

REFLECTION

The Freedom Riders of the Civil Rights Movement

*"I'm taking a trip on the Greyhound bus line,
I'm riding the front seat to New Orleans this time.
Hallelujah I'm a travelin', hallelujah ain't it fine,
Hallelujah I'm a travelin' down freedom's main line."*

This reflection is based on the PBS documentary, "Freedom Riders," which is a production of The American Experience. To watch the film, go to: <http://to.pbs.org/1VbeNVm>.

SUMMARY OF THE FILM

From May to November 1961, over 400 Americans, both black and white, witnessed the power of nonviolent activism for civil rights. The Freedom Riders were opposing the racist Jim Crow laws of the South by riding bus lines from Washington, D.C., down through the Deep South. These Freedom Rides were organized by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Despite the violence, threats, and extraordinary racism they faced, people of conscience, both black and white, Northern and Southern, rich and poor, old and young, carried out the Freedom Rides as a testimony to the basic truth all Americans hold: that the government must protect the constitutional rights of its people.

Finally, on September 22, 1961, segregation on the bus lines ended. This was arguably the movement that changed the force and effectiveness of the Civil Rights Movement as a whole and set the stage for other organized movements like the Selma to Montgomery March and the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. This documentary is based on the book *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Equality* by Raymond Arsenault (<http://bit.ly/1Vbn4sy>).

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What struck you about this documentary? Did you learn anything new about the Freedom Ride movement or the Civil Rights Movement in general?
- In the film, John Seigenthaler says of the black help in his family's house growing up, "They were invisible women to me. We were blind to the reality of racism, and afraid, I guess, of change." Who are the invisible groups in our society today? What prevents you from changing the way society is structured?



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- “Black folks always lived in fear of white folks and now they’re seeing young people defying white people and so we help to get rid of that myth of impotence.” What can be learned from this quote? How can younger generations be the impetus for change? What other civil and human rights causes around the world have been led by youth?
- In his Civil Rights Address, President John F. Kennedy said, “A great change is at hand, and our task, our obligation, is to make that revolution, that change, peaceful and constructive for all. Those who do nothing are inviting shame as well as violence. Those who act boldly are recognizing right as well as reality.” What does Catholic social tradition say about acting on behalf of civil and human rights? How can you prevent yourself from becoming a bystander when someone’s human dignity is being violated?
- Do you believe there can be another Civil Rights Movement in the United States? Does there need to be another event like the Freedom Rides to help the movement gain traction? What role does social media play in advocacy and activism today?

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TRADITION AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

CST Themes

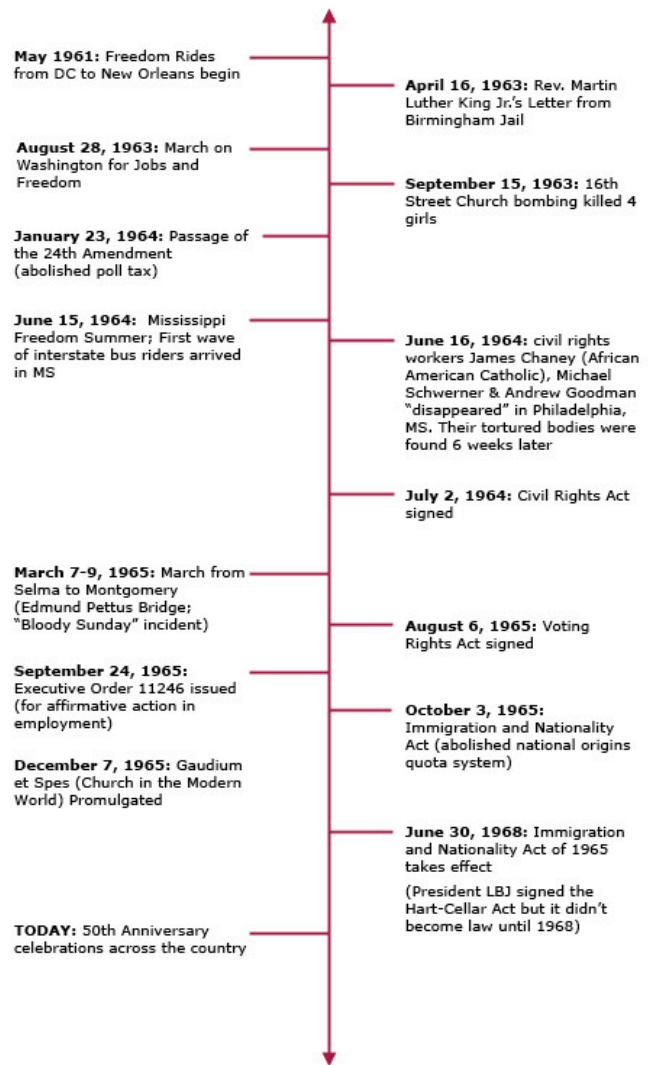
- Solidarity
- Call to Community and Participation
- Rights and Responsibilities

Rebuilding the Bridge: African American Affairs’ 50th Anniversary Initiative (USCCB)

- Read the U.S. Bishops’ statement in 2014 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act and get resources for this initiative at: <http://bit.ly/1RPZdQ1>.



“1961 ... ‘Freedom Riders’” by Paul Shutzer/James Vaughan licensed under CC BY 2.0.



Timeline of Civil Rights Movement, USCCB, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1RPZdQ1>.

