Church and the full participation with all the Catholic faithful at Sunday Eucharist. It is meant for Mystagogy to be a life-long stage of Catholic introspection and exploration, as all believers are encouraged by the Church to continue discerning how they might best live the Christian life.⁵²

In 1947, at the age of twenty three, Marge began her nine-month, twice-weekly program of instruction into the Catholic Church with a local priest, Father Kenneth Harris – the leader of the white Catholic parish, St. Mary’s Cathedral in Natchez. Of Marge’s path to catechesis, Louis Baroni remembers, “[Marge] read a lot of Catholic literature and that got her started. And she decided that she wanted to become a Catholic...over the objections of her mother in particular...I suppose her whole family but her mother was, she was [a] hard-shell Baptist.”⁵³ Marge, too, recalls her mother’s displeasure. “I didn’t even tell my mother where I was going, because Catholics had horns, to her, really. And she kept [Neil], who was about four then.”⁵⁴ In describing her rather unconventional RCIA experience, Marge explains that her instruction process with Father Harris did not always follow strict Catholic rules. “I would go up and have this long discussion with Father Harris, the diocesan priest, and he talked about, well, we just talked about...we didn’t even use the Baltimore Catechism, and I think he gave me one, once, and I didn’t want to be bothered with that.”⁵⁵

During this time of intellectual and spiritual exploration, Marge began identifying and drawing parallels between her own journey of racial conversion and her newly-developing

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Louis Baroni, Interview with Susan Sullivan and Tim Murphy, February 7, 2000, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

⁵⁴ Marge Baroni, Interview with Peter E. Hogan, SSJ, February 11, 1977, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

religious conversion. This part of Marge's conversion journey is in keeping with Fred Hobson's assertion, "In every way the struggle with race on the part of the white writer of conscience was profoundly religious, and this became even more the case with the rise of the Civil Rights Movement." Hobson continues to explain that for whites involved in the movement, or others who were sympathetic to movement objectives, "the movement had always been...in part about saving their own souls – about willing themselves back into a religion they could believe in."⁵⁶ This phenomenon is exactly what Marge describes in her own writings about her convergent journeys of racial and religious conversion. "I wanted to know that the Church taught about race," she writes. "There was good intellectual content there... [so] I became a reading Catholic."⁵⁷ In calling herself a "reading Catholic," Marge distinguishes herself further from other members of the white congregation as someone more in tune with the social conflicts of the pre-civil rights era South. To this end, Marge writes, "[When] I became a reading Catholic, I was just amazed that [others] were not. What they did was go to Mass, and make the sign of the cross, and go to the early Mass so they could get it over with. And if I sound like a Pharisee, I guess I am."⁵⁸ Just as Marge had read her way into an interest in the Catholic faith, her desire to know more about the Church's stance on racial issues directed the course of her instruction and self-driven inquiry towards texts dealing with race and faith.

As her knowledge of the belief system of the Catholic Church and the lessons of Jesus Christ developed, so too did her understanding that those teachings and principles were not in accord with the injustices crippling the African American community in Natchez. This realization was a critical juncture in Marge's instruction in the Catholic Church. In an attempt to

⁵⁶ Hobson, *But Now I See*, 17.

⁵⁷ Marge Baroni, Interview with Peter E. Hogan, SSJ, February 11, 1977, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

learn more of, and reconcile this gap between, the teachings of the Church and the reality of racial injustice, as had been the case since childhood, Marge set out to read as much as possible the literature about the Catholic Church and its positions on race and the South. Although she made great strides in her own spiritual development, not all of Marge's research positively informed her desire to address the race question through the lens of the Catholic Church. Baroni impresses this point in stating that because of her research, "I had become very, very aware of the gap between...the teaching and the practice of the Church, with reference to race, and the race question, and human dignity, and integrity, and [that] had been the thing I had wanted to get very, very settled as being something I could live with, ethically, and every other way."⁵⁹

Although Marge's conversion to Catholicism raised endless questions concerning the Church's position on race and the climate of racial conflict stirring in the South, the theological and spiritual lessons Marge learned in the instruction process left no room in her mind for doubt that she had found the deep faith and awareness of God's divinity that she had been searching for. Her conversion so profoundly changed her life that she often reflected on that time and experiences throughout her writings and in her personal papers and letters to friends. In one letter to her friend Dot, Marge recalls the theological enlightenment she experienced during her conversion:

My husband and I absolutely never discussed religion. Not that it would have done any good since he knew very little about the Church – or Christ – and is inarticulate – anyway, nobody could tell me anything...I am aware that I am speaking intimately of my own interior life; but I must make you understand that I was not attracted to the Catholic Church by anything outward – I knew very very little of her when I sought instructions...I have told you before that the thought of God was with me for as long as I can remember – but I don't think I have told you of the desperation of my prayer to know his will, the impelling need I had to find something certain and sure; some strong evidence that I was important to God.

⁵⁹ Marge Baroni, Interview with Peter Hogan, SSJ, February 11, 1977, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

Of the doctrine of grace, I had no idea. Of the theological virtues – faith, hope, and charity, I had no knowledge. Of the sacrament of Baptism, that had the power to quicken my soul with the life of Christ himself, which would make me by grace what He is by nature. That was literally undreamed of. Even when I learned about that I thought it too good to be true – except that it is true, or Jesus Christ has lied. I am still staggered by the implications of that doctrine. The human nature of Christ is united to His divine nature by virtue of the hypostatic union – an uncreated means of union – and I am united to Him by means of sanctifying grace, created for that purpose – so that I may be an adopted child of God. For now when the Father looks at me, he sees His own Divine Son. I am by grace what Jesus is by nature. Whatever is good in me is by the grace of God, and whatever is evil in me is by the grace of Marge.⁶⁰

In the same letter, Marge asserts her full faith in the teachings of the Catholic Church. “I believe that you think I have somehow adapted either for myself or unto myself some kind of esoteric conglomeration of Catholicism. No and a thousand times no. Ask me whether I believe something – such and such and thus and so – and I will answer that if the Catholic Church teaches it: I believe it. I want nothing more than to be one with the mind of the church and to love with her love, since it is with the mind of Christ and his love that she lives.”⁶¹ In this desire to love as God loved, and as the Catholic Church decreed, Marge continued her voracious reading and research into the Church’s ability to address racial issues in the South.

Throughout the remainder of the 1940s and the whole of the 1950s, Marge read and wrote endlessly on Catholic social thought and philosophies of social change. In one revealing document, a speech Marge delivered at Cathedral School to high school-aged girls, Marge writes clearly of her belief that Catholic faith requires believers to act. “I have been a Catholic for nine years,” she writes. “Some of the things I have learned in nine years are elementary to you...For I was married five years before it ever occurred to me that the Catholic Church might have something to do with me! And sometimes now I have to pinch myself to see if I’m dreaming. Please don’t take your religion for granted. Study it – practice it – I know you practice it, but do

⁶⁰ Letter from Marge Baroni to a “Dot,” March 20, 1962, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

it as if you meant it. Think about these means of grace that you use and remember that you can act like a Catholic pretty well, all you have to do is conform to outward practices, but you have to work to really BE one!”⁶² In a 1958 letter, Father Harris, who had directed Marge’s instruction process, wrote of her advances in Catholic thought, her willingness to promote these lessons in her weekly column for the Natchez Democrat newspaper, and her efforts with the Holy Family Church. “Indeed I do remember you very well and have often remarked what a good Catholic you turned out. I have seen your name in the Democrat in work for the Church. All of which I know – because when a person fights hard they are sincere. An easy convert makes an easy going Catholic. You are doing good work and I only wish I was there to share in it.”⁶³

Marge would not be sated to simply be a good Catholic. In an effort to offer more Catholic texts to the local parish, St. Mary’s Cathedral, Marge instituted a Catholic library. She spent a great deal of time at the library, reading texts recommended in letters by friends who were aware of Marge’s desire to learn more about the Church’s place in the world and in her own life. As will be examined in greater detail in the next chapter, the book most influential in directing Marge’s journeys of faith and race into an enlightened and actualized faith of action was the autobiography of the Catholic Worker Movement and newsletter co-founder, Dorothy Day. Marge’s reading of *The Long Loneliness* in 1954 served as the catalyst for the shift of her reading from inquiring as to what the Catholic Church had to say about segregation and injustice to reinterpreting Catholic teachings in a way that required nothing less of Marge than to act. Marge’s conversion journeys of race and faith had readied her for the introduction of Dorothy Day and Catholic Worker philosophies in her own life. While conversion was the single most

⁶² Marge Baroni, Manuscript of speech delivered at Cathedral School, Natchez, MS, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

⁶³ Letter from Father Harris to Marge Baroni, St. Joseph Hospice, Jemez Springs, NM Aug. 4, 1958, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

important moment in Marge Baroni's story, her friendship with Dorothy Day and the impression both Day and the Catholic Worker Movement made in Marge's life are a close second.

CHAPTER III

ENLIGHTENMENT: DOROTHY DAY AND THE CATHOLIC WORKER MOVEMENT

In the script of a pilgrimage or faith journey, the enlightenment phase is considered pivotal. After the initial inquiry and conversion, there must be a phase of intellectual, spiritual, or philosophical transformation and growth that matures the pilgrim, priming that individual for the continued journey and a life of faith. For Marge Baroni, reading Catholic Worker Movement co-founder Dorothy Day's *The Long Loneliness* served as her entry into the enlightenment phase on her journeys of faith and activism. While conversion to Catholicism had opened Marge's mind and heart to new doctrines and practices of grace, ritual, and piety, her readings of Dorothy's writings on personalist philosophies and a Catholic faith rooted in social justice work brought about a critical tipping point in Marge's life. Throughout her conversion process, Marge had searched – through intensive reading and conversations with priests – for an example of how she might address the issues of segregation and racial injustice using the language and power of the Church. Marge found exactly what she had been looking for in Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker. Beginning with her reading of Dorothy's memoir, Marge became an avid supporter of the Catholic Worker, adopting and reapplying its philosophies and religious teachings in context to her activism in Natchez; gaining encouragement and guidance in her friendship and correspondence with Dorothy and other Catholic activists; and transitioning, in her spiritual and religious life, from a faith of introspection and reading to a faith of action and writing.

Marge was not the first person emboldened by the work, words, and example of Dorothy Day. Widely recognized, in the words of Catholic historian David O'Brien, as "the most significant, interesting, and influential person in the history of American Catholicism," Dorothy indelibly influenced twentieth century religious and social life through her role in the Catholic Worker, as a columnist and social commentator featured in such publications as *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Life* magazines, and her half dozen books and approximately 1,500 articles, essays, and reviews.⁶⁴ Heralded by the *New York Times* as a "nonviolent social radical of luminous personality" and by friends within the Catholic Church as the "foremost among the witnesses of the incomprehensible Goodness who is God," Dorothy not only wrote eloquently and prolifically, but worked for more than a half century to improve the lives of the oppressed, overlooked, overworked, and underpaid people in the name of God.⁶⁵ Dorothy's faith drove her work, as recognized by Daniel Berrigan, who wrote in his introduction to *The Long Loneliness*, "She urged our consciences off the beaten track; she made the impossible (in our case) probable and then actual. She did this first of all by living as though the truth were true."⁶⁶ Robert Ellsberg, in his introduction to her *By Little and By Little: The Selected Writings of Dorothy Day*, speaks to her faith of action. "Yet it was not what Dorothy Day wrote that was extraordinary, not even what she believed, but the fact that there was absolutely no distinction between what she believed, what she wrote, and the manner in which she lived."⁶⁷

By the time Marge read *The Long Loneliness* in 1954, Dorothy had been a prominent figure in the world of social justice work and Catholicism for more than twenty years. Similarly,

⁶⁴ Brigid O'Shea Merriman, *Searching for Christ: The Spirituality of Dorothy Day*, Notre Dame Studies in American Catholicism (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), vii; Dorothy Day, *By Little and By Little: The Selected Writings of Dorothy Day*, ed. Robert Ellsberg (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), xv.

⁶⁵ Mark and Louise Zwick, "Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement," in *On Pilgrimage* (New York: Curtis Books, 1972), 1-3.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 2.

⁶⁷ Dorothy Day, *By Little and By Little: The Selected Writings of Dorothy Day*, xv.

Marge had been member of the Catholic Church for seven years, in which time she had developed a strong desire to use the teachings of the Church to address social issues in 1950s Mississippi. Dorothy's story – which details her religious journey from conversion to Catholicism to a lifetime of activism – provided Marge with a framework for expanding her understanding of how she could translate faith could into activism. Speaking in reflection on the impact of *The Long Loneliness* in her life, Marge describes, “I was reading Dorothy’s autobiography, and I found out that there were some people who, in the world, believed that...the Sermon on the Mount was valid, and that you had to follow your conscience, no matter how difficult it was.” She further emphasizes Dorothy’s impact in redirecting her own faith and activism journeys in stating, “I needed to know that there were people in the Catholic Church, at that time, who were living as nearly as possible by the teachings of Christ and the Holy Spirit...And that is when I found out about the Catholic Worker...and that just changed my whole approach.”⁶⁸

Dorothy’s story so moved Marge that she immediately began a correspondence and friendship with the Catholic activist that continued until Dorothy’s death in 1980. This correspondence, Marge’s extensive collection of Catholic Worker newsletters, and letters and essays penned by Marge and others concerning the Catholic Worker presence in the Natchez civil rights movement create a hitherto unexplored link between the Catholic Worker movement efforts of the 1950s and 1960s and the civil rights movement. Furthermore, these resources inform a reading of Marge and Dorothy’s correspondence and Marge’s adoption of Catholic Worker philosophies as a distinct period of enlightenment in Marge’s faith and activism

⁶⁸ Marge Baroni, Interview with Peter E. Hogan, SSJ, February 11, 1977, Marjorie R. Baroni collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

journeys, the effects of which significantly impact the Catholic nature of the Natchez civil rights movement.

DOROTHY DAY’S PILGRIMAGE AND THE CATHOLIC WORKER MOVEMENT

While the focus of this chapter is on the relationship between Dorothy and Marge and the Catholic Worker philosophies and actions and the civil rights movement philosophies and actions, it is important to begin examining these stories as Marge did, with Dorothy’s autobiography, *The Long Loneliness* – specifically in regards to themes of religion, faith journeys, and conversion. A comparative reading of *The Long Loneliness* and Marge’s autobiographical writings reveals striking parallels between the two women’s lives – parallels that must have encouraged Marge to identify and connect so immediately with Dorothy’s story.

Dorothy May Day was born at Bath Beach, Brooklyn, New York on November 8, 1897, the third of five children to John Day, an itinerant sportswriter, and Grace Saterlee Day. John Day was a Scots-Irishman from Cleveland, Tennessee and Grace an Episcopalian from Marlboro, New York. Like Marge, Dorothy’s father bounced from job to job throughout her childhood, moving the family from New York to San Francisco, and finally to Chicago, Illinois after the family survived the San Francisco earthquake of 1906.⁶⁹ During those years in Chicago, Day first began to think of God and religion. Although her mother professed a faith, as Marge’s did, the family did not practice any specific religion. Of this time, Dorothy writes, “We did not

⁶⁹ William D. Miller, *Dorothy Day: A Biography* (Cambridge: Harper & Row Publishers, 1982); William D. Miller, *A Harsh and Dreadful Love: Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement* (New York: Liveright, 1973); Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of the Legendary Catholic Social Activist Dorothy Day* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1952).

search for God when we were children. We took Him for granted. We were at some time taught to say our evening prayers... This done, we prayed no more unless a thunderstorm made us hide our heads under the covers and propitiate the Deity by promising to be good.”⁷⁰ In describing the effects of the San Francisco earthquake on her family, Dorothy writes of her childhood understanding of the nature of the holy trinity. “Even as I write this I am wondering if I had these nightmares before the San Francisco earthquake or afterward. I remember these dreams only in connection with California and they were linked up with my idea of God as a tremendous Force, a frightening impersonal God, a Voice, a Hand stretched out to seize me, His child, and not in love. Christ was the savior, meek and humble of heart, Jesus, the Good Shepherd. But I did not think of Jesus as God. I had no one to teach me, as my parents had no one to teach them.”⁷¹

The family’s relocation to Chicago encouraged Dorothy to pursue both education and religion further. Much like Marge, Dorothy spent the majority of her childhood reading. Because of the nature of her father’s journalism job, for which he worked nights, Dorothy and her siblings had to stay quiet in their Chicago apartment. Reading became the Day children’s activity of choice, and it was by reading that Dorothy, like Marge, found the Church. Of these literary and religious influences, Dorothy writes, “There were no picture books, detective stories or what father termed ‘trash’ around the house. We had Scott, Hugo, Dickens, Stevenson, Cooper and Poe... The Psalms became part of my childhood... I remember coming across a volume of John Wesley’s sermons when I was thirteen and being strongly attracted to his evangelical piety.”⁷²

⁷⁰ Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of the Legendary Catholic Social Activist Dorothy Day* (New York, Harper & Row Publishers, 1952), 17.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 21.

⁷² *Ibid*, 25, 29.

As a child, Dorothy joined the Episcopal Church, which became the foundation of her later attraction to the Catholic Church. Of her childhood experience in the Church, Dorothy describes:

I went to church too every Sunday...I loved the Psalms and the Collect prayers and learned many of them by heart, and the anthems filled me with joy. I had never heard anything as beautiful as the *Benedicite* and the *Te Deum*....The song thrilled my heart, and though I was only ten years old, through these Psalms and canticles I called on all creation to join with me in blessing the Lord...Whenever I felt the beauty of the world in song or story, in the material universe around me, or glimpsed it in human love, I wanted to cry out with joy. The Psalms were an outlet for this enthusiasm of joy or grief – and I suppose my writing was also an outlet. After all, one must communicate ideas. I always felt the common unity of our humanity; the longing of the human heart is for this communion. If only I could sing, I thought, I would shout before the Lord, and call upon the world to shout with me, ‘All ye works of the Lord, bless ye the Lord, praise Him and glorify Him forever.’ My idea of heaven became one of fields and meadows, sweet with flowers and songs and melodies unutterable, in which even the laughing gull and the waves on the shore would play their part.⁷³

The preceding passage no doubt grabbed Marge Baroni’s attention as she first read *The Long Loneliness*. Just as Marge had done, Dorothy read her way into faith; along the same vein, however, is the contrary element of Dorothy’s narrative – she read her way out of faith and back again.

In her late teenage years and into her first two years of university in Illinois, Dorothy began exploring literature on the plight of the poor and issues of class divisions in America. Figures like Eugene Debs, “a great and noble labor leader of inspired utterance,” and leaders of the Industrial Workers of the World fascinated Dorothy. Similarly, her reading of Jack London’s *Martin Eden* and essays on class struggles, as well as Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* and numbers of other writers’ texts, provided Dorothy entrance into a hitherto unknown world. Of this realization, she writes, “Kropotkin especially brought to my mind the plight of the poor, of the workers, and though my only experience of the destitute was in books, the very fact that *The*

⁷³ *Ibid*, 29.

Jungle was about Chicago where I lived, whose streets I walked, made me feel that from then on my life was to be linked to theirs, their interests were to be mine; I had received a call, a vocation, a direction to my life.”⁷⁴

Dorothy soon found that she could not reconcile this call to serve the poor with the message of the Church as she knew it then. In a passage pivotal to this project for numerous reasons, namely its wealth of detail about Dorothy’s faith and activism journeys and its clear parallels with Marge Baroni’s own recounting of her own desire to reconcile faith and purpose, Dorothy explains the effect the disconnect between the Church and the needy had on her young-adult outlook:

I did not see anyone taking off his coat and giving it to the poor. I didn’t see anyone having a banquet and calling in the lame, the halt and the blind. And those who were doing it, like the Salvation Army, did not appeal to me. I wanted, though I did not know it then, a synthesis. I wanted life and I wanted the abundant life. I wanted it for others too. I did not want just the few, the missionary-minded people like the Salvation Army, to be kind to the poor, as the poor. I wanted everyone to be kind. I wanted every home to be open to the lame, the halt and the blind, the way it had been after the San Francisco earthquake. Only then did people really live, really love their brothers. In such love was the abundant life and I did not have the slightest idea how to find it.⁷⁵

In an effort to address what she saw as voids in the Church, Dorothy joined the Socialist Party and began to read the works of writers like Dostoevsky, Gorki, and Tolstoy. As she read her way into activism, she read her way out of the church. “I felt at the time that religion would only impede my work,” Dorothy writes. “I wanted to have nothing to do with the religion of those whom I saw all about me. I felt that I must turn from it as a drug. I felt it indeed to be an opiate of the people and not a very attractive one, so I hardened my heart. It was a conscious and deliberate process.”⁷⁶

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 38.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 39.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 43.

Disenchanted with the collegiate experience, Dorothy left the University of Illinois after two years and moved to New York City to begin her career as a journalist with the Socialist daily paper, *The Call*. The following years, which included the emergence of World War I, were a time of transience for Dorothy. Much like her father had done, she bounced from job to job working as a journalist for the Anti-Conscription League, a newspaper titled *The Masses*, and the Communist journal *The Liberator*. During these years, Dorothy worked with the protests of the suffragists in Washington, for which she had been arrested, an experience she credits with changing her forever. She also wrote and published her first novel, *The Eleventh Virgin* (1924).⁷⁷ As a part of this whirlwind series of years, Dorothy once again ended up in a Chicago tenement, which she rented from a Catholic family, the Barretts. Dorothy's relationship with this family led to her greatest moment of transformation and the most applicable parallel to Marge Baroni – her adult conversion to Catholicism.

Like Marge, Dorothy first considered Catholicism because it had been the faith of those individuals living around her. Dorothy writes that she used to watch the family leave daily for mass, and, on occasion, walked with them to the Catholic mission. To this end, she explains, "I felt that Catholicism was something rich and real and fascinating, but I felt outside, and though I went with them to the mission, it never occurred to them that I might want to talk to a priest."⁷⁸ She continues, "They were kind to me. I saw them wrestling with moral problems, with the principles by which they lived, and this made them noble in my eyes. I saw them pray, and the public prayer in the church and Blanche's kneeling down...As with the sight of Mrs. Barrett kneeling beside her bed, this posture, this gesture, convinced me that worship, adoration, thanksgiving, supplication – these were the noblest acts of which men were capable in this

⁷⁷ Day, *By Little and By Little*, xxi.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 106.

life.”⁷⁹ Although Dorothy remained a passive observer of Catholicism in practice, she began actively reading about the teachings of the Catholic Church; ultimately, just as Marge would later do, reading her way, once more, into the Church. “I read *En Route*, *The Oblate*, *The Cathedral*, and it was these books which made me feel that I too could be at home in the Catholic Church...I felt the age, the antiquity of the Mass, and here to find in Huysmans detailed instructions in regard to rubrics, all the complicated ritual, which was a great joy to me, so that I went more often to the Cathedral,” Dorothy writes of this beginning of her conversion process.⁸⁰ Although she began to value the Catholic Church, Dorothy did not convert until after the birth of her daughter, Tamar Teresa, in 1926.

It is not difficult to imagine how Marge Baroni found resonance in Dorothy’s narrative of intellectual exploration and religious conversion, especially when one considers that Marge read Dorothy’s work as a recent convert to Catholicism in the years immediately following her first child’s birth. While Marge had Father Harris to help her through the Catechumenate process, Dorothy had a nun, Sister Aloysia, whom she had seen walking past her home. Dorothy sought baptism for Tamar, but Sister Aloysia required that she learn the Baltimore Catechism, to say the rosary, and read texts like the *Imitation of Christ*, works of St. Augustine, and the New Testament before Tamar could be baptized. Even as Dorothy read her way into the Catholic Church, she still struggled with reconciling the politics and shortcomings of the Church with the needs of the poor and oppressed, as Marge would later struggle to reconcile the teachings of the Church and with issues of race when she first encountered Dorothy. “I loved the Church for Christ made visible,” she writes, “Not for itself.”⁸¹ Dorothy envisioned a way to help the poor without the context of Christian “charity,” without the support from the government that

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 107.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 141.

religious organizations so often received, an effort that would meet the poor, as they were, recognizing them as members in the Mystical Body of Christ. Dorothy had been confirmed in the Catholic Church for three years when Peter Maurin, a French peasant and Catholic theologian and philosopher, proposed an organization that would do just as Dorothy had desired – The Catholic Worker.

Dorothy and Peter Maurin founded the Catholic Worker Movement in 1933. The two had spent the winter and spring of 1932 dreaming up a new program of action meant to address the injustices of life for the “worker” on the coattails of the Great Depression from the perspective of the Catholic faith. An important distinction here is that both Dorothy and Peter had no desire to unite the Catholic Worker to the institutional Catholic Church. Maurin, the mastermind behind the Catholic Worker, advocated that the organization should have a four-fold objective – to publish a newspaper, facilitate round-table discussions, open and operate houses of hospitality, and create intentional farming communes. Maurin saw the purpose of the newspaper to be a method of disseminating his ideas about unemployment and ways to address this issue to a wider Catholic audience in order to “popularize the Personalist and Communitarian Revolution” and to encourage round-table discussion “for the clarification of thought.” Maurin’s personalist philosophy, which he had honed in France under the tutelage of philosopher Jacques Maritain, is best summarized as: “Feed the hungry for Christ’s sake, clothe the naked for Christ’s sake, as the first Christians used to do, which made the pagans say about the Christians, ‘See how they love one another?’”⁸²

Dorothy and Peter both lacked any trust for state-run charity organizations, thus it was their visions that communities of individuals working from a personalist perspective – with a distinctive Catholic faith – might make a more significant change for their brother or sister, the

⁸² William D. Miller, *Dorothy Day: A Biography* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row Publishers, 1982), 281.

worker. The houses of hospitality, which in time became iconic markers of Catholic Worker communitarian practice, were to be the “centers of parish life, hospices where the Works of Mercy could be practiced and craft schools starting.” The final proposition of the Catholic Worker structure espoused by Peter was for the creation of farming communities, places from which many of Marge Baroni’s acquaintances and allies in the Catholic Worker Movement would later write her to encourage a similar commune in Mississippi. These farming communities served to “restore the communal aspect of Christianity, and were to be in imitation of the Irish universities back in the tenth century to which men from all Europe came to live and study.”⁸³

In addition to constructing a blueprint for the Catholic Worker’s organization structure, Peter and Dorothy wanted the humanitarian and social justice efforts of the organization to be clear – to help the worker was to promote the wellness of the entire “mystical body of Christ.” In a 1957 article published in *The Catholic Worker* newsletter, J. Michael McCloskey writes succinctly and eloquently about how this concern for the worker as a member of the body of Christ was manifest in Catholic Worker life and work:

The Catholic Worker movement is not a movement of Catholic workers. Rather it is a movement of a few exceptional Catholics who go among the working and the poor. These are largely lay Catholics, and they go among the poor ‘not to save but to be saved.’ In the slum dweller, the skid-row alcoholic, and the prostitute they see Christ Himself... In helping those who so need help, the Catholic Workers are really being helped themselves for they are being given the opportunity to help out of love for Christ, those in who Christ stands, and in doing this they earn their own salvation... This mystical devotion to the poor in the tradition of St. Francis of Assisi and this deep spirituality are combined with a social consciousness and an activism of this world. The late Cardinal Suhard of Paris resolved the paradox in these words: ‘One cannot be a saint and live the Gospel we preach without spending oneself to provide everyone with the housing, employment, goods, leisure, education, etc. without which life is not human.’⁸⁴

⁸³ *Ibid*, 252.

⁸⁴ J. Michael McCloskey, “The Catholic Worker Movement,” *The Catholic Worker*, May 1957, 216-222.

Essentially, the Catholic Worker philosophy rested on five basic principles: biblical earnestness, personalist politics, solidarity with the poor through hospitality, living in community, and membership turnover.⁸⁵ These are the tenets balancing devout Catholic faith and a progressive activist stance on social justice issues that Marge Baroni encountered when she read Day's autobiography and subsequent Catholic Worker publications, including the organization's newsletter, *The Catholic Worker*, each of which encouraged her to consider how she, too, could serve the mystical body of Christ in the Natchez, Mississippi of the 1950s.

THE TIPPING POINT

Just as the Catholic Worker Movement seemed to find Dorothy Day at the moment she most needed a way to balance her faith with what she saw as the work of Christ in serving the poor, the Catholic Worker and Dorothy Day found Marge Baroni at a similar tipping point in her journeys of faith and activism. In an interview with Father Peter Hogan, Marge describes the discontent and disconnects with the Church she felt during her first years of confirmation and conversion. "As I've said before, when I began to realize that all this great stuff that we said we believed, we didn't act as if we believed, I was really shocked. And I didn't know what I was going to do about it."⁸⁶ Her readings of Dorothy's texts, Catholic Worker newsletters, and personalist philosophers offered a way to bridge those divides of thought and practice.

Beginning in the mid-1950s, Marge Baroni began shaping her personal philosophies on faith and social justice around the tenets of the Catholic Worker and the example of Dorothy

⁸⁵ Patrick G. Coy, "An Experiment in Personalist Politics: The Catholic Worker Movement and Nonviolent Action," *Peace and Change*, January 2001, Vol. 26, No. 1, 81.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

Day. Marge also began corresponding with other Catholic clergy and laypeople that were friendly to Catholic Worker ideologies about her explorations. In a letter from Father Harris, the priest who instructed Marge through her Catechumenate process, he comments specifically on this depth of philosophical inquiry Marge undertook during this period of enlightenment. “I am so glad you have found your way to Maurice Chesterton and those wonderful minds. There is a thrill in going deeper into the Church because one approaches the mind of God through His great thinkers. And even though no man is even near the Infinite Mind it does warm one to draw even a jot nearer to the flame.”⁸⁷ In that same letter, Father Harris presents clear evidence that Marge wrote often of Dorothy and Catholic Worker ideas in her correspondence with him. “I have heard [of] Dorothy Day and, years ago, Peter Maurin. I’m afraid goodness will always be radical because so few dare go deeper than the catechism. The Saints were all considered screw balls in their day because they didn’t play the same way others did. When faith grows cold the world gets less daring. They dare to go to outer space by rockets but don’t believe strongly enough to go further by prayer.”⁸⁸

Throughout the late 1950s, Marge developed and practiced a faith that was anything but cold. A critical element to this progress in Marge’s faith and activism was her personal relationship with Dorothy and her organizational connections with Catholic clergy, laypeople, and other members of the Catholic Worker network. As mentioned earlier, Marge began corresponding with Dorothy in the years immediately following her reading of *The Long Loneliness*. Although not all of their correspondence is available in archives, the documents that are accessible paint a clear picture of a friendship driven by a shared sense of faith and purpose. In one of the earliest letters available to researchers, postmarked November 8, 1957, Dorothy

⁸⁷ Letter from Father Harris to Marge Baroni, St. Joseph Hospice, Jemez Springs, NM Aug. 19, 1958, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

writes to Marge as a friend, detailing her own activities and encouraging Marge's continued intellectual and spiritual exploration:

Dear Marge – (We are Christians and must call each other by our Christian names.) Thank you for your good letter! But do keep in touch if only by an occasional card. I have had a few sad experiences in the past of going to people who were no longer interested or who had become definitely antagonistic over one or another issue. Today is my 60th birthday and I am celebrating it by being in Washington to take part in a prayer vigil before the White House against nuclear weapons testing. And today the members of the White Citizen's Councils are picketing them to protest the imprisonment of Casper of infamous deed! So I ask your prayers. There is no time with god, and prayer is retroactive. The group here is all denominations. Are you a member of any Third Order? Do you know the Little Sisters of Jesus of Chas. de Foucault? Have you read *Seeds of the Desert* by Voillanne? Magnificent spiritual reading. (You see you have to answer sooner or later.) In Christ – Dorothy Day⁸⁹

Many of Dorothy's letters to Marge indicate that Marge wrote to Dorothy often.⁹⁰ Most of the letters in the collection are postcards from Dorothy, with a stamped prayer on one side and a personal note on the other.

In an oral history interview, both Louis Baroni and Mary Jane Baroni Tarver discussed at length the impact that Dorothy's example and friendship had in Marge's life. According to Louis, the two Catholic activists were great friends who never had "small talk." "It was always [about] something that really mattered," remarks Louis. "They talked about religion. Oh yeah, when Dorothy talks she would always bring in God."⁹¹ Dorothy visited Marge and the Baroni family three times in Natchez from the late 1950s through the 1960s. On one visit, Mary Jane

⁸⁹ Letter from Dorothy Day to Marge Baroni, November 8, 1957, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

⁹⁰ Unfortunately, many of the letters sent from Marge to Dorothy are unavailable in the Marjorie R. Baroni Collection of the Special Collections Library at the University of Mississippi. When Susan Sullivan began constructing the collection, using documents given to her and the university by Louis Baroni, she consulted the Dorothy Day Collection at Marquette University. The librarians at Marquette recognized Marge Baroni's name from numerous letters and publications of Dorothy's, and they sent some of these letters to the Marjorie R. Baroni Collection. These letters, however, do not reveal as thorough a portrait of the two women's correspondence and discourse as documents at Marquette's collection might have. In future projects, trips to the Marquette and Catholic Worker archives will be helpful in contributing more evidence that could fill some gaps in Dorothy and Marge's correspondence.

⁹¹ Louis Baroni, Interview with Susan Sullivan and Tim Murphy, February 7, 2000, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

Baroni Tarver remembers that Dorothy bought her and her siblings all ice cream cones from the local grocery store while on a walk. Mary Jane also remembers Dorothy's presence in their home and friendship with her mother fondly. "I've got a picture of her and us...She was very gentle, soft-spoken, generous...Mother was obviously extremely pleased to have her there." Mary Jane continues, "I think mother had probably had a secret desire to do something like that [Dorothy Day's work with the Catholic Worker], [but] she was never free to because of us. I think that really appealed to her greatly just to go and...the poor was always a concern for her as well." Mary Jane continues, "Like I said when she first became Catholic it was a fad but I think eventually that her faith blossomed and really came to fruition it was because of the teachings of Jesus and the poor, being always with us. And I think that was pretty much a central thing with her and the church should, maybe it didn't always but should, be there for that."⁹² In addition to Dorothy's visits to Natchez, the entire Baroni family took a summer vacation with Dorothy to the Catholic Worker Farm on the Hudson River in Tivoli, New York. Of the experience, Louis remembers, "It's quite an interesting place. You know, they have a garden and the Hudson was just next to the house and we just mingled with the people there. And of course Marge and Dorothy had their conversations...they both believed in human rights...they believed in the same things."⁹³

As Louis alludes, Dorothy Day's influence on Marge's perspectives on faith and activism is unmistakable. Both women recognize the effects of their unique friendship in their personal and public writings. In many essays, penned for personal use, Marge gives due credit to Dorothy and the Catholic Worker Movement, saying, in one such letter, "I have the Catholic worker, and

⁹² Mary Jane Tarver, Interview with Susan Sullivan and Tim Murphy, February 9, 2000, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

⁹³ Louis Baroni, Interview with Susan Sullivan and Tim Murphy, February 7, 2000, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

specifically you, Dorothy to thank for [my] new perspectives.”⁹⁴ In her own writings, Dorothy reciprocated Marge’s admiration and praised the work Marge undertook in the Natchez civil rights movement when she says, “Dear Marge, Do excuse my long silence – but I’ve been thinking of you and our plans for the South – a farm in Mississippi somewhere between Natchez and Fayette. Idle dreams maybe but your energies and desires to serve the Lord, your love of people and interracial justice should find expression... You have been a voice in the wilderness and a shining light to the blind!”⁹⁵ During the civil rights years, Dorothy and Marge wrote back and forth continuously, planning visits, meetings, and participation in movement activities, such as the freedom rides in the summer of 1961.⁹⁶

Throughout the latter half of the 1950s, Marge joined an intricate network of allies, seeking, in each new relationship, to find a community that both valued the leadership and example of Dorothy and the Catholic Worker and wanted to address the racial issues in Natchez. In doing so, she began building relationships with the clergy and congregation of the Holy Family Church, the African American parish in Natchez, and with two Josephite priests, Father William Danahy and Father William Morrissey. Of her relationship with Bill Danahy, which began over a mutual interest in and knowledge of the Catholic Worker Movement, Marge writes, “Yeah, he came to the hospital. He was making some calls...and I was there, and he said...something that Peter Maurin said...[he] was the co-founder with Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker. And I felt that anybody who knew who Peter Maurin was must be somebody I needed to know, and so I started cultivating his acquaintance.” She continues, “Father Danahy,

⁹⁴ Marge Baroni, Undated and unsent letter to Dorothy Day, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

⁹⁵ Undated letter from Dorothy Day to Marge Baroni. See also Susan Sullivan’s “Marjorie Baroni: Ordinary Southern Woman, Extraordinary Activist,” delivered as a Brown Bag Lecture at the Center for the Study of Southern Culture, October 4, 2000, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

⁹⁶ Undated letters from Dorothy Day to Marge Baroni, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

he was just a twin spirit. He was somebody that I really needed because he felt...the racial injustices...of Natchez, as I did.”⁹⁷ Marge’s relationships with Fathers Danahy and Morrissey and the Holy Family Church are significant in understanding how she applied the principles of her faith to the practice of her activism, how Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker encouraged her work, and how her ties to the Church became a jumping-off point for her greater movement-related activism.

THE CATHOLIC WORKER AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

In addition to revealing the depth and importance of Marge and Dorothy’s friendship in both women’s lives, the correspondence between the two women and others sympathetic to both the civil rights movement and the Catholic Worker also illuminate the extent to which the Catholic Worker focused on the civil rights movement in its efforts throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Very little of the extensive scholarship on Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker examines the connections between the two movements. This oversight voids a historically significant element of the Catholic Worker story – its relevancy to activist-minded Catholics who applied the Worker principles on personalism and pacifism to other social movements. Similarly, the lack of attention given to Dorothy and the Catholic Worker’s immediate efforts in the South throughout the movement years and coverage of the movement through articles in *The Catholic Worker* newsletter in the 1950s and 1960s limits scholars’ understandings of the scale of the Catholic Worker during this time.

⁹⁷ Marge Baroni, Interview with Peter E. Hogan, SSJ, February 11, 1977, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

As it was for all Americans, the 1950s and 1960s were decades of considerable change in the efforts of the Catholic Worker and Dorothy Day. When Dorothy and Peter Maurin founded the Catholic Worker in 1933, they focused their efforts and editorials published in *The Catholic Worker* on addressing economic issues and unemployment because those were the “fundamental human problems of sin, sickness, and death” affecting the people the Catholic Worker served.⁹⁸ By the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Catholic Worker and Dorothy Day were forced by the currents of change sweeping the world to shift their focuses away from economic issues to address the realities of war, revolution, mass armament, and racial violence. Historians of the Catholic Worker Movement have primarily focused their research on the Catholic Worker’s direct response, through articles published in *The Catholic Worker*, to Fidel Castro’s Cuban Revolution and the many ways Catholic Workers attempted to reconcile their support for communism and pacifism in the face of large-scale violence and nuclear threats on the global level. Historians have also focused on Dorothy’s extensive traveling during this time – to Cuba to witness and report back on the people affected by the revolution, to Rome for portions of the Second Vatican Council, and to London to speak at a British Catholic peace conference.⁹⁹

However, there is little mention of the responses of the Catholic Worker and Dorothy Day to the civil rights movement in any of the texts within the canon of Catholic Worker history. This is a significant oversight. As had been the case with most social, political, or economic issues addressed by the Catholic Worker and Dorothy Day, *The Catholic Worker* newsletter became a forum for an extensive discourse on race, Catholic faith, and the civil rights movement. Marge Baroni kept many of these newsletters and their inclusion in her collection at the University of Mississippi is an excellent resource for students of the Catholic Worker response to

⁹⁸ William D. Miller, *A Harsh and Dreadful Love*, 302.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 310.

domestic issues in the civil rights era. The first article to address these issues was Clinton Herrick's "Segregation and the New Testament," printed in the July-August 1958 edition of *The Catholic Worker*. Herrick's article is an attempt to provide a scriptural response to segregation, in which he writes, "Segregation is diametrically opposed to the Christian law of love...Because segregation means all these things – it is unjustly discriminating; it jealously prevents a large segment of the population from outgrowing their position of social, educational, and economic inferiority; and it is cruelly damaging to the self-respect of free men and children of God – segregation and Christianity are incompatible. The sincere Christian cannot be a segregationist."¹⁰⁰

The Catholic Worker contributors not only used the newsletter to advance theological positions on the issues of segregation and racial injustice, but also announced future movement events to its readership. In prelude to the 1961 Freedom Rides, *The Catholic Worker* published a notice entitled "Ride for Freedom," which announced the dates and plans of the Freedom Rides, comparing the effort to the 1947 Journey of Reconciliation, and highlighted significant elements of the nonviolent riders' plans – to penetrate into the deep south, challenge segregation not only aboard buses but in terminal facilities, and to remain in jail rather than accept release on bail or payment of fines.¹⁰¹

Catholic Worker contributors who responded to the Freedom Rides notice by joining with the movement relayed several of their experiences back to *The Catholic Worker* readership throughout the early 1960s. In the July-August 1961 edition of *The Catholic Worker*, a front-page article read "Report From a Freedom Rider" and detailed Freedom Rider Felix Singer's violent experience in Mississippi's Parchman Penitentiary. "I was thrown off [a truck]...[and]

¹⁰⁰ Clinton Herrick, "Segregation and the New Testament" in *The Catholic Worker*, Vol. XXV No. 1, 3, 7., Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

¹⁰¹ The Catholic Worker, "Ride for Freedom," *The Catholic Worker*, Volume and Date unknown.

dragged by the arms, body prone, across wet grass, pebbles, mud, cement into the building...our clothes were ripped violently off us. I was poked a half dozen times with an electric ‘cattle shocker.’”¹⁰² In the following September 1961 edition of the newsletter, Phillip Harvey documented his time in southern prisons in “Notes Between the Bars.” Dorothy had mentioned Harvey’s imprisonment to Marge in a letter detailing her desire to join a Freedom Ride. “I’m afraid I’ll be diplomatic once again and skip a visit if I come in the Fall on a Freedom Ride with a group for the [Catholic Worker],” Dorothy writes. “We have one. Phillip Harvey at Parchman now. Pray for him. We do want to do penance and join with others in suffering for our brothers.”¹⁰³ Harvey’s article illuminates a reality of the ecumenical backgrounds of many activists who ended up in prisons together, as well as the Catholic Worker presence within the ranks of these faith-driven activists, when he describes how individuals shared their faith with one another:

The lack of reading materials did not effect [sic] the Freedom Riders for we were already under maximum security regulations which restricted our reading to the few editions of the Bible that could be passed from cell to cell...In the large dormitory of the work camp we began organizing seminars on the Bible and various other topics from that area of existence beyond the walls that we jokingly called “real life.” I spoke both of the Catholic Worker and non-violence as a way of life. Much of the discussion centered around the integration problem...I felt that segregation restricted the gradual evolution of the Mystical Body of Christ.¹⁰⁴

The Freedom Rider and southern prison experiences were also well-documented in “Mississippi and ‘MOM’” by Terry Sullivan in the November 1961 edition of *The Catholic Worker*.¹⁰⁵

Aside from just informing *The Catholic Worker* readers on the volatility of the early civil rights years, Dorothy Day and the leadership of the Catholic Worker encouraged individuals to

¹⁰² Felix Singer, “Report From a Freedom Rider,” *The Catholic Worker*, Vol. XXVIII No. 1, 1, 6.

¹⁰³ Undated postcard from Dorothy Day to Marge Baroni, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

¹⁰⁴ Phillip Harvey, “Notes Between the Bars,” *The Catholic Worker*, Vol. XXVIII No. 2. 1-3.

¹⁰⁵ Terry Sullivan, “Mississippi and ‘MOM’,” *The Catholic Worker*, Vol. XXVIII No. 4.

join the movement. In the December 1961 issues of *The Catholic Worker* Dorothy Day issued “A Call to Action” in which she explains, “As the civil rights movement extends itself into the rural South, an area still largely unaffected by civil rights gains, it will shift its major concern from desegregation of social facilities to attack the economic and political bases of discrimination.” Dorothy continues in asking for Catholic Worker participation in the movement. “The movement will have an increasing need for independents who can pull up their roots and live for periods of time with families in depressed Southern rural areas. This will entail working with them in the fields and sharing all their life conditions.”¹⁰⁶ From 1961 to 1963, pages of *The Catholic Worker* are filled with editorials varying from “The Race Problem and the Christian Conscience” and “Criminal Anarchy in the South” to direct coverage of and responses to critical events in the movement like Peter Dargis’, “Reflection on Birmingham” in 1963.¹⁰⁷ In addition to contributors from outside of the South, *The Catholic Worker* often published letters and editorials by those within the region – most notably Marge Baroni, who contributed a number of articles and letters over the years.¹⁰⁸

Before Marge encountered Dorothy Day and the *Catholic Worker* she needed to know what the Catholic church taught about race. She needed a way to reconcile her faith with the world around her. Dorothy’s own pilgrimage of faith, her writing on the philosophies of an activist Catholic faith, and personal friendship provided Marge with a compass for directing her

¹⁰⁶ *The Catholic Worker*, “A Call to Action,” *The Catholic Worker*, Vol. XXVIII No. 5, 1, 8.

¹⁰⁷ Fr. Phillip F. Berrigan, SSJ, “The Race Problem and The Christian Conscience,” *The Catholic Worker* Vol. XXVIII No. 5, 1, 4-8; Edgar Forand, “Criminal Anarchy in the South,” *The Catholic Worker* Vol. XXVIII No. 10, May 1962, 1-3; Peter Dargis, “Reflection on Birmingham,” *The Catholic Worker*, Vol. Unknown, October 1963.

¹⁰⁸ Although we know that Marge did write articles and letters for *The Catholic Worker* there are no copies of those issues available in the resources I was able to use. Future projects will include finding these resources in order to compose a better picture of exactly what Marge was contributing to *The Catholic Worker* and the ways it informed readers of the goings-on in the South during the civil rights movement. See also, Susan Sullivan, “Marjorie Baroni: Ordinary Southern Woman, Extraordinary Activist,” delivered as part of the Brown Bag Lecture Series at the Center for the Study of Southern Culture, October 4, 2000, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

own course of faith-driven activism. Drawing from the lessons and guidance provided by Dorothy and the Catholic Worker, Marge's belief in "an open approach to the wide, wide world, and to the overriding truth that we believed essential to the free personalist – that of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man" inspired and directed her activism throughout the years of the civil rights movement.¹⁰⁹

As the 1950s progressed and the 1960s began, the rumbles of Montgomery's successful bus boycott and college students' brave sit-ins at lunch counters across the South began reaching the ears of those primed for social action in Mississippi. Marge waited at the ready for an opportunity to act. This readiness represents the culmination of her enlightenment phase and the beginning of the maturation process of her journeys of faith and activism. By the time the civil rights movement reached Natchez, Marge's faith had matured to a point at which she was prepared to lead the activist Catholic community in the fight for equal rights and racial justice for all of her brothers and sisters in the mystical Body of Christ.

¹⁰⁹ Marge Baroni, Personal Papers, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

CHAPTER IV

MATURATION: A CHANGING CHURCH IN A CHANGING SOUTH

The decade 1947 to 1957 had been a time of incredible growth in Marge Baroni's journeys of faith and activism. From her conversion to Catholicism to the enlightenment she experienced in learning about and adopting Catholic activist philosophies under the influence of Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker, Marge's faith had matured to a point where her religious beliefs and convictions were inextricably bound to her social conscience and worldview. Dorothy Day's example had been a powerful one in her pilgrimage, and the year 1957 became an important time for Marge to live out her belief. This was the year when Marge's belief in a Catholic faith that required action came to fruition and her involvement in the Natchez civil rights movement began.

One particular anecdote from this period illustrates this maturation of a faith requiring action in Marge's life. In 1957, a female parishioner of the Holy Family Catholic Church was shot and killed only blocks from the church on East Franklin Street in Natchez. As was often the case in the Jim Crow South, the black and white communities, as well as the police, knew the identity of the man who had shot the woman. *The Natchez Democrat* had even run a cover story about the murder. Still, nothing had been done to bring the woman's killer to justice. This was too much for Marge, who had recently worked as the women's page editor at the newspaper, so she decided to directly petition Natchez's mayor, Troy Watkins, who agreed to speak with her.

Marge did not tell Mayor Watkins that she had recently quit working at the paper knowing that he would be more willing to talk if she had the weight of *The Natchez Democrat* behind her. Promising Marge the truth – strictly off the record – Mayor Watkins went on to say that while the police department knew who had killed the woman, they could never get an indictment. This stalemate frustrated Marge, and, in a pivotal moment, Marge chose to make her stand against the Natchez establishment for the first time. Marge recalls this encounter, “I said, you know, we really need to have a discussion between the races in Natchez...because we are going to have a lot of trouble...[and] this thing is going to explode.” When Mayor Watkins asked who was going to facilitate such a discussion, Marge replied, “Well, you are. You are the mayor of this town.” To which Watkins answered, “No. That would be the kiss of death, political suicide.” “Well,” Marge said, “I will do it.”¹¹⁰ And she did.

Though her first efforts in movement activities were muted and behind closed doors, they are of pivotal import to this project. In examining who Marge worked with in these years as well as what these groups of people sought to accomplish, what becomes clear is that Natchez’s activist community centered, atypically, around the black Catholic Church, Holy Family, and its leadership, Fathers William Danahy and William Morrissey. Beginning in the late 1950s, the Catholic leadership of the black Natchez community laid the groundwork for later campaigns of the city’s movement which began as the organizations of the national civil rights movement arrived in Natchez in 1962. Understanding this pivotal time in the Natchez movement’s history, as well as the people who directed these actions, is critical in revealing sites of conflict deserving of further study – the experience of black Catholic Churches in the South, how their leadership,

¹¹⁰ Marge Baroni, Personal Papers, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

Josephite priests, responded to the social changes of the civil rights movement, and the greater changes of the Catholic Church in relationship to the decrees of the Second Vatican Council.

CHANGE AND THE SOUTHERN CATHOLIC EXPERIENCE

Although the fact is often overlooked, Roman Catholicism in the American South has a history as long as the European colonization of the region. As Spanish and French explorers entered the area now known as the South in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, they brought their Roman Catholic faith with them. The first Roman Catholic diocese in what is now known as the United States' territories was established in Puerto Rico in 1511. As explorers moved up through Florida and the Gulf of Mexico toward the areas which are now Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana, they were accompanied by priests who established parishes for their parties to worship and missions in attempts to convert Native Americans in the region to Catholicism.¹¹¹ Beginning with these Spanish and French explorers, the Roman Catholic Church has always been a church of immigrants. The second wave of immigrants to reach the South arrived on March 4, 1634. This group of Catholic noblemen, accompanied by Jesuit missionaries, left Europe to escape religious persecution as a result of the Protestant Reformation and established St. Mary's City and the Maryland colony as a haven for Catholics seeking religious freedom. Baltimore, the eventual capital of Maryland, has been the Archdiocesan see, or highest authority of the Church next to the Pope, of the American Catholic Church since Pope

¹¹¹ Chester Gillis, *Roman Catholicism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 49.

Pius VI confirmed Father John Carroll as Bishop of the Thirteen United States of North America on June 6, 1874.¹¹²

Because the Catholic Church in America was the church of immigrants, the spread of Catholicism throughout the American South, likewise, follows the region's immigration patterns. Port cities like Baltimore, Maryland; Savannah, Georgia; St. Augustine, Florida; Mobile, Alabama; New Orleans, Louisiana; Natchez, Mississippi; and Galveston, Texas became major Catholic hubs as waves of Italian, French, and Spanish immigrants entered the region in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. Catholic historian Randall Miller avers that the immigrant nature of the American Catholic church has, more than anything else, "shaped the social and cultural contours of American Catholicism and fixed its place in American consciousness." Miller continues, "For much of its history in the [South], Catholicism also has been at odds with the dominant religious culture."¹¹³ While Catholicism became the majority religion of the North by 1860, Catholicism remained a perimeter faith in the South. Miller explains that "because the evangelical mold already had set by the time Catholic immigrants found their way to southern cities in the 1840s and 1850s," it is "impossible to understand southern Catholicism except in terms of its response to the pervasive evangelical culture of the South and that culture's response to it."¹¹⁴

The Natchez Catholic community is a useful case study in examining how southern Catholics sought to reconcile their dual identities. Established as the Catholic Diocesan see of Mississippi on July 28, 1837, the Catholic Church in Natchez thrived as waves of Spanish, French, and Italian immigrants moved to the southwest Mississippi river city in the nineteenth

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 53-55.

¹¹³ Randall M. Miller, "Catholics in a Protestant World: The Old South Example" in *Varieties of Southern Religious Experience*, ed. Sam Hill (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 115.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

and twentieth centuries. These groups of Catholic immigrants joined with the long-established Catholic community present in Natchez since French Catholic missionaries settled among the Natchez native communities in 1698. The city of Natchez had been established by these French missionaries and other French immigrants in 1705. Later in the century, the city would be controlled by the Spanish. The city's strategic location on the bluffs of the Mississippi River allowed Natchez to flourish as a lucrative port for shipping the region's cotton and other exports around the world at the height of the cotton trade. The explosion of cotton wealth that occurred in the Deep South after the invention of the cotton gin in the 1840s and 1850s significantly changed the population and wealth of the Natchez Catholic community. Although never a majority, Catholics have been an important and powerful community in Natchez throughout its history because of this legacy of wealth. At the heart of the Natchez Catholic community was St. Mary's Parish, also known as the Natchez Cathedral, which was completed in the mid-1850s thanks in large part to the wealth of its parishioners. Because of the influx of both wealthy and working-class migrants to Natchez, the economic and ethnic demographics of Natchezians ran the gamut.

While the Natchez Catholic community consisted of families of varied economic and ethnic backgrounds – Italians, Poles, Irish, Germans, and French – the community found unity in their shared religious faith. Because of the anti-Catholic sentiments often expressed by other dominant Protestant faith communities, the Catholic community in Natchez created its social structure in order for the area's Catholic citizens to live their faith freely. Historian Michael V. Namorato speaks to this reality in his text, *The Catholic Church in Mississippi, 1911-1984: A History*. "Catholics did, indeed, face and overcome prejudice and ignorance on an individual basis and more. To a large extent, this sustains even more the importance of the Catholic schools,

Catholic charities, and the Catholic hospitals.” Namorato explains that these Catholic institutions, which made up the nucleus of Catholic life in Natchez, “represented the Mississippi Catholic Church’s way of reaching out...[and] evangelizing to those around them,” as well as a way to operate independently as Catholics in the South.¹¹⁵ Namorato is also careful to highlight that the Catholic Church in Mississippi did not exist in a vacuum; rather, the Church constantly changed in response to the social, political, and religious forces in southern culture throughout its history.

Namorato’s point is evident in Marge Baroni’s life and activism within the Natchez Catholic community. As exceptional a character as Marge Baroni is in the early civil rights movement in Natchez, her importance in and effect on movement activities must be understood in direct relationship to the changing nature of the Catholic Church in the years immediately preceding, and of, the civil rights era in the American South. Echoing Randall Miller’s claims on the duality of southern Catholic identity, historian Andrew Moore explains that Catholics in the South during the mid-twentieth century were in the peculiar circumstance of being a double minority – Catholic in the Protestant Bible Belt, and southern in the greater American Catholic community. Moore, in his text *The South’s Tolerable Alien*, describes that this “dilemma facing white Catholics in the predominantly Protestant South,” was to find a way to be both “good Catholics and good citizens in a region that was divided by race and defined by at least nominal adherence to one of a variety of Protestant denominations.”¹¹⁶ Moore continues in arguing that for much of the early twentieth century, southern Catholics walked a narrow line between societal acceptance and staunch regionally-specific anti-Catholicism, which he attributes to a

¹¹⁵ Michael V. Namorato, *The Catholic Church in Mississippi, 1911-1984: A History* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), xv.

¹¹⁶ Andrew S. Moore, *The South’s Tolerable Alien: Roman Catholics in Alabama and Georgia, 1945 – 1970* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 1.

uniquely Protestant need to distinguish the South as “the last bastion of Protestant America and the last region to flaunt religious prejudice as central to group identity.”¹¹⁷

Moore’s statements are even more pointed when one considers that Natchez, known as the city “where the Old South still lives,” continued to be the hub of Ku Klux Klan activity in Mississippi throughout the mid-twentieth century and annually celebrated its Old South heritage with the Natchez Pilgrimage celebration. Danny Duncan Collum, an oral historian who studies the Holy Family Church in Natchez, speaks to these religious and cultural differences facing southern Catholics in relationship to the Natchez Catholic community:

The conflicting claims of local culture and custom set against the principles of a universal church kept Mississippi Catholics in some tension with their surroundings throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We can add to all of the above the fact that predominantly Catholic ethnic groups – such as Italians and Lebanese – were sometimes considered ‘not quite white’ in a racist’s hierarchy of skin tones, and were certainly viewed as ‘foreign’ in the Southern context. Then, in its early twentieth-century revival, the Ku Klux Klan lumped Catholics in with blacks and Jews as enemies of ‘white Christian civilization.’ Meanwhile, the growth of African American Catholic missions and schools was creating a population of educated black Catholics who expected to look white people in the eye as equals, and saw no reason to accept that second-class status.¹¹⁸

All of these regionally-specific tensions were at play in the Natchez Catholic community as Marge Baroni began to realize how she might apply her activism-oriented Catholic faith to the racial conflicts burgeoning in her city. This strange amalgamation of religious and societal tensions came to a head in the early 1960s with the confluence of changing racial forces, occurring in conjunction with the civil rights movement, in the South and sweeping reforms in the theology and practice of the greater American Roman Catholic Church.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹¹⁸ Danny Duncan Collum, *Black and Catholic in the Jim Crow South: The Stuff That Makes Community* (New York: Paulist Press, 2006), 6.

VATICAN II

Indeed, when Marge Baroni began to act for racial equality based on the convictions she developed while converting to Catholicism and adopting tenets of Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement, she placed herself squarely in the middle of these changing worlds – the South and the Catholic Church. As Andrew Moore explains, not only did southern Catholics – regardless of their stance on the civil rights movement – find themselves in the whirlwinds of racial change sweeping through the South, they were also being affected by changes imposed on the Catholic Church as a result of the Second Vatican Council.

Commonly referred to as Vatican II, the Second Vatican Council had been convened by Pope John XXIII in 1962 for the purpose of studying the Catholic Church's role in the modern world and served as the catalyst for vast transformations in the approach of the Catholic Church to social issues. The Second Vatican Council, comprised of clergy members from across the world, including two local Natchez priests, met periodically at Vatican City in Rome, Italy from 1962 to 1965. Catholic historian Andrew Greeley writes that Vatican II was “the Catholic Revolution.” Greeley avers, “The Catholic Revolution began on October 13, 1962... With the support of Pope John XXIII, this *event* became the equivalent of the storming of the Bastille. The Council fathers began to realize that they could overcome the entrenched power of the Roman Curia. It would be possible to change the Church, not drastically, it seemed to them, but in certain important areas like liturgy, ecumenism, the interpretation of Scripture, attitudes towards Jews, and religious freedom. With the realization that they had the power to remake the Church, the bishops were swept by a euphoria.”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Revolution: New Wine, Old Wineskins, and the Second Vatican Council* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 191.

As a result of the council, the Catholic Church introduced sweeping liturgical reforms. Most notably, allowing for the celebration of the mass in vernacular in the place of the traditional Latin service. The bishops comprising the council also recognized and affirmed the right of every Catholic to exercise his or her own religious freedom, including which parish he or she, regardless of color, chose to attend. Consequently, the council decreed, “Catholics should be governed by their conscience and ‘immune from coercion by individuals, social groups and every human power’ so that they would not be ‘forced to act against their own convictions.’”¹²⁰ In one of the most challenging shifts for Catholics in the American South, Vatican II “reinterpreted the nature of the Church as ‘the people of God,’” rather than a hierarchal institution, “a reform that emboldened Catholics to identify more closely with the disadvantaged, the marginalized, and the underprivileged.”¹²¹

Although the reforms of Vatican II caused a reordering and reimagining of Catholic belief and practice across the world, the convergence of the council with the sweeping social challenges occurring in relation to the civil rights movement in the American South put both black and white southern Catholics in a position of theological and social limbo. In writing about the southern Catholic response to Vatican II in Atlanta, Andrew Moore highlights this friction of belief and practice southern Catholics navigated through in the civil rights years:

For Catholics, the Second Vatican Council has often been portrayed as a liberating phenomenon, both legitimating and encouraging activism. It certainly was that. But for southern Catholic liberals, conciliar reforms were of secondary importance. They took time and special preparation to implement. The civil rights movement created immediate opportunities and provoked visceral reactions. It released white liberals from the restrictive boundaries of segregation and actually freed them to implement Catholic social doctrine. So for them, the civil rights movement, reinforced by the reforms of Vatican II, became a ‘white freedom struggle’ as well as a black one.¹²²

¹²⁰ Andrew S. Moore, “Practicing What We Preach: White Catholics and the Civil Rights Movement in Atlanta” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* (Fall 2005): 336-337.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *Ibid.*

Southern responses to Vatican II were varied. In urban centers like Atlanta, Georgia and Richmond, Virginia, diocesan bishops and liberal lay Catholics promoted the reforms of Vatican II through congregational and parochial school integration efforts, while more isolated and rural Catholic communities like Natchez delayed integration until after the civil rights movement.¹²³

For many southern Catholic liberals who, throughout the 1940s and 1950s, were frustrated in their failed efforts to “bring their church in line with Catholic social teaching against segregation,” the Vatican II decrees provided an institutional mandate for the change they had been unable to bring about in previous decades.¹²⁴ For other southern Catholics, the gospel of openness and racial inclusion being professed by the institutional Church revived and cemented the segregationist attitudes held over from the Jim Crow years. Regardless of the Catholic individual’s personal response to Vatican II, the combination of the Catholic reforms with the American civil rights movement drew southern Catholics into the center of a theological and social hurricane of thought and change. Because of this, Andrew Moore claims, “Catholics’ religious identity could not be separated from opposition to or support of racial reform and the black freedom struggle.”¹²⁵ This was no doubt the case in Marge Baroni’s Catholic community in Natchez.

The Natchez Catholic community had been directly, yet divergently affected by the changes wrought by Vatican II, as the calls for openness and non-discrimination in the Mississippi Church grew louder. In speaking of the white Catholic response to Vatican II reform in Natchez, Danny Duncan Collum remarks, “The proclamations of Vatican II did not make white Mississippi Catholics forsake their segregationist leaning. In fact, the church’s eventual

¹²³ Mark Newman, “Desegregation in the Catholic Diocese of Richmond, 1945-1973” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* (2009): 356.

¹²⁴ Andrew Moore, “Practicing What We Preach,” 336.

¹²⁵ Andrew Moore, *The South’s Tolerable Alien*, 7.

support for integration created deep division throughout the state. But Vatican II did make the rest of the U.S. Church less tolerant of conditions in the South.”¹²⁶ Andrew Moore also speaks to this shift in the Catholic social conscience and how it affected southern Catholics. “The modern, post-Vatican II Church was forced to sort out the moral implications of a relatively newfound social ethic that undermined racial discrimination. In a place of hierarchical authority came the promise of racial equality for black Catholics – the Church as the ‘people of God’ – a notion that many whites refused to acknowledge.”¹²⁷

Another effect of this nation-wide shift in Catholic theology and social thought was that, much like the way the civil rights movement brought students and activists from various cities throughout the nation to the South, the same types of movement occurred within the post-Vatican II Catholic Church. To this end, Collum explains, “Catholic priests, nuns and laypeople, inspired by Vatican II, joined the army of activists intent on changing the South.”¹²⁸ Many of these liberal-minded Catholic men and women came to the greater Natchez area to work with the Holy Family Catholic Church, where they became Marge Baroni’s allies in the fight for civil rights in the local community.

¹²⁶ Danny Duncan Collum, *Black and Catholic in the Jim Crow South*, 6.

¹²⁷ Andrew Moore, *The South’s Tolerable Alien*, 7.

¹²⁸ Danny Duncan Collum, *Black and Catholic in the Jim Crow South*, 6.

THE HOLY FAMILY CHURCH AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NATCHEZ MOVEMENT

The Holy Family Catholic Church, founded in 1890 as the first black parish in the state of Mississippi, is also one of the first Josephite parishes established in the nation. The Josephite brothers, an order of Catholic priests whose ministry focused exclusively on their work within African American communities, began as the St. Joseph's Society of the Sacred Heart for Foreign Missions, founded in Mill Hill, England in 1866 by the Reverend Herbert Vaughan.¹²⁹ Because so many black Americans still lived in the South during the post-emancipation years, Josephite priests established missions, churches, and schools throughout the region in an effort to “preserve the faith of the relative handful of black Catholics in the United States and to win converts among nonchurched and Protestant Afro-Americans.”¹³⁰

One of the priorities of Josephite priests and churches, as well as white Catholic parishes, throughout the South was to establish parochial schools in their communities so that black children in the area could receive a quality education. In Natchez, the Fathers and Sisters of the Holy Family Church established the St. Francis School as the area's parochial school for black children. The school, in addition to the Church, made Holy Family a fixture of the Natchez African American neighborhood. This relationship to the community became pivotal in the early years of civil rights. One Natchezian, Joe Frazier, writes about his experience as a student at St. Francis. “Many of the prominent black people in Natchez, even many that did not become Catholic, went to Catholic school...The school had a ripple effect. A lot of people were educated by the nuns and priests at St. Francis School. They may or may not have joined the faith, but they carried back a lot of the teaching and a lot of the education that was given here and made a

¹²⁹ Stephen J. Ochs, *Desegregating the Altar: The Josephites and the Struggle for Black Priests, 1871-1960* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 3.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

contribution.”¹³¹ Another former student, Lavera Gibson Allen, comments that while she identified as a Baptist, she felt that because of her schooling at St. Francis, she had actually been raised Catholic. Allen writes, “I really grew up in the Catholic Church...we were part of all the teachings and everything that went along with the church because we were involved in the school...It was something you grew up with, so it became a habit.”¹³² Aside from the St. Francis schools ability to promote both Catholicism and education within the Natchez African American community, the school also made Holy Family the center of black life in the mid-century South.

In his case study of the Holy Family Catholic Church, *Black and Catholic in the Jim Crow South: The Stuff that Makes Community*, Danny Duncan Collum avers that the greater Natchez Catholic community, including the Holy Family congregation, was at “the center of Mississippi Catholicism” during the years of the Jim Crow South and the beginning of the civil rights movement. Collum continues, “Seen in this light, the Holy Family story can help us understand the Mississippi Church’s relationship with its African American people and the Church’s impact on race relations in the state.”¹³³ In his attempt to tell this story, Collum relies on oral histories to narrate the stories of Holy Family parishioners’ and allies’ experiences of activism in the civil rights movement, highlighting the importance of three individuals – Father William Morrissey, Mamie Mazique, and Marge Baroni. While many of the oral histories in Collum’s text provide useful information on the work of Father Morrissey, Mamie Mazique, and Marge, none of them compares to the detailed accounts of Holy Family’s work during this time period that Marge’s memoirs and papers provide.

Marge did not become affiliated with the Holy Family congregation and the work of Father Morrissey and Mamie Mazique until after she encountered and adopted the tenets of

¹³¹ Danny Duncan Collum, *Black and Catholic in the Jim Crow South*, 46.

¹³² *Ibid*, 49.

¹³³ *Ibid*, 2-4.

Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker. As mentioned in previous chapters, a mutual respect for Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin initially encouraged Marge to become friends with Father Danahy, who, at that time, in 1957, served in Natchez as the Josephite priest at the Holy Family church. Marge elaborates on the beginnings of her relationship with the Holy Family church in her papers. “The Holy Family, I didn’t even realize that it was out there. I had been there a couple of times, but it never occurred to me that there was a whole life in Natchez, in the Catholic Church, that was going on. To me, the Catholic Church was up there – where the white people went.” Revealing the extent to which her attitudes towards the white Catholic Church – St. Mary’s Cathedral – were changing, Marge continues, “And when I became aware that there was another life – it all happened about the same time I realized that there was a big slip twix the cup and the lip – I began to sort of keep my eyes and ears open, because I felt that a ministry that was working with the poor, specifically the Blacks in the South, must be more attuned to social issues.”¹³⁴ By 1957 Marge had stopped attending masses at St. Mary’s because, as Louis Baroni explains, “[She] didn’t go to mass because of the hypocrisy in the Catholic thought, in particular in the Catholic diocese.”¹³⁵ Where the influences of Dorothy Day, the Vatican II decrees, and her own convictions provided Marge with an avenue for combining her faith and activism, the white Catholic community of Natchez discouraged Marge’s efforts. In response, Marge turned her focus outward, moving away from the white parish of St. Mary’s towards the Holy Family Church.

Throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Holy Family Catholic community served Natchez as the quiet locus of the city’s activist network. Although most efforts of both black and

¹³⁴ Marge Baroni, Interview with Peter E. Hogan, SSJ, February 11, 1977, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

¹³⁵ Louis Baroni, Interview with Susan Sullivan and Tim Murphy, February 7, 2000, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

white activists remained hushed until the mid-1960s, Marge placed herself firmly in the center of the movement – through her connections to the Holy Family Church and Josephite priests – from its earliest days in the city. Although there is not much evidence of specific instances of Marge’s activism throughout the last half of the 1950s – as the majority of primary documents indicate activity in the early to mid-1960s – there are many letters from Fathers Danahy and Harris, Dorothy Day, and friends in the Catholic Worker movement that indicate that from 1957 to 1960, Marge had already begun networking with local activists through the Holy Family Church. A closer look at Marge’s first activities and networks at the Holy Family Church further reveals how the Natchez civil rights movement grew up out of the black Catholic community and how Holy Family parishioners and leaders later became the stalwarts of the Natchez movement.

Marge initially made contact with Father Danahy and the Holy Family Church in her efforts to begin a communal dialogue about race in response to the aforementioned murder of the Holy Family parishioner in 1957. She relates the importance of Father Danahy’s meeting her and creating a way for her to begin this dialogue in her accounts of these early movement activities. “When I appeared at his doorstep, a known Catholic activist, co-founder of the parish library at St. Mary’s Cathedral (where I hoped Catholics would come and learn something about the intellectual treasures of their faith, as well as the spiritual ones) he was ready to listen to me. Yes, the black community was bitter and angry about the situation, and yes, he would arrange for me and my two friends to meet three black women with whom we could start a dialogue.”¹³⁶

In these initial gatherings with Father Danahy and members of the Holy Family Church in the late 1950s, the individuals met to begin discussion groups, much like those Peter Maurin envisioned for the Catholic Worker movement, for parishioners who wished to talk with Marge

¹³⁶ Marge Baroni, Private Papers, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

and her friends. Of this time, Marge reflects, “We never really did anything, except talk about local problems. But we got to know each other on an equal basis, and we kept those relationships going.” In her personal journals of reflection on her involvement in these early movement activities, Marge writes of the importance of the Holy Family discussion group – made up of two other white women, Margaret Alsworth and Marie Grover, and three black women, Annette Donnan, Barbara Crews, and Eliza Coleman – as deserving the credit for truly opening her eyes to the reality of black life in Natchez. “It was through these black women that I had come to experience in the smallest way what it meant to be black in Mississippi,” she writes in one passage. Marge goes on to say that these conversations revealed to her that she had “lived with an illusion about the truth of black/white relations,” causing her to experience a “profound spiritual vomiting.”¹³⁷

In a passage from an oral history included in Danny Duncan Collum’s project on the Holy Family Church, Marge adds that she realized after-the-fact that the entirely female make-up of the discussion groups was a strategic device employed by Father Danahy to keep the group members safe from the dangerous reactions of the white Natchez community. Although Marge did not realize it at the time, the group discussions at Holy Family were her first real efforts in the Natchez movement. She later writes of the danger she and the other women could have been in for their subversive actions when she exclaims, “I’ve since realized why Father Danahy wanted to start out with women. The men would have probably been killed!”¹³⁸ Marge continues reminiscing about these meetings, “How long ago it seems, and it is a long time...since Margaret, Marie and I met Annette, Barbara, and Miss Lewis – her age then was fifty, which seemed horribly old to me, and we automatically gave her the courtesy title although it was just

¹³⁷ Marge Baroni, “1964: Some Memories of Freedom Summer In Natchez, Mississippi,” Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

¹³⁸ Collum, *Black and Catholic in the Jim Crow South*, 102.

not done in those days. We met for two years, every week, and as the days lengthened into those years, we each formed individual friendships.”¹³⁹

While Marge’s journeys of faith and activism had already led her to a deep Catholic faith, encouraged to act by Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement, these sessions at Holy Family matured Marge. The sessions brought a sense of reality and necessity to the place for the Church and those activists of faith in the movement that no article on race in *The Catholic Worker* or reading of Chesterton could offer Marge. In addition to her early efforts within the Holy Family network, Marge also spent a great deal of time in the late 1950s working within the white Natchez community. As she had not yet been discovered to be sympathetic to civil rights, Marge still contributed to the St. Mary’s Cathedral. She did this through establishing a library for St. Mary’s in hopes that the luxury of the facility might lead more of the white Catholic community to learn more about their faith. In an October 13, 1958 letter, Marge’s friend, James Broderick, writes of her work with the library. “You are doing fine work with the library, one of the most important works in American, where Catholics do not read as much as they should...So you see, your noble efforts to read and mark and inwardly digest what they learned, especially about their religion, is a true apostolate; indeed, one of the best forms of it.”¹⁴⁰

Throughout the late 1950s, Marge led a weekly book club at the Cathedral library for any Catholics who wished to read about and discuss their faith in greater detail. At one such meeting, Marge met Bob Doyle, who had recently moved to the Natchez area. Although she did not intend to seek out allies for her social justice work through these meetings, that is exactly what happened with Bob. Marge writes of the beginning of their friendship, “We belonged to a book

¹³⁹ Marge Baroni, Personal Papers, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

¹⁴⁰ Letter from James Brodrick to Marge Baroni, dated October 13, 1958, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

club that held discussions...every week, and I was fascinated with this young New Yorker's intellectual brilliance – and put off by his naiveté.” Marge got Bob a job at *The Natchez Democrat*, but often quarreled with him over the state of race relations in the South. While Bob did not think things were as bad as Marge argued, he soon came to learn that they were. Bob had been one of *The Natchez Democrat* reporters who covered the 1957 murder of the Holy Family parishioner that had inspired Marge to begin her activism. Marge writes of how covering that story changed Bob's perspective on race problems in Natchez. “When the publisher told Bob to drop any follow-up, to just let the story die, my young friend was astounded. The epiphany was upon him.”¹⁴¹ In response to this episode, Bob joined with Marge as allies within the white Catholic community who worked for civil rights in Natchez.

As tensions mounted in response to the 1957 murder, Marge found it harder to remain both an active member of Natchez's white community and a committed activist for civil rights within the black community. During these years Marge stopped attending cultural and civic events and quit her job at *The Natchez Democrat* permanently. Marge writes of that time, “The same incident caused me to take up learning; I had long months past quit the newspaper for just that same kind of thing and I knew that Natchez would need some way to prevent much greater trouble as the school [integration] loomed large in our future. With no newspaper and no human relations council to pave the way to rational and peaceful resolution of our racial problems, there was no way we could remain as we were. I thought I knew something about how black people thought, and how they lived. I also thought that, since I was one of them, I knew how white people thought.”¹⁴² Marge soon learned she knew much less than she had assumed.

¹⁴¹ Marjorie R. Baroni, Personal Papers, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

Like both the Catholic Church and the American South, the mid-1950s were, for Marge Baroni, “a time for the reexamination of social relationships, and, more especially, of the ideological constraints that guide behaviors” towards the union of faith and social activism.¹⁴³ Indeed, with her conversion to a new way of understanding her relationship to God and the Church, Marge, like many progressive white southerners in the pre-civil rights era, had also experienced a change in the ways she viewed her own relationship to the segregated South. As noted in previous chapters, Fred Hobson speaks to this in his exploration of southern racial conversion narratives, “Departing from the old vertical southern religion – that salvation-centered faith with heaven as its goal – [southerners] embraced a horizontal religion that held that getting right with man was at least as important as getting right with God.”¹⁴⁴

Marge speaks to this need of the liberal white community in Natchez to achieve freedom from the systems of race privilege in the South. “In every area of the state, at the same time as black were throwing off the shackles of fear that had held them defenseless, some whites were also demanding emancipation for themselves. It is possible now to begin inscription of a roll of these freedom fighters. It is important to do so lest young men and women students fail to learn what really took place in Mississippi for the thirty years ending about 1976 or so.”¹⁴⁵ Marge continues, “In a transitional southland, where once the racial spectre stopped life from achieving its fullness, there’s a good deal of getting to know the other side. Mostly it has been on the white side, curiosity of the black side is less intense since most of white life has been an open

¹⁴³ William B. Friend and Jon W. Anderson, *The Culture of Bible Belt Catholics* (New York: Paulist Press, 1995), 246.

¹⁴⁴ Fred Hobson, *But Now I See*, 2.

¹⁴⁵ Marge Baroni, Personal Papers, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

book. The arrogance of the superior or master race has kept it so. Besides, our life seems so boring and shallow to the average black person.”¹⁴⁶

This period of “getting to know the other side” can be seen as Marge’s maturation period of her journeys of faith and activism. While her Catholic faith and activist philosophies and tenets encouraged action, she could not just implant herself into the movement whenever she chose. Marge needed to earn the trust and respect of Natchez’s African American community. She needed to network with those leaders already preparing for the battles that were to come. Her relationships with the Holy Family Catholic Church discussion groups and with Father Morrissey allowed Marge the time and experience she needed to truly understand how best she could contribute to the movement. While her actions during this time period were mostly behind closed doors and hushed, this became a critical time in allowing Marge to create a concrete here-on-earth, personalist-oriented, and Catholicism-driven philosophy of activism.

Indeed, as the civil rights movement worked its way to Natchez, Mississippi, the changed perspectives and new relationships Marge had carefully cultivated throughout the mid-1950s – with Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement; and Fathers Danahy and Morrissey and members of the Holy Family Catholic Church – were a significant influence on, and assistance to, the direct action she undertook in Natchez as she lived out her changed theology in the civil rights years. By the late 1950s, Marge no longer had any patience for the old style of Natchez racial etiquette in which “it was perfectly acceptable for white people to sit down and talk about how black people were mistreated so long as one didn’t do anything about it, so long as one didn’t attempt to change it.” In a 1977 interview, Marge continues in describing the attitude she distanced herself from in her conversion to Catholicism and movement towards activism. “You could deplore it. You could be upset about it. You could say it was wrong. You could point to the

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

Bible. We had...weekly discussion clubs, [but] it always seemed to me that discussion, without acting on what you get out of the discussion was absolutely barren.”¹⁴⁷ So Marge chose to act.

¹⁴⁷ Marge Baroni, Interview with Peter E. Hogan, SSJ, February 11, 1977, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

CHAPTER V

ACTUALIZATION: LIVED THEOLOGY IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS YEARS

There has yet to be an authoritative history written on the people and efforts of the Natchez, Mississippi civil rights movement. Marge Baroni's extensive accounts of her personal experiences in and observations of the movement offer a particularly Catholic-focused, yet surprisingly composite picture of the Natchez movement that can serve to fill this gap. As a lifelong Natchezian, a distinguished – if discontented – member of the city's Catholic community, and one of the first white locals to join together with the city's black community to work for integration and racial equality, Marge is a fascinating vessel for studying this particular local movement. Through these accounts, students of the Natchez movement are provided with an insiders' perspective of the Natchez activist community, including the efforts of Catholic activists like Marge, Father Morrissey and Mamie Mazique, as well as members of state and national organizations like the NAACP, COFO, CORE, and SNCC. In relationship to Marge Baroni specifically, these accounts reveal how the compounding influences of her readings of Catholic teachings and the Catholic Worker newsletter, as well as her own navigation of how to practice her Catholicism through activism in the immediate Vatican II years, culminate in her own on-the-ground efforts, her actualized and lived theology at play, in the Natchez community. Similarly, the accounts reveal the dangers and social ostracism the entire Baroni family faced throughout the movement years and in the decades afterward. Although the Baroni family would

always call Natchez home, the city was not supportive of the opinions and efforts of Marge and the family.

Natchez, Mississippi post-1960 became an entirely different world for the Baronis and Marge, than the one Marge had known the majority of her life. She writes of how her perspective of the place changed as a consequence of her transformed social and religious conscience:

Natchez was not a good place to be for me anymore. I had loved it, had thought of it as my town for so many years – even as early as five years old I used to wander about the streets in happy exploration, breathing in the spirit of the old town and identifying with her completely...Like Thomas Wolfe, when I went away from my place I was always thinking about it – always being called home. Unlike Wolfe, I could and did go home again. It was a wrenching, anguishing experience. Living through the late fifties and the decades of the sixties in Natchez, Mississippi was like being in one of the stalags of a concentration camp. In fact, to me Mississippi was one vast penal institution, one vast bedlam during those fifteen or more years... We are like a great family, in Mississippi, I thought. Only from someone so close can cruelty hurt so much.¹⁴⁸

This was the reality of life in Natchez for Marge Baroni during the pre- and early civil rights years. In the midst of this harsh and volatile climate of racial hatred and violence, Marge labored to put into practice the religious and social philosophies she spent so much of the previous decade developing to maturity. It is in these years that the lived theology of Marge Baroni helped change the lives of many individuals in Natchez and throughout the state of Mississippi.

MISSISSIPPI AND THE MOVEMENT

At its core, the American civil rights movement was a freedom struggle driven by local people like Marge Baroni. These individuals, aware of the injustices handed them or their neighbors, and ready to put all on the line to fight for freedom, stood on the ground that they

¹⁴⁸ Marge Baroni, Personal Papers, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

knew – their own downtown boulevards, their own department store lunch counters, their own neighbors’ porches, their own churches, their own prisons – and demanded change. From Greensboro to Nashville to Birmingham, local men and women throughout the American South put their faith and action in the notion expressed by John Lewis, “You can do it *yourself*. There is no more powerful force than *you*. There is no leader as powerful as *you*, if you pull together.”¹⁴⁹ In her own memoir of the movement, Mary King, another white southerner who, like Baroni, stood up for civil rights, reflects on the value of local activity. “It was about human promise and democracy. It was about empowering new indigenous leadership. It was about transforming potentiality into actuality.”¹⁵⁰ To this end, historian David Garrow explains:

What the carefully-scrutinized historical record shows is that the actual human catalysts of the movement, the people who really gave direction to the movement’s organizing work, the individuals whose records reflect the greatest substantive accomplishments, were not the administrators or spokespersons, and were not those whom most scholarship on the movement identifies as the leaders. Instead, in any list, long or short, of the activists who had the greatest personal impact on the course of the southern movement, the vast majority of names will be ones that are unfamiliar to most readers.¹⁵¹

Across the nation, local people like Marge Baroni became the peaceful foot soldiers on the battlefields of their own towns, counties, and regions. In no other state was this activity as imperative to the success of the movement as it was in Mississippi.

There is little doubt that pre-civil-rights-era-Mississippi was an exceptional place. Unlike Tennessee, Alabama, and North Carolina, southern states where movement activities began in urban centers with young and idealistic students and leaders from universities and progressive religious bodies at the helm, Mississippi offered few major urban centers, aside from Jackson, and fewer still indigenous networks for revolutionary action. The rural nature of the state, its

¹⁴⁹ John Lewis, *Walking With the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1998), 188.

¹⁵⁰ Mary King, *Freedom Song: A Personal Story of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1987), 405.

¹⁵¹ Quoted from a passage in Charles Payne’s *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and The Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: CA: The University of California Press, 1995), 3.

sheer size, and alarmingly high rate of poverty restricted the amount of information members of the state's black communities were able to receive about bus boycotts in Montgomery or sit-ins in Nashville, either through newspapers or radio and television broadcasts. In addition to the limited access to media, the economic system of sharecropping and the repressive legacy of Jim Crow laws kept the majority African American, and scattered sympathetic white citizens of the state like Marge Baroni either in constant poverty or fear for their lives, livelihood, and station in what James Silver dubbed the "closed society" of Mississippi.¹⁵²

Because of these seemingly impregnable challenges, leaders of the early civil rights struggle directed their efforts elsewhere, away from the battleground of Mississippi. To this end, Chris Myers Asch explains, "Civil rights activists recognized the particularly difficult task of opening up Mississippi's closed society. For more than a year after the formation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the organization studiously avoided the state, focusing instead on building its organization strength in less repressive areas."¹⁵³ After the Freedom Rides of May 1961 made their way into Mississippi, so too did civil rights organizations like SNCC and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Following the trails of the Greyhound buses, movement leaders from various organizations, including the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the National Urban League, channeled their efforts into Mississippi. In response to the influx of new organizations, movement leaders founded the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) as an umbrella group meant to encourage unity of purpose and efforts among the many civil rights organizations working in the movement and in the state of Mississippi.

¹⁵² James Silver, *Mississippi: The Closed Society* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1964).

¹⁵³ Chris Myers Asch, *The Senator and the Sharecropper: The Freedom Struggles of James O. Eastland and Fannie Lou Hamer* (New York: The New Press, 2008), 173-174.

As the presence of civil rights organizations in communities throughout Mississippi became readily visible, both black and white Mississippians who had previously been isolated from the greater movement activities or fearful of participating in protests began to realize the opportunity for change that had found its way to their doorsteps. Over the course of the next year COFO, SNCC, and CORE tapped into a wealth of previously dormant groups of activists, their message and methods attracting those individuals who would, in time, become the indigenous leaders of the Mississippi movement. These people needed to intimately know the land, the people, the systems of governance and law enforcement in order to best figure how to unite their friends and neighbors in action, and to challenge their foes to a nonviolent political and moral showdown.

Although countless numbers of Mississippians stepped forward throughout the movement to take these indigenous leadership positions, Marge Baroni stands out as an exceptional example of a grassroots activist who stood on the right side of history in her own community, fought local battles, faced off against the old establishment, and brought about lasting local changes. Of her decision to stay in her hometown of Natchez in order to address civil rights issues, Marge writes, “It simply did not seem right, even when it seemed possible, for us to leave and turn our backs on the fight for human rights.”¹⁵⁴ A close study of Marge’s accounts of her activism and the greater civil rights efforts in Natchez throughout the movement will significantly enhance historians’ understandings of who the key players and what the significant moments were in the Natchez movement. Similarly, Marge’s narrative sheds light on the experiences of white individuals working for civil rights in their hometowns, including the resistance and social

¹⁵⁴ Marge Baroni, Undated letter to Dorothy Day, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

rejection these individuals faced and the spaces of social and psychological conflict they created in their own lives and towns.

MARGE BARONI AND THE NATCHEZ, MISSISSIPPI CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Marge begins one of her many essays on the Natchez, Mississippi civil rights movement by describing that “in the changing of the state of Mississippi from a state of chaos, anarchy, and atrocity to one of the states of the union to which it professedly belongs, there was a long period of what may be called pre-civilization.” Marge attributes the centuries before the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision as this time of pre-civilization, but remarks that with the beginning of the civil rights movement, “it is now possible to see the dawn of civilization in Mississippi.”¹⁵⁵ Two of the main organizations in Natchez active in these immediate post-*Brown vs. Board* years leading up to the large-scale efforts of the Natchez movement in the early 1960s were the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Josephite-led Holy Family Catholic Church.

One of the many contributions of Marge’s accounts of the Natchez movement that parallels many scholars’ works on other local movements across the nation is her care to highlight the importance of the NAACP in the early years of the city’s local movement. Although organizations like SNCC, CORE, and COFO would come to play key roles in Natchez movement activities in the mainstream movement years of 1962-1965, the NAACP had been the strongest organizational force within the city’s black and activist communities throughout the

¹⁵⁵ Marge Baroni, Private Papers, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

1950s and the early 1960s. John Dittmer attributes the NAACP's place in the Natchez community to the paternalistic nature of the Natchez white aristocratic "old regime" who tolerated the organization's presence in the city so long as the "blacks did not challenge the caste system." Dittmer also explains that because of the long-standing reputation of the NAACP, it was the only black organization able to operate in Natchez in the early 1960s under the watchful eyes of the region's Ku Klux Klan, which was stronger in Natchez "than in any other Mississippi community, even McComb."¹⁵⁶ Like most of the hushed movement activities of the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Natchez NAACP chapter, led by Natchez native George Metcalf, held all of their meetings at the Holy Family Catholic Church and benefitted directly from the cooperation and involvement of Marge Baroni and Father William Morrissey.

Of Father Morrissey and Holy Family's role in these early efforts, Marge writes, "Father Morrissey was particularly aware that the church, in order to be meaningful to the "New Negro" must have leadership from the clergy who were on the scene." Marge explains that Father Morrissey knew how important it was that priests like himself kept abreast of the developments of the burgeoning civil rights movement in other southern states. During the early movement years, Father Morrissey made it a priority to follow news of the movement, learning all he could about new national organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and their methods for bringing about change – like sit-ins and voter registration drives. Marge explains that Father Morrissey not only offered the NAACP space to meet at the Holy Family Church, but that he also "began to take part in the necessary clandestine meetings of the underground chapter" in Natchez. Before the Natchez movement became a public effort, Father Morrissey often drove to Jackson, Mississippi to attend meetings of the "quasi-clandestine Mississippi

¹⁵⁶ John Dittmer, *Local People* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 353.

Council of Human Relations” in an attempt to prepare for the campaigns and conflicts sure to come in Natchez.¹⁵⁷

Marge reflects on the gradual development of movement activities and the Holy Family Church’s response to them in a draft of her unfinished master’s thesis, although she willingly omits her own hushed involvement in the Holy Family discussion groups of the late 1950s and other early movement activities:

In 1961, the Josephite parish at Natchez, Holy Family, was not any different from any other Negro church in the South, except in denomination and color of the pastor’s complexion...In 1962 the same situation prevailed, although the stories of the Freedom Riders had begun to filter into Mississippi and some riders had even come into the Natchez bus station – only to be met by local police and taken off the bus before they could test the station’s segregated facilities.

It was 1963 before the pace changed at Holy Family, and the change came with a vengeance. Visits to jails and efforts to get bail bond for members of the parish and even non-members who had some reason to feel close to Holy Family were routine activities for the priests. Father William Morrissey and his assistant, Father Paul Kluthe, were called one night by the mother of a former student of St. Francis High School (now Holy Family school). Her son, William Ware, had come home from Ghana where he had served for three months in the Peace Corps before being sent home with stomach trouble. He had visited his grandmother in Natchez for a few days, and had left her house to return to the country where his mother lived. Only he never got there.¹⁵⁸

The kidnapping, beating, and subsequent jailing of Bill Ware that Marge references served as the tipping-point in the Natchez movement. As a result of the media circus that ensued around the case, both the black and white Natchez communities recognized that the movement had to begin in Natchez.

The year of the Bill Ware case, 1963, was also the year that Marge Baroni began publicly aiding the cause of civil rights within the black and white Natchez communities. Of her decision to be both a vocal and visible supporter of black civil rights, Marge writes, “[As] you grow older,

¹⁵⁷ Marge Baroni, Personal papers, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

¹⁵⁸ Marge Baroni, Draft of unfinished master’s thesis, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

you grow stronger, [and] you go through things that you look back on and wonder how in the hell you ever went through it, because you don't just get your toe in the water. There is no way you can just stick your toe in. You go in. If you are identified, you go in the water all the way.”¹⁵⁹ Marge's Catholic ties, from her strong relationship with Father Morrissey and her Holy Family discussion groups to her relationship with Dorothy Day and the Catholic worker movement, encouraged her to take the risk of becoming a public activist who always professed her Catholic faith as the driving force of her activism.

The Bill Ware affair also served to connect Marge to Mamie Lee Mazique, a leader in the Natchez black community and the Holy Family Church, who later wrote of Marge, “She helped to open a lot of avenues in the state of Mississippi, but especially in these three counties here – Adams, Jefferson, and Claiborne...All the time they was tearing up everything down here – demonstrating and picketing and marching and burning – she would go right in the middle of it. She would go to jail.”¹⁶⁰ While Mamie Mazique may have admired Marge's participation, it was Marge who saw Mamie as one of the primary leaders of the movement and a personal example of a Catholic faith-driven activist in the movement. Marge often references Mrs. Mazique, with whom she shared a lifelong friendship, as the “heart” of the Natchez movement.¹⁶¹ Marge writes of Mamie, “Her life was a perpetual response to crisis. She had no time to act, all she could do was to react to whatever demand was pressing at the moment.”¹⁶² Marge continues, “Mrs. Mazique used to amaze me. She could cool like a dove, yet all the time be raging inside at the persona she was talking to. It was my first lesson in being indirect, watching and listening to

¹⁵⁹ Marge Baroni, Interview with Peter E. Hogan, SSJ, February 11, 1977, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

¹⁶⁰ Danny Collum, *Black and Catholic in the Jim Crow South*, 97.

¹⁶¹ Marge Baroni, “1964: Some Memories of Freedom Summer in Natchez, Mississippi,” Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

her.”¹⁶³ Mamie Mazique became an instrumental figure in Marge’s journeys of faith and activism as she often challenged Marge to take on leadership roles in movement activities where Marge might have previously chosen to stay in the background.

One of Marge’s first leadership roles in a public activism campaign occurred in November 1963, when she spearheaded the organization of a Natchez-area Mississippi Freedom Campaign (which would later become the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party) voting drive. The Holy Family Church Hall had been designated as one of the two polling places in the city – as it was frequently used as a headquarters for activity and meetings throughout the movement – with SNCC staff members and Holy Family congregants, including Marge and Mrs. Mazique, staffing the polls. With that first Freedom Vote, the attitude towards direct action within the Natchez activist community experienced a sea-change. “Fear was indeed the watchword – but slowly and steadily the Movement came to Natchez, and life began to change.” Marge writes of this shift in momentum. “People who formerly had met stealthily and by night in the ‘underground’ NAACP, now began to say ‘I’d rather be dead than to live like this.’ The feeling increased, making bravery in the face of incomprehensible odds the only way to live.”¹⁶⁴

With the onset of the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project of 1964, Marge began her most intensive period of direct action within Natchez movement efforts, even joining larger national campaigns during this time. In her essay, “1964: Some Memories of Freedom Summer in Natchez, Mississippi,” Marge writes of the effort: “From Holly Springs to Biloxi, from Natchez to Meridian, from the Mississippi River to the infamous earthen dam in Neshoba county, the Mississippi that was so long a state of intransigence and violence, was now the object

¹⁶³ Marge Baroni, Personal Papers, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

¹⁶⁴ Marge Baroni, Personal Papers, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

of such an attack as this nation had never seen before. The efforts of the freedom riders, the Meredith sympathizers, the long years spent by the national NAACP in hammering away at the legal bastions behind which destroyers of civil rights hid – all these forces coalesced into Freedom Summer.” She continues, “In 1964 the object, moving inexorably in Mississippi, met the hitherto irresistible force, and the force gave way, albeit reluctantly and under massive duress. It was a political year, an important event in national life.”¹⁶⁵

As part of her activism during this time, the “beginning of the end for the old Mississippi,” Marge regularly brought supplies to one of Natchez’s COFO Freedom Schools and to the local COFO and SNCC staff houses.¹⁶⁶ Of these visits, Marge recalls, “All who staffed the house at this time were black, and I wanted so much to let them know that the solid white south had its chinks and cracks – I was proof of that, I thought...I needed this contact, needed to get to know the youths who were changing the world not only for black adults and children, but for me also, and for my children. Even for other whites, I thought, who never considered their world needed changing.”¹⁶⁷ According to Mary Jane Tarver, Marge and Louis’s eldest daughter, the Baroni household often became a place of lodging and respite for movement workers. “They would be young people who came down to help out. I mean they would be there for a good cause, no question...they were really interested in the movement at that time and they would come from all over.”¹⁶⁸ Jason Berry, a family friend of the Baronis has also written about Marge opening the family’s home to the community of activists. Berry explains that Marge’s personal and matriarchal nature made the Baroni house one of the most welcoming in the area. “[It] served as a kind of way station for committed people who always seemed to be passing through.

¹⁶⁵ Marge Baroni, “1964: Some Memories of Freedom Summer in Natchez, Mississippi,” Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ Mary Jane Tarver, Interview with Susan Sullivan and Tim Murphy, February 9, 2000, Ridgeland, MS.

On any given weekend, a visitor there might meet writers, psychiatrists, feminists, Ivy League students, French Canadian pianists, community organizers, priests, and in later years a moderately liberal judge, state legislator, or even a sheriff from time to time.”¹⁶⁹

Just as Marge opened the Baroni household to activists, she also recounts how Father Morrissey opened both his own home and the Holy Family Church to use by the Natchez movement participants. “But more than his [activities],” Marge writes, “Father Morrissey became known to all the black community of Natchez as the one white person who could be counted on to help in the struggle. If white students came in to work on voter registration...they often could find no place to sleep. Father Morrissey’s house became synonymous with hospitality – and for four years, from 1963-1967 – a steady procession of visitors, movement people, Justice Department task forces, poverty program developers, and volunteers of one kind or another, found a friendly refuge at 16 Orange Avenue.”¹⁷⁰

Father Morrissey is a central figure in Marge’s narratives of faith and activism, mirroring his place of importance in organizing and leading movement activities in Natchez. Marge credits his role duly in the following passage:

Someday the comprehensive story of how civil rights came to Natchez will be told. And one of the most important chapters will deal with the contribution that Father Morrissey made. Though he was born in Cedarhurst, Long Island, and became a Josephite, God knows why – and that is not meant facetiously or flippantly – it is in Natchez that he will have made his mark on the progress of justice for all. Like all good and effective priests everywhere in the world, Father Morrissey has not been content to sit and take what comes – he has gone out to meet the future, and wherever he went, the Church was there. His empathy is not limited to people his own age; he is equally appreciated by young people, and his qualities as host and friend are treasured even by those whites in Natchez who stayed away from him for years for fear of “guilt by association.”¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ Marge Baroni, “1964: Some Memories of Freedom Summer in Natchez, Mississippi,” Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

¹⁷¹ Marge Baroni, Personal papers, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

Father Morrissey's work for civil rights earned him the monikers "cause celebre" and "villain" in the white Natchez community. Often the priest at St. Mary's Parish – Monsignor Fullam – had to explain to his parishioners that Father Morrissey's efforts at Holy Family were not part of a greater communist plot, but the work required of a Catholic priest in serving his community. Despite Monsignor Fullam's efforts, Father Morrissey's house at 16 Orange Street became known as the center of "communist" activity in Natchez, with Klansmen keeping watch on those coming and going at the house from the filling station across the street. Marge recalls that the Klansman who owned the station often stood in the parking lot "snapping his bullwhip" while staring at Father Morrissey's window at the Holy Family rectory with a menacing grin.¹⁷² As had been the case in countless local movements, the Natchez white community responded to the progress of the Natchez civil rights movement with extreme violence.

One of the final efforts of the Natchez movement was a mass boycott of downtown stores in response to the August 1965 bombing of the home of George Metcalf, the local NAACP president. The boycott lasted six months and culminated in the mass arrest of hundreds of individuals. Natchez police had originally placed those arrested in the Natchez City Auditorium and kept them there without food for days. Marge writes of this arrest, "Ironically, the first time the [Natchez] City Auditorium, home of the Natchez Pilgrimage's Confederate pageant, was integrated, it was as a prison."¹⁷³ Those who had been arrested in the boycott were then shipped to the Parchman Penitentiary where they were subject to starvation, violence, and humiliation. The city made no plans for bringing any of the arrested home. That responsibility fell to their family, friends, and allies like Marge Baroni and Mamie Mazique.

¹⁷² Marge Baroni, Personal papers, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

¹⁷³ Marge Baroni, "1964: Some Memories of Freedom Summer in Natchez, Mississippi," Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

Although Marge did not participate in the boycott to the point of arrest, she and the other members of the Baroni family kept up with the boycott, observing its statutes religiously and helping others where they could. “I remember the day Mark and David and I stood on our front porch, high above the street, and watched the buses carrying the arrested demonstrators to jail. The boys, five and seven, were horror-stricken. Already honoring the boycott, they solemnly assured me they would never break it,” Marge recalls. “Boycotting was not new to us as a family.”¹⁷⁴

As the movement progressed and her connections to the local communities and national organizations of activists deepened, Marge felt encouraged to expand the scope of her activism from participating as a part of a group demonstration to representing the fight for civil rights as an individual. From Freedom Summer of 1964 forward, Marge arranged the integration of Natchez’s Eola Hotel, and later the integration of the white public library in the city with Chock Mazique, Mamie Lee Mazique’s son. She also took on a more political role in 1964, attending the Civil Rights Commission hearings and joining the Mississippi Council on Human Relations (MCHR). At a Tougaloo College MCHR meeting in May 1964, Marge met Mickey Schwerner only a month before he, Andrew Goodman, and James Chaney were murdered near Philadelphia, Mississippi.¹⁷⁵ In December 1964, Marge took her politics to the streets, participating in a sit-in in downtown Natchez as a challenge to the Civil Rights Act’s public accommodations title.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁴ Marge Baroni, “1964: Some Memories of Freedom Summer in Natchez, Mississippi,” Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, Ms.

¹⁷⁵ Susan Sullivan, *Marjorie Baroni: Ordinary Southern Woman, Extraordinary Activist*, delivered as a ‘Brown Bag’ Lecture at the Center for the Study of Southern Culture, October 4, 2000, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

¹⁷⁶ Marge Baroni, Draft of unfinished master’s thesis, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

Also noteworthy is Marge's attendance at the Religion and Race in the South: Catholic Perspectives Conference as a Natchez-area delegate.¹⁷⁷

In addition to these efforts, a handful of letters hidden in the boxes of the Marge Baroni Collection reveal that Marge had begun a personal fundraising and letter-writing campaign in response to early national and Catholic movement efforts. In a letter postmarked December 28, 1961, then Auxiliary Bishop of the Catholic Church in Mississippi, Joseph Brunini, wrote to Marge, "I am indeed happy to know of your interest in interracial justice. People who take an interest in this field among our Catholics are indeed few and so I am doubly happy to know of your interest. I am sure as the years go on that more direct activity will be necessary. At the present time, of course, given the atmosphere here in Mississippi not too much can be accomplished. However, a little bit goes a long way."¹⁷⁸ Further illustrating how Marge sought guidance from Catholic leaders in her early years of activism is a letter to Marge, addressed December 29, 1961, written by Henry Cabirac, Jr. of the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice. The letter reads, "It was certainly a pleasure being able to meet with you and your husband...to learn that there are some right thinking people in such a place as Natchez, MS. Unquestionably, yours is a difficult task, but one to which you must address yourself." Cabirac continues, "I would heartily suggest that you work with the Catholic Negroes...This, in my opinion, presents the greatest opportunity at this particular time...These steps may appear to be small, but if successfully accomplished would certainly be an excellent start from which you could build to greater things."¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁷ Undated nametag from conference entitled, "Religion and Race in the South: Catholic Perspectives," Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

¹⁷⁸ Joseph B. Brunini, Letter to Marge Baroni dated December 28, 1961, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

¹⁷⁹ Henry Cabirac, Jr., Letter to Marge Baroni dated December 29, 1961, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

Aside from her letter writing campaign to religious leaders within the Catholic Church, Marge also wrote to and supported another Catholic leader of the early 1960s, President John F. Kennedy, Jr. In a letter dated November 9, 1962, President Kennedy's assistant, Ralph A. Dungan, writes to Marge, "The President has asked me to thank you for your letter supporting his action with respect to the University of Mississippi. Your words of good will and expressions of support mean a great deal to him."¹⁸⁰ A second letter from Ralph Dungan reads, "The President has received his remarks at the commencement exercises of the American University. It was especially kind of you to write and your generous expression of approval is gratifying to him."¹⁸¹ Marge did not only write to seek guidance from or support Catholic religious and political leaders, but she also directed her letter-writing and fundraising towards staunch segregationists like Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett. In her letter to Mr. Barnett, months after the assassination of Medgar Evers, Marge writes, "I have enclosed a check made payable to you as a trustee for the memorial fund of the family of Medgar Evers. As a native Mississippian, I have been heartsick at our state leadership's lack of realistic understanding and response to the direction of local, state, national and world interest. You can understand this when you know that not only am I a Kennedy-type democrat, but a Mississippian eager to see our state truly global among her forty-nine peers."¹⁸²

In all of her efforts in the Natchez, Mississippi civil rights movement – from voter registration drives, to supplying CORE and SNCC Freedom Schools, to letter writing – Marge not only maintained, but, in her retelling of these momentous years, exhibits the full maturation of her unwavering dedication to social justice from a faith-driven perspective:

¹⁸⁰ Ralph A. Dungan, Letter to Marge Baroni dated November 9, 1962, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

¹⁸¹ Ralph A. Dungan, Letter to Marge Baroni dated July 2, 1963, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

¹⁸² Marge Baroni, Letter to Gov. Ross Barnett dated January 29, 1964, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

The attempt to build a new society in the shell of the old in the deep South of the United States is sometimes so difficult as to seem insane. To identify with the poor, the left out, the sick, the old and the displaced is almost impossible without appearing crazy to those who think charity, never mind love, is best taken care of by an “organization”...I have met people in the South who have given up trying to do good because of social pressure. Because they are afraid of gossip and rumor, they turn aside when they see their brother or sister in trouble, in need...not knowing they are called to following the footsteps of their creator who became man in order to show us how to become whole. The Savior who became obedient, even to death on the cross, who submitted whatever the state and its guardians would do to one who caused a disturbance of the status quo, the Savior who overcame the world with His submission and His weapons of the spirit, has shown us it is not easy. But he did not ask anything of us He was not willing to do himself, and so we must, if we long for the city that is to come, believe that He will give us the courage and strength to do as He has done before us.¹⁸³

Marge never shied away from her understanding that her involvement in the movement was not only justified, but mandated by her faith as well. “There is a great need for advocacy,” writes Marge. The lines immediately following this reflection mirror the motivations inspiring Marge’s activism throughout the movement, “Out there are numbers of people with problems. To some, their problems have them on the magnitude of the burden of the cross or that of the old man and the sea. But another party, who will make the problem his own, can sometimes cut the bonds and free the sufferer.”¹⁸⁴

THE NATCHEZ MOVEMENT AND THE BARONI FAMILY

As extraordinary as Marge’s activism in the movement is, she did not participate in the movement as a singular entity. Her family – husband, Louis, and children, Neil, Mary Jane, Phillip, Roseanne, David, and Mark – were at the heart of her life and her work in movement

¹⁸³ Marge Baroni, Personal papers, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

activities. Many of Marge's personal papers, essays, and letters, as well as oral history interviews with Louis and Mary Jane Tarver Baroni, and correspondence with Dorothy Day, depict the gauntlet of societal rejection, violent threats, and constant dangers they faced as a family beginning in the late 1950s. The white Natchez community's response to the Baroni family affected nearly every aspect of their lives – what neighborhoods they could live in, whether or not their children were safe in Natchez, their social life, and Louis's professional life.

In early writings on her experiences in the local movement, Marge describes that “in Natchez, from mid-1963 on, I was ‘that Baroni woman’ even to people I had gone to school with – whom I had liked and been liked by in return (I thought).” Marge continues, “As we became more and more known for our breaking the southern white code of behavior, my name was more and more synonymous as exemplification of all that would drag my fair sex into the mud.” Marge explains that while she and Louis shared the same religious and moral philosophies on the race issues of the time, the Natchez white community singled her out as the “villain, the renegade and traitor.” A former sheriff of Adams County, who later became a friend of the Baronis, once told Marge and Louis that he “could have sworn” they would have been killed, especially Marge. “He said they hated me and pitied Louis.”¹⁸⁵ Marge became used to violent threats and suggestions of gruesome responses to her activism. One local newspaperwoman, “a member of an old line family in Natchez and quite a person in her own right,” once told people along Main St. that Louis “ought to bash [Marge's] head in.” Marge writes that she and Louis laughed about the threat, commenting, “It was apparently unthought of and unheard for a white husband not to control his wife's every action. That kind of reaction was not unusual after a while.”¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

Beyond the public scrutiny the Baronis faced within their community, Louis faced significant discrimination and threats at his job at the Armstrong Rubber Company. For three years, no one at the rubber plant spoke to him at all. However, he did not lose his job because of his union membership.¹⁸⁷ Louis endured the isolation, but remained mindful of the threats of violence constantly present during those years. In order to avoid having a bomb planted on his car, Louis had Marge take him to and from work every day for six months. Finally he decided he would drive himself, but parked his car on the street – not in the employee parking lot where it could be recognized – and would put “little pebbles on the hood” as indicator as to whether or not the hood had been raised during the day. If it had, the pebbles would fall off of the car and Louis would have known if someone might have tried to plant a bomb. Louis accredits this process with keeping him safe at work.¹⁸⁸

When the Baroni family attempted to move from their home on Oriole Terrace in Natchez, in an effort to escape some of the neighborhood tensions which elevated throughout the early movement years, they found Natchez an unwelcoming place for the first time in their lives. The neighbors in the downtown area they had chosen a new home in publicly protested the Baronis’ move to the neighborhood. Of this protest, Marge writes, “It is true that the real estate agent we had chosen to help us get the ‘Baronial Manor’ refused to deal with us and told lies about us to the former owners.” However, the owners of the grand historic home at 305 Monroe Avenue chose to deal directly with the Baronis and sold them the house. “They helped us in a time of great trouble and I think they too came in for their share of abuse even for treating us like human beings,” Marge remembers. For the Baronis, this new home offered a solace from the volatility of civil rights-era Natchez. Marge recalls that the family loved living in the “great barn

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*; See also Louis Baroni, Interview with Susan Sullivan

¹⁸⁸ Louis Baroni, Interview with Susan Sullivan

of a place” because it “harbored [them] from living completely in the despising public eye, and our family has had a shelter to rely on these last eight years when the pitiless elements made our own pilgrimage hard and abrading.”¹⁸⁹

The Baroni home may have been the family’s safe harbor, but that did not deter Natchez-area Klansmen from targeting the family and their home on multiple occasions. Marge and Louis highlight New Year’s Day 1965 as one of the most threatening instances of those years. On New Year’s Eve the family had been kept up all night by people coming to their front door, a barrage of threatening telephone calls, and “men in pickup trucks with guns” sitting along the edge of their yard. That day the Baronis had learned they were at the head of a local list of people thought to be “subversive to the southern way of life.” A pamphlet of the list had been reprinted hundreds of times and copies of the list littered the yards of the Baronis’ neighbors. Marge explains that Louis and the Baroni boys had “long adopted the habit of going into another neighborhood and scooping up the latest edition from somebody’s driveway,” but this threat was particularly bad. The FBI informed the Baronis that the list was “a vicious piece of smearing, one of the most vicious” they had seen.¹⁹⁰

The heightened tensions surrounding the Baronis encouraged the FBI to place agents at the Bienville Apartments across the street from the Baroni home to keep an eye on the family.¹⁹¹ “They weren’t there long,” Louis recalls of the FBI. “They somehow got in touch with us over here and let us know that they were over there... We talked a long time and they were talking about protecting our property. I said, ‘Property? What about our lives?’ I don’t know what they

¹⁸⁹ Marge Baroni in an undated letter to Dorothy Day, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

¹⁹⁰ Marge Baroni, Draft of unfinished master’s thesis, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

¹⁹¹ Louis Baroni, Interview with Susan Sullivan.

had to say about...I think they said something like, ‘You know, we can’t do a thing unless something happens.’¹⁹²

The FBI presence did not deter the Baronis hecklers. Indeed, violence was an all-too-common reality for the family. Louis recalls one occasion in which he and his son, Phillip, were sitting on the family’s front porch and a “white Cadillac drove up, stopped in front, and fired a shot.” Louis explains that he and Phillip “ducked back into the house” at which point Louis went and retrieved his shotgun in case the armed men returned. Louis recalls this experience: “We turned all the lights out and Phillip and me went on the upstairs front porch and just waited but they never came back...Phillip was saying, ‘Daddy, what if they come back?’...I’m going to shoot. But they didn’t...I don’t know whether I would have shot them or not.”¹⁹³ According to Marge, the Baroni children often feared that either she or they would be shot, and at nights she and Louis would help pull the children’s beds away from their bedroom windows in case some fired a shot into the house and they were cut by shattered glass.¹⁹⁴ On another occasion, Roseanne, the Baronis’ younger daughter, had been walking in the neighborhood one evening when “a man with a pick-up truck, with a rifle in its rack” asked her where the Baroni house was. Frightened, Roseanne pointed to the Baroni home then ran home to alert her parents that “somebody strange was trying to find out where we [they] lived.” That warning allowed Louis and Marge to be at the ready in case any attack had been made. Marge explains that, years later, another former sheriff told her and Louis that a “true bombing attempt was underway against us that night,” and it had only been thwarted by Roseanne’s warning.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ Marge Baroni, Personal Papers, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

Of her children's resilience during these years, Marge writes, "The children were marvelous. They trusted their father and me to bring them through. They knew I was much more in the public eye than their father, but they also knew he was a hundred percent behind what I did. They knew what was at stake, and they also heard their classmates quoting their own parents' hatred and hysteria."¹⁹⁶ Marge often repeats that the children faced the most adversity from their friends' parents, but also relates stories of her younger sons having to fend off bullies. "David used to come home and curl up in bed in the afternoons, tired from his labors in first grade. Sometimes he would also be tired from running from the larger kid who chased [him]...and kicked [him] and called [him] a nigger-lover." Marge goes on to say that David soon learned how to handle that situation – he "simply outran him." "One day he told me victoriously that he told Mike, 'Sure I like black people, and what's wrong with that?' And ran like crazy," Marge recalls.¹⁹⁷ While the younger Baroni children embraced Marge's efforts, Mary Jane Tarver explains that she "tried to remove myself from the situation as much as possible." Because most of Marge's activities in the Natchez movement occurred after Mary Jane had left for college, she only experienced the early years of the family's rejection. Still, she says, "I really was a typical teenager. I wanted to belong. I didn't want rejection...And besides, it was terrifying the things that were going on...The way I handled it was...I tried to stay as uninvolved as I could."¹⁹⁸

Although the Baroni children were mainly ostracized by their friends' parents, the fact that they attended the Natchez Cathedral's parochial school meant that whatever ostracism they faced at school, they also faced at the Church. While Marge had stopped attending masses at St. Mary's Cathedral earlier in the movement years, the children and Louis attended regularly until

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁸ Mary Jane Tarver. Interview with Susan Sullivan.

the communal backlash became too much to handle on Sunday mornings. Approximately around 1963, Dorothy Day penned the following paragraph, published in the Modern Spirituality Series, about the Baroni family's ostracism at the Cathedral and in the Natchez community:

'Our God is a consuming fire...it is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God.' These words come to mind when I think of the situation of my friends Louis and Marge Baroni. That fire has consumed the dross of any social life for them. They no longer have any. For the last three years they have been shunned by other white people of Natchez, the city they both grew up in. At Sunday Mass people go up to the altar rail with them and then avert their heads. 'With the Host in their mouth, the Bread,' Marge says, 'The keep their bitter looks.'¹⁹⁹

Like Dorothy, Marge wrote often of the lack of a social life the family had during that time.

As the movement progressed, Marge notes that "constant visitors had dwindled to one other white family [the Doyles] who were bombed and one white Catholic priest [Father Morrissey]...It was a small band we had, but how important we were to each other for moral courage and sustained spirit." When the Doyle family were bombed and moved away to Boulder, Colorado, Marge claims it was "as if there had been a death in the family." She continues, "Even though our sufferings were minor indeed compared to those the black community underwent, we did not have a whole community with us. Our childhood friends abandoned us...Our insurance had been canceled...Once a woman spat at me when I spoke to her on the street. It was hard for me to break a lifelong habit of speaking first to whomever I knew along the street. That incident made it a little easier." On a lighter note, Marge offers, "I was [even] turned down at the beauty salon where I'd had a standing appointment every Saturday for years."²⁰⁰

One of the harshest realities about community Marge learned during these years of ostracism was that, even though the white community rejected her and her family because of her

¹⁹⁹ Susan Sullivan, "Marjorie Baroni: Ordinary Southern Woman, Extraordinary Activist," delivered as part of the Brown Bag Lecture Series at the Center for the Study of Southern Culture, October 4, 2000, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

²⁰⁰ Marge Baroni, Personal Papers, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

work within the black community, there was no place for them within the black Natchez community either. To this end, Marge explains a conversation she, Mamie Lee Mazique, and Mrs. Mazique's son, Dude, shared nearly ten years after the movement had ended. Marge explains that she and Mrs. Mazique had been tossing memories back and forth, when Mrs. Mazique asked her why she had not done more publicly during the movement. Marge explains that she had promised Louis early on in the movement that she would not be arrested or go too far with her activism. Marge recalls the conversation:

I laughed and said something about Mamie Lee not believing that I only held back because of my promise to Louis. 'I know she never trusted me. She always believed I could have done much more than I did and that I was just hiding behind him.' Dude registered dismay that I would say such things, 'Aw, Ms. Baroni, you know that's not so. She did trust you.' I laughed, it was a laughing matter now, but it had rankled me for many years. 'No, she really didn't trust me,' and I looked at Mrs. Mazique for corroboration, 'It's the truth, Dude. I swear I didn't. She's got it right. I thought she was just making out that her husband wouldn't let her go but just so far. I didn't know him then.'²⁰¹

Marge continues in explaining that because Mrs. Mazique still did not know her very well during the prime movement years, she had not known how much restraint Marge had shown "in order not to put too great a psychological burden on the family. "Somehow I knew that if I insisted on doing things my own way, I would wreck us," Marge writes. "I have always been thankful that I did hold back and stay in the background as much as possible."²⁰²

Of the Natchez community that publicly shunned her and privately made attempts to harm her family, Marge writes, "It is difficult to explain the Southerner to people who have neither observed or experienced the intensity of emotion caused by racial hatred and fear." She continues, "It is hard to write about those times. Mississippi seemed then like one giant concentration camp. Always, as I remember how the populace of the state, the whites, went into

²⁰¹ Marge Baroni, Personal Papers, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

²⁰² *Ibid.*

convulsions of rage and hatred, I wonder at the manifestation. I am overwhelmed by the relatively simple aims of the civil rights movement, and how these were perceived by white Mississippians, from the governors on down.”²⁰³

As many threats and as much ostracism as the Baronis faced, Marge never faltered in her belief that her role in the movement was not only supported, but mandated by her faith. In one of her many letters to Dorothy Day, Marge writes positively about the Baroni family’s civil rights experiences:

I think, too, you know how I have longed for anonymity – because this is my hometown, and Louis’ too, and all our six children were born and grew up here. Yet it simply did not seem right even when it seemed possible, for us to leave and turn our backs on the fight for human rights. Our children’s formation was at stake, and although they have had their share of scorn and rejections... Yet, now the changing South is truly visible. And we are armored by the combat.²⁰⁴

Marge, Louis, and the Baroni children had no doubt been armored by the experiences they shared throughout the civil rights years in Natchez.

Marge reflects on this time in the Baroni family’s history as one of a group pilgrimage. She writes, “Our pilgrimage sought freedom for all, beginning with ours.”²⁰⁵ In reflection on this time in her family’s life, Marge writes of the effect the movement years had on her children:

The most remarkable thing about the period was the way our children grew up to be responsible people who cared for each other and others in the world. It crowned our efforts to educate them to be real men and women when one by one they would come home from college and say how their experiences with all the volunteers from universities all over the country, with black leaders and with reporters from television, newspapers and magazines had broadened their outlook and made them aware that Mississippi, while a great place to be, was only part of a great world.²⁰⁶

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁴ Marge Baroni, Undated letter to Dorothy Day, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁶ Marge Baroni, Undated letter to Dorothy Day, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

Even as the surge of movement activity shifted away from Natchez and Mississippi as a whole, Marge and the Baroni's pilgrimages continued.

EPILOGUE

BENEDICTION: MARGE BARONI AND THE POST-CIVIL RIGHTS YEARS

The civil rights years were not the final chapter of Marge Baroni's journeys of faith and activism. Rather, in the post-civil rights years, Marge took significant roles in the continued struggle for racial equality and educational opportunity in the Natchez community. Although these years were pivotal in the desegregation battles of Natchez's public and parochial schools, Marge stayed away from these efforts, explaining, "I was sort of a persona non grata around there, then. I tried to stay away as much as possible because I was already identified in the Catholic white community as being... a rabble rouser, an agitator, and a crazy woman."²⁰⁷ As she had done in the late 1950s, Marge redirected her efforts towards the enrichment of Natchez's minority communities. Much of Marge's work in the late-1960s and 1970s stemmed from a realization she had during the years she and her family had been subject to the public backlash of the white Natchez community in response to her efforts in the Natchez movement. Marge reflects on this lesson:

White citizens of [Mississippi], those who were sensitive to the meaning of freedom for the human spirit, were brought... face to face with a fact of life that their black counterparts had always faced. All the institutions failed us. Never before had it been so blatantly obvious that church, state and local governments, educational and press organizations, and business institutions were dedicated in our state to the preservation of a status quo based on the separation of the races.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁷ Marge Baroni, Interview with Peter E. Hogan, SSJ, February 11, 1977, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

²⁰⁸ Marge Baroni, "1964: Some Memories of Freedom Summer In Natchez, Mississippi," Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

In order to combat this status quo, Marge continued her activism by working to establish community organizations whose services were made accessible to citizens of every race, color, and creed.

From February 1965 to 1967, Marge spearheaded a drive to form a community action agency and local Head Start program under the umbrella of the recently-passed Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. The agency received its charter from Mississippi Governor Paul B. Johnson on August 3, 1967. Known as “Systematic Training and Redevelopment, Inc., Natchez Center” (STAR), the program was “the first single-purpose statewide poverty program” sponsored in the State of Mississippi, with support from the state’s Catholic Diocese of Natchez-Jackson. Because the Catholic Church sponsored the organization, Father William Morrissey became the Natchez Coordinator for the project and Marge Baroni served as his secretary. STAR, Inc. offered “programs for “little children, high school aged work programs, and adult literacy programs,” as well as Adult Basic Education, Job Counseling, and Community Action Development programs.²⁰⁹ Marge worked as a Community Action Specialist at STAR, Inc. from February 1966 to October 1967.²¹⁰ In this position, Marge’s responsibilities were “to work with any and all public and private groups, organizations, and institutions – as well as individuals – to establish a non-profit corporation chartered by the State of Mississippi.”²¹¹ During these years, Marge also served as a member of the Board of Directors and Assistant Director for the Adams-Jefferson Improvement Corporation (AJIC), which operated a Neighborhood Youth Corps in the Natchez African American community. Marge left the AJIC in September 1969. Beginning in October 1969, Marge served for a decade as an aide to Fayette, Mississippi Mayor Charles

²⁰⁹ Marge Baroni, Personal Papers, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

²¹⁰ Marge Baroni, Segments of a Resumé, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

Evers, the brother of Medgar Evers and the first black man elected mayor of a biracial Mississippi town since reconstruction.²¹²

While Marge spent the better part of the 1970s investing in the Natchez and Fayette African-American communities, she also took the time to invest in herself and realized her long-time dream of earning a college degree when she graduated in 1982 with a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Southern Mississippi. From 1982 to 1986 Marge split her time between Natchez and Hattiesburg, Mississippi, where she worked part-time as a teacher while she pursued a Master's degree at the University of Southern Mississippi at Hattiesburg. As part of her master's program, Marge spent a considerable amount of time documenting her involvement in the civil rights movement through letters to friends, personal journal entries, short stories and essays. In one such letter to Dorothy Day, Marge reflects on her activism and her need to tell about it:

Like Don Marquis' Warty Bliggens, the toad, I thought the world was made expressly for me. Unlike Warty Bliggens, I discovered it wasn't and became angry, as you detected very early. Reading over your re-issued trilogy, and especially page 350 of *On Pilgrimage: The Sixties*, suddenly everything came in focus. You took a swipe at me when you parenthesized, 'It is a shame we have to get our news from the subway because our fellow workers in Natchez are too busy...to write about it.' Touche. But now that I have started to write I suppose you will have to bear with such personalized reflections as I have to get out of my system. And now that I have started, I hope you realize you will have a hard time stopping me...God help us to continue the work you have begun in all of us here in Mississippi. And help me to tell about it in truth and with compassion and perspective.

In examining Marge's story as a faith journey, this time to reflect, to write, to debrief her life's path is critical. During these years, Marge found the clarity of thought and retrospection to

²¹² Susan Sullivan, "Marjorie Baroni: Ordinary Southern Woman, Extraordinary Activist," delivered as part of the Brown Bag Lecture Series at the Center for the Study of Southern Culture, October 4, 2000, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

record a life's worth of stories, people, events, and ideas for the sake of posterity. "I must write...must communicate...what happened here," Marge writes in one journal entry. "It is not so much the what – the daily happenings, but the why." In another passage, Marge explains that she wanted to tell her story so that others might learn how to truly love and live. "Now that I have lived 48 years, I begin to see that I could learn some things about being human...I am the wife of one husband, mother of six children, 49 years old, and married two-thirds of my life plus one year, and just now beginning to know a little something about how to live."²¹³ The benediction to her journeys of faith and activism is that this collection of documents exists at all – that Marge Baroni had the chance to tell her story, her way.

Marge died on March 3, 1986 of complications from colon cancer. Even throughout her illness, Marge continued working to better the lives of those in her immediate communities. Of his wife's determination to contribute to the goodness of life for all, Louis remarks, "She never quit. She never quit working." Indeed, only a few months before her death, in August 1985, photos of an emaciated Marge appeared alongside a story in the Mississippi's Catholic diocesan newspaper about her work to secure adequate housing for a century-old African American woman.²¹⁴ Marge Baroni lived an exceptional life, rooted in an exceptional idea – that the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man demanded nothing less from Catholics than to show kindness and justice towards all people. As an historical figure, Marge is an equally noteworthy character whose story contributes significantly to scholarship on the greater narratives of the religious motivations of the civil rights movement. Her letters, personal journals, and essays provide scholars with a wealth of sources which illuminate a more

²¹³ Marge Baroni, Personal Papers, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

²¹⁴ Susan Sullivan, *Marjorie Baroni: Ordinary Southern Woman, Extraordinary Activist*, delivered as a 'Brown Bag' Lecture at the Center for the Study of Southern Culture, October 4, 2000, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

developed understanding of the influences, networks, and experiences of grassroots Catholic activists within the Natchez, Mississippi movement and further edify and expand current scholastic discourse on the religious culture of the South during the civil rights years.

Flannery O'Connor, in her essay collection *Mystery and Manners*, pens a poignant line about her life as a southern Catholic artist that in many ways mirrors how Marge Baroni may have felt about her own activism in relationship to her uniquely southern Catholic motivations. The verse reads, "When people have told me that because I am a Catholic, I cannot be an artist, I have had to reply, ruefully, that because I am a Catholic, I cannot afford to be less than an artist."²¹⁵ Marge may well have written the same lines, but in context her version would have read, "Because I am a Catholic, I cannot afford to be less than an activist." Of course, Marge did not write those words. She did, however, write these, which beautifully encapsulate a theme constant throughout Marge Baroni's journeys of faith and activism: "To love, one must risk being bruised and buffeted by this crazy world. Indeed, one can almost count on being bruised and buffeted. So be it. Be open and vulnerable, like a flower. Only then will you live – and love."²¹⁶

²¹⁵ Flannery O'Connor, *Mysteries and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), 146.

²¹⁶ Marge Baroni, Handwritten quotation from collection of spiral-bound notebooks, Marjorie R. Baroni Collection, Special Collections Library, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

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Mercer University, Macon, GA 2005-2009

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HONORS AND RECOGNITIONS

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RELEVANT EXPERIENCE

FedEx Student-Athlete Academic Support Center, Oxford, MS, Tutor Jan. 2012 – Present

- Employed to serve as an academic tutor for six undergraduate student athletes needing assistance in writing, African American studies, and history courses
- Focused on encouraging these students to create weekly study plans and to improve their note-taking and critical reading skills in order to succeed in balancing their rigorous coursework with their equally difficult athletic training schedules

The Center for the Study of Southern Culture, Oxford, MS, Graduate Assistant 2010 – Present

- Served two semesters as the Teaching Assistant for Southern Studies 102 courses of 65+ undergraduate students
- Responsible for grading student exams and essays, recording attendance, and being available to students for help outside of the classroom
- Researched and composed 12 entries, on topics varying from catfish farming in the Mississippi Delta to the stories of lesser-known Mississippi civil rights activists, for publication in the upcoming Mississippi Encyclopedia
- Conducted an oral history project for the Second Missionary Baptist Church, Oxford, MS, in which I interviewed church elders about growing up black in the Jim Crow South and their experiences in the civil rights movement years