
Richard Gribble, CSC
Stonehill College

For a period of some 10 years, two Roman Catholic priests, James Gillis, CSP and John LaFarge, SJ, became unlikely collaborators and colleagues in their common effort to bring greater justice to Black Catholics in the United States. Gillis, a strong political and theological conservative and LaFarge, a much more liberal thinker, were two prominent members of the Northeast Clergy Conference for Negro Welfare, a group that arose on the early 1930s and for the next decade produced documents, programs, and initiated various initiatives to better the life of Black Catholics, initially in the Northeast part of the country and then broadening out its reach in a more general way. The ability for two apparent opposites to collaborate in a common effort to assist an oppressed group tells an interesting story of cooperation between apparent political and religious opposites.

Keywords: Black Catholics, American Catholicism, racism, Northeast Clergy Conference for Negro Welfare, Jesuits, Paulists

Introduction

The Black Catholic experience in the United States is a story dominated by pain, discrimination, and in general a lack of understanding and acceptance. Indeed in 1904, the Apostolic Delegate to the United States, Archbishop Diomede Falconio, OFM, received a letter from the Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation of the Propaganda, Girolamo Maria Gotti, ODC, which in part read:

It has been referred to this Sacred Congregation that in some of the dioceses of the United States the condition of the Catholic Negroes, not only in respect to the other faithful but also in respect to their pastors and bishops, is very humiliating and entirely different from that of the whites.1

In a similar tone, the Dean of American Catholic Black history, Benedictine Father Cyprian Davis, has described the history of Black Catholics in the United States as “systematically ignored.”2 He continues, “Black Catholics have been here the longest, … [b]ut, like Native Americans and Hispanics, they have been among the forgotten and neglected children of this ancient church.”3 A few historians and noted scholars have chronicled various dimensions of this overall story of misery and woe. For example, Stephen Ochs’

1 Quoted in Cyprian Davis, OSB, The History of Black Catholics in the United States (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 195.
2 Ibid., xi.
monumental study of the road to ordination for Black men, *Desegregating the Altar*, chronicles how even religious communities that sought to minister to the African-American community were often dismissive or even rejected the efforts of Blacks to enter the priesthood.

Despite general discrimination and even racism toward African-American Catholics, there are important, but lesser-known, triumphs in ministry to the Black Catholic population in the United States. During the period of Catholic Action, beginning in the early 1930s, prominent activists arose such as Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, co-founders of the Catholic Worker Movement and Baroness Catherine de Hueck Doherty, a Russian émigré to the United States via Canada who started Friendship House, a specialized outreach ministry to the African American community. This essay chronicles the significant of two Catholic clerics, John LaFarge, SJ and James Gillis, CSP, who, coming from almost polar opposite political and social perspectives were, nonetheless, able to find common ground through their membership and work in the Northeast Clergy Conference for Negro Welfare and its promotion and support of Black Catholics.

**John LaFarge, SJ and James Gillis, CSP**

John LaFarge was born into an aristocratic family in Newport, Rhode Island in 1880. His father, John LaFarge, Sr. was a famous artist. After graduating from Harvard University in 1901, he trained for the priesthood and was ordained in 1905. However, he saw himself not suited for the secular (diocesan) priesthood and thus joined the Jesuits. He seemed headed for an academic career until ill health forced him to be sent to Southern Maryland for therapy. He ultimately stayed there 15 years, a period of great influence during which he encountered the Black population, many of whom were Catholic. Convinced of a gap between the creed of the universal Church and racist policies which he observed, he dove into racial work with great vigor. His ministry was highlighted by the foundation of the Cardinal Gibbons Institute in 1924. From 1926 to his death in 1963, LaFarge was on the editorial staff of *America*, the popular Jesuit weekly, serving as editor-in-chief from 1944 to 1948.

LaFarge was widely recognized as one of the most influential Catholic spokesmen on black-white relations in the United States. In September 1924 he established the Cardinal Gibbons Institute, the first high school for African-Americans in St. Mary’s County, Maryland. Three years later he organized the Catholic Laymen’s Union in 1927, a group of approximately 25 Black businessmen and professionals who were interested in deepening their spirituality by applying Gospel principles to their daily lives. His advocacy for interracial justice was paramount in his life. He called for general justice for African-Americans where injustice had reigned for many decades, such as the common use of public facilities, ways certain people were preferentially treated (or maltreated), and the all-too-common practice of lynching Blacks for sport. He asked, would a Catholic stand by and allow such injustices to happen if our friends and relatives were so treated?

Interracial justice lay at the heart of LaFarge’s advocacy for Black Catholics; he used it as the base from which his advocacy for the Black Catholic community took flight. In an article published in 1934, he wrote: “[Interracial justice is] the organization of society so that each racial (or minority) group obtains an equal share

---

4 The Cardinal Gibbons Institute was St. Mary’s County’s first high school built to educate Blacks. Located in Ridge, Maryland, it provided academic, vocational and religious instructions to black students from across the United States.  
in the common benefits to which it has an equal claim.”

He suggested that the main culprit that kept African-Americans from justice was in large measure due not only to present conditions, but past history. LaFarge once commented,

The condition of the Negro as he is now found in this country may be stated in terms of his past experience or of his present environment. It may be well to cast a glance upon both. His past experience is that of slavery; his present environment is that of our commercialized civilization.

LaFarge strongly believed that Christianity demanded interracial justice. He wrote, “We have … the duties toward one another of justice and love that is [sic] natural for the members of a body to entertain towards one another.”

He believed that interracial programs were necessary for the advancement of African-Americans in general, including being a vehicle for their conversion to Catholicism. He believed that this justice could be achieved when, as a first step, there was recognition that interracial justice was a moral and spiritual issue. Additionally, a program of interracial justice necessarily implied a program for the increase of supernatural charity.

While LaFarge fully believed in and promoted interracial justice, he did not see it as a panacea for the plight of African-Americans. He wrote,

It is meaningless unless it is accompanied by the works of spiritual ministration, education and social welfare which are directly concerned with the Negro himself and not with what people say and think about him. But these same works are likewise without efficacy … unless their operation is accompanied and sustained by a systematic, tireless campaign against the ignorance and prejudices which now close the doors of spiritual vocational opportunity to a great proportion of the Negroes.

A close contemporary to LaFarge in age, but almost diametrically opposed in general political and theological thought, James Gillis was born in Boston on November 12, 1876, the second of four surviving children of James Gillis and Catherine Roche, both of whom traced their ancestry to Northern Ireland. An outstanding student, Gillis graduated from Boston Latin, one of the most prestigious high schools in the metropolitan area, attended St. Charles minor seminary in Ellicott City, Maryland, and then matriculated to St. John’s Seminary in Brighton for the Archdiocese of Boston. During his early seminary years Gillis met Paulist Father Walter Elliott, whose enthusiasm captivated the young seminarian. Eventually on September 11, 1898

---

11 John LaFarge, SJ, “Speech,” November 16, 1941, Box 52, Folder 15, John LaFarge Papers, Archives Georgetown University (hereafter AGU), Washington, D.C.
12 The Congregation of Missionary Priests of St. Paul the Apostle, commonly known as the Paulists, was organized in 1858 under the guidance of Isaac Thomas Hecker and three associates, Augustine Hewit, George DeShon, and Francis Baker, all converts. Hecker had converted to Catholicism after searching for a religious practice and charism in accord with his personal spirituality. He was ordained a Redemptorist priest on October 23, 1849 at the hands of Bishop (later Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster) Nicholas Wiseman in England. Hecker’s missionary commitment as a Redemptorist was soon manifested in his ministry in the United States. He became convinced that what America needed was a new foundation of the Redemptorists aimed toward mission work. When Hecker went to Rome in August 1857 to plead for such a wing of the community, he was promptly expelled from the order for his unauthorized trip. Hecker found friends in high places in Rome, however, in the person of Alessandro Barnabo, prefect of the Congregation of the Propaganda, which supervised American affairs. Barnabo spoke with Pope Pius IX, who released Hecker and his associates from their vows and suggested that they form a new community. Back in the United States, Hecker discussed his plan with his friends. A “Programme Rule” was drawn up and approved by Archbishop John Hughes of New York on July 10, 1858. Hecker believed that America needed the new religious community to carry the message of Catholicism to non-Catholics.
he officially registered at St. Thomas College, the religious house of formation for the Paulists in Washington, D.C. During the next two years Gillis’ training in religious life and priesthood was dominated by the Paulist rule, the influence of community members, especially his mentor Walter Elliott, and his academic studies. On December 21, 1901 Gillis was ordained to the priesthood at St. Paul the Apostle Church in New York.

Gillis’ philosophy of life and his understanding of America’s role in the world were developed and honed through contact with influential people and experiences in his childhood and formative years. Gillis was imbued by his father with a sense of moral responsibility and personal duty. The senior Gillis believed in rugged individualism and promoted the idea that people contribute to society through their own initiative and effort; there was no place for laziness or inattention to duty.

Gillis’ national consciousness and world view were formed through his initial experiences in ministry. Immediately after ordination Gillis attended The Catholic University of America, earning a STL in 1903. He was then sent to Old St. Mary’s in Chicago to assist in the Paulist mission band. His mission preaching and painful encounters with fellow Paulists and parishioners left a bad impression on him, leading him to emphasize personal moral responsibility in his missionary preaching. He believed that sin was one’s personal choice--one can accept or reject God at any time.

Gillis’ inability to achieve inner peace because of a self-imposed goal of spiritual perfection, led him to project his need for moral rigorism and absolutism onto society, voicing his world view, developed from his spirituality, which pitted the forces of darkness against the righteousness of God. He used his strongly held convictions as the basis upon which he would critique the world's manifestations of moral irresponsibility--its leaders, institutions, ideologies, and programs, for more than three decades through the varied public media.

Over the decades of his public career the face of the enemy changed for James Gillis: apparent moral laxity, greed, and the demise of family life in the 1920s, the leviathan state and interventionist politics in the 1930s, and Communism, deceptive government, and imperialism in the 1940s and 1950s. In the 1930s one manifestation of moral laxity was the Church’s failure to meet the needs of the burgeoning Black Catholic population. Working at the same time as John LaFarge, he acted stridently and with great fervor to right a long-standing wrong.14

Although a strong conservative politically and socially, Gillis was in union with LaFarge in his advocacy for Black Catholics, utilizing the vehicles of radio and printed media to voice his ideas. In November 1932 he gave a radio talk, “White Man and Black,” on the nationally syndicated “Catholic Hour.” Speaking generically of the situation experienced by Black Americans he commented:

On the whole the Negro is considered an alien, an outcast, and as it were, a leper in our midst. He is ostracized if not exiled. He is the victim of such discrimination and injustice as would precipitate unending race riots if he were not more tolerant, more patient, and more law-abiding than his white neighbors.

Basic justice to humanity mandated that Blacks receive the same rights or prerogatives given to the white population. Speaking to the white majority audience, he suggested that past treatment of African-Americans had been “manifestly and outrageously wrong.” He continued,

We are treating the Negro as unjustly, if not with quite so much bloody cruelty, as we treated the Indian. Whatever we are doing now to atone for our crime against the red man from whom we stole the continent, we are doing little or nothing to atone for the crimes we commit against the black man. We have not even ceased to deal unmercifully with him.

He concluded, chiding the white population to demonstrate mercy but if this was not possible “at least let us give him [the African-American] simple justice.”

Gillis was equally strident in his most popular medium of writing. In an essay published in June 1934 he continued his earlier themes, calling for Christian justice and criticizing the white population for its treatment of African-Americans. He wrote,

Any Christian who creates or perpetuates or tolerates race hatred or any race prejudice contradicts and crucifies Christ; any human being who discriminates against his fellow man because of the color of that man’s skin or because of the fanciful opinion that any other man’s blood differs essentially from his own is guilty of a crime against not one race, but against the human race.

He suggested that any white man who presumed to speak on the subject of interracial justice should begin with a public confession of the sins and crimes that he and his race had committed against the Black population. He suggested further that the majority of Christians had failed to exemplify the most basic and elementary principles of the religion they profess. He concluded, “Hatred, prejudice, persecution, discrimination against any man because of his race is a sin against one’s own flesh and blood; race hatred in its ultimate manifestation is mystically fratricide, the crime of Cain.”

The Black Catholic Experience in America

The early nineteenth century history of African-American Catholics is rooted in religious congregations, both communities formed for Black membership only and others organized specifically to serve the African-American Catholic community. The first Black congregation of women religious, the Oblate Sisters of Providence, founded by Jacques Joubert, SS and led by Elizabeth Lange, took vows in 1829. The Sisters of the Holy Family were established in New Orleans in November 1842; the Missionary Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Heart, under the guidance of Mother Mathilda Beasley, were founded in Savannah, Georgia in 1891. These communities sought to educate Black children, as public education was largely not available to them.

In the latter quarter of the century three new congregations arose in the United States specifically to serve the African-American community. In 1891, a young Philadelphia heiress, Katharine Drexel, founded the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament for Indians and Colored People. The Mill Hill Fathers, founded in 1871 by Herbert Vaughn in England, were manifested in the United States as the Josephites, beginning in 1893. In September 1923 the Divine Word Missionaries opened St. Augustine Seminary in Bay St. Louis, Louisiana, as a training ground for Black priests. The histories of these congregations produced many stories of both successful foundations and compassionate ministry, but their failures to move the African-American Catholic community towards an equal status with other Catholics, were often glaring.

Possibly the most significant champion of the Black Catholic cause in the late nineteenth century was Daniel Rudd. A newspaper man from Cincinnati and founder of the American Catholic Tribune, the first Black Catholic newspaper, Rudd was the driving force behind a series of five lay Black Catholic Congresses, held

15 James Gillis, “White Man and Black,” Catholic Hour Broadcast, November 20, 1932, James Gillis Papers, Box 34, Archives Paulist Fathers (hereafter APF), Washington, D.C.
17 Ibid., 175, 185.
18 Religious communities were basically segregated until the 1950s.
between 1889 and 1897. These national meetings, which drew some of the most talented and best educated Black Catholics, became venues to discuss many topics pertinent to African-Americans of the day, including education, vocational training, labor issues, establishment of better housing, and the problem of racism in the Church.¹⁹

The twentieth century provided new leaders but the plight of the African-American Catholic community improved little. Thomas Wyatt Turner, longtime professor at Howard University, held no punches in his strong criticism of the segregationist policies in the Church. In his writings he addressed five major areas where Black Catholics had been subjugated: (1) education, (2) Catholic organizations, (3) The Catholic University of America, (4) Black priests, and (5) racism in the Church. Apathy and indifference reigned, even with the significant migration of Black Catholics to the industrial North. George Hunton, a prominent Catholic layman who worked closely with LaFarge, commented,

The Negro admires Catholic teaching as to his equal dignity as a man and regarding his internal destiny and the sacredness of his natural rights. But he finds in the existence of Catholic indifference and neglect a grave inconsistency between Catholic principles and the attitude and conduct of the majority of the Catholic laity.²⁰

The Josephite priest, John Gillard, similarly commented,

Priests shall judge the Negro by his character, not by his color. … It is strange that priests who ordinarily put much stress upon spiritual values, should be so blind to the vast reservoir of spiritual energy represented by millions of un-churched Negroes.²¹

Gillard suggested that there had been three basic responses to the movement of Black Catholics northward: (1) Some pastors saw it as an opportunity to harvest souls; (2) Some rather oblivious to the situation, while not antagonistic to Blacks, did little to help them; (3) Some, seeing the flight of white parishioners and thus the disintegration of the parish due to the arrival of Blacks became resentful of them. He suggested the largest groups “are simply indifferent to the welfare of Negroes.”²² Gillard declared that the white man was the Negro’s burden in that despite the fact that Black Catholic had proven himself “worthy to walk the streets of the New Jerusalem, he is forced to be satisfied with the alleys of life and the rear entrance to Paradise.” He concluded, “For the Negro there is nothing but the carrion of neglect in the valley of Catholicism.”²³

One bright spot in the history between African Americans and the Church was the formation in 1924 of the Federated Colored Catholics (FCC) by the Howard University Professor, Thomas Wyatt Turner. The group sought to bring unity to Black Catholics, enhance their possibility for Catholic education, and to raise the overall status of Blacks within the Church through greater participation in the cause of racial justice. The historian Martin Zielinski has written,

---


²² Ibid., 148, 149.

²³ Ibid., 144, 158. Interestingly, Gillard tried to dampen criticism of Church members for their failure to convert more African-Americans to Catholicism. He wrote, “The fact of the matter is that Negro converts are no easier to make them any other kind.” See Ibid., 155.
The general purpose of the group was to provide support for the newly-opened [St. Emma’s Industrial] School, to promote the cause of Catholic education among the black population, and to raise the status of black Catholics in the Church.

The FCC endeavored to act as a clearing house for Catholic African-American opinion. A dispute arose, however, between the Jesuit priests, John LaFarge and William Markoe, on one side and Turner on the other, leading eventually in December 1932 to Turner’s ouster as head of the FCC. The famous African-American writer, W.E.B. DuBois, was highly critical of the “take over,” seeing it as a power grab. He suggested that if Blacks had more priests and even one bishop, “all would work out normally,” but the present situation does not allow a fair fight.

DuBois was generally critical of how the Church operated toward African Americans. His observations convinced him that the Church “stands for color separation and discrimination to a degree unequalled by any other church in America.” Indeed, he went so far as to suggest that Church practice toward Blacks was no better than the actions of the Ku Klux Klan. Additionally, DuBois criticized the Church for doing little to assist African Americans, especially its failure to evangelize the Black population and to seek converts.

The Northeast Clergy Conference for Negro Welfare

The interwar years saw a significant migration of African-Americans from Southern regions to the industrialized cities of the North. For example between 1920 and 1930 the African-American population in New York City increased from 152,000 to 327,000; in Philadelphia a similar rise from 134,000 to 219,000 was experienced. Unfortunately, this migration of African-Americans north did not initially precipitate an enhanced outreach to this population by the Catholic Church. Rather, Blacks were often met with apathy and even hostility, even by ordained clergy. However, two other factors did prompt more progressive Catholic clergy to express concern over the lack of outreach in the northeast urban areas to the burgeoning Black population. First, Black Catholics had formed an organization to protest their treatment in the Church. Rather, Blacks were often met with apathy and even hostility, even by ordained clergy. However, two other factors did prompt more progressive Catholic clergy to express concern over the lack of outreach in the northeast urban areas to the burgeoning Black population. First, Black Catholics had formed an organization to protest their treatment in the Church. Rather, Blacks were often met with apathy and even hostility, even by ordained clergy. However, two other factors did prompt more progressive Catholic clergy to express concern over the lack of outreach in the northeast urban areas to the burgeoning Black population. First, Black Catholics had formed an organization to protest their treatment in the Church. Rather, Blacks were often met with apathy and even hostility, even by ordained clergy. However, two other factors did prompt more progressive Catholic clergy to express concern over the lack of outreach in the northeast urban areas to the burgeoning Black population. First, Black Catholics had formed an organization to protest their treatment in the Church. Rather, Blacks were often met with apathy and even hostility, even by ordained clergy. However, two other factors did prompt more progressive Catholic clergy to express concern over the lack of outreach in the northeast urban areas to the burgeoning Black population. First, Black Catholics had formed an organization to protest their treatment in the Church. Rather, Blacks were often met with apathy and even hostility, even by ordained clergy. However, two other factors did prompt more progressive Catholic clergy to express concern over the lack of outreach in the northeast urban areas to the burgeoning Black population. First, Black Catholics had formed an organization to protest their treatment in the Church. Rather, Blacks were often met with apathy and even hostility, even by ordained clergy. However, two other factors did prompt more progressive Catholic clergy to express concern over the lack of outreach in the northeast urban areas to the burgeoning Black population. First, Black Catholics had formed an organization to protest their treatment in the Church. Rather, Blacks were often met with apathy and even hostility, even by ordained clergy. However, two other factors did prompt more progressive Catholic clergy to express concern over the lack of outreach in the northeast urban areas to the burgeoning Black population. First, Black Catholics had formed an organization to protest their treatment in the Church. Rather, Blacks were often met with apathy and even hostility, even by ordained clergy. However, two other factors did prompt more progressive Catholic clergy to express concern over the lack of outreach in the northeast urban areas to the burgeoning Black population. First, Black Catholics had formed an organization to protest their treatment in the Church. Rather, Blacks were often met with apathy and even hostility, even by ordained clergy. However, two other factors did prompt more progressive Catholic clergy to express concern over the lack of outreach in the northeast urban areas to the burgeoning Black population. First, Black Catholics had formed an organization to protest their treatment in the Church. Rather, Blacks were often met with apathy and even hostility, even by ordained clergy. However, two other factors did prompt more progressive Catholic clergy to express concern over the lack of outreach in the northeast urban areas to the burgeoning Black population. First, Black Catholics had formed an organization to protest their treatment in the Church. Rather, Blacks were often met with apathy and even hostility, even by ordained clergy. However, two other factors did prompt more progressive Catholic clergy to express concern over the lack of outreach in the northeast urban areas to the burgeoning Black population. First, Black Catholics had formed an organization to protest their treatment in the Church. Rather, Blacks were often met with apathy and even hostility, even by ordained clergy. However, two other factors did prompt more progressive Catholic clergy to express concern over the lack of outreach in the northeast urban areas to the burgeoning Black population. First, Black Catholics had formed an organization to protest their treatment in the Church. Rather, Blacks were often met with apathy and even hostility, even by ordained clergy. However, two other factors did prompt more progressive Catholic clergy to express concern over the lack of outreach in the northeast urban areas to the burgeoning Black population. First, Black Catholics had formed an organization to protest their treatment in the Church. Rather, Blacks were often met with apathy and even hostility, even by ordained clergy. However, two other factors did prompt more progressive Catholic clergy to express concern over the lack of outreach in the northeast urban areas to the burgeoning Black population. First, Black Catholics had formed an organization to protest their treatment in the Church. Rather, Blacks were often met with apathy and even hostility, even by ordained clergy. However, two other factors...
The presence of the Negroes in our cities and in the midst of our majority communities has dramatized the basic truth that the Negroes’ material and spiritual welfare alike are not the mere concern of the Negro alone, but the common concerns of us all. We can neither live nor work nor suffer not [sic] pray apart from one another.

Acting on the perceived needs and the past failures of the Church toward the Black Catholic community, eight priests met on November 13, 1933 at the Athletic Club in Newark, New Jersey at the invitation of Father Harold Purcell, C.P, editor of Sign, a weekly Catholic journal. The assembled clerics gathered to discuss a response to the aforementioned migration, seeking common ground “so that a unified logical presentation of the subject [Black apostolate] finally could be made to the general public.” The group discussed methods to make Catholic clergy in the United States more “colored conscious.” Commenting years later on the first meeting, LaFarge, who served as the chairman pro tem at this meeting, wrote, “All were animated by a common concern: the question of public opinion, especially among Catholics, as to the Negro and its effects upon what was being done for the Negro’s spiritual welfare.”

Discussions at this initial meeting led to a proposed five-point program for the Conference to follow: (1) Spiritual care of Negroes; (2) Social justice; (3) Education; (4) Race relations; (5) Cultural development. The participants were very strong on the influence that could be wielded by those who had connections to printed publications, such as Purcell and LaFarge. At the meeting LaFarge voiced the view, “The Negroes will not be satisfied with any religious program which does not contain at least three elements: a program of social justice; Catholic higher education for Negro youth; a Negro clergy.” In his autobiography The Manner is Ordinary, LaFarge contended that the participants at the outset of the Clergy Conference were convinced of two things:

1. That public opinion is a capital factor in the Negroes spiritual welfare and in the material circumstances that affect that welfare.

2. That the combating of false opinions and the building up of a sound one cannot be left to mere chance.

He concluded that there must be “systematically and intelligently organized propaganda for the spiritual welfare of the Negro and its material implications and the clergy themselves should be leaders in such an undertaking.” LaFarge described the deliberations at this first meeting, and with all subsequent gatherings, as “off the record” and “free and frank.” Indeed, one LaFarge biographer, David Southern, has written, “The meetings of the Northeast Clergy Conference on [sic—for] Negro Welfare resembled a modern-day...
consciousness—raising or support group. The discussion that took place was pastoral, frank and largely confidential."

The initial meeting in Newark was followed only one week later on November 19 with a second gathering in Brooklyn. The original eight members were joined by four additional prominent clergyman, including John Ryan, professor of moral theology at The Catholic University of America and head of the Social Action Department of the National Catholic Welfare Conference and James Gillis. At this second meeting the members, led by LaFarge, Bernard Quinn, and Cornelius Ahern, agreed to compose a body of doctrine for the Conference, agreeing that the ultimate goal of the organization and interracial work in general should be the conversion of African-Americans. This document, a *modus agenda*, written in seven sections, was presented to the conference members at the third meeting, held on March 20, 1934 at the Philadelphia home of Louise D. Morrell, sister of Mother Katherine Drexel.

Beginning at the second meeting and continuing in subsequent gatherings, the significant contributions of LaFarge and Gillis in their various manifestations began to emerge. Although his attendance was not as regular as LaFarge, Gillis was clearly the more outspoken of the two men when the Conference met. Indeed, the historian David Southern has written, “Gillis clearly was the most outspoken and mercurial of the lot. His impassioned speeches hammered Jim Crow Christianity and shocked and angered many.” Gillis suggested that American Catholics needed to be bombarded by the press towards making the clergy “colored conscious.” He argued that a conciliatory tone would not work, suggesting instead that confrontation might be necessary.

His no-nonsense approach was demonstrated at the Conference’s second gathering, the first that he attended: “Timidity and an apologetic attitude will not help. People need to be ‘shocked’; an ‘open row’ would not hurt.” LaFarge, on the other hand, was much more measured in his approach, pushing publicity and the formation of doctrine within the Conference. He insisted that it was of paramount importance to proclaim the Conference’s message, set forth in a series of practical conclusions to which all could satisfactorily agree, and to transmit them to both clergy and laity.

In 1934 the Conference expanded its reach and membership while formalizing its own internal organization. On March 20, 1934 the Conference again met at the home of Louise Morrell with a total of 37 attendees. Nine committees were created. Gillis was appointed chair of the radio committee (later expanded to

---

39 Hruzd, “North Clergy Conference,” 18. The other two new participants were Joseph Corrigan, Rector of Overbrook Seminary in Philadelphia, and John Cooper, Professor of Anthropology at The Catholic University of America.
40 Ibid., 20. The seven sections of the document were: General Considerations, Conversions, Social Justice, Negro Clergy, Education, Race Relations, and Cultural Development.
41 Records for all of the meetings of the Northeast Clergy Conference are not extant, but LaFarge, as recording secretary, was present at all the meetings. Gillis, due in large measure to his extensive travel schedule as a public speaker, was present at approximately 60% of the meetings.
43 Meeting Minutes, Northeast Clergy Conference for Negro Welfare, November 19, 1933, John LaFarge Papers, Box 52, Folder 9, AGU. Gillis’ mercurial style with the Clergy Conference was consistent with his often bombastic comments in his monthly editorial comments in *The Catholic World*. For example, Gillis held no punches in his dislike for President Franklin Roosevelt, commenting on one occasion: “I confess I don’t understand the man [Roosevelt]. But I do think him inconsistent and unpredictable. A ‘dangerous,’ ‘reckless,’ ‘audacious,’ inconsistent, unpredictable man is no man to be three times President of the United States. To perpetuate in office a man with a mania for power who asks, obtains and holds all he gets, and demands ever more and more would be as great a political blunder as that of Hindenburg and the Reichstag that handed over liberties of the people to Hitler.” See James Gillis, “Editorial Comment,” *The Catholic World* 152 (November 1940): 132, 138.
44 Meeting Minutes, Northeast Clergy Conference for Negro Welfare, November 19, 1933, John LaFarge Papers, Box 52, Folder 9, AGU.
publicity committee) with LaFarge assigned as the chairman of the lay organization committee, as well as serving as recording secretary. Discussing the events of the March 1934 meeting a few years later, LaFarge, Ahern, and Joseph Corrigan recalled, “The purpose of the various committees was not executive, but advisory in order to furnish information to the Conference, that the entire group be better able to act as a committee of the whole.” Conference members voiced the need to advance educational opportunities for African-Americans in general and seminary options for Black Catholics. LaFarge pushed for cultural advancement for the African-American community, but his most controversial contribution dealt with the question of episcopal sanction for the Conference. He commented at the meeting:

> We have laid our cards on the table. The only way to progress in this matter is by frankness, whether the formation of a permanent organization is involved in further action at some point in the future, I don’t know. … An organization demands the sanction of the hierarchy. A more feasible way at present seems the one we have taken whereby the committee, although it has nobody definitely to report to, is nevertheless able to meet and go ahead developing ways and means to accomplish the objects which brought us together here today.

The question of episcopal sanction was tabled. At the next meeting in April 1934, it was agreed that the Conference must continue to function as a group of individuals gathered together, rather than an episcopally-sanctioned body. At this time, LaFarge contributed a “Clergy Pamphlet” that provided a synopsis of the Conference’s history and work to date. The four-page pamphlet clearly stated that the Conference’s program was “purely educational” and that each member had the “sanction of his own superior … to promote an apostolic attitude toward the Negro.”

Meetings of the Conference during the remainder of 1934 centered about publicizing the group’s work more widely and the question of episcopal sanction. In May, LaFarge was tasked with writing an eight-page pamphlet to explain more fully the Conference’s work. In October the Conference still held the opinion that it should not seek episcopal support:

> We should remain an unofficial group; merely for discussion, not advisory. Each man’s participation is known to his own Bishop or Religious Superior. We should remain as we are without attempt at further organization or a secretariat. Our goal: a converging of ideas.

The October meeting was also significant as it was decided to send a mass mailing to 10,000 priests in the Northeast, informing them of the Conference’s work. The letter, signed by Gillis as chair of the publicity committee, read in part: “Perhaps there is yet time, but we shall have to act quickly … if Blacks are to be converted. … The next 10 years may decide the spiritual fate of American Blacks.” The letter insisted that the clergy show that “the Church is consistent in her treatment of all people alike.”

---

45 Memorandum of Conversation, January 10, 1939, John LaFarge Papers, Box 52, Folder 10, AGU; Meeting Minutes, Northeast Clergy Conference for Negro Welfare, April 11, 1934, John LaFarge Papers, Box 52, Folder 9, AGU. The original committees were, radio, literature, pamphlet, lay organizations, magazines and newspapers, seminary and schools, propagation of the faith and priests’ retreats, sodalities, and liturgy.

46 Meeting Minutes, Northeastern Clergy Conference for Negro Welfare, March 20, 1934, John LaFarge Papers, Box 52, Folder 9, AGU.

47 Hruzd, “Northeast Clergy Conference,” 40, 28-29. It should be noted that while Conference was making strides within its membership, there were those who believed the group was headed in the wrong direction. Prominent among the detractors was Father Joseph Pastorelli, Superior General of the Josephites. Teresa Hruzd believes that this opposition put somewhat of a damper on the Conference, even taming the language of James Gillis to a more “conciliatory tone.”

48 Meeting Minutes, Northeast Clergy Conference for Negro Welfare, October 9, 1934, John LaFarge Papers, Box 52, Folder 9, AGU.

letter was mixed. Gillis, despite the rather tepid response, insisted that another letter be prepared as the Conference needed to forcefully act on questions. He suggested that the Conference must make a strident statement in support of both “white and colored in Catholic schools in the North,” a highly controversial topic of the day.\footnote{Ibid., 35-37.}

The Conference closed out 1934 with a meeting in New York City on December 11. At this meeting, Gillis suggested that the assistance of the national clergy be sought through the mass media, including radio. He informed Conference members that the Paulist radio station in New York City, WLWL, could be utilized as well as various newspaper and magazine columns.\footnote{Ibid.}

The Conference’s 1935 meetings, while seeking a general program for race relations, featured the reemergence of the more forceful attitude of James Gillis. At the May 7 meeting, held in Cornwell Heights, Pennsylvania, Gillis pushed for a general formula for race relations as a means of removing obstacles that beset the Negro apostolate. The formal document asked for “full Catholic life for the Negro, and a full equality of opportunity and fulfillment of the Negroes’ duties toward God and his fellow man.”\footnote{Meeting Minutes, Northeast Clergy Conference for Negro Welfare, May 7, 1935, John LaFarge Papers, Box 52, Folder 9, AGU; LaFarge, \textit{Manner is Ordinary}, 340.} In October Gillis’ patented firebrand style came to the forefront. Again promoting his idea of co-education for Whites and Blacks in Catholic schools in the North, he pushed Conference members to be more proactive, especially in its published statements:

\begin{quote}
We must become specific we cannot help coming down to the difficult questions. What shall we do with specific statements and articles? Can we agree on some programs? People wish to know what we will do in such a case. \footnote{Meeting Minutes, Northeastern Clergy Conference for Negro Welfare, October 12, 1935, John LaFarge Papers, Box 52, Folder 9, AGU.}
\end{quote}

LaFarge, as in the past was more measured, responding to Gillis’ suggestion by stating that the Conference’s \textit{modus agendi}, published in 1934, dealt with many of the issues that concerned Gillis. But the Paulist fired back, “Shall the Committee make a decision on whether these [emphasis original] controversial points in our program shall be made public, or whether such an article is in accordance with our principles?”\footnote{Ibid.} The minor battle between LaFarge and Gillis, at this point, was won by Gillis as the Conference began to confront issues in a more forthright manner.

The efforts of Gillis and LaFarge highlighted the work of the Conference in 1936 as well. Gillis again pushed for the Conference to draw geographic distinctions in its approach to its general goal of making people more “colored conscious.” For example when discussing the decision to publish a second generic letter to the American clergy he stated, “We cannot write one [a letter] that will stir up the North without offending the South.”\footnote{Meeting Minutes, Northeast Clergy Conference for Negro Welfare, February 12, 1936, John LaFarge Papers, Box 52, Folder 10, AGU.} In a similar vein, with respect to radio, he commented, it would be impossible to obtain a series on the Catholic Hour, due to its national coverage. Thus, he suggested that the Conference should be strident in its message to the North, since this geographic area was the target for the organization’s work from the outset. Later in the year, Gillis asked whether or not the Conference should concentrate only on the Negro apostolate or if it should entertain wider questions concerning the Church in the Northeast.\footnote{Ibid., Meeting Minutes, Northeast Clergy Conference for Negro Welfare, December 1, 1936, John LaFarge Papers, Box 52, Folder 10, AGU.}
LaFarge played multiple roles in the Conference during this same year. He was called upon to respond to a rather scurrilous attack on the Conference by the Josephite priest John Gillard. Utilizing two organs, America and Interracial Review, LaFarge refuted Gillard’s categorization of the Conference’s members as full-time advocates for African Americans. While some of the Conference members worked directly with Black Catholics, others had no contact with this population at all, but simply supported the Conference’s efforts. This critique of the Conference led to the first manifestation of ecclesiastical recognition. On May 6, the 14th gathering of the Conference, LaFarge hosted Bishop Thomas Molloy of Brooklyn, the first member of the hierarchy to attend a meeting of the group. Molloy told the Conference members, “Your method of extending information through circularizing is a splendid general program of approach.” He went on to suggest that the Conference should reconsider its apparent aversion to ecclesiastical approval.57 At the Conference’s December 1 meeting it was decided that another letter should be written to the American clergy, updating them on the Conference’s work. LaFarge was again assigned to write the communiqué.58

The Conference’s work during the latter years of the 1930s featured some important administrative moves. In 1938 the Conference reorganized its committee structure establishing three new groups: “Colored Non-Catholics,” “Seminarians,” and most importantly “Episcopal Relations,” the latter precipitated not only by the aforementioned visit of Molloy, but the attendance of four bishops at a special meeting held at Hartford, Connecticut in October 1938.59

Gillis’ work with the Conference in the late 1930s highlighted a new and significant issue not previously addressed. Even though greater ecclesiastical approbation for the Conference and its work was clearly evident, Gillis reported to the members a harangue published by the Baltimore Catholic Review which “severely criticized” him and LaFarge claiming that “any more utterances by men like Gillis and LaFarge would disrupt the entire educational system in Baltimore.” The criticism, clearly a reference to Gillis’ advocacy for integrated Catholic schools, only prompted the prominent Paulist editor to give more support for African-Americans in additional areas.60 At the Conference’s 31st general meeting, held on November 21, 1939, Gillis gave a prepared talk, “Obstacles to the Conversion of the American Negro.” In his speech he suggested that African-Americans cannot be converted unless they receive help in their social situation. Thus, it was absolutely necessary to reach out to a population that had been neglected by the Church and society in general for far too long. Ringing the alarm bell, Gillis, accompanied by LaFarge and others, suggested that if the Church does not reach out, the Communists will.

The issue of Bolshevism, which was heightened in 1933 when the Roosevelt administration, seeking open markets during the depths of the Great Depression, gave political recognition to the Soviet Union, never went away totally.61 At the November 23, 1937 Conference meeting, Gillis suggested that Communists had invaded the Black population and were sowing seeds of their atheistic ideology in the population. He opined, “We are

58 Meeting Minutes, Northeast Clergy Conference for Negro Welfare, December 1, 1936, John LaFarge Papers, Box 52, Folder 10, AGU.
59 Hruzd, “Northeast Clergy Conference,” 64; Meeting Minutes, Northeast Clergy Conference for Negro Welfare, October 4, 1938, John LaFarge Papers, Box 52, Folder 10, AGU.
not exaggerating the danger.”  

Similarly, writing in March 1936, LaFarge, addressing the Communist question directly, suggested a twofold method to keep the red menace away from the Black population: combating race prejudice, and promoting social justice. He wrote, “The Negro looks at the Catholic Church for such intelligent interest. From us, who are members of the one Body of whom Christ Himself is the Head, he [the African American] expects a wide and sympathetic point of view.”  

George Hunton, warned that Blacks were the central target for communist propaganda. Therefore, he enjoined the Church to rise to the occasion and to bring interracial justice to the forefront. He wrote,

> While many Catholics are deeply concerned with the threat of Communism and others are keenly aware of the need of social justice, it cannot be denied that the vast majority of white Catholics are oblivious to the problems confronting the Negro, and at the same time are indifferent to the need of interracial justice. They have not realized that the Negro group is the most disadvantaged in America. While many would arise to warn the Negro against the false promises and hopes of Communism, most Catholics have little or no conception of the barriers to Negro progress, or of the cruel discriminations and denials that surround him on every side.

In the late 1930s, LaFarge, aware of the Communist threat, and not averse to speaking about it, returned to his basic message of racial justice. He feared that the Conference might be pulling away from its original goals and thus he promoted a return to the basic objective of procuring a “colored conscious” clergy. He suggested one method to broaden the message was for parishes in the North to “adopt” parishes in the South. From an economic perspective Southern pastors and bishops responded enthusiastically to the proposal yet, no mandates could ever be presented. Since the Clergy Conference could only make suggestions, the program found few takers.

The contributions made by the Northeast Clergy Conference for Negro Welfare were often directly tied to the contributions of James Gillis and John LaFarge. The strong conservative and traditional theological perspective so evident in the editorials, essays, and public speeches of Gillis make his participation in the Conference rather surprising and certainly historically significant. While being a great advocate for African-Americans in general and Black Catholics specifically, Gillis was simultaneously “hammering” the Roosevelt administration for its policies, both domestically and internationally. Gillis saw FDR’s New Deal as a behemoth national takeover of individualism; on the international front Roosevelt’s policies, such as Lend-Lease, which moved the country closer to eventual involvement in the European war theater, prompted Gillis to be an active member of America First. Thus, his firebrand method that pushed the Conference to do more was completely consistent with his method of operation; its progressive tone was, however, a shift from his otherwise conservative mindset. The historian of the Conference, Teresa Hruzd presents Gillis’ contributions in a very positive light.

The contributions of John LaFarge, while clear in their physical manifestations, have been reviewed with some skepticism. The historian David Southern has undoubtedly been the chief critic. Southern characterizes LaFarge as much more conservative than his lifetime commitment to Black Catholics might indicate. Indeed, referring to the Jesuit’s work with the Conference as a reforming action, he has written, “So fiercely loyal was

---

62 Meeting Minutes, Northeast Clergy Conference for Negro Welfare, November 23, 1937, John LaFarge Papers, Box 52, Folder 10, AGU.
65 See Gribble, Guardian of America, especially pages 123-62. America First was the organization started in September 1940 that promoted an isolationist policy, thus rejecting Roosevelt’s series of initiatives that aided England materially after the onset of World War II on September 1, 1939.
LaFarge to the institutional church that his efforts to reform it seemed almost out of character.” Southern suggests that there were other Catholics who were more advanced concerning the race issue in the Church. He describes LaFarge as “an exceedingly cautious reformer who was slow to condemn segregation and reluctant to support nonviolent direct action by blacks.” He concludes, “His [LaFarge’s] aristocratic background and his Eurocentric bias, which often aided him in the racial apostolate, and in higher-echelon Catholic politics, saddled him with a lingering paternalism and ambivalence about black culture.”

Hruzd finds it an anomaly that while LaFarge was a prominent public advocate for Black Catholics, his role in the Conference was limited to recording secretary.

LaFarge’s contributions to the Conference can be viewed, however, in a more positive light. While a complete record of the meeting minutes of the Conference is not extent, the available information shows that LaFarge, as recording secretary, was always present, which cannot be said for any other member, especially Gillis. Although more subdued in his general approach, especially when compared to Gillis, he was nonetheless the one to whom the members went for the production of various documents that outlined to non-members the Conference’s purpose, work, and agenda. His fidelity and production of documents is itself significant, but when his work is seen in a broader context, especially his eventual work with the Catholic Interracial Council of New York, his contributions to the Clergy Conference are indeed significant.

The contributions of LaFarge and Gillis notwithstanding, the Clergy Conference did not survive the War years. The final meeting was held in April 1944. The deaths of several significant founding members of the Conference, especially Cornelius Ahern, Joseph Corrigan, Bernard Quinn, and Augustine Walsh, created a huge gap not only in membership, but more importantly in leadership. While this loss was indeed significant, nonetheless, LaFarge, writing to a fellow Jesuit some five years later, hinted that a lack of support from the Archdiocese of New York was also a significant factor in the Conference’s demise. He wrote,

Off the record, another obstacle which had impeded the Conference from the beginning was the curious indifference shown to it by Msgr. William R. McCann, pastor of St. Charles Borromeo Church, Harlem. Msgr. McCann always took the peculiar position that appeals of the Conference to the interest of the clergy toward the Negro throughout the country were a personal reflection on himself and the Archdiocese. This point of view was adopted at the Chancery and no amount of explanation could dislodge it.

Conclusion

Started in November 1933 the Northeast Clergy Conference for Negro Welfare was the first clerical organization inaugurated in the United States for the support and promotion of Black Catholics. While the work of the Conference is noteworthy in its own right, the partnership forged between James Gillis and John LaFarge, two clerics who were politically polar opposites could, nonetheless come together and combine their efforts under one banner in order to aid an oppressed minority within the Church is significant. Contributing in their personal ways, Gillis more as a firebrand and LaFarge more of a conciliator, the two, combined with the efforts of many others, fueled the machine which allowed the Conference to move forward, making significant strides in multiple ways. The unlikely partnership between Gillis and LaFarge forms an important story in the history of Black Catholics in the United States.

67 Southern, John LaFarge, xix, xviii.
69 John LaFarge to Albert Foley, November 28, 1949, John LaFarge Papers, Box 64, Folder 11, AGU.
References

Primary Sources
John LaFarge Papers, Archives Georgetown University, Washington, D.C.
James Gillis Papers, Archives Paulist Fathers, Washington, D.C.

Secondary Sources