

# St. Ignatius audience enthralled by black Catholic history address

Charles Village resident Mark Kirby found the topic of a St. Ignatius, Baltimore, presentation on the history of black Catholics in Maryland mesmerizing, mainly because he hadn't examined the race with the religion in a historically relevant manner before.

"It's one of those hidden corners of our history," the white St. Ignatius parishioner said. "I think it's an interesting topic – something I've always wondered about."

Mr. Kirby was joined by more than 75 other congregants May 21 to hear Dr. Diane Bates Morrow – associate professor of history and African studies at the University of Georgia and an award-winning author of black Catholic history – discuss the early struggles of black Catholics in the Archdiocese of Baltimore and their triumphs today.

"Our connection with black Catholic history is very strong," said Father James A. Casciotti, S.J., pastor of St. Ignatius, referring to its basement chapel that had been used for an all-black Mass for a time shortly after the church was built in the 1850s. "This was during a time when they were not treated all that well."

There were an estimated 3,000 black Catholics in the Baltimore region when the archdiocese was established in the late 1700s and the city quickly became a haven for the faithful men and women of color, Dr. Morrow said.

Though Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange helped form the Oblate Sisters of Providence – the first Catholic order for black women – in the 1820s and established St. Frances Academy in Baltimore – the oldest continuously operating black Catholic school in the United States – black Catholics were also met with scorn and often shunned by their white counterparts during the 19th Century, she said.

Black Catholics were segregated at Mass at the city's Cathedral and other Catholic churches, several Catholic religious orders owned slaves, the all-black Mass chapels were often closed for other uses and the support from many of the archbishops

wavered throughout the century, Dr. Morrow said.

“This was the standard of the day, not just in the Catholic church,” the historian and author told the mostly white congregation at St. Ignatius. “Racism, not religious principal, prevailed.”

However, black Catholics continued their struggle for equal treatment and eventually found support from within the leadership of the archdiocese and today St. Frances Academy is nationally recognized for its high rate of minority student success, she said.

The May 21 program was part of a year-long series of lectures the parish has held to commemorate its 150th anniversary.

After receiving a standing ovation from the audience, Dr. Morrow told the group she wished she could transport them to the University of Georgia, because they were among the most engaged spectators she has ever addressed.