

The Year of the Priest

A few Sundays ago, St. Peter Claver and St. Pius V parishes celebrated the “Year of the Priest.” Since both parishes are conducted by the Josephite Fathers, Father. Edward Chiffrieller, superior general, celebrated the liturgy, accompanied by a host of Josephite priests, brothers and seminarians. At this liturgy, three Josephite seminarians made their final promises (lifetime commitment).

After the ceremony, all were invited to a delicious home-cooked meal in the church hall, followed by a program. A PowerPoint presentation provided pictures of all the pastors of both parishes. The first pastor of St. Peter Claver, Father Lambert Welbers, started the first African-American parish school in West Baltimore. The school is now known as Father Charles A. Hall School. The school is scheduled to close this June after an existence of more than 115 years. Noteworthy of the school is the fact that just two years after starting the West Baltimore parish, Father Welbers opened the school with two lay teachers, one black, one white. The black teacher, Caroline Cook, was a former student of St. Frances Academy. She was previously sent to Northern Massachusetts College for teacher training. This happened through the generosity of another Josephite, Father John R. Slattery.

Another slide pictured the basketball Josephite, Father John McShane who integrated the CYO Basketball League in Baltimore. Later, this good priest did the same thing in a little town in southern Louisiana. Other slides showed former Josephites working tirelessly with the Urban League, NAACP, Public Housing, the Cursillo Movement and a host of other events.

The amazing thing about the priests who operate St. Peter Claver and St Pius V parishes is the fact that they work solely with the black population.

Originally coming to Baltimore at the request of Archbishop Martin Spalding, the men were then known as the Mill Hill Fathers. Years of extreme isolation and mistreatment from bishops and fellow clergymen, because of their work with the black population, caused the men to come to a decision. Go back to England or stay in the United States as a separate entity. Some priests returned to Mill Hill. Others remained in the United States in order to minister to the African-Americans. The

result was the formation of a new religious society, called The Society of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart, known today as the Josephite Fathers.

The order, originally made up of men from England, is now interracial. The society has given to the church of America three African-American bishops. The headquarters are located right here in Baltimore on the corner of North Calvert and Biddle streets. Today, the Josephites work in 40 parishes in 13 dioceses. In addition to St. Peter Claver and St. Pius V parishes, the Josephites operate the historic and first African-American parish in the United States, St. Francis Xavier in East Baltimore and St. Veronica in South Baltimore. They conduct a formation house in Baltimore, a seminary in Washington, D.C., and a seminary in Nigeria.

In addition to parish work, the Josephites have a prison ministry; assist as chaplains in hospitals, work in drug addiction programs and conduct, in New Orleans, the great St. Augustine High School. True to their tradition of service to African-Americans, It was the Josephite priests of St. Augustine who integrated the football and other athletic programs in the City of New Orleans. It took time, effort and pain. But in the end the victory was theirs. In this, the "Year of the Priest," it is only right and just that the parishes of St. Peter Claver and St. Pius V recognize the outstanding and selfless work of the Josephite Fathers.

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