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Author(s): Trushna Parekh

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Trushna Parekh

In March 2006, about six months after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, when only 40 percent of evacuees had returned to New Orleans, the Archdiocese of the Catholic Church in New Orleans announced its decision to close seven of its churches.¹ Listed among the closures was the Parish of St. Augustine Church, which opened in 1842 and is widely regarded as the oldest African-American church in the country. The loss of the parish—including a resident pastor and church ministries for the sick, the youth, the bereaved, and so on—would leave the already devastated community with the empty shell of the church building itself, and only occasional Masses held by a non-resident priest. According to the archdiocesan plan, St. Augustine would be consolidated with its neighboring parish, St. Peter Claver. This decision came as part of a larger plan of closures prompted by significant hurricane damage to some churches, leaving the archdiocese with more than \$84 million dollars' worth of repairs not covered by insurance.²

Upon hearing the announcement of impending closure on March 13, St. Augustine parishioners endeavored to persuade the archbishop to give them time to demonstrate their viability as a parish. One letter from the pastor and three letters from the Pastoral Council that were sent to the archdiocese all went unanswered. As a last-ditch effort to keep the church open, on the evening of March 20, after the beloved resident pastor, Father Jerome LeDoux, had left the premises, twelve protesters locked themselves in the church rectory and remained there for nineteen days. Parishioners held a press conference and protest outside the church on March 21. On March 26, the priest from St. Peter Claver, Father Michael Jacques, came to St. Augustine, wearing Kente cloth vestments to offer Mass. So threatened did Jacques feel by the St. Augustine parishioners that he arrived with a committee of eleven armed undercover security guards.³ The parishioners held up signs in the

church in protest before and during the Mass. Some implored the priest to speak to them about why the archdiocese was proceeding in this manner, but he refused to do so. Finally, amid chants of “We shall not be moved,” and in accord with a signal given by Rev. William Maestri, spokesperson for the archbishop, Father Jacques discontinued the Mass. It was later revealed that Maestri took this action because he considered the altar to be “desecrated” as a result of the protests.⁴

Following negotiations between representatives of the archbishop and representatives of St. Augustine, the church was reconsecrated and the parish conditionally reopened on April 8, 2006. Unfortunately, the St. Augustine community and Tremé neighborhood lost their much loved resident pastor, Father LeDoux, who was asked to leave as part of the negotiation agreements. The church was without an assigned priest for several months until the archbishop named Rev. Quentin Moody as temporary administrator, effective November 1, 2006. Rev. Moody had been one of the visiting priests during the absence of an assigned priest. As a result of the negotiations, the archdiocese established ten benchmarks which the church was expected to meet within the next year. These included increasing the number of parishioners, balancing the budget, placing the parish’s sacramental and financial records in order, and celebrating Mass “in fidelity to the church’s liturgical directives immediately.”⁵ Following his required departure from St. Augustine, Father LeDoux accepted the position of pastor of Our Mother of Mercy Church in Fort Worth, Texas. As part of the negotiation agreements, LeDoux would be allowed to return to St. Augustine for six Masses that year, including the fiftieth anniversary of his ordination.

The archdiocese’s efforts to consolidate the parishes of St. Augustine and St. Peter Claver perpetuated the racially discriminatory climate in the wake of Katrina, calling to action community leaders who employed civil rights-era nonviolent tactics in dealing with grossly insensitive church officials. It has been suggested that the Archdiocese of New Orleans was in such a financial bind that there were no alternatives open to them.⁶ On the contrary, this essay will illustrate that there were plenty of alternatives, and the ways in which the archdiocese chose to carry out its decision made it extremely difficult to interpret many of its actions as anything other than the perpetuation of a history of discrimination toward the Black Catholics of St. Augustine Church.

In the New Orleans metropolitan area, hurricane-induced loss resulted in a population that was “more white, less poor, and more transitory than the pre-hurricane population.”⁷ Inequities that existed long before Katrina were exposed as the media’s self-imposed silence was lifted in the face of the

post-hurricane social debacle.⁸ Rather than assuming responsibility for the “manufactured destitution”⁹ that led to the racially inequitable burden of the devastation, the Bush administration continued in the same vein after Katrina by extending massive subsidies to developers who served upper-middle-class and wealthy residents and by effectively exiling many of the poor and working-class citizens of New Orleans.¹⁰ By December 6, 2006, public housing officials had decided to proceed with demolitions of more than 4,500 perfectly inhabitable government apartments in the city.¹¹ Bill Quigley spoke of such policies as “a government-sanctioned Diaspora of New Orleans’s poorest African-American citizens.”¹² While issues such as voting and housing rights have received much attention, the impact of Katrina on churches and other community institutions has not been examined. St. Augustine Church, which has reinforced community ties for generations, sustained very little damage in the aftermath of the hurricane, yet it was slated for closure nonetheless. As I will show, the attempted closure of St. Augustine Church is a significant part of a larger pattern of disparagement of Afro-Creole social spaces and institutions in New Orleans.

First, I describe St. Augustine under the pastorate of Father Jerome LeDoux, as well as the Afro-Creole heritage of the church, illustrating the role of the beloved pastor in integrating the traditions and legacy of the church with the neighborhood. I then examine why and how the archdiocese decided to close the St. Augustine Parish and merge it with St. Peter Claver. In the following sections, I tell the story of the attempted closure from the perspectives of the pastor and some parishioners, detailing the responses and actions of the parishioners. In the final section I offer a glimpse into the current situation at St. Augustine under their newly assigned pastor and conclude with some final thoughts about the discriminatory nature of the archdiocese’s actions.

St. Augustine under Father Jerome G. LeDoux, S.V.D.

Father Jerome LeDoux was born in Lake Charles, Louisiana, on February 26, 1930. After attending Sacred Heart School in Lake Charles, he went to high school at St. Augustine Seminary in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. The seminary, established in Greenville, Mississippi, in 1920, moved to Bay St. Louis in 1923 and is renowned as the first seminary in the country to train African-American men for religious life and the priesthood. The school is affectionately referred to as “the Bay,” and the romanticized term itself, LeDoux confided, played a role in drawing him, at the age of thirteen, to follow in the footsteps of his elder brother by four years, Louis Verlin LeDoux, in attending the seminary.

Jerome LeDoux completed two years of spiritual training at Techny, Illinois, and another two years at Divine Word Seminary in Epworth, Iowa. He then attended college at St. Augustine Seminary until 1953, and after completing four years of theological training, from 1953 to 1957, he was ordained into the priesthood on May 11, 1957. An intellectual at heart, LeDoux holds a master's degree in sacred theology and a PhD in church law, which he earned upon completion of his studies in Rome from 1957 to 1961. He taught moral theology and church law at St. Augustine Major Seminary in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, from 1961 to 1967, and theology courses at Xavier University in New Orleans from 1969 to 1980. Before he came to St. Augustine Church in 1990, LeDoux was pastor of St. Martin de Porres Church in Prairie View, Texas (1981–84), and of St. Paul the Apostle Church in Baton Rouge, Louisiana (1984–88).

With this background, LeDoux found it easy to not only maintain the Catholic traditions, but also draw many parishioners to St. Augustine, through both his personality and the keen balance he struck in integrating Catholicism with elements of African American and Creole culture particular to New Orleans, and especially to this neighborhood, with its tradition of second lining and its Mardi Gras Indians.¹³ He exhibited a natural capacity to make churchgoers feel at home, as part of the St. Augustine family. In his sixteen years as pastor, LeDoux's reverence for both the legacies and music of Afro-Creole cultural traditions and Catholic traditions in his practices meant that under his tenure (1990–2006), St. Augustine remained the vital cultural node that it has always been in the Tremé neighborhood.

A Catholic church, St. Augustine is widely regarded as one of the oldest churches in New Orleans. It was built in 1841–42, in a Greek revival style, designed by a French architect, J. N. B. de Pouilly.¹⁴ There is a central pedimented block with a corner bell tower and circular windows along the side. The bells of the church were bought at the New Orleans Exposition of 1894. French and Spanish Creoles and free people of color took up a collection to finance the church. When the church was built, half of the congregation consisted of Creoles of French and Spanish ancestry and recent French immigrants; the other half was composed of free people of color, with a few pews reserved for the enslaved. In honor of these enslaved people, some of whose remains have been found buried throughout the neighborhood, as well as in honor of all enslaved people in the United States, Father LeDoux and

Figure 1.
St. Augustine Church. Photo
courtesy of author.



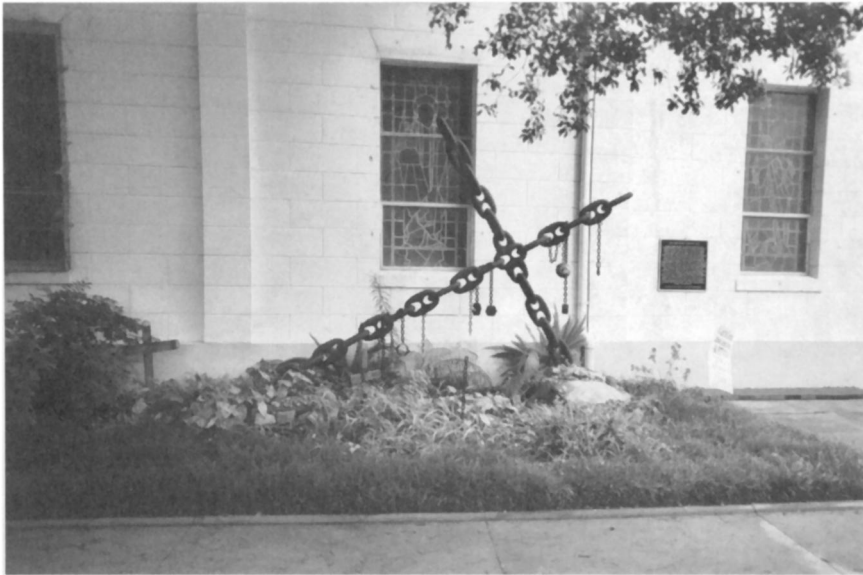


Figure 2.
Tomb of the Unknown Slave.
Photo courtesy of author.

members of his parish together raised funds and put up a monument to remember them, which was dedicated on October 30, 2004. Called the Tomb of the Unknown Slave, the monument is a large metal cross weighing 1,500 pounds. Placed on its side, the cross is composed of rusty chains with shackles and a few balls and chains hanging off it, and it is located in the church garden on Governor Nicholls Street.

Inside, the church is painted in a soft pink and white, contrasting with the dark wooden pews, and light streams in through stained glass windows along the sides of the church. Gold letters above the altar read “Si Tu Savais le Don le Dieu,” meaning, “if you knew the gift of God,” and to one side of the altar is a statue of St. Joseph. LeDoux had hung large fabric panels above the pews, appliquéd with translations of the principles of Kwanzaa into Swahili: Faith (Imani), Unity (Umoja), and Purpose (Nia). LeDoux created a pulpit from the varnished trunk of a cypress tree from the swamps of DeLille, Mississippi, and a similar stand nearby holds the Bible. Below the Stations of the Cross hanging along the side walls of the church, he placed pictures and photographs of Mardi Gras Indians. An exquisite painting of St. Monica by the local artist Vernon Dobard hung in the church, depicting the mother of St. Augustine, the church’s namesake, with her son; her dark hair and caramel skin bear more than a passing resemblance to the Creoles of the Tremé and

adjacent Seventh Ward. This was the first in what was meant to be a series of commissioned paintings that would eventually hang from the church's ceiling. At the rectory next door, photographs of African-American bishops were hung along the walls of the hallway. Naturally, LeDoux donned African prints on his vestments during Mass.

LeDoux's personality and popularity among not only churchgoers, but New Orleanians more broadly, cannot be exaggerated. At seventy-nine years old, LeDoux is so active that he is frequently found jumping for joy in the middle of his mass, his feet rising well off the ground, and these crescendos are punctuated by expressions of "Hallelujah!" and "Thank you Jesus," usually followed by several spins around the spot for good measure, all in the Birkenstock shoes he frequently sports. On one occasion when the church's choir director and piano player, Carol LeBlanc, was absent, LeDoux hardly skipped a beat and rushed up to the piano to play and sing at various points even as he seamlessly led the Mass. He speaks several languages, including French, Italian, and German. Unsuspecting international tourists who visit the church almost weekly are stunned when LeDoux picks up the microphone with an enthusiastic smile, to greet and warmly welcome them in their own languages. Since 1969, LeDoux has written an engaging and popular column, *Reflections on Life*, which is syndicated in several Catholic weeklies and published in (among others) New Orleans's African-American focused *Louisiana Weekly*.

A former executive director of the New Orleans Jazz Legacy Foundation, Morgan Clevenger, told the *Washington Post*, "You can't overstate how important St. Augustine and Father LeDoux are to the African and Creole tradition of the city . . . Father LeDoux has always acknowledged the black Indians, the social pleasure clubs, the jazz of New Orleans. He acknowledged the spirituality of African people before Catholicism. The loss of Father LeDoux would be a grave loss to the community."¹⁵ LeDoux would bless the Mardi Gras Indians, sprinkling them with holy water before their parades, and he danced in some of the jazz funerals that were put on by the social and pleasure clubs, which frequently began at the front doors of the St. Augustine Church. The close-knit Tremé neighbors who attend St. Augustine are accustomed to LeDoux's Mass in which the peace greeting—a largely symbolic gesture in most Catholic churches, whereby parishioners shake their neighbors' hands and wish them peace—can last for up to twenty minutes as church members circulate, exchanging embraces and warm greetings all around. Fostering and maintaining the neighborhood's jazz legacy has earned LeDoux the nickname "Jazz Priest." LeDoux initiated what was to become an annual Jazz Mass, celebrating the life and music of Louis Armstrong and coinciding with the



citywide Satchmofest activities. On days of the annual Jazz Mass, tourists and locals alike would begin their Sunday festivities at St. Augustine's Church hall with the popular early morning breakfast hosted by the St. Augustine Altar Society before kick-starting the day with LeDoux's energetic Mass.

Afro-Creole Heritage and St. Augustine Church

According to James Bennet, Catholic churches in New Orleans were "among the central institutions that originally fostered a unique Creole identity."¹⁶ As a result of French colonial slave laws (Code Noir) that required the conversion of slaves to Catholicism, and the Catholic system of parish organization (in which all the residents of a particular area constitute the parish) Catholic churches in colonial Louisiana became what Bennet calls "interracial churches that ministered to every shade."¹⁷

Figure 3.
Detail of "Father LeDoux Celebrating 50th
Anniversary of Priestly Ordination" poster. ©
copyright 2007 GMC Company Advertising,
used with permission.

St. Augustine Church has been linked to Afro-Creole identity in New Orleans since it was built, and continues to be the main place of worship for the city's black Catholics.¹⁸ Free people of color contributed to the fundraising for the

church, bought up the majority of the pews in the church when it was built, and continued to both attend in record numbers and substantially contribute to the church financially.¹⁹ While unique in the United States, New Orleans's three-tiered racial hierarchy, with free people of color (later known as Creoles of color or Afro-Creoles) emerging between black and white, was commonly found in many predominantly Catholic societies in the Caribbean and South America.²⁰ The uniqueness of New Orleans, as Arnold Hirsch points out, was that the three-tiered system coexisted both spatially and temporally with the standard American system of black-white racialization.²¹

The Creoles of color in New Orleans were pioneers in challenging the black-white binary. Creole historian Rodolphe Desdunes, along with Louis Charles Roudanez, a physician and owner-publisher of the bilingual *New Orleans Tribune*, and the attorney Louis A. Martinet took the lead in resisting Jim Crow in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²² The Comité des Citoyens, founded by Martinet and co-organized by Desdunes, was a group of Creole leaders that selected Homer Plessy to challenge the Separate Car Act in 1891.²³ While the Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* reduced overt resistance citywide, downtown neighborhoods such as the Seventh Ward and neighboring Sixth Ward, where St. Augustine is located, continued to maintain a tradition of strong Creole leadership.²⁴

This tradition continued into the civil rights era through the leadership of A. P. Turead, lawyer and civil rights leader, who also worshipped at St. Augustine, and Dutch Morial, also a lawyer (who went on to become mayor of New Orleans in 1978), who filed many desegregation suits together. The city has had four black mayors, each of whom share the downtown Afro-Creole heritage.²⁵

Civil rights activists from the Tremé neighborhood, such as Jerome Smith and others, followed in the lineage of this Afro-Creole tradition by protesting segregation and housing discrimination and even scaling back urban renewal during the 1950s and 1960s that displaced many residents of the Tremé neighborhood.²⁶ Jerome Smith credits another former St. Augustine parishioner and community leader, Mardi Gras Indian Chief Allison Tootie Montana, as an important political influence.²⁷

The heritage of Mardi Gras Indians is also linked to a non-Catholic, or less explicitly Catholic, legacy that is based in St. Augustine Church. For instance, Mardi Gras Indians celebrate St. Joseph, a Catholic saint, albeit in a non-Catholic ritual, by holding an annual St. Joseph's night parade. Mardi Gras Indian tribes serve as mutual aid societies, providing a form of insurance for unexpected emergencies such as illnesses or layoffs.²⁸ These long-standing networks are also found in the social and pleasure clubs that put on jazz funerals, also known as second line parades. Such traditions provide neighborhood networks and family ties that extend across generations and serve as a crucial means of self-support for working-class blacks in New Orleans.²⁹ These local traditions are not supported by any city funds or infrastructure. Instead, in the city at large, such practices have been denigrated and criminalized, particularly in the wake of Katrina.³⁰

The performance traditions of Mardi Gras Indians, second line parades, jazz music, and what LeDoux calls "Holy Blues" or Negro spirituals (which evolved in the nearby Congo Square, where the enslaved were permitted to dance and perform)³¹ are all place-specific musical traditions that are tied to St. Augustine Church. The venues of Congo Square, St. Augustine Church, local cemeteries, and funeral homes serve as physical nodes that tie together these local cultural traditions.³² Father LeDoux naturally fostered the continued development of the Afro-Creole heritage of New Orleans through his understanding and appreciation of the many links that join the church and the community. He strengthened the networks between the church, Mardi Gras Indians, social and pleasure clubs, and the community at large by supporting these activities and encouraging their connections with St. Augustine.

Decision

It is worth asking why St. Augustine Church was one of the seven parishes selected for closure when, in contrast to some churches that were completely destroyed, it had suffered only wind damage (losing part of the copper sheathing around its bell tower, and one of the walls of the church hall) and no flood damage. In fact, plans were already in place to close these churches long before Hurricane Katrina. The financial strain from the hurricanes prompted the archdiocese to move forward with greater urgency.

In a historical novel Father LeDoux is writing about St. Augustine Church, *The War of the Pews*, he chronicles the ups and downs in the enrollment of parishioners since the establishment of the church on October 4, 1842. The church began to face difficulties “when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of Ferguson on May 18, 1896, precipitating 58 years of segregation and causing most of the people of color to leave the area.”³³ LeDoux further links a decline in enrollment during the 1970s to suburbanization, which led to the first talks about the possible closure of the church.³⁴ These early discussions planted the seed for the idea to consolidate the parishes of St. Augustine with St. Peter Claver. The Catholic Life 2000 plan reiterated the notion of consolidation, but there was never sufficient impetus to put such ideas into action. It was only in the aftermath of Katrina that the long-standing plans gained momentum.

On the evening of Wednesday, February 8, 2006, the archbishop called Father LeDoux, “informing him of the death sentence on St. Augustine Church,”³⁵ meaning that the archbishop had decided to move forward with the Catholic Life 2000 Plan, effective on March 15, 2006. As LeDoux writes, “Torn and disconsolate after that baleful phone call, yet hoping that the mind of the Archbishop could still be changed before the morrow, Father LeDoux sat down at his computer and hammered out a last-ditch appeal which he hand-delivered that afternoon to Archbishop Alfred Hughes at his residence on Carrollton Avenue.”³⁶ The letter clearly stated what was on the pastor’s mind, informing the archbishop of his perspective on the situation: “What I submit to you now,” writes LeDoux, “is that for the first time in my stay here, there is strong motivation and activity, evidently triggered by the storms and their aftermath. . . . Curiously, although our full membership is not yet back, our offertory is averaging above \$3,000 per Sunday, with the high point of \$11,930.37 on January 15 at a special Jazz Mass.” This was in contrast with the typical Sunday, when the average was about \$1,000.

On Thursday, February 9, Archbishop Hughes handed out his fourteen-page Pastoral Plan, which stated that “St. Augustine Parish will remain open as a place of worship, but the parish will be closed. Its territory will be included in the area of St. Peter Claver. All its other buildings will be in the care of the Archdiocese of New Orleans.”³⁷

Archbishop Alfred Hughes declined interviews, even with Bruce Nolan, the respected *New Orleans Times-Picayune* religion columnist, making it difficult to fully comprehend his motives. Nolan quotes Hughes as saying, “This plan calls for self-sacrifice in service to the common good.” The unanswered question is, why St. Augustine? *Times-Picayune* columnist Lolis Elie is reported to have asked why St. Louis Cathedral was remaining open when there were similar problems with low enrollments there.³⁸ The St. Louis Cathedral, located in the French Quarter and attended by mostly white parishioners, is a sort of a binary opposite to St. Augustine, which is located in the neighboring, predominantly black, Tremé.

Jason Berry, author and journalist for New Orleans’s *Gambit Weekly*, considers the extent to which the value of the real estate is part of the archbishop’s decision. He notes that the archbishop, who has only recently moved to New Orleans from Boston, relies heavily on the opinion of the local clergy. In particular, he is known to value the opinion of Father Michael Jacques, dean of the Tremé area in which St. Augustine Church is located and the author of the Catholic Life 2000 Plan. In this regard, the hierarchy, in favoring Jacques, is tipped against LeDoux, regardless of the financial situation, which is not ameliorated by the fact that many of St. Augustine’s parishioners before Katrina were retirees, who could not be expected to contribute large sums at the offertory.

Berry interviewed Father Bruce Teague, a hospital chaplain in Boston, who attended seminary where Hughes taught. Berry said of the archbishop:

My take on Al is that he is a good-hearted man but overwhelmed by the whole complexity after the catastrophic destruction of Katrina. New Orleans has so many different strains of its cultural tradition. The average Boston priest is not trained to handle that. We live in a city that was dominated by Irish Catholic culture. . . . Al trained most of his career in Rome. That type of training was like West Point. The priesthood was a class apart; you were immune from the ordinary lives of people.³⁹

The archbishop’s potential difficulties in relating to the culture of Tremé and LeDoux’s role therein would in turn have contributed to his lack of appreciation for both LeDoux and the centrality of the institution of St. Augustine in the Tremé community.

Reaction

On Thursday, February 9, less than twenty-four hours after LeDoux received the call from the archbishop, St. Augustine parishioners watched the evening news in shock as the archdiocesan plans to close their parish were aired, complete with an interview of a crestfallen Father LeDoux. “A day later it came out in the *Times-Picayune*,” noted a parishioner. “That was when most of us found out; it was like all of a sudden, what’s this?” The date that the closure would take effect was only a month later, on March 15. The plan included “closing 7 of its 142 parishes, temporarily merging about two dozen, and consolidating or changing many of its 107 schools.”⁴⁰

Sandra Gordon was confirmed and married in the church, her children were baptized there, her mother and grandmother were buried from there, and she volunteers there most days of the week.⁴¹ Upset about the closure of a church she views as part of her family’s heritage, she asks of the consolidation plan, “What good is a building when you don’t have a body of parishioners to worship?” Gordon is also president of the Pastoral Council, a small group of active parishioners at St. Augustine. Upon hearing about the impending closure, the members of the Pastoral Council wrote the first of four letters addressed to Archbishop Alfred Hughes,⁴² urging him to communicate with the Pastoral Council and to reconsider their decision. In a letter dated March 14, they write: “The fact that Father Michael Jacques, S.S.E., chaired and hosted the appeals process at his Parish, and also had a direct interest in the outcome of the hearing, seems to be contrary to any sense of objectivity and fairness. This created an unfortunate conflict of interest which undermines the integrity of the process.”⁴³ Father Jacques, who drew up the plan, had a direct interest in the outcome, as the consolidation of the parishes would mean that he would displace Father LeDoux at St. Augustine Church. There was no response to this letter, nor to the other three, all of which raised legitimate concerns about the inconsistencies with canon law (church law) and how the decision was communicated. These concerns about the process and the decision simply went unaddressed.

On Ash Wednesday, March 1, LeDoux met with the archbishop and his provincial superior from the Society of the Divine Word, Father Joseph Simon, at the archbishop’s home. Because the shortage of clergy is frequently cited as one of the reasons behind the church closures, Father Simon later wrote a letter to the archbishop to assure him that the Society of the Divine Word is committed to continue to staff St. Augustine for the foreseeable future. LeDoux describes how in this “hypertense atmosphere,” at the meeting, he was told

by the archbishop to prepare his parishioners for the closure of the church. LeDoux notified his parishioners at the following Sunday Mass.

At a city council meeting on March 2, 2006, where Father LeDoux was being honored for his role as pastor of St. Augustine, Councilwoman Jacqueline Clarkson said LeDoux would always be a part of the history of Tremé. She said to him, "You have been a spiritual rebirth for so much of this city."⁴⁴ Mama D., also known as Mama Cole, a New Orleans activist, said with obvious pain in her voice, "We're *not* gonna memorialize St. Augustine, *nor our* spiritual leader . . . *leave St. Augustine alone.*" Councilwoman Clarkson interrupted her to clarify that the church was not, in fact, closing but would remain open under the auspices of St. Peter Claver Parish. In other words, the building would remain open, but without the community's beloved pastor, Father LeDoux, to which Mama D. responded, "We will not tolerate others making this decision for us and our community. We're down. Why we keep getting kicked? Don't try us on this one. We're not gonna have to be what our American history has taught us to be—violent."⁴⁵ The city council later wrote a letter to the archbishop, dated March 21, 2006, stating, "We urge you to reconsider the decision to close St. Augustine as a Parish and we pledge to do whatever we can to support the parish as it continues the process of rebuilding itself since the storms."⁴⁶

The Appeal That Became a "Listening" Session

On March 5, 2006, Michael Valentino, a prominent local businessman, encountered the archbishop at a banquet gathering and asked about the possibility for a meeting in which St. Augustine's pastor and council could present a plan for the continued life of St. Augustine. Valentino was assured that there was an appeals process that Father LeDoux and members of his Pastoral Council could pursue.⁴⁷ On March 6, Father Michael Jacques called Father LeDoux and informed him that "he and two Pastoral Council members should prepare for a hearing before an appeals panel of the Archdiocese of New Orleans on March 9, 2006."⁴⁸

In preparation for the hearing, the Pastoral Council gathered up key documents, and at the Pastoral Council meeting on the evening of March 8, Sandra Gordon urged the council to pray as she explained what she knew about who would be on the panel: "Archbishop Hughes, Father Michael Jacques, and there are going to be other people on the panel. We've got to pray for them too, y'all. More than we could pray for us. 'Cause we got to ask God to touch their hearts. To make them know the spirit of being Christian. To make them know that we got families here that want St. Augustine to remain open."⁴⁹

LeDoux describes his feelings as he was heading to St. Peter Claver, where the meeting was to be held:

Naturally, ungodly pressure built up while we prepared ourselves to meet the appeal panel. With bated breath two Pastoral Council members and I awaited the 9.30 am time of March 9th. A strange portent on that morning was a March wind gusting up to 50 miles an hour, blowing post-Katrina trash all over that area of the city.⁵⁰

At the hearing, the archbishop was not present. Instead, Father Jacques chaired the panel of four priests and two lay officers of the archdiocese. LeDoux's appeals included the letter from his superior, described above, as well as two checks: one for \$12,000 for the church's assessment and another for \$10,000 in payment against their loans. In addition to the offertory money presented by LeDoux, he assured the panel that Valentino's family had also offered to raise a sum of \$1 million for St. Augustine Church.⁵¹

Three days later, on March 12, although LeDoux and the Pastoral Council had no word on the results of the appeals process, *Times-Picayune* reporter John Pope was notified by Father William Maestri, the spokesman for the archbishop, that the appeal was rejected. His story was published in the newspaper the following morning, before LeDoux was notified. It was only at 11:29 a.m. on March 13 that the archbishop finally called Father LeDoux to tell him the appeal had been rejected and the archdiocese's plan to close the parish would go forward. Recanting their original terminology, Hughes had told the reporter that the appeals process did not change anything—there was no appeals process, only a hearing or “listening” session.

Although Father Jacques was scheduled to offer Mass on March 19, he called LeDoux, asking him to take the March 19 Mass. “The people will appreciate your presence there,” he said. The significance of this date was that this was Super Sunday, when Mardi Gras Indians, who were accustomed to Father LeDoux's hospitality and inclusion at St. Augustine, would be out in full force. As LeDoux writes, “The obvious intent of that move was to pacify the local populace.”⁵²

Father LeDoux Departs, and His Rectory Is Occupied

By the night of March 20, at 1:00 a.m., LeDoux had packed the last of his belongings into his car to drive to St. Augustine Seminary in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. What he did not know at the time was that immediately after his departure, the church rectory was occupied by protesters who were supporting the parishioners of St. Augustine. After asking for meetings and waiting patiently for the archdiocese to hear their pleas, the protesters had decided as

a last resort to take matters into their own hands to ensure that the church would not be closed.

On March 20, activists opposing the closure of the St. Augustine Parish occupied the church's vacant rectory. Those who shut themselves in the rectory, identified only as volunteers for various hurricane relief organizations, vary in number in the newspaper reports from ten to twelve. While some of the supporters suggested that they were asked to occupy the church by parishioners, the head of the lay leadership council, Sandra Gordon, told *Times-Picayune* reporter Bruce Nolan that no church members were involved in the takeover. In addition to those inside the church rectory, a small crowd of up to fifty parishioners and supporters chanted slogans in support of St. Augustine on the sidewalk outside the church.

As part of a well-thought-out plan of nonviolent action that would serve to make the archdiocese question their actions, Allen Harris, neighborhood activist and longtime Tremé resident, helped organize the youth group members of Common Ground, a grassroots hurricane relief group, in a sit-in at the rectory. Suncere Ali Shakur, a veteran community activist/organizer, and John Powell, a middle-aged member of St. Augustine, both led the youth group members in the sit-in. Jacques Morial, brother of former mayor Marc Morial, also assisted with organizational aspects of the sit-in, such as food provisions for those who would remain in the rectory for nineteen days. The sit-in was an absolute last resort for all of those involved and was considered a viable option only after more cooperative measures had failed.

Questioning Motives

The archdiocese's logic for the closure of the church and removal of LeDoux, as well as the pace and manner in which the parishioners were informed, and their lack of participation in the process, made parishioners question the archdiocese's reasons for wanting to close the church. Sandra Gordon, speaking to the church as president of the Pastoral Council on March 19, described the situation to the parishioners. While other parishes slated for closure had been given a chance to improve their parishioner counts, St. Augustine had not. Some of these parishes did ultimately manage to successfully petition to keep their churches open. St. Augustine was not presented with this option despite appeals to the Archdiocese. At the end of a service on March 1, Gordon stated in reference to the archdiocese being so unresponsive to St. Augustine's requests: "I don't know about you all, but they made me question the motive. The motive of their actions."⁵³

In Peter Entell's film *Shake the Devil Off*, which captures the events at St. Augustine during this time, Ashton Ramsey asked the question that was on the minds of everyone at St. Augustine: "After the most horrific thing happened in our country, why you want to take this away from the people now? *Why? Why? Why?* . . . We need it now more than *ever* . . . [Father LeDoux] can't say all this."⁵⁴ LeDoux, of course, acted "in obedience," as one parishioner phrased it to me, when he was asked by the archbishop to do "no more interviews." Another parishioner states in the film: "They know that this is a diamond in the rough. They know this. And they have some other plans and some other ideas about generating money . . . They want to make it a shrine. That's what I was told."⁵⁵ Another unidentified Tremé resident interviewed by the documentary crew stated: "That steeple's been up there for the last damn near six months, just about ready to fall. Now all of a sudden the transition turned over. Well now, Father LeDoux's not gonna be here any more. *Now* the steeple starts getting fixed all of a sudden. [Pause] Yeah. What's with that?"⁵⁶ The questions raised by the parishioners suggest that the archdiocese may have excluded Father LeDoux and refurbished the church in order to make it a more profitable financial investment.

Allen Harris, speaking at a Pastoral Council meeting in the rectory of the church on March 14, the day after the decision to close the parish was made, put things in clear terms with his frank remarks on the takeover by Father Jacques. Harris's remarks followed a tense visit earlier in the day from Father Jacques, who came to the church to claim the keys from Father LeDoux and let the parishioners know that he was going to be the new pastor. Harris said of Jacques:

He's a land grabber. He's been watching the real estate values of this neighborhood. They're selling houses in Esplanade Ridge for \$785,000–1.5 million. \$3–400,000 they're putting in these properties all around this church. You got to get the full scope of it. This is *not* going to flood. Father Mike is not stupid. He knows what he's doing.⁵⁷

Harris's speculations on the motives of the archdiocese suggest an attempt to profit from the gentrification of the surrounding neighborhood. Property values in the Tremé neighborhood, which had already been increasing prior to Katrina, further escalated in the aftermath of the hurricane.⁵⁸ If the goal of the archdiocese was to make more money from the church, either by increasing the number of parishioners, or through the creation of a shrine/museum, these goals could all be achieved with LeDoux in place as the pastor. Arguably, in pursuing the goals of increasing participation and even the construction

of a museum, the archdiocese could not have sought a more qualified person than Father LeDoux. These goals could have been communicated to the parishioners and they could have been involved in the process. In the absence of such communication, parishioners were only left with their own speculations about the reasoning behind the actions of the archdiocese. Since their appeals were not heard and their repeated written requests for meetings with the archbishop were ignored, they were left feeling disrespected, as Gordon told the *Times-Picayune*.⁵⁹

Consequently, the archdiocesan lack of appreciation of longstanding cultural traditions and their lack of inclusion of St. Augustine parishioners in their decision-making process raised suspicions among the parishioners about their motives. In light of the gentrification of the surrounding neighborhood, and broader post-Katrina trends, including the destruction of public housing and private redevelopment, the plans of the archdiocese seemed aligned with a larger trend of post-Katrina injustices

The Drama and the Trauma of March 26

On March 26, 2006, Father Michael Jacques arrived, wearing kente cloth vestments, accompanied by Father William Maestri and Deacon Rudy Rayfield, to offer the 10 o'clock Mass at St. Augustine. One parishioner described to me what happened on that day:

Tension was high when Jacques came in. Here was the black beloved priest being put out, here was a white Yankee come in. And because of him, he was representing the white slave master sending off the beloved black priest. It was a lot of history there and a lot of tension. . . . He brought parishioners from Peter Claver that were policemen. . . . One of the St. Augustine people saw the gun poking out from the holster under the belt of one of them.⁶⁰

The parishioner went on to explain that Jerome Smith, a neighborhood resident and longtime activist who had marched with Martin Luther King Jr., was very upset. According to the parishioner, Smith said that even during the civil rights movement, no one brought a gun into a church, and policemen would leave guns outside. The parishioner went on to say that the armed police presence was “terribly inappropriate” and that it “shows how disconnected they were from who we were at St. Augustine. They didn’t know that because those people weren’t participants at St. Augustine.”⁶¹

During the same Mass, students and Common Ground Activists held up signs in the church, saying “Save Our Parish” and “Save St. Augustine.” While Jacques was trying to give the service, Mama D. came up in front of him and

asked, "Why are you doing this to us?" Jacques refused to respond to her, and eventually people began to sing together, "We shall not be moved."

Archdiocese representative Rev. Maestri requested that Father Jacques end the packed service "for the sake of public safety." He admitted that he had asked ten police officers in plain clothes, many of them members of St. Peter Claver, to attend Mass on Sunday in order to "make sure we had taken precautions in case things got out of hand." Maestri said he "felt threatened" by protesters on Sunday. "I was followed to my car with police protection," he said.⁶²

Sandra Gordon described the events of the day as "the drama and the trauma" to some parishioners. She was later interviewed by Amy Goodman of *Democracy Now! The War and Peace Report*. Gordon describes how she felt at that Mass: "I was insulted as a person. I was insulted not only for the black culture but for all cultures. We have never had any violence at St. Augustine's through our church hall, nor through our church, and to think that we were such people that you needed to bring armed guards as part of your welcoming committee—I was appalled."⁶³ Asked by Goodman what he thought when Father Jacques had come into St. Augustine with armed guards, LeDoux responded: "Racial profiling. You see, we here in Tremé, we here in the church, know the difference between black people who are upset, even angry, and black people who are dangerous. These folks are not dangerous. They're just upset. But if you're not acculturated, you don't understand that, so you come in with armed guards."⁶⁴

It is no small irony that Reverend Maestri felt the church was "defiled" by the protesters, who used only nonviolent means, whereas those he had asked to carry the guns were not to blame for the supposed "desecration" of the altar. Had they attempted any measure of cultural sensitivity, the archdiocese would have tried to find out how St. Augustine provides its own security, even by consulting the local police. On high-profile Mass days, when St. Augustine required security, such as the funeral for Mardi Gras Indian Chief Tootie Montana, held in July 2005, parishioners were accustomed to calling in the Nation of Islam, who employ nonviolent measures of security and do not carry weapons into the church.

Current Situation

After negotiations between the archbishop and the Pastoral Council via a mediator, on April 8, St. Augustine Parish was reconsecrated and reopened provisionally. St. Augustine was given an eighteen-month trial period that has since been extended, because the parish spent a few months without a

resident priest. The church was presented with twelve benchmarks they were required to meet.⁶⁵ At the April 8 Mass, Archbishop Hughes, Father Maestri, and Father LeDoux were present, and during the Mass, the archbishop admitted to “missteps by the Archdiocese.”

Father Moody, a black priest of the archdiocese, originally from Belize, was named as temporary administrator of the parish. He had celebrated Mass at St. Augustine as a visiting priest following the departure of Father LeDoux. Initially, most parishioners responded well to him, in part because he sang with the choir on his first visit, reminding some of them of Father LeDoux. He presented himself as one who would work well with the parishioners and seemed willing to take on the leadership of working toward achieving the benchmarks. He was thus selected as a mutually agreed upon choice between the archdiocese and the parish.

However, as parishioners got to know Father Moody as a priest in residence, they began to describe him as “reclusive,” “uncommunicative,” and, most frequently, “authoritarian.” One suggested the following comparison: “Look, if Father LeDoux was the ‘Jazz Priest,’ this one [in reference to Moody] is the ‘No-no-no priest,’” since he says no to everything. A parishioner I spoke with noted that Moody mentioned in the middle of Mass that he was to be consulted prior to taking any actions. “Wouldn’t you bring that up at a business meeting? That’s not the way Father LeDoux conducted Mass.”⁶⁶ While there are some parishioners who like Father Moody, the inevitable comparison between him and his predecessor were, even if predictable, disappointing nonetheless. Some have even gone so far as to suggest that Moody was sent to the church specifically to close it down.

A neighbor noticed Father Moody depositing Father LeDoux’s more Afro-centric vestments in the dumpster behind the church hall. On another occasion, someone happened to notice Moody throwing out the photographs of the African-American bishops that had lined the walls of the church rectory for many years. Describing how Moody relates to the African-American culture of the neighborhood, a parishioner stated, “He’s just not interested in it.” Another described how he wouldn’t dance in the second line like Father LeDoux did—arguably a local way of measuring one’s integration into the neighborhood culture. As mentioned above, part of the annual celebration of the Tremé neighborhood’s most renowned musician, Louis Armstrong, was the Altar Society’s tradition of serving breakfast before the Mass. The breakfast, known to not only bring parishioners and the community together, but, of course, to generate a large portion of the income brought in by the Jazz Mass, was abolished by Father Moody.

Father Moody has continued some traditions at St. Augustine. With the assistance of Carol LeBlanc, the choir director who worked with Father LeDoux, the music ministry that developed under LeDoux has continued. Parishioners still join hands in singing the Lord's Prayer, raising their hands, and uniting the entire church both physically and spiritually. The parish has also managed to maintain the extended peace greeting. However, the lack of integration of Afro-Creole traditions within the religious services and events held at St. Augustine represents a considerable change to both the Tremé neighborhood and New Orleans.

Conclusion

C. C. Campbell-Rock, a New Orleans reporter based in San Francisco since Katrina, has called the actions of the archdiocese "ethnic cleansing."⁶⁷ In the context of everything else that is happening in New Orleans—the loss of public housing, the rising real estate values, the wholesale removal of a particular class of people—it seems only natural to question whether the archdiocese is also using Hurricane Katrina as a means of getting working-class African Americans out of an institution that might be viewed as a vehicle for generating income, either through the sale of real estate or the creation of a shrine/museum at St. Augustine, as some have suggested. Instead of doing all that could be done to maintain one of the few communities people were able to turn to after the storm, a community so cohesive that many described it as family, the archdiocese appears to have been doing all it could to break it up by closing the church and forcing the community's beloved pastor to leave.

Clearly, the way in which the archdiocese chose to operate in its determination to close the historically significant Parish of St. Augustine demonstrates a complete lack of sensitivity to the history and legacy of this parish. In the wake of Katrina, archdiocesan actions made the recovery process even more difficult for the parish. Without consideration of alternatives, without hearing the plea of its parishioners, and treating them with complete disrespect, the actions of the Archdiocese could only be interpreted as racial discrimination toward the parishioners of St. Augustine.

St. Augustine is sacred ground for many reasons, not simply because it is a church. St. Augustine not only remembers its origins as a church where the enslaved worshipped but its steeple also rises from the neighborhood as a beacon of the resilience, strength and honor of the city's Afro-Creole heritage and traditions. This is the same Afro-Creole community that bought up the majority of St. Augustine's pews when it was first built,⁶⁸ went on to chal-

lenge American racial conceptions and the imposition of Jim Crow, and that ultimately emerged as dominant in New Orleans city politics.⁶⁹

“Black churches were not only dominant in their communities, but they also became the womb of black culture and a number of major social institutions.”⁷⁰ Churches not only “provide a major resource for strengthening African-American communities,” but historically African-American churches have tended to do so through a “communal orientation” that takes into account not simply the religious needs of its members, but also extends to other aspects of their lives, including their political, economic, and social concerns.⁷¹ In New Orleans, these concerns include the acknowledgment of Mardi Gras Indians and participation in second lines to counteract the long history of criminalization, marginalization, and outright repression of these practices.⁷²

The movement to keep the parish open at St. Augustine follows a long history of resilience and activism in the Tremé neighborhood. Activists who spoke out and took actions to keep St. Augustine open drew upon not only their experiences during the civil rights movement, but also on the successes they achieved through their fight for housing and other human rights in the neighborhood, saving much of it from the urban renewal that took out entire blocks.⁷³ For generations, St. Augustine parish has served to support this spirit of resilience and self-determination in the face of failed top-down policies, and its parishioners have ensured that it will continue to do so for future generations.

Coda

As of this writing, St. Augustine has met the benchmarks that were set by the archdiocese, and the church is no longer on a probationary status. Rev. Moody made the announcement to a jubilant crowd at St. Augustine Church on March 1, 2009. Moody’s title has been converted from “parochial administrator” to pastor. The parish now has about 510 families and is financially self-sufficient, but Moody told parishioners that the archdiocese will “review its status in six months—a more frequent inspection cycle than other parishes undergo.”⁷⁴

The parish community of St. Augustine is steeped in traditions that have evolved for many generations. Keeping the building open and the number of parishioners high will secure the survival of the parish. However, St. Augustine will have the opportunity to reach its full potential as a parish community only if the cultural practices and social networks that were forged and sustained through the community before Katrina are able to continue.

Notes

The topic for this article was suggested by Michael Crutcher, who has also provided the valuable mentorship needed to see this project to completion. Helen Regis also shared her expertise on the neighborhood and provided generous intellectual feedback at an early stage of this project. Father LeDoux not only welcomed me to St. Augustine when I first moved to Tremé, but he has always been enthusiastic to talk about the church and generously shared his materials and sources with me. My deepest thanks go to the parishioners who took the time to talk with me and made me feel a part of the St. Augustine community, including Marge Palatou, Sandra Gordon, Leola Brown, and two anonymous parishioners who are quoted in this text. Marge and Sandra also read and commented on an earlier draft of this article. Thanks to Jim Hanlon and Chris Blackden for generous comments and discussions that have transformed this essay. I would also like to thank Susan Roberts, Liana Vasseur, the anonymous reviewers, and Curtis Marez for insightful editorial guidance.

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