

**O God Forgive Us**  
**by Suzanne Noonan**

As parishioners and visitors come to Church next Sunday, they will surely note a large handsome plaque hanging on the fence close by the front steps. The inscription on this plaque will read:

*This church, dedicated in 1851, was for many years a segregated space. Black parishioners, enslaved and free, then numbered as much as a third of the congregation.*

*Until the 1880's, Black parishioners had to sit in the church's side and rear balconies. The main floor was for White parishioners. After the side balconies were removed, the rear balcony was expanded and Black parishioners had to sit there during Mass, separated by a curtain from the choir and taking Communion after the White parishioners.*

*Hundreds of Black parishioners left Holy Trinity in the 1920s and founded Epiphany Catholic Church in Georgetown because of the ongoing segregation and discrimination they found here.*

*O God, forgive us for these sins of racism and the pain they have caused. Guide us from repentance to reconciliation.*

*Approved by the  
Holy Trinity Parish Pastoral Council  
Dedicated June 19, 2024*

The plaque recognizes and repents of the ill treatment endured for so many years by our Black former Black parishioners. It marks one more milestone on our parish journey to discover and understand the lessons of slavery, segregation, and race which are deeply embedded in Holy Trinity's past. The journey is being led by our Holy Trinity History Committee, established in 2020, the year of George Floyd, to provide a source of education – to our parishioners and others – on this often painful but very real history.

Our hope is that, by throwing light on the past, we will open doors to reflection on that past, and help us discern its implication for our present and our future.

On Wednesday, June 19 (Juneteenth), Father Gillespie will lead a Dedication Ceremony beginning with Mass at 5:30 in Saint Ignatius Chapel, followed by a procession to the front of the Church where the plaque will be blessed and dedicated. All are welcome and encouraged to attend. A reception will follow in the Chapel gardens.

A separate display on a similar topic is currently in the design phase and will be installed later in the summer outside St. Ignatius Chapel, in the hallway leading to the Parish Center. Until 1851, the Chapel was our parish church – and it, too, was a segregated space.

Black parishioners, enslaved and free, who made up about a third of the congregation, had to enter the church by an outside staircase, sit in balconies and take Communion after the White parishioners. This second display will tell the fascinating stories of some of these African Americans – people like David Thomas and his wife Philis who were married here, the free Black sisters Lucy and Liddy Butler, Anne Marie Becraft and the many generations of the Belt family who were part of the parish for over 100 years.

To date, the work of the History Committee has borne much fruit. In addition to the new plaques, the parish blog, Cura Virtualis, hosts 24 deeply researched articles (with more to come), as well as livestreams of several Committee sponsored events. In April 2022, in conjunction with the Ignatian Spirituality and Prayer Mission, it sponsored an emotional and prayerful Pilgrimage which began in Holy Rood Cemetery and ended at the Church, with participants experiencing how it felt to sit in the formerly segregated balcony. Also, it has hung a commemorative poster describing Holy Trinity's first pastor outside the Neale Room, and presented several well-attended public programs in partnership with Georgetown neighbors and organizations to mark Black Catholic History Month in November and Black History Month in February.

Particularly gratifying is the growing connection and collaboration in research into Black Catholic family histories with members of Epiphany, St. Augustine's, and Visitation.

Parish sacramental records and archives, housed at Georgetown University, have been a primary source of information about our African-American fellow parishioners. Notably, Georgetown University's own role in the injustice of slavery and the legacy of segregation have been one of the motivating factors in examining Holy Trinity's past.

We are most grateful for the rich trove of information generously shared with us by the descendants of some of those dedicated souls who organized the exodus of Black parishioners from Holy Trinity and helped found Epiphany Church in Georgetown.

We invite you to join us in praying that God will, indeed, lead us from repentance to reconciliation, and we hope to see you at the blessing and dedication of the ~~first~~ plaque on Juneteenth.

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Transcribed by Peter J. Albert.