

A Welcoming Church

Mississippi congregation reaches out after devastating immigration raid

By Sue Weishar, Ph.D.

On August 25, 2008, the small town of Laurel, Mississippi was the site of the largest single workplace site raid in U.S. history. Early that morning hundreds of Immigration Control and Enforcement (ICE) agents swooped down on the Howard Industries plant in Laurel, which produces electric transformers, and began rounding up workers. Anyone who appeared to be of Hispanic origin was separated from other workers and escorted outside to a fenced yard. Roads around the sprawling plant were blocked and ICE helicopters hovered overhead. One resident thought there had been a terrorist attack.¹ For the 595 immigrant workers that were arrested that day, there might as well have been. By evening of that long, hot summer day, 488 immigrant workers, many in handcuffs, had been transported on dozens of ICE buses to an immigrant detention center in Jena, Louisiana, four hours away—ripped apart from their families and a community they had come to think of as home. Another 107 persons, mostly women, had been deemed “humanitarian” cases² and were released with electronic monitoring devices attached to their ankles. They were forced to wear these devices day and night for 22 months.

In the midst of such terror, a small Catholic church became the center of solace and assistance. Several Catholic agencies and the Loyola University New Orleans Law Clinic also played key roles in assisting raid victims. This article examines the Church’s response to the raid in Laurel,³ and how a small Catholic community in the middle of a deeply conservative state was able to mitigate some of the harmful effects of the raid on its immigrant members.

Church Response and Challenges

On the afternoon of the raid several dozen family members of arrested immigrants gathered at the safest place they could think of at such a frightening time—Immaculate Conception Church (ICC) in Laurel. ICC has been serving Hispanic immigrants since the mid-1990s, when many came to work in poultry plants in Jones County. At the time of the raid approximately 700 persons attended Sunday Masses at ICC, including about 350 Hispanics.

Although the church had no plan to respond to such a crisis when the raid occurred, it soon became the center of response efforts and a major conduit for assistance. The church organized a meeting in its parish hall that same afternoon. Several agencies—including Catholic Charities staff from Jackson, Mississippi, and New Orleans, and the Loyola University New Orleans Law Clinic—interviewed family members and the raid victims who had been released. They worked to determine humanitarian and legal needs and to provide resources. The evening of the raid, the church converted its hall into living quarters for 20 women and children too frightened to return to their homes. Anglo parishioners brought meals and blankets. Food and money began pouring in immediately from other church parishes in Mississippi and from across the country—including an entire trailer of food from a Midwest church.

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Hispanic Ministries Coordinator Laura Hamilton, church volunteer Leroy Hamilton, and Pastor Michael Thornton in front of Immaculate Conception Church in Laurel, Mississippi. Immaculate Conception staff and church members provided vital assistance to the victims of the largest single worksite raid in U.S. history in Laurel on August 25, 2008.

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The cash donations, which totaled \$150,000, were administered by ICC parish staff and were spent mainly to pay rent and utilities. To save expenses, many of those affected gave up their own apartments and moved in with friends or family members in Laurel. ICC Deacon Larry Presley helped to coordinate donations of food and money from members of ICC, who were generous in their support of raid victims. ICC provided assistance over the next two years to more than 250 families and 25 individuals affected by the raid. In addition to material assistance, the spiritual counseling and emotional support provided by ICC's pastoral staff were extremely important. The despair that remaining family members felt over the loss of a spouse or parent was at times overwhelming. Kind and attentive listening helped boost flagging spirits and give thoughtful consideration of options for leaving or staying in Laurel.

In a study conducted by the Urban Institute of communities that have been affected by ICE raids, researchers found that competent legal assistance is one of the most important and most difficult services to obtain for victims.⁴ That was not the case in Laurel. Legal assistance was provided to victims by several Catholic and non-Catholic agencies in Mississippi and Louisiana, with the bulk of representation provided by the Loyola University New Orleans Law Clinic.⁵

Transportation for raid victims from non-urban areas to immigration hearings was another challenge the Urban Institute study noted.⁶ ICC was able to overcome the difficulty of transporting victims to court hearings in New Orleans and Jackson with a 28-seat bus donated to the church in 2007 and a 7-seat van the church received after Hurricane Katrina.

Factors That Contributed to a Successful Response

Years of contact with a mission church in Mexico and church leadership fluent in Spanish made this small congregation in the middle of a state with a small immigrant population⁷ surprisingly well-positioned to respond to parishioners' needs after the raid. Monsignor Michael Thornton, the ICC pastor, had served as a pastor at mission churches in Mexico for 11 years. The ICC coordinator for Hispanic ministries, Mrs. Laura Hamilton, is from Mexico and is well known and trusted in the Laurel Hispanic community for years of charitable work with newcomers. The assistant pastor at the time, Fr. Sergio Balderas, is also from Mexico.

ICC had been sending youth and adult groups, including all three of ICC's deacons, to a mission church in Mexico for more than 40 years. Monsignor Thornton believes these immersion and faith formation experiences helped to build cohesion and understanding among parishioners for the victims of the raid and resulted in generous assistance from the Anglo parishioners. Additionally, the church had built excellent relationships with local police and local schools.

Conclusion

Almost three years later, the help and support that ICC provided the community has resulted in Hispanic membership at the same levels as before the raid. When asked what she felt about the raid and its aftermath, one parishioner responded, "I am sad because most of the co-workers and friends that I knew and cared for are not here anymore. [But] now I have a great church community that helps strengthen my faith and is there for me all the time."

The terror and lingering trauma caused by worksite raids have been put on hold by the Obama administration, which has shifted worksite enforcement focus from arresting workers to pressuring employers not to hire undocumented workers. However, until comprehensive immigration reform is realized, millions of immigrant workers will continue to live with the constant fear that their lives could be upended and their families shattered because of their lack of legal status. By its efforts, Immaculate Conception Church illustrates how a caring faith community can accompany its immigrant members during their darkest hours.

ENDNOTES

- 1 From an interview with Leroy Hamilton, long-time resident of Jones County, Mississippi, on December 2, 2010. Information on the Laurel community response was provided to the author during interviews with Leroy Hamilton, Laura Hamilton, Monsignor Michael Thornton, and Fr. Sergio Balderas conducted December 2010 through March 2011.
- 2 Humanitarian cases included the primary caretakers of children or pregnant women.
- 3 Other organizations that played important roles assisting raid victims included The Village-El Pueblo, from Biloxi, Mississippi, which provided legal assistance and administered a bond fund, and the Mississippi Immigrant Rights Alliance, which also provided legal assistance and informed workers of their rights. Fr. Tom Greene, S.J., who was the JSRI migration specialist at the time, helped conduct intakes and assisted raid victims at their hearings in Gulfport and New Orleans. Sacred Heart Church in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, led by Fr. Ken Landry, provided extensive assistance to raid victims living in the Hattiesburg area.
- 4 Ajay Chaudry, Randolph Capps, Juan Pedroza, Rosa Maria Castaneda, Robert Santos, and Molly Schott, *Facing Our Future: Children in the Aftermath of Immigration Enforcement*, Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, February, 2010 (accessed May 5, 2011 at http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/412020_FacingOurFuture_final.pdf).
- 5 The Loyola University New Orleans Law Clinic represented 67 of the 107 persons who were released on ankle bracelets after the Laurel raid. Interview with Laila Hlass, staff attorney, Loyola University New Orleans Law Clinic, February 23, 2011.
- 6 Ibid, Chaudry, *et al.*
- 7 In 2008, Mississippi was home to just 60,555 foreign-born persons, who composed only 2.1 percent of the state's population. American FactFinder, U.S. Census Bureau, 2008 American Community Survey, 1-year Estimates (accessed May 7, 2011, at <http://factfinder.census.gov>).



Catholic Social Thought and Unemployment

By Fred Kammer, S.J.

With millions unemployed in this economy, it is important to understand how Catholic social thought considers unemployment. It is not just another “economic indicator.” Unemployment undermines a just society since work is at the heart of the social question.

The tradition of modern Catholic Social Teaching that begins with *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 focuses first on the situation of the worker, whom Pope John Paul II later called the sole “subject of work.” In John Paul’s writings, he makes it clear that, by their work, workers are continuing and perfecting the creative activity of God the Creator and thus deepening the reality of being made in God’s image.¹ Unemployment assaults that profound spiritual identity.

Pope Benedict XVI describes the same centrality of workers in his most recent encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* in these words, “. . .the primary capital to be safeguarded and valued is man, the human person in his or her integrity. . .”² In a single paragraph later in the encyclical, the pope reiterates certain traditional particulars about human work: that it be freely chosen; respectful of the worker; without discrimination; enabling a family to meet their needs and the educational needs of their children; prohibiting child labor; allowing organization of workers (unions) and their voices to be heard; providing “enough room” for personal and spiritual development; and supportive of a decent retirement.³

Turning to unemployment, Benedict reminds us that mobility and deregulation in a more globalized economy, aggravated by the current global crisis, create a kind of unemployment that causes psychological instability, provokes new forms of economic marginalization, and—with or without public assistance—undermines the freedom and creativity of the person and his family, “causing great psychological and spiritual suffering.”⁴ It is in light of the dignity of

“...unemployment is seen as an evil by the Church because it undermines family life, assaults human dignity, and marginalizes the unemployed workers...”

the human person and the demands of justice that we continue to “prioritize the goal of access to steady employment for everyone.”

The Catechism of the Catholic Church underscores the relationship of unemployment to human dignity and family life:

Unemployment almost always wounds its victim’s dignity and threatens the equilibrium of his life. Besides the harm done to him personally, it entails many risks for his family.⁶

We can better understand the damage of unemployment from the multiple purposes of work, as does the Vatican’s recent *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*: “Work is needed to form and maintain a family, to have the right to property, to contribute to the common good of the human family.”⁷ Conversely, unemployment is seen as an evil by the Church because it undermines family life, assaults human dignity, and marginalizes the unemployed workers, creating “victims of social exclusion”⁸ and, when high, becomes “a real social disaster.”⁹

The Catholic Church recommends at least three responses: first, “Full employment’ therefore remains a mandatory objective for every economic system oriented towards justice and the common good;”¹⁰ second, educational systems must provide sufficient human and technological formation needed for access to jobs and encourage people to undertake ongoing updating and retraining;¹¹ and third, as Pope John Paul II put it, the obligation to provide unemployment benefits suitable

for the basic support of unemployed workers and their families is a “duty springing from the fundamental principle of . . . the common use of goods or, to put it in another and simpler way, the right to life and subsistence.”¹²

ENDNOTES

- 1 Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, 1981, esp. Nos. 6 and 25.
- 2 Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 2009, No. 25.
- 3 *Ibid.*, No. 63.
- 4 *Ibid.*, No. 25.
- 5 *Ibid.*, No. 32, emphasis in original.
- 6 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2436, emphasis in original.
- 7 *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, No. 287.
- 8 *Ibid.*, No. 289.
- 9 Pope John Paul II, op. cit., No. 18.
- 10 *Compendium*, No. 288.
- 11 *Ibid.*, No. 289.
- 12 Pope John Paul II, op. cit., No. 18.

Employment Slow to Rebound

Millions of Gulf South workers face still greater challenges

By Fred Kammer, S.J.

Many commentators assume that, because there are economic indicators that the “great recession” has ended, workers are back to work and our national and regional troubles are at end. Far from it. Nationally, we lost 8.7 million jobs in this recession, and subsequent job growth has reduced that by only a fifth, to 7 million jobs.¹ Assuming national growth at the April 2011 level of 244,000 jobs a month, it would take almost two and a half years to erase that remaining job deficit and years more to reach full employment due to continuing population growth.

In the Gulf South, regional unemployment declined from 9.9 percent to 9.5 percent between February 2010 and February 2011, with the number of officially unemployed workers dropping by about 86,000. Three states have seen some unemployment reduction in the past year—Alabama, Florida, and Mississippi. Louisiana and Texas unemployment continues to grow, but both have had relatively low unemployment compared to many other states. Overall, the region still has *one and a half million more unemployed workers* than four years ago. (See table on page 5.)

Even these numbers are deceptive because official unemployment statistics do not count millions who are no longer looking for work due to a number of factors, including despair over searching for a job in this economy.

Increased difficulties finding jobs

Officially unemployed now in the United States are a shocking *13.5 million workers*.² There were 3.1 million job openings in March, putting the ratio of workers to job openings at 4.3-to-1. That is an improvement from earlier months in the recession, but the “job seeker’s ratio” now has been higher than 4-to-1 for two years and three months.³ The worst this ratio ever became in the last recession was 2.8-to-1, in 2003. That is the first of many problems confronting the unemployed—the lack of jobs. In that so-called “jobless” post-recession recovery early in this decade, after a year of recovery the private sector had regained almost half (47 percent) of the jobs it had lost. “By contrast, to date, the private sector has recovered only 14 percent of the jobs it lost during 2008 and 2009.”⁴

Another problem for workers is job distribution. Most of recent job openings were in professional and business services, education, and health care.⁵ Overall, however, lower-wage industries are growing, rather

than the higher paying jobs. This means that workers who had made better wages are less likely to find jobs paying in the range to which they were accustomed and against which they planned their family budgets and borrowing. As the National Employment Law Project reports:

- Lower-wage (\$9.03-\$12.91 per hour) industries constituted 23 percent of job loss, but fully 49 percent of recent growth.
- Mid-wage (\$12.92-\$19.04) industries constituted 36 percent of job loss, and 37 percent of recent growth.
- Higher-wage (\$19.05-\$31.40) industries constituted 40 percent of job loss, but only 14 percent of recent growth.

Another problem for workers is how long they have been unemployed and looking for a job. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported in May that the number of long-term unemployed (defined as those without work for 27 weeks and more) had declined by 242,000, but was 5.8 million workers. This was 43.4 percent of the unemployed.⁷ Studies show that the longer the period of unemployment, the tougher the odds of finding another job.⁸ A year earlier, in the second quarter of 2010, 46 percent of the unemployed were jobless for 27 weeks or longer, but 31 percent had been unemployed for a year or more. This is the highest level ever reported. Their job prospects are even bleaker, and this is true throughout the business cycle—in good times and bad.

The reasons are multiple: employers are more hesitant to hire such workers, wondering about their job readiness and the decline of their work-worthiness; workers are more likely to be depressed, suffer low self-esteem, and interview poorly; and skills atrophy and contacts grow stale.⁹

Race-based disparities in unemployment also continue and worsen. In April, the unemployment rate was 8.0 percent for whites (3.6 percent higher than when the recession started), 16.1 percent for African Americans (7.1 percent higher than at the recession’s start), and 11.8 percent for Hispanics (up 5.5 percent from the start of the recession).¹⁰ It was worse in some states. In the year 2010, African Americans in Mississippi experienced an unemployment rate averaging 18.0 percent, having peaked at 20.0 percent in the first quarter, easily doubling the white peak of 8.1

Studies show that the longer the period of unemployment, the tougher the odds of finding another job.

Unemployment Rates in the Gulf South

STATE	FEB. 2007	FEB. 2008	FEB. 2009	FEB. 2010	FEB. 2011	INCREASE FROM 2008 TO 2011
Alabama Unemployed	72,367	88,972	187,149	227,717	196,714	124,347
Unemployment Rate	3.3%	4.1%	8.7%	11.1%	9.2%	
Florida Unemployed	321,432	459,412	842,161	1,125,959	1,068,382	746,950
Unemployment Rate	3.6%	5.0%	9.2%	12.2%	11.5%	
Louisiana Unemployed	77,924	77,698	122,459	151,248	164,850	86,926
Unemployment Rate	3.9%	3.8%	5.9%	7.3%	7.9%	
Mississippi Unemployed	77,924	78,601	111,212	148,768	136,360	52,580
Unemployment Rate	6.5%	6.0%	8.6%	11.4%	10.2%	
Texas Unemployed	500,378	503,966	799,972	1,000,589	1,001,630	501,252
Unemployment Rate	4.4%	4.4%	6.8%	8.3%	8.2%	
Gulf South Unemployed	1,055,881	1,208,649	2,062,953	2,654,281	2,567,936	1,512,055
Unemployment Rate	4.3%	4.6%	7.8%	9.9%	9.5%	

percent in the third quarter of 2009.¹¹ In Texas in 2010, while white non-Hispanic workers experienced unemployment of 6.0 percent, 13.6 percent of African Americans and 9.6 percent of Hispanics were unemployed.¹² African Americans and Hispanics are also over-represented in the ranks of those who were jobless for a year or more, as reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics.¹³

Blaming the Victim

In light of the great recession, Congress took several steps in recent years to extend unemployment insurance benefits and other assistance for U.S. workers, especially for the long-term unemployed and for states with higher unemployment levels. Currently, however, despite the inadequate number of jobs available and a fragile economy, some state legislatures and some members of Congress have moved to cut benefits to workers or, at the state level, refused to utilize federal opportunities to extend benefits. This has left workers with a patchwork of extended unemployment benefits available: 60 weeks of benefits (5 states); 73 weeks available (11 states, including Louisiana); 76 weeks (1 state); 79 weeks (4 states, including Mississippi); 86 weeks (4 states); 93 weeks (4 states, including Texas); and 99 weeks (25 states, including Alabama and Florida).

ENDNOTES

- 1 *Statement: Chad Stone, Chief Economist, on the April Employment Report*, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, May 6, 2011, at <http://www.cbpp.org/cms/index.cfm?fa=view&id=3487> (accessed May 12, 2011).
- 2 Heidi Shierholz, *Continuing dearth of job opportunities leaves many workers still sidelined*, Economic Policy Institute, May 11, 2011 at http://www.epi.org/publications/entry/continuing_dearth_of_job_opportunities_leaves_many_workers_still_sidelined (accessed May 12, 2011).
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 Annette Bernhardt and Christine Riordan, *A Year of Unbalanced Growth: Industries, Wages, and the First 12 Months of Job Growth After the Great Recession*, National Employment Law Project, February 2011, p. 1, at http://www.nelp.org/page/-Justice/2011/UnbalancedGrowthFeb2011.pdf?no_cdn=1 (accessed May 12, 2011).
- 5 Shierholz, *op. cit.*
- 6 Bernhardt and Riordan, *op. cit.*, p. 3
- 7 *The Employment Situation—April 2011*, Bureau of Labor Statistics, May 6, 2011, USDLS-0622.
- 8 Catherine Rampell, *Will Today's Unemployed Become Tomorrow's Unemployable?*, New York Times, December 2, 2010, at <http://economix.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/12/02/will-todays-unemployed-become-tomorrows-unemployable/> (accessed May 12, 2011).
- 9 *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.
- 10 Chad Stone, *op. cit.*, p. 1.
- 11 Douglas Hall and Algernon Austin, *Distressed Mississippi—Unemployment rate for African American workers is significantly higher than for whites*, Economic Policy Institute Issue Brief, April 28, 2011, pp. 1-2 at http://www.epi.org/page/-old/Issuebriefs/IB303_Mississippi_FINAL.pdf (accessed May 11, 2011).
- 12 Mary Gable, Douglas Hall, and Algernon Austin, *Distressed Texas—Unemployment high among African Americans and Hispanics in an uneven jobs recovery*, Economic Policy Institute Issue Brief, May 4, 2011, pp. 1-3 at http://epi.3cdn.net/9651fc4939d0cbe73e_rrm6bpx.pdf (accessed May 11, 2011).
- 13 Thomas Luke Spreen, *Ranks of Unemployed for a Year or More Up Sharply*, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Summary 10-10, October 2010, p. 1.

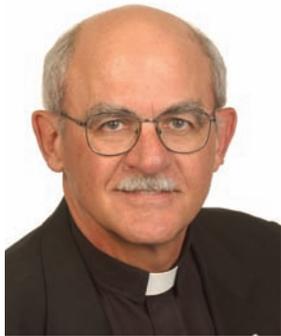


International Caritas General Assembly



From left: Father Fred Kammer, S.J., Lesley-Anne Knight, secretary general; Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga, president; and Cardinal Robert Sarah, president of the Pontifical Council Cor Unum

JSRI Director is Moderator for International Caritas Assembly



Father Fred Kammer, S.J., director of the Jesuit Social Research Institute, was the moderator for the week-long General Assembly of Caritas Internationalis in Rome, Italy, working under the assembly theme of *One Human Family, Zero Poverty*.

One hundred and thirty Caritas member organizations from across the world sent representatives to their 19th General Assembly from May 22 to 27 to mark the 60th anniversary of the founding of the confederation. During the sessions

chaired by Fr. Kammer, more than 300 delegates elected their officers and agreed on a four-year “strategic framework” to strengthen their service working alongside and on behalf of the poor.

Caritas Internationalis was founded in 1951 by 13 Catholic charitable organizations, including Catholic Charities USA (then known as the National Conference of Catholic Charities) to better coordinate the Church’s humanitarian work. They received support in their founding from Msgr. Giovanni Battista Montini, who would become Pope Paul VI in 1963.

The Caritas confederation has grown to 165 members comprising the humanitarian and social development arms of national bishops’ conferences worldwide. Caritas members support millions of poor people in improving their own lives with programs ranging from disaster risk reduction, relief and reconstruction, peace-building and reconciliation, climate mitigation and food security, primary health care, and education.

Father Kammer was the president and CEO of Catholic Charities USA from 1992 to 2001. In that capacity, he was active in the international confederation and its vice-president for the North America regional group, consisting of Catholic Charities USA, Catholic Relief Services, Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace, and the Catholic Campaign for Human Development.

Caritas Internationalis President Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga of Honduras said, “Caritas Internationalis is immensely privileged to be at the heart of the Church and her life-giving cycle of love. We are celebrating 60 years of responding through our faith with practical action to human suffering in an unjust world.

“In the second decade of the 21st century, however, we face a series of challenges that threaten to halt or even reverse that progress. Hunger is increasing, the number of humanitarian emergencies is growing, and climate change will cause further harm.

“Caritas has a vision for our world as one human family where no one dies because of poverty and injustice. For this reason, over the coming years we will strive to fulfill that vision.”

During the General Assembly, members reelected Cardinal Rodriguez as Caritas president for the next four years, elected Mr. Jürg Krummenacher, former head of Caritas Switzerland, as treasurer, and Mr. Michel Roy of Secours Catholique of France as secretary general.

Caritas members at the General Assembly heard from Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, SDB, the secretary of state to the Holy See, as presider at its opening Eucharist. During the week that followed, the General Assembly was addressed by Cardinal Robert Sarah, president of the Pontifical Council Cor Unum; Cardinal Peter Turkson, president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, outgoing Secretary-General Lesley-Anne Knight, and others. At the conclusion of the Assembly, members were received by Pope Benedict XVI at an audience at the Vatican on Friday, May 27.

The General Assembly business guided by Fr. Kammer included presentations regarding the ongoing revisions of the confederation’s Statutes and Rules. This has been a multi-year process of various committees of Caritas, and for two years Fr. Kammer has been the moderator for the meetings of the 30-member Executive Committee as they have considered these revisions. Fr. Kammer explained, “My role has been to try to help people from all over the world to work smoothly together on their common mission of charity and justice.”



Carl Staples stands front and center of the Louisiana Supreme Court with Friends of the Court on May 9, 2011. Friends wear buttons that state: "Subject to Removal for Cause," referring to the fact that Staples was rejected for jury service because he objected to the Confederate flag that flies in front of the Caddo Parish Courthouse. Photo by Sophie Cull

A Curious Case of Racial Amnesia

Dr. Alex Mikulich, Research Fellow

"Is it a prerequisite for jury service that you do not object to the Confederate flag flying outside the courthouse?"¹

This is a real and legal question 150 years after the Civil War.

The Louisiana Supreme Court and the Caddo Parish District Attorney seemed to assume that objection to the symbol of slavery constitutes bias on behalf of a potential juror, in the hearing of a death-penalty appeal on May 9, 2011.

As I observed the Supreme Court proceeding, this assumption of the Louisiana Supreme Court justices and of the Caddo Parish district attorney struck me with a sense of the fear that African Americans must have felt during Jim Crow. Yet this is 2011.

The questions of the Supreme Court justices called to my mind Ralph Ellison's insight that "Americans are notoriously selective in the exercise of historical memory," and that this selectivity demonstrates "some self-deceptive magic ... for in spite of what is left out of our recorded history, our unwritten history looms as its obscure alter ego, and although repressed from our general knowledge of ourselves, it is always active in the shaping of events."²

Since the Supreme Court nearly declared the death penalty unconstitutional in *Furman v. Georgia* (1972), juries in Caddo Parish have voted to impose the death penalty on 16 men and one woman. Thirteen of these cases involved black defendants, and research demonstrates that the combination of a black defendant and a white victim exponentially increases the likelihood of aggressive prosecution.

The legacy of official racial discrimination is alive and well in the last capital of the Confederacy, Caddo Parish (Shreveport) Louisiana, where the Confederate flag still flies at the courthouse.³

The monument that stands at the Caddo Courthouse was erected in 1906. The monument includes Clio, the muse of history, pointing to an inscription "Lest We Forget." The busts of Confederate leaders Stonewall Jackson, P.G.T. Beauregard, Henry Watkins Allen, and Robert E. Lee adorn the corners of the monument. "To the Just Cause, 1861-1865" is on the rear of the monument.

No flag flew on the monument in 1906, as lynching enforced minority white rule. The Caddo Parish government did not decide to fly the "blood-stained banner" of the Confederacy until October 17, 1951. The "blood-stained banner" of the Confederacy includes a red stripe running down the edge, symbolizing Confederates' willingness to die for their cause.

Carl Staples was summoned to jury duty on May 14, 2009, in the capital case of Felton Dejuan Dorsey, an African American accused of killing a white firefighter in the majority white area of Caddo Parish. Staples called the Clerk of Court to state his objection to serve as a juror under the Confederate flag. The clerk responded that a warrant would be put out for his arrest if he did not show up for jury duty. Upon individual examination for jury duty, he stated:

The flag is a symbol of one of the most heinous crimes ever committed to another member of the human race ... and then again you overlook this great injustice by continuing to fly this flag which ... puts salt in the wounds of people of color. I don't buy it.⁴

The prosecutor promptly moved the court to strike Staples, arguing that he could not be fair. The judge granted the motion. The prosecutor proceeded to strike five out of the remaining seven qualified black prospective jurors. The defense objected to the strikes as racially discriminatory and in violation of the Supreme Court's *Batson v. Kentucky* decision. The judge rejected the challenge and Felton Dejuan Dorsey was convicted and sentenced to death by a jury of eleven whites and one black.

Another troubling assumption of the Supreme Court justices and the Caddo district attorney, revealed during the May 9 hearing, is that since only one African American objected to the flag, it must be OK for all African Americans. In other words, nearly 50 years after the achievement of Civil Rights, the onus remains on African Americans to protest and achieve racial justice.

In his oral argument before the Supreme Court, Caddo Parish District Attorney Brady O'Callaghan called the flag challenge "an insult to the intelligence of Caddo Parish jurors because it suggests that they are so frail and easily swayed by the influence of random stimuli." In fact, O'Callaghan's assertion that the Confederate flag is "random stimuli" defies the reason why white Caddo Parish leaders raised the "Blood Stained" banner of the Confederacy in 1951 as an act of white resistance to African American rights.

Social psychological studies find that the Confederate flag "primes" the expression of negative attitudes toward African Americans. Racial priming operates by increasing cognitive and emotional accessibility of culturally associated biases in the subconscious mind.

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A Curious Case of Racial Amnesia

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Dr. Alex Mikulich, Research Fellow



Caddo Parish Courthouse

Multiple studies have demonstrated how whites associate blackness with guilt, criminality, and dangerousness.⁵

Once implicit bias is activated cognitively—it affects how people remember and process information. Implicit racial bias necessarily inhibits the ability of whites to perceive a black defendant as an individual.

By activating implicit bias, the Confederate flag “encourages the jury to see the defendant in group terms and to attribute to him characteristics associated with the group. This cognitive process alone denies the defendant the opportunity for meaningful individual consideration to which he is entitled under the

Eighth Amendment.”⁶ In the case of Felton Dorsey, the jurors serving that trial passed the Confederate flag at least 12 and possibly two or three dozen times.

Even more problematic is that these subconscious preconceptions about guilt and aggression of the accused cannot be consciously set aside. As the Dalai Lama explains, the social conditioning that gives rise to racial bias can only be undone by “actively disputing

the distorted ideas and false beliefs, [and] presenting a case for revising these beliefs, by pointing out where there are false premises upon which they base their beliefs, false projections, and so on. It is a matter of discovering the reality.”⁷ When will white Louisianans discover and confront our reality?

ENDNOTES

- 1 Rachel Maddow asked this question on her MSNBC program on May 9, 2011 online at <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/26315908/>
- 2 Ralph Ellison, *Going to the Territory* (Random House, 1986), p. 124. Originally from Ellison’s speech at Brown University in 1979.
- 3 Cecelia Trenticosta and William Claude Collins, “Death and Dixie: How the Courthouse Confederate Flag Influences Capital Cases in Louisiana,” accessed online at online February 17, 2011 at http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1734397#%23
- 4 *Ibid.*, “Death and Dixie.”
- 5 See Justin D. Levinson, “Race, Death, and the Complicitous Mind,” *DePaul Law Review* 599 (2008-2009): 599-644.
- 6 *Ibid.*, “Death and Dixie.”
- 7 Howard Cutler and Dalai Lama, *The Art of Happiness in a Troubled World* (Harmony Books, 2009), p. 69.