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## Joseph Leppert, Founder of Memphis Catholic Human Relations Council, 1968

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Download date	2026-03-07 18:12:53
Link to Item	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10267/33888">http://hdl.handle.net/10267/33888</a>

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Unknown Female Interviewer- Yes we are going to test now that Joan can hold the buttons down.

Joan Beifuss- 1, 2, 3, 4. Ok. So tell us about the first march.

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- The first march is that the one you were talking about the first march isn't it.

Unknown Female Interviewer- Well we were asking about whether some of the nuns had participated in anything prior to the first march.

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- They probably did I...

Unknown Female Interviewer- Just can't keep track of it..

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- No, but...there was interest in say a hall affair and discussion pros and cons with regards to the benefit of marching. It was then after talking with the bishop about the desire of some making my own decision but I decided that I would march and I went a long reception my guardian angel I asked him to go with me, and we did. It was very gratifying and encouraging to, to see the reaction in some of the leaders and ministers. The negro minister's association, some, (muffled) appreciate you coming and we thought you would be here. So they were, that didn't disappoint them.

Unknown Female Interviewer- Now within the march where in the line were you up towards the front or in the middle or in the back.

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- Oh I was probably 50 or 75 feet from the front because all the VIP's were up front. Dr. Martin Luther King and we were close enough to see what was going on.

Joan Beifuss- Now did you have any impressions of the march before it ever left Clayborne Temple.

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- Not before, it wasn't until the organizer didn't seem to be able to get it off the ground too well, many leaders and many directions being given, there was a little bit of confusion there. Finally we did start moving onto Beale St. going towards Main St. with a momentary pause. (Muffled) was up on Main St. There were maybe a 100 people on Main St. Father Greenspun and I were together at this junction and so before anyone realized what was going on one of the boys with a banner stick broke through the windows at the men's clothing store there and that created quite a bit of concern immediately.

Joan Beifuss- Did you see him do it?

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- I saw him and Father Greenspun said this is going to be serious, what shall we do. I said let's try to stay in procession and keep the march

intact and proceed on to Main St. if possible. Several men around us negro men were reprimanding the boy and several boys who had accompanied him at that time in breaking windows and looting and asked them not to do that because as they said we haven't come here for that purpose. This is to be nonviolent and we don't want any of that destruction going on.

Unknown Female Interviewer- But the boys didn't seem....

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- The boys continued they didn't pay any attention at all because you could see they were useful....

Unknown Female Interviewer- Had that boy been in the group of marchers?

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- You couldn't tell he was just one of them but there was a large number of boys there, young people in our area of the march. As I understand and recall there was some violence at one of the schools, Conwell school? Was it Conwell School?

Joan Beifuss- Hamilton.

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- Hamilton school earlier in the day when some of the students tried to prevent other students from going to school but it hadn't been declared a holiday and the police had been called and there was some conflict out there between the police and the students and several people got hurt.

Joan Beifuss- Did you know about that when the march started?

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- No I didn't know about it. It wouldn't have changed my actions during the march I just heard about it later. That was evidently part of the violence that disrupted on Beale St. These students were now getting back at the police who were aggravating them at least as a result of their (muffled) early in the day.

Joan Beifuss- Were there police nearby?

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- I found one policemen who was nearby but at that time I thought he made a good decision to try to not get into that himself because he would have been badly hurt and not (muffled) either tried to stop this looting in this one particular area.

Joan Beifuss- So the march started to proceed forward while he breaking is going on the side?

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- This is one store, was the first store and where they started momentarily but shortly afterwards then the pawn shop on the other side of the street was also broken and looting there. Then we went on to Main St. and as soon as we turned on Main St. we could see that it was going to continue, so the leaders of the march in just a few minutes saw what was happening and from the sound truck which was accompanying alongside of us, they first of all they tried to

get the young people who were breaking the windows to stop and then they called a halt to the march and directed everybody to turn around and proceed back to the Clayborne Temple and there they would decide what the next move would be. Meanwhile the police went into action and so people began getting maced and tear gassed and getting hurt with sticks and cuffs. There was a great deal of rock throwing and so there was a general disperse, it just broke into a violent mob and a conflict between the police and the authorities and whoever was involved. The whole reaction, some innocent personas got hurt and there were other cases where there was unnecessary pushing and clubbing and tear gassing and macing. Where the individual responsibility lies it depends upon interpretation.

Joan Beifuss- So what happened to you and Father Greenspun?

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- Well in, I lost sight of Father Greenspun and I know he lost sight of me because when we saw that it would be a violent outbreak, momentarily it was a local civil war, there was no actual shooting.

Joan Beifuss- Were the people around you shouting or anything?

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- Much shouting, yes, and things were being said. Just expressions of hatred and trying to control the situation. Police were doing the job they thought they had to do and you know there are cases, emotions rampid....

Joan Beifuss- Monsignor were you pushed at all by anybody?

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- No, I was dressed as a priest in my clerical garb and collar and could be seen (muffled) at one time I was glad I had some identification because seeing that just everybody there was responsible for what was happening it was synthetic with the strikers, sympathetic with the people who (muffled) because of the strike rather. So controlling a mob that was disrupting, but we were identified as I said, several times I thought I was going to be shot and it turned out to be one of those tear bomb missiles came flying at me and it landed right at my feet. The fumes and the gas it does hurt and it makes you cry and just to know that something has happened of course, the police are all around me and I am right in the middle of the group from time to time I would cross one side of the street to another and try to get away from the crowds so I would enable the police to do what they thought was necessary and if they would come after me as an individual I would at least have some time to discuss the matter with him. If you are in a crowd you can't discuss things, (muffled). It is too dangerous first of all and the police have (muffled). Rocks and sticks and clubs and they had gas masks on they were protected in that respect.

Joan Beifuss- Were you trying to get back down Beale St?

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- I wanted to get back to St. Patrick's you know St. Patrick's is right there next to Clayborne Temple, that is where I started from. We were not permitted to go, several times we would make a move and the policemen would give you a signal not to go and just to stay and go a certain direction. I didn't want to go and the directions they wanted to go so I was just standing waiting until I

had a chance to have some discussion with one of them when he come near. They didn't pursue me in any direction as far as I was concerned on grounds of recognition. They saw who I was and (muffled) my position and I was very grateful. One young policemen came by and I knew him personally and he said father this is going to be bad, it is going to be pretty rough you are in a dangerous situation here so you better get under cover. So I thanked him and said you do the same. Be careful. Finally we got back to St. Patrick's.

Joan Beifuss- Now how did you get back you didn't go back down Beale St.?

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- I went back down Linden, I went down to Linden.

Joan Beifuss- Was it pretty clear on Linden at the time?

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- No it was bad down that way also. A lot of trouble in that area also.

Unknown Female Interviewer- But you did get back to St. Patrick's?

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- I finally got back to St. Patrick's and things were, there was a lot of excitement around Clayborne Temple. Police cars were going here and there and (muffled). It was evident that the police at least for the time they had things under control and most people were seeking shelter and some of them had been taken in by the authorities.

Unknown Female Interviewer- Did you try to get back down to Clayborne Temple or did you stay at St. Patrick's?

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- There was no purpose in going to Clayborne Temple as far as I could see because people were in the temple and it was just crowded there as it was. (muffled).

Joan Beifuss- Were you in the actual church of St. Patrick's or were you in the rectory?

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- I was in and out of the church and in the rectory. One boy came in there who had been cut very badly and saying he needed one of the sisters, sister Thomas (muffled). And couple of the boys were with him and I took him into St. Patrick's kitchen and we gave him first aide and wrapped up his, and put some (Muffled) gave him first aide treatment and stopped the bleeding with a tourniquet and clothes and with instruction (muffled) until he got to the hospital. So then the sisters a group of the sisters were there in a car and one of these boys went with the wounded boy who cut his hand they took him over to the hospital. I told him to go to John Gaston first, if he couldn't get treatment there take him to St. Joes hospital emergency and so they did. I didn't hear any more about that particular case but he was cut pretty badly on the hand but we gave him first aide as much as we could with the tools that we had and also the (muffled) available.

Joan Beifuss- Who else was back at St. Patrick's? Did some of the marchers come back to St. Patrick's?

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- Most of them went to the temple well some of the marchers did, some of the sisters and some of the priests were there and some of the lay people were around there. They are so close together the two yards are adjacent you know. Then on it was just a question of clearing up and then the curfew went into existence of the night and the next couple weeks.

Joan Beifuss- Well now did you go to hear Dr. King the, when he came back in town for the march, the second march?

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- No I didn't hear that not for the second march. I heard on the radio and gave exertions talking and talking.

Joan Beifuss- Ok now well monsignor after the so called mini riot and then the 5 more days that preceded Dr. King's death, did you make any special efforts during that period, it appeared to be terribly serious at that time after the mini riot was there anything you felt you could do at that point?

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- Well there was nothing really to be down because I think everyone was aware that it was a serious situation and it was so serious that many, it was revealed that Dr. King was going to return for another march thought it was imprudent and unwise he should come back but there were others that supported his decisions and though it was just and also proper and that was his commendment and dedication to a cause. He was a fearless man, it just depended on how you looked at him.

Joan Beifuss- Did any of your negro parishioners come and talk to you about Dr. King coming back a second time?

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- No, other than just general conversation it was no special meeting or like that. Each one would express his own opinion as we talked about it. Some thought he was alright.

Joan Beifuss- Ok now was there another meeting of the ministerial association the day before Dr. King's death? Some kind of a meeting of white clergy and negro clergy on that day?

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- Oh I think there were small meetings I mean just general constantly they never agreed to discontinue the few groups that form a meeting I am well aware of the facts of a full association meetings that we had spoken about that ge2tting the two groups together, the two associations. We would have a united front unity of thought and purpose and action. We all were aware that it was (muffled) getting worse all the time.

Joan Beifuss- Now how did you find out that Dr. King had been shot?

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- We were having a priests association meeting, a study program, in the school auditorium that evening and we had finished our program and were having dinner and an announcement came to us at that time.

Someone...one of the priests who had on a receiver came over late in the evening and it had been reported that he just heard the announcement on the radio.

Joan Beifuss- That Dr. King was shot or that he was dead?

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- That he was shot.

Joan Beifuss- So what happened then?

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- First we tried to inquire if we could get through to the hospital to see what his condition was, lines were so busy. We finally learned that it was serious he was critical and later that he was dead.

Joan Beifuss- What was the reaction of the priests at the many? Or how many were there?

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- It was shock, and just I think regret, sincere concern about the situation that would lead to such a tragedy. Some of us would say unfortunate and tragic occurrence. (muffled) one man (muffled) and a true evaluation the event and conditions led up to all the situation. Who is to blame is difficult if not impossible to determine, a man shot and killed Dr. King. He was the instrument of course of the...I don't think....he was not the representative of the community in Memphis and even though I think there was a difference of opinion I think about the strike, and even race relations but I think that he was carrying out the judgment of the people in Memphis (muffled) this individual tonight.

Joan Beifuss- Was there any kind of a prayer service for Dr. King that night by the priests or the community?

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- We all at that time we all offered a prayer first for his recovery and then for (muffled). The next morning masses were offered (muffled). Intentions for his benefit and also for the needs of the people in a time like this a tragedy and violence and no peace.

Joan Beifuss- Did you go to the meeting he next morning that Friday morning that the ministers went down at St. Mary's where they had this statement?

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- Went to give to the mayor?

Joan Beifuss- Yes.

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- Yes. We went to, that was a procession not a march we were just proceeding peacefully, law abiding citizens we stop at the red lights and watch both ways when we step out into the street. So we called the mayor and had

an appointment and force our way in to see him. Dean Demmick lead the procession. He was a real crusader, he had the procession cross out all by himself. Always within calling distance however, he knew we were there giving full support.

Unknown Female Interviewer- About how many ministers proceeded down to the city office.

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- 100 or 150 I would think or more, it is either (muffled) it was a good number and an impressive group. And we were coming by patrol cars but we were on the walk and these were on the street fortunately we didn't have the inference to turn over any car and they didn't have to mace us.

Joan Beifuss- Was it at that meeting that morning at the cathedral that it was the incident of the white ministers kneeling in front of the black minister and asking his forgiveness that...

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- Yes, was that Father Veron?

Joan Beifuss- I don't know?

Unknown Female Interviewer- Someone did mention the name Father Veron.

Joan Beifuss- Might have been Father Veron.

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- I think he did but he was again expressing feelings that we all had, it was a symbolic action.

Joan Beifuss- Yes what did the black minister do when he did that is what I wondered about?

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- Well I think he felt complimented and he felt it was not to him it was to his people and to the cause. He was grateful he felt that here was a man that had courage to speak and who was heartsick to use that expression with real sorrow. The sacrifice that had to be offered to bring peace and to bring harmony on the races and to the community in support of the cause and justice and human rights, he was very much impressed because we all were. We all said amen.

Joan Beifuss- So what was your impression of the meeting in the mayor's office?

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- I thought it was fruitful it was again, different individuals various ones spoke and ministers spoke and Rabbi Wax spoke. Each one with his own temperament and feelings and his way of expression. The mayor I think was courteous and he was sympathetic but I think he was impressed but he would not change in his attitude or his intentions because he felt he was in a position of representation and he was doing what he thought was right all along, he regretted it happened but at the time he didn't see where that would change his opinion as long as that was just in his mind and it was right.

Joan Beifuss- Did his reaction change at all when Rabbi Wax was speaking?

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- I don't think, he was Rabbi was more emotional and probably was, I want to say his voice rose and he was very earnest in his say his talk. Speaking about the laws of god taking precedence over the laws of man. And that was the way he interpreted it.

Joan Beifuss- Now was that in the statement you had drawn up for the mayor about the laws of god taking precedence?

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- No that was Rabbi's own personal talk.

Unknown Female Interviewer- Do you recall who drafted the actual working of the statement you presented to the mayor?

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- I think it was group, Rabbi's committee got to express what has to be done.

Joan Beifuss- Monsignor looking back now after it is all over is there anything that you think could have been done differently?

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- The strike could have been settled in the first day, that would have been a help.

Joan Beifuss- But how? Can you?

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- Well any men who were in responsible positions to come to some kind of agreement. The mayor and the council together or the mayor alone, the council taking a different position if they are permitted to do so and have done so. Good memories of the union leaders presenting the case somewhat differently than they did and avoiding creating an almost angry attitude which was evident almost the first speech or series of speeches and dialogue that took place between the union leaders and the mayor and the council so that...

Joan Beifuss- Do you see that the ministerial association could have taken any different tact than it did?

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- No I think they did all that they could and did well as far as I can see. I wasn't on special committees and all I was just an observer and I think they did what they could and tried to do constantly what was called for at the time.

Joan Beifuss- Is it your feeling that since Dr. King's death there has been any change in the racial climate of the city?

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- In some areas there has been a great change, the churches are becoming more involved or getting more involved in comparative people. We don't realize the race relations, that is a question of justice and rights. Human dignity all these things are involved for people can't live, where they want to live, where they want to work, they get a just wage and certain privileges of all people of the community and I think this has come to the attention I think very clearly to church men now because before we thought this was for community

management or workers or unions or youth directors, recreational people, various civic concerns with the church is concerned, I think that has definitely changed. We are contained to how (muffled) smaller groups in the clergy and churches area, ecumenical programs. That is going to help a great deal, we are trying to emphasize a need in all of these affairs where people are involved, people with weaknesses they have (muffled) opinions. As we mentioned before emotions and reason is such a conflict. Emotions will use you over reason.

Joan Beifuss- Did you notice a lot more catholic clergy in the memorial march for Dr. King for instance than had been in the first march when the bishop marched?

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- Yes there was a few more but I don't think there were a great many more but there were more. I don't think too many, that didn't impress me too much the numbers that were there. But the same ones I knew were interested in human affairs in the council problem I think that many people don't think a march has great value and they don't want to expose themselves that much.

Unknown Female Interviewer- Ok well is there anything else you would like to get on the tape for history, a last word?

Monsignor Joseph Leppert- I am trying to promote a crusade of prayer for peace and I am using the prayer of St. Francis, distributor of St. Francis for peace and passing it by and feel and think the elements, the contents of changing people's thinking and by the grace of god that will be provided. We need supernatural help with this. Help them to control their own emotions and feelings rather than getting into these (muffled) and natural tendencies they would attempt to be virtuous and I think you have to change the thinking of people and the man is a rational animal. Unless he controls himself by reason he is going to be controlled by his instincts and recent (muffled) is not sufficient at times because we need the grace of god we have to think as god thinks about things and about people. If we think with god then we go ask god to make us issue some of his peace or his hatred that we may so love and (muffled). There is doubt and faith but there is hope, there is dark and there is light, sadness and joy. It is god's to help us and trying to, well to console people rather than be consoled to understand them rather than be understood. Love them rather than to be loved, you think of god giving to us as he has, the value he has placed on human life and the dignity and the honor he has given to the men and see what he has given to us and we will try to give in return. It is giving that we receive (muffled) prayer. It is in pardoning that we are pardoned and it is in dying we go to enough eternal life. I think if we can get enough people praying that prayer there will be a great change, so a little effort that we try to make or a little influence that we could bring to bear and get others to accept this as many do now that this is a prayer not only (muffled) everyone prays this prayer and they are fairly happy to hear it being publicized, I hope it will bear fruit in this community but the fruits of our prayers and efforts will be extended to not only help peace in Memphis but in Arkansas but peace in the world, peace in Vietnam, peace in (muffled), peace everywhere. In my opinion can only come through the prince of peace, through god being accepted by men and by men becoming subject of god with the god of love.

Joan Beifuss- Ok.

(Tape End)