

# In 1829, bishops praise St. Frances Academy

In October 1829, the first Provincial Council in the United States was held here in Baltimore. In attendance were five bishops and one archbishop. The archbishop, of course, was our own Archbishop James Whitfield. The five bishops were Fenwick of Boston, Joseph Flaget of Bardstown (now Louisville, Ky.), Rosati of St. Louis, England of Charleston, S.C., Fenwick of Cincinnati and also Messrs. Brute and Blanc, future bishops of Vincennes (now Indianapolis) and New Orleans.

Just four months earlier, four African-American women pronounced the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience as the first congregation of religious of color in the world. The event took place here in Baltimore also. Connected to the convent was a school for colored girls that began a year and a half earlier. That school, now known as St. Frances Academy, was the first Catholic School for African-American children. On Oct. 21, 1829, the bishops, except Bishop Fenwick of Cincinnati, accompanied Archbishop Whitfield on a visit to this new unique institution.

Father James Joubert, S.S., noted in his diary that the bishops took in everything in detail. They visited the convent and quizzed some of the children. They left well-satisfied with the school and strongly recommended to Father Joubert that he continue the good work, which was a blessing to religion and society in general. Before leaving the facility, Father Joubert asked Archbishop Whitfield for his blessings. The archbishop replied that the institution was in his diocese and he blessed the works of the sisters every day. Archbishop Whitfield suggested that Bishop Flaget, the oldest of the bishops attending, give the blessing. Bishop Flaget first gave words of encouragement to both the sisters and students. Father Joubert notes in his diary that as the bishop raised his hand to give the blessing, he counted the sisters and said the following words, "Today you are four; in two years, you shall be 12 - in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen." Bishop Flaget's words turned out to be a prophecy. In two years, 1831, the Oblate Sisters did number 12. Mount Providence, the motherhouse of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, has a series of windows displaying the history of the community. The

fourth window on the right-hand side depicts Bishop Flaget seated with the four sisters around him listening to his words.

On Nov. 3, after the council had ended, Bishop England of Charleston, who was extremely busy during the council, asked Father Joubert to accompany him to the sisters' convent and school. The bishop said he had heard only good things about the school from the other bishops' trip to George Street. Bishop England wanted to experience the colored school as he was most interested in the colored Catholics in his diocese. An exceptional scholar, Bishop England examined the rules and constitutions of the Oblates, spent time in the classroom observing and questioning the students, talking with the sisters, examining the writings and drawings of the children and concluded by giving a short lecture on edification and encouragement. Before leaving, he gave his blessings to the staff and students. Bishop England confided to Father Joubert that he was most pleased with everything and was inclined to start such a school in his own diocese. Eventually, Bishop England did start a school for the colored Catholics in Charleston, but due to protests and other problems, the school was discontinued.

The site of the convent and school on George Street no longer exists. However, in its place is a monument dedicated by the former mayor, Martin O'Malley, to the first four Oblate Sisters whose ministry of education impressed all the bishops of the United States in 1829.

It is also interesting to note that the 34th decree of the First Provincial Council called for the building of Catholic schools throughout the nation.

Sister M. Reginald Gerdes, O.S.P., is a historical researcher for the Oblate Sisters of Providence.