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Archives reveal planning, prayer behind desegregating Catholic schools

by Gretchen Keiser by The Georgia Bulletin

Atlanta — Fifty years ago, federal court pressure was forcing Atlanta to dismantle an unjust segregated public school system. The bishops of Georgia and South Carolina decided that this was the right time to also desegregate the Catholic schools.

It took several years, but documents in the Atlanta archdiocese's archives show how stressful and carefully planned this effort was.

Three bishops, Bishop Francis E. Hyland of Atlanta, Bishop Thomas J. McDonough of Savannah, and Charleston Bishop Paul J. Hallinan, struggled initially to agree on how to approach informing their people. The three decided to issue not a statement, but a pastoral letter, which was read to local Catholics on the first Sunday of Lent 1961. It set -- in a moral framework -- their decision to admit Catholic students, regardless of their race, to all Catholic schools "as soon as this can be done with safety to the children and the schools."

The process of desegregation, mandated by the U.S. Supreme Court's 1954 decision that separate schools based on race were inherently unequal, had not come quickly either to public or parochial schools.

According to the Southern Education Reporting Service, it was not until 1960 that the public schools in the South opened without violence.

Catholic schools in North Carolina, Virginia and Louisiana had desegregated by 1961, but those in Alabama and Mississippi had not, except at some Catholic colleges.

A federal court ordered the Atlanta public schools to begin desegregating in September 1961 and nine

black pupils entered four high schools. All other Georgia public schools were still segregated.

According to the archdiocese archives, in October 1957 Hyland asked his "consultors" -- a small group of chosen priest advisors each bishop has -- about integrating Atlanta's new St. Pius X High School, opening in 1958, because there were 87 black Catholic students who were ready for high school.

However, a majority of the consultors said, "integration at this time because of the political climate would be imprudent." They feared punitive measures from the state of Georgia -- perhaps a change in the Catholic school's tax status or a loss of teachers' licenses for religious.

Acting together

Four years later, Hyland wrote of his confidence in the three bishops acting to desegregate the schools together.

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In a January 1961 letter to Hallinan, he said, "I agree that it is time for us to speak up, and, acting in concert, gives us a strength which none of us possesses alone. Following your own prayerful example, I resolved to offer Holy Mass every other day for the spiritual success of our venture. Personally I do not think the reaction will be an unfavorable one on the part of some as we may fear. I am inclined to think that a substantial number of people in the South want this issue settled justly as well as peacefully."

He recommended that the pastoral letter say something to allay fear.

"Fear seems to me to be uppermost in the mind of most Southern people in relation to segregation ... fear of the changes, particularly social changes, which integration may eventually entail," Hyland wrote.

In a daily diary he kept, now in the archives, Hallinan expressed his own struggles to push through uncertainty about the timing and to trust in God.

"Dear God, thanks for your steady help. Please keep it up," he wrote on Jan. 15, 1961, a month before the pastoral letter was published. The night before he said he had "temptations ... to postpone the Pastoral Letter ... but it's all clearer in the morning. Pray for strength and courage and ... guidance."

On Feb. 7, 1961, he wrote to Hyland, "I have put away all doubts. The Holy Spirit is not going to let down three of his men."

The pastoral letter was read on Feb. 19, 1961, and Hallinan wrote the next day, "Thank God for a real victory -- apparently it is accepted. The priests have rallied. ... The news coverage (national and local) was just right. The die-hards are protesting. The politicians are sore, the Protestants generally agree ... it was inevitable and I am confident that Catholics are proud we acted."

According to an Atlanta Journal article, there were 270 black children in the two black elementary schools of the Atlanta archdiocese and 6,452 white children in 17 elementary schools and two high schools. Black children made up only around 4 percent of the students.

Atlanta Constitution editor and publisher Ralph McGill wrote in his column on Feb. 26, 1961, "These three pastoral decisions, in two deep-South states, are important. They already have caused considerable soul-searching in Protestant churches which operate or control private or parochial schools."

"The bishops' letters are more than mere straws in the wind," McGill wrote. "They say what many a silent Protestant minister would like to tell his congregation if he had apostolic authority behind him."

But announcing the intention to desegregate the Catholic schools was only the first step. Setting the date for the actual integration of the schools took more time. The integration was finally set for September 1962. That April, Hallinan had succeeded Hyland in Atlanta, becoming its first archbishop.

Hallinan wrote a four-sentence draft statement announcing school integration in his diary on April 10, 1962. The day's notes end with, "I pray over (integration) problem -- hope it can be done."

He met May 7, 1962, with former Atlanta Mayor William B. Hartsfield, "a fine conference," where the archbishop was advised to let "more lay people in on it." In response, Hallinan added racial integration into his comments in meetings with parishioners.

By May 15, 1962, he had spoken to Atlanta Mayor Ivan Allen, Police Chief Herbert Jenkins, the priests of the archdiocese and laymen, telling them that the 1961 pastoral letter would be put into action.

"I have been both surprised and pleased to find a general agreement that the Church should move soon, that although there would be some opposition, the general reaction could be rated as favorable to neutral," Hallinan wrote to Marist Fr. Vincent Brennan.

The consultors formally approved the school policy change on May 24, 1962.

A second pastoral letter went out on Pentecost Sunday, June 10, 1962, informing Catholics that "Catholic children, regardless of race or color, will be admitted to Catholic schools of the Archdiocese as of Sept. 1, 1962."

"This decision, promised in the Pastoral Letter of 1961, has been made after long and prayerful deliberation, and has been unanimously approved by the members of the Archdiocesan Board of Consultors and the superiors of religious institutes," Hallinan wrote.

17 'pioneers'

Although the decision was announced in June, archdiocesan high schools had already started interviewing and considering eighth-graders who wanted to go to Catholic high school in April, implementing the integrated policy. The elementary schools took new registrations until July 15, 1962.

At the end of the summer, 17 black pupils were registered to enter previously all-white Catholic elementary and high schools in the Atlanta archdiocese.

On Sept. 4, 1962, the 17 children integrated into the Catholic schools in the Atlanta archdiocese without incident.

Seven went to St. Joseph's High School, located on Courtland Street in Atlanta. One entered Marist School, Atlanta. Among the elementary schools, three each went to St. Joseph School, Marietta, and St. Joseph School, Athens, while two entered Immaculate Conception School, Atlanta, and one, St. John the Evangelist, Hapeville.

The number of black students who wanted to register in previously all-white Catholic schools was "very light," Hallinan acknowledged in a letter to the pastor of Immaculate Conception Shrine.

A few were kindergarten or first-graders whose parents wanted them to enter the black elementary schools of Our Lady of Lourdes or St. Paul of the Cross in Atlanta, but could not get them in because those schools were full.

In letters to each of the families, Hallinan wrote that they and their children, whom he called "pioneers," "will merit a great share of the credit and good will that will come to our beloved Church as this new program goes into action in September."

"Your family will be constantly in my prayers and Mass during these days," he wrote.

MORE: Integration meant an Atlanta black Catholic could 'come home'

[Gretchen Keiser is a staff writer for The Georgia Bulletin, the newspaper of the Atlanta archdiocese, where this piece first appeared.]

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