



Jesse Louis Jackson and I : A Reflection During Eastertide

By

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I. Who Was Jesse Jackson to Me?

The Reverend Dr. Jesse Louis Jackson, 84, who was born in Greenville, South Carolina on October 8, 1941, died on *Mardi Gras*, February 17, 2026 at the beginning of the Lenten-Easter Season. The next day, Ash Wednesday, another towering African American leader, Dr. Norman Francis died. He was the 94-year-old brother of the late Bishop Joseph Francis, SVD., a distinguished educator and President of Xavier Catholic University in New Orleans for 47 years.

I was able to concelebrate the Liturgy of Christian Burial for my friend, Dr. Francis, at the Cathedral of St. Louis in New Orleans. However, I regret that I was not able to attend the funeral services for Reverend Jackson in late February and early March. Jesse Jackson and I knew each other, but not very well. Though my contacts with him were infrequent, his life and work have had a significant impact on my life and ministry. During these days of Eastertide, when we contemplate the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth and ponder the mystery of the Risen Lord, we also think about our own hope to share in “the life of the world to come.” These thoughts prompt this reflection on Jesse Jackson, a singular human being, who I believe thought of himself first and foremost not as a “civil rights activist” but as a Christian and a Baptist minister. I pray for him as the Church reflects on the gospels of the Sundays of Easter.

Americans in general and American Catholics in particular have profoundly different opinions of Reverend Jackson. There are those who thought he was a much-needed Spirit-filled visionary, the conscience of America, and a troubadour for racial justice and world peace. Some people thought of him as a loud, divisive, and ambitious troublemaker. Other people thought of him as a latter-day Old Testament prophet speaking truth to power. Still other people thought of him as the flawed heir to the irreplaceable Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., keeping hope alive. Many people of a certain age are convinced that he was the person without whom there would have been no biracial President Barack Obama.

There are entire generations of African Americans who are deeply grateful to him for building up their self-esteem by encouraging them to affirm, “I am SOMEBODY! I am SOMEBODY!” During my seminary years and my early years in the priesthood, I had the impression that, for various reasons, many of the Catholic laity, religious, and clergy I encountered disagreed with his message and his manner. They did not like him, did not respect him, did not know him.

While I did not agree with his positions on some important social and moral issues, he is one of a small group of people, including my family, from Chicago, the old neighborhood of my life, who opened my eyes. (I have written about this in my book, The Church and the Racial Divide: Reflections of an African American Catholic Bishop.)

II. Operation Breadbasket

In the late 1960’s my dear father, Cullen, my precious brother, Lawrence, and, sometimes, my wonderful sister, Patricia and I made our way, from time to time, on Saturday mornings to the southside meetings of Operation Breadbasket to hear Jesse Jackson’s powerful, encouraging messages that were one part scripture, one part motivational pep talk, one part economic lesson, and one part marching orders charging each of us to do something to advance racial and economic justice and world peace. I was struck by his imposing stature, powerful voice, and eloquent oratory in the style of Black Protestant preachers, like his mentor, The Reverend Dr. King. I can still hear him saying, “Never look down on anybody, unless you’re lifting him up!”

I learned a great deal about Jesse Jackson and Operation Breadbasket on those Saturday mornings. Operation Breadbasket was founded in Atlanta, Georgia as a department of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1962. In 1964, Mr. Jackson left his native South Carolina to study for the ministry at the Chicago Theological Seminary. He subsequently joined the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and worked to establish Operation Breadbasket in Chicago.

Beginning in 1967, Operation Breadbasket’s weekly Saturday morning meetings, which drew thousands to the South Side’s Parkway Ballroom, featured discussions, sermons, a jazz ensemble and choir, workshops (presented by Black and White political and economic leaders) promoting economic opportunities, and plans for economic boycotts of businesses that did not hire People of Color. The goal of Operation Breadbasket was to ensure fair employment for Black residents, especially by businesses located in African American communities. It actively supported the growth of Black owned businesses. These meetings were a major hub in the effort to bring about civil rights and economic fairness in Chicago during the late 1960s.

The core principle of Operation Breadbasket was the belief that African Americans should not support businesses that denied them job opportunities, career advancement, or basic courtesy. To achieve these goals listeners were urged to adopt the strategy of “selective patronage.” The early campaigns focused on supermarket chains and dairy companies. They organized pickets and encouraged boycotts of stores that carried products

from specific companies, pressuring them to improve their employment practices and support for Black communities. They used “the power of the pulpit and the purse,” to keep “a slice of the “bread” in Black communities. During a period of six years from 1966 to 1971, Operation Breadbasket’s efforts produced forty-five hundred jobs and sharply increased commerce involving Black-owned businesses. Economic gains on Chicago’s South Side amounted to \$57.5 million annually by 1971. I knew almost nothing about these ideas and tactics until I started attending Operation Breadbasket meetings. Seminary courses on social justice did not examine these very real problems in our dystopian world. Nor did they offer any creative efforts to solve them.

III. The Archdiocese of Chicago

I spoke to Jesse personally on several occasions after the Breadbasket meetings. One of our earliest conversations was about the impact that W. E. B. Du Bois’s The Souls of Black Folk had on each of us. He was very interested in the Catholic Church and the fact that I was in my final years of preparation to be ordained a Catholic priest. He told me that some White pastors, including a small number of Catholic pastors, were supportive of his “power of the purse and pulpit” and boycott projects as effective ways to counter the racial and economic injustices that were entrenched in the segregated neighborhoods of the South Side of Chicago. In his opinion, the Catholic pastors and parishes had the potential to play an influential role in the efforts of Operation Breadbasket because of the size and structure of the Catholic Church. However, he thought most of the pastors were cautious about openly supporting his efforts, in part, this was because there were so few African American Catholics and because White Catholic parishes that bordered on Black neighborhoods were in danger of “White flight” that would shrink their numbers and diminish their financial support.

Not only that, some White Catholics owned businesses that contributed to the problem because of their own racist policies of not hiring Black workers and making it almost impossible for Black owned businesses to open and flourish in their neighborhoods. Jesse openly challenged me asking if I thought the Catholic Church in Chicago was a prophetic voice against racism, or a silent perpetrator of the status quo. He asked me outright if I was convinced that God was calling me to be a Catholic priest. Would I be free to speak openly about the deeply ingrained structures of racial prejudice and economic injustice in the city of Chicago in which the Catholic Archdiocese plays an important role. He also asked me how I thought I would be treated as a priest in a Catholic Church that was overwhelmingly White. Would I be encouraged to make full use of my abilities and would I feel free to speak out honestly about racial prejudice within the Church?

I discussed these questions with my friends, Father George Clements, thought of as progressive, and Father Rollins Lambert, thought of as traditional, two of a very small number of African American priests in the Archdiocese. They answered my questions straightforwardly with surprising bluntness. In 1969, Father Lambert, at the time the first and only Black pastor in Chicago, boldly described John Cardinal Cody, the then Archbishop of Chicago, and “the whole White Church” as “unconsciously racist.” Father

Lambert said his recent appointment as Pastor of St. Dorothy Parish, a thriving all Black parish was a “political move.” He said that Father Clements, who had served six years as Associate Pastor of St. Dorothy Parish, should have been named pastor. Father Lambert said that, if Father Clements was not made a pastor immediately, he would not continue to serve as Pastor of St. Dorothy, since he would consider his ministry there to be a participation in racism.

I also spoke to Cardinal Cody about these questions before I was ordained a deacon. I knew that in 1962, as Archbishop of New Orleans, he decisively forced the desegregation of Catholic schools, before public school desegregation in that city. In Chicago, he supported integration and open housing in spite of the backlash from conservative White Catholics. He received more than six hundred letters from White Catholics outraged and disgusted over the Archdiocese’s support for desegregation between 1965 and 1968. At the same time, he was concerned about the pace of the civil rights movement. He is said to have asked Dr. King to stop some demonstrations in Chicago. He told me that perhaps Jesse Jackson was unaware of the many efforts of the Catholic Church in Chicago on behalf of Black communities, especially the work of the Catholic schools in providing excellent education to African American children who were not Catholics. He stressed that the situation concerning Father Lambert, Father Clements, and St. Dorothy Parish was more complex than the media suggested. He assured me that, as long as he was archbishop, he would encourage me to use my God given talents to the fullest in service to the Church. He later sent me to the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium to earn a Doctorate in Sacred Theology.

As my May 13, 1970 ordination approached, Jesse asked me a telling question. Since your home parish is in the neighborhood of the historic, beautiful South Shore Country Club, do you think the club will allow you to have your ordination and First Mass celebrations there? I told him I did not plan to have my celebrations at the Country Club. I said we both know the club is restricted, with a sign over the porte-cochere reading “For Members Only,” excluding Jewish Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, and African Americans from membership. Then he asked: wouldn’t some of the many White parishioners who are members of the club ask that the club make an exception for one of their parishioners on such an important occasion? I told him I would be uncomfortable asking them to do that. He bluntly asked: “Does that make you a coward?”

The club operated from 1906 to 1974, when it was sold to the Chicago Park District due to declining membership. As late as 1969, the club's leadership stated there were no plans to relax membership qualifications, despite changing demographics in the surrounding neighborhood. They would rather close than welcome a more diverse membership. The famously beautiful buildings on the banks of Lake Michigan are now open to all, as the new South Shore Cultural Center. By a strange fate and a stranger fortune, after their marriage at Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago on October 3, 1992, Michelle and Barack Obama had their wedding reception there celebrating in the

same elegant “country club” rooms from which they would have been excluded less than twenty years earlier.

At the November 7, 2008 celebration in Grant Park of the election of President Barack Obama, Reverend Jesse Jackson wept uncontrollably at the emotional, long-awaited culmination of the 60-year civil rights struggle, redeeming the suffering and sacrifices of activists and martyrs. He saw the President-elect’s victory as a “dream come true,” a move from the “slave ship to the White House”. He would live long enough to witness the systematic efforts by some forces in the United States to turn that dream into “a dream deferred.”

IV. Faith in Action

In 1971, the year after I was ordained a priest, Jesse Jackson left Operation Breadbasket to form Operation PUSH (People United to Save Humanity). He later changed the name to People United to Serve Humanity. After that we continued to communicate by occasional notes and infrequent brief meetings. He spoke highly of the American Bishops’ 1979 *“Brothers and Sisters to Us: A Pastoral Letter on Racism in Our Day”*. But he wondered how effectively it would be implemented.

Reverend Jackson believed firmly in the Christian faith. The resurrection of Jesus was the cornerstone of his faith. For him, this faith was the source of optimism even though he acknowledged that he was, like everyone else, a redeemed sinner. He believed that Easter faith in God must be an active, public commitment to social justice. He could not understand how some Christians could profess strong faith in the resurrection and argue that this faith did not require them to work to overcome all forms of injustice. He viewed the gospel as a call to serve the marginalized and to fight for economic and racial equality. He thought of his ministry as “faith in action”. Faith should not be confined to the sanctuary. For him prayer was a foundation for action, not an excuse for inaction.

He believed faith and hope are expressed in disciplined courageous work against injustice. His faith embraced Dr. King’s commitment to nonviolent resistance. The prophetic tradition of Sacred Scripture was foundational for his faith. It is that which guided his social and political concerns and empowered him to challenge established systems from the moral standpoint of Jesus Christ.

He wanted people to understand his Christian faith is what gives his politics a broadness and a depth that politics without a moral foundation does not have. He was not approaching questions of racial and economic justice from a merely managerial perspective. He was approaching them from a moral and spiritual perspective.

He believed in what he was doing and he believed that large forces of good were at work through him and every Christian. This is how he was able to get up in the morning and answers the question, why am I doing the work that I am doing? He was preaching the social gospel because it was part of something in which he believed deeply. He believed this was what God wanted him to spend his life doing.

V. Presidential Campaigns

In 1984, Reverend Jackson organized the Rainbow Coalition and resigned as president of Operation PUSH so that he could run for president of the United States as a progressive Democrat. He was a long-standing critic of the Republican Party because of his firm belief that the party largely represented the interests of the wealthy, ignoring the needs of the poor, and working at every level of government all the way to the White House and the Supreme Court to overturn the fair housing rights, fair education rights, fair employment rights, civil rights, and voting rights of People of Color. He welcomed Republican leaders to offer him evidence that his beliefs were incorrect.

Over the years he had become deeply frustrated by the Supreme Court's successful efforts to eviscerate almost completely President Lyndon Johnson's landmark 1965 Voting Rights Act. Chief Justice John Roberts, a Catholic, had long been a foe of the Act. As far back as 1982, as a young lawyer in the Reagan Administration, he opposed the expansion of the Act, arguing it was not needed since the problem of racial discrimination was a thing of the past. He wrote the majority Opinion of *Shelby County v. Holder*, June 25, 2013, which struck down section 4 (b) of the Act as unconstitutional.

On April 29, 2026, two months after Reverend Jackson's death, Chief Justice Roberts voted with the majority for the Supreme Court's 6-3 ruling in *Louisiana v. Callais*, disregarding decades of precedent and contradicting its own recent rulings, all but eliminating Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act limiting protection against discriminatory redistricting. This decision guts the core of the Voting Rights Act. Many legal scholars see this ruling as the "death knell" for the Voting Right Act's power to protect African American voters, especially in the south. Election Law scholars have called the ruling a "catastrophe," "the worst ruling in a century." Roberts's harshest critics compared him to Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, (an owner of enslaved free human beings and a Catholic), who penned the infamous 7-2 1857 *Dred Scott v. Sanford* decision which ruled that neither Mr. Scott nor any other person of African ancestry could claim citizenship in the United States, since they were property of their "owners" and therefore had no standing to sue in a federal court. History has condemned this as the most egregious decision in the history of the Supreme Court.

Advocates for racial justice have expressed profound regret to see the undoing of this foundational voting rights achievement of Reverend Jackson, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., Reverend Ralph Abernathy, Congressman John Lewis.

Early in his campaign, candidate Jackson made anti-Semitic comments to a reporter that caused a major controversy a few days before the New Hampshire primary. He initially denied making the remarks including during a nationally televised debate in February. After weeks of harsh criticism, he admitted that he had made the comments which he deeply regretted. He apologized at a Manchester, New Hampshire synagogue on February 26. But the damage was done. His remarks had a significant negative impact on

his 1984 campaign, which was considered the first serious presidential bid by an African American candidate in the Democratic Party. Though no serious observer thought he had a chance of securing the nomination, his famous “Rainbow Coalition” address at the 1984 Democratic National Convention in San Francisco on July 17, 1984 was the first speech at a national convention to mention gays and lesbians.

In the early 1970’s Jesse Jackson held strong pro-life views against abortion in keeping with the views on many Black Baptists and their ministers. About a month after the 1973 Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade* legalized abortion, he began a PUSH campaign against the decision, calling abortion murder and arguing that Jesus and Moses might not have been born, if abortion had been permitted in biblical times.

In 1975, he endorsed a plan for a constitutional amendment banning abortion. He also endorsed the Hyde Amendment, which bars the funding of abortions through the federal Medicaid program. In a 1977, National Right to Life Committee News report, Reverend Jackson argued that the basis for *Roe v. Wade*—the right to privacy—had also been used to justify slavery and the treatment of slaves on plantations. He rejected what he believed was the casual taking of life, which indicated a decline in American values.

However, by the time of his 1988 bid for the presidency, Jesse Jackson had changed his position arguing that women have the right to an abortion. He had become staunchly pro-abortion rights and supported federal funding for abortions, marking a complete reversal from his outspoken pro-life stance in the 1970s. He argued that private, moral, or religious views on the issue should not be imposed on public policy. He was fully aligned with the Democratic Party platform, advocating that legal abortion was a woman’s right. This transformation from a pro-life stance in the late 1970s to a pro-abortion position in the 1980s was thought by many to be a pivot based on political necessity.

Though he did not win the nomination in 1988, his campaign was considered historic. He was seen as a serious contender. He won 6.9 million votes, more than double his 1984 total. 92% of African American voters supported him and 12% of White voters supported him. He was the first African American candidate to win the nationwide youth vote of those under 30.

As the question of same sex relationships became more and more a part of the national conversation, Jesse Jackson gradually began to express support for same sex marriage. As early as 2004 in a speech in Massachusetts, he spoke in favor of same sex marriage. And in 2010 he officially declared at a rally against California’s Proposition 8: “Marriage is based on love and commitment, not on sexual orientation. I support the right for any person to marry the person of their choosing”. “People’s rights to self-expression, self-determination, must be respected and affirmed,” he said. This departure from the traditional moral stance of Black Baptist ministers was influenced, in part, by a cultural shift that argued that, if someone is defending the civil rights of oppressed racial groups, they should be willing to defend the civil rights of oppressed sexual groups.

Reverend Jackson never enjoyed a great deal of support from American Catholics, for a variety of reasons. His changed positions on abortion and homosexuality led to a decline in support on the part of Catholics who were committed to the Church's teachings on the dignity of every human life from conception to natural death and on sexual morality and the nature of marriage. Jesse Jackson and I never discussed our serious disagreement concerning these and other issues. It is clearly possible to like and admire someone even when there are profound differences concerning serious matters. This is often true in families.

VI. Death and Eastertide

Reverend Jackson remained very active in politics, religion and social justice concerns for many years after losing the 1988 presidential nomination. However, I did not have any further contact with him until I learned of his serious illness. He was initially diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in 2017. But in 2024, it was determined that he was actually suffering from Progressive Supranuclear Palsy, a rare, progressive neurodegenerative disorder often confused with Parkinson's disease. In spite of his illness, which eventually forced him to use a wheelchair and require health care assistance, he remained active in social justice causes until the end of his life. He eventually lost his ability to speak, thus silencing one of the most eloquent and powerful voices in American public life. I learned his long decline was filled with pain and acute suffering, which he endured without complaint. I was one of many who wrote to his wife, Mrs. Jacqueline Jackson and his family expressing prayerful concern and support. At the time of his death on February 17, 2026, *Mardi Gras*, there was an outpouring of tributes from around the country and beyond acknowledging his unique contributions to the work for social justice and peace. Many celebrated this Baptist minister and protégé of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as a charismatic, seasoned, and chastened leader of the relentless movement toward the 'beloved community.' There were also harsh criticisms from those who never approved of his positions and tactics.

Jesse Jackson was a great admirer of Pope Francis, and he expressed that admiration in a written statement when the Pontiff died on Easter Monday, April 21, 2025. He wrote, in part: "His Holiness, Pope Francis was a giant of moral vision, spiritual strength, and boundless compassion. As the beloved Bishop of Rome and leader of the Catholic Church, Pope Francis was a world statesman whose voice called out across borders and boundaries for unity, justice, peace, and unconditional love. His Holiness reminded us to welcome the stranger, uplift the poor, and protect the planet. He often emphasized that our shared human experience is grounded in the image of God and that the gospel is not a weapon of division but a light that guides us toward reconciliation and justice."

"He taught us that to serve Christ is to serve humanity—and to do so with tenderness and boldness...Whether speaking out against economic inequality, advocating for the environment, or opening the doors of compassion to immigrants and refugees, Pope Francis was a shepherd of peace in a time of division. His life was a living sermon, calling all of us to love more, to judge less, and to walk humbly with our God."

“As I have always said, ‘We must turn to each other, not on each other,’ and Pope Francis lived that truth with every breath of his ministry. He was a moral compass in a time of confusion and conflict, a fierce advocate for peace in an age of war, and a champion of dignity in the face of oppression. Let us not only mourn Pope Francis but also move in his memory. Let us act with integrity, walk with compassion, and push for the beloved community where all of God's children can live in peace and dignity.”

Jesse Jackson did not live to learn that Pope Leo XIV’s first pastoral journey as Bishop of Rome would be to Africa, a continent he knew well, which he called “the Mother Land”. He was a staunch foe of the evils of South Africa’s apartheid. He forcefully lobbied Congress for sanctions against it in the 1980s, long before it was popular to do so. He established a deep friendship with the heroic Nelson Mandela, supporting Mr. Mandela during his imprisonment, witnessing his release in 1990, and attending his historic 1994 inauguration as president of what was thought to be a new South Africa. They were brothers in the struggle.

Certainly, Reverend Jackson would have applauded the Pontiff’s powerful words during his 11-day Eastertide apostolic journey that took him to Algeria, Cameroon, Angola, and Equatorial Guinea on the continent where the Catholic Church is growing faster than anywhere else in the world, with now one-fifth of all Catholics.

On April 19, 2026, the 3rd Sunday of Easter, Luke 24:13-35 reminded us that the disciples on the road to Emmaus recognized Jesus in the “Breaking of the Bread.” Jesse Jackson was convinced that once we recognize Christ, we must imitate Him. It is this imitation of the one who declares “Blessed are the peacemakers for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” that compelled our Holy Father to speak forthrightly about regional conflicts and poverty in Africa and the need for leaders to seek reconciliation and peace avoiding violence, war, and senseless deaths. When the Roman Pontiff said concerning Cameroon’s civil war, “Woe to those who manipulate religion and the very name of God for their own military, economic and political gain, dragging that which is sacred into darkness,” he is not expressing a desire to become entangled in the domestic policies of countries in Africa or any other countries in the world. It is precisely because he recognizes Jesus in the “Breaking of the Bread” that he feels compelled to apply the clear teachings of Jesus to today’s perilous situations. As Vicar of Christ, Leo’s pulpit is the world. While the Successor of Peter and Jesse Jackson would disagree about many things, they would not disagree about imitating the one whom they both recognized in the “Breaking of the Bread”.

VII. Conclusion

I began this essay as “early jottings” when I was at a conference for Bishops at the University of Notre Dame, in February, just days after Jesse Jackson died. Like many of my jottings, I did not think they would amount to anything, and I probably would not share them with anyone. My jottings are often part of an internal conversation meant to clarify my thoughts. They are never shared. I ask myself if my readers will understand why

I would write an essay such as this. They may think it does not seem like me, or that it is too revelatory. Will readers who truly disliked Reverend Jackson think my personal reflections from halcyon days long ago are too favorable?

Yet, for some reason the phrase “Jesse Jackson and I” and memories of me listening to him at Operation Breadbasket so many years ago stayed with me. Every few days, I would write a few more sentences. I prayed about it wondering if readers would ask why would I, a Catholic Priest and Bishop, write about this man whose death may have been for them only a passing announcement in the evening news.

There was something about Lent, Holy Week, and Eastertide that was causing me to think and pray more than usual about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Himself as well as the deaths of people I knew very well, like Dr. Norman Francis of Xavier University and others who I did not know at all, like Tatiana Kennedy Schlossberg, 35, President Kennedy’s granddaughter who died from leukemia on December 30, 2025, after publishing in *The New Yorker*, an extraordinary essay, “*A Battle with My Blood*” on November 22, the 62nd anniversary of the assassination of her grandfather. I think these meditations and my ongoing reflections on eschatology and eternal life nudged me to pen these reflections on Jesse Jackson, whose life, by his own admission, was far from perfect. But it was a life well lived. As Catholics gathered in their parishes days after he died on February 22, the First Sunday of Lent, I wonder if any of the Christian Faithful included prayers for the soul of this man that he might share in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

These are his prescient words. “We must all learn a great lesson-how to live together. This is the new challenge of the new world—learning to co-exist and not co-annihilate.”

“I am not a perfect servant. I am a public servant doing my best against the odds. As I develop and serve, be patient. God is not finished with me yet.”

“A man must be willing to die for justice. Death is an inescapable reality. Men die daily. But good deeds live forever!”

Eternal rest grant unto your servant, Jesse, O Lord. May flights of angels sing him to his rest!