

Black Catholic History Month is coming

In just a few days, we will usher in the 19th celebration of November as Black Catholic History Month, and we have something to celebrate.

Statistics support that there are more than 200 million people of African descent in the Roman Catholic Church. This designation and celebration of Catholicism within the black community in the United States was established in 1990 through the advocacy of the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus.

During the same year, the first celebration of Black Catholic History Month began in November in various cities in the U.S. with the celebration of St. Martin de Porres' Feast Day. On Nov. 3 of that year, a liturgy celebrated the 150th anniversary of St. Martin's transition to eternal life.

Historically, many firsts involving black Catholics occurred right here in the Archdiocese of Baltimore including the following:

Aboard the Ark and Dove, boats from England, which landed in Southern Maryland, it has been reported by historians that there were 100 Catholics, two priests and a servant Catholic Negro on board. This was in 1634. (Henry S. Spalding, *Catholic Colonial Maryland*, 1931, pg. 102)

The Afro American Newspaper reports that there were two blacks aboard these ships. One, John Price from England, sometimes referred to as Joyce, and one from Barbados, Matthias de Sousa, (Catholic) who assisted in the rebuilding on one of the above ships as it was shipwrecked during its voyage. Both were indentured servants.

The baptismal register of the Cathedral of the Assumption (downtown Baltimore) includes records of baptisms of black people as far back as 1797, with the baptism of an 18-year-old woman, Jeanne Antoinette Sanite. (Cyprian Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in The United States*, pg. 85).

The Oblate Sisters of Providence were formed in 1829 as the first African-American

religious order of women in the United States and in the world. Both the foundress Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange and founder, Rev. James Joubert, S.S., were exiles from the French Colony of Saint Domingue.

Mother Lange and other women established in 1828 St. Frances Academy, which is still in existence in east Baltimore. By 1836, the Oblate Sisters of Providence built a chapel on Richmond Street near Read Street. This site held their convent and academy

St. Francis Xavier in east Baltimore was founded in 1863, becoming the first official black Catholic parish in the United States. This faith community bought a historic Universalist Church for \$6,000. Father Michael O'Conner, S.J., helped to raise funds for this purchase. This church was once the site of Henry Clay's Nomination Address.

In 1843 the first black Catholic organization "The Holy Family Society" was founded, with a membership of 270 people. They met in the basement of the pro-Cathedral, in what was known as Calvert Hall.

William A. Williams, a black man who once studied at Rome's Urban College from 1855-1862, was active at St. Francis Xavier. During the period from 1855-1863, Williams published in Baltimore a journal called the Truth Communicator, directed to freedmen, and called them to work toward the emancipation of slaves. Williams was a well-known tutor and teacher of black men and worked at the Enoch Pratt Library. (James Hennesey, S.J. American Catholics: pgs. 144-45). This journal predates Daniel Rudd's newspaper.

In 1891, Father Charles Uncles, S.S.J. a Baltimorean, became the first black Josephite priest and the first black priest ordained in the United States. (Father Augustine Tolton was the first black priest ordained in Rome).

On June 17, 2002, a housing unit for seniors was opened and named after Father Uncles. Its location is 608 Pennsylvania Ave.

In 1894, the Fifth Black Catholic Congress was held in Baltimore at St. Peter Claver.

While Black Catholic History Month is a time for us to celebrate the contributions of

black Catholics to the Roman Catholic tradition , it is also a time to become activated and pray for the advancement of evangelization with and among African Americans.

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