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St. Elizabeth's Parish & W.M Markoe:
A Matter of Agency

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In her book, *Black Catholic Protest and the Federated Colored Catholics: Three Perspectives on Racial Justice*, Marilyn Wenzke Nickels provides a rich history of William Markoe, S.J. In it, she paints Markoe as a prominent St. Louis ally of Black civil rights, seen largely through his work in St. Elizabeth's parish and the Federated Colored Catholics association. Indeed, Markoe did valuable work in advancing Black rights and desegregation efforts within the Catholic church. However, what Nickels' argument does not quite analyze is how the focus on Markoe feeds into the erasure of those that he sought to progress. In various primary sources, most of which Markoe had a hand in producing, we see the stripping of the agency of Black parishioners. This is not to say that Markoe's work should be erased. Rather, historians ought to better consider the role of the Black members of the church. After all, there would be no Markoe without those that he chose to lead and the Black members of the parish were fully capable of advocating for themselves. In this paper, I argue that the history of St. Elizabeth's parish and its focus on William M. Markoe, from the late 1920s to mid 1930s, contributes to the erasure of Black parishioner agency and history.

William Morgan Markoe became affiliated with St. Elizabeth's parish in 1927, following his conclusion of study at Saint Louis University. Before his priesthood in the parish, Markoe was a proponent of desegregation who made his position known, as he wrote several articles in Catholic Jesuit magazine, *America*, that called for Catholics to defend racial equity.¹ *America* magazine's audience was widely white and Catholic, which Markoe surely considered when composing pieces pleading for white Catholics to 'love thy neighbor' and do a better job at incorporating Black members into their communities. He found that there was a 'race problem,'

¹Marilyn Wenzke Nickels, *Black Catholic Protest and the Federated Colored Catholics 1917-1913 Three Perspectives on Racial Justice* (New York & London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1988), 146.

developing following World War I and that the solution to that problem was the Catholic Church.

In *Black Catholic Protest and the Federated Colored Catholics*, Nickels frames Markoe as somewhat of a radical, especially when analyzing his opinions on interracial education. Markoe's white Catholics remained reluctant to the implementation of integration out of fear that it would bring about the social equality of the negro. Nickels states that when responding to his critics, Markoe would repeatedly reply that schools were both social and religious institutions.² Nickels continues to describe Markoe as a champion of "interracial justice and charity." She furthers this argument by describing contributions by Markoe and his fellow Jesuit, John LaFarge, stating that "by cooperating on a religious level, they solved problems not only in the church, but the larger race problem itself."³ Here, she makes the argument that Markoe was dedicated to the social equality of Black people, especially around desegregation within the church and outside of it. Through her description of Markoe's various *America* articles and replies to critics, Nickels frames the larger 'race problem,' or race inequality, as the motivation of Markoe's life's work. She will go on to further this claim later in the book when writing about the description of his involvement in St. Elizabeth's parish.

Nickels is right in her claim that interracial efforts were a large part of Markoe's work and motivation. However, what she fails to note is that Markoe was not so much a champion of Black social rights or liberation. Rather, he was focused on changing the beliefs of bigoted white American Catholics. In one of these articles, he wrote, "suppose the popular notions of the Negro are not exaggerated, that he is as bad and even worse than painted, is this any reason why we American Catholics should allow his soul to be lost?" He believed that his role was not to

² Nickels, 146.

³ Ibid, 164.

“eulogize the Negro or to demand for him social equality,”⁴ rather it was to convert him to Catholic life and save his soul. Unlike how Nickels frames him, I argue that Markoe would not describe himself as a proponent of total racial equity and, instead, put Markoe down as a moderate, who believed in some advancement and evangelization, but not total equality.

Founded in 1873, St. Elizabeth’s Parish was the first Black parish in St. Louis, Missouri. The parish originated from the segregated worship space of St. Xavier College Church following emancipation. By 1930, the church had become the central hub for Black Catholics in the city, complete with a congregation made up entirely of Black people. Despite this, the parish’s leadership was predominantly white. A clear example of this difference is depicted in a photo in the May 1928 edition of *St. Elizabeth’s Chronicle*, a monthly newsletter developed by Markoe. In the photo is a group of Black men, women, and children in their Sunday’s best outside of what can be assumed to be either St. Elizabeth’s church or school. There are three priests in the photo, all of whom are white men. One of five people sitting in the front row is none other than William Markoe. Below the photo in the *St. Elizabeth’s Chronicle* is the caption, “St. Elizabeth’s Club,” reflecting that this group is made up of members of the church.⁵ This photo in the *Chronicle* serves as good context for the patterns that will follow in the newsletter.

In 1928, each monthly newsletter begins with an opening editorial by the church’s pastor, in this case, Rev. William Morgan Markoe, S.J. Each piece goes on for multiple pages and consists of Markoe speaking about what he finds to be the current state of the Black population, which he deems in need of saving. In the July 1928 edition, Markoe composed the article titled, “A Negro Helps His Own,” in which he tells the story of his visit to one of his congregation

⁴ William Markoe, “Viewing the Negro Supernaturally,” *America* June 20, 1920.

⁵ “St. Elizabeth’s Club,” *St. Elizabeth’s Chronicle*, Vol. 1 No. 53 (May 1928).

members, an older Black woman named “Miss Annie.” When quoting her, he mimics her word choice and accent throughout his writing. For example, instead of writing that Miss Annie said, ‘Father, I sure am glad you came,’ he instead writes, “Fathah, I sho’ am glad you come.”⁶ His word choice for Miss Annie’s dialogue is reminiscent of that of a minstrel show or how a mammy stereotype may be expected to speak. Though it could be argued that Markoe is simply a product of his time, I make the objection that if Markoe was truly the interracial champion that Nickels promotes him as, why would he stereotype the people he fought to protect, thus perpetuating the supremacy that he sought to end. By impersonating Miss Annie, he obscures and objectifies her voice and therefore, fails to give her any type of agency.

Additionally, in the *Chronicle*, the majority of the featured pieces are written by Markoe or by another white priest within the church. Take for example, the April 1928 edition of the *St. Elizabeth’s Chronicle* in which both notable written editorials, *The Negro’s Viewpoint* and *The New School Campaign* are written by Markoe.⁷ Alongside the longer articles are smaller pieces like poems or scriptures, usually written by prominent white poets or anonymous authors. The very first article written by a Black parishioner that I came across in the inaugural 1928 collection of the *Chronicle*, was a piece titled “Miss Jim Crow,” published on page 9 of the November newsletter. Written by Hazel Burnette McDaniel, “Miss Jim Crow” is a first-hand account of her experience on a southern segregated train. The narrative is one recalling the violence and fear that she, and many other Black Americans, faced when attempting to ride public transportation. McDaniel ends the story with a powerful line, writing that she is “reminded constantly in one way or the other that I am of a marked people and as unhappy as I

⁶ William M. Markoe, “A Negro Helps His Own,” *St. Elizabeth’s Chronicle*, Vol. 1 No. 5 (July 1928).

⁷ *St. Elizabeth’s Chronicle*, Vol 1. No. 2 (April 1928).

sometimes am made because of conditions I am happier to remain what I am—a Negro.”⁸

Hearing her experience in her own words is captivating and an important example of the true experience of the negro during this time. Yet, the reader of the newsletter is quickly met with a stark example of how McDaniel’s’ words don’t seem to be nearly as impactful as her white priest’s words.

On page 10 is an advertisement calling on its viewers to submit suggestions for the *Chronicle*’s new name. In reference to the newsletter, it states, “Time and again has it been quoted in other publications and its contents, especially the Race articles of Father William Markoe, discussed far and wide.”⁹ Markoe’s mentioned race articles are those like the ironically titled article *The Negro’s Viewpoint*. In this article, Markoe describes what he understands to be the goals of Black people and the solution to the race problem. Throughout the article, he never incorporates the voices or opinions of Black members of his congregation, nor does he mention any Black Catholic leaders. He begins by making the claim that the Negro asks of the white man to help him “become more cultured, and self-respecting, to treat him like a fellow human being.”¹⁰ He then turns to describe the “animal nature” and “sex impulse” that the Black man has when it comes to the white race, instead of a “natural aversion” that many believe to be true. He likens the changing landscape of Black identity to one that is likely to become subject to radicalism and Bolshevism, which would both threaten the American way of life. Markoe ends his argument by asserting his belief that saving the Negro ought to be undertaken by Catholic churches and educational institutions. Again, Markoe’s motivations do not purely involve social equality, rather they surround saving and evangelizing Black people. By speaking for Black

⁸ *St. Elizabeth’s Chronicle*, Vol 1. No. 2 (November 1928).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *St. Elizabeth’s Chronicle*, Vol 1. No. 2 (April 1928).

people and providing what he deems to be the race problem and its solution, Markoe fails to give those affected, agency over the telling of their story. Thus, he erases nearly all of the history of those he seeks to fight for. He uses his Black congregation as objects for what he deems as correct, rather than providing true solidarity and letting them decide for themselves.

Another example of Markoe stripping Black parishioners of their agency is through his involvement with the Federated Colored Catholics (FCC) of the United States. The FCC was founded by a Black man named Thomas W. Turner in 1925. The coalition was founded with the purpose of uniting Black Catholics, to raise the general status of Black people within the church, and, more broadly, advance the Black Catholic role in the solution to the race problem.¹¹ In 1931, Markoe and his fellow Jesuit, John LaFarge became involved with the FCC and assisted in planning the 7th Annual FCC Convention in September of that year. Markoe joined the organization with a different vision than that of Turner. As previously mentioned, Turner's goals for the coalition were based in Black liberation and agency. Markoe's vision for the coalition sought to include white Catholic leadership, like that of St. Elizabeth's parish. David S. Southern's book *John LaFarge and the Limits of Catholic Interracialism* puts it well when it reads, "Markoe prodded the FCC further along in the direction of Catholic Action and interracialism and further away from the emphasis on black protest and race leadership."¹² By doing so, he has taken Black leadership away from the national Catholic organization and, consequently, stripped Black agency yet again.

The announcement program for the convention states that the conference was "America's Most Important Interracial Congress."¹³ The convention's details were largely organized by

¹¹ Southern, 39.

¹² Southern, 127.

¹³ *7th Annual Convention of the Federal Colored Catholics of the United States*. 1931. St. Elizabeth's Parish History. OFL PHS 1.26.120. SLU Archives.

Markoe and St. Elizabeth's parish. This would explain the emphasis on the cruciality of interracialism as to the solution to the race problem, and the convention's promotion that "The CATHOLIC CHURCH is the only ultimate solution for all problems of Race!"¹⁴ By turning the convention into one that promotes interracialism, Markoe transformed the event from Turner's original intentions of Black agency and the social equality of the Negro. Not only did Markoe change the convention's goals, he also changed the name of the *St. Elizabeth's Chronicle* to reflect this realignment. In October 1932, what was known as the *Chronicle* now became the *Interracial Review*. Thomas Turner objected to this change in a series of letters to the Foundation's spiritual director and its executive committee. In those letters, it is revealed that the name change put into place by Markoe was unapproved by the committee. Turner also wrote to Markoe of his disapproval. Markoe and John LaFarge continued to move the FCC towards racial integration and evangelization in what Nickels calls a "new thrust in the organization."¹⁵

Once the name *Interracial Review* became official through publication, Turner submit a press release to both Catholic and secular periodicals to publicly criticize and confront not only the name change, but also Markoe's role as the appointed deputy organizer. On December 5th, 1932, Turner was controversially removed from office after being charged with non-compliance of the organizations by-laws. Markoe's personal responsibility for these changes is counterintuitive to Nickel's argument of Markoe's goal being the equality of the Black race. Markoe's intention was to integrate the church and bring Black people to Catholicism, not to advance equality. If Markoe's main goal was to further Black social equality, he would not have been so easily intimidated by strong Black leadership.

¹⁴ 7th Annual Convention of the Federal Colored Catholics of the United States. 1931. St. Elizabeth's Parish History. OFL PHS 1.26.120. SLU Archives.

¹⁵ Nickels, 103.

None of this is to discredit Markoe's contributions to the advancement of Black Catholics within the national framework of the Catholic church. Many of his *America* magazine articles were indeed successful at challenging the status quo and continue to spark research, such as this. His work in St. Elizabeth's parish helped to make the church a convening space for St. Louis' Black Catholics. His work in desegregating churches and schools cannot be discounted or ignored. However, it *can* be complicated. Both Marilyn Nickels and William Markoe failed to give voice to the Black people who filled the parish pews. Throughout the current research, there is a clear preference for whose history was maintained and it is not that of the congregation. Throughout her book, Nickels repeatedly refers to the parish as belonging to Markoe. An example can be found when she writes, "in theory all black Catholics in the city were members of his, "the" black Catholic, parish."¹⁶ But, the parish does not belong to Markoe, it belongs to the Black parishioners whom it was intended to serve, the ones largely left out of this narrative.

¹⁶ Nickels, 165.

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