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Walking the Walk: The Sanctuary Movement and Holy Cross Catholic Church in Dallas,
Texas, 1970-1986

In October 1983, Holy Cross Catholic Church in South Dallas declared that it would be a sanctuary for refugees fleeing from the United States-funded civil wars in Central America. Three generations of one family, the Martells, had arrived from El Salvador, and Holy Cross parishioners and clergy announced at a press conference that they intended to harbor the family in a convent-cum-commune on church property. Their decision was part of a growing movement throughout the United States to deliberately break U.S. immigration laws, and illegally offer a haven to Central American refugees. The organizers relied on a centuries-old tradition that precluded state authorities from entering a religious space to apprehend criminals.

While this tradition is not formally part of United States law, several religious and civic organizations have resurrected the concept at least twice in the past fifty years as a way of protesting government actions or laws that they find incompatible with their beliefs and/or interpretation of the U.S. constitution. Holy Cross took part in the most recent incarnation of Sanctuary, which occurred in the 1980s when churches throughout the United States, in protest of U.S. political and financial support to repressive Central American dictators, offered shelter to the refugees. These activities formed the basis of the Sanctuary Movement, a loose network of organizations from religious groups to local city governments who offered sanctuary. Texas, because of its strategic location bordering Mexico, became an important point of illegal entry for the refugees, but surprisingly Holy Cross Catholic Church in the predominantly African American Oak

Cliff neighborhood of Dallas was the only Catholic Church to officially declare sanctuary.

Holy Cross' participation raises several important questions: Why did this church in one of the poorest and most neglected areas of Dallas decide to become part of a movement that was so clearly and deliberately breaking U.S. laws? Why did the predominantly African American parishioners, a group that was suffering from structural inequalities in Dallas themselves, decide to rally around the plight of Central American refugees? And why were they the only Catholics in Texas to formally do so? This paper addresses these questions by examining both the setting in which the decision took place as well as the actors who participated in the church's decision. Doing so reveals both the place and the people had a critical role in the decision.

A Brief Review of Existing Literature

Because the Sanctuary Movement relied heavily on the media, both to publicize the plight of the refugees and to shame the Reagan administration and the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) into preserving the sanctity of religious institutions, journalists produced numerous articles and contemporary analyses of the movement's actions and their participants. Unfortunately, these are heavily influenced by partisan politics.¹ In the last decade, several journalists have published full length books that give simplified histories of the Sanctuary Movement, but these give preference to the Southwest churches and their leaders who began the movement. Moreover, they usually place heavy emphasis on the legal troubles that plagued sanctuary workers in the mid-to-

¹ See for example, "A Dallas Church becomes a Sanctuary for Refugees," *Texas Observer* 18 (23 Dec. 1983), and other articles in Sanctuary Movement vertical file in the Texas Catholic Archives.

late eighties and on the high profile cases in which several people were sentenced to prison terms or probation for their roles in transporting illegal aliens.² However, Sanctuary Movement workers themselves were fairly prolific, documenting both their reasoning for participating in the movement and their motivations and goals.³

Academics, especially anthropologists and sociologists, have not been far behind the move to document Sanctuary churches. Anthropologists have ranged from studying the “culture of protest” that helped create the Sanctuary Movement to examining how Church and State relations contributed to the movement.⁴ Sociologist Robin Lorentzen has looked at women’s roles in the Sanctuary Movement, while Maria Christina Garcia’s *Seeking Refuge* is the only historical study that includes some discussion of the Sanctuary Movement.⁵ Perhaps what is most striking about these examples, besides the relative lack of scholarship, is the almost complete absence of the voices of minority participation in the Sanctuary Movement. While a few studies mention the participation of Latinos, there appears to be no examination of African American participation in the movement. However, because the Sanctuary Movement has not thoroughly been documented, it is difficult to know if this absence is a result of negligible minority participation or just scholarly neglect.

² See for example, Robert Tomsho, *The American Sanctuary Movement* (Austin, TX: Texas Monthly Press, 1987), Ann Crittenden, *Sanctuary: A Story of American Conscience and the Law in Collision* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988), Miriam Davidson, *Convictions of the Heart: Jim Corbett and the Sanctuary Movement* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1988).

³ For example, see Jim Corbett, *The Sanctuary Church* (Wallingford, Pa. : Pendle Hill Publications, 1987, 1986), also Gary MacEoin, *Sanctuary: a resource guide for understanding and participating in the Central American refugees' struggle* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985).

⁴ See Susan Bibler Coutin, *The Culture of Protest: Religious Activism and the U.S. Sanctuary Movement* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993) and Hilary Cunningham, *God and Caesar at the Rio Grande* (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

⁵ See Robin Lorentzen, *Women in the Sanctuary Movement* (Philadelphia : Temple University Press, 1991) and Maria Cristina Garcia, *Seeking refuge : Central American Migration to Mexico, the United States, and Canada* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 2006).

With this in mind, the participation of Holy Cross Catholic Church takes on great significance. The racial makeup of the parish and their decision to participate, besides perhaps being a rarity in the record, is all the more noteworthy because of the historical divide between blacks and Latinos in the United States. This paper attempts to explain Holy Cross' Sanctuary decision by exploring how parishioners, the Church, and parish at large were (and are) situated in several borderlands and border zones. To do this, I performed interviews with several parishioners who attended Holy Cross at the time and who remember or were actively involved in the Sanctuary decision. I also interviewed the priest and two of the nuns who were instrumental in bringing the issue to the attention of their parishioners. Using their words as well as ideas put forward by anthropologists Roger Rouse and Steven Gregory and historian, Sarah Deutsch, I examine how the parish's presence in a segregated part of Dallas, the church's resulting demographics and programs, and the parishioners historical memory as "others" confronting state-sanctioned violence, contributed to their decision to breach the physical border at the Rio Grande and help Central Americans find refuge in the United States. The paper is divided into three parts: The first examines how the changing landscape affected the people who lived and worked in Oak Cliff, the second describes how residents and volunteers affected the landscape, and the third focuses on the participants, themselves.

U.S. Intervention, Civil Wars and the Sanctuary Movement: Some Background Information

In the 1970s and 1980s, civil wars wracked the landscape of much of Central America. In Nicaragua, after years of guerrilla warfare against the Somozas, the triumphant Sandinistas found themselves engaged in war yet again; however, this time the enemy,

popularly known as the *contras*, was actively funded and supported by the United States. In Guatemala, a series of military dictators, many of whom U.S. trained in the School of the Americas, waged a dirty war, later identified as genocide, against the Maya people, who were allegedly harboring communist guerrillas. In El Salvador, a disorganized and divided guerrilla movement fought against a military complex that brutally suppressed any resistance to their control. The tie that bound these three countries was the support from a Reagan administration that feared a communist take over in their “own backyard.” In addition, all three countries experienced a growing divide between the rich and the poor, which inspired people to take up arms or speak out against the government, with tragic results.⁶

As a result of these wars, at least 200,000 Central Americans were dead. The majority killed by the military and their death squads, although some were killed by the guerrillas. Countless numbers of people were internally and externally displaced, one million of whom sought refuge in the United States.⁷ Powerless to stop the Reagan administration’s support of these repressive regimes, ordinary citizens of the United States decided to help the refugees.

The story of the Sanctuary Movement then is one of ordinary citizens who, unable to change national policy, took matters into their own hands. The Sanctuary Movement of the eighties has its origins along the border of Arizona, when, late 1981, Southside Presbyterian Church, and its pastor, John Fife made contact with a Quaker rancher, Jim

⁶ For a more complete description of the Central American revolutions and the United States role in the violence and genocide, see Walter Lafeber, *Inevitable Revolutions* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993).

⁷ These are very low estimates. The number of dead is taken from Lafeber, 362, but it is probably closer to a total of 400,000 because Lafeber mentions 75,000 Guatemalans who were killed—scholars now believe that number to be closer to 200,000. The number of refugees entering the United States comes from Robert S. Kahn, *Other People’s Blood: U.S. Immigration Prisons in the Reagan Decade* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1996) 2.

Corbett, who recently had begun aiding Central American refugees detained in INS prisons. Together with the Tucson Ecumenical Council (TEC), an organization of fifty local churches, they began helping refugees find legal assistance for their asylum claims and sometimes helped others cross the border and avoid the border patrol. As the INS became aware of their activities, the TEC was forced to come up with a new tactic: sanctuary. Corbett had learned from a pastor that INS officers in California had pledged to not enter churches, schools or hospitals to detain immigrants. Hoping the INS in other states would follow a similar policy, the TEC decided that declaring sanctuary could help publicize the plight of Central Americans, while shaming the government into ending their involvement in Central America. Fife volunteered Southside Church to be the first official sanctuary, and the movement began.⁸ Eventually almost four hundred churches and cities would declare sanctuary, one of which was Holy Cross Catholic Church in Dallas, Texas—the only Catholic Church in Texas to formally participate.⁹ To understand why this was the case, we must first understand the community and the parish to which Holy Cross belonged.

Segregation Today: Oak Cliff

Holy Cross parish is solidly located in the south Dallas neighborhood of Oak Cliff. Today, when Dallas residents are asked about the area, many describe it as a rough part of town, poverty stricken, and neglected by the city itself.¹⁰ But this was not always the case. The neighborhood was once a booming suburb, filled with up-and-coming white

⁸ Davidson, 6-73. This section is a very good description of the origins of the Sanctuary Movement. Interestingly, Southside Church was also a church on the “rough” side of Tucson, with a history of social justice ministry. See Davidson, 26.

⁹ Cunningham, 63-64.

¹⁰ Gathered from conversations I had with Dallas residents.

families. In the memories of most of the parishioners interviewed, the neighborhood demographics changed rapidly after it was forcibly integrated in the sixties, and Oak Cliff itself began to experience a decline. Using the framework set by Sandra Deutsch who examines women organizing in Boston, this section studies the relationship between the city and the “choices and strategies” of its inhabitants.¹¹

In *Women and the City*, Deutsch explains how Denison House, a settlement house operated by middle class women in an “immigrant working class neighborhood” in Boston, represented an “incursion” that made the women “pioneers” navigating unfamiliar territory and spaces claimed by different groups.¹² Deutsch explains how turn of the century Boston experienced great changes that “helped imbue the new urban landscape with meaning.”¹³ Holy Cross, as a church with mostly middle class African American parishioners and white clergy-members, likewise represented a middle class incursion into a poor, working class neighborhood, one that in the past decade had experienced a complete population shift.

But to understand the incursion, we must first look at how Oak Cliff came to represent a contested space, where different race and ethnicities came into contact and conflict as a result of desegregation policies, and how the parishioners’ actions, perhaps inadvertently and not necessarily overtly, gave Oak Cliff and their parish new meaning. In fact, Holy Cross parishioners motivated by the economic deterioration around them, took action to help others beyond their community by declaring sanctuary and, in the process, they created a church that would be known not only for its community service, but also for its interest in global activism.

¹¹ Sarah Deutsch, *Women and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 4.

¹² *Ibid.*, 6 and 154.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 286.

The mass exodus of white families in the sixties and seventies contributed to much of Oak Cliff's economic decline. Many parishioners can still recall how Oak Cliff was once a neighborhood of Anglo families. A long time resident, Ammer Jean Edwards recalls that fifty years ago, when she moved to Oak Cliff, the neighborhood was 80% white.¹⁴ Bill Acosta, a Los Angeles native who first started attending Holy Cross in 1976, remembers, "This neighborhood was probably easily upper middle class until the time came for integration. It was all white, and a lot of the white families moved out."¹⁵ The change was so rapid, a 1976 Texas Catholic article explained, "In a period of 15 years [Oak Cliff]...changed from an area with less than 1,000 black families to one in which at least six out of every 10 families are black."¹⁶ In fact, by the early 80s, most white families had moved across what was quickly becoming a border between Oak Cliff and the other suburbs, Interstate 35.¹⁷

Soon, I-35 separated not only whites from blacks, but also affluence from poverty. A once growing area for economic development, Oak Cliff lost many of its business with the white families that exited en masse during these years.¹⁸ Holy Cross responded to changes in the neighborhood by changing the character of its social outreach. In January 1977, Holy Cross sponsored a series of panel discussions called "Directions for Oak Cliff." This four part series dwelt on strategies for community improvement, with topics ranging from creating magnet schools to reenergizing the local economy. At one of these talks, panelists discussed the lack of jobs and affordable

¹⁴ Ammer Jean Edwards, interview with the author, 7 Oct. 2006.

¹⁵ Bill Acosta, interview with the author, 7 Oct. 2006.

¹⁶ *Texas Catholic* [Dallas, Tx] October 1976. See the Holy Cross Vertical File at the Catholic Archives in Austin, Tx

¹⁷ Reva Carter, interview with the author, 7 Oct. 2006.

¹⁸ Alan Elliot, 11 July 2006, "A Brief History of Oak Cliff," 15 Nov. 2006, <<http://www.oakcliff.com/history.htm>>. This website, produced by a Dallas author, largely neglects the African American presence in Oak Cliff and the poverty that resulted from white flight.

housing, the closing of local business and the need for a “black-owned bank.”¹⁹ This last issue hints at possible problems facing African Americans in Oak Cliff: the loss of business and racism within those that remained. Attendees expressed a belief that black business would bring “compassionate sensitivity to the consumer”—something that might have been absent in the white owned business left in the area or a memory of a previous encounter with white business owners. In addition, participants also discussed the role of local government in marginalizing Oak Cliff. The journalist covering the event writes that participants asked “whether the systematic racism of government bodies has made a choice about the location of the resources of the city.”²⁰ In fact, a current parishioner, new to Holy Cross but a long time resident of Dallas, described Oak Cliff as “on the fringes of the city” and “neglected...even though it is part of Dallas proper. [The city] has only recently tried to redevelop some areas.” He went on to say that for a long time, a nearby VA hospital was “the only thing here” and that most residents had to commute to find work.²¹ In the seventies and eighties then, Oak Cliff was a neighborhood in decline, suffering from the cumulative effects of segregation and neglect. Indeed, Oak Cliff was like, Deutsch’s Boston, a “reinvented city”—one where city policies changed the ethnic and class landscape of certain neighborhoods.²² In Oak Cliff, the white majority was replaced with an African American one and prosperity with poverty. But as the talks at Holy Cross demonstrate, its residents had not lost hope of

¹⁹ “Economy of South Oak Cliff Topic of Holy Cross program” *Texas Catholic* [Dallas, Tx] 28 Jan. 1977.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Ken Eppes, interview with the author, 7 Oct. 2006.

²² Deutsch writes, “By the late nineteenth century, Boston had assumed its modern outlines. In a brief orgy of annexation, Boston brought within its borders...[several] outline territories...Impoverished immigrants continued to flock to the North and West Ends but also crowded into the genteel housing stock of the new South End...” Deutsch, 6. Deutsch explores the term “reinvented city” on page 285.

changing the neighborhood's future and indeed were attempting to "redraw the city" and help Oak Cliff prosper. Nonetheless, they faced a formidable challenge.

White flight and the lack of a viable economy in Oak Cliff meant that the parishioners of Holy Cross were well aware of the destructive effects of both individual and structural racism, a form of violence in itself. Without jobs and city support, many of Oak Cliff's African American residents sank into poverty. Parishioners and residents could easily see the contrast between their own predominantly black neighborhood and the booming, white suburbs on the other side of I-35. The marginalization of Oak Cliff and its residents' subsequent experience of exclusion certainly contributed to the parishioners' understanding of what it meant to be victims of state structural violence. Writing about Jewish participants in the Sanctuary Movement, Susan Bibler Coutin notes, "[U]nlike their Christian colleagues, [they] did not need to cross a border between security and suffering to enter Central American reality. Their own history placed them already on the other side."²³ Similarly, the parishioners' experience as victims of state structural violence meant that they could identify with the marginalized Central American refugees, who also suffered from governments that relegated the poor to slums and shantytowns. Living or worshipping in a community marked by segregation and neglect created a sense of shared suffering that encouraged the parishioners to unite with and share their urban space with Central American refugees.

But shared suffering could also create divisions. Perceptions of community suffering might inspire some to argue that they should focus first on improving local conditions. For example, one prominent member of Holy Cross, Deacon Henry Vault,

²³ Coutin, 79.

voted against participating in the Sanctuary Movement arguing, “We have social problems here in our community that we should be concerned with also—more concerned with.”²⁴ However, it was precisely those social problems that allowed Holy Cross to establish some common ground between the community, its parishioners and the refugees. Holy Cross’ location resulted in the church and its parishioners’ commitment to social justice. This activism attracted Catholics and even non-Catholics from throughout Dallas, creating a border zone where poor and middle class blacks, Latinos and whites could interact and worship together.

“A Very Unique Parish”

The diocese of Dallas established Holy Cross parish in 1956, when Oak Cliff and to a larger extent South Dallas was in development. Evelyn Macek a long time parishioner of Holy Cross remembers once overhearing someone say,

[t]hat he had never been that far south in Dallas County. He wondered who had put a parish so far out in the sticks. Bishop Gorman overheard him. He stated that he had started the parish because he knew where his people were and to remember that Holy Cross would someday be a very unique parish...He was right.²⁵

The uniqueness would stem from its marginalized location, diverse membership and the church’s commitment to social justice. Father Tim Gallob arrived in the parish in 1969 and remains the priest to this day. He is so well regarded that parishioners circulate the following story:

²⁴ “A Dallas Church becomes a Sanctuary for Refugees,” *Texas Observer*, 23 Dec. 1983, see Holy Cross Vertical File at the Texas Catholic Archives. Henry Vault’s feelings are by no means unique or the exception, as Nicolás C. Vaca has discussed, experiences of suffering do not always create solidarity between the black and latino communities. See Nicolás C. Vaca, *The Presumed Alliance* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004). He cites a study that found “Blacks do not believe that Latinos are as deserving of civil rights protections as Blas because Blacks have suffered more discrimination than Latinos.” Vaca, 9.

²⁵ This quote is from a photocopy of an article Evelyn Macek wrote on the history of Holy Cross that I found folded in one of the parish directories.

One of the reasons why [Father Tim] is here is because when he was ordained and he came to the diocese for an assignment—this is the story; I wasn't there to hear it—that he told the bishop: I want you to assign me to the poorest parish in the diocese.²⁶

This story, related by Bill Acosta, expresses both the parishioners' great affection for their priest—there is an almost legendary aspect to Bill's retelling—as well as Father Tim's deep commitment to serving the poor. Father Tim's leadership, in addition to the presence of Sister Patricia Ridgley and Sister Linda Hajek (who has since left her religious order), helped steer the parish towards a community activism that not only attracted a diverse array of parishioners but also created a space where people from throughout Dallas and Texas came to live together (as was the case in Bethany House), volunteer together (in the social outreach programs), and organize together. These networks converged at Holy Cross and exposed parishioners to emerging ideas and discussions on poverty and current global events, all of which would empower and educate them, as well as contribute to their decision to participate in the Sanctuary Movement.

In his article, "The Social Space of Postmodernism," Roger Rouse quotes Américo Paredes' explanation that borders are not necessarily physical sites, but can also be "a sensitized area where two cultures or two political systems come face to face."²⁷ In the case of Oak Cliff, three cultures were intersecting at the Holy Cross parish to create a border zone that was and is constantly changing.²⁸ As mentioned earlier, in the seventies and eighties Holy Cross had a predominantly black congregation. However, Sr. Patricia

²⁶ Bill Acosta, interview with the author.

²⁷ Roger Rouse, "Mexican Migration and the Social Space of Postmodernism," *Diaspora* 1.1 (1991): 15.

²⁸ For example, many parishioners explained that the parish has moved from being made up of mostly Anglo parishioners in the 60s, to a predominance of African American parishioners in the 70s and 80s, and now there is an equal number or more of Latinos.

describes the presence of an “active minority” of white and Latino families.²⁹ Anglo parishioners typically had been members since before integration, but Mexican American families started to attend in the early seventies when Father Tim began offering a Mass in Spanish. According to Bill Acosta, Mexican Americans drove to Holy Cross from all over Dallas to attend the Spanish Mass.³⁰ Perhaps fleeing ethnic exclusion at other Catholic churches, Mexican Americans found a welcoming community at Holy Cross, one that celebrated its diversity.³¹

In fact, Holy Cross worked hard to ensure parishioners felt welcome and included, and the church embraced multiculturalism. For example, at Holy Cross’ twentieth anniversary celebration, the liturgy was read in the three languages most representative of the parishioners: Spanish, Ibo and English.³² At a time when other priests were refusing to say Mass in Spanish, Father Tim’s decision to hold a tri-lingual service was remarkable indeed. In fact, in another effort that demonstrates Holy Cross’ wish to be inclusive, a committee was formed to acquire art that represented the different ethnic groups in the parish, and in February of 1978 a mural depiction of Mexican heritage was unveiled. An article in the *Texas Catholic* explained that the church hoped the mural would “serve as a means of educating their parishioners to the ethnic background of Mexico.” The mural demonstrated that at Holy Cross people of different races were not

²⁹ Patricia Ridgeley, interview with the author, 22 Sept. 2006, Dallas, Tx.

³⁰ Bill Acosta, interview with the author.

³¹ I am not sure how many churches were offering a Spanish mass, but Bill recalls a telling incident where a priest responded to a question about starting up a Spanish mass at his church, the nearby St. Elizabeth’s: “we will have a mass in Spanish here at St. Elizabeth’s...over my dead body.” The priest’s words indicate tensions between the Spanish speaking community and some churches. Bill Acosta, interview with the author.

³² “Twentieth Anniversary Celebrated at Holy Cross,” *Texas Catholic* [Dallas, Tx] 17 Sept. 1976. See Holy Cross Vertical file at Catholic Archives.

merely given a space with no expectation of interacting with each other.³³ Instead, the members sought to educate each other about their respective cultures and race. The emphasis placed on understanding and celebrating other cultures ensured that all parishioners would be exposed to the tri-cultural make up of the parish. While Mass might be segregated because of language issues, the church itself represented a space that the three groups had in common, a religion they shared. At celebrations, activities, and parish council meetings each group would share their own experiences with poverty and suffering with the community and its mission.³⁴

Besides being a space, where people of different race came together, Holy Cross, was also place of different neighborhoods interacted. Many of these parishioners were not from the immediate parish vicinity—a glance at the parish directory of 1981 shows that many parishioners lived in different zip codes. Moreover, interviews with parishioners, none of whom lived within the parish boundaries at the time of the Sanctuary Movement, indicated that many commuted to Holy Cross to attend Mass. Bill and Grace Acosta, for example, lived in the neighboring parish of St. Elizabeth's. Reva Carter had lived in apartments neighboring the church for two years in the early seventies, but then moved to the other side of I-35. Carole Brown recalled that most parishioners, including African Americans, came from neighborhoods throughout Dallas “because there actually weren't that many Catholic Churches where African Americans

³³ This is a common criticism directed towards “multiculturalist” churches, see Timothy M. Matovina, “Representation and the Reconstruction of power: the Rise of PADRES and Las Hermanas” in *What's Left? Liberal American Catholics*, ed. Mary Jo Weaver (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999) 215.

³⁴ Reva Carter suggested this idea to me. Reva Carter, interview with the author.

were attending.”³⁵ So, in addition to a Mexican American community traveling to Mass, many black and Anglo parishioners did also.

There was yet another network that converged at Holy Cross: the small community of people who lived in Bethany House, a convent on church property that had been turned into a Catholic commune. The transition occurred in the early eighties, as Srs. Patricia and Linda became more involved in the activist community in Dallas. They came into contact with people who shared a similar interest in social justice issues. At the time, only Srs. Patricia and Linda and another nun lived in the convent, a space that could easily fit many more people.³⁶ In 1982, they invited some of their co-workers to come live with them. The group was never very large; at its height, it probably had less than ten people. There was a student from Southern Methodist University, a couple of teachers who worked in the nearby schools, the nuns, volunteer workers from a German peace organization, and sometimes special guests or friends who needed a space. At one point, several farm worker organizers stayed at the house. It is interesting to note that aside from the farm workers and the Salvadoran family that lived at Bethany House in the early days of the Sanctuary movement; the regular inhabitants were Anglos, but they had diverse religious backgrounds—most were Catholic, some were Methodists and others were Episcopalians.³⁷

In this regard, Bethany House, like Deutsch’s Denison House, also represented a white, middle class incursion into the community. The inhabitants were similarly committed to community organizing, and in fact that was the tie that bound them all: their interest in working in the nearby community or what Sr. Linda calls their “commitment

³⁵ Carole Brown, interview with the author, 8 Dec. 2006, Dallas, Tx.

³⁶ Linda Hajek, interview with the author, 10 Dec. 2006, Dallas, Tx.

³⁷ Ibid.

to a gospel of social justice and peace.”³⁸ Bethany House was instrumental in the days when the church was discussing sanctuary—several of the meetings were held there, and its inhabitants were heavily involved in the activist community. Writing about Denison House, Deutsch explains that it “was both part of a city reconceived and a vehicle for building a reconceived city.”³⁹ Bethany House occupied a similar position. Its existence was a direct result of the need for social outreach programs in the neighborhood (many of its inhabitants chose to live there because they worked or volunteered in the community), and its members were committed to helping rehabilitate the area. Moreover, the parish provided white liberal activists with a space to organize—something that might have been in short supply in conservative-Reagan era Dallas.

In addition to being a space where people of different races, cultures and political persuasions could interact, Holy Cross also represented a border zone where people of different classes and economic status met. As mentioned earlier, Holy Cross parish is located in a neglected part of Dallas. Sr. Patricia explained that the parish is “situated in a low-income...part of the city,” but its membership was largely working and middle class. There were “many teachers in the congregation—first generation college; only a few ‘professionals’ in the sense of 2 pharmacists. But the parish was basically middle class economically and socially.” As a result of this dichotomy between the parishioners and the community members, the church took on, as Sr. Patricia describes it, “a tradition of social outreach.”⁴⁰ The church provided a food pantry, youth programs, women’s organizations and a space where people could meet and discuss community development issues.

³⁸ Linda Hajek, interview with the author, 10 Dec. 2006.

³⁹ Deutsch, 14.

⁴⁰ Patricia Ridgley, “RE: Holy Cross Sanctuary,” email to the author, 10 Oct. 2006.

It was this social justice leaning that many parishioners credit the church's decision to participate in the Sanctuary Movement. When asked why Holy Cross was the only Catholic Church in Texas to formally declare sanctuary, Carole Brown, president of the Parish Council during the sanctuary decision, explained:

Well, because [we] are already participating in other kinds of programs that are reaching out...[Also,] I think the leadership being involved themselves...They might have a sermon on...something...that pertains to social action that should be taken [and] we knew that they were out in the open participating.⁴¹

Holy Cross' social outreach programs transcended the boundaries between its middle class parishioners and white leadership and the neighboring lower class and African American community members. This history of ignoring socially constructed borders would mean that when the time came to decide whether to help Central Americans, borders of ethnicity and class would not be an obstacle to Holy Cross' participation, since there was already a precedent for crossing such borders. In addition, Carole's reference to the example set by the leadership highlights the importance of their active participation. The clergy's record of involvement in community service meant that they had additional influence in the church because they "talked the talk and walked the walk." So when two of those leaders, Sr. Patricia and Sr. Linda began to get involved in the Central American activist scene, parishioners knew it was a legitimate and worthwhile cause.

Sr. Patricia and Sr. Linda were among the individuals who lived at Bethany House, and it was they who began networking with other progressive Christians in Dallas, via a Christian socialist inquiry group. This group connected the two nuns to university students and professors who were also interested in exploring this topic. At

⁴¹ Carole Brown, interview with the author.

these meetings, participants discussed topics such as liberation theology and the events taking place in Central America. Inspired by the stories of Christian courage in the face of persecution and appalled at accounts of torture and repression, the two nuns organized a prayer service, which was a great success, in 1981 for four American churchwomen who had been killed in El Salvador. A wide sampling of people from Dallas attended.

We got 200 people [to] come in...And it was packed with this—I looked around and thought, Lord have mercy—myriad, like, SWPs, socialist worker’s party people, because some of us had been friends with some of them, Communist party people—I didn’t even know they existed here, old nuns hobbling in, and then young people. I mean the church was packed...I remember standing at the back and thinking, oh my gosh...what had happened.⁴²

Moved by this outpouring of solidarity, the two women decided, “We have to be organized so we made the religious task force on Central America.”⁴³ Building off the membership of the Christian socialist inquiry group, the task force would also be a largely ecumenical organization. Later, they learned of other groups interested in Central America and networked with them. But at this early stage, the task force leadership decided that in order to avoid alienating their more conservative members, they would have to set up a different organization for the more radical, activist and labor organizers, a political group, “which was CISPES, the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador.”⁴⁴

Both of these groups met at Holy Cross in Bethany House, and some of their meetings were attended by guests who would come from throughout Texas and the Southwest to talk about Central America, including refugees fleeing repression and

⁴² Sr. Linda, interview with the author, 22 Sept, 2006.

⁴³ *ibid.*

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

sanctuary workers like Jim Corbett and Jack and Diane Elder.⁴⁵ These groups provided important meeting places and interactions between people who were concerned with Central America, and it was these links and networks that ultimately spread the idea of sanctuary to Holy Cross. Sr. Linda recalls attending a meeting in Colorado where they attended a session on the Sanctuary Movement, and soon after they were in touch with sanctuary workers.⁴⁶

Despite the fact that the meetings were held on the premises of Holy Cross Church and organized by its leadership, Sr. Patricia recalls that only a small percentage of the parish attended. She remembered, “More than anything the parish of Holy Cross—they knew that Bethany House, our community, was very involved in these issues and they said good, let it be.”⁴⁷ The parishioners who occasionally attended these meetings, often left inspired and informed by the discussion. Reva Carter once attended a meeting at Southern Methodist University, where she heard Dr. Bill Farmer, a Methodist preacher and professor, and others speak on the issue of sanctuary, and she recalls leaving with a “broader understanding” of what was happening in Central America.⁴⁸

The close proximity of the meetings and the active participation of church leaders in networks that were trying to help Central Americans ensured that many of the parishioners were informed of the plight of the refugees and well aware of the measures that could be taken to help them. The presence of guest speakers, who were refugees and sanctuary workers, further highlighted the importance of taking action and gave credence

⁴⁵ Jim Corbett, an Arizona Rancher, is largely credited with starting the Sanctuary Movement in the Southwest. Jack and Diane Elder were Sanctuary workers and the directors of Casa Romero—a shelter for refugees in South Texas. Jack Elder was eventually imprisoned for his role in transporting “illegal aliens.”

⁴⁶ Sr. Linda and Sr. Patricia, interviews with the author, 22 Sept. 2006, Dallas, Tx.

⁴⁷ Patricia Ridgley, interview with the author, 22 Sept. 2006, Dallas, Tx.

⁴⁸ Reva Carter, interview with the author.

to reports parishioners might have been hearing of government repression. Holy Cross as a site where African Americans, Latinos and Anglos, the poor and middle class, and conservative Christians and radical labor organizers converged, created a border zone where people who did not ordinarily interact could meet and share experiences on a regular basis. In fact, the parishioners themselves recognized the unique nature of the parish. When asked why she thought Holy Cross was the only Texas Catholic church to formally declare sanctuary, Reva Carter explained, “There were enough diversity and trust with the group that was working with it...if you look at our group we have Hispanics, Blacks and Anglos...I felt like that is reflective of our social consciousness.”⁴⁹

The decision to participate in the Sanctuary Movement was put to a vote after Mass on the weekend of June 25th to the 26th, 1983 and 67% of the parishioners voted in favor.⁵⁰ Because of their majority status, African Americans played critical role in the decision. This next section turns to the African American parishioners and their memories of violence as a decisive factor in their participation.

Talking the Talk and Walking the Walk: Memories of Structural Violence and the Underground Railroad

In her study of the Sanctuary Movement, anthropologist Susan Bibler Coutin explains, “Jewish Sanctuary workers did not undergo conversions but rather identified with Central Americans out of their own history of marginalization.”⁵¹ She later writes that, while “Christians tended to identify with refugees by drawing on the view that God is among the poor...and by comparing Central Americans experiences to Christ’s persecution and

⁴⁹ Reva Carter, interview with the author.

⁵⁰ Kevin Shay, “Holy Cross offers Refugees Sanctuary” *Texas Catholic*, 14 Oct. 1983. See Holy Cross Vertical File at the Catholic Archives in Austin, Tx.

⁵¹ Coutin, 71.

martyrdom,” Jews could relate to Central Americans based on “parallels in their people’s persecutions.”⁵² However, Coutin forgets about the experiences of African American Christians, who likewise shared a “history of marginalization.” When asked to explain the sanctuary decision, black parishioners of Holy Cross repeatedly referenced the past when they and their ancestors were systematically excluded and persecuted because of their race. This historical memory of violence and their contemporary struggles against racism were critical factors in their decision to participate in the Sanctuary Movement.

Establishing a link between identity and activism is a complicated process. In his introduction to *Black Corona*, a study of black community activism in New York, Steven Gregory cautions against assuming the existence of a homogenous black identity; instead, scholars must understand the “relationship between the formation of collective identities *and* structural arrangements of power” if we ultimately hope to explain “how and why people collectively act.”⁵³ The earlier sections of this essay have attempted to explore “the structural arrangements of power” by describing Oak Cliff’s decline and the relationship between black parishioners and the Church and community at large. This section seeks to understand how historical memories of persecution formed a shared consciousness of the need to act to defend others who are experiencing similar forms of violence.⁵⁴

Perhaps the most obvious comparison between the history of African Americans and the plight of the Central American refugees is the Underground Railroad. In fact,

⁵² Coutin, 78.

⁵³ Steven Gregory, *Black Corona: Race and the Politics of Place in an Urban Community* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 14.

⁵⁴ This was by no means an inevitable result, see fnnt 24.

many journalists dwelt on this comparison, and sanctuary workers embraced it.⁵⁵ It was also a comparison discussed among parishioners and Holy Cross clergy at the time. One parishioner recalled an incident, verified by others, that deserves to be detailed in full:

One time when they were discussing whether or not to declare sanctuary, a woman stood up [a long time African American parishioner] and said, I don't think we should be doing this because it's illegal and I didn't come here to do illegal things but for the word of God. And Father Tim said: Thank you for your word, but I want to remind you about something that existed in the 19th century—something called the Underground Railroad that helped a lot of us. That was illegal too and that was the Word of God.⁵⁶

By referencing the Underground Railroad and the risks that participants took when they helped slaves to freedom, Father Tim reminded the parishioners that illegality was not always equivalent to ungodly. He also drew on a historical incident that, at the time in which it occurred, was probably just as heatedly debated but that today has entered into history as a moment of great moral triumph. But many parishioners did not need Father Tim to make the comparison for them. When asked why she supported the decision, Carole Brown explained,

I didn't see there was any way we could just turn our backs on them, and I think back to the plight of the slaves when they needed assistance, people helped them along the way. And you know...they were strangers to them...So I thought that was a similar plight, you know, people gave them assistance and all and so that helped me to have compassion for them.⁵⁷

This memory of the kindness of strangers during times of need helped parishioners identify with Central American refugees.

⁵⁵ For example, see Renny Golden and Michael McConnell, *Sanctuary: the New Underground Railroad*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986).

⁵⁶ Anabelle Simon, Interview with the author, 8 Oct. 2006, Dallas, Tx. This is a pseudonym, as the parishioner did not wish to give her name.

⁵⁷ Carole Brown, interview with the author.

As a result, black parishioners viewed their participation as a continuation of their struggle against racism and structural violence. Reva Carter explains that at Holy Cross, parishioners did not share the poverty of the refugees, but their ancestors once did.

We have poverty here in the states, but we didn't have the kind of poverty [experienced by central Americans] *since* the civil war. Past Jim Crow, past the lynchings and all that stuff that in 1980 we weren't hearing so much in our community—that type of violence that was being experienced. [*italics mine*]⁵⁸

Reva brings up several interesting points. Note first how she equates poverty with violence, an idea that is not common among many Americans. In doing so, she establishes a link between the poverty/violence post-Civil War African Americans experienced and the poverty/violence that Central American refugees were currently experiencing. Likewise, her reference to Jim Crow laws and lynchings recalls a period in the not too distant past, when violence against African Americans went unpunished and was even encouraged by state laws. These memories of persecution united African Americans and Central American refugees, just as it did Jewish sanctuary workers and the refugees described by Coutin.

The historical memory of persecution served as a means of motivating African Americans to take collective action. Holy Cross' declaration of sanctuary is noteworthy because it demonstrates how shared experiences of suffering brought Latinos and African Americans together to protest racial and structural injustice. In so doing, African Americans were inspired to open up their neighborhood and their parish to Latinos, a move that ironically would eventually lead to the remapping of Oak Cliff as a neighborhood with a burgeoning Latino presence. The combination of the Spanish Mass, as well as the presence of Central Americans passing through the area in search of

⁵⁸ Reva Carter, interview with the author.

sanctuary, eventually drew more and more Latinos to the area; today, there are more Latino parishioners at Holy Cross than there are African Americans.

Conclusions

Coutin explains that when U.S. churches helped refugees, “barriers between citizen and undocumented, U.S. and Central American and first and third world were being broken.”⁵⁹ Holy Cross’ decision to participate in the Sanctuary Movement shows how, for African Americans, many of those barriers were actually artificial.⁶⁰ Despite their status as citizens of the United States, historically, African Americans have been systematically denied the rights that accompanied their citizenship. Living and worshipping in what essentially amounted to a Dallas ghetto, places sometimes described as third world in the first world, Holy Cross parishioners did not need to travel far to see the suffering caused by poverty. In addition, Holy Cross, as a place where different networks of people overlapped, fostered an activist multiculturalism, so to speak, that is a confluence of representatives from diverse cultures and races, united by a common interest in the community at large and moved beyond themselves to help others. Moreover, the tri-racial nature of Holy Cross parish demonstrates how artificial borders between people of different nations were overcome.

As mentioned in the introduction, the story of Sanctuary at Holy Cross is as much about the people as it is about the place. As Deutsch observes, “The relation between physical and human urban landscapes is intimate and intimately raced and gendered.... In

⁵⁹ Coutin, 46.

⁶⁰ This idea is similar to one Coutin makes when she analyzing a quote made by a sanctuary worker, she writes that crossing borders resulted in a reevaluation of reality, one that “exposed the falsehood of life in the United States.” Coutin, 62.

an urban landscape, you know who you are by where you are.”⁶¹ The actions of the parishioners and the clergy cannot be disassociated with their setting in Oak Cliff. The surrounding poverty influenced the church’s agenda and its leaders, and, in turn, the parishioners were learned about problems and participated in solutions. Reva Carter explained that what made Holy Cross and Father Tim especially popular was his sermons: “They are very applicable so that...what you get with him is a highlight of how you use [bible readings] today...I go away feeling like I have a living message, living in terms of how to live better, how to apply it.”⁶² While this paper has neglected the religious dimension of their actions, in reality it was a critical factor in their decision because, to a large extent, it united all the actors involved and inspired the remapping of Holy Cross parish as a common ground for those interested in social justice. In the end, Holy Cross was the only Catholic Church in Texas to participate because its location, its membership and the effect they had on one another, created a community that broke down borders to find common ground.

⁶¹ Deutsch, 286.

⁶² Reva Carter, interview with the author.

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