

“To Serve Through Compelling Love”: The Society of Christ Our King and the Civil Rights Movement in Danville, Virginia, 1963

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Danville sits directly in the middle of Virginia just above the North Carolina state line. When William Byrd “discovered” the river which runs through the city in 1728, he wrote “a small distance from our camp, we crossed a pleasant stream of water called Cocquade Creek, and something more than a mile from thence our line intersected the south branch of the Roanoke River for the first time, which we called the ‘Dan.’”¹ Danville historians generally agree that Byrd named the river the Dan because it was evocative of the Biblical Dan that was a land of plenty.² A little less than fifty years later, Danville emerged as the largest market for bright leaf tobacco and a whole culture of tobacco, its cultivation, its sale, and its distribution, that would dominate the area for the next two-hundred years. When the Civil War began in 1861, Danville was a village of about 6,000 citizens who readily embraced the cause of the Confederacy. Over the next four years, Danville served as a quartermaster depot and rail center for the Confederacy. It was the location for a major Confederate hospital and prison camp. At one point during the Civil War, Danville imprisoned almost as many Union soldiers as it housed citizens. The many tobacco warehouses served as impromptu prisons, referred to by one Civil-War historian as “houses of horror.”³ In the last days of the Civil War, the Confederacy moved its capital to Danville and it gained the title “the last Capital of the Confederacy.” The home of Major W. T. Sutherlin, commonly referred to as the Sutherlin Mansion, on Main Street served as the Confederacy’s “White House.” Confederate President Jefferson Davis and his cabinet took up residence there on April 3, 1865 until April 10, 1865.⁴ On April 9, 1865, about seventy miles north and east of Danville, General Robert E. Lee surrendered to General Ulysses S. Grant in Appomattox, Virginia, effectively ending the United States Civil War. But, psychically the Civil War did not end for most Southerners, particularly white Southerners, and it would not end for many more generations.

Before the Civil War, the Catholic presence in Danville was virtually non-existent. According to the history of the Catholic Church in Danville, the first Mass was held at Mr. Kelly’s tailor shop in 1875 with Father J.J. McGurk presiding.⁵ Three years later Catholics built their first church in Danville at the intersection of Ross Street and Holbrook Avenue. The city’s first pastor, Father Augustine Habets, made the construction of the first church possible by raising \$2,000 and the Tabernacle Society of Washington, D.C. provided the furnishings for

¹ Jane Gray Hagan, *The Story of Danville* (New York: Stratford House, 1950), 3.

² L. Beatrice W. Hairston, *A Brief History of Danville, Virginia, 1729-1954* (Richmond, Va.: The Dietz Press, Incorporated, 1954), vii-viii.

³ James I. Robertson, Jr., “Houses of Horror: Danville’s Civil War Prisons,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* LXIX (1961): 329-345 and Alfred S. Roe, *In a Rebel Prison: Or, Experiences in Danville, Virginia* (Providence: Published by the Society, 1891).

⁴ John H. Burbaker III, *The Last Capital: Danville, Virginia and the Final Days of the Confederacy* (The Danville Museum of Fine Arts and History, Danville, Va.: McCain Printing, 1979), 3.

⁵ Sacred Heart Church Directory, 2003.

the church.⁶ The church took the Sacred Heart of Jesus as its patron and henceforth Sacred Heart Catholic Church served the spiritual needs of all Catholics in the city and Catholics in the neighboring communities. The first church was located diagonally from the Sutherlin Mansion and at the head of the African American neighborhood that housed the town's black elite: doctors, lawyers, preachers and teachers. And, this would be the position the Society of Christ Our King would find itself in as they took a stand during what some have considered to be the second American Civil War.

In 1915, Father August Halblies initiated a "Buy a Brick" program to raise money to build a larger church for Danville Catholics.⁷ This initiative raised \$66,000 but it would not be until the waning days of the Depression in May 1939 that Bishop Peter Ireton, Richmond's coadjutor, would come to Danville to consecrate the new Sacred Heart Church. The new elegant Gothic church was located on West Main Street about a mile and half from the first church on Ross and Holbrook.⁸ About the same time that Danville Catholics were moving into their new church on West Main Street, the Society of Christ Our King was transplanting itself to Danville, Virginia.

The Society of Christ Our King was founded in Greenville, North Carolina in 1931 by Mary Lavinia Skinner and Ella Montiero Skinner.⁹ Their names in religious life were Sisters Mary Joseph and Mary Frances, respectively. The Skinners were wealthy women and provided the money, property, and vocations necessary to establish the community.¹⁰ With the encouragement of Father Thomas Price, North Carolina's first native born priest and a founder of the Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America (Maryknoll Missioners), the Skinners pursued their vocations in religious life with the support of Bishop William Hafey of Raleigh, North Carolina.

In order to assist the Skinners in establishing their community, Bishop Hafey appealed to the Oak Lane Carmelites of Philadelphia for help. He requested that the Philadelphia Carmel send a sister to help found a canonical religious community in his diocese. The Carmel agreed to release Sister Teresa of Jesus to North Carolina to form the Skinners in religious life and to help them establish their community. In April 1931, just after Easter, Hafey wrote to Sister Teresa of Jesus and informed her:

I have received a reply from the Sacred Congregation of Religious, and approval for the foundation [of the Society of Christ Our King] is given. . . . The letter also states that you have been given permission to leave the enclosure for the purpose expressed in our petition. From my interpretation of the document I feel that we are in a position to proceed in due time.¹¹

About a month later and after hearing from the Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop Pietro-Fumasoni-Biondi, Hafey wrote with more definitive directions for Sister Teresa of

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ "The History of Saint Peter's Parish," The Passionist Historical Archives. This is a history of the Catholic parish in Greenville, North Carolina. Mary Lavinia Skinner was baptized at St. Peter's in 1879 and Ella Montiero Skinner was baptized there in 1886.

¹⁰ Sister Leona Card, O.S.F., interview with author, July 23, 2004.

¹¹ Bishop William J. Hafey to Sr. Teresa of Jesus, April 6, 1931, Archives of the Diocese of Raleigh, North Carolina.

Jesus. He advised, “it is the opinion of His Excellency that not only is permission given to establish the new order under the title Society of Christ, Our King but that the document also is sufficient warrant for us to immediately undertake that work. ... It is therefore, permissible for you to leave the cloister and to arrange for the formal institution on Sunday, June 7th.”¹² Not long after Sister Teresa of Jesus arrived in Greenville, North Carolina and assumed the role of mother superior of the fledgling community, a role she would retain for the rest of her life. She would hence forth be known as Mother Teresa.

In anticipation of the formal foundation of the Society of Christ Our King, Bishop Hafey sent a press release to the National Catholic Welfare News Association to announce the new community. He declared:

THE SOCIETY OF CHRIST, OUR KING will be devoted to the extension of the Reign of Christ by bringing the knowledge of His Real Presence in the Blessed Eucharist to non-Catholic women and as well as fostering Catholic women and children. To this end the Sisters will endeavor, by means of instruction among the young and privately conducted retreats for adults, to give a right understanding of the externals of the Church, and to open a way for a thorough grounding in the Truths of the Faith and the full light of Divine Grace.¹³

Clearly, Hafey intended the society to be a major facet of the diocese of Raleigh’s attempts to evangelize North Carolina, which of all the states had the smallest per capita Catholic population in the United States at the time. He expressed his hope that “with God’s blessings upon it will the Society of Christ, Our King, undertake its labors in behalf of souls, praying that the small group of postulants will be augmented from the ranks of Catholic young women who had the advantage of higher education and who feel called to spread the Kingdom of Christ in the great North State of the Southland.”¹⁴

While in North Carolina, the Society of Christ Our King accepted four more sisters bringing the entire community to seven including Mother Teresa. These sisters were Sister Agnes, an Irish-American commercial artist from New York City, Sister Cecilia, a South Carolinian educated in music at Converse College in South Carolina, Sister Camilla, a German woman who was the community cook, and Sister Agatha from River Rouge, Michigan.¹⁵ The sisters regarded themselves as a missionary order dedicated to evangelization and social work, ministering to the temporal and spiritual needs of all people, regardless of race or religion. The Society of Christ Our King took its motto from the words of Pope Pius XI in his 1931 encyclical on Catholic social teaching, *Quadragesimo Anno*. The Society of Christ Our King was dedicated to “the reform of the social order and to reconstructing society in Christ.”

In 1938, the Society of Christ Our King moved its motherhouse and ministry to Danville, Virginia. With the help of some friends in Danville, the sisters bought a house on Main Street just across from the Sutherlin Mansion.¹⁶ Once in Danville, the society began to

¹² Bishop William J. Hafey to Sr. Teresa of Jesus, May 11, 1931, Archives of the Diocese of Raleigh, North Carolina.

¹³ Press release on the Society of Christ Our King submitted to the National Catholic Welfare News Association by Bishop William J. Hafey, May 26, 1931, Archives of the Diocese of Raleigh, North Carolina.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Sister Leona Card, O.S.F., interview with author, July 23, 2004.

¹⁶ Ibid.

establish relationships in the Catholic community, but as their primary mission was to reach out to non-Catholics and to minister to the poor, their main work was in the poor black and white communities in and around Danville. The sisters fed the hungry, took care of the sick, ran a school in the convent for disabled children, taught Sunday school at the church, helped people find employment, and did whatever they could to help Danvillians to live better lives, especially the poor. Mrs. Lalor Earle a friend and co-worker of the sisters said of them, “they filled in the gaps when there was nothing else.”¹⁷ For many Danvillians, the Society of Christ Our King was the face of Catholicism in Danville and over their years in the city the sisters earned the respect and admiration of a wide-cross section of its citizens, Catholic and Protestant, black and white, wealthy and poor.¹⁸

By the late 1940s, the Society of Christ Our King moved to an eighty-acre farm on the outskirts of Danville. They called their new convent and farm Lynn Regis and regarded it as essential to their mission to non-Catholic Americans. In a newsletter the sisters explained:

The immediate preparation for apostolic work is prayer and penance. Our Lord gave the example for this role before entering on his His public ministry. He went into the desert and fasted and prayed for forty days. It was for such preparation that the Society of Christ Our King selected a secluded place of eighty acres, just outside Danville, Virginia and called it Lynn Regis. The Sisters are devoting themselves to prayer, study and work in preparation for this apostolate to non-Catholics. Lynn Regis makes it easy to pray. All around are “foot prints of the Creator” – the fair blue sky, the brilliant sunshine, the stately hills and verdant forest speak of Him whom the Sisters seek to serve through compelling love.¹⁹

Because of their foundational connection to the Carmelites for their first thirteen years in Danville, the Society of Christ Our King continued to wear a habit that Mother Teresa designed that was similar to the Carmelite habit. But, when they moved from the city to Lynn Regis and took up the work of farming, Mother Teresa deemed that they should have a habit that was better suited for their very active and physical lives. In particular, the Carmelite-style habit with its long and flowing sleeves got in the way when they were driving their Dodge truck. In order to make this change, Mother Teresa invited a leading American fashion designer, Hattie Carnegie, to design a new habit for the Society of Christ Our King. Hattie Carnegie had designed the Women’s Army Corps (WAC) uniform during World War II that was a resounding success; the sisters had great confidence that she would design something that would be perfect for them. Their new habit made national news, mentioned in the September 17, 1951 issue of *Time*. The magazine reported:

Top-flight Fashion Designer Carnegie had whipped up the WAC uniform. Why couldn’t she do a moderm garb for hard-working nuns? Hattie’s solution, designed free of charge: a simple two-piece, ankle length dress in grey wool with a gored skirt that can be turned inside out when the fabric begins to wear; a coat of heavy grey wool with

¹⁷ Mrs. Lalor Earle, interview with author, June 2004.

¹⁸ Mrs. Hazel C. Moore, interview with author, July 15, 2004.

¹⁹ The Society of Christ Our King, “Newsletter No. 1” n.d., personal files of Sister Leona Card, O.S.F.

a Peter Pan collar and close-fitting sleeves; a small brimmed grey hat with deep cloche sides.²⁰

Apparently, the sisters “stopped traffic” in their “very contemporary smart-looking suits with snappy little hats” as they “tooled around Danville in their station wagon” doing corporal and spiritual works of mercy.²¹

On the Feast of the Presentation, February 2, 1943, Leona Card entered the Society of Christ Our King. She would be the last sister to enter the Society and the only sister to enter at Danville. Card was a Connecticut Yankee with ancestors on her father’s side that could be traced back to the colonial period. Her mother’s side was Irish Catholic. Her father converted to Catholicism and, according to Leona, became a devout and passionate Catholic.²² The Cards raised their family of ten in Wilton, Connecticut in a home that Leon Card had built himself.

Shortly after her graduation from Laurelton Hall in Milford, Connecticut, Leona Card boarded a train accompanied by her brother, Jim, and traveled to Danville, Virginia to enter the Society of Christ Our King. Mother Teresa greeted Leona and her brother at the train station and thereupon Jim told Mother Teresa that Leona was “a good pie baker” and “a good driver,” skills that would both come in very handy in the 1960s when the Society of Christ Our King would dedicate itself to civil rights in Danville. When it was time for Leona’s brother to return to Connecticut, Leona was allowed to drive him to the train station and to see him off. While waiting for his train to arrive, they took seats in the station. But, soon a woman from the Traveler’s Aid desk rushed over to them and told them to move to the other side of the station because they were sitting on the black side.²³

Sister Leona recalled that this was her first real experience with Southern racism and it astounded her. She said it was only because she was new to town that she and her brother did not say anything, but they were horrified. “Danville was a foreign country,” She Leona recalled. It was so different from the world she knew in Wilton.

In the South there were races and classes and permutations of both and one did not challenge the boundaries of the permutations. Despite the culture shock and the intransigent racism that she would witness in her more than twenty years of ministry in Danville, Sister Leona said she knew she had to be there and was willing to give her whole life to serve there. Of her vocation to the Society of Christ Our King, she said, “It was Jesus. ‘Come and see’ Jesus said. He wanted me to trust him completely. The call was to come to the Society of Christ Our King and to Danville.”²⁴ Therefore, Sister Leona, whose religious name while a member of the Society of Christ Our King was Sister Rosalie, with her sisters devoted themselves to “reconstruct society in Christ” in Danville, Virginia for the next twenty-five years.²⁵

Because they were a missionary order dedicated to evangelization and apostolic works, the Society of Christ Our King did not have a ministry that regularly brought money into their

²⁰ “Habit by Hattie,” *Time*, September 17, 1951.

²¹ Mrs. Lalor Earle, interview with author, June 2004. ²² Sister Leona Card, O.S.F., interview with author, July 24, 2004.

²² Sister Leona Card, O.S.F., interview with author, July 24, 2004.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Sister Leona is both a subject and a source of this history. Therefore, in order to avoid confusion, I have decided to use her birth name and present religious name throughout the article; but it is important to note that when she was a member of the Society of Christ Our King her name was Sr. Rosalie.

community as did teaching and nursing communities. One of the ways in which they earned money to support their ministries was by doing parish census work in the winter in Newark, New Jersey. The purpose of a parish census was to give a record of the parish that included information such as how many Catholics were in the parish and what their needs were. In order to facilitate the work of her sisters doing the census, Mother Teresa developed a tab system. The sisters used colored tabs to show converts, if a baptism was needed, if there was an invalid marriage, if a divorce was involved, if there was an interest in a religious vocation, among other topics. Sister Leona said, “Mother Teresa would not let us go to a parish where we could just get an address file to send envelopes to – no way would we take that. In parishes we went to we had to be assured that the priests would go right out and take care of the people we found.”²⁶

The sisters loved the census work because it provided them with plum opportunities to evangelize. “When I was welcomed in their homes I could talk to them about Our Lord and help them to understand how much they were loved by God and if they had problems encourage them to ask God to help them to solve their problems, especially their spiritual problems.” Sister Leona recalled that they always identified at least twenty to thirty potential converts to Catholicism during these census visits and she accorded the ease with which they were welcomed into non-Catholic homes to the great popularity of Bishop Fulton J. Sheen. After completing the censuses, each spring the sisters would return to Danville to begin their work on the farm. The products they raised on the farm such as milk, butter, eggs, and cream were other sources of income for the sisters and provided food for them to share with the poor and the sick.²⁷

Well before the 1960s, the Society of Christ Our King was doing what it could to help break down racism in the Catholic Church. Mother Teresa and the sisters were concerned by the fact that black Catholics always sat in the rear of the church and they developed a strategy to move blacks from the backseats to the heart of the congregation. The sisters would arrive early for Mass and take up the backseats before the black parishioners could take them. This meant that they would have to move toward the front. And with every week that would pass, the sisters would claim the seat that the blacks had sat in the week before and before long the blacks had moved to seats in the middle of the church and did not return to sitting in the back row.²⁸ Quiet and subtle practices such as these signaled to black Danvillians and others that the Society of Christ Our King was interested in changing a culture that had enshrined the notion of the separation of the races.

In the spring and summer of 1963, the Danville Christian Progressive Association (DCPA) organized and led civil rights demonstrations in the city of Danville. The leaders of the DCPA were Rev. L. W. Chase, president, Rev. H. G. McGhee, first vice president, Rev. A. I. Dunlap, second vice president, and Rev. Lawrence G. Campbell, secretary. They received help from the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee in training Danville demonstrators, many of whom were school children, in singing, clapping, mass marching, non-violent resistance and chanting. They were hoping to make progress in ending segregation in

²⁶ Sister Leona Card, O.S.F., interview with author, July 24, 2004.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Sister Leona Card, O.S.F., interview with author, July 24, 2004; Mrs. Hazel C. Moore, interview with author, July 15, 2004. Both Mrs. Moore and Sister Leona described this evangelization strategy to the author. It was through this strategy that Mrs. Moore came to know the sisters of the Society of Christ Our King and began to spend time at Lynn Regis in the late 1950s.

employment and public facilities and to extend voting rights to all citizens of Danville.²⁹ Despite the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* school desegregation decision in 1954, like most of the South, Danville still enforced rigid racial segregation. Danville schools were still segregated, as of course the city government did not hire blacks nor did downtown stores, and all parks and public facilities remained segregated.

The DCPA had its first demonstration in downtown Danville on May 31, 1963.³⁰ The Revs. Campbell, Chase, McGhee and Dunlap led their congregations and students to city hall calling for equality in hiring practices in city government. They demonstrated daily until June 5, 1963 when the city fathers were exasperated and dredged up an antebellum Virginia statute that prohibited the incitement of the "colored population to acts of violence and war against the white population."³¹ Demonstrators were charged with "inciting riot" and because many children were among the demonstrators they also levied the charge of "inciting or encouraging a minor to commit a misdemeanor." This began a string of arrests and the imprisonment of demonstrators and even parents of children who demonstrated but did not demonstrate themselves. Dr. Joyce E. Glaise, who grew up in Danville during the 1960s, recalled, "we had youngsters – seventeen, eighteen – that came out to demonstrate and take part in the civil rights movement, and those youngsters that came out to take part in the demonstrations were arrested, and they were held in the courthouse until their parents would come down to get them, and when their parents came down to get them, then their parents were arrested."³² Judge Archibald M. Aiken issued a temporary injunction against the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and a restraining order barring any singing, marching, or public demonstrations without a parade permit. None of this was being covered by the Danville papers, *The Register* or *The Bee*. And nothing would be reported until the Associated Press got wind of what was happening in Danville and threatened to cut wire service to the city.³³

While all of this was happening Mother Teresa was keeping the sisters informed of the events in Danville and about of the civil rights movement in other areas of the country. Sister Leona recalled that Mother Teresa told them about the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rosa Parks and anything that was being done to help blacks gain their rights in America. Mother Teresa read all of the papers and gave her sisters a digest of any news that she thought would be edifying for her sisters. The Society of Christ Our King saw in the civil rights movement a true living out of their mission "to reconstruct society in Christ." Of this Sister Leona remarked, "We were committed to bringing Christ to society and there was Rosa Parks doing it for us down in Montgomery."³⁴

²⁹ William G. Thomas, III, "Television New and the Civil Rights Struggle: The Views of Virginia and Mississippi," *Southern Spaces: An Internet Journal and Scholarly Forum* <http://www.southernspaces.org/contents/2004/print/4d.htm>, 3.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, and the 1963 Danville (Va.) Civil Rights Case Files, 1963-1973, The Library of Virginia, <http://www.lva.lib.va.us/findaid/380099.htm>. According to the Danville civil rights case files from 1963 1973 over 250 were Danville civil rights demonstrators were arrested between May 5, 1963 and mid-July 1963 on charges of contempt, trespassing, disorderly conduct, assault, parading without a permit, and resisting arrest. Defense lawyers from Danville and other parts of Virginia as well as lawyers from the National Lawyer's Guild and the NAACP represented the accused who insisted on individual trials. These cases were not all resolved until February 1973.

³² Dr. Joyce E. Glaise, interview by Voices of Freedom, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, [http://www.library.vcu.edu/jbc/speccoll/civil rights/glaiseO1.html](http://www.library.vcu.edu/jbc/speccoll/civil%20rights/glaiseO1.html)

³³ Sister Leona Card, O.S.F., interview with author, July 24, 2004.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

The arrests, imprisonments, and seeming lack of progress discouraged the youngest demonstrators. In an effort to boost their confidence and resolve, Rev. Lawrence Campbell, pastor of Bibleway Church and member of the DCPA, invited Mother Teresa to speak to the youth who were “losing heart.” He also informed Mother Teresa that the Danville papers were not letting any news of the civil rights demonstrations to get out of the city and that this was doing great harm to the work of the demonstrators. The sisters volunteered to type articles about the events in Danville. Sister Leona recalled, “I happily agreed to type up their message so they could sent it to the Associated Press and to the United Press to wire the stories across the United States.” Mother Teresa also accepted Campbell’s invitation to address the children of the movement at his church.³⁵

At Bibleway Church, Mother Teresa “assured the youngsters that it was necessary to demonstrate because to demonstrate was to teach.” She told the young people that they were teaching “responsible Christian people” about the evils of segregation and in doing so were helping to change society for the better. While at the church that night, Campbell asked Mother Teresa if she would join the demonstrators the next day on the courthouse steps. Not expecting to be asked such a question and being the head of a semi-cloistered community of sisters that only appeared in public when charity demanded it, Mother Teresa said she would do what she could and she pledged her support for the movement that she believed was thoroughly Christian in its roots and purpose. Her remarks were aired on Danville radio.³⁶

When Mother Teresa arrived back at the convent, the telephone rang. On the line was a prominent Catholic woman from Danville who urged Mother Teresa to stop speaking out for civil rights and warned her that she was putting her good reputation at risk, a reputation that had taken years to build up in Danville. Mother Teresa told the woman that she was not worried about ruining her reputation but was she was ultimately concerned with doing what was Christian and supporting civil rights for blacks.³⁷ It was precisely Mother Teresa’s freedom from fear and her commitment to justice that allowed Rev. Campbell (now Bishop Campbell) and other black civil rights leaders and demonstrators to identify her and the Society of Christ Our King as true allies in the movement. Of the sisters, Campbell remembers, “they were disturbed by the injustice of the society and felt there was a role they could play in helping to extract black people from the tyranny of racism.”³⁸

The next afternoon as Mother Teresa prepared to go to the courthouse to demonstrate Sister Leona begged to be allowed to go with her. She recalled her desire to go: “half in fear of what would happen to her, a Catholic sister ‘down South’ and half in love to bear witness to the honor and integrity of the black people.” Her appeal was successful and she accompanied Mother Teresa to the demonstration. When they reached the courthouse steps an African American woman handed Mother Teresa a sign that said, “Segregation is inherently evil.” The climb up the steps of the court house winded Mother Teresa who had a heart condition so she asked Sister Leona to hold the sign for her. “I gladly did. The whole world and his wife went by that night probably three times to see the Catholic sisters standing up there with the black people.” The sisters stood with the sign that afternoon and evening as the young demonstrators sang and prayed.³⁹

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Bishop Lawrence G. Campbell, interview with author, August 2, 2006.

³⁹ Sr. Leona Card, O.S.F., interview with author, July 24, 2004.

This demonstration would be the first and the last that Society of Christ Our King would participate in because another call was waiting for them when they returned to the convent that evening. Word was sent from Danville to Bishop John J. Russell in Richmond, Virginia that the sisters had demonstrated for civil rights that day. Russell, though sympathetic to the cause of the civil rights movement, was not willing to have priests and sisters of the diocese publicly involved in demonstrations. He forbade the sisters from participating in public demonstrations but he did tell them that they could find other ways to help with civil rights, including doing things for the movement at their convent.⁴⁰ Within a year of this event, Russell and several other Southern Catholic bishops encouraged their priests and sisters “to stand up for black people.”

In fact later that month, Russell was invited by President John F. Kennedy to serve on a national interfaith committee that was concerned with racial justice. Russell also issued a pastoral letter supporting the principal aims of the civil rights movement and advocating the Church’s obligation in civil rights in late June 1963. It was published in the diocesan newspaper, *The Catholic Virginian*, and read in every church in the diocese. In the pastoral, the bishop declared it both “appropriate and important” to remind his people in the Diocese of Richmond of their obligation in “fraternal charity and racial justice.”⁴¹ He spoke of African Americans’ “full rights as citizens” and called on Catholics to use Christian principles and to work with “our fellow citizens of other faiths for the cause of racial justice in Christian charity.”⁴² Of this statement, historian, Gerald P. Fogarty, S.J., contends, “his letter was not only an implementation of the national interfaith committee’s work but also a practical application of ecumenism then being discussed at [the Second Vatican Council].”⁴³ Given Russell’s disposition towards civil rights and his public encouragement of Catholic support for civil rights, the Society of Christ Our King worked with the blessings of the bishop.

On June 10, 1963, Danville experienced “Bloody Monday.” That evening, civil rights demonstrators gathered at the city jail to pray for those who were imprisoned for their roles in public demonstrations. It began as a peaceful and prayerful gathering but it did not remain that way for long. By assembling and praying at the jail, the demonstrators defied the injunction against parading. The city police deputized city sanitation workers on the spot and enlisted their assistance in beating and arresting those praying.⁴⁴ The police also turned high-pressure hoses on the demonstrators. Mrs. Lawrence G. Campbell, who survived this brutal attack, testified:

At this time I heard a voice saying “I am tired of you people! I have told you to stay away! Let them have it!” Then I heard loud laughter. At this time I saw a fire truck pull up the street about fifty feet and I saw the fire hoses being unwound out in the street. It was a most horrible moment to wait for the water to hit us. All of a sudden a great force of water hit me from my back and I was thrown to the pavement with my dress over my head. As I tried to get up I was beaten on my back by a policeman. We saw policemen

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Gerald P. Fogarty, S.J., *Commonwealth Catholicism: A History of the Catholic Church in Virginia* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 533.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Mary King, *Freedom Song: A Personal Story of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Quill, William Morrow, 1987), 87.

standing around us with long nightsticks. They looked as if they had never been used before. I saw bodies washed under parked cars just as trash runs down a street after a hard rain. I heard horrible sounds. Screams like people were being burned up in a fire, the sounds were. As I tried to get up I was beaten in my back. I was helped out to the sidewalk by Mrs. Myrtle McLeod.⁴⁵

Thirty-eight demonstrators were arrested that night and over forty people were beaten and treated at Winslow Hospital in Danville, the hospital for blacks.⁴⁶ The police claimed that the protestors were spitting on them and that protestors had ice picks, a baseball bat, and other weapons. This was reported in the Richmond paper, *The News Leader*.⁴⁷ Immediately word of this got out to the national press and to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Press and supporters of the movement poured into Danville and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., promised to return to Danville, saying that this was the worst case of police brutality seen by the movement.

Reinforcements started to arrive in Danville; King returned and college civil rights demonstrators began arriving. The plan of the DCPA was to house demonstrators from out of town in the homes of those who supported the movement. However, when the city government got word of this, they passed yet another injunction making it illegal for blacks and white to stay together, even in private homes. Where would they go? Many would find welcome and rest at Lynn Regis.⁴⁸

Mary King, a young Methodist college student and civil rights demonstrator, was one of the first who stayed with the Society of Christ Our King in the summer of 1963. In her memoir, *Freedom Song*, King recalled:

The nuns welcomed me with keen interest. They gave me a clean simple room with a narrow bed covered with spotless sheets. The sisters, most of them North Carolinians and all of them white, were interesting, very sympathetic to the civil rights movement but were distant from it in their self-imposed monasticism. They were hungry for information, wanting it as reinforcement for their thinking and discussion. I fed them with stories, vignettes, graphic scenes and detailed accounts. They in turn fed me. They served me an unforgettable meal of succulent corn, tomatoes, beans, and other vegetables they had grown themselves in their garden, along with fried chicken from hens they raised. I can still taste that fresh corn and tomatoes now. Never having enough time for proper meals in the vortex of the movement, and always yearning for a delicious spread, I gorged myself on the nuns' southern cooking. I fell asleep in mid-afternoon, more exhausted than I realized, relaxing now in the sweet haven the nuns offered me.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Len Holt, *An Act of Conscience* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), 24. Len Holt quoted from Mrs. Lawrence G. Campbell's testimony about her experience on "Bloody Monday" in his memoir about the Danville's "Summer of Protest."

⁴⁶ King, *Freedom Song*, 88. There are numerous accounts of the events of June 10, 1963, "Bloody Monday," and most put the number of those arrested around thirty-seven and those beaten and treated in the hospital between forty and fifty. Sr. Leona Card recalls going to Winslow Hospital to visit victims of the June 10, 1963 assaults.

⁴⁷ Thomas, "Television News and the Civil Rights Struggle," 3.

⁴⁸ Sr. Leona Card, O.S.F., to author, February 2005.

⁴⁹ King, *Freedom Song*, 118.

King was but one demonstrator who found hospitality with the society during this time and viewed the time spent with the sisters as a refuge. Bishop Campbell recalls that for many African American civil rights activists the welcome the sisters gave to them was the first time they had ever been invited to the home much less to the dining table of a white person as a guest.⁵⁰ The sisters would welcome, feed, and pray for many, many more. Mother Teresa opened the convent to black and white youth demonstrators because she wanted to encourage what they were doing and because it was a way for the sisters to act on their own Christian convictions regarding civil rights for black Americans and to live out their mission to “reconstruct society in Christ.” These young people, most of whom were Methodist, Baptist, and Jewish and some of whom were socialists, were truly received as guests of the society. The sisters provided them with good food, a place to plan and organize, and a bucolic respite from their labors. Of these young people, Sister Leona said, “they were committed to helping others no matter what their religion was.”

One guest of the sisters was a reporter for a socialist newspaper. She stayed with the sisters for more than a month and sent her reports from Danville to her newspaper. The sisters knew that this woman was a socialist and did not approve of her political stance but they respected her. Sister Leona said, “She was a wonderful person.” But when the FBI got word that this woman was staying at the convent they determined to arrest her. Tipped off that the FBI was on the way to pick up the reporter, Mother Teresa directed Sister Leona to drive her to a safe place across the state line into North Carolina. Once over the state line, Sister Leona promised the reporter that she would return the next day and bring the reporter all of the things she had left behind. True to her word, Sister Leona came back to North Carolina the following day and the reporter was thankful to the sisters for their faithfulness to her.⁵¹ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was also thankful to the Society of Christ Our King. One night after Mother Teresa had sent the sisters to bed, King arrived at the convent with some members of the DCPA to thank Mother Teresa for all the sisters were doing for the cause of civil rights.⁵²

In July 1963, the DCPA planned a mothers’ march for civil rights in Danville and asked Mother Teresa to participate. She told the ministers she would do whatever she could to help them but she could not march.⁵³ Desiring that there be Catholic representation at the march, Mother Teresa contacted Dorothy Day and asked her if she would come to Danville and represent the Catholic Church at the march. Day readily agreed to do so and boarded a bus to Danville. Of this experience, Day wrote, “it was not long after I arrived [at the convent] that a group of young people from SNCC arrived for a late supper. ... We ate the good farm products (there were steak and hot dogs besides) and students told me of the happenings in Danville. Stories of which had been publicized all over the country, but they still could scarcely convey the horror or brutality which had been inflicted on a helpless, unarmed crowd of demonstrators.”⁵⁴

Rev. L.W. Chase invited Day to speak at a mass meeting the night before the march at his church, High Street Baptist. Of it she said, “the meeting began with song and hymns and the hymn singing was hearty and beautiful ... the Freedom Songs were more lively than the hymns and clapping accompanied them and a light tapping of the feet. . . . There were many verses and

⁵⁰ Bishop Lawrence G. Campbell, interview with author, August 2, 1904.

⁵¹ Sr. Leona Card, O.S.F., interview with author, July 24, 2004.

⁵² Sr. Leona Card, O.S.F., interview with author, October 2004.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Dorothy Day, *On Pilgrimage: The Sixties* (New York City: Curtis Books, 1972), 150.

many refrains. The singing lifted the heart, strengthened the knees.”⁵⁵ About her talk, Day recalled her experience, “I did not know whether I would have had the courage to speak, outsider that I was, if I had not been there to represent Mother Teresa whose work was known and loved by them all. Besides, the singing lightened my own heart, dissolved my own fear so that I could tell them of the Women’s Pilgrimage of Peace and the Pope’s encyclical *Pacem in Terris*. ... I told my listeners too, that after so many years of work in the Peace Movement, I had come to the conclusion that basic to peace was this struggle of the colored for education, job opportunity, health, and recognition as men.”⁵⁶

The next day, Day joined a small group of women demonstrators who picketed in downtown Danville on July 10, 1963, a month following “Bloody Monday.” The Danville Register reported that a small afternoon gathering of about six African American women with picket signs and noted “another group, including Mrs. Dorothy Day, editor of the ‘Catholic Worker’ picketed during the morning.”⁵⁷ That was all the Danville newspaper had to say about the mothers’ march but Day recalled the significance as being much greater for herself as well as for the people in Danville and throughout the South who committed their lives to this fight for civil rights. They received “hostile or indifferent stares of hundreds of people during their lunch hour.” But, Day says she also had the opportunity to talk with some of the women who suffered beatings on Bloody Monday and with many of the children who were active in the demonstrations. She wrote, “the very young among the Negro students have led in integrating of public facilities, lunch counters, hospitals, libraries, theaters, and housing in many places and have engaged the minds and hearts of youth in Danville, too. It was fascinating to see and hear these young ones, some of them only fourteen, talk of the work and the struggle ahead.”⁵⁸

The “struggle ahead” only intensified as over 200,000 Americans, black and white, Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant, Northern, Southern, Eastern and Western, poor, wealthy and middle-class, made a pilgrimage to the nation’s capital to demonstrate for civil rights on August 28. Many, many speeches were delivered that day but the most enduring in the American consciousness was the “I Have Dream” speech that Dr. King offered. In it he talked about his dream, which was “deeply-rooted in the American dream” that the equal dignity and rights of all Americans would be recognized and honored. He dreamed of people being “judged not the by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” And he dreamed of a time when all Americans from all walks and ways of life would join hands and sing the Negro spiritual: “Free at last, free at last, thank God almighty, I am free at last.” Less than a month later, four little black girls would become martyrs for this dream when they were killed at their church, the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. And then about two months after their deaths, President John F. Kennedy had his life taken by an assassin in Dallas, Texas. The “struggle” continued on Danville. By the fall the lively demonstrations and violence that accompanied them in the spring and summer of 1963 died down, but through more quiet and subdued boycotts, protests, and negotiations between Danville civil rights leaders, lawyers, area business and religious leaders, and officials from the city government, the struggle brought slow and often painful change.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 152.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 153.

⁵⁷ “On Eve of King Appearance: Michie Remands Injunction Case to Corporation Court of Danville,” The Danville Register, July 11, 1963, The Virginia Bourne Papers on the Civil Rights Demonstrations of 1963 in Danville, Virginia, Archives of Averett University.

⁵⁸ Day, On Pilgrimage: The Sixties, 154-155.

Only recently is Danville, Virginia being looked at as a pivotal player in the American civil rights movement of the 1960s. For a long time it has been overlooked by historians who have focused great attention on places like Birmingham, Selma, Greensboro, and Mississippi as well they should. However, Danville's role in the civil rights movement was also important. Many black Danvillians, particularly young people, offered noble and precious witness in this movement for justice. It is appropriate that now more attention is being paid to this place and time in our national history. Likewise, the role that Catholics, lay and religious, played in the civil rights movement is also just beginning to be considered.⁵⁹ While the history of the Catholic Church in the United States and civil rights reveals that the Church was not unified in its support, it is of significance that there were Catholic allies to be found in the movement. The Society of Christ Our King is but one example of Catholics fearlessly joined their efforts and their faith with black Americans who were simply asking for justice in their own country.

When asked why the Society of Christ Our King and its role in the Danville civil rights movement is not recorded anywhere, Bishop Lawrence G. Campbell replied: "I think the sisters are not mentioned because while they were supportive they did not seek the limelight. They intentionally chose to do things that would not bring attention to themselves but that would advance the cause of the movement."⁶⁰ Even though they are not recorded in any of the official histories, their deeds are recorded in the memories and hearts of those who knew them. Campbell declared, "We saw Mother Teresa as a mother, our mother. I will never forget the impact she had on my life and on the lives of the people in Danville." He was referring not just to blacks but to all the citizens of Danville. Campbell suggested that one of most significant contributions the sisters made was in giving white Danvillians a way to see themselves as allies of the movement. He said, "the sisters participated with us. They stood with us for the cause. They were not afraid to attend rallies."⁶¹ Unlike most white citizens who expressed an opinion during this time, Campbell observed that the sisters clearly accepted that the work of the civil rights demonstrators did not result from the prompting of "outsiders" but from within the black community in Danville itself whose members desired to live differently and equally with all of their fellow citizens. In a similar vein, Sisters Leona recalled that after the sisters became involved in supporting the civil rights movement, whites in Danville who had never acknowledged them began to recognize the sisters and show respect for them. Sister Leona recalled, "We showed them that they, too, could do this."⁶² The many years the Society of Christ Our King spent working in the black community in Danville was clearly a source of motivation for the sisters to become involved in the civil rights movement. However, the most important motivation was their Christian conviction that compelled them to love all people. They intensely identified their call "to serve with compelling love" in the mission of Dr. King. Of him, Sister Leona said, "it was the spirit of Martin Luther King that changed the country, his spirit of living and forgiving those who had offended the black people. No child or adult could march with him if they could not have an attitude of love and forgiveness, not attempting to

⁵⁹ See R. Bentley Anderson, *S.J. Black, White, and Catholic: New Orleans Interracialism, 1947-1956* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2005), Danny Duncan Collum, *Black and Catholic in the Jim Crow South: The Stuff That Makes Community* (New York/Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2006), Mary A. Ward, *A Mission for Justice: The History of the First African American Catholic Church in Newark, New Jersey* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002), and Cornelia F. Sexauer, "A Well-Behaved Woman Who Made History: Sister Mary Antona's Journey to Selma," *American Catholic Studies* vol. 115, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 37-57.

⁶⁰ Bishop Lawrence G. Campbell, interview with author, August 2, 2006.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Sister Leona Card, O.S.F., interview with author, July 24, 2004.

retaliate for any hurts, and they experienced many. He was truly a minister of God. He lived the Gospel. Through it Christ inspired him to lead in love. Anyone who lived the Gospel could identify with him and support him, either physically, financially or spiritually. And so many did.”⁶³

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⁶³ Sr. Leona Card, O.S.F. to author, January 22, 2006. I offer my deep thanks to Sr. Leona Card, O.S.F, Mrs. Hazel C. Moore, Mrs. Lalor Earle, Bishop Lawrence G. Campbell, the Averett College Library, the University of Virginia Special Collections, Mrs. Marva Gray, Dr. Kelly Johnson, and Mrs. Vicki Craddock of Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Danville, Virginia for their assistance in researching the Society of Christ Our King and the Danville civil rights movement. Without their contributions this article could not have been written.