

A BRIEF HISTORY OF BLACK CATHOLICS

By Bridget Wilson, Director of Multi-Cultural Ministry in the Catholic Diocese of Arlington

While well-known European Catholics settled Maryland in the 1600s, as early as the 1500s, black Catholics settled St. Augustine, Florida. Despite the considerable hardship black Catholics faced throughout their history in America, they established religious orders, lay fraternities, and other critical institutions in the life of the Catholic Church in America. These orders and institutions include the Oblate Sisters of Providence, whose first superior was Mother Mary Lange; the Sisters of the Holy Family, founded by Venerable Henriette Delille, and the Knights of Peter Claver, a lay order established to serve the Church and the poor during the time when the Knights of Columbus had yet to desegregate. American Catholic Bishops continually promoted and encouraged racial equality and justice, and many Catholics marched in Selma, Alabama. The First Black Clergy Caucus was established in 1968, and the Black Catholic Congress began in 1985 and continues through today.

When Washington DC was established as the capital of the United States, it was made using territory from Virginia and Maryland. Virginia's portion was called Alexandria County and became the home of Franklin and Armfield – the nation's largest slave-trading company. In the 17th century, as tensions mounted between northern and southern states and momentum seemed to lean towards Washington DC making the slave trade illegal, Congress was petitioned to return the city of Alexandria to the Commonwealth of Virginia in 1847. Slave traders flocked to Alexandria, the “safe” zone for the slave trade industry. This caught Alexandria between the slave-owning south and free north. This period of Alexandria history has had social, political, cultural, and even spiritual ramifications which echo to this day.

Although the Catholic Bishops denounced racism, the effects of racism still plagued black Catholics in Northern Virginia. After the Civil War and even into the 20th Century, black Catholics would sit in the back of the church and were sometimes denied Holy Communion. Black Catholics in what is now the Diocese of Arlington (formerly part of the Diocese of Richmond until it was established as independent in 1974) knew where to find priests who would give them the sacraments if their parish priest would not. Consequently, St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Alexandria, founded in 1915, and later Our Lady Queen of Peace in Arlington, founded in 1945, were established to help serve and welcome the black Catholic community. The community establishing St. Joseph, although quite poor at the time, worked tirelessly to fundraise in order to break ground on their new parish. The history of the parish is blessed with the help of a saint, St. Katharine Drexel, who donated funds to build the parish. Since its establishment, the parish has been led by priests from the Society of St. Joseph of the Sacred Heart (SSJ), otherwise known as Josephites, who minister specifically to African Americans. The founding of Our Lady Queen of Peace marks the time after the end of World War II. Bishop Ireton granted the request for the new parish to be established, and it was ministered by the Holy Ghost Fathers. Today, all parishes are integrated, but St. Joseph and Our Lady Queen of Peace continue to be influenced and inspired by their history and heritage.

Notable black Catholics in the Diocese of Arlington include Cecelia Braveboy (née Thomas), a parishioner of Our Lady Queen of Peace. She and her brothers, Keith and James, were the first black students to attend St. Thomas More Catholic School in Arlington. Today, Cecelia leads the contemplative group Minkisi (Swahili for “healing objects”), that guides its members to become “instruments of peace”. They are involved in works of charity, hosting retreats, and more. Their patroness is Sr. Thea Bowman, a religious sister and scholar, who dedicated her life to sharing and promoting African American spirituality. In 2007, the Diocese of Arlington assigned Eugene Harper, choir director at St. Joseph’s and Director of the National Association of Pastoral Musicians in Virginia, as the first Chair of Black Catholic Ministry. After his tenure, Deacon Al Anderson of St. Joseph’s was appointed Chair. Deacon Al was the first black Catholic to be ordained a deacon in the Diocese of Arlington and would be joined six years later by Deacon Gerard-Marie Anthony of St. Timothy Catholic Church in Chantilly. Deacon Al served as chair until 2019 and was succeeded by Gerard “Jerry” Cousin. Through their efforts and of countless Catholics before them, the black Catholic community has made great strides in promoting black Catholic saints, celebrating and sharing black spirituality, and addressing the issues of racism and prejudice that are ongoing to this day.

Sources

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