

Black and Catholic in Savannah, Georgia



Gary Wray McDonogh

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Frontispiece. Saint Benedict's graduation, 1932. Photograph courtesy
of Mrs. Mildred Chisholm.

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*To my godchildren—
Meghan, Nicholas, Julian, Jimmie, Joe Bob, and Samantha—
who are the future; to Cindy, of course;
to Pie, a miraculous mother;
and to Larissa Jiit-Wai McDonogh-Wong,
with all our love*

Acknowledgments

It seems fitting that a text revindicating creative human community in the face of contradictions should begin by acknowledging three disparate communities within which this work has taken shape. These communities, each defined by social networks bonded to a strong sense of place, have been my source of data, my arena for criticism, and my life-worlds over the past decade, and all three—Savannah, New College, and Barcelona—have left their mark on this work as they have on me.

Savannah's role transcends its meaning as a field site or ethnographic case study. In 1982 I began research for this work under the aegis of a grant from the University of South Florida Creative Research Fellowships. At that time, I knew the city only as a casual tourist with a secondhand introduction to friends of family friends. By the end of the summer, the people of Savannah had made me feel at home by their generous cooperation in interviews, observation, research, and teaching, a process that has intensified in the subsequent years. The convenience of Savannah as a field site, seven hours from my university, allowed frequent weekend visits in addition to two semesters of sabbatical research supported in part by New College. My acknowledgments there begin in Saint Benedict's with my adopted mother, Mildred "Pie" Chisholm, and her household and breakfast club; Jimmie Reynolds, my godson; Geraldine Abernathy; Annie and David Polite; Devon Mayo; Otis and Lillie Mae Charlton; Willowdean and Herbert Brown and the Scurdy family; Franklin Jenkins; Deacon Prince Jackson; Bobby McCallister; Mary Lockwood; Delores Howard; Carlos and Tamika Washington; and many others. Outside this immediate family, the late Veronica Arnold provided a unique historical link to both Matilda Beasley, her step-grandmother,

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Finally, it is impossible to separate this work from my ongoing commitment to urban anthropology in Barcelona. What I have gained from seventeen years of fieldwork there, in approaching the complexities of urban life and generalizing from Savannah to a more theoretical vision of the city, permeates these pages. My ideas on Savannah have often been the subject of discussion with colleagues there, while their studies have inspired new looks at American society. Among those who must be acknowledged as colleagues and friends are Jim Amelang and Elena López, Susan DiGiacomo and Oriol Pi-Sunyer, Carlos Carreras and Mercedes Marín, Kit Woolard, Josefina Roma and Joan Santomá, Pep Fradera, Xavier Gil, Gaspar Maza, Josep Maria Gallart, Florentino and Cristina de Retana (on whose balcony I edited the final drafts), Juanjo Pujadas and M. Dolores Comas d'Argemir, and Jesús Contreras.

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Introduction

The controversial nomination of Clarence Thomas to the United States Supreme Court in the summer of 1991 and the subsequent publicity and hearings that explored his past focused national attention on those who are African American and Catholic in his hometown of Savannah. Thomas's story, in the hands of local and national media, became an American myth to be believed or attacked: a "black Horatio Alger," to be understood through examination of his race, his region, his era, and his religion. While his former teacher, Sister Mary Vergilius Reidy, appeared on television, testifying in a Senate chamber, journalists called on my friends in St. Benedict the Moor Parish for their memories of the nominee, of Savannah life and ambiance, and of the meaning of a Catholic education in black success.

I do not know Judge Thomas; he left Savannah years before I began my work there in 1982 and no longer practices as a Catholic. Yet the "Thomas story," as I interpreted it within my work among African Americans and Catholics in Savannah as well as conversations with members of Saint Benedict's who became excited by his nomination, highlights many anomalies of race, religion, and individual choice that have shaped southern life and belief. Remarks about his sister being on welfare, for example, have pointed out the divisions of opportunity as well as religion that have torn apart black families in Savannah. Thomas recalled racism within both integrated seminaries and the all-black parochial school where students paid attention to skin shades as marks of class. These echo the memories of southern racial divisions and Christian ideals in Savannah Catholicism that friends have shared over the years as they themselves have sought to make sense of racism within their lives. Even

his differences from the positions of other black activists suggest the ambivalent heritage of Roman Catholicism within the civil rights era as well as the agonies of many contemporary Catholics facing issues such as abortion or war (Lancaster and Lafraniere 1991).

Nor is Thomas the only African-American Catholic to claim national attention in recent years. The separatist church of Reverend George Stallings in Washington, whose appeal to Afrocentric worship has included African-American followers in Georgia, has decried conflicts of values within black and Catholic traditions. Meanwhile, the consecration of Archbishop Eugene Marino of Atlanta as the first black archbishop in the United States, his stepping down, and his replacement by fellow black prelate Joseph Lykes underscored the ambiguous spotlight on blacks within the Catholic church.

This book, however, does not focus on the famous or powerful, whether Clarence Thomas, George Stallings, Eugene Marino, Joseph Lykes, or such past actors as Bishop James Healy, Reverend Andrew Marshall, Mother Matilda Beasley, James Cardinal Gibbons, or Father Divine. Nor does it attempt to trace the complex national and institutional panorama of black Catholicism in the United States, which has recently attracted the increasing attention of authors such as Stephen Ochs (1990) and Cyprian Davis (1991). Instead, it focuses on many lives, relationships, institutions, and beliefs that have constituted key facets of Catholicism in a city divided by conflicts over culture, class, and ethnic or racial differences. Those who have been black and Catholic in Savannah over the past two centuries have formed their lives, families, parishes, and city among conflictive identities and interpretations of the world. Ambiguities pervade belief and rite as much as they shape meanings of education and economic opportunities. Questions arise before the altar in the relations of authority between blacks and whites while they permeate the meanings of such everyday acts as sharing food. In this study, religion provides an important cultural medium through which to understand both the general situation of black and Catholic life and the meaning of divided cultures in the modern city. At the same time, religion remains a theme of study in itself within the social and cultural contexts in which it has evolved.

This study is constructed out of voices, memories, acts, and observations constituting the basis of both ethnology and practice. As such, its local knowledge provides the basis for comparative insights and theoretical generalization. The construction of community through ritual,

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school, and society can be framed by insights into other Catholic communities, black and white, as well as ethnohistorical approaches to the South. This book also moves further afield into social studies of symbolism, gender, class, authority, and power. The imagery of mass media evoked by Thomas, Stallings, and Marino makes us focus on how “we”—Americans, anthropologists, or readers of many heritages and interests—think and talk about religion and race in contemporary society and deal with the many conflicts that arise among social identities in urban life. The violent divisions that flared up in many American cities in 1992, from Los Angeles to Atlanta and Savannah, underscore the ongoing need to understand these issues and to act on them.

This dialectic of local experience and wide generalizations, so central to the anthropological imagination, can be evoked through two events that I attended on Sunday, September 15, 1985, after several years of fieldwork. The first, from 12:30 to 3:00 p.m., was the solemn reopening of Savannah’s Saint John the Baptist Cathedral and the dedication of its new altar. The second, from 5:00 to 8:00 p.m. of the same day, was the twelfth anniversary concert of the Saint Benedict the Moor Gospel Choir, held at the mother church of black and Catholic Savannah.

CATHOLICISM AS SYMBOL AND PRACTICE

Savannah’s eighty-five-year-old cathedral, the center for worship in South Georgia, was closed in 1982 when structural damage became evident. A diocesan campaign raised \$2 million for repairs, interior restoration, and a new main altar. The liturgy celebrating the reopening of the building evoked the splendor, order, and unity of the Roman Catholic church of decades past. Catholics from the entire diocese crowded the cathedral. Urban dignitaries, Catholic and non-Catholic, also joined the assembly. Blacks were present throughout the church as representatives of the traditionally black parishes of the diocese as well as of parishes that had become mixed through consolidation and recruitment; African Americans were also prominent in the procession and ceremonial. Yet, to me, the black presence took on meanings with regard to other groups—including women, youth, and the laity—whose positions reflect the distribution of power within the church and the city.

The entrance procession, for example, sanctioned classic Roman Catholic hierarchy. Young male acolytes led the double files that moved

between the central pews. Their dress and roles were analogous to those of priests, whom they assist during the mass. Senior males from Catholic military orders followed. They represented European institutions such as the Knights of Saint Gregory and better-known American groups like the Knights of Columbus. A member of the traditionally black Knights of Saint Peter Claver proved the only black in the honor salute through which others in the procession passed.

Priests and deacons of the diocese followed the knights. This order enforced a distinction between deacons—who may be either men training for the priesthood or laymen acting as ordained associates in the parish—and the ritual leaders set apart by further training, ordination, and vows of celibacy. Black and white clerics joined the procession. Another black deacon later helped bring gifts to the altar while a third worked with the ushers. Finally, the bishops of Savannah and neighboring dioceses entered the cathedral sanctuary with local abbots and the apostolic nuncio, Pio Laghi, who represented the pope.

The mass itself emphasized interlocking differences of space and rank. The bishops and abbots, colorfully vested, sat behind and around the altar, with other clerics, robed in white, on either side. An altar rail separated them from the laity in their crowded pews. Musicians sang from a back choir loft above the participants. This geography of power was underscored by the boundaries of participation. No women—religious or lay—participated in the procession, although women later read and brought forward gifts to the sanctuary. Apart from the knights, nonordained males took even more limited roles in the ceremony as ushers, gift bearers, and musicians. Almost everyone who took on a public role was a mature adult; youth and children were not nearly as well represented as they are in normal parish life.

Actions inside the sanctuary affirmed the imagery of political, social, and religious power. After two women, including the chancellor of the diocese, proclaimed the first readings, a black deacon read the Gospel (which can only be delivered by a consecrated specialist). Later, bishops and priests concelebrated the Eucharist, the central act of belief and worship in the Catholic church. Although most parishes nationwide rely on the laity to distribute communion to the congregation, only priests and deacons performed the task in the cathedral. Thus, the laity physically moved toward the priests to participate in full union with the church and with God. This ceremony identified the cathedral with the clergy, the episcopacy, and the papacy, whose representatives held the central