

All Oppression Shall Cease

A History of Slavery, Abolitionism,
and the Catholic Church

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Introduction

The history of the Catholic Church and slavery is not pretty in any aspect. It is really ugly, and there is no way to make it look otherwise without being dishonest. It is a history that involves physical and psychological violence, sexual assault, the selling of children, torture, and killing. It involves Catholics engaging in the trade of human beings and other Catholics being silenced or punished for protesting that trade. And it involves Church leadership at its highest levels choosing to ignore these atrocities and at times directly engaging in them. This is an ugly history, and there will be very little in this book that is pleasant to read. But if we want to know the truth, we have to trudge through the facts, no matter how painful they may be.

The ugliness of this history is compounded by the impossibility of fully wrapping one's mind around why things occurred the way they did. I have heard many well-intentioned, faithful Catholics try to explain the history of Catholicism and slavery with a simple, digestible answer of some kind: that the Church was always against slavery; that the Church was always implicitly against it, but in its wisdom took time to openly condemn it; that it is only a recent innovation to imagine that the Church should fight oppression or try to change the world, and therefore, the Church did not condemn slavery over the years; that the Church was okay with some "forms of servitude" but not chattel slavery; that the Church was always against the Atlantic slave trade and the enslavement of black Africans; that people did not know slavery was wrong "back then"; or that the slave trade was the result of racist views, and now we know better.

I have wrestled with all of these answers, and at points I have believed some of them. I now recognize clearly that all of them are wrong. When it comes to the Church's history with slavery, there are no easy answers. There is no one teaching of the faith that consistently guided the Church in its decisions, and there is no one teaching of the faith that the Church consistently ignored. The history of the Church and slavery is complex, uneven, perplexing, and maddening, and it is a history not of one choice but of countless choices made by countless Catholics. Yet this does not

mean the story is untellable. In fact, when we do dive into this history, letting go of our tendencies either to quickly defend or quickly condemn, a story emerges that is worth telling in all its difficulties and complexities. It is also one from which I believe we can learn a great deal.

The Scope of This Book

The story of the Catholic Church and slavery takes place over the course of millennia. The amount of chronological and geographical territory to cover is massive, and to make this book manageable, I have had to select certain topics, regions, and events on which to focus. That also means I have had to leave out many very interesting topics, people, and stories. For readers who are interested in delving deeper into a particular aspect of this history, I have provided ample footnotes as well as a “Recommendations for Further Reading” section at the end of this book.

For the purposes of this book, I have decided to focus on material that will allow the reader to develop a basic, era-by-era grasp of what the Church’s hierarchy and theologians were saying and doing in each era regarding slaveholding. I put a special focus in this book on those people throughout history who on the basis of their Catholic faith challenged the moral acceptability of the enslavement of indigenous peoples, the Atlantic slave trade, and even slavery itself. Readers will also encounter stories about real people who were enslaved to Catholics as well as times that enslaved and formerly enslaved Catholics fought against slavery using all the means they had available to them. This book is about how Catholicism and the Catholic Church impacted people’s decisions to defend, ignore, oppose, and even rebel against slavery in every era.

This book is not a history of the Church and racism. As we will see, the great majority of the Church’s slaveholding history had very little to do with the modern conception of “race” that groups people according to certain traits like skin color. For most of Church history, slaves of Catholics were usually from foreign lands, but their skin colors varied. Even the Atlantic trade in African slaves did not begin as a racially motivated enterprise as much as an economically motivated one. Only when the brutality and injustices of the trade were widely known did some Catholics begin developing explicitly racist arguments in order to rationalize buying enslaved Africans. There will be many aspects of this book that relate to the history of Catholicism and racism and from which implications can be drawn about contemporary questions concerning racial justice. But

sometimes the Church's involvement in slavery had nothing to do with race at all.

Likewise, this book includes very little about slaveholding by other religions or Christian denominations. I have too often heard Catholics immediately want to defend the Church's slaveholding history by arguing that the slaveholding of other cultures, religions, or denominations was somehow worse than that of the Catholic Church. Such argumentation smacks of Adam and Eve in the garden trying to blame everyone but themselves or someone going into the confessional to complain about other people's sins while ignoring their own. It can be extremely painful to look at the past and see famous popes, theologians, and even saints engaging in troubling behavior, but trying to make ourselves feel better by pointing fingers at others is an unnecessary posture that keeps us from knowing and reconciling with our past. That being said, I do not attempt to judge the moral culpability of any particular historical person mentioned in this book. While the stories in this book may compel us to portray the lives and legacies of certain Catholic historical personages with more complexity and honesty than we previously have done, it is impossible to know precisely what these people were thinking and why they did the things they did. We can condemn their actions as harmful and even evil, but their personal culpability for those actions is neither discoverable nor necessary for this history.

Challenges to Understanding the History

I still remember being eleven years old and watching parts of Ken Burns's *The Civil War* documentary in my fifth-grade history class. I knew slavery existed, but I had not really thought about it too much before that point. I remember sitting in class, staring at the screen, wondering how this had happened. Weren't we a Christian nation? How did people justify slavery? At some point in my formation as a high school student and then as a young adult, I began hearing explanations. People did not think slavery was wrong back in the day, I heard. I accepted this idea at first, but I began to wonder where the Church was during this debate. I read around and found an answer that brought me some sense of peace: the Church had condemned American slavery, of course, but the American bishops and religious orders decided to disobey the Vatican.¹ This

¹For examples of this line of thought, see Joel Panzer, *The Popes and Slavery* (Staten Island,

answer made sense to me. There were many times in the Church's history where individual priests, bishops, and even popes did not live up to the Church's teachings.

In 2011, I entered the novitiate of the Society of Jesus in Grand Coteau, Louisiana. I learned at that time that the Jesuits of Louisiana relied on enslaved labor loaned to the Society by the Religious of the Sacred Heart. Later I learned that the Jesuits in Grand Coteau owned enslaved people, too.² At first the whole "sins of the individual members" idea kept me from having to question that history too much. But then I began to wonder: why in the world didn't these slaveholding religious orders and bishops get in more trouble? I knew there were times in history when popes excommunicated people or put whole cities under interdict. If American slaveholding was really condemned by the Church as evil, how in the world did so many members of the clergy and religious orders get away with it?

I discovered a 2005 article written by Cardinal Avery Dulles, my favorite theologian. In the article Dulles reviewed John T. Noonan Jr.'s *A Church That Can and Cannot Change*, a book that in part argued that the Church did not condemn slavery until the Second Vatican Council and the pontificate of Saint John Paul II. Noonan portrayed slavery as an "unknown sin," something that no one knew was wrong until Quakers started opposing slavery at the end of the seventeenth century. Noonan argued that the Church had authorized the African slave trade nearly from the trade's very beginning. And though the Church at times in its history condemned certain instances of slavery like the enslavement of indigenous peoples in the Americas, Noonan's story went, the Church did not fully condemn slavery until the second half of the twentieth century when "everybody knew that slavery was bad."³ Dulles's critical review claimed that neither Vatican II nor John Paul had condemned slavery (*servitus*), or servitude, as such. Servitude, Dulles wrote, was a matter of degrees. There were moderate forms of servitude in history like serfdom that were acceptable in the Church's eyes, and some forms of servitude would always be a part of human life.⁴ Though popes and councils had never broadly condemned

NY: Alba House, 1996); Rodney Stark, *Bearing False Witness: Debunking Centuries of Anti-Catholic History* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2016), 170–73. Cyprian Davis's more nuanced account argues that Pope Gregory XVI condemned slavery "by inference" in 1839; see Cyprian Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 39–66.

²See Kelly L. Schmidt, "A National Legacy of Enslavement: An Overview of the Work of the Slavery, History, Memory, and Reconciliation Project," *Journal of Jesuit Studies* 8 (2021): 97–102.

³See John T. Noonan, *A Church That Can and Cannot Change* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 17–123, 119.

⁴Avery Dulles, "Development or Reversal?" *First Things* (October 2005): 53–58.

slavery, Dulles wrote, “they constantly sought to alleviate the evils of slavery and repeatedly denounced the mass enslavement of conquered populations and the infamous slave trade, thereby undermining slavery at its sources.”⁵ Noonan’s and Dulles’s wildly different portrayals of this history confused me further. And yet as I continued to research this topic, I realized that there was a wide array of disagreement among Catholic authors about nearly every possible aspect of the Church’s historical engagement with slavery and abolitionism: Did the Church condemn the Atlantic trade in African slaves or not? Did anybody know that slavery was wrong before the Quakers? Did the Church ever condemn slavery or just particularly severe forms of it? What was the truth?

I wrote this book in the hopes of answering those questions. The history of slavery is one that marks contemporary society in manifold ways, and it is important to know that history and the Catholic Church’s role in it. Yet it is a history that is complex and easily misunderstood. In order to prevent some of the common mistakes made when attempting to understand the Church’s historical relationship to slavery, I would like to offer a few cautions and suggestions for approaching this topic and its historical sources.

First, when approaching historical theological treatises and Church documents, we have to read them carefully and within their proper historical, linguistic, and theological context. Otherwise, we might misinterpret both the meaning of these documents and their historical significance. For example, if I read a papal document that condemns the enslavement of indigenous peoples in the Spanish Americas, but I know nothing about what was happening in the Americas and what the Spanish government thought about it, I will most likely make errors in attempting to explain what the document was doing and why it was important. Likewise, some of the Latin words commonly used to refer to a slave, such as *servus*, are at times used in historical documents metaphorically (e.g., “a slave to his passions”) or to refer to people who were in some type of unfree relationship (such as serfdom) but not true slaves. Therefore, it is important to pay attention to the surrounding context to ascertain these words’ meanings. The theological context is just as crucial. Some of the most significant papal documents regarding slavery have been repeatedly misinterpreted by scholars precisely because those analyses have not been rooted in an understanding of the debates that preceded those documents’ promulgation.

Second, we have to make sure we do not let our own biases get in the

⁵Dulles, “Development or Reversal?” 55–56, 56.

way. I am choosing that word “biases,” which has a negative connotation, rather than “beliefs” or “opinions.” I do not think it is possible to read or write history without letting one’s beliefs or opinions guide one’s work, and that is not necessarily a bad thing. Even by choosing what to cover in this book and what to set aside, I am making personal decisions about what I think is important for understanding this history. If I did not make those decisions, this book would probably end up being the length of a full encyclopedia or perhaps even a whole library. That being said, our biases, such as the constant desire to either defend or condemn the Church at any cost, can get in the way of looking at this history honestly. If we enter into this study thinking that the Catholic Church, whether as a governing and teaching institution or through its members, could not possibly have erred, we might end up ignoring, explaining away, or rationalizing troubling material. If, on the other hand, we are intent on making the Church look bad, we might end up sensationalizing the negative things we discover and ignoring the ways that Catholics used their faith to promote good. Letting go of the compulsion to quickly condemn or defend is difficult, but it helps us to get a clearer portrait of the past.

Third, we must recognize that there was a huge variety of Catholic opinions regarding slavery over the centuries. While it is true that we could probably group these into two or three categories (e.g., “slaveholding is morally acceptable” or “slaveholding is morally wrong”), even those camps would have a lot of variety within them. For example, Gregory of Nazianzus wrote about slavery as if it were evil, yet he himself was a slaveholder (see chapter 2). Bishop John England of South Carolina defended the moral legitimacy of Southern US slaveholding and in that respect could in no way be considered an abolitionist theologian. Yet at the same time, Bishop England clearly wanted to see slavery disappear from the United States (see chapter 8). Many others defended slaveholding as compatible with Christianity but thought that the Atlantic slave trade in Africans was gravely evil.

Even those who thought slaveholding was morally wrong and should end (whom I will call abolitionists or abolitionist theologians) differed over strategy. They had to deal with the knowledge that their writings probably would not convince slaveholders to end their slaveholding. Therefore, some abolitionist theologians would suggest a halfway point, much in the way that Country A, knowing that enemy Country B will not release Country A’s political prisoners, asks Country B if it will at least allow the Red Cross into the prison to give medical care. If they knew that slaveholders were unwilling to manumit their slaves, abolition-

ist theologians might instead suggest better treatment, or that perhaps the slaveholders would consider manumitting their slaves in six years as the Israelites had done for their fellow Israelite slaves. Not recognizing this nuance in antislavery theology was the fatal flaw of Noonan's work on slavery, but frankly, very little historical research has been done on abolitionist thought throughout the centuries. In this book I show that abolitionist thought was rare before the Quakers came along, but it did exist. Slavery was not, as Noonan called it, an "unknown sin." In fact, the major theological arguments employed by the abolitionist movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had already been used by philosophers and theologians predating those abolitionists by hundreds and in some cases thousands of years.

Fourth, we have to remember that slavery always involved real-life human persons: human persons who had names and faces and hopes and dreams, who loved, cried, laughed, made mistakes, and who, according to Christian theology, were made in God's image (see Gn 1:26–27). Likewise, these human persons were not born slaves in the same way that someone might be born with blonde or red hair, nor did they "fall into slavery" in the same way that someone might accidentally brush against poison ivy and develop a rash. They became slaves because the human-written law of the land allowed slavery and contained human-devised ways by which a person could become legally enslaved. They remained slaves because others chose to buy them and not manumit (legally free) them. Even in regions or institutions that made the manumission of enslaved people very difficult, the decision to impose that difficulty was made by real-life people. Despite Church figures at times portraying slavery as something that just "happened," slaveholding was always a choice. And when royal and Church officials made decisions to condemn cases of enslavement or not, or leave loopholes in their condemnations or not, those decisions impacted the lives of real people.

A Definition and Terminology

There are some excellent studies available, particularly by David Brion Davis and Orlando Patterson, that attempt to define what it meant to be a slave in world history. Davis tends to focus on how slaves were bought, sold, viewed, and treated in ways similar to livestock, while Patterson focuses more on the ways in which enslaved persons were forcibly alienated from their families and the heritage of their ancestors in order

to be dominated, dishonored, and subjected to a kind of social death.⁶ This book will in no way contradict Davis's and Patterson's definitions, because while Davis and Patterson focus more broadly on what the meaning and purpose of enslaving persons was in world history, I am looking specifically at how the Roman Catholic Church legally and theologically defined, justified, and engaged in slaveholding in its own history. Aspects of livestock-like raising and treatment, alienation from one's family and heritage, and social death will appear repeatedly in this book. But when I talk about "slaves" in this work, I simply mean people (1) who could be individually bought and sold as moveable property (or *chattel*), (2) whose masters could force them to work without pay, and (3) who only became legally free through a legal declaration of emancipation or manumission. Being a slave almost always also meant that (4) a master could legally punish you with physical violence; and (5) if you were an enslaved woman, your enslaved status would be passed to your newborn children (*partus sequitur ventrem*) who would then become the property of your owner. Whenever this book uses the term *slave*, *enslaved person*, *true slave*, or *chattel slavery*, the reader should assume that the above five elements apply.

A note on terminology. There has been a welcome change in historical scholarship from calling people *slaves* and *masters* to using terms such as *enslaved persons* or *bondspersons* and *slaveholders*. Such a change in language helps the reader to recognize that there was a real person underneath the term *slave* and that no one was cosmically fixed in the category of *master*. Again, slaveholding was always a choice. I primarily use the terms *enslaved persons* and *slaveholders* in this book, but in order to remind the reader that I am talking about the same legal categories as those almost always described in the ecclesial, theological, and historical documents as *masters* and *slaves*, I will at times use those terms, as well. Likewise, since historical documents at times will refer to the Americas as *the Indies* and to the indigenous people encountered by European colonizers as *Indians*, I will at times refer to these persons as *the indigenous peoples of the Americas* and at other times as *Indians*. The historical documents will refer to the immediate victims of the Atlantic slave trade (those persons forcibly shipped from the African continent to Europe or the Americas) using all kinds of terms, such as *Africans*, *Ethiopians*, *Guineamen*, *blacks*, or *negroes*. I will usually use the term

⁶David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966); David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study with a New Preface* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

Africans, though the reader should take note that prior to the Atlantic slave trade, the diverse peoples of the African continent did not have a pan-African consciousness of themselves united as Africans distinct from the rest of the world.⁷ They likely saw themselves much as the peoples of the medieval European continent viewed themselves: distinct peoples with differing languages, cultural traditions, histories, religious traditions, and political structures. We could say the same thing for the diverse indigenous peoples of the Americas.

In order to describe those Africans' enslaved or free descendants in Europe or the Americas, I will sometimes refer to them as "black" since early modern European documents frequently lumped these diverse peoples together under the racial category of *black* or *negro*. These Africans and their descendants often adopted this terminology for self-reference in order to forge a common identity among themselves to assist in their mutual survival.⁸ Finally, while I will at times use the phrase *African slave trade* to describe the overseas trade in enslaved Africans that began roughly in 1441, I will usually use the phrase *Atlantic slave trade* or *Atlantic trade in enslaved Africans* to emphasize the intercontinental scope of this centuries-long commerce.

Outline

The first three chapters of this book concern slavery and the Bible, the Patristic era, and the Middle Ages. The fourth, fifth, and sixth chapters tell the stories of the enslavement of indigenous peoples in the Americas, the Atlantic slave trade, and how different people within the Church debated and responded to these events. The seventh, eighth, and ninth chapters cover the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when the abolitionist movement grew in influence and changed the course of human history, and the tenth chapter tells the story of Pope Leo XIII finally condemning slavery and how his successors followed in his footsteps. The conclusion of this book is a theological reflection on how the Church can come to terms with this challenging and painful history.

⁷Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, 88.

⁸Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, 88; Philip D. Morgan, "Slavery in the British Caribbean," in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery, Volume 3: AD 1420–AD 1804*, ed. David Eltis and Stanley L. Engerman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 393; see also M. Shawn Copeland, "Race," in *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology*, ed. Gareth Jones (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 499–511; Alejandro de la Fuente and Ariela J. Gross, *Becoming Free, Becoming Black: Race, Freedom, and Law in Cuba, Virginia, and Louisiana* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

This book is not meant to be the final word on any of the topics presented within it. This book is far too short to be definitive, and there are many other stories yet to be discovered and told. I instead hope that this book can serve as one starting point for further conversation, reflection, and research. For the history of the Catholic Church, slaveholding, and abolitionism is a history worth knowing, a history worth discussing, and a history that could even change the way we think about the future.