

St. Peter Claver celebrates 120th anniversary

My first visit to St. Peter Claver occurred during my senior year in college. My friend Anthony Supo Akingbade, a Nigerian studying in America, came home to Baltimore with me from college in Massachusetts for the Christmas holidays. At the time, I was not a Roman Catholic, and all I wanted to do was make sure Supo would make it to midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. We walked the half-mile from our house on Robert Street to the church, found a packed sanctuary and had to sit in the aisle. Over the years, I have come to know much more about St. Peter Claver, the historical development of the church and the Josephite priests who have ministered here from its conception. During this, the 120th anniversary of the church's founding, I would like to share with you what I have learned and talk about the hope for the future of this monument to perseverance.

Historical development

St. Peter Claver was a Spaniard, born in 1581 in Verdu, Spain. At the age of 21, he entered the Society of Jesus, and eight years later, he was sent to Cartagena, where for the next 41 years, he dedicated himself to the aid of African slaves. He was canonized in 1888, and his feast day is Sept. 9.

The Josephites came to Baltimore to evangelize African-Americans. Their evangelism efforts were so successful that they quickly took over ministry at St. Francis Xavier and established for African-Americans at St. Monica's parish. The first pastor of St. Peter Claver was Father Lambert Welbers, a Josephite. The pastor today is Father Joseph Del Vecchio, a Josephite, testimony to the 120 years of unbroken leadership and commitment by the Josephites.

In 1888, the same year as the canonization of St. Peter Claver, the Josephites built a third church on the site of Whatcost Methodist Episcopal Church. The Father McHale of Immaculate Conception Church said he was "sorry to lose some of the best Christians" in his congregation. Some 1,500 people marched from St. Francis Xavier on Calvert and Pleasant streets, with many musical bands and banners on

Sunday, Sept. 9, to the new site at the intersection of Pennsylvania and Fremont avenues, the heart of the Sandtown community. His Eminence Cardinal James Gibbons was there to meet them, along with Bishop Alfred Curtis of the Wilmington, Del., Diocese. At the dedication of St. Peter Claver, the parish was entrusted with the spiritual care of all African-American Catholics west of Charles Street.

Over the years, St. Peter Claver has served the church and the community. It was the site of the fifth National Black Catholic Congress in 1894, and the eighth National Black Catholic Congress in 1997 hosted a play here. Dr. Beverly A. Carroll, founding executive director of the Secretariat for African-American Catholics at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and a loyal St. Peter Claver parishioner, calls these lay congresses, pivotal moments in African-American Catholic history. Today, the St. Vincent De Paul Society routinely provides bags of food to the hungry, and the church opens its doors weekly to Narcotics and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. A Thanksgiving “Love Feast” was inaugurated in the 1960s by Cecelia Sewell, a part-time housekeeper and cook for the parish after making the Cursillo. On every Thanksgiving Day since, the doors of St. Peter Claver are opened wide to share with the poor from our bounty, all the food that everyone coming through the door can eat. The workers are multicultural, multiracial, all shapes and sizes, from many geographical locations.

Read more about St. Peter Claver’s history next week.

Willard Witherspoon is a parishioner of St. Peter Claver.