

# St. Peter Claver is 120 years strong

St. Peter Claver Parish can rightfully be called “The Mother Parish” of west Baltimore African-American Catholics. Founded in 1888 by the Mill Hill Josephite Fathers, this church, specifically for African-Americans, was the first of its kind in West Baltimore.

St. Peter Claver Church is the daughter church of St. Francis Xavier on the east side. We can attribute the first black parish to the Sulpician Fathers, who held services and religion classes for the people of color in the lower chapel of St. Mary’s Seminary. Later, in the 1830s, the congregation worshipped in the Oblate Sisters Chapel on Richmond (now Read Street). Under the Jesuit Fathers, the congregation moved to the basement of St. Ignatius Church on Calvert Street. The church was called the Chapel of St. Peter Claver.

Finally, the Jesuits purchased a former church on Calvert and Pleasant streets. The black Catholics now had their very own church building. By this time, Archbishop Martin John Spalding had asked the Mill Hill Fathers of England to come to America to evangelize the black population. Archbishop Spalding had a very special interest in converting the 4 million newly freed slaves.

By 1888, the Josephite Fathers bought the Western Maryland Hotel on Pennsylvania Avenue. They converted the building into a seminary for training young men for the black apostolate. At the same time, the American superior of the Mill Hill Fathers, Father John Slattery, desired to have a parish for the training of seminarians.

By the mid 1800s, blacks were living all over Baltimore and many Catholics had to trod miles to reach St. Francis Xavier. The solution: create another parish for the black Catholics in west Baltimore. The Mill Hill Fathers purchased the Methodist Episcopal Church and the adjoining house at the intersection of Pennsylvania and Fremont avenues to serve as a parish center. Immediately, Father Slattery added a sanctuary and a sacristy on each side of the church.

On Sept. 9, 1888, the feast of the newly canonized St. Peter Claver, the Church of St. Peter Claver was dedicated by Cardinal James Gibbons. It was a great day for the

black Catholics of west Baltimore. Preceding the dedication was a procession from St. Francis Xavier on the east side to the future St. Peter Claver on the west side.

A new dynasty began with the opening of St. Peter Claver Church. The new pastor, Father Lambert Welbers, started a school right away. Two laywomen did the teaching. One, Caroline Cook, was a graduate of St. Frances Academy and North Massachusetts State Normal School.

By 1891, just three years after the founding of the parish, Father Welbers purchased some land behind the church and built a large school. That September, the Glen Riddle Franciscans began the operation of St. Peter Claver School. The Sisters remained as teachers until 1998 after serving black Catholics for 103 years.

In 1892, just four years after the foundation of the parish, Father Welbers founded the House of Good Shepherd on Calverton Street. This was the first of the many social justice and social action services to be associated with St. Peter Claver Church. That same year, while only four years old, St. Peter Claver had 1,000 parishioners and 130 students enrolled in the school. Also in 1892, the fourth anniversary Mass was offered by the first African-American priest trained and ordained in the United States, Father Charles Uncles, S.S.J., a Baltimore native.

In 1893, some of the Mill Hill Fathers returned to Europe and those who remained constitute the Josephite Society as we know it today.

St. Peter Claver has given to the religious orders of the church more than 40 sons and daughters.

This week, the “Mother Church” of west Baltimore’s African-American Catholics celebrates 120 years of evangelizing, educating and socially serving the black population of the city of Baltimore.

Congratulations, parishioners, for your many years of hard work and dedication to the church and to mankind.

Blessings!

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