

Claverism in Baltimore

As the Premier See of American Catholicism, Baltimore has always occupied an important place in the history of the church in America. This preeminence extends also to the history of Catholics of color. In addition to being home to the oldest religious community of women of color and the oldest parochial church canonically erected for the use of Catholics of color, Baltimore also holds an early place within the history of the Knights of Peter Claver.

The nation's largest and oldest continually operating organization of black Catholics was founded in Mobile, Ala., in 1909 by Father Conrad F. Rebesh, a member of the Josephite Society and pastor of Most Pure Heart of Mary Church in Mobile. Named after the great Jesuit missionary, it endeavors to further the ideal of brotherhood, to serve God and his people, and to support Holy Mother Church.

On Sept. 12, 1915, while returning from a visit to his childhood home of Buffalo, N.Y., Father Rebesh stopped in Baltimore, where he organized Baltimore Council No. 13 of the Knights of Peter Claver, the first in the state of Maryland, and only the second in what is now considered the order's Northern States District.

The Knights of Baltimore Council represented a cross-section of Baltimore's black population. Ignatius Walter Adams was a stevedore for the wholesale business of Jacob Epstein. Charles Emory Gladden and George McKim were both porters, at the Alfred Sporting Goods Company and Auditorium Theatre, respectively. There were also numerous skilled tradesmen and professionals, including the two printers, Gabriel Braxton Maddox and Charles Marcellus Dorsey, and Charles T. Woodland, a physician.

The Knights elected Teackle Wallis Lansey, founder of the Ideal Savings Bank, as their first Grand Knight. Grand Knight Lansey would also be appointed as Deputy for the state of Maryland in 1917. Though Council No. 13 was the only active council on the East Coast at the time, his appointment as state deputy showed the order's optimism for future expansion.

In 1918, Father Rebesh was reassigned to St. Barnabas Church in Baltimore,

where he would serve as pastor for the next nine years. On June 6, 1920, Father Rebesher organized the second council in Baltimore, Council No. 30, which the men named Rebesher Council in his honor.

These two councils co-existed in Baltimore throughout the 1920s. They raised funds for charitable causes, sponsored dances and banquets, and supported the parishes to which they were attached. Council No. 13 originally met in the basement of St. Francis Xavier Church and later in the historic Elks' Hall at 414 West Hoffman Street. The Grand Knights successively were T. Wallis Lansey, George A. Brown, Major Charles E. Gladden and Charles Woodland.

At present, the oldest Claver unit in Baltimore, and the oldest in what is the Northern States District, is Unit No. 62. St. Benedict the Moor Council was established Sept. 18, 1929, as the result of a merger between the two existing councils in Baltimore. The decision to merge came at a time of great excitement in Baltimore's black Catholic community. The city was host to the fifth annual Convention of the Federated Colored Catholics, a national organization, which was founded by Dr. Thomas Wyatt Turner to address the issues of Catholics of color in the church.

Professor John H. Clouser, the national traveling deputy of the Knights, and Gilbert Faustina, the past Supreme Knight and national treasurer, had both come to Baltimore for the convention. While in the city, they were the guests of their brother Knights, and sparked within them a renewed interest in Claverism. Our Lady of Good Counsel Court No. 62 of the Ladies Auxiliary was established nine years later, on Aug. 19, 1938.

The first Grand Knight of Council No. 62 was Eustace Pilgrim, the caretaker of St. Mary's Seminary for more than 20 years. The first Grand Lady of Court No. 62 was Theresa Fonseca. Three-quarters of a century after the banner of Claverism was first planted in Baltimore, three units, Nos: 323 (1991), 331 (1992-93) and 349 (1996), were established. Of these three, Charles R. Uncles Council No. 323 and Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange Court No. 323 continue to thrive.

As the Knights of Peter Claver moves into its second century of Catholic action, the Archdiocese of Baltimore can rejoice in its long history of Claverism.

Jari Honora is a historian studying at Tulane University. He serves as Grand Knight of Father Schmodry Council No. 52 in New Orleans and is currently writing a history of the Knights of Peter Claver.