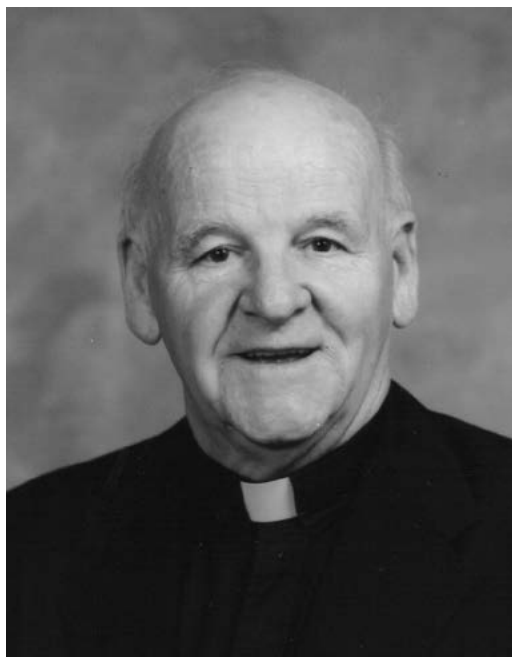


## REV. JOSEPH A. COSTELLO, SM

# Early Catholic Voice Against Segregation in the South

by Susan J. Illis, Archivist, Archives of the Society of Mary, US Province



Reverend Joseph A. Costello, SM,

*“...let there be no further discrimination or segregation in the pews, at the Communion rail, at the confessional and in parish meetings, just as there will be no segregation in the kingdom of heaven.”*

– Archbishop Joseph F. Rummel, 1953

Reverend Joseph A. Costello, SM, was serving on the faculty of Notre Dame Seminary in New Orleans, Louisiana in 1953 when Archbishop Joseph Rummel issued “Blessed are the Peacemakers,” a pastoral letter calling for complete desegregation of the Archdiocese of New Orleans. Two years later, Rummel signaled his commitment to racial equity by discontinuing services at a Catholic chapel where parishioners refused to allow an African American priest to preside at Mass. The following year he issued another pastoral letter declaring racial segregation “morally wrong and sinful.”

Despite the fact the Supreme Court had already declared school segregation unconstitutional in 1954, Rummel still faced criticism and angry attacks from staunch segregationists in the Archdiocese of New Orleans. In response to the unrest over the issue, Father Costello published “Moral Aspects of Segregation,” supporting Archbishop Rummel’s calls for desegregation and underscoring the sinfulness of the practice.

In writing this booklet, Costello drew from both religious scholarship and his own experience as a teacher of moral theology and canon law. Since 1944 he had taught at Notre Dame Seminary, which Rummel had integrated in 1948 along with other seminaries in the archdiocese. Father Costello, a native of Boston, was born in 1916 and ordained a Marist priest by Bishop Michael Keyes, SM, in 1943. Costello earned his doctorate in Sacred Theology from The Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, and continued teaching at Notre Dame Seminary until 1963.

In “Moral Aspects of Segregation” Father Costello reminds Catholics that because something, such as segregation in the Deep South in the 1950s, is customary does not mean it is moral, and individuals should independently distinguish moral right from wrong, regardless of common practice or even law. He also reinforces the authority of the archbishop in making decisions and leading Catholics within his charge while also defending him against ridiculous accusations, such as aligning himself with Communist propaganda. He further states that segregation contradicts the principles of charity and neighborly love.

The entire text of Father Costello’s publication may be read at <https://bit.ly/2R8m0gA>. A few excerpts from this publication are:

“...there is no inequality in human dignity.”

“Charity is violated in custom-sanctioned racial segregation.”

“Love of neighbor is violated in the practice of racial segregation.”

“Basic natural rights flow from the worth of a person and no particular person can claim to be superior to another in intrinsic worth and dignity, for all essentially are equal.”

“Segregation - as now practiced - involves discriminations which are sinful and unjust.”

Racial segregation “should have no place in Catholic life. To hold the supremacy of the white race, explicitly or implicitly, is a sin contrary to the *virtue of faith*, if knowingly and deliberately, it is a *grave sin*.”



Archbishop Joseph F. Rummel at Notre Dame Seminary. Notre Dame opened in 1923; from the time of its founding until 1967, it was administered by the Society of Mary (Marists).

While a few outspoken segregationist Catholics threatened to withhold donations to the Church if Catholic schools were desegregated, Father Costello called upon Catholics to take the lead in achieving social change:

“That Catholics have, as a social body, a duty to follow the Commandments of God, to repair, in so far as they can, the evils that affect society is clear.”

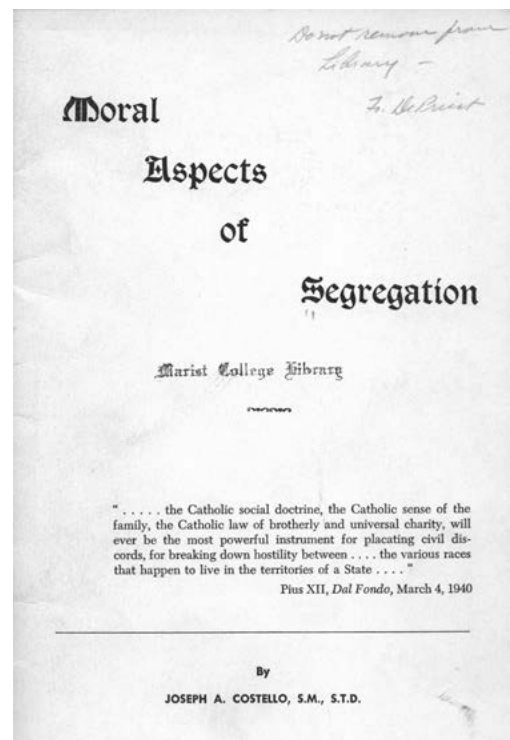
Ultimately parochial schools in New Orleans desegregated peacefully for the 1963-1964 school year.

In addition to teaching at Notre Dame in New Orleans, Father Costello served as defender of the bond on the archdiocesan marriage tribunal. He also served on the Court of Inquiry to examine a miraculous cure in the beatification process of Elizabeth Ann Seton, who was canonized as the first United States-born saint in 1975.

In 1963, Father Costello began another stage of ministry - that of parish priest. After serving as pastor of St. Vincent de Paul Parish in Wheeling, West Virginia for a few years, he was transferred to Georgia, where he served in various churches for the next twenty years. His assignments included Waycross, Saint Simons Island, Brunswick, and Darien, where he was known as the “Pope of Darien.” Throughout this time, he continued his work on the marriage tribunal for the Diocese of Savannah.

Although Father Costello spent his career in the Deep South, his life ended near where it began in New England. While visiting family on vacation in 1996, Father Costello broke his hip. During his rehabilitation, he suffered a heart attack and died on July 11, 1996. He is buried in the Marist plot at Holy Cross Cemetery in Malden, Massachusetts.

Booklet Cover (circa 1956)



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