

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis:                   RELEVANCE, SELF-DETERMINATION,  
AND UNIVERSALITY THROUGH ST.  
AUGUSTINE CATHOLIC CHURCH'S  
GOSPEL CHOIR

Victoria Lynn Visceglia, Master of Arts in  
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Thesis Directed By:           Professor Siv B. Lie, Musicology and  
Ethnomusicology Division

The Second Vatican Council provided ample opportunity for individual Catholic parishes to choose music that suited their congregations and contribute to the “Universal Church” through their particularity. St. Augustine Catholic Church in Washington, D.C. formed a gospel choir in light of this newfound freedom. Based on about one year of participant observation, this thesis analyzes the Gospel Choir’s role in making the Mass more relevant and interactive for parishioners. Singers maintain certain practices and ideals of the Church that they know make their ministry more effective while acknowledging the shortcomings of Catholicism at an institutional level. They animate listeners to respond dialogically with the Mass, allowing their lived experiences to inform their spiritual transformations. After more than 40 years, the Gospel Choir continues to navigate the boundaries between sacred and secular, Catholic and Protestant, and contrasting conceptions of African American identity.

RELEVANCE, SELF-DETERMINATION, AND UNIVERSALITY THROUGH  
ST. AUGUSTINE CATHOLIC CHURCH'S GOSPEL CHOIR

by

Victoria Lynn Visceglia

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Advisory Committee:  
Professor Siv B. Lie, Chair  
Professor J. Lawrence Witzleben  
Professor Fernando Rios

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## Dedication

To my grandfathers, Edward Moore and Ralph Visceglia.

## Acknowledgements

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

“Don’t let the word ‘Catholic’ fool you.” This is how Gail Jackson, an alto from St. Augustine<sup>1</sup> Catholic Church’s inaugural Gospel Choir, prefaced every performance outside of their usual Mass when she addressed the audience in the ensemble’s early days of the late 1970s.<sup>2</sup> She understood not only that gospel music was a typically Protestant genre rarely found in Catholic churches, but that more than a decade after the Second Vatican Council, the word “Catholic” was *still* laden with implications that quite mismatched the Choir’s open invitation to move and clap along with the music they sang. American Catholic Masses were formulaic and rigid, and often rather still and quiet; gospel music was almost anything but.

During its more than 40 years of existence, the St. Augustine Gospel Choir has challenged both the expected conventions of Catholic worship in the United States and the assumptions about religion attached to gospel music. The singers animate the Catholic Mass, inspiring movement and employing the music that they deem spiritually effective and relevant, while embracing the faith and expressing themselves as proudly Catholic. The Choir furthers the goals of the Second Vatican Council, which accepted more of what the modern world in the 1960s had to offer and set a precedent for continued experimentation with the Catholic liturgy on a global scale. St. Augustine is the oldest Black Catholic church in the capital of the United States and currently boasts a racially and socioeconomically diverse congregation. Like the Catholic Church as a whole since the Council, St. Augustine

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<sup>1</sup> Pronounced “uh-GUS-tin”

<sup>2</sup> Gail Jackson, interview, 15 April 2018.

celebrates difference and the literal translation of “Catholic”—universal—by adding their preferred sacred music to the worldwide repertoire. Ultimately, St. Augustine also subscribes to the Second Vatican Council’s hope to achieve unity with all believers.

Given the parish’s Black Catholic heritage and gospel music’s Black roots, St. Augustine and its music also expand the definition of what it means to be Black and religious in America, since African Americans and the music they birthed do not belong exclusively to the Protestant Church. The Gospel Choir disrupts persisting narratives that American Catholics are not Black and that Christian African Americans are not Catholic. Gospel music bridges the gap not only between Catholicity and Blackness in the United States, proving that they are not incompatible, but also the gaps between Christian denominations that include African Americans, and the gaps between Catholic identities and misgivings about older Church traditions. While St. Augustine has always directed its efforts toward Black Catholics, and while gospel music continues to be dominated by African Americans, gospel music in this context reaches past racial boundaries to welcome all worshipers into this Catholic congregation due to the relevance it brings to every Mass. Additionally, not all of St. Augustine’s Black parishioners prefer gospel music, and the congregation recognizes gospel music as only one of several genres fitting for a multifarious Black Catholic community.

The Gospel Choir seeks to mediate the tensions that some of St. Augustine’s parishioners feel between their lived experiences and their Catholic faiths, knowing that it is through their own particular understandings of their religion that they bring



relevance, autonomy, and unity to the settings in which they perform. In this thesis, I put the broad traditions of the Catholic Church in conversation with the commentary of my interlocutors about their ministry at St. Augustine and their time at other places of worship. With the assistance of my ethnographic observations, I analyze how the Gospel Choir and its leadership enhance the Catholic liturgy to be inclusive of its listeners, affirming their identities and motivating congregants to do God's work when they leave the sanctuary.

I have two caveats about language before I begin. First, I speak only for the Roman Catholic Church and its Roman rite, and do not make my claims about any other rites or ritual families, such as the Ambrosian rite or Mozarabic rite. Second, I use "African American" and "Black" interchangeably because I focus my attention on the United States. This history does not specifically account for African Catholics, who have populated the Catholic Church since its beginning, or Afro-diasporic Catholics outside of the United States. I tend to write "Black" and capitalize it because Black Catholic leaders during and after the Black Catholic Movement have done this, and St. Augustine has followed this tradition on its website. Additionally, the term "African American Catholics" is used to describe adherents to the African American rite, which is not recognized by the Roman Catholic Church, through the African-American Catholic Congregation that was started in Washington, D.C. (Kamalidiin 2001). St. Augustine does not subscribe to this rite.

In the following pages, St. Augustine's history will be examined within those of the American Catholic Church and of other Black Catholics.

*The Catholic Church in the Americas before the Second Vatican Council*

Black Catholics sit at the margins of both African American studies and Catholic studies. According to Cyprian Davis' landmark book, *A History of Black Catholics in the United States* (1990), Black Catholics have inhabited the Americas since the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. Many early African slaves were forced into Catholicism; for European invaders, evangelization was a natural part of colonization (ibid). In other cases, both free and enslaved African Americans chose to become Catholics. Catholic missionization of racial and ethnic minorities within the United States continued to grow and became more common in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, especially after Pope Pius XII encouraged white American Catholics to help their darker-skinned brothers and sisters enjoy membership in the Church (Cressler 2016). Most notably, Matthew J. Cressler (ibid.) contended that some African Americans believed in the Catholic Church's dogmatic assumption that it constituted a "Universal Church" that was superior and more encompassing compared to other denominations. They thought that belonging to the "Universal Church" "lifted them up above the color line" (ibid.: 114), unified them with Catholics of other racial and ethnic identities, and could keep them safe from the racism that abounded beyond its doors.

But white men still ran the Church, as Black and Native American priests could not yet be ordained.<sup>3</sup> The worship style of American Catholic Churches was undeniably different from those of Protestant Black Christians through most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Catholic Masses were routinely quiet, methodical, and free of excess motion and sound, while popularized conceptions of Black Protestant churches

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<sup>3</sup> According to Davis (1990), the first African American Catholic priest was ordained in 1886, but such occurrences were very rare.

included verbal interjections and comments, speaking in tongues, collapsing, clapping and stomping, and other displays of heightened emotion. Though the Vatican's rulings on music were somewhat unspecific prior to the Second Vatican Council, parishes in the United States featured the hymns of Euroamericans, regardless of individual parish demographics and race relations (Cressler 2016). Despite its self-proclaimed status as the "Universal Church," the Catholic Church often represented certain groups while excluding others, and it continues to do so today. Indeed, my interlocutors always used white Catholic churches as their point of reference when differentiating St. Augustine from other Catholic worship they have experienced.

Additionally, racial segregation and discrimination in the United States extended to sanctuaries of all denominations. The Vatican expressed disapproval of segregation in American Catholic Churches since the time of St. Augustine's emergence, but American bishops were always left to use their discretion, and Vatican leadership trusted American bishops who sometimes falsely reported improvement in race relations. Many parishes moved from being homogeneous in their racial and ethnic composition to being uncomfortably heterogeneous as African Americans moved to predominantly white neighborhoods. Up until the Civil Rights Movement, Black Catholics throughout the United States received mixed receptions in their community parishes; some reported relegation to the back pews, withholding of the Eucharist, and hostile glances and comments (McGreevy 1996, MacGregor 1999).

St. Augustine Catholic Church, by virtue of its origins, avoided discrimination within the parish, according to Morris J. MacGregor's 1999 book about St.

Augustine, *The Emergence of a Black Catholic Community: St. Augustine's in Washington*. Any long-standing member of the church will tell you that St. Augustine, named after the famous early Church theologian Augustine of Hippo, was uniquely established in 1858 by emancipated Black Catholics and for Black Catholics in what was previously the Archdiocese of Baltimore.<sup>4</sup> Other Black Catholic churches throughout Washington, D.C. and most others throughout the United States transformed out of white congregations that became less white as Black worshippers moved in, making St. Augustine a model and “Mother Church” for other Black Catholic parishes in Washington, D.C (MacGregor 1999). While this move demonstrated an unprecedented degree of autonomy on the part of parishioners, it resulted in the first place from struggles that typified the African American Catholic experience; the emancipated Black founders formed the church because they no longer wished to celebrate Mass in the basement of the white Catholic St. Matthew's.<sup>5</sup> Archdiocesan leaders supported this effort, believing that the racial climate and anti-immigrant sentiments in the United States necessitated parishes that were segregated by race and ethnicity (MacGregor 1999).

Despite St. Augustine's relative independence, MacGregor wrote, it was still under the jurisdiction of the white racist American Catholic Church that lied to the Vatican about segregation while widely upholding it. The congregants were not immune to changing race relations and economic realities in the city, and they were

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<sup>4</sup> An archdiocese is a district of Catholic Churches within a certain geographical area. The Archdiocese of Baltimore split to form a separate Archdiocese of Washington because its jurisdiction grew too large.

<sup>5</sup> According to MacGregor's archival research, there is no evidence that Black parishioners worshiped in the basement; however, this fact is a prominent feature of St. Augustine's oral history. No one I know thinks it is false.

affected by the segregation of other local Catholic institutions, such as Providence Hospital and Catholic University. The parish fluctuated in and out of debt while it supported itself as much as possible under the regimes of several indifferent archbishops who prioritized the welfare of other, whiter archdiocesan parishes. Other Church leaders in the District unexpectedly raised interest on loans they made to St. Augustine. Archbishops attempted to change St. Augustine's leadership several times throughout the parish's history, despite the obvious difficulty that could result from the sudden presence of unwilling white priests in Black spaces. Furthermore, despite St. Augustine's desire for Black priests, their pleas were left unsatisfied by the archdiocese and by other American Catholic leaders for decades. In the 1890s, the archbishop sought to take over St. Augustine's building, turn it into a white Catholic church, and move the center of African American Catholicism elsewhere in the city. In the mid-1940s, the archdiocese succeeded in selling St. Augustine's deteriorating structure without plans for a replacement. Frustrated but undeterred, parishioners began celebrating Mass in the basement of St. Augustine School (MacGregor 1999).

According to MacGregor (1999), St. Augustine's congregation was combined with the nearby white St. Paul's in 1961. It was here, under the new combined title of "Saints Paul and Augustine," that the Gospel Choir would emerge. Parishioners once belonging to St. Paul's left over time, and the remaining Catholics were primarily natives of St. Augustine. It was not until 1982 that this church officially became only "St. Augustine" to avoid losing the impressive history associated with the parish.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Father Patrick Smith, interview (28 March, 2018).

The church is proud of its history of fighting for autonomy and for a welcoming worship environment, especially in light of the barriers it encountered.

*Interracialism, the Second Vatican Council, and the Black Catholic Movement*

While the American Catholic Church reflected the segregationist practices prevalent in the United States, individual parishes and individual Catholics displayed different levels of acceptance. Some acknowledged that it was wrong without acting to reverse it (Massingale 1997). For other Catholics in the United States, interracialism became a prominent goal and moral pursuit during the 1940s. Its supporters believed that all racial and ethnic boundaries—those that would divide not only Black from white Catholics, but Polish from Irish Catholics, for example—belonged in the past so that the Catholic Church might truly become universal. Interracialists sought to desegregate Catholic churches, hospitals, and schools. The movement also united Catholics with other groups of faith in the United States, given the issue’s widespread significance. Though interracialism, with its focus on the universality of the Catholic Church, paved the way for future changes, it predictably glossed over some real problems. Yves Congar, a French theologian, wrote in 1953 that, “The idea of race...has no place in theology, missiology, pastoral theology, or canon law” (McGreevy 1996: 88). A “Universal Church” could not become truly universal without acknowledging and tackling challenges, such as racism, that faced some of its adherents. Black Catholics felt emboldened to proclaim this after the Civil Rights Movement, the Second Vatican Council, and the rise of the Black Power Movement.

By the beginning of the 1960s, Catholic churches were gradually ministering to an increasingly diverse global flock and could not so easily present themselves as monolithic without deterring members. Leaders also recognized that growing Catholic anti-intellectualism and reluctance to engage with current political and social struggles was alienating worshipers. In response, the Second Vatican Council, or Vatican II for short, adjourned in 1965 with four constitutions, nine decrees, and three declarations containing language of reciprocity and friendship, encouraging lay participation in the Church, and promising local agency (Greeley 1973, Cummings et. al. 2018). The rhetoric facilitated some immediate changes—Masses could take place in the local vernacular now instead Latin, with priests facing the congregation rather than the altar—but most shifts happened as churches interpreted Vatican II’s products over time. The years following the Council brought experimentation to the Church in terms of structure, outreach, and liturgy. While foundational aspects of the Church remained unchanged, liberal Catholics interpreted Vatican II as a paradigm shift and as a challenge to the Church that once structured itself in opposition of the Protestant Reformation to finally accept its own long-overdue reformation. According to Joseph A. Komonchak (2018), “The conciliar texts can be read as so many efforts to lead the church to take fuller and more conscious responsibility for its own self-realization” (287), mirroring the increasingly independent laity in an increasingly secular world. Liberals viewed religion as a lived practice; it was an institution obligated to move with its practitioners, and one that should strive to embrace all people (Greeley 1973).

In the United States, the Black Power Movement followed quickly on the heels of the Civil Rights Movement. A few important Black Catholic leaders in

Chicago met Bobby Seale and became acquainted with the Black Panthers. These Black priests incorporated Black Power ideology; Black Catholics had the right to self-determination without the paternalistic guidance of white diocesan leaders, and the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. served as a catalyst for this shift. Black Catholic churches in Chicago quickly transformed, and Vatican II made it easier for them to do so without retribution. One had a statue of Dr. King alongside the statues of saints. One priest refused to leave his parish to work for the diocese, insisting that a Black Catholic parish needed him, a Black pastor. Masses bore elements of African aesthetics both in decoration and in music. Some Black Catholics appreciated these changes; others missed the way their churches used to be and wanted no part of these changes that tainted what they loved about Catholicism. In fact, the majority of Black Catholics felt uneasy, at the very least, about the Black Power Movement and its newfound impact on their worship practices (Cressler 2016).

There were other leaders, too, whose actions were not quite so radical. They did not make changes at the local level, but instead conversed with peers in a series of national meetings. Ten African American Catholic bishops published a document called “What We Have Seen and Heard” calling for African American practices in Catholic worship, including music that was joyful and holistically meaningful. There were several conferences where speakers such as Father Clarence R. J. Rivers, Dr. Toinette Eugene, Father J-Glenn Murray, and Father Glenn V. Jean-Marie spoke about Black Catholic theology and the liturgical practices that should accompany it. Though they did not specifically name gospel music, they identified aspects of gospel



vocabulary, such as movement of the Spirit, bodily response, and dialogue between liturgical leaders and worshipers.

Perhaps somewhat paradoxically, Vatican II suggested that the implementation of culturally-specific practices in Mass would attract worshipers to a global church with at least some degree of standardization. In reality, the Catholic Church recognized that the global Church's diversity was a gift, and that the individual genius of each community contributed to a more complete body that represented all of God's creation. Additionally, by encouraging manifestations of uniqueness, the Catholic Church demonstrated that individual particularities were welcome in a broader practice that united believers around the world. For Black Catholics, the convergence of both racial and religious shifts in the United States allowed new ways of being both "authentically Black and truly Catholic."<sup>7</sup>

### *Gospel Music in the Catholic Church*

Gospel music is usually categorized as either Black/African American or white; my work only considers the former, which is an orally transmitted tradition. Scholars have pointed to African American spirituals, white gospel music, and blues music as the roots of Black gospel music. The genre started in Pentecostal churches populated by Black worshipers who had migrated north from the southern United States (Southern 1997). Gospel music became familiar to all Americans in the 1950s and 1960s, and songs like "Oh Happy Day" (Reagon 1992) and movies like *Sister Act*

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<sup>7</sup> Black Catholic Bishops of the United States, *What We Have Seen and Heard: A Pastoral Letter on Evangelization from the Black Bishops of the United States* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1984), 31.

(Waseda 2013) introduced a global audience to the genre. Musically, gospel includes clapping or other emphasis on offbeats, repetition, call-and-response, and improvisation (Southern 1997). Academics recognize gospel music's position between sacred and secular contexts, and gospel scholarship tends to either focus on its place in worship or the industry that produces popularized versions of it. While some Black Christians initially rejected gospel music for its audible relationship to popular music, others now reject the secularization of the genre that is evident through the American music industry's commercial production of it (Burnim 2017).

Catholics in Washington, D.C. were aware of the changes rocking the national Black Catholic community throughout the 1960s and 1970s and dealt with their own racial struggles both within and outside of their churches.<sup>8</sup> The St. Augustine Gospel Choir began in 1977, and the founding members I interviewed, Gail and soprano Fran Robertson, have insisted that it only happened because the right people were at St. Augustine at the right time. Enough members of the parish wanted a gospel choir, the pastor was entirely supportive because Vatican II allowed him to be, and a local monumental gospel musician, Leon Roberts, was both willing and able to accept this unusual job. Gail and Fran told me that other Black Catholic churches in D.C. established gospel choirs before they did, but St. Augustine's group reached a higher level of acclaim within a few years of its commencement.

Gospel music was not sung in Black Catholic churches prior to the 1960s, and likely not prior to the 1970s (Reagon 1992). Now, gospel music is much more common in Catholic churches, thanks to groups like the St. Augustine Gospel Choir

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<sup>8</sup> See MacGregor (1999), chapter 9.

and their first longstanding director, who ran a conference for other Catholic gospel musicians who needed repertoire and training. Today, the Archdiocese of Washington alone is home to several gospel choirs, including its own Gospel Mass Choir.

Jacqueline Codgell DjeDje (1986) wrote about three parishes in Los Angeles that tried incorporating gospel music and achieved varying levels of success due to racial make-up and differing involvement of priests; the parish with the least involved pastor and lowest population of Black Catholics met the most resistance to gospel music. The short documentary *Fire in the Pews* (1987) demonstrates gospel music and other typically African American practices in Catholic churches in New York, Chicago, and other cities throughout the United States. These aspects of the liturgy were valued and were contrasted with American white Catholic churches in this video. Mary E. McGann's 2004 book, *A Precious Fountain: Music in the Worship of an African American Catholic Community*, indicates that the practice also existed in San Francisco. The St. Augustine Gospel Choir even sang for Pope Francis when he visited the White House in 2015, indicating obvious acceptance of the genre within the Catholic Church (and, of course, the Choir's renown).

Though gospel music is welcomed by most, it is not preferred by everyone. DjeDje recognized this in her 1986 article, and Cressler emphasized in his book that the Black Catholic community is in no way monolithic. The St. Augustine Gospel Choir faced some dissent upon its emergence in the parish. Though these vocal critics have long since calmed down, St. Augustine continues to offer multiple other Masses without gospel music so that parishioners can choose music that they prefer, if that is important to them. For example, the 4:30 Saturday evening Mass features a vocalist

and pianist; the 8:00 Sunday Mass features a vocalist and organist; and the 10:00 Sunday Mass, which Father Pat considers the parish's main Mass, features the Chorale.<sup>9</sup> Our Lady of Lourdes from McGann's work (2004), all of the churches from Djedje's work (1986), and a few other churches I know of also host multiple types of liturgical music.

The St. Augustine Gospel Choir navigates the space between the concept of the "Universal Church" and the self-determination sought during the Black Catholic Movement. The 12:30 Mass and its choir welcome people of all backgrounds, but the Black Catholic heritage of the parish is never erased. They are "authentically Black and truly Catholic," but singers do not perform gospel music simply because they are Black, nor does this Mass attract a monoracial body of worshipers. St. Augustine's music ministry and other leadership strive to reach everyone, and through their performance of locally-preferred gospel music, stake the parish's claim in the "Universal Church."

### Methods

As a "cradle Catholic," like many of my interlocutors, I have a lifetime of experience with the American Catholic Church. From birth until I was about halfway through my undergraduate degree, I attended Mass every weekend with few exceptions, with my family and later by myself or with friends. I visited multiple Catholic churches in Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, and Florida, especially in

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<sup>9</sup> The first opera company in the United States came out of this group. See "Chorale," St. Augustine Catholic Church, <https://saintaugustine-dc.org/chorale>, and Morris J. MacGregor's *The Emergence of a Black Catholic Community: St. Augustine's in Washington* (1999), pages 487-516.

the former two states, and thanks to this research, I can now add Maryland and Washington, D.C.

This thesis draws on approximately one year of participant-observation. I attended St. Augustine's 12:30 gospel Mass once or twice each month starting in March 2018 and finishing in March 2019, being careful to distribute my time among the various liturgical seasons, including Lent (which precedes Easter), Easter, Advent (which precedes Christmas), Christmas, and Ordinary Time. Because the Choir sang at the notoriously lengthy Easter Vigil on the evening of March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2018, and at the Christmas midnight Mass in 2018, I ensured that I witnessed these celebratory occasions. This provided me with a broad idea of what happens at St. Augustine in times of spiritual joy and sorrow, and on both fiercely celebratory and liturgically "ordinary" occasions. In order to develop a balanced view of the church, I visited each of the other three Mass times at least once during my research, one 12:30 Mass that featured the Young Adult Choir during the Gospel Choir's time off in July, and a few other parish events. Additionally, I attended two Sunday evening performances at the church, one by the Chorale and one by both the Chorale and Gospel Choir, and three Gospel Choir rehearsals. To broaden my perception of the Black Catholic community in the Archdiocese of Washington, I went to the archdiocese's Black Catholic History Month (November) Mass and Martin Luther King, Jr. Day Mass, both of which featured the Archdiocese of Washington Gospel Mass Choir directed by Lynné Gray and Henry Herrera. I occasionally made audio recordings on my phone for my own use.

I also sought to situate myself in different locations throughout the sanctuary to vary my view of the congregants around me and of the altar, where the Choir and Father Pat celebrated the liturgy. Admittedly, I gravitated towards the speaker cabinets at the end of my research, since St. Augustine does not have ideal acoustics and it was sometimes difficult to hear consonants clearly. I occasionally chose my position based on the concealment it provided so that I could take notes or record songs on my phone without igniting the suspicion or indignation of others near me. Otherwise, I saved the majority of my fieldnote-writing until after Mass. Though St. Augustine is a Black Catholic church, its congregation is diverse, so I did not stand out as a young white woman. Despite my deep ambivalence regarding the Catholic Church, I almost always participated fully in the Mass, reciting the prayers and responses and taking Communion. I thought it would be best to blend in and emphasize the cultural practices that I shared with my interlocutors, and it did not feel right to me as a researcher or as someone who was raised Catholic to go against what was expected.

Though I met a few members of the congregation through light conversation before the start of Mass, the 160<sup>th</sup> anniversary picnic, and a few other events, most of my interaction was with the Gospel Choir. I conducted formal interviews with seven singers, and I aimed for diversity in terms of age, race, gender, personal religious history, duration in the Choir, and voice part. I also interviewed Father Patrick Smith, better known as Father Pat, the congregation's second Black pastor who has been at St. Augustine since 2004; Samuel "Eddie" Cromwell, better known as Eddie, who has directed the Gospel Choir and Chorale since 1998; and Valerie DeCosta, a

longstanding lector at the 12:30 Mass whom I fortuitously sat beside in the first month of my research. I use first names throughout my thesis to mitigate confusion—there are two Smiths—and to recognize the friendly relationships I have been fortunate to develop. Though I have considered what I learned from more informal conversations with these interviewees and with other singers and parishioners as I wrote, I do not cite them directly or by name.

To demonstrate my appreciation for the time and energy that my interlocutors gave me, I volunteered to help out at St. Augustine where I could. For example, I was assigned to paint faces at the 160<sup>th</sup> anniversary picnic in May and sell concessions at the Gospel Choir's bazaar in November, and I assisted with both the set-up and tear-down of each event. I have shared my research with those I interviewed and incorporated their feedback.

### *Outline of Chapters*

In Chapter 2, I assess the St. Augustine Gospel Choir as a microcosm of the Catholic Church, despite the fact that most members do not subscribe to all of the Church's teachings and beliefs. As a ministry, singers serve a mediating role for congregants, maintaining their own relationships with God in order to effectively share His love with worshipers. They view themselves as part of an institutional hierarchy that mirrors the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, and like Church leaders, they recognize their organization, their diversity of roles, and their placement within an impressive history as strengths of their ministry. Despite these similarities between both institutions, the Gospel Choir adheres to its own specific liturgical preferences to

stake their belongings in the global Church, and members balance their Catholic pride with their understanding of Catholicism's shortcomings.

In Chapter 3, I consider Father Pat's emphasis on relevance, given the perceived distance that many Catholics, especially Black Catholics, recognize between the Mass and their lived realities. I argue that the recontextualization of both gospel and other liturgical music facilitates relevance for the congregation, blurring the boundaries of sacred and secular. This is accomplished through the ability of movement, dynamics, and lyrics in gospel music to index Blackness, Protestantism, and matters beyond the liturgy. After analyzing the role of all of St. Augustine's musical offerings and the role of gospel music in the lives of parishioners outside of Mass, I conduct a close reading of a homily, or sermon, given by Father Pat about the crucifixion of Jesus. In it, he recontextualized two very different Christian songs that indexed previous church services for congregants and provided worshipers with multiple opportunities to understand that Christ's sacrifice was made on their behalf.

In Chapter 4, I discuss the Holy Spirit. Its abilities cannot be fully articulated by the singers, which demonstrates the sheer power of the Holy Spirit, if they choose to call it such. I argue that this force transcends definition and that it rather consistently sparks movement, connection, and transformation. I explain the typical physical reactions that St. Augustine's parishioners have to the gospel Mass's liturgy, such as standing, clapping, and verbally interjecting, and how these practices align with scholarship on gospel music in non-Catholic contexts. Successful mediation of the Holy Spirit by the Choir relies in part on the venue and on the expectations of listeners. The Gospel Choir seeks to initiate this dialogic spiritual exchange no matter



where they sing, even when spectators beyond St. Augustine are not familiar with typical performer-audience dynamics of gospel music, and to move listeners to carry out the work of the Holy Spirit long after the music has stopped.

This thesis aligns with previous ethnomusicological scholarship about Christianity. St. Augustine's implementation of a gospel choir is an example of indigenizing liturgy through music, a concept that applies to both Catholic and non-Catholic networks around the world (Scruggs 2005, Sherinian 2007). As Jonathan Dueck and Suzel Ana Reily wrote in the introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Music and World Christianities* (2016), Christian music circulates understandings of doctrine, is hybridized in local contexts, communicates historical routes, and inspires debates about what is holy and appropriate in church. Music can unify Christians in distant locales while complicating relations at home. Ultimately, it mediates between sacred spaces and the problematic societies encasing them (ibid.). Much of this is true of the St. Augustine Gospel Choir, and this thesis contributes a North American Catholic church—a rarity in ethnomusicological scholarship—to the conversation.

Many studies about post-Vatican II Catholicism focus on individual parishes since the Council recognized that there are multiple acceptable ways to express Catholic identity (McGann 2004, Komonchak 2018). This thesis adds yet one more church to the global Catholic narrative, one with a relatively wealthy Black congregation in a gentrified area of the political center of the United States. With admiration for McGann (2004) and Glenn Hinson's *Fire in My Bones: Transcendence and the Holy Spirit in African American Gospel* (2000), I consider closely the perspectives and religious convictions of my interlocutors. However, I

hope to more comprehensively address the tensions and diversity within St. Augustine and within the Black Catholic community on a larger scale. The Gospel Choir thrives somewhere between the “Universal Church” and Black Power, between Catholic and Protestant, between different ways of being a Black American, and between the sacred and secular. The exact nature of its contribution to Black Catholics is continuously negotiated based on current events in the singers’ lives, in St. Augustine, in Washington, D.C., and in the Catholic Church.

## Chapter 2: The St. Augustine Gospel Choir as a Microcosm of the Catholic Church

I agreed to meet alto Marilyn Smith at IKEA's café in College Park for an interview. Because College Park lies between her home and St. Augustine, and she had her choir rehearsal that evening, it made sense for us to meet closer to me before we had to drive to our own separate musical engagements. We talked for almost two hours at a secluded table about Marilyn's involvement with the St. Augustine Gospel Choir, which began in the early 1980s. She told me that she loved the music they sang and the community she had found. However, as someone who had grown up Catholic, Marilyn did not attend church regularly for a period of time in her early adulthood, instead visiting her friends intermittently at their Protestant churches. She had felt something was missing from these services, despite the quality of worship and music she experienced. I finally found a break in the flow of conversation to ask what she values in the Catholic Church now—what was absent in the other denominations? She answered,

The Eucharist and [...] the ritual ceremony. I like that [...] the incense [...] I love that, the pomp and circumstance of it, the ceremony, I love that. Our Masses are longer than any other Catholic church I've ever gone to. [...] And it's because of the music and the congregation feeding off of each other. But it doesn't bother me. [...] It goes by pretty fast, and I think the music ties it together as well, that sense of togetherness, fellowship. [*Sitting back in her chair, sheepishly averting her eyes for a moment, trailing off*] I like the Catholic Church.

Marilyn's comments are illuminating. She appreciates the order inherent in the Mass. Her penchant for Catholicism is strongly tied to St. Augustine's particular, lengthy way of holding a Mass, which differs from every other parish she has visited, and the music sung contributes to this length. This gospel music is also integral to the

sense of unity Marilyn feels each Sunday; with a diverse population, St. Augustine truly becomes a “universal church.” Yet despite her liturgical inclinations, she recognizes a level of audacity in stating her appreciation for such a contested institution, whose problems we discussed later at the end of our interview. Based on the interviews I conducted, Marilyn’s comments represent some of the preferences and reservations shared by other Choir members. St. Augustine’s musicians navigate these conflicting feelings by adopting and perpetuating what they perhaps consider the more favorable doctrinal aspects of Catholicism, such as its hierarchy, its emphasis on mediation, and its perception of inherited tradition.

Though it was contested by more conservative parishioners in its infancy for not being “Catholic enough,” and though members do not accept absolutely everything the Catholic Church teaches, I argue that gospel music practice at St. Augustine is a microcosm of the Catholic Church, even when the institutions are at odds with each other. I begin by considering Catholic doctrine since the Second Vatican Council and contrasting it with the experiences of St. Augustine’s parishioners. Then, I describe the Choir’s rigid hierarchy, including Father Pat, original director Leon Roberts, current director Eddie Cromwell, and the Choir’s officers, which mirrors that of the Vatican and aids their mission in bringing worshipers to Christ. Diversity of roles and gifts, which aligns with Vatican II’s goal for a Universal Church comprising multiple individual offerings, is vital to both hierarchies. Finally, I consider mediation within the Catholic Church and within the St. Augustine Gospel Choir. Singers contend that through their commitment to gospel music and to the Catholic Church, as Sister Thea Bowman once said, each member

can “bring my whole history, my traditions, my experience, my culture, my African American song and dance and gesture and movement...as gift to the church.”<sup>10</sup>

### *Dissonance in the Catholic Church*

The Catholic Church has always been known for its firm hierarchical structure, and the Second Vatican Council’s dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium* (1964) upheld this. Catholics believe in apostolic succession, which says that Christ’s disciples passed down direct authority through each generation of Catholic leaders. They say that Jesus appointed Peter to lead the Church after His ascension, and the long line of popes that has since followed are spiritual successors of Peter. The pope is believed to be infallible, and is the “visible source and foundation of unity of faith and communion” (ibid.: 18), responsible for the global population of Catholics. Christ’s apostles have since been replaced by bishops, who have authority over smaller pockets of Catholics throughout the world. Below bishops are priests, who normally have responsibilities towards individual churches.

St. Augustine is proudly Catholic, but its personnel are not blind followers of the Church’s leaders; all men are fallible, and a long history of questionable institutional behavior proves this. Father Pat addressed the huge gathering of Christmas worshipers in 2018 with a note of apology. He admitted that “a lot of darkness has been exposed” in the Catholic Church since Christmas of 2017 without being specific, perhaps in consideration of children in attendance, but commented without judgment that some in the pews were probably struggling with their faith.

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Brown (1998), 120

The prevalence of “lapsed Catholics,” “cafeteria Catholics,” or “cultural Catholics” throughout the United States is undeniable. People of faith who identify as Catholic often choose not to attend weekly Mass or otherwise engage with the Catholic Church on a regular basis, and this is not necessarily a result of secularism. This is a significant community within Catholicism, one that does not invest fully in the ritual components that make up the Catholic Mass, or in their obligation to show up every Sunday. Perhaps they recognize the lack of agency afforded parishioners in such a hierarchical institution; they choose not to participate in more passive religious consumption while ordained men preach, consecrate and distribute the Eucharist, and celebrate sacraments (Mayblin et. al. 2017). Others take issue with conservative political stances of the Church on subjects such as contraception, abortion, and homosexuality (Cavendish 2007). In a study published after the public sexual abuse reports were released in the summer of 2018, it was found that for every Catholic convert, there are between six and seven people who have already abandoned the faith (Masci and Smith 2018). Even for Catholics who attend church regularly, it is very common to ignore select portions of the doctrine with which they disagree (Greeley 2011). In my experience, it is atypical for Catholics to be full adherents to the Church.

While I heard many varied comments about Catholic Masses and ritual, my interlocutors tended to demonstrate loyalty to the religion itself above the men who represent it. Bass Will Ferroggiaro, a member of the Gospel Choir since 2007, remembered the leadership at his Jesuit college as men who “rested on their laurels.” St. Augustine in particular, with its Black Catholic heritage, has a history of clashing

with Church powers. Gail told me about the ousting of one of St. Augustine's priests in the 1990s for undermining higher authorities with statements such as, "The Cardinal is nothing but a little red bird." In a more publicized incident, beloved Black former pastor Russell Dillard was forcefully removed from his position by white former Archbishop Theodore McCarrick over two old sexual misconduct allegations. Some of the more established parishioners were furious upon learning in the summer of 2018 that McCarrick, who has since been defrocked, had committed his own more serious and more numerous offenses.<sup>11</sup> And in a pattern that characterizes American Catholics everywhere, social teachings of the Catholic Church seem increasingly out-of-touch to certain parishioners.

Like Marilyn, members of St. Augustine make peace with the flaws of the Church. Gail expressed her doubt that God cares about denominations; she just finds her Catholic milieu most comfortable. Others are more openly proud of their Catholic tradition, perhaps due to the struggles the congregation has faced to remain relatively independent in an archdiocese that did not treat them favorably. Soprano Vanessa Cooke, a member of the Gospel Choir since the 1980s who grew up Baptist, explained her position as a Catholic by saying,

I understand that it's an institution that's run by people. [...] But I am very clear in being able to separate my relationship with God with my relationship with the Church. [...] People don't always make the right choices, and make the right choices no matter what the tenants of the Church may be. Slavery is the perfect example of that. [...] But I do believe in the Church. I think that what the Church teaches in my heart is absolute, it's just that people don't always carry it out in the way that God intended.

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<sup>11</sup> For more information on Dillard, see [https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/2002/09/15/pondering-his-fall-from-churchs-grace/4b505600-ddcd-4865-973b-1c078ae364a9/?utm\\_term=.6d17ae7e8c9b](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/2002/09/15/pondering-his-fall-from-churchs-grace/4b505600-ddcd-4865-973b-1c078ae364a9/?utm_term=.6d17ae7e8c9b). For more information on McCarrick, see <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/16/us/mccarrick-defrocked-vatican.html>.

Much like there is dissonance between St. Augustine and Catholic leadership, there has also been, at least historically, dissonance between gospel music and Catholics within the congregation. Some of the elder members of St. Augustine voiced their displeasure to Father Raymond Kemp, then pastor, upon the formation of the Gospel Choir, believing that it had no business being in the Catholic Church. In part, this was due to gospel's origins in the Protestant Church, from which St. Augustine's parishioners wanted to distinguish themselves. In the eyes of its critics, the Gospel Choir added complications to the Catholic identities they claimed by proudly referencing both Protestantism and Blackness, providing additional ammunition for doubters who would question their authenticity as Catholics. Father Kemp stood his ground, however, asserting that the Gospel Choir was there to stay and that dissenters could choose from three other Mass times.

Members of the Gospel Choir are situated within a church that has struggled to practice the Catholic faith in what was often a toxic racial climate within Washington, D.C. and throughout the greater United States. St. Augustine's congregation has established itself as both a Black and a Catholic parish with pride, but it has thrived without much help from the Archdiocese of Baltimore, and later Washington. The valued heritage at this historic church resulted in discrepancies over what was appropriately "Black" and "Catholic" after the Gospel Choir's emergence, and parishioners knew that the answers could influence their ongoing relationship with local Church authorities. Singers minister within the tension between St. Augustine and the Catholic Church and within competing ideas about St. Augustine's identity. Still, singers are not dissuaded from maintaining their loyalty to what they



feel are more useful Catholic practices, despite some doubts about leadership and social teachings. The rest of this chapter explores how the St. Augustine Gospel Choir successfully employs aspects of Catholic teaching and tradition in order to fulfill their mission as a choir. They continuously negotiate their preferred aesthetics, their personal convictions, and the Catholic Church's law in all of their musical activity.

### Ministry and Hierarchy

The aforementioned Vatican II constitution *Lumen Gentium* balances its monarchical adherence to previous doctrine with recognition that no matter their rank, Catholics need each other to create a universal church on earth. In its 13<sup>th</sup> section, *Lumen Gentium* explains,

In virtue of this catholicity each individual part contributes through its special gifts to the good of the other parts and of the whole Church. Through the common sharing of gifts and through the common effort to attain fullness in unity, the whole and each of the parts receive increase [*sic*]. Not only, then, is the people of God made up of different peoples but in its inner structure also it is composed of various ranks. This diversity among its members arises either by reason of their duties, as is the case with those who exercise the sacred ministry for the good of their brethren, or by reason of their condition and state of life, as is the case with those many who enter the religious state and, tending toward holiness by a narrower path, stimulate their brethren by their example.

Structure is necessary for the Catholic Church at every level of society, then, and it depends on the variable gifts from *all* of its constituents.

The Gospel Choir considers itself to be part of St. Augustine's leadership. Bass Maurice Baptiste,<sup>12</sup> a relatively new Gospel Choir member who grew up in France, explained that when Choir members display anything even remotely close to

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<sup>12</sup> This is an alias.

arrogance, “Eddie likes to remind us about the purpose of the Choir, and he always says, ‘You are a ministry.’” This simplified mission, articulated by the ensemble’s director, was echoed in all of my interviews. The Gospel Choir has an official, more comprehensive mission statement that is included both on St. Augustine’s website and in the Gospel Choir’s written guidelines:

The St. Augustine Gospel Choir seeks to provide musical support to enhance the liturgical, sacramental, and worship services of St. Augustine Catholic Church; offer spiritual and musical witness in support of the evangelical, educational, cultural, and service ministries of the St. Augustine community; and bear musical witness to communities of faith throughout the world in any setting that God provides.<sup>13</sup>

Like the ordained leaders of the Catholic Church, members of the Gospel Choir have, at least on paper, some broad goals to keep in mind as they practice their ministry.

The organization of the St. Augustine Gospel Choir, within the highly-organized Archdiocese of Washington, within the highly-organized Catholic Church, is necessary not only for musical cohesion. In the words of Marilyn, “You could understand that’s why the Choir was renowned, and that’s why it achieved the success in evangelizing that it did, because it *had* structure.” The fulfillment of the Choir’s mission depends on their hierarchy, which forces singers and other personnel to be accountable to each other; without it, their impact as a ministry suffers.

The Gospel Choir, particularly its director, must ultimately answer to Father Pat. Father Pat trusts Eddie to choose appropriate repertoire, but he told me that his permission is usually sought if the Choir does anything new or unusual. He has

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<sup>13</sup> “Music Ministry,” Saint Augustine Catholic Church, Accessed 24 February 2019, <https://saintaugustine-dc.org/gospel-choir>.

dismissed head musicians during his previous tenures as a priest for one parish and as the pastor of two others. Father Pat usually did so because the individuals stretched themselves too thin, accepting opportunities at other churches to the extent that their service at his church suffered. He suggested that their egos convinced them that they could take on that amount of responsibility without compromising the quality of their delivery. Father Pat told me in an interview, “We can’t do ministry without humility...if you’re *leading* a choir, you have to be buying into it yourself.” He advocated, to an extent, the high level of dedication that ordained Catholic leadership must embrace in order to fulfill their sacred duties. Father Pat has also asked elderly musicians to leave if they could no longer perform particularly well. He has always sought to appoint musical leaders who would devote ample time and energy to their ministry for the good of the singers and congregants, adding that, “*no* music is always better than bad music,” and that regardless of the genre, “the idea is to give God your best!”

The highest authority figure within the Gospel Choir is, of course, the director. When the St. Augustine Gospel Choir began in 1978, few musicians had the experience or the desire to confront the monumental task ahead as a director. Despite Vatican II’s flexibility, Catholic Masses continued to follow a rigid formula, employing Mass parts that punctuated key moments of the ritual and maintained the same text across all churches. St. Augustine did not have the first ever Catholic gospel choir, but such groups were still in their infancy, meaning that there were almost no Mass parts in the gospel style. Additionally, the thirteen inaugural singers had little experience singing gospel music. Their first director, who lasted two weeks,

“said that there was not enough talent in that choir,” according to soprano Fran Robertson, an original member, in our interview.

Leon Roberts became this man’s replacement. Roberts, who previously helped lead the gospel choirs at Howard University and at a Baptist church, was a highly qualified director. He graciously accepted meager compensation and worked diligently with the group at St. Augustine. Roberts composed gospel-style Mass parts, taught St. Augustine’s new singers to read music, and brought additional singers from Howard. Additionally, recognizing the needs of other Catholic gospel choir directors, he put his talents to use for a wider community. The Gospel Choir recorded multiple albums that featured Roberts’ Catholic-friendly compositions, such as *He Has the Power: The Mass of St. Augustine*, and he published his work for other Catholic churches to use. He also contributed to the 1987 *Lead Me, Guide Me* Black Catholic hymnal that still sits at the end of every pew in St. Augustine, and recorded selections from it with the Gospel Choir. Roberts even assisted in running a conference called Rejoice! that served as a platform for composers and directors of Catholic gospel music.<sup>14</sup>

Leon Roberts ultimately converted to Catholicism due to his involvement with St. Augustine, as did some of the Protestant Howard students that he introduced to the community. He and the Choir he directed for nearly two decades left a legacy that served as an inspiration for other Catholic gospel choirs, and his singers still remember the late Roberts as an astonishingly impressive, holy figure. Gail stated,

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<sup>14</sup> Gail Jackson and Fran Robertson, interview, 15 April 2018; Marilyn Smith, interview, 19 February 2019; MacGregor 1999.

It was an appointment with destiny, and it was divinely ordained that he'd be here. Because St. Augustine is the oldest Black Catholic church in this area, so we call it the mother church. And I thought how fitting that it would happen here that this music would just—and they were doing it, but Leon brought a different level of [pause] *professionalism*—he was a *stickler* for how we sound.

It is no accident that current singers characterize him as someone *ordained*, like leaders in the Catholic Church, to fulfill this destined role. Fran similarly declared that the Choir's early success "was all because of the anointed direction of Leon!" Words like "ordained" and "anointed" indicate that Roberts occupied a status somewhere above lay Catholics. Gail's comment also demonstrates that in the case of Roberts, the God-given talent the Gospel Choir continues to extol was necessarily paired with piety and a desire for excellence. Marilyn, who first met Roberts at a Rejoice! conference, remembered in our interview, "He was tough. I'd never had a choir director like that before, ever, that was so absorbed in his ministry. It wasn't just a job; it was a ministry for him, and it was apparent." And later, "Leon is a special individual. He was truly touched, I think, by God."

Vanessa, who maintained a friendship with Roberts outside of the Choir, told me:

He just brought a particular spirit to his writing, and even the way he set the music, and his teaching and his writing style, was just very unique. [...] And I think it has to do with him being so God-centered, and most of the songs were scripture-based, so him really believing that and being able to set those very same words to music was just an incredible gift, I think. And we can't really put too much emphasis on the mechanics of it.

Even historian Morris J. MacGregor, who wrote a book about St. Augustine in 1999, thanked Roberts, who would pass away that same year. He wrote in his preface, "In Leon Roberts one senses the presence of an artist of the highest order and a man

Spirit possessed” (ibid.: xiii). In the St. Augustine Gospel Choir, the presence of an informally ordained, holy person at its head made all the difference in the group’s success.

Eddie Cromwell has been the Gospel Choir’s director since 1998 after a few short-lived directors came and went, and he also leads the Chorale. He balances about nine jobs in his life, but he is leaving his own legacy in the Choir because he is good at what he does. All of my interlocutors spoke highly of Eddie’s musical abilities, and he composed a few new Mass parts when the English translation of the liturgy changed at the end of 2011. One of these Mass parts, the “Gloria,” is sung every week at Mass and was called by Maurice “a trademark.” Eddie told me that he tries to bring every choir he leads to another level or to build something if there is not already a firm foundation. Though he is Seventh-Day Adventist, he took care to learn the particularities of the Catholic liturgy during his early years at St. Augustine so that he could effectively lead the Gospel Choir. In our interview, Eddie remembered a recent Mass, which I also attended, when Father Pat accidentally referred to him as “Monsignor Cromwell” in front of the congregation. The singers laughed at the time, but Eddie added, “The Choir members were like, ‘Yeah, we’ve been knowing this for years, I don’t know why he’s saying this for the first time.’ Because I take it seriously.” As a non-Catholic, he has accepted the same responsibilities as other Catholic leaders and brought his best intentions, talents, and standards to St. Augustine.

Among the singers, there is also hierarchy. All members follow a written set of guidelines that is explained to them by a section leader when they first join. The

guidelines outline rehearsal, performance, wardrobe, and conduct expectations. After singing alone for the director, new participants must attend four rehearsals and Masses before they are permitted to sing on the altar during Mass. A few current singers described this somewhat daunting process to me; it took a lot of encouragement from various Choir members for Will, for example, to finally join. He explained, “It was, for me—something I picked up very early on is that these people are very fierce in their faith, and that was intimidating. It’s frankly intimidating, and it came out through their music [...] you could tell that these people were about more than just the music.” Vanessa told me that she understood this way of thinking, “because we’re old. I mean, you know, so it’s kind of hard to walk into an old established group. It takes a certain kind of person to do that, and sometimes I think people are intimidated by it.”

The guidelines describe the process of elections and the duties of the elected, as well. There are typical offices—Marilynn, for example, is the Gospel Choir’s secretary—but there is also a sergeant-at-arms to address behavior, a team of four section leaders to monitor musical issues and fledgling singers, and a chaplain (Gail, now) to promote the mission of the Gospel Choir. Additionally, there are multiple committees operating at any given time. There is also an unspoken designation of tradition-bearers, who have the right to speak about and for the Gospel Choir. One section leader did not want to be interviewed, presumably because he believed he was not in a position to do so, and pointed me instead toward two more established members. A parishioner I met early in my research told me to interview Gail, who was “a wealth of knowledge,” instead of his alto wife. Still, Gail acknowledged the

Choir's large aging population in our interview and noted that they are trying to pass the baton to the next generation. They cannot be the primary authority figures for much longer, and they do not want to leave gaping holes in the Gospel Choir's institutional memory when they depart. "We realize that we're transitioning. And that's why it's *so* incredibly important, and they are *thirsting* for it, to know our history. Because you know, with us, if we don't pass that on, it'll die."

Since the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church has advocated for diversity in roles and liturgical practices, as demonstrated in the *Lumen Gentium* quote beginning this section. Another Vatican II constitution, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, stated the Church's desire to, "respect and foster the genius and talents of the various races and peoples" (1963: 37). The Vatican's conception of a "Universal Church" required, and still requires, the combined genius of all people, "that the gifts of individuals and of particular groups become the common heritage shared by all" (Black Catholic Bishops 1984: 4).

The diversity of roles within the Choir, like the diversity of roles within the Catholic Church, is complemented by the diversity of the people themselves. Most of the members are reportedly in their 50s, 60s, and 70s, with the youngest being just under 30. They also represent a variety of nationalities, races, and histories, from government workers to therapists to high school guidance counselors. Maurice told me, "I really love that about the Choir, it's very open to new members, very open to international people, there's no- they're open to white people, if you want me to put it more dynamically. And that's great." Gail explained,

The congregation has changed, and the Choir has changed in make-up. [...] And so we have now- even the Choir is kind of multicultural! We have Choir



members from France and Africa, or the islands, Trinidad, various places, it's multicultural! [...] It has changed because the composition of the city has changed.

Vanessa, too, recognized the value of diversity within the Choir, explaining that she wishes more parishioners would join because, "I'm sure there are so many people that have so much to bring." For singers, this is not about diversity for diversity's sake. Tenor Latore Whitaker, who has been a member of the Gospel Choir since 1993, expressed to me the advantage of having "people from different backgrounds, different expressions, different experiences and all that kind of stuff. But when we come together, we bring that collective experience together." Through the contribution of different gifts, the Choir as a whole becomes a stronger institution that represents St. Augustine's population.

The Gospel Choir mirrors the post-Vatican II Catholic Church in structure and in its expectations of leaders. They rely in part on their hierarchy in order to fulfill their ministry to the absolute best of their abilities. Constituents contribute myriad gifts, representative of their own uniqueness and of the community surrounding St. Augustine, forming one universal body of believers. Like Catholic leaders, they celebrate their group's history, knowing that their work must last beyond their lifetimes.

### Mediation

In addition to hierarchy, mediation is a prominent theme in Catholic practice; for believers, connection with God happens not only within a person's heart and mind, but through actual experiences of events, objects, and people. God acts directly

in the lives of Catholics through sacraments, which are mandatory and ritualized events, such as baptism, confirmation, and holy matrimony. Priests, as ordained men, have the authority to forgive sins on behalf of God through the sacrament of reconciliation and to transform the bread and wine of Communion into the literal body and blood of Christ. Jesus is an additional mediator, as God made Him both divine and holy so that humanity could grow to know God, and the Church mediates access to Jesus (McBrien 2005). In sum, Catholics believe that unity with the divine is possible through a complex, layered web of structures and practices of the Church.

As a ministry, the Gospel Choir fulfills a mediating role by delivering the Word of God to the congregation. From all of my interviewees, I heard similar comments about how individuals understood their group's purpose. Father Pat suggested that music is a vessel by saying, "The *goal* is not to lead people to gospel [music], it's to lead people to Christ." Vanessa told me, "I think our major goal is to engage people in worship," later explaining that the Holy Spirit comes through singers when they perform their ministry. Gail claimed their mission "is to bring about the Good News in song," informing the audience through music "that God is a healer, and a deliverer." Maurice answered this question of intention with lyrics from "God Restores," a prominent song in the Gospel Choir's repertoire: "I'm a living testimony' [...] delivering Jesus' messages the best way we can and being living testimonies that God restores." He chose a notable line, a phrase that coincides with the climax of this comforting song's melody. No matter how it was articulated, these ministers understood themselves as transmitting something divine to the congregation through their music.

Every single person I interviewed insisted that singers must maintain their own strong, affirming relationships with their Lord for this mediation to occur. Eddie told me what constitutes good gospel singing, in addition to correct pitches: “They have to know Jesus. Because gospel music is Jesus. So to really convey gospel music, we have to know how to give Jesus to the rest of the congregation or the rest of the audience. If you can’t do that, then it’s just words and song.” Father Pat confirmed that the Gospel Choir’s impact relied on the religious conviction of each member. In his enthusiastic Pentecost Sunday homily, he explained that he and the Choir depended on God just as much as the parishioners did, and that this relationship necessarily preceded their ministry.

I daresay God has never given this choir a song in 40 years that was not first meant for them! So that when they tell you about Jesus being the source of their strength, or that God is the strength for their lives,<sup>15</sup> they can tell you as firsthand witnesses about a God they know, and a God they need (“Pentecost Sunday 2018 1230pm...”).

The singers voiced their agreement, with multiple declarations of “Yes” and applause.

Gospel Choir personnel sustain their relationships with Jesus both alone and as a group. According to Will, “One of the things we try to do is make ourselves available to the Spirit, to serve who needs to be served, to reach who needs to be reached, and we take that very seriously. It’s something we pray on, there’s a reason it’s called a ministry; it’s not a choir, it’s a ministry.” The Gospel Choir has not been on a retreat in years, but they used to serve an important role in maintaining group cohesion. According to Gail and Fran, the ensemble had shared a fulfilling, rejuvenating retreat in approximately 1982, and Gail briefly spoke in front of the

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<sup>15</sup> Lyrics from Richard Smallwood’s “Total Praise”: “You are the source of my strength/You are the strength of my life.”

Choir on that Pentecost Sunday morning, the end of their time there. After stepping off the podium, she collapsed, and she heard the others present screaming and speaking in tongues. Gail and Fran felt confident that this experience mirrored the real Pentecost, and parishioners reported significant improvement after they sang their usual Mass at St. Augustine that same afternoon. Today, the Gospel Choir stands in a circle, links their hands, and prays together before and after every Tuesday rehearsal. I participated in this on November 13<sup>th</sup>, 2018. Members of the Choir brought up a range of events from the past week; one man was almost attacked by a group of teenagers, and Marilyn was thankful that her daughter had found a job. When we said the Lord's Prayer to conclude the prayer circle, I was taken aback by the unison of their speaking voices; it sounded as if someone were conducting them. More likely, however, they were attuned to the actions of their fellow singers, they had recited the prayer together so many times, and both factors extended to their unity as a group of musicians. These bonding experiences in sacred contexts led them to sing "with a conviction that really just touched people's hearts and souls and minds"<sup>16</sup> and more importantly, "like one accord," a phrase I constantly heard to describe effective music ministry.

As conduits of Jesus, it is clear to the receiving party—the congregation—if the Gospel Choir is not connected to Him, at least in the minds of liturgical leaders. Marilyn told me in an interview, "I don't know how you can really sing a song about God if you don't know God. I mean, how can you sing it convincingly? If you don't know Him, you're not gonna touch me. Unless you're an absolutely wonderful

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<sup>16</sup> Gail Jackson, interview (April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2018).

performer or actor, but I don't think that's gonna happen." Valerie explained her view of the Gospel Choir as an outsider: "It's not talent night, you know? It's not that they're performing for money or for applause, they're there to praise God. I mean, many of them are in tears when they sing. They're expressing their vocation and their ministry through song." Father Pat brought up the hypothetical scenario of a highly-trained gospel choir populated by atheists. If this choir were to replace the St. Augustine Gospel Choir at Mass one Sunday, he mused, the congregation would hear the difference. If the worshipers failed to perceive any spiritual shortcomings, it would indicate that the St. Augustine Gospel Choir was doing something incorrectly. There is a little extra something, then, that indicates sincerity in a singer's spirituality, and the leadership at St. Augustine is convinced that listeners can detect its presence or absence.

While St. Augustine's gospel musicians do not aggrandize their roles—they recognize that Christ is the focus of the Mass—they strive to be at Christ's disposal, to draw worshipers closer to Him. To accomplish this mediation, singers must feel secure in their relationships with God and in their relationships with each other. Only then can they sing of one accord, imparting His love and His message of unity to any congregation that hears them.

### Conclusion

Even if the leadership of the Catholic Church both locally and on a larger scale has been far from infallible, the Gospel Choir knows that by adapting the Church's hierarchy on a smaller scale, the ensemble becomes a cohesive, effective

ministry. Singers answer to their leaders, the director, and ultimately, Father Pat, while they give of their myriad talents for the benefit of the Choir as a whole. The Choir is also an additional mediating power for St. Augustine among other Catholic practices, collectively maintaining a strong relationship with God so that it can be a weekly conduit of His love. Members, like Catholic leaders, see themselves as inheritors of a sacred lineage that they hope will continue beyond their lifetimes. While the Choir knows the flaws of the Catholic Church, they bring their own gifts to the larger institution and fit comfortably within its structure.

A few weeks after I first heard his rendition of the Doxology with the Gospel Choir, Father Pat told me,

I believe the Mass crescendos with the Doxology. That's what it's designed [to do]. And so [it's] unlike, let's say, a Protestant church, where the crescendo is the sermon. So, we go—I preach, but then we move, shift it to the altar. And that's where the Word becomes flesh, the talk becomes action. The cause has an effect, and that's the effect.

The Doxology is a brief prayer that happens shortly before Communion, when the bread and wine become the literal body and blood of Christ by mediation of the celebrant for consumption by those authorized to participate in the sacrament.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, it marks the miracle that occurs in every Mass, the climax of the ritual. The text is simple, and in my experience, it is either sung with piano accompaniment, chanted, or spoken by the priest.

During the gospel Mass, the Doxology happens almost the same way every time. Father Pat covers a range of topics in the preceding scripted Eucharistic prayer, providing a summarized account of what Catholics believe, claiming the attention of

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<sup>17</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd. ed., 1333, accessed 26 February, 2019.

the congregation. Meanwhile, Eddie supports this leader with light, sustained piano accompaniment. The Gospel Choir members, uniform in their attire and arranged in a formation that does not indicate rank, stand still and silent. Father Pat addresses God the Father, mentioning Jesus, “By whose death You willingly reconcile us to Yourself. Grant that we who are nourished by the body and blood of Your Son, and filled with the Holy Spirit, will become one body, one spirit in Christ.” He pays homage to the well-known mediators of the Catholic Church: “Mary, the Virgin Mother of God, the blessed Joseph, her spouse, Your blessed apostles and glorious martyrs, and all of Your saints, who we rely on for unfailing help.” Father Pat prays that God will “advance the peace and salvation of all the world...through Your servant, Francis, our pope,” and soon after, bishops, clergy, and His “entire people.”

Sounding much like a gospel soloist, Father Pat begins singing slowly and confidently with the piano in a smooth tenor voice with his eyes closed, rising in pitch and falling only on the last word, “Through Him, with Him, in Him.” This prayer recognizes both the humanity and mediating powers of Christ. Father Pat continues, with short ascending lines, “Oh God/almighty Father/in the unity/of the Holy Spirit.” At each slash, he takes a dramatic breath, as if he expends his own physical energy through the consecration. “All ga-lory/and honor/are Yours forever.”

As he sustains the last syllable, the Choir enters, strongly singing a melismatic “Amen, Amen” four times in harmony, each set of Amens following a general rising and falling stepwise pattern and successively rising in pitch. This serves as The Great Amen, the musical portion of Mass that must follow the Doxology. But this musical fragment is originally the coda of Richard Smallwood’s “Total Praise,” a popular

gospel song across denominations that thanks God for His help in times of need and never fails to inspire reactionary movement within the congregation. Father Pat riffs with repetitions of “Forever” and a few other lines from the Doxology, like any good gospel soloist would, barely heard over the Choir. The song slows to a stop with the loudest sustained syllable yet.

In the end, the priest performs the consecration, the singers offer their musical support, and the director holds everyone together. I could not help but smile widely when I first heard this rendition of the mediating Doxology. I had never heard it done with a choir. This brought unity to this moment of mediation while highlighting the intricate structure of the Church that allowed for such mediating experiences. They sang of one accord. And while the actors themselves were depersonalized to fulfill their duties, they brought a particularity—one that suggests both racial identity and affiliations beyond the Catholic Church—to this liturgical moment that is shared by parishes around the globe.



## Chapter 3: Recontextualization and Indexicality at St. Augustine's Gospel Mass

On the first Sunday in Advent 2018 at St. Augustine Catholic Church, the gospel reading that preceded the homily featured Jesus Christ talking to his disciples about the end of the world. Father Pat had not freely chosen this passage; the Catholic Church mandates a rigid cycle of readings corresponding with the liturgical calendar. But by his own choice, he talked about Marx's idea of religion as the "opium of the people," a transcendent fantasy that comforts its adherents in times of trouble:

So often religion is dismissed, because people assume that it's not real, it's not really speaking to *my* real realities, my real world, and so if it can't be honest about that, then what good is it to me? And it's a fair judgment, when religion does that, but the true, true religion never does. And so it's not *really* odd, I mean, because the calendar says it's a month from Christmas, and because the song says, [*singing*] "It's the most wonderful time of the year!"—well, it might not be that for you right now! ("1<sup>st</sup> Sunday...")

The congregation laughed as Father Pat continued, explaining that Advent spreads hope without completely ignoring harsh worldly realities, including the numerous troubling events in the news cycle.

Father Pat prioritizes *relevance* in his every liturgical move to prevent his church from becoming an "opium of the people," or a "fairy tale" that provides a pleasant momentary distraction and moral lesson, because he knows that fanciful or abstract messages repel those with significant hardships. In Father Pat's Christmas homily, he revisited Marx's phrase and explained that Marx and others who viewed religion as a drug, as an escape from reality, did not consider what would happen after the drug wears off. Those taking the opium would still eventually face all of the difficult realities of their lives, including lost loved ones, shattered relationships,

health problems, and government shutdowns, referencing the then-recently declared shutdown in the United States that impacted many of St. Augustine's parishioners. After quoting snippets of the first reading,<sup>18</sup> including, "A people who walked in darkness" and "cloaks rolled in blood," Father Pat exclaimed, "The reality is, sin and darkness and death and mourning are not a fairy tale, and you know it!" ("Christmas Eve Midnight Mass 2018..."). He believes religion is not just a nice story, and Mass is not just a nice performance; it is a protest of worldly circumstances, an affirmation that we are understood and loved in our broken human condition, and a call to make changes for the better in God's name.

Father Pat intends to demonstrate that the Mass he celebrates *does* correlate with the lived experiences of his parishioners, and music aids him in this endeavor. Using "Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life" by Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs (1990) as a guide, I argue that musical recontextualization at St. Augustine Parish during the 12:30 gospel Mass, which often occurs alongside the recontextualization of current events, allows worshipers to hear relevance in the liturgy. According to the article by Bauman and Briggs, contextualization is the active negotiation of context as a performance unfolds in real time. Recontextualization, then, is the contextualization of texts that have been taken from a different previous contextualization, attaching new meanings to each text. For example, Father Pat's recontextualization of the popular Christmas song, "It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year," in his Advent homily allowed parishioners to recall the numerous contexts in which they had heard that tune,

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<sup>18</sup> Isaiah 9:1-6

including films, stores, and holiday gatherings. The lyrics of the song are relentlessly gleeful, naming multiple antiquated Christmas traditions that suggest Yuletide cheer is ubiquitous during the holiday season. Father Pat recontextualized them in a message of realism, telling his congregation that it was okay if they did not presently find themselves in “the most wonderful time of the year,” because Jesus would not accept the song as completely representative of life’s realities, either. Worshipers might now hear that song as a vapid Christmas fairy tale, similar to Marx’s notion of an “opium of the people,” and find that the message of Advent—that of hope in difficult times—is more relevant to their experiences.

Worshipers gain the ability to hear the relevance of the Mass through multiple modalities and make connections to their “secular” lives outside of the present service. This is largely accomplished through indexing, a semiotic relationship in which a sign’s relationship to an object is one of proximity; for example, smoke indexes fire. In the examples I use throughout this chapter, the aesthetic and semantic aspects of music during the 12:30 Mass index experiences, identity classifications, and stages of life.

In this chapter, I begin by defining irrelevance in a manner more specific to the Catholic Mass and relate this concept to both the Black Catholic Movement and African American spirituality in general. Next, I discuss gospel’s racial and religious roots and consider its ability to transcend both; it has the potential to spark relevance for all parishioners. Then, I explain Father Pat’s role in fostering relevance, accounting for patterns within St. Augustine and within African American preaching. Finally, I conduct a close reading of a particular homily given by Father Pat in-depth,

addressing its recontextualizing process and the indexical relationships it fosters. The perspectives of liturgical leaders regarding both the music and homily present in a Mass illuminate the relevance that is intended by them through musical recontextualization.

### *Catholic Relevance, Race, and Gospel Music*

Based on my interviews and fieldwork, St. Augustine is home to a socioeconomically, racially, and ethnically diverse congregation. Today, St. Augustine comprises Black Catholics of all stripes, including descendants of the original elite African American families who founded the church. The ancestors of some parishioners were owned by Catholic slaveholders. Other parishioners reached the Americas as Catholics, and still others converted to the faith for various reasons. St. Augustine Catholic School, one of the few remaining majority-Black Catholic schools in Washington, D.C., inspired the conversions of numerous Black residents in the neighborhood since its opening four years prior to mandated education for Black minors (MacGregor 1999). While St. Augustine remains at its core a “Black Catholic Church,” it is also home to an assortment of non-Black Catholics, and has welcomed Catholics of every color throughout its history. Father Pat said to me, “How do we be a voice for Black Catholics and for the Black community? And everybody who comes, Black, white, Asian, whatever, are invited to see the value of that mission and embrace the mission. And they have!” The challenge for the music ministry and other liturgical leaders is to make the Mass relevant for every individual in this eclectic congregation.

In our interview, Father Pat described the lack of relevance that Catholics in particular detect in their own religious services. He explained,

Too many people who come to church have such a very little understanding of the Mass itself. And so it's *so* underestimated. And so, [someone who has] an experience might say, "Well, it's not relevant to my life," or, "It was boring." The word "boring" by definition means "not relevant." So, you know, five-year-olds can get bored and 95-year-olds can get bored.

Relevance, then, has nothing to do with attention span in church and everything to do with active participation and active connection between the liturgy and the daily lives of congregants. Those who are bored and who consider the Mass irrelevant find the liturgy unengaging and disconnected. The Catholic Mass is prone to these problems; it is almost entirely scripted, with prayers and songs that are repeated each week, and the readings also follow a cycle, providing scant opportunity for elaboration or improvisation. Additionally, the priest does most of the work during a service. Before Vatican II, he performed the most sacred parts of the Mass with his back turned, which Father Pat told me made many Catholics wonder, "What does this have to do with me?" It is easy for Catholics to feel like spectators of a mysterious ritual that does not specifically address their current needs and concerns.

Liturgy that is memorable, that does not abstractly refer to religious ideas but connects them to circumstances that the congregation understands, is paramount at St. Augustine. The Mass content should be applicable to everyday situations, easily recalled in the future when guidance is needed. A good deal of originality is also necessary in order to circumvent the regularity of the Catholic Church. According to Father Pat, "I think the key is that I believe the gospel is always relevant. So, we might do a good job, we might do a piss-poor job. (In) some parishes, there's nothing

memorable about what we preach, nothing memorable about the music. I felt like we punched in our time and left.” In his opinion, a significant amount of responsibility for relevance in the Mass falls on liturgical leaders, including himself and the Gospel Choir.

Based on St. Augustine’s history and African American Catholic history, it is apparent that Black Catholics are especially unlikely to find relevance and connection in an environment that seems to ignore racial issues or an institution that repeatedly demonstrates hypocrisy while it upholds the utmost faith in its flawed hierarchy and unyielding doctrine and practices. Cressler (2016) explained that the Black Catholic Movement sought to bring relevance to the Mass for African Americans in order to keep the Catholic Church alive in predominantly Black communities. Leaders of the Black Catholic Movement operated under particular assumptions about Blackness that were of course not representative of all Black Catholics. Still, this newfound focus on relevance encouraged priests to think beyond the liturgy to the people who sat in front of them and the lives they lived beyond the doors of the sanctuary. This often meant bringing aspects of pan-African American spirituality, which was undeniably associated with the Protestant Church, into Mass. St. Augustine continues this trend.

For example, numerous scholars of Black worship have explained that the secular and sacred coalesce in religious practice, resulting in a more holistic service.<sup>19</sup> Father Glenn V. Jean-Marie, a Black Catholic scholar, explained that this fluid

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<sup>19</sup> Including Anthony Pinn’s *The Black Church in the Post Civil-Rights Era* (2002) and Melva Wilson Costen’s *African American Christian Worship* (1997).

relationship “affirm(s) God’s wholeness,” honoring the dynamic work of the Lord (Harbor 2008, 110). Black Catholic liturgical innovator Father Clarence R. J. Rivers included the mythical connection between the secular and sacred realms, sometimes viewed as dichotomous in Christian thought, as part of his account of the African worldview (McGann 2008). Mary E. McGann (2004) emphasized the relationship between the sacred and secular in her liturgical ethnography of Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church in San Francisco. She noticed an absence of competition between sacred ritual and everyday concerns in her fieldwork, because “liturgy doesn’t filter out the everyday” (ibid.: 19). McGann also recognized music as a vital bridge, a “point of convergence” (ibid.: 20), between the church and its exterior. Worshipers hear what they need, based on their daily lives, in music. In her conclusion, McGann identified the confluence of sacred and secular activity at Our Lady of Lourdes as contributing to the parishioners’ sacramental worldview, which posits that God is present and active through all of life’s experiences. In addition to its inclusion in typical African American Christian worship, this fuzzy boundary between the sacred and secular is a natural extension of the Black Catholic Movement’s quest for relevance.

Gospel music is another practice at St. Augustine that stems from the Black Protestant tradition. Gospel at St. Augustine follows the conventions of the genre as it is performed in Protestant contexts, including syncopation, wide embouchures, improvisation, movement, and a build in dynamic level, harmonic complexity, and embellishment as a song progresses. The Choir’s repertoire reflects gospel throughout all periods of its history, and much of it is drawn from African American composers

with Protestant backgrounds. Given the strict liturgy of the Catholic Mass, some of the Choir's songs bear Catholic texts that fulfill certain roles in the Mass—this is why original director Leon Roberts had so much responsibility as a composer—and the Choir sings music by composers who are affiliated with Catholicism, such as Roberts, Kenneth Louis, and Roderick Bell. Additionally, the Gospel Choir performs few solo songs, so this choir is unusual in that it reverts to strictly choral singing more often than not.

Understandably, St. Augustine's gospel singers told me in our interviews that they prefer the music they sing during the 12:30 Mass to the music sung during other Mass times. Displaying varying degrees of candor, they sometimes expressed their penchant for gospel music by contrasting it with other liturgical music they have encountered in their tenures as Catholics. For example, Marilyn said of gospel, "That music is what speaks to me. Some of the old Catholic music, it's like, [*exasperated*] 'Oh my gosh.'" Many identified gospel music as music that "speaks to" them, and others indicated that the music provided reminders about their identity or previous life experiences. My interlocutors had difficulty naming specific musical preferences, though. It seemed as if gospel music as a whole—its roots, its sound, and its message—was spiritually important to them.

Singers are likely pulled to gospel music by its stylistic elements, since they remain the same across denominations. For some of my interlocutors, gospel's aesthetics index Black and Protestant identity; for others, they index personal experiences. Drawing on the work of semiotician Charles Peirce, who explained indexicality as a connection based on a close spatial relationship, Thomas Turino



(1999) described indexicality as “a sign that is related to its object through co-occurrence in actual experience” (ibid.: 227). Turino wrote that musical indexicality can refer to people who we associate with certain songs or times in our lives when that music was salient for us. It builds a sort of bridge between the sign—the aesthetics of gospel music—and African American identity, Protestant identity, past experiences, and internal states.

Though members did not always explicitly identify gospel as a traditionally African American or Protestant genre, nor did they consistently name this history a reason for its appeal, some alluded to it. Gail, who converted to Catholicism as a child so that her uncle would pay for her Catholic education, explained,

The gospel music spoke to me. [...] My mother was Baptist, my father was Methodist, so I grew up kind of hearing that music. [*Slowly*] And it really spoke to the spiritual innateness, I guess, within my culture and what I heard in my background and from my parents and all. And so, when the Catholic Church opened it up for us to be able to do that, that was the music that spoke to me.

Vanessa, who is also African American, similarly told me that gospel music recalled her childhood church experiences as a Baptist before her Catholic conversion.

Regardless of whether or not singers associated gospel music with Blackness or Protestantism, they acknowledged its correlation with their lives outside of Mass. Nearly all of the singers I spoke with listened to gospel music in their day-to-day lives and also did so prior to joining the Choir. Latore, a trained classical singer who rarely performs in that style anymore, accounted for his ongoing relationship with gospel music, which is connected to both his mother’s status as a gospel singer and his own African American identity:

It comes out of the tradition of one's history, so me being African American, [I] have always been around spiritual music and gospel music. [...] And then when gospel music came along and it's a part of who you are, and how you grew up, and a part of your culture and all that kind of stuff, it's a natural thing to just kind of go ahead and do that.

Gospel music undoubtedly has racial and religious associations. And while some congregants at St. Augustine initially viewed the Black Protestant origins of gospel music as a threat to what they consider authentic Catholicism, others celebrated, and continue to celebrate, these roots, especially if it has played a role in their lived experiences. For gospel lovers, this particular genre “speaks to” them, augmenting their understanding of the songs and their accompanying contextual components within the Mass.

There is no denying that gospel music is popular at St. Augustine beyond the Choir's population. In our interview, Father Pat called the 12:30 Mass the “neon sign” and the “gateway Mass” of the parish, explaining that it attracts the vast majority of newer parishioners, regardless of which Mass they move to later on. He also recognized that younger people without families frequent this Mass, as does, interestingly, the highest proportion of white Catholics compared to the three other services. A few of my interlocutors believe that St. Augustine's high number of visitors, many of whom are international,<sup>20</sup> still results in part from the allure of the Gospel Choir.

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<sup>20</sup> Valerie DeCosta told me in our interview (18 October 2018) that St. Augustine was once featured in a *Lonely Planet* travel guide, though I could not find this myself. At the end of Mass on August 26<sup>th</sup>, 2018, substitute priest Friar Paul asked visitors to stand, continent by continent. There were five Europeans, one African, and approximately five South Americans. There were also approximately ten Americans who stood. Some international visitors seem to intentionally seek out St. Augustine while others stumble upon it.

My consultants confirmed what Father Pat's data suggests: gospel music has the potential to relate to people of all racial identities due to both its aesthetics and lyric content. Will, a white man, attributed his interest in varied liturgical music to a few select experiences with a Baptist preacher within his childhood Catholic parish. "It exposed me to the idea that you could have a personal relationship" with God, he explained, and he feels that gospel music at St. Augustine "helps rearrange the focus on God's mercy and love." Gail explained the initial appeal and success of the Gospel Choir by recognizing the emotional content of its history, saying,

There is a spirit that flows through the music, of a people, and a people of struggle, and I think it grabs people who are seeking and searching and wanting to heal from whatever has gone on in their lives. So it speaks to that, it's a music that speaks to drawing people in who are hurting and knowing that God is a healer, and a deliverer.

Several of my interlocutors mentioned volume as a prominent aesthetic element of gospel music. The diversity of moods conveyed through gospel repertoire renders the genre indexical for a variety of people who find themselves in different seasons of life, with softer dynamics indexing more somber times and louder dynamics indexing more celebratory times. This is not always true of other American Catholic music. Vanessa told me that she disagreed with critics who claim that gospel music is too loud. "Some of the music that we sing is not quiet in every song that we sing, but there's both, there's all of that. There's a particular quietness, but then there's also room for other things." Latore concurred, commenting to me,

All gospel music isn't loud. Some gospel music is very mellow and melancholy. Some of it *is* loud [...] because that's our experience. We experience different things in our lives. Sometimes we can have tragedies in our lives that can move us in a way that is quiet, but other times we can have things that go on in our lives that can move us to excitement and it's something just a little bit louder, or that has a little more expression. And you

want music in your spiritual space that speaks to all of those expressions. And I think that gospel music can do that.

Like gospel music's lyrics, its dynamics acknowledge life's troubles and triumphs. Its aesthetics index both internal states and identity categories, reflecting the rich collection of possible human experiences while emphasizing God's compassion through it all.

St. Augustine rails against irrelevance that often permeates American Catholicism, and this requires acknowledgement of personal histories and respect for individual preferences. Music and liturgy must take past religious encounters, current spiritual needs, and contemporary secular realities into account in order to cultivate a holistic experience. Parishioners are free to choose a regular Mass that is most musically relevant to their lives as Catholics, if that is important to them, but for many of my interlocutors, gospel music is what most closely indexes their experiences outside of Mass. While the church has historically tailored its ministry to Black Catholics, the aesthetics and lyrics of gospel music index pertinent emotions and experiences that people of any background might have in addition to African American and Protestant identities.

### *Father Pat's Role*

Father Pat told me that Catholics sometimes struggle to pay attention to the Mass because the text is the same every week. Therefore, where it is appropriate, he forms deliberate connections between all aspects of the service, from the readings to his homily to the music. Maurice used the word "customize" in our interview to describe the extra indexical material apparent within St. Augustine's liturgy. He

provided the introduction to Mass as a prime example of Father Pat’s attention to the particularity of each week: the greeter always reads a brief message before the entrance song, linking the three planned readings and homily that will occur that day. Maurice told me that this practice is only a few years old.

Regardless of genre, Father Pat occasionally makes comments about the music sung during Mass to foster further indexical relationships between parts of the Mass within the liturgy. In his Christmas homily, he encouraged the congregation to celebrate Christmas and glorify God wholeheartedly, despite all of the Church’s shortcomings and the country’s challenges, including the government shutdown that had just commenced. The earliest Masses, after all, were protests, since worshipers gathered on days that were meant for work. It took a degree of boldness to praise the Lord in a world that did not—and still does not—recognize Him. Later, the combined Chorale and Gospel Choir sang George Frideric Handel’s “Hallelujah Chorus”<sup>21</sup> as a third Communion song, once the throngs approaching the altar had finally subsided. Amidst the applause following the song, Father Pat yelled, “Do you hear the conviction, the defiance, the protest? ‘He *shall* reign!’” By intentionally using parts of the liturgy, including music, to index other aspects of the Mass when opportunities arise, Father Pat brings cohesion to the Mass and creates new contextual understandings of, in this example, the “Hallelujah Chorus” and weekly worship.

Given the structure of the Mass, the homily allows Father Pat the most flexibility in his quest for relevance, and it is by no means a text that stands on its own. According to Anthony Pinn (2002), Black preaching across denominations

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<sup>21</sup> George Frideric Handel, *Messiah* HWV 56 (Stuttgart: Carus, 1742) 216-225, musical score.

typically draws from “Scripture and interpretation, Black history, current events, communal experience or history of the particular denomination and local church, personal experience, popular culture, and the world of nature” (ibid.: 59). It aims to address the needs and circumstances of a given congregation, relating the Bible’s contents to their lived experiences. African American sermons have given voice to the unspoken sufferings and injustices of worshipers, validating their day-to-day concerns and inspiring hope for a better future (ibid.).

Jon Michael Spencer’s *Sacred Symphony: The Chanted Sermon of the Black Preacher* (1988) focused his work on the musicality inherent in the sermons of sixteen Protestant African American worship leaders; these preachers demonstrated melody through their rising and falling pitch, rhythm through the acceleration and deceleration of their words, and form from their intentional repetition, parallel syntax, and songlike structures.<sup>22</sup> Black Catholic leader Father Rivers recognized the importance of the same music-like prosodic and formal elements for Catholic homilies. He wrote in 1974 that the English translation of the Catholic Mass lacked the oratorical power that Black congregations demanded. Preaching, Rivers believed, should “build up and heighten the community’s engagement with the Word” as the celebrant moves “from ordinary speech, to chanting, to moments of ecstatic speech” (McGann 2008, 76).<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> For more on musicality in preaching, see Melva Wilson Costen’s *African American Christian Worship* (1997) and Pearl Williams-Jones’ “Afro-American Gospel Music: A Crystallization of the Black Aesthetic” (1975). Scholars like Eileen Southern, in *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (1997) have conversely addressed preaching patterns in gospel singing.

<sup>23</sup> To be clear, Father Pat did not attribute his style of preaching to race. In our interview, he recognized St. Augustine as a mostly African American congregation that has been that way since its beginning. Father Pat explained that if he were moved to an all-white church, however, he would maintain his practices, endeavoring “to make the Gospel relevant to people’s lives.”

Though these musical elements are apparent in Father Pat's homilies, the rest of this chapter explores more closely the semiotically dense messages he weaves by employing fragments of music. Throughout 2018, Father Pat often incorporated song lyrics and current secular events into his homilies to construct indexical relationships between the homily, the outside world, and other parts of the Mass. For example, he quoted the hymn "The King of Love My Shepherd Is" on April 15<sup>th</sup>. On May 20<sup>th</sup>, Father Pat discussed the widely broadcasted marriage of England's Prince Harry and Meghan Markle with close attention to Bishop Michael Curry's sermon and the Kingdom Choir's performance of "Stand By Me." On November 4<sup>th</sup>, he lamented over the upcoming closure of Providence Hospital in Washington, D.C. For the remainder of this chapter, I will engage in a close reading of Father Pat's homily from the gospel Mass on March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2018, to demonstrate his recontextualization of song fragments and use of the Gospel Choir to help parishioners index messages that they have learned in services and beyond them. This happened to be Palm Sunday.

### *Palm Sunday Homily*

Palm Sunday is the final Sunday of Lent, a time of solemn observation of Christ's preparation for death. This Mass traditionally includes the participatory reading of the Passion, the story of Jesus Christ's crucifixion, immediately before the homily rather than a Gospel reading, or New Testament reading, done by the priest. During this, the congregation takes the role of "Crowd" and the celebrating priest takes the role of Jesus. This happens every year at every Roman Catholic church; it is ingrained in practicing Catholics. Father Pat told me in an interview the following

week, “We read the Passion *every* Palm Sunday. And the question is, how do you make it new, how do you make people continue to look at it in a new way and appreciate it? That’s why liturgy’s tough, and part of our planning is: what is the experience?”

In his homily, Father Pat talked about the March for Our Lives that had occurred the previous day just a few miles from the church, which he saw as an appropriate angry response to violence. He contended that we should figuratively march with just as much indignation on behalf of Christ and His suffering:

When we see that death is caused as a result of violence, there is the sense that, ‘We *have* to be able to do something to stop that. We can make a difference.’ And so we read the Passion, but the danger is that we will no longer see it for what it is.

That we can go through the whole story and not be horrified by it.

That we can listen to the story and not be shocked by it.

That we could proclaim the story and not even necessarily be moved that much by it.

We must not so sanitize the cross and the crucifixion that we lose sight of the horror that it was, that we no longer see the violence that Jesus went through for us. Because if we do, then the cross will be less relevant than a school shooting. Human trafficking. Racial injustice, poverty. All forms of injustice. We will be shocked by shootings, but no longer shocked by crucifixion (“Palm Sunday 2018 1230pm...”).

Here, Father Pat plainly voiced his concern that Christ’s suffering might become irrelevant with repetition, employing repetition himself in the three lines that began with, “That we,” as iconic of the recurrence of the Passion in the liturgical cycle. In this repetition, he articulated this fear with the same syntactic pattern, with the beginning of each line referring to the telling of the Passion and the end referring to the possible numb feelings of its proclaimers. Father Pat referenced contemporary injustices understood both personally and objectively on a local level by parishioners



in their daily lives, allowing congregants to index the plight of Jesus to that of present victims of more currently relevant forms of oppression and maltreatment.

Near the end of his homily, Eddie, the Gospel Choir's director and pianist, began playing gently beneath Father Pat's words. It sounded like an instrumental introduction, mostly in a major key, to a more subdued gospel song, with slow chord progressions and vague indications of melody. Father Pat explained that he would read a physician's description of the crucifixion to help his congregation rediscover the injustice suffered by Christ. He read from a sheet of paper for nearly four minutes, starting with the moment Christ's shoulders were tied to His wooden cross and ending with His death. The physician had spared no details in his writing, including medical jargon that the uninitiated do not often encounter (Davis); Father Pat stumbled only once over "metatarsal." Listening to this physical interpretation was nothing short of gruesome. Most unnerving to me was the seemingly ill-fitting cocktail-hour piano tinkling that Cromwell had continued as background music with only a loose sense of pulse. Had the two men communicated about this at all? Was Father Pat trying to be ironic with the juxtaposition of such a gory event with soft church music, to demonstrate that the crucifixion was incompatible with religion as an "opium of the people"?

Looking up from his paper, he finished with, "All this, the scriptures captured in the simple phrase, 'And they crucified Him'" ("Palm Sunday 2018 1230pm..."). With his concluding statement, Father Pat demonstrated that there was an agonizing chain of events beneath this summarizing sentence in the gospel.

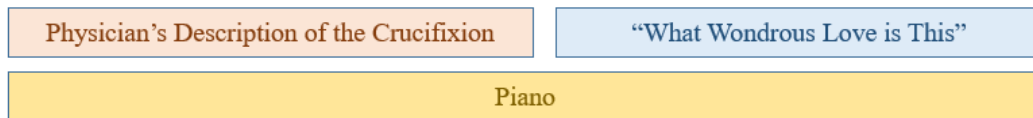
Father Pat spoke each word of his next question quite deliberately: “What wondrous love...is this?” (“Palm Sunday 2018 1230pm...”). This was the instantly recognizable title of one of the more popular ballad tunes originating in *The Southern Harmony*, a nineteenth-century white Southern hymnbook containing songs with ties to American folk tunes that had been passed down orally; later, hymnbooks from multiple Christian denominations, including Catholicism, incorporated “What Wondrous Love is This” into their Lenten sections (Cobb 1978). Father Pat continued with three verses of the song, reciting them with heightened, mystical speech rather than singing:

What wondrous love is this, o my soul, o my soul,  
What wondrous love is this, for my soul  
What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss  
To bear the dreadful curse for my soul, for *my* soul?  
To bear the dreadful curse for *my* soul?  
**I don’t know, but** to God and to the Lamb, I will sing, I will sing,  
To God and to the Lamb, I will sing!  
To God and to the Lamb, who is the great I AM  
While *millions* join the theme, I will sing, I will sing,  
While millions join the theme, I will sing.  
And when from death I’m free, I’ll sing on, [*noticeably wider embouchure, as if happy*] **yes**, I’ll sing on  
And when from death I’m free, I’ll sing on  
And when from death *I’m* free, **because of what He *did* for me, I’ll sing his love for me**, and through eternity, **I will** sing on, and through **all** eternity, **I will** sing on [emphatic] (“Palm Sunday 2018 1230pm...”).

“What wondrous love is this?” he asked, repeating the song’s title. Suddenly, Father Pat returned to a lower and gravely serious variation of his regular speaking voice for his final statement. “It’s the love of Jesus Christ—for you. And He said, ‘This is my commandment: Love one another, as I have loved you (‘Palm Sunday 2018 1230pm...’).” Cromwell continued playing the piano by himself for about four

beats before the congregation realized that the homily was over. Their enthusiastic applause filled the sanctuary, with the piano's final chords barely audible beneath it.

### Analysis



Above is a basic timeline illustrating the end of Father Pat's homily, minus his brief concluding statement. The orange bar shows the piano, providing a base on which Father Pat could read a physician's description of the crucifixion, followed by a recitation of hymn lyrics from "What Wondrous Love is This." In between, of course, was Father Pat's transitional statement, "What wondrous love is this?" It served both as an introduction to the hymn and an appropriate awestruck response to Christ's horrifying last hours that he had just described. In order to understand the intentions of this homily, it is necessary to scrutinize both musical layers of it; in other words, the orange and blue portions.

The hymn "What Wondrous Love is This" is set to a flowing, contemplative Dorian melody with phrasing that does not follow a consistent pattern (Cobb 1978). The popular tune has served as fodder for classical composers such as Samuel Barber (Heyman 1992). Its repetitive first-person text, however, lacks complexity and tends to be overshadowed by the beloved melody. Father Pat did not sing these lyrics, but he altered his voice and kept a degree of the song's fluidity, sounding overjoyed and amazed. He varied his prosody most in the last verse in particular, climactically increasing his dynamic level and tempo before settling into the final four words.

Without the hymn's melody, Father Pat highlighted the text of the hymn and contextualized it within the homily's content.

Father Pat made deliberate textual changes, improvising much the same way a gospel soloist would. Though there are multiple versions of the last few lines of the verse, he broke them apart, inserting additional similar rhyming phrases (bolded) that could easily substitute for the actual lines in any version of this hymn. Father Pat also changed "I'll sing on" to "I *will* sing on"; freed from the constraints of the hymn's melody, he could add a syllable for emphasis, and he indeed spoke each word of this phrase insistently in its final iteration. He even added metanarrative asides, such as "I don't know, but," that appropriately transitioned between phrases.

In recontextualizing the lyrics of "What Wondrous Love is This," Father Pat also changed the narrator; he spoke the words as an individual reflecting on Christ's sacrifice, marveling that it was made on his behalf. It was no longer a congregational song, but deeply personal contemplation that naturally followed the physician's jarring description of the crucifixion. It was no longer a pretty melody, but a monologue that conveyed awe, gratitude, and a desire to share the good news. Worshipers could imagine themselves in that role, sharing in this reflection. At the conclusion of the three verses, "What Wondrous Love is This" functioned not as a title, but as a question, to which Father Pat had an immediate, succinct response. It was delivered in his usual register, as if a "voice of reason" intervened to answer the song text's transcendental question.

This leaves the piano melody, which perplexed me in the moment. In an interview later that week, I asked Father Pat about the music during his reading and

learned that it had been his choice. He explained that it was the gospel song “Just for Me” by Kenneth Louis, a Catholic composer. The text bears a similar message to “What Wondrous Love is This”; it recognizes the first-person singer as a personal recipient of the gift of eternal salvation given by Jesus through His willing death. Father Pat expected his congregation at the 12:30 Mass to recognize the tune and imagine its lyrics, with which they were familiar, as Cromwell played. He was confident that they would think, “He did that, ‘just for me,’”<sup>24</sup> mentally accounting for all of the dreadful details of exactly what Christ did “just for me” as Father Pat read the physician’s description aloud.

This layering and recontextualization was intended to thicken and enrich the indexical relationships that worshipers formed during this section of Father Pat’s homily. Parishioners could hear “Just for Me” alongside the physician’s description of the crucifixion, and later with “What Wondrous Love is This.” Both of these songs indexed previous Lenten religious services for the congregants, at St. Augustine and possibly in other Catholic and non-Catholic contexts. Furthermore, the previous associations parishioners held with these songs were multiplied by hearing the songs in new contexts, alongside fresh methods of conveying the same message of salvation. This was a nice illustration of Peirce’s concept of semiotic chaining in which interpretants<sup>25</sup> become new signs, thus continuing the semiotic process (Peirce 1991). Father Pat purposely layered contrasting audible texts, namely a spoken physiological description, the instrumental music of a gospel song, and the spoken

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<sup>24</sup> Father Patrick Smith, interview (28 March, 2018).

<sup>25</sup> An interpretant “is the *effect* created by bringing the sign and object together in the mind of the perceiver” (Turino 1999, 222).

words of a common Southern Baptist hymn, to create a dense pan-Christian object of interpretation.

Again, this recontextualization was Father Pat's decision, and he hoped to engage people through it. Of course, these planned indexical relationships were more emotionally salient for interpreters who have extensive experience with the signs—in this case, the songs “Just for Me” and “What Wondrous Love is This.” Therefore, an obvious question remains: did parishioners recognize “Just for Me” without its lyrics, or “What Wondrous Love is This” without its melody, so that Father Pat's homily achieved success in his attempt to make the gospel relevant? Simon Frith (1996) wrote that listeners often have difficulty recognizing the words of a song devoid of music. Given the blatant repetitions of the title “What Wondrous Love is This,” in the text of the hymn, I think it likely that anyone familiar with the song recognized the text.

As for “Just for Me,” I have already indicated that I did not know the song prior to this Mass. Even for people who regularly attended St. Augustine during Lent, however, the loose playing style of Cromwell might not have immediately sparked memories of the song. The listener had other tools on which to draw; in any linguistic or musical exchange, interpretation depends on contextual information (Feld 1984). It is possible, then, that worshipers at least assumed that Cromwell's music referred to the death of Jesus in some way, given the crucifixion description and an appropriate response to the description layered over top of it. Audience interpretation is also interpersonal, demanding cooperation between the speaker and the listener (Feld 1984, Duranti 1986). Father Pat voiced that he knew his congregation well enough to

accurately gauge what music they would recognize; the number of people who actually recognized it is uncertain.

Interpretation also occurs as supporting events unfold (Bauman and Briggs 1990). The Gospel Choir performed “Just for Me” during Communion later in the Palm Sunday Mass, but I did not identify it as the same song from the homily. It was only after I learned the name of Cromwell’s piece that I recognized it as a sort of musical foreshadowing. Perhaps keener ears than mine recognized the Gospel Choir’s song as a reprise of the piano music from Father Pat’s homily, indexing his message once more and incorporating new associations into this performance of it. As I took what I learned in the interview into consideration, my interpretation also shifted from bewilderment, or viewing the musical choice as potential satire; I now understood the instrumental “Just for Me” as reinforcement of Father Pat’s message.

It is also worth noting that Father Pat did not pick just any Lenten song for Cromwell to perform. Though he requested “Just for Me” for the gospel Mass, he chose “O Sacred Head Surrounded” for what he called the “more traditional” 10:00 Mass that features the Chorale (“Palm Sunday 2018 10am...”). This melody was most famously harmonized by Johann Sebastian Bach in his *St. Matthew Passion*, and like “What Wondrous Love is This,” it now exists in hymnbooks across denominations. This corresponded both with the Chorale’s typical music and with the theme of Father Pat’s homily, as the lyrics of the hymn lament Christ’s suffering (Hill 1996). Father Pat’s choices demonstrate his sensitivity to the diversity of his congregation, knowing that some parishioners would have stronger indexical relationships with certain songs over others.

The layering of song fragments in Father Pat's Palm Sunday homily, coupled with the physician's description of the crucifixion, provided multiple opportunities for congregants to index the same Lenten truth of human salvation through the death of Jesus, and added contextual meaning to each component of that homily. Simultaneously, the recontextualization of "Just for Me" and "What Wondrous Love is This" indexed previous church services, perhaps in different denominational settings, rendering St. Augustine's Mass more relevant for parishioners who had prior associations with these songs. Father Pat even formed indexical relationships within the Mass simply by asking that Cromwell play "Just for Me" during the homily, which the congregation would hear again later in the Mass.

### Conclusion

Speaking once more in his interview following Palm Sunday, Father Pat said, "The word 'gospel' means 'good news.' And part of that is, [it] means it's not only good, but it's new. [...] The Gospel's not routine." He endeavors to keep the Scriptures fresh and combat the disengagement that easily results from the "routine" Catholic Mass, leveraging music as a strength of the liturgy. Through this, St. Augustine challenges, along with many other African American churches in the United States, the dichotomy of sacred and secular, because the parish cannot afford to risk irrelevance by relegating the sacred to its own opiate-like realm. Congregants hear the contents of their lives outside of church in the current events thoughtfully employed in Father Pat's homilies and in the music performed throughout the Mass. Each Mass time at St. Augustine provides a different flavor of worship, featuring a



different ensemble and style with different indexical potentialities. The unending supply of parishioners from all walks of life, according to Father Pat, indicates that St. Augustine's liturgy is comprehensively engaging.

This pursuit of relevance does not stop with Father Pat; he insists that everyone included in St. Augustine's hierarchy, from the priest to the musicians to the Eucharistic ministers, must share the purpose of bringing worshipers closer to Christ through engagement with the liturgy. To do this, the parish's leadership purposefully gauges the level of attention at every Mass to improve what they do. Eddie said in an interview that as he plays the piano, "I tend to look out [during Mass], see what's going on. Are they engaged? Am I doing something right, am I not doing something right?" The next chapter considers the Gospel Choir's responsibility to worshipers, mediating the divine while being attentive to the needs of its motley listeners both within and beyond St. Augustine.

## Chapter 4: Movement of the Holy Spirit

On a basic level, the Holy Spirit is a part of the Christian Trinity representing the mystery of a God in three parts, comprising the Father, Son (Jesus), and Holy Spirit. Catholics begin and end each Mass with the sign of the cross, tracing the shape of a crucifix on their upper bodies with their right hands, while reciting the three constituents of the Trinity. The sign of the cross also precedes any session of prayer for Catholics outside of the Mass, including the prayers that begin and end Gospel Choir rehearsals. Everything that happens at church and in rehearsal as a group is, in part, done in the name of the Holy Spirit. The Catechism of the Catholic Church describes the Holy Spirit as “His gift of love to the world” (n.d.: 689), which can be detected “in the witness of saints through whom he manifests his holiness and continues the work of salvation” (n.d.: 688). On a basic level, it is the joining of the human with the divine, a sign of God’s driving force in what people do for each other out of love. Many other Church documents do not provide any solid definition. That the Holy Spirit exists and is important in a Christian life, however is unanimously acknowledged, and its influence is more prominent in Protestant scholarship.

This chapter details the Holy Spirit’s activity through the St. Augustine Gospel Choir as reported by liturgical leaders, liberating individuals to participate dialogically with the singers and others on the altar, through movement and vocalization. Their accounts of this force mirror accounts in other scholarship about gospel music: they are not necessarily specific, but there is recognition that something vital and vibrant acts in their midst. Though the Holy Spirit manifests somewhat differently in every worshiper, it knits together the congregation and the parts of the

Mass into a cohesive, dynamic whole. The Holy Spirit also accompanies the Gospel Choir, a natural extension of this justice-oriented parish, as they themselves move to bring the same interaction, freedom, and alteration to listeners across denominations and oceans. The ambiguity in accounts and diversity in manifestations of the Holy Spirit attest to the magnitude of its brilliance. I argue that movement, relationships, and transformation *do* unite all of Its actions.

In this chapter, I begin by describing the perceived absence or presence of the Holy Spirit at Catholic churches and its relationship with gospel music and Protestant worship. Next, based on my participant observation, I account for the physical and verbal reactions that regularly occur during St. Augustine's Masses to both gospel music and homilies as a result of this power flowing through the sanctuary. After that, I consider the interpretations of these actions made by Gospel Choir members to explore the Holy Spirit's slippery definition. Finally, I narrate some of the Gospel Choir's experiences outside of St. Augustine to demonstrate its ministerial effects on strangers.

### *Catholics and the Holy Spirit*

Parishioners at St. Augustine contrast their conception of community and Spirit during their Mass with most other Catholic parishes they have visited. Valerie DeCosta, a regular lector at the 12:30 Mass, commented to me about St. Augustine, "It's not sort of a go in there and say your one hour Mass prayers and maybe say hello to two people and leave, you know?" An organist at his childhood church in France, gospel singer Maurice said of his experience as a performer, "At the end of a French

Mass, sometimes people would come and see me and say, ‘Congrats, you play very well,’ but not, ‘Congrats, you moved me,’ or ‘You touched me.’” From the start, the gospel Mass has contained an element of novelty for Catholics; speaking about the Choir’s beginnings, Gail said, “And one of the beautiful things [is that for] those of us who were Catholic, that whole experience of a movement of the Spirit was a new thing.”

The reality is that most Catholic Americans—and, in theory, anyone celebrating the Roman rite at Mass—subscribe to a scripted series of sitting, standing, kneeling, and walking to the altar to receive Communion.<sup>26</sup> At every white Catholic Mass I have attended in my lifetime, congregations have been silent aside from their required responses. The Roman Missal, which resides in every American Catholic pew as a reference, resembles a script at first glance. Perhaps to some, being Catholic looks like passive religious consumption; it is only ordained men who can preach, consecrate and distribute the Eucharist, and celebrate sacraments. One Black Catholic parishioner in the 1987 *Fire in the Pews* documentary put it simply: “When you go to a normal Catholic church, it’s rather staid and unemotional.” In the same documentary, Father George Stallings, now pastor of the controversial African American Catholic Congregation,<sup>27</sup> said, “They’re being preached *at* instead of somehow being involved *in*.” The Black Catholic Movement challenged the

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<sup>26</sup> St. Augustine uses the *We Celebrate Worship Resource* Missal published by World Library Publications.

<sup>27</sup> He planned his own mass in an African American Rite in Washington, D.C., which later became a weekly occurrence. The Catholic Church did not recognize this rite, so Stallings withdrew from the Church to continue his rite. (Kamalidiin 2001).

phlegmatic congregational participation that characterized American Catholic churches, looking to Protestant traditions for inspiration.

In scholarship on African American Christianity, the Holy Spirit, often referred to simply as “the Spirit,” is almost always associated with music, especially gospel music. It is important to note that the vast majority of work in this area considers Protestant, not Catholic, contexts. In Glenn Hinson’s book (2000), his Black Christian interlocutors described the Spirit as a force that could spur bodily movement, powerful preaching, improvised lyrics, glossolalia, and shouting. The Spirit brings knowledge, feeling, and divine inspiration to all participants, strengthening their trust in God. Hinson identified gospel music as the element of the services he observed that could truly ignite the Spirit among both the singers and congregants, leading to a sense of elevated holiness; the readings, while grounded in the Spirit, serve a more preparatory role. Though the Spirit could be felt at any time, it is more meaningful to experience it as a divine conversation in a crowded sanctuary, since “within this whole, attention easily refocuses on the holy, reengaging the self in a conversation both personal and collective” (ibid.: 320). The Spirit, therefore, ties together people and parts of the service as it sparks individual action.

The visible movements of the Spirit are expected at performances of gospel music in any context. Clapping on offbeats has characterized the genre from its earliest days (Waterman 1951, Southern 1997), as has improvisation, particularly in terms of lyrics, from the musicians (Southern 1997). These interactive audience behaviors were so vital to gospel performance that Mahalia Jackson tried to teach these responses to uninitiated fans in the United Kingdom during her concerts rather

than sing for quiet, unmoving spectators (Burnim 2017). Black worship, after all, is experiential and participant-oriented (Boyer 1979, Walker 1979), and many believe that gospel music belongs exclusively in sacred spaces (Southern 1997, Pinn 2002, Burnim 2017). Gospel requires a level of engagement and openness to allow both individual and collective experiences with the profound to shape the substance of a performance. Pearl Williams-Jones described gospel music as “a colorful kaleidoscope of Black oratory, poetry, drama and dance” (1975: 376) and as an art that demands movement to fulfill its holistic, spiritual purpose. Anthony Pinn (2002) described all of Black worship, including gospel music, as a movement-filled and dialogic experience with the Spirit and with fellow human beings. Both Williams-Jones and Pinn described intraservice unity as representative of Black worship, which Father Pat tries to accomplish each week.

During the Black Catholic Movement, Father Clarence R. J. Rivers was one of many who actively sought to reform the liturgy of Black Catholic churches so that it might better reflect the history and culture of their attendees (McGann and Lumas 2008). Therefore, he emphasized the importance of the Holy Spirit in Black spirituality and contended that it fit comfortably in Catholicism. Like other scholars, he conceptualized the Spirit as the living Word of God, a force that continues to act and move about those who invoke it. It brings power, energy, and life, and inspires worship with one’s whole being, or soulful worship (McGann 2008). At the 1978 inaugural Black Catholic Theological Symposium, Dr. Toinette Eugene described the Holy Spirit as “liberating,” something vital to African American Christianity, given its roots in slavery (Harbor 2008).

Though others did not specifically name “the Spirit” as a force, Rivers and Eugene were not alone in calling for this model of Catholic worship; leaders such as Father Glenn V. Jean-Marie called for creativity and dialogue in all liturgical aspects of the Mass, both elements of the Black Church and both examples of what the Spirit could inspire, at the same 1978 symposium (Harbor 2008). This trend of bringing Black Catholic parishes stylistically closer to their Black Protestant counterparts continued into the 1980s and beyond. In the 1984 pastoral letter from ten African American bishops, “What We Have Seen and Heard,” the writers named four primary components of Black spirituality that belonged to Black Catholics. It should be *contemplative; holistic*, welcoming “intellect and emotion, spirit and body, action and contemplation, individual and community, sacred and secular” (ibid.: 8); *joyful*, apparent through “movement and song, rhythm and feeling” (ibid.: 9); and *communitarian*. These bishops recognized the physical work of the Spirit and paired it with music and affinity for others, as did other prominent liturgical leaders. In his portion of the 1987 *Lead Me, Guide Me* hymnal (to which two of those ten bishops contributed), titled “The Liturgy of the Roman Rite and African American Worship,” Father J-Glenn Murray included “indigenous music,”<sup>28</sup> clapping, dialogic preaching, and spontaneous prayer as facets of “authentically Black” worship in Catholic churches. Later, the document “Plenty Good Room: The Spirit and Truth of African American Worship” produced by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in 1990, criticized the lack of these practices in some Catholic churches by writing,

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<sup>28</sup> By “indigenous music,” Murray means music that was born of African Americans. This also references the “indigenization” of Christian music and liturgy around the world after the Second Vatican Council.

“The deadly silence of an unresponsive assembly gives the impression that the Spirit is absent from the community’s act of praise” (ibid.: 102).

In sum, the conception of the Holy Spirit as paramount to a service that is wholly fulfilling to congregants is a legacy of the Black Church, and by extension, of Black Catholics. Also ubiquitous is the notion that music is a natural stimulus for and manifestation of the Holy Spirit’s dynamic, ever-motivating presence. The Spirit draws worshipers together in the same space by acting through and between multiple people who are willing to engage with it. Whether or not individuals at St. Augustine or elsewhere talk about “the Spirit,” there is unanimous acknowledgment of a sacred dialogical connection between the Gospel Choir and the congregation, and of a power that moves parishioners to react in audible or visible ways while drawing them together.

### *Signs of the Spirit*

Movement, sound, and relationships are evident upon walking into St. Augustine. No one ever talks in what might be considered an “outside voice,” but the minutes surrounding each Mass give rise to a hum of greetings, introductions, and friendly conversation with friends and strangers alike while parishioners stroll around the church. The first Sunday of every month is “Nametag Sunday,” during which each worshiper wears a sticker bearing their name. This small addition to the normal Mass facilitates more personal conversation between unacquainted parties.

The Gospel Choir knows that it needs to extend this sort of activity into their sung worship. In our interview, Gail recalled and quoted her welcoming address from



her MC days with the Gospel Choir: “We welcome you to clap your hands and stomp your feet and praise God, because that’s what we’re going to do. We came to worship the Lord.” Indeed, true to its genre’s performance conventions, St. Augustine’s gospel singers often clap, step from side to side, or sway while they sing. It always appears planned and choreographed; Choir members will begin their movements at the same time with only rare mistakes. Certain Mass parts that are sung every Sunday, like the “Holy, Holy, Holy” and “Gloria,” are physically accompanied by the Choir in the same manner each time, the former in triple meter with clapping on beats two and three, the latter with stepping and clapping on alternate beats. There is some space for creativity, particularly for the altos and sopranos who are not stationed in the front, and are therefore partially hidden. Gail, for example, sometimes improvises her own dances in the third row by swaying in place and moving her arms. Others, like Latore, might involve their hands, heads, or entire bodies more than the choreography requires. With few exceptions,<sup>29</sup> Father Pat participates in the clapping without other bodily movement.

Additionally, St. Augustine has a dance ministry that adds to the more prominent Masses, including Palm Sunday, Easter, Pentecost, and the parish’s anniversary. Such liturgical dance became popular in Black Catholic churches during the 1990s (McGann and Lumas 2008). St. Augustine’s group performs choreographed movement to the processions, recessions, and certain psalms, songs, and readings, and sets an expressive example for the congregation. According to J.G. Davies (1984),

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<sup>29</sup> He has stood up a few times during the second Communion song, and has often followed up with comments about their singing (much like he did after the “Hallelujah Chorus” as described in my second chapter).

liturgical dance can “be seen as an extension of the already existing mobility in the church’s worship” (ibid.: 127) and “be integrated with worship as a vital factor to increase participation” (ibid.: 145).

Beyond the regimented series of standing, sitting, and reciting prayers and responses, many members of the congregation take their cues from the Choir on the altar. For example, once the singers begin clapping and stepping at the repeat of the “Holy, Holy, Holy” or the third refrain of the “Gloria,” the parish never fails to follow with enthusiasm every week. On one occasion when there was a substitute pianist, the congregation began clapping rhythmically in the part of “Holy, Holy, Holy” where it is customary to do so, but some chose to stop when they noticed the Gospel Choir’s hands at their sides. Worshipers do not only mirror movement when they follow the Gospel Choir. Once, when the Choir sang Timothy Wright’s upbeat “Who’s on the Lord’s Side,” nearly the whole church stood up when the Choir reached a repeated section of, “Get up, if you’re on the Lord’s side!”

Though some members of the congregation simply heed the Choir’s example or sung commands, others will feel compelled to react as a song builds, and they display this movement to varying degrees; they might raise one or two arms, close their eyes, rise to their feet, sway in place, or any combination of the four. I have also witnessed other, more unique physical reactions, such as a woman who put her face in her hands as she sat and a standing man who jabbed his index finger at the Choir with each syllable they sang. Will, who is white, told me that he “didn’t have the experience of responding the way people usually would to gospel music.” Before he

joined the Choir, he would stand and hold his fist in the air from St. Augustine's pews.

These movements are additions to the typical choreography of the Mass, but they are not planned. They are reactions that coincide with the building harmonic complexity and dynamic level of a given Offertory or Communion song, when the congregation is otherwise expected to sit or kneel per the Missal. Hinson (2000) wrote that physical spontaneity tends to occur when the Choir reaches the climax of a song or the soloist, if there is one, demonstrates increased intensity and freedom. This portion of the song includes repeated sung figures from the Choir, perhaps with more strained, yet powerful, voices. At St. Augustine, where there are fewer solo songs and gospel songs do not usually last as long as they might at other churches, changes in congregational movement are most noticeable after key changes. For example, the Gospel Choir sang "How Excellent"<sup>30</sup> as the first Communion hymn on one Sunday. Prior to the key change, only a few people were on their feet; immediately after it, at least ten people joined them. This particular occasion also demonstrates the tendency for movement to happen in waves. On January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2019, a soloist sang "Behold Your God" by Kenneth Louis, a song that is exclusive to the Christmas season. Approximately one third of the parish stood up after the first key change, most of them in the front portion of the church, so it was not long before most of the rest of the church followed suit.

Spontaneous vocalization, in addition to movement, is another common reaction to the liturgy, especially the word "Amen." "Amen" expresses approval,

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<sup>30</sup> Known elsewhere as "Perfect Praise."

indicating on a basic level that, “Yes, I heard that and it corresponds with what I believe to be true.” Non-musical applause at the end of a song or other part of the Mass serves a similar function; through this action, congregants do more than is required to respond to what just took place.

Worshippers usually show appreciation for psalms and the soloists who sing them by saying “Amen” and sometimes applauding upon their completion. Generally, parishioners do this for any solo, which could also take place as an Offertory or Communion song. The Choir even claps for itself and their soloist, presumably, along with the worshippers in the pews after the “Gloria.” It is uncommon for congregants to vocalize during songs, but when the Choir sang Richard Smallwood’s popular song, “Total Praise,” a woman in the pews shouted both, “Alleluia!” in the first verse and “Sing it!” in the second verse.

As with other Black churches, some of these reactions appear during nonmusical portions of the service. Readings, particularly second readings from the New Testament, are sometimes met with murmurings of “Amen.” Parishioners respond to crucial moments of the homily with quiet utterances of “Amen,” “Mmmm,” “That’s right,” and “Yes.” Jokes evoke light laughter. Other times, the comments are louder and more emphatic, perhaps accompanied by clapping. The homily’s conclusion is always met with applause, and usually with affirmations of “Amen!”.

Accounting for the Signs

Through this willingness to vocalize and move, parishioners demonstrate a desire to actively participate in the liturgy. These actions are not part of the Roman Missal, and not part of strict traditions at St. Augustine, since their employment is not consistent. Congregants are free to take liberties in their responses to both the music and the homily, displaying characteristics of participatory music as outlined by Thomas Turino in *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (2008). From an outsider's perspective, especially an outsider who is familiar with white American Catholic churches, this higher level of engagement is obvious. What is not obvious, and what led to ambiguity in my interviews, is *what* causes this. Other scholarship about gospel music, including the aforementioned books by Hinson (2000) and McGann (2004), focus on the Holy Spirit's role in gospel performance while discussing it in equally vague terms. Some of my interlocutors talked about the Holy Spirit's role in movement and vocalization, while others did not. When I brought this up to Will, he told me, "It's all based on people's experience. [...] Some people are also more apt to talk about what their experiences are. [...] There is definitely a dynamic [between worshipers when we sing]." It is important to explore the multifaceted actions of the Holy Spirit that inspire this "dynamic."

For some music ministers, their own emotions and situations determine how they respond to the music they sing. Will attributed physical and vocal spontaneity to revelation, while acknowledging that these instances of uninhibitedness could never be satisfactorily articulated by anyone:

Mini revelations about God's love for you, your ridiculousness. [...] In a way, it is a compliment, I guess, to the Scripture in that sense, in terms of maybe

breaking it down, opening you up [...] and I think some people react that way. You know, when I'm ministering, something I'm singing might do that for me. Where I'm in the middle of singing and then I'll just have this, "Oh, of course!" [...] So maybe you have a revelation about this, or you have a feeling that something's lifted from you, so what more can you do except vocalize? Or clap, or laugh, or sometimes you just kind of—you know, I just catch myself kind of laughing, because the grace I've just realized I've now accessed somehow. But I think that's kind of what I pick up. [...] I think if it's not something that's happened to them, they are standing up in order to access that. They feel it coming, they feel the need. But again, I think this is very individual, so it's hard to say what [the impetus is]—I guess that's the one thing I'd say about it, it's just very individual.

These revelations can happen to both singers and to people in the pews, and they leave the individual unable to resist demonstrating that something significant has happened. Marilyn explained to me in our interview,

Sometimes it's like, "Oh, there's a congregation?" Certain songs, depending on the certain frame of mind I'm in, they get me. It gets me a certain way, sometimes it's like I'm bouncing off the ceiling, and then sometimes it just—I'm just *absorbed* in the song. And sometimes it just gets me choked up and I can't even sing the doggone song.

Like Will, she feels inner changes unfolding that capture and physically change her.

Even if Marilyn momentarily forgets the worshipers, the Holy Spirit is acting upon her. This total surrender to a divine power makes her a more effective minister.

Latore told me that he is quite sure that his own kinesthetic expression as a gospel singer has connected him to many parishioners who are strangers to him. They often talk to him after Mass as if they know him well. Latore said that he never seeks to entertain anyone; on the contrary,

Sometimes when I'm up there and the music and the expression fills me, I go with that feeling. It's like, you know, it's not like I'm thinking about it, it happens because I'm feeling that music, too. It's speaking to me, too, it's speaking to whatever emotional issues or whatever aspirations or problems that I have, too. So I'm just going with that. And sometimes I think people see that, and they connect to that.

At another point in the interview, he agreed with Will by saying, “When a song moves you like that, you can’t just stand still. You have to express yourself somehow, some way.”

Individual reactions to gospel music, which cannot be stopped, help people empathetically “catch” whatever is being felt. Like Latore told me, “There are times where it all just comes together at the right moment, at the right time. And you can just feel it, it’s just all over the place.” Based on my observational evidence, there is undoubtedly a relationship between the individual reactions of congregants, as if they are all responding to the same force. As the Holy Spirit acts, worshipers feed off of each other and achieve communion, a Catholic belief that people never connect with the divine in isolation (McBrien 2005). Will described his weekly activity as,

Ministering and responding at the same time. [...] Sometimes you might approach this [singing at any church] as, “Oh, we’ll go and sing to them and minister to them.” In fact, you get back sometimes from people, maybe it’s their appreciation, maybe it’s their need, maybe it’s whatever it is—I came away feeling like I got ministered to.

Like Will, every choir member I spoke with participated in this engagement and stood to gain spiritually from this mutual reflection and exchange. Vanessa, noting that the Choir sang better as a result of this spiritual kinship, mused:

Because it’s like [*pause*] you’re giving everything, and you’re also receiving at the same time. So it just—it kind of flows both ways, that we’re giving it all of who we are spiritually, but you’re getting that back. So it just has a whole different feel to it when you can see that people are engaged. [...] It’s more than just liking the notes we’re singing, you can see that they’re being [*pause*] touched by the Spirit in whatever way they display that, whether that’s just a facial expression or they’re clapping or whatever they may be doing. It just makes the Spirit a lot more real for me.

There is also potential for a minister feeling the Holy Spirit to apparently be alone in that feeling. While Marilyn and I talked about the congregation's effect on the Choir's performance, she said,

It depends on I think, sometimes, the music and how it affects me. Because during certain seasons like Lent sometimes, if there are certain songs, and it may be where my head is or what I'm going through. And you know, the congregation may not be rising, clapping, whatever, but a certain song may touch me a certain way. You know, bring tears or just make me happy.

If a particular song resonates with the events in a singer's life, that person might experience the "revelation" that Will talked about, regardless of anyone else's responses.

While the Holy Spirit can rebound through any group of people, personal relationships facilitate this exchange. When I asked Valerie what about the Gospel Choir helps her to pray, she immediately answered, "I know many of them." She sits with the same parishioners week after week, whether or not she is serving as lector. Maurice acknowledged possible bias in his perception that the congregants at St. Augustine were communicating with God by telling me, "Of course, these are faces I'm used to seeing every Sunday now." If the Choir believes that those listening are spiritually engaged, they will be also, and singers know what spiritual engagement looks and sounds like in those to whom they are accustomed.

I also observed the importance of familiar leaders reflected in congregational behavior during my fieldwork. For example, the Gospel Choir had a substitute pianist one Sunday. There were plainly audible differences between this man's performance and Eddie's usual musical decisions. Some songs were slower; some choreography was different, perhaps to keep the proceedings as simple as possible for the stand-in;



and the Offertory ended abruptly, while Eddie always filled the ceremonial space following the song with piano improvisation. The psalm sung that day was not met with any “Amen” upon its consummation, and few parishioners, if any, offered one at the completion of a tenor soloist’s second Communion song, “My Lord, What a Morning,” despite this particular soloist’s tendency to inspire reactions from the congregants. Father Pat’s homily on that day, on the other hand, elicited ample vocalizations and clapping from the worshipers. In a similar fashion, homilies that are given by visiting and substitute priests are rarely met with any response but polite applause at their terminations, except for the case of Friar Paul, a priest who preaches dialogically and has years of familiarity with St. Augustine’s congregation.

Regardless of whether or not members of the Gospel Choir say much about “the Spirit,” they know that both the congregation and they themselves are in some way connecting to the divine. They describe revelation, engagement, emotions, something that moves, and something that speaks. The difficulty my interlocutors had in accounting for this force is a testament to the power of the Holy Spirit. Whatever it is, this energy can only manifest through openness and intentional engagement with all present and with the liturgy, sparking both revelation and dialogue. The typical performance traditions of Gospel Choirs and their audiences—standing, clapping, stepping, vocalizing—are natural outcomes. Listeners feel renewed and ready to share God’s love with others. However, not every audience is familiar, and not every listener has the shared experience of being a parishioner at St. Augustine. The Gospel Choir maintains its commitment to the Lord, its kinship with Black spirituality, and its hope for dual engagement when it moves beyond the doors of the church it

represents at the corner of 15<sup>th</sup> and V Streets, despite the mixed interactions that singers report.

### *Travel and Social Justice*

As it rose to prominence, the Gospel Choir often sang at churches besides St. Augustine for choir anniversaries and similar occasions with the knowledge that such audiences were more familiar with the genre. Initially, the Choir maintained an arduous schedule; Fran commented, “There were some Sundays where we would leave St. Augustine, then go to one church, leave that church and go to another.” Now, the Gospel Choir has an average of two engagements per month outside of their 12:30 Masses. Some events occur on an annual basis, such as the revival at Peoples Congregational United Church of Christ in Washington, D.C.<sup>31</sup>

Maurice described to me the experience of singing outside of the usual Catholic Mass at other Christian services:

In those churches, sometimes interactions [...] depending on the setting, are way more intense than at St. Augustine Church because it’s the way they’re used to participating in Masses [services]. It’s very common in St. Augustine to see people moved to tears and cry and clap. But I remember a few times where I would see people almost passing out and falling on the floor and stuff like that [at Protestant churches]. In general, the reception is very good. People are moved, and they’re also very thankful.

Because the Protestant churches that the St. Augustine Gospel Choir visits are usually at home with the genre, worshipers easily establish more dialogic relationships with the singers. They may not respond in the same ways as St. Augustine’s parishioners, but the Choir recognizes that they are reaching broader audiences who have their own

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<sup>31</sup> Learned from Will Ferroggiaro, interview (February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2019).

customs surrounding spiritual connections. After describing Protestant congregants' expressions of glossolalia to me, Latore said that these reactions are no different from what happens at St. Augustine; they are "really more about being touched by the Spirit in a way that moves their bodies to just convulse or gyrate or whatever. [...] It's the Spirit moving them in a way that they just can't stand still. They have to react. And sometimes that reaction is not conscious." And since many of these churches are predominantly Black, these guest appearances allow the Gospel Choir to stake its belonging to the African American Christian tradition through worship.

In addition to local, small-scale engagements, the St. Augustine Gospel Choir has also toured nationally and internationally throughout its history. It has performed in major Midwest cities, sung at venues such as the Apollo Theater, appeared on programs such as *Nightline*, and participated in gospel competitions sponsored by major American companies. Presidents Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama each invited the St. Augustine Gospel Choir to sing at the White House at least once, including Pope Francis' visit to the capital in September of 2015. The singers fondly remember Pope Francis' approving smile after their a cappella rendition of "Total Praise."<sup>32</sup>

Abroad, the Choir performed in Costa Rica, France, Germany, and Italy. There is ample scholarship about gospel music's role outside of the United States, taken out of context and passively consumed as something closer to secular music (Johnson 2005, Waseda 2013, Burnim 2016). Maurice told me, "I think gospel music

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<sup>32</sup> Gail Jackson and Fran Robertson, interview, 15 April 2018. The performance can be found at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yg\\_9VDJHEnl](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yg_9VDJHEnl).

is more perceived as a music style than a way to worship,” explaining that he only ever heard gospel music in secular settings while in France. From interviews, it was apparent that the Europeans encountered by the St. Augustine Gospel Choir at least held gospel music in high regard. Vanessa demonstrated a positive outlook on European interest in gospel music, believing that connections were still forged between listeners and Choir members. “Especially in Europe, people really do appreciate gospel music, so they’re very into it, and very much enjoy what you’re doing, because [...] they don’t hear it very often, so they’re always very engaged. So you can even produce a better sound when people are engaged.” Even if audience members were not fully conscious of gospel music’s place in worship, then, they could still be moved and be metaphorically in harmony with the performers. Eddie reported obvious respect from Europeans, noting that the German gospel choir who hosted them, “*Embraced* us. [...] They treated us like royalty. [...] Really, really good friends came from that trip.”

I learned in several interviews that while on one trip to Italy, primarily with the purpose of singing at the Vatican, the Gospel Choir was spontaneously invited to perform one night at a summer blues festival. By all accounts, the singers were out of place; rather than performing indoors for worshipers during a daytime Mass, they sang outdoors late at night for a slightly inebriated audience at an event meant for popular music and revelry. In fact, the groups that preceded them onstage boasted names like “Hot Chocolate Sex” and sang crude lyrics. The performance that the St. Augustine Gospel Choir delivered was unexpected and memorable for its members and audience. Father Pat believes that the Choir fulfilled its mission and that the

crowd experienced something divine. “They were clearly moved. [...] You didn’t have just a passive crowd listening to a choir sing, like a concert.” No matter what or who I asked, I could garner no specific details about the exact reactions of this audience, other than the presence of both a palpable shift in atmosphere and enthusiastic applause. Unanimously, however, my interlocutors recognized this event as an exceptional moment, an occasion where they broke through the performance expectations of the festival to engage the audience. Of course, this account will remain incomplete, since I heard only the perspectives of my interlocutors, none of whom spoke directly with audience members. The juxtaposition of language, mindset, and genre made for a precarious situation and a humorous story, but the responses of the audience—whatever they were—cemented this performance as a victory for St. Augustine’s mission. For singers, it provided evidence of the connections that could be forged with even the most disparate groups through their music. Vanessa told me, “Even with the language difference, oftentimes, they get this spiritual aspect of it all, even if they don’t always understand all of the words.”

The Choir has not traveled very far since its 2013 trip to Italy. The more established members of the St. Augustine Gospel Choir miss traveling, and not just for the venues, audiences, and novelty. Gail commented, “It was a wonderful way to bond, for the Choir members to bond. And we would just be cutting up, having a good time, but when it came time for worship, [*claps once*] everybody was on one accord.” Quality time within the Gospel Choir contributes to the quality of their ministry in much the same way that group prayer does. Currently, Maurice is working

to organize an exchange with a European choir, and as of February 2019, there is interest from an ensemble in Switzerland.

The ultimate goal of the Gospel Choir's invocation of the Holy Spirit is to bring people closer to Christ, which inspires parishioners to subsequently share that love with others and work for justice. For several reasons, it is natural that St. Augustine Catholic Church maintains a strong commitment to social justice. A survey done by sociologist and Catholic priest Andrew Greeley with Chicago Catholics in 2011 found that 75% of respondents named "Concern for the poor" as "very important" to Catholic identity, and 63% said the same about "Emphasis on social justice" (ibid.: 18). Other scholars have deemed social justice an integral part of the Black Church and Black theology in America. Anthony Pinn (2002) explained that Black churches have historically centered Christian social teachings and brought needed educational resources to their struggling communities. Bryan Massingale (1997) wrote that exclusion from full, uninhibited participation in society naturally leads to questions and actions surrounding justice.

Social justice initiatives, then, align with both Catholic and Black Christian theology. Father Pat named "Catholic education, social justice, liturgy and worship" as longstanding pillars of St. Augustine. And he named their two goals as a parish: "Spread the gospel [...] and serve where there's a need," particularly on a local level. Accordingly, every homily Father Pat delivers, along with most messages he writes in the weekly bulletin, demand action in the pursuit of justice in one way or another. Mere feelings about injustice are insufficient for living a Christian life of service. Similarly, Black and Catholic Father Jean-Marie said, "Like Jesus, if we do not break

our bodies and pour out our blood in loving service,...then we have nothing to celebrate, nothing to offer” (Harbor 2008, 115). Crucially, Father Pat and his parishioners believe that they are not simply being nice people through charity; they are fulfilling their promise as baptized Christians to spread the love of God and bring as many people as possible into His embrace. In other words, all good works rely on the power of the triune God. Father Pat prayed on Pentecost Sunday, the celebration most closely associated with the Holy Spirit, “Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful, and kindle within us the fire of your love, so that we can then answer the call to go forth, confident that you are with us every step of the way.” As he has stated in numerous homilies and in our interview, Catholics must go to Mass with the desire to be changed by the Holy Spirit.

The St. Augustine Gospel Choir emerged at about the same time that the congregation made community service a higher priority (MacGregor 1999). The Choir has always sought to foster relationships between themselves as a congregation and the Holy Spirit, the power that ultimately runs the social justice initiatives of the parish through Its purveyors. While the ensemble is not otherwise intimately involved in social justice efforts as an ensemble, the Gospel Choir paired up with Team Homeless Outreach through Prevention and Education (HOPE) for their most recent anniversary concert on November 18<sup>th</sup>, 2018, at 4 p.m. The ensemble performed in McPherson Square Park in Washington, D.C., an area where both groups expected homeless people to gather. I could not attend the performance, but Gail reported a low turnout of homeless people, because they typically convene later in the evening. Unfortunately, the Gospel Choir did not have the opportunity to be conduits of the

Holy Spirit for those who they had hoped to see. The Choir still gave a nice concert for audience members who usually seek to hear them, along with some passerby, whom Maurice felt the Choir had reached. “They were enjoying it, pleasantly surprised to see a gospel choir. I have no clue if these guys were religious or not, Catholic or not. But they were connecting very well with us and that’s already a good source of satisfaction for me.” He detected curiosity and smiles more than the presence of the Holy Spirit among these strangers, but there was at least some level of engagement in the form of active attention. The Gospel Choir fulfilled their ministry to the extent that they could with an audience largely comprised of listeners who had not gone to McPherson Square seeking religious fulfillment.

No matter where the Choir goes, singers detect elements of revelation, engagement, and dialogue. In these brief drop-in performances, members can only guess the impact their ministry has based on the audience’s behaviors. Still, the Gospel Choir serves as a mobile extension of St. Augustine, hoping to share the Holy Spirit, achieve communion with its listeners, and inspire them to build God’s kingdom on earth. The success of these endeavors depends on audience expectations and behaviors in addition to the Holy Spirit’s unpredictable trajectory.

### Conclusion

After listing all of the trips he has taken with the Gospel Choir, Father Pat insisted in our interview, “The Gospel Choir at its best, to me, is most inspiring at Mass on Sunday. That’s when I appreciate them *most*. They’re [...] tying it to something bigger than them: the Mass itself.”



The St. Augustine Gospel Choir boasts decades of ministerial history as ambassadors of both the Black and Catholic Church. As the Gospel Choir itself has moved, the Holy Spirit's presence in their music has physically, verbally, and spiritually moved worshipers around the world and at all levels of society, connecting singers with audiences. Though there are musical features that correlate with these responses, St. Augustine's leaders attest to something sacred that brings people who engage with it to stand, speak, or even faint unexpectedly. And although these spiritual conversations can take place anywhere, they are most powerful when people who know and like each other are gathered and are hoping to experience the Spirit together within the Catholic liturgy. For many American Catholics, this behavior of the Holy Spirit during Mass is unprecedented, and it heightens the sense of communion that parishioners feel.

The goal of sharing the Spirit is to multiply its presence so that listeners are inspired, in turn, to share God's love. The Gospel Choir participates in this chain, sometimes initiating it, with the hope that they might detect the sense of "universality" advocated for by the Catholic Church. Like Gail told me, "And so, wherever, whatever church, whatever denomination, whatever country, whatever state, whatever, what unifies is that we're one, as brothers and sisters in Christ."

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

In her 1989 speech to American bishops, Black Catholic leader Sister Thea Bowman made it clear that Blackness was not valued in the American Catholic Church, and those in charge were obligated to correct this. Merely talking about diversity was insufficient; liturgical negotiation was needed. She said, “See, you all talk about what you have to do if you want to be a multicultural church: Sometimes I do things your way, sometimes you do things my way” (Brown 1998, 171). Gospel music at St. Augustine exhibits this give-and-take that Bowman suggested at every choir engagement. The Gospel Choir maintains and celebrates their Catholicity, despite their disagreements about operations within the larger institution. The singers understand themselves as a somewhat unique manifestation of this denomination, with both structure and purpose that ultimately align with Catholic ideals. They bring relevance to parishioners who struggle to find purpose in the Catholic Mass by indexing aspects of their secular lives within the structures provided by the Church. And they bring the Holy Spirit in its full, dynamic form to the Catholic Mass.

In reality, there is no such clear border between what constitutes “your way” and “my way.” Though Bowman referred to general patterns of the white American Catholic Church in “your way,” the global Catholic Church encompassed a multiplicity of “ways” after the Second Vatican Council. “My way,” from the Gospel Choir’s perspective, is difficult to define. The nature of their ministry depends on more than just the singers, who bring their own experiences and individual gifts to the Gospel Choir as a whole; where they are, when they are singing, and who is listening are equally, if not more important, considerations. The Gospel Choir does not

subscribe to one “way” or even teeter between two conflicting “ways,” but charts its own path, borrowing elements that have historically belonged to different denominations while shaping their actions based on the dialogue and current events surrounding each performance.

The Gospel Choir is not so successful simply because its audience is primarily Black. Father Pat emphasized to me as I embarked on this research that the Gospel Choir is not the only musical entity at the parish with something valuable to offer. St. Augustine’s music is varied because the Black Catholic community, which includes St. Augustine, itself has never been monolithic. Father Pat, referring to the 8:00 a.m. Sunday Mass, said to me, “I would challenge anyone to somehow say that, ‘Poor you, you haven’t been liberated yet. You’re a black person, but you like organ music.’” Others have echoed this sentiment, believing that all congregants have the right to attend a given Mass based in part on music. According to Gail in our interview, “I think people are drawn to whatever pulls their spirit man in worship. So some people are just 10 o’clock people [*laughs*].” Future research might consider the other three Mass times at St. Augustine and their accompanying music. This avenue would elaborate on the diversity of Black Catholic identity in one parish alone.

Additionally, this thesis only analyzes the intentions of liturgical leaders. It is important to remember that interviewing congregation members could change my findings. Do parishioners view the Gospel Choir as a mediator? Do they truly hear relevance in gospel music through the indexical powers of its aesthetics and lyrics? Do they feel the Holy Spirit when they move or vocalize, and do they believe the sincerity of others when they do the same? Some simply do not have the spiritual

foundation to interpret gospel music in the way that St. Augustine's leadership hopes worshipers do, and reception of a verbal performance contributes to its meaning (Duranti 1986). There are as many perspectives as there are congregants, and their input would help determine whether or not the theories of my interlocutors hold water.

Finally, scholarship on Black Catholics and their music has not addressed Washington, D.C. in its entirety the way that it has for Chicago, for example (Cressler 2016). As a city close to the Catholic hub of Baltimore,<sup>33</sup> near the Mason-Dixon Line, and with the nickname "Chocolate City," it serves as an interesting point of convergence. It is the city where Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech and where Father George Stallings broke off from the Roman Catholic Church. It hosts performers from all over the world and contains some of the most well-known musicians and ensembles in the country. Washington's status as the political center of the United States with both governmental and Catholic institutional corruption add further challenges to Catholic life in such a region. Such changes and challenges have been especially obvious in recent times. On April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Pope Francis installed Wilton Gregory as the Archdiocese of Washington's first African American archbishop. He follows two archbishops who were implicated in sexual abuse scandals and is likely to be named the first African American cardinal.<sup>34</sup>

Political movements, government workers, Catholic leaders, and artists come and go,

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<sup>33</sup> Maryland was founded as a Catholic colony and the first American diocese was located in Baltimore.

<sup>34</sup> For more information, see <https://www.npr.org/2019/04/04/709794584/pope-names-new-washington-d-c-archbishop>.

but St. Augustine, other Catholic churches, and their music both withstand and morph with this tornado of constant transformation.

## Glossary

**Advent:** A liturgical season encompassing the four Sundays preceding Christmas

**Archdiocese or diocese:** Collection of Catholic parishes in the same geographical area, headed by a bishop

**Communion:** See Eucharist

**Consecration:** The moment when the bread and wine becomes the literal body and blood of Christ

**Doxology:** The brief prayer that happens shortly before Communion

**Eucharist:** The same as Communion; the sacrament of receiving the body and blood of Christ represented in bread and wine

**Holy Spirit:** One constituent of the Trinity that resides in parishioners

**Homily:** The sermon done by the priest, done after all three required readings

**Lector:** The layperson who reads the introduction to Mass and the first and second readings

**Lent:** A liturgical season encompassing the 40 days preceding Easter

**Liturgy:** The ritual order of the Mass

**Mass:** The weekly Sunday service

**Missal:** The written program, of sorts, that contains the prayers and actions in the Mass

**Offertory:** The song accompanying the period during Mass when tithes are collected

**Ordain:** Officially authorize a man to celebrate Mass as a priest

**Palm Sunday:** The Sunday before Easter when the Passion is read as a play

**Parish:** An individual Catholic church and its community of believers

**Passion:** The story of Christ's crucifixion

**Pastor:** The lead priest of a parish

**Pentecost:** 50 days after Easter, when the Holy Spirit descended on Christ's disciples after His ascension

**Priest:** An ordained man who can celebrate the Mass; often stationed at one parish

**Readings:** There are three each Mass; one from the Old Testament, one from the New Testament, and one from the Gospels

**Trinity:** The mystery of one God in three parts: the Father (God), Son (Jesus), and Holy Spirit

**Vatican:** The official headquarters of the Catholic Church, located in Rome, Italy

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