

Walking in Our Forebears' Footsteps

by Catherine Heinhold

The morning of April 5th [2022] was beautiful and bright as some 50 parishioners and guests gathered at Holy Rood Cemetery to begin "In Our Forebears' Footsteps: A Pilgrimage to Remember Our Forgotten Black Parishioners." This half-day Ignatian Year event brought our pilgrims from Holy Rood Cemetery to Holy Trinity Church, with stops in the neighborhood. The pilgrimage focused on our Black parishioners who once made up at least 1/3 of the parish. Some were enslaved, some were free, and in 1923, more than 350 of them left to form Epiphany Parish because of ongoing segregation they faced here. Holy Trinity parishioners were joined by Dorothy and Linda Gray, two descendants of parishioners who left for Epiphany. Both are still Epiphany parishioners, where Linda serves on the parish council.

At Holy Rood Cemetery, Mary Finkbone invoked the blessing of Lucy and Liddy Butler, two free Black women who were godmothers to 65 Black children baptized at Holy Trinity. She asked them to be our godmothers for the day. Pilgrims learned about the Butlers and other families, and about the history of the cemetery. After praying Psalm 13, a psalm of lament ("How long, O Lord?"), pilgrims wandered through the cemetery to seek out gravestones of our parishioners. When the group arrived at Visitation School, Bernie Cook spoke about Catholic efforts to educate Black children, including Anne Marie Becraft's school for Black girls. Walking to Holy Trinity along 36th Street, Peter Albert pointed out houses where Black parishioners used to live, including one where the exodus to Epiphany was planned.

Once the pilgrims had arrived at Holy Trinity Church, Paul Maco told the story of Priscilla Queen, an enslaved Black woman who filed an unsuccessful lawsuit to win her freedom from Holy Trinity's first pastor, Fr. Francis Neale, S.J. Peter Albert explained the history of segregation at Holy Trinity, when Black parishioners had to sit in a separate portion of the balcony, screened off from the choir. Bernie Cook told the story of a young parishioner, heartbroken to be prohibited from participating in the May procession because of her race.

Catherine Heinhold concluded the pilgrimage with prayerful guided contemplation

in the Ignatian tradition. Pilgrims were invited to sit either in the balcony or down below, and imagine the experience of having to sit in a segregated balcony during Mass and wait to receive communion until after White parishioners had received. In conversation with God, they looked for God's invitations to act on their experience of the day. In the discussion that followed the prayer, Linda Gray reflected that the most important part of the day for her was the acknowledgment by today's Holy Trinity parishioners of the segregation and discrimination practiced by the parish in the past.

Feedback from the day has been very positive, and parishioners have expressed interest in learning more and visiting Epiphany Church. We hope to repeat the experience with added stops in the fall. The Pilgrimage planning team included Tania Chomiak-Salvi and Kate Devlin in addition to Bernie, Catherine, Mary, Paul, and Peter.

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