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**Establishing a Conscience of Connection:
The Individual Conscience and the National Soul in the Sermons of Pauli Murray**

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The occasion marked the first time in North Carolina's history when a woman priest officially celebrated the Holy Eucharist. On February 13, 1977, the Rev. Dr. Pauli Murray performed the sacrament at the Chapel of the Cross in Chapel Hill. Only a few weeks earlier, on January 8, Murray had been ordained the first African American female Episcopal priest at the Washington National Cathedral. In her autobiography, Murray described that day in January as a "bitter-cold, gray morning in Washington, with ice and snow covering the ground." Witnesses noted, however, that the moment the bishop consecrated Murray, "the sun broke through the clouds outside and sent shafts of rainbow-colored light down through the stained-glass windows. The shimmering beams of light were so striking that members of the congregation gasped."¹

The celebration in Chapel Hill was no less personally significant for Murray. The sixty-six-year-old Murray wore orange kente cloth from Ghana and a turquoise ring to honor her African and Native American heritage.² Her heritage linked her to the church, for her grandmother Cornelia Smith had been baptized at the Chapel of the Cross in 1854 as one of "five servant children of Miss Mary Ruffin Smith." Murray's grandmother was the child of Mary Ruffin Smith's brother and her slave Harriet, who was part Cherokee. After reading Murray's family memoir *Proud Shoes: The Story of an American Family*, in which Murray eloquently narrates her grandmother's history, the rector of Chapel of the Cross invited Murray to celebrate

¹ Pauli Murray, *Song in a Weary Throat: An American Pilgrimage* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 434-435.

² Darlene O'Dell, *Sites of Southern Memory: The Autobiographies of Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin, Lillian Smith and Pauli Murray* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 119.

Holy Eucharist there. During the service, the Reverend Peter James Lee called Murray a “bridge builder,” and Murray used her grandmother’s Bible as she spoke on “healing and reconciliation.”³

For Murray, that February day was a day of family healing but also of national reconciliation. Drawing upon the civil rights movement’s anthem, she told the congregation,

“Deep in my heart, I do believe” that the American South will lead the way toward the renewal of our moral and spiritual strength and our sense of mission. The initiative has passed from New England, where those first Pilgrims back in the 17th Century saw the new country as the “new Jerusalem,” “a city set on a hill,” “a light to the world,” to places like Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where we are today witnessing to the reconciling of Isaac and Ishmael in the House of Abraham.⁴

Quoting from the book of Luke, Murray began her sermon describing humanity as she had come to define it:

“A great multitude of people” – always, it seems to me, is a signal of a deeply religious experience – joyous, friendly, full of song and praise, inclusive, -- embracing all sorts and conditions of humankind – men, women and children, old and young, the lame, the halt, the blind, the Jew and Greek, the Black, White, Red, Yellow – Republicans and Democrats, rich and poor – ...⁵

Murray’s national vision was symbolized by that “rainbow-colored light” that shined down on her during her ordination. She had dedicated her life to becoming an American conscience in order to bring about equality of opportunity for all citizens. Murray’s humanist vision shaped her conscience of connection, which was defined by inclusivity and by

³ O’Dell, *Sites of Southern Memory*, 119; Murray, *Song in a Weary Throat*, 432; Peter James Lee, “Servant Children,” homily, 13 February 1977, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, box 64, folder 1092, the Pauli Murray Papers, Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Cambridge, Massachusetts (hereafter cited as the Pauli Murray Papers); Pauli Murray, “Healing and Reconciliation,” sermon, 13 February 1977, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, box 64, folder 1092, the Pauli Murray Papers.

⁴ Murray, “Healing and Reconciliation,” the Pauli Murray Papers.

⁵ Murray, “Healing and Reconciliation,” the Pauli Murray Papers.

relationships based on equality and respect. She worked to speak that conscience as a student, an activist, a writer, a lawyer, a teacher, a priest, and – perhaps most significantly – as an American.

In her introduction to a group of essays published on Murray in the *Journal of Women's History*, Susan Ware speculated that “it may be that when historians look back on twentieth-century America, all roads will lead to Pauli Murray.”⁶ The statement references Murray’s remarkably varied career, her energetic pursuit of her causes, and the connections she made along the way. Murray was born Anna Pauline Murray on November 20, 1910 in Baltimore, Maryland. She was a lawyer and a labor, civil rights, and women’s rights activist in addition to being the first African American woman to be ordained in the Episcopal Church. Historians and other scholars have long noted how her life can provide insight into a wide swath of the twentieth century in the United States: race relations and civil rights, the women’s movement, workers’ movements, LGBTQ history, religion, the law, literature, the impact of the Second Red Scare, and Americans’ relationships with people around the world among other topics. Furthermore, Murray’s life demonstrates the interconnections between these developments that are so often analyzed in isolation. The complex ways that political, social, cultural, economic, and diplomatic movements intersected are not only demonstrated in Murray’s life, but they also parallel the heart of her message. Murray advocated for an inclusive, humanist political culture based on her understanding of God and American principles and that theme feature prominently in her sermons. It was this notion of the connectivity of people that characterizes the kind of national conscience she was. Theologian Anthony Pinn, who has written extensively on Murray, describes how her theology reflected a synergetic perspective that understood ways in which

⁶ Susan Ware, “Pauli Murray’s Notable Connections,” *Journal of Women's History* 14, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 54.

different kinds of oppression overlapped.⁷ In her 2017 biography of Murray, Rosalind Rosenberg draws connections between Murray's personal life and her ministry, arguing that Murray's struggles with her sexuality and her life lived "in between" drove her mission to build bridges.⁸ Her sermons revealed a central theme of a national conscience of connection that promoted individual dignity and interrelatedness.

Murray's activism contributed to an American jeremiad tradition that blended religious and secular prophecy with a collective sense of idealistic obligation. From John Winthrop's "city upon a hill" to Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address to Murray's contemporary Martin Luther King, Jr., Americans had appealed to a national conscience to encourage reform. Murray's prophetic style and message fit squarely within the American jeremiad tradition. In a sermon that she sent to "friends of all faiths," Murray analyzed the implications of the Iran Hostage Crisis: "I cannot help thinking that the chastening, tragic episode of the ill-fated rescue mission in the Iranian desert – a self-inflicted wound – was the judgment of God upon a powerful nation, a warning that this crisis was not to be resolved by reliance upon military force but must be unraveled by the agonizingly slow, painstaking use of instruments of peaceful negotiation."⁹ This was reminiscent of Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address, in which he suggested that the Civil War had been divine punishment upon a country that had fostered slavery. Murray's conscience-pricking prophecy intended to promote human rights in the United States by blending nationalism and religion. She often explained the country's errors as resulting from separation from and rebellion against God. Only by relying on God could the country

⁷ Anthony B. Pinn, *Becoming "America's Problem Child": An Outline of Pauli Murray's Religious Life and Theology* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2008), 82.

⁸ Rosalind Rosenberg, *Jane Crow: The Life of Pauli Murray* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 5.

⁹ Murray, "The Light of the World," 1 February 1981, box 65, folder 1104, the Pauli Murray Papers.

overcome the power of evil. Murray spent much of her life spreading this message and becoming part of the American prophetic tradition. As she put it in a note to historian Caroline Ware that she never sent, “I also happen to think that I have a point of view which needs to be stated as often and as publicly as possible – because my goal is understanding, upon which reconciliation is based.”¹⁰

Murray was a part of the jeremiad tradition, but she also was an intermediary, encouraging others to become human rights prophets as well by lauding exemplars of the past. In her sermons, she often held up individuals as examples. One of her most frequent was her friend Eleanor Roosevelt.¹¹ Roosevelt, Murray claimed in a 1984 sermon, had spoken for the indigent as the “conscience of the New Deal.”¹² In an early 1977 sermon, Murray compared Roosevelt with early-twentieth-century women’s rights activist Alice Paul, saying that both women had “made a lasting impact upon the world in which they lived by their unswerving devotion to the cause of human rights.”¹³ Murray believed that their work was a Christian obligation, and she encouraged her listeners to follow the examples of individuals like Paul and Roosevelt, even if it proved difficult. “To say that the Christian mission is to transform the world is frightening to most of us. We feel that the problems of our time are too complex, that we are only one person, and that we, individually, can make very little impact upon society. ... Yet all around us are examples of individuals who felt themselves called to a mission and who helped to change the

¹⁰ Murray to Ware, 5 March 1974, *Pauli Murray & Caroline Ware: Forty Years of Letters in Black & White*, ed. Anne Firor Scott (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 163.

¹¹ See Patricia Bell-Scott, *The Firebrand and the First Lady: Portrait of a Friendship: Pauli Murray, Eleanor Roosevelt, and the Struggle for Social Justice* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016).

¹² Murray, sermon, n.d., box 65, folder 1107, the Pauli Murray Papers.

¹³ Murray, “Mary Has Chosen the Best Part,” sermon, 14 July 1977, box 64, folder 1094, the Pauli Murray Papers.

face of society.”¹⁴ Murray recognized the importance of individual conscience. Her sermons urged her listeners to use their consciences to transform the national soul.

As a priest and a priest-in-training, Murray preached often about the need for messengers of conscience in the United States. In a sermon she delivered at Emanuel Church of Boston in 1974, she stated that the country was “now in a deep and pervasive national crisis not unlike the crisis the 8th Century prophets and their successors foresaw in their own era. In such periods of human crisis, God has called forth prophets who will not be silenced, who will not be coopted by the established hierarchies whether they be clerical or secular. The role of these prophets is to call the people to repentance, to a return to the God of salvation.”¹⁵ Murray not only spoke out for human rights in her sermons, but she also weighed in on (among others) the dangers of nuclear weapons, on the resignation of U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Andrew Young after he met with the Palestinian Liberation Organization, and on what she called the United States’ “evils of abundance that has turned into glut.”¹⁶

As these examples indicate, Murray was not shy about pricking the national conscience by weighing in on current affairs and political debates in her sermons. In some ways, this was merely a new platform from which to project her voice of conscience. In addition to involvement in labor and civil rights demonstrations as well as her legal work, Murray had written letters to policymakers and letters to the editors of various newspapers for years. She considered doing so a national duty, writing in a 1959 letter to the *New York Times* about school desegregation that

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Murray, “Inaugural” sermon, 3 March 1974, Boston, box 64, folder 1089, the Pauli Murray Papers.

¹⁶ See Murray, “Mary Has Chosen the Best Part,” 14 July 1977, box 64, folder 1094, the Pauli Murray Papers; Murray, sermon on 2 May 1982, box 65, folder 1106, the Pauli Murray Papers; Murray, “Atonement,” 9 September 1979, box 64, folder 1099, the Pauli Murray Papers; Murray, sermon on 10 August 1980, in *Pauli Murray: Selected Sermons*, 151.

“in the absence of Presidential leadership, the people themselves must point the way.”¹⁷ Not above using these methods to carry out a stunt in order to arouse the national conscience about an issue, Murray wrote to President Nixon in 1971 suggesting that he nominate her to the Supreme Court. She explained to historian Caroline Ware that “it would help to reduce the politics and shenanigans if the country would accept the idea that Supreme Court appointments, like CIVIL SERVICE, were handled on their merits, openly and without backroom politics. So I decided to gamble on the 200,000,000th chance and go for all the marbles.”¹⁸ Murray called putting her name forward “the kookiest idea in the world,”¹⁹ but however far-fetched, it was an example of Murray’s role as a national prophetic conscience.

When Murray decided to pursue the priesthood, she enlisted religious means alongside legal and literary ones to prick the national conscience and confront injustice. As an Episcopal leader, Murray expanded her platform in order to emphasize human connectivity, including gender equality. In one prayer she led following a Mother’s Day sermon in 1977, Murray pleaded, “O God, you have bound us together in a common life – male and female. In our struggles for justice and inclusiveness to proclaim your Word and do your will, so that all humanity may be brought into the merciful embrace of Divine Love, help us to discern the truth, to confront one another without hatred or bitterness, and to work together with mutual forbearance and respect; through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.”²⁰ While Murray became a

¹⁷ Murray, letter to the editor, *New York Times*, 5 March 1959.

¹⁸ Murray to Caroline Ware, 22 September 1971 in *Pauli Murray & Caroline Ware*, 155.

¹⁹ Quoted in Eleanor Blau, “63 and an Activist, She Hopes to Become an Episcopal Priest,” *New York Times*, 11 February 1974.

²⁰ Pauli Murray, “Has the Lord Spoken to Moses Only?,” 8 May 1977, Church of Our Savior, Washington, D.C., box 64, folder 1093, the Pauli Murray Papers.

priest for multiple reasons, she recognized that her ordination was in part a challenge to gender barriers within the Episcopal Church. One of the licenses found in the Pauli Murray Papers has been edited with “his” marked out and “her” handwritten beside it.²¹

In a 1976 sermon she preached on women’s ordination, Murray articulated an explanation for the dispute over women’s ordination that illuminates her own perspective about what she believed to be her prophetic place as a voice of conscience in the twentieth century world. The Christian Church has long existed balancing two historic “spirits,” she argued. The tension between the “spirit of prophecy,” which warns civilizations to return to God, and a “spirit of order,” which seeks slow change within social institutions, had been strained in the 1900s. A static, corrupted order had opened the door for a “prophetic movement.” Murray hypothesized on the implications of the contemporary “national crisis” in the United States:

Talking with some of these women, or listening to them preach, or reading their accounts of their own call, one is increasingly struck with the idea that nothing less than the urgency of their mission, born of their responses to the depths of our moral and spiritual crisis, could impel them to face the incredible barriers that have existed for thousands of years, to endure the ridicule and even violence of their detractors, and to persist in the face of the continual heartache of rejection that blocks their path and denies the authenticity of their call. Dare we say that they and their supporters are not answering to a higher authority than that of the political structures of our church? Is God using this movement to call our church and ourselves to judgment? How do we answer?²²

Murray believed that the women who pursued ordination, herself included, were not only answering God’s call; they also had an important prophetic message to share with congregations

²¹ Diocese of Washington, Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States, license for the Reverend Pauli Murray, 13 July 1980, box 63, folder 1065, the Pauli Murray Papers.

²² Murray, “Sermon on the Ordination of Women,” 1976, in *Pauli Murray: Selected Sermons and Writings*, ed. Anthony B. Pinn (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 61-63.

and with the entire country. They were both the messengers of divine conscience but the embodiment of that conscience as well.

Murray's life, spent fighting injustice both inside and outside the Church, influenced her sermons. Relationships, interdependence, and reconciliation were at the heart of Murray's twentieth-century prophetic message. "The *key* to the reconciliation of the races (or the sexes)," she argued, "is my sense of *relatedness* to an individual of another social classification; the *key* also lies in one-to-one relationships – the development of reciprocal affection and esteem between two individuals that spills over into group relationships."²³ These connections were not confined within national boundaries as Murray made clear in a sermon she gave after the assassination of Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1984. Christians have duties beyond their local and national communities, she maintained. "More and more we realize the interdependence of human life, that what happens in other parts of the world has a profound effect upon our own lives, and that what we do ourselves affects the destinies of peoples beyond our borders."²⁴ Interdependence, despite nationality, represented Murray's conscience of connection well. She believed it was crucial to speak out about the bonds that linked people in order to protect individual civil rights.

Murray concluded her sermon that Sunday morning in February 1977, when she became the first woman priest in North Carolina's history to administer the Eucharist, with a summary of her career and her worldview:

My entire life's quest has been for spiritual integration, and this quest has led me ultimately to Christ in whom there is no East or West, no North or South, no Black or White, no Red or Yellow, no Jew or Gentile, no Islam or Buddha, no Baptist, Methodist,

²³ Murray, "What the Protestant Episcopal Church of the USA Could Be Doing the Next Century," in *Pauli Murray: Selected Sermons and Writings*, 192.

²⁴ Murray, sermon, n.d., box 65, folder 1107, the Pauli Murray Papers.

Episcopalian or Roman Catholic, no Male or Female. There is no Black Christ, nor White Christ, nor Red Christ – although these images may have transitory cultural value. There is only the Christ, the Spirit of Love and reconciliation, the Healer of deep psychic wounds, drawing us all closer to that goal of perfection which links us to God our Creator and to eternity.²⁵

Murray's life story reads much like an inventory of important themes characterizing the twentieth century. Her mission to better integrate her family's history into the American story paralleled civil rights leaders' attempts to do the same thing. Her reliance on the law, religion, and non-violent civil disobedience to advance civil rights highlighted important aspects of the movement. Her participation in both the black freedom and women's rights movements demonstrated the ways that groups seeking to overcome inequality and injustice drew inspiration from each other. It was Womanist Theology, but it was applied to reach broad audiences of individuals with diverse experiences and backgrounds. Murray's insistence on the subtle balance in her sermons and writings between individualism and connectedness that characterized her prophetic voice was also her unique contribution to national conscience. She fought to promote a worldview that recognized "the human race and just people."

²⁵ Murray, "Healing and Reconciliation," the Pauli Murray Papers.