

**Thieves, Queers and Fruit Jars:
The Community and Media Responses to the Fire
At the Up Stairs Lounge**
by Clayton Delery

It was a grisly time in New Orleans.

In November of 1972, a fire had broken out in the Rault Center, a seventeen-story office building in the Central Business District. The fire started on the fifteenth floor, spreading rapidly. Although between three and four hundred people made it to the safety of the street, many people on the top three floors were trapped (Ball 1, 10). Eight men were able to get to the roof where, incredibly, they were rescued by a private helicopter pilot who had responded to distress calls. He lifted these men off the roof a few at a time, bringing the last two to safety only minutes before the roof caved in (Treadway 1,16).

Others were not so lucky. Five women in a beauty parlor on the fifteenth floor stood in a window, waving and screaming for help, until the fire spread into their room. Faced with certain death by fire, or an uncertain fate if they jumped, they leapt from the window, falling to the roof of a neighboring office building eight floors below. Three of the five did not survive the fall (Lee and LaFourcade 1, 5).

The six deaths in the Rault Center included these three women, a man on the fourteenth floor who died of smoke inhalation, and two other men who escaped the fire at first, but who reentered the building to try to rescue others (“Rault Tragedy Claims Sixth Victim” 6).

The spectacular tragedy elicited an outpouring of sympathy and grief. Mayor Moon Landrieu was out of town at the time of the fire. When he heard the news, he held a press conference in Indiana, and ended his trip a day early to come home (“Landrieu Leaves” 1). The day after the fire, he said that the dead were “mourned not only by those who knew them, but by New Orleanians in all walks of life.” On behalf of the city, he offered

“heartfelt prayers for those who were injured,” and thanks to all those who risked their lives to save others (“Mayor Offers Sympathy, Prayers” 11). The next day, Governor Edwin Edwards drove to the city from Baton Rouge. While touring the Rault, he, too, issued a statement of sympathy to the survivors and the families of all the victims (Ball 1).

In the early 1970’s, the New Orleans area was about 47 percent Catholic.¹ Not quite a majority, perhaps, but a very substantial plurality. Thus, while the Pope is sometimes known as the Bishop of Rome, it isn’t too much of a stretch to call the city’s Archbishop the Pope of New Orleans. Philip Hannan took his duties as Archbishop very seriously, writing a weekly column for the archdiocesan newspaper, *The Clarion Herald*, and issuing public statements in other papers and on the television news when significant events occurred. The day after the Rault Center blaze, he issued a press release in which he, like the mayor and the governor, offered condolences and sympathy to the survivors as well as to the families and friends of all the victims. He also requested “that prayers be recited in all our churches, begging God’s mercy on the deceased and His grace and support of their families as well as of those hospitalized by the fire” (“Condolences to Victims’ Families” 3).

Less than six weeks later, tragedy struck again. On the morning of Sunday, January 7, a young black militant by the name of Mark Essex infiltrated the downtown Howard Johnson’s Hotel at the corner of Loyola Avenue and Gravier Street. Essex was a former member of the New York chapter of the Black Panthers, and was on mission to kill as many white people—especially as many white police—as he could. He climbed the stairs to the eighteenth floor of the hotel, where he killed two young newlyweds from Virginia. He then set

fire to their room and several other rooms to create a disturbance, shooting at guests and hotel personnel as they tried to escape, and at policemen and firefighters as they tried to put out the flames and rescue guests.

The police eventually pursued Essex to the roof, where he took cover behind a concrete structure housing mechanical equipment. With nearly one hundred police on the scene and a Marine helicopter sweeping the area, Essex had no chance of escape (Segura "100 Policemen Fire at Sniper" 1). He finally emerged from cover at around ten o'clock, at which point the police shot him dozens, perhaps hundreds of times.

Based on eyewitness reports, police believed that other terrorists were involved. For the next seventeen hours, they periodically charged the bunker and fired upon it, retreating when officers were wounded by what they believed to be fire from Essex's accomplices, but what was actually friendly fire or police bullets that ricocheted off the bunker (Segura "Incident Begins in Chaos" 6; see also Lafourcade 5). When it was all over, there was a total of eight dead, including Deputy Police Superintendent Louis Sirgo, two patrolmen, the young married couple, the manager and assistant manager of the Howard Johnson's hotel,² and Mark Essex himself, who turned out to be acting alone.

Once again, the community rallied behind the victims. Charity Hospital was overrun with people eager to donate blood for the wounded, and so the hospital called upon the 4010 Army Hospital Reserve Unit for assistance. Other hospitals and blood banks opened their doors to the willing donors as well (LaPlace 2). Mayor Moon Landrieu issued public statements of sympathy for the victims and their families. He declared a city-wide period of mourning until January 14, the date of the last victim's funeral ("N.O. Mourning is Proclaimed" 9). In honor of the police killed in the incident, Mayor Landrieu started a tragedy fund for the wives and families of all police and fire personnel killed in the line of duty, effective from

January 1, 1973, and continuing in perpetuity (Lewis 1-2).

Archbishop Hannan himself celebrated the funeral mass of two of the three slain policemen: Deputy Superintendent Louis Sirgo, and Patrolman Paul Persigo. *The Times Picayune* covered this event in detail, and a photograph on the front page of the January 11, 1973 edition shows Hannan embracing Sirgo's widow after the funeral service. The *Clarion Herald's* Executive Editor, Father Elmo L. Romagosa, wrote a lengthy piece, documenting all of the Archbishop's participation in the crisis: how he "spent almost nine hours... at Charity Hospital as a shepherd consoling his flock"; how he "went in person to the homes of Mrs. Louis Sirgo and Mrs. Paul Persigo to comfort them in the loss of their husbands"; how he even offered himself to the mayor and the police superintendent as an intermediary or an exchange for hostages being held by the snipers, an offer that was respectfully vetoed by both men, and which was ultimately unnecessary, since no hostages were ever taken (1, 3).

Given that race relations in the city are historically charged, and given that Essex was a black man out to kill white people, it is surprising that the incident did not ignite a racial crisis in the city ("Hate Attitude Noted by Cleric" 1, 19). Perhaps some of the credit is due to the Archbishop, who used his regular weekly column in the *Clarion* to offer up a prayer. Stating that "every member of this community [is] united in common tragedy," the prayer goes on to ask God "may we stand as a single family of every race, every culture, every religion; may we stand as brothers united under the fatherhood of God, dedicated to fulfilling His will. Give us Your strength to overcome the evil of this tragedy as you overcame death by the Resurrection of Your Son" (1).

Less than six months later, an arsonist set a fire in the stairwell of a gay bar called the Up Stairs Lounge. The fire quickly spread up the stairs and into the lounge itself. Phoned into the fire

department at 7:56, and extinguished just eighteen minutes later, the blaze was as brief as it was ferocious. In those eighteen minutes, it killed twenty-nine people and sent thirteen to the hospital, where three more would later die. All but one of the dead were gay men. This fire still stands as the single deadliest fire-related incident in the history of New Orleans, and it's worth noting that the death toll from the Up Stairs fire was *double* that of the Rault Center and the Howard Johnson's incidents *combined*. Faced with disaster of such magnitude, what was Archbishop Hannan's response?

Publicly, there wasn't any. He did not go to Charity Hospital to console the families of the dead or dying. He did not help break the news of a son's death to any mother. He did not write a prayer, urging "every member of the community...to stand as a single family," nor did he ask for God's mercy on the souls of the deceased. He didn't even issue a press release. Given his habit for making public statements, this was a rather stark omission. The mainstream news outlets either didn't notice, or chose not to report it. Only Bill Rushton, writing for an alternative weekly called the *Vieux Carré Courier*, was willing to confront the Archdiocese. He reports phoning the Archdiocesan Human Relations Committee to ask for a statement, only to be told that "they had seen no reason to issue any sort of statement on the matter and that they have no plans to issue one." Pressing forward, Rushton called the Chancery office and asked to speak to the Archbishop himself. The priest who answered the phone responded to Rushton's inquiries with long, embarrassed pauses, followed by evasive answers, but still made it very clear that the Archbishop would not be coming to the phone (6).

Though the Archbishop made no public statement, he apparently made some private ones. Anecdotal reports circulated at the time, and still circulate today, indicating that he had forbidden the priests in the archdiocese from conducting Catholic funeral services for the victims, or burying them in Catholic cemeteries. It is known that some of the

Catholic victims of the fire were denied Catholic services, though it remains unclear whether individual priests made the decisions, or whether they were acting upon Archbishop Hannan's orders.³ Archbishop Hannan is now retired, though still active in church and community affairs. Given a recent chance to respond to this charge, he declined to comment.⁴

The Governor's office was as non-responsive as the Archdiocese, neither issuing a statement, nor responding to direct appeals for one (Perry 94). Nor was anything forthcoming from Mayor Landrieu. As was the case with the Rault Center fire, the mayor was out of town when the fire at the Up Stairs Lounge took place. In contrast to his response to the Rault Center, he did not hold a press conference from a remote location, nor did he abort his trip to come home and oversee the tragedy. Again, the mainstream news outlets made no mention of the conspicuous silence, but Bill Rushton of the *Courier* was willing to press the case. He documents multiple calls to the mayor's office, during which he was repeatedly told that the mayor was out of town, that he had made no statement on the Up Stairs to date, but that "he *might* say something at his press conference July 11," (emphasis added) which meant that his earliest statement would come seventeen days after the fire (Rushton 1). When the Mayor was finally questioned about the fire, and, in particular, questioned about the failure of the major power brokers to acknowledge its victims and their families, all he had to say was that he was "not aware of any lack of concern in the community" (Townsend "Black Momma/White Momma" 1).

Perhaps he had not been reading the paper, where the city's own chief of police, Major Henry Morris, said that it would be difficult to identify the bodies because the police didn't know if the identification found on the victims even belonged to them. Elaborating on that comment, he said, "Some thieves hung out there and you know this was a queer bar" (Nolan and Segura 1). As it happens,

false identification was not a major difficulty in identifying the bodies. The little identification that was found belonged to people who died in the fire, but most bodies had no identification at all; it had been burned away, along with their clothing, their fingerprints, and their faces.⁵

Still, the dubious and prejudicial assertion that all gays, or at least large numbers of them, were in the habit of carrying false identification, was picked up by several news outlets, which passed it on to their readers and viewers without question.

The remark surfaces, for example, in a national broadcast by Bruce Hall of CBS News. This news broadcast is available on YouTube today. It includes a clip of New Orleans newsman, Bill Elders, as he speaks to two survivors who would only consent to the interview if he did not use their names or show their faces. Having managed to escape from the inferno, they were too afraid of hostile reactions from employers, families or townspeople to risk revealing their identity on television. Several people who used to go to the Up Stairs Lounge, who witnessed the fire, and who lost friends there, say today that one of the worst parts of the experience was going to work the next day and having to remain silent about their pain, because they were not out on the job (Butler; see also Marcel).

This was more caution than paranoia. Citizens of New Orleans were not overrunning Charity Hospital, volunteering to give blood. Instead, the Up Stairs fire became an occasion to vent blatant homophobia. One gay man, for example, went to a government office the very next day to conduct some personal business. The clerk waiting on him perceived he was gay, and with a look of hatred on her face, she said, “You should have died in that fire!” (Townsend “Miss Fury” 1). Other people were less confrontational, but were circulating jokes that revealed a great deal of deep-seated bigotry. One of them was:

Q: What major tragedy happened in New Orleans on June 24?

A: That only 30 faggots died—not more!

Another joke managed to blend set-up and punch line into one: Did you hear the one about the flaming queens? (Townsend “Bill Richardson” 5). Still another made reference to a children’s cereal popular at the time, and said that the fire had turned a bunch of fairies into Crispy Critters (Raybourne). Probably the most wide-spread joke had to do with the problem of disposing of the bodies of over thirty gay men. The solution? Bury them in fruit jars (Townsend “Bill Richardson” 1; see also Perry 88).

This last joke, disgusting as it is, touched on a very real issue: Who would memorialize the victims, and where would this ceremony take place? The Reverend Troy Perry, founder of the gay-inclusive ministry, The Metropolitan Community Church, flew into New Orleans from Los Angeles the day after the fire, accompanied by several other MCC ministers and gay activists from across the country. Their goals were to give comfort to the survivors of the victims, and to take up the leadership role that nobody in the city was willing or able to assume. There was little organized gay leadership in the city at that time, and some of the people most likely to have accepted that role had died in the fire. Perry and the other MCC ministers worked with a local Episcopalian priest, Father Bill Richardson, and put together a hastily organized service at St. George’s Episcopal Church. This memorial took place on Monday, June 25, exactly twenty-four hours after the fire. Father Richardson knew his conservative parishioners might not welcome his participation in the memorial, but was still unprepared for the level of hostility he encountered. The local Episcopal bishop received over one hundred telephone calls in protest, many demanding Father Richardson’s resignation, and Richardson himself received both hate calls and hate mail (Townsend “Bill Richardson” 3).

And that was all due to a hastily organized event with little advance publicity, and only about fifty people in attendance (Nolan and Segura 1). Many people who lost friends, family or lovers in the Up Stairs fire had not been aware of the service at St. George's, and as the long process of identifying the bodies took place, new names were being released each day.

Troy Perry called church after church, minister after minister, asking that they be allowed to hold another memorial for the Up Stairs victims. He was repeatedly turned down. After several days the Reverend Edward Kennedy, a Methodist Minister, agreed to host, and volunteered to be a concelebrant. The church was St. Mark's Methodist on North Rampart, and the service was Sunday, July 1, exactly one week after the fire (Perry 95-96).

Kennedy's bishop, the Reverend Finis Crutchfield, attended the service as a show of support, and he encouraged other local Methodist ministers to attend as well (Winn). In all there were nearly two hundred people in attendance. Some were survivors of the fire, some had lost lovers, friends or relatives, and some were merely there to acknowledge the vast loss of life. After a week of shock, mourning, pain, homophobic jokes, hostile clergy, intrusive media coverage and indifferent public officials, there was, at last, a moment when people could sit peacefully together and share a common grief.

Near the end of the service, a message was passed to Troy Perry as he stood at the altar. It said that a group of television journalists with news cameras was waiting outside the church to cover the service, and to film people as they left. Perry announced that there was a rear exit which would enable people to leave without being filmed doing so. There was an anxious moment as the mourners looked to each other, trying to decide what to do. Many of the mourners were gay, lesbian or transgendered, and many were still in the closet. Should they go out the front? Would it be better to sneak out the back?

The tension broke as a woman, who has never been identified, stood up and shouted, "I'm not ashamed of who I am or who my friends are. I came in the front door, and I'm damn sure going out that way."⁶

She had made a collective decision. In stark contrast to just one week earlier, when survivors of the fire consented to a television interview only if they were filmed from behind, the entire congregation rose and walked out the front door to face the cameras.

End Notes

¹According to the *Official Catholic Directory* (2008 edition), in 1970, the Archdiocese of New Orleans included 1,380,400 people, of whom 655,285 were Catholic. The Archdiocese included the city, the suburbs, and many surrounding rural towns. These last, especially if in Cajun areas, were likely to be overwhelmingly Catholic. The city itself would have been more diverse, but Catholics were still the largest single religious denomination, by a wide margin.

²Frank Schneider, the Assistant manager, died on the scene; Walter Collins, the Manager, was severely wounded and lingered in the hospital for several weeks before dying.

³Paul Killgore, for example, had a lover named Frank Scarsone, now deceased. Scarsone was from an Italian Catholic family in New Orleans, and his mother received a tearful phone call from a friend whose son died in the fire, and who was not being permitted to give him a Catholic burial (Personal Interview. August 9, 2009). Slylar Fein, a New Orleans artist whose installation on the Up Stairs Lounge had great popular and critical acclaim, recalls viewers coming to see his exhibit who told him stories about how they had heard of the Archbishop's prohibition, and how, even at the time, they felt the prohibition was wrong (Personal Interview. June 4, 2009). The Reverend Troy Perry tells a similar story in his memoir, *Don't Be Afraid Anymore* (95-96).

⁴I contacted Archbishop Hannan by mail in August of 2009, informing him that I was writing a book about the fire at the Up Stairs Lounge, and that I would be including mention of the anecdotal report that he had forbidden Catholic rites to the victims. I offered him a chance to offer any comments, corrections or clarifications, and said that I would include those in the book. The letter was delivered August 12, 2009. To date, I have not received a response.

⁵Information derived from the autopsy protocol reports on file in the Louisiana Division of the main branch of the New Orleans Public Library. See NOPD General Case Report, file F-2149-73.

⁶Toni Pizanie, who attended the memorial, believes the woman who made the statement, was

Charlene Schneider, a woman who a few years later would own the lesbian bar, Charlene's (Personal Interview. June 1, 2009). Stewart Butler, who also attended the memorial service, does not recall it being Charlene, but says that "It would certainly have been in her character" (Personal Interview. July 2 200). Paul Killgore says that he saw the woman clearly, and says that it was definitely not Charlene Schneider (Personal Interview. August 9, 2009). Charlene Schneider herself is dead, and cannot comment. In the years after the fire, Toni Pizanie, Charlene Schneider, Stewart Butler and Paul Killgore would all become prominent gay activists in New Orleans.