

Catholic history of east Baltimore explored

This past summer I had the opportunity to make my annual retreat at the Carmelite Monastery in Towson. The day before starting my retreat, I gave a lecture on the founding of the Oblate Sisters of Providence to the Auxiliary Society of St. Martin's Home for the Elderly. By a strange coincidence or rather by the workings of providence, these three institutions, many years ago, were located just blocks from each other. In fact, the area was a haven of Catholic institutions.

In East Baltimore, the area east-west from Brentwood Avenue to Caroline Street and north-south from Biddle to Madison housed several Catholic institutions. Starting east, on the corner of Brentwood and Chase, is the chapel of St. Frances Academy. That block housed at one time the motherhouse of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, St. Frances Boarding School and Day Academy and until 1923, located in the same facility, was the St. Frances Orphan Asylum.

The St. Frances Chapel congregation would eventually nurture the religious vocation of Josephite Father Charles Randolph Uncles, who became the first black Catholic priest ordained in the United States in 1891. Father Uncles' parents were active at St. Frances Chapel as early as 1850.

In its early years (around 1830), the Oblate School of St. Frances Academy annual charges consisted of \$80. This included 12 months of board and tuition at \$4 a month, an annual medical fee of \$24 and a bed and bedding fee of \$8. Day students paid 50 cents per month, and family discounts were applied. Oblate records note that three daughters of Magdeline Jean paid \$1.25 per month.

From almost their beginnings, the Oblates had a social justice outreach alongside their religious education and general education ministries. Records gleaned from the writings of Redemptorist Father Thaddeus Anwander (Oblate spiritual director) indicate stories of “the children of the house,” orphans, boarders and day students being taught together.

Today, the expanded campus of St. Frances Academy includes the school, the Mother Lange Center, the chapel, an athletic facility and the Community Outreach Center. Relatively new to Chase Street is the Mother Lange Center led by Oblate Sister Mary Claudina Sanz. This oasis in the city serves as a home for abused and homeless girls. The motherhouse is now located on Gun Road in southwest Baltimore County.

Walking east and crossing Greenmount Avenue, we come to Valley Street. A right turn takes us to the former Irish parish of St. John the Evangelist. Here at the corner of Valley and Eager streets once stood the boys’ school, conducted by the Christian Brothers. This building, after the civil rights movement, housed the offices of St. Ambrose Housing and served the social needs of the inhabitants of the area. Diagonally from the boys’ school stands the church, which at one time was the largest Irish parish in the archdiocese. Later, the building became a social service center, supplying clothing and food to the area residents. This project was sponsored by the Redemptorist Fathers of St. James Church. Redemptorist Father George Wichland ran the operation. Today, the building is vacant. The girls’ school, which was conducted by the Daughters of Charity, became a federally funded apartment complex providing affordable housing for the poor of east Baltimore.

Next week, I will continue this journey by further exploring the historic Catholic presence and ministry provided in east Baltimore. Join me on this excursion and discovery of the Catholic history embedded in east Baltimore’s corridors.

(Diane Batts Morrow's book on the Oblate Sisters of Providence, titled "Persons of Color and Religious at the Same Time," served as a reference for this segment.)

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