

The Founding of Epiphany Catholic Church (1923-26)

by Peter J. Albert

*God of our weary years
God of our silent tears
Thou who has brought us thus far on the way
Thou who has by Thy might
Led us into the light
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.
("Lift Every Voice and Sing")*

On March 4, 1923, three Black Holy Trinity parishioners – James Smackum, (1) Richard Carter (2) and Aloysius Marshall (3) – met with Archbishop Michael Curley, (4) the prelate with jurisdiction over Washington, D.C., to propose creating a new parish in Georgetown for the African American members of the Holy Trinity community. Here is their handwritten report of the meeting: (5)

Your committee selected to wait on the Archbishop in [the] interest of the colored catholics of Georgetown, respectfully reports that we met the Archbishop Sunday Mar 4th at St. Patrick's rectory Washington, D.C. and received a very hearty welcome.

We stated the object of our call briefly, telling of the crowded condition at Holy Trinity[,] of our poor accomodations, of the small space asigned to us, 30 pews with a seating capacity of 120 out of 400 members, of the number of our people staying away from church on account of segregation and poor accomodations.

His Grace stated that the segregation was not approved of by the church but he was powerless to correct the evil.

His Grace was very much in sympathy with our cause, he not only promised us a church but he wants us to have a school also saying we can not expect our children to put up with what we have put up with.

His Grace stated that some of our people wanted a church of our own and some do not want it and those who do not want it are fools. He also said he would like to have colored priest[s] for colored churches but there were not enough to go around.

We have been ordered by His Grace to take the census of Georgetown (6) thoroughly and send it to him, and he will notify us when to call a general meeting, and he will come and address us, and we will not have to worry about the finance

His Grace stated that if we are accredited with 400 members it was most likely there are 600 in the parish so for us to take our time in taking the census, also if necessary he would call the committee in conference before the general meeting.

At [the] conclusion of our conference His Grace gave us his blessings.

Holy Trinity's African American parishioners endured other indignities besides crowded and segregated seating. For example, Dorothy Thomas (7) recalled that as a girl she was invited one year by a nun at Holy Trinity's Sunday School to join in the annual May procession. But when she and other Black girls from her Sunday School class came the next week, arrayed in white dresses handmade by their mothers, they were told a mistake had been made and they could not participate in the procession with the White girls. (8) Another Epiphany parishioner remembered that when "she and others would contribute small sandwiches to be shared after Mass for special occasions, they'd watch as someone would put toothpicks in the sandwiches, so that White parishioners would know to avoid food made by the African Americans." (9)

At Archbishop Curley's request, Holy Trinity's pastor Benedict Smith, S.J., (10) and Trinity's African-American parishioners compiled a list of the African Americans at Holy Trinity, giving their names and addresses, indicating the number of children in each family and how many were of school age, and noting if one or the other of the parents was not Catholic. The list enumerated 356 adults and 330 children. Of the children, 164 were of school age. Of the adults, some 52% were female and 48% were male. Most of the adults – 327 (92%) – lived in Georgetown, with the rest living

elsewhere in the city, or in Maryland or Virginia. Of the 327 adults living in Georgetown, 189 (58%) lived east of Wisconsin Avenue and 138 (42%) lived to the west. (11)

This list of African American parishioners at Holy Trinity represented, in the words of Epiphany's parish history,

a large group of devoted Catholics whose one desire was a Church of their own, one into which they could put their own sacrifices of time, money and effort in view of a personal hundred fold reward of blessings for themselves and their growing families. A Church, of its nature, is "a community of the faithful." God's holy people gathered together in Christ, united in the unity of the sign of Christ's Sacred Body, the Holy Eucharist, formed into the Mystical Body of Christ and enjoying the moving power of the Holy Spirit within them. (12)

On June 1, 1923, Archbishop Curley forwarded the list of African American parishioners at Holy Trinity to Fr. Louis B. Pastorelli, S.S.J., (13) the Superior General of the Josephite Order. From October 1923 into the summer of 1924, African American parishioners scheduled at least five meetings at Holy Trinity to lay plans for the new parish, as well as a dance to raise funds for the effort. The meetings were scheduled for Oct. 3, 1923, and Apr. 9, May 14, June 11, and July 9, 1924, and the dance for June 26, 1924. (14) Thomas Duffey, S.S.J., (15) pastor at the Church of the Good Shepherd in Washington, D.C., assisted them in an advisory capacity.

The transition was not an easy one, however. Epiphany's founders remembered that their meeting times at Holy Trinity were sometimes changed without notice so they encountered locked doors when they arrived, and they recalled threats and other mistreatment as well. (16) Deciding they simply could not meet at Trinity, they began to gather instead in the homes of African American members of the parish and at the beauty parlor owned and operated by Mrs. Eleanora Jackson, which offered more space than private homes. (17)

In the spring of 1924 Archbishop Curley, together with Cardinal Dennis Dougherty of Philadelphia and Archbishop Patrick Hayes of New York, issued an "Appeal in Behalf of the Negro and Indian Missions of the United States." The Appeal

was aimed, in part, to raise funds to establish seminaries to train young African American men for the priesthood. One paragraph in particular read:

The bishops of the country are asking for many more priests and Sisters to carry on this special work of the Church among the Negroes and the Indians. They find that the Colored people in particular do not feel at home in White churches, or they think themselves treated coldly, only tolerated, and in some instances, openly snubbed. There are exceptions in some of the more robust Catholic centers of the North and South, but this is fast becoming the prevailing opinion. It is to be expected that the specialist can give better service than the general practitioner. This should hold good in religion as well as in medicine. (18)

In August 1924 Lawrence E. Schaefer, S.S.J., (19) was assigned to the new parish, then known as the "Epiphany Mission." Initially the Black community refurbished a building where Mass could be said at 1409 28th Street, N.W. Dorothy Thomas could recall her father painting the building. (20) With assiduous effort, the African American community then raised funds to purchase two vacant lots on Dumbarton Street as the site for their new church; the deed to these properties was dated Feb. 26, 1925. (21) Epiphany's cornerstone was laid in July 1925. (22) By the end of the year, work on the new church was far enough along that a funeral could be held there on Dec. 19, for Lester Curtis, and a wedding could be celebrated there on Dec. 26, between Thomas Marshall (the younger brother of Aloysius Marshall) and Bessie Hayden. (23) The church was dedicated in January 1926. (24) The roster of parishioners showed a congregation at Epiphany of some 600 members in 1924 and 630 members in 1925, with 100 children in Sunday School there in 1925 and 140 in 1926. (25) Today, some 100 years later, the parish, which has embraced the membership of a French community, a Lithuanian community, and a Korean community, continues to serve the faithful who come from the District, Maryland, and Virginia to worship at Epiphany Catholic Church in Georgetown.

Notes

1. James Aloysius Smackum, Sr., was born in Washington, D.C., in 1871 and was baptized later that year at Holy Trinity. He worked variously as a broom maker, upholsterer, and clerk, and was a member of the Knights of St. John at Epiphany Roman Catholic Church. Smackum died in 1938. His wife, Mary, was born in Kentucky around 1872, and the two married in 1893. Mrs. Smackum died in 1927.

2. Richard N. Carter, a cutter in the monotype section of the Government Printing Office, was born in Washington, D.C., in 1876. He served in the army during World War I. After the establishment of Epiphany, Carter was a member there of the Knights of St. John and the Holy Name Society and served as an usher. He died in 1952.

3. Aloysius Rockford Marshall was born in 1894 in Washington, D.C. He was baptized at Holy Trinity in 1894 and was married there in 1915 to Julia Curtis. The godparents at his baptism were Mary Agnes Marshall Smackum, the wife of Charles Adam Smackum, and her son Arthur Smackum. Aloysius Marshall worked variously as a waiter, driver, janitor, and laborer. He died in 1963.

4. Michael Joseph Curley (1879-1947) served as archbishop of Baltimore from 1921 to 1947 and as the first archbishop of Washington from 1939 to 1947.

5. "To The Officers of The Holy Trinity Branch of The Gibbons Institute," Mar. 9, 1923. The spelling in this transcription is rendered as found in the original document.

6. Actually, the request was for a census of African American parishioners at Holy Trinity. For the resulting list, see "A List of African American Parishioners at Holy Trinity in 1923," below.

7. Dorothy W. Thomas (1912-99), a long-time Epiphany parishioner, served as president District 2 of the Ladies' Auxiliary of the Knights of St. John at Epiphany.

8. See “A 1994 Account from ‘Holy Trinity News’ of the Reconciliation Service with Epiphany Parishioners,” below.

9. Jo Owen to Peter J. Albert, Apr. 21, 2023.

10. Benedict J. Smith, S.J. (1875-1925), served as pastor of Holy Trinity from 1922 until his death in February 1925.

11. The names and addresses of the adult African American parishioners given in the list were subsequently published in the “History of Epiphany Catholic Church,” Appendix I, pp. 49-52, published in 1967 and printed together with the 1967 Epiphany parish directory.

12. “History of Epiphany Catholic Church,” 1967, p. 13.

13. Louis B. Pastorelli, S.S.J. (1873-1956), served as superior general of the Josephites from 1918 to 1942.

14. Notices of these meetings can be found in the Holy Trinity Weekly Announcements for Sept. 30, 1923, and Apr. 6, May 11, June 8, and July 6, 1924; the dance was mentioned in the Weekly Announcements of June 22, 1924. (Holy Trinity Weekly Announcements, 1923-24, Holy Trinity Church Archives, Georgetown University Archives, Booth Family Center for Special Collections, Washington, D.C.)

15. Thomas J. Duffey, S.S.J. (1873-1944), was the first pastor of the Church of the Good Shepherd in Washington, D.C. That parish was founded in 1923.

16. Linda Gray to Peter J. Albert, Sept. 14, 2022.

17. Eleanora Jackson was born in Maryland around 1895. She owned and

operated a beauty parlor in Georgetown which served as a meeting place for the exodus community from Holy Trinity, and where the procession for the cornerstone-laying ceremony at Epiphany assembled. At Epiphany she was a prefect of the Our Lady of Mercy Sodality. Mrs. Jackson died in 1981.

18. [Mar. 9, 1924], "An Appeal in Behalf of the Negro and Indian Missions in the United States." The Appeal was transmitted to all parishes in the archdiocese by William Hafey, the chancellor of the archdiocese, with the request that "the salient points of this Circular [be] clearly brought before the attention of our congregations." In the copy of the Appeal in Holy Trinity's archives, all of the paragraph after "they think themselves treated coldly" is crossed out. The Appeal raised \$119.65 at Holy Trinity (William Hafey to Reverend Dear Father, Feb. 25, 1924; Holy Trinity Weekly Announcements of Mar. 16, 1924).

19. Lawrence E. Schaefer, S.S.J. (1886-1970), served as pastor of Epiphany Roman Catholic Church from 1924 until 1931. For the date of his appointment, see "Two New Missions in Washington, D.C.," *The Colored Harvest*, Jan-Feb. 1925.

20. "History of Epiphany Catholic Church," 1967, p. 13; Greg Kitsock, "Keeping the Faith: The Black Churches of Georgetown Endure," *City Paper*, Sept. 12-18, 1986. See also Gertrude Turner Waters, "Historical Sketch – Epiphany Catholic Church," below.

21. "History of Epiphany Catholic Church," 1967, p. 13.

22. "New Church of the Epiphany," *Baltimore Catholic Review*, July 25, 1925; "Lay Cornerstone for New Church in Capital City," *Chicago Defender*, Aug. 1, 1925.

23. "History of Epiphany Catholic Church," 1967, p. 16.

24. Ibid.

25. Parish Annual Reports, Archives of the Society of Saint Joseph of the Sacred Heart, Washington, D.C.