

# Nation of Islam members push to Ferguson's front lines

August 23, 2014

By Lilly Fowler

It was the first night the curfew was tested in Ferguson.

Around the corner sat single-family homes, but here on West Florissant Avenue a car blasted “F- the police” while members of the Moorish Science Temple of America directed traffic.

Nation of Islam member J.A. Salaam believed the pouring rain was God’s doing. Sharply dressed in a blue suit with a white striped shirt underneath, Salaam explained that members were encouraging demonstrators to obey the midnight curfew, even asking that they go home early so as to stay out of harm’s way. The rain would help.

Ever since Michael Brown, a young, unarmed African-American, was shot by a police officer on Aug. 9, various crews have played a part in achieving the tentative peace that has taken hold of the St. Louis suburb once rocked by protests.

Some wear black T-shirts with large white letters that spell out “Peacekeepers.” Others dress in bright orange shirts and call themselves “Clergy United.” All acknowledge that the Nation of Islam has been a key player since the very beginning.

Last week, Capt. Ronald S. Johnson of the Missouri Highway Patrol, who took over the police security patrol in Ferguson, acknowledged on national television that the Nation of Islam and other groups — such as Black Lawyers for Justice — helped control the crowds on West Florissant. Others on social media pointed out that the Nation of Islam protected businesses from looters.

Yet, many find the Nation of Islam — a Muslim sect that dominated headlines during the civil rights era but has since diminished in prominence — problematic.

In some ways, Nation of Islam members are not unlike other Muslims. They worship Allah and pray five times a day. They also fast during Ramadan and require a pilgrimage to Mecca, or Hajj. But the Nation of Islam also calls for a separate nation for blacks, according to international representative Akbar Muhammad.

On Sunday, Minister Louis Farrakhan, the national representative of the Nation of Islam, addressed Brown’s death directly from the religious group’s base in Chicago.

“In every city and town where black people live, black men are being shot down by police,” Farrakhan said. “The killing of Michael Brown is one of many.” Farrakhan also spoke of a government conspiracy against

black youth.

Yet, despite controversial teachings, experts say Nation of Islam members do not advocate violence and are first and foremost interested in the thriving of African-American communities.

Despite its strong presence in Ferguson, the Nation of Islam, founded in 1930, is far from what it was at its peak in 1995, when Farrakhan managed to inspire hundreds of thousands of African-Americans to gather in Washington in what is known as the Million Man March. Experts estimate that current Nation of Islam membership is in the tens of thousands, though many more African-Americans may find the religion's teachings inspiring.

Part of the reason for the dwindling numbers could be attributed to a 1970s break in leadership, where one faction of the Nation of Islam moved toward Sunni Islam under the leadership of Warith Deen Muhammad, while others chose to follow Farrakhan.

On Saturday, Aug. 16, the night when the curfew was first tested in Ferguson, Malik Shabazz, founder of Black Lawyers for Justice, marched up and down West Florissant flanked by Nation of Islam members, many of whom dressed up their suits with bow ties. Like Farrakhan, Shabazz has been repeatedly accused of making anti-Semitic remarks.

"Don't worry about them," Shabazz shouted into a megaphone, referring to the police. "Don't get distracted." At one point he raised his arm and yelled "Black power!"

In an effort to try to persuade demonstrators to obey authorities and go home, Shabazz cried, "We're going to dominate the streets tomorrow."

"C'mon, let's roll out," he continued. "We gotta win, not them."

One demonstrator shouted, "Yeah that's what they want us to do. Run."

Those on the street praised the groups' efforts.

"They've been doing a good job for the most part," said Ronnie Robinson of the St. Louis City Police Department. "I don't see anybody from the Nation of Islam causing any problem."

St. Louis Alderman Antonio French, who has been at the protest site nightly, said Nation of Islam members had "a relationship with these young guys that few others do. Their presence makes us feel better about being able to keep the peace."

But the late-night protesters haven't always heeded the pleading of Nation of Islam volunteers.

On Saturday, Shabazz and others failed, despite a long night of effort, to persuade the hangers-on to go home.

"Michael Brown can't go home, why should we?" some demonstrators yelled. "Ain't no curfew for justice."

Dozens of protesters moved to the middle of West Florissant holding their hands up in the air as curfew drew near.

Then, as if on cue, when the clock struck midnight, a torrential downpour descended on those left in the street. Demonstrators waited for the police.

Nation of Islam member Salaam might have called the rain an act from God.

But he, like others, had already abandoned the streets.

## Clergy-led protest raises questions over nature of repentance

October 15, 2014

By Lilly Fowler

The rain pounding the pavement made no difference to those urging repentance.

With or without umbrellas, a gang of clergy from various faith traditions marched to the Ferguson Police Department on “Moral Monday,” the last day in a weekend of protests dubbed FergusonOctober. Clergy advanced on South Florissant Road determined to force one question on a community of officers: Will you repent?

They gathered in the parking lot of the police station and created a memorial to Michael Brown, the unarmed teenager fatally shot by Ferguson police Officer Darren Wilson on Aug. 9, by drawing a chalk outline of a body on the pavement. Candles were lit.

A line of police officers quickly formed a perimeter around a crowd of hundreds who had come in support of the clergy. Some guarded the police department’s side door. Officers soon changed into riot gear, equipping themselves with shields and batons.

Then, in the midst of the unrelenting rain, one protest leader cried that officers would be given the chance to confess their sins and repent. One by one, clergy approached the officers on guard, asking them to — for at least a moment — forget their duties and reflect instead on America’s system of racial injustice.

There were signs of tenderness and understanding, such as a rabbi holding hands with an officer.

Others, however, said the protest reflected a more fire-and-brimstone kind of theology, with some in the crowd yelling “In Jesus’ name, repent!,” which sounded less like an invitation and more like a threat.

Sgt. Tim Harris of the Ferguson Police Department, who has been an officer for almost 30 years, was facing

the front lines of the protest. Harris said that although he tried, he had a difficult time hearing some of the pastors who spoke to him because of all the shouting.

“You could tell some of them were trying to be sincere, but this isn’t the place,” Harris said. “They wanted to force this on us.

“If they respected us, they wouldn’t have come at us the way they did.”

Harris said one rabbi had approached him with a “face scrunched up like I was disgusting.” When he pointed it out, he said, she apologized. He said that in the end, they were able to have “an OK conversation.”

David Greenhaw, president of Eden Theological Seminary, who participated in the protest, said he, too, could have done without that part of the demonstration.

It was “dramatic but unrealistic to think that a police officer would offer their confession,” Greenhaw said. “You know, I wasn’t crazy about that. I didn’t think that was the best element.”

Repentance, Greenhaw said, isn’t “coercive, I think it’s invited, and there was a coercive element.” Greenhaw said the protest reflected a doctrinal divide in the theology of repentance.

Others said the call to repentance wasn’t meant as a condemnation of any one individual but of American society as a whole. Before the march to the police station, clergy themselves were asked to repent for their complicity in a system of racial disparity that continues to hurt African-Americans.

Rabbi Susan Talve of Central Reform Congregation said the officers were “part of the system that use young black people as an ATM,” referring to the disproportionate number of traffic tickets and fines inflicted on African-Americans.

But Talve also admitted clergy had been part of that structure for too long. The protest, she said, was one step toward earning “the trust back of a generation that feels like we’ve neglected them, not heard them, and betrayed them.”

The Rev. Jim Wallis, founder of the Christian magazine *Sojourners* and a spiritual adviser to President Barack Obama, said that despite the noise, he managed an intimate conversation with a 36-year veteran of the police force — a fellow Christian — who described the last two months as the hardest of his life.

Wallis said that although he does not believe every officer is engaging in brutality, “You can’t say you’re not a racist if you accept and support systems that are.”

“There’s no doubt that racialized policing is occurring.”

One officer even seemed to confess as much.

“My heart feels that this has been going on too long,” Ferguson Officer Ray Nabzdyk told the clergy, according to the Associated Press. “We all stand in fault because we didn’t address this.”

Wallis said repentance isn't about saying you're sorry or feeling guilty but about change, which he has yet to see in the police department's policies. The faith community, Wallis said, won't rest until that change comes.

Greenhaw said his hope was "that we not put a cork in it, but repent in the best sense of the word, actually do better as a community."

"Repentance is not about the police officers," he said. "It's about all of us. Repentance is to recognize (that) where we are is wrong."

## **St. Louis area couple's divorce highlights tensions in Catholic annulments**

October 19, 2014

By Lilly Fowler

By the time Beatrice and James met, both had loved and lost.

It was 1990 when, according to Beatrice, a friend set her up on a blind date with James, a St. Louis businessman. Each had been through a divorce. Although there was a bit of an age difference, the two courted three years before finally becoming engaged.

The couple talked at length about what had gone wrong with their respective marriages before tying the knot. Beatrice, a Protestant, and James, a Roman Catholic, promised they would respect each other's faith traditions. She also agreed to sign a prenuptial agreement. In other words, according to Beatrice, each thought long and hard about what the marriage would entail.

Ten years later, the couple divorced. Then this May, Beatrice learned that apart from the civil divorce, James, who is engaged to be married, is seeking an annulment, a declaration that, in the eyes of the Roman Catholic Church, their marriage never happened.

The annulment, his second if granted, would enable James to remarry in the Roman Catholic Church. But, if approved, the annulment would happen over the objection of Beatrice, who wants no part of her ex-husband's request.

"I have a problem with moving laws around to make it fit your lifestyle," she said.

The couple's dispute is spelled out in church documents in which Beatrice raises concerns not only about the annulment in general, but about the process used by the Archdiocese of St. Louis to grant them. At the request of the ex-husband, the Post-Dispatch is not using the real names of the couple to protect their privacy.

Beatrice is far from the first to feel that the cards in the annulment process are stacked against people like her. Grass-roots groups such as [“Save Our Sacrament”](#) dedicate themselves to helping spouses fight back when they don’t believe an annulment should be granted.

Now an annulment process that critics say makes it too easy to negate marriages could get even easier.

The Vatican is considering streamlining the annulment procedure, potentially shortening or eliminating the different appellate routes.

At the same time, Pope Francis and the world’s bishops are wrapping up what some describe as revolutionary talks about a wider acceptance of “irregular” unions, which could diminish the need for annulments because the church would be more inclusive even of those married outside of it.

Although the Roman Catholic Church teaches annulments can be granted only in special circumstances, worldwide it receives approximately 50,000 annulment applications every year from spouses, according to Vatican statistics.

The Archdiocese of St. Louis says it approves of annulments when there is proof that “because of some personal incapacity, or because of the exclusion of some essential element of marriage, a valid and binding marital bond, as ordained by almighty God, was never created between the two parties.” A couple who marry in Las Vegas while inebriated and later file for an annulment, for example, might be awarded one.

Once one partner files for an annulment, the other party is notified. Each is asked a series of questions and given the opportunity to provide testimony about the marriage. Spouses are also encouraged to provide a list of witnesses who can testify on their behalf. An ecclesiastical court issues an initial decision when it has completed an investigation.

If a spouse disagrees, he or she can appeal. Even without an appeal, a second ecclesiastical court, or tribunal, reviews the evidence before a final decision is made. If the lower courts can’t agree on the evidence, or if one partner objects to the final decision, the Roman Rota, typically the last appellate stop for annulments, might agree to re-examine the case.

Beatrice says although she doesn’t have any issues with the civil divorce or her ex-husband’s engagement, she objects to the annulment.

“For me that says I’m willing to lie about my life, and I’m not willing to do that for the Catholic church,” Beatrice said, noting that various problems caused the split-up, though not anything that she believes would qualify for an annulment.

James, for his part, says while he can understand his ex-wife’s view, he just wants to marry in the church like any faithful Roman Catholic would.

“I hope to remarry, and I hope to remain Catholic as I’ve always been,” James said.

## DEBATE AT THE VATICAN

While some argue annulments are unnecessarily burdensome, others feel the church hands them out too readily. Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI both spoke publicly about their concerns over the ease with which annulments are granted by ecclesiastical courts.

Quoting John Paul II, Benedict reminded the Roman Rota in 2009, of the “scandal of seeing the value of Christian marriage being destroyed in practice by the exaggerated and almost automatic multiplication of declarations of nullity, in cases of the failure of marriage, on the pretext of some immaturity or psychic weakness on the part of the contracting parties.”

At a two-week Vatican meeting, or synod, which ends Sunday, Pope Francis has led the charge to a new approach, noting that “the church must accompany her most fragile sons and daughters, marked by wounded and lost love,” [according to a preliminary report](#).

The church’s midterm report also speaks of the need for forging “a new pastoral course” when ministering to divorced and civilly remarried Catholics, as well as case-by-case discernment with regard to access to the sacraments. Currently, Roman Catholics who divorce and remarry outside of the church are unable to receive the Eucharist or take on leadership positions because in its view, they are committing adultery.

Saturday, the Vatican released a final version of the synod’s report, and bishops voted on each of the document’s 62 paragraphs. Sections exploring the issue of divorced and civilly remarried Roman Catholics receiving the sacraments proved especially controversial and did not receive the necessary two-thirds majority vote to pass. While some favored finding a way to allow divorced and remarried Roman Catholics to take Holy Communion, others wanted to maintain current practice.

Although the synod has already made waves in the Roman Catholic world, launching an epic battle between conservative and liberal bishops, no final decisions are expected until a bigger meeting takes place next October at the world Synod of Bishops.

[A 2007 survey by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate](#) at Georgetown University in Washington found that 23 percent of U.S. Roman Catholics have been through a divorce, though only 15 percent of divorcees apply for an annulment.

According to the Rev. Nicholas E. Kastenzholz, judicial vicar for the Metropolitan Tribunal, the archdiocese’s ecclesiastical court, it receives about 200 petitions for annulments a year, the majority of which are granted. The annulment is \$750 in the archdiocese, though the fee can be waived in certain circumstances.

Worldwide, the United States accounts for 49 percent of annulment cases, according to Vatican statistics. In 2012, about 24,000 petitions for annulment were filed in the United States.

Defenders of the annulment process say it offers a means to move on.

Ed Hogan, a theology professor at Kenrick-Glennon Seminary in Shrewsbury, said that the church intends

for the process to act like a kind of cleansing agent when mistakes have truly been made, giving couples an opportunity to heal.

Otherwise, he says, the “church presumes that the marriage is valid. The presumption is on her side.”

Others say that the church’s courts go to great lengths to ensure fairness.

“More often than not, the judges and the tribunal people bend over backward to stay objective,” said J. Michael Ritty, a New York attorney who specializes in annulment cases.

### **BATTLE OF LETTERS**

After the divorce, Beatrice says she and James remained friends and eventually got back together. A photograph from a few years ago shows the couple at a fundraising gala for the archdiocese. Ultimately, however, that relationship ended, too.

In May, Beatrice received a letter from the archdiocese, alerting her that an ecclesiastical court had launched an investigation into her former marriage. By July, Beatrice had asked the presiding judge to recuse himself because of his connections to her ex-husband.

Beatrice also requested the case be moved to an ecclesiastical court outside the Archdiocese of St. Louis.

Later that month, Beatrice received a letter from the archdiocese saying that, because of the presiding judge’s ties to her former spouse, a new judge would be named.

Still, for months Beatrice continued to argue that because of her ex-husband’s close relationship with the archdiocese, only a change in venue would grant a fair trial.

Earlier this month, an archdiocesan official wrote to Beatrice to say he was asking the Apostolic Signatura, the church’s highest court, to transfer the case to the Archdiocese of Chicago “in the hope that this case may proceed more smoothly in discerning the truth.”

James, for his part, says he is confident he has a solid case for an annulment, and that he has dozens of witnesses who will testify to that fact. Said James: “My only goal is to remain a good Catholic.”