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Citation for published version:

Newman, M 2021, 'The Catholic diocese of Mobile-Birmingham and parochial school desegregation, 1962-1969', *Alabama Review*, vol. 74, no. 1, pp. 24-61.

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Alabama Review

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“The Catholic Diocese of Mobile-Birmingham and Parochial School Desegregation, 1962-
1969”

In September 1963, Catholic diocesan newspapers in Tennessee, South Carolina, and as far away as Texas and Virginia reported that St. Joseph's, a previously all-African American Catholic school in Huntsville, had admitted twelve white students and had thus become the first desegregated elementary school in Alabama. Father Mark Sterbenz, the white Salvatorian (Society of the Divine Savior) pastor of St. Joseph's Mission, told reporters that desegregation had occurred "very quietly and very smoothly" with "no trouble." The event was newsworthy because white parents had initiated desegregation by asking Sterbenz if they could enroll their children, and Governor George C. Wallace had closed the city's public schools that day to prevent their desegregation under a federal court order. Wallace telephoned Archbishop Thomas J. Toolen of the Diocese of Mobile-Birmingham asking him to postpone the opening of St. Joseph's, but Toolen refused. Many of the white parents who sent their children to St. Joseph's had moved from outside the South to work in Huntsville's federal military installations, and they did not share the segregationist sentiment of most southern whites, including Catholics. As Huntsville's white Catholic school was already full, they applied to St. Joseph's to ensure that their children received a Catholic education.¹

¹ "Former Negro School Enrolls 12 White Pupils," *Catholic Virginian*, September 11, 1963, 2 (quotations); "Alabama Catholics Lead School to Integration," *Tennessee Register*, September 13, 1963, 1; "Alabama, Georgia Schools Integrate," *Alamo Messenger*, September 13, 1963, 7; "Alabama Catholic School Desegregates Quietly," *Catholic Banner*, September 15, 1963, 1; Henry Cabirac, Jr. to C. J. Hazeur, Jr., September 11, 1963, folder 10, box 1, "Southern Field Service Report of Activities, 1962-63, Program Goals 1964," 8, folder 7, box 4, Henry Cabirac to Mathew Ahmann, September 5, 1963, folder 2, box 1, series 33, National Catholic Council for Interracial Justice Records (hereafter cited as NCCIJR), Marquette

Unreported, but perhaps of greater significance because it affected more schools, the Diocese of Mobile-Birmingham, which included all of Alabama and ten counties in northwest Florida, also peacefully desegregated several grades in its high schools and elementary schools in Pensacola that month. Unlike in Huntsville, a sustained campaign by African American Catholics in Pensacola, the county seat and largest city in Escambia County, exerted pressure on the diocese to begin desegregating the city's Catholic schools. The Southern Field Service of the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice (NCCIJ) played an instrumental behind-the-scenes role in stimulating, encouraging and advising Black Catholics in their campaign and by working with John P. "Jack" Sisson, a White Catholic Pensacola native, who was committed to desegregating the city. Enlisted by Sisson, several White Catholics crossed the racial divide and joined Black Catholics in their attempts to pressure and persuade Toolen to overturn Catholic school segregation. The Southern Field Service sought to replicate the Pensacola model in Catholic communities in

University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. More white parents sent their children that fall to St. Joseph's, with the result that white children soon constituted twenty-two of its overall enrollment of 110. Two of the school's four Parent Teacher Association officers were also white. Henry Cabirac to Bernard Law, October 2, 1963, folder 16, box 11, series 33, NCCIJR. On the desegregation of St. Joseph's see Paul T. Murray, "Peaceful History: 'Reverse Integration' at St. Joseph's School," *National Catholic Reporter*, September 15, 2018, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/parish/peaceful-history-reverse-integration-st-josephs-school> (accessed October 15, 2019) and Paul T. Murray, "The Reverse Integration of St. Joseph's School: An Alternative Path to Integrated Education," *Alabama Review* 73, no. 2 (April 2020): 118-148.

Birmingham and Mobile but made little progress, although a few Black Catholics applied for admittance to White Catholic schools in both cities.²

In a successful effort to minimize and deflect segregationist criticism from within and outside Catholic ranks and to deter segregationists from withdrawing their children from Catholic schools, Toolen authorized Catholic school desegregation in Pensacola and Huntsville only when they were subject to federal court-ordered public school desegregation. He delayed acting in Pensacola until 1963, a year after public school desegregation had occurred without public disorder. Toolen ordered the desegregation of his diocese's other Catholic schools in 1964 to coincide with federally mandated public school desegregation in other Alabama school districts. Like public schools in the diocese, he ensured that Catholic school desegregation was limited. Although Black Catholic schools had a large (often a majority) non-Catholic enrollment, Toolen decreed that only those who were Catholic could attend a Catholic school with children of another race. Religious orders of sisters and priests, who taught in Black Catholic schools, urged him to desegregate Catholic education. Financial pressures and a shortage of vocations, as well as the pursuit of desegregation, also motivated Toolen to begin dismantling the diocese's dual school system. Although the diocese had created a school system which ensured that Black Catholic schools were less funded and equipped than White schools, the archbishop adopted a desegregation policy that closed Black schools on the grounds that they had inferior facilities, and he did not consider the

² "Archbishop Orders Alabama High, Grade Schools to Integrate," *Southern Cross*, April 30, 1964, 1; T. J. Toolen to Mr. and Mrs. Cecil T. Hunter, June 11, 1963 (quotations), folder "School Letters 1963," Archbishop Thomas J. Toolen Papers (hereafter cited as Toolen Papers), Archives of the Archdiocese of Mobile, Mobile, Alabama.

wishes of African Americans. Although opposed to segregation and discrimination, many African Americans wanted to keep traditionally Black Catholic schools open. They valued them for the education and values their dedicated staff, primarily sisters and priests, imparted to their students, and they treasured them as community institutions.³

While historian Paul T. Murray has provided a valuable account of the desegregation of St. Joseph's, scholars have not fully addressed Catholic school desegregation in the Diocese of Mobile-Birmingham. J. Michael Butler makes no mention of Catholics or Catholic school desegregation in Pensacola in his account of the African American freedom struggle in Escambia County, Florida. Andrew S. Moore's pioneering study of Catholics in postwar Alabama, northwest Florida, and Georgia omits the Southern Field Service and considers parochial school desegregation in Toolen's diocese in a few pages. Moore does not recognize that pressure on the Diocese of Mobile-Birmingham from African American Catholics in Pensacola was part of an organized campaign orchestrated by the service, and he

³ *Birmingham Post Herald*, September 3, 1964, press clipping, folder 2, box 1, series 33, NCCIJR. In the 1950s, the diocese spent \$1,000,000 to provide McGill Institute, a white high school in Mobile, with a new building but only \$200,000 (with \$100,000 of that given by the Society of St. Joseph of the Sacred Heart) five years later for a new school building for Most Pure Heart of Mary, a black high school in Mobile with half of McGill Institute's capacity. See Albert S. Foley, "The Diocese of Mobile-Birmingham," 7, folder 40, box 8, Albert S. Foley Papers (hereafter cited as Foley Papers), Spring Hill College Archives, Mobile, Alabama; "McGill-Toolen Catholic High School," <https://www.midtownmobile.org/mcgilltoolen-catholic-high-school> (accessed November 3, 2019).

does not address its efforts in Birmingham and Mobile. His coverage of the Diocese of Mobile-Birmingham refers to the NCCIJ in passing, noting only that it helped to organize the participation of Catholics from other parts of the nation in the Selma voting rights protests in 1965. J. Mills Thornton III's study of civil rights struggles in Montgomery, Birmingham and Selma does not discuss Catholics, and Richard A. Pride's account of school desegregation in Mobile mentions Catholic school desegregation fleetingly in a discussion of the 1970s.⁴

Tied to public school desegregation and token in its results, Catholic school desegregation in the Diocese of Mobile-Birmingham fit a pattern I have previously described in my work on other Catholic dioceses in the Deep South. It also provides further, although

⁴ Murray, "Peaceful History"; Murray, "Reverse Integration of St. Joseph's School," 118-148; J. Michael Butler, *Beyond Integration: The Black Freedom Struggle in Escambia County, Florida, 1960-1980* (Chapel Hill, 2016); Andrew S. Moore, *The South's Tolerable Alien: Roman Catholics in Alabama and Georgia, 1945-1970* (Baton Rouge, 2007), 105, 109, 119-24; J. Mills Thornton, III, *Dividing Lines: Municipal Politics and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma* (Tuscaloosa and London, 2002); Richard A. Pride, *The Political Use of Racial Narratives: School Desegregation in Mobile, Alabama, 1954-97* (Urbana and Chicago, 2002), 107, 125. Glenn T. Eskew's study of the Civil Rights struggle in Birmingham and Andrew M. Manis's biography of Birmingham Civil Rights activist Fred Shuttlesworth discuss public school, but not Catholic school, desegregation in the city. See Glenn T. Eskew, *But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1997), 140-41, 318-19; Andrew M. Manis, *A Fire You Can't Put Out: The Civil Rights Life of Birmingham's Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth* (Tuscaloosa and London, 1999), 401-403.

qualified, evidence from the South for an emerging historiography which argues that African American Catholics in the United States were articulate and active agents in a struggle for equal rights within and outside the Catholic Church. This article reveals and discusses the contribution of the Southern Field Service to Catholic school desegregation, and it demonstrates that the NCCIJ's involvement in the diocese preceded the Selma protests. Although Toolen refused to cooperate with the Southern Field Service, it nevertheless played a crucial role in generating biracial Catholic pressure on the archbishop to begin school desegregation in his diocese. In limiting African American admissions to desegregated White Catholic schools to Catholics, however, Toolen acted no differently from most other Catholic prelates in the South. Other Catholic bishops in the region also, like Toolen, tended to close African American schools in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the name of desegregation when they sought to eliminate a dual Catholic school system that was a legacy of segregation.⁵

⁵ Mark Newman, *Desegregating Dixie: The Catholic Church in the South and Desegregation, 1945-1992* (Jackson, Miss., 2018), 139-200; Shannen Dee Williams, "Black Catholics were at the Forefront of the American Civil Rights Movement," *Catholic News Service*, November 8, 2018, <http://catholicphilly.com/2018/11/catholic-spirituality/black-catholics-were-at-the-forefront-of-the-american-civil-rights-movement/> (accessed February 16, 2019); Shannen Dee Williams, "Black Nuns and the Struggle to Desegregate Catholic America After World War I" (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 2013); R. Bentley Anderson, *Black, White, and Catholic: New Orleans Interracialism, 1947-1956* (Nashville, 2005); Cyprian Davis, O.S.B., "Black Catholics in the Civil Rights Movement in the Southern United States: A. P. Tureaud, Thomas Wyatt Turner, and Earl Johnson," *U.S. Catholic*

Born in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1886, Thomas J. Toolen was educated in Catholic institutions in the city and Washington, D.C., before becoming a priest in Baltimore. Reared in cities that segregated public accommodations and in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, which segregated African Americans in its churches and schools, he seemed untroubled by the existence of segregation. Appointed Bishop of Mobile in 1927 and given the personal title of archbishop in 1954 when the Vatican changed the diocese's name to Mobile-Birmingham, he oversaw the expansion of separate churches, schools, hospitals, orphanages and old people's homes for African Americans as a means of converting and keeping them in the faith and as a way to meet the needs of often impoverished Black communities. Although genuinely concerned with their material, as well as their spiritual, needs, Toolen regarded African Americans as a missionary field of dependent people to be treated with beneficent paternalism. Dismissing the often meager financial contributions that African American Catholics could afford to make to the church, he claimed that they contributed nothing monetarily to the separate churches and schools they attended and the segregated Catholic facilities they used.⁶

Historian 24 (Fall 2006): 69-81; Karen J. Johnson, *One in Christ: Chicago Catholics and the Quest for Interracial Justice* (New York, 2018).

⁶ "Archbishop Thomas J. Toolen," *Catholic Week*, November 23, 1979, 9-10; Archbishop Oscar H. Lipscomb, interview by author, July 24, 2007; Foley, "Diocese of Mobile-Birmingham," 1-2, 12-13; Thomas J. Toolen to Simon William Boyd, May 30, 1962, folder 26, box 3, series 33, NCCIJR; *Our Negro and Indian Missions: Annual Report of the Secretary of the Commission for the Catholic Missions among the Colored People and the Indians*, January 1961, 7-12, January 1962, 7-12, January 1963, 7-10, Archives of the Society

An administrator and fund raiser as well as a religious leader, Toolen concentrated much of his effort on building churches, schools, hospitals and other institutions. He asked the Commission for the Catholic Missions among the Colored People and the Indians in Washington, D.C., and religious orders of clergy and sisters, mostly based outside the South, to help fund the construction of churches and schools for African Americans and subsidize their maintenance. Whereas diocesan priests mostly staffed the diocese's White Catholic churches, Toolen invited religious orders that were usually wholly or largely White to staff Black churches and missions and schools and help defray their cost. In 1960, priests from the Society of St. Joseph of the Sacred Heart (Josephites), the Society of Saint Edmund (Edmundites) and the Salvatorians were among those from several orders who served the diocese's thirty-two Black churches and eighteen Black missions that catered for 17,547 African American Catholics. Fourteen religious priests (as members of religious orders were known) also taught in the diocese's thirty-two Black Catholic schools, which had an enrollment of 6,253, but they were mostly staffed by 139 sisters from religious orders, such as the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament and the Oblate Sisters of Providence, a Black order, and by forty-five lay teachers. In addition, the Missionary Sisters of Verona staffed a social service bureau for African Americans in Mobile, and other orders staffed Catholic hospitals for blacks and Catholic hospitals that admitted both races but segregated their wards.⁷

of St. Joseph of the Sacred Heart, Baltimore, Maryland (hereafter cited as ASSJ);

“Institutions especially for the Colored in the Diocese,” folder “Colored Report 1962,”

Toolen Papers.

⁷ *Our Negro and Indian Missions*, January 1962, 7-12, January 1963, 7-10, January 1964, 7-20, ASSJ; “Archbishop Thomas J. Toolen”; “Institutions especially for the Colored in the

Despite presiding over racially separate Catholic institutions and White churches that routinely confined African Americans to a separate section, usually the rear of the church, and that gave them communion after Whites, Toolen claimed that “We never have had segregation in our churches.” He seemed to equate segregation with exclusion of African Americans rather than with racial separation, although the latter was the essence of segregation. Toolen argued that the diocese did not exclude African Americans but provided them with healthcare, education, and religious and social services. He maintained that African Americans were not interested in “social equality” but education and improved living standards. The church, Toolen contended, was helping in those areas. He dismissed the Civil Rights movement as comprising “outside agitators” who “hurt more than helped our colored people.”⁸

Diocese”; “List of Churches for Special Use of Colored 1960,” folder “Colored Report 1962,” George F. O’Dea to T. J. Toolen, September 10, 1963, T. J. Toolen to George F. O’Dea, September 26, 1963, folder “Josephite Fathers 1963,” Toolen Papers; “The Society of St. Joseph,” *Catholic Week*, November 23, 1979, 87; Gretta Palmer, “Southern Catholics Fight Race Hatred,” *Look* 14 (March 28, 1950): 98-100; *Selma Times-Journal*, June 20, 1983; Shawn A. Bivens, *Mobile, Alabama’s People of Color: A Tricentennial History, 1702-2002*, vol. 1 (N.p., 2004), 162-63, 203-205; “Martin de Porres Hospital Closing,” *Catholic Week*, April 23, 1971, 1; *Century Book* (Bensalem, Pa., 1991), 17.

⁸ Foley, “Diocese of Mobile-Birmingham,” 3; *Our Negro and Indian Missions*, January 1943, 15-16, January 1946, 12-13 (second quotation), January 1949, 9-13 (fourth quotation), January 1951, 7-10, January 1954, 7-12, 1965, 7-8 (first quotation), ASSJ; Thomas J. Toolen

Nevertheless, Toolen was not ideologically wedded to segregation. In 1944, he provided facilities for the Dominican Nuns of the Perpetual Rosary and Adoration, a cloistered order, to establish a monastery in Marbury, knowing that it would have African American and White candidates, and in 1945 he participated in the investiture of two black postulants. In 1956, Toolen said of white southerners, "Our job is to turn over [i.e. convert] these people and educate them out of their prejudice against the Catholic Church as well as against the colored race," but he did not adopt a follow-up program. Toolen wrote in the same year that "we are anxious for it [desegregation], but the time is not propitious now" because, he claimed, ninety-five percent of African American pupils in Catholic schools "preferred their own schools," although they had no choice in the matter. Despite tolerating segregation in White Catholic churches with African Americans confined to rear pews and given communion after Whites, Toolen acted when racial discrimination involved exclusion. In 1963, he threatened to close Immaculate Conception, a White church in Orrville, after some of its parishioners prevented African Americans from attending Mass.⁹

to J. B. Tennyly, September 10, 1965 (third quotation), folder "Missions---Negro and Indian 1965," Toolen Papers.

⁹ Daniel A. Lord, "Race Relations in Practice," *Our Colored Missions* 32 (December 1946): 189; Patrica McGerr, "Alabama's Interracial Monastery," *Interracial Review* 23 (August 1950): 118-19; "Interracial Convent," *Ebony* 6 (March 1951): 102-104, 106; Foley, "Diocese of Mobile-Birmingham," 12 (first quotation); *Our Negro and Indian Missions*, January 1945, 7-8, January 1956, 7-10 (second and third and quotations), ASSJ; Eddie L. English to T. J. Toolen, September 23, 1963, T. J. Toolen to Thomas Lorigan, September 24, 1963, T. J. Toolen to Eddie L. English, September 24, 1963, folder "E 1963," Joseph I. McHugh to T. J.

However, Toolen was acutely aware that despite an increase in their number from 70,739 in 1950 to 131,864 (19,734 of them African American) in 1966 (a total that amounted to three percent of Alabama's population), Catholics in the Diocese of Mobile-Birmingham were a minority that the Protestant majority often viewed with suspicion and even hostility. During his early years as bishop in the 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), which was both racist and anti-Catholic, had been prominent in Alabama and sometimes violent toward Catholics. The Klan underwent a revival in the 1950s, and it sometimes targeted Catholic facilities, such as Spring Hill College, a Jesuit institution in Mobile outside of Toolen's control which had desegregated its undergraduate program in 1954. In 1957, Toolen wrote that "Great difficulties have been encountered this year from the K.K.K." He also realized that most White Catholic laity in the diocese, like other Whites, favored segregation, which made him unwilling to desegregate Catholic schools ahead of public school desegregation. Anxious not to risk alienating White segregationist Catholics or stoking anti-Catholicism and endangering Catholics, Toolen opposed any overt Catholic efforts to help overturn segregation in his diocese. He urged the Jesuits to remove Father Albert S. Foley, S.J., a sociology professor at Spring Hill College, because of his interracial activities and, Toolen mistakenly believed, his training of African Americans in violent methods to confront segregation.¹⁰

Toolen, September 29, 1963, folder "Mc 1963," Toolen Papers; "Pastor Clarifies Story Saying Negroes Kept Out of Church," *Catholic Week*, October 11, 1963, 1.

¹⁰ "Archdiocese of Mobile," <http://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/diocese/dmobi.html> (accessed November 4, 2019); *Our Negro and Indian Missions*, January 1958, 7-11 (quotation), 1966, 21, ASSJ; Foley, "Diocese of Mobile-Birmingham," 8-10; Albert S. Foley, "KKK in Mobile,

Toolen recognized that as a universal body, the Catholic Church should exclude no one because of their race, but he did think that universality required immediate or swift integration and, in that, he was not out of step with the Catholic hierarchy. The Vatican had condemned Nazi and Fascism racism in the 1930s, but it allowed prelates to run dioceses as they saw fit according to local conditions. America's Catholic bishops condemned segregation and racial discrimination at their annual meeting in November 1958, but they also called for gradual change, warned against "rash impetuosity," and did not address segregation in Catholic institutions. Although some dioceses in the Upper South began desegregating

Ala.," *America* 96 (December 8, 1956): 298-99; Harry J. Maloney to *Our Colored Missions* 63 (August 1957): 123; Albert S. Foley, "The Negro and Catholic Higher Education," *Interracial Review* 30 (October 1957): 172; *New York Times*, December 10, 1976; Albert S. Foley to Oliver Adams, November 23, 1977, 3-4, 9-10, 11-13, folder 18, box 9, Foley Papers; Glenn Feldman, *Politics, Society, and the Klan in Alabama, 1915-1949* (Tuscaloosa and London, 1999); Nahfiza Ahmed, "Race, Class and Citizenship: The Civil Rights Struggle in Mobile, Alabama, 1925-85," (Ph.D. diss. University of Leicester, 1999), 144. On the desegregation of Spring Hill College see Charles S. Padgett, "'Without Hysteria or Unnecessary Disturbance': Desegregation at Spring Hill College, Mobile, Alabama, 1948-1954," *History of Education Quarterly* 41 (Summer 2001): 167-88; and Charles S. Padgett, "Hidden from History, Shielded from Harm: Desegregation at Spring Hill College, 1954-1957," *Alabama Review* 56, no. 4 (October 2003): 278-310. On Albert S. Foley see Carol A. Ellis, "'The Tragedy of the White Moderate': Father Albert Foley and Alabama Civil Rights, 1963-1967" (M.A. thesis, University of South Alabama, 2002); and Moore, *South's Tolerable Alien*, 63-84.

Catholic schools in the 1950s, school desegregation did not begin in the Deep South until 1962, when the Archdioceses of New Orleans and Atlanta ordered their schools to admit Catholics regardless of race.¹¹

However, the NCCIJ wanted immediate change. The group endorsed the direct action tactics of the Civil Rights Movement and advocated integration in church and society. Established in Chicago in 1960 with the approval of the American Catholic hierarchy, the NCCIJ was not an official church organization but a group of affiliated local Catholic interracial councils of clergy and laity, each formed with the consent of the local bishop. Most of the NCCIJ's councils were in the North and Midwest, but there were a few in the South. The conference established the Southern Field Service in New Orleans in 1961 to increase their number in the region, to encourage and persuade prelates to desegregate Catholic institutions in their dioceses, and to assist bishops in implementing desegregation.¹²

¹¹ John LaFarge, S.J., *The Catholic Viewpoint on Race Relations* (Garden City, N.Y., 1956), 82-83; John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North* (Chicago and London, 1996), 50-52; "Discrimination and the Christian Conscience," *Journal of Negro Education* 28 (Winter 1959): 66-69 (quotation on p. 69); Reed Sarratt, *The Ordeal of Desegregation: The First Decade* (New York and London, 1966), 278-81.

¹² "Fact Sheet on the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice," folder 1, box 2, series 8, "National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice Proposal for a Southern Field Service," 1-7, folder 7, box 4, series 30, NCCIJR; "Fact Sheet on the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice," folder 720.10, National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice, "A proposal to the Commission for the Catholic Missions Among the

In its early years, the Southern Field Service comprised Henry A. Cabirac, Jr., a White former businessman from New Orleans, as director and his secretary. Given responsibility by the NCCIJ for fourteen southern states, Cabirac contacted Catholic chanceries, worked with Catholic interracial councils, and established links with interested African American and White Catholic laity and secular organizations, such as the Southern Regional Council (SRC), that supported desegregation. In April 1962, Paul M. Rilling, field director for the SRC in Atlanta, telephoned Cabirac and asked him if he could help get Catholic schools in Pensacola to desegregate in tandem with public schools, scheduled to desegregate all grades in September 1962 under a federal court order.¹³

At Rilling's suggestion, Cabirac wrote to Jack Sisson, a White Catholic layman who had urged the biracial Escambia County Community Council (ECCC), a SRC affiliate, to address Pensacola's Civil Rights issues and who had sought Rilling's advice. Sisson had been a member of a six man biracial "Special Committee" that the ECCC had appointed at the

Colored People and the Indians," folder 719.78, Archives of the Diocese of Charleston, Charleston, South Carolina; *New York Times*, March 20, 1965.

¹³ "Biographical Sketch---Henry A. Cabirac, Jr.," folder 1, box 7, series 34, Henry Cabirac, Jr., to Arthur A. Butler, May 9, 1962, folder 26, box 3, series 33, NCCIJR; Henry Cabirac, Jr., to John Sisson, April 4, 1962, in possession of the author; "Henry A. Cabirac, Jr.,"

Arizona Republic, September 25, 2007,

[https://cache.legacy.net/legacy/images/Cobrand/AZCentral/Photos/PDF/0005858335-](https://cache.legacy.net/legacy/images/Cobrand/AZCentral/Photos/PDF/0005858335-01_09252007.pdf)

01_09252007.pdf (accessed November 4, 2019); "Paul M. Rilling "Obituary," *Anniston Star*,

[https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/annistonstar/obituary.aspx?n=paul-m-](https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/annistonstar/obituary.aspx?n=paul-m-rilling&pid=184125195&fhid=6249)

rilling&pid=184125195&fhid=6249 (accessed October 24, 2019).

behest of the Pensacola City Council to negotiate an end to lunch counter segregation in Pensacola after sit-ins protests began in June 1961. Modeled on those undertaken in Greensboro, North Carolina, in February 1960, the sit-ins were spearheaded by the Reverend W. C. Dobbins, a Black United Methodist Church minister who enlisted local Black clergy and their congregations in the struggle and revitalized the local youth chapter of the NAACP. With downtown businessmen anxious for a settlement to stem the financial losses they incurred from the sit-ins, the Special Committee negotiated a settlement that desegregated lunch counters in March 1962.¹⁴

Born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1926, Sisson attended parochial schools in Pensacola after his family relocated there for his father's employment when Sisson was five. He transferred during his senior year to Episcopal High in Alexandria, Virginia, in search of a better quality education. From childhood, Sisson's unprejudiced views toward African Americans were shaped by his father, a Chicago native. After serving in the U.S. Army between 1944 and 1946, Sisson earned a degree in mathematics from Duke University, worked for General Electric in Schenectady, New York, and spent five years studying at several Catholic colleges and St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore. Abandoning his plans to enter the Jesuit priesthood, Sisson returned to Pensacola in 1960 and took a job in an advertising agency. Nevertheless, he remained active in the Catholic Church by joining the

¹⁴ Cabirac, Jr., to Sisson, April 4, 1962; John P. Sisson, interview by author, July 30, 2007; Butler, *Beyond Integration*, 37-46; John P. Sisson, "A Southern City Changes Gracefully," *Interracial Review* 36 (May 1963): 98-100.

Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, under whose auspices he instructed students, who attended public high school, in the faith.¹⁵

Sisson tried to help ensure a smooth transition to desegregation demanded by the Civil Rights Movement in Pensacola in public schools and at lunch counters. The NAACP's lawyers litigated a class action suit filed in February 1960 by African American parents to desegregate Escambia County's public schools. In March 1961, a federal court ruled that the Escambia County School Board had violated the Supreme Court's May 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling that segregated public schools were unconstitutional. The board subsequently accepted a pupil placement plan that affected all grades but, in practice, limited desegregation. Dissatisfied, the plaintiffs successfully took their case to the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, which in July 1962 rejected the plan and ordered the county to commence school desegregation. Sisson became chairman of the Executive Committee of the School Assistance Committee, a White group formed on the initiative of elected local and county officials and "representatives of many churches, schools and civil agencies" to ensure an orderly and peaceful transition to school desegregation by working "through existing [White] organizations" and African American leaders. Although he persuaded a Catholic layman to serve on the committee, Sisson informed Cabirac that the man "felt pretty much like other [White] people here about desegregation," meaning that he favored segregation.¹⁶

¹⁵ Sisson interview; John P. Sisson résumé, folder 26, box 3, series 33, NCCIJR; Jack Sisson email to "Bob," January 25, 2004, in possession of the author.

¹⁶ "Purpose of the School Assistance Committee (SCA)" (first and second quotations), John P. Sisson to Henry [Cabirac, Jr.], April 11, 1962 (third quotation), folder 26, box 3, series 33, NCCIJR; Sisson résumé; Butler, *Beyond Integration*, 3, 29-33.

Nevertheless, Sisson accepted Cabirac's offer to visit Pensacola and arranged meetings for him with the School Assistance Committee and with some Black Catholics to learn about their aspirations. Cabirac subsequently corresponded with two of the Black Catholics he had met, C. F. Benboe, the owner of a funeral home, and Dr. S. W. Boyd, a dentist. Benboe and Boyd had a black clientele that made them economically independent of the White community and able to speak their minds without fear of retribution. Cabirac later wrote Boyd, "It was heartening to see that there are so many Catholic Negroes who are willing to work for racial justice"; less effusively but more realistically, he informed George E. Barrett, a sympathetic White Catholic in Nashville, that "There is a small Catholic group in Pensacola who would like to see Archbishop Toolen---a hard nut to crack" desegregate Catholic schools alongside public schools.¹⁷

In his meeting, Cabirac suggested that the participants should encourage Black parents to register their children at White Catholic schools and, if denied registration, send Toolen personal letters of complaint. In a follow-up letter to Boyd, Cabirac urged Black Catholics to "work with Jack Sisson to coordinate your efforts as you will remember I am asking him to try to get prominent [White] non-Catholics from Pensacola to call on Bishop

¹⁷ Henry Cabirac, Jr., to S. W. Boyd, May 3, 1962 (first quotation), John P. Sisson, draft of unsent letter, to T. J. Toolen, n.d., attached to John P. Sisson to Henry [Cabirac, Jr.], May 17, 1962, folder 26, box 3, Henry Cabirac, Jr., to George E. Barrett, April 23, 1962 (second quotation), folder 12, box 14, series 33, NCCIJR.

Toolen to encourage him to desegregate the Catholic schools as a community effort and to have a group of priests call on the bishop to urge him to do the same.”¹⁸

While in Pensacola, Cabirac also met with Father Jules A. Keating, the pastor of St. Thomas More, a White Catholic church. Finding him sympathetic, Cabirac urged Keating to attempt “to get a group of priests together to ask His Excellency Archbishop Toolen to do something about the Catholic schools in order to protect the image of the Church.” Whether Keating attempted to follow through, or whether he did so and was rebuffed by his fellow priests, is unclear, but at any rate, no group of priests approached Toolen. Cabirac’s activities on behalf of the recently formed Southern Field Service, which few, if any, priests would have heard of before, may also have aroused concern. Cabirac avoided publicity in hopes that he might have more influence and prevent organized opposition from forming, but his behind-the-scenes approach sometimes created suspicion.¹⁹

The Reverend Arthur A. Butler, a Franciscan Father who pastored St. Anthony of Padua, a Black Catholic church, was out of town when Cabirac called on his rectory. After learning on his return about Cabirac’s activities, Butler reported Cabirac to Toolen for, as Cabirac explained, “inciting rebellion against” the archbishop. In light of Butler’s complaint, Cabirac wrote to Toolen introducing himself as the product of “many generations” of

¹⁸ Cabirac, Jr., to Boyd, May 3, 1962 (quotation); Henry Cabirac, Jr., to Charles [*sic*] Benboe, May 3, 1962, folder 26, box 3, series 33, NCCIJR; Sisson, draft of unsent letter, to T. J. Toolen, n.d.

¹⁹ Henry Cabirac, Jr., to Jules A. Keating, May 3, 1962 (quotation), Henry Cabirac, Jr., to Jack Sisson, June 20, 1962, folder 26, box 3, Henry Cabirac, Jr., to Thomas J. Toolen, May 21, 1962, folder 11, box 1, series 33, NCCIJR.

southerners and someone who understood “the problems and people of the South.” Cabirac also listed the names of Catholic bishops in Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas who “have called on us for information and advice.” Without directly referring to desegregation, Cabirac claimed, “We have some understanding of the administrative, legal, financial and other problems involved during periods of changes in policy of race,” and he concluded by asking “Could we be of help to you?” There is no record of a reply from Toolen, who likely resented someone from another state and a layman offering to advise him about the running of his diocese.²⁰

Although he had complained to Toolen about Cabirac, Butler was nevertheless sympathetic to Catholic school desegregation. He supported two of his parishioners, Boyd and Wilhelmina Valcour, both of whom had met Cabirac, when they tried unsuccessfully to register their daughters at Catholic High, a White school. Father James Amos, the school’s principal, told the parents that desegregation was a matter for Monsignor J. Edwin Stuardi,

²⁰ Henry Cabirac, Jr., to Arthur A. Butler, May 9, 1962, Henry Cabirac, Jr., to Matt [Ahmann], May 11, 1962, Henry Cabirac, Jr., to John Sisson, May 11, 1962, Henry Cabirac, Jr., to Jovian Weigel, May 16, 1962 (first quotation), Henry Cabirac, Jr., to John Sisson, May 21, 1962, Henry Cabirac, Jr., to Charles [sic] Benboe and S. W. Boyd, June 13, 1962, folder 26, box 3, series 33, NCCIJR; Cabirac, Jr., to Toolen, May 21, 1962 (second through sixth quotations).

the diocesan superintendent of schools, and that consequently he could neither register nor refuse Black applicants.²¹

In response, Butler wrote to Toolen asking him to ensure the children's admittance and outlining their qualifications. In his reply, which Butler shared with the parents concerned, Toolen stated that he would consider desegregating schools a year hence, after he had gauged the reaction of the White community to the implementation of public school desegregation. He argued that he did not want to risk White parents withdrawing fifty or sixty of their children from Catholic schools if he permitted even one or two Black children to attend a single, White Catholic school. The archbishop asked Butler to persuade the parents to "hold off" pursuing desegregation for another year. However, a few other Black parents also tried to register their children in White Catholic schools. Benboe and Boyd's group of African American Catholics also held regular meetings, which averaged between ten and fifteen people, and kept Cabirac informed.²²

As Cabirac had advised, Wilhelmina Valcour wrote to Toolen requesting him to reconsider his decision. She explained that she and her husband wanted their daughter Cheryl to enter Catholic High School because "we want the best Catholic education" and Catholic High was superior to St. Joseph High School, Pensacola's Black Catholic high school, which lacked "facilities." The Valcours did not wish to wait another year because their daughter was "ready for the ninth year of school." Valcour criticized the discriminatory, arbitrary nature of

²¹ C. F. Benboe and S. W. Boyd to Henry Cabirac, Jr., May 15, 1962, folder 26, box 3, NCCIJR; "History: Catholic High School Over 75 Year Presence in Pensacola," <https://www.pensacolachs.org/domain/13> (accessed October 29, 2019).

²² Benboe and Boyd to Cabirac, Jr., May 15, 1962.

segregation. “We don’t feel that it is quite fair,” she lamented, “for us to have only one choice in the High School that Cheryl attends just because of our color.” She added that “As Negroes, we need, more than ever before, to be accepted for our ability and achievement.” Valcour did not receive a reply from Toolen; instead, Monsignor Philip Cullen, the diocesan chancellor, sent her a curt letter, stating that while the diocese was “unable to accede to your request,” he hoped that “Please God, in the not too distant future we may be able to do so, but not just at this time.”²³

Boyd also wrote to Toolen, and like Valcour, cited his child’s educational needs. Boyd argued that his son aspired to enter “a class ‘A’” Catholic college after high school, but an education at St. Joseph would deprive him of the opportunity because it was “not accredited.” Although he assured Toolen that he would abide by whatever decision the archbishop made, Boyd expressed his exasperation with the church’s inconsistency. He declared that “it is frustrating to a cracking point when the church teaches one thing and have you believe completely on the teaching and when the jumping off point comes you are pushed over board.”²⁴

Unlike Valcour’s letter, Boyd’s criticism that the church was not implementing its teachings drew a written response from Toolen, who defended the diocese’s treatment of African Americans. Despite segregation in diocesan organizations and an annual Feast of Christ procession in Mobile in which a “colored division” marched after Whites, Toolen, who equated segregation with exclusion, maintained that “We have tried to integrate them

²³ Wilhelmina Valcour to Thomas J. Toolen, May 15, 1962, Philip Cullen to Mrs. Calvin Valcour, May 17, 1962, folder “Schools 1962-1963,” Toolen Papers.

²⁴ S. W. Boyd to T. J. Toolen, May 18, 1962, folder “Schools 1962-1963,” Toolen Papers.

[African Americans] in our Holy Name Society and our meetings and parades and in many other ways.” He argued that “We have always tried to give to the negroes of the Diocese the same opportunities as the whites.” The archbishop alleged that African Americans did not contribute to the church financially, but in so doing, he unwittingly acknowledged that the diocese did not give them equal opportunities. Toolen declared: “The colored people of West Florida and Alabama have never accepted their obligations and perhaps that is one reason why the high school in Pensacola [St. Joseph] is not up to the standard it should be and this is true all over the Diocese. Anything that the colored parishes have has been given to them either by a [religious] community or by the diocese and it is not easy to keep these places going.”²⁵

The archbishop declared that “I am sure without doubt that integration is coming in next few years,” but he cautioned, “I don’t think we are ready for it just now.” Toolen claimed that even token school desegregation would lead to the withdrawal of “a great number of the white children.” Consequently, he advised Boyd to “save all the difficulty and trouble that we would run into in Pensacola” by desegregating Catholic schools and “send your boy to an institution outside of the state that will give him all that you desire.”²⁶

Rebuffed by Toolen, Boyd and Benboe wrote to Cabirac for advice about “where to go from here.” Acting at his suggestion, a few Black Catholics from Pensacola, including

²⁵ Andrew S. Moore, “‘But We Were a Group Apart’: Alabama Catholic Subculture and Twentieth-Century Southern Society,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 18 (Summer 2000): 80 (first quotation); T. J. Toolen to Simon William Boyd, May 30, 1962 (second, third and fourth quotations), folder “Schools 1962-1963,” Toolen Papers.

²⁶ Toolen to Boyd, May 30, 1962.

some who were, as Cabirac advised, officers in local Catholic organizations wrote Toolen individual letters asking him to desegregate Catholic schools. Calvin Valcour, who was treasurer of St. Anthony Church's Holy Name Society, and whose wife, Wilhelmina, had earlier written to Toolen, wrote to the archbishop protesting his decision to refuse Valcour's daughter admission to Catholic High School. Valcour argued that the issue was not only his daughter's education but also morality and the universality of Catholicism. He explained: "As a race, we have too long kept quiet and waited for something to happen. When it comes to our Church, we can do no less than protest something which is morally wrong and sinful being practiced within the very walls of Catholicism. The image of the Church is at stake. Here in Pensacola, the public schools will be integrated in the fall. It is a blight on our record that we Catholics, who maintain that segregation is sinful, are continuing to practice such in our schools." There is no record of a reply from Toolen or the chancery to Valcour and others who wrote during the summer of 1962 calling for desegregation.²⁷

However, in a letter to the Commission for the Catholic Missions among the Colored People and the Indians in August, Toolen commented that "We all know integration will and must come, but we want it to come without bitterness or strife." His concern for a peaceful transition to desegregation informed Toolen's decision not to desegregate parochial schools in Pensacola until he had gauged White responses to the forthcoming desegregation of the

²⁷ S. W. Boyd and Clarence F. Benboe to Henry Cabirac, Jr., June 8, 1962 (first quotation), folder 26, box 3, series 33, NCCIJR; Calvin Valcour to Thomas J. Toolen, June 29, 1962 (second quotation), folder "Schools 1962-1963," Toolen Papers.

city's public schools. He was unwilling to risk Catholic schools becoming targets for segregationist opposition if he desegregated them at the same time as public schools.²⁸

Asked by Cabirac during the summer about their progress, Boyd and Benboe explained that "We have had no group of non-Catholics nor group of priests to call on the Archbishop." Although they saw no prospect of priests acting, they referred to "an interested group of non-Catholics who are waiting for the word from us to either send letters or call on Archbishop Toolen if necessary." While they did not provide details, these people were likely the same African American Protestant ministers and three White non-Catholics who, according to Sisson, were prepared to write to Toolen. Along with Boyd and Benboe's group, Sisson and Rilling had helped to secure the involvement of at least some of them. Rilling, however, informed Cabirac that the School Assistance Committee, which called for lawful compliance with federal court-ordered public school desegregation, would not approach Toolen about desegregating parochial schools, because "They do not want to give the appearance of favoring desegregating anything."²⁹

²⁸ T. J. Toolen to J. B. Tenny, August 6, 1962, folder "Missions – Negro & Indian 1962," Toolen Papers.

²⁹ Cabirac, Jr., to Benboe and Boyd, June 13, 1962; Jack [Sisson] to Henry [Cabirac, Jr.], June 10, 1962, Henry Cabirac, Jr., to John Sisson, June 15, 20, 1962, Henry Cabirac, Jr., to S. W. Boyd, June 20, 1962, S. W. Boyd and C. F. Benboe to Henry Cabirac, Jr., June 25, 1962 (first and second quotations), Paul M. Rilling to Henry Cabirac, Jr., June 22, 1962 (third quotation), folder 26, box 3, series 33, NCCIJR. If the non-Catholics wrote Archbishop Toolen, their letters have not survived in the diocesan archives.

However, Sisson discovered that arranging for Whites to visit Boyd in the dentist's home during the summer of 1962 was an effective means of enlisting their support: "I've found that I cannot personally convey the needs---the presentation must come from the negroes themselves." He explained that "Each time we have someone new we start over again at the beginning and assume that they know nothing." Eventually, Sisson was able to arrange a meeting between several locally prominent White Catholics, including an unnamed priest (probably Keating), and Boyd and his group, who agreed to seek a joint meeting with Toolen when he made a scheduled visit to Pensacola. Frank Fricker, one of the White Catholics, contacted Monsignor William J. Cusick, the Dean of West Florida, to arrange the meeting. Cusick assured him "that if the Archbishop came to Pensacola as planned, a meeting would be held with members of both groups." However, no action followed and Cusick did not return Fricker's telephone calls.³⁰

In the meantime, on August 27, twenty-one African American children desegregated ten public schools in Escambia County, Florida. Although reporters and police officials reported that desegregation occurred peacefully and without segregationist protest, Black students recalled being ostracized, insulted, attacked and discriminated during the school year. However, the appearance of a seemingly successful instance of desegregation gave its Catholic supporters encouragement to emulate it in parochial schools.³¹

³⁰ Jack Sisson to Henry [Cabirac, Jr.], August 17, 1962 (first and second quotations), Jack [Sisson] to Henry Cabirac, Jr., August 27, 1962, S. W. Boyd to Henry Cabirac, Jr., October 4, 1962 (third quotation), folder 26, box 3, series 33, NCCIJR.

³¹ Butler, *Beyond Integration*, 33-34; Jack [Sisson] to Cabirac, Jr., August 27, 1962.

Sisson and Ira “Frenchy” Bascle, another of the White Catholics, visited Cusick when they learned he was in Pensacola. Cusick informed them that Toolen had left for Rome to attend the Second Vatican Council and would consider the request for a meeting on his return. In the meantime, Toolen forbade any further meetings by or between Boyd and Benboe’s group and the White Catholic group, or between them and any priests. In response, Boyd wrote Cabirac, “Our group feels that we have been slapped. To be completely ignored is degrading.” Cabirac advised Boyd and his group to obey the prohibition on large meetings. At the same time, he added that they should “do what ever you think is necessary” to maintain a “favorable relationship” with sympathetic White Catholics and use them to seek a meeting with the archbishop on his return.³²

Aware that Toolen, now back from Rome, would soon visit Pensacola, in January 1963 Boyd, Benboe, Calvin and Wilhelmina Valcour, Sisson, Bascle, and Fricker were among thirteen Catholics, at least half of them lay White parish leaders, who sent a joint letter to the archbishop, copied to Cusick, requesting a meeting. They argued that “The matter of inter-race relationships within the Church here seems to need clarification and leadership” and that “the school aspect has been intensified by the completely successful integration of Pensacola’s public schools.” Cusick responded by summoning four of the signatories to a meeting during which, Sisson recalled, he “read us the riot act on ‘How dare we suggest a moral stance to the bishop!!!’” Toolen did not reply or meet with the signatories.

³² Boyd to Cabirac, Jr., October 4, 1962 (first and second quotations); Henry Cabirac, Jr., to S. W. Boyd, October 9, 1962 (third and fourth quotations), folder 26, box 3, series 33, NCCIJR.

Nevertheless, in March, Boyd and two other parents received notification that their children would be admitted to White Catholic schools in the fall.³³

In June, at St. Joseph High School's graduating exercises, Toolen publicly announced that all of Pensacola's Catholic schools would admit Catholic students regardless of race. However, when Mr. and Mrs. Cecil T. Hunter tried to register their child for the eleventh grade at Cathedral High School, they were refused and appealed the decision to Toolen. The archbishop replied that the diocese had decided in a meeting with Pensacola's Catholic pastors that only the first four grades and the ninth and tenth grades of Pensacola's parochial schools would desegregate in order "to avoid much trouble that otherwise would develop." Toolen did not explain how partial desegregation would avert "trouble," but limited grade desegregation was probably motivated by a belief that the students in higher grades in both elementary and high schools were already too accustomed to segregation to accept its end with equanimity. In September, six African American children entered Pensacola High School and another Black child entered St. Michael's Elementary School in the city.

³³ Ira Bascle, C. Benboe, Daniel Bruno, V. Paul Bruno, S. W. Boyd, Arthur Dreis, Frank Fricker, William Hubert, Cecil Hunter, John P. Sisson, Mr. and Mrs. Valcour, and Vincent Whibbs to T. J. Toolen, January 27, 1963 (first and second quotations) in possession of the author; Henry Cabirac, Jr., to Dr. and Mrs. C. J. Hazeur, February 1, 1963, folder 10, box 1, Jack [Sisson] to Henry [Cabirac, Jr.], February 3, 1963, Jack Sisson to Henry [Cabirac, Jr.], March 26, 1963, Henry Cabirac, Jr., to Jack Sisson, April 9, 1963, folder 26, box 3, series 33, NCCIJR; Jack Sisson, email to author, February 25, 2009 (third quotation). The sources do not reveal who or which Catholic office informed the parents of their children's acceptance.

Wilhelmina Valcour, whose daughter entered Cathedral High School, informed Cabirac that “The children have been treated well, and made welcome.”³⁴

After Toolen publicly announced Catholic school desegregation in Pensacola, Cabirac wrote to Boyd that “If it hadn’t been for the courage and vision of you and Jack [Sisson], this probably would not have come about so soon.” The campaign of some Black Catholics in Pensacola exhibited their agency, demonstrated the catalytic support of the Southern Field Service, and, in their work with White Catholic allies, put racial equality into practice.³⁵

Although their efforts may well have led Toolen to order desegregation earlier in Pensacola than he might otherwise have done, the archbishop consistently stood by the policy he had explained to Father Butler in May 1962 of waiting to see how public school desegregation in Pensacola unfolded before making a decision about Catholic schools. Accordingly, Toolen did not bow to Black Catholic pressure to desegregate Catholic schools at the same time as the public schools. He acted only after public schools had been desegregated for months without public disorder.

Toolen probably sanctioned the desegregation of St. Joseph School in Huntsville at the same time because, uniquely, it involved White families seeking to attend a Black Catholic school, and he judged, correctly, that it would be unlikely to arouse White

³⁴ Mr. and Mrs. Cecil T. Hunter to Thomas J. Toolen, June 3, 1963, folder “School Letters 1963,” Toolen Papers; Toolen to Mr. and Mrs. Hunter, June 11, 1963 (first and second quotations); Wilhelmina Valcour to Henry Cabirac, Jr., September 10, 1963 (third quotation), Sister Mary Anthony, R.S.M., “John XXIII Council, Minutes of the Meeting Feb. 8, 1966,” 2, folder 26, box 3, series 33, NCCIJR.

³⁵ Henry Cabirac, Jr., to S. W. Boyd, June 25, 1963, folder 26, box 3, NCCIJR.

opposition, which focused on desegregation of White public schools in the city. On the day that St. Joseph's admitted White students, a mob of White children and adults gathered outside Huntsville's Fifth Avenue public school when it was due to desegregate, even though it and the city's other public schools had been closed on Governor George Wallace's order. Wallace subsequently sent state troopers to keep the schools closed, but he soon withdrew them, amid mounting local White opposition to his action, and desegregation proceeded.³⁶

Although public school desegregation also began in Birmingham, Mobile, and Macon County under federal court order in September 1963, Toolen did not desegregate any other Catholic schools, and he waited another year before acting. Several factors likely influenced his decision. Unlike in Huntsville, White parents did not try to send their children to any other Black Catholic school in Alabama and, unlike in Pensacola, no group of Black Catholics waged a lengthy campaign for desegregation or managed to cultivate local White Catholics allies. Furthermore, Wallace had promised in his January 1963 inaugural speech to maintain segregation in Alabama, and he mounted more determined resistance to desegregation in Birmingham, Mobile and Macon County than in Huntsville, resistance that held until President John F. Kennedy federalized the National Guard to ensure that desegregation proceeded. In the aftermath, the desegregated Tuskegee High School became all-Black when its White students transferred to two White public schools in Macon County

³⁶ *Washington Post*, September 10, 1963; Sarratt, *Ordeal of Desegregation*, 168; "On this day in Alabama history: Huntsville public schools desegregated," September 9, 2018, at <https://alabamane.wscenter.com/2018/09/09/day-alabama-history-huntsville-public-schools-desegregated/> (accessed November 6, 2019).

and to a hastily created private segregationist academy. Many White students boycotted desegregated schools in Mobile and Birmingham. Although the boycotts soon fizzled out, in Birmingham they did so only after Klansmen bombed Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, an organizational center for civil rights protests in April and May, killing four African American girls. Concerned about endangering Catholics and hoping to minimize opposition from within and outside Catholic ranks, Toolen waited until overt resistance to public school desegregation had ended and federal courts ordered the beginning of public school desegregation in districts across Alabama before he desegregated Catholic schools in the state (besides St. Joseph's in Huntsville).³⁷

Convinced that the efforts of Black and White Catholics in Pensacola were an effective means for achieving change, Cabirac had tried to stimulate a similar effort in Birmingham, which had a small Catholic population and, unlike Pensacola, a long and continuing history of segregationist violence. Some African Americans dubbed the city "Bombingham" because of the dynamiting of the homes of African Americans and Civil Rights proponents and Black churches associated with the Civil Rights Movement. In April

³⁷ *Washington Post*, September 10, 1963; Sarratt, *Ordeal of Desegregation*, 167-68; Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics* (Baton Rouge and London, 1995), 9-11, 170, 172-73; Pride, *Political Use of Racial Narratives*, 40-44; Thornton, *Dividing Lines*, 337-47; Manis, *A Fire You Can't Put Out*, 401-404; Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 318-22; *New York Times*, September 4, 1964, 11; Brian K. Landsberg, "Enforcing Desegregation: A Case Study of Federal District Court Power and Social Change in Macon County, Alabama," *Law and Society Review* 48 (December 2014): 876-82.

and May 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference mounted a direct action campaign against segregation and racial discrimination in the city. In April, amidst the protests, Cabirac visited Black Catholics and Father Paul A. Downey, the White Josephite pastor of Our Lady of Fatima, an African American church in the city. Cabirac urged African American Catholics to try to register their children at White Catholic schools. None of them did so, probably, and understandably, deterred by a hostile and violent racial environment. In May, Commissioner of Public Safety Theophilus Eugene “Bull” Connor deployed high-power fire hoses and police dogs against demonstrators, and segregationists bombed the Black-owned A. G. Gaston Motel, used by Civil Rights leaders, and the home of A. D. King, King’s brother. Some Blacks rioted in response to the bombings. Toolen and his auxiliary bishop, Joseph A. Durick, and other White denominational leaders in Alabama, publicly criticized the Civil Rights protests as unwise and a threat to law and order. Nevertheless, Holy Family Hospital, a Black Catholic hospital in Birmingham, treated Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, a prominent local Black Civil Rights leader and Baptist minister, for the injuries he sustained from a fire hose jet.³⁸

³⁸ Charles Carruth, “Reporter Sees Ala. Torn Between Custom, Reality,” *Catholic Commentator*, August 23, 1963, 8; Manis, *A Fire You Can’t Put Out*, 2, 80, 108-12, 162, 168-70, 328-29, 344-80, 393, 402; Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 53-61, 79-80, 82-83, 131-32, 219-97, 300-306, 361n48; “Negro Citizenry Urged to Withdraw Support from Racial Demonstrators,” *Catholic Week*, April 19, 1963, 1, 13; Henry Cabirac, Jr., to Paul A. Downey, April 24, 1963, Henry Cabirac, Jr., to Virgil L. Harris, April 29, 1963, folder 4, box 1, series 33, NCCIJR; Joseph A. Durick, “Bishop Durick’s Statement on Racial Tensions,” *Catholic Week*, May 10, 1963, 1; “Negroes Reminded That Obligations Accompany Rights,”

When Toolen announced in June that he would partially desegregate Catholic schools in Pensacola, Cabirac urged Downey to use this news “to encourage [African American] parents to register their children in the white Catholic schools of Birmingham.” Cabirac also referenced Toolen’s Pensacola desegregation decision when he urged African American Catholics to act in Birmingham. Cabirac wrote to Mr. and Mrs. Virgil Harris, “Permit me to remind you again that it was essential for whatever success achieved in Pensacola to confront Archbishop Toolen with test cases. Without the attempts of several Catholic Negro parents to register their children in formerly all white Catholic schools it would have been impossible to achieve this. Can you do anything to encourage such an effort in Birmingham?”³⁹

The city’s racial tension and violence made it very difficult for Cabirac and Downey to recruit African American Catholics for a challenge to segregation in Catholic schools and impossible to enlist White lay support. However, their efforts yielded a result, if only a minor one. In September, Downey informed Cabirac that two girls from Immaculata High School, an African American Catholic school, had tried to enroll in John Carroll High School,

Catholic Week, May 17, 1963, 1. On Durick and Toolen’s response to civil rights protests in Birmingham see S. Jonathan Bass, *Blessed Are the Peacemakers: Martin Luther King Jr., Eight White Religious Leaders, and the “Letter from Birmingham Jail”* (Baton Rouge, 2001). Manis claims that twenty-nine bombings occurred in Birmingham between 1951 and 1963, and Eskew that there were “some fifty dynamitings between 1947 and 1965.” See Manis, *A Fire You Can’t Put Out*, 403; Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 53.

³⁹ Henry Cabirac, Jr., to Paul A. Downey, May 15, June 25, 1963 (first quotation), folder 5, box 1, Henry Cabirac, Jr., to Mr. and Mrs. Virgil Harris, June 21, 1963 (second quotation), folder 4, box 1, series 33, NCCIJR.

Birmingham's only White Catholic high school. School principal Monsignor William R. Houck told them that he did not have authority to admit them, and he referred them to Stuardi, who did not return their telephone calls. In reference to the girls' efforts, Downey wrote Cabirac that "this would not have been done without you!" However, Catholic schools in Birmingham remained segregated.⁴⁰

Mobile did not experience the racial violence of Birmingham. In the Port City, where Catholics constituted twenty percent of the population and a racially moderate Catholic, Joseph N. Langan, sat on the three-person city commission, there seemed a greater opportunity for forging a Catholic interracial effort. Yet, here too, many Whites were opposed to desegregation, despite Langan helping to facilitate the peaceful desegregation of the public golf course in 1961 and lunch counters in 1962, and many African Americans felt so attached to Most Pure Heart of Mary, the Black Catholic high school, that they did not want their children to go to a White Catholic school.⁴¹

Cabirac tried to use the approach in Mobile that he had adopted in Pensacola. In June 1962, he asked Benboe and Boyd for "the names and addresses of some Catholics in Mobile who would be willing to cooperate with us in an effort to write His Excellency Archbishop Toolen urging him to desegregate the schools." As a result, in July, Cabirac met with Dr.

⁴⁰ Paul A. Downey to Henry [Cabirac, Jr.], September 2, 1963 (quotation), Henry Cabirac, Jr., to Paul A. Downey, September 5, 1963, folder 1, box 6, series 11, NCCIJR.

⁴¹ *Wall Street Journal*, July 18, 1963; Nahfiza Ahmed, "A City Too Respectable to Hate: Mobile during the Era of Desegregation, 1961-1965," *Gulf South Historical Review* 15 (Fall 1999): 49-67; Patsy Busby Dow, "Joseph N. Langan: Mobile's Racial Diplomat" (M.A. thesis, University of South Alabama, 1993), iii-iv, 2, 8-9, 33-34, 36, 40-41.

Clement J. Hazeur, Jr., whom Boyd may have known through their shared profession of dentistry, and his wife, Evelyn C. Hazeur, in Mobile. The couple, Cabirac reported to Boyd, “promised to try to get some of their friends to write the Archbishop to seek admittance to the white Catholic schools of Mobile.” Cabirac urged the Hazeurs to ensure that “each letter appear[s] to be coming spontaneously from various individuals over a period of time.” In October, Cabirac wrote to the Hazeurs asking for an update on progress. He also sought to encourage them by noting that “the group in Pensacola has been able to convince some of the white Catholic power structure to request a meeting with the archbishop to discuss school desegregation.”⁴²

In January 1963, Cabirac, Boyd and Sisson visited a group of seven Black Catholics the Hazeurs had organized in Mobile and urged them to emulate the efforts of those of Pensacola. To encourage them, he later sent the Hazeurs a copy of the letter that the Pensacola group of Black and White Catholics had recently sent Toolen seeking a meeting with him. In June, Cabirac visited the group again. “Dr. Hazeur,” Cabirac reported to the NCCIJ, “confessed that they hadn’t done anything but faithfully promised that they would not only attempt among themselves to register children but would contact as many people as possible to encourage them to do so.” In July, Hazeur tried to fulfil his promise by attempting

⁴² Cabirac, Jr., to Benboe and Boyd, June 13, 1962 (first quotation); Henry Cabirac, Jr., to S. W. Boyd, July 5, 1962 (second quotation), August 13, 1962, folder 26, box 3, Henry Cabirac, Jr., to Dr. and Mrs. C. J. Hazeur, July 5, 1962 (third quotation), Henry [Cabirac, Jr.] to Ernie [Morial], August 8, 1962, Henry Cabirac, Jr., to Dr. and Mrs. Clement Hazeur, October 16, 1962 (fourth quotation), Henry Cabirac, Jr., to Norman Melum, June 3, 1963, folder 10, box 1, series 33, NCCIJR.

to register his child at several White Catholic schools, but their staff members were not present. Stuardi, likewise was absent, when Hazeur went to his office in Mobile and made it known that he wanted to register his child. No action followed from Stuardi, and Hazeur does not seem to have pursued the matter any further during the summer. His group also became inactive.⁴³

In September, Mobile public schools began token school desegregation under a federal court order, but segregation in the city's Catholic schools continued. Hazeur explained to Cabirac that "most of the [African American] Catholics here are affraid [sic] to try registering at a white school because they *love* [Most Pure] Heart of Mary [the Black Catholic high school] [and] they consider it a rare privilege for their children to be able to attend high school there." These parents treasured their children's places at Most Pure Heart of Mary partly because, as the only Catholic high school available for Black children in Mobile, it was always oversubscribed and had to turn away many applicants. Although African American Catholics were affronted by segregation and discrimination in church and society and wanted them overturned, they did not necessarily want their children to attend White schools. Many Black parents appreciated and valued the education, discipline, and

⁴³ Henry Cabirac, Jr., to S. W. Boyd, December 24, 1962, Henry Cabirac, Jr., to John P. Sisson, December 24, 1962, folder 26, box 3, Henry Cabirac, Jr., to Paul M. Rilling, December 20, 1962, Henry Cabirac, Jr., to Edward J. Kahalley, January 9, 1963, Henry Cabirac, Jr. to Dr. and Mrs. C. J. Hazeur, January 11, February 1, 1963, Henry Cabirac, Jr., to C. J. Hazeur, Jr., June 24, 1963 and typed note on the letter to Matt [Ahmann] (quotation), Henry Cabirac, Jr., to John L. Finley, June 24, 1963, Henry Cabirac, Jr., to Mathew Ahmann, July 29, 1963, folder 10, box 1, series 33, NCCIJR; Cabirac, Jr., to Melum, June 3, 1965.

moral training their children received in Black Catholic schools and the dedication and pedagogical skills of those who taught in them. Desegregation also posed the risk that their children would be made unwelcome in White Catholic schools and face ostracism, harassment, and discrimination. However, Hazeur noted that “there[']s some good Catholics here who aren’t afraid [sic]” and “feel very strong about obtaining [the] best Catholic education for their kids,” which, he implied, better funded White Catholic schools provided.⁴⁴

Some African American parents had other, practical reasons for seeking to enroll their children in local Catholic schools that were reserved for Whites. Hazeur informed Cabirac that “Two families have attempted to register in a neighborhood school and were told that it’s up to the bishop.” Such parents favored local White schools for their children not because they necessarily wanted to desegregate them, but because they were closer to home than many Black Catholic schools that could be difficult and time consuming to reach and often brought transportation problems.⁴⁵

In December, Hazeur wrote to Stuardi asking to be informed when Catholic schools would desegregate. The superintendent replied that Hazeur would be notified if Toolen decided to desegregate the schools. Stuardi defended the academic quality of Most Pure Heart of Mary High School and assured Hazeur that “if your daughter would be accepted at Heart of Mary she could obtain as fine an education there as at any other school that may accept her.” Hazeur informed Cabirac that “*I intend to do everything possible to get my younger*

⁴⁴ Clement J. Hazeur, Jr., to Henry Cabirac, Jr., December 31, 1963 (quotations), folder 10, box 1, series 33, NCCIR; *Our Negro and Indian Missions*, 1965, 8, ASSJ; Bivens, *Mobile, Alabama’s People of Color*, 110.

⁴⁵ Hazeur, Jr., to Cabirac, Jr., December 31, 1963.

daughter in one of the local schools in Sept if it takes excommunication.” In early January, Cabriac replied that “You might take heart from the fact that I was in Birmingham a few weeks ago and got reliable information that the Catholic schools in Alabama will be opened in 1964. Keep the faith.” This suggested that, as in the case of Pensacola, Toolen had waited to see how public school desegregation unfolded before making a decision about desegregating Alabama’s Catholic schools.⁴⁶

If Toolen had decided before the end of 1963 that he would desegregate Alabama’s Catholic schools in the fall, he did not make his decision public or inform school principals. However, in March 1964 the diocese administered a test for admission to any Catholic high school and thereby ensured, as Hazeur informed Cabirac, that “some Negroes will be accepted into the white high schools in Sept.” Hazeur remained unable to establish links between his group and White Catholics, which he attributed to “a strong anti-Negro feeling here.”⁴⁷

In April 1964, in a pastoral letter read to parishioners in every church throughout the diocese, Toolen announced that all of its schools would desegregate in September. The archbishop wrote, “I know this will not meet with the approval of many of our people, but in justice and charity, this must be done.” He appealed to Catholics to accept the decision regardless of their personal feelings because “the common good of all must come first.” The

⁴⁶ Hazeur, Jr., to Cabirac, Jr., December 31, 1963 (second quotation); J. Edwin Stuardi to Clement J. Hazeur, Jr., December 7, 1963 (first quotation), Henry Cabirac, Jr., to Clement J. Hazeur, Jr., January 3, 1964 (third quotation), folder 10, box 1, series 33, NCCIJR.

⁴⁷ Clement J. Hazeur, Jr., to Henry [Cabirac, Jr.], March 14, 1964, folder 10, box 1, series 33, NCCIJR.

New York Times reported “no apparent reaction among the congregations attending morning and afternoon masses in the state’s major cities.” Nevertheless, some Catholics expressed their displeasure. Catherine M. West, a Catholic mother in Mobile, informed Toolen that “I do not intend to have my children schooled with negroes.” Like many segregationists, West believed that segregation was a longstanding practice, and she implied that school desegregation would lead to interracial sex. She declared, “If these children are permitted to go to school together they will be thrown together in all phases, social as well as functions dealing with education. I, for one, cannot and do not intend to deceive my children by throwing them into this experimental game to take part in the destruction of what has been taught for 2,000 years.”⁴⁸

In making his school desegregation announcement, Toolen had moved ahead of public schools. The Fifth Court of Appeals was still considering a suit to ensure public school desegregation throughout Alabama. However, the archbishop limited desegregation by restricting it to Catholics, and by delegating its implementation to the discretion of pastors and the superintendent of diocesan schools, he ensured, whether he intended to or not, that school desegregation would be gradual. Catholic school desegregation was also circumscribed by the relatively small number (5,710) of Catholic and non-Catholic African Americans in Catholic schools (with only Catholics eligible to transfer to White schools),

⁴⁸ *New York Times*, April 27, 1964 1, 17 (first, second and third quotations); Catherine M. West to T. J. Toolen, April 26, 1964 (fourth and fifth quotations), folder “Integration Letters 1964,” Toolen Papers.

who constituted twenty-one percent of a total enrollment of nearly 26,000, as well as by residential segregation throughout the diocese.⁴⁹

As it had done when Toolen publicly announced that he would begin partial desegregation in Pensacola's Catholic schools, the Southern Field Service, which Jack Sisson had joined as assistant director, wrote to the archbishop offering its assistance; but, once more, the organization received no response. In June, Sisson tried to see Toolen in Mobile, but a chancery official berated him for trying to force himself on the archbishop and injecting "controversy into the diocese." Two months later, Sisson visited Birmingham, where he met with Monsignor Francis J. Wade, editor of the archdiocese's weekly newspaper, the *Catholic Week*. "Msgr. Wade, saw me," Cabirac reported, "but said that this would have to be the last time since Archbishop Toolen has given him explicit instructions to have nothing to do with

⁴⁹ *Chicago Defender*, May 9-15, 1964, press clipping, folder 1, box 6, series 11, NCCIJR; "Archbishop Orders Alabama High, Grade Schools to Integrate," *Birmingham Post Herald*, September 3, 1964; "1964 Report on special work for Colored in the Diocese of Mobile-Birmingham," September 4, 1964, 1, folder "Negro and Indian Fund," Toolen Papers; Moore, *South's Tolerable Alien*, 122. The federal judiciary declined to issue a statewide public school desegregation order in 1964. Until 1970, desegregation proceeded slowly under freedom of choice plans that required parents to choose to send their children to school with children of another race. See *New York Times*, June 10, 1968; Gordon Harvey, "Public Education in Alabama after Desegregation," *Encyclopedia of Alabama*, <http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-3421> (accessed November 7, 2019); Wendy Parker, "Why Alabama School Desegregation Succeeded (And Failed)," *Case Western Reserve Law Review* 67 (2017): 1101-1105; Sarratt, *Ordeal of Desegregation*, 215-16.

NCCIJ or me.” Toolen objected to outsiders coming into the state and, as he saw it, interfering in his jurisdiction and undermining his authority. Sisson also met Monsignor Houck, principal of John Carroll High School and discussed its forthcoming desegregation.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ John P. Sisson to Thomas J. Toolen, April 28, June 3, 18, 1964, memorandum, Jack [Sisson] to Matt [Ahmann], “Mobile diocese visit, Friday, June 5, 1964,” June 9, 1964 (first quotation), folder 11, box 1, memorandum, Jack [Sisson] to Matt [Ahmann], “Birmingham,” August 28, 1964, folder 5, box 1, memorandum, Jack Sisson to Mathew Ahmann, “Trip to Birmingham, August 29-31, 1964,” September 4, 1964 (second quotation), folder 2, box 1, series 33, NCCIJR; Mathew Ahmann to John P. Sisson, May 30, 1963, in possession of the author. In the summer of 1963, Archbishop Egidio Vagnozzi, the Washington, D.C.-based apostolic delegate to the United States, Rome’s highest representative in the United States who was senior to all members of the U.S. Catholic hierarchy except cardinals, telephoned Toolen to ask what he was going to do regarding school desegregation. Toolen angrily, and irrationally, replied, “When are you going to clean up the mess you have in your own backyard---Washington, D.C.?” Segregationists alleged, without convincing evidence, that public school desegregation in the national capital had led to increased petty crime, delinquency, sexual disease, and illegitimacy. See Henry Cabirac, Jr., to Mathew Ahmann, September 5, 1963 (quotation), folder 2, box 1, series 33, NCCIJR; “Archbishop Vagnozzi is the Seventh Apostolic Delegate to the U.S.,” *Catholic Banner*, April 24, 1960, 1A, 3A; *Mobile Press*, September 21, 1956; Anders Walker, “‘A Horrible Fascination’: Segregation, Obscenity, and the Cultural Contingency of Rights,” *Washington University Law Journal* 89 (July 2012): 1036-37.

The diocese did not release statistics about the number of African American Catholics who attended formerly White Catholic schools when they opened in September for the new school year, but the number was small. Toolen reported that “very few of them [African American children] had come over to the white schools, and only a few white children are enrolled in our colored schools.” Only four African Americans enrolled in John Carroll High School, which admitted the students without public incident. Several White families withdrew their children from Our Lady of Lourdes School in Mobile when it admitted several African American children, but there were no protests outside desegregated Catholic schools. By contrast, segregationists picketed outside some of Birmingham’s desegregated former White public schools that had a total of nine African American students. Desegregation did not, the *Catholic Week* reported, harm Catholic school enrollment; in fact, the paper reported, it had reached a record, but undisclosed, number.⁵¹

However, a decline in vocations brought the withdrawal of sisters from the teaching staff of some, often Black, Catholic schools. In response, the diocese closed the schools and transferred their students mostly to former White Catholic schools. In September 1966, Toolen explained that “This past year has been one of change and a bit of turmoil. We had to close Immaculata High School in Birmingham because we were told the sisters could no

⁵¹ *Our Negro and Indian Missions*, 1965, 8 (quotation), ASSJ; *Birmingham Post Herald*, September 3, 1964; *New York Times*, September 4, 1964; Sister Mary Paul to “My dear Sisters and Friends,” February 7, 1965, folder 14, box G13-1-2, Record Group 831.102 Selma: St. Elizabeth’s Mission, Community Archives, Sisters of St. Joseph, Rochester, N.Y.; “Enrollment Record High in Diocese,” *Catholic Week*, September 11, 1964, 1.

longer staff it. This was a real blow. We have absorbed all the catholic children in the two high schools in Birmingham, John Carroll and Holy Family [a Black school].”⁵²

Some religious orders of priests and sisters, who taught in Black Catholic schools, urged Toolen to close them as they did not want to teach in segregated schools, and they began to withdraw from them. In March 1967, the Dominican Sisters of the Congregation of the Most Holy Rosary who taught at Most Pure Heart of Mary High School in Mobile put pressure on the archbishop to close the school. In response, Toolen wrote Sister Mary Benedicta, the order’s mother general in Sinsinawa, Wisconsin, “Whether we like it or not there will be segregated schools because they are in the section where no one lives but our Negro people. It would be much easier and better if we could do away with them but as it is I don’t see how we can.” However, Sister Mary Benedicta insisted that the school either close in 1967, or be gradually phased out. Toolen reluctantly agreed to her plan for the school to admit no more students and close in 1970 after graduating its last class. Students who had already applied to enter the ninth grade of Most Pure Heart of Mary High School in the fall of 1967 were advised to apply to Mobile’s three White Catholic high schools: McGill Institute, Bishop Toolen High School, and Mercy High School, which would itself be closed in June 1968. The archbishop wrote Sister Mary Benedicta, “I am most sure that a great many will not come ... our [mostly White] high schools have been open to the Negroes for the past four

⁵² T. J. Toolen to J. B. Tenny, September 1, 1966, folder “Negro and Indian Fund,” Toolen Papers.

years but very few have applied. They would rather be with their own and the Negro people all know that [Most] Pure Heart of Mary, because of the Sisters, is an excellent school.”⁵³

Although Toolen was correct that residential segregation meant that some Catholic schools would be de facto segregated, and that many Black Catholics valued the Catholic schools that had traditionally served them and often wanted them maintained, he did not consider that another reason why so few Black Catholics transferred to formerly White Catholic schools was because they were not made to feel welcome or treated equally within them. In September 1967, a White mother from Mobile wrote Toolen, “Catholic white parents and students of this Diocese have accepted integration with good grace and harmony, but I do not think that we are ready for social integration.” In May 1968, Alphonse Allen, a tenth grade student at Most Pure Heart of Mary High School in Mobile, observed that “Every

⁵³ T. J. Toolen to J. B. Tenny, August 29, 1967, folder “Negro and Indian Fund,” John T. Doyle, “Minutes of the Mobile District Catholic School Board,” April 14, 1969, 1, folder “School Boards, Minutes of Meetings & other correspondence,” Toolen Papers; Sister Mary Benedicta to Thomas J. Toolen, March 10, 1967,” T. J. Toolen to Mother Mary Benedicta, March 20, 1967 (first quotation), folder “B,” J. Edwin Stuardi to T. J. Toolen, March 20, 1967, J. Edwin Stuardi to Charles G. McOsker, April 24, 1967, folder “Schools 1967,” Sister Mary Benedicta to Thomas J. Toolen, April 17, May 5, 1967, T. J. Toolen to Sister Mary Benedicta, April 25, 1967 (second quotation), folder “Benedictines,” John L. May Papers (hereafter cited as May Papers), Archives of the Archdiocese of Mobile, Mobile, Alabama; “McGill-Toolen Catholic High School.”

time our school attends functions with the other three white schools, we are openly sneered at.”⁵⁴

Toolen and diocesan officials showed no sensitivity to the needs of African American students who enrolled in formerly White schools or an awareness of the sometimes hostile reception they encountered. The archbishop claimed that “Although they say they want integration, we find in the schools that the Negroes who attend tend to segregate themselves from the rest of the [White] children of the school.” He did not consider that the discriminatory and unwelcoming manner in which some of their White faculty and students treated Black students might account for this situation. Diocesan officials and some teachers also expected African Americans to adopt and conform to White norms and displayed insensitivity when they did not or asserted their own identity. Although it was common practice for White students and faculty in Catholic schools to wear something green on the Feast of St. Patrick, Stuardi instructed the principal of McGill Institute to stop African American students, influenced by Black Power, from wearing black armbands to denote racial pride. Although some sisters and priests who taught in desegregated White schools were committed to racial equality, the schools had little, if any, faculty desegregation. Dora A. Franklin Finley II, an African American student at Bishop Toolen High School for girls, complained that her school had no Black teachers and did not teach Black history.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Mrs. John R. Shinnors to T. J. Toolen, September 22, 1967 (first quotation), folder “Schools 1967,” May Papers; Alphonse Allen to the *Catholic Week*, April 19, 1968, 7, May 3, 1968, 7 (second quotation).

⁵⁵ T. J. Toolen to J. B. Tennyly, September 12, 1969 (quotation), folder “Negro and Indian Fund,” Francis A. Messing to J. Edwin Stuardi, May 7, 1969, folder “Schools,” Toolen

Toolen and many of the religious orders of priests and sisters who taught in black schools conceived of desegregation as one-sided process in which African Americans would transfer to White schools. The closure of Black schools gave their students little option but to enroll in White Catholic schools if their parents wanted them to remain in Catholic education. Toolen's concerns that African American students would not transfer to White schools if Black schools closed proved largely unfounded. When the diocese closed Most Pure Heart of Mary High School in Mobile in June 1968, ahead of schedule, Toolen reported that its "students, who were all Catholic, came over one hundred percent to our other diocesan high schools."⁵⁶

Apart from segregationist sentiment and transportation issues, the inferior facilities and condition of many Black Catholic schools also deterred White parents from enrolling their children in Black Catholic schools. Rather than undertake the expense of investing in Black Catholic schools, and faced with the withdrawal of many religious orders from them, Toolen increasingly terminated Black schools. In 1968, the diocese closed St. Joseph High School in Pensacola because it lacked "State or Southern Association [of Colleges and Schools] accreditation" and, Stuardi argued, "It would be most difficult to prepare it for

Papers; Dora A. Franklin Finley, II, to John L. May, January 14, 1970, folder "Schools--- (High Schools)," May Papers.

⁵⁶ T. J. Toolen to J. B. Tenny, September 23, 1968 (quotation), folder "Negro and Indian Fund," Toolen Papers; Doyle, "Minutes of the Mobile District Catholic School Board," April 14, 1969, 1; *Our Negro and Indian Missions*, January 1970, 7-10, ASSJ; Oscar H. Lipscomb to Frank O'Neill, March 16, 1970, folder "Southern Regional Council," May Papers.

either.” Toolen reported that following its closure, most of St. Joseph’s students transferred to Pensacola High School.⁵⁷

Although the diocese had formally ended school segregation in 1964 and closed some Black schools, in many places there were still dual Catholic schools, particularly at the elementary level, and their enrollment remained mostly or exclusively African American or White. In 1968, Father Anthony V. Wiggins, an Edmundite priest at All Saints Church in Anniston, explained to his superior, Father Eymard Galligan in Winooski, Vermont, that “here at All Saints we have wished for some white students and none have applied for admission and there has been no colored student applied for admission at [the White] St. Mary’s School.” Similarly, in 1969, Father Edward A. Leary, an Edmundite priest in Selma, informed Toolen that “our St. Elizabeth Grammar School has an entirely Negro student enrollment” and the Church of Assumption School, a “relatively short distance away,” had “an entirely white student enrollment.”⁵⁸

⁵⁷ J. Edwin Stuardi to T. J. Toolen, December 22, 1966 (quotation), folder “Schools 1966,” Toolen Papers; T. J. Toolen to J. B. Tenny, December 12, 1968, folder “Negro and Indian Fund,” T. J. Toolen, “American Board of Missions---Diocese of Mobile-Birmingham Request,” attached to Jerome J. Hastrich to T. J. Toolen, May 1, 1968, folder “Missions---1968 American Board of Catholic Missions,” Toolen Papers; “About St. Joseph’s,” <https://stjoepns.org/about/> (accessed November 3, 2019).

⁵⁸ A. V. Wiggins to Eymard Galligan, November 13, 1968 (first quotation), folder “Anniston All Saints,” box 27, “Catholic Church and School Integration,” folder “Selma-St. Elizabeth’s,” box 25, Edward A. Leary to Thomas J. Toolen, May 21, 1969 (second, third and fourth quotations), folder “Three Folders on Amalgamation,” box 10, Local Administration,

When Toolen retired in 1969 at the age of eighty-three, the diocese had much work left to do to desegregate all of its parochial schools and phase out its dual school system. After closing six elementary schools and three high schools for African Americans in three years, it still had “twenty elementary and two high schools for Negro children, with a total attendance of 4,859 students.” These students constituted the overwhelming majority of African Americans enrolled in Catholic schools. With the notable exception of St. Joseph’s in Huntsville, which by 1968 had 182 White and eighty-eight African American students (and many interracial friendships between them), the diocese had not yet achieved an integration within its schools based on mutual understanding and reciprocity between the races. These issues would remain for his two successors, Joseph G. Vath and John L. May, to grapple with because, on Toolen’s retirement, the Vatican divided his diocese into the dioceses of Birmingham and Mobile because of their growth during his long tenure, having ceded its northwest Florida section to the Diocese of St. Augustine in 1968.⁵⁹

Society of Saint Edmund Archives, Colchester, Vermont; “Predominantly Black parishes,” attached to Oscar H. Lipscomb to Joseph M. Davis, October 16, 1970, folder “Black Catholics,” May Papers.

⁵⁹ “Archbishop Toolen Resigns; Pope Paul Names 2 Successors,” *Catholic Week*, October 10, 1969, 1; “1966 Report on Special Work for the Colored in the Diocese of Mobile-Birmingham,” folder “Negro and Indian Fund,” Toolen Papers; *Our Negro and Indian Missions*, January 1969, 7-10 (quotation), ASSJ; John L. May to “Dear Father,” n.d. [1971], folder “Bishop May--- Letters,” May Papers; John L. May, “Another Week,” *Catholic Week*, July 16, 1971, 5; Murray, “Peaceful History”; “Formal Transfer of Florida Section Observed in Mobile,” *Catholic Week*, July 12, 1968, 2.

As he neared the end of his tenure, Toolen believed that he had been “crucified” for making widely reported attacks on the Selma protests in 1965, criticism which, he believed, had overshadowed his long record of helping African Americans in religion, education, medical, and social services and, more latterly, his efforts to desegregate Catholic institutions in his diocese. The archbishop had severely criticized the hundreds of Catholic priests and sisters, mainly from the Midwest and North who, invited by Martin Luther King, Jr., had joined the Selma demonstrations without seeking Toolen’s permission as the resident Catholic prelate. He argued that they should instead be “at home doing God’s work.” Although Toolen also called for “just and equitable treatment of Negroes,” he denounced King for “trying to divide the people.”⁶⁰

Toolen claimed in his defense that “I am not, nor have I ever been a segregationist.” Although he had never advocated segregation, in a pragmatic adaption to its dominance in the South, Toolen, like other Catholic bishops in the region, had built separate Catholic schools and other institutions for African Americans and Whites, even though as private institutions they were not subject to Alabama’s segregation laws. It seems unlikely, given the segregationist preferences of most Whites, Catholic and Protestant alike, and widespread

⁶⁰ Toolen to Tenny, September 10, 1965 (first quotation); “Archbishop Toolen Criticizes Presence of Priests, Sisters in Demonstrations,” *Catholic Week*, March 19, 1965, 1 (second, third and fourth quotations), 12. On Catholics and the Selma protests see Gregory Nelson Hite, “The Hottest Places in Hell: The Catholic Church and Civil Rights in Selma, Alabama, 1937-1965” (Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 2002), and Paul T. Murray, “‘The Most Righteous White Man in Selma’: Father Maurice Ouellet and the Struggle for Voting Rights,” *Alabama Review* 68, no. 1 (January 2015): 31-73

anti-Catholicism, that Toolen could have done otherwise without endangering Catholics and hampering the church's institutional survival and growth, at least among White people. Although he argued that "I have always tried to give the negroes the equal of that given to our white Catholics," the diocese's inferior, segregated black Catholic schools fell considerably short of that goal. As much as he sought to rationalize otherwise, racially separate Catholic institutions were not equal and exemplified segregation.⁶¹

Toolen asserted that "Where segregation existed, we were the first diocese to integrate from the first grade to the twelfth." In fact, several Catholic dioceses in the Deep South acted before Toolen. The Archdioceses of Atlanta and New Orleans opened their schools to all Catholic students in 1962, and the Diocese of Savannah did so a year later. Having desegregated its schools in Charleston in 1963 to align with public school desegregation in the city, the diocese there opened the remainder of its schools in South Carolina to Catholic students regardless of race in 1964. Each of these dioceses waited until federal court-ordered public school desegregation began within their boundaries before desegregating Catholic schools, and Atlanta and New Orleans, like Mobile-Birmingham, did not act until at least a year after the public schools. Toolen was not ahead of other Catholic dioceses in desegregating parochial schools, but neither was he out of step with those in the Deep South in waiting first for the courts to act.⁶²

⁶¹ Toolen to Tenny, September 10, 1965.

⁶² Toolen to Tenny, September 10, 1965 (quotation); Paul J. Hallinan to "My dear Catholic people," June 10, 1962, folder 11, box 015/2, Archives of the Archdiocese of Atlanta, Atlanta, Georgia; "Date Advanced for Integration in Charleston," *Clarion Herald*, August 29, 1963, 8; *Savannah Morning News*, June 24, 1963; "Enrollment Sets New Record in Parochial

In the Diocese of Mobile-Birmingham, school desegregation was, as in other southern Catholic dioceses, generally one-sided, controlled by Whites, and implemented at the expense of Black Catholic institutions. The attachment of many African Americans in Mobile to Most Pure Heart of Mary High School nevertheless demonstrated that although Black people opposed segregation and discrimination, many also valued institutions that served their community, even when they resulted from segregation. The story of Pensacola's desegregation, for its part, contributes to growing evidence of African American Catholic agency in challenging segregation and discrimination and reveals the hitherto unacknowledged influence of the Southern Field Service, suggesting that historians might do well to look for its imprint elsewhere in the South during the 1960s.⁶³

Schools,” *Catholic Banner*, September 13, 1964, 1A; “School Rolls Are Open to All Catholics,” *Catholic Action of the South*, April 1, 1962, 1A.

⁶³ Newman, *Desegregating Dixie*, 166, 244.