

Tyrrell spread the Gospel among African-Americans

Songwriter Samuel W. Beazley wrote in his song "The Gospel News": "Tell the Word of Life to all who may be found wand'ring far from God. ... Tell out the Gospel news; preach it, teach it, tell it, that all may know Jesus the savior, who loves them so. Spread abroad the Gospel news." And that is what Wales R. Tyrrell, a Catholic layman, did by evangelizing to African-Americans on his faith journey with God in Virginia.

Mr. Tyrrell was born in Halifax County, Va., and was a school teacher by profession. After conversion into the Catholic Church for just four years, Mr. Tyrrell professed a deep desire to spread and infuse into the African-American community of Virginia the Gospel as taught by Catholics. Sister Addie Lorraine Walker, a School Sister of Notre Dame, in her lecture on Feb. 7 titled "The Black Catholic Experience," stated that "after conversion into the church, Wales saw the situation of people of color and considered the church as a means to improve the quality of life for his people. Thus, Mr. Tyrrell sought to define a strategy." Sister Addie quoted Mr. Tyrrell saying, "I must do something about the situation" and chiseled out a strategy and a level of autonomy towards the regeneration of a people.

In 1886, Mr. Tyrrell was hired to teach in the public school in Keswick located in Albermarle County, Va. A humble but positive man, he also taught and conducted Sunday school on the side, thus giving him the opportunity to put his strategy of evangelization in place to spread and teach the Gospel news according to his faith. To assist Mr. Tyrrell in his strategy, he asked Josephite Father John R. Slattery in January 1886 to travel from Richmond, Va., and conduct Mass. Father Slattery was convinced that African-Americans were the best to convert their race to Catholicism and wholeheartedly supported Mr. Tyrrell's strategy of evangelization and uplifting his people.

Mr. Tyrrell states in his own handwritten account of his quests to teach and spread the Gospel of being brought before the public school board in Charlottesville, Va., as a result of three accusations related to his evangelization. His writings describe how

in February 1887, the school board chairman read the charges against him of being Catholic, teaching a Sunday school composed of the students in the public school, leading them astray and also allowing a Catholic priest to preach in his room at school. It appeared that one minister of the Protestant faith called to testify was misinformed of Mr. Tyrrell's actions, and one minister spoke on behalf of him. Mr. Tyrrell was instructed by the board not to discuss Catholicism while teaching at the school. This scenario shows that Catholicism was not welcome in some parts of Virginia and being African-American only exacerbated the situation. But nothing would stop Mr. Tyrrell from sharing and spreading the Gospel news to his people even though he faced prejudice because of his religion.

In August 1888, Mr. Tyrrell left with six other students for England to study at the preparatory seminary in Freshfield, only to return to the United States in January 1889 because of health problems to continue evangelization in Keswick. What made Mr. Tyrrell continue to spread the Gospel and to teach after not being able to complete his studies? One could say that Wales Tyrrell was like Stephen, the first martyr who was one of the great men of faith in the early church. Though he was not an apostle, Stephen holds a special place in Scripture because he was chosen to minister to the widows who were being cared for in Jerusalem. Though not an apostle or priest, Mr. Tyrrell was also a great man of faith and continued to be called to spread the Gospel, teaching to prepare young African-American men for entrance into Epiphany Apostolic College, which was a preparatory school for St. Joseph Seminary located in the Walbrook area of Baltimore.

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