

. . OF THE . .

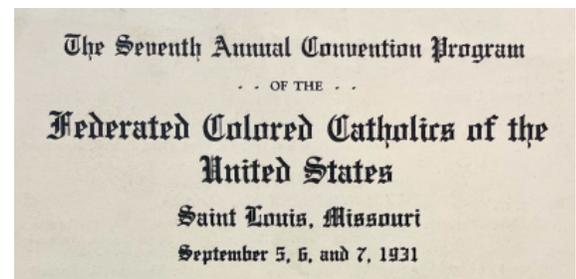
Federated Colored Catholics of the United States

Saint Louis, Missouri

The Federated Colored Catholics of America

In 1917, Dr. Thomas Wyatt Turner, a biology professor at the Hampton Institute in Virginia and a member of the NAACP, began holding ad hoc meetings of Black Catholics in his home to begin addressing the problem of racial inequalities within the American Catholic Church. During these meetings, Turner would facilitate conversations about ways in which to combat racial discrimination within the Church. In 1924, Turner would formally organize the group, calling it the Federated Colored Catholics of the United States.

The Federation's top priority was the availability of a Catholic education to Black students, as well as a more robust development of the Black clergy. Under Turner's leadership, the group both lobbied the American Catholic hierarchy through letters and personal meetings, and, through apostolic delegates, appealed to the Vatican in an effort to eliminate racial discrimination in the Church, especially in Catholic schools, universities, and seminaries.



Courtesy of the Saint
Louis University Archives.

This exhibit will explore one of the ways in which the Federated Colored Catholics sought to galvanize support from the larger Catholic community: annual conventions. In 1931, one such event was held in St. Louis; its official program is held in the Saint Louis University Archives, allowing us to get a glimpse into the Federated Colored Catholics' activism. We will also explore tensions that arose within the Federation, specifically, a conflict between Turner and [Fr. Markoe of St. Elizabeth's parish](#). These conflicts ultimately caused the Federation to dissolve in 1932, just one year after the convention was held in St. Louis.

The Convention

The Flyer: Appealing to the Public

ATTEND . . .

SEVENTH ANNUAL CONVENTION

— OF THE —

Federated Colored Catholics of the United States

at ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI - - SEPTEMBER 5th, 6th, and 7th

The CATHOLIC CHURCH
is the only ultimate solution
for all problems of Race!



St. Francis Xavier Church in Grand Boulevard, St. Louis, Missouri,
where the 1911 Synod Convention was held.

Help the Negro to a greater
share in the organized Cath-
olic life of our nation!

America's Most Important Interracial Congress

1st Day—The Negro In Industry 2nd Day—Solemn Interracial Mass
3rd Day—The Negro and Catholic Action

St. Louis Welcomes the Catholic Negroes of America

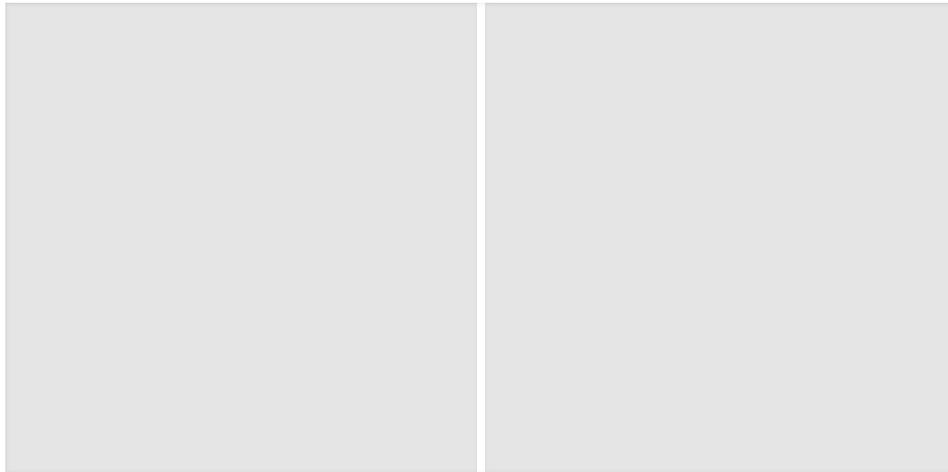
LABOR DAY EXCURSION RATES

For particulars, write
ST. ELIZABETH'S CHURCH
2721 Pine Blvd. - St. Louis, Mo.

Flyer for the Annual Convention. Courtesy
of the Saint Louis University Archives.

On September 5th, 6th, and 7th of 1931, the 7th Annual Convention of the Federated Colored Catholics of the United States took place in St. Louis: the two conference days were held at the Peoples Finance Building, a major political, commercial, and cultural center for Black St. Louisans, and the solemn interracial mass took place at St. Francis Xavier Church. A flyer for the event held in the SLU archives describes the event as “**America’s Most Important Interracial Congress.**” This emphasis on the importance of the event implies the increasing need for racial reform in the United States and, specifically in this case, the role of the Catholic Church in facilitating and enacting this reform. Moreover, the interracial nature of the event shows the

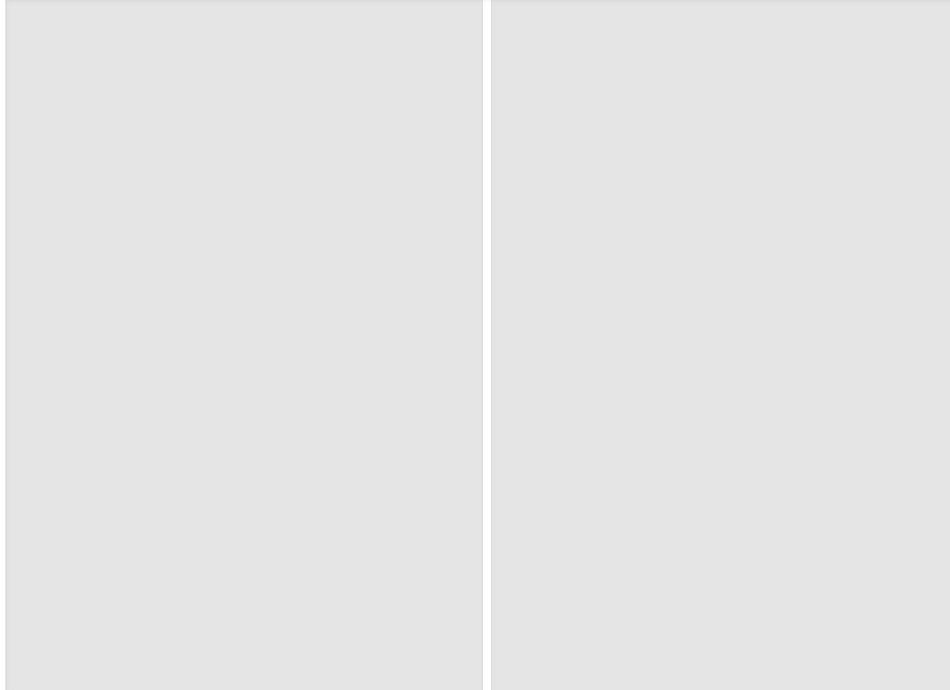
progress being made towards desegregation and equality; we will see in the following section, however, that this progress was not without complication and conflict.



Details of flyer. Courtesy of the Saint Louis University Archives.

These two quotes featured on the flyer, surrounding an image of St. Francis Xavier church, directly link the Catholic Church with the struggle for racial equality. The quote on the left states that **“the CATHOLIC CHURCH is the only ultimate solution for all problems of Race!”** This assertive and blunt statement indicates the Federation’s belief that the Church was able to—and indeed, was obligated to—address racial inequality and participate in its elimination. The quote on the right appeals to St. Louis’s Catholic community to **“help the Negro to a greater share in the organized Catholic life of our nation!”** The Catholic Church is again implicated in the fight for equality. In addition, the broader Catholic community is appealed to in such a way that St. Louis becomes a node in the national movement for the fight for the end to racial discrimination and oppression.

A Glimpse Inside the Conference: The Official Program



Official Program of the Federated Colored Catholics Convention,
1931. Courtesy of the Saint Louis University Archives.

The official program for the convention gives us a sense of the types of conversations that would have been happening over the event's three days. The first day, September 5th, focused on topics related to **"the Negro in Industry."** Speakers during the morning session included a white reverend from Minnesota, a Black member of the U.S. Department of Commerce, and a Black executive secretary of the St. Louis Urban League. Just this small collection of speakers from the morning session of the convention's first day shows the truly interracial quality of the event. Black voices were just as much a part of the conversation as white voices.

Women also attended as speakers, including Oblate Sr. Mary Laurentia, who spoke on the need for increased access to Catholic education for Black students. While women were given the opportunity to speak, they still made up just 3 of the fourteen speakers, demonstrating the persistence of gender inequality that accompanied the evolution of the civil rights movement. The third day of the convention, which revolved around **"the Negro and Catholic Action,"** included a wide variety of speakers, including multiple reverends from around the country, doctors, and newspaper editors. The afternoon session was followed by a trip to Normandy, a city just outside

St. Louis, to attend the Annual Bazaar of the Oblate Sisters, who would also provide dinner. The evening ended with a convention dance at the Saint Louis University Gymnasium. Music would be provided by Black conductor Harvey Lankford's orchestra.

The convention, then, represented the interracial quality of the Federated Colored Catholics and the organization's determination to educate the wider Catholic community—American and global—about the pressing need for racial equality. The various events such as the interracial mass, dance, and luncheon, indicate that the event was meant not only to foster more official, policy-related connections between Black and white Catholics, but also a sense of community that would disregard racial categories. The progress towards interracial cohesion shown in the flyer and program was in many ways encouraging. However, as the following section will demonstrate, this emphasis on cohesion was not without controversy, and led to disagreements between Turner, who desired a more Black-centered approach, and the Federated Colored Catholics' white leaders, who prioritized the need for interracial cooperation.

The Conflict

The controversy within the Federated Colored Catholics stemmed from disagreements between its three main leaders, Turner (middle), Fr. Markoe (left), and his fellow Jesuit Fr. John LaFarge (right). The two white priests—Fr. Markoe and Fr. LaFarge—believed that the key to ending racial discrimination was through educating white people and bringing them increasingly into interracial settings. Accordingly, they insisted on shifting the Federation away from its origins as an essentially Black Catholic protest group towards a necessarily interracial group where whites would play a crucial role in procuring close cooperation with ecclesiastical authorities.

Turner, the Federation's first president and a Black man, acknowledged the need and desirability for cooperation between Black and white Catholics. However, he envisioned the Federated Colored Catholics as retaining its fundamentally Black, lay identity. Moreover, he sought to increase Black clergy's access to leadership roles in an effort to decrease the need for white ecclesiastical intermediaries. Essentially, Turner was not interested in relying on white support to

address racial inequality. Rather, he saw the Federated Colored Catholics as a Black organization that would remain primarily within the Black Catholic community.

The timeline of the Federation's internal controversy can be mapped onto the evolution of its chronicle. The publication grew out of St. Elizabeth's Chronicle, essentially a parish newsletter that Fr. Markoe helped to produce. In 1929, "St. Elizabeth's" was dropped from the name, and the "Chronicle" was published as the "official organ" of the Federated Colored Catholics. At this time, it was still edited and produced by Fr. Markoe who was still the pastor of St. Elizabeth's. According to Dr. Marilyn Wenzke Nickels, a professor at Catholic University and later Education Specialist for the Bureau of the Census in D.C., Fr. Markoe increasingly saw himself as a spokesperson for Black people, alongside Fr. LaFarge, in his dual roles as editor of the chronicle and co-leader of the Federation. Fr. LaFarge even became nationally known as the foremost spokesman of racial equality, as Nickels writes in her 1988 book, *Black Catholic Protest and the Federated Colored Catholics, 1917-1933: Three Perspectives on Racial Justice (1988)*.

Throughout the early years of the 1930s, Turner came into increasing conflict with Frs. Markoe and LaFarge. In 1932, one year after the convention that was held in St. Louis, Fr. Markoe crafted changes in the Federation's constitution, including—at Fr. LaFarge's request—a new title for the journal: the "Interracial Review." Turner rejected this and many other changes, publicly accusing the two Jesuits of "deception, clericalism, and paternalism," according to Nickels. In response, the executive committee of the Federation, which at this point was decidedly interracial as opposed to a majority Black leadership, met in Chicago and removed Turner as president. They renamed the organization the "National Catholic Interracial Federation," essentially transforming it into a completely different organization from what had begun in Turner's home in Virginia three years earlier.

Turner refused to accept the decisions made in Chicago, and remained president of the old Federation until 1933, when he stepped down for medical reasons. For several years he served as honorary president, and for a few more years the Federation continued to hold annual meetings. However, the

conflict and definitive schism among the original leaders rendered both organizations ineffective: in 1952, the Federation of Colored Catholics held its last event. Fr. LaFarge moved the National Catholic Interracial Federation to the east coast, renaming it the “Catholic Interracial Council of New York.” The “Interracial Review” continued to be published, now out of New York. From 1934 onwards, LaFarge’s New York-based organization became the primary Catholic group promoting racial justice in the United States. While some members of the original Federated Colored Catholics joined the Interracial Council, it bore little resemblance to Turner’s original, homegrown association.

The ultimately schismatic conflict within the leadership of the Federated Colored Catholics is emblematic of the uneven evolution of racial equality in the United States. Cooperation between white and Black Catholics required a delicate balance of support and independence. Black Catholics were more often than not determined to gain their rights through their own actions, and white allies were often important supporters of such actions. However, as the disagreements between Turner and Frs. Markoe and LaFarge as well as the dissolution

of the Federated Colored Catholics show, racial equality was not won in the United States in any neat, uncomplicated way. Rather, it was colored by moments of simultaneous conflict and cooperation, and progress was often accompanied by tension.

[Click to return to Main Exhibit](#)