

*American Catholics and Slavery: 1789-1866.* This 1994 anthology compiles documents from Scripture, church councils, theologians, bishops and popes from the first century on. Zanca is a professor of religious studies at Marymount College in Palos Verdes, Calif.

U.S. Catholic leaders may have been on the front line of social justice issues in recent memory, Zanca said, but few Catholics today seem to understand that "justice" (and "social justice" in particular) is an *evolving* concept.

"Our moral consciousness gets sensitized over time," Zanca said in an interview with the *Courier*.

**Impact lingers**

Watching movies such as "Amistad" seems to stir up a guilt, a "subversive memory," Hayes said. But she requires students to see it and Alex Haley's "Roots."

"We as a church and those of us in the United States need to acknowledge guilt for the sins that were committed in the past and the lingering impact those sins have had upon us," she said.

Such guilt need not necessarily be acknowledged in an apology, she said, but perhaps in a request for forgiveness.

Both Catholic and Protestant churches were involved in perpetuating slavery, Hayes noted, although it was the Catholic Church that gave the Spanish and Portuguese kings authority over the New World and empowered them to take slaves.

And even religious orders, priests and bishops in the United States kept slaves, Father Davis noted. The Jesuit decision to sell 272 slaves in Maryland in 1837, as the order chose to leave agriculture and concentrate on education, raised an uproar mainly because they sold them to non-Catholics and slave families would be split. And in Loretto, Ky., the first superior of the Sisters of Loretta sold her personal slave in 1812 to allow the order to buy land for a convent.

Indeed, it was a rare American Catholic cleric who spoke out against slavery. One such critic was Father Felix Dicharry of Natchitoches, La., who in 1852 called slavery as it was practiced a public crime, in a letter to the Propagation of the Faith.

But on the whole, the bishops did not discuss slavery at the seven provincial councils of Baltimore between 1829 and 1849, Father Davis stated. He added that a leading historian later praised such silence, say-

Father Davis, however, wrote in his black Catholic history, "Slavery has cast a long shadow over the history of the United States. It has led to civil strife, racial violence, and ethnic resentments that still fester. American Catholic history is covered by that same shadow."

The church outside the United States had developed a "moral consciousness" that by the mid-19th century could no longer tolerate slavery, but the U.S. church did not follow, Father Davis wrote.

"This factor unfortunately prevented the American church from playing any serious role until the middle of the twentieth century in the most tragic debate that this nation had to face," he added.

It took a Civil War (1861-65) to end slavery in the United States, he noted. Other countries had already abolished slavery: Chile in 1823, Spain in 1837, the Dominican Republic in 1844, and Ecuador in 1851, for instance. Brazil waited until 1888.

**Justifications**

In church circles, the issue has revolved around the question: "Is slavery ever justified?" Father Davis said. "Catholic teaching up until the 19th century said under certain circumstances it is justified."

Father John Francis Maxwell, an English Catholic, writing in his 1975 book, *The History of Catholic Teaching Concerning the Moral Legitimacy of the Institution of Slavery*, lists pages of reasons for Catholic acceptance of slavery over the centuries.

Enslavement was permitted, for example, of prisoners captured in war; of people convicted of certain crimes; for payment of debts; and of the child of a slave-mother.

Also, the very written word of God contained references to slavery. Exodus 21:1-11 ("If you buy a Hebrew slave...") and Lev. 25:39-55 were among the verses most often cited as "proof" of the moral legitimacy of slavery. These passages today are understood as simply accounts of local customs, not as justification for slavery.

**Teachings varied**

Although certain interpretations of Scripture, as well as writings of the early church fathers were used to support slavery, the line of support for slavery over the centuries "does have breaks in it," Hayes noted.

"There's no question more and more at-

not in this instance."

In fact, many papal teachings and church councils sought to ameliorate slave conditions, he maintained.

St. Gregory of Nyssa, about 385, produced the first truly anti-slavery text, according to Father Maxwell. In a homily, St. Gregory stated, in part, "Tell me, what price did you pay to acquire them? What is the equivalent in goods for the cost of human nature? ... What price did you pay, in obols, for the image of God?"

But the fruits of such preaching were 1,400 years away, Father Maxwell remarked.

Meanwhile, from 633 to 1089, local church councils actually imposed slavery on people. For example, according to Father Maxwell, the Council of Toledo in 655 decreed that for priests who offended against clerical celibacy, the penalty be that their offspring remain permanently in slavery to the church.

A major breakthrough, historians say, came in Pope Gregory XVI's 1839 apostolic letter, *In Supremo Apostolatus*, which condemned slave trade as unchristian and morally unlawful. In part, it admonished, "that no one hereafter may dare unjustly to molest Indians, Negroes, or other men of this sort; or to spoil them of their goods; or to reduce them to slavery; or to extend help or favor to others who perpetrate such things against them; or to exercise that inhuman trade by which Negroes, as if they were not men, but mere animals, howsoever reduced into slavery ..."

Unfortunately, the U.S. bishops ignored the condemnation, historians note. Further, Bishop John England of Charleston, S.C., wrote letters to "explain" the teaching; his letters were "reprehensible," Father Davis said.

For example, in 1840-41 letters to Secretary of State John Forsyth, the bishop insisted the papal statement referred only to slave trade, not to domestic slavery. He cited Scripture, and stated that had the bishops been aware of contrary practices, they would have tried to stop them, and would have refused sacraments to those "who would persevere in the immoral conduct."

Decades after Pope Gregory XVI's letter, and after the United States outlawed slavery, Pope Leo XIII further enunciated the universal church's growing opposition to slavery, Father Maxwell observed. In his 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, for example, the pontiff wrote that human labor is a person's own, not the property of anyone else.

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**Change is slow**

Father Davis compared the slow evolution of the church's thought on the issue to that regarding capital punishment.

"In the last few years Catholic attitude, teaching, the pope himself have come to say there is no justification for society to have capital punishment," he said.

He cautioned, "Today I am much more aware of the fact one has to be sophisticated looking at the question of slavery in the United States from the period of the 17th or late 16th century to the end of slavery at the end of the Civil War."

"Not that you in any way are saying slavery is good or bad, but it is an institution with all its harshness that existed under different forms."

He noted, "In America slavery wasn't based on Roman law. We based it on English common law. There were no rights."

Hayes pointed out that outside the United States, before European colonization here, there were legal ways slaves could obtain their freedom.

"These forms of slavery did not carry with them, for the most part, the stigma of racial inferiority ... or dehumanization," she wrote in an essay for *Rome Has Spoken: A Catholic Guide to Forgotten and Hidden Papal Statements* due out next fall by Crossroad and sponsored by Catholics Speak Out.

Even today, she and Father Davis observed, slavery continues, from kidnappings in Africa to widespread child labor. Published accounts in the *Los Angeles Times*, for example, cite Anti-Slavery International as having exposed slavery in 30 countries and estimating that 400 million people are slaves in some form — including children forced into prostitution, for example.

Hayes well recalls hearing remarks that slavery in America's early history, however, was benign; such comments continue to anger her.

She added, "I know what (the church history) is, and why they framed it the way they did," Hayes said. "But in terms of human understanding in the Christian church no, I don't understand it. I don't see how the church could ever say slavery was right."

"And I do recall Jesus said something about setting the captive free."

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