

Part One: A portrait of Baltimore's black Catholic history

In order to better appreciate the devotion and dedication of black Catholics to the church, it is necessary to be aware of the political, social and religious environment which people of color had to endure and overcome.

Early Baltimore, for black people, was a unique experience. Although Maryland did not secede from the union and was not a member of the Confederate States, it was a major slaveholding state. At the same time, Maryland had the largest number of free blacks in the United States. West Pratt Street housed slave pens where blacks were held until they were shipped from Fells Point to New Orleans, where plantation owners from the South came to buy slaves at the auctions.

Maryland had the largest center of the Colonial Society of America. The organization's primary purpose was to send free blacks back to Africa. Octavius Taney, brother of Roger Taney of the famed Dred Scott decision, introduced a bill into the state Legislature that would remove all free blacks from the State of Maryland. Fortunately, the bill did not pass. Maryland did not provide state education for blacks until after the Civil War. However, the free blacks were taxed for services they did not receive. As early as 1806, free blacks petitioned the state for education and other taxable privileges.

In the religious arena, John Carroll, our first bishop, owned slaves, along with the Jesuits and the Visitation Sisters. Oddly enough, our own Sister Mary Paul Lee's grandfather was a slave and coachman for the Washington Visitation Sisters. In an archival exhibit at the Carmelite Monastery in Towson, there is a bill from a young lady entering the order, transferring a slave family from her family to the Carmelite Sisters as part of her dowry. Father William DuBourg, the Sulpician who laid the foundation for the first African-American parish in the country and saw that the parish continued when he was made bishop of Louisiana, introduced the concept of slavery to the Vincentian Fathers in St. Louis. Bishop DuBourg refused permission for St. Rose Philippine Duchesne to start a religious order for black women in Louisiana.

Yet, we can credit the Sulpician Fathers with the first major attempt to create a parish for people of African descent. Father DuBourg started a parish for the Saint Dominique (now Haiti) refugees. It was under the Sulpicians, along with Mother Mary Lange, that the first black Catholic school in America, St. Frances Academy, was founded in 1828. One year later, 1829, four black women made vows as religious, and the first order of black nuns in the Catholic Church came into existence. When the sisters moved to Richmond Street, their motherhouse became the parish for black Catholics. As early as 1836, Father Joubert had girls as altar servers.

We can also credit the Sulpicians with starting the first black Catholic lay society, The Society of the Holy Family. This society was moderated by Sulpician Father John Hickey, who was the rector of the cathedral. The society, a dues-paying organization, met monthly and had officers, and at the first meeting, accounted for 200 black Catholics. This was in the 1840s. The Holy Family society had a lending library, hired a German organist for liturgical celebrations, had a burial society and was a regular contributor to the cathedral. One Sunday, when arriving for a meeting, the society was surprised to find building materials in the meeting room. The powers that be decided to use the hall where the society met for a boys' school, Calvert Hall. The society eventually disbanded.

Archbishop James Whitfield (who gave Father Joubert permission to start the Oblate Sisters) left in his will a sizable amount of money to the white communities, but much less to the Oblate Sisters. It is documented that Archbishop Whitfield also stated that there was a potential harvest among the black population, but he did not have enough priests to take care of the white people. This was the milieu of the black Catholics in the early years of Baltimore. Yet, these people of God continued in their faith.

On a different note of history as we celebrate Black Catholic History Month, let us congratulate two strong and faithful African-American Catholic women; Oblate Sister Claudina Sanz and Gwendolyn Lindsay. They were honored late last month by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People for their outstanding service to the community.

This topic will be continued next week.

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