

# Reconsidering Little Rock: Hannah Arendt, Martin Luther King Jr., and Catholic Social Thought on Children and Families in the Struggle for Justice

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TO ADDRESS THE ROLE OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES IN STRUGGLES FOR justice, we must bear in mind not “family” in the abstract but particular families in particular times and places. The decisions and actions of particular families—certain African American and white families with children of high school age in Little Rock, Arkansas, during the academic years 1957 and 1958—prompted the controversy I reconsider here, between the German-born political philosopher Hannah Arendt and African American participants and leaders in the southern civil rights movement, most famously represented by Martin Luther King Jr.

After examining the historical events that unfolded in Little Rock in the fall of 1957 and spring of 1958, this essay lays out the critique of the southern civil rights campaign that these events educed from Hannah Arendt and discusses ways in which the specific circumstances, experiences, and judgments of leaders and family participants in the southern civil rights movement rebut certain of Arendt’s contentions. Finally, focusing on the example of U.S. Roman Catholicism, I consider what light the Little Rock controversy might shed on the calling of U.S. Christian families today to risky engagement for the sake of justice and the common good.

## The Historical Events

The controversy reconsidered here was prompted by a series of news photos, taken by Will Counts of the *Arkansas Democrat* on the first day of school, September 4, 1957. We see in them fifteen-year-old Elizabeth Eckford turned away from Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, surrounded by an angry mob of teens and adults. Counts’ photos, circulated in the national and international media, inspired philosopher Hannah Arendt to write her “Reflections on Little Rock,” published in *Dissent* in 1959. To situate Arendt’s contro-

versial essay, we must first delve into the background, people, and events behind these iconic images.

The scene was the U.S. South, less than one year after the Montgomery bus boycott—the first campaign led by Martin Luther King Jr.—concluded with the desegregation of Alabama bus transportation and three years after the U.S. Supreme Court had declared in *Brown v. Board of Education* that racially segregated public schools were unconstitutional and had ordered school integration implemented in the states, “with all deliberate speed.” In the city of Little Rock, Arkansas, known as one of the more racially moderate southern states, school desegregation was to begin at Central High School in the fall of 1957, but only after much foot-dragging and a lawsuit brought by the National Association of Colored People (NAACP).<sup>1</sup> Little Rock school superintendent Virgil Blossom had developed a severely circumscribed “minimum compliance” plan (e.g., the black students were to be prohibited from participating in any extracurricular activities, purportedly for their own safety) following contentious conversation with the Arkansas NAACP, led by its feisty, charismatic director, Daisy Bates.<sup>2</sup> Following a “screening process” conducted by Superintendent Blossom, only seventeen black students of the ninety who had applied were accepted for matriculation at Central.<sup>3</sup>

Tensions mounted over the summer of 1957 as anti-integration forces gained in strength and vociferousness. Then, two weeks before classes were to begin, Gov. Orval Faubus, under pressure from segregationist constituents, withdrew his previous support for the desegregation plan. This move exacerbated an already tense situation and culminated in Faubus ordering the Arkansas National Guard to Little Rock, ostensibly to ward off violence on the first day of school.

Days before school was to begin, Superintendent Blossom met with the seventeen black students, their parents, and Daisy Bates. Blossom urged students to put off their transfers to Central, promising them that they could register at Central after the semester had gotten under way and “things quieted down.” Eight students took this offer. The superintendent told the anxious parents of the remaining nine students that authorities would be better able to protect their children on the first day of school if parents did not accompany them. Very reluctantly, the parents agreed to this.<sup>4</sup> The evening before the first day of school, however, Bates, fearing for the children’s safety, contacted several NAACP supporters who agreed to escort the nine students into the school building. The students were told to meet at Bates’ house the next morning, September 4, and the students would proceed with their escorts to Central High.

Unfortunately, one of the nine, Elizabeth Eckford, did not get the message about the change of plans. Elizabeth was the second of six children in a working-class family that did not own a telephone. Elizabeth, who had convinced her apprehensive parents only late in the summer to allow her to at-

tend Central, was a quiet, serious student who, inspired by Thurgood Marshall, aspired to be a lawyer.<sup>5</sup> Like her classmates, she saw participating in the desegregation effort as a contribution to a better future for herself and those who came after her.<sup>6</sup>

That September morning, Elizabeth recalls the television reporting that a mob was gathering at Central High. Her father paced nervously; her mother prayed and worried aloud. Eckford felt fear but she was determined, and confident that she and the others would be protected. After praying together with her family Psalm 27—"The Lord is my light and my salvation, of whom should I be afraid?"—Elizabeth boarded a city bus to ride downtown to school, as per the superintendent's earlier instructions, without adult accompaniment.<sup>7</sup>

As she approached the imposing Central High building, Elizabeth found herself flanked by a crowd of white reporters on one side and several hundred angry white protesters on the other. She heard voices. "They're coming!" "The n——rs are coming!" "Don't let her in!" Ahead she saw the National Guardsmen ringing the school, and, noticing that they were letting students through to enter the building, felt reassured. But as she approached the soldiers they repeatedly closed ranks and crossed bayonets to block her passage. In fact the guardsmen's orders from the governor were to prevent the black students from entering the school. Eckford turned and headed to a bus stop, barraged by vitriol and followed by a now 250-plus crowd, shouting: "Lynch her! Lynch her!" "No n——r bitch is going to get in our school!" Looking about for a friendly adult face, she turned to an old woman in the crowd, who spat on her.<sup>8</sup>

"This little girl, this tender little thing, walking with this whole mob bay- ing at her like a pack of wolves," was how Benjamin Fine of the *New York Times* later described the scene. Once she reached the bus stop, Elizabeth sat down at the edge of the empty bench. "Drag her over to this tree!" someone shouted.<sup>9</sup> "A small group of reporters . . . formed an informal protective cordon around her. . . . Fine sat himself next to Elizabeth and put his arm around her." His move further inflamed the crowd, who spewed anti-Semitic epithets at Fine.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, after a tense thirty minutes, Grace Lorch, a local white woman, helped Eckford onto a bus home. Elizabeth did not go home though; she went straight to the school where her mother worked to find her down in the laundry, praying and crying. Birdie Eckford had heard news reports of a girl injured or killed at Central High.<sup>11</sup> In a 2004 interview Eckford recalled, "My mother was extremely overprotective. So how in the world is it she allowed me to go back to the school? I didn't tell my folks what was happening on a daily basis. I knew my mother wouldn't let me stay if she had known, but she had to have known. It was not only unpleasant, but it was difficult. Really, really difficult. I'm now aware of what an awful price my mother had to have paid."<sup>12</sup>

Elizabeth was deeply shaken and beset by nightmares; years later her classmate Gloria Ray likely spoke for them all in saying, "that day, my childhood

ended.” But she and her eight companions, with the support of their families and Bates, were determined to persevere at Central High.<sup>13</sup> For the Nine, it was truly a year where things never quieted down. After a federal judge ruled that the governor had used the National Guard solely to prevent integration of Central High and the students confronted a mob of one thousand when they again attempted to enter school on September 23, President Dwight D. Eisenhower called in U.S. Army paratroopers to expel the mob and to escort the nine students into the school.<sup>14</sup> On October 24, for the first time without the armed guard, the nine students were finally able to enter the high school through the front door.

But throughout the 1957–58 year, the Little Rock Nine, as they came to be known, were subjected to persistent harassment. They were shoved, spit at, tripped, jeered, cornered, physically threatened, and had their lockers broken into.<sup>15</sup> Isolated in the large school of 1,900 and vulnerable to daily attacks, the year was lonely and frightening for each of them.<sup>16</sup> Their active tormenters were a minority. And there was the exceptional teacher, administrator, or fellow student who did reach out. But most whites stood by, silently supportive, fearful, or indifferent.<sup>17</sup>

Along with their children, the families of the Nine paid a price. Parents received terror and death threats. In 1958 Elizabeth’s mother lost her job. Someone threw a brick through the window of her grandfather’s store. Black neighbors and relatives castigated them for stirring up trouble.<sup>18</sup> The children underscore especially the suffering their parents endured in knowing that their children were being daily exposed to pain and harm in a hostile environment. The Little Rock Nine gained national notoriety and received many letters of support, but concealed from the eyes of the public, the students and those close to them suffered greatly on a day-to-day basis.

Elizabeth and her cohort survived that hellish year and its aftermath, finishing their schooling and moving on with life.<sup>19</sup> But the scars of Eckford’s Central High experience were long-lived. Following the tumult of those first days at Central, Margolick writes, “something descended on Elizabeth that has never fully lifted. Afterward, said another of the Nine, Jefferson Thomas, ‘she walked with her head down, as if she wanted to make sure the floor didn’t open up beneath her.’” Her early dreams of becoming a lawyer crumbled; following a stint in the Army she returned to Little Rock, remained in her familial home, and struggled both personally and economically. Elizabeth endured bouts of severe depression. She retreated into herself; she attempted suicide more than once; she shunned anniversary gatherings of the Nine, finally venturing to participate in the fortieth anniversary celebrations in 1997.<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth’s assessment of the events of 1957–58 retained sharp edges and ambiguity. She criticized Daisy Bates for getting credit for heroism that was primarily due to the parents.<sup>21</sup> She contended that she and her classmates, at least to some extent, had

been manipulated by the NAACP for its own ends; she declared that she “wouldn’t do it over again” though she was pleased to have done it once.<sup>22</sup>

### Arendt’s “Reflections on Little Rock”

The disagreement between Hannah Arendt and black leaders over the ethics of involving children in civil rights action had much to do with the way theoretical claims about justice depend upon, and intersect with, embodied particularities experienced within and around families. Arendt’s political theory was impelled by a passionate commitment to the concrete. Both her political philosophy and her life experience, especially empathy for the plight of the “unwelcome child,” underlay her support for the rights of minorities but also her doubts concerning the effectiveness of a campaign for racial justice that focused on enforced integration of the public schools.<sup>23</sup>

Arendt was inspired to write “Reflections on Little Rock” by Will Counts’ news photos of Elizabeth Eckford under attack as she sought to enter Central High on September 4, 1957.<sup>24</sup> Her first questions, Arendt wrote, were existential and practical: “What would I do if I were a Negro mother?” “What would I do if I were a white mother?”<sup>25</sup> Here Arendt also speaks as “her mother’s daughter.”<sup>26</sup> Empathy for Elizabeth Eckford as a daughter and a child as well as concomitant concerns about the parents of the white and black children involved—likely colored by Arendt’s memories of her own childhood—were tapped by the events and the photos that prompted her essay.

As a child in prewar Germany, Arendt experienced a social and school setting where neither classmates nor teachers could be fully trusted; either could be perpetrators of anti-Semitism. Hannah’s parents instructed her to “defend herself” against schoolyard peers. If a teacher displayed or tolerated anti-Semitism in the classroom, however, she was to stand up, leave immediately, and return home; her mother would then write “one of her many letters” to the school authorities.<sup>27</sup> In her philosophical descriptions of the household as a privileged zone of “idiosyncratic exclusivity” and a “sphere of protection against the continued expansion and extension of the social,” one detects echoes of Arendt’s own early memories of being a socially unwelcome but familially protected middle-class Jewish child.<sup>28</sup>

As an expatriate scholar in the United States, Arendt advanced both the *vita activa* and the life of the mind, insisting that political theory be grounded in as well as reflect practice. Indeed, the purpose of political philosophy is to enable citizens and communities to “think what we are doing.” Championing a vital public life, she decried the encroachment on both the familial “private” and political “public” arenas of a modern, ever-expanding version of the “social.” Arendt defined society as “that curiously hybrid realm where private interests

assume public significance.”<sup>29</sup> In the social arena, which includes the economy and the institutions of “civil society” including schools, the pursuit of private interest goes public. The social sphere, Arendt argued, ought to play a supporting role to the private, familial household (the sheltered locus of interpersonal intimacy and parental authority) on one hand, and to the public, political realm (where persons interact on equal legal footing with fellow citizens, and through word and deed, enact their uniqueness amid, and for the sake of, their common world) on the other. In a modern reversal, however, the properly private and the properly public are increasingly being subordinated to and usurped by the social. Arendt feared that by pursuing social inclusion, in a realm of “discrimination” where “self-interest in public” and free association hold sway, school integrationists misguidedly prioritized “social advancement” over battles to legally protect the intimate realm of family, and to attain full, equal participation in the political realm.<sup>30</sup>

For Arendt, court-ordered school desegregation in Little Rock was problematic for three reasons: it targeted the wrong battle; it took place in the wrong context, the schools; and it used the wrong combatants, children.

### *Wrong Battle*

By making schools their battleground, Arendt argued, African Americans were seeking in the social sphere rights and freedoms proper to the public, political sphere. To the extent that the social arena involves the specifically economic and access to the means to “get on with the business of life,” legal desegregation of public accommodations such as restaurants and public transportation made sense.<sup>31</sup> But court-ordered school desegregation forced association in a zone overlapping less with the market than with the family, hence an arena where persons should not be impelled to interact with others against their wills.

### *Wrong Context*

The heart of Arendt’s second objection was her conviction that education, the function of which is to prepare children for their adult roles as citizens, is—and should remain—in this familially linked, prepolitical “social” sphere. Arendt supported legally protected political rights for all citizens, especially the rights to vote and to hold office. She strongly favored the repeal of antimiscegenation laws, which interfered with privacy and freedom of intimate association within families. And she vigorously opposed racial segregation by law in every sphere. She castigated Little Rock’s white citizens for their political failure to respect the law exhibited by “the sorry fact” that “the town’s law-abiding citizens left the streets to the mob” and the fact that “law-abiding southerners had decided that enforcement of the law against mob rule and protection of chil-

dren against adult mobsters were none of their business.”<sup>32</sup> But in her eyes, legally enforced school integration wrongly introduced coercion into the social arena where families and groups’ pursuit of private interest, including the freedom to associate or not according to cultural or social differences, have a legitimate place.<sup>33</sup> What would she do, as a black mother?

Under no circumstances would I expose my child to conditions which made it appear as though [she] wanted to push [her] way into a group where [she] was not wanted. Psychologically, the situation of being unwanted (a typical social predicament) is more difficult to bear than outright persecution (a political predicament) because personal pride is involved. . . . Pride . . . is indispensable for personal integrity, and it is lost not so much by persecution as by pushing, or rather being pushed into pushing, one’s way out of one group and into another.<sup>34</sup>

“I would feel,” Arendt concluded, “that the Supreme Court ruling, unwillingly but unavoidably, has put my child into a more humiliating position than [she] had been in before.”<sup>35</sup>

In earlier writings, Arendt had traced in the Jewish community two trajectories of response to social and racial marginalization: that of the pariah and that of the parvenu.<sup>36</sup> Simply put, the pariah remains on the margins, finding dignity and embracing one’s agency as a social outsider yet participant. By contrast, the parvenu seeks complete assimilation into the dominant society, often at the cost of denying one’s history and identity and subsequent self-contempt. Arendt’s sensitivity to the pariah–parvenu dialectic and her own relatively successful personal experience as an insider–outsider in the scholarly world helps explain her worry that by grasping at social inclusion, African American civil rights leaders might unwittingly court negative, parvenu-like consequences.<sup>37</sup>

### *Wrong Combatants*

Arendt’s third objection in “Reflections on Little Rock” was that in the southern movement for racial justice, children were being exposed to and made to take on conflicts that are the job of adult citizens to resolve. When children are saddled with the social problems and political burdens of adults, adults abdicate their responsibilities to educate and protect those children and neglect their own duties as mature citizens. Both white and black families, argued Arendt, were ill served. If she were a white parent, she would reject the government’s claim that it “had any right to tell me in whose company” her children must receive instruction. “The rights of parents to decide such matters for their children until they are grown-ups are challenged only by dictators.”<sup>38</sup> Black families were being “involved in an affair of social climbing” and distracted from more important political battles.

But the protection of children was the job of all citizens, and Arendt found it shameful that “neither white nor black citizens felt it their duty to see the Negro children safely to school.”<sup>39</sup> In the mob scene that the photographs of September 4, 1957, recorded, adult citizens had failed both the white and black children involved. “The girl [Elizabeth Eckford] obviously was asked to be a hero—that is, something neither her absent father nor the equally absent representatives of the NAACP felt called upon to be. It will be hard for the white youngsters, or at least those among them who outgrow their present brutality, to live down this photograph which exposes so mercilessly their juvenile delinquency.”<sup>40</sup> Arendt likened the photo to a caricature of progressive education that, abolishing the authority of adults, “implicitly denies their responsibility for the world into which they have borne their children and refuses the duty of guiding them into it. Have we now come to the point where it is the children who are being asked to change or improve the world? And do we intend to have our political battles fought out in the school yards?”<sup>41</sup>

### **Contra Arendt: King, African American Families, and Racial Injustice**

“Reflections on Little Rock” drew harsh responses from both white and black critics.<sup>42</sup> Although he never issued a formal rebuttal to Arendt’s essay, Martin Luther King Jr. contended that the struggle for civil rights was as much for and about children as it was adults and that to strategically engage families and children in the struggle for civil rights was both legitimate and salutary.<sup>43</sup> King’s speeches, his public and family life, and the movement as a whole embody eloquent responses to the objections raised by Arendt and bespeak alternative ways of addressing her concerns about children in the public realm. In their circumstances, the witness of King and family participants in the civil rights movement counterindicate Arendt’s effort to rigidly separate the social and political spheres, her judgments concerning children’s vulnerability and adults’ responsibility, and her understanding (or lack thereof) of the worth and meaning of familial risk and sacrifice for the sake of public ends.

### **The Personal, the Social, and the Political**

At the historical moment in which the Little Rock Nine gained notoriety and Hannah Arendt wrote her “Reflections,” African Americans in the United States were experiencing critical momentum in a struggle against institutional racism that had been ongoing since the end of the Civil War. As Cornel West puts it, black justice-seekers during this period focused their principal attentions on “the racist institutional structures in the United States which rendered the vast majority of black people politically powerless (deprived of the right to



vote or participate in governmental affairs), economically exploited (in dependent positions as sharecroppers or in unskilled jobs), and socially degraded (separate, segregated, and unequal eating and recreational facilities, housing, education, transportation, and police protection)."<sup>44</sup> The movement that Martin Luther King Jr. came to symbolize recognized racism's mutually reinforcing entrenchment in each of these areas—the political, the economic, and the social—and thus sought, through a variety of nonviolent but assertive strategies, to combat it on all three fronts.

By arguing that racial exclusion ought to be resisted only on the “political” front, Arendt failed to take into account the fact that institutional racism—of which southern Jim Crow segregation was but one egregious example—was sustained not only by laws but also by force of powerful ideology and habituated social custom backed by violence and terror. Lynchings and Ku Klux Klan activities did not need to be frequent to maintain a climate that deterred the majority of the black population, fearing for their families' safety, from openly resisting their subordinate and exploited social, economic, and political status.

Arendt's critique, ironically for one whose political philosophy demanded attention to concrete particulars and to historical specificity, neither examined nor took fully into account the particularities of southern black families' situation. For them, the personal–familial, social–economic, and legal–political effects of racism were profoundly intertwined. Nor did she grasp the significance of a historical moment when legal and judicial support for dismantling racist institutions seemed newly within reach. Hope that real change was at last possible energized African American families who chose to engage in what was, on Arendt's own terms, genuinely political action. By marching, registering voters, rallying, or participating in school integration programs, families publicly acted in concert, in ways intended to bring forth and shore up something new in the common world. Far from self-interested “social climbing,” this political action entailed danger and sacrifice, but its anticipated fruits, which included the recovery of participants' agency and self-respect in public, were deemed worth the risks.<sup>45</sup>

We can get a better sense of how the embodied particularities of southern black families' situations warranted their decisions to involve children in the fight for racial justice by further considering how experiences of children's vulnerability and family responsibility, interacting with a potent spiritual perspective on suffering and the cross, yielded aspects of the Little Rock situation that Arendt either misperceived or missed entirely.

## **Children's Vulnerability and Families' Responsibilities**

Protecting children is a crucial parental task and a primary obligation of adult society to children. At the same time, protection is not the only parental role. Philosopher Sara Ruddick argues that maternal practice encompasses a three-

fold aim: the child's physical survival, the child's nurture and growth, and training of the child for successful participation in society. In a similar vein, David Blankenhorn attributes to fatherhood the tasks of providing, protecting, nurturing, and sponsoring/mentoring. As the adults primarily responsible for introducing their children to the larger world and their future roles in it, parents are called upon to perform complicated and evolving "liminal work," assisting their children at the boundaries between the family and the social and public world.<sup>46</sup>

In the Jim Crow South, black families were routinely thwarted in their efforts to shield their children from the ravages of racism. Black children, exposed to a racially toxic white world, faced danger and the strong potential for hopelessness. For African American parents, the task of shoring up their children's sense of dignity and agency in a social world that impugned, undermined, and dismissed them was as daunting as it was crucial.

The Jim Crow system of institutional and cultural racism inflicted a state of chronic, at times explicit, terror. Just as a lifetime of breathing contaminated air debilitates physical health, immersion in racist culture perpetrated and still perpetrates long-lasting harm on targeted individuals, families, and communities as well as on their white counterparts, although to different effect.<sup>47</sup> The wonder is that the stories of southern black families were also narratives of survival, resistance, and courage; to the best of everyone's ability, local communities protected, nurtured, and trained black children for productive and dignified adulthood despite dehumanizing treatment by white society.<sup>48</sup> But adult agency, including parents' roles as protectors, nurturers, and mentors of their children, was routinely undercut, often in public, humiliating ways.

Black authors' accounts of growing up in the Jim Crow South bristle with childhood memories of confusion, disillusionment, anger, and fear as the truths about their families' second-class citizenship, the punishment that could follow even minor transgressions of racial boundaries, and adults' inability to defend themselves or their children against race-based abuse became painfully clear. Melba Patillo Beals' memories of her parents being harassed by a local white storekeeper are representative.

Daddy was a tall man . . . with broad shoulders and big muscles in his arms. . . . Until that moment, I had thought he could take on the world, if he had to protect me. But watching him kowtow to the grocer made me know it wasn't so. It frightened me and made me think a lot about how, if I got into trouble with white people, the folks I counted on most in my life for protection couldn't help me at all. I was beginning to resign myself to the fact that white people were definitely in charge, and there was nothing we could do about it.<sup>49</sup>

Beals remembers the hope and expectation that surged through the black community in the wake of the 1954 *Brown v. the Board of Education* decision.

But *Brown* also sparked angry white backlash and, in the short run, more danger for black families. Shortly after the *Brown* decision, Beals, at age twelve, was sexually assaulted by a local white man who muttered about blacks forcing themselves into white schools. Her anguished parents did not report the assault for fear, she recalls, that “the police might do something worse to me” than she had already experienced.<sup>50</sup> The brutal murder of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi, in August 1955 was prompted by the Chicago boy’s casual remark to a southern white woman and his boasting about having a white girlfriend.<sup>51</sup> A widely acknowledged subtext for the furious southern white reaction to *Brown* and white opposition to the integration of Little Rock’s Central High was fear that “forced racial mixing” would lead to interracial sexual relations and marriage.<sup>52</sup>

In this highly volatile historical moment, the decision of Little Rock’s black teens and families to participate in integrating Central High was deliberate, clear-eyed about the risks, and gutsy. The Nine’s parents were well aware that their children were entering a dangerous situation and that there would be a price to pay by both children and adults. As Minniejean Brown Trickey put it later, “It was my father who lost his job. It was my mother who got the terror calls. It was my mother who was frightened for my life. [Our parents] were the heroes of this.”<sup>53</sup>

Civil rights leaders sought to employ this cruel fact—that black children were inevitably exposed to the degrading injustices that beset black adults—to positive effect. Although the most famous example was the 1963 Birmingham, Alabama, “Children’s Crusade,” where nearly one thousand schoolchildren were arrested in antisegregation demonstrations, southern civil rights campaigns regularly involved carefully considered, collective risk-taking by families and children.<sup>54</sup> Fueling this risk-taking was the conviction among civil rights leaders that exerting strategic, nonviolent pressure on the strongholds of institutional racism could expose its perversity to public view, create support for legal redress, and thereby begin to undermine it. Despite real danger, movement families acted; in so doing, they bore witness to their hope in America’s civic possibilities and to a courage nourished by Christian faith.

## **Spiritual and Religious Foundations for Families and Children’s Involvement**

The willingness of southern black families active in the civil rights movement to sacrifice in order to claim their civil rights was anchored in a spiritual-religious tradition, forged and burnished through centuries of suffering and struggle on the American continent.<sup>55</sup> At its core was faith in an Exodus God who was on the side of the poor and oppressed, and in Jesus Christ, whose cross revealed the power of suffering love and its place in God’s work for justice and

reconciliation.<sup>56</sup> Martin Luther King Jr.'s own Christian faith and political activism, in James Cone's analysis, were animated by a theology steeped in the cross. Faith that God protects and acts on behalf of God's victimized and set-upon children, and that suffering endured for justice's sake can be a spiritually meaningful, potentially redemptive exercise of agency gave strategies for gaining civil rights a supple, spiritual counterpoint.

The cross for Martin Luther King Jr. and for the families of the Little Rock Nine revealed God incarnate and in solidarity with their stories of pain and endurance, in both public, collective and intimate, personal aspects. The suffering Christ spoke to justice-seeking black families' recognition that, although the risk and danger they confronted were graphically real, they would not have the last word. King often spoke of this connection between Christ's cross and Christians' call to risk suffering for the sake of others.<sup>57</sup> Importantly, though, the spirituality that Little Rock Nine parents and grandparents offered their children as they faced the trials of the 1957–58 school year focused less on images of the Suffering Servant than on God the protector and vindicator depicted in the Psalms. Their children's daily vulnerability to suffering and harm were things these parents knew in the concrete. This was why Birdie Eckford gathered her children the morning of September 4, 1957, to pray the words of Psalm 27.

As American citizens and Christian disciples, the Little Rock Nine families chose risky forays into the public realm motivated not primarily, as Arendt mistakenly assumed, by the self-interested desire to help their children "get ahead" socially. Rather, they were motivated by American principles of "freedom and equality for self-development, growth and purposeful citizenship," framed by Christian faith.<sup>58</sup> The Little Rock families also recognized something Martin Luther King Jr. repeatedly emphasized during these years: that "dignity in sacrifice and danger was part and parcel of the black struggle for self-respect, itself a necessary ingredient (not merely a by-product) of social protest."<sup>59</sup> Adumbrating a notion that would be at the heart of Latin American liberation theology, King and his fellow movement leaders argued that recovering the agency and the self-respect that racism had corroded could be facilitated by participation in action for civil rights.<sup>60</sup> Participants had to be prepared to accept suffering for the sake of a justice that encompasses healing and empowerment for former victims and, potentially, reconciliation with former perpetrators. This perspective is both politically astute and thoroughly Christian. It bespeaks a costly discipleship in the midst of hardship that is the polar opposite of cheap grace or armchair "consumer" faith. Central to its genius is its capacity to acknowledge and absorb the reality of evil and its effects while holding to heart the hope of divine intentions for a destiny of healing and wholeness.

What, then, are we to conclude concerning Hannah Arendt's analysis of Little Rock? Although motivated by empathy for Elizabeth Eckford's ordeal,

Arendt's critique failed to comprehend the full particulars of African American families' situations and the momentum of the U.S. civil rights movement at this historical juncture. Her analysis thereby violated her own principles concerning political theorists' attention to the concrete. In an object lesson on the sins that white intellectuals can commit in the name of a superficial solidarity, Arendt, by eschewing careful investigation focused on understanding the African American families and communities behind the photos, disrespected, misinterpreted, and disserved those families and communities.<sup>61</sup> And by uncritically insisting that public schools were part of the quasi-private social realm, a realm characterized by freedom "to discriminate" and "not to associate" as individuals and families see fit, Arendt's argument offered aid and comfort to those who responded to racial desegregation of schools and neighborhoods through "white flight" in its various forms.<sup>62</sup>

Yet, despite her serious errors, this brilliant, angular thinker did not get Little Rock all wrong. Both Arendt and the southern civil rights movement had certain things profoundly right; both offer resources and challenges to justice-seeking families today. Wishing to uphold the rights and integrity of families against modern incursions, Arendt insisted that the personal (which included the social) is not the political. She was correct. King and African American civil rights families (only later to be followed by second-wave feminists) countered that in real ways the personal (including the social) *is* the political. They also were correct. Arendt further insisted that children have the right to be protected by adults from, and properly prepared for, participation in public. She was right. Black families engaged in civil rights efforts agreed but knew from experience that in a situation of pervasive racism, children cannot be and are never protected from its corrosive effects. Therefore, to the question "how is a child's well-being best served in a situation of systemic racism and social hostility?" these families risked a response based on their judgment that in certain cases, children would be better served and justice more effectively advanced by including them in public action on justice's behalf.

One further point about the religious worldview that underpinned the southern civil rights movement is pertinent. Critics derided as naïve King's "dream"—a future of racial justice and peace. But as King well knew, and as the personal and collective aftermaths of the case of the Little Rock Nine attest, Christianity is about not fantasy but hope. The nine senior citizens captured in a 2007 fiftieth anniversary photo radiate dignity and accomplishment but bear personal histories that mix pain and happiness, success and hardship. They stand on the lawn of their alma mater that, like so many urban public schools, sits in an economically depressed neighborhood and is populated largely by less affluent minority students.<sup>63</sup> This photograph witnesses to the fact that a half-century later, as Minniejean Brown Trickey wrote in 2007, true racial equality and justice have yet to be fully attained. Addressing this unfin-

ished work, as King saw clearly toward the end of his life, requires combating the oppressive workings of race within individualist and consumer-capitalist social and economic structures.<sup>64</sup> To do this, Trickey argues, we must level our gaze at “the ideology of race hierarchy that has supported economic and social inequality over centuries.”<sup>65</sup> Fifty years after Little Rock, racial division remains embedded not only in the public education system but also in all social relations. “We are all victims of skewed social memories [and practices] that support domination and separation.”<sup>66</sup> Facing these realities reminds contemporary justice-seekers that there was, and is, no simple “happily ever after.” As Melba Patillo’s grandmother India often reminded her, Christians must continue to “watch, fight, and pray.”

### U.S. Christian Families and Risk for Justice, Fifty Years Later

In Little Rock, 1957–58, black families and children confronted danger and endured suffering for the sake of justice. But as Eddie Glaude argues, rather than romanticizing or reifying the specific actions taken in *this* historical moment by *these* families, the challenge for families seeking justice in 2008 is to perceive in the particularities of the present day what it means to “watch, fight, and pray” and to discover what type of risky action this might demand.<sup>67</sup> As Christian families ponder what is asked of them, the same kind of inquiry ought to be taking place in their ecclesial communities. Local congregations are themselves families in Christ, whose shared vocation includes the responsibility to discern and enact courageous, justice-making action apropos the demands of their particular time and circumstances.

Does discipleship require that U.S. Christian families and their children expose themselves to possible harm by engaging in public, justice-seeking action? Families in oppressed circumstances find exposure to danger and suffering built into their lives; simply surviving often requires taking risks daily. But for many U.S. families today, considering this question evokes a complicated cognitive and affective dissonance that requires deeper moral analysis on at least two fronts. First, parents—indeed, most adults—can easily conjure up the visceral feelings that surround our roles as protectors of children. This was partly why Arendt and people across the world responded so strongly to the photographs of Elizabeth Eckford. But does the life of faith require families in some cases to override this default instinct to protect their own children? If so, in what specific ways and to what degrees?

Jean Bethke Elshtain poses these questions about citizens, not believers, and reaches a measured and contextualized conclusion about the engagement of families and children in the public sphere. Not the mere fact of engaging children in action for justice but, to return to a theme, the embodied particu-

larities and exigencies of specific personal and historical circumstances must be taken into account. Thus in each case families and communities must ask of children's involvement: "In whose name? Under what auspices? In what cause? To what ends?"<sup>68</sup> And, I would add, at what age and in what developmentally appropriate manner?<sup>69</sup>

Elshtain's contextual and strategic focus and Glaude's historically attuned pragmatism are helpful in addressing this first set of questions. But contemporary Christian families seeking to honor the legacy of Little Rock face more than simply strategic or philosophical uncertainty about when and how to involve children in the struggle for justice. They confront cultural and socioeconomic forces that make family agency on behalf of justice extremely difficult to conceive, let alone to enact. When we consider this second set of obstacles in relation to the U.S. Catholic community, the story of Little Rock stands as an inspiration but also as an indictment.

### *Modern Catholic Teaching and the "Dual Vocation" of Families*

Recent official Catholic teaching implies but fails to highlight or insist on an obligation for Catholic families to discern and undertake risky public action on behalf of justice and the common good. In this failure, official teaching mirrors the history of twentieth-century U.S. Catholic parish and family practice with respect to racism, in particular, and justice-seeking, more broadly.<sup>70</sup> In his 1981 apostolic letter "On the Family," Pope John Paul II describes four basic practices through which a Christian family responds to the injunction, "families, become what you are!"<sup>71</sup> A family is to be an "intimate communion of life and love," to "serve life," to "contribute to the good of society," and to "embody and advance the mission of the church" by itself living as a "domestic church."<sup>72</sup> As Julie Hanlon Rubio correctly claims, this fourfold agenda comprises a dual vocation for Christian spouses and families.<sup>73</sup> Families have a mission, *ad intra*, to cultivate a basic, ecclesial community of love, life, ongoing development, and service to one another; simultaneously, they are responsible for engaging as families in the public realm for the good of the larger human community. The U.S. Catholic bishops include in this aspect of the family's mission "bringing children to participate in the development of society": "Parents help children grow in moral and spiritual maturity and also help to build a caring and just society. Through families, children should come to identify with the most needy in the community, especially poor and suffering children, and should develop a lifelong commitment to respond through *service of the poor and disadvantaged and through action for justice and peace in their own communities and the world.*"<sup>74</sup> The Christian family that eschews public outreach and engagement fulfills only part of its vocation, and when this public *ad extra* dimension is absent, its mission *ad intra* is also endangered.

### *Catholic Social Thought on the Familial, Social, and Political Spheres*

Like Arendt's political philosophy, contemporary Catholic teaching on families and justice employs a multiassociational social theory that affirms the potential of a robust democratic polity and a market economy—provided its tendencies toward exclusion, inequality, and exploitation are adequately controlled—for fostering sustenance and justice among its members.<sup>75</sup> With Arendt, Catholic social teaching has recognized that distinct yet interdependent spheres compose a social order that is united yet diverse. The priority, integrity, and autonomy of the family is stressed; indeed the economic and political are said to serve the family, rather than primarily vice versa. But while Arendt envisages the public as the realm of that supremely human activity, political action, Catholicism sees participation in each communal sphere culminating in loving service of the neighbor and the common good, to God's glory.<sup>76</sup> Given this, and in the face of systemic injustices that Pope John Paul II has called structures of sin, Catholic social thought suggests that one important role of families is to act as staging grounds for and agents of justice-seeking participation in public life.<sup>77</sup> Insofar as families are "schools" of justice and solidarity, including children in justice-seeking public activity in ways appropriate to their age, temperament, and abilities also seems apt. Elshtain's suggestion that Little Rock exemplified the potential for adolescents, properly supported by their families and local communities, to engage in "apprenticeships for citizenship" could thus find its counterpart in a Catholic ethic of family justice-seeking.<sup>78</sup>

Yet two aspects of recent Catholic treatments of families and justice-seeking have undercut an ethic of engagement. First, official teaching on this subject frequently reflects the perspective of, and appears to be addressed primarily to, families in more materially and socially secure circumstances. Second, in both content and tone, familial action for justice, especially risk-taking activism, tends to be framed as an option, one that Christian families and parish families may choose either to exercise or to defer. In the contemporary United States, this failure of official teaching to assert risk-taking action for justice as a requirement for Christian family discipleship bred the conditions for the numbers of "Catholic consumerist families" devoted primarily to the cultural gospel of work for their own gain, comfort, and security to mushroom and become entrenched.

### *Which Gospel? Mainstreaming U.S. Catholic Families and "White" Flight from Vulnerability*

Black families participating in the southern civil rights movement recognized and accepted the fact that the fight for racial justice would involve conflict, suf-



fering, and sacrifice. Despite notable exceptions, the history of the (mostly white) Catholic majority in the twentieth-century United States is too often a story of acquiescence to the dominant culture in the quest to “make it” in the American mainstream. A hallmark of that dominant culture is an individualistic consumerism that fosters aversion to suffering, and that emits the constantly reinforced message that vulnerability to suffering may be successfully combated only through one’s work, achievement, spending, and consumption. As Catholic social critics such as John Kavanaugh and Vincent Miller and economists such as Juliet Schor and Robert Frank have detailed over the past decade, consumerist culture seduces and ensnares families in an enticing, far-from-Christian fantasy of “happily ever after” pursued through continuous participation in what turns out to be an enervating “work-spend” cycle. Middle-class and middle-class aspirant U.S. Catholic families are as entangled in this cultural pattern as are their neighbors.<sup>79</sup> Far from upholding the value of sacrifice for the sake of the common good, consumerist culture idolizes the flight from suffering and the endless pursuit of security, comfort, and convenience for oneself and one’s own. In an ideological climate that breeds its own very subtle form of terror, the protection and well-being that families naturally seek for themselves is prone to be exaggerated, even totalized.

The Little Rock Nine families responded courageously to a historical moment when “the next step” was dramatic and clear. For advantaged Catholic families in the U.S. fifty years later, social injustice and evil may be trickier to target and harder to combat. Black families in the civil rights era took action to claim their rights, which demanded that they face and overcome fear, withstand threats, and often undergo tedious, daily harassment. U.S. Catholic families are deflected from justice-seeking action by packed schedules, culturally habituated fears of insecurity and suffering, predilections for simplified explanation, novelty and distraction, and impatience with long-haul commitment to endeavors whose results are not guaranteed.<sup>80</sup> In the 1950s, Hannah Arendt warned that the American republic was being transformed from a nation of citizens into a nation of jobholders and consumers. In 2009, advantaged families, Catholic and otherwise, too often fulfill Arendt’s description. The justice-seeking families of the civil rights era might restate Arendt’s concern in this way: When a family’s primary interest becomes avoiding any circumstance where invoking Psalm 27 might be necessary, can it legitimately call itself a community of Christian disciples?

## Conclusion

The legacies of King, Little Rock, and Arendt raise serious questions for Christian justice-seekers in the present day. What risks and costs does solidarity

require of the families and children of the relatively privileged? What does solidarity and risk for justice require of families and children of the oppressed and exploited? Where might these disparate families meet on common ground? And shouldn't the churches, which Arendt intriguingly called "the only public force that can fight social prejudice" because they base their treatment of persons not on appearances, but on the unique dignity of each person, be sites where these deliberations, these meetings and such action are especially emphasized and supported?<sup>81</sup>

Christian families and congregations who take up these thorny matters will find in the legacy of 1957–58 a rich trove of lessons from which to draw. I conclude by highlighting four.

***1. Action for justice by families and their children is best approached in a context of mutual consent, careful organization, and clearly conveyed communal support.***

Daisy Bates and the NAACP organized a network to help students and their families to withstand pacifically the difficulties they were sure to face. All the parents and the children had to consent, and they mutually supported one another as the action unfolded.

In Little Rock, one saw more family and communal support for the nine teens than was often experienced by white youth who became active in the civil rights movement. In 1962, for instance, white Wisconsin college student Jim Zwerg, one of the Freedom Riders featured in the film documentary *Eyes on the Prize*, was brutally beaten by a furious mob after he volunteered to be first to disembark at the bus station in Montgomery, Alabama. Zwerg, who credited his parents with instilling in him a strong Christian faith, experienced his involvement in the movement as a deeply religious calling. Yet his parents were vehemently against his participation. In the aftermath of the beatings, Zwerg's father suffered a heart attack and his mother a nervous breakdown. Their son suffered years of guilt and anger.<sup>82</sup> By contrast, sociologists noted the cohesion of Little Rock's black community around support for "the children" as the crisis evolved. "Not only was there a growing unity over the need for desegregation, and the feeling that this was a 'kind of second emancipation,' but 'Everyone felt the morale of the children had to be protected.'"<sup>83</sup>

***2. Christian families acting for justice benefit from intelligent and reliable institutional support, both local and higher-level.***

The significant roles of the courts, the federal and local governments, and the media in the drama of the Little Rock Nine were not lost on those who were

seeking school desegregation, nor on those resisting it. Part of the work for justice today, as in 1957, involves prudently discerning ways to harness requisite institutional support—political, legal, media, and other—including by effectively communicating to the public the vision of justice being pursued and the relation of that vision to specific strategies and goals.

***3. Christian family risk-taking for justice is most effectively pursued by way of targeted strategies fashioned to accomplish specific and clearly understood goals.***

In this regard, adherence to specific, “concrete operative norms” by justice-seekers can help to foster discipline, common cause, and effective action.<sup>84</sup> The Montgomery bus boycott and Little Rock’s school desegregation effort are two examples of strategic plans that enabled specific and coordinated collective and individual action.

***4. Christian family efforts for justice are most firmly grounded in a “cross and resurrection” shaped spirituality that cherishes courageous action in service of the survival and well-being of the marginalized—a spirituality embedded in the practices of solidarity within concrete faith communities.***

Only such a spirituality can enable justice-seeking families to act knowing that their action will entail costs. Local ecclesial communities must grapple with the fact that justice-seekers will inevitably “rock the boat” and stir up trouble for those ensconced in the status quo. How can institutional church structures be sites of support and encouragement for justice-seeking efforts that may well put those very structures at economic, social, and even physical risk?<sup>85</sup>

For the families of the Little Rock Nine, for the family of Martin Luther King Jr., and for the families who participated in the civil rights movement, taking risky action to promote racial justice made sense in the face of the alternatives: continuing social degradation, economic exploitation, and political exclusion in a debilitating climate of chronic fear and stunted agency. In today’s dominant culture, U.S. Christian families also confront paralysis, the constricting effects of fear, a sense of impotence, and the temptation to despair of the possibility of change. The dangerous memories of the actions undertaken fifty years ago by the Little Rock Nine, and the sacrifices, even unto death, made by the families of Martin Luther King Jr. and the many other movement families who stepped forward on behalf of freedom and justice, press contemporary Christian families to discern anew what it means to “watch, fight, and pray” in the struggle for justice in our own, unique and unrepeatable, embodied circumstances.

## Notes

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1. See, e.g., Elizabeth Jacoway, *Turn Away Thy Son: Little Rock, The Crisis That Shocked the Nation* (New York: The Free Press, 2007), 10; David Margolick, "Through a Lens, Darkly: Politics and Power," *Vanity Fair* (September 24, 1957), 2, [www.vanityfair.com/politics/features/2007/09/littlerock200709](http://www.vanityfair.com/politics/features/2007/09/littlerock200709).
2. Ernest Green, the oldest of the Nine, remembered that, "Daisy Bates was the poster child of black resistance. She was a quarterback, the coach. We were the players." "Daisy Bates and the Little Rock Nine," National Public Radio report by Juan Williams, September 21, 2007, [www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=14563865](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=14563865).
3. This "screening process" sought to identify black students "strong enough to survive the ordeal but placid enough not to make trouble"—or as others put it, "good Negroes." Tellingly, not one of those selected was among the thirty-three students—labeled "radicals" by many whites—named in a suit the NAACP had brought against the state the previous year suing for the implementation of *Brown*. Jacoway, *Turn Away Thy Son*, 101–5; Margolick, "Through a Lens, Darkly," 3.
4. Arguably, this move was less in the children's interest than part of an overall drift toward carrying out a plan destined not to succeed. See John A. Kirk, *Beyond Little Rock: The Origins and Legacies of the Central High Crisis* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2007), esp. chaps. 1, 6.
5. "While underfunded, Little Rock's black schools had a distinguished tradition, teaching black pride before the term existed and black history before there were any texts. So whatever benefits Central conferred on its first black students would come at a cost: the loss of friends, community, and teachers who cared, as well as the chance to participate in extracurricular activities." Margolick, "Through a Lens, Darkly," 3.
6. Jacoway, *Turn Away Thy Son*, 103–5.
7. Psalm 27 reads in part: <sup>1</sup>The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? <sup>2</sup>When the wicked, even mine enemies and my foes, came upon me to eat up my flesh, they stumbled and fell. <sup>3</sup>Though a host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear: though war should rise against me, in this will I be confident.
8. Margolick, "Through a Lens, Darkly," 4. The nine students recall their horrified surprise as they realized that *adults* on the scene were there not to protect but to oppose or even attack them. See, e.g., Daisy Bates, *The Long Shadow of Little Rock: A Memoir* (New York: David McKay Co., 1962), 74–75.
9. Numerous gestures communicating the threat of lynching were directed at the Little Rock Nine and their families. On October 3, 1957, for example, a black student effigy was hung on a tree near the school and was kicked and stabbed by a group of white students, one of whom said to a reporter, "I sure wish he was real." Film of the incident is viewable at the Digital Civil Rights Library, <http://crdl.usg.edu/voci/go/crdl/dvd/viewItemc/wsbn37222/flash/6177.jsessionid=EC30BADE612F2BF6342861FFB0750703>. See also Melba Patillo Beals, *Warriors Don't Cry: A Searing Memoir of the Battle to Integrate Little Rock's Central High* (New York: Pocket Books, 1994), 174.
10. Beals, *Warriors Don't Cry*, 5; Bates, *Long Shadow*, chap. 5.
11. Margolick, "Through a Lens, Darkly," 5–6; Jacoway, *Turn Away Thy Son*, 6; Bates, *Long Shadow*, 71–72.

12. CNN Law Center, "Eckford: Little Rock High in '57 'Was not . . . a normal environment.'" May 17, 2004, [www.cnn.com/2004/LAW/05/17/eckford.transcript/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2004/LAW/05/17/eckford.transcript/index.html).
13. The Nine were Eckford, Ray, Minniejean Brown, Ernest Green, Melba Patillo, Thelma Mothershed, Terrance Roberts, Jefferson Thomas, and Carlotta Walls.
14. On September 30, the parents of the Nine sent a telegram to President Eisenhower that read in part: "We believe that freedom and equality with which all men are endowed at birth can be maintained only through freedom and equality of opportunity for self-development, growth and purposeful citizenship. We believe that the degree to which people everywhere realize and accept this concept will determine in a large measure America's true growth and true greatness. You have demonstrated admirably to us, the nation, and the world how profoundly you believe in this concept." Reproduced in Catherine M. Lewis and J. Richard Lewis, eds., *Race, Politics and Memory: A Documentary History of the Little Rock School Crisis* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2007), 65–66.
15. For a number of reasons, most of the public remained unaware of the extent and the persistence of the abuse the students endured. In February, one of the Nine, Minniejean Brown, an outspoken personality, was expelled for verbally retaliating against some white girls who had been taunting her (after earlier being suspended for dropping a bowl of chili on some of her taunters' heads "accidentally on purpose"). Following this, some white students circulated and wore cards that said "one down, eight to go." Jacoway, *Turn Away Thy Son*, 232–34, 236–37; see also Beth Roy's analysis of Minniejean Brown as scapegoat, *Bitters in the Honey: Tales of Hope and Disappointment across Divides of Race and Time* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1999), chaps. 6, 9.
16. The records kept by Elizabeth Huckaby, assistant principal for girls, are revealing: "Some-time in October: Elizabeth hit with a shower of sharpened pencils. October 28: Elizabeth shoved in hall. November 20: Elizabeth jostled in gym. November 21: Elizabeth hit with paper clip. December 10: Elizabeth kicked. December 18: Elizabeth punched. January 10: Elizabeth shoved on the stairs. January 14: Elizabeth knocked flat. January 22: Elizabeth spat upon. January 29: Elizabeth attacked with spitballs. January 31: Elizabeth asks grandfather to take her home after girls serenade her with humiliating songs in gym class. February 4: Elizabeth has soda bottle thrown at her. February 14: Elizabeth attacked with rock-filled snowballs. March 7: Elizabeth hit by egg. March 12: Elizabeth hit by tomato." The list continues. Margolick, "Through a Lens, Darkly," 4. See also Elizabeth Huckaby, *Crisis at Central High* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980).
17. But Ernest Green later described how "a small cadre of students" (Elizabeth Eckford remembered "a coordinated group of about 55 students who attacked us out of 1,900 students at the school") created an atmosphere of terror for the Nine. In a typical incident, one of the girls was phoned and warned that she would be shot in the face with an acid-filled water gun; this did happen the next day but with a water-filled gun. Green comments, "that kind of thing is psychologically unnerving. It's a little bit like guerrilla warfare." Lewis and Lewis, *Race, Politics, and Memory*, 131–32. Eckford quoted in CNN interview, May 17, 2004. Beth Roy probes the ways white Central alumni later interpreted these same experiences in *Bitters in the Honey*.
18. See, e.g., Beals, *Warriors Don't Cry*, 69–72.
19. Wrangling and obfuscation among school administrators, the legislature and governor, and federal authorities led to school at Central High being cancelled during 1958–59. Students kept up their studies by watching televised lessons, transferring to schools in other cities (which several of the Little Rock Nine did), or postponing their education for a year. Jacoway, *Turn Away Thy Son*, chap. 14, esp. 289.
20. Margolick details Eckford's difficult later life as a story of ultimate survival and growth despite much suffering and many obstacles; "Through a Lens, Darkly," 9–17.

21. Eckford, CNN interview, May 17, 2004. Minniejean Brown Trickey echoed this sentiment in 2007, averring that Bates took too much credit for her role in the drama. Williams, "Daisy Bates and the Little Rock Nine," NPR, September 21, 2007.
22. Margolick, "Through a Lens, Darkly," 2. Also Beals, *Warriors Don't Cry*, xxvii.
23. See, e.g., Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958) chap. 5, esp. 175–81, 243–47. See also Vicky LeBeau, "The Unwelcome Child: Elizabeth Eckford and Hannah Arendt," *Journal of Visual Culture* 3, no. 1 (2004): 51–62.
24. What Arendt describes as one photo seems to be a distilled image drawn from the series of photographs taken by Will Counts. See LeBeau, "Unwelcome Child," 54–55.
25. Hannah Arendt, "Reflections on Little Rock," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 193–94.
26. This is an appellation Arendt occasionally gave herself. Carol Brightman, ed., *Between Friends: The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy, 1949–1975* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995).
27. Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1982), chap. 1, esp. 11–12.
28. Arendt, "Reflections," 211; Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, "Hannah Arendt among Feminists," in *Hannah Arendt: Twenty Years Later*, Larry May and Jerome Kohn, eds. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), 311.
29. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 35. In "Reflections," Arendt calls society "that curious, somewhat hybrid realm, between the political and the private in which, since the beginning of the modern age, most men have spent the greater part of their lives" (205).
30. Seyla Benhabib notes that Arendt uses the notion of the social in three principal ways: "At one level, the 'social' refers to the growth of a capitalist commodity exchange economy. At the second, the 'social' refers to aspects of 'mass society.' At the third and least investigated level, the social refers to 'sociability,' to the quality of life in civil society and civic associations." Seyla Benhabib, "The Pariah and Her Shadow: Hannah Arendt's Biography of Rahel Varnhagen," in *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, ed. Bonnie Honig (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 95. In "Reflections," Arendt focuses on the third meaning but in a manner that emphasizes the lack of equality that prevails in civil society due to our right to choose some associations and not others.
31. Arendt, "Reflections," 207.
32. *Ibid.*, 202.
33. "What equality is to the body politic—its innermost principle—discrimination is to society. . . . In American society, people group together, and therefore discriminate against each other, along lines of profession, income and ethnic origin, while in Europe the lines run along class origin, education, and manners. From the viewpoint of the human person, none of these discriminatory practices makes sense; but then it is doubtful whether the human person as such ever appears in the social realm. At any rate, without discrimination of some sort, society would simply cease to exist and very important possibilities of free association and group formation would disappear." *Ibid.*, 205.
34. *Ibid.*, 194–95. LeBeau points out that the trope, "you shouldn't go where you are not wanted," was in fact a common one among white and black critics of the Little Rock Nine; "Unwelcome Child," 57.
35. Arendt, "Reflections," 194.
36. On the pariah–parvenu dynamic in Arendt's thought, see Benhabib, "Pariah and Her Shadow," 83–105. But in a later response to Ralph Ellison's critique of her "Little Rock" essay, (see n. 37), Arendt conceded that black children were not "an American version of

- the Jewish children of Arendt's own youth who got pushed into groups where they were unwelcome. Parvenu did not apply." Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Political Children," in *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, ed. Bonnie Honig (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 263–83 at 269; Young-Bruehl, *Arendt*, 311–15.
37. Arendt revised this judgment in response to the only critic of "Reflections" to whom she conceded ground, the black author Ralph Ellison, to whose published remarks (in Robert Penn Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* [New York: Random House, 1965], 343–44) she replied in a letter (Arendt to Ellison, July 1967, Library of Congress, cited in Young-Bruehl, *For Love of the World*, 315–17, 519). Arendt, Ellison contended, failed to grasp the importance of the "ideal of sacrifice" among black Americans, and had "absolutely no conception of what goes on in the minds of Negro parents when they send their kids through those lines of hostile people" (Warren, 344). In her letter, Arendt acknowledged that she had not understood this "ideal of sacrifice," and that her accusation of parvenu social behavior had misread the "the element of stark violence; of elemental, bodily fear in the situation." She accepted Ellison's interpretation of the children's experience as, rather, an initiation "by an ordeal of fire" into the realities of racist society. *Ibid.*, 316.
  38. Arendt, "Reflections," 195. This exact sentiment was emphasized by the two most prominent white citizens' groups opposing the desegregation of Central High in 1957, the Mothers League of Central High, and the Capital Citizens' Council (CCC). "Brotherhood by Bayonet!" proclaimed one of the CCC's flyers, showing black and white children being shoved together by military personnel; *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture*, <http://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=718>.
  39. Arendt, "Reflections," 202.
  40. *Ibid.*, 203.
  41. *Ibid.*, 204.
  42. Arendt's "Reflections on Little Rock" originally appeared in *Dissent* 6, no. 1 (1959): 45–56. Arendt's "Reply to Critics" was published in *Dissent* 6, no. 2 (1959): 179–81, and follow-up letters are found in the next several issues.
  43. Martin Luther King Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Signet, 1964), chap. 1 and photos included in the text; Elshtain, "Political Children," 274–75; Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–63* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 756–80.
  44. Cornel West, *Prophecy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 102–3.
  45. King in fact directly challenged members of the black middle class whose goals appeared limited to their own status, prestige, and conspicuous consumption, calling on black professionals to risk their own security in solidarity with the movement for economic and social justice for all black persons. See John J. Ansbro, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Making of a Mind* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1982), 226–27. King believed deeply that "the Negro is God's instrument to save the soul of America. He urged his people to accept their redemptive role by pursuing five objectives: self-respect, high moral standards, whole-hearted work, leadership, and non-violence." James H. Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991, 1998), 71. The first and primary objective, "self-respect," was kept in mind in the planning and execution of all direct nonviolent action.
  46. Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989); David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).
  47. I focus here on African American families and children during the southern civil rights era. A complete study would require attention to the experiences and actions of the white

- families and children involved. On this, see especially, Roy, *Bitters in the Honey*, Lewis and Lewis, *Race, Politics, and Memory*.
48. On childhood encounters with racism's effects on black families, see, e.g., Audre Lorde, "Excerpt from Zami: A New Spelling of My Name," in *Catholic Girls*, eds. A. C. Sumrall and P. Vecchione (New York: Penguin, 1992), 45–55; on dignified black family living in the Jim Crow South, see, e.g., Marion Wright Edelman, *The Measure of Our Success: A Letter to My Children and Yours* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), chap. 1.
  49. Beals, *Warriors Don't Cry*, 17. This theme appears with painful regularity. See, e.g., Jacoway, *Turn Away Thy Son*, 1; Bates, *Long Shadow*, 6–31; Coretta Scott King, "Family on the Front Line," *Essence* 30, no. 8 (December 1999): 102–4; King, *Why We Can't Wait*, 81.
  50. Beals, *Warriors Don't Cry*, 22–27.
  51. The admitted murderers were tried but acquitted. The Emmett Till case is recounted, e.g., in the Public Broadcasting Series' *Eyes on The Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954–1965)*, Blackslide Productions, 1987, Part I: "Beginnings: 1954–56."
  52. See, e.g., Jacoway, *Turn Away Thy Son*, "Introduction"; and Lewis and Lewis, *Race, Politics, and Memory*, 25–30.
  53. Trickey interviewed by Juan Williams, National Public Radio, September 21, 2007.
  54. See Branch, *Parting the Waters*, chap. 20, and "The Birmingham Children's Crusade," [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Birmingham\\_campaign#Children.27s\\_Crusade](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Birmingham_campaign#Children.27s_Crusade).
  55. Many black families participated in civil rights campaigns; many more did not. As in Little Rock, some black families demurred for fear of stirring up more trouble because they did not see great chances of success or because of a desire to protect themselves. See M. Savaron and S. Van Evera, "Fear, Apathy, and Discrimination: A Test of Three Explanations of Political [Non] Participation," *The American Political Science Review* 67, no. 4 (December, 1973): 1288–1306.
  56. On black religious faith, see Albert J. Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995); Dwight Hopkins, *Shoes That Fit Our Feet: Sources for a Constructive Black Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993). On King's faith and theology, see Cone, *Martin and Malcolm*, chap. 5, esp. 127–28; H. J. Lee, *We Will Get to the Promised Land: Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Communal-Political Spirituality* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim, 2006), esp. chap. 3.
  57. Cone, *Martin and Malcolm*, 125–31; Lee, *Promised Land*, 118–19; Joanne Marie Terrell offers a womanist theological assessment of the ambiguity of the symbol of the cross in African American religious history and spirituality; Terrell, *Power in the Blood? The Cross in the African American Experience* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1998), esp. chaps. 3–5.
  58. Parents' telegram to President Eisenhower September 30, 1957, in Lewis and Lewis, *Race, Politics and Memory*, 65–66.
  59. Elshtain, "Political Children," 275, citing Robert Coles, *Children of Crisis* (Boston: Little & Brown, 1967). See also King, *Why We Can't Wait*, 30.
  60. See, especially, Gustavo Gutierrez's treatment of the Christian liberation as encompassing a pivotal, "anthropological" dimension, entailing liberation from victimhood and the recovery by the oppressed of their agency and subjectivity within history. *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1971), chap. 1.
  61. Arendt's misjudgments stemmed at least partly from her own unreflective white racism. Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 309; Hannah Arendt, "Preliminary Remarks," *Dissent* (1959): 46. LeBeau, "The Unwelcome Child," 56; Anne Norton, "Heart of Darkness: Africa and African Americans in the Writings of Hannah Arendt," in *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, ed. Bonnie Honig (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 247–62.



62. This was empathically *not* Arendt's intention; it reflects, rather, a personal and scholarly commitment, well documented by Young-Bruehl, to speaking the truth as she understood it, even when doing so was likely to be unpopular or misunderstood. Unfortunately she was unable to grasp an analogous enactment of "speaking the truth" in the actions of the Little Rock families.
63. In 2007 Craig and Brent Renaud, collaborating with Minniejean Brown Trickey, released an HBO documentary, "Inside Central High," detailing the complex racial and economic situations of Little Rock students today.
64. See, e.g., King's last book, *Where Do We Go from Here? Chaos or Community?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), esp. 131–34, 139–46, 188–89.
65. Minniejean Brown Trickey, foreword, in Kirk, *Beyond Little Rock*, ix. Trickey served as assistant secretary for Health, Education and Welfare in the Bill Clinton administration.
66. *Ibid.*
67. See Eddie Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America* (New York, London: Continuum, 2007), esp. chap. 3. Glaude discourages treating the civil rights forebear generation as fixed archetypes, advocating instead a pragmatic, inductive approach to racial justice rooted in close analysis of the very specific conditions—material and ideological, structural and spiritual—of deprivation, oppression, and frustration that African Americans confront today. Glaude follows Cornel West in pointing to the American philosophical tradition of critical pragmatism as an important resource in this effort.
68. Elshtain, "Political Children," 274–75.
69. Important questions surround the degrees to which young participants in public action act as accountable agents in their own rights. Were the Little Rock Nine children young adults or, as Elshtain suggests, "apprentice citizens"? *Ibid.* Arguably, the agency exercised by the teen participants in the 1957 Little Rock drama was greater, due to their greater developmental maturity, than that exercised by the younger children engaged in the 1963 Birmingham Children's Crusade. As families and faith communities discern their responsibilities for public engagement, moral questions concerning the agency of children and teens (and attentiveness to particular children and teens in their very specific circumstances) demand careful consideration.
70. On U.S. Catholics and white racism, see, e.g., John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Andrew S. Moore, "Practicing What We Preach: White Catholics and the Civil Rights Movement in Atlanta," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 89, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 334–67; R. Bentley Anderson, *Black, White, and Catholic: New Orleans Interracialism 1947–1956* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2005); Alex Mikulich and Laurie Cassidy, eds., *Interrupting White Privilege: Catholic Theologians Break the Silence* (New York: Continuum, 2007).
71. Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio* ("On the Family"), 1981, no. 17. See also, Lisa Sowle Cahill's commentary in *Modern Catholic Social Teaching*, eds. Kenneth Himes et al. (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2005), 363–88; Margaret Farley, "Family," in *New Dictionary of Catholic Social Thought*, ed. Judith Dwyer (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1994), 371–81.
72. Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, Part III.
73. Julie Hanlon Rubio, *A Christian Theology of Marriage and Family* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist, 2002), chap. 5, esp. 106–10.
74. "Putting Families and Children First," Statement by United States Catholic Conference, November 1991, *Origins* 21, no. 30 (January 2, 1992): 473–92. Italics added.
75. See, e.g., Vatican II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, *Gaudium et spes*, nos. 63–76; Himes, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations*.

76. See, e.g., Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, nos. 42, 43, 47–48, 64.
77. *Ibid.*, nos. 21, 64.
78. Elshtain, “Political Children,” 282. Elshtain discusses family and child involvement in pro-life activism, 276–77. See also Christine Firer Hinze, “Catholic Families 1945–1990: Unity and Diversity in the Body of Christ,” in *Faith Traditions and the Family*, eds. Phyllis Airhart and Margaret Bendroth (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1996), 53–72, esp. 59–60, 65–66.
79. See John Kavanaugh, SJ, *(Still) Following Christ in a Consumer Society*, 25th anniversary edition (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2006); Vincent Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2004); Robert H. Frank, *Luxury Fever: Why Money Fails to Satisfy in an Era of Excess* (New York: Free Press, 1999); Juliet Schor, *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), Schor, *The Overspent American: Upscaling, Downshifting, and the New Consumerism* (New York: Basic Books, 1998); Christine Firer Hinze, “What Is ‘Enough’? Catholic Social Thought, Consumerism, and Material Sufficiency,” in *Having: Property and Possessions in Religious and Social Life*, eds. W. Schwieker and C. Mathewes (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004), 162–88.
80. Sharon Welch critiques this culturally widespread “ethic of control”; Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), chap. 1.
81. “The churches are indeed the only communal and public place where appearances do not count, and if discrimination creeps into houses of worship, this is an infallible sign of their religious failing. They have become social and are no longer religious institutions.” Arendt, “Reflections,” 209. “The government can legitimately take no steps against social discrimination because government can act only in the name of equality—a principle which does not obtain in the social sphere. The only public force that can fight social prejudice is the churches, and they can do so in the name of the uniqueness of the person, for it is on the principle of the uniqueness of souls that religion (and especially the Christian faith) is based.” *Ibid.*
82. John Blake, *Children of the Movement* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill, 2004), 25–35. According to Zwerg’s daughter, the night before beginning the Freedom Ride, Zwerg called his mother in Wisconsin. “‘Don’t go. Don’t go,’ she said. . . . ‘You can’t do this to your father.’ . . . ‘I have no choice. I have to,’ he told her. . . . ‘You have killed your father,’ his mother replied, and hung up.” Zwerg’s parents were “enraged” when they opened their Milwaukee newspaper the day after the attack and saw the now-famous picture of their battered son on the front page. *Ibid.*, 26, 31.
83. Jacoway, *Turn Away Thy Son*, 195, 411 n. 39, citing Tilman C. Cothran and William M. Phillips, “Negro Leadership in a Crisis Situation,” *Phylon* (Summer 1961), 107–18.
84. Prentiss Pemberton and Daniel Rush Finn effectively use the historical example of the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott to lay out the relationship between visions of justice and the generation of “concrete historical norms” able to move groups to particular strategic action in *Toward a Christian Economic Ethic* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1986), chap. 1.
85. For connecting spirituality to justice-seeking action, fostering communal virtues—especially the virtue of solidarity—is key. See Christine Firer Hinze, “What Is ‘Enough’?” 162–88, and Firer Hinze “Straining Toward Solidarity in a Suffering World: *Gaudium et spes* ‘After Forty Years,’” in *Vatican II Forty Years Later*, ed. W. Madges (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2005), 165–95.

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