

TEACHING AND LEARNING WITH “AN EXCEPTION TO THE RULE”

Remembering the Civil Rights Movement

1. What comes to mind when you hear the words “civil rights movement?” What was it? What people, places, and things pop into your head? The ways we understand the past have a huge impact on the decisions we make in the present. How we understand the civil rights movement and its key figures – like Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. – shapes how we respond to social issues today. Does this webcomic story confirm, complicate, or challenge your assumptions about the civil rights movement? How so? Are you surprised, like El is, to learn that segregation existed outside the Jim Crow South? Or that, in Chicago, Dr. King faced white mobs “more hostile and hate-filled” than those he’d seen in Alabama or Mississippi? From your perspective, what has changed since 1966? What hasn’t? What conclusions do you draw from that reflection?

“Good” and “Bad” Catholics

2. When we engage stories we tend to identify heroes and villains – the “good guys” and “bad guys” – whether we’re watching a superhero movie or reading a historical webcomic like this one. Not only that, this story about Sr. Angelica Schultz and the Chicago Freedom Movement is part of a project called *Bad Catholics, Good Trouble*. So, you may find yourself instinctively identifying “good” and “bad” Catholics. We’d invite you to resist that urge and consider a question that may be a bit more challenging. What makes someone a “good” or “bad” Catholic in the first place? Sr. Angelica felt that her faith called her to march in the streets for civil rights. At the same time, many white Catholics – like the mother in Chapter 3 – labeled Sr. Angelica a “bad Catholic” precisely because of this. White Catholics opposed to integration thought *they* were the real Catholics, the good Catholics. After all, most people assume they’re the heroes of their own stories. What do you make of these conflicting ideas about what makes someone a “good” or “bad” Catholic? What does it teach you about how people understand their own religious traditions? Don’t let this just be a thought experiment. Can you think of similar dynamics and tensions in your own community (whether that’s Catholic Christian or some other tradition)?

Getting into Good Trouble

3. “Trouble” is a word that tends to have negative connotations. Most of us are taught at a very early age to “stay out of trouble.” When we get into trouble we face consequences. And yet John Lewis, the late great congressman from Georgia who was a leader in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee during the civil rights era, encouraged us to get into a particular kind of trouble. “Our struggle [for a just world] is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month, or a year,” he insisted. “It is the struggle of a lifetime. Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get into [good trouble, necessary trouble](#).” If trouble is defined as “public disorder and unrest,” good trouble means refusing to rest in the face of oppressive laws and institutions. It means disrupting the unjust social order through protest, activism, and community organizing. How did Martin Luther King, Jr., Sr. Angelica Schultz, and other characters in this webcomic get into “good trouble”? What consequences did they face? What might “good trouble” look like for you? Does the idea of getting into “good trouble” make you nervous? Excited? How so? Why?

The Importance of Open Housing

4. Sister Angelica was living comfortably at a convent in an overwhelmingly white suburb at a time when African Americans in Chicago were largely restricted to crowded, rat-infested, run-down areas of the city. Are there parts of your community that are segregated by race, class, or other factors? How does the place a person lives affect their well-being and life opportunities? What kind of neighborhood do you live in? Has your family ever had trouble finding somewhere to live? Why is it important for all people to have access to safe and affordable housing?

5. Open housing efforts met with violent resistance from white residents of the largely Catholic neighborhoods through which the civil rights activists marched. Why do you think seeing these activists made white Catholics and other white people so angry? Why did the residents feel the need to “protect” their neighborhood? Why did the members of the mob think Sister Angelica should feel “ashamed” for marching? Why do you think they told her to go back to her convent?

Racism, Antiracism, and the Struggle for Racial Justice

6. Would you describe the mob's actions as “racist”? Why or why not? Would you describe the people who remained “mostly silent” – those who “did nothing” and seemed comfortable with the status quo – as racist? Why or why not? What thoughts and emotions came up for you when you saw how white residents responded to the open housing march? Or when you read that most white people did and said nothing? What does the word “racism” mean to you? Where do you see racism in your experience of the world today? What does it mean to be “anti-racist”? What different models of anti-racism do you see in the webcomic?

7. Why do you think Sister Angelica felt she needed “a push” from Dr. King to start participating in the Chicago Freedom Movement? Why did the silence of so many Catholics regarding racial justice trouble Sister Angelica? Does it trouble you today? Why or why not?

8. Why do you think Sister Angelica rejected being referred to as a “hero”? How does she feel she failed those members of the white Catholic mob who attacked her?

9. Why do you think Dr. King not only encouraged but actively recruited people like Sister Angelica – white people, Catholics, vowed religious men and women (a.k.a. sisters and priests) – to get involved in civil rights struggles?

10. What do you think Sister Angelica means when she calls herself “an exception to the rule”? Later in the story she tells El to “go be an exception.” What does that mean in today’s world? What kinds of actions might they take? Sister Angelica warned that “it won’t be easy.” Why might that be? What reception do you think El might receive if they were to act on what they learned? What are the risks of standing up against racism, of getting into good trouble to try to make a more just world? How might El protect themselves against the risks? What are the rewards?

Confronting and Overcoming Fear

11. The violent reaction Sister Angelica experienced in Marquette Park may have been far worse than she anticipated, but she kept walking and didn’t turn back. Not only that, she participated in three more marches after the attack. What do you think kept her and other civil rights activists going? Do you think they were afraid? What might have helped them overcome their fear?

12. What do you think gave Sister Angelica strength to carry on in the face of fear and violence? Have you ever spoken up or taken other actions when you saw someone being bullied or treated unfairly? Or did someone speak up for you when you were being bullied? How did others respond to the situation? How did you feel afterward? What gives you the strength to do what is right in the face of the potential consequences?

Catholics in the Civil Rights Era

13. The young man who threw the brick deliberately targeted Sister Angelica. There are numerous examples of white Catholics in the civil rights era reserving their most physically and verbally abusive responses for sisters and priests who marched for racial justice. Why do you think that was the case? Why do you think Sr. Angelica was singled out to be attacked?

14. What Church teachings and gospel messages do you think inspired Sister Angelica and the other Christian civil rights marchers? Why do you think those teachings didn't have the same impact on those attacking the marchers, most of whom were also Catholic and Christian? What were the most important lessons you've learned about being Catholic and/or Christian in your life? Were you encouraged to abide by the rule of law and order? To get into "good trouble, necessary trouble"? Both? Neither?

15. Many white Catholics wrote letters after the march justifying the attack on Sister Angelica. These letter writers told sisters and priests to "mind their own business" and to keep politics out of religion. What do you think the role of priests and sisters and other religious people should be in addressing social injustice today? Where do you think Jesus would stand on this debate?

TEACHING AND LEARNING WITH "AN EXCEPTION TO THE RULE" *Young Readers Edition*

The Civil Rights Movement

1. What do you think of when someone says "civil rights movement" or "Martin Luther King"? Draw a picture of the people, places, thoughts, and feelings that come to mind. Now compare your picture to this webcomic. How are they similar? How are they different?

Good Catholics and Bad Catholics

2. What does it mean to be a good Catholic, a good religious person, or simply a good human being? What have your family and friends, your teachers and community leaders taught you? Make a list of what you've been taught makes you a good person. Now, compare your list with the things different characters in the webcomic are doing. Pretty much all of them thought they were doing the right thing – Sister Angelica and Martin Luther King, but also the white young

man who threw the brick and the white mother who called Sister Angelica a “bad Catholic.” What do you think about that? What does that teach you about words like “good” and “bad”?

Getting into Good Trouble

3. If there’s one thing almost all young people are taught, it’s to stay out of trouble. When we get into trouble, we face consequences. However, civil rights leader John Lewis said that people who want to make a better world *need* to get into “[good trouble](#).” Martin Luther King got into “good trouble” when he fought for civil rights – he went to jail dozens of times and was killed for his trouble. Sister Angelica got into “good trouble” when she marched for open housing – she got hit in the head by a brick for her trouble. What might “good trouble” look like for you? Does the idea of getting into “good trouble” make you nervous? Excited? Why?

Good Homes

4. Sister Angelica lived in a comfortable home at a convent in an all-white suburb, but African Americans in Chicago had to live in old, crowded, rat-infested, run-down areas of the city. What is your home like? What kind of neighborhood do you live in? How would you describe your schools, parks, playgrounds, and grocery stores? Do you have access to clean air and water, and safe streets? Draw a picture or write a paragraph describing your home and neighborhood. Then discuss what you drew/wrote with a peer. How does the health and safety of your home and neighborhood shape your life? How could you make your neighborhood safer and healthier?

Standing Up for Others

5. Sister Angelica felt it was important to stand up for African Americans living in segregated neighborhoods. Can you think of a time when you felt excluded or picked on and someone stood up for you? How did that make you feel? Have you ever stood up for someone else who was being bullied? How did that make you feel? Jesus teaches us to love one another as we love ourselves. How did Sister Angelica show that she believed that? How can kids stand up against racism? Have there been racial justice demonstrations in your neighborhood? Why or why not?

SOME ADDITIONAL (FREE!) TEACHING AND LEARNING MATERIALS

1. U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, ad hoc committee against racism, educational resources: <https://www.usccb.org/committees/ad-hoc-committee-against-racism/combating-racism-educational-resources>.

2. “Open Wide Our Hearts,” pastoral letter on racism and lessons on the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops: <https://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/racism/upload/resources-hs-mlk.pdf>

3. “All Together Now – A Lesson Plan on Racism,” by Young Catholics:
<https://young-catholics.com/1655/all-together-now-a-lesson-plan-on-racism/>
4. “The Chicago Freedom Movement: An In-Depth Look at One of the Biggest Movements in the North and Its Relevance Today,” by Elena Kovachevic, All Power to the People website:
<https://allpower.wordpress.com/teaching/teaching-activities-2019/the-chicago-freedom-movement-an-in-depth-look-at-one-of-the-biggest-movements-in-the-north-and-its-relevance-today-by-elena-kovachevich/>
5. “Putting the Movement Back into Civil Rights Teaching: A Resource Guide for Classrooms and Communities,” Civil Rights Teaching, a project of Teaching for Change:
<https://www.civilrightsteaching.org/about>
6. “The White Ally Toolkit Workbook,” by David Camp: <https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/files/antiracismresources/files/whiteallytoolkitworkbook-advanced-edition.pdf>

A FEW MORE (ILLUSTRATED!!!) TEACHING/LEARNING MATERIALS

1. Alfred Hassler, Benton Resnik, and Sy Barry, *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story* (Fellowship of Reconciliation, 1957): https://www.crmvet.org/docs/ms_for_comic.pdf.
2. John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell, *March* (Top Shelf Productions, 2016): <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/series/1MA/march>.
3. Tiffany Jewell (illustrated by Aurélia Durand, *This Book is Anti-Racist: 20 Lessons on How to Wake Up, Take Action, and Do the Work* (Quarto Publishing, 2020): <https://www.quarto.com/books/9780711245211/this-book-is-anti-racist>.
4. W. Kamau Bell and Kate Schatz, *Do the Work: An Antiracist Activity Book* (Workman Publishing, 2022): <https://www.amazon.com/Do-Work-Antiracist-Activity-Book/dp/1523514280>.