

**The Development of Black Catholic Parishes
in the Washington Area
by Bernard A. Cook**

The manifestations of racism and its results in the history of Holy Trinity parish (1) find similarities and parallels in the histories of other parishes in the District of Columbia and the segment of Virginia that was part of the District from 1790 to 1846. African American parishioners, offended by the fact that they were not treated as equal members of the Body of Christ, withdrew from a number of Washington area Catholic churches and founded their own Catholic parishes where they could worship without being subjected to demeaning treatment.

St. Augustine

The first of these stories of exclusion, exodus, and rebirth occurred in 1858. In that year, free Black Catholics, repelled by the racism they experienced at St. Matthew's Catholic Church (now the Cathedral of Saint Matthew the Apostle), where they were required to attend Mass in the basement, founded Martin de Porres, the first Black Catholic parish in the District of Columbia. According to St. Augustine's parish history, "Faced with a society that was not yet willing to put off the last vestiges of slavery and a Church that, at best, tolerated the presence of Black people in its congregation, these men and women founded a Catholic school and chapel on 15th Street under the patronage of Blessed Martin de Porres." (2)

The parish was re-dedicated in 1876 to St. Augustine, and in 1908 the parish school, which had been forced to close in 1885, reopened under the direction of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, the first successful religious order of Black Catholic women in the United States. It was that order which Anne Marie Becraft, Holy Trinity's pioneering promoter of education for Black children, joined in 1831 when she was 26. St. Augustine today proudly calls itself the mother church of Black Catholics in the United States.

St. Cyprian

The second exodus of Washington Black Catholics occurred in 1883. Similarly repelled by the racism which they experienced at St. Peter's Catholic Church on 2nd Street on Capitol Hill, Black parishioners petitioned Bishop James Gibbons, (3) the bishop of Baltimore, whose diocese at that time included Washington, to establish their own church. The 1500 Black Catholics at St. Peter's had not been allowed to attend Mass, have their children baptized, or celebrate marriage in the body of the parish church but had been relegated to its basement. Fr. James R. Matthews, the pastor, was sympathetic to the request and supported the aspiration of his African American parishioners for their own parish. He asked his assistant Fr. J. M. O'Brien to write Bishop Gibbons on their behalf. O'Brien wrote, "They, prompted by the necessity of their situation, have voluntarily taken the matter into their own hands and are consequently ready to go to work at once if you only encourage them." (4) Gibbons gave his approval, and construction of the church, dedicated to St. Cyprian, reputedly the first African bishop to suffer martyrdom, was begun in 1893 at 13th and C Streets, S.E.

During the construction of the church, Fr. Matthews celebrated Mass for his Black parishioners at St. Peter's Hall on E Street. The temporary congregation took the name St. Benedict the Moor. Even before the church was built, a school, later named St. Ann's Academy, was launched. Miss Mary Atkins, a parishioner whose sister was an Oblate Sister of Providence, donated her home and a neighboring lot as a site for a school. (5) The school, which initially had 160 students, was conducted by the Oblate Sisters of Providence. Fr. Matthews left St. Peter's and served as pastor of St. Cyprian's from its inception in 1893 until 1934.

In 1966, to the dismay of the parishioners of St. Cyprian's, their parish was closed and their parish was merged with Holy Comforter, a formerly White parish nearby that had been decimated by White flight to the suburbs. The Black Catholics felt that they were forced to relinquish their own church, the product of their sacrifices and labor, in which their families had celebrated milestones of the faith. Fr. Robert M. Kearns, a former pastor of Holy Comforter-St. Cyprian, said, "They weren't consulted properly. They were given two weeks' notice to evacuate their church." (6) Nevertheless, Black Catholics constituted approximately 95 percent of the combined church's congregation, and liturgies at the combined parish were replete with African-American spirituality. (7)

Our Lady of Perpetual Help

The exodus of Washington area Black Catholics to their own parishes continued in the twentieth century. Black parishioners of St. Teresa of Avila in Anacostia in southeast Washington, were compelled to attend Mass in the last two pews of St. Teresa's, excluded from any active role in the parish, and denied religious instruction for their children. The parish history frankly relates,

As the church grew, racial tensions began to slowly surface in the predominantly White church. Black Catholics became disappointed and dissatisfied with their positions and the limited roles they were allowed to assume in the church that they had helped to build. Although everyone believed in one unifying Lord, everyone did not believe in one unifying church. (8)

In 1911, no longer willing to tolerate the discrimination to which they were subjected, Louis Cooke and Charles Edelin, with the support of St. Teresa's pastor, Fr. Charles Bart, met with now Cardinal Gibbons to request the formation of a parish for St. Teresa's Black Catholics. With support from the cardinal and Fr. Bart, before a separate parish was constructed, the basement of St. Teresa's was renovated for the "Colored' Catholic Community of Anacostia." In 1918 the cardinal gave the Community permission to buy land and build a church. Parishioners cleared the land and in 1920 a formal procession marched from St. Teresa's up the "Hill" to lay the cornerstone of Our Lady of Perpetual Help church. The church was completed and dedicated in 1921.

Today the parish website proclaims:

Our Lady of Perpetual Help is a Roman Catholic Community serving the Black Catholics of Washington DC for more than 95 years! . . . The uniqueness of Our Lady of Perpetual Help places it in a leadership position allowing interaction with other Black and non-Black parishes! Utilizing the gifts of Blacks' spirituality through music, dance, education, and spiritual special action, our call to ministry

is to proclaim the Good News to our Brothers and Sisters who do not know Christ! We continue in service, have faith in the present, and are marching towards our future as an experience community! (9)

Ironically, racial tensions in the 1960s led to an exodus of the White population from Anacostia. In 1976, Fr. George A. Stallings, Jr., was appointed the first Black pastor of St. Teresa's where Black Catholics had been earlier treated with such disdain. Fr. Stallings introduced a liturgy that was both African-American and Catholic in a church that now labels itself "the Mother Church of Southeast Washington." (10)

Epiphany

In 1923 the Black members of Holy Trinity, with the permission of the bishop, began the process of forming their own church, Epiphany, in Georgetown. The congregation at Epiphany numbered around 600 in 1924. (11) That exodus was preceded by the exodus of Black Catholics from the other Washington parish staffed by the Jesuits, St. Aloysius church on North Capitol St., N.W.

Holy Redeemer

St. Aloysius, which was consecrated in 1859, had among its parishioners both Irish and Black Catholics. Morris J. MacGregor wrote of "the large contingent of black Catholics who worshipped at the Jesuit church . . . albeit from segregated pews in its upper balcony." (12) Black parishioners joined sodalities and other religious societies, but attendance at the functions of the societies was segregated. "In all cases the role of minimum participation meant rigid exclusion from full participation in parish social organizations as a matter of course." (13)

Dissatisfied with this segregated status at St. Aloysius', over 200 Black Catholic families petitioned Cardinal Gibbons in 1919 to establish a church where they could practice their faith with acceptance and dignity. Their request was granted. Their new church, the Church of the Holy Redeemer on New York Avenue, N.W., was dedicated in October 1922. (14) In 2012, St. Aloysius' parish was closed and its parishioners assigned to Holy Redeemer. Fr. Raymond Kemp observed that it was "Ironic, that Holy

Redeemer becomes the parish to which St. Aloysius parishioners are sent when the Jesuits and the Archdiocese closed St. Als.” (15)

Church of the Incarnation

Good Shepherd / St. Vincent de Paul

Two additional churches which were established in the Washington area for African American Catholics around this time, the Church of the Incarnation and Good Shepherd / St. Vincent de Paul, were not cases of exodus from predominantly White parishes. However, they were instances where Black Catholics were not treated as equal members of the Body of Christ by White Catholics. Unable to find a place at the Eucharistic table, approximately twenty Black families, with the support of Fr. Francis A. Schwallenberg, the pastor at St. Margaret’s, sought a site where they could celebrate the Eucharist without impediment or insult. Around 1912, they found a temporary site at the Moses Masonic Hall on Lane Place. In September 1914, the cornerstone of their new church, the Church of the Incarnation, was laid on Browning Place, N.E., now 46th Street. The church was assigned to the Josephites and received its first resident pastor in 1924. (16) Around that same time Good Shepherd / St. Vincent de Paul was established near the Navy Yard on 14 M Street, S.W.

St. Joseph

In addition to parallels with the predominantly White Washington parishes’ treatment of Black Catholics, Holy Trinity in Georgetown and St. Mary’s in Alexandria, Virginia, shared a common background. In fact, there was an organic connection between St. Mary’s and Holy Trinity. They had the same founder, Francis Neale, S.J. (17) St. Mary’s was a mission church of the Maryland Jesuits, and Fr. Neale attended to the needs of the parishioners intermittently until approximately 1818.

From 1818 until 1831, a secular priest, Joseph W. Fairclough, acting as Neale’s agent, resided at the parish. Fairclough was succeeded by a series of Jesuit pastors, and until 1891 St. Mary’s was staffed by Maryland Jesuits. (18)

Before Emancipation both Holy Trinity and St. Mary’s had free and enslaved Black parishioners as well as White parishioners. In both parishes Black parishioners

whether free or enslaved were not treated as equal members of the Body of Christ. This unequal and prejudiced treatment continued after Emancipation. In 1914 Black parishioners of St. Mary's, with the permission of their bishop, withdrew from St. Mary's and founded their own church, St. Joseph's. As noted above, in 1923 the Black members of Holy Trinity, with the permission of their bishop, began the process of forming their own church, Epiphany, in Georgetown. This exodus involved 357 Black adults. (19)

The history of racism at St. Mary's echoes the experience of Black Catholics at Holy Trinity. Under the direction of Fr. Neale and with the support of Lt. Col. John Fitzgerald, a Catholic, who had served as an aide-de-camp for George Washington, a Catholic church was constructed in Alexandria in 1795 and 1796 on Church and South Washington Streets, then on the edge of the town. George Washington and the son of the founder of Alexandria both contributed to the construction of this initial church. In 1809, Fr. Francis Neale purchased an old Methodist meeting house on Chapel Alley for \$900. That served as the parish church until 1826. In that year, the present church on 310 South Royal Street was erected. In 1869, Peter Kroes, S.J., added a chapel on the church's south side, dedicated to St. Joseph. That chapel was the site of a Sunday school for Black children. (20)

Alexandria was located in the District of Columbia from 1790 until the retrocession of the District's land to the west of the Potomac to Virginia in 1846. The retrocession was prompted by the fear of enslavers in Alexandria, which had a very active and lucrative slave market, that slavery might be abolished in the District of Columbia. In fact, when the Jesuits decided to sell the African Americans whom they enslaved on their Maryland plantations, the first group, 51 enslaved men and women, were taken to Alexandria where they were placed aboard a ship and transported to Louisiana. (21) Later, in November 1838, 130 enslaved men, women, and children sold by the Jesuits led by Fr Thomas Mulledy, S.J. (president of Georgetown University, 1829-38 and 1845-48, and Provincial of the Jesuits of Maryland Province in 1838), were transported on the *Katherine Jackson* from Alexandria to New Orleans. (22)

St. Mary's is the oldest Catholic Church in what is now the Commonwealth of Virginia. The parish covered approximately 80 square miles, and eventually served

approximately 1600 Catholics. Mission chapels were established at Falls Church, 10 miles from Alexandria, and Fairfax Station, 17 miles from Alexandria, where priests from St. Mary's would celebrate Mass every other Sunday. (23)

At St. Mary's both free and enslaved Black Catholics were required to sit in segregated galleries along both sides of the church. (24) Holy Trinity also relegated its Black parishioners, free and enslaved, to separate segregated areas of the church, initially side galleries and later a section of the rear balcony, and required them to approach the Communion rail after the White parishioners. They also had separate segregated religious education classes. (25)

After the Civil War, as Jim Crow regulations were imposed in society, Black Catholics in Alexandria were not even permitted to be married in the church. Their marriages were celebrated by the parish's priests in the homes of Black parishioners. (26) By the beginning of the twentieth century, a Josephite priest, Fr. Charles Hannigan, came every Sunday from Richmond to celebrate Mass for Alexandria's Black Catholics in an alcove of the church. After Mass they met in St. Mary's Lyceum. (27) There the plans for a new Black Catholic parish were developed.

In 1913, Thomas Blair, who had served as sexton of St. Mary's for thirty years, organized a meeting of Alexandria's Black Catholics to attempt to organize their own church. With the support of Fr. Hannigan, Blair and his committee asked Bishop Denis J. O'Connell, the bishop of the Diocese of Richmond, for permission to establish a parish for Alexandria's Black Catholics. In 1914, the committee acquired land for the church at the corners of Wythe and North Columbus streets in what was then a predominantly Black section of Alexandria. Fr. Hannigan was able to persuade Katherine Drexel to contribute \$8,000 toward the construction of the church. (28) An additional \$4,000 was raised by Blair's committee. (29) Another Josephite, Fr. Joseph J. Kelly, was appointed to lead the church, which was dedicated on May 14, 1916. Thomas Blair lived to see his dream take shape, but he died two weeks after the dedication of St. Joseph's. (30)

Fr. Kelly lived in the church's sacristy until a rectory was built in 1921. This willingness to sacrifice characterized another Josephite, Fr. Bernard Lyons. Fr. Lyons, who was pastor of Epiphany, the new Black parish in Georgetown, lived in the church

behind the sacristy during the Depression. (31)

In 1928, St. Joseph's established the first Catholic elementary school for African American children in Northern Virginia. It was staffed by the Oblate Sisters of Providence and operated within the church itself until a school building was completed in 1931. The school closed in 1969 when integration provided alternative opportunities to Black students.

In 2022, Fr. Donald Fest, commenting on St. Joseph's, pointed out that 80 percent of the 3 million African American Catholics worshiped in predominantly White parishes. He stated that African American culture is lacking in those parishes. He stressed that at St. Joseph's "the flavors of African American culture" were part of the parish's liturgies. "The Masses tend to go longer than other parishes, the music might be a tad different, and enthusiasm and expressions might be more pronounced." Fr. Fest asserted, "It means something to people when you see your customs, traditions or culture being celebrated." St. Joseph's, in his opinion, importantly offers Black parishioners more opportunity to serve in leadership positions. According to Fr. Fest, "That's one of the reasons these parishes were founded and exist to this day." (32)

Our Lady Queen of Peace

St. Joseph's was initially the only Catholic church for Black Catholics in northern Virginia. The area grew rapidly during World War II. In 1947 a second Catholic church, Our Lady Queen of Peace, was established in Arlington to serve Black Catholics. Mrs. Cecilia Braveboy, a parishioner at Our Lady Queen of Peace, wrote, "Sacraments for Black people were not readily available in the White Virginia parishes. St. Charles parish in North Arlington was noted for possibly giving communion to African Americans at Mass." (33) Faced with this scandalous impediment to the practice of their faith, sixteen Black Catholics requested permission from Bishop Peter Ireton of the Richmond Diocese to establish their own church in Green Valley, (34) then a predominantly Black section of Arlington.

The construction of the Pentagon and the roads built to provide access to it resulted in the destruction of several predominantly Black neighborhoods. Some of the displaced African Americans settled in Green Valley, so Green Valley was a natural

location chosen by Black Catholics for their own church. Among the sixteen founders of that church, Our Lady Queen of Peace, were people with surnames common to the early Black parishioners of Holy Trinity, Joseph Bowman, Alice Butler, and Lawrence and Jessie Butler. (35)

There are numerous parallels between Holy Trinity, St. Mary's, and other area parishes regarding the status and treatment of Black Catholics. Perhaps priests and parishioners at these churches were oblivious to the structural evils of slavery, segregation, and racism and the moral failure involved in participating in these structural evils, but they did participate in them. Attention to St. Paul's admonition against divisions at the Eucharistic table (I Cor. 11:21-22) should have been a wake-up call. In his letter to Philemon, Paul admonished Philemon to accept Onesimus, whom Philemon had enslaved, "as a beloved brother." Paul wrote, "I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you" (Phil. 8 and 16). St. James (James 2:1-7) decried divisions in the Eucharistic assembly by those assigning less desirable places to those denigrated as inferior. However, accommodation to American society's code of racial apartheid trumped the demands of Christian charity and fellowship.

Thomas Merton reacted to practices in the Diocese of Alexandria in Louisiana, where Black Catholics could not attend White churches in areas that had a Catholic church for Black Catholics. If there was no Black Catholic church, African Americans who attended a White Catholic church had to sit in a segregated section of the church and only receive Communion after all the White parishioners had first received the Eucharist. This was a practice that existed at Holy Trinity until after the establishment of Epiphany and at St. Mary's until after the establishment of St. Joseph's-

John Thompson, the Georgetown basketball coach, experienced this sort of discrimination as a boy when his family visited relatives in St. Mary's County, Maryland. Eventually he came to the conclusion, "The priest was saying Jesus loves everybody the same, but I had to go to Communion second after the white folks. You're telling me one thing about God and Jesus, and you're practicing another thing. That was the first time I recognized racism in the Catholic Church." (36)

Merton saw discrimination within the Body of Christ in Louisiana in the same

way. “For Merton, this meant that the Eucharist – ‘the sacrament of love that binds us together’ and manifests Christ’s love for all humankind – had been weaponized as an instrument of disunity and hate, ‘the ultimate blasphemy.’” (37)

Notes

1. See, for example, Bernard A. Cook, “Holy Trinity Parish and Race: An Overview,” above; Peter J. Albert, “The Founding of Epiphany Catholic Church (1923-26),” below; and Gertrude Turner Waters, “Historical Sketch – Epiphany Catholic Church,” below.

2. “Our History since 1858,” St. Augustine Catholic Church, <https://saintaugustine-dc.org/history>. See Sybil Templeman Williams and Dena D. Grant, “Connections – Saint Augustine Parish and Holy Trinity Parish,” below.

3. James Gibbons (1834-1921) was born in Baltimore. His parents were from Ireland. He was apostolic vicar to North Carolina from 1868 to 1872 and bishop of Richmond from 1872 to 1877. He served as archbishop of Baltimore from 1877 until he died in 1921. Pope Leo XIII made him a cardinal in 1886.

4. Stephanie Shapiro, “St. Cyprian,” *Washington Post*, Oct. 13, 1983. Amended with information from Carol Sorgen, “A History of Holy Comforter-St. Cyprian Parish,” <https://hscchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/HSC-History-1.pdf>, “Holy Comforter-St. Cyprian Catholic Church (Washington, D.C.),” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holy_Comforter-St._Cyprian_Catholic_Church_\(Washington,_D.C.\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holy_Comforter-St._Cyprian_Catholic_Church_(Washington,_D.C.)).

5. Sorgen, “A History of Holy Comforter-St. Cyprian Parish.”

6. Shapiro, “St. Cyprian.”

7. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holy_Comforter-St._Cyprian_Catholic_Church_\(Washington,_D.C.\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holy_Comforter-St._Cyprian_Catholic_Church_(Washington,_D.C.)).
8. St. Teresa of Avila, Washington, D.C., <https://stachurchdc.org/history>.
9. Our Lady of Perpetual Help Roman Catholic Church, D.C., <https://olphsedc.com>.
10. St. Teresa of Avila, Washington, D.C., <https://stachurchdc.org/history>.
11. See note 1, above.
12. Morris J. MacGregor, *The Emergence of a Black Catholic Community: St. Augustine's in Washington* (Washington, D.C., 1999), p. 71.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 209.
14. The History of Holy Redeemer Parish, <http://holyredeemerchurchdc.org/hrc/index.php/history/parish-history>.
15. Fr. Raymond Kemp to Bernard Cook, July 6, 2022. See Michelle Boorstein, "Shrinking Jesuit population forces closing of D.C.'s St. Aloysius Gonzaga parish," *Washington Post*, June 19, 2012.
16. Church of the Incarnation, <https://incarnationdc.org/history>.
17. 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 president (acting, 1808-9; permanent, 1809-12) of Georgetown College.

18. Anonymous autograph manuscript, "History of St. Mary's, Alexandria, Va.," Archives of the Maryland Province of the Society of Jesus, box 81, folder 8, Georgetown University Archives, Booth Family Center for Special Collections, Washington, D.C. The historical note states that the Jesuits of Georgetown College served the Catholics of Alexandria from the 1790s until Fr. Fairclough became the resident priest in 1818. In addition to Fr. Neale, the Jesuit priests included Anthony Coleman, E. Fenwick, Gratia, B. Fenwick, R. Baxter, and others whose names were not recorded. After the departure of Fr. Fairclough in 1831, these Jesuits served down to 1891: John Smith (1831-37), Stephen Dubuisson (1837-41), James Power and James Moore (1841), Rodger Dietz (1842), Benjamin Young (1843), C. Stonesteet (?) (1844), Ignatius Coombs (1845), John Aiken (1846-50), Joseph M. Finotti (1850-52), George Villiger (1852-54), John E. Blox (1854-56), Peter Kroes (1856-72), and Dennis O'Kane (1872-91).

19. Albert, "The Founding of Epiphany Catholic Church"; Cook, "Holy Trinity Parish and Race: An Overview."

20. "History of St. Mary's, Alexandria, Va." It is highly probable that both the original chapel and the current church that St. Mary's erected in the 1820's were built with the labor of enslaved workers. It is also probable that at Holy Trinity in Georgetown both the original church, now Ignatius Chapel, and the present church erected in the 1850's, were built with the labor of enslaved workers. However, records documenting the involvement of enslaved workers in these projects have not been found.

21. Adam Rothman, "Georgetown University and the Business of Slavery," *Washington History* 29 (2017): 21.

22. *Katherine Jackson* manifest, Dec. 6, 1838, Georgetown Slavery Archives, <https://slaveryarchive.georgetown.edu/items/show/2>. For an account of the sale, see Bernard A. Cook, "Maryland Jesuits and Slavery," above.

23. "History of St. Mary's, Alexandria, Va."

24. Leslie Miller, "St. Mary's 225th Anniversary Highlights History of Catholicism in Virginia," *Arlington Catholic Herald*, Sept. 30, 2020.

25. See Cook, "Holy Trinity Parish and Race: An Overview."

26. "Establishing St. Joseph Church," *Alexandria Times*, June 10, 2010; Vernon Miles, "Alexandria: St. Joseph Catholic Church Celebrates Its 100th Anniversary," *Connection Newspapers*, Nov. 19, 2015.

27. "National Register of Historic Places Registration Form," U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, NPS Form 10-800, OMB No. 1024-0018, pp. 12 and 292.

28. "Establishing St. Joseph Church."

29. Stephen J. Ochs, *Desegregating the Altar: The Josephites and the Struggle for Black Priests, 1871-1960* (Baton Rouge, 1993).

30. "Establishing St. Joseph Church."

31. See Waters, "Historical Sketch – Epiphany Catholic Church," below.

32. "Sharing Their Charisms: Josephite Society of the Sacred Heart," *Arlington Catholic Herald*, Aug. 11-24, 2022, p. 11.

33. Comments of (Mrs.) Cecilia Braveboy, May 11, 2022, submitted to Suzanne Noonan, Holy Trinity History Committee.

34. The area was previously named Nauck after John D. Nauck, a former Confederate soldier turned land developer. In 2019, the Nauck Civic Association voted

to change the name of the area to Green Valley, the name preferred by the area's Black residents. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nauck_Virginia/.

35. History of Our Lady Queen of Peace,
<https://www.ourladyqueenofpeace.org/our-history.html>.

36. John Thompson, *I Came as a Shadow* (New York, 2020), pp. 18-20.

37. Judith Valente, "Thomas Merton's Deep Devotion to the Eucharist – and How It Called Him to Radical Love," *America*, May 19, 2022. St. Paul, too, would have had something to say. After all, for him, charity was the prime virtue (I Corinthians 13:13).