

“Lift Every Voice and Sing!”
by Father Raymond B. Kemp

Holy Trinity Parish, Georgetown, has been a grace-filled and inspiring community of Catholics from its beginnings in the late seventeen hundreds down to the present time. It pre-existed the establishment of the District of Columbia and along with the College next door claimed Maryland as its home. Surely the grace of a good God through the workings of a Trinity of Persons has marked its every generation. Yet part of its history and geography placed it firmly in the middle of an indentured, then an enslaving, economy. The time of bringing the whole history to the fore has arrived.

For a congregation to raise the question about where their Black congregants went one hundred years ago, and then, where their Black members were a century before that, is a blessed movement of the spirit. To know, and then to own, a history of a living community and a college, may seem normal enough. Not so. The work of this parish, through the committee responsible for this collection, is the first instance of which I am aware of a majority White Catholic parish owning its history as part of both a slave-holding and a segregated community of faith in this area of the United States.

I owe most of what I know of the history of Black Catholics on this side of the Potomac to the members of Saint Augustine Parish. I was privileged to serve there as an associate and then as a pastor from 1967 to 1981, and to continue to live there until 1986. It was there that I learned of the history of Black Catholics leaving Saint Aloysius Gonzaga in 1919-22 to form Holy Redeemer Parish, and then of a similar migration from Holy Trinity to form Epiphany Parish in Northwest D.C. in 1923-26. Over the years, stories and histories have been exchanged among Black Catholics as many parishes changed complexion across Washington and Maryland.

The story of Saint Augustine church and school, now at Fifteenth and V Streets, N.W., goes back to Black Catholics seeking their own parish in the late 1850's as members of Saint Matthew's Church, now the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle. Morris J. MacGregor's *The Emergence of a Black Catholic Community: St. Augustine's in Washington* (Washington, D.C., 1999) recounts the story in detail. Saint Matthew's was then ten blocks east of Holy Trinity and two blocks from the White House. Many

Blacks, Catholic, Methodist, and Baptist, worked for the White House and the burgeoning city around it. Black Protestant churches had developed sizable congregations in nineteenth century Washington. The Black Catholic families knew each other from Jesuit parishes in the city, including Holy Trinity, and in Maryland.

When the pastor of Saint Matthew's purchased a vacant lot in the 1500 block of L Street for a Black Catholic Sunday School, he asked the Black Catholic members of the parish to help with the mortgage. They organized a committee. Of course! A committee of twelve couples. The lead couple worked for and around the White House and were known to the president and his wife. Mary and Gabriel Coakley asked Mr. Lincoln if they could hold a Strawberry Festival on the White House Grounds on July 4, 1864, and he agreed. Black Catholics from across the city joined Black Protestants and others numbering 800 or so, and raised close to \$2,000 to launch the fund. Soon a temporary structure was erected and a school was started and Sunday masses were begun. A pattern was set. Separate parishes thrived in racist divides.

Trinity's History Committee began its work around the same time as the sale of Catholic slaves in Maryland to Catholic slave holders in Louisiana was becoming public with a new notoriety. The publicity prompted a deeper dig into the question of where Black members of Holy Trinity had gone. The whole history is here, and a renewed set of relations with Black Georgetown, its Black churches and cemeteries, and families with stories comes along with tales of descendants from around Louisiana and other parts of the country that capture the imagination. The cemetery at Sacred Heart White Marsh with graves of Black Catholics joins the news of the day even as Holy Trinity recovers the Black Catholic history of the parish's Holy Rood Cemetery.

For me, to know these sisters and brothers, Black and White, living and deceased, and to know the Black historians at St. Augustine's and Epiphany and the librarians of the Jesuit Collections at Lauinger and Holy Trinity, along with all of Black Georgetown and Mount Zion United Methodist Church – and to know that all of these have and hold the attention of today's Holy Trinity parishioners, is to know that we all can gather and sing together a song written to sustain Black believers by James Weldon Johnson and sung in a segregated school to celebrate Mr. Lincoln's birthday in 1900:

*Stony the road we trod,
Bitter the chastening rod,
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;
Yet with a steady beat,
Have not our weary feet
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?
(Lift Every Voice and Sing)*

We know what our ancestors did. All of them. We can work from the knowledge here recorded that in God's clear eyes we are all God's children, and each of us along with all creation needs to be tended with care and justice.