

## Extracts from the Journal of John McElroy, S.J.

by Peter J. Albert

*I urge you, brothers and sisters,  
in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ . . .  
that there be no divisions among you.  
(1 Cor. 1:10)*

Looking back on his service as assistant pastor of Holy Trinity and as president of Georgetown, Fr. John Grassi, S.J. (1775-1849), wrote, "I ought not to pass over in silence the very great consolation which the negroes bring to the missionary; for amongst them, although they are poor slaves and so abject in the eyes of the world, are found chosen souls filled with such beautiful sentiments of true piety, that they move one to tears, and the missionary himself is encouraged to work for the glory of God. The frequent offering of their labors to the Lord, patient endurance of ill-treatment from hard masters, obedience for the love of God, the recitation of the beads when it is possible, these are the devotions chiefly recommended to them, and which they chiefly practise; consequently, Catholic slaves are preferred to all others, because they are more docile and faithful to their masters." (1)

Fr. Grassi's view of enslaved African Americans "as objects of ministry" (2) and his focus on shaping their spiritual practices – "the frequent offering of their labors to the Lord, patient endurance of ill-treatment from hard masters, obedience for the love of God, the recitation of the beads" – while accepting their enslavement, is echoed in granular detail in the diary of his contemporary, Holy Trinity assistant pastor and Georgetown College procurator John McElroy, S.J. (1782-1877).

Born in Ireland, McElroy came to America in 1803. Gifted, according to his biographer, "with a keen business acumen," he soon found employment as a clerk in a general store in Baltimore. He moved the next year to a store in Georgetown, and then, in 1806, began working at Georgetown College, where he rose from clerk to procurator and treasurer. Ordained in 1817, he served as assistant pastor at Holy Trinity from 1817 to 1822 while continuing with his responsibilities at Georgetown College. In 1822 he

was transferred to Frederick, Maryland, where he remained until moving back to Holy Trinity to serve as pastor from 1845 to 1846. (3)

McElroy's papers reveal how commonplace it was in the economy of Georgetown College to buy and sell enslaved individuals, with each transaction duly set down in the records of the procurator's office. In February 1808, for example, we find a record of Francis Neale, S.J.'s, purchase of linen cloth – and then, in the very next line, as if she were just another commodity, his purchase of an enslaved woman. At this time Fr. Neale was the pastor at Holy Trinity and vice-president of Georgetown College: (4)

|   |               |
|---|---------------|
| <i>By Linen purchased by Revd F. Neale for the use of College</i> | <i>33.00</i>  |
| <i>By 1 Negro Woman purchased by do . . . do</i>                  | <i>240.00</i> |

In January 1814 McElroy recorded that Isaac, an enslaved man, had run away from Georgetown College in an attempt to make his way to Pennsylvania, where slavery for life had been abolished in 1780, and he noted Isaac's subsequent capture in Baltimore and his prompt sale there by Fr. Neale to an enslaver in Harford County, Maryland: (5)

*[January] 29th [1814] . . . Isaac ran away from the College . . .*

*January 30th, 1814 This day Isaac was taken up in Balto. & Committed to Jail. Revd Mr Neale being there same time, sold him to a Man in Hartford [sic] County –*

We also have a copy of McElroy's newspaper advertisement soliciting Isaac's capture: (6)

**THIRTY DOLLARS REWARD.**

*Ranaway from Georgetown College, on Saturday night the 29th inst a Negro Man named ISAAC, about 23 years old, quite black complexion, about 5 feet 8 inches high; had on when he went away a short coat of drab cloth, pantaloons of the same kind, fur hat & great coat made of thick drab coating and bound with ferreting – he carried with*

*him a pair of blue cloth trowsers, [t]wo Russia linen shirts, an old hat and other articles of clothing not recollected, it is probable he may change his clothing – he has learned to read tolerably well, and it is likely he may have procured a written pass. It is supposed that he is gone to Pennsylvania; he was raised at Mrs. Johnson's near Bryantown, Charles County. The above reward will be paid if secured in any Jail more than 50 miles from this District, and reasonable expences paid if brought home, or twenty dollars if a shorter distance, by the subscriber Clerk of Georgetown College, District of Columbia.*

*JOHN McELROY.*

Four years later, now ordained, Fr. McElroy recorded how he imprisoned the enslaved man Davy and threatened to sell him: (7)

*[January] 22d [1818] ... Had one of our Negro's from the Marsh (Davy) confined in Jail for his bad conduct, where he is to remain until he is sold*

*Febry 4 ... This day delivered Davy from Jail and sent him to Mr Tiernan in Baltre who intends to purchase him ...*

*[February] 23 ... The Negro Man (Davy) whom we confined in the Prison at Washington has return'd to White Marsh, he makes many promises of amendment. I was offered \$500 for him frequently. –*

At the same time he was recording the purchase and sale of enslaved African Americans, Fr. McElroy recorded his concern, as assistant pastor at Holy Trinity, with the spiritual life of African Americans in the parish, including them, for example, in a First Communion ceremony at the church: (8)

*March 29 [1818] till 7 ½ P.M. – This morning I said Mass in T. Church at 8OC. Had the children all arranged previously, in good Order, with lighted Candles in their hands – The Girls around the Comm. rail and in the centre pews. the Boys in the side pews – There were 35 white Girls. 1 Married Lady. thirteen white Boys – 8 Colored Girls & 1*

*Colored Man, in all about 57 – I gave a short Instruction from the Altar before Mass – the Church was crowded. it being the first time that first Com. was made in a Solemn manner. in this Church. Mr Dabuisson, (9) with all the Singers from the College attended during Mass. Mr Dinoff played the Organ – I read the prayers before Com. before Mass – and after Mass the prayers after Comm. loud from the foot of the Altar –*

A year later, Fr. McElroy noted that he had begun a Sunday school “for colored persons” at Holy Trinity: (10)

*June - 6th 1819 This being Trinity Sunday. I gave the instruction in the Church as usual at 8 OClock, and also at 10 1/2 at high Mass – continued the school for Colored persons this evening in the school house opposite the Church – the object of this school is 1st - To prevent Cath. negroes from frequenting the schools Kept on Sundays by Methodists &c – 2d To teach them their prayers & Catechism at the same time they learn to spell and read – . . . . .*

*27th The Sunday School for colored persons continues to increase in numbers – they now begin to read a little and [?] to their Catechism; also the Lords Prayer Hail Mary & Creed with the acts of Faith Hope & Love*

And Fr. McElroy movingly recorded the death and burial in 1819 of the enslaved woman Suckey: (11)

*Suckey a colored Woman about 17 Yrs old belonging to Mr. Key (12) Baptized her conditionally, heard her confession & gave her Extreme Unction – She died the next day – I buried her in our ground at which about 400 Colored & other persons attended – I gave an exhortation on the occasion –*

Noting that Fr. McElroy "has no word of criticism" either for slavery as an institution or for those who bought, enslaved, or sold African Americans, his subsequent biographer acknowledges that some of the entries in his diary "may come as a shock to

the casual reader." (13) Nor is there any indication in the diary that Fr. McElroy's actions, in looking after what he considered to be the spiritual needs of the enslaved African Americans in his flock while tacitly endorsing their ongoing enslavement, met with disapproval from his superiors or from the White members of the congregation at Holy Trinity.

Fr. Grassi returned to Italy in 1817. Fr. McElroy moved to Boston in 1847, where he was a founder of Boston College.

## Notes

1. John A. Grassi (Giovanni Antonio Grassi), S.J., "The Catholic Religion in the United States in 1818," *Woodstock Letters* 11 (1882): 243. Grassi served as assistant pastor at Holy Trinity in 1811 and as president of Georgetown College from 1812 to 1817. See also Laurence J. Kelly, S.J., *History of Holy Trinity Parish, Washington, D.C., 1795-1945* (Baltimore, Md., 1945), p. 59.

2. Kelly L. Schmidt and Billy Critchley-Menor, S.J., "Daily Theology: Symposium on Racism & White Supremacy," Oct. 28, 2020.

3. Louis Berkeley Kines, S.J., "Lincoln in a Cassock: Life of Father John McElroy, S.J., 1782 to 1847," *Woodstock Letters* 87 (1958): 337-39, 343, 345-46, 369.

4. Francis Ignatius Neale, S.J., was the first pastor (1790-1817) of Holy Trinity. He also served for a time as vice-president (1797-1808) and then president (acting, 1808-9; permanent, 1809-12) of Georgetown College. "Future President of Georgetown College, Rev. Francis Neale, Purchases an Unnamed Enslaved Woman, 1808," Georgetown University Slavery Archive, item 95, <http://slaveryarchive.georgetown.edu/items/show/104>.

5. "Isaac Runs Away, 1814," Georgetown University Slavery Archive, item 20,

<http://slaveryarchive.georgetown.edu/items/show/25>.

6. "Runaway Ad for Isaac, 1814," Georgetown University Slavery Archive, item 45, <http://slaveryarchive.georgetown.edu/items/show/51>.

7. "Davey Threatened with Sale, 1818," Georgetown University Slavery Archive, item 24, <http://slaveryarchive.georgetown.edu/items/show/29>.

8. "Mass at Trinity Church," 1818, Georgetown University Slavery Archive, item 25, <http://slaveryarchive.georgetown.edu/items/show/30>.

9. Stephen Lariguadelle Dubuisson, S.J. (1786-1864), was at this time studying for the priesthood. Ordained in 1821, he served as pastor of Holy Trinity from 1825 to 1826, and again from 1831 to 1833.

10. "School for Colored Persons at Trinity Church, 1819," Georgetown University Slavery Archive, item 27, <http://slaveryarchive.georgetown.edu/items/show/32>.

11. "Sukey's Funeral at the College Ground, 1819," Georgetown University Slavery Archive, item 298, <http://slaveryarchive.georgetown.edu/items/show/325>.

12. Francis Scott Key.

13. Kines, "Lincoln in a Cassock," p. 342.