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“Making A Way Out Of No Way”: The Oblate Sisters Of Providence Pursue Higher Education Under Jim Crow

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Abstract: Organized in the slave-holding city of Baltimore, Maryland in 1828, the Oblate Sisters of Providence dedicated themselves as “a Religious society of Coloured Women . . . [who] renounce the world to consecrate themselves to God, and to the Christian education of young girls of color.” Early in the sisterhood’s existence Oblate co-foundress Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange had explicitly articulated their consciousness of their exceptionalism as “persons of color and religious at the same time” who nevertheless sought “the respect which is due to the state we have embraced and the holy habit which we have the honor to wear” in a racist society. From their inception the sisterhood’s race and their education ministry had constituted two seminal components of their charism, self-identity, and self-concept.

However, as the Oblate Sisters pursued their original ministry of education into the twentieth century they confronted new obstacles. In feverish competition with public school systems which offered such advantages as tuition free access, secondary or high school educational opportunities, and certified, accredited teaching staffs, the Catholic hierarchy established parochial high schools. This development required advanced degrees for secondary teachers from Catholic colleges and universities, all of which at the time denied access to black students—including women religious.

This essay examines how this pioneering sisterhood exercised agency on its own behalf as it strove to advance its own educational opportunities as well as those of its pupils by expanding its support networks within ecclesial constituencies. It further demonstrates how these efforts required the sisterhood to re-examine—if not re-frame—its own understandings of the intersectionality of its existence as “persons of color and religious at the same time” in Jim Crow America.

Keywords: Oblate Sisters of Providence, Catholic higher education, Intersectionality, Colorism, Jim Crow, Segregation.

From the inception of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, their black racial identity, their status as women religious, and their teaching ministry had constituted three seminal components of their existence. However, as the Oblate Sisters pursued their original ministry of education into the twentieth century they confronted new obstacles. This essay examines how this pioneering sisterhood exercised agency on its own behalf as it strove to advance its educational opportunities by expanding its support networks within ecclesial constituencies. It further demonstrates how these efforts required the sisterhood to reframe its own understandings of the intersectionality of its existence as “persons of color and religious at the same time” in Jim Crow America.

The Third Plenary Council in 1884 had sought to enforce its dictum requiring Catholic parents to enroll their children in parochial schools by making such schools more competitive with public schools through enhanced instruction. By the turn of the century Catholic education specialists acknowledged that “the comparative neglect of the formal study of pedagogy by the nuns was a serious defect.” Between 1873 and 1902 white sisterhoods in the Archdiocese of Baltimore established their own normal and collegiate institutions to provide programs of pedagogy for the theoretical and practical training of sisters. Such institutional expansion equipped their members to fulfill the increasingly rigorous educational standards states across the nation imposed on their teachers in the first decades of the twentieth century.¹ Such professionalization of Catholic education required normal school certification or advanced degrees from Catholic colleges and universities—most of which at the time denied access to black students, including women religious.

In this context of escalating teacher education requirements, the Oblate Corporate Council in 1917 “decided something must be done to get a Summer School started at the motherhouse for the Sisters.” The remark “After many unsuccessful attempts to obtain help from various religious congregations” suggests that Oblate Superior General Frances

¹ “St. Catherine’s Normal Institute,” CM, New Series I, # 20, 12 September 1885, Education in Classified; J. L. Spalding, “Normal Schools for Catholics,” *The Catholic World*, vol. 51, #301, 95-6. All quotations cited in Eileen Mary Brewer, *Nuns and the Education of American Catholic Women, 1860-1920* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1987), 176, note 46, 176-77, note 49. For thoughtful discussions about the education of women religious, see among others Mary Ewing, *The Role of the Nun in Nineteenth-Century America*, Eileen Brewer, *Nuns and the Education of Catholic Women, 1860-1920*, Karen Kennelly, ed. *American Catholic Women: A Historical Exploration*, Kathleen Sprows Cummings, *New Women of the Old Faith: Gender and American Catholicism in the Progressive Era*.

Fielding had approached local white sisterhoods with established normal institutes and colleges for assistance to no avail. She “finally approached Bro[ther] Isidore the Provincial of the Xaverian Brothers who promised to help us if possible.” Bros. Simeon and later Bartholomew and Bede conducted summer normal school sessions at the Oblate motherhouse through 1926. Bro. Bede persuaded Villanova College in Pennsylvania to admit Oblate members to its summer extension courses in 1924 for which Mother Katharine Drexel, SBS defrayed expenses; St. Louis University in Missouri followed suit in 1928.²

The Oblate community sought educational advancement for its teachers on three levels: high school education for sisters without diplomas; normal school certification for primary grade teachers; and college degrees for high school teachers. While scholarship support existed for white sisterhoods to educate their members, nothing comparable subsidized education for the black sisterhoods. Furthermore, had both total access to Catholic institutions and full funding existed, the community’s relatively small size and their primary dependence on maximum employment of their teachers in both Oblate and diocesan schools to maintain institutional solvency would have precluded significant Oblate full-time pursuit of higher education.

Following the model established with the Xaverian Brothers in 1917, the Oblate community initially relied on part-time pursuit of education, either on Saturdays or during the summers. In 1929 Oblate Superior General Consuella Clifford requested permission from the School Sisters of Notre Dame for four Oblate Sisters to attend their Saturday Extension Classes at Notre Dame College. The School Sisters consented. Then in 1931 Clifford initiated “arrangements for a Summer Normal Extension from Villanova to be taught by two degreed Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament” at the Oblate motherhouse.

In her 14 April 1931 letter to the sisterhood announcing these plans, Clifford emphasized, “Summer school means hard work but...thousands of religious are in the same condition—so let us murmur a prayer, buckle on the armor of courage and press forward. We cannot afford to be slackers if we would continue to carry on the work of education.” She further observed, “The time is rapidly nearing when no teacher, religious or lay, is going to be permitted to teach without [a]

² Council Corporation Meeting Minutes, Vol. I, 1903-32, 28, RG III, Box 44, Folder 5, AOSP; Sherwood, Oblates’ 101 Years, 194.

state teacher certificate. This ruling already holds true in some states. Now it is not possible to obtain a state teacher's certificate without normal school training, and before doing normal work, it is first necessary to finish high school work." Appealing to Oblate pride in their historic teaching mission she exhorted, "Hence we all realize the importance and necessity of doing all in our power to render ourselves more worthy of our name as a teaching community [by striving] to keep up with ranks of educators of the day." Otherwise she warned, [W]e shall have to step out of line, and what a distressing and shameful thing that would be after 100 years of service to the poorest of God's children." She advised those sisters "who still lack high school credits... to be most conscientious" in completing those requirements and chastised "some few who have not worked as faithfully as they should and consequently are not as far ahead as they should be." Finally, she assured "[t]hose Sisters who have never taught or perhaps will never teach, [that] one and all form part of this teaching community" and that "the work you do outside of the classroom is equally important with that of the teachers." She concluded, "Therefore your interest in the educational advance of the community is, I'm sure, just as strong as those who must struggle and study to make themselves fit for the present-day classroom requirements."³

Clifford's explicit inclusion of non-teaching sisters as vital contributors to the Oblate mission failed to convince at least one candidate. The 18 July 1931 annals entry reported the dissatisfaction of a novice for the past two months despite her model deportment as a "docile, industrious and obedient" person. "However, she has practically no education and for some reason or other feels that the lack of an education will make her life here unhappy." Despite every effort "to disabuse her of this false notion" including an interview with Oblate Spiritual Director Msg. Michael F. Foley "who could not reason with her," she left the community.⁴

The sisterhood's urgent focus on producing certified and degreed teaching personnel evidently further exacerbated pre-existing class and color intra-communal strains. Colorism—or discrimination based on skin color—prevailed in both white and black societies and occasionally breached the spiritual boundaries separating the Oblate sisterhood from secular influence. The 1929 centennial photographs of the Oblate

³ 1931 Oblate Annals, 10 January, 29 May, RG II, Box 35; Clifford to "My Dear Sisters," 14 April 1931, RG V, Box 2, Folder 4, AOSP.

⁴ Oblate Annals, 18 July 1931, 1931 Annals, RG II, Box 35, AOSP.

community document the physically inclusive nature of Oblate membership, confirming Fr. John Greene's characterization of their appearance as "fifty religious of all shades, from all but white to down-right ebony, who have consecrated their lives to God and their neighbor" some forty years earlier. While their complexioned diversity proved a tribute to Oblate inclusivity, it also provided a fertile field for strained interpersonal relationships in a racist society.

When Oblate Superior General Thaddeus Bennett, accompanied by Sr. Consuella Clifford, had paid her first official visit to Archbishop Michael J. Curley of Baltimore in 1922, "His Grace received her kindly, asked about the affairs of the community, whether the fair Sisters were treated in an unfriendly manner by the darker ones as he had heard this report from some source. He seemed gratified when answered in the negative."⁵

Sometimes ethnic differences contributed to racial tensions. On 8 May 1928 the annalist reported that a disappointed postulant from Puerto Rico mistakenly "thought she was going to the Mission Helpers, a community of white Sisters. She says all her people are white. Maybe, but she isn't. We advised her to write for return passage to Puerto Rico as she did not bring sufficient funds."⁶ An incident in 1933 involving a Cuban sister further exemplified the discrete cultural understandings of racial identity which could characterize African American and African Caribbean sisters. This sister "has been dissatisfied for some time and resented having to wait 'on these colored people' as she expressed it. Her conduct was more or less dis-edifying at all times during the twenty years she has been in the community. Therefore, there was not much regret when she expressed the wish to return to her home."⁷

Ethnic differences played no role in the following example which involved African American sisters exclusively and had festered for years within the community. The 1933 Oblate record stated that Sr. M. pronounced her vows in 1922 "although the Novice Mistress [deceased] was not in favor of allowing her to do so, as she predicted that Sr. M. would be a source of trouble to the Community." Assigned non-teaching duties in the kitchen and laundry throughout her religious life, Sr. M. embarked on a pattern of dysfunctional behavior almost from the start.

⁵ Council Corporation Meeting Minutes, Vol. I, 1903-32, 5 June 1922, 57-8, RG III, Box 44, Folder 5, AOSP.

⁶ Oblate Annals, 8 May 1928, RG II, Box 35, 1928 Annals, AOSP.

⁷ Council Meeting Minutes 1933-44, Vol. II, 24 August 1933, 5-6, RG III, Box 45, Folder 1, AOSP.

Most particularly, "If undesirable members of the Novitiate were dismissed, she criticized the authorities for this. If they were of a dark complexion she would say that they were sent away because they were 'black' and 'uneducated.' This question of color was always being brought up by her and she usually found some one to listen to her criticisms." Charges leveled against Sr. M. included that she "interfered with the charges of others"; "spoke roughly to them, used harsh and unbecoming expressions"; "referred to their color, their deficiencies, their faults of character"; and "spread false reports and created discord among the Sisters by claiming falsely that differences were made on account of color and education." Perhaps the promising novice mentioned above who left the community in 1931 in spite of the sisterhood's entreaties had fallen victim to Sr. M.'s allegations. The community dismissed her in August 1933. When Sr. M. wrote to Pope Pius XI in November 1933 seeking reinstatement in the Oblate community, the situation required the Oblate sisterhood and the Archbishop of Baltimore to justify their actions to Rome.

In her cover letter to the documents she submitted to Curley to forward to the Vatican, Clifford revealed not only the sisterhood's aversion to reinstating Sr. M. but also her perceptive grasp of the peculiarity of the racial situation in the United States:

Ever since she has been out of the community we have been in fear and trembling over the forms her vindictiveness might assume, but even that fear of trouble is small when compared with the actual trouble she caused us while in the community.

She should have been dismissed years ago but because of her vindictive disposition we feared that expulsion would cause a greater evil.

She seemed to be obsessed with the idea that her color had something to do with the difficulties which she brought upon herself. She was constantly "dragging in" the racial issues and thereby disrupting the usual peace of the community.

I do not mention this question of color among my observations because I doubt if Rome would appreciate this

source of difficulty in our country. Your Excellency will understand the situation.⁸

Colorism would continue to challenge to harmony of the Oblate sisterhood throughout the period under review.

Integrating white colleges provided black women religious with new opportunities to convert racial indignities and humiliations into purifying trials in the pursuit of spiritual perfection unique to their experience. The Oblate leadership's compilation of seventeen "Suggestions for the Sisters Attending College" proves instructive. Strict prohibitions against accepting invitations to visit with members of other communities, participating in parties "either in the private rooms of the Sisters or at any convent on the grounds," going to any sister's room to study "either to receive or to give assistance" and rules always requiring a walking companion on campus—"One of your own community is preferable, unless courtesy demands you to walk with a Sister of another community," and asking questions of any professor only in the presence of another sister ensured not only Oblate observance of the modest, retiring behavior deemed appropriate for all women religious but also of Jim Crow's racial etiquette of separation.

The extraordinary stipulation, "Pay no attention to any remarks relative to the Negro race—whether made by white Sisters, the professor, or secular students. As religious we have no race issues." warrants analysis. Throughout their history the Oblate Sisters had considered themselves a teaching order of "persons of color and religious at the same time," the intersectionality of being black women, women religious, and teachers constituting co-equal elements of their identity. The statement, "As religious we have no race issues" did not deny their black racial identity but rather reframed it in relation to their identities as teachers and women religious. To maintain their viability as teachers by attending white colleges required them to transcend the slings and arrows of racial discrimination by "striving to practice the perfection which is demanded of you by the promise you made at your profession." The mandate "If you experience humiliations—show no resentment. If accepted in the right spirit they may be far more useful for your sanctification than your degree will be" resonated with the

⁸ Cojourner Mary Magdalen Thomas [Sr. M. Ernestine] File, 1, 2, 3; Mary Consuella, OSP to Most Reverend Michael J. Curley, 26 February 1934, RG IV, Box 105, Folder 5, AOSP.

Oblate practice of transforming intended racial denigration into spiritual benefit. Acting on their obligations as women religious to pursue spiritual perfection would thus attenuate the insults of racial discrimination they encountered as they pursued the necessary courses to remain qualified educators.⁹

Such carefully crafted guidelines, however, failed to prevent the "Catholic University Problem" in 1934. A professor's comment, "That something reminded him of a Negro's kinky head," disturbed an Oblate student who "thought it was the proper thing for her to let the teacher know that she did not like what he had said....Without asking advice from anyone she went to the professor after class hours and told him that she belonged to the Negro race and that she did not like the comparison." Although both the sister and Oblate leadership believed the professor had not intended to offend anyone, they concluded, "...it should not have been noticed at all—even if it had been passed out of prejudice. As religious we are not expected to notice such remarks" and all sisters attending college "have been told by Reverend Mother to ignore any remarks relative to color in order to avoid any unpleasant relations." When Sister M. reported the incident to Clifford, she added "the professor immediately offered her an apology and repeated that he thought little 'kinky heads' were cute."

This situation generated both surprise and concern within the Oblate leadership. Not only had Sr. M. disobeyed instructions about challenging racial slurs and approaching professors individually, but also she had not consulted Oblate authorities before acting on her own. The counsellors advised Clifford to recall the errant sister to Baltimore to warn her again "as we fear that unpleasant situations may arise from Sisters taking up 'race' questions" at college. Mother very kindly showed her where she had failed and impressed on her the necessity of being most careful to ignore any [racial] remarks...." She reiterated the mantra, "As religious there is to be no race issue with us and we are to forget all about our color and act first, last and always as religious." The contrite Sr. M. acknowledged her mistake "and expressed much regret for acting without asking advice."¹⁰

⁹ "Suggestions for the Sisters Attending College," n.d., RG IV, Box 19, Folder 21, AOSP.

¹⁰ Council Minutes and Materials 1933-44, 24 March 1934, 26-7, RG III, Box 45, Folder 1, AOSP.

Mother Consuella constantly advised sisters at colleges against roiling racial waters. She cautioned a sister invited to write a piece for publication to “avoid anything which borders too strongly on the bitter feelings of race problems. You know that articles of [this] kind stir up antagonistic sentiments. Don’t publish anything please without submitting it first, dear.” In the same letter Clifford observed “Colored Sisters can really be fine women, as Fr. Markoe says, but you and I and all the rest of us want to be fine religious, don’t we dear?”¹¹

Oblate humor occasionally eased the situation. Clifford recounted, “The Sisters at Villanova have a joke this year [1931] about their nationality. Some of the newcomers of white Sisterhoods have decided that the Oblates are Mexican Sisters—as they cannot conceive that colored people can be lady like.” The sisters puzzled “just why they had been taken for Mexicans, unless these white Sisters think that all colored people are dark.” Issues of both class and color inhered in this case of mistaken identity. Enforced segregation permitted such ignorant misconceptions to survive. As evidently only the newcomers among the white sisters held such views, previous interracial exposure may have succeeded in educating the returning white sisters.¹²

Dr. Thomas Wyatt Turner, a biology professor at Hampton Institute in Virginia, had founded the Federated Colored Catholics, a national network of black Catholic organizations, in 1925 as “an action group led by black Catholics and for black Catholics that would ensure that the black Catholic community take a responsible and leadership role in American Catholicism and American society.”¹³ On 9 July 1931 Turner invited Clifford to give an address on education at the FCC September convention in St. Louis. Instead, she delegated Sister Laurentia Short, OSP stationed in St. Louis at St. Rita’s Academy and one of two Oblate members attending the Summer Institute at St. Louis University to address the audience.

¹¹ Mother M. Consuella to Sr. M. Felix, OSP, 31 July 1931, RG III, Box 3, Folder 10, AOSP. Rev. William Markoe, SJ, pastor of the black St. Elizabeth parish in St. Louis, MO, a self-styled champion of black people within the Church, nevertheless frequently opposed the agency and activism of Thomas Wyatt Turner and other black leaders in the Federated Colored Catholics. See Marilyn Wenzke Nickels, *Black Catholic Protest and the Federated Colored Catholics 1917 – 1933* (New York: Garland, 1988).

¹² Mother M. Consuella to Sr. M. Felix, OSP, 31 July 1931, RG III, Box 3, Folder 10, AOSP.

¹³ Cyprian Davis, OSB, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 220.

More than a conventional plea for funds, Short's address revealed perceptive insights into current Oblate senses of their mission and agency. Short asserted, "Mere material progress and secular education may, after a fashion, fit us to take our rightful place in a prosaic work-a-day world...but something far more ennobling is required if we are to bring to fruition the highest potentialities of our race." Citing the demands of the black Catholic community for higher education under Catholic leadership, she stated, "...Catholic students, you as Catholic parents, and we as Catholic educators know that the salvation of our young people lies not necessarily in higher education in the secular sense." She posited the deficiencies of public school education as a preparation for life because "it fails to develop all the faculties of soul and body," lacks direction to "clear thinking and right acting" and consequently proves "worse than no education." Recalling the proud century-old Oblate history as educators she asserted, "Verily, the Oblate Sisters of Providence have found the perfect form in which to express the great thought of service for love's sake." She then introduced the current urgent "demands for more and excellently equipped Sisters" and assured the audience of Oblate willingness "by redoubling our energies we can multiply our deeds. For this have we come into the world—that we may spend and be spent in the service of a great cause." Short emphasized "Our Sisters are well able to meet the heavy demands made upon them by the increasing exactness of State Boards of Education" and Oblate willingness to endure "the heavy strain this summer work places upon the health of our younger Sisters."

Nevertheless, the sisters "are finding it increasingly difficult to meet the financial obligations entailed by this program of longer and higher training," including "buying expensive equipment, securing added teachers for our summer schools, and paying the tuition for attendance at outside institutions of higher learning." White sisterhoods had scholarships and donations to subsidize their advanced education, but the Oblate Sisters see "their expenses increase as their income decreases, for let it not be forgotten that the depression which weighs so heavily upon this country just now afflicts us with a double load." Short explained that for the sisterhood to compete with public schools, "we must have some assured source of income to meet the expenses incurred.... Our people must stand back of us by founding scholarships, establishing burses, and making generous contributions toward providing university training for the candidates for the work of the Oblate Sisters of Providence. Short concluded, "Firm in the belief that

nothing is too good for the youth of our race, the Oblate Sisters of Providence are devoting themselves wholeheartedly to do their part in the higher education of the Negro youth in the United States. We ask your cooperation."¹⁴ This eloquent Oblate plea for black Catholic financial support yielded few results because the Depression afflicting the sisterhood "with a double load" also gripped most black people—historically positioned at the bottom of the economic ladder— just as relentlessly in its talons of high unemployment and minimal discretionary income.

Wherever they taught, the Oblate Sisters had to comply with state requirements for teacher accreditation and college degrees. Unlike the white sisterhoods, the Oblate Sisters had confronted the obstacle of racial exclusion from Catholic colleges for many years, precluding their acquiring the necessary academic degrees. Clifford addressed this situation frankly in her correspondence with Bishop Emmet Walsh of South Carolina, concerning the staffing of the Oblate Sisters' high school in Charleston in 1933. Her letter reflected her consummate administrative skill, racial awareness, and religious obedience. In a previous letter, Walsh had pleaded urgently for a full complement of sisters with degrees in hand and, as a last resort, had threatened to replace them with white sisters. Clifford responded, "As a matter of fact, it might be truly said that if Catholic institutions of higher learning had opened their doors to our Sisters sooner and with greater welcome, neither Your Excellency nor I would be in the present embarrassing situation as regards the Immaculate Conception High School. Now that better opportunity is given us for getting a higher education, we are bending every personal effort and all our community resources to the end that many of our Sisters will have degrees."

She then proposed a temporary staffing solution of two Oblate Sisters with degrees and two lay teacher graduates of Xavier University—the only black Catholic college in the nation—for the immediate academic year with assurances of four Oblate Sisters with diplomas for the next year. Clifford reasoned, "With such a faculty Your Excellency can secure recognition for the high school to your satisfaction and we can be spared the embarrassment of feeling that we are a handicap rather than an asset to our own people." She concluded

¹⁴ Sr. M. Laurentia, OSP, "The Oblate Sisters of Providence and Higher Education," in *The Chronicle: Official Organ of the Federated Colored Catholics of the United States*, 8-9, January 1932, 145 A-29, JFA.

pointedly and poignantly, "If, however, you feel that the continuance of our Sisters means the endangering of the whole project, and that other Sisters can more immediately and adequately meet Your Excellency's requirements, in the best interests of our own race and for the greater glory of God, we stand ready to do Your Excellency's bidding." On August 19th, Walsh replied that he deemed her suggestion of the two lay teachers "a happy solution."¹⁵

On August 18th, Oblate chaplain Rev. John T. Gillard, SSJ entered the conversation, prompted by Clifford's concerns about the Charleston situation. He wrote an extraordinary letter to Bishop Walsh in which he introduced himself as the "sort of unofficial director, hence the reason for this unofficial and confidential letter—Archbishop Curley asked me to take an interest in their welfare and look out for their interests." In his characteristically direct manner, Gillard then argued in support of Clifford's proposed compromise:

Mother Consuella... [r]ealizing the urgency of the need of sisters with degrees [has] set about securing a remedy. However, she was confronted with the seemingly insurmountable difficulty of finding schools willing to take colored sisters. You know the old story. The situation was impossible: higher education was being demanded of the sisters and the means to obtain it were denied them. Today we have fairly overcome that. This year for the first time we had colored sisters at the Catholic University. . . .

Really, Your Excellency, the poor Oblates are having a pretty tough time of it and they feel very keenly the fact that they cannot deliver the goods just now. As one vitally interested in them, I know how few friends they can turn to. . . . I realize that comparable to the white sisters the colored sisters are more expensive. But I ask Your Excellency quite frankly if we who are in the work are not patient with them and give them an opportunity to learn how to run things how are they ever going to develop? We are spending a lot of money trying to bring out the best that is in the race, but if we deny them an opportunity to function most of our efforts will be abortive. I

¹⁵ Mother Consuella Clifford to Most Reverend Emmet W. Walsh, 8 August 1933; Emmet W. Walsh to Mother M. Consuella, O.S.P., 19 August 1933, RG III, Box 2, Folder 33, AOSP.

admit quite readily that on the face of things white sisters can give greater efficiency, but there are other values to be considered. . . .

I am sure Your Excellency will forgive me if I seem forward. I am so interested in the Oblates and the present situation seems not at all insurmountable that I simply had to write.¹⁶

Although this informative letter ultimately proved unnecessary to the resolution of the problem, it reveals Gillard's nuanced, insightful—and at times patronizing—understanding of his relationship with the Oblate Sisters and their racially informed experience. The potential loss of income consequent to Oblate withdrawal from the high school constituted a significant but secondary concern. Consistent with his statement above that bringing out the best in the race required providing opportunities for black people to function, Gillard warned that replacing the Oblates with white sisters would have dire consequences. He concluded his letter, "Just now Mother Consuella is worried over the impression you are anxious for a change. I am sure you do not contemplate such drastic action. The difficulties confronting the continued progress of the sisters are at times, especially now, so staggering that your friendship will do more for their morale and the furtherance of their work than I can tell you. A set-back now would be very serious, in fact tragic."¹⁷

In January 1935 Gillard obtained Mother Consuella's permission to allow Rev. John Dudine of Louisville, Kentucky to film Oblate Motherhouse activities. Dudine made movies of Catholic mission work among black people for educational purposes. The annalist explained, "Fr. Dudine sponsors the work being so well done by the [Catholic] Students Mission Crusade [CSMC] to foster better and more amicable relations between the black and white races in the United States. The younger generation will be the future adults and what is now being inculcated will carry over during the years to come. . . . Fr. Gillard is also very much interested in the Student Mission Crusade."¹⁸ Indeed, Gillard's active involvement in the CSMC over the years contributed substantively to the eventual integration of Catholic higher education.

¹⁶ John T. Gillard to Most Rev. Emmet Walsh, D.D., 18 August 1933, Gillard Papers, F50A, Box 4, Correspondence 1930s U-V-W-X-Y-Z Folder, JFA.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Oblate Annals, 21 January 1935, RG II, Box 36, 1935 Annals, AOSP.

In June the sisters confronted a pedagogical problem that Gillard resolved. The annalist reported, "Fr. Gillard brought us good news this evening. He has been so much concerned because Notre Dame of Maryland will not have classes this summer that he secured permission from his superior general . . . to teach Logic and Religion for us this summer. . . . Thus our problem along that line is solved. Thanks be to the good God." After noting that Notre Dame agreed to give full credit for the courses Gillard would teach, the annalist added, "In addition to being a Ph.D. Father is an excellent teacher, so we shall be privileged to have Father." At the conclusion of the summer session the annalist proudly listed Gillard's name with all his academic credentials—"Fr. J. T. Gillard, S.S.J., MA, STB, Ph.D."—perhaps to emphasize the legitimacy of the private Oblate summer session as much as to register Oblate cognizance of their close association with such an academically distinguished individual.¹⁹

Gillard proved invaluable as one ecclesial constituency facilitating Oblate higher education; white sisterhoods, another. From the late 1920s through the 1950s several white sisterhoods responded to the Oblate sisterhood's accreditation plight with Christian charity toward "our [dear] sisters in Christ."²⁰ In defiance of racial custom they gradually escalated their outreach from conducting high school classes and extension normal institutes at the Oblate motherhouse to admitting Oblate members to their Saturday and summer schools for their own sisters to enrolling Oblate members in their regular school term classes and waiving tuition fees. The sisterhoods inscribed on the honor roll of perpetual gratitude in the hearts of the Oblate community for their courageous interracial cooperation include the School Sisters of Notre Dame, the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, the Daughters of Charity, Emmitsburg, MD and the Sisters of Charity, Leavensworth, KS; the Benedictine Sisters of Atchison, KS; and the Sinsinawa Dominican Sisters of Rosary College in River Forest, IL .

The matriculation of Oblate Sisters at Rosary College in the mid-1930s proves particularly elucidating—not only concerning the intricacies involved in defying contemporary racial norms but also in revealing Gillard's agency again. The silver-tongued Gillard initiated the process in his 10 September 1935 missive to Sr. Thomas Aquinas O'Neill, OP, the

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3, June, 1 August 1935.

²⁰ Mother Philemon, SSND to Rev. John T. Gillard, 15 September 1938, RG V, Box 4, Folder 36, AOSP.

newly appointed Superior of Rosary College. He first complimented her on her poem on the priesthood he had read in *Commonweal*, asserting, "I rarely read poetry and never wax enthusiastic over poets—well there's an ovation to you, orchids and all." He continued:

I read in nearly all Catholic newspapers that Rosary is going to accept colored students this year. I know you are in back of this Christian decision. One of the most perverse obstacles in the way of our work among better class Negroes has always been the frightful inconsistency between Catholic teaching and Catholic practice in matters educational. It has been a source of perpetual embarrassment to try to explain why Canon Law and Papal encyclicals fulminate against sending Catholic children to non-Catholic schools, when Catholic colleges and universities refuse to admit colored Catholics. Thank God and Catholic educators like you and dear Mother Samuel [Coughlin, Superior General of the Sinsinawa Dominican Sisters] those days of embarrassment are rapidly drawing to an end....

Just recently I met a delightful little colored girl (practically white) who told me she hopes to be one of the first in Rosary. She was visiting her three sisters who are Oblate Sisters here in Baltimore. I am their Director.... I am positive she will ultimately follow her three sisters into the convent. Wouldn't it be wonderful to have your first graduate become a nun?...That's what can be done with the Negroes when given a good Catholic training.²¹

The next day Gillard wrote Sinsinawan Dominican Sr. M. Gertrude Galligan, his cousin who had informed him of Sr. Aquinas's appointment as Superior at Rosary, "I do hope no difficulty will arise now to prevent Rosary from going through with its announced intention of admitting colored girls—it would be a step backwards." Citing the intention of the Sisters of Charity at the College of Saint Elizabeth in Convent Station, NJ to integrate that year, Gillard perhaps too confidently predicted, "in fact

²¹ J. Gillard. SSJ to Reverend and dear Sister Aquinas, 10 September 1935, Correspondence, Fr. John T. Gillard, SSJ, re: Oblate Sisters (1935-1937), 4083 Office of the President – S. Thomas Aquinas O' Neill, OP, Dominican University Archives [hereinafter cited as Gillard Correspondence re: Oblate Sisters (1935-37), O'Neill, DUA].

all the worth-while Catholic Colleges are, so Rosary might as well maintain its position out in front. The Holy Father will be pleased to hear of its attitude."²²

After a six week hiatus, O'Neill finally replied to Gillard's initial letter, "which meant a great deal to me even while I could not write frankly in reply." Clearly the school integration project, "a matter so dear to my heart," proved so controversial that she wrote Gillard "to tell you that I count on your continued prayers for light as to the best procedure under a terribly difficult situation....That you may have a part in preparing the minds of the young people here is my prayer, I would not have begun that way, that is preparing their minds, but I am under compulsion to do so." She requested that Gillard visit Rosary College that year "to get over the message as you can so well do."²³

Two weeks later Gillard responded sympathetically, "Sorry you are meeting obstacles in the way of making Rosary a catholic Catholic college. Of course psychological influences must be recognized, but one very successful way of doing something is to go ahead and do it. In religion, however, there are brakes and breaks!" He then proposed for his visit a week's seminar on "Race Relations...a good subject not beneath the dignity of a Philosophy or Sociology professor." He added that "Columbia and several other places" offered accredited courses on the topic, noting that "Columbia has James Weldon Johnson a high-hat Negro giving the course."²⁴

Sometime in 1936 Gillard wrote Sr. Aquinas again:

I have an idea—don't get excited. As regards the policy of Rosary towards Negroes, let me know how you react to the suggestion of giving a few scholarships to a couple of colored Sisters as a starter. I could probably dig up a few very light

²² Father John to My dear Sister Gertrude, 11 September 1935, Gillard Correspondence re: Oblate Sisters (1935-37), O'Neill, DUA.

²³ Sr. Aquinas to Dear Father Gillard, 23 October 1935, Gillard Correspondence re: Oblate Sisters (1935-37), O'Neill, DUA.

²⁴ J. Gillard, SSJ to Reverend and dear Sr. Aquinas, 5 November 1935, Gillard Correspondence re: Oblate Sisters (1935-37), O'Neill, DUA. James Weldon Johnson merited Gillard's characterization of him as a "high-hat Negro." A luminary in the Harlem Renaissance, noted black educator, author, composer, and civil rights activist, Johnson counted among his numerous literary accomplishments authorship of the lyrics of "Lift Every Voice and Sing" popularly acclaimed as the Negro National Anthem as well as several volumes of poetry, novels, and musical productions. His extraordinary work as a civil rights activist effected his stellar rise in the NAACP from field secretary and organizer in 1916 to the first black executive secretary—essentially national director—in 1920.

ones as a starter. The student body could not possibly object to your taking in colored nuns, could they?

That's the way we are working it at the Catholic University. Two more of our Sisters received their A. B. at the C. U. this summer. We expect to have two more there this year. As a result the C. U. is now about to open its doors to Negroes under its new rector, Monsignor Corrigan. There are several Negroes enrolled already but they are "passe pour blanc" [passing for white].

I haven't mentioned this idea to a soul so don't mind stifling it in birth if you don't like it.²⁵

O'Neill answered Gillard, "I am very happy to receive your letter and the proposition you make about a way to begin to carry out my heart's desire." She promised to present his proposal to her Mother General "as forcefully as I can, and in the meantime I am praying for her support in my determination to carry this into effect." Beseeching his prayers in support as well, she promised to pursue his lecturing to the student body "during the coming year."²⁶

In September Gillard informed O'Neill, "Having had no word from you concerning Mother General's decision on the matter of the scholarships I assigned the two sisters I have in mind to other work for the year, so there is no use of pushing the matter any further." He persisted, "I still think the plan is a good one all around. The two I had in mind were very light, either one could pass for white, but the fact would be that Rosary would be safe. Keep it in mind for next year." He announced for the next day the opening of a "state accredited high school for colored girls in Baltimore" whose Oblate faculty had earned degrees from several institutions including Notre Dame of Maryland, Villanova, Catholic University, "so you see the 'lily-white' policy is fading all around." He accepted her invitation "to lecture at Rosary, particularly if I can help the good work along." He assured her, "I won't forget you in Mass—you have hard work to do for God and you must be brave to do it for God's work is always opposed. God bless you and keep you." O'Neill's reply two days later that her Superior and her Council "had

²⁵ J. Gillard to My dear Sister Aquinas, Any ol' time, [sic], Gillard Correspondence re: Oblate Sisters (1935-37), O'Neill, DUA.

²⁶ Sr. Thomas Aquinas to My Dear Father Gillard, 26 August 1936, Gillard Correspondence re: Oblate Sisters (1935-37), O'Neill, DUA.

actually been too busy on the assignment of the Sisters to give this the consideration it needs and of course the fact that we are crowded to the doors and cannot take some of the Sister students who have applied to live here is a basis for the postponement of the matter" ended the discussion for the year.²⁷

In June 1937 the persistent Gillard, who had in the interim visited Rosary College, inquired directly, "Has the question been brought up as to the availability of two scholarships for my colored Sisters? When I was at Rosario [sic] someone suggested that as a solution for the difficulty of admitting Negro students to Rosario. Certainly no one can legitimately object to colored nuns attending a Catholic college. I have two who are very light and quite representative; they would be ideal for the experiment." Currently scheduling summer school classes for the Oblate sisters, he explained, "I would like to direct the courses of these two particular Sisters so they could fit right into the third year of Rosary if my hopes mature."²⁸ O'Neill responded within a week:

I have delayed answering your letter because I had to consult our Mother General about the matter of offering scholarships to two colored Sisters who you would appoint. I am sure you know where my heart is in this matter. However, since I will not be in a position of authority at the College next year, I do not feel ready to assert myself about taking the Sisters unless there is direct authorization from our higher superiors.

Mother General consulted with the council and has written me that they are willing to have you send the Sisters.²⁹

When he returned from his retreat Gillard thanked O'Neill for obtaining the scholarships "for my beloved Oblate Sisters" and reassured her that "the two I have in view are excellent subjects, most agreeable personalities, good students, and quite light—in fact one can pass for

²⁷ J. Gillard, SSJ to Reverend and dear Sister, 13 September 1936; Sr. Aquinas to Dear Father Gillard, 15 September 1936, Gillard Correspondence re: Oblate Sisters (1935-37), O'Neill, Gillard Correspondence re: Oblate Sisters (1935-37), O'Neill, DUA.

²⁸ J. Gillard, SSJ to Reverend and dear Sister Thomas Aquinas, 9 June 1937, Gillard Correspondence re: Oblate Sisters (1935-37), O'Neill, DUA.

²⁹ Sr. Aquinas to Dear Reverend Father, 17 June 1937, Gillard Correspondence re: Oblate Sisters (1935-37), O'Neill, DUA.

white. It is better to start the experiment with two pleasing personalities behind faces not too Negroid."³⁰

Gillard's multiple references to skin color strategies throughout this correspondence warrant comment. Soon after his ordination in 1928 Gillard had become personal secretary to Louis B. Pastorelli, SSJ, Superior General of the Josephite order, with whom he enjoyed "a close personal and professional relationship built on mutual esteem and respect" and served as "the chief spokesman for Pastorelli and the Josephites" for over a decade. Pastorelli routinely barred most black applicants from entering Josephite institutions except a few fair skinned mulattos, for whom he maintained a decided preference. Pastorelli's attitude plausibly informed Gillard's policy in consciously selecting "almost white" Oblate candidates to integrate white Catholic institutions.³¹

Prior to Gillard's tenure as Oblate chaplain no explicit physical appearance requirements had informed the selection of Oblate enrollees at Villanova University. Photographic evidence verifies the inclusion of at least two brown-skinned sisters in the cohort of four attending summer sessions at Villanova between 1924 and 1926.³²

In 1932 both the Oblate Sisters and Mother Katharine Drexel, SBS "had heard indirectly" that the CU authorities intended to integrate the school. Drexel "seemed especially anxious to have us send at least two Sisters to the Catholic University...for Summer Session" and stipulated only that they be "well qualified sisters." Evidently skin color attributes did not concern Drexel. Prior arrangements precluded Oblate enrollment at CU in 1932; however, Oblate sisters did enroll in 1933 and 1934.³³

On 26 January 1935 the Baltimore black newspaper Afro-American broke the story in a front-page article, "Fair Women Slip Through Color Bar at Catholic School." Their reporter had discovered that contrary to the school's official policy of excluding black students from admission, "two [Oblate] sisters...are attending the Catholic Sisters College, a branch of the university, this year and that two were graduated last

³⁰ Father J. Gillard, SSJ to My dear Sister Thomas Aquinas, 29 June 1937, Gillard Correspondence re: Oblate Sisters (1935-37), O'Neill, DUA.

³¹ Ochs, Desegregating the Altar, 301, 214-16.

³² Council Meetings Minutes, July 1924, 61: Mother M. Theresa Shockley, Srs. Rita Barrett, Angela Wade, Liberata Dedeaux, RG III, Box 44, Folder 5 [1903 - 1932]. AOSP.

³³ Notes or Minutes, Meetings: Corporation, 14 June 1932: 47, RG III, Box 43, Folder 1, AOSP.

year." The clerk at the Sisters College readily confirmed the fact of Oblate attendance and provided the names of the current enrollees, Srs. Mary Liberata and Mary of the Visitation "both fair in complexion"; and the graduates, Srs. Mary Consolata and Mary of Good Counsel, both currently teaching at St. Katherine's School in Charleston, SC. In full compliance with Oblate policy concerning racial matters, Mother Superior Mary Dominica Saunders of St. Augustine Convent where the sisters resided remained "adamant in her refusal to talk about the situation, saying that she did not wish to get 'mixed up in this segregation discussion'" and refused to admit or deny the sisters attend the college. She also refused the reporter permission to interview the sisters. The reporter alleged in conclusion, "It is believed by some that fair colored students are admitted to the school as a sort of cover-up, that is the university officials know that such students are colored, and thus can give answer to the Vatican that the school does not have a segregation policy; and on the other hand they can satisfy their local supporters by stating that colored do not attend."³⁴

The Oblate annalist—plausibly Sr. Mary Theresa Shockley based on handwriting samples—deemed the Afro-American "a sensational paper which prints all the scandal imaginable" for this article "saying the Catholic U. would not admit colored students and that our Sisters slipped in because they were light. But this is bosh. The two Sisters there last year were brown. The policy of the University is none of our business."³⁵ Although Gillard had freely admitted in his 1936 proposal to O'Neill about integrating Rosary College that he had applied color restrictions in selecting Oblate candidates for Catholic University in 1933 and 1934, he evidently had not disclosed his strategy to the Oblate Sisters themselves. Had he done so, Shockley—as the Assistant Superior General, Secretary, and close friend and confidante of Superior General Clifford—would have known and not denied the tactic so vehemently. Instead, she would have more plausibly focused her indignation on the paper's allegations about Catholic University's duplicity toward the Vatican and the American public alone. Ascribing a person's precise position along the minutely calibrated spectrum of skin color remains a highly subjective if not elusive task. Census takers not infrequently designated the same individual in different decades white, mulatto, and

³⁴ "Fair Women Slip through Color Bar at Catholic School." Afro-American (1893-1988), 26 January 1935: 1
<https://search.proquest.com/docview/531101733?accountid=34685>. Date Accessed needed. 2 October 2012.

³⁵ Oblate Annals, 25 January 1935, RG II, Box 36, 1935 Annals, AOSP.

black.³⁶ Photographs indicate the brown complexion of Sr. Consolata, but not of Sr. Mary of Good Counsel. Color resided in the eye of the beholder.

Exigency soon trumped Gillard's preference for sending fairer sisters to integrate schools. In July 1938 he revealed his problem to Sr. Evelyn Murphy, OP, O'Neill's successor as President of Rosary College. The Maryland State Department of Education demanded that St. Frances Academy open a Domestic Arts or Science Department to maintain accreditation. He explained that he had the money to equip such a department, "but we have no Sister with a B.S. in the required subjects....At any rate I simply must start a Sister studying for her B. S. This will take three or four years of full time work. Naturally the schools around Baltimore would not consider even a colored Sister as a full-time student; I have sounded them out on the subject." He asked directly, "Would Rosary be willing to take another Sister?" Explaining that he was not seeking another scholarship and would insist on financing her expenses personally, he reiterated, "All I want to know is whether or not you feel that Rosary could stand another colored Sister." He further assured her he had not mentioned this idea to the Oblate Sisters, "so you need have no hesitation in giving a negative reply if in your judgement a third Oblate would cause the slightest difficulty." The most awkward part of this correspondence addressed the issue of color:

As I recall, the original plan was for me to send two light colored Sisters at first, then later to send a darker one. The Sister I have in mind for her B.S. [Sr. Theophane Bennett, OSP] is a dark-skinned girl and a perfect lady—just the same caliber as Srs. Frances and Venard. She would fit in perfectly with the plan because she has good features, a pleasing personality, and is everything that I would expect a representative Oblate to be.³⁷

Sr. Evelyn agreed to accept Sr. Theophane. Gillard, not the Sinsinawa Dominican Sisters, had introduced and insisted on the fair

³⁶ Diane Batts Morrow, *Persons of Color and Religious at the Same Time: The Oblate Sisters of Providence, 1828-1860* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 109.

³⁷ Fr. John T. Gillard, SSJ to Rev. Sr. Evelyn, OP, Ph.D., 6 July 1938, Gillard Correspondence re: Oblate Sisters (1938), 4083 Office of the President- S. Evelyn Murphy, OP, DUA.

complexion stipulation. Whether he had considered how some sources—like the Afro-American—could legitimately consider this approach a policy of deception or the possible psychological burden on the fair-skinned pioneers to hide their racial identity and to endure racist remarks or actions expressed in the safety of an allegedly exclusively white environment—plausibly the experience of Sr. M. at CU in 1934—remains unknown. Nevertheless, Gillard's ability to abandon his fair complexion policy indicated his determination to do whatever proved necessary to advance his primary and enduring goal: promoting the welfare and progress of his beloved Oblate sisterhood.

Evidently color proved no deal breaker at Rosary College. Years later a Sinsinawa Dominican sister recalled the integration of the school:

It can be said objectively that Rosary College students as a group have shown, with reference to the matter of race, an attitude which is logically Christian. The first two Chinese students entered the College in 1931; both in time received their degrees. There have been other Chinese students since. The first Negro students (1938) were Oblate Sisters of Providence from Baltimore, whose beautiful religious spirit brought its own blessing; since then several lay Negro students have attended and been graduated from the College. Two Indian young women from New Mexico entered for the year 1936-1937.³⁸

Fr. John T. Gillard, other clergy, and several white sisterhoods constituted the ecclesial agents of Christian courage enabling the Oblate sisterhood to breach the barriers of racism in pursuit of higher education. Nevertheless, the Oblate community itself remained at the epicenter of achieving its goal of higher education in the first half of the twentieth century. In 1935 their Corporate Council agreed to enroll two sisters in college full time during the regular school term to expedite getting "St. Frances Academy accredited by the State as soon as we have four degreed teachers. All the members of the Council see the necessity of getting the Academy accredited as soon as possible. Otherwise we will continue to lose pupils as all our colored people clamor

³⁸ Sr. Mary Eva Mc Carty, OP, *The Sinsinawa Dominicans: Outlines of Twentieth Century Development, 1901-1949* [Dubuque, Iowa: The Hoermann Press, 1952], 457.

for a school recognized by the State. No other inducements will satisfy them. Hence we must make every sacrifice to reach the desired goal."³⁹ That the erudite Gillard during his tenure as Director and Chaplain to the sisterhood had written and signed the Forward to the St. Frances Academy Catalogue no doubt resonated with the sisters' observed parental clamor for credentials.⁴⁰

Superiors General Consuella Clifford (1926-37) and her assistant and later successor Theresa Shockley (1937-55) demonstrated not only extraordinary leadership, but also consummate administrative and people skills as they deftly negotiated the uncharted territory of black sisters pursuing higher education. Astutely aware of their "complexities of compoundedness,"⁴¹ they manipulated the interrelationship of their tripartite identities as black women, women religious, and educators as circumstances required in order to preserve the intersectionality of their unique experience in Jim Crow America.

³⁹ "Council Minutes and Materials 1933-44," 21-25 August 1935, 35, RG III, Box 45, Folder 1, AOSP.

⁴⁰ St. Frances Academy Brochures and Catalogues: 1820s-1940s, undated catalogue possibly 1938-40, p. 3 for Gillard signature, RG II, Box 19, Folder 17, AOSP.

⁴¹ Kimberle Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum*: Vol. 1989, Iss. 1, Article 8: 166.

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