

# The Spirit of Selma

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Photo by Marc Delmonico  
 Congressional delegation prays during 40th anniversary march from Selma to Montgomery

Our Catholic tradition has always had a prominent place for the tradition of the pilgrimage, and through these journeys, we are called to re-enact, re-new, and re-member our own call to personal and social transformation in the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Over spring break this year, I was blessed to be part of The Faith & Politics Institute's Seventh Congressional Civil Rights Pilgrimage to Alabama.

The Faith & Politics Institute is a nonprofit interfaith organization located on Capitol Hill, where I did my pastoral internship in the summer of 2004. Through outreach to members of Congress, congressional staff and others in public service, the Institute seeks to fulfill its mission of "providing occasions for moral reflection and spiritual community to political leaders, drawing universal wisdom from a range of religious traditions."

Under the leadership of civil rights luminary Congressman John Lewis (D-GA), this year's delegation included 36 members of Congress, including Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-TN) and Sen. Jon Corzine (D-NJ), as well as Rep. Chris Van Hollen (D-MD). We also were accompanied by other luminaries from "the Movement," along with Fr. Daniel Coughlin, chaplain of the U.S. House of Representatives.

During our visits to a number of historic civil rights locations, we listened spell-bound to the sacred stories of the Movement. We were also able to listen to first hand accounts from journalists and photographers whose coverage enabled the message of civil rights to reach a national audience and to drive home the heinous injustices of racism. I noted with particular interest the role the churches played in the civil rights struggle. It was clear that, during the Movement, faith and politics not only went together, but that both were needed to maintain courage in the face of the towering structures of white power.

Finally, our visit to AME Brown Chapel of Selma and our participation in the Sunday morning worship there was particularly poignant, because it was from that sanctuary that the first historic march from Selma to Montgomery began forty years ago. That march ended in bloodshed a few miles

away on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, as Alabama State Police beat back the nonviolent marchers with billy clubs and tear gas. Among those beaten was Congressman Lewis. His eloquent stories of his early association with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Freedom Rides, as well as his recollections of the fear he and his fellow marchers felt on that bridge forty years ago continue to resound in my heart. Their courage, and the courage of so many others – black and white – that we commemorated on that day made this experience a true pilgrimage. I was proud to share in the Spirit of Selma as our delegation joined 15,000 others to once again cross the Pettus Bridge – a reminder that we have come a long way, but that we also have more bridges to cross in the cause of justice in our nation and our world.

The purpose of a pilgrimage is to raise questions about one's spiritual journey and to provide the impetus to discover the answers in the depths of one's heart through conversation with God and others. I have returned from this historic event with questions about how to share what I have seen and heard, how to encourage efforts within the Catholic community to confront, both theologically and pastorally, the issues of racism that persist in our society and our church, and how to deepen our church's ability to foster the type of faith that, in the words of Congressman Lewis, emboldens people to "get in the way" for the sake of justice, even in the face of opposition. ❖