African-American Catholicism in Milwaukee: St. Benedict the Moor Church and School

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St. Benedict the Moor Mission was established by the Catholic Church in 1908 to minister to the many African Americans then moving into northern cities. Black Catholics had attended various near-North Side parishes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but most had forced African American parishioners to sit in segregated areas of the church. Lincoln C. Valle initiated the small black parish in 1908, but the Capuchin Fathers took over responsibility in 1911, when the Mission was re-established at 1041 N. 9th Street. The School Sisters of Notre Dame began operating a day school in 1912. The school expanded after the arrival of Father Stephen John Eckert, and in the early 1920s a boarding school had been created. About three hundred African-American children--half of them boarders, half from the neighboring community--attended the school in any given year. The following excerpt from an article by the Marquette University historian Steven A. Avella describes the educational, religious, and social experiences of the students at St. Benedict's.

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How did the school affect the life and behavior of the African-American children who flocked to it? Three key areas emerge: religious formation, academics, and community life. We have a clear picture of the religious dimension of the school through the chronicles kept by the Capuchins and Dominicans. They relate details of religious celebrations, the visits of superiors, occasional frustrations and disappointments, and answered prayers. From these documents it is clear that the primary purpose of the school was to convert blacks to Catholicism. Annually, anywhere from 100 to 150 school children wen baptized in impressive group ceremonies. Although Eckert and his successors took pains to insist that these conversions were not coerced, the social pressure especially for boarding students must have been great. How many of them remained Catholic is difficult to determine with any accuracy. However, impressionistic evidence gathered from occasional reunions reveals a continued Catholic identity for many of St. Benedict's graduates in both the day and boarding schools.

Other elements of Roman Catholic teaching were brought to bear. The manner of teaching morality popular among Catholics in the first half of this century was through prescriptive manuals and catechisms which spelled out, often in painstaking detail, the various kinds of sins and faults that a believer ought to avoid. Spun from the Ten Commandments, the prescriptions of Jesus Christ in the New Testament, and the Roman Catholic church's own rather extensive legal code, these books taught in rather clear, legalistic terms the difference between right and wrong, and the penalties attached for the latter behavior. Vivid descriptions of the torments of hell or the pains of purgatory reinforced the lessons

Yet another feature of Roman Catholic religious formation that the children of St. Benedict's experienced was Catholic ritual. The elaborate and mysterious ceremonies of Roman Catholicism must have struck many of the African-American youth as strange. For those

who were practicing Baptists and Methodists, Catholic ceremonies lacked the spontaneity of religious services in their churches. Moreover, the hierarchical structure of Roman Catholicism precluded lay participation in any meaningful way. Yet, the Latin ceremonies and pageantry of the celebrations were attractive to many African-Americans, many of whom did become and remain devout Catholics. Indeed, African-American youngsters vied to become altar boys, which meant learning the prayers and responses of the Mass which were in Latin and dressing in the Roman cassock and supplice. These religious ceremonies and devotions to the saints and the Blessed Virgin Mary were indeed a very different experience for the young men and women of the Mission, but they had a formative effect on their evolving religious sensibilities This is no better indicated than by the number of them who became and remained Catholics. A smaller number expressed interest in becoming sisters and priests.

One small concession to popular participation that blended Catholic piety with Protestant idioms of black worship was the so-called Storm Novena. The novena was a popular form of Catholic petitionary prayer consisting of nine days of prayer to a saint or the Blessed virgin seeking a favor. The black children were encouraged by the priests and sisters to "storm" heaven with their prayers. Eventually the custom developed of praying nine times each day with arms outstretched before the altar (a rather unusual prayer posture in Catholic worship until the advent of Catholic pentacostalism in the 1960s and '70s) to petition God to grant a particular request. The children of St. Benedict's constantly made the Storm Novena and attributed the successes in the Mission's life to the power of the prayers. It was also an important selling point to possible benefactors: in exchange for a Storm Novena, they were encouraged to donate to the Mission.

The academic program of St. Benedict's was dominated by the theological focus of Catholicism, which was heavily neoscholastic. Philip Gleason has convincingly demonstrated how neoscholasticism constituted an official ideology for the church in this era and how this ideology was translated into practice. According to this particular approach, truth was both objective and knowable. Clear and distinct ideas could be taught and one could be sure of them. Moreover, Catholics believed that faith and reason were compatible. Hence, Catholic schools taught all branches of knowledge from the perspective that these were to bring one to the threshold of faith.

The two religious communities of sisters who conducted the school had established programs of study that translated these insights into standard curriculums. The curriculum of the elementary program emphasized the mastery of reading, writing and basic mathematics. Pedagogical techniques relied heavily on rote memorization and regular repetition of rules and mathematical tables. For the higher grades, the Racine Dominicans drew from their long years of experience with girls' academies in Racine and supplemented a basically classical curriculum with the fine arts of music, art, public speaking and dramatics. The high school as well had a small department of domestic economy which taught the girls sewing. Boys were offered some trade courses in printing and "manual arts." However, these latter programs were smaller. Although earlier in its history some of the Capuchins had planned to emphasize industrial arts and domestic skills as the core of the curriculum, these never materialized, and St. Benedict's never had the reputation of being a vocational school. Sports and recreational programs also augmented the school program, and St. Benedict had field teams in all the competitive sports.

An anonymous author wrote of the effects of a St. Benedict's education:

"Many students upon their leaving the school find that they are much in advance in practical knowledge over their friends. The erudition they have received under the influence of religion gives them an advantage in life. The confidence they have is very noticeable by their friends and marks one of the desirable qualities in character traits which St. Benedict's inspires."

But the curriculum was also calculated to the needs of the young blacks who very much wished to learn more about their heritage. The sense of racial inferiority felt by some of the black children who attended St. Benedict's was no more pathetically rrecaled than in an anecdote related in the Capuchin chronicles. When one of the Notre Dame nuns discovered one of the pupils rubbing white facial powder on his cheeks, she took it from him and the lad apologized to her by saying "he wanted to be white like her." At another time, the black children asked the same sister: "Why did not God make us all white like you." Moreover, as Milwaukee's African-American population grew, incidents of racial discrimination accelerated as well, even among Catholics.

To help children overcome these feelings of inferiority, the priests and the sisters arranged events that cultivated and reinforced a sense of ethnic pride. Visits by prominent black leaders to the Mission provided important role models of successful African-American figures. The day after Christmas in 1914 African nationalist Marcus Garvey spoke to the children and teachers at the Mission about the proliferation of Catholicism among the blacks of Haiti. Students of St. Benedict's met and gave a copy of their vearbook to Bill "Bojangles" Robinson who was performing at the Riverside Theater. In 1944, Harlem Renaissance poet Claude McKay spent a day with the students, sharing poetry and the reasons for his recent conversion to Catholicism. The Mission hired an African-American teacher, Charles Madison, who also served as a role model for the students.

Equally impressive was the emphasis given by the sisters to the study of black history and historical figures of the Negro race. In 1943, what was known as Black History Month was celebrated in February with an assembly commemorating the contributions of such notable African-American historical figures as Crispus Attucks, Marian Anderson, Ralph Metcalfe, Benjamin Banneker, and even a favorite black Catholic priest, Father William Lane, who periodically visited the school from his home in Minnesota.

The dynamics of boarding school life also had a significant impact the lives of there black youngsters. The chronicle of the School Sisters of Notre Dame records the state of the first students who appeared in 1912: "rough street boys, with no shoes on their feet, their trousers dirty and torn. They said that they came to the Catholic school thinking they would get something to eat." Not all of the black youth who entered the Mission school were as desperately poor as these first five, but most were not much removed from these conditions. For many of the young people, the regimen of life at the Mission imposed order on their lives, provided them with clean clothes and regularly scheduled meals. The difference between their home environment and the environment of the Mission was summed up years later by graduate George Gaines who recalled, "When I cane to St. Ben's I felt as if I had been transplanted to another planet."

To do this, the regime of the boarding school was strict. Harold Washington, who attended the school from 1928 to 1932, later observed that "St. Ben's got me ready for the army." Students followed a strict daily schedule which began with early rising and attendance at Mass. Household chores were apportioned among the youngsters according to their age and capabilities, and a regularly scheduled study ball made sure they did their homework and

kept on task with their studies. Discipline was firm and infractions against the rules often merited corporal punishment.

One incident revealed the nature of the approach to discipline. When a Notre Dame sister discovered a troublesome student attempting to knock a crucifix off the wall, the chronicle reports, "She [Sister Marie] downed him and gave him and the others an object lesson from which they would not so soon forget." The chronicle concluded, "From that time the crucible remained unmolested in its place of honor."

Runaways were a persistent problem as well. Occasionally, older students would sneak off the Mission property for fun downtown. Some, having had enough of the discipline of the school, would stow away on trains heading south. For those who were caught, the punishment was swift and painful. Such was the case of one Roy Mitchell, whom the chronicle reported as "again playing truant" in early summer of 1913. When one of the Mission priests spotted Mitchell riding in a truck, the boy took off running. The priest chased and caught him, and dragged him to a local Catholic school, "where after a good flogging, he was kept at the monastery until probation office notified us what to do with him." If the discipline was firm it was probably because there were repeated incidents of running away, vandalism, petty theft, and disrespect for Catholic values. Not all efforts to reform the young people were successful and there were expulsions. However, people noticed the changed behavior. One truancy officer "expressed his surprise" to the of the Notre Dame sisters "to see the change and improvement of the children. I do not understand your method," he commented."

But whatever difficulties administering discipline may have posed to the priests and sisters, they realized that their students would need a great deal of control to withstand the forces of racism in society and even in the Catholic Church. Father Philip Steffes, who oversaw the Mission for nearly thirty years, was especially aware of the racism that still existed within the Catholic Church. He expressed his concerns about the exclusion of the rapidly growing black population from white parishes in a letter to Milwaukee Archbishop Samuel A. Stritch: "The only reason to fear that the Negro will be lost to the Church is the old and bitter evil of segregation. The Negro is not welcome except in Negro churches and schools. . . . There is little encouragement for a colored man to join the Catholic church in Wisconsin if he knows he can be a Catholic in Milwaukee at St. Benedict's but it is impossible for him to be a Catholic in Madison and Beloit." 'It was hoped that graduates from St. Benedict's would be equipped intellectually and spiritually to confront white society.

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The shift of the African American community north and west of the St. Benedict's neighborhood, together with urban renewal, caused the school to discontinue the boarding school in 1954, close the high school in 1964, and close the grade school in 1967.