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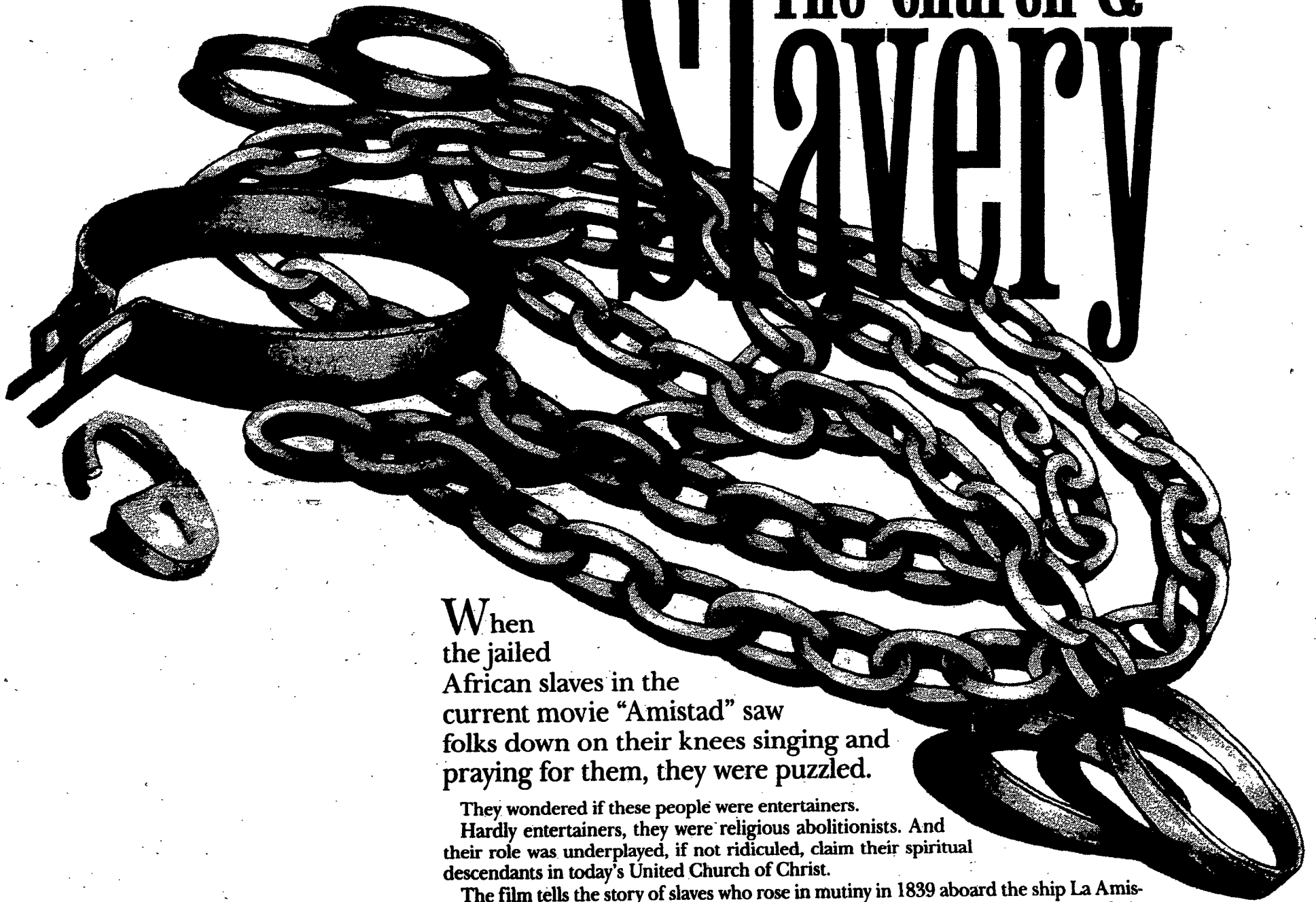
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Catholic Courier

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The Church & Slavery



When the jailed African slaves in the current movie "Amistad" saw folks down on their knees singing and praying for them, they were puzzled.

They wondered if these people were entertainers. Hardly entertainers, they were religious abolitionists. And their role was underplayed, if not ridiculed, claim their spiritual descendants in today's United Church of Christ.

**BLACK
HISTORY
MONTH**

The film tells the story of slaves who rose in mutiny in 1839 aboard the ship *La Amistad*, and killed most of their captors. Seized and jailed in Connecticut, their case went to the U.S. Supreme Court — with the slaves' cause championed by the Protestant protesters.

The movie depicted a Catholic scene as well: a priest sprinkling water on kidnapped Africans boarding a slave-trading ship off Africa.

Such scenes are not fictional, according to church historians and theologians. "The Portuguese baptized slaves as they got on the boat; the Spanish baptized slaves when they got off," commented Father Cyprian Davis, a Benedictine monk who wrote the 1992 *The History of Black Catholics in the United States*. He

spoke with the *Catholic Courier* from St. Meinrad Archabbey in Indiana, where he teaches church history.

"They were baptized en masse before put on the boat in Africa," said Diana Hayes, associate professor of theology at Georgetown University. "They thought they were bringing Christianity to savages."

Slavery was an institution well in place when Christianity came into being. The church saw the existence of slavery as part of natural law, and as St. Augustine wrote, the result of sin. However, even from Christianity's earliest days, the church was concerned about slaves' souls.

The church's acceptance of slavery continued through the centuries, and Catholics brought this acceptance when they settled in North America. Catholics in the United States were still organizing their church — and battling religious prejudice — as the abolitionist movement picked up steam. Thus Catholics, by and large, did not take part in abolitionist efforts.

Even in Rochester, where abolitionist Frederick Douglass started his *North Star* weekly in 1847, local and national historians have found no trace of Catholic activism in the abolitionist movement. It remained small, largely Protestant and often anti-Catholic.

"Many Catholics are surprised to learn that their religious tradition has not always been opposed to what today is clearly judged a heinous social evil: slavery," wrote Kenneth J. Zanca in

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