

“A GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY FOR REAPING A HARVEST OF SOULS”:
A HISTORY OF THE MINISTRY TO AFRICAN AMERICAN
CATHOLICS IN MILWAUKEE, 1908-1963

by

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A Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School,
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ABSTRACT
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Marquette University, 2009

This dissertation is a study of the ministerial outreach of the Catholic Church of Milwaukee to the African American community. Beginning with an overview of the social and economic problems African Americans faced in their urban setting from the late nineteenth century to the 1960s, it then reviews the church's ministerial norms and institutions of its missionary outreach that influenced the Catholic Church of Milwaukee. This dissertation traces the establishment of St. Benedict the Moor Mission in 1908 by Lincoln Valle, an African American layman, to the arrival of the Capuchin Fathers to serve the mission. The opening of St. Benedict the Moor School, the role of Father Stephen Eckert, O.F.M. Cap. and Father Philip Steffes, O.F.M. Cap., and the establishment of St. Anthony Hospital highlight the mission's history. Then, the education and spiritual life of St. Benedict the Moor School is described. Finally, the study ends with the changes that emerge from the end of the Second World War to 1963 and the Church's role and participation in the emerging Civil Rights Movement.

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INTRODUCTION

On Milwaukee's State Street between Ninth and Tenth Streets stands St. Benedict the Moor Church. Apart from the lines of people who wait to be served by the daily meal program, the church and its adjoining buildings seem to be fairly life-less. Like many urban churches, its neighborhood was demolished by the expressway. Around it are various public buildings, a venerable Missouri Synod Lutheran Church and nearby the hulking remains of the once-thriving Pabst brewery. One could scarcely imagine that at one time this church was the center of an important and thriving ministry to African Americans sponsored and supported by the Roman Catholic church in Milwaukee. At its height it sustained a parish community for black Catholics, a nationally respected boarding grade and high school, and residences for the Capuchin priests and brothers who still tend to the needs of the small groups of Catholics who worship there. This dissertation is about the network of institutions that comprise St. Benedict the Moor Mission which provided a spectrum of services to African Americans in Milwaukee. This study spans a fifty-five year period from 1908-1963 during which American Catholics made the transition from an European immigrant church to one about to be jettisoned into an uncertain future as a result of changes emanating from the Second Vatican Council and the social and cultural changes in American society during the mid-twentieth century.

African Americans came in larger and larger numbers to northern cities at the end

of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. Attracted by the prospect of industrial work and anxious to remove themselves from the degradations of the Jim Crow south, African Americans carved out for themselves niches in many northern communities: Harlem in New York and “black belt” on the south side of Chicago. Milwaukee did not attract many in the first wave of internal migrants; only after World War II did the numbers of African Americans living in Brew City increase substantially. However, a small, but thriving black community developed on the city’s near north side and an array of institutions stepped up to assist and help them adjust to conditions in the urban north. St. Benedict the Moor Mission was one of them.

St. Benedict the Moor was typical of a number of Catholic parishes and schools for blacks in other American cities where segregation of the races was accepted as a social reality. Ministerial efforts sometimes reinforced a sense of racial inferiority. Yet, they also provided care for a despised minority in American society and, as its ministries stabilized and developed, they actually inculcated in African Americans a much more positive sense of their identity and dignity as children of God and equal members of the Catholic Church. Through its church, school and various forms of social outreach, St. Benedict the Moor was an important center of African American life in the city.

The history of the Catholic outreach to the African Americans in Milwaukee dovetailed with the growth and spatial diffusion of the city’s African American population. Hence, the study concludes with a chapter discussing the expansion of the African American community to areas north and west of St. Benedict and the “black district” in the post-World War II period. During this time, ministry to African

Americans moved away from the racially-segregated model used successfully since 1908 and adopted a racially-integrated model which was favored by the advancing civil rights movement. As growing numbers of African American Catholics arrived in previously all white Catholic parishes, they found a varied and uneven reception. Fortunately, a cadre of local Catholic activists and groups prepared the way for a fuller engagement of Catholics with Milwaukee's race issues.

By the mid-1960s, Catholic engagement in racial questions confronting Milwaukee was very intense. Catholic activism on behalf of racial justice was spearheaded most visibly by Father James E. Groppi, a priest of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. However singular his reputation and activity seemed to be to many Milwaukeeans, Groppi's work and others with him emerged from the activities of St. Benedict's and the pioneering efforts of other Catholic groups. This dissertation does not cover Groppi's role, but provides a fuller understanding of the context from which he and other like-minded activists emerged.

Although a comprehensive account of this ministry would include the reactions and voices of black Catholics themselves, this dissertation is almost exclusively dedicated to the activities of white Catholics, mostly priests and sisters, who ministered to African Americans. This is not to deny African American agency nor under-value the ways in which black Catholics governed their own destinies and adapted Catholicism to their own cultural and social realities. Admittedly, this dissertation is only an opening to the rich and varied world of African American Catholic life in Milwaukee. A future study can and should incorporate more African American voices.

Significance of the Study

There have been informal works and studies done on St. Benedict the Moor Mission. Because the Catholic outreach to African Americans in Milwaukee was through St. Benedict the Moor Mission for almost all of the first-half of the twentieth century, this dissertation is the first full length study of development of this institution and its various works. It draws on materials that have already been written, but breaks new ground in providing what is hoped to be a systematic overview of this important and understudied Catholic enterprise in Milwaukee. This dissertation draws on similar studies in other communities for information, but does not explicitly compare St. Benedict's to them, except to note that what was happening in Milwaukee was not unique.

Historical Scholarship

This dissertation makes a contribution to several areas of historical scholarship: Catholics and African Americans, the history of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, African American urban history, the history of Milwaukee, and indirectly, the history of race and the history of northern migration of African Americans.

Catholics and African Americans and the History of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee

Since this work is about African American Catholic history in Milwaukee, a brief review of the historiography of American Catholic history and African Americans is necessary to place it within these fields. In Catholic history, African Americans were largely ignored until recently. Albert Raboteau referred to African American Catholics as

“minority within a minority.”¹ African American theologian M. Shawn Copeland stated, “Social historians, sociologists, and theologians...have rendered African American Catholics either invisible or a curiosity before the 1960s.”² However, a few Catholic historians before the 1960s included African Americans in American Catholic history.

The early scholarly study of African American Catholics was largely comprised of biographical accounts of the few black clerics or general histories of the Church’s evangelization work with African Americans. John T. Gillard, S.S.J. was one of the first to give a general accounting of the history of African American Catholics in his books *The Catholic Church and the American Negro* in 1929 and *Colored Catholics in the United States* in 1941.³ While his professional study was only partly historical, he provided much data and statistics, assessing many aspects of the conversion and catechizing efforts of the Church. Although Gillard was apologetic for the Church’s treatment of African Americans, he did not hesitate to point to discrimination that African Americans suffered from their fellow white congregants,

In a similar manner, Albert S. Foley authored two books, *Bishop Healy: Beloved Outcast* in 1954 and *God’s Men of Color: The Colored Catholic Priests in the United*

¹Albert J. Raboteau, “Minority within a Minority: History of Black Catholicism in America,” in *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African American Religious History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995): 117-37.

²M. Shawn Copeland, “Tradition and the Traditions of African American Catholicism,” *Theological Studies* 61 (December 2000): 633.

³John T. Gillard, S.S.J., *The Catholic Church and the American Negro* (Baltimore: St. Joseph Society Press, 1929); *Colored Catholics in the United States* (Baltimore: The Josephite Press, 1941).

States, 1854-1954 in 1955.⁴ The former work detailed the life of James Healy, a mixed-race priest who passed for being white and remained silent on the matter of race. He eventually became the bishop of Portland, Maine. The latter work dealt with Patrick Francis Healy and Alexander Sherwood Healy, two brothers of James Healy who also became priests. Like James, they too passed for whites and did not speak of race or their racial origins.⁵

The new social history of the 1960s gave a voice to groups and communities that were often inarticulate. In Catholic Church history more attention was given to people, ethnic groups, lay leaders, and parishes and less coverage to bishops, priests, and dioceses. Perhaps most noteworthy in his ability to weave social history with American Catholic institutional history was Jay P. Dolan's work, *The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to the Present*⁶ in 1985. Similar to Dolan was James Hennesey's *American Catholics: A History of the Roman Catholic Community in the United States*⁷ in 1981. Both Dolan and Hennesey examined various lay groups in the Church that had traditionally not been treated. African American Catholics and racial issues were covered in the new Catholic history, but only in a limited and general way.

⁴Albert S. Foley, S.J., *Bishop Healy: Beloved Outcast* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Young, 1954); *God's Men of Color: The Colored Catholic Priests of the United States, 1854-1954* (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1955).

⁵For recent work on the Healy brothers, see James M. O'Toole, *Passing for White: Race, Religion, and the Healy Family, 1829-1920* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002).

⁶Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience, A History from Colonial Times to the Present* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1992).

⁷James Hennesey, *American Catholics: A History of the Roman Catholic Community in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

They did not adequately address the race issue nor did they examine its larger connection to American and Catholic history.

Along with the new social history of the 1960s, the Second Vatican Council also created an environment that permitted a greater appreciation of diverse elements in the church. During this time, two works that dealt with African American Catholics included William Osborne's *The Segregated Covenant* (1967) and David Spalding's article "The Negro Catholic Congresses, 1889-1894" that appeared in *The Catholic Historical Review* in 1969.⁸ Osborne detailed numerous incidents of racial prejudice and discrimination that African American Catholics encountered from white lay people and priests in both north and south in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Spalding's scholarship traced the history of the four African American Catholic congresses. In these historic sessions, not well known in U.S. Catholic history, African Americans organized major national gatherings and turned to church leaders for help in dealing with religious and racial issues in the Catholic Church.⁹

It was in the late 1980s and early 1990s that two excellent studies dealing with

⁸William A. Osborne, *A Segregated Covenant: Race Relations and American Catholics* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967); David Spalding, C.F.X., "The Negro Catholic Congresses, 1889-1894," *The Catholic Historical Review*, LX (October 1969): 337-57.

⁹Biographies were also written of notable African American Catholics. Maria Lannon wrote a biography of Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange who was the first superior of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, the first successful community of black sisters. Sister Audrey Marie Detiege wrote the story of Henriette Delille who founded the second black religious congregation in the United States, the Sisters of the Holy Family. Maria Lannon, *Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange: Life of Love and Service* (Washington, D.C.: Josephite Pastoral Center, 1976); Audrey Detiege, *Henriette Delille: Free Woman of Color* (New Orleans: Sisters of the Holy Family, 1976). Also noteworthy are Ellen Tarry, *The Other Toussaint: A Modern Biography of Pierre Toussaint: Post Revolutionary Black* (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1981) and Michael McNally, "A Minority of a Minority: The Witness of Black Women Religious in the Antebellum South," *Review for Religious* 40 (1981): 260-9.

specific topics of African American Catholicism appeared. Marilyn Nickels published *Black Catholic Protests and the Federated Colored Catholics, 1917-1933: Three Perspectives on Racial Justice* in 1988.¹⁰ She researched Thomas Wyatt Turner, the African American lay leader of the first half of the twentieth century, who organized the Federated Colored Catholics in 1924. She then traced this movement and the conflict that ensued between Turner and two prominent Jesuit interracialists, Father John LaFarge and Father William Markoe, and the emergence of the Catholic Interracial Council.

*Desegregating the Altar: The Josephites and the Struggle for Black Priests, 1871-1960*¹¹ was written in 1990 by Stephen Ochs and examined the role of the Josephite religious congregation, the only American community of Catholic priests devoted exclusively to evangelization of African Americans, in the development of an African American clergy. The work revealed the tenacity of institutional racism and the struggle of African American Catholics for priests of their own race as part of their agenda for racial equality and justice.

What remained lacking in the field of Catholic history was a synthetic historical overview of the African American community in this country. This gap was filled in 1990 with Benedictine historian Cyprian Davis' *The History of Black Catholics in the United States*.¹² Davis' work and meticulous research provided the most comprehensive,

¹⁰Marilyn Nickels, *Black Catholic Protest and the Federated Colored Catholics, 1917-1933: Three Perspectives on Racial Justice* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1988).

¹¹Stephen J. Ochs, *Desegregating The Altar: The Josephites and the Struggle for Black Priests, 1871-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1990).

¹²Cyprian Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996).

sustained, and detailed account of African American Catholicism. He examined the history of African American Catholics from colonial times to the end of the Second World War. Davis suggested that future scholarship on the Catholic African American community be channeled at the local level. In a statement that influenced the writing of this dissertation, he noted, "Ideally, the history of the black Catholic community should be the synthesis of carefully research histories carried out on the local level. To a large extent this research is still lacking."¹³

With the publication of *Black Catholics*, visibility and interest in African American Catholicism grew. The research spiraled in different directions. Some studied the Catholic African American community in a given city. *At the Altar of Their God: African American Catholics in Cleveland, 1922-1961* by Dorothy Ann Blatnica in 1995, *Black and Catholic in Savannah, Georgia* by Gary Wray McDonogh in 1993, and doctoral dissertation "Vigor in Arduis: A History of Boston's African American Catholic Community, 1788-1988" by William Leonard in 1999 are examples of this research direction.¹⁴ Others have focused their research on particular African American parishes such as *The Emergence of a Black Catholic Community: St. Augustine's in Washington* by Morris MacGregor in 1999 and *A Mission for Justice: The History of the First African*

¹³Ibid., vi.

¹⁴Dorothy Ann Blatnica, V.S.C., "*At the Altar of Their God*" – *African American Catholics in Cleveland, 1922-1961* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995); Gary Wray McDonogh, *Black and Catholic in Savanna, Georgia* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1993); William C. Leonard, "Vigor in Arduis: A history of Boston's African American Catholic Community, 1788-1988" Ph.D. diss., Boston College, 1999.

American Catholic Church in Newark, New Jersey by Mary A. Ward in 2002.¹⁵

When turning to the Catholic history of Milwaukee, *Milwaukee Catholicism*, edited by Steven Avella in 1991, was a collection of essays on various topics of Milwaukee's Catholic history. Topics included German-Catholics and communal celebrations, ministry to Hispanics in Milwaukee, women in Milwaukee Catholic life, and Catholicism and political life. The article on changes in the Milwaukee Catholic community from 1945 to 1960 dealt with Catholic efforts on behalf of African American Catholics. An additional examination of African American Catholics in Milwaukee along with many other ethnic groups has been woven together with the institutional history of the Milwaukee archdiocese in Steven Avella's 2002 work, *In The Richness of the Earth: A History of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, 1843-1958*.¹⁶ However, this work left plenty of issues to study concerning African American Catholics in Milwaukee.

African American Urban History and the History of Milwaukee

¹⁵Morris MacGregor, *The Emergence of a Black Catholic Community: St. Augustine's in Washington* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1999); Mary A. Ward, *A Mission for Justice: The History of the First African American Catholic Church in Newark, New Jersey* (Knoxville, the University of Tennessee Press, 2002); Other scholarly works include Joseph H. Lockner, "The Foundations of St. Ann's Parish, 1866-1870: The African American Experience in Cincinnati," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 15 (Spring 1996): 13-36; Richard Tristano, "Holy Family Parish: The Genesis of an African-American Catholic Community in Natchez, Mississippi," *Journal of Negro History* Vol. 83 No. 4 (1998):258-283; John Bernard Alberts, "Origins of Black Parishes in the Archdiocese of New Orleans, 1718-1920" Ph.D. diss., Louisiana State University, 1998; Nancy Marie Davis, "Integration, the 'New Negro,' and Community Building in Four Catholic Church in Detroit, 1911-1945" Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1996. Also there is a combined biography with social history in James O'Toole, *Passing for White: Race, Religion, and the Healy Family, 1829-1920* (Amherst, Mass.: The University of Massachusetts Press, 2002). Finally some have examined the arrival of African Americans in white ethnic neighborhoods. Eileen McMahon, *What Parish Are You From? A Chicago Irish Community Race Relations* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1993); Cecilia Moore, "Keeping Harlem Catholic: African-American Catholics and Harlem," *American Catholic Studies* Vol. 114 No. 3 (2003): 3-21.

¹⁶Steven M. Avella (editor), *Milwaukee Catholicism* (Milwaukee: Knights of Columbus, 1991); Steven M. Avella, *In the Richness of the Earth: A History of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, 1843-1958* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2002).

This study contributes only indirectly to African American urban history. In his article “The Black Urban Experience in American History,” Kenneth L. Kusmer stated, “In marked contrast with such traditional areas of research as slavery and emancipation, the subject of black urban history has only recently begun to engage the interest of historians in a serious way. As a topic of historical research, the field can scarcely be said to have existed prior to the mid-1960s.”¹⁷ With the rise of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, historians were deeply concerned about the plight of African Americans.¹⁸ African American urban histories in the 1960s and 1970s emphasized racial segregation and the tangle of problems that resulted when African Americans migrated into cities. Most of the studies were conducted in major cities of the North and centered upon the formation and development of the black ghetto. Racism was seen as the key in understanding the African American community and African Americans were viewed as fairly reactive to white pressures.¹⁹

In 1973 historian John W. Blassingame observed that African American communities were centers of black life and culture and questioned the emphasis on “race relations.” He contended that there was a variety of social, intellectual, and creative talents and an infrastructure within the African American community that historians had

¹⁷Kenneth L. Kusmer, “The Black Urban Experience in American History” in *The State of Afro-American History – Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Darlene Clark Hine (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986): 91.

¹⁸Two examples of works dealing with the plight of African Americans in northern cities are Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966); Allan Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

¹⁹Kusmer, 95-99; Lillian S. Williams, “Introduction: African American and the Urban Landscape,” *The Journal of African American History* Vol. 89 No. 2 (Spring 2004): 93-94.

overlooked.²⁰ In the late 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, some scholars abandoned the traditional approach to African American urban history and moved the focus from the ghetto or slum to various internal elements of African American urban life. They began to research the internal values, institutions, and organizations of the African American community that assisted it in surviving the long decades of racial animosity.²¹ The church proved to be one of the major social and cultural institutions in the African American community. Kusmer stated, “By the late nineteenth century, and in many cases much earlier, the black church in both northern and southern cities had emerged as the most influential institution in the black community.”²²

Milwaukee History

This dissertation adds another layer to our knowledge of the history of African Americans in Milwaukee. African Americans were only mentioned a few times in Bayard Still’s early history, *Milwaukee: The History of a City*, in 1948.²³ However, African Americans were an important part of the most recent general history of the city,

²⁰John W. Blassingame, “Before the Ghetto: The Making of the Black Community in Savannah, Georgia, 1865-1880,” *The Journal of Social History* 6 (Summer 1973): 463.

²¹Williams, 94-95; Kusmer, 97-98, 101-102; Focusing on African American institutions to serve their needs is James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1979). Another noteworthy study that deals with community organizations in San Francisco’s African American community is Albert Broussard, *Black San Francisco: The Struggle for Racial Equality in the West, 1900-1954* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1994). Finally, exploring lower class African American folklore, religion, and family life is James Borchert, *Alley Life in Washington: Family, Community, Religion, and Folklife in the City, 1850-1970* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1980).

²²Kusmer, 120.

²³Bayard Still, *Milwaukee: The History of a City* (Madison: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1948).

John Gurda's *The Making of Milwaukee*.²⁴ While African American Catholics remained a small minority in the African American community of Milwaukee, Gurda did include St. Benedict the Moor Catholic community in his work. The most scholarly and detailed analysis of the African American working class in Milwaukee was Joe William Trotter's work in 1985, *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-1945*.²⁵ Apart from these publications, scholarship on African Americans in Milwaukee can be found in some articles, master's and doctoral theses. William Vollmar's "The Negro in a Midwestern City, Milwaukee," came out in 1968 and was followed in 1973 by Thomas Buchanan's "Black Milwaukee, 1890-1915," Also, Robert Weems wrote "From the Great Migration to the Great Depression, 1915-1929" in 1962 and "Black Working Class, 1915-1925" in 1983.²⁶ Valuable studies also include "From Mississippi to Milwaukee: A Case Study of the Southern Black Migration to Milwaukee, 1940-1970" by Paul Geib in 1988, "'In God We Trust': Religion, The Cold War, and Civil Rights in Milwaukee, 1947-1963" by Kevin Smith in 1999 and "'The Selma of the North': Race Relations and Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee, 1958-1970" by Patrick D. Jones in 2002.²⁷ This

²⁴John Gurda, *The Making of Milwaukee* (Milwaukee: Milwaukee County Historical Society, 1999).

²⁵Joe William Trotter, *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-1945* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois, 1985).

²⁶Thomas R. Buchanan, "Black Milwaukee, 1890-1915" Master's thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1973; William J. Vollmar, "The Negro in a Midwestern City, Milwaukee: 1835-1870" Master's thesis, Marquette University, 1968; Robert E. Weems, "From the Great Migration to the Great Depression: Black Milwaukee, 1915-1929" Master's thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1962; Robert E. Weems, "Black Working class, 1915-1925," *Milwaukee History* 6 (Winter 1983): 107-114.

²⁷Paul Geib, "From Mississippi to Milwaukee: A Case Study of the Southern Black Migration to Milwaukee, 1940-1970," *The Journal of Negro History* Vol. 83 No. 4 (Fall 1998): 229-249; Kevin D. Smith, "'In God We Trust': Religion, The Cold War, and Civil Rights in Milwaukee, 1947-1963" Ph.D.

dissertation hopes to make a contribution with these works dealing with various aspects of Milwaukee's history.

Sources Used

This dissertation relies heavily on sources unique to the Roman Catholic church and are mainly found in the archives of the Capuchin Franciscans who ran St. Benedict's and the Sisters of St. Dominic of Racine who taught in the grade and high school. One of the sources, not often tapped by historians, are the diary house chronicles kept by religious orders of men and women in their various local communities. These records provided a day by day or week by week log of events in the local parish, school, and city. Some of the details related were accounts of religious events and the school year, visits of prominent religious or secular officials and occasional editorial comments by the person writing the text. Interspersed in some of these entries were yellowing newspaper clippings of events related to the mission. The texts are written from the unique perspective of vowed Roman Catholic religious orders and include specific nomenclature and titles unique to this way of life. I have tried to explain these distinctive references when they first appear in the text.

I was also able to make extensive use of letter correspondence between Capuchin friars at St. Benedict in Milwaukee and the Capuchin provincial in Detroit. These letters provided a unique source of knowledge about the activity of the mission. The archives

Diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1999; Patrick Damien Jones, "'The Selma of the North': Race Relations and Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee, 1958-1970" Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2002. The latter dissertation has now come out as a book. Patrick D. Jones, *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

had newspaper clippings, memorial jubilee booklets, hand-written sermons delivered at St. Benedict the Moor, and Sunday parish bulletins of other Capuchin parishes in Milwaukee. To my knowledge, I was the first person to extensively use the resources of the house chronicles, correspondence letters, church bulletins, and hand-written sermons. There was also a biographical history of Father Stephen Eckert, a history of the Capuchin congregation, and *The Messenger*, an annual report of each Capuchin community along with a necrological biography of each friar who died in the given year. The archives of the Milwaukee Archdiocese provided the annual reports of the Commission for the Negro and Indian Missions, the annual *Status Animarum* reports of each Catholic parish in the Milwaukee archdiocese, and files on the many North-side Catholic parishes. The archives of the Racine Dominican Sisters furnished yearbooks from St. Benedict the Moor and a written history and other resources on the school. The archives of the Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls, Minnesota, housed useful information on St. Anthony Hospital including newspaper clippings, hospital correspondence, a history of the religious community, and many pictures. Finally, the archives of the Dominican Sisters in Sinsinawa, Wisconsin, and the School Sisters of Notre Dame in Milwaukee had useful information on the way some white parishes in Milwaukee dealt with the arrival of African Americans in the parish and parochial school. As good as these women's archives were in some areas, I found them deficient in matters of race and discrimination especially with regard to hospital admission policies and also the admission of African American religious candidates to their ranks.

An Overview

This dissertation consists of nine chapters. Chapter 1, “The Urban Setting,” presents an overview of the urban social forces in Milwaukee, focusing on migration, housing, employment, and the emergence of churches and other institutions that address some of the issues of the African American community. Chapter 2, “The Religious Legacy,” identifies African roots in the early days of the Catholic Church, examines the interaction between the Vatican and the American Catholic hierarchy on issues related to African Americans, covers the emergence of the Catholic African American Lay movement, and reviews some responses of Catholic outreach to the racial issues. Chapter 3, “The Beginnings of African American Catholic Ministry in Milwaukee,” deals with the establishment of St. Benedict the Moor by Lincoln Valle, a prominent lay Catholic African American, and ends with the arrival of the Capuchin friars and the opening of a school. Chapter 4, “The Mission Father,” focuses on the impact of Father Stephen Eckert, the first resident pastor of St. Benedict. Chapter 5, “Reconstituting St. Benedict the Moor,” deals with the efforts to reconstitute the school after a nearly disastrous decision to move the school. It spans from the mid-1920s to the 1950s and centers on the work of Father Sebastian Schaff and Father Phillip Steffes whose efforts eventually brought stability and growth to the institution. Chapter 6, “St. Anthony Hospital,” presents the story of the founding and growth of a fully integrated hospital staffed by the Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls, Minnesota, and established in the midst of the Depression in 1930 as part of St. Benedict the Moor’s ministry. Chapters 7 and 8, covers on the “The Educational Life of St. Benedict the Moor School” and “The Religious Life of St. Benedict the Moor”

respectively. These two chapters describe and examine the various features in the lives of those who attended St. Benedict the Moor. Chapter 9, “Demographic Changes and Concern for Civil Rights” puts the community of St. Benedict the Moor into the larger historical and social context from the 1945 to 1963. It examines the changes in the city of Milwaukee in the postwar era and the movement of African Americans into white Catholic parishes. It shows how the race issue divided the Catholic Church and examines some prominent individuals, institutions, and organizations that promoted civil rights for African Americans as part of the Church’s social justice agenda.

The study ends in 1963 with the rising civil rights movement. The year 1963 was selected as an appropriate ending year for this study for several reasons. First, with the march on Selma, Alabama, in 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. appealed specifically to Catholics to join his non-violent protest. Catholic priests, sisters, and the laity responded in large numbers to King’s plea. Thus, 1963 marked the beginning of a significant involvement of Catholics in the national Civil Rights Movement. Second, 1963 was just before significant civil rights legislation was passed, notably, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Finally, in Milwaukee in 1963, Fr. James E. Groppi is transferred to St. Boniface Church from where he launched an intense civil rights campaign in the city.

The story that unfolds on these pages has its peaks and valleys. It records instances of high-minded idealism and genuine sacrifice exemplified by the Capuchins and the Racine Dominicans. It also chronicles moments of misunderstanding, petty racism, and other attitudes that would be embarrassing to Catholic priests and religious today.

Standing back with the perspective of time, it is evident that St. Benedict the Moor through its various agencies: church, school, and hospital, did much good for individuals and for the city of Milwaukee and for the Catholic church. It is well to note that the ultimate source of this good from the perspective of the priests and religious was their deep religious faith and a sincere motivation to serve others in the model of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, and St. Francis. That motive of faith is integral to answering the “why” of Catholic ministry to African Americans.

CHAPTER 1

THE URBAN SETTING

One cannot understand the Catholic outreach to African Americans unless there is an understanding of the urban setting and the religious legacy of the Catholic Church since both components shaped its story.

Milwaukee's Early African American Community to 1870

African Americans lived in Milwaukee before the Civil War. Milwaukee was also a city with strong anti-slavery sentiment as the incident of Joshua Glover illustrated. Glover, a fugitive slave who lived in Racine, Wisconsin, was recovered by a slave catcher. After being incarcerated in Milwaukee under the new Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, nearly 5,000 angry Milwaukeeans stormed the jail freeing Glover and then aided his passage to Canada. The incident galvanized abolitionists in the area and led to the ruling by the Wisconsin Supreme Court declaring the federal Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 unconstitutional.¹

From the Joshua Glover incident, one may get the impression that African Americans would be warmly received and well treated not only in the pre-Civil War days, but in the many decades after emancipation and the Civil War. While anti-slavery sentiments prevailed in the 1850s, African Americans did encounter many difficulties in the several decades after emancipation and in the twentieth century as they migrated to

¹John Gurda, *The Making of Milwaukee* (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Country Historical Society, 1999), 94.

Milwaukee.

From the 1850s to 1870 Milwaukee's African American population comprised a very small proportion of the city's total population. In 1850 there were 20,061 city residents and only ninety-eight were African Americans. This number is minuscule compared to the 10,070 Germans and 4,350 Irish in Milwaukee along with Danes, Norwegians, Dutch, Swiss, Swedes, and Bohemians, each comprising less than two percent of the city's population.² In the decades after the American Civil War, the African American population in Milwaukee remained very small. A large migration of emancipated slaves to Milwaukee and the state of Wisconsin, predicted by some, did not occur. By 1870, Milwaukee's population was 71,440 which included only 176 African Americans or .25 percent of the city's population.³

William Vollmar, who studied Milwaukee's African American community from 1835 to 1870, observed that in the early years African American residences were not confined to a particular area, but were scattered throughout the city. However, in the 1860s a small group of African American residences began to concentrate around Fourth and Cedar (Kilbourn) Streets. Vollmar explained:

This grouping together or polarization was probably brought about to a large degree by the colored man's sense of a lack of physical security caused by his almost complete political impotency, an attitude of open hostility on the part of the immigrant population, and a feeling of desertion

²Ibid., 67-68; U.S. Census Office, *Seventh Census, Population of the U.S., 1850* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1852), 17; William J. Vollmar, "The Negro in a Midwest Frontier City, Milwaukee, 1835-1870" (Master's thesis, Marquette University, 1968), 23.

³U.S. Census Office, *Ninth Census, Population of the U.S.*, vol.1 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1872), 292; R. O. Washington and John Oliver, *The Identification of Strengths in the Black Community of Metropolitan Milwaukee* (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Urban Observatory, 1976), 44.

by the local abolitionists in favor of the more popular, less immediate movement to free the slaves in the southern states.⁴

The tendency to reside in the area west of the Milwaukee River was given greater impetus later when St. Mark's African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church was established in 1869 on Fourth and Cedar (Kilbourn) Streets, becoming the first African American house of worship in the community. The church quickly became the center of activities for the African American community and stimulated the movement of the community to the near-west side. In addition to being close to the church, African Americans also desired to be within walking distance to many of their employers such as the Plankinton Hotel. This location was also a safe distance away from the east side of the Third Ward which was the home of the detested Irish with whom African Americans competed for unskilled jobs. Yet, despite the residential concentration in one area, African Americans were still living in every area of the city well into the twentieth century.⁵

Milwaukee and its African American Community, 1870 - 1914

From 1870 to 1914, Milwaukee, like other northern cities, saw its urban-industrial economy eclipse trade and commerce, without replacing it, as the mainstay of the city's economic life. In his history of Milwaukee, Bayrd Still asserted that the growth of manufacturing was the most significant development in the economic life of the city from 1870 to 1910. By the end of the 1870s, Milwaukee had firmly established such industries as slaughtering and meat packing, tanning, and brewing. Like other lake cities,

⁴Vollmar, 72.

⁵Thomas R. Buchanan, "Black Milwaukee, 1890-1915" (Master's thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1973), 6-9; Washington and Oliver, 54-55; Gurda, 137.

Milwaukee looked to iron and steel industries for long term growth. From 1870 to 1910 the city's annual value of manufacturing products had climbed tenfold.⁶

Industrial expansion created economic opportunities, increased population, and transformed the spatial structure of Milwaukee. The city's population jumped from 71,440 in 1870 to 373,857 in 1910 and raised her rank among America's largest cities from nineteenth in 1870 to twelfth in 1910.⁷ Still emphasized that "at the outset of her metropolitan era, Milwaukee was still, to a considerable extent, Europe once or twice removed."⁸ In 1890, the census declared Milwaukee the most "foreign" of the twenty-eight largest cities in the United States. In 1890 three-fourths of Milwaukee's population were classified as "foreign white stock." The second great wave of immigration running from 1880 to 1914 left the Germans and Irish still dominant among the foreign born, but brought new arrivals from southern and eastern Europe, especially Poles and Russian Jews.⁹ According to Still,

the maturing city had seen the dispersion and intermingling of immigrants of the Northern European wave; the coordinate communities which now on a much smaller scale replaced the self-contained *Deutsch-Athen* of an earlier day were colonies from South-European and Slavic newcomers

⁶Bayrd Still, *Milwaukee, The History of the City* (Madison: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1948), 321; Joe William Trotter, *Black Milwaukee* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 3-4.

⁷U.S. Census Office, *Ninth Census, Population of the U.S.*, vol. 1 (Washington, Government Printing Office, 1872), 292; Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the U.S., vol 1: Population, 1910* (Washington, Government Printing Office, 1913), 210.

⁸Still, 258.

⁹Roger D. Simon, *The City Building Process: Housing and Services in Milwaukee Neighborhoods, 1880-1910* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1996), 29-34; Still, 257-259, 268.

propelled by the ‘new immigration.’¹⁰

Along with immigrants arriving in Milwaukee from 1870 to 1910, there was a small but steadily increasing migration of African Americans from the South. The African American population increased fivefold, from 176 in 1870 to 980 in 1910.¹¹ They came for a variety of reasons. Some were pulled North out of curiosity to see the big city. Some wayward husbands abandoned their families and responsibilities and escaped to the North. Others fled a depressed economy of the South. Many fled the social proscription and violence of the South. The historian C. Van Woodward in *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* used the phrase the “Capitulation to Racism” to refer to southern racist attitudes toward African Americans that had been held in check and then emerged in the late 1880s into a violently racist white supremacy movement. There were more African Americans lynched, tortured, and burned in the late eighties, nineties, and first decade of the twentieth century than at any time in history. The American Colonization Society, originally established in 1817, was revived in the 1890s with plans to relocate African Americans to Africa. Coupled with such violence was the expanding segregation and subjugation of African Americans with Jim Crow Laws.¹²

Probably, the most important of all reasons for migration from the South was the

¹⁰Still, 268.

¹¹Washington and Oliver, 36-37, 72; Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto* 2nd ed. (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 1996), 18-19.; U.S. Census Office, *Ninth Census of the U.S., vol.1: Population, 1870* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1872), 210; Bureau of Census, *Thirteenth Census of the U.S., vol. 3: Population, 1910* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913), 1101.

¹²Osofsky, 20-22; C. Van Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), Chapter III, 67-109; Robert E. Weems, “From the Great Migration to the Great Depression: Black Milwaukee, 1915-1929” (Master’s thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1962), 2-3.

desire for economic opportunities. Going north “to better my condition” was a common expression used by migrants. The African Americans who migrated starting in the 1890s were a new generation. They were the post-slave generation; they had not directly experienced the blight of slavery as their parents and grandparents did and they did not feel a strong attachment to the soil. This new generation saw the stagnant or meager economic gains from their parents’ lifetime work in the South and did not intend to stay and repeat the process. Most of the newcomers were young people, generally unskilled and unmarried. However, other African Americans in the South did not view migration as an attractive alternative. Booker T. Washington’s speech at the Atlanta Exposition in September, 1895, calling upon his fellow African Americans to “cast down your bucket where you are,” is seen generally by historians as exhorting them to stay in the South.¹³

For Milwaukee, the 1870 Census marks the beginning of occupational and economic changes in the African American population which would form a pattern for the next several decades. While the African American population in Milwaukee expanded fivefold from 1870 to 1910, its growth was offset by the rising tide of immigrants and never exceeded .30 per cent for the entire period. The jobs that were available for African Americans during this period were the “fringe” jobs in the industrial and commercial sectors or low-paying jobs in the service sector. Competition from the large numbers of Irish and Germans and the ever-growing “new” immigrant groups put African Americans at a clear disadvantage. Immigrants were more numerous and could assimilate more easily

¹³Osofsky, 22-24; Weems, 2-3; August Meier, “Toward a Reinterpretation of Booker T. Washington,” *Journal of Southern History*, 23 (1957), 226.

into the dominant white community.¹⁴ In general, unions barred African Americans from industrial and skilled work while immigrants pushed them out of most factory jobs. The few African Americans who were skilled laborers, factory workers, merchants or professionals formed a tiny African American middle class. A disproportionately large number occupied the lowest rung of the economic ladder with little chance to move up the ladder. African Americans waited on tables in hotels, swept floors in downtown office

Year	Total Population	African American Population	Percent
1870	71,440	176	0.25
1880	115,587	304	0.26
1890	204,468	449	0.2
1900	285,315	862	0.3
1910	373,857	980	0.2

Source: *Thirteenth Census of the U.S., 1910*, vol. 1 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913), 178; *The Eighteenth Decennial Census of the U.S.: Census of Population: 1960*, vol. 1, pt. 51 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1963), 51-12, 51-66

buildings, shined shoes in the barbershops, carried luggage at the railroad station, and laid the heavy streetcar tracks in hot asphalt. Factories would hire them only as strikebreakers. As industry became more mechanized and specialized in this period, the demand for unskilled labor declined, further threatening the occupational viability of African Americans. Positioned at the fringe of the city's economy, this community was easily shaken by technological changes and economic downturns as in 1883, 1893, and 1908.

¹⁴Washington and Oliver, 72-73.

They had no political power and few resources. Thus, from 1870 to 1914, Africans Americans faced restrictions, discriminatory practices, and keen competition from European immigrants. The economic base of their small community was weakening and becoming increasingly fragile.¹⁵

Despite diminished economic opportunities in Milwaukee, there were a some noteworthy exceptions. John J. Miles served as the head waiter at Milwaukee's Plankinton House for twenty-five years and moved freely in the white community until the 1890s. Lucian Palmer was noteworthy because he held many appointed government positions and was the first African American elected to the state legislature in 1906.¹⁶ In 1899, Dr. Clifford A. Johnson became the first African American dentist in the city and practiced for thirty-five years. Dr. Allen L. Herron was the first physician. He was instrumental in establishing St. Anthony's Hospital in 1930 where African American doctors could intern and practice. William T. Green served as legal counsel for the National African American League and lobbied for the adoption of a state civil rights statute.¹⁷ Yet, tragically both the white community as well as the African American community were mildly supportive of African American professionals. In his study Buchanan found,

No matter how able the black professional, a large proportion of the Negro middle and lower class apparently preferred to deal with white lawyers, doctors, and dentists. For reasons as old as slavery itself, many Negroes distrusted each other or had more confidence in whites.

¹⁵Washington and Oliver, 36-37, 72-73; Buchanan, 16-17, 52-53; Still, 321-355.

¹⁶Washington and Oliver, 73.

¹⁷Buchanan, 29-31, 40-41.

Milwaukee, with an African American population of more than 1,000, supported only a single doctor, dentist, and lawyer, all of whom had large white clienteles, too.¹⁸

African Americans who ran businesses were also in a precarious position. Some catered exclusively to African Americans, running small hotels, cafes, saloons, and billiard halls. However, most African American business people had an exclusively white clientele. African American businessmen knew they needed white money to be profitable and whites avoided businesses which served both races. Unfortunately, most African American businesses failed after a short life. They frequently lacked sufficient capital and sometimes business experience to compete successfully with their white counterparts. The individuals who succeeded were likely to have other sources of income besides their one business.¹⁹

As the first decade of the twentieth century dawned, economic eroding of the African American labor force heightened. Regardless of one's level of performance, sudden dismissals became more and more common. By 1905 African Americans in Milwaukee found themselves losing to immigrants in competition for their own jobs. By 1908 the Plankinton House was the only hotel in Milwaukee still employing African Americans. Within a year, it replaced its African Americans with Greeks and other white immigrant groups.²⁰ As early as 1901, W. E. B. Du Bois observed this development in Boston and other northern cities:

¹⁸Ibid., 32.

¹⁹Buchanan, 21, 24; Washington and Oliver, 75; Wells, "The Negro in Wisconsin" series, *Milwaukee Journal*, November 5, 1967, 4.

²⁰Washington and Oliver, 74; Buchanan, 40-49, 51.

In Boston as elsewhere the typical Negro employments are disappearing. The Negro waiter is going from the hotels. The Negro barber is disappearing. The bootblack has almost gone.²¹

Along with a shifting of white attitudes toward them, African Americans also experienced the drawing of the "color line." Buchanan characterized the changed attitude:

By the turn of the century, Milwaukee Negroes were treated with indifference or hostility. The benevolent paternalism and street-nodding familiarity that had once seemed to characterized relations between blacks and whites in the city had given way to a cold and formalized pattern of race relations. Persons of color, no matter how refined or wealthy, were segregated in areas of social contact between the races.²²

Similarly, historian Kenneth L. Kusmer studied the hardening of racial lines in Cleveland and concluded that:

By the late nineteenth century there was the acceptance of racial stereotypes and the emergence of a new 'scientific' racism which swept the white community. The new racism pictured the Negro as inferior to the white man in most respects (physical endurance and musical ability excepted) and morally deficient. Blacks were becoming stereotyped by popular writers and scientists alike as ignorant, lazy and immoral.²³

The changed attitude of whites toward African Americans was also reflected in Supreme Court rulings. In 1883 the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the Civil Rights Act of 1875 which prohibited discrimination against African Americans in public places. The court relinquished federal responsibility for protecting such rights and left the matter to the state's discretion. The erosion of civil rights reached its hiatus in 1896 with the U.S. Supreme Court case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Here the court upheld the segregationist

²¹W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Black North in 1901: A Social Study* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 23.

²²Buchanan, 54.

²³Kusmer, 69.

practices with the “separate but equal” principle.²⁴

While the African American community experienced an erosion in the occupational sector, housing proved to be equally dismal from 1870 to 1914. Several scholars have described this time as the “formative years” of the black ghetto in the United States.²⁵ The 1870 the census found 84 percent of the African American population living in the Second and Fourth Wards.²⁶ Between 1890 and 1915, Milwaukee, like many major American cities, had a “colored district,” sometimes called “Milwaukee’s Little Africa.” Here the great majority of its African American residents were forced to live in old flats and cheap rooming houses.²⁷ The “colored district” encompassed a rectangular area of thirty-five blocks bounded on the south by State Street, on the north by Walnut Street, on the east by Third Street, and on the west by Eighth Street. Yet, enclaves of African Americans could still be found scattered around the metropolis. By 1915, segregation in Milwaukee was not as complete or as rigid as other Northern cities with large African American populations. A segregated, all-black ghetto had not yet coalesced.²⁸

During this time, the downtown business district was advancing north. By 1910 commercial and light industrial plants had forced African Americans out of the area

²⁴Buchanan, 55-58; Washington and Oliver, 82.

²⁵Allan H. Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967); Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem, The Making of a Ghetto, 1890-1930*, 2nd ed. (1963; rev. ed. Chicago, Ivan R. Dee, 1996); Kenneth L. Kusmer, *A Ghetto Takes Shape: Black Cleveland, 1870-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976).

²⁶U.S. Census Office, *Ninth Census of the U.S., 1870* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1872), vol I, 421, vol II, 121, vol III, 207; Vollmar 87.

²⁷Osofsky, 11, 17, 105-111; Spear, 25-27.

²⁸Buchanan, 1, 7, 62.

between Wisconsin Avenue and State Street. To the east was the Milwaukee River and the Third Ward shopping district. Thus, the growing African American community could only expand in two directions – north and west. North of Walnut Street and west of Eighth Street were neighborhoods with available housing. This area had originally been settled by Germans in the 1880s and 1890s to be replaced by Russian Jews in the early 1900s. By 1905 citizen groups were already describing it as a “problem area.” They referred to the many dilapidated buildings, many basement dwellings, insufficient and unsanitary water closets, filth in the houses and yards, and decaying two-story wooden houses.²⁹ African Americans started to inhabit these older homes before the First World War as the Jewish community moved farther north. In their study of the Jewish community in Milwaukee, Louis Swichkow and Lloyd P. Garner stated, “By the start of World War I, the Jews who ‘wanted to live better’ began leaving as ‘Greeks and Negroes infiltrated’ the deteriorating area.”³⁰ By 1915, the “colored district” had edged to Tenth Street on the west.³¹

The first blatant incident of discrimination in Milwaukee was in 1889 when Owen Howell was denied a seat on the main floor of the Bijou Opera House. Despite the fact that the Wisconsin state legislature passed a Civil Rights Act in 1895 barring discrimination in public places like restaurants and theaters, it proved to be weak in its enforcement and was frequently evaded or ignored. Color barriers in employment,

²⁹Ibid., 13-14.

³⁰Louis J. Swichkow and Lloyd P. Gartner, *The History of the Jews in Milwaukee* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1963), 89-90, 166-168.

³¹Buchanan, 54.

housing, and places of public amusement, transportation, and accommodation multiplied.³²

To defend themselves against discrimination in court and to lobby for civil rights on the state level, African Americans quickly formed a “protective league.” In 1895, a Milwaukee branch of the National Afro-American League was founded to safeguard rights. However, by 1908, the national organization disbanded and Milwaukee’s local chapter followed suit. African Americans stood helpless, lacking both a strong national organization and money for legal services to insure their legally entitled rights.³³

The increased hostility and segregation coupled with an erosion of civil rights protection caused African Americans to reassess their desire for integration and acceptance into the white community. Many advocated the notions of self-help and racial unity and pride popularized by highly-influential Booker T. Washington. They desired to build an African American community capable of providing the advantages denied them in the white community. Within the African American community in Milwaukee, fissures emerged over the possible future direction: self help and racial unity versus integration. In the end, the goal of integration was not discarded for the long term, but for the present and foreseeable future.³⁴

The doctrines of self-help, racial pride and solidarity would dominate as the African American community in Milwaukee organized their own institutions. Richard B. Montgomery, editor of the *Advocate*, an influential African American newspaper, strongly

³²Buchanan 55-58; Washington and Oliver, 82.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Buchanan, 96; Washington and Oliver, 82-83.

supported this approach. The paper's motto, "The Negro must work out his own problem," heralded the new course to be taken. A large picture of a benevolent-looking Booker T. Washington appeared many times on the paper's front page. And, almost every issue sounded the praises of the "Wizard of Tuskegee" while attacking his opponents. Montgomery claimed that attacks on Washington were motivated by personal jealousy and simply delayed the "onward progress of Negroes." Rarely did scathing accounts of discrimination appear; news items had a tone of optimism and progress. One extreme example of the *Advocate's* accommodating the racial policy occurred in 1900 when the General Federation of Women's Clubs held its national convention in Milwaukee and excluded African American women from attending. The dispute reached its peak when Mary Church Terrell, president of the National Association for Colored Women, was not even allowed to extend her greetings to the convention. The *Advocate* applauded the Federation's decision to draw the color line explaining that God in his infinite Wisdom would not have created different races if He did not intend that they should remain apart. The paper added that the solution to this racial question would not be found as long as African Americans continue to force themselves where they do not belong.³⁵

African Americans in Milwaukee also responded to the drawing of the color line and the wall of prejudice by forming their own clubs, lodges, social welfare agencies, and churches. In 1898 the Colored Help and Hand Society was formed to aid new arrivals to the city. Its programs included a free job placement service, meals, and temporary shelter for the unemployed and indigent. It was funded mainly by charitable support from

³⁵Ibid.

wealthy whites. Soon, its finances were so reduced that only the employment agency operated and a fee was required for both employer and employee. Many social groups, literary societies, self-improvement associations, women's groups, and fraternal and mutual aid societies were organized. There were local chapters of the Masons, Knights of Pythias, and the Odd Fellows. One favorable feature of the lodges was that they did offer health and death benefits. Without such insurance from the lodges, many African Americans otherwise would not have been afforded insurance due to the exorbitant discriminatory rates or the outright refusal to African American clients by some insurance companies. African American women's organizations included the Woman's Improvement Club and the Silver Leaf Charity Club which engaged in civic and charitable activities. However, in these organizations, the membership was usually small, generally between twelve and twenty members. By the outbreak of World War I, membership in these organizations had dropped, probably due to decline and death of older elites who had given them status when they were first organized.³⁶

In this time of shaky social and civic organizations, one stable institution provided ballast for the African American community – the church. African American churches became a stable focal point in the community providing spiritual strength and desperately needed social services. Most notable as pillars of stability and providers of social services were St. Mark's AME, Calvary Baptist Church, and St. Benedict the Moor Catholic Church. St. Mark's AME church, formerly located on the corner of Fourth and Cedar

³⁶Weems, "From the Great Migration to the Great Depression: Black Milwaukee, 1915-1929," 15-16; Washington and Oliver, 83-85; Buchanan, 114-115.

(Kilbourn) Streets for forty-six years, moved in 1914 into the former German Reformed Church seven blocks north on Galena and Cherry Streets. Calvary Baptist Church first met in a rented hall on Seventh Street between Wisconsin Avenue and Wells Street. Then, in 1913 the congregation purchased a church eight blocks north on Fourth Street and Cherry Street. St. Benedict the Moor began as a storefront mission and then built an impressive church on Ninth and State Streets. At this time, the churches served as the primary avenue of self-expression in addressing the needs of the African American community. Later in 1919 other institutions, like local chapters of the Urban League and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, were organized.³⁷

Milwaukee and the African American Community, 1914-1945

The period of 1914-1945 witnessed the continued decline of housing for African Americans and a fluctuating occupation sector. World War I was a turning point in the history of African Americans in the North.³⁸ Northern industries boomed during the war due to the increasing demand for war goods, creating a corresponding increase in the demand for workers. The outbreak of war also ended the second wave of European immigration. James Grossman, noted historian of the Great Migration, argued that African American migration was a “rational response to a change in the labor market.”³⁹ Northern jobs paid considerably higher wages than a black southerner could earn at home.

³⁷Washington and Oliver, 54; Still, 54; Buchanan, 11; Robert E. Weems, “Black Working Class, 1915-1929,” *Milwaukee History* 6 (Winter 1983): 110.

³⁸Spear, 129.

³⁹James Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 14.

In addition, there were a string of economic setbacks in the South. An agricultural depression engulfed the South in 1914-1915 when Europe went to war, cutting off its lucrative overseas markets for cotton. Next came storms and flooding, the infestations of the boll weevil, and the tightening of credit. Finally, there was the notion among African Americans in the South that race relations in the North were less oppressive. These circumstances would unleash the Great Migration where more than one million African Americans from 1910 to 1930 left the South and traveled to northern industrial cities looking for work. For many migrants, the North represented a “promised land” or a “land of hope.”⁴⁰

The Great Migration had less effect on Milwaukee than on other industrial northern cities. Even though Milwaukee industrialists, like those in Pittsburgh and other northern cities, actually send labor agents into the South to recruit workers, huge number of African Americans never came to the city.⁴¹ One explanation for the comparatively lower number of migrants was that cities like Detroit and Chicago were primary destinations and acted as a huge buffer. During the Great Migration of 1910-1930, Milwaukee’s African American jumped from 980 in 1910 to 7,501 in 1930. However, African Americans still comprised only 1.2 percent of Milwaukee’s total population in 1930, compared to 6.9 in Chicago, 4.7 in New York, and 11.3 in Philadelphia.⁴²

⁴⁰Eric Arnesen, *Black Protest and the Great Migration* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s Press, 2003), 2-6, 11; Grossman, 14-17.

⁴¹Grossman, 70.

⁴²Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the U.S., vol. 1: Population* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913), 210; Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the U.S., vol 3 pt. 2, 1930* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1932), 1368; Trotter, 44, 46.

Northern white workers who remained on the “home front” generally climbed the economic ladder quickly to more skilled or higher-paying positions, thereby creating a shortage of lesser-skilled or unskilled labor at the lower rungs of the economic ladder. Under these circumstances, African Americans hoped they would get their long-awaited opportunity.⁴³ Historian Charles H. Wesley asserted that “Negro laborers were not chosen because of preference but out of necessity. An emergency had arisen and the Negroes were the only source of relief.”⁴⁴

Year	Population	African American Population	Percent
1920	457,147	2,229	0.4
1930	578,249	7,501	1.2
1940	587,472	8,821	1.5

Source: *Fourteenth Census of the U.S., 1920*, vol. 2 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1922), 47; *Fifteenth Census of the U.S., 1930*, vol. 2 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1933), 70; Yuan H.Tien (editor), *Milwaukee Metropolitan Area Fact Book, 1940, 1950, 1960* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1962), 21

The African American migrants who did come to Milwaukee soon discovered that the majority of Milwaukee industries would not hire them. Out of the city’s more than 2,000 manufacturing establishments, only eleven firms hired African American workers during the World War I. Six companies, Plankinton Packing, Albert Trostel Leather, Pfister-Vogel Tanning, Allis-Chalmers Manufacturing Company, Falk Manufacturing (an iron foundry), and Milwaukee Coke and Gas Company, hired 75 percent of all African

⁴³Washington and Oliver, 75-76.

⁴⁴Charles H. Wesley, *Negro Labor in the United States, 1850-1925* (New York: Russel and Russel, 1967), 284.

American workers in the city's industries. Most of the African American labor force during the war years was unskilled labor at the bottom of the industrial occupational ladder.⁴⁵

While the war fostered the growth of the African American working class, it exacerbated the African American housing problem in the city. African Americans found it nearly impossible to find homes outside the "colored district." With 1,300 newcomers to Milwaukee, the already-tired old buildings became more overcrowded and hastened further deterioration in their neighborhood. Rents soared and services cut back as landlords, recognizing the monopoly they had on available housing for African Americans, maximized their profits.⁴⁶

Given Milwaukee's hostility toward the new arrivals in the Great Migration, various organizations and institutions emerged to address issues of the African American. The Cooperative Development and Progressive Association, with its motto "Unity of Effort is the High Road to Achievement," was organized in 1916 and promoted racial pride and solidarity. In 1919 it changed its name to the "Wisconsin Progressive Association." Rev. Jesse T. Woods, pastor of St. Mark's AME, opened the Booker T. Washington Industrial and Social Center. It served as an intermediary between Milwaukee industries and African Americans seeking work. It also provided living quarters for nearly

⁴⁵Weems, "From the Great Migration to the Great Depression: Black Milwaukee, 1915-1929," 27-28.

⁴⁶ Emmett J. Scott, *Negro Migration During the War* (1920; rept. New York: Arno Press, 1969), 111-118; Weems, "From the Great Migration to the Great Depression: Black Milwaukee, 1915-1929," 7, 14, 17; Weems, "Black Working Class, 1915-1925," 107-108; Robert W. Wells, "The Negro in Wisconsin" series, *Milwaukee Journal*, November 8, 1967, 2.

one hundred men and held classes in industrial skills. By early 1918 it was apparent to Woods and George De Reef, a local African American attorney, that their individual efforts were not solving the community's major problems. In a bold step, Woods and De Reef proposed the establishment of a National Urban League chapter in Milwaukee whose purpose would be dedicated to improving the industrial, economic, and social conditions among African Americans in the Milwaukee area. On November 4, 1919 the Milwaukee Urban League was incorporated by the State of Wisconsin. Likewise, African Americans who were concerned with the loss of various rights met at St. Mark's A.M.E. Church and established on January 23, 1919 the Milwaukee chapter of the NAACP.⁴⁷ Both organizations joined St. Benedict the Moor and the other black churches of Milwaukee as the major social institutions dealing with an array of needs of the African American community.

The years immediately after World War I marked an economic decline at first in Milwaukee and the nation to be followed by returning prosperity. Recession, inflation, and unemployment gripped the nation after the war as wartime controls ended and servicemen re-entered the labor market. African American workers generally were the first to be laid off.⁴⁸ By 1923, economic prosperity returned to Milwaukee. Increased manufacturing coupled with a sharp decline of European immigrant laborers, due to a federal immigration restriction law passed in 1921, meant that African Americans were once again enticed to

⁴⁷Weems, "From the Great Migration to the Great Depression: Black Milwaukee, 1915-1929," 23; Weems, "Black Working Class, 1915-1925," 109-110.

⁴⁸Weems, "From the Great Migration to the Great Depression: Black Milwaukee, 1915-1929," 42-43, 49.

migrate from the South. In his study of Milwaukee's African American working class, Joe William Trotter argued that the Great Migration came to Milwaukee and many northern cities in two peaks; 1916-1917, the World War I period, and 1924-1925. In the decade from 1920 to 1930, Milwaukee's African American community more than tripled, growing from 2,229 residents to 7,501.⁴⁹ James Harvey Kerns, the forceful executive secretary of the Milwaukee Urban League, made the following observation of the new arrivals:

There has been a marked change in the character of Negroes who have been coming to Milwaukee recently. They are bringing their families with them and have money. They intend to make their homes here and are prepared to make the first payment on property when they can find anything suitable at a reasonable price. Their reasons for leaving the south are principally economic.⁵⁰

The rapid growth of the Milwaukee's African American population in the mid-1920s and the higher proportion of families seeking permanent settlement re-invigorated African-American business ventures.⁵¹ With a significantly larger African American market, a new economic dynamic emerged. Trotter asserted that a new middle class emerged comprised of African American businessmen who catered to an African American market.⁵² This so-called "Black Metropolis" included such African American businesses as the Columbia Building and Loan Association, Community Drug Store,

⁴⁹Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the U.S., vol. 3: Population, 1920* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1922), 1131; Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the U.S., vol. 3, pt. 2, 1930* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1933), 1368; Trotter, 45; Charles T. O'Reilly, Willard E. Downing, and Steven I. Pflanzler, *The People of the Inner Core-North: A Study of Milwaukee's Negro Community* (New York: LePlay Research Inc., 1965), 2.

⁵⁰Wells, "The Negro in Wisconsin" series, *Milwaukee Journal*, November 8, 1967, 1-2.

⁵¹Weems, "Black Working Class, 1915-1925," 111.

⁵²Trotter, 80; Scott, 111-118; Florette Henri, *Black Migration: Movement North, 1900-1920* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1975), 53-56.

Willarege Hotel, Angel Tea Food Shop, and the Columbian Theater.⁵³ The African American press urged its readers to support its “own” businesses.

The rise of African American-owned businesses stoked the fires of racial pride and solidarity. In 1924, the Milwaukee Negro Professional and Business Men’s League was established. Its most impressive achievement was its sponsoring the Milwaukee Negro Progress Exposition on May 6-8, 1926. The exposition displayed the progress of Milwaukee’s African American community with the work of the churches, fraternal organizations, women’s clubs, and business and professional men. Also, the Milwaukee Urban League sponsored the first observance of “Negro History Week” from February 7-12, 1926. The Milwaukee Public Library displayed their collection of books by and about African Americans in their History Room. Throughout the week, the daily press published favorable articles on the accomplishments of African Americans.⁵⁴

While the “Black Metropolis” movement radiated optimism, pessimism prevailed over the condition of African American housing in the twenties. By 1930, one in every nine white residents in Milwaukee owned his own home, whereas only one in seventy-five African Americans owned his own home. As in previous decades, African Americans in Milwaukee remained a community of renters who were at the mercy of unscrupulous landlords. While the administration of Milwaukee’s socialist mayor, Daniel W. Hoan, was regarded as “progressive,” in the area of housing, it was racist. When the Garden Homes

⁵³Weems, “From the Great Migration to the Great Depression: Black Milwaukee, 1915-1929,” 62-65.

⁵⁴Weems, “From the Great Migration to the Great Depression: Black Milwaukee, 1915-1929,” 65, 67-69.

Project began in 1921, it was purported to be the first low-income housing project of its kind in the nation. It called for one hundred homes to be built, but excluded African Americans. City government also obstructed the need for better housing. In 1920 a zoning ordinance was passed, setting aside the southern portion of the African American residential area for commercial and light industry. The Milwaukee Urban League reported that numerous junk yards were appearing and warned in 1926 that the fifteen junk yards in the Sixth Ward would soon bring disease. Three years later, Leslie Laws, Director of Research for the Wisconsin Anti-Tuberculosis Association, found African Americans in Milwaukee were dying nine times faster than whites from tuberculosis. Discriminatory real estate policies also impeded African American access to adequate housing. The Milwaukee Real Estate Board in 1924, reflecting the will of the city's real estate agents, resolved to contain African Americans within a "black belt" with the use of racially restrictive housing covenants, preventing whites in white neighborhoods from selling to African Americans. This proved to be the most effective form of residential segregation imposed upon African Americans.⁵⁵

The coming of the Great Depression, more than any other event, would attest to the African American community's remarkable ability to survive. The Depression halted further migration from the South. Unemployment figures of African Americans were more than three times that of whites. Many African American businesses had reached the

⁵⁵Charles E. Hall, *Negroes in the United States, 1920-1930* (Washington D. C., U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1935), 279; Weems, "From the Great Migration to the Great Depression: Black Milwaukee, 1915-1929," 76-78; Trotter, 66-71.

point of diminishing returns and collapsed,⁵⁶ AFL labor unions deliberately banned African Americans from many trades and crafts through exclusionary clauses in their constitutions and by-laws.⁵⁷ Employers continued to regard the African American as suited for only dirty, unpleasant, low-paying, and heavy work. Companies such as International Harvester Corporation, Plankinton Packing Company, and the Wehr Steel Foundry retained a corps of African American workers in mainly hot and difficult jobs through the Depression years. At the Schroeder Hotel, for example, African American women ran the freight elevators, scrubbed the floors, and performed the most disagreeable maid's duties while white women ran the passenger elevators and filled all clerical positions. The growing number of available white workers displaced by the Depression made it easier for industrialists to exclude African Americans. When the breweries resumed operations with the repeal of Prohibition in 1933, the two largest breweries, Pabst and Schiltz, both located in the heavily-populated African American Sixth Ward, refused to hire any African Americans. In 1933, a Milwaukee Urban League survey revealed that 54.6 percent of African American male workers were unemployed and 69.1 percent were receiving county aid because of unemployment or insufficient wages. Thus, any economic gains made during the First World War and the Twenties were arrested and even reversed in the Great Depression.⁵⁸

⁵⁶Weems, "From the Great Migration to the Great Depression," 102-103; Trotter, Appendices 5 and 6, "Black Occupations in Milwaukee, 1930, 1940," 254, 257-258, 261.

⁵⁷Ruth Zubrensky, *A Report on Past Discrimination Against African Americans in Milwaukee, 1835-1999*" (Milwaukee: City of Milwaukee Equal Rights Commission, 1999), 23-24, 26.

⁵⁸Trotter, 151-152, 154, 159-160.

In the area of housing, the so-called “colored district” expanded its crowded area during the Depression. By 1930, African Americans were most heavily concentrated in the Sixth ward with 56.5 percent of its population and the Second ward with 26.2 percent, totaling 82.7 percent of all African Americans in Milwaukee. Most dramatically, the northern boundary expanded from Walnut Street to North Avenue and the western boundary was pushed from Eighth Street to Twelfth Street. Landlords or property owners on the periphery of the African American district, who previously refused to rent or sell to African Americans, now became color-blind as hard times made for fewer white renters or buyers. As African Americans generally moved north and west into areas vacated by Jews and Italians, they became more segregated from other ethnic groups. While spatial separation of whites and blacks was increasing, the characteristic large-scale black ghetto had not yet developed. However, by 1930 the geographical boundaries of what would later become Milwaukee’s black ghetto were merely established.⁵⁹ Trotter offered an explanation why a ghetto was not acknowledged:

Blacks became even more tightly circumscribed into a particular area of the city’s space as the process of ghetto formation gained greater expression, yet the small size of Milwaukee’s black community kept the ghetto, a nearly exclusively black, spatially restricted area of significant size, at bay.⁶⁰

The New Deal sought to ameliorate the plight of American workers victimized by the Depression. African Americans were, to some extent, beneficiaries of relief programs. Trotter enumerated some of the problems African Americans encountered:

⁵⁹Trotter, 67-69; Washington and Oliver, 12, 54-55.

⁶⁰Trotter, 176.

Despite the existence of improved income through relief work and minor expansion in private industry by the mid and late 1930s, several factors accentuated the economic decline and suffering of the black proletariat: inadequate wages on work relief, drastic cuts in WPA appropriations, harassment by direct relief officials, and the enduring employment difficulties of black women.⁶¹

The emergence of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) proved to be an important ally of African Americans. Unlike the AFL, which discriminated against African Americans in nearly all of their local unions, the CIO tried to modify the traditionally strong anti-African American attitudes of white workers. In Milwaukee and elsewhere, the CIO established a good relationship with the African American community. They attacked their counterpart, the AFL, for racially discriminatory unions.⁶²

New Deal housing measures in Milwaukee during the 1930s proved to be riddled with bigotry. The National Housing Act of 1934, as enforced by the Federal Housing Authority (FHA), continued the pattern in Milwaukee of *de facto* housing segregation. FHA guidelines were used to prevent mortgages being given to African Americans outside of segregated areas. Public housing subsidized by federal funds fared no better. Milwaukee received federal funds to build a housing project called "Parkland." While a public housing project in the Sixth Ward would have relieved some of the over-crowded and sub-standard living conditions, whites opposed the Sixth Ward location, arguing that the project would create a "race problem" and lead to the "mixing of the races." Opposition proved so strong that, when Parkland opened in August, 1937, it was located in

⁶¹Ibid., 158.

⁶²Still, 500-501; Trotter, 162-163.

the northwest portion of the city on West Capitol Drive, far beyond the northwestern limits of the African American community. The project had an exclusionary rule against housing African Americans in the 418 low-income housing unit complex even though federal funds were used. African American leaders protested the exclusionary rule and ended with a small victory when six African American families were admitted into the housing project.⁶³

The outbreak of the Second World War brought some changes affecting race relations. From 1940 to 1943, industrial employments in metropolitan Milwaukee soared from 110,000 to 200,000. This extraordinary demand for industrial workers pulled thousands from rural Wisconsin towns and farms to the city. The worker demand also opened jobs for African Americans for the first time in more than a decade and triggered another migration from the South. In 1943 the Milwaukee Urban League reported African American labor was actually sought by heavy industry and there was hardly an African American man in Milwaukee who was physically able and willing to work who was not employed. Furthermore, African Americans broke what St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton called the “job ceiling,” being hired as semi-skilled and skilled laborers in some jobs. The African American population rapidly soared from 8,821 in 1940 to 21,722 in 1950. While the city’s total population had increased by 8.5 percent, the African American population climbed 147 percent.⁶⁴

⁶³“New Deal Practices Discrimination Against Negro Owners Here: Milwaukee Slant on F.H.A. Discrimination,” *Blade*, September 28, 1945; Trotter, 182-184; Zubrensky, 43.

⁶⁴Gurda, 310-311; Trotter, 2nd ed., 147,149; St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis, A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (1945, rev. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 214-62; 287-311.

While African Americans obtained some skilled and semi-skilled jobs for the first time during the war, the color bar still remained in other sectors. On the war front, approximately one thousand African Americans soldiers from Milwaukee served in the armed forces of the United States, but, they, like all other African Americans, fought in segregated units. On the home front, African Americans still could not rent or buy outside the general area where they lived.⁶⁵ The federal government issued Executive Order No. 8802 which prohibited employment discrimination of government contractors. The Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) was created to insure compliance of war contractors to reverse previous discriminatory employment practices. In January 1942, James Dorsey, president of the Milwaukee NAACP, and William Kelley, president of the Milwaukee Urban League, presented evidence of racial discrimination by several Milwaukee firms with millions of dollars of federal war contracts. The FEPC cited five Milwaukee companies. As a result, by 1945 nearly 1,000 African Americans were hired in Milwaukee plants that had previously been completely segregated.⁶⁶

One result of the booming African American population and its concentration in the Sixth Ward from the 1920s through World War II was the consolidation of African American political strength. In the 1940s Ernst Bland, Aaron Tolliver, and Hollis B. Kinner Jr. were elected county supervisors. LeRoy Simmons won a seat in 1944 in the Wisconsin assembly. The persistent efforts of African Americans to gain elective office as

⁶⁵Wells, "The Negro in Wisconsin" series, *Milwaukee Journal*, November 12, 1967, 1.

⁶⁶Trotter, 166; Herbert Garfinkel, *When Negroes March: The March on Washington Movement in the Organizational Politics for FEPC* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1959), 37-61; John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (New York: Alfred A Knoff, 1967), 578-560.

well as their growing support base among the electorate reflected their desire to use the political potential of their expanding community to deal with such issues as jobs, adequate relief, and low cost housing.⁶⁷ Likewise, the expanding political strength of African Americans meant that their issues received greater visibility and attention from white political leaders in Milwaukee. One example of this growing political clout was the attention given to the need for some recreational facility in the overcrowded African American neighborhoods. As a result, the WPA built a playground and pool at Tenth Street and Reservoir Street. Most noteworthy, a progressive alliance was formed consisting of both white and African American civic, religious, labor, and social welfare leaders. From this alliance's efforts, the Milwaukee Housing Authority was created in 1944 and immediately focused its attention on constructing a 144-unit low income housing project for war workers in the Sixth Ward. Although the project would be segregated, such concessions were made to improve the accessibility of African Americans obtaining such help.⁶⁸

At the end of the Second World War, the Citizen's Governmental Research Bureau studied housing conditions in Milwaukee and found 67.7 percent of the dwelling occupied by African Americans in need of major repairs and unfit for use. This was extraordinarily high when compared to 34 percent in Detroit and 36 percent in Buffalo. At the same time, it found only 6.5 percent of the city's white residences in such dire conditions. The study revealed, to no surprise, two segregated worlds where living conditions for African

⁶⁷Trotter, 209-212, 228.

⁶⁸Ibid., 212.

Americans were deteriorating. So, from 1939 to 1946, despite the war years of economic boom, living conditions of African Americans worsened as additional migrants moved into an already overcrowded neighborhood.⁶⁹

Post-World War II Milwaukee

At the end of the Second World War, Milwaukee and many other cities faced economic and social challenges. During the Depression and war years, new construction was halted in Milwaukee, creating a “run down” look to the city’s existing homes and buildings. The city’s infrastructure, built before the arrival of mass automobile transportation, needed updating. In his history of Milwaukee, John Gurda stated:

The fifteen year famine in building, buying, and births had left Milwaukeeans sick of the old and starving for the new.... After years of getting by, people wanted to get ahead again....They wanted new consumer goods....They wanted new cars....And, they wanted new homes....What Milwaukeeans wanted, in short, was new lives, and they found them, more often than not, on the urban fringe.⁷⁰

At the same time, a critical housing shortage as well as a population exodus out of the city confronted Milwaukee. The housing shortage exacerbated and reached a crisis as thousands of soldiers returned home and wanted to start families. Quonset huts, barracks, trailers, cabins, and vacant schools were converted to makeshift residences. Returning vets found little trouble finding jobs in Milwaukee as seen by a two percent unemployment rate in the city for 1946. Continuing prosperity in the post-war years added to the demand for homes. Thus, Milwaukeeans demanded new housing and had money to pay for it. As

⁶⁹Washington and Oliver, 55; Zubrensky, 44; Gurda, 359.

⁷⁰Gurda, 325.

federal loan programs and building materials became available, most white Milwaukeeans

Year	Total Population	African American Population	Percent
1950	637,392	21,722	3.4
1960	741,324	62,458	8.4

Source: *Milwaukee Metropolitan Area Fact Book, 1940, 1950, 1960* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1962), 21; *The Eighteenth Decennial Census of the U.S.: Census of Population: 1960*, vol. 1, pt. 51 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1963), 51-12, 51-66.

favored new housing in the surrounding suburbs.⁷¹

With no postwar recession and an abundance of jobs, African Americans continued to be attracted to Milwaukee as iron filings are attracted to a magnet. The decade of the 1940s saw the largest migration of African Americans in the city's history up to this time. The size of the African American community jumped from about 9,000 in 1940 to nearly 22,000 in 1950. Still, housing segregation continued and relegated the African American community to a fixed area on the lower northwest side of the city. And, while African Americans gradually expanded their residential boundaries north and west, they did so at a much slower rate than the influx of new arrivals, adding more pressure to the overcrowding problem. The deterioration was most severe in the square mile bordered by Third and Twelfth Streets and Juneau and North Avenues. After the Second World War, this residential section of the city would be frequently called an "the inner core." Continued concentration of African Americans in this one area of the city led some

⁷¹Ibid., 321-324.

authorities to call the area a ghetto by 1950.⁷²

Through government loan programs after the war, federal money continued to support segregated housing, racial prejudice, and movement of whites to the city's outskirts and suburbs. While the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and the Veterans Administration (VA) both encouraged home ownership with attractive terms of no money down, 4-percent interest, and thirty years to pay, there was one significant condition to meet. FHA and VA "guarantees were available only on 'conventional' homes in 'harmonious, attractive neighborhoods' free from the threat of 'incompatible racial or social groups.'" In practice, the FHA followed a national policy of not insuring home mortgage loans to African Americans in all-white neighborhoods or to whites in blighted neighborhoods for home improvement. As a result, funds were channeled away from minority neighborhoods, triggering a general disinvestment in the African American community in the 1950s and 1960s. Thus, FHA policies encouraged white flight from the city and the burgeoning white suburban population. It was not until 1967 that FHA changed its local and national policy and began to actively encourage lenders to make FHA-insured loans in the inner city, ending its role as the nation's leading practitioner of "red-lining." Of course, by that time it was too late; whites had already fled. In addition, the construction of expressways to the suburbs facilitated the mass exodus of whites. From 1950 to 1970, the percentage of whites who lived in the "inner city north" fell from

⁷²Yuan H. Tien (editor), *Milwaukee Metropolitan Area Fact Book, 1940, 1950, 1960* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1962), 21; Kevin Smith, "In God We Trust: Religion, the Cold War, and Civil Rights in Milwaukee, 1947-1963" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1999), 24; Washington and Oliver, 38, 77; Gurda, 358.

80.9 percent to 12.7 percent.⁷³

Mayor Frank Zeidler, elected to his first term in 1948, addressed the problem of deterioration of the city's inner core in two major ways. Zeidler first embarked on a city annexation plan with a "grow or die" belief. From 1948 to 1960, the city doubled its area. Through annexation, Milwaukee added 123,870 people from 1950 to 1960 overall while suffering a net loss of 19,938 inside its 1950 boundaries. Thus, it was annexation rather than internal growth that would be responsible for Milwaukee's population growth by 1960. Secondly, Mayor Zeidler sought to implement a comprehensive plan of urban redevelopment calling for slum clearance, the construction of expressways to connect the suburbs with the downtown, and providing public assistance to those displaced by such projects and those who could only afford public housing.⁷⁴

Opposition to public housing was laced with racism. It was spearheaded from the Milwaukee Board of Realtors (MBR), the Certified Rental Operators' Alliance (CROA), and especially, the Milwaukee County Property Owners' Association (MCPOA).⁷⁵ When Hillside Terrace was proposed in 1944 by the Housing Authority, it called for replacing two slum blocks in the Sixth Ward with 232 units of low-income public housing. With delaying tactics and political infighting, the project was not completed until 1950. The racism of the opposition was eventually allayed to some extent because Hillside was intended to provide housing for military veterans and senior citizens. Hillside Terrace was

⁷³Zubrensky, 46-47; Gurda, 324.

⁷⁴Bureau of the Census, *Eighteenth Decennial Census of the U.S.: Census of Population: 1960*. vol. 1, pt. 5 (Washington, Government Printing Office, 1963), 51-12; Tien, 21; Gurda, 358; Smith, 28.

⁷⁵Smith, 101.

followed by Westlawn, the city's next federally financed low rent project, constructed near N. 68 Street and W. Silver Spring Drive and comprising 726 units. Later housing projects included Southlawn, Northlawn, and Berryland. Providing housing for low income African American families was at best an uphill struggle in Milwaukee.⁷⁶ In 1951 Richard W. E. Perrin, the City Development Director, reflecting on the opposition to the Hillside Terrace project, remarked:

If the truth were known, general public housing for families as distinguished from that for the elderly has always had connotations of (black) occupancy... That is where the whole opposition stemmed from in the beginning. It was less an argument of opposing housing for people of low incomes as it was of opposing housing for (blacks).⁷⁷

Housing discrimination severely restricted the ability of the African American community to expand geographically as it grew numerically. In 1952, the Mayor's Commission on Human Rights reported that segregation of African Americans in the city was "widely and openly practiced," and "had resulted in a ghetto pattern," in which an African American "finds it almost impossible to move out of Milwaukee's worst housing area." Living conditions further deteriorated when absentee landlords let a building fall into disrepair while profiting each month by collected rents. City health officials reported major violations in the area of garbage nuisances, inadequate rat-proofing, and defective heating units.⁷⁸

⁷⁶Richard W. E. Perrin Papers, Perrin Scrapbook 2, 1924-1956 undated, Box 40, Folder 11, Milwaukee Public Library Archives (MPLA); Gurda 359.

⁷⁷Chris Lecos, "Public Housing Gets 25th Birthday Salute," *Milwaukee Journal*, May 4, 1969, quoted in Zubrensky, 45.

⁷⁸Smith, 39; Zubrensky, 45-46.

A series of events in 1952 would bring the city's somewhat submerged racial discrimination and prejudice to the fore. First, in 1952 the National Baptist Convention, the nation's largest association of African American Baptists, was to be held in Milwaukee. Initiated by Rev. Theophilus Lovelace, pastor of Mount Zion Baptist Church, the event brought about 5,000 African Americans to the city for three days in June. It was complicated by the fact that the Wisconsin Bankers' Association had earlier booked most of Milwaukee's hotels for their convention at the same time. However, on short notice accommodations were secured for the large group and the convention was hailed as a great success. This brought a sense of unity, pride, and accomplishment. For much of the white community in Milwaukee, the National Baptist Convention panicked the city and sounded an alarm as to the growing number of African Americans in the city. This fear was reflected in many anonymous letters to the Zeidler for the rest of his administration (in 1960) attributing the beginnings of Milwaukee's "Negro problem" to the Baptist Convention of 1952. The second event occurred when charges were made against Milwaukee real estate agents in October 1952 that they were involved in "block busting," the practice of selling a home in a white area to an African American, usually at an inflated price and located on the edge of an African American neighborhood. This sale would cause panicky whites to sell their homes at a fraction of its value to real estate agents who in turn would sell to other African Americans for full value, thereby making a windfall profit. The incident further intensified hostility between African Americans and whites and led to an entrenchment of some whites to prevent the sale of homes in "their neighborhood to African Americans." Finally, in November 1952 three whites were

murdered by a deranged African American man. In this already fearful and tense climate, many whites were convinced that Milwaukee was facing a major “crime wave” by African Americans. The fact that Milwaukee had one of the lowest crime rates of any city in the nation of its size was overruled by fear and prejudice.⁷⁹

Despite efforts by Zeidler, the NAACP, the Urban League, and the Mayor’s Commission on Human Rights to calm down the city, the rising tide of racial prejudice was too strong. When Zeidler ran for re-election in 1952 and again in 1956, rumors spread through the city alleging that he ordered billboards posted in the South urging African Americans to migrate to Milwaukee. By election day, the rumors gained national publicity and Milwaukee was hailed in the South as proof of northern racism and castigated by *Time* magazine as a misguided victim of dishonest real estate interests to subvert the mayor’s progressive agenda.⁸⁰ Zeidler validated the racism in the city in a speech to a labor group in 1957 when he stated: “To many people, urban renewal means only public housing; and, to them, public housing means housing for migrant Negro families, so they are against the whole program.”⁸¹

While Milwaukee’s housing conditions for African Americans continued to deteriorate, there were modest gains made in employment opportunities that previously had been closed to them. In 1949 African American trolley car operators were hired and the Milwaukee police force got its first two African American detectives. In 1950 the

⁷⁹Smith, 39-42; Frank Zeidler, interview by Kevin Smith, March 21, 1996, in Smith, 40-41.

⁸⁰“Northerners Against Negroes,” *Shreveport Journal*, March, 1956, 1; “The Shame of Milwaukee,” *Time* 67 (April 2, 1956); 23 cited in Smith, 43.

⁸¹Gurda, 360.

breweries started hiring African Americans and the first African American graduate of a Milwaukee nursing school was recorded. In 1951 the first African American high school teacher was hired by the Milwaukee Public Schools and, a year later, an African American woman became the first full time salesgirl to work for a major department store in Milwaukee. In 1954 Dr. John W. Maxwell became chief of staff at St. Anthony's Hospital in Milwaukee, becoming the first African American to be chief of staff of a Wisconsin hospital. In 1956 Vel Phillips became not only the first African American but also the first woman alderman of the Milwaukee Common Council. Alonzo Robinson became the first African American architect licensed by the state of Wisconsin. In 1958 the first African American woman physician, Dr. Anna Standard, began her practice in Milwaukee and Stanley Hebert was appointed the first African American assistant city attorney. In 1960 Grant Gordon became the first African American principal of a Milwaukee school and in 1964 James Dorsey was appointed the first African American county court commissioner. Between 1950 to 1960, the number of African American teachers increased from 22 to 314, the number of nurses from 12 to 129. The above data suggests that, while discrimination continued in housing, African Americans broke the color bar in several areas of employment and an educated middle class expanded.⁸²

Mayor Zeidler established a commission to study the conditions in Milwaukee's inner city. The "Mayor's Study Committee on Social Problems in the Inner Core Area of the City" issued its report on April 15, 1960. It identified the "inner core" as the area bounded on the south by W. Juneau Avenue, on the north by W. Keefe Avenue, on the east

⁸²Wells, "The Negro in Wisconsin" series, *Milwaukee Journal*, November 13, 1967, 1, 3.

by the Milwaukee River to its junction with N. Holton Street, and on the west by N. Twelfth Street. The commission then proceeded to describe various demographic features of the inner core. In this 5.63 square mile area the residential population density was approximately 82 persons per net acre as compared with a city-wide average of 50. The birth rate of the inner core from 1950 to 1958 increased by 22 percent while the total city rate increased by 15 percent. The population contained a higher proportion of young adults. In 1950 the non-white population in the 20 to 32 age group stood at 32.5 percent compared to 24.9 percent for the whole city. Many middle class families had moved out of the inner core farther north and west and were replaced by low-income labor-class families or newcomers mostly from the rural South. The study also found that Milwaukee faced in the future a critical shortage in some skilled trades. While labor unions claimed that minority groups were given equal treatment, minority group members were overlooked for employment in skilled trades. As a result, some African Americans believed that few, if any, opportunities existed for them in skilled trades. Not surprising, the commission observed a very low set of expectations among African American children. Few African American children envisioned themselves as mechanics, technicians, artisans, or professionals. The study claimed that economic inequality, in particular discrimination in the job market, was largely responsible for such a lack of economic incentive among African American children.⁸³

⁸³“Mayor’s Study Committee on Social Problems in the Inner Core Area of the City – Final Report to the Honorable Frank P. Zeidler, Mayor, City of Milwaukee” April 15, 1960, Milwaukee Public Library (MPL), 5-8; “Report on Availability of City Facilities in the Inner Core” February, 1960, Annex E, 2, 11; “Report on Education and Vocational Skills and Their Improvement in the Inner Core” March 18, 1960, Annex H, 31,43.

Among the several topics covered by the Mayor's Study Committee, it addressed the issues of housing. It decried the dilapidated conditions of the inner core housing, noting that the need for interior renovations was 200 percent higher than other sections of the city. There were also higher rates of vermin and rat infestation, rubbish nuisances, and broken windows. In addition, the committee found that over-occupancy of housing exceeded health department standards by two to three times the frequency found in the rest of the city. Absentee ownership exceeded the rest of the city. Above all, the committee cited mortgage financing as the key to the real estate problem in the inner core. Mortgage financing from FHA, VA, or savings and loan companies were virtually impossible to obtain in the inner core. Because many wanted to sell and few wanted to buy, sellers accepted offers with little regard to the buyer's financial ability to maintain and repair the property. The result was a further deterioration of the residential housing.⁸⁴

After the issue of housing, the study committee addressed the issues of crime and law enforcement and found an astonishing high crime rate. While the inner core contained 13.7 percent of the city's population, this area accounted for 60 percent of the city's murders, 48 percent of the rapes, 21 percent of the robberies, and 69 percent of the city's aggravated assaults. Correspondingly, juvenile delinquency increased from 6.5 percent in 1956 to 10.6 percent in 1958. In interviews with African Americans living in the inner core, the committee reported that racial prejudice was found among police officers and law enforcement was perceived as being more strict in the inner core especially with minor

⁸⁴Mayor's Study Committee on Social Problems in the Inner Core Area of the City – Final Report of the Honorable Frank P. Zeidler, Mayor, City of Milwaukee” April 15, 1960, MPL, 17-18.

infractions.⁸⁵

The committee's report called for a comprehensive action plan. It recommended more slum clearance and public housing. It called for a program to strengthen families, improve community recreational facilities, educate police assigned to the inner city, and make major housing improvements in the area. It suggested a meeting with church leaders of all denominations to find out what further contribution churches could make. It took a strong stand on the need for real economic opportunities and suggested job training programs and ways to disseminate information about employment opportunities. The commission recognized the special problems of newcomers from the rural South and the need to involve universities and community resources to set up new programs to facilitate their adjustments to urban life. It called for educational programs in basic skills for students who cannot succeed in a regular school curriculum to make them economically self-sufficient.⁸⁶

Unfortunately, time was running out in Zeidler's term and he chose not to seek re-election in 1960. The report would wait for the new mayor. Thus, by the end of the Zeidler administration in 1960, Milwaukee's urban renewal remained immobile. Uncertainty over the future of the inner city prevented investment and new construction. Attempts to relocate African Americans outside the inner city were consistently blocked. In short, the whole economic base of the African American community was being

⁸⁵Ibid., 19.

⁸⁶Ibid, 20-30.

undermined.⁸⁷ A new political era dawned in Milwaukee in 1960 as Mayor Henry Maier took office. The new mayor quickly proved to be no leader on social issues. He dismissed the Inner City Report commissioned by Zeidler in 1959 as “an incontrovertible mass of facts, figures, and bleak reports.”⁸⁸ The Maier administration took a very narrow view of what Milwaukee could do on its own and always looked for help from the federal, state, or county levels of government. Starting in 1960, the Maier administration and its policies would intensify frustration levels in the African American community. The national Civil Rights Movement would provide a catalyst for Milwaukee’s African American community to publically protest and demonstrate against discrimination and segregation. Led by Father James Groppi, a Catholic priest of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, the civil rights movement divided the city into hostile camps and eventually erupted into a riot. While little change came from City Hall, the movement did raise the level of consciousness of the problems faced by African Americans and gradually won wider support in the larger community.

Summary

Milwaukee’s African American community was very small until the mid-twentieth century. There was a brief time of economic and social mobility in the 1850s, but from 1870 to 1890, such gains were eroded. By the last decade of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, Milwaukee’s African American community experienced greater occupational and residential separation from the whites. Racist beliefs within American

⁸⁷Gurda, 37.

⁸⁸Ibid., 365.

society, along with court rulings, further segregated the African American community and increased discrimination and prejudice in both housing and jobs. It was at first the African American churches that proved the most effective institutions in providing a degree of stability with social help and spiritual strength. Later, other organizations like the Milwaukee chapters of the NAACP and Urban League, became advocates for the African American community. The Great Migration during the First World War and the 1920s did increase the African American population, but it still remained proportionately small compared to the total city population. Few inroads were made in jobs during the war years while the condition of housing continued to deteriorate as African American neighborhoods became terribly overcrowded. With the prevailing prejudice of the society, the African American community was greatly influenced by Booker T. Washington and turned inward with efforts to help themselves. The emergence of a Black Metropolis in the 1920s brought some economic gains. However, the Great Depression eroded any gains from the previous decades and proved the greatest test up to that time for the survival of the African American community. It was not until the United States' entrance in the Second World War and the continuing prosperity after the war that the African American population in Milwaukee became large enough to draw attention to its social problems. As whites fled the dingy and run-down city after the war for new homes in the suburbs, the exploding African American community moved quickly into old, all-white, ethnic neighborhoods. Attempts to deal with the problems of the inner city with a comprehensive plan, as offered under the Zeidler administration, were met with huge opposition, largely racially-motivated.

In the six decades of the twentieth century of this study, the social problems of the growing African American community were generally not addressed by city government nor public policy. Within the African American community, institutions and organizations like the black churches, the Urban League, the NAACP, the lodges and self-help societies, and others emerged or developed to take care of its needs. The need for these structures was all the more important as the African American community became more “ghettoized” and marginalized spatially and socially in Milwaukee. In this changing urban setting, the Catholic Church became a player with the creation of St. Benedict the Moor Mission. It was one more of a concatenation of institutions in Milwaukee. In its social outreach, it provided scores of very dedicated men and women that offered services in health care and education. These primary services were complimented with many other services including a job finding service, child care, recreational facilities, lodging for single women, and numerous charitable works. Largely through St. Benedict the Moor, the African American community in Milwaukee became an object of the Catholic Church’s outreach. Such roles affected and effected the quality and dynamics of urban life in Milwaukee.

CHAPTER 2

THE RELIGIOUS LEGACY

While the urban setting helped shape the way that the Catholic Church in Milwaukee would minister to the African American community, it was more directly influenced by the church's own ministerial norms and institutions. Catholics in Milwaukee were part of a wider universal church which had (and continues to have) a very active missionary outreach to all parts of the globe. Catholics believe that Jesus Christ exhorted his followers to spread their faith throughout the world and, from the origins of Christianity in the first century C.E., it has done so. As such, African Americans and other people of color were the objects of missionary zeal on the part of the church. Mission activity in Catholicism shares many common characteristics: the preaching and proclaiming of the gospel or "Good News" of salvation in Christ, the creation of mission institutions such as churches, chapels, schools, hospitals, and other forms of social provision, and efforts to challenge, erase or adapt existing religious systems. However, these missions were also adapted to distinct local regional conditions – geography, climate, and existing social and cultural realities. Missions to African Americans in the United States had to take into account and adapt to local attitudes towards people of color. In the American South, ministry to blacks was dictated heavily by the existence of slavery and the insistence on white supremacy embodied in the legal and social treatment of African Americans even after slavery formally ended. In the north, negative attitudes towards blacks prevailed as well. Although conditions were somewhat improved over the

south, African Americans were still considered social inferiors and lived in segregated areas. Since African Americans were not traditionally Catholic, little or no attention was paid to them by church leaders in the north. However, individuals and groups of dedicated Catholic clergy, religious and laity created mission outposts to blacks in the north. Although they were subject to the above-mentioned restraints, they did manage to create a stable ministry and a visible institutional presence for the small but growing numbers of black Catholics. In fact, some of the initiative for a greater ministry to African Americans came from the black Catholic laity which prodded the church to give greater attention to their religious and social needs.

While the founding of St. Benedict the Moor Mission in 1908 marked the “official” start of ministry to African Americans in Milwaukee, it stemmed from a Catholic religious legacy. This chapter surveys the religious legacy of the Catholic Church’s ministry to African Americans in the last half of the nineteenth century and first part of the twentieth century. By providing such a framework, along with Milwaukee’s urban setting, the approach, efforts, and features of the Catholic Church’s outreach to the African American community can be seen in its larger historical context.

Early American Catholic Attitudes on Slavery and Race

American Catholics have generally viewed their Church as a white institution. Its popes, saints, and congregations have been of white European stock. However, unknown to most Catholics, there were African roots in the early Catholic Church, even if such African presence seldom has been acknowledged. In *The History of Black Catholics in the United States*, Cyprian Davis examined the early Christian church and noted that

African Catholic communities in Egypt, Nubia, Ethiopia, and other parts of Africa flourished long before Christianity was brought to England or Ireland. Three popes are believed to have been Africans: St. Victor (ca.186 - ca.197), St. Miltiades (311-314), and St. Gelasius (492-496). And, some of the oldest and most venerated saints such as Augustine, Monica, Benedict the Moor, Cyprian, Cyril, Perpetua, Felicity, Zeno, and Maurice were African.¹

Before the American Civil War, there was a division of opinion among Catholics concerning slavery. In the early nineteenth century, a few European Catholic theologians criticized slavery. Latin American countries, with large Catholic populations, abolished slavery. In 1839 Pope Gregory XVI condemned the slave trade and banned Catholic participation in it. Charles Montalembert, the leading French liberal Catholic, was critical of American slavery and helped lead a successful campaign to abolish slavery in French colonial possessions in the late 1840s. Daniel O'Connell, a prominent Catholic, criticized Irish Americans who were tolerant of slavery. The confluence of such factors led Wendell Phillips to denounce the prejudice his fellow-abolitionist harbored against Catholics. He also read Gregory XVI's letter, the only papal bull ever read at Faneuil Hall in Boston, and led a crowd of abolitionists in giving three cheers for the pope. It seemed as though an alliance between Catholics and anti-slavery activists might be possible.²

At the same time, a strong tie emerged between slavery advocates and Catholics.

¹Cyprian Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1990), 1-16.

²John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom, A History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003), 20, 47, 50.

Slavery was not seen as a violation of natural law or church teaching. Since the country's founding, several bishops and six of the first eight women's religious congregations held slaves.³ While Gregory XVI did condemn the slave trade, he did not condemn slavery. Moral theology at the time did not teach that slavery, itself, was immoral. It did speak in favor of the humane treatment of slaves by the master. Francis P. Kenrick, Bishop of Philadelphia and, later, Baltimore, was one of the leading Catholic moral theologians in the country. While he did "regret" that there were so many slaves, he insisted that the law must be obeyed to maintain social order.⁴

In the wake of the abolitionist movement, American bishops for the most part remained silent. One reason for Catholic reticence on the slavery issue was that the American Catholic Church found itself on the defensive with frequent attacks from nativists. Anti-Catholic writers, such as Samuel F. B. Morse, labeled Catholicism as "idolatrous," "foreign," and "anti-American." Maria Monk wrote *Awful Disclosures*, salacious stories of convent life. Between 1834 and 1855, Catholic convents, schools, and churches were attacked by nativist mobs in cities such as Philadelphia, St. Louis, Louisville, San Antonio, and Charlestown, Massachusetts. In 1855, the avowedly anti-Catholic American, or Know-Nothing, party held forty-three seats in the Thirty-fourth Congress of the United States.⁵ Some nativists who vehemently opposed Roman

³Angelyn Dries OSF, *The Missionary Movement in American Catholic History* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1998), 28.

⁴James Hennesey, *American Catholics, A History of the Roman Catholic Community in the United States* (Oxford, and New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 144-145.

⁵Stephen J. Ochs, *Desegregating the Altar – The Josephites and the Struggle for Black Priests, 1871-1960* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 17; Hennesey, 145-146.

Catholicism were also abolitionists, such as Rev. Elijah Lovejoy, of Alton, Illinois. One Know-Nothing resolution in Norfolk, Massachusetts, captured their argument.

Roman Catholicism and slavery being alike founded and supported on the basis of ignorance and tyranny; being, therefore, natural allies in every warfare against liberty and enlightenment; therefore, be it Resolved, That there can exist no real hostility to Roman Catholicism which does not embrace slavery, its natural co-worker in opposition to freedom and republican institutions.⁶

There were other factors explaining why the American Catholic Church did not condemn slavery. If Catholic leaders, particularly in the South, displayed an inclination to help African Americans, a hostile public opinion could ignite against the Church. When Bishop John England of Charleston, South Carolina, opened a school for African American children, public reaction exploded with threats of destruction to the cathedral that eventually forced him to close the school. In the end, even England went on record in favor of slavery with arguments from scripture and the Catholic tradition. Another contributing factor to the Church's reluctance to stand against slavery involved the economic status of Catholic immigrants, especially the Irish. Many Catholic immigrants, living in northern cities, eked out a living at the bottom of the economic ladder. They viewed the emancipation of slaves as potentially unleashing an exodus of newly freed labor from the South to Northern cities competing for their livelihood.⁷

Due to the precarious and vulnerable position of the Catholic Church in American

⁶Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860, A Study of the Origins of American Nativism* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1964), 425.

⁷Hennesey, 145-146; Ochs, 19; Patrick Carey, *An Immigrant Bishop: John England's Adaptation of Irish Catholicism to American Republicanism* (Yonkers, N.Y.: U.S. Catholic Historical Society, 1982), 90-97.

society, it tended to avoid social and political controversy by accommodating the prevailing racial, social, and political norms. Catholic social thought emphasized personal obligations of providing for one's family and obeying the government. It did not include the notion of changing social or economic institutions and conditions. In the end, no Catholic bishop argued for abolition. In fact, in the seven provincial councils of Baltimore held between 1829 and 1849, neither African Americans nor slavery were ever agenda topics addressed by the American hierarchy.⁸ Vatican officials detected from the outset a reticence on the part of American bishops to deal with such topics and would urge them to do so.

While American Catholic authorities did not condemn slavery in the years before the Civil War, some initiatives to help African Americans were made. In 1829, Suplician priest Jacques Hector Joubert de la Muraille and Mary Elizabeth Lange established the first African American congregation of religious women. Joubert, who served a small Catholic Haitian community in Baltimore, discovered that it was difficult for the young children to learn their catechism because they could not read. It was for this reason that the Oblate Sisters of Providence was founded. In 1842, a second African American order of religious women, the Sisters of the Holy Family, was founded in New Orleans. Juliet Gaudin and Henrietta Delille, two women of color, were helped by a priest, the Abbe Rousselon, to start a congregation for the purpose of serving the destitute African American poor. The sisters began a hospice, an orphanage, an asylum, and a school for

⁸Ochs, 18.

girls.⁹

The importance of these religious congregations indicate many of the critical features of the Catholic Church's ministry to African Americans. First, the Church's response would be characterized by diversity rather than homogeneity. Second, Catholic religious congregations in the United States would play a pivotal role in the Church's ministry to the African American community. Third, these congregations testified to the fact that religious vocations existed among African Americans Catholics even when white religious orders and seminaries refused such applicants on the basis of race. Next, the relationship between Catholic evangelists and African Americans was asymmetrical. African Americans were seen as slaves and social inferiors. Whites saw themselves as bringing religion and social services to destitute people, caring for them, and uplifting them. Finally, ministry to African Americans would come mainly from dedicated and zealous priests, religious, and African American lay people with little leadership from the American hierarchy. These features of Catholic outreach in the antebellum period continued into the twentieth century and were operative at St. Benedict the Moor in Milwaukee.

The Second Plenary Council of 1866 and the Third Plenary Council of 1884

After the emancipation of the slaves, many Protestant denominations in the South split along racial lines into separate sects. The Catholic Church preserved its organizational unity and did not split. However, many African American Catholics, emulating the exodus from white Protestant churches, left the Catholic Church. Black

⁹Dries, 26; Davis, 99, 105-107, 114-115.

Protestant churches, unlike the Catholic Church, offered opportunities for leadership and participation. In the Catholic Church, African Americans were subject to humiliating seating arrangements in church in the back pews, the gallery, or sitting in the aisles. Alarmed by the loss of African American Catholics and eager to evangelize nearly four million freedmen in the South, Archbishop Martin John Spalding of Baltimore sought to organize a coordinated Catholic effort to reach African Americans. In a letter to Archbishop John McCloskey of New York, Spalding wrote,

I think it is precisely the most urgent duty of all to discuss the future status of the Negro. Four million of these unfortunates are thrown on our charity.... It is a golden opportunity for reaping a harvest of souls, which neglected may not return.¹⁰

The Congregation of the Propaganda¹¹ in Rome, responsive to Spalding's suggestion, convened a Second Plenary Council in October, 1866, in Baltimore with forty-five American bishops in attendance. Councils, at this time, could erect new dioceses, provide for greater unity in church government, and offer public witness of American Catholic unity.¹²

The topics on the agenda of the Second Plenary Council ranged from the dislocation and destruction of church property in the Civil War to the need for parochial schools to the standardizing of many diocesan procedures throughout the country. The

¹⁰Cyprian Davis, "The Holy See and American Black Catholics, A Forgotten Chapter in the History of the American Church," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 7, nos. 2 and 3 (Spring/Summer 1988): 157.

¹¹The Congregation of the Propaganda in Rome was the office in the Vatican bureaucracy that dealt with matters involved in propagating or spreading the Catholic religion in the world. Sometimes it is referred to as simply the Propaganda.

¹²John Tracy Ellis, *American Catholicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 101; Ochs, 36-39.

evangelization of African Americans was the last topic on an eight point agenda. After more than two weeks of deliberation, the subject of the evangelization of African Americans still did not arise and time was expiring. An extraordinary session was finally scheduled on Monday, October 22, 1866, in order to deal with the unfinished business, including a discussion of the "Negro problem." The Propaganda, with Spalding's wholehearted support, proposed the appointment of a national bishop administrator who would recruit missionaries, raise money, and attend to the needs of African Americans. This prelate would have jurisdiction on a national level for the ministry of African American Catholics.¹³

In the discussion of the "Negro problem," American bishops rejected the Propaganda's proposal for a national bishop in a heated and emotionally-charged discussion. Most feared that jurisdictional disputes would break out between the local diocesan bishop and the national bishop administrator, appointed and answerable to Rome. Archbishop Peter Kenrick of St. Louis declared that the bishops' duty was to rule their dioceses, not to carry out instructions from the Propaganda. He became so enraged that he threatened to resign if Rome forced him to accept such an imposition. Archbishop John Odin asserted that African Americans in New Orleans already received sufficient care and had no need for new programs. And, Archbishop John McCloskey of New York expressed the sentiments of many northern bishops when he stated that the issue was a southern matter rather than a northern concern. His archdiocese, like other northern dioceses,

¹³Bernard Julius Meiring, *Educational Aspects of the Legislation of the Council of Baltimore 1829-1884* (New York: Arno Press, 1978), 154-189; Delores Egger Labbe, *Jim Crow Comes To Church* (New York: Arno Press, 1978), 21-22; Ochs, 41; Hennesey, 160.

contained relatively few African Americans and “in no way was the conscience of the bishops of the North burdened in regard to the black.”¹⁴

A pastoral letter to the clergy and laity, written at the end of the council, revealed some racial bias. First, it appeared that some bishops may have had second thoughts about the plan to emancipate slaves for they expressed regret that a more gradual system of emancipation had not been adopted. Second, they stated that they hoped to help matters by providing to African Americans “Christian education and moral restraint which they so much stand in need of.” They then appealed to religious congregations in Europe for help in their ministry to African Americans.¹⁵

When the Second Plenary Council ended, few probably realized Spalding’s prophetic words of “a golden opportunity for reaping a harvest of souls” was indeed missed. No concrete, coordinated, practical plan for missionary work of evangelization of African Americans came out of the council. Instead, the Church’s approach would vary from diocese to diocese and take a variety of forms and structures or be non-existent. Such responses depended on the local bishop’s predilection to the issue of evangelization of African Americans and the priority he gave to the topic. In some cases, a bishop’s response depended on how many other pressing issues he faced in the fledgling Church of his diocese. It proved to be much easier for American bishops to exhort than to initiate an

¹⁴“The Second Plenary Council of Baltimore, the Minutes of the Extraordinary Session, October 22, 1866” in Cyprian Davis and Jamie Phelps (editors), *Stamped with the Image of God” – African Americans as God’s Image in Black* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003), 55-57; Ochs, 41; Hennessey, 161.

¹⁵“The Bishops’ Pastoral Letter at the Close of the Second Plenary Council of Baltimore, 1866” in *Stamped with the Image of God”* by Davis and Phelps (editors); Labbe, 21-22; Peter Guilday, *A History of the Councils of Baltimore, 1791-1884* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1932), 220.

effective program of evangelization for African Americans. The Archbishop of New Orleans, for example, appealed to religious orders in his jurisdiction to open schools for African Americans, but no responses came. Southern sentiment against educating African Americans was so intense that some Southern members of religious congregations harbored racist notions themselves or avoided such appeals out of fear of alienating their white patronage. In addition to racial prejudice and timidity of some bishops and religious congregations, there was also a scarcity of personnel and resources among both groups. With the combination of such factors, the chance for large-scale conversion of African Americans to Catholicism after the Civil War gradually slipped away.¹⁶ In the meantime, the Holy See¹⁷ would continue to encourage and prod American bishops in their ministerial and evangelizing efforts for African Americans.

In response to the call of the American bishops for European religious orders to work with African Americans, Father Herbert Vaughan, an Englishman, and four other members of his recently-founded order, Foreign Missionary Society, volunteered. The order was commonly known as the “Mill Hill Fathers,” named after the property Vaughan acquired outside of London in the locality called “Mill Hill.” Later, in 1893 the American community separated from the parent body in England and became known as the “Josephites.” In 1871, Vaughan arrived in Baltimore and was warmly welcomed by Spalding. Vaughan’s first step was a tour of the South to raise funds and determine the scope of his ministry. While predisposed to finding the worst, Vaughan was shocked by

¹⁶Ellis, 101-102.

¹⁷The Holy See refers to the Pope and the Vatican curia or bureaucracy.

the treatment of African Americans in Savannah, Vicksburg, Natchez, Memphis, Charleston, New Orleans, and St. Louis. In his diary Vaughan gave a first-hand account of how white Southern Catholics treated their prospective converts. He stated that African Americans were “regarded even by priests as so many dogs.” In one entry Vaughan wrote,

I visited a hospital where there were a number of Negroes. Talked to many in it and in the street. All said they had no religion. Never baptized. All said either they would like to be Catholics or something to show that they were not opposed to it. Neither the priest with me nor the Sisters in the hospital do anything to instruct them. They just smile at them as if they had no souls.¹⁸

In a Catholic cathedral he witnessed a white priest refusing to give communion to an African American soldier. In churches he saw low, backless benches marked off “For Negroes.” He found that First Communion was held on one day for whites and on another day for African Americans. In St. Louis, Vaughan met with the archbishop in January of 1872 and made this entry in his diary: “The Archbishop thought all my plans would fail; could suggest nothing for the Negroes, and refused permission to collect; and declined to give a letter of approval.” Despite this most uninviting beginning, the Mill Hill Fathers stayed. The coming of the Mill Hill Fathers to Baltimore in 1871 represented the first organized effort to evangelize African Americans.¹⁹

A Third Plenary Council convened in Baltimore in 1884 with Archbishop James Gibbons of Baltimore presiding over seventy-two American prelates. Vatican authorities once again placed the topic of ministry to the African Americans on the council’s agenda

¹⁸William A. Osborne, *The Segregated Covenant, Race Relations and American Catholics* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 23.

¹⁹Ochs, 43-45; Osborne, 23; Guilday, 275-276.

because they were aware that, except for the work of the Mill Hill Fathers, little had been done since the Second Plenary Council seventeen years ago. The Third Plenary Council identified some of the difficulties in evangelization of African Americans. Money and personnel from Northern dioceses that might have gone to Southern dioceses were needed at home. Shortages of personnel and finances were cited as definite factors, but no mention was made of the brutal racist treatment of African Americans that Vaughan had observed. In the end, the Third Plenary Council voted to have an annual collection on the first Sunday in Lent in all dioceses in the country for the Church's evangelization efforts and ministry to the Native American Indians and African Americans. A Commission for Catholic Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians was formed to allocate money to needy dioceses. There would also be a priest-secretary to administer the program.²⁰

While the meetings of the Third Plenary Council were closed to the public, special church services held at the cathedral in Baltimore were open to lay people. At one of the Masses, Bishop William Gross of Savannah was asked to preach on "The Missions for the Colored People." His sermon showed a glimpse of the "superior-inferior" mindset of some council members toward the plight of the African American. Bishop Gross said,

We know the history of this people. In their native country, Africa, they were sunken from time immemorial in barbarism; and their religion, Fetishism, was the most depraved that the world has ever known.... As a general thing, their ministers are poor colored men, the vast

²⁰"Pastoral Letter of the Archbishops and Bishops of the United States Assembled in the Third Plenary council of Baltimore, To the Clergy and Laity of Their Charge," in *The Memorial Volume. A History of the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore, November 9 – December 7, 1844* (inserted at the end of the volume), 30; Guilday, 223, 241; Osborne, 24; Labbe, 22.

majority of them uneducated, and they only make a travesty of religion – “The blind leading the blind.”... the poor colored people do not stand very high in the scale of morality.... There is only one thing that will do any good, and that is to elevate them morally; make them honest men, chaste women, obedient, law-abiding citizens.²¹

Gross and other Catholic clergy of this period lacked any appreciation for the history and humanity of African Americans.

American Catholics, whether the clergy or the laity, reflected the spectrum of views held by American society. While Gross’ views were offensive, condescending, and arrogant, there were some more respectful and tolerant positions in the Church as there were in the larger American society. Archbishop John Ireland of St. Paul, Minnesota, consistently adopted a stand on African Americans that was as courageous as it was unpopular. The “consecrated blizzard of the northwest” enrolled an African American student in his seminary in 1888, a phenomenon practically unknown at the time. Throughout his thirty-year tenure in St. Paul, the parochial schools were integrated.²² What is extraordinary about Ireland was that his speeches and writings were not bland general statements but loaded with specificity. For example, in one speech Ireland connected American democratic principles with religious teachings:

All the black men want is fair play. That given, they will care for themselves. The equality of man is an American principle; it is also a religious teaching.... We are all brothers in Christ, and brothers do

²¹William Gross, “The Missions for the Colored People” in *A History of the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore, November 9 – December 7, 1884: The Memorial Volume* (Baltimore: The Baltimore Publishing, 1885), 71-74; Osborne, 24.

²²Marvin R. O’Connell, *John Ireland and the American Catholic Church* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1988), 268; Osborne, 24-25.

not look at color or race.²³

In a speech delivered three years after he became archbishop, Ireland stated his goals on the race issue:

There is but one solution of the problem, and it is to obliterate all color lines....Let the Negro be our equal in the enjoyment of all political rights of the citizen. The Constitution grants him those rights; let us be loyal to the Constitution.... I would open to the Negro all industrial and professional avenues – the test for his advance being his ability, but never his color. I would in all public gatherings and in all public resorts, in halls and hotels, treat the black man as I treat the white.²⁴

Despite a voice like Ireland, the Catholic Church, in general, reflected the more common views of white American society toward African Americans as expressed by Gross. To most whites, the African American was illiterate, superstitious, irresponsible, and immoral by his nature or by his African ancestry. Jay Dolan claimed that Catholic clergymen viewed African Americans as they looked upon Native American Indians; both had little or no religion and needed evangelization. Except for the an annual collection for missionary work for these two groups and creation of the board to disperse the funds, the Third Plenary Council of 1884 failed to devise any comprehensive plan addressing both the spiritual and material needs of the African American.²⁵

The Impact of Social and Religious Factors on African American Evangelization Efforts

The Catholic Church's ministry to African American took place in separate institutions. In order to understand how and why separate institutions were started, it is

²³O'Connell, 268.

²⁴Ibid., 268.

²⁵Jay Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience – A History from Colonial Times to the Present* (Notre Dame, Indian: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 359-360; O'Connell, 26.

necessary to digress briefly from the Church's ministry to African Americans and to turn to the Church's outreach to various immigrant groups in the United States. While the Catholic Church in the United States took a minimalist stand on evangelization and ministry to the African Americans, it was confronted at the same time with major problems and challenges that tended to consume the attention of the bishops. Immigration would dramatically transform the American Catholic church in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The second wave of immigration began in the 1880s and would last until the start of World War I, bringing huge numbers from southern and eastern Europe, many of whom were Catholic. In 1882, for example, 87 percent of the immigrants came from northern and western Europe while 13 percent came from southern and eastern Europe. By 1907, only 19.3 percent came from northern and western Europe while 80.7 percent came from southern and eastern Europe. The new immigrants in the second wave were Italians, Poles, Bohemians, Greeks, Hungarians, Slovaks, Croats, Lithuanians, Slovenes, and others. More than one million Catholics came each decade from 1880 to 1920; two million came between 1900 and 1910. The total Catholic population grew from 6,259,000 in 1880 to 16,363,000 in 1910 (an increase of over 10,000,000) while the national population went from 75,995,000 to 91,972,000 (an increase of nearly 16,000,000). Some of the immigrants became farmers, but the majority settled in eastern and mid-western cities.²⁶ Winthrop Hudson stated, "The most spectacular development in American religious life during the latter half of the nineteenth century was the growth of

²⁶Hennesey, 173.

the Roman Catholic Church.”²⁷

Due to the religious faith of these newcomers, they became the responsibility of the Church, a responsibility that taxed every bit of personnel and money of dioceses and parishes. The American bishops of the 1880s and 1890s believed they were accountable to God for the religious training of both the native and immigrant Catholic children. They knew that bishops earlier tried and failed to reach an understanding with the public school system. In their minds, the only alternative left was the parochial school. For the first time, the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1884 made the parochial school almost mandatory for priests and people.²⁸ The Catholic school would soon emerge as a hallmark of the Church in the United States. It also would play the pivotal role of educating and catechizing immigrant children and teaching them English. The Catholic educational system would be a chief catalyst insuring future social mobility and affluence in later years. It is not surprising that within this educational outreach of the Catholic Church to various immigrant groups that a similar approach or model would also be used for African American and Native Americans. Religious historian Dolan wrote that when church leaders talked about evangelization of African Americans and Native Americans, the focus was almost always on the youth, not the adults, and the chosen remedy for both was the school.²⁹

In addition to parochial schools, the Church erected parishes for the various

²⁷Winthrop Hudson and John Corrigan, *Religion in America: An Historical Account of the Development of American Religious Life* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992), 241.

²⁸Ellis, 104.

²⁹Dolan, 359-360.

nationalities and multiplied and widened the scope of its charitable agencies. Hospitals, orphanages, and homes for the elderly were founded where immigrants were welcomed. These institutions served the dual purpose of preserving the faith of the immigrant and helping him to adjust to American culture. The Catholic Church became the church of the laborer and city-dweller, the church of the neighborhood, tenement, or slum. The poverty of Catholic immigrants meant that the Church would emphasize elementary education and works of charity. The Church fostered immigrant pride and group loyalty. With meager salaries, immigrants sacrificed to construct "their church" which would stand as a long lasting testimonial to their faith and their ethnic pride. Catholic life centered around the parish with almost every imaginable society and club for congregants of all ages along with athletic teams, insurance lodges, theatrical troupes, choirs, orchestras, bands, scouts, and the like. Six thousand priests, who ministered to immigrants in 1880, grew to twelve thousand in 1900 and seventeen thousand in 1910. Accompanying this explosive growth of immigrants with the multitude of church programs and the phenomenal building projects, the financial status of many dioceses was stretched to a dangerous level. As late as 1909 there were twenty-one dioceses in the nation that were still partially subsidized by Rome. In a report to the Holy See, it was stated that the debts of the American Catholic Church equaled half of the value of church property. Frequently, pastors had to be chosen, not for their pastoral skills, but for their financial acumen.³⁰ The immigrant church with its many religious and social activities and organizations and its social outreach programs became the model used when establishing the African American congregation at St.

³⁰Hennesey, 175-176; Osborne, 27, Ellis, 104-105.

Benedict the Moor in Milwaukee and other Catholic African American missions in the country. While the model was adapted to their specific needs, African American Catholics, like immigrant Catholics, had their separate churches, schools, and other institutions.

In the process of Americanizing the immigrant and proving that one could be a good citizen and a good Catholic, the American Church was hit with an attack from the anti-Catholic American Protective Association (A.P.A.). Founded in 1887 in Clinton, Iowa, by Henry Bowers, the A.P.A. engaged in a wide range of activities from the sublime to the bizarre. Members of the association promised never to vote for a Catholic, never to hire one when a Protestant was available, and never to join Catholics in a strike. There was also a vitriolic dispute over whether religion should be taught in the public schools and whether Catholic workers should be in the union movement. In 1893 the A.P.A. achieved its greatest prominence when it spread the rumor that a papal decree had absolved all oaths of allegiance to the United States and that a massacre of heretics (non-Catholics) was planned for September 5, which they mistakenly believed was the feast day of St. Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits. The A.P.A.'s anti-Catholicism was fueled by its resentment of foreigners, the rapid growth of the Catholic Church, and the Church's commitment to parochial schools.³¹

All of these factors, a flood of Catholic immigrants and their needs, severe financial strains, shortages of priests and religious, and a storm of anti-Catholic sentiment and campaigns, consumed the attention and resources of American bishops and neglected

³¹Osborne, 27; Hennesey, 182-183.

the African American issue. In addition there was the factor of geography and visibility. The American Catholic Church was rooted in northern cities, while most of the African American population was still in southern rural areas. In short, African Americans were remote and not very visible in the strongholds of American Catholicism.

The low priority given to ministry and evangelization of African Americans was reflective of the social attitudes toward African Americans in the nation and in the annual contributions to the Catholic Missions Among the Indians and Colored People. In 1919 contributions averaged three-fourths of one cent for each Catholic in the United States. William Osborne described one typical reaction to the special collection for the Indian and Negro Home Missions. A Northern pastor read the bishop's letter soliciting the congregation's support for the home mission collection. Then the priest casually remarked, "I do not know about this collection...You will find a box down there at the door and if you wish to put anything in it, for the Negroes and Indians, you can do so."³² Finally, there was the permeating racial attitude which denied the humanity of African Americans. It was described vividly by the ex-Union general, Carl Schurz, in a trip he took through the South shortly after the Civil War:

Men who are honorable in their dealings with their white neighbors will cheat a Negro without feeling a single twinge of their honor. To kill a Negro, they do not deem murder; to debauch a Negro woman, they do not think fornication; to take the property away from a Negro, they do not consider robbery. The people boast that when they get freedmen's affairs in their own hands (Southern Home Rule), to use their own expression, 'the niggers will catch hell.'³³

³²Osborne, 31.

³³Ibid., 27.

There were other obstacles standing in the way of African American conversion besides the meager proselytizing efforts of the Catholic Church. Augustin Verot, the first Vicar of Florida and later Bishop of Savannah, Georgia, wrote in 1865 that “the Catholic religion is eminently favorable for attracting and winning the admiration of the Negroes , because of the pomp, variety, and symbolism of its ceremonial ritual.”³⁴ It appears that such an attraction was not widespread. Albert Raboteau recognized a parallel between African ritual and its understanding of God with the Catholic Church’s rituals, the use of sacred objects, and its devotion to saints. However, bodily participation and ecstatic behavior, which was part of African dance and ceremony, were present in the prayer meetings, shouting, and spirituals of African American Protestant churches, but missing in Catholic worship services. In the end, this more physical and emotional experience tended to attract African Americans to the Protestant churches more than the Catholic Church.³⁵

Another problem with the Catholic church for African Americans involved the issue of autonomy or “ownership.” In Catholic churches, that were open to both races, African Americans were segregated, usually to the back pews of the church or in a side section of pews or in the gallery. James Hennesey argued that “most blacks preferred their own churches, where they heard black preachers and played a physically and vocally active part in church worship and management.”³⁶ In Catholic churches, whether exclusively for

³⁴Michael V. Gannon, *Rebel Bishop: The Life and Era of Augustin Verot* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1964), 117.

³⁵Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Ante-bellum South* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 87-89, 271-275.

³⁶Hennesey, 163.

African Americans or open to both races, African Americans lacked a sense of “ownership” in the church. Their priests were white and, if a community of Sisters were present, they too were probably white. There were the few rare exceptions of the Oblate Sisters of Providence and the Sisters of the Holy Family. Even more rare were African American priests. Augustus Tolton was the first African American priest ordained specifically for work with African Americans in 1888. There were also the three mixed-race Healy brothers who could “pass” for white. They were sons of a white, Irish Georgia plantation owner and his slave wife. The first son, James Augustine Healy, was chancellor of the Boston diocese and then became the bishop of Portland, Maine, from 1875 to 1900. Alexander Sherwood Healy taught at a seminary in Troy, New York, and then became secretary to the Bishop of Boston. And, Jesuit Patrick Healy was president of Georgetown University from 1873 to 1882. However, religious orders and seminaries generally did not accept African American candidates until the twentieth century. Having no African American role models as priests, sisters, or brothers and having been relegated to the “black gallery” in racially-mixed Catholic congregations, it is no wonder why African Americans did not feel part of the Catholic Church.³⁷

The communal nature of the African American Protestant church, the danger of hostility from the larger white community, and the possibility of being ostracized by one’s own African American community all contributed to the meager number of African American Catholic converts. The Protestant church, on the one hand, not only provided a worship experience drawing more from roots of African culture; it also encouraged a

³⁷Hennesey, 163; Osborne, 29.

strong sense of community. Catholicism, on the other hand, tended to emphasize doctrine which African Americans found difficult to comprehend without any education. Thus, an anti-Catholic sentiment prevailed among African Americans in the country, particularly in the South. As a result, an African American Catholic faced, not only prejudice from the white community for his skin color, but animosity and ostracism from an enriching African American Protestant community for belonging to a maligned religion.³⁸

The American Catholic attitudes on race reflected the larger American society. Catholic bishops and their congregants as well as American society tended to favor racial positions that were closer to Bishop Gross than to Archbishop Ireland. While racial bias can explain the tepid response of some bishops, there were many other important issues demanding the immediate attention of American prelates, especially in large northern cities. The throngs of Catholic immigrants arriving in dioceses required more priests, more parochial schools, and more money. At the same time, American bishops found their Church under siege by a virulent anti-Catholicism. These became the pressing problems of the American hierarchy. There was, however, the infrastructure and model of the immigrant church that provided a framework for ministry to African Americans. A few religious congregations took the challenge to organize apostolates³⁹ to African Americans despite the prevailing attitude of racism that permeated American society. One side-effect of the very modest response by the American Catholic leaders was that it would

³⁸Ibid., 28-29.

³⁹The term "apostolate" is a Catholic term that generally refers to an individual's or group's work, like an educational apostolate.

provide room for African American Catholics themselves to initiate the work of evangelization as seen by the rise of the African American Lay Congress movement.

The Rise of African American Catholic Organizations

At the same time that some religious congregations saw an apostolate to African American as an appropriate ministry, an active and vigorous lay movement emerged in the later part of the nineteenth century among African Americans themselves. In the end, this group of articulate laymen urged Church leaders to recognize African Americans as an object of Catholic ministry and to confront racial segregation, discrimination, and prejudice as moral and religious issues.

As African Americans moved into northern cities, the Catholic policy was to segregate them in their own separate parishes. The national-parish model was seen as pastorally appropriate at the time. Later in the nineteenth century, it also became to be seen as racially desirable. If African Americans attended church services in a white church, they were seen as outsiders and in many places could never become full members. It was this segregation and discrimination that motivated Daniel Rudd of Cincinnati to organize the African American Congress movement. From 1889 to 1894, African American Catholics held five lay congresses. In the absence of African American priests, who could speak on behalf of the African American Catholic community and could command attention and respect as other ethnic groups had, African American lay leaders would have to rely on their own initiative and ambition.⁴⁰

Daniel Rudd served as editor of the *American Catholic Tribune*, a newspaper

⁴⁰Dolan, 365; Hennesey, 191-192.

published by and for African American Catholics. Rudd was born a slave in Bardstown, Kentucky in 1854 of Catholic parents. After the Civil War, he went to Springfield, Ohio, completed his secondary education, and started a newspaper in the 1880s. To Rudd, the Catholic Church was the single great hope for African Americans in the United States. He was convinced that the Catholic Church had the ability to bring change and help alleviate the plight of African Americans and break the color line and a congress could provide a spark to make this happen. In his newspaper, Rudd stated,

We thought that if we would turn the attention of our people to the moral truths and the exact equality of the human family before God, as taught by Holy Mother Church Universal...our Lord would lift us as He has the mighty Caucasian race from oppression, doubt, ignorance, and place on a higher plane of moral and intellectual life.⁴¹

To Rudd, the congress held much promise and hope. Having African American Catholics discussing the needs of their race would dispel some of the misconceptions African American Protestants had of the Catholic Church's attitude toward African Americans. For African American Protestants, who regarded the African American Catholic as an anomaly, Rudd thought it was significant for them to see their united strength. Most importantly, the congress provided an opportunity for African American Catholics to get to know one another and exchange viewpoints. Rudd believed that many African American Catholics at times felt isolated and disengaged from other African American Catholics. A congress would boost Catholic identity, pride, and solidarity among African Americans. While being an outspoken advocate of civil rights, Rudd saw the congress as a

⁴¹*American Catholic Tribune*, June 22, 1888 as quoted in "Daniel Rudd Explains the Proposed Congress of Black Catholics, 1888" in Davis and Phelps (editors), *Stamped with the Image of God*, 77.

vehicle to promote “racial pride” and, in a more unified way, cooperate with the clergy in the conversion and education of African Americans. For public consumption, Rudd believed it was important for African American Catholics to assemble with the blessing of the Church. Rudd delivered a hopeful and optimistic message, stressing the improvement of the African American race.⁴² In his newspaper, Rudd stated,

There are a good many things going on within my own race that I do not know anything about, but this I do know; We seek to place all citizens upon the basis that the law says they should stand, they stand alike in the Catholic Church, in the glory and grandeur of her history, she has been impartial. We turn to her and ask that she shall teach men a decent respect for God and each other.⁴³

The Catholic African American Congress movement was patterned after the notions of self-help and racial pride popularized by Booker T. Washington. With the erosion of civil rights and the rise of the color bar in employment, housing, education, and public facilities in the latter part of the nineteenth century, African Americans turned inward. They sought to build an African American community capable of providing the advantages denied them in the white community. In the area of education, Washington especially stressed the importance of technical education. Such ideas influenced the African American Catholics who recognize the fact that they were a minority within a minority – an African American and a Catholic. Lincoln Valle, who was instrumental in the founding of St. Benedict the Moor, was a product of this African American lay congress movement. He saw the Catholic Church as a benefit to his race. Motivated by

⁴²Davis, “The Holy See and American Black Catholics,” 158-160.

⁴³*American Catholic Tribune*, June 15, 1888, as quoted in “Daniel Rudd, Newspaper Editor, Lecturer, Lay Leader, 1888” in Davis and Phelps (editors), “*Stamped with the Image of God*,” 74-76.

this notion, he would play an initiating role in the Church's outreach to the African American community of Milwaukee.

The first African American lay congress took place on January 1-4, 1889, in Washington, D.C. Father Augustus Tolton, the only full-blooded African American priest in the United States, celebrated the opening liturgy. Gibbons, the Archbishop of Baltimore, delivered the sermon in which he pointedly reminded the delegates, "Remember the eye of the whole country is on you. It is not the eye of friendship, but...criticism."⁴⁴ Mindful of the accuracy of the Cardinal's admonition, the public statements of the congress were phrased in a deliberately tactful and discrete manner when expressing their concerns for the problems facing the African American community.

The attendees represented African American talent from many parts of the country. Charles H. Butler, a clerk of the Department of the Treasury, called the meeting to order. William H. Smith, assistant librarian of the United States Congress, gave the welcoming address. Robert L. Ruffin, a recent convert and clerk in the office of the Massachusetts Secretary of State, gave a response to the welcome address. Lincoln Valle, assistant editor of the St. Louis *Advance*, was elected first vice-president. He was one of the leading African American Catholic lay leaders who favored an strong activist approach in Catholic ministry to African Americans. Other prominent members included Dr. William Lofton, a Washington dentist, and James A. Spencer, a former member of the South Carolina

⁴⁴David Spalding, "The Negro Catholic Congresses, 1889-1894," *The Catholic Historical Review*, LX (October 1969): 340.

legislature and an official in the Charleston customhouse.⁴⁵ Perhaps even more impressive than the delegates themselves was the document they issued at the end of the congress entitled “Address of the Congress to their Catholic Fellow Citizens.” While recognizing the progress African Americans made in the last quarter of a century, the document still lamented that “the sacred rights of justice and humanity are still sadly wounded.”⁴⁶ It praised the efforts made by some religious orders who ministered to African Americans. It confidently asserted that the Catholic Church would dispel prejudices of misguided people and then pledged the cooperation of the delegates in the establishment of societies and institutions, like hospitals, orphanages, and asylums, for African Americans. It appealed to labor unions, employers, landlords, and real estate agents to eliminate discrimination and other unfair and degrading practices. In particular, the congress called for the establishment of more Catholic schools for African American children, especially for more trade schools. It stated,

The education of a people being the great and fundamental means of elevating it to the higher planes to which all Christian civilization tends, we pledge ourselves to aid in establishing, wherever we are to be found, Catholic schools...as in them and through them alone can we expect to reach the large masses of Colored children now growing up in the country without a semblance of Christian education....⁴⁷

While the issues raised at the congress reflected many of the ideas of Booker T. Washington, it did furnish a Catholic moral perspective to the marginal position of the

⁴⁵Ibid., 340-341.

⁴⁶Ibid., 342.

⁴⁷*Three Catholic Afro-American Congresses* (New York: Arno Press, 1978), 68-69.

African American in society.⁴⁸

While the first congress was a great success, the subsequent congresses built on the earlier success. They dealt with more substantive issues and took more forceful stands on issues. Rudd, who was the catalyst behind the first congress, played a diminishing role in the later congresses as new leaders and a new African American Catholic consciousness emerged.

The second African American Catholic lay congress took place in Cincinnati on July 8-10, 1890. Lofton delivered an impressive address where he observed that there were only 200,000 African American Catholics among nearly 8,000,000 African Americans in the United States. To Lofton, the most imperative need was education, especially manual training. However, he noted that the black child was effectively barred from Catholic industrial schools despite the Church's insistence that it was color-blind. Furthermore, in spite of the Church's demand that Catholic children attend its parochial schools, the Church provided no schools for African American children over the age of twelve.⁴⁹ Butler, who was previously mentioned in the first congress, emerged as a new leader. He spoke on the discrepancy between the Church's words and practices. He claimed that every year the Catholic Church lost converts due to the absence of Catholic schools. Like Lofton, Butler was convinced of the importance of vocational schools to teach the skilled trades.⁵⁰ The importance of providing a Christian education became, in

⁴⁸Ibid., 66-72.

⁴⁹Spalding, 344.

⁵⁰*Three Catholic Afro-American Congresses*, 94-110.

the minds of these lay leaders, the greatest priority in the Church's ministry to African Americans.

The second lay congress closed with a set of resolutions. It proposed the establishment of night schools to provide religious education to all Catholics. It also called for guarantees of both moral and civil rights to all of its citizens and urged labor unions to be accessible to African Americans and to provide them with benefits. Shopkeepers were urged to hire African Americans while greater aid was urged for African American orphans. One resolution expressed gratitude to Archbishop Ireland of St. Paul, Minnesota, and called him "a champion of the race." Finally, the delegates promised to support religious vocations among African Americans and stated their loyalty and obedience to the Catholic Church.⁵¹

Unlike the first congress, this Cincinnati congress was more forceful and less discrete. It exposed publicly, through its published resolutions, the inconsistency between the Church's words and its deeds regarding Catholic schools. By singling out Ireland, the delegates identified a prelate as a model for others of what ecclesiastical leadership can or should be in the Church's ministry to African Americans. Also noteworthy was the increasing importance of Catholic education in the minds of the delegates as a counterforce against discrimination in society and as a crucial element in the Church's evangelization efforts.

The third African American Catholic lay congress was held in Philadelphia on January 5-7, 1892, in the newly refurbished St. Peter Claver Church which had recently

⁵¹Ibid., 74-127

been designated as the parish for African American Catholics in that city. The topic of education quickly emerged again as a dominating issue. One southern delegate, William Edgar Easton, even went so far as to call for a moratorium on the building of Catholic churches for African Americans in lieu of constructing more Catholic schools that would educate the “head, hand, and heart” – the regular academic subjects, vocational skills, and religious education.⁵²

Frederick McGhee emerged as one of the new leaders at the third congress. Born a slave in Mississippi in 1861, McGhee moved to Tennessee after the Civil War and enrolled in Knoxville College. Afterwards, he earned a law degree in Chicago in 1885, and then moved to St. Paul, Minnesota. He was a friend of Booker T. Washington and later became a follower of W.E.B. DuBois. He was involved in the Niagara Movement and helped establish the legal arm of the NAACP. He became a convert to Catholicism in 1891 partly because of Ireland’s strong stand on behalf of African Americans.⁵³

McGhee proposed the establishment of a permanent organization that would be an instrument to implement the decisions and designs of the congresses along with a structure to redress grievances. For example, this organization established a fund, as directed by the third congress, for the building of churches, schools, and other institutions known as the Catholic Building and Loan Association of Colored People. A very important component of the permanent organization was the formation of a committee to examine grievances of

⁵²Ibid., 146-48.

⁵³Davis, *Black Catholics*, 180.

African American Catholics in the Church.⁵⁴ Not only did it allege discrimination in Catholic schools, as the second congress did, but now there would be an investigation. Finally, the acute need for Catholic schools and institutions, even at the price of forgoing construction of new churches, was underscored by this third congress.

The fourth African American Catholic lay congress convened in Chicago on September 4-8, 1893, during the Columbian Exposition and marked the hiatus of the lay congress movement. It also coincided with the second congress for the white Catholic laity, called the "Columbian Catholic Congress." There was one joint meeting of the Columbian Catholic Congress and the Fourth African American Catholic Lay Congress. While there is no evidence, it certainly seems plausible that some priests or religious from Milwaukee could have traveled to Chicago and attended the Columbian Catholic Congress and, perhaps, the joint-meeting with the African American congress.

Charles Butler was chosen to address the joint session with a speech entitled "The Condition and Future of the Negro Race in the United States." Butler's speech was pointed but not intended to offend. He echoed the sentiment that the Church had established the reputation as a civilizing and educating agent in history. He noted that the Protestant Church was significantly ahead of the Catholic Church in its proselytizing efforts and in its number of colleges and industrial schools in the South. Butler also distinguished between "social equality" and "civil equality." Butler spoke in favor of civil equality, meaning no discrimination in public places and equal access to jobs and other opportunities. As for social equality, Butler claimed that such a thing would be as

⁵⁴*Three Afro-American Congresses*, 133, 137-39, 146.

distasteful to the African American as it was to the white man. This idea would be repeated three years later when Booker T. Washington gave his famous speech calling for education and economic opportunities for the African American. Dramatically holding up his hand, Washington asserted that in all things that are purely social, African Americans can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress. Finally, Butler confronted the prejudice within the Church as evidenced by relegating the African American to an obscure corner in Catholic churches. He asked his audience to help strike down the monster of color prejudice which is unworthy of the Catholic Church and the nation.⁵⁵

On the agenda of the fourth congress was a follow-up matter: a committee of grievances was to report on grievances received from Catholic African Americans and the committee's investigation findings. The congress carefully referred to these wrongs committed against African Americans in the Church in the context of being contrary to the fundamental Catholic teachings and militated against future conversion efforts among African Americans.⁵⁶ Quoting from Ireland, they deplored the fact that some members in various parts of the country had "departed from the teaching of the Church in the treatment of the colored Catholics and yielded right to popular prejudice."⁵⁷ They then eloquently exhort all Catholics by stating,

⁵⁵ *Progress of the Catholic Church in America and the Great Columbian Catholic Congress of 1893*, Vol II (Chicago: J.S. Hyland, 1897), 121; Charles Butler of Washington, D.C., "The Condition and Future of the Negro Race," 1893, in Davis and Phelps (editors), "*Stamped with the Image of God*," 83-84; Spalding, 349-350.

⁵⁶ Davis, *Black Catholics*, 178, 187-188.

⁵⁷ "The Black Catholic Lay Congresses, 1893" in Davis and Phelps (editors), "*Stamped with the Image of God*," 82.

From the day of Christ it (the Catholic Church) has been her mission... to raise up the downtrodden....It has been her mission to proclaim to the end of the earth that we all have stamped on our immortal souls in the image of God....For ages the Church has labored to break down the walls of race prejudice, to teach the world the doctrine of the meek and humble Christ...For did not the Holy Church canonize Augustine and Monica, Benedict the Moor, Cyprian, Perpetua and Felicity?⁵⁸

The sentiments expressed a tremendous love and loyalty to the Catholic Church and at the same time a complete rejection of racism within the Church. A deep sense of gratitude and pride of Catholic schools and institutions was stated along with a keen sense of the African roots in the Catholic Church.

Between the fourth and fifth congresses, Robert N. Wood, a Democratic politician in New York and a leader at the congresses, chaired the Committee on Grievances established by the third congress. He sent a letter to every American bishop in the country inquiring about the treatment of African Americans in his diocese. The survey posed inquiries such as: Were there any rules imposing segregation in the churches and institutions of the diocese? Did African American children attend the same parochial schools and Catholic colleges as white children? Were African Americans admitted to Catholic hospitals in the diocese? Wood received responses from sixty-seven bishops, about two-thirds. The survey responses would be an agenda point for the next congress.⁵⁹

The fifth and last African American Catholic lay congress met in Baltimore on October 8-11, 1894. Speeches were given on the familiar topics of discrimination and the need of education for African American Catholics. The survey results from American

⁵⁸Ibid., 81-82.

⁵⁹Spalding, 351.

bishops on the treatment of African Americans in their dioceses as well as complaints of discrimination made to the grievance committee were discussed at length.⁶⁰ In general, the report from the bishops claimed that African Americans were not the objects of discrimination by any rule of the diocese; discrimination, which the bishops deprecated, could be found in some individual parishes.⁶¹

The fifth congress was the last one and ended the African American Catholic congress movement. David Spalding suggested some possible contributing factors for its collapse. Correspondence with Cardinal Gibbons requesting another congress referred to mistakes made at previous congresses, even though no specifics were given. Spalding argued that the growing militancy of the African American delegates in their independence and outspokenness was discomfiting for the bishops. Church leaders were uneasy about the “lay renaissance” of the 1880s and 1890s. Spalding also contended that racial bias played a part as well as growing tensions between liberal and conservative church leaders. By the end of the nineteenth century, Catholic conservative sentiments had won out and was matched with a conservative political victory in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) and the nadir of the African American. Finally, based on attendance records, there was a waning interest among African Americans themselves. The fifth congress had fifty-seven delegates and alternates while the first congress had eighty-five.⁶²

⁶⁰It seems very plausible that the Archdiocese of Milwaukee would have responded to the survey questions and one can only speculate if any African American Catholic in Milwaukee filed a complaint with the grievance committee.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 352-353; Davis, *Black Catholics*, 191-193.

⁶²Spalding, 354-355.

At the same time, the African American Catholic congress movement was a success. It brought African American Catholics together where they demonstrated leadership, initiative, love and devotion to the Church, pride in their accomplishments, balance in dealing with issues of discrimination and prejudice in the Church, and the ability to articulate their stand on these issues. Likewise, the congress movement made an impact on Vatican officials and reinforced their long-held view held that the Catholic Church did not sufficiently embrace African Americans as an object of its ministry. The congress movement also recognized the pivotal importance of the Church in fighting racism in the country. Finally, the congress movement also would propel future careers of men such as Rudd, Valle, and McGhee in their zeal for the faith.⁶³ Lincoln Valle, who lived in Chicago during the years of the later congresses, would travel north to Milwaukee in the first part of the twentieth century and establish the first mission church for African Americans in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee.

Solutions to the “Negro Problem”

For the American Catholic Church at this time, the solution to the “Negro Problem,” what to do with African American Catholics, was to provide for the establishment of separate churches and schools, if possible, and to designate the back of the church and the gallery as the “colored pews” in racially mixed congregations. An early indication of the choice by the American Catholic Church to favor separation of the races in churches and schools was seen in a pastoral letter was written by Gibbons in 1869, who was at that time Bishop of Richmond, Virginia. Gibbons stated:

⁶³Davis, *Black Catholics*, 193-194.

We therefore desire that separate schools and churches be established for the blacks, wherever, in the judgement of the Ordinary, they may be deemed practical and expedient. Where special schools and churches not erected for them, every facility should be afforded for their religious and moral training, as far as circumstances will permit.⁶⁴

After the Second Plenary Council's appeal to religious congregations in Europe to help evangelize and minister to African Americans, religious congregations provided the leadership and personnel in the Church's mission to African Americans. After the Mill Hill Fathers or Josephites, other religious congregations who embarked upon an apostolate to African Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were the Society of St. Edmund, the Holy Ghost Fathers, the Society of African Missions, and the Society of Divine Word. These religious orders served as missionaries in East and West Africa and American bishops believed they could easily transfer their approach from blacks in Africa to blacks in the United States. Also, since ministry to African Americans was costly and many dioceses were financially strapped, religious orders had financial resources and had the potential to raise funds in the many places where they had an apostolate. Diocesan-sponsored ministries, on the other hand, were limited in fund raising drives to its own diocesan boundaries.⁶⁵

On the touchy issue of Church vocations, African Americans were discouraged to embrace them and, if they persisted, were rejected outright from entering white seminaries and religious congregations and steered to African American communities and seminaries. The "Josephites" decided to admit African American candidates for the priesthood which

⁶⁴John Tracy Ellis, *The Life of James Cardinal Gibbons* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1952), 88.

⁶⁵Hennesey, 163; Osborne, 30.

was most unusual and noteworthy for the time. Father Charles Randolph Uncles, S.S.J. was ordained on December 19, 1891, by Cardinal Gibbons in the Baltimore Cathedral. This marked the first time that an African American was ordained in the United States. It was also the first time that African Americans in any numbers had been allowed to come into the cathedral or to sit in good seats. The only major seminary in the country established exclusively for African Americans was St. Augustine Seminary in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, and run by the Society of Divine Word.⁶⁶

Most significant among women's religious orders working with African Americans was the work of Katharine Drexel, canonized a saint of the Catholic Church in 2000. Having been born into wealthy banking family in Philadelphia, Katharine and her two sisters inherited a fortune of fourteen million dollars from their father. In a private audience with Pope Leo XIII in 1887, Drexel asked that he send missionary priests to American Indian territories. His Holiness responded by asking "why she did not become a missionary herself?" This incident eventually culminated in the founding of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament in 1891 by Drexel to work exclusively with Native Americans and African Americans. Her family's fortune supplemented numerous Church ministries for these two minority groups, including the building of schools and missions. Perhaps the most famous institution founded and staffed by the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament is Xavier University in New Orleans, for decades America's only Catholic African American university. Two other women religious orders who devoted a significant portion of their work to the African American missions were the Sister-Servants of the Holy Ghost and

⁶⁶Ochs, 5, 80-82.

Mary Immaculate from San Antonio and the Franciscan Handmaids of the Most Pure Heart of Mary.⁶⁷

The priority of founding schools had been expressed by Vatican officials and members of the African American Lay Catholic Congress movement. Some religious congregations embraced an apostolate to African Americans and established schools as a key component in its ministry. St. Benedict the Moor in Milwaukee was a day and boarding school that opened in 1912 and staffed by the School Sisters of Notre Dame at first and then the Dominican Sisters of Racine, Wisconsin. Before St. Benedict School, Mother Katharine Drexel and the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament started four African American boarding schools. Holy Providence School for grade school boys and girls began in 1893 and was located on the Motherhouse grounds in Cornwells Heights, Pennsylvania. St. Joseph Industrial School for Colored Boys was run by the Josephites in Clayton, Delaware and opened in 1895. The opening of St. Joseph's Mission for Colored People in Wilmington, Delaware, had a school and orphanage for African American boys under the direction of Josephite priest, Father Justin McCarthy. Drexel also founded St. Emma's Industrial School for boys in Castle Rock, Virginia in 1894 and had religious orders of men staff the school. St. Francis de Sales, also in Castle Rock, Virginia, was another boarding school started in 1899 by the Blessed Sacrament Sisters for grade school and high school girls. In 1911 the Sisters of the Good Shepherd established the Illinois School for Colored Girls in Chicago. Cardinal Gibbons Institute, located in Ridge,

⁶⁷Sister Consuela Marie Duffy, *Katharine Drexel: A Biography* (Cornwells Heights, Pa.: Mother Katharine Drexel Guild, 1966), 74-75, 100-101, 169.

Maryland, was started in 1924 and was the only lay-run and administered Catholic industrial school in the United States.⁶⁸

There was a growing responsiveness by the American hierarchy to the dictates from Rome by the turn of the century. Historian Gerald P. Fogarty stated, "From its inception in 1789, the American hierarchy had been jealous of its relative degree of autonomy from Rome."⁶⁹ However, Fogarty claimed that the hierarchy moved from a stage of collegiality to a stage of "Romanization" in the last decades of the nineteenth century. In the phase of collegiality, bishops decided matters as a group with little consideration to Rome's views. In the period of Romanization, Rome asserted more authority and control on the American Church and church leaders readily complied. This process was accomplished first by the establishment of the North American College in Rome in 1859. Young seminarians, identified as possible future church leaders, were sent to study at the North American College and took on the "*spirito Romano*," a certain familiarity with the Roman manner of conducting affairs and were instilled with the notion of obedience to Rome. Another contributing factor to Romanization was the creation by the Holy See of the office of apostolic delegate to the United States in the 1890s. This high-ranking prelate was assigned by the Vatican as the pope's personal representative in

⁶⁸Sr. Patricia Lynch, SBS, *Sharing The Bread In Service: Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, 1891-1991* (Bensalem, Pennsylvania: Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, 1998), 50, 66-67, 75, 86; Stephen Ochs, *Desegregating The Altar, The Josephites and the Struggle for Black Priests, 1871-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 87; Nicholas M. Creary, "A Catholic Tuskegee: The Cardinal Gibbons Institute, 1922-1933," *Maryland Historical Magazine*, 102 (2007): 608; Suellen Hoy, "Illinois Technical School for Colored Girls: A Catholic Institution on Chicago's South Side, 1911-1953," *Journal of Illinois History*, vol 4, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 103.

⁶⁹Gerald P. Fogarty, *The Vatican and the American Hierarchy From 1870 to 1965* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1985), 115.

the United States. The apostolic delegate reported regularly to the Holy See and was instrumental in the selection of bishops. Roman training and orientation became an increasingly important factor in the selection of new bishops and advancement in the Church. The power held by the apostolic delegate and its strong and direct connection to the Vatican and the pope also made the American hierarchy much more responsive to Rome's requests and appeals than they had been in the early and mid-nineteenth century. Of the archbishops in Milwaukee in the twentieth century, Samuel Stritch, Moses Kiley, and Albert Meyer were all educated in Rome.⁷⁰

Vatican officials continued to initiate inquiries and prod American bishops to do more for African Americans. This struggle could be illustrated by the Directive of 1904. Girolamo Maria Gotti, the cardinal prefect of the Congregation of the Propaganda, sent a letter to Archbishop Diomedede Falconio, the apostolic delegate for the United States, in 1904 concerning African American Catholics in the United States. In an unusually pointed manner, the letter stated,

It has been referred to this Sacred Congregation that in some of the dioceses of the United States the condition of the Catholic Negroes, not only in respect to the other faithful but also in respect to their pastors and bishops, is very humiliating and entirely different from that of whites. As this is not in conformity with the spirit of Christianity... I ask your Excellency to call the attention of His Eminence Cardinal Gibbons (Baltimore) to this matter...to procure that this diversity of treatment may be lessened and...little by little entirely removed.⁷¹

Cyprian Davis speculates that Rome's directive of 1904 may have been

⁷⁰Ibid., 9, 24-26, 195-197.

⁷¹"Letter of Cardinal Gotti to the Apostolic Delegate on the Treatment of Black Catholics, 1904," in Davis and Phelps (editors), *Stamped with the Image of God*, 87.

precipitated by a sixty-four page booklet written by Joseph Anciaux, a Josephite, in 1903. The booklet was stamped confidential and was entitled in Latin, "To the Holy See Concerning the Miserable Condition of Black Catholics in America." It provided Rome with a scathing report that detailed the inequalities and indignities suffered by African Americans within the Catholic Church. It included segregation of African Americans in Catholic churches, refusal to admit African American children to Catholic schools, hostility of white pastors toward African American congregants, opposition of bishops to the ordination of African American priests, and the pervasive contempt toward African Americans within the American Catholic Church. Anciaux mentioned priests and bishops by name and cited specific actions they took and words they said and included the time and place. He also mentioned Ireland of St. Paul, Durier of Natchitoches, and Janssens of New Orleans as bishops who were the exceptions in their willingness and "boldness to protect and defend openly the rights of blacks."⁷² Thus, as late as 1904, many of the same injustices within the Catholic Church since the Second Plenary Council of 1866 still remained.

The American bishops responded by creating another agency, The Catholic Board of Negro Missions, in 1907 and appointed Father John E. Burke, a diocesan priest from New York, as director. The perceptions and priorities of the Catholic Board of Negro Missions can be seen in a letter Burke wrote to Archbishop Giovanni Bonzano, the apostolic delegate, in 1912. Bonzano had asked for Burke's own opinions on how the

⁷²"A Report to the Holy See on the Situation of African Americans in the United States, 1903," in Davis and Phelps, *Stamped with the Image of God*, 88-89; Davis, "The Holy See and American Black Catholics," 171-172; Davis, *Black Catholics*, 196-198.

Church could best attract African American converts and serve the African American Catholic community. In Burke's response, he explained first what he saw as the major obstacles to the conversion of African Americans. At the top of his list was the lack of African American priests. In a period where African Americans were starting to enter more professions, there were only four African American priests in the entire country. The second obstacle Burke listed was secret societies. African Americans joined secret societies that were banned by the Catholic Church. Burke noted that African Americans joined such secret societies long before the Church banned them and the attraction was the insurance benefits given to their members. The third obstacle, according to Burke, was that African Americans in many cases were unable to comply with the marriage laws of the Church. He said that many marriages were invalid and blamed this in part on ignorant African American preachers.⁷³

Burke next addressed the question of what the Church could do to gain more African American converts. The most important priority, according to Burke, was the establishment of Catholic schools. As to the obstacle of secret societies, Burke supported the Church's ban, but believed the Holy See could grant permission to prospective converts to keep their membership in a secret society in order to remain eligible for its financial benefits. Burke also thought the Catholic Church should have societies that provide similar financial benefits to African Americans. Third, Burke stated that separate African American churches, especially in the parts of the South, was preferable to racially-mixed congregations. However, linked to his preference for separate churches was the

⁷³Davis, *Black Catholics*, 200-201.

importance of an indigenous priesthood. He was firmly convinced that only with African American priests and sisters could significant evangelization gains be made with the African American race. Finally, Burke believed that the church's pageantry and ceremony was an appealing element for most African Americans. He urged such things as processions, banners, many parish missions, and other ceremonial displays of ritual and regalia.⁷⁴

As head of the Catholic Board for Negro Missions, Burke's views would be influential. What made the beliefs and opinions of this New York priest even more creditable was his reputation. When discussing Burke and his report to the Bonzano, historian Cyprian Davis stated,

Burke's report is exceptional because of its fairness and thoroughness. Unlike many ecclesiastics writing at the time, Burke never spoke about blacks in a condescending and demeaning manner. He made no assumption of black inferiority and no complacent observations about the black people's lax morality. The man who devoted thirty years of his life to ministry in the black community was one who evinced a sincere respect for the people whom he served.⁷⁵

By the mid summer of 1914, Cardinal Gaetano De Lai, prefect of the Consistorial Congregation, reported on the deliberations regarding the concerns of the Church's African American ministry in the United States. It strongly favored the training and development of catechists. It saw the necessity of increasing the number of schools. It favored the establishment of hospitals and "diverse associations even of an economic nature" for the exclusive needs of African Americans. In other words, the Roman Curia

⁷⁴Ibid., 201-202.

⁷⁵Ibid., 203.

took a very broad view of evangelization. Ministry and evangelization were not limited to providing worship services and catechism instructions. The scope should also include concern for adequate health care as well as the financial needs of a people whom they described as being “especially in a difficult situation.”⁷⁶ The development of St. Benedict the Moor in Milwaukee would embody many of the aforementioned features.

Summary

From the end of the American Civil War to the time of the First World War, African Americans in the Catholic Church could be described as a “shadow in the Church”⁷⁷ that gradually grows as a priority. The legacy prevailed for most of the nineteenth century despite numerous admonitions from curia officials in the Vatican. No coordinated approach for evangelization of African Americans was undertaken. The annual collection for African American and Native American “home” missions and the Catholic Board of Negro Missions, headed by Burke, were the only two structural mechanisms in the Church’s nationwide ministry to African Americans. The ministerial efforts overall remained in the hands of each bishop or archbishop and, therefore, varied in its scope from diocese to diocese, depending largely on the local bishop’s beliefs and prejudices. Near the end of the nineteenth century, there was a greater responsiveness to Rome’s voice. The model followed in most northern dioceses in the country was that of the immigrant national parish. A church or mission was established for African

⁷⁶Ibid., 207-208.

⁷⁷This phrase was used in a letter by Phyllis Brown to Cardinal Spellman in New York on March 19, 1965. It was quoted in Thomas J. Shelley, “Slouching Toward the Center: Cardinal Francis Spellman, Archbishop Paul J. Hallinan and American Catholicism in the 1960s,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 17, no. 4 (Fall 1999): 31-32.

Americans as “their” church similar to the Polish, Irish, or German churches where they were expected to attend religious services and not at another ethnic or white parish. If a church had both African American and white parishioners, segregation in some form was generally practiced. In most dioceses, the real leadership and work of African American evangelization and ministry was given to religious congregations. The Church’s goal was essentially conversion in order to save souls. The necessary vehicle to achieve that goal was establishing a school so proper religious instruction could be given to African American youth. Frequently, the ministers brought a paternalistic attitude, seeing African Americans as social inferiors, and in need of social services. African Americans were not recruited and usually discouraged from pursuing a Church vocation of any kind.

Officials in Rome in the early period expressed a far more enlightened view than the American Catholic hierarchy. Rome encouraged the establishment of churches, schools, hospitals, orphanages, and “diverse associations of an economic nature” for African Americans. In Rome’s view, ministry was not limited to worship services and catechism instructions, but also health and financial concerns. Such a comprehensive approach to African American ministry was dependent, of course, on the local bishop and possibly local parish priests although the hierarchy became more responsive to Rome.

For African Americans Catholics, the teachings of the Church were viewed as a vehicle to fight against racism in the country. Prejudice and discriminatory practices were recognized as being against the Church’s teachings and hurting conversion efforts. At the same time, African American Catholic leaders reflected the educational and self-help philosophy of Booker T. Washington. African Americans clamored for Catholic schools

and favored training in the skilled areas. Africans Americans shared the wider and more comprehensive view of ministry with the social components as expressed by Vatican officials. The African American Catholic laity was much more active than the white laity and respectfully pushed the American Church toward greater consistency between its teachings and its practices. Thus, African American leaders strongly favored an indigenous African American clergy and many more good Catholic schools accessible to African Americans. It is in this context that Lincoln Valle, who participated in all of the African American Catholic lay congresses, was to play the role of initiating an organized approach and plan for ministry to African American Catholics in Milwaukee with the strong approval of Archbishop Sebastian Messmer. The ministerial efforts in Milwaukee were shaped to a large extent by the legacy of Catholic traditions and patterns that developed in the nation in the last few decades of the nineteenth century.

CHAPTER 3

THE BEGINNINGS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CATHOLIC MINISTRY IN MILWAUKEE

The Catholic Church of Milwaukee's outreach with the African American community was primarily through the worship, education, and social welfare activities centered in a mission church named St. Benedict the Moor. Established in 1908 for African American Catholics in the Milwaukee, St. Benedict the Moor's impact would go far beyond the range of simply gaining new converts. The mission with its many activities and organizations played an important role in the African American community of Milwaukee and in the life of the city.

African American Catholics Before the Founding of St. Benedict the Moor

The diocese of Milwaukee was established in 1843 and raised to the status of an archdiocese in 1875, creating a wide network of parishes in Milwaukee as well as the region in the southeastern quadrant of Wisconsin. The first recorded evidence of an African American Catholic community presence in Milwaukee was in 1886 at St. Gall's Church on West Michigan and North Third Streets. Since the parish's founding in 1849, the congregation was overwhelmingly Irish. Charles Beotting, a white Catholic layman, was connected in some way with the Jesuit-run St. Gall. Beotting worked to convert the small African American community in Milwaukee. Beotting (who spelled his name "Boettinger" earlier in his life) was supported in his efforts by the pastor of St. Gall, Father Stanislaus P. Lalumiere, S.J. The baptismal records of St. Gall indicate that seven African

Americans were baptized on November 26, 1886: Marian Lincoln, Susan Johnson, Mary Wilson, Mary Veronica Peck, Frederick Ferry, Aloysius Fowler, and Richard Fowler. Beotting was a sponsor for most of the newly baptized. Between December, 1886, through January, 1888, nineteen other African Americans were baptized at St. Gall.¹

The status of the early African American converts at St. Gall seems ambivalent at best. An article in the *Milwaukee Sentinel* on Christmas Day in 1887 announced a musical entertainment by “colored Catholics” to take place on two nights the next week at St. Gall Church, with proceeds going to benefit the parish. At the same time, the House Chronicles of St. Benedict the Moor note that the African American parishioners of St. Gall were seated in the gallery of the church. The chronicles also state that Beotting received reprimands for his “indiscreet zeal” and at one point took the African American converts to another church.² Though the information is sparse, it is noteworthy that the leadership behind the early conversion work of African Americans was a layman rather than a cleric who operated with the tacit approval of Lalumiere, and, apparently, Milwaukee Archbishop Michael Heiss. While it is not known what the “indiscreet zeal” of Beotting involved, he clearly had influence over the African American Catholics by taking them to another church.

Beotting was born and raised a Lutheran and then converted to Catholicism.

¹Annabel Douglas McArthur, *Religion in Early Milwaukee*, 1946, 26; St. Benedict House Chronicle, 1908-1913, Archives of Capuchin Fathers (ACF).

²*Milwaukee Sentinel*, December 25, 1887, cited in Ann Mallinger, “Early Black Church Development in Milwaukee,” (Seminar paper, Marquette University, 1989), 19, in “Black Catholics” Chancery Office General Archives, # 36, Archives of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee (AAM); St. Benedict House Chronicles, 1908-1913, ACF.

Although his proselytizing zeal and religious fervor seem genuine, there was an eccentric or erratic side to his persona. On one occasion, he led a group of African Americans to St. Francis of Assisi Church on Fourth and Brown Streets. He went into the sacristy, put on a cassock and surplice, and came out and preached to the African Americans. He did the same thing at St. Gall. Sometimes he would preach standing on a soapbox on the street, attired in a cassock and surplice. After many warnings, the Jesuits at St. Gall banned him from the church and apparently got him to leave the city. The African American parishioners were told one Sunday at the end of Mass that Boetting left for Rome to study, but they realized that his departure without any notice or farewell to them was too abrupt. While this religious enthusiast certainly raised controversy, there is no doubt that he was a strong advocate for the small Catholic African American community of his day. Boetting's departure represented a loss in the struggle against prejudicial treatment within the Church.³ No one else took up Boetting's work and soon the numbers of practicing African American Catholics dwindled as they faced prejudice and neglect in their new Church.

With the closing of St. Gall's in 1894, the African American Catholics next went to Holy Name Church on Eleventh and State Streets. However, the opening of the large Church of Gesu in the same year subsumed both the old St. Gall and Holy Name congregations. In 1895, the number of African American Catholics was estimated at 140. By 1911 there were fewer than five members. Records indicate that a certain Mrs. Adair, an African American woman at St. Gall and Gesu, recalled that with the closing of St. Gall

³Mallinger, 19-20; St. Benedict House Chronicles, 1908-1913.

Church, many African American Catholics “were left to themselves.” Some attended other Catholic churches “where they fared ill” and others simply “abandoned their religion entirely.” In Gesu Church, African Americans were relegated to the gallery which created animosity. They appealed to the pastor, Father Adrian Hayden, S.J., for some recourse, but he said “he could not do anything for them, consoling them that the future may bring better days.” Mrs. Adair reports that as a result of their treatment at Gesu, some African Americans attended Protestant churches, hoping to find some consolation on Sundays, but they did not.⁴

The early relationship between African Americans and the Catholic Church of Milwaukee was characterized by neglect and segregation. In the decades following the Plenary Council of 1866, where bishops were charged with evangelizing and catechizing African Americans in their own dioceses, nothing was done in Milwaukee. There was no plan or program for gaining converts or catechizing the baptized. They were relegated to the gallery or back pews during church services, holding up the color line. The handful of African American Catholics was a barely perceived “shadow in the Church.”

Lincoln Valle

The disintegrating Catholic African American community was resuscitated with the arrival of Captain⁵ Lincoln Charles Valle in Milwaukee. Valle, a Catholic African American layman who had participated in all of the African American Lay congresses in

⁴St. Benedict House Chronicles, 1908-1913.

⁵In *Black Catholics* by Cyprian Davis, footnote 42 in chapter 8 that explains that the title “captain” was given to Valle during his stay in Milwaukee. It seems that Valle served as a recruit in one of the black regiments in the Spanish American War. See John Fillmore to Archbishop Mundelein, December 9, 1915, Deceased Priests File, Morris, John, Archdiocese of Chicago Archives.

the late nineteenth century, came to Milwaukee in hopes of converting African Americans to Catholicism. Valle was born in 1854 and worked with Daniel Rudd on the *American Catholic Tribune* in St. Louis. He lived for a time in Chicago and was active in St. Monica's where Augustus Tolton was the pastor. For a short time Valle was the editor of the *Conservator*, an African American newspaper appealing to the rising African American middle class.⁶

In Milwaukee Valle began publishing *The Catholic Truth* each month. Cyprian Davis in his book, *Black Catholics*, stated that no copies of *The Catholic Truth* seem to exist. He speculated that the publication was probably a type of newsletter giving information about the mission and soliciting donations.⁷ However, there is one issue of *The Catholic Truth* in the Archives of the Capuchin Fathers in Detroit. While it is not possible to generalize too much, this one issue suggest the publication was a combination of a theological journal and a compendium of news items related to the Church's ministry to African Americans nationwide and prominent African American Catholics. It offers what few clues we have about Valle and of other prominent African American lay Catholics at the time.

In the editorial column, Valle stated his position as a Catholic publication or what today may be referred to as a mission statement:

This paper, while edited and run in the interest of the Colored Catholic mission here and elsewhere, is cosmopolitan. It is purely Catholic and not allied with any one race or nationality. The spirit of Catholicity is

⁶Cyprian Davis, "Black Catholics in Nineteenth Century America," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 5, no. 1 (1986): 16; Davis, *Black Catholics*, 210.

⁷Davis, *Black Catholics*, 211.

not confined to no particular race or nationality. To be otherwise it would be un-American and not Catholic.⁸

Thus, in the mind of Lincoln Valle, the creed of the Catholic Church, as well as the creed of American democracy, was to be inclusive without regard to one's race or nationality.

One of the major articles entitled "The Catholic Church and the Negro Race" was the third installment in a series tracing how the Catholic Church had served in world history as an agent securing favorable treatment of slaves. He mentioned the Church's influence on the Christian Roman emperors in the slave's favor. He listed laws under Constantine forbidding the breaking up of slave families and explained how criminal and civil law recognized the slaves as humans rather than as chattel. He pointed out how Emperor Valentine appointed "defensores," men to watch over slaves and protect them from aggressive masters. He emphasized the important role of Pope Gregory the Great in the Sixth Century who favored emancipation, ransomed slaves taken in war, gave loans without interest to *coloni* so they could pay the state tax, improved the condition of Church slaves so much that slaves preferred to serve on Church lands rather than secular masters.

Then, Valle added:

It may seem a little queer to some to hear that the Church possessed Slaves, while we teach that the Church was the great enemy of slavery. But, we must not judge the conditions of those times according to our present conditions. Then slavery was everywhere in vogue, it was the customary way of possessing servants.⁹

Then, at another point in the article, after explaining the Church's role through the centuries of trying to improve the status and treatment of slaves, Valle lamented:

⁸*The Catholic Truth*, May 1912, 8, ACF.

⁹*Ibid.*, 3.

And yet men can sneer at and criticize Catholic institutions, which although existing centuries before our enlightened age, still were in advance of us as regards to humaneness and philanthropy.¹⁰

This article and others in the magazine showed the scholarly side of Valle and such a publication would appeal more to the educated individual rather than to the masses.

The Catholic Truth championed interracial harmony and reported on events of acceptance of African Americans by the Catholic Church. In an article titled "An Ovation to Colored Catholics," Valle described an assembly of 3,000 delegates of the Holy Name Society at St. John's Church in White Plains, New York. In the large group were ten African American delegates from St. Benedict the Moor Colored Church of New York City. When calling the roll, the delegates from this Church responded by rising and were greeted with an extended ovation from their fellow delegates. Valle closed the article by saying:

...seeing it (the extended ovation) visibly demonstrated that the Catholic Church bears out its claim to the title of Catholicity by granting equal rights and honors to each, regardless of race or tongue. And the Church thereby proves herself to be animated by the same spirit as in centuries gone by, when the Church of Africa furnished pages of glory for her history.¹¹

There were devotional and theological elements in *The Catholic Truth*. In the month of May there was an article on the Blessed Mother entitled "The Queen of May." The article detailed the three forms of Catholic devotion -- *latria*, *dulia*, *hyperdulia*. It concluded by explaining three reasons why Mary is honored above the saints. Again, such an article would be hardly understood by most Catholics at this time in the immigrant

¹⁰Ibid., 2.

¹¹Ibid., 5.

Church.¹²

Like the other Catholic African American laymen who took part in the congress movement, Valle prized African American vocations and extolled the accomplishments of African Americans within the Catholic Church. There was an extended article on Father John Henry Dorsey, one of the few African American priests in the United States at the time. Dorsey gave a week long mission at St. Benedict the Moor in December of 1912 and Valle, no doubt, interviewed him for a future article. After praising the qualities of the young priest and tracing his journey to priesthood, Valle hammered away at his theme that the Catholic Church is the African American's best friend. He made the following statement:

Though the Protestant sects promote the intellectual training of the Negro, they neglect the training of character. The Catholic Church alone combines the training of the mind and heart. Hence the Catholic Church alone can produce virtuous and industrious Negroes....The Catholic Church is willing to enroll the Negroes among her fold. It all depends upon the good will of the Negroes. Away with prejudices! Listen to Father Dorsey, who has the welfare of the Negroes at heart....Follow his words and example by becoming a faithful member of the true Church.¹³

The growth of the Catholic Church among African Americans in the United States was also noted. Under a column, "Notes on Catholic Colored Missions," Valle informed his readers of a new church that opened for African Americans in Lafayette, Louisiana. Before the founding of this church, African Americans worshiped with whites at St. John's Church. Valle stated that relations between the races were friendly, but the African

¹²Ibid., 8-10.

¹³Ibid., 11.

Americans wanted a church of their own and so petitioned the archbishop.¹⁴

The Catholic Truth provided information to aid its readers in the practice of their faith and to notify them of faith-related enrichment opportunities available to them. Under the column “Book Notes,” Valle reviewed the book, *Confessions Made Easy*, and recommended it as an instruction book for the laity giving a practical plan on the way to make a good confession. There was an short article that Frederick L. McGhee, the prominent African American lawyer of St. Paul, Minnesota who also participated in the congress movement, delivered a scholarly lecture on April 28, 1912, at Gesu Auditorium in Milwaukee. The topic was “The Upbuilding of the Race” and a summary of the article followed. McGhee showed how the Catholic faith and discipline, when applied to the life of the African American, had “a wholesome effect on the race.” He also “made a plea to white Catholics to extend to his race the warm hand of fellowship.” McGhee was a friend of Valle, and, since Valle lived in Milwaukee at this time, it is likely that Valle invited McGhee to give the lecture.¹⁵

The advertisements were also noteworthy in *The Catholic Truth*. Comprising three full pages and two partial pages, there were thirty-eight different ads of varying lengths. The ads ranged from architect firms and pharmacies to funeral parlors and opticians, from clothing stores and tailor shops to cigar shops and florists. The extensive number of ads suggested that Valle must have had a friendly, respectful, and persuasive disposition with

¹⁴Ibid., 7.

¹⁵Ibid., 11-12.

refined social skills to secure the number and quality of advertisers in the paper.¹⁶

From what little we can extrapolate from this solitary surviving issue of *The Catholic Truth*, we can assume that it provided a rich treasure trove of news stories involving African American Catholics throughout the country, book reviews, and explanations of theological topics. It apparently went beyond Cyprian Davis' speculation that it only reflected conditions in Milwaukee and raised money. Instead, it reflected the enlightened, scholarly, and articulate approach of the African American Congress movement.

The Accomplishments of Lincoln Valle

Valle and his wife, Julia Yoular, came to Milwaukee on August 25, 1908. The reason why he selected Milwaukee is not known, but his purpose was to preach and convert his fellow African Americans to Catholicism. In this way, Valle was an apostle who provided leadership and religious zeal in establishing a permanent and thriving African American Catholic church in Milwaukee from 1908 to 1912. Upon his arrival, Valle met with Sebastian Messmer, the archbishop of Milwaukee. Messmer encouraged Valle in his interest in the evangelization of Milwaukee's African Americans and quickly gave ecclesiastical authorization for his plan and assured Valle of his support. The archbishop wrote a letter of introduction which Valle provided to Father Nicholas B. Becker, pastor of St. Mary's Church, who was appointed to work with the Captain on the project.¹⁷

¹⁶Ibid., 12-16.

¹⁷St. Benedict House Chronicles, 1908-1913.

Establishing a Catholic mission for African Americans relied heavily on Valle's talents and abilities. At the time there were only two other churches in Milwaukee for African Americans – St. Mark's African Methodist Episcopal and Calvary Baptist Church. Valle began holding meetings at St. Mary's School Hall, but the attendance was very low. Besides Valle and his wife, only one other Catholic attended the first meeting. African Americans in Milwaukee, as in most other places in the nation, possessed a distrust or skepticism toward the Catholic Church. Gradually, through Valle's dedication, endurance, and sincerity, more and more African Americans attended the meetings and put their trust in him.¹⁸

Lincoln Valle also displayed resourcefulness and diplomacy in the early days. St. Mary's School Hall was too far away for some older people and tended to be an awkward place for African American to come for meetings, being located outside the African American neighborhood. Given these obstacles with the location of St. Mary's, Valle sought another closer and more neutral site. On October 2, 1908, Valle secured a vacant store front at 274 Fourth Street from the real estate firm of Richter, Dick, and Reutemann. The firm permitted Valle to use the store until they found a tenant. This room solved the problem of an inconvenient location, but it was completely vacant – no chairs, no table, no light, and bare walls. Tony Burgett, the deacon of the Methodist church, carried over chairs to Valle's vacant room before each meeting. Valle soon began to win Catholic converts.¹⁹

¹⁸“The History of St. Benedict the Moor Catholic Colored Mission,” 14, ACF.

¹⁹Ibid., 15.

Valle also publicized his work as a worthwhile cause and attracted donations within Catholic circles. At first, a crucifix, two candlesticks, a picture of St. Joseph, and a statue of the Blessed Mother comprised the Catholic Mission's inventory of religious accouterments. Other donations soon came. Becker donated a permanent set of chairs so it would no longer be necessary to haul chairs to and from the Methodist church. Father Damian Leone, pastor of the Italian church, Our Lady of Pompeii, gave the mission an altar. The Daughters of Charity from St. Mary's Hospital presented a set of vestments, Stations of the Cross, and other ornaments for the altar. The Sisters of St. Agnes from Fond du Lac, Wisconsin and the Catholic Order of Foresters along with Messmer and other priests also became benefactors of the Catholic Mission.²⁰

In addition to the physical needs and financial support, the Mission also had religious needs. As African Americans became interested in joining the Catholic faith, formal religious instructions had to begin. Becker, the pastor of St. Mary's Church, appointed his assistant, Father Joseph Barbian, to conduct religious instructions to the prospective converts. Valle made home visits to African American families and invited them to come to the Mission. His work led to an increasing number of conversions and this, in turn, led to the need to have a priest minister to the community on a regular basis. Father Christian M. Nellen, the chaplain of the Chapel of St. Mary's Convent, volunteered his services to teach religious instruction classes and to accompany Valle on home visits of possible new converts. The attendance each week at services ranged from fifty to sixty

²⁰Ibid., 15-16.

people.²¹

When Valle was notified that he would have to vacate the storefront on Fourth Street because a renter had been found, the church moved to a site at 530 State Street, leased for forty dollars a month. It was a frame house in the African American neighborhood north of Wisconsin Avenue and west of the river. In June 1909 the new Mission chapel was formally opened and was dedicated to St. Benedict the Moor according to the wishes of Archbishop Messmer.²²

Besides relocating the Mission in 1909, Valle secured the School Sisters of Notre Dame to provide religious instructions to the children in the Sunday School as well as to care for the altar. Such an arrangement attests to the strong and consistent emphasis on the education of children as the primary means for conversion held by Valle and other prominent Catholic African American leaders from the time of the lay congress movement. It also underscores Valle's ability to persuade and interest others in his work. In October 1909 the Archbishop gave permission for Mass to be celebrated at the Mission. The first Mass was offered on October 31, 1909 by Father Cyril Kufner, O.F.M.Cap. The

²¹Ibid., 15.

²²Ibid., 16, 20. St. Benedict the Moor (1526-1589) was an appropriate choice for an African American Catholic Mission. Benedict's parents were Christians and descendants of African slaves who were sent to Sicily. Benedict's father, Christopher Manasseri, was highly valued by his master. As a token of appreciation, the master made him the overseer of his laborers on the estate and, his first-born boy, Benedict, would be given full civil freedom. Thus, Benedict was born in Messina as a free person while his parents were slaves. At the age of twenty-one, he joined a religious group of hermits and later became the superior. The order was disbanded in 1562 by Pope Pius IV and Benedict joined the Order of Friars Minor of the Observance and worked as a cook. Due to his monastic virtues, he again was chosen the superior or Guardian of the congregation and, after his term ended, became Master of Novices. Thus, Benedict the Moor is a saint representing the African roots of the Catholic Church and his name was a most appropriate choice for the Catholic African American mission in Milwaukee. From Herbert Thurston, S.J. and Donald Attwater, *Butler's Lives of the Saints, Vol II* (New York: P.J. Kennedy & Sons, 1956), 30-31.

records of St. Benedict indicate that Clarence Simons was the first convert to be baptized in the chapel on November 7, 1909. In the remaining two months of 1909, there were nine more baptisms, three deaths, four First Communion, and four conversions. In 1910 there were twenty baptisms (six of which were converts), eight deaths, seven First Communion, and two Confirmations (not in St. Benedict's chapel) in the African American Catholic community of St. Benedict the Moor.²³ An African American Catholic community was now established and growing with promising signs for the future.

In just over two years after his arrival in Milwaukee, Valle found a nearly- extinct African American Catholic community and, through his persistence, dedication, and abilities, was able to win over their trust and enkindle in them an interest in the Catholic Church. While he was supported and encouraged by Messmer, it was largely Valle's initiative that revived Catholicism in the African American community in Milwaukee which resulted in converts, baptisms, and First Communion. By the summer of 1910 Valle wrote a letter to Father Justin McCarthy, S.S.J., the superior of the Josephites, which revealed satisfaction with his efforts:

Our work is moving along nicely, here. In fact the success of this work, through my own efforts as a layman has startled this part of the county.²⁴

Securing the Capuchin Fathers and Their Early Impact

In the letter to McCarthy, Valle hinted at the next challenge he would face. He said that all of the work was accomplished "without a Pastor or the full time attention of a

²³St. Benedict House Chronicles; "The History of St. Benedict the Moor Catholic Colored Mission," 19; St. Benedict House Chronicles, 1909-1910.

²⁴Valle to McCarthy, June 27, 1910, 31-D-9, Josephite Archives, cited in Davis, *Black Catholics*, 211.

priest.”²⁵ Valle realized that a priest assigned to the mission full time was necessary for the continuing religious formation of his congregants and this became his next goal. While Valle had secured the services of Becker and Barbian from St. Mary’s, the Capuchin Franciscan priests from St. Francis Friary,²⁶ and other priests in the area, each could only offer part time and irregular service given the fact that they had their own church and school to run or had other full time ministerial roles. A full time priest would provide regularity and stability. There would be greater attention given to religious formation and greater consistency and planning for the future growth and vibrancy of the mission church. In a letter to the Provincial²⁷ of the Capuchin Franciscans, Valle expressed his optimistic hopes for the future as well as some of his new challenges. After thanking the Provincial for sending a three hundred dollar donation to the Mission, Valle stated, “Our work has grown to a wonderful magnitude. It has welded itself into the minds of our people and it looks fair for a prosperous work.” He also wrote of his appreciation of the priests from St. Francis who came to the Mission to celebrate Sunday Mass. “Their sermons to the people have excited a love for Almighty God, and His Church....the Mass on Sundays with the sermons has done more than at we could ever pay the good fathers for.” Valle recognized the need for a greater priestly presence at the Mission. He stated that “Father Becker is unable with the work he had to do at his own church to give us the benefit of religious services on Sundays....I am in hopes that...the Archbishop...will give us

²⁵Davis, *Black Catholics*, 211.

²⁶A friary is a house or residence for persons under religious vows, like monks.

²⁷A Provincial is the head of a religious congregation, usually for a geographic region of a country.

some priest to help us keep the people we have gathered.” Valle then expressed concern over finances. As publisher of *The Catholic Truth*, he said “the paper has been the means of spreading the news concerning the Mission.” The money received from subscriptions “furnishes me with means whenever we fall short on donations to make up the deficiency. It also gives me a living which after all is but a mere one.”²⁸

By the fall of 1910 Messmer shared Valle’s sentiments that the ministerial efforts at St. Benedict would prosper even more with proper clerical attention. Messmer called on the Capuchin Fathers at St. Francis Monastery on 21 October 1910 and proposed his plan to have them take over St. Benedict the Moor. Father Benno Aichinger, at the time head lector of the clericate,²⁹ met with Messmer. In his letter dated October 23, Aichinger, who would later become provincial and a strong supporter of St. Benedict the Moor Mission, notified the Provincial of Messmer’s request and urged acceptance:

Last Friday evening His Grace paid us a visit, in order to discuss certain problems. The burning question is the Colored Mission; he would be only too glad to give us charge of it, and that is also the most urgent desire of the colored people themselves....According to my opinion, we Capuchins ought to accede to this request of the Archbishop; it is a genuinely Franciscan work, which our holy Father St. Francis would certainly not decline.³⁰

Aichinger’s statement that it would be the “urgent desire of the colored people themselves” reflected the experience of the Capuchins who has been offering Mass every

²⁸Valle to Wilmer, September 8, 1910, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 1, “Hosp as S. Benedictum, 1910-1926,” ACF.

²⁹The clericate is another name for a seminary or school for the education and training of future Capuchin priests.

³⁰“Souvenir of St. Benedict the Moor Mission, 1909-1934,” 5.

Sunday at St. Benedict the Moor during the entire year. The friars got to know the congregation and showed great interest in this ministry because it involved working with poor people, a special charge of the Franciscan order and consistent with the charism of its founder, St. Francis of Assisi. Finally, the Archbishop made a personal appeal to the Capuchin order to take over the Mission; such a request would insure that the matter receive serious consideration at the provincial headquarters in Detroit.³¹

Messmer's request to the Capuchins apparently was motivated by several factors. First, with the phenomenal growth of the immigrant Church of Milwaukee, there was a shortage in the supply of priests from the ranks of the secular clergy in the archdiocese. Messmer, like many other bishops in dioceses across the country, sought a religious congregation to minister to the African American mission. Second, the mission was not popular among some whites in the city with strong racist views. Such antipathies seemed to have been strong enough politically that caused the Mayor to petition Messmer more than once to close the Mission's doors.³² Messmer did not yield to such pressure, but believed that a religious order was not as much "in a position to be answerable to city politicians" as the secular diocesan clergy would be. Finally, the Archbishop was familiar with the work of the Capuchins because they were already were in the archdiocese and his own brother, Gabriel, was a member of the order.³³

On 16 January 1911 Father Antonine Wilmer, the Capuchin Provincial, met with

³¹Ibid., 3-4.

³²"St. Benedict the Moor 75th Anniversary" booklet, 1.

³³Ibid., 1; "Souvenir of St. Benedict the Moor Mission, 1909-1934," 3, ACF.

Messmer and formally accepted the Mission. The agreement gave the Capuchin Province the deeds to the property of the mission. If the order should relinquish the Mission at any time, a reverter clause went into effect and the Archdiocese would assume ownership of the property. However, this was not a canonical transfer of St. Benedict to the Capuchin order. Under Canon Law, the Archbishop would still have decision-making authority over St. Benedict Mission.³⁴ Furthermore, the Capuchin Fathers realized that St. Benedict the Moor would be a work of charity. This meant that priests serving St. Benedict would not receive a salary from collection monies, but would be subsidized by the Capuchin Province as a whole and the Province would be obliged to pay bills incurred by the Mission whenever revenues fell below the expenses. It was presumed that the African American congregation at St. Benedict could not be expected to contribute at the level where its income and expenses would necessarily balance. Given the financial sacrifice the Capuchin Fathers would be assuming, Messmer directed that all alms contributed to the Mission should go to them. Thus, any money given to Valle by benefactors for use of the Mission was also to be turned over to the Capuchin pastor.³⁵

The acceptance of St. Benedict the Moor Mission by the Capuchin Fathers brought assurance of regular attention to Catholic African American community of Milwaukee. When Father Paul Reichertz, the Guardian³⁶ of St. Francis Monastery announced to the

³⁴The distinction between a legal transfer of property and a canonical transfer was provided by Brother Patrick McSherry, OFM Cap., Provincial Archivist of the Capuchin Province of St. Joseph, December 3, 2008.

³⁵Celestine Bittle, *A Romance of Lady Poverty* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1933), 407; "Souvenir of St. Benedict the Moor Mission, 1909-1934," 5; St. Benedict House Chronicles, 1911.

³⁶Guardian is a Capuchin term referring to the head or superior of a monastery.

congregation of St. Benedict on Sunday, 22 January 1911 that the Mission had been transferred to the care of the Capuchins, the people were overjoyed. In a short time five men began religious instructions and were baptized in March; four more were baptized in April. Worship services were standardized: Mass was at 10 o'clock on Sunday mornings; Sunday School for the children taught by the School Sisters of Notre Dame was given immediately after Mass; religious services with instructions for adults were held every Friday and Sunday evening at 8 o'clock. A Sewing Circle was started for women who wanted to learn how to sew and what was made was donated to the poor. A choir was organized and sang their first Mass on Pentecost Sunday to a congregation crowded together with standees even in the corners. Sylvester Barth, a young man from St. Francis Parish, became the organist. Perhaps, the most emotional and deeply moving event occurred when the congregation saw the first class of children receive their First Holy Communion on 6 August 1911. The records for 1911 show twenty-three baptisms, fourteen of which were adults, twenty first communions, and five marriages. Within one year, Messmer's belief that evangelization efforts would benefit even more with proper clerical attention was proving correct.³⁷

The Capuchins also prepared for the future and long-term stability of St. Benedict the Moor. In April 1911 the Definitory³⁸ approved the need for a larger and more suitable facility for St. Benedict Mission. The present building at 530 State Street was being

³⁷Celestine Bittle, 407; St. Benedict House Chronicles, 1911; "Souvenir of St. Benedict the Moor Mission, 1909-1934," 5.

³⁸The Definitory or Definition is a Capuchin term that refers to a deliberative body of elected members for a region or province of the religious congregation and make important decisions or give approvals to requests and proposals with the Provincial that affect the congregation and its ministry.

rented for forty dollars per month and became too small, unfit, and run down. Social meetings, for example, had be held in the cellar of the building which was damp and without any floor.³⁹

The task of finding a new home for the Mission proved to be formidable. The search first found an old factory on Seventh Street and Chestnut (Juneau) Street. Then, the former Maternity Hospital run by the Sisters of St. Vincent de Paul on Vliet Street between Fourth and Fifth Streets became available. (This later became the Office of Archdiocesan Catholic Education.) After months of searching in 1911, the most promising place was the "Liederkrantz Tafel," a German society, on Seventh and Prairie (Highland) Streets which was on the market for \$24,500. Both Messmer and Valle were enthusiastic over the prospect of purchasing this building. Messmer cautioned those involved to maintain strict secrecy until the purchase was concluded because he believed the Socialists in the city would spoil the deal if the transaction became known. It seems that the financial straits of the Liederkrantz Tafel Society complicated the sale of its building with a pending lawsuit and three different mortgages on the property along with seven bond holders who were not paid any interest in two years. This site proved unobtainable. The house chronicle of St. Benedict the Moor indicates that in August 1911 the Liederkrantz project was abandoned entirely and this is followed by the statement, "Socialist behind the deal." Finally, on 2 October 1911 the Capuchins started a novena to St. Joseph and on the same day a beautiful house was found on Ninth and Prairie Streets. After nearly seven months of searching, the house was purchased for \$8,160 on 7

³⁹St. Benedict House Chronicles, 1911.

November 1911. The lot measured 58 by 135 feet and was located at 311 Ninth Street (now 1041 North Ninth Street between West State Street and West Highland Avenue). The news of the purchase was kept a secret to the congregation until the Sunday before Christmas. When Reichertz made the announcement, he described it as a Christmas gift for the congregation. This news was warmly received.⁴⁰

While the African American community of St. Benedict was thrilled about having a new home, their new neighbors were not. Trinity Lutheran Church located on Ninth and Highland Streets, about one block away from St. Benedict's new home, held a protest meeting. African American neighbors were simply not acceptable to them. They organized a committee and met with Archbishop Messmer to have the Mission removed. They were willing to purchase the property at a higher price and find another suitable place for the Mission (but not near them). The Archbishop refused their offer and informed the committee members that St. Benedict the Moor was there to stay.⁴¹

In addition to the purchase of a more suitable site for the Mission, other events in 1912 also served as signs of a hopeful future. First, Father Cyril Kufner, professor of moral theology in the seminary at St. Francis Monastery in Milwaukee, was appointed the permanent pastor of the Mission. He was under the jurisdiction of the Guardian (superior) of St. Francis Monastery and resided at the monastery at Fourth and Brown Streets. Secondly, in March 1912 another piece of property was purchased by the Capuchin Fathers for \$4,800 for a parish hall. In August 1912 another house was purchased on the

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid.

corner of Ninth and Prairie (Highland) Streets for \$9,500 to serve as a free school. Anticipating the acquisition of a building for a school, Kufner began visiting parish members in July in order to encourage them to enroll their children in the school that would open that September. The School Sisters of Notre Dame, who conducted religious instructions already at the Mission, agreed to staff the new school.⁴² Thus, in less than two years since the Mission was placed under the jurisdiction of the Capuchin Fathers, a permanent pastor, a new church, a parish hall, and a Catholic school had been established. The cost for the buildings was in excess of \$22,000 and indicated not only the investment and commitment of the Capuchin Order in the future of St. Benedict the Moor, but also the realization that ministry includes more than religious services.

The opening of the new school brought some challenges. The school's staff consisted of Sister Elias (Elia) Raes, who resided at the Notre Dame mother-house, and a Sister-candidate, Marie Kronki. Opening on a rainy morning on 4 September 1912, the two teachers hoped for at least twenty students and were disappointed when only five boys appeared. The boys, Albert Mitchell, Roy Mitchell, Louis Lee, Arthur Lee, and Ervin Simons were rough street boys with no shoes on their feet, dirty and torn trousers. They said they came to the Catholic school thinking they would get something to eat. In the afternoon, Claude Williams, Sherman Williams, and an orphan girl, Mary Bailey, arrived. The first day of school ended with eight children enrolled. Raes displayed a love and zeal for the work, despite many challenges. Some children that came to school would have to be washed; some came with clothes that needed mending; some had no discipline and

⁴²St. Benedict House Chronicles, 1912.

were rude, wild, and vulgar. Roy Mitchell, for example, was eight years old and brought to Juvenile Court a few weeks later for starting a fire in a barn. Roy's mother had to work the entire day and Roy frequently would get into mischief without realizing any harmful consequences. By Thanksgiving the school was up to seventeen students and slow and steady progress was being made with the children.⁴³

Near the end of 1912 there was a problem with Kufner. Perusing the house chronicle of St. Benedict and the house chronicle of the Notre Dame Sisters at St. Benedict, it seemed that the pastor was not meeting expectations and lines of authority between the pastor and the Valles were blurred. A priest who conducted a mission at St. Benedict, recognized some problems and, without giving any specifics, said "If this Mission continues to be run as it is, it will be a failure." Father Guardian from St. Francis Monastery conducted an investigation. Raes complained to him of a lack of interest in the Mission on the part of the Kufner. Raes also wrote in her house chronicle that "Father Cyril hardly ever came near us (the school), because he did not like Negroes." As a result of the investigation, Kufner formally withdrew from the Mission as pastor on 27 December 1912. On the next day Father Sebastian Schaff was appointed the new pastor of St. Benedict the Moor.⁴⁴

In the end, it seemed as though Kufner, on the one hand, may have lost interest in the Mission apostolate or may never have had the interest, but merely accepted the assignment from his superiors as fulfilling his vow of obedience. Also, there seemed to be

⁴³St. Benedict the Moor House Chronicles of School Sisters of Notre Dame, Archives of the School Sisters of Notre Dame (ASSND).

⁴⁴St. Benedict House Chronicles, 1912; SSND Chronicles.

an opposition force within the parish, including Julia Valle, bent on undermining his efforts. Other than Raes's assertion that Kufner did not like African Americans, there was no other evidence of such racial antipathy. Perhaps it was nothing more than an imagined reason in Raes's mind why Kufner did not visit the school. In his necrological notice to the community, Kufner was described as enjoying "the quiet and simple routine of religious life, with a preference for books and study." He was said to have "a retiring disposition" and a "hatred to be in the limelight." He never craved offices or honors. He developed a "real abhorrence to all publicity, which even affected some phases of his priestly work. His estimate of himself in that regard was without doubt an injustice to himself."⁴⁵ Probably, more than anything else, Kufner's very retiring and introverted nature and his somewhat shaky self-confidence combined with his preference for quiet and intellectual study explains why the assignment as pastor of St. Benedict would be a challenge for him. The role of pastor would have been better suited to one who was outgoing, extroverted, highly visible, and enjoyed social interaction. It can explain to some extent why his presence in the school was missing and why it could be said he lacked an interest in the place, as Raes complained. It also can explain why he did not assert his authority or did not defend himself or confront efforts by Julia Valle and others who sought to undermine his position and retain their influence. It would never be easy to be pastor, Kufner's shortened pastorate notwithstanding. The Capuchins embraced their new apostolate with enthusiasm, zeal, and respect for the people they served. They brought the needed stability and regularity.

⁴⁵*The Messenger* 3, no. 11 (March 1938): 267, ACF.

Conflicts with the Valles

One important implication of Capuchin administration was that the position of Valle and his wife Julia at the mission would drastically change. In one sense, the Valles' were ahead of their time. The notion of Catholic lay people actively working with a priest in parish ministry in a shared decision-making role would not emerge until after the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. Thus, when the Capuchins were given the mission, Valle was not given any ministerial or administrative role and this created tension especially in the critical area of finances. In the agreement between Messmer and the Capuchins, all donations to the Mission would be turned over to the Capuchins. The financial arrangement between Valle and the Capuchins set up in January 1912 gave Valle a salary of sixty dollars a month to do janitorial work at St. Benedict. While such a change in Valle's position at the Mission had to be perceived as a demotion, Valle and his wife continued to live upstairs in the house that served as the Mission church, while the Capuchin pastor lived at St. Francis Friary, several blocks away. When parishioners came to the Mission wanting a priest for a sick call or wanting to enroll a child in the school, they were more likely to be assisted by the Valles and not the pastor. Thus, while Valle's salary was for janitorial duties, he and his wife found themselves in a situation that required them to do much more.⁴⁶ Schaff recognized the problem in a report on the Mission:

A more thorough oversight, insight, supervision, with better results could be had if Mr. and Mrs. (underlined three times) Valle would be out of the house and could not interfere...in any affairs concerning management, etc.

⁴⁶St. Benedict House Chronicles, 1912.

of the Mission.⁴⁷

Trouble seems to have started with Julia Valle and involved allegations ranging from petty to serious. The first two priests who served St. Benedict, Reichertz and Kufner, suspected that Julia Valle might be creating ill feelings among some of the parishioners, causing some of them to stay away from the Mission. Under Schaff's tenure as pastor in 1913, complaints against Julia Valle snowballed. Accusations were made against what some perceived to be her domineering and interfering behavior and that she spread lies and rumors. People complained that she was exercising too much authority in the Mission. Julia Valle would reprimand people during church services for inappropriate behavior or stop them when leaving church and scold them. Furthermore, she gave people the impression that such things as sick calls and funeral arrangements were to be handled through her and not through the pastor. She purportedly said that whatever is given to the Mission must go through her. It was also claimed that she drove out the two women who started the Sewing Circle just because they were white. She took it upon herself to dispose of the clothes that were made by the Sewing Circle and allegedly sold some of the them and kept the money. When the school children gave a performance in an inter-church Fiftieth Anniversary Emancipation Celebration, Julia Valle spread the false story that Sister Elia Raes gave up on the children's program in the last week and that she saved the program. Others attributed to her such quotes as "We (the Valles) are controlling this Mission" and "only whom we permit will come." One parishioner stated that she no longer

⁴⁷Report of Fr. Sebastian Schaff, April 6, 1913, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 1, "Hosp ad S. Benedictum, 1910-1926," ACF.

attended the Mission, but went to Gesu for peace of conscience. Julia Valle's behavior kept away converts and kept some women from attending Mass and services.⁴⁸

There were also problematic reports against Lincoln Valle. In April 1913 a printing shop was set up at St. Francis Monastery in order to reduce the price of printing *The Catholic Truth* and to teach the boys from the school a trade. It was called the "Catholic Truth Publishing Company" and Joseph Tucker, a printer who worked for Valle in Chicago, was called by the Captain to help him in Milwaukee. All agreed that the printing company would be, at the least, self-supporting and other printing jobs would be solicited by the company in addition to its printing of *The Catholic Truth*. Any profit was to be split three ways: one-third to defray expenses, one-third for salaries, and one-third for distributing free pamphlets to African Americans in Milwaukee. Valle was still permitted to keep all monies raised by subscriptions to the magazine. Afterwards, it was alleged that Valle often received alms for the Mission from benefactors and never turned over the money to the Capuchins. It was even estimated that such alms could have amounted to hundreds of dollars. In addition to misappropriation of funds, it was rumored that Valle drank regularly and at times became intoxicated.⁴⁹

A meeting between Valle and Father Guardian of St. Francis Friary occurred on 6 June 1913. Valle conceded to acting independently and as an official of the Mission when not authorized to do so. He also admitted to misappropriating some monies and alms; yet, he believed that some money sent to him from benefactors was to be used for sending out

⁴⁸St. Benedict House Chronicles, 1913.

⁴⁹Ibid.

free copies of *The Catholic Truth*. The next day the superior of St. Francis met with Archbishop Messmer and explained the whole matter to him. In the end Messmer decided that the Valles must leave the Mission house by July 1 and insisted that they be disconnected from the Mission entirely. The Valles vacated their upstairs residence of the mission on 14 June and on July 1913 the last issue of *The Catholic Truth* was published.⁵⁰

In trying to unravel the various sides in this complicated episode, the living arrangements contributed greatly to the ambiguous relationship between the Valles and the Capuchins. There was not a clear job description or understanding between the Capuchin pastor and the Valles of who did what and how people who came to the church with some need or request should be handled. Thus, difficulties arose when certain authority roles the Valles assumed at the church overlapped with those the non-resident pastor asserted. Still, in some areas Lincoln Valle admitted to acting as an authority of the Mission when he was no longer authorized to do so. It is not unusual to believe that the Valles who started the Mission and preceded the Capuchins and had personally invested much in the Mission did act independently at times. The misappropriation of funds by Lincoln Valle may have been the result poor accounting procedures or sloppiness and carelessness in the allocating and recording of funds. He may also have felt entitled to such funds as a means of support. It seems unlikely that Valle was motivated by extorting large sums of money from the financially-strapped Mission. The behavior of Julia Valle may have been a reaction to the lack of respect and appreciation she and her husband felt. While she caused dissension within the congregation and may have caused some people to stop

⁵⁰Ibid.

coming to church, this could be a response to the ill-feelings she was harboring.

Valle's talents and knowledge of the Catholic faith was being woefully underutilized in a custodial job and some imaginative leadership could have permitted him to assume a more appropriate position. It has already been suggested that there was no model in the Catholic Church at this time of a layman serving in a significant ministerial role along with a priest in a parish. However, the house chronicles of St. Benedict suggested that racism may have played a role in Vale's demotion after the Capuchins took over the mission. A chronicle entry, perhaps written by Schaff, on 8 July 1913 entry stated that Captain Valle's newspaper, *The Catholic Truth*, was a failure and that "if a white, reliable man had been at its head, with a little business understanding and tactics, there would have been success."⁵¹ The troubling statement suggests the racist view of African American inferiority. If one believes that an African American is not capable to run a newspaper, one could also view an African American as being unfit for any ministerial or administrative position in a parish. Valle had in fact successfully initiated a ministry to African American Catholics in Milwaukee where no real successful attempt was made before him. Archbishop Messmer had even acknowledged him on 28 January 1912 on the occasion of his first visit to the new Mission and the first time the Sacrament of Confirmation was administered there:

I wish to openly express my thanks to Captain Valle and his wife for their endeavors and labors among their race for the good of our religion. One thing is pretty sure: were it not for Captain Valle, it is doubtful whether we would have a Catholic colored Mission at all in this city of Milwaukee. He has sacrificed his own time and abilities entirely to the propagation of

⁵¹Ibid.

the Faith, and has cleared the path for the priest and organized our Mission. He truly deserves our hearty thanks. We greatly appreciate his work.⁵²

By June 1913, this was forgotten and Valle was sent packing. His name was erased from memory.

The expressions of long overdue gratitude to Lincoln Valle came fourteen years later. On 14 September 1927, Captain Valle returned to St. Benedict the Moor for a surprise visit. Valle, who lived at that time in Hot Springs, South Dakota, stayed only a few hours. He was impressed by the great strides the Mission had made since his departure and expressed his gratification at such progress. Most telling however, in the early afternoon, he was given the opportunity to address the children and many were surprised and pleased to learn that an African American had started the Mission. The occasion became even more memorable for the children because, at the conclusion of Captain Valle's talk, they were given off the rest of the afternoon in honor of his visit.⁵³ Despite what must have been an abrupt and tense departure from the Mission, Lincoln Valle may have gone to his grave satisfied that his efforts at St. Benedict the Moor yielded a rich harvest.

Summary

St. Benedict the Moor was established through the initiating efforts of Lincoln Valle, one of the several Catholic African American laymen who participated in the Catholic African American congresses of the 1890s. Valle was a journalist and very knowledgeable of Catholicism. When starting St. Benedict in 1908, Valle showed

⁵²St. Benedict House Chronicle, 1912.

⁵³*The Messenger* 3, no. 2 (December 1927): 51, ACF.

remarkable talents in securing help, publicizing and recruiting people, providing religious services as well as social services, and establishing a parochial school. Valle, the quintessence of African American agency, was not simply a passive victim of the Church's indifference toward African Americans. He was part of an empowered African American laity who asserted themselves in the congress movement of the 1890s and was integral to the origins of St. Benedict the Moor Mission. When the Capuchins assumed control of the parish, there was a hint of racial condescension and paternalism in their motivation for taking the ministry. There was no longer an appropriate role at that time in history for Valle as a Catholic layman at the mission. Despite his talents, knowledge of Catholicism, and key role in the history of the mission, Valle was treated poorly and under-appreciated. Unfortunately, his departure in 1913 was marked with difficulties and Valle was quickly forgotten. It was most telling during his visit in 1927 that many were surprised to learn that an African American man had founded the St. Benedict the Moor.

CHAPTER 4

THE “MISSION FATHER”

Today St. Benedict the Moor Church still stands on State Street between Ninth and Tenth Streets in Milwaukee, just across the street from the county jail. In the yard just west of the church is a lonely white marble statue of a Capuchin friar. He is partially hidden from the street and can be easily overlooked by those who pass by it. He is depicted as having a large burly stature with a serious expression on his face. On the inscription appears the name “Father Stephen Eckert.” Today the name of Stephen Eckert has been nearly forgotten. However, in the history of St. Benedict the Moor, Eckert played a prominent role and served as a guiding light and source of inspiration. Eckert is an elusive character and his historical identity can be difficult to uncover because of efforts to canonize him. The main biographical work done on Eckert was composed by fellow Capuchin Berchmans Bittle who certainly knew him. Bittle relates important factual data on Eckert, but the main focus of the volume is to encourage Catholics to view him as a potential saint and advance his cause for beatification and canonization. Hence, virtually everything Eckert does, including some of his disastrous failures, is perfumed with the “odor of sanctity.” Bittle, reflecting the demands of what he was requested to write, is primarily a hagiographer, not a dispassionate historian. This chapter draws to some extent on Bittle’s information while not sharing his desire that Eckert is canonized by the Catholic church. This chapter intends to humanize Eckert as well as underscore his role as a key figure in the Catholic outreach to the Africa American community in Milwaukee.

Eckert, the first resident pastor of St. Benedict, was very charismatic and engendered a generosity in others. His boundless energy, his single-minded devotion to the Mission, his tremendous rapport with people, and his remarkable public relations skills made St. Benedict known and respected in the community.

After the Valles

Even before the Valles vacated the mission house on 14 June 1913, the Definition¹ of the Capuchin congregation discussed the future of St. Benedict the Moor Mission. Should a resident pastor be assigned there? Should the governing structure be different or remain the same? Should there be a boarding school? Should a convent for the Sisters be secured?²

In preparation for this meeting, Benno Aichinger, one of the Definitors,³ had asked Schaff, pastor of St. Benedict, to prepare a report on the present status of the Mission. Schaff obtained information and opinions from both the Sisters as well as Valle. The report on 6 April 1913 gave a well balanced and generally an encouraging picture of Mission. The mission was meeting success in making converts. Schaff reported that since March 1910, there were 106 members of the congregation and twenty-seven adult converts were baptized and received First Communion. Twenty-four adults were confirmed and six couples were married. For the children, there were thirty-three baptisms and seven made

¹The term "Definition" or "Definitory" is a specialized term used by Capuchin congregation and means the deliberative body of the order that makes major decisions for the province and advises the provincial.

²St. Benedict House Chronicle, 1913.

³A definator is one who is elected by the members of the religious congregation to serve on the Definition or deliberative body for the order.

their first Confession.⁴

A major part of Schaff's report dealt with the new school. The 1912-1913 school year started with eight children in September and now (in April) was up to nineteen. The school consisted of kindergarten through grade six. The Sisters claimed that the children's behavior, which was "very rough, even immoral," had improved greatly, especially "since the baptism of that little band, their behavior is over 90% better; they study their catechism, pay better attention, take religion more earnestly, and are a source of pleasure for their teachers." The Sisters reported that the children had a great desire for learning and they studied quite well. Children told the Sisters that they preferred our school over the public school because they learned more. There was the example of the Lee boys who were offered clothes by another principal to come to the public school, but declined. Schaff also remarked that several parents, without being approached, expressed to him their satisfaction with the school. Parents noticed an advancement in their children in their studies and even more so in their behavior at home. And, the prevailing view that education of children was the vehicle for conversion was evidenced by Schaff's statement, "Four families have in consequence been gained for the faith; partly instructed or to begin in (the) near future. Through the children we will get to the grown people...."⁵

On the topic of Mass attendance, Schaff stated that Sunday Mass attendance was good while weekday attendance was poor. He admitted that for many men and women their jobs prevented them from attending Mass. "Here we must accommodate ourselves to

⁴Report of Fr. Sebastian Schaff, April 6, 1913, The Provincial Files , Box 9, File 1, "Hosp ad S. Benedictum, 1910-1926," ACF.

⁵Ibid.

the people, fixing time convenient for them or even giving them two Masses....My opinion is, that judging from the good will which I have noticed in the few I have come in contact with, better results can be hoped for.” The Sisters reported that the children who were Catholic had very good attendance at Mass. “Some even come without breakfast.” On the other hand, the children’s attendance at Christian Doctrine classes (for children in the parish attending a public school) had been discouraging at first, but was slowly increasing. One tactic reported was that the Methodist church tried to lure children to their Sunday School by giving each attendee a dime every Sunday.⁶

The last section of Schaff’s report covered the overall obstacles facing the Mission. At the top of the list for both Schaff and Valle was prejudice against African Americans from whites in Milwaukee. Schaff stated there is an “abhorrence with which (the) race is held from the part of whites. This is only overcome by showing love toward them and interest in their behalf. It is remarkable how they respond to love and interest shown them, for they are very sensitive.” Other obstacles in the ministry to African Americans included divorce and double and triple marriages which prevented some from entering the Church. The last obstacle Schaff included was having a commuting rather than a resident pastor and the problem of the Valles. Schaff wrote,

They (the people) are estranged from the Father, everything – sick calls, children for school application, etc. all must go through a second hand. These people keep aloof from the Monastery up here....How much more convenient regarding time and distance if they could come to the Mission if a Pater sic (Father) was there...Confidence to Father could be better fostered..⁷

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

A financial report was also included. For 1912, the income came from pew rent, Sunday collections, the bazaar, donations, rentals, and a loan of \$12,200 from the Capuchin Province totaling to \$18,646.82. The expenses totaled \$18,247.01 and did not include any salary for the Schaff or the Sisters. On paper there was a surplus for the year of \$399.81. In addition there was a debt of \$20,200 from the purchase of properties for the Mission by the Capuchin Order. Thus, considering the operating expenses for the year 1912, there was an actual deficit of about \$12,000 for the year which the Capuchins alleviated with a "loan."⁸

The most significant part of Schaff's report were his general remarks and observations at the end. He said things were not despairing. The improved conduct of the children, their interest in the school, and the satisfaction with the Sisters all pointed to a bright future. He suggested that the new pastor should be a person who is approachable and interacts well with the people and children. He urged that the appointment be a permanent resident pastor.⁹ Such sentiments must have been supported by observations of the provincial and some definitors because the events that followed would have a profound effect on the Mission and the Catholic Church of Milwaukee. When the Definition met and examined Schaff's report, the decision was made to appoint Father Stephen John Eckert as resident pastor of St. Benedict the Moor effective July, 1913.¹⁰

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰St. Benedict House Chronicles, 1913.

Early Life

John Eckert (later known as Father Stephen) was born 28 April 1869 on a farm near St. Columban, Ontario in Canada. His family name was John and he was the fifth of nine children. His parents, John Eckert and Kunigunda Arnold, were immigrants from the German state of Bavaria who in 1858, unlike most newcomers, did not come in the United States. They were devout Catholics. They valued education and had their children attend school even when there was pressing farm work to do. Each of the Eckert children was taught responsibility by having chores to do both before and after school. Eckert's parents were industrious, frugal, and thrifty. The Eckert family prospered modestly and provided an education for their children beyond the common school.¹¹

In the romantic account of Berchmans Bittle, young John Eckert was a strong boy with a large physique for his age. He was able and willing to protect and defend his weaker classmates. One incident from his early school years revealed such propensities. When a group of bullies took advantage of certain boys and girls and made them the butt of jokes and ridicule, Eckert physically fought the bullies and won due to his size and strength. He quickly became the hero of his classmates and the harassment episode ended. Even at an early age, Eckert defended the disadvantaged. With determination and compassion, he seemed willing to take risks in countering some wrong.¹²

After elementary school, Eckert entered St. Jerome's College in Berlin (now Kitchener), Ontario, conducted by the Resurrectionist Fathers, in 1885. He made friends

¹¹Berchmans Bittle, *A Herald of the Great King, Father Stephen Eckert, O.M.Cap.* (Milwaukee: St. Benedict the Moor Mission, 1933), 1-8.

¹²*Ibid.*, 9-10.

easily, excelled in sports, and was a conscientious student. He first became acquainted with the Capuchin friars when one conducted a mission¹³ in Kitchener while he was at St. Jerome. Their missionary work attracted young Eckert. His parents also were familiar with the Capuchins from their days in Bavaria and spoke of them occasionally. Upon completing his studies, Eckert entered the Capuchin novitiate in Detroit on 21 May 1891 and received the religious name of Stephen. Eckert continued his studies at St. Francis Monastery in Milwaukee. His self-discipline, affability, and diligence won him the respect of his teachers and classmates. He also developed a passion for public speaking during this time. He was ordained on 2 July 1896 at the age of twenty-seven.¹⁴

Eckert's Attraction to an African American Ministry

St. Fidelis Monastery in New York City was Eckert's first assignment. He spent only one year there and experienced frequent, but not serious, health problems. When his health was restored, his superior thought it would be best to transfer him to give him a new start. From 1897 to 1905, Eckert served at Sacred Heart Parish in Yonkers. It was a newly organized parish, founded in 1891, and comprised of almost exclusively of Irish families. At this time he joined various civic and social organizations and encountered many non-Catholics. Eckert had a tendency to engage with those who were disadvantaged in some way. Being idealistic and zealous, he began to think about an apostolate to African Americans. He believed it held out the promise of a rich harvest for conversion

¹³A mission was a common practice among Catholics where services were held for several consecutive days with preaching, devotional prayers, Mass, and time set aside for personal reflection and prayer.

¹⁴Berchmans Bittle, 12-14, 19, 28-30.

and he was intrigued by the challenge it posed. To him, the African American was “a race that was suffering from the ills inflicted by the injustice of the white man.” The desire to work with African Americans was strengthened when he visited the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, or Mother Drexel’s Sisters, as they were called, at Convent of St. Elizabeth at Cornwells Heights, near Philadelphia. They devoted themselves to the cause of the African American and the American Indian.¹⁵ Their example deeply impressed him already in 1904. In a letter to the Capuchin Provincial, Father Gabriel Messmer (brother of Milwaukee Archbishop Sebastian Messmer), Eckert wrote:

I humbly ask of you the privilege of devoting my life to purely missionary work....I have been thinking for the last years to go down to the South to labor among the Negroes, so if you think this would be to the glory of God, I would be equally pleased to do so.¹⁶

There was no immediate reply. In the summer of 1905, Eckert was assigned to be chaplain of St. Agnes Convent in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, and to minister to the patients of St. Agnes Hospital. He gained valuable experience in working with the sick and dying, many of whom were non-Catholic patients.¹⁷

In January 1906 Eckert was recalled to Detroit to prepare for his work as a missionary to African Americans. During this time, he wrote to various people about his desire and possible plans to minister to African Americans. The responses he received helped refine and shape how he would minister to the African American community. Initially, Eckert envisioned himself going to the South and traveling from place to place

¹⁵Ibid., 42, 44, 46-47, 55.

¹⁶Eckert to Messmer, April 5, 1904, as quoted in Berchmans Bittle, 59.

¹⁷Berchmans Bittle, 60-62.

preaching and baptizing African Americans. He wrote to Bishop Camillus Maes of Covington, Kentucky, stating his interest and seeking any information or advice. Maes held back nothing telling Eckert that a religious should never go alone on mission work because there would be no community life which is an essential condition of his religious vocation. He suggested that Eckert obtain permission to open a monastery located in the South where there is a large African American population. Maes insisted that it remain segregated as an apostolate for African Americans only and not whites. He also warned that a monastery would have to be erected by the Capuchins and include a church and a children's school. Maes noted that such an undertaking would place a great financial burden on the Capuchin order.¹⁸ But, Maes ended on an optimistic note:

I am convinced that if a Religious Order adopted such a distinct and great work as its own share of charity towards the salvation of the souls of the Negro Race, God would bless it in a most signal way. He would send you strong vocations, He would bless your houses in the North and of the cities with more than enough financial aid and that compensate a hundredfold the sacrifices which the Order would make for such a noble end.¹⁹

Maes reinforced Eckert's decision of a ministry to African Americans, but insisted that he think realistically about it. It needs a clear commitment from the religious congregation and based in a monastic community and involves a considerable financial outlay. It should also respect existing the custom of segregation.²⁰

Eckert also wrote to the Josephite, Father Justin McCarthy, at the St. Joseph's

¹⁸Maes to Eckert, April 7, 1907, Stephen Eckert Papers, File 11, "Letters to him re race problem, 1905-1922," ACF.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

Seminary in Baltimore, seeking his observations of African American ministry. As we have seen, the Josephites had been committed to proselytizing African Americans for several decades and Eckert sought to learn from this experience. McCarthy replied that African Americans made good Catholics as any other people and converts were easily made. However, there were some peculiar difficulties. First, the people were very poor and it would take a long time before a congregation became self-supporting. When the Josephites began such a ministry, they first tried to find the straggling African American Catholics and get them together. Then, they open a little school and church. In the meantime, they visited homes, catechized, and sought new converts. For financial support, the missionary had to look outside. Second, there were racial troubles to be encountered. Most whites treated the African American “shamefully, and will not do a thing for him more than the law requires for him. The result is that one, wishing to help the Negro, must take anything he can get and be satisfied.” McCarthy cited the following example of the feelings toward the African Americans in the South.

A few years ago, one of our priests was asked by a bishop to give a course of missions in his diocese to colored folk. Wherever the priest succeeded in getting permission from the local parish priest to do so, he had to have the church scrubbed before the white parishioners would come in again, and do it at his own expense before leaving.²¹

Responses from individuals like McCarthy and Maes as well as those of his own Capuchin superiors saw Eckert’s initial plan as too idealistic and impractical. While no one contested the need for a ministry to African Americans, both Maes and McCarthy

²¹McCarthy to Eckert, March 4, 1906, Fr. Stephen Eckert Papers, File 11, “Letters to him re race problem, 1905-1922.” ACF.

believed the proper method for evangelization of African Americans in the South was to have the religious congregation establish a mission house from which evangelization activities would radiate. Both also realistically warned Eckert that financial strains and racism would be constant companions in such an endeavor. Considering the possibility of opening a mission for African Americans in the South, the Capuchin Detroit Province was required to seek approval from their headquarters in Rome. Father General²² responded to the request by stating that in his opinion the Province was still too weak to undertake such a mission. On 16 May 1906 the Definitory dropped the proposal to begin a mission in the South as premature. Clearly, Eckert was disappointed by this turn of events.²³

From 1906 to 1913, Eckert worked at Our Lady of the Angels in Harlem and at St. John the Baptist on West Thirtieth Street in New York City. Our Lady of the Angels was located in an area with a large floating population. There were large numbers of Italians, Hungarians, and other foreign immigrants as well as some older Germans. It was close to the African American population in Harlem. St. John's was one of the oldest German parishes in New York. The arrival of Penn Terminal in 1902 brought a radical change in the area and most of the parishioners moved out. The neighborhood soon became part of the westside slums housing the poor and transients. At the same time, the uptown business began creeping into the parish limits with business people in the surrounding skyscrapers. It was at St. John's that Eckert made his first contact with the African American people, who had settled in the parish limits. Eckert visited many of the African

²²Father General is the person who is in charge of the entire international congregation. A Provincil, on the other hand, is in charge of a region or province of the congregation.

²³Berchmans Bittle, *Herald*, 63-65; Celestine Bittle, *Romance*, 431.

American families and proved very successful at gaining converts.²⁴ During this time, Eckert began an ongoing correspondence with Mother Katherine Drexel that would continue for the rest of his life.²⁵ Drexel and her order was earning a nationwide reputation for their work with Native Americans and African Americans. Also, the superiors of the Capuchin Order seemed to have been influenced by the writings of Drexel, especially when she asserted that the best means to work for African American children was by providing boarding schools.²⁶ A few years later in a letter to Drexel, Eckert noted,

My higher superiors got the idea of beginning a boarding school from some pamphlet issued by you explaining the necessity of boarding schools to train the colored children.²⁷

Eckert Comes to Milwaukee

Capuchin friars had been serving St. Benedict the Moor with temporary pastors since January 1911. By 1913 Messmer deemed it was time to bring greater stability to the mission with a full time resident pastor at the mission. Messmer made this request to the Capuchins realizing that St. Francis Monastery on Brown Street would serve as a base contact community for the friar assigned as resident pastor to the Mission. Eckert would be the choice armed with advice from Maes, McCarthy, and Drexel and the decision of the Father General, sure that establishing a ministry in the South was perhaps too ambitious.

²⁴Berchmans Bittle, 65-71; Celestine Bittle, 217, 310, 383, 566.

²⁵The archives of the Capuchin Fathers in Detroit contain several letters between St. Katharine Drexel and Fr. Stephen Eckert from 1911 to 1922.

²⁶Drexel to Eckert, January 15, 1915, Fr. Stephen Eckert Papers, "Correspondence with Mother Katharine Drexel," ACF.

²⁷Eckert to Drexel, February 10, 1915, Fr. Stephen Eckert Papers, "Correspondence with Mother Katharine Drexel," ACF.

In early July 1913 the Capuchin provincial appointed Eckert as resident pastor of St. Benedict the Moor. He arrived in Milwaukee about two weeks later to assume his duties.²⁸

Eckert at first followed a pattern commonly used in parish work by the Capuchins, who visited homes and invited people to come to their church. After moving into an upstairs room at the Mission, Eckert began a systematic visitation of the African American neighborhood making friendly contacts with people and extending an invitation to them to attend services at the Mission. By 1 September 1913, just over one month since his arrival, he had visited about four hundred fifty people. His genial spirit as well his sincerity triggered a friendly reception almost everywhere he went. About half promised to attend the Mission and twelve promised to take instructions. Soon the chapel became too crowded and Eckert increased the number of Masses from one to two on Sundays.²⁹

Along with home visitations, Capuchins also established an array of social programs to address the material needs of their parishioners and the neighborhood community. Eckert soon established a day nursery where mothers who had to work could have their children properly attended during the day. On 5 November 1913 Miss Frances Goodwin came from New York to run the day nursery and attend to the sick of the parish. All she asked was to be given board at the Mission and five dollars per month. On 21 January 1915 Eckert welcomed Agnes Ryan, a practical nurse from St. John's Parish in New York City, who knew Eckert from the time when he served there. She came to St.

²⁸Celestine Bittle, *Romance*, 431-432; Berchmans Bittle, *Herald*, 93.

²⁹St. Benedict House Chronicles, 1913; Berchmans Bittle, 95-96.

Benedict to help with health needs and other needs of the parish without any compensation. Next, a Club Room was arranged to provide suitable recreation for women and girls. An employment service for women was run from the Club Room by Laura Duncan, who was one of Eckert's first converts in Milwaukee. Also, the Mission Settlement, as it was called, was housed in the Club Room. Here women who sought a safe and wholesome residence could obtain lodging and board.³⁰ Thus, within a very short period of time under Eckert's leadership and charisma, St. Benedict the Moor provided an array of useful social services and attracted many dedicated lay people with expertise to run them.

The School

During Eckert's home visits, he urged parents to send their children to the free Catholic school at the Mission. His efforts resulted in twelve new students arriving when the school year opened in September 1913, bringing the total enrollment to about forty. On 2 September 1913 three brothers, Frank, Cyril, and James Catron, were received as the first boarders at St. Benedict.³¹ This was a momentous decision.

Eckert seemed to embrace ideas about a fuller ministry to African Americans than just church sacraments. In 1914, writing on the Catholic Church in the United States and evangelization of African Americans, Cardinal Gaetano De Lai, prefect of the Consistorial Congregation, made the specific recommendation that schools were to be increased, and hospitals and "diverse associations even of an economic nature" must be established in the

³⁰St. Benedict House Chronicles, 1913, 1915, 1917, 1919; Berchmans Bittle, 105; Conversations with Rev. James Wolfe at St. Bonaventure Monastery, December 3, 2001.

³¹St. Benedict House Chronicles, 1913; Berchmans Bittle, 97.

Church's missionary work with African Americans. As noted by Cyprian Davis, Rome viewed evangelization efforts to African Americans to include more than worship and catechetics. It was to include a concern for health care and the financial needs of African American who were described as being "especially in a difficult situation."³²

From the humble beginning of Eckert taking in three boarding students, the notion of boarding school as a home for destitute and homeless children took root. Once it became known that the Mission was willing to accept homeless waifs, applications mushroomed. Within a year there were thirty-six boarders and the character of St. Benedict the Moor Mission would significantly change. It quickly gained the reputation of a private boarding school for African American children. Eckert very much favored this direction.

The establishment of the boarding school came with two accompanying challenges – personnel to provide the necessary structure and supervision and sufficient funds to meet the increased expense of providing room and board. The former challenge was met when the School Sisters of Notre Dame, who had been teaching at the day school and commuted from their Motherhouse in Milwaukee, took up residence at the Mission. A part of the house that served as the school was reserved as living quarters for the Sisters. They generously agreed to take care of the children boarding at the Mission.³³ To deal with the problem of increased expense of boarding students, Eckert would turn to fund-raising appeals.

³²Davis, *Black Catholics*, 207-208.

³³St. Benedict House Chronicles, 1915; Berchmans Bittle, 99.

By 1916 the success of Eckert's work was impressive. By September 1916, the school enrollment had increased to fifty-six students with all but seven being boarders. Because of limited space and facilities, there was a waiting list and each year some students were not accepted because there simply was not enough room for them. The sacrament of Confirmation was held in June 1916 to thirty-seven people, thirty-four of whom were school children. In his first three years, from July 1913 to July 1916, Eckert had baptized over one hundred school children.³⁴ While education was viewed as the vehicle of conversion or the nursery of Faith, the boarding school seemed to accelerate the whole process.

Eckert and Fund Raising Operations

In his zeal for his ministry to African Americans, the financial costs from the increasing number of boarders never seemed to scare or worry Eckert. His deep faith in Divine Providence, that God would provide, enabled him to appear even cavalier in his attitude. When bills started to accumulate, one day he would say, "I suppose I shall have to go and find some good friend to help us!" With his outgoing, friendly, and sincere personality, he was remarkably successful. In the early days, a devoted friend of the Mission, named Paul, served as the purchasing agent, buying the food and supplies each week for the Mission. One day Paul asked Eckert to accompany him to Commission Row to buy vegetables. Paul believed, that with the priest's presence, the merchants would be willing to donate more of their food to the Mission. Paul's suspicion proved correct, but

³⁴St. Benedict House Chronicles, 1916; Eckert to Drexel, July 12, 1916, Fr. Stephen Eckert Papers, ACF.

even went beyond his wildest expectation. Eckert quickly became known as the “Mission Father” by the food purveyors and his appearance with Paul on Commission Row meant that many more donations of food would be secured for the children.³⁵

There were other sources of money Eckert tapped. Frequently, he was invited by parishes to give a weekly mission or to conduct Forty Hours’ Devotions or to give retreats. Eckert’s effectiveness as a speaker and his warm and magnetic personality made him popular in such roles and resulted in more invitations. He used the stipends he earned from these religious services to supplement the income of the Mission. Another source of money was from Drexel. In his correspondence with her, Eckert frequently thanked her for donations. In one letter, Drexel says she was glad to have been able to enclose a check for the sum she promised. Then, she wrote in the postscript,

We beg that our name be not mentioned in connection with this donation. People may get erroneous impressions, and think you have all you need, and as we desire only that the colored may have many benefactors, we beg our name not to be mentioned.³⁶

By 1916 the task of maintaining a sufficient financial base became increasingly difficult. The Mission consisted of old homes that were used as a makeshift church, school, dormitories for boys and girls, and a Sisters’ convent. The facilities were overcrowded, deteriorating, and in need of constant repair. Each year there was a waiting list of boarding students due to a lack of space. Most of the boarders came from Milwaukee and Chicago, but St. Benedict also drew students from Minnesota, Michigan,

³⁵Berchmans Bittle, 100-103.

³⁶Ibid., 101; Drexel to Eckert, September 9, 1916, Fr. Stephen Eckert Papers, “Correspondence with Mother Katharine Drexel,” ACF.

South Dakota, Iowa, Arkansas, and California. Given the increasing number of applications and the deteriorating physical condition of the houses, it became evident that the long-term viability of the Mission depended on a major capital campaign to secure funds for adequate facilities and additional property for the multiple activities of the Mission. The decision to expand the Mission called for expenditures of funds well beyond what the ordinary budget allowed. A longer term plan of fund raising was made and approved by Messmer. Eckert wrote to all of the pastors in the archdiocese, requesting that he be invited to their parish to speak at all of the Masses on a Sunday and to take up a collection for his project. He made the same request to the other dioceses from which the Mission had children.³⁷

Eckert developed some very effective techniques and strategies. For example, when he wrote his letter to the priests in the Milwaukee archdiocese requesting to speak at Sunday Masses to appeal for donations, he quoted Messmer, "I heartily endorse this appeal in behalf of a most excellent work."³⁸ Then, Eckert included another letter to the pastors signed by the heads of prominent Catholic charitable organization such as Father Joseph F. Kroha, Director of Catholic Charities; Charles Knoernschild, President of St. Vincent de Paul Society; William Nern, President of the Chief Rangers of the Confraternity of Faith, making the case of the worthiness of the Mission and the need for its capital campaign.³⁹

When he arrived at a parish for his appeal, Eckert was well organized in his

³⁷Berchmans Bittle, *Herald*, 100-102.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 102.

³⁹Kroha, Knoernschild, and Nern to Rev. Pastor, no date given, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 1, "Hosp ad S. Benedictum, 1910-1926," ACF.

approach. He provided an information packet that each person would receive. The packet consisted of a pledge card, a cover letter from Messmer, and an information sheet on the Mission. In his letter, the archbishop heartedly endorsed the appeal and stated:

This mission was started for the Catholic Colored people who were practically neglected and wandering about like lost sheep....Its day and boarding school which has done untold spiritual good, not only for the children themselves, but also for their families. This good work could expand a hundredfold, if we had sufficient accommodations to take in all children which are anxious to enjoy the blessings of a Colored Catholic School.⁴⁰

The information sheet that Eckert provided the parishioners began with a concise statement of financial need. It stated that the Capuchin Order already assumed a debt of \$35,000 and was willing to assume a similar burden, provided that the St. Benedict the Moor Mission could secure \$100,000 in donations from the Catholic community. A larger facility was needed because the current one is much too small. It stated there are one hundred forty students of which ninety are boarders and many have been turned away because there is no room. Next, the reasons for the appeal were stated concisely and included an interesting array of historical, religious, and educational factors. Historically, the African American deserved the help of the white man because he was brought here under force and kept in slavery for two hundred fifty years and “when made free was left without means and education.” Religiously, the African American is our brother or sister, “having a common parent – Adam – and the same Heavenly Father.” Educationally, “to educate the Negro means, above all to educate the Negro child and for this work a proper

⁴⁰Messmer to Catholic Parishioners, June 13, 1918, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 1, “Hosp ad S. Benedictum,” ACF.

home is necessary, for so many colored parents need the help of institutional care for their children and are willing to do all they can financially.” As a hallmark of any effective capital campaign material, the information sheet stated what made the institution unique. “This institution is the only one of its kind in the northern part of the United States” – a boarding school and a day school for both African American boys and girls. Finally, the appeal letter was signed by fourteen prominent citizens of the Milwaukee Association of Commerce.⁴¹

Eckert also made appeals to other dioceses. He persuaded Messmer to write a cover letter of endorsement to the bishops of the various dioceses from where St. Benedict students came. In addition to endorsing Eckert’s request to speak in parishes of the diocese for the solicitation of funds and supporting the need for larger facilities of the Mission, Messmer suggested another way that his brother-bishops could help St. Benedict.

I am convinced that the bishops of the states or dioceses from whence we have colored children are fully justified in allowing us one-half of their Negro and Indian collection in order to build up this Catholic Mission, the only one of the Northwest.⁴²

In other words, Messmer was asking bishops to consider giving as much as half of the money they receive from the annual Negro and Indian collection to the planned building project of St. Benedict the Moor.

The “capital campaign” launched by Eckert had other fronts besides direct appeals

⁴¹Information Sheet on St. Benedict the Moor Mission, no date given, and letter from Milwaukee Association of Commerce, dated November 20, 1919, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 1, “Hosp ad S. Benedictum,” ACF.

⁴²Messmer to Bishop, February 16, 1919, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 1, “Hosp ad S. Benedictum, 1910-1926,” ACF.

in parishes. Convinced that nothing could succeed without God's help, Eckert urged the Sisters and the students to pray regularly for the success of St. Benedict's expansion campaign. Social activities and entertainments such as card parties, picnics, and church bazaars, also raised money for the anticipated building project. Eckert realized that the children of the Mission were effective promoters of the Mission to the public. By staging children's musicals and talent shows, the cause of the Mission was kept before the public eye and proceeds went for the project.⁴³

Eckert was a highly effective fund raiser. His strategies and tactics were masterful. The content of his letters and information sheet was concise, complete, and convincing. The need for larger facilities at St. Benedict was indisputable and its solicitation appeal spanned historical, religious, and educational rationales. As one may suspect, Eckert was successful in the parishes where he was permitted to make his appeal. However, after sending his letters requesting permission to speak in parishes, some pastors declined. Getting permission to speak from pastors proved harder than Eckert anticipated and limited the potential amount of money that otherwise could be realized. Eckert was not easily discouraged; he continued making appeals whenever he could for the Mission inching his way to his long-term goal of \$50,000 to \$100,000. By the time of his death in 1923, he had amassed a substantial sum of money for this project.⁴⁴

The Corliss Fiasco

Through Eckert's appeals at parish churches along with his retreats, parish

⁴³Berchmans Bittle, *Herald*, 103-104.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 100-102.

missions, Forty Hours devotions, he and St. Benedict the Moor became well known in the archdiocese of Milwaukee. In May 1920 Mother Romana Thom, Provincial of the Sisters of St. Dominic from Racine, Wisconsin, knew of their need for a larger facility and proposed what must have seemed an answer to all of the prayers for the Mission's future. In the community of Corliss (now Sturtevant) between Milwaukee and Racine, the Dominican Sisters operated a boarding school, Holy Rosary Academy for Girls. It became unprofitable and operational expenses were mounting. In 1917 the Sisters' Community Council decided to close the school indefinitely. The property also consisted of a convalescent home for the Sisters, a home for elderly women, and an eight-acre farm with farm buildings and two homes. The Sisters were intending to build in Racine and needed money. Thom offered the entire property for \$150,000 to Eckert.⁴⁵

In writing to the Definitors of the Capuchin Order, Eckert urged that congregation purchase the Corliss property for several reasons. First, Eckert reasserted his belief that an adequate facility would enable him to continue his worthwhile work of providing a Christian environment to children from many single-parent families who were not able to raise their children as they would like to do.

The experience of seven years has shown the great work to uplift the Colored Race is to have a Home for their children, because so many are found having only father or mother....There are many parents, though not Catholic, who realize that their children should have a religious instruction and that the Catholic Church is giving them the best.⁴⁶

Next, Eckert saw the advantages of a boarding school as opposed to a day school which

⁴⁵Celestine Bittle, *Romance*, 436; Sr. Mary Hortense Kohler, O.P., *Rooted in Hope, The Story of the Dominican Sisters of Racine, Wisconsin* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1962), 190-191.

⁴⁶“Souvenir of St. Benedict the Moor Mission, 1909-1934,” 13.

the Corliss property, located in the country, would provide. He said,

Up to the present time, the results of the day school have not been gratifying, while those of the boarders have. We have not yet had one conversion of an adult through a day pupil, and day pupils do not remain very faithful. Those in this field of labor told me in the beginning that more good is accomplished by a Home in one year than by a day school in five years.⁴⁷

Eckert also envisioned the boarding school environment as a place that would foster vocations to the priesthood and religious life among the African American students, something which was usually discouraged in Catholic circles at the time. He stated,

We must admit that the colored field is too great for the white man alone to labor. If the colored people are to be brought to the True Faith, we must have a large boarding school, in order to give boys and girls the best Christian education, with the hopes that they will follow the higher inspirations of becoming priests and sisters, if God grant them the vocation....⁴⁸

Eckert believed the Corliss property offered advantages financially as well as the fact that it offered a rural setting. Eckert stated that to build a wing at the current Mission site to accommodate 150 boarders and 50 day students would cost at least \$150,000. For the same amount of money, they could have the Corliss property which would house 300 children with eighty acres of land. And, the Racine Dominicans agreed that payments could be made over a three year period without interest. Also, the rural setting of a boarding school was also extremely appealing to Eckert who had been raised on a farm. He seemed to have a romanticized vision, held by others in the 1920s, that a rural setting would be a more healthy place to raise children and gardening and farming would build character, responsibility, and a wholesome work ethic. The farm would produce many

⁴⁷Ibid., 13.

⁴⁸Ibid., 15.

staple foods which in the city had to be purchased and comprised a large part of the cost of the boarding school. Eckert also believed that agriculture was well suited for the African Americans because it would be enable them to be self-supporting and economically independent. He seemed to have discarded the fact that many African Americans left farms in the South and came to Milwaukee and other northern cities hoping to escape farming. It would be unlikely that these parents would want their children doing farm work.⁴⁹

Aichinger, one of the Definitors, inspected the property with Eckert and met with Thom. In writing to another Definitor, Aichinger agreed with Eckert's arguments of the financial and educational benefits of a country location where the children would learn gardening and be removed from undesirable influences of the city. Aichinger also mentioned that the archbishop favored the idea, but left it entirely up to us (the Capuchins) to decide.⁵⁰ However, Aichinger expressed one key reservation:

I am afraid that Father Stephen (Eckert) would hardly be the man to direct a larger institute. To give him an assistant, or to place a manager or superior over him, will hardly be possible now.⁵¹

The Capuchin Provincial and his board (Definiton) consented to relocate the boarding school at Corliss on a one-year trial period without obligation to buy in order to determine the feasibility of the project. The Dominican Sisters voted almost unanimously to staff the school and supervise the boarders and presented Thom with a list of names of

⁴⁹Berchmans Bittle, 122-123.

⁵⁰Celestine Bittle, *Romance*, 438.

⁵¹*Ibid.*

volunteers. On 21 September 1920 Eckert moved to Corliss while Schaff was appointed acting pastor of St. Benedict the Moor church in Milwaukee. With the moving of the school out of the city, the School Sisters of Notre Dame at this point ended their association with St. Benedict. Duncan continued to run the St. Benedict's Settlement and Valverde kept the day nursery. In September 1920 St. Benedict the Moor School began in its new location with about 120 students which included thirty white children from the local parish of Corliss.⁵²

On 26 February 1921 Thom informed Father Benedict Mueller, Capuchin Provincial, that they had received a good offer to sell the Corliss property. The federal government was interested in purchasing homes for invalid soldiers from World War I and offered the Dominican Sisters \$250,000 for the Corliss property. For Thom, "the problem of how to get (the) means to build in Racine could be solved" with the prospective sale to the federal government. Apparently, in the months since the arrival of St. Benedict School at Corliss, Thom began to doubt the possibility of the Capuchins purchasing the property at the end of the one-year trial period. In her letter to Mueller, Thom states, "we (the Dominican Sisters) cannot let the opportunity slip by, as there may not be another....As your Community never intends to buy the place we feel we must take advantage of this opportunity." Hearing news of the possible purchase of the Corliss property, Eckert urged the Provincial to purchase the property, but on 30 March 1921 the Provincial Board

⁵²Berchmans Bittle, *Herald*, 123-124; Celestine Bittle, *Romance*, 438; St. Benedict House Chronicles, 1920; Sr. Mary Hortense Kohler, 191.

decided to move the school back to Milwaukee.⁵³

Eckert spent the next several months trying to devise some plan to keep the school at Corliss. Since his arrival there, he had made many unsuccessful attempts to find a generous benefactor who could finance up to \$150,000 needed to buy the property. Eckert believed the unstable post-World War I economic conditions contributed partially to his lack of success. The Capuchin Provincial Board's position was that the Corliss property would be too hazardous a venture for them to purchase at that time. Eckert tried to persuade Thom to let him keep the school for another year, hoping to find a benefactor or to change the mind of the Provincial Board or to win approval of the General Chapter⁵⁴ which was to meet in July. He also tried unsuccessfully to negotiate some type of contract with Thom guaranteeing a certain number of Sisters for the school regardless of where it would be located.⁵⁵

In a letter to the Mueller on 29 June 1921, Thom gave her honest assessment of the state of the boarding school. She first stated her position that the sale of the Corliss property was necessary for the Dominican Sisters since they needed to build in Racine and there was no other available source of financing. Then, she focused on many issues and problems concerning the boarding school. As Provincial she clearly saw her role of

⁵³Mother Romana to Fr. Benedict, February 26, 1921, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 2, "St. Benedict the Moor, January 1921 to March 1922," ACF; Celestine Bittle, *Romance*, 439.

⁵⁴A General Chapter is a province-wide meeting of elected delegates who generally convene as their Rule prescribes, usually every three or four years, to make changes in the rules, procedures, and mechanisms of governance. Usually following the Chapter or at the end of the Chapter is the election of the Provincial. All decisions of the Chapter are then subject to approval from the international headquarters in Rome and Church authorities.

⁵⁵Celestine Bittle, *Romance*, 439; Berchmans Bittle, *Herald*, 124.

seeking or defending the best interests of the congregation as a whole as well as the Sisters working at St. Benedict. In her opinion, to run the boarding school effectively required many more Sisters than the congregation could supply, given their already-existing commitments of personnel. If the Dominican Sisters were to remain at St. Benedict's, many lay teachers would have to be hired for positions that the Sisters could not fill. Reflecting a typical pre-Vatican II perspective of religious orders, Thom had serious reservations about frequent contacts between the Sisters and seculars (lay men and women). At this time members of a religious congregation were intentionally separated from the "world" of lay people as much as possible. A religious congregation generally would not accept the charge of a school unless they had sufficient personnel to staff it almost entirely. The notion of running a school with a large number of lay teachers would certainly increase the contacts with seculars and, thus, would be strongly discouraged. In her estimation, the Racine Dominicans were not able to provide the adequate number of Sisters necessary to effectively staff the school and supervise the children in the hours after school.⁵⁶

In addition to her concerns for the Order as a whole, there were other problems or issues dealing with Eckert and the way he ran the school. Thom believed Eckert should be more selective in recruiting students to the school. She said that some of the students Eckert accepted really belonged in a correction school. She felt Eckert was unrealistic, thinking that the school children would do farm work like raising vegetables, thereby,

⁵⁶Mother Romana to Fr. Benedict Mueller, June 29, 1921, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 2, "St. Benedict the Moor, January 1921 to March 1922," ACF.

cutting the cost of food purchases. Thom objected to some of the work expectations Eckert had of the Sisters. She claimed that Eckert expected the Sisters to supervise the children doing farm work in the heat. Thom also opposed the housing of both sexes in the same building and favored having adult males to supervise the older boys. Thom's impression was that Eckert viewed the boarding school as a vehicle for winning converts for the Church and all other matters were secondary. On the other hand, Thom knew what was necessary to run an effective boarding school. In her letter to the Capuchin Provincial, she reflected, at best, a pessimistic view of the African American children, particularly the boys. She also criticized Eckert's idealism and naivete.

No one but Father Stephen thinks that these children would work....
If you were to spend a week at Corliss, you would agree with me that colored children will not work except when little duties are assigned to them before and after school....Nothing in the yard or building is sacred to these children. They must be constantly policed to keep them from breaking and ruining everything.

...I know this letter is not encouraging, but I could never expect our Sisters to work another year at Corliss under the conditions as those of the past year; and I myself could not go through the strain of another such year..... Therefore, I don't feel as though I could promise you to have our Sisters keep up this work....

My opinion about Father Stephen is this: He is exceptional in doing missionary work and collecting funds for any cause, but he is not a practical supervisor of a school.

...Father, I should like you to consider this letter a personal one. It is the first time I am communicating to you and not telling Father Stephen exactly what I am writing you.⁵⁷

Hearing all this, the Provincial Chapter passed a resolution in July 1921 to have the

⁵⁷Ibid.

school vacate Corliss and return to Milwaukee. The Chapter placed Schaff, the acting pastor of the Mission, as head of St. Benedict the Moor. Eckert would no longer be in charge; he was assigned to do missionary work while securing funds and promoting the Mission. In effect, this was a demotion for Eckert.

While the decision of the Chapter went contrary to what Eckert would have wanted, the Chapter then made an unrelated decision that greatly impacted the future of St. Benedict the Moor. The Chapter elected Father Benno Aichinger as the new Provincial, a long time supporter of the African American apostolate in Milwaukee. In his capacity as Provincial as well in his earlier position as Definitor, he exerted a significant influence on the congregation in its commitment and support of St. Benedict the Moor for some thirty years.⁵⁸ When the Mission was placed under the jurisdiction of the Provincial rather than the superior of St. Francis Monastery in Milwaukee, the Provincial had considerable more influence on that apostolate than on others. Aichinger was a very pastoral person with a keen intellect and a wide range of knowledge. He consistently favored a strong Capuchin presence and commitment to St. Benedict the Moor, especially during his long tenure as Provincial.

The Death of Eckert

The year 1923 would bring a most tragic event for St. Benedict the Moor – the sudden and unexpected death of Eckert. The decision to remove Eckert as director of the Mission was difficult for him personally and for the Capuchin leadership. Before being elected provincial, Aichinger, a novitiate classmate of Eckert who knew him well,

⁵⁸Celestine Bittle, *Romance*, 439-440.

expressed some reservation about his administrative skills in being placed in charge of the Corliss institution, but saw no other suitable recourse. Near the end of the year at Corliss, Dominican Provincial Thom also expressed confidentially to the Capuchin provincial that Eckert was unable to administer the boarding school well. However, when it came to promoting the Mission, securing benefactors, and making appeals, all agreed that Eckert was unsurpassed. Upon returning the school back to Milwaukee, Eckert worked tirelessly and enthusiastically in public relations and development on the Mission's behalf. While the obedience was appropriate, it was still seen to be a demotion. It also pulled Eckert away from the Mission more and more, reducing his contact with the children whom he loved and with whom he had a remarkable rapport.

Besides contacting potential benefactors for the Mission, Eckert spent much of his time conducting parish missions, retreats, tridua,⁵⁹ and Forty Hours' devotions. He frequently gave talks about the apostolate to African Americans at schools, colleges, seminaries, and various parish societies and organizations. In his last letter on 17 January 1923 to Aichinger from Assumption parish in St. Paul, Minnesota, Eckert expressed his characteristic, un-boundless optimism:

I hope you and all are well. The Forty Hours' devotion here was very successful....I addressed the college boys attending the school of the Christian Brothers here yesterday, and I will talk today to the girl students of St. Joseph College here, and leave Saturday for Britt, Iowa. I just learned that my words to the students at the seminary here last year had some effect. Three whites and one colored left to join the Mission Fathers of Lyons to devote themselves to the Southern

⁵⁹A triduum is a three day religious services usually consisting of devotional prayers, a sermon, and benediction. Tridua is the plural form for triduum.

Missions.⁶⁰

In Britt, Iowa, Eckert conducted a Triduum. On the last night, he gave a sermon which left him perspiring. After the service, he heard confessions while the church became cold and drafty as the congregation exited on the wintery January night. He contracted pneumonia, but believed he only had a bad cold and decided to return to Milwaukee. Upon returning to St. Benedict on January 26, he was taken to St. Joseph's Hospital. His condition worsened over the next few weeks and he died in the early morning hours of 16 February 1923.⁶¹

Eckert's wake was held at St. Francis Monastery where hundreds came to view his body and pray. Many brought religious articles and touched his body with these. He was regarded by many parishioners and the school children as a truly holy man. The funeral was attended by about a thousand people, eighty priests, and two Protestant ministers. His brother, Father Michael Eckert O.P., officiated at the Requiem Mass assisted by Rt. Rev. John Forbes, Bishop of Uganda, Africa. He was buried in the Capuchin plot in Calvary Cemetery, on Bluemound Road, in Milwaukee, on February 20, 1923. Some believed Eckert was a saint and some claimed that miraculous cures occurred through his intercession.⁶²

In the years following Eckert's death, his cause for beatification and canonization was advanced. His cause came largely from the urging of parishioners and others who

⁶⁰Celestine Bittle, *Romance*, 442.

⁶¹Celestine Bittle, *A Romance of Lady Poverty*, 442.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 443, 445.

knew him rather than the Capuchin order. On the twenty-fifth anniversary of his death, Father Philip Steffes, head of St. Benedict the Moor, felt it would be an appropriate time to transfer his remains back to the Mission. Archbishop Moses E. Kiley of Milwaukee and Father Edmund Kramer, Capuchin Provincial, acceded to Steffes' request. On January 9, 1948, the State Board of Health had authorised the disinterment and transferral, thereby confirming the permission granted by the Milwaukee Health Department. Kiley initiated canonical procedures by the Church for the identification and preservation of the remains and appointed official personnel to attend the disinterment. An automatic air-hammer was necessary to break through two feet of frozen ground. The remains were taken from its wooden casket and placed in a waterproof zipper-bag and then taken to the mortuary where the bones were cleaned and placed in a disinfectant. The bones and remaining parts of his habit and religious objects were then placed in a stainless-steel, moisture-proof casket. During the preceding weeks a sunken vault of reinforced concrete was constructed in the courtyard facing State Street in the yard just west of the church.⁶³

The morning of February 16, 1948, the day of the burial and the twenty-fifth anniversary of Eckert's death, the very heavy casket was carried by twelve men from the hearse into St. Benedict the Moor Church. The entire church, including the choir loft, was packed; many stood along the walls and in the rear. Some persons arrived one and even two hours before the services, so as to be sure to have a seat. Some of Eckert's relatives from Canada attended along with many Capuchins and priests and sisters from

⁶³ Celestine Bittle, O.F.M.Cap., "The Burial of Father Stephen," 1-8, Father Stephen Eckert Files, ACF.

Milwaukee. Kramer, Capuchin Provincial, celebrated the eleven o'clock Requiem Anniversary Mass and Father Theodosius Foley, ex-Provincial, gave the sermon. After the services in the church, the casket was carried to the burial vault and Milwaukee Auxiliary Bishop Roman Atkielski read the prayers for burial. Having completed the liturgical rites, the people passed around the casket. Many of them touched the casket with their hands, rosaries or medals. The procession around the casket lasted until nearly 1:30 p.m. The casket was then lowered into the vault and the self-sealing cover was put in place. Workmen next applied a thick coat of roofing tar around the entire top of the walls of the vault and a concrete slab was slid over it and slowly lowered, sealing the vault completely. In later weeks, a large white marble statue of Eckert marked the grave site and remains there today as a lonely reminder of his important contributions to St. Benedict the Moor and his legacy as the "Mission Father."⁶⁴

Summary

From the arrival of Lincoln Valle in 1908 and the beginning of an evangelization ministry to the African American community in Milwaukee, the institution of St. Benedict the Moor was established and secured. It consisted of a mission church for African Americans in Milwaukee and a school for both boys and girls with day students and boarders. In addition, there were many strong and active social outreach programs including day care, sewing circle, safe lodging and recreation for women, an employment service, a band and choir, a print shop, and the usual church clubs and organizations. The

⁶⁴Ibid.; Steven M. Avella, *In the Richness of the Earth: A History of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, 1843-1958* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2002), 355-356.

one-year school experiment at Corliss proved to be a disaster and nearly killed the enterprise. Personnel was insufficient for the task, the work load was too heavy, and enrollment plummeted. Eckert's poor administrative abilities were evident and his notion of some idealized rustic setting proved unrealistic. St. Benedict School was re-constituted in Milwaukee by other Capuchins and the Racine Dominican Sisters which raises the question of whether Eckert helped or hurt the cause of African American ministry in this way. While recruiting efforts needed to be accelerated and many other problems after 1921 confronted St. Benedict, it needed a time of stability and consolidation with capable leadership and administrative acumen for qualitative growth to take place.

The role of Father Stephen Eckert in the history of St. Benedict the Moor Mission was monumental. He was a devout Capuchin who nurtured a hope to work with African American from the very start of his priesthood. He first encountered African Americans as a young priest at St. John's in New York. Eckert's preparation for ministering to African Americans was carefully done. He consulted with Maes, McCarthy, and Drexel, major figures in African American ministry, and he took their advice. He also followed the "tried but true" Capuchin methods of conversion; he went door-to-door in New York and Milwaukee meeting African Americans and inviting them to attend Catholic services. This proved to be highly successful. He was the father of St. Benedict the Moor Mission and the boarding school, which he started, became an important hub in the Church's outreach to African Americans through education. He was also somewhat impractical and idealistic. While he lacked strong administrative skills and his methods of seeking converts were questionable, Eckert's positive qualities were undeniable. His interest,

dedication, enthusiasm, charisma, holiness, and hard work made St. Benedict known throughout the Milwaukee area and to some extent in the mid-west and the nation. Eckert was also a phenomenal marketing and sales person. His product was St. Benedict the Moor Mission and he continually promoted the worthiness of this ministry in very optimistic and religious terms. Given these qualities along with his congenial personality and his effective speaking ability, Eckert proved to be a tremendous fund raiser and the best public relations person for the Mission.

CHAPTER 5

RECONSTITUTING ST. BENEDICT THE MOOR

St. Benedict School returned to Milwaukee, barely avoiding disaster with the ill-fated Corliss endeavor in 1921. By the late 1940s, this African American school had expanded its facilities to encompass one square city block. A new church was built, the old Marquette Academy was purchased, a hospital was established, and one of the few African American Catholic boarding high schools in the country was started. It encountered severe financial and personnel problems and met and surmounted obstacles from the city of Milwaukee and even within the Catholic Church to perpetuate its ministry. By the late 1940s, St. Benedict the Moor had re-constituted its popular and respected school program. The boarding and day school grew to 400 students and had a waiting list of student-applicants. In this period, the students came from twenty-three states, underscoring the fact that St. Benedict was well known with an excellent reputation. Several Capuchins played an important role in this transformation, but critical to it all was Father Philip Steffes, OFM, Cap. who pastored St. Benedict from 1922 to his death in 1950.

The mission met and surmounted many challenges in the first half of the 1920s and became a well established school by the 1940s. The first challenge was to secure a long-term commitment from a women's religious congregation to staff the boarding school. Next, an adequate and permanent location for the Mission had to be determined. There was also the need to develop sources to finance the Mission, paying for its day-to-day

operations as well as purchasing future land parcels and constructing new buildings.

Finally, the relationship between the Capuchin order and the archdiocese over ownership of St. Benedict had to be clarified. Once these challenges were resolved, a new church was completed, a school was purchased, and social outreach programs culminated with the construction of a hospital. A high school program was added in 1936 and St. Benedict became the only Catholic co-ed boarding school for grade school and high school African Americans students in the nation.

Staffing the Mission School

After St. Benedict School had moved from Corliss back to Milwaukee in 1921, it faced a crisis. In less than two months school would open and there were no Sisters to teach in the school or supervise the boarders. The Capuchin Provincial made an appeal to Mother Katharine Drexel for the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament to come to Milwaukee but to no avail. Drexel suggested some other religious orders like the Sisters of the Pious Missions (Pallottines) or the English Franciscans. In the event that they were unable to obtain any Sisters, Drexel thought that the Capuchin Fathers could simply run a boarding school just for African American boys. She said, "There is scarcely a Catholic place for Colored boys in the United States save the two in Delaware and one in Virginia. There are none in the Northwest as far as I know."¹ About a week later, she sent another letter suggesting the Sisters of St. Ann from Marlboro, Massachusetts, who "have been doing

¹Mother Katharine Drexel to Rev. Father, July 30, 1921, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 2, "St. Benedict the Moor, January 1921 to March 1922," ACF. The two schools in Delaware that Katharine Drexel refers to is St. Joseph's Mission and Orphanage in Wilmington, Delaware and St. Joseph's Industrial School in Clayton, Delaware, both under the direction of the Josephites. The one school in Virginia is St. Emma's Industrial School in Rock Castle, Virginia.

heroic work among the Indians of the Northwest.”² In August 1921 Eckert made another desperate appeal requesting the Racine Dominicans to come to Milwaukee and continue staffing the St. Benedict. The response from Sister Mary Benedicta Hauser, writing on behalf of Mother Romana Thom, stated that the “Mothers of Council do not consider the Milwaukee buildings in their present condition a suitable habitation for Sisters.”³

Securing the Racine Dominicans

After all of the inquiries to women’s religious congregations failed, Schaff, the director of St. Benedict, hired a complete staff of lay teachers to be ready when the school year opened in September. Then, on 23 September 1921, Schaff was shocked to see two Dominican Sisters from Corliss arrive unannounced at the Mission. They had come with Thom’s permission to help unpack and sort out the children’s clothing. The Sisters told Schaff that they had made continual requests of Thom to let them come to Milwaukee and work with the Mission children. The persistence of the Sisters finally swayed Thom. She relented and told the Sisters they could start on October 1 at the Mission if they were still wanted. In writing to Aichinger, Capuchin Provincial, about this unusual turn of events, Schaff was both excited and perplexed. He stated, “How this came about is not known.” In early September he asked Thom if there was any hope of having a few Sisters to come to Milwaukee. She reiterated that she “cannot let the Sisters go given the condition of the

²Mother Katharine Drexel to Rev. Father, August 9, 1921, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 2, “St. Benedict the Moor, January 1921 to March 1922,” ACF.

³Sr. Benedicta to Rev. Father, August 15, 1921, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 2, “St. Benedict the Moor, January 1921 to March 1922,” ACF.

dilapidated buildings.”⁴ However, Thom finally relented and on 29 September 1921 she wrote to Schaff:

The Sisters have given me no rest; therefore, with the consent of the council, I finally told them that if they were wanted, they might go. If you are satisfied to have Sisters Petra (Lefevre), Evangelist (Thomas), Marcella (Wacter), Louise (O’Neill), Ambrose (Nuetzl), and possibly Agatha (Painter), I am satisfied that they help you out for the present.... However, do not be loath to express yourself regarding this plan. If you do not care to have them come, do not hesitate telling me so. It is only on the part of ...their own request that I have yielded to their petitions.⁵

As might be expected, Thom’s offer was quickly accepted and the five Sisters were greeted with open arms. With polished diplomacy, uncharacteristic of his straightforwardness and even occasional brashness, Schaff wrote to Thom expressing his “appreciation and profound gratitude” for sending five Sisters. He also appreciated “the sacrifice which the community is making by placing these Sisters” to work at the Mission and the “noble spirit of charity which actuated these Sisters to volunteer their services for the ‘poorest of the poor.’” And, he hoped that next year they “will be favored, if possible, with teaching Sisters.... In this we feel we are not only voicing our own hopes, but also the sentiments of the Sisters.”⁶

Thom viewed the presence of the Dominican Sisters cautiously, initially seeing it as a temporary arrangement and continued to monitor the Sisters’ welfare and living

⁴Fr. Sebastian Schaff to Fr. Benno Aichinger, September 23, 1921, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 2, “St. Benedict the Moor, January 1921 to March 1922,” ACF.

⁵Mother Romana to Fr. Sebastian Schaff, September 29, 1921, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 2, “St. Benedict the Moor, January 1921 to March 1922,” ACF.

⁶Fr. Sebastian Schaff to Mother Romana, October 7, 1921, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 2, “St. Benedict the Moor, January 1921 to March 1922,” ACF.

conditions. She had to also consider the personnel commitments of the congregation. Thom interestingly never expressed in her correspondence with the Capuchins the worthiness of a commitment to a ministry to the African American children of St. Benedict the Moor. For their part, the individual Sisters stationed at St. Benedict the Moor were very committed to the work with the Mission children in spite of the poor physical conditions and very rigorous work. At one point Thom tried to terminate the sisters service informed Schaff on 5 April 1922:

At this time I wish to say, that from my own observation of your school, I feel that it will be useless for us to try to keep up the work after this year. It cannot be successfully done without, at least, four good teachers – Sisters, and additional help in supervising. It seems to me that we are losing more than we are gaining in conducting the school as we now do. It would be impossible for us to furnish enough Sisters next year. I am referring to this, so you may feel free in making whatever other arrangements you would like.⁷

Schaff, however, wanted a long-term commitment from the Racine Dominicans to insure the viability of St. Benedict's future. In writing to his provincial Aichinger, Schaff was frustrated in his attempts to obtain a positive response from Thom and with Archbishop Messmer who was procrastinating on a promise to speak with Thom.

Yesterday, without any provocation or move on our part or the part of the Archbishop, I am sure, I received the following letter (excerpt quoted above), an ultimatum as it were....So that settles it! Let them go. I have no further use for them henceforth. Our dealings with these Sisters has been a failure.... I had been waiting continuously for His Grace's answer from these Sisters, but could not get to him.⁸

⁷Mother Romana to Fr. Sebastian Schaff, April 5, 1922, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 3, "St. Benedict the Moor, April 1922 to July 1923," ACF.

⁸Fr. Sebastian Schaff to Fr. Benno Aichinger, April 7, 1922, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 3, "St. Benedict the Moor, April 1922 to July 1923," ACF.

But, in a letter to Eckert, Thom's objection to the Mission remained consistent.

...we cannot possibly do all the work that is expected of us in the Colored Boarding School. The Sisters that worked there last year are all worn out. To continue is to make more failures. No one but two or three (Sisters) care to stay. I cannot provide what I have not....I fear Sister Petra (Lefevre) will never continue the work either. Her enthusiasm has cooled under the strain of last year. To continue community life there as it is, can hardly be expected.⁹

At this point Schaff spent the spring and summer of 1922 contacting various Sisterhoods appealing to them to staff the Mission boarding school. The School Sisters of Notre Dame, who had staffed the school prior to the Corliss move, were unable to return. Inquiries were made to the Sisters of Divine Savior on Thirty-fifth and Center Streets, the Sisters of St. Agnes in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, and to Drexel and the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. Schaff also appealed unsuccessfully to the Sisters of the Holy Family in New Orleans, one of the African American Sisterhoods. In the end, thirteen Sisterhoods declined his appeal.¹⁰

A glimmer of hope came when Thomas, one of the Sisters at St. Benedict, reported to Schaff of a conversation she had with Thom concerning the future of the Dominican Sisters at the Mission. Having told Thom of the Sisters' desire to remain at St. Benedict for another year and their hope for additional Sisters, Thom stated that she had written Schaff and was waiting for an answer from him; she could not understand why he had not written her yet. When writing to Aichinger about this confused incident, Schaff exclaimed in his usual direct way and with all patience gone,

⁹Mother Romana to Fr. Stephen Eckert, August 2, 1922, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 3, "St. Benedict the Moor, April 1922 to July 1923," ACF.

¹⁰Celestine Bittle, *Romance*, 440.

Is there anyone who understands that woman (Mother Romana), what she talks about? I got a letter, yes, but that did not need any answer, anymore than thanks, all right, that settles it....The Sisters in the work wanted to stay and they were carrying the talk to and from to the greatest confusion of all concerned.¹¹

In July 1922 the Dominican Sisters agreed to continue at the Mission for the coming 1922-1923 school term without compensation as a work of charity. Lay people would continue to help out. When Thom visited the school on September 25, she again stated that she did not intend for the Sisters to stay after the current school term. During the next several months, Thom sent letters asking the new pastor and head, Father Philip Steffes, what plans he had made for the next school year in light of the fact that the Dominican Sisters would not be returning. More inquiries for help to women's religious orders proved fruitless. The school children prayed regularly to God for a recourse to the problem¹²

Securing the Racine Dominican Sisters to staff the school on a permanent basis was not totally resolved until 1923. Thom, undoubtedly touched by Eckert's untimely death and his key role in the Mission, made the important decision on 8 March 1923 that the congregation would staff St. Benedict the Moor as teachers and domestics on a permanent basis and without compensation as a work of charity. This decision brought an end to the annual threats of Thom to withdraw the Sisters at the end of each school year and the frequent searches to find an new order of Sisters or face the possibility of closing

¹¹Fr. Sebastian Schaff to Fr. Benno Aichinger, May 5, 1922, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 3, "St. Benedict the Moor, April 1922 to July 1923," ACF.

¹²St. Benedict House Chronicles, 1922; Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Benno Aichinger, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 3, "St. Benedict the Moor, April 1922 to July 1923," ACF; Celestine Bittle, *Romance*, 445.

the school. One of the major problems facing the Mission finally was resolved.¹³

For the Racine Dominican order, St. Benedict the Moor was a major commitment of personnel. The working and living conditions for the sisters were hard with few breaks. Still, the Racine Dominicans stayed. For the Capuchins and the Dominican Sisters there, the work, while exhausting and difficult, was regarded as worthwhile and gratifying. While disagreements did emerge and, at times, dissatisfied individuals religious left St. Benedict, overall there was a genuine cooperative and energizing spirit present. In a letter to Aichinger, Steffes expressed similar sentiments:

I must say, that since my stay here at the Mission, none of our Sisters have ever caused me the least kind of opposition. They always cooperated with me to the best of their ability. I could under the circumstances never expect more from them than they did.¹⁴

Securing the Site

Another problem that emerged with relocating the Mission boarding school back to Milwaukee was the need for a permanent church, school, and hall. This triggered a major dispute with the city. At this time the Mission consisted of large houses that were used for a chapel and a school with some adjustments, like removing a couple of walls. With the growth of St. Benedict, the future clearly called for the replacement of the make-shift church and school with structures built for those specific purposes. The question then

¹³After the commitment of the Racine Dominicans to St. Benedict the Moor, the Capuchins appeared to believe that Thom would still try to remove the Sisters if an opportunity presented itself. The Capuchin Provincial and Messmer both made another appeal to Drexel and the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament to staff St. Benedict. Drexel visited St. Benedict on 5 and 6 May 1924. She was very impressed and was willing to send Sisters provided her council agreed. By July 1924 the General Council of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament notified the Capuchins and Messmer that they did not have sufficient numbers to come to the mission in September 1925.

¹⁴Fr. Philip to Fr. Provincial, July 31, 1924, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 5, May 1924 to May 1925, ACF.

became whether to stay in the same location and buy up neighboring property as it became available and eventually build the church, school, and hall or to move the institution to another site with such existing buildings. It is in this context that a major controversy would arise, pitting the Mission against city officials and even Archbishop Messmer.

St. John Nepomoc was a Bohemian parish located on Cherry and Fourth Streets. The parish had moved to the outskirts of the city, putting its buildings and property on the market for sale. Messmer strongly urged the Mission to purchase the Bohemian church property and re-locate the Mission into its existing buildings. The main advantage behind such a plan was that the Bohemian property was more centrally located in the African American district of Milwaukee.¹⁵ The influx of African Americans during World War I and in the 1920s and the expansion of the downtown resulted in a movement of the African American neighborhood northward away from St. Benedict.

The first time the possibility of moving the Mission to the St. John's (Bohemian) property came up was in 1921 when Schaff was pastor of St. Benedict and the school had just returned from Corliss. Schaff asked Vincent J. Schoenecker, Jr. to get an appraisal of the property. Schoenecker was one of three men on the Loan and Appraisal Committee of the Sterling Savings, Loan, and Building Association of Milwaukee. Having assessed all of the ground area, the church, school, parsonage, sisters' convent, and a small cottage, the total value came to \$41,050.00. However, the appraisal committee recommended that St. Benedict only pay between \$25,000 to \$35,000, preferably the lower figure. Their explanation for paying well below the assessed value was due to some major problems

¹⁵Celestine Bittle, *Romance*, 440-441; St. Benedict House Chronicles, 1921.

they identified. First, the buildings were very old, dating back to 1867 for the church, and in need of major repair work in the near future. Second, the buildings were brick veneer and would deteriorate and wear more easily. Third, the property was in a poor location and the buildings should never have been erected there. Next, the property had no value as a selling proposition except for religious services.¹⁶ Finally, the grounds were too cramped and on the slope of a hill which diminished the quality of the playing fields.¹⁷

In addition to these problems, the biggest stumbling block to the sale of the Bohemian property was the price. Originally, in April 1921 St. John Nepomoc held out for the enormous amount of \$55,000. Edward Grieb, an advisor to the archdiocese on real estate matters and a member of the Board of Land Commissioners for the city of Milwaukee, played an important role in these negotiations. In July 1921, Grieb also represented the St. John's Bohemian Parish. He notified the Capuchins that the selling price was lowered to \$43,000 and urged them to buy. Even this amount was deemed as too high and made for a easy decision by the Capuchin Provincial Board, the Definitory, to reject the property proposition. As a result, it seemed that the matter was resolved and St. Benedict would remain at its location and expand north of State Street between Ninth Street and Tenth Streets.¹⁸

Grieb then became a major problem for St. Benedict in the next several years as a clear conflict of interest emerged between his position as the real estate agent for the city

¹⁶V. J. Schenecker to Fr. Sebastian Schaff, April 11, 1921, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 2, "St. Benedict the Moor, January 1921 to March 1922," ACF.

¹⁷St. Benedict House Chronicles, 1921.

¹⁸Celestine Bittle, *Romance*, 440-441: St. Benedict House Chronicles, 1921.

of Milwaukee and his role as a property advisor to the archdiocese. Grieb was a Milwaukee native born on 25 February 1866. His parents emigrated from Germany in 1845 and his father opened a retail grocery store on Milwaukee's South side. When the family lived above the store, Grieb was educated at Holy Trinity parochial school and later at the Fifth Ward school. After graduating from a business college, he became an engraver of jewelry. Failing eyesight forced him to relinquish that profession and then he turned to the real estate business. In 1919 Mayor Hoan appointed him to the public land commission and three years later he was named city real estate agent. In this capacity Grieb was in charge of selling, buying, and leasing land for the city. In 1925 Grieb along with twenty other defendants were convicted in a federal case involving Union Food Stores Company. His involvement was that he helped obtain a permit for sale of the company's stock in Wisconsin. Later, his sentence was commuted by President Coolidge at the urging of Congressman Victor Berger and other supporters and Grieb returned to Milwaukee in 1928. His real estate broker's license was restored and he was reappointed city real estate agent by the land commission. He was a member of the Eagles Club and a member of St. Thomas Aquinas parish at the time of his death in 1939.¹⁹

As city real estate agent, Grieb had a notable record. He was regarded as a shrewd buyer and seller of land, frequently obtaining property the city wanted at a price well below the assessed value. Cornelius Corcoran, one-time president of the Common Council, stated that in just one deal (the purchase of the old circus grounds) Grieb saved the city his salary for five years. During the rising tide of tax delinquencies in the

¹⁹*Milwaukee Sentinel*, February 13, 1939, 1 and 10; *Milwaukee Journal*, February 13, 1939, 1.

Depression, Grieb dumped more and more parcels of land into the city's lap. He also served as an advisor to several other agencies, including the school board, library, and museum. In addition, he handled real estate properties for the archdiocese of Milwaukee under Archbishops Messmer and Stritch. Grieb was hardfisted as a buyer of land and shrewd as a seller. There was no doubt he was there to see that the city got the bargain when he was on the buying side. Such a dogged approach triggered the ire of many and Grieb became a lightning rod of controversy and hostility among many Milwaukeeans.²⁰

One year after the Capuchins decided not to purchase the Bohemian property, St. Benedict was once again pressured by city officials and Messmer to reverse the decision. In this second attempt, the issue of ownership emerged. In order to understand the complicated set of events that follow, it will be helpful to understand the difference between legal ownership and canonical ownership. As was stated earlier, when the Capuchins took over St. Benedict in 1911, there was a transfer of property from the Archdiocese of Milwaukee to the Capuchin congregation. The order then owned the property of the St. Benedict's church and school.²¹ However, as mentioned earlier, there was a reverter clause stating that, if the Capuchins leave, the property would revert to the archdiocese. Thus, legally the Capuchins were the owners as long as they remained on that property. However, in Canon Law there is the concept of *dominium* in canon 1256 which does not exist in common law. In this case, *dominium* means the owner is "clearly

²⁰Ibid.

²¹The Office of the Register of Deeds at the Milwaukee County Building indicated ownership of parcels of land in Lot 98 by the Capuchin Congregation of the St. Joseph Province and the tax records at the Milwaukee Public Library confirmed ownership to the Capuchin congregation.

identifiable over against all other persons and his or her interest was undivided and complete. No other person is entitled to regard the things as his or hers and no other person could take possession of or make use of the thing without the consent of the person having *dominium*.²² In American civil law and common law, there is no fundamental objection to ownership being fragmented or having various aspects of ownership separated. However, under Canon Law, there is only one owner and one can have possession of property or funds and not have *dominium* in any full sense. As far as St. Benedict was concerned, the Capuchins did own the property under American civil law, but they did not have *dominium* under Canon Law; the Archdiocese of Milwaukee had *dominium* of St. Benedict the Moor. In other words, under Canon Law, Messmer still retained decision-making authority over the parish. Under this set of circumstances, there will be a plot to get the Capuchins to re-locate St. Benedict the Moor.²³

By 1922 the city and county of Milwaukee planned a massive building project called the Civic Center. It would consist of county government offices, the county court house, county jail, and police headquarters. Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., the son of the leading urban landscape architect in the nation who had designed Central Park in New York City, was hired to design a park-like setting for the Civic Center. In what could almost be described as an opera plot, the episode began with a city report on 7 January 1922 that the blocks from State Street to Prairie (Highland) Street and from Eighth Street

²²James A. Coriden, Thomas J. Green, and Donald E. Heintschel, editors, *Code of Canon Law a Text and Commentary, Study Edition* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 862.

²³*Ibid.*, 861-863; Phone conversation with Father Joseph Tapella, Canon Lawyer for the Diocese of Joliet, December 31, 2008.

to Eleventh Street was planned for a city park. St. Benedict along with all other buildings within the designated area were subject to be condemned by the city of Milwaukee. Schaff turned to Joseph Caldwell for more information and help. Caldwell was the Assistant City Building inspector and a friend of the Mission. He first investigated the plan of the Civic Center. Three days later, Caldwell brought Schaff a copy of the plan of the proposed Civic Center showing there was no danger that St. Benedict would have to evacuate its premises. The plan indicated that State Street was the northern border of the Civic Center. The County Jail was planned to be built on the south side of State Street between Eighth and Ninth Street, becoming the new neighbor of St. Benedict Mission across the street. Prairie (Highland) Street would be widened by sixty feet on the north side of the street. This would prevent any interference with the new one-million dollar trade school which the city had just completed on the south side of Prairie (Highland) Street between Sixth and Seventh Streets.²⁴ Thus, there was a discrepancy between the actual architectural plans for the Civic Center which did not include St. Benedict's land and the city report of the Land Commission which called for the condemnation of the Mission.

Grieb told Messmer that St. Benedict's property was not safe and the Land Commission's plan and would undoubtedly condemn the property as "undesirable in the neighborhood of the Civic Center."²⁵ A new jail, city police department, county court system and offices all were planned to be constructed in a central area offset with parks

²⁴St. Benedict House Chronicles, 1922; Fr. Sebastian Schaff to Fr. Benno Aichinger, January 7, 1922 and January 10, 1922, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 2, "St. Benedict the Moor, January 1921 to March 1922," ACF.

²⁵Fr. Sebastian Schaff to Fr. Benno Aichinger, March 2, 1922, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 2, "St. Benedict the Moor, January 1921 to March 1922." ACF.

and grass areas with wide streets feeding into the Civic Center. In this city-beautiful project, some city officials did not want to see poor African Americans at the Mission for religious, educational, or social purposes. The way the Land Commission would get the Mission condemned was by changing its plan of widening Eighth Street and instead widening Ninth Street. This meant that St. Benedict's property on the west side of Ninth Street would be condemned since the traffic flow to and from the Civic Center would take place on Ninth Street. The law authorized the Land Commission to purchase for the city up to 500 feet on either side of a public improvement for beautification purposes. Grieb pointed out that the city could take 500 feet north of State Street and 500 feet west of Ninth Street, which would mean the entire square on which St. Benedict was located. In a letter to Aichinger, Schaff expressed his anger at Grieb and his frustration with Messmer.

Of course, Mr. Grieb assured us that he would seek to protect our (Catholic) interests, but for the good of the city would have to consent to the decision of the (Land Commission) Board. Then, too, he appealed to our interest in the city's welfare as citizens of the community, not wishing to mar the beauty of the Civic Center by a Negro settlement. How nice! And the Archbishop fell for that stuff very nicely, remarking as to the sentiment of the citizens if we did remain...The Archbishop, it is true, took the stand in our interests, but he is a tool in the hand of his real estate adviser, Mr. Grieb.²⁶

At a meeting with the Archbishop, Schaff, and Grieb, the latter boasted of having purchased in the past property for the city at or below its appraised value. Grieb went on to say that he, on behalf of the Land Commission, would help to relocate St. Benedict. The new location that Grieb and Messmer favored was, of course, the Bohemian property. Recalling his feelings in a letter, Schaff stated,

²⁶Ibid..

And then the cat was let out of the bag – the Bohemian property was just the location. (This was the reason of the first call of His Grace urged on by Mr. Grieb, to find out whether we are still in the market for the Bohemian property.) At once I took the stand against that property as not being adequate for our purpose....In all consideration for the Archbishop, I did not say what I would like to have said to Mr. Grieb; we left, I promising to look into the matter.²⁷

Provincial Aichinger, expressed some frustration with Messmer for resurrecting the Bohemian property issue again and urging the Capuchins to purchase it:

His Grace must have forgotten everything about our conversation on the train, from Chicago to Milwaukee, last November. I, at that time, explained (to him the) reasons why the Bohemian property was nothing for our purpose.²⁸

Some reliable friends of the Mission told Schaff that Grieb's dual positions as a member of the Board of Land Commissioners for the city and as advisor to the archdiocese on real estate matters created a conflict of interest which frequently did not seem to serve the archdiocese well. When seeking advice on the impending condemnation of the Mission's property on Ninth and State Streets, Caldwell arranged a meeting with Grieb. Afterwards, Caldwell suggested that Grieb may be bluffing and urged that St. Benedict not move, but take a stand to stay at its present location and continue to make known its intentions to build there in the future. An unfavorable opinion of Grieb also was shared by Josephine Zimmermann who was an active promoter of the Mission. She and her father, Joseph Zimmermann, were also well acquainted with many business people in Milwaukee as well as municipal affairs and charitable undertakings in the city. Miss

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Fr. Benno Aichinger to Fr. Sebastian Schaff, March 4, 1922, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 2, "St. Benedict the Moor, January 1921 to March 1922," ACF.

Zimmermann felt Grieb had too great of an influence on the Archbishop. In her view, Grieb had duped many religious congregations with property purchases and sales that were not in the orders' best interests. Finally, Father Albert E. Darnieder, an archdiocesan priest and friend of the Mission, gave his candid opinion of Grieb, stating that the man could not be trusted and sought mainly his own financial benefit at others' expense, despite his profuse statements to the contrary whenever he dealt with Catholic priests, Sisters, or even the Archbishop.²⁹ Thus, the relocation of St. Benedict was now favored by Grieb and city officials. Taking advantage of his position in the archdiocese with his access to Messmer, Grieb managed to ally the archbishop with the city against the Mission under a thin veneer hiding racism.

The Capuchin Definitory Board met on April 1922 and asked Schaff to prepare a report on the status of St. Benedict the Moor and with suggestions. On the question of whether or not St. Benedict should move, Schaff followed Caldwell's advice and favored staying at the present location.

I feel convinced to state that a Catholic member of the Land Commission Board was persuaded by selfish interests. We...need not apologize to the citizens of Milwaukee if we hold our own in this neighborhood of the Civic Center. Why should an unselfish work, a Christian charity work have to efface itself from unpleasant surroundings like a prostitute? The uplift of a suppressed and undesirable people to better citizens and to cleaner morals is the standard and claim that we will hold to any aggressors.³⁰

Furthermore, to secure their place, Schaff suggested the Definitory approve the purchase

²⁹Fr. Sebastian Schaff to Fr. Benno Aichinger, March 2, 1922, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 2, "St. Benedict the Moor, January 1921 to March 1922," ACF.

³⁰Report to the Definitorium by Fr. Sebastian Schaff, April 17, 1922, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 3, "St. Benedict the Moor, April 1922 to July 1923," ACF.

of a large piece of property, 150 feet by 100 feet, on Tenth Street which would give the Mission land running for nearly the entire block from Ninth to Tenth Streets. The property would include two brick-veneer buildings and three frame buildings, all being two stories high and worth approximately \$35,000. Schaff also stressed the need for adequate boarding school facilities rather than the make-shift houses in order that the school would grow and that the children could be properly supervised. He felt that they had been fortunate thus far for not having the Board of Health and the Fire Department wage a more aggressive campaign against them.³¹

The Definitory acted on these recommendations. St. Benedict would resist any further attempts to move to the Bohemian property or to the outskirts of the city. They approved the purchase of the land and buildings on Tenth Street. At the same time permission was granted to purchase property as it became available to form a square on Ninth Street, Prairie (Highland) Street, Tenth Street, and State Street and to prepare for a building of a chapel, school, and hospice when the means to raise the money was certain. It was also at this meeting that the decision was made to appoint Father Philip Steffes as the new head of St. Benedict the Moor, replacing Schaff, effective in July 1922.³²

It seemed like the decision to stand firm won the day. In January 1923 a building permit was secured from the Milwaukee Land Commission for the construction of a chapel. The issuance of the building permit allayed reservations about the Mission interfering with the proposed Civic Center had ended. On 2 March 1923 Messmer gave

³¹Ibid.

³²St. Benedict House Chronicles, 1922; Celestine Bittle, *Romance*, 445.

his permission for St. Benedict to build a chapel. In the following six weeks, six different properties were purchased by the Capuchins on North Tenth Street totaling \$52,400.

Excavation for the new chapel, spanning four lots, began on 1 June 1923. However, the “victory” was short-lived; a bombshell hit on 12 June 1923 with the arrival of a letter to Steffes from Messmer.³³

Last week I found out that the authorities at the City Hall (Mayor Hoan included) are very much opposed to your proposed building in your block.... I would not wish to be placed in antagonism to the City Hall and its Land Commission (Civic Center) and would insist that the future buildings of St. Benedict's be placed outside the city. In view of the fact that you have already bought lots on 10th Street, I believe I can assure you of the City Hall assistance in disposing of these again without loss to your community.... When I made no further objection to you settling for good where you are, I took it for granted that the Capuchins were taking the whole responsibility and I so told the City authorities. But, if Father Benno's view is to hold and the Archdiocese is to be ultimately responsible, I would object to further building and prefer to have St. Benedict's move elsewhere.³⁴

The Archbishop's letter was both shocking and confusing. First, Steffes was under the impression that Messmer was both informed and in agreement with the decision of the Mission to remain in its present location as evidenced by his granting them permission to build the new chapel. Now, after the Order incurred the expenses of purchasing additional land, hiring an architect to draw building plans, and excavating the site, the Archbishop suddenly said he did not favor having the Mission remain at its location due to antagonism from City Hall. Second, there was confusion over who really was the owner of the Mission – the Capuchin Order or the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. Messmer told city

³³Celestine Bittle, *Romance*, 446.

³⁴Archbishop Messmer to Fr. Philip Steffes, June 12, 1923, The Provincial Files, Bishops Correspondence with Archdiocese of Milwaukee 2-28, ACF.

officials that the Capuchins owned St. Benedict; yet Capuchin Provincial Aichinger believed it was owned by the Archdiocese of Milwaukee and he even stated that to the Archbishop. Messmer now took the position that he would stop the construction project if Aichinger's view, that the property is owned by the archdiocese, was correct. The shock from the letter that struck Steffes in Milwaukee fell with equal force when Steffes frantically notified Aichinger of the Archbishop's words. At the same time Gans, the Provincial's representative over St. Benedict and also serving at this time as pastor of St. Elizabeth's parish in Milwaukee, also wrote Aichinger. Gans labeled the Archbishop's letter as "throwing a bomb into our colored mission proposition" and laid out the alternatives to the Provincial as he could best assess the situation:

Either we have to take over the mission as an institution of the province and then fight the city land commission to find out if they can really prevent us building there or we must take the other alternative i.e. to let the mission come to a standstill as far as buildings are concerned...This matter must be settled definitely now, and soon.³⁵

Gans went on to say that if the land commission would give \$150,000, they could try to locate somewhere else. However, Gans questioned whether or not the land commission had such authority. Furthermore, Gans felt \$200,000 would be a more than just indemnity. Joseph Zimmermann phoned Gans and said he believed that the land commission was bluffing in order to get the Archbishop to move the mission. The architect was told to stop his work on the plans for the chapel until further notice. Since the architect's plans were almost finished, an incurred cost of \$1,500 had already been realized as well as a cost of

³⁵Fr. Roger Gans to Fr. Benno Aichinger, June 15, 1923, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 4, June 1923 to April 1924.

\$2,500 for the excavation work that was also already done.³⁶

While sincerity and rationality characterized all of Aichinger's correspondence, his quick response to Messmer's shocking letter to Steffes was charged with emotion.

Like a thunderbolt from a clear sky this morning's mail struck terror into my heart. I received the letter that Your Grace had sent to Father Philip on June 12th. Its contents apparently deal the death-blow to the promising Colored Mission in Milwaukee.³⁷

Aichinger then proceeded to explain his view of the development of recent events prior to the Archbishop's letter. On 20 January 1922 Aichinger visited the Archbishop and explained why it was impossible to relocate to the Bohemian property and why it was imperative to build at the Mission. On 1 March 1922 he made a second visit to the Archbishop and received his permission to build on Tenth Street provided the Land Commission gave its consent. Afterwards, land was purchased on the corner of Tenth Street and State Street and a building permit was obtained. On 23 May 1922 Aichinger informed Messmer that both the land acquisition and the building permit was obtained. He then asked the Archbishop if they could go forward with the project and Messmer consented. Aichinger also asked if the Archbishop received his explanation of the canonical status of the Mission and if it was satisfactory. To this the Archbishop answered "yes;" only some details would have to be settled later. For the next year, plans were made for the erection of the chapel. An architect was hired and sketches were drawn and now excavation is underway. Showing frustration, Aichinger stated,

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Fr. Benno Aichinger to Archbishop Messmer, June 16, 1923, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 4, "St. Benedict the Moor, June, 1923 to April, 1924," ACF.

And now Your Grace condemns it all, for the reason that the Mission is considered a Diocesan Institute! ...If it is Your Grace's sincere wish that Our Province take over the Institute in the full canonical sense, just let me know and I shall take the necessary steps in Rome rather than ruin the whole Mission which is so promising of great fruit....the Province is the rightful possessor as we hold all the Deeds, etc. at present.³⁸

Aichinger also re-stated his view why the Bohemian property was unacceptable because of the tremendous costs that the Capuchin Province would incur in the purchase of the property and the extensive repair work required in that old facility. Furthermore, there was not sufficient space to run a boarding school there, lacking adequate room for recreation and separate boys and girls dormitories. Aichinger asserted,

After all of the heavy debts contracted for the present site, it is impossible to go still further into debts for a place which will never serve the purposes of the Mission. The reasons I have already explained....The chief reason is the dilapidated condition of the Bohemian property... and lack of room imperative for a Boarding School in which the sexes must be strictly separated....It would be throwing away money without the hope of gaining a profit.³⁹

On the Archbishop's suggestion to move outside the city, Aichinger was equally emphatic that a city location for the boarding school was essential in order to supplement the cost of running the boarding school with donations of benefactors. A city location also would provide housing for the older students who graduated St. Benedict and then continue to high school or a trade school in Milwaukee. Finally, a city location was more convenient and accessible to medical and recreational facilities. Aichinger continued,

Then Your Grace insists that "St. Benedict's Mission should be placed elsewhere, preferably outside the city." We have tried this already during the year when Father Stephen located at Corliss -- and, in consequence, lost

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ibid.

all the benefactors. He had to start all over again on the return to the city, ...Then the grave proposition of medical and hospital facilities, the free use of the Natatorium for the children in summer and in winter. Then the facility for the older pupils to attend High School and Trade Schools, etc....⁴⁰

Having chronicled the developments leading up to this crisis and having given a rationale of why the Archbishop's wish for the Mission to relocate was unacceptable to the Capuchins, Aichinger closed the letter telling Messmer that he must make the decision. If he decided the Mission was ultimately an archdiocesan institution (canonical ownership) rather than a Capuchin institution, the Capuchins had no alternative but to withdraw completely from St. Benedict the Moor.

Now, Your Grace, what are we to do? Are we to vacate in earnest?...The money spent on the architect and excavation, I suppose is to be considered simple loss to the Province, likewise the refilling of the excavated parts.

If Your Grace prefers that the Province shoulder the whole problem at 10th Street, we are satisfied and I hope to obtain Father General's consent as soon as I meet him again in New York.

If Your Grace prefers to consider it a strictly Diocesan problem which obliges You to remove the Mission from its present site and to forbid any improvements, we as Your administrators, of course, must obey Your wishes. But under such conditions we feel obliged to beg Your Grace to accept our resignation as administrators. The Province cannot add unlimited debts to those already incurred for this work.⁴¹

By the end of the month Messmer decided to canonically transfer the Mission to the Capuchin Fathers. As explained earlier, this means Messmer would no longer have *dominium* under Canon Law. Also, the Capuchin religious order as such was the "pastor"

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid.

of the church and the order would assign someone in its name as pastor.⁴² Messmer saw this as the best arrangement not only for the Capuchins who had invested so much into the Mission already, but also for the Archdiocese. As long as canonical ownership by the archdiocese existed, city officials could pressure Messmer to re-locate St. Benedict. In a letter to Aichinger on 30 June 1923, the Archbishop stated,

...I came to the conclusion that the Capuchin Fathers should be owners of the Colored Mission not only in the face of Civil Law, but also in that of Canonical Law. I strongly prefer that St. Benedict's Mission be entirely and in every regard in the hands of the Capuchin Order. It will be the best arrangement also as far as the Archdiocese is concerned....⁴³

The whole episode suggested that Messmer was willing to acquiesce to the racist motives of city officials in order to prevent contrary public sentiment and less than harmonious relations with City Hall. Messmer was also unfortunately influenced by Grieb who was not respected and viewed as mercenary in some circles. In fact, there was an unsubstantiated story that Grieb was to be paid two thousand dollars if he prevented the new construction project at St. Benedict. Since the Capuchin Provincial was willing to accept St. Benedict as an institution of the order and threatened to withdraw if Messmer bent to racially-motivated public pressure, the archbishop capitulated and saw the canonical transfer as the best solution and his way out. On June 30, 1923, Messmer canonically transferred St. Benedict from the archdiocese to the Capuchins.⁴⁴

⁴²The information on Canon Law was provided by Br. Patrick Mc Sherry, Provincial Archivist of the Capuchin Province of St. Joseph in Detroit, Michigan.

⁴³Archbishop Messmer to Fr. Provincial, June 30, 1923, 2-28 Bishops Correspondence with Archdiocese of Milwaukee, 1920 to June 1923, ACF.

⁴⁴Archbishop Messmer to Fr. Benno Aichinger, March 5, 1923 and June 30, 1923, Bishops' Correspondence with Archdiocese of Milwaukee, 1920 to June 1923, ACF; Fr. Gans to Fr. Benno, July 2, 1923, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 4, "St. Benedict the Moor, June 1923 to April 1924," ACF;

The canonical transfer to the Capuchin Fathers was very significant in terms of providing greater stability for the future of St. Benedict the Moor. It made the archbishop less-susceptible to the pressures, ploys, and tactics of city officials who, racially motivated, did not want a “Negro Colony” adjoining the grand and beautiful Civic Center. The archbishop could simply “pass the buck,” claiming, that because the Capuchins owned the Mission, he could not order them to relocate. This notion supported the observation Gans made in a letter to Aichinger when he stated that “the Archbishop seems to have a fear of the Land Commission which borders on the puerile.”⁴⁵ After *The Catholic Citizen*, the archdiocesan newspaper, printed a story that the building of St. Benedict’s church and school was postponed until a definite site could be selected, Aichinger asked the newspaper to correct the story. In a letter to Aichinger, *The Catholic Citizen* stated they would comply with his request, but added:

There has been and still is considerable opposition in Milwaukee to the building of a school for colored children directly across the street from the proposed Milwaukee Civic Center.⁴⁶

From this incident, Aichinger emerged as the savior of the Mission. In his key position as provincial, he provided forceful leadership at this critical time. Using skills that would rival the best diplomat or poker player, he challenged Messmer and played his trump card, saying give us the land or we will accept the loss and withdraw from the

Celestine Bittle, *Romance*, 449-450.

⁴⁵Fr. Roger Gans to Fr. Benno Aichinger, July 12, 1923, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 4, June 1923 to April 1924, ACF.

⁴⁶*The Catholic Citizen* to Fr. Benno Aichinger, July 19, 1923, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 4, June 1923 to April 1924, ACF.

Mission. He was motivated by finances and the interests of the Mission for its apostolate and its future. From 1911, the year the Capuchin took over the St Benedict's Mission, to 1923, the Order spent \$93,000 on real estate alone. Since St. Benedict was considered a "charity" apostolate by the Capuchins, the priests were never salaried and each year the Order funded deficits created by the difference between the costs of running the Mission and the revenues received. The total amount of expenditures exceeded well over \$100,000. Aichinger also was aware of other elements that were promising indicators of the Mission's future viability. The number of student applications for admission was increasing, even creating the happy problem of a waiting list for student enrollments. Donations of benefactors and fund-raising efforts, stymied during the Corliss move, had recovered considerably through the charismatic and untiring efforts of Eckert until his death in February 1923 and then with memorials after his death.

Aichinger embraced the African American ministry from the very beginning when he, as director of seminarians at St. Francis Monastery in Milwaukee in 1910, wrote the Provincial favoring Messmer's request to the Capuchin Fathers to take charge of St. Benedict the Moor. The Capuchin commitment to the African American ministry in Milwaukee had taken nearly twelve years to reach a level of stability where this apostolate was ready to blossom. At this budding time of growth for the Mission, the yielding of Mesmer to racially-motivated ambitions of city officials to move St. Benedict the Moor likely would have spelled the ruin of the Mission. Aichinger, determined that the Mission not be devastated on his watch as Provincial, used masterful diplomacy and pressure to safeguard the future of the Mission while allowing the Archbishop to make the decision.

Ernest G. Miller: Mission Savior

Construction work on the new chapel immediately resumed after the property transfer. Ernest G. Miller, the President of the Miller Brewing Company in Milwaukee, became the financial savior of the Mission with large donations to pay for the construction of the new church and the purchase of a school along with substantial help for many smaller projects. His commitment and patronage of the Mission over several years contributed tremendously to its stability and growth.

The Miller Brewing Company in Milwaukee was started by Ernest Miller's father, Frederic Miller. He came from Germany and was the royal brew-master to the Catholic-branch of the Hohenzollern family in Sigmaringen. Due to the stifling of personal freedoms along with a tragic loss in his family, Miller came to America in 1850s. He traveled the country for a year searching for the best place to establish a brewery. He chose Milwaukee due to its excellent harbor, abundant supplies of grain and water, and the presence of many skilled craftsmen. He purchased the Plank Road Brewery which had gone bankrupt one year earlier. In his first year, he produced 300 barrels of beer and in the next year he was the first person to establish an age-old Milwaukee tradition, the beer garden. Frederic Miller had nine children; four died in infancy and Ernest was the oldest of the five who survived. In a letter to family members in Germany, Frederic described his oldest son when he was fourteen years old, "Ernest has a good head. He is healthy, quick, and spirited. He speaks English and German well. Also Latin. He is studying piano."⁴⁷

⁴⁷Frederic Miller to relatives in Germany, July 1879, Frederic E. Miller 1824 - 1888. Miller Family Papers #167, MUA.

Frederic Miller was a loving and devoted father who instilled in Ernest and his other children deep religious convictions and a sense of gratitude and generosity. He also wrote about his belief in God by stating, "...I realize that we must submit ourselves without murmur or complaint to the unexplainable wisdom of God and that such wisdom transcends human understanding. So, I bow in humility and thank the Lord that He has given and also taken away."⁴⁸ In 1888 Frederic Miller died and Ernest took over the booming business producing over 80,000 barrels of beer annually.

Ernest Miller was born in Milwaukee in 1865 and was educated in parochial schools and at Marquette College. He began working at the brewing company when he was twenty years old. He was known as a quiet, studious man, who avoided any type of ostentation or showiness. He never married. Miller's philanthropy was supported by his early home life and also by the Milwaukee Brewers' Association, an organization comprised of the chief officers of the major breweries that contributed regularly and generously to civic and social organizations and programs in the city. Miller personally sought out persons whose lots were particularly sad and destitute in order to help them. Miller was generous to many Catholic institutions, especially St. Benedict the Moor, St. Rose's parochial school, and Catholic missionaries in China.⁴⁹

A few days after construction work on the new chapel resumed, Miller paid a visit to Steffes and offered to pay for the entire cost of the Mission Chapel. Steffes told Miller

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹*Milwaukee Sentinel*, September 22, 1925, 1; *Milwaukee Journal*, September 22, 1925, 17; Milwaukee Brewers' Association. Records, 1883-1894 #142, MUA; "The Miller Legacy" pamphlet, 2-6, The Miller Brewing Company 1855-1980 files, MUA; Frederic E. Miller 1824-1888. Miller Family Papers #167, MUA.

the cost would be about \$35,000. In the end, the building cost amounted to \$63,750 and Miller agreed to pay the larger sum.⁵⁰ In writing to Provincial Aichinger, Steffes expressed his excitement:

Mr. Ernest Miller has also called on me this morning. Hold your breath! Guess first what he intends to do. He wishes to come up for the whole expense of the Chapel. But, it must be kept quiet until the building is completed. If it comes out before, he is liable to withdraw his promise. The condition under which he gives this is that we have a stone erected on the building on which he wishes to have his name inscribed after the building is completed.⁵¹

The cornerstone of the new chapel was laid on 7 October 1923 in an impressive ceremony. The boys and girls of the Mission marched to the new chapel in procession with banners of the Divine Infant and St. Francis followed by definitors, former provincials, other friars of the Capuchin Order, and Bishop Francis Xavier Geyer of Uganda, a special guest. After a song by the chapel choir, Steffes greeted the congregation and said the new chapel would help the African American to live for "God alone," referring to their motto in Latin, *Deo Soli*, engraved in the cornerstone. He introduced Geyer, a missionary bishop who spent forty years in Africa. After retiring to Germany, Geyer visited the United States. It was then that he was asked to attend the laying of the cornerstone at St. Benedict and to give the sermon. In his address, Geyer first highlighted the importance of the ministry to the African American community in the United States. He echoed the belief of the African American Catholic Lay Congresses that Catholic education was the chief vehicle for the conversion of African Americans and productive

⁵⁰Celestine Bittle, *Romance*, 450-451.

⁵¹Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Benno Aichinger, July 18, 1923, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 4, June 1923 to July 1924, ACF.

and self-sufficient livelihoods as American citizens. He quoted from a speech Messmer gave a year earlier in which he said,

...the most important works of the Church in this country is the spiritual care of the Negro people....We must direct our main efforts towards the Negro children, by giving them a truly Christian education which alone will form them into useful citizens.⁵²

Geyer also affirmed the dedication of African Americans to Catholicism from a worldwide perspective. The Africans in Uganda showed the willingness to die for the faith as evidenced by the beatification of twenty-two Ugandan martyrs in 1920 in St. Peter's in Rome.⁵³

Five months after the laying of the cornerstone, St. Benedict the Moor Chapel was dedicated on 2 March 1924. Messmer expressed his support and appreciation for the African American ministry work being done in the archdiocese by the Capuchins.

We must implore the help of God that this institution may in all reality become a center of Catholic charitable work for the welfare of the colored people in the West, for the Negro folk of this city....I believe the spirit of dear good Father Stephen is still working among you and among the Catholic Colored of the city....(He then gave his) sincerest thanks to the generous benefactors of this chapel, most of all the chief benefactor, a devout Catholic, who made it possible to build this church for you.⁵⁴

One of the people invited to the dedication ceremony was Lincoln Valle. Writing to Steffes from Hot Springs, South Dakota, Valle expressed his regrets for not being able to attend. The letter revealed Valle's continued commitment to the Catholic Church's

⁵²Sermon of Bishop Geyer, preached at laying of Cornerstone at St. Benedict's Mission, October 6, 1923, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 4, June 1923 to April 1924, ACF.

⁵³"Missionary Bishop Lay Cornerstone of St. Benedict the Moor Chapel," unnamed newspaper, October 11, 1924, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 4, June 1923 to April 1924, ACF.

⁵⁴Celestine Bittle, *Romance*, 451.

ministry to the African American community along with his deep faith and conviction that the Church remained the African American's best hope for breaking down prejudice. His gratefulness, humility, and generosity were evident in his letter.

...I pray that Almighty God ...will bless you (Father Steffes) and the Capuchin Fathers in your efforts in building up a work for my poor neglected people. In my feeble efforts in starting that work in Milwaukee, I did not in the outset presume to think that a work of that kind would be other than a humble experiment.

Knowing too that our divinely established Church and divinely guided Church ever the true friend of the down-trodden, would by the innate force of her truth gradually dispel the prejudices unhappily prevailing amongst so many misguided people.⁵⁵

Ernest Miller, the benefactor of the new chapel, also missed the dedication ceremony. When he returned from his winter travels to Florida, Cuba, and the Panama Canal Zone, Steffes held a "Welcome Home Reception" on 21 May 1924 in the hall under the chapel. Miller was invited for supper along with other priests and lay benefactors. Then he was escorted to the hall where his brothers, sisters, secretary, and other relatives and friends were already seated. He was cheered by the assembly while the St. Benedict band played a march. The children then presented a program for him. Afterwards, Miller expressed his appreciation and turned his remarks to Marquette Academy, his high school alma mater, located next to St. Benedict. Miller knew that the Jesuits were interested in selling the building. He told the audience, "There is a building over there – Marquette—where I attended school several years. Within a year, we are going to get busy on it. We are going to develop. We will have a trade school....Our new institution will be second to

⁵⁵Lincoln Valle to Fr. Fr. Philip Steffes, February 18, 1924, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 4, June 1923 to April 1924, ACF.

none. It will be one that the whole U.S. will look up to”⁵⁶ Finally, Miller closed by expressing his belief in the importance of education for African Americans. He stated,

The colored people must get so far as to be able to help themselves and earn their own living to support themselves and their families....owing to the industrial and religious training they will receive in this institution. We want to make real good citizens out of them....We want to do our best for all, no matter whether one is white, black, or of what other color one may be. We all have a body and soul; hence, all are entitled to the same training and education. Before God all souls are white and equal.⁵⁷

The evening ended with benediction in the chapel. The newly-installed organ, which was completed just two hours before the reception, was played for the first time. Many positive comments about the Mission abounded throughout the event. People called the chapel a “Brielmeier (the architect) masterpiece,” simple but artistic. Miller’s secretary said, “I am sure that the colored people appreciate this even more than whites for we have all opportunities.”⁵⁸

Miller turned his attention to the Marquette Academy building. In September 1923 he heard that the Jesuits of Marquette University possibly were looking to sell their academy and use the money to build a new high school farther west. Again, Miller went to see Steffes and promised to pay for the Marquette Academy building if St. Benedict would be lucky enough to get it. The property consisted of one square block, running from Tenth Street on the east to Eleventh Street on the west and from State Street on the south to Prairie (Highland) Street on the north. The Marquette property was ideally located on

⁵⁶Celestine Bittle, *Romance*, 452-453.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*

⁵⁸Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Provincial, May 22, 1924, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 5, ACF.

the block directly across Tenth Street from the Mission block. St. Benedict had intended to build a school after the chapel and hospice were completed. The possible purchase of the Marquette Academy building was seen as a favorable move for St. Benedict. While the building needed some repair work, it would be cheaper than constructing a new school and occupancy would be sooner. The make-shift houses used for classrooms needed to be replaced by an actual school building. The Marquette property also included a football field which would provide additional playground space. To some extent, Miller was motivated by sentimentality since he graduated from Marquette Academy.⁵⁹

The negotiations for the purchase of Marquette Academy between the Jesuits and the Capuchins proved to be unnecessarily complicated and layered with delay. After inquiries were made about the property, the Jesuits stated they would make a decision whether or not to sell by 18 September 1923. Father Albert Fox S.J., President of Marquette University, then informed Steffes that he could not give a definite answer for at least a year. This delay put the Capuchins in a difficult position with Miller. At the time Miller's health was frail and his demise before the purchase of the Marquette property would possibly have negated his promise to pay for the building. Miller had instructed Steffes to try to get Marquette for \$75,000, although he was willing to go higher. A year later there was no guarantee that the Jesuits would be willing to sell the property to St. Benedict. Fox needed more time to decide where the new Marquette University High School would be located and how it would be financed.⁶⁰ The Capuchins debated whether

⁵⁹Celestine Bittle, *Romance*, 452.

⁶⁰Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Benno Aichinger, September 20, 1923, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 4, June 1923 to April 1924, ACF.

to go ahead with their plans to build their own school and not be delayed any more or to wait for the Jesuit decision. Joseph Zimmermann, the purchasing agent hired by St. Benedict, and Miller urged the Capuchins to wait.⁶¹

Eventually, Fox informed the Capuchins that the selling price for the Marquette Academy building would be \$125,000. Miller, writing from the Panama Canal Zone, stated that he would be willing to buy the property at that price, and instructed the Capuchins to get an option on the property which he agreed to sign. This would obligate Miller's estate to purchase the property in case anything might happen to him. Next, the purchasing committee of Marquette informed the Capuchins that the price was raised to \$150,000. The reason for the increased price was that Marquette University was at the end of their credit line. It was necessary, therefore, that the selling price of the old academy property pay for their new site, which was \$150,000. Unable to reach Miller, who was still traveling in the Canal Zone, and notify him of the price increase, the Capuchins applied for credit at the Second Ward Bank and were given from the bank a letter approving the credit line. At this point Fox informed Zimmermann that the building committee demanded a cash deposit at the bank for the whole amount before the purchase could be made. Zimmermann tried to convince the committee that the letter from the bank was tantamount to a guarantee of payment. However, the committee insisted on a cash deposit and threatened to call off the entire deal if this were not done by December 31, 1923. Gans, as Treasurer of the Capuchin Provincial Corporation at this time, quickly

⁶¹Fr. Albert Fox to Mr. Zimmermann, no date; Fr. Roger Gans to Fr. Benno Aichinger, September 20, 1923 and October 2, 1923; Fr. Philip Steffes to Mr. Miller, November 11, 1923; Mr. Joseph J. Zimmermann to Fr. Provincial, November 12, 1923; Mr. Ernest Miller to Fr. Philip, November 16, 1923, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 4, June 1923 to April 1924, ACF.

signed a note for \$150,000 at six percent interest for three months and the cash credit was established.⁶² Negotiations dragged on until 19 March 1924. Zimmermann became increasingly frustrated with what he termed as an inconsiderate handling of the matter by the four Marquette lawyers and a transaction made unnecessarily complicated.⁶³ The closing on the property sale was delayed on February 9, again on February 12, and finally closed on 19 March 1924. From 31 December 1923, the date when Gans signed the note for \$150,000, to 19 March 1924, the date of the closing, the Capuchins were obliged to pay \$2,750 in interest on the note. Why the Marquette purchasing committee would not accept the letter of the bank promising the loan, which is considered cash and which demanded no interest payment, remained unknown.⁶⁴ As a result of the purchase, the Mission now owned almost two entire square blocks and a school.

In the end, Miller contributed \$150,000 for the purchase of Marquette Academy and an addition that was immediately started after the purchase.⁶⁵ A two-story addition to the Marquette building was in process with the lower level serving as a kitchen and dining room for the children and the upper floor containing living quarters for the Dominican

⁶²Raphael N. Hamilton, S.J., *The Story of Marquette University – An Object Lesson in the Development of Higher Education* (Milwaukee: The Marquette University Press, 1953), 198; R. Roger Gans to Fr. Francis X. McNanemy S.J., Provincial, May 27, 1924, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 5, May 1924 to May 1925, ACF.

⁶³Fr. Steffes to Fr. Benno, December 23, 1923; Fr. Gans to Fr. Benno, December 24, 1923; Mr. Zimmermann to Fr. Benno, February 12, 1924; Mr. Zimmermann to Fr. Benno, February 15, 1924; Mr. Zimmermann to Fr. Benno, March 19 1924, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 4, June 1923 to April 1924, ACF.

⁶⁴Fr. Gans to Fr. Francis X. McNanemy S.J., Provincial, May 27, 1924, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 5, May 1924 to May 1925, ACF.

⁶⁵Celestine Bittle, 453.

Sisters who staffed the Mission school. A trade school was to be established in the new building and a large modern building to house the female residents was envisioned.⁶⁶

On Labor Day, 7 September 1925, the school, officially called “The Ernest G. Miller Foundation,” was formally dedicated with Msgr. Joseph Rainer presiding. Rainer presented Miller with the papal decoration, “*Pro Pontifice et Ecclesia*,” as a token of appreciation from His Holiness, Pope Pius XI, for his contributions to the Church’s ministry to African American Mission of St. Benedict and the Chinese Missions overseas.

The dedication ceremony of the school consisted of a Mass and banquet. The sermon and other speeches given on this occasion provide an insight into how the Church’s ministry to the African American and in Milwaukee, in particular, was viewed. The sermon at the dedication service was preached by Father Michael Weyer. He praised Lincoln Valle for “spreading the faith among the people of his race... which shows ...that Catholic laymen have taken an important part of this (Church’s ministry to African Americans) work.”⁶⁷

At the banquet following the dedication Mass for the school, Father Joseph E. Eckert from St. Elizabeth Parish, an African American parish in Chicago, gave one of the speeches. Eckert asserted that African Americans make good Catholics. He used his growing parish as an example where there were nearly eight hundred children in the parish

⁶⁶Memorandum to the State Board of Control of Wisconsin, July 13, 1925 and Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Provincial, July 17, 1925, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 3, July 1925 to December 1926; Fr. Philip Steffes to Dear Friend, no date given, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 5, May 1924 to May 1925, ACF; Celestine Bittle, *Romance*, 453-454.

⁶⁷“Sermon preached by Rev. Fr. Weyer at the Dedication of St. Benedict the Moor Institute, September 7, 1925,” The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 6, July 1925 to December 1926, ACF.

school and a few thousand parishioners. Masses were well attended and the parish was self-supporting. He asserted that the African American just needed to be given a chance in society, but most white people were unwilling to give that chance. The Catholic Church, according to Eckert, only recently started to minister to African Americans, especially in the South. Such a delay on the part of the Catholic Church resulted in a decided disadvantage with the Protestant churches. In the nation, Protestant churches for African Americans numbered 47,000 while Catholics had only 132 churches. There were fifty-two seminaries to train Protestant African American ministers while the Catholic Church had only one. Eckert's point, of course, was that the Catholic Church lagged behind others in evangelizing and ministering to African Americans and education was essential in winning converts and giving African Americans the chance they need to rise in life.⁶⁸ In this respect, Eckert merely reiterated the sentiments of the African American Lay Congress Movement in the 1890s in its emphasis on Catholic education and the position taken by Rome since the Second Plenary Council in 1866 in urging American bishops to give greater attention in their ministry to African Americans.

James O'Connor, a lawyer who had done legal work for St. Benedict, also spoke at the dedication banquet about a moral obligation whites had to the African American race. Historically, Europeans and Americans, seeking to make money, engaged in the slave trade. They were cruelly treated such that fifty percent of them died on the sea voyage. Four million African Americans were enslaved when the Civil War erupted. "That we

⁶⁸Speech given by Fr. Eckert of Chicago, Ill., at the banquet on the occasion of the dedication of the St. Benedict the Moor Institute, September 7, 1925, Milwaukee, Wis., The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 6, July 1925 to December 1926, ACF.

Americans owe a greater obligation to the colored race than to any other is beyond doubt. Therefore, it is our duty to do all we can to improve them, to make them better.”⁶⁹ Thus O’Connor seemed to subtly raise the question of reparations for African Americans. He also reflected to some extent Father Stephen Eckert’s idea that a “debt” was owed by American whites to African Americans. O’Connor saw the debt or obligation stemming from the years of slavery and cruel treatment. Eckert, on the other hand, believed the debt resulted from prejudice and discrimination that denied opportunities to African Americans after slavery ended.

On 21 September 1925, a couple of weeks after the dedication of the new school, Ernest Miller unexpectedly died after a short illness. St. Benedict had lost its greatest benefactor. In his will Miller bequeathed \$200,000 to the Mission.⁷⁰ It was not until September 1926 that St. Benedict received the sum of \$152,653.20 from the estate of Miller in the form of Liberty Bonds at market value. With this amount, \$100,000 on notes was paid to the Second Ward Bank and the remainder went to pay mortgages on the properties on the corner of Ninth and State Streets, 295, 297, and 299 Ninth Street, leaving a debt of \$38,000.⁷¹

In the end it was the incredible generosity of Miller that was responsible for the building of the new church, the purchase of the Marquette Academy building for the new

⁶⁹Extract, Fourth Speaker, Mr. O’Connor, Dedication banquet of St. Benedict the Moor Institute, Sept. 7, 1925, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 6, July 1925 to December 1926, ACF.

⁷⁰Celestine Bittle, *Romance*, 453-454.

⁷¹“Historical Data Relative to St. Benedict’s Mission,” The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 7, January 1927 to December 1929, ACF.

school, and the payment a debts incurred from the acquisition of parcels of property in the two-square block campus of St. Benedict. While St. Benedict had many other benefactors, Miller's contribution was most significant.

Other Sources of Funding

Messmer did help financially to support St. Benedict Mission by making personal donations as well as through the Indian and Negro Missions in the United States annual collection. On a fairly regular basis, Messmer sent fifty or one-hundred dollars or made a contribution in a visit or ceremony at the Mission. In a visit to the Mission in October 1923, Messmer donated fifty dollars because he would not able to attend the St. Benedict Bazaar the following week. He also said that he would give one-half of the money collected in the archdiocese in the annual collection on the first Sunday in Lent for the Indian and Negro Missions in the United States. He said he would write a letter of introduction on behalf of St. Benedict Mission to the priest in Baltimore, Father Edward Dyer, who was in charge of the collection in the country. Dyer served as vicar general of the Sulpicians in the United States, rector of St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore, and as executive secretary of the Negro and Indian Commission.⁷² Dyer headed the board that distributed the funds from the nationwide annual collection for the Indian and Negro Home Missions taken on the first Sunday in Lent. If St. Benedict did not receive a substantial amount from the national fund, Messmer threatened that he would not turn over any money to them from the annual archdiocesan collection. The archbishop

⁷²Stephen J. Ochs, *Desegregating the Altar—The Josephites and the Struggle for Black Priests, 1871-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 229.

expressed his enthusiasm over the work done at St. Benedict and his conviction that St. Benedict would be the main Negro center in the northwestern states.⁷³

St. Benedict did receive money from the Indian and Negro Mission fund, but not nearly in the amount that the Capuchins and Messmer expected. While the Archbishop's promised one-half of what was collected in the Milwaukee archdiocese, this statement clearly violated the procedures that the American bishops had established when the Negro and Indian Home Mission Collection was established. On 2 November 1923, Dyer wrote to Steffes. While it is not known how much money Steffes requested, the Indian and Negro Mission Board considered it too large to be able to honor. They also indicated that they had many urgent appeals and they tried to do something for all of them. Dyer clarified the procedure of applying for funds which seems to imply that this was the first time Steffes had applied for money from the collection. Dyer stated, "The rule of the Commission is that all applications must be made by the Most Reverend and the Right Reverend Ordinaries (head bishop or archbishop of a diocese/archdiocese) and the monies voted are at their disposal."⁷⁴ In the end, St. Benedict received only \$1,000. Dyer explained,

...the distributing board decided that the amounts involved were so large that what the resources at their disposal would enable them to do would be practically of little or no avail. Besides, there were numerous and in many cases urgent appeals from various mission centers that they recognized could be helped quite effectively by the small amounts that

⁷³Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Benno Aichinger, October 18, 1923, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 4, June 1923 to April 1924, ACF.

⁷⁴Fr. Dyer to Fr. Steffes, November 2, 1923, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 4, June 1923 to April 1924, ACF.

they could dispose of.⁷⁵

For the next several years, St. Benedict applied for help to the Indian and Negro Mission Board and received between \$1,000 and \$1,400.⁷⁶ While this money was very small in the overall operating expenses of St. Benedict, it must be remembered that the Indian and Negro Home Mission collection was neither well supported by American Catholics nor by some priests. Also, the fund was founded mainly to help African American missions in the southern states. Thus, St. Benedict did receive money from the annual Indian and Negro Mission fund, but the amount was small and a mere token contribution.

The Establishment of a High School

In the mid-1920s, there was a manageable financial state of the Mission along with an increasing student enrollment and stable parish membership. In August 1926, Steffes received permission from his Provincial to begin a two-year commercial high school if he were able to get the Racine Dominicans to staff it. Reflecting the views of African American leaders like Booker T. Washington, a commercial high school was seen by Steffes as being more useful to African American children rather than a real college-prep high school. Steffes, of course, needed to raise money for the high school and had to provide additional accommodations for more older students.⁷⁷

In a brochure designed to solicit funds for a boarding high school, Steffes referred

⁷⁵Fr. Dyer to Fr. Benno Aichinger, December 23, 1923, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 4, June 1923 to April 1924, ACF.

⁷⁶St. Benedict the Moor House Chronicle, June 14, 1933, 256, St. Benedict the Moor Parish (SBMP).

⁷⁷Fr. Benno Aichinger to Fr. Philip Steffes, August 24, 1926; Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Benno Aichinger, August 30, 1926, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 6, July 1925 to December 1926, ACF.

to a letter written by Pope Pius XI in February 1925 to the American bishops dealing with the missions. The Pope urged greater interest in the missions and especially recommended the training of native priests. Statistics showed that there were proportionally very few African American Catholics. Out of eleven million African Americans in the United States, only 250,000 were Catholic. The brochure stated that a boarding high school for African American students was an appropriate response to the Pope's exhortation. St. Benedict was one of the few boarding schools for African American children in the middle and northwestern states, drawing students from thirteen different states. Ninety-seven percent of the students arrived at St. Benedict as non-Catholics, but almost all later adopted the Catholic faith. It stated that last February sixty-six children were baptized. Hence, the brochure contended that St. Benedict the Moor Boarding School was a vital ministry of the Catholic Church to the African American. Adding a high school department was the logical next step and could prove to be fertile ground for the cultivation of African American priestly vocations as urged by the Pope.⁷⁸

The brochure also described the home environment of many St. Benedict's students and alleged racism among Catholics. It stated that most of their children came from "unfortunate homes." The need for a boarding school was to protect both the boys and girls in their most dangerous period of life. Reminiscent of Eckert's belief, the brochure contended that a day high school could not sufficiently supervise the children in their homes. Since many African American parents were cooks or porters on trains, or

⁷⁸"Are You Ready for High School—But Where Shall We Go?," no date. The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 6, July 1925 to December 1926, ACF.

scrubbed offices during night hours, or were janitors, they had to work during hours when others take recreation or rest. They were therefore unable to provide adequate supervision of their children during after-school hours.

Unless a Catholic high school is erected that takes care of pupils after they leave here, our work is practically paralyzed and the progress of our colored people as practical church members is hampered. We are willing to enlarge our institute and especially equip it with an industrial department since our colored people are seldom engaged in office work and thus offer them these opportunities.⁷⁹

Lastly, the brochure raised the topic of racist practices among Catholics and stated the incompatibility of racism with Catholic teachings.

Religious conditions in this country among the colored are still lamentable. The practice of the Catholic religion is only too often made impossible for the Negro on account of his color. In too many they attempt to attend Catholic services, they are directly turned out....they are too often considered inferior beings having no immortal soul....Whosoever draws the color line when there is a question of religion is not truly Catholic for the Catholic Church embraces all nations and races of men.⁸⁰

With smaller enrollments during the Depression years, Steffes' plan for a boarding high school became a reality since providing accommodations at the Mission was no longer a deterrent. In August 1934 Thom, who had recently been re-elected Provincial of the Dominican Sisters of Racine, approved of the proposal to open a ninth grade at St. Benedict and add a grade each year until a full four-year high school program was established.

When the Mission school expanded to include a high school, the need for a gymnasium to provide an adequate athletic program became apparent. A gymnasium was

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Ibid.

erected along with a laundry in October 1937 for a cost of about \$60,000.00. The gym was given the name of “Blessed Martin de Porres Gymnasium” and served the children of the Mission school and the parish as well as outside groups. In 1947 another story was added on the top of the gym for a dormitory for the older boys⁸¹ The gym was an immediate success as Steffes commented in a letter to the Provincial in 1939, “The gymnasium is now well used. Every evening – for months in advance– is already booked. It brings us in contact with all our young colored folks. This has changed their attitude toward us considerably.”⁸²

Other changes came to the high school in the school year of 1946-1947. At the Chapter of the Racine Dominican in the summer of 1946, Mother Cleopha Pell was elected Provincial. She decided that the Sisters would no longer supervise the dormitories at St. Benedict. While one of her motives surely was to reduce the number of Sisters at St. Benedict, she went beyond this point and seemed to be trying to micro-manage or, at least, give very prescriptive suggestions. In a letter to the Capuchin Provincial, Father Edmund Kraemer, Steffes explains,

She plans an entirely new set up at St. Bens – Sisters will no longer take care of the boys in the dormitories. She wants to switch the girls’ houses on Ninth Street with the boys’ house from sixth grade through high school. All this one week before school is to start. Such a move would require changes in plumbing and cannot possibly be done. We have 81 boys in grades 1-5 who have already bought their clothes. We cannot tell them to stay home now.⁸³

⁸¹*The Messenger* 13 (1950): 157; *The Messenger* 6, no. 6 (December 1937): 169, ACF.

⁸²Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Foley, February 9, 1939, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 11, St. Benedict 1938-1940, ACF.

⁸³Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Edmund Kraemer, August 22, 1946, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 13, St. Benedict 1945-1949, ACF.

Once again, the issue of the availability of the Sisters put the future of the Mission school in jeopardy and hundreds of boarding students could be adversely affected. Pell's timing was incredibly poor and only surpassed by her granite intransigence on the matter. Steffes spoke to her explaining the problem with the very short notice and the difficulties in getting supervisors, but she refused to yield at all. Milwaukee Archbishop Moses E. Kiley had Msgr. Roman Atkielski go to Racine and speak to Pell. Her answer was that due to the lack of personnel, she had to act as she did. Why or how the lack of personnel would suddenly emerge to such an extreme point one week before the start of school remained a mystery. Immediately, Steffes sent out appeals to various Brotherhoods and Sisterhoods. A novena of Masses was offered for the successful outcome of the issue. A temporary solution to the problem was given when Mother Fidelis Kreiter, head of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, informed Steffes that she would send two Sisters on August 29 to supervise the boys living in the cottages. The two Sisters arrived and assumed the task of supervision, thus, ending the crisis at the start of the 1946-1947 school term.⁸⁴

Steffes tried to secure an order of Brothers for the Mission school for the 1947-1948 school term. For a time, two Brotherhoods were willing to come, the Christian Brothers from Glencoe, Missouri, and the Presentation Brothers from Ottawa, Canada. The Christian Brothers were willing to take supervision of the dormitory, gym, and playgrounds and the teaching of the boys from grades six through twelve. According to their Rule, they could not teach girls. However, the Sisters did not want the Brothers to teach, but only to do domestic work. At this point, the Christian Brothers withdrew their

⁸⁴*The Messenger* 9, no. 6 (December 1946): 199-200, ACF.

offer to come. The Provincial of the Presentation Brothers in Canada visited St. Benedict and, by April 1947 decided to establish a house at the Mission to work at the school.

Three Presentation Brothers arrived on 3 September 1947 to take charge of the boys from the seventh to twelfth grades. They were given living quarters in the newly constructed dormitory above the gymnasium. School opened on September 8 with over 300 students.⁸⁵

But, the reach of Pell and her micro-managing propensities was still to be felt. Steffes described the controversy that emerged at the “last minute” over whether the Presentation Brothers or the Dominican Sisters would teach the 7th and 8th grades.

Originally the Provincial (Pell) wanted the Brothers to take over all the grades from 7 to 12. To this they (the Sisters) objected. I wrote the Provincial and compromised in permitting them to retain the 7th and 8th grade boys. A few days before the coming of the Brothers they (the Sisters) changed their minds and wanted the Brothers to take care of this group. I was in suspense as to what decision to make since there was barely enough time to confer with their Provincial again on the matter. I mentioned this to the local Superioress who in turn claimed that one of the Sisters could take over; however, the Superioress went to the Motherhouse and returned with the verdict that the Brothers must take over all in the last moment.⁸⁶

Pell also insisted that the number of boarding students that the Sisters were to supervise had to be reduced. She also informed Steffes that the Sisters would not be permitted to perform some of the non-teaching jobs the Sisters had previously done. In a letter to the Capuchin Provincial Steffes explained,

Over and above this they (the Sisters) have curtailed the enrollment of the Boarders considerably claiming that they were only able to take care of so

⁸⁵*The Messenger* 10, no. 4 (July 1947): 179; *The Messenger* 10, no. 6 (November 1947): 264; Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Edmund Kraemer, May 12, 1947, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 13, St. Benedict 1945-1949, ACF.

⁸⁶Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Edmund Kraemer, September 16, 1947, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 13, St. Benedict 1945-1949, ACF.

many although the Brothers have to do all the cleaning of the school, dormitory, and playground with the boys' supervision and teaching. They (the Brothers) must even supervise the boys in the dining room.... It is as though they had gone on a strike. I am convinced that the local Sisters would be willing to pitch in as in the past but the Reverend Mother will not allow it and, as you have experienced, one cannot argue with the Reverend Mother.⁸⁷

Like Thom before her, Pell had the interests of the Dominican Sisters at St.

Benedict in mind. Their workload was incredible with teaching and then supervision duties during after school hours. However, her timing and approach in addressing such legitimate concerns was very poor. In later years, Pell seemed to have changed and took a less-demanding position. The high school division of St. Benedict the Moor High School did close for two years in 1948 and 1949, except for ninth grade, and re-opened in 1950. Pell agreed to send two high school teachers for September 1950 and to supply two more until the four years were completed. She also agreed that the classes should have forty to fifty pupils, quite a concession from her initial approach in dealing with St. Benedict.

St. Benedict and the Crisis of the Great Depression

A census taken by young Capuchins in the summer of 1935 of the African American community in Milwaukee found "dire poverty stared at them in nearly every home. This was also the main reason given by the majority of parishioners for non-attendance at Sunday services. To overcome this difficulty, numerous pleas for help were directed to the St. Vincent de Paul Society."⁸⁸ Saddled in the thirties with a decade of deprivation and extreme poverty, African Americans continued to experience long-

⁸⁷Ibid.

⁸⁸"Back to the Days of St. Paul," July, 1935, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 10, St. Benedict 1935-1937, ACF.

standing prejudice and discrimination from whites as economic opportunities vanished.

The Great Depression had an adverse effect on the Mission school's enrollment. In 1932, St. Benedict started the school year with only eighty-two boarders. Steffes explained, "The colored people have not even sufficient money to pay the traveling expenses to send their children to us."⁸⁹ The *Status Animarum* report of 1932 indicated an enrollment of 229 children in the school (day students and boarders). The school year of 1933 opened with only 144 students and in 1934 with about 200 students.⁹⁰ This contrasts to the time before the Depression in 1928 when the enrollment stood at 290 students.⁹¹ In writing to his Provincial, Steffes said in August 1934, "At present, we have 86 boarders and in the Mission over 105 city children."⁹² When school opened, Steffes reported,

We have at the present time around 200 children in the school. Applications are only now beginning to come in greater numbers. For a time it looked bad. In fact, we have very few pupils from out of town. Almost all of the old ones returned.⁹³

The school enrollment numbers beginning in 1930 reflected another change. In February 1930 the Juvenile Civil Court Authorities faced a problem of having twenty-seven dependent African American children and nowhere to place them. The State of

⁸⁹Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Benno Aichinger, September 9, 1932, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 9, St. Benedict 1932-1934, ACF.

⁹⁰Ibid.; *Status Animarum* 1932; Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Benno Aichinger, September 8, 1933; Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Benno Aichinger, September 14, 1934, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 9, St. Benedict 1932-1934, ACF.

⁹¹"Archdiocese of Milwaukee, *Status Animarum*, Church and School Report for year ending December 31, 1928," The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 7, January 1927 to December 1929, ACF.

⁹²Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Benno Aichinger, August 1934, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 9, St. Benedict 1932-1934, ACF.

⁹³Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Benno Aichinger, September 14, 1934, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 9, St. Benedict 1932-1934, ACF.

Wisconsin was willing to pay three dollars per week to any institution that accepted these children. The juvenile court asked St. Benedict to accept some of the children. At first, Steffes was reluctant because it could detract from the good reputation the boarding school enjoyed in the community. State officials made a second appeal claiming that the children were not delinquents, but orphans. Steffes feared an unfavorable stand by the State toward the Mission if he refused a second time. He recalled an episode a few years earlier when the State Board of Control attempted to cripple the Mission by accusing it of imposing new expenses on the State through their policy of bringing children from out of state into Wisconsin. The State Board of Control also contacted Messmer, hoping to obtain an ally. However, the archbishop responded by telling them to leave the Capuchins alone, that they knew what they were doing. When that approach failed, some Board of Control members tried to insert in the new Children's Code a clause stating that when an institution admits children from another State, a bond of one thousand dollars per child be given to the State by the institution. Now the Juvenile Civil Court was asking St. Benedict to accept dependent orphans. State authorities were not as aggressive as they were in the past incident. They assured Steffes that they had no intention of putting St. Benedict out of existence and urged Steffes to reconsider their request. They promised that the children sent by the State was a temporary move and the State would take them after their studies were ended. Also, if a student became a discipline problem, the State promised to relieve the school of the student. The school would be paid twelve dollars per month per child by the State. After consultation with the Capuchin Provincial Mueller and others, the consensus was that it was better to have a cooperative relationship with the State rather

than an adversarial one. Steffes agreed to accept students who were charges of the State of Wisconsin on the conditions that St. Benedict could select the desirable children and refuse the undesirable ones and, more importantly, the State promised that St. Benedict would remain a private, charitable institution.⁹⁴

While the Great Depression had an adverse effect on enrollment, it had a similar effect on revenue. In the 1934-1935 school year, Steffes figured that the average expense to run the boarding school was \$3,000 per month. However, only an average of \$500 came from room and board each month during the school year and only \$200 during the vacation period. Thus, the monthly deficit hovered between \$2,500 to \$2,800 each month.⁹⁵

At the same time, archdiocesan taxes increased for St. Benedict despite Milwaukee Archbishop Stritch's promises to help them. Steffes expressed his dissatisfaction with the lack of financial support of the Archbishop in this letter in 1933 to the Capuchin Provincial.

We are being taxed higher...But, we are not drawing a salary nor are we taking anything out of the collections, and the amount of collections does not cover current expenses. We are not able to drum anything out of our parishioners either, for they are all living on charity. We ourselves help many of them by clothing, meals, etc. We can collect no school fees whatever from our city pupils and even give them daily a free dinner. All the stationary and books must be given free....

⁹⁴Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Provincial, October 22, 1929, February 9, 1930, and March 13, 1930; Fr. Benedict Mueller to Fr. Philip Steffes, March 17, 1930, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 8, St. Benedict the Moor, October 1929 to September 1931, ACF.

⁹⁵Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Benno Aichinger, May 1, 1933 and December 18, 1934, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 9, St. Benedict 1932-1934; Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Benno Aichinger, August 20, 1935, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 10, St. Benedict 1935-1937, ACF.

Now I do not know what to do. Every time I meet his Excellency he asks me about our financial standing and in turn very generously promises assistance but actually acts the other way.⁹⁶

The problem of Archdiocesan assessments for St. Benedict continued to the end of Stritch's tenure in Milwaukee and was exacerbated when he withheld money earmarked by the Indian and Negro Mission Commission for St. Benedict for at least two years. Again, Steffes revealed his disdain for the Archbishop's tactics in December 1938 in his letter to his Provincial, Father Theodosius Foley.

Pardon me if I pester you again relative to the Archdiocesan dues.... he (Stritch) at that time dispensed us from one year's taxes. However, we were nothing ahead since he withheld from our quota of the Indian and Negro Commission for a period of two years, since it depends on his decision whether or not we receive the allotted amount. Our quota always came to us the latter part of November. So far I have not received it this year, which is an indication that we are faring again as we did previously....⁹⁷

Stritch's actions were not callous. He found himself in a difficult situation given the fragile economic condition of the Archdiocese and the overwhelming needs for relief among the poor. Upon his arrival in Milwaukee, the Archbishop was besieged with letters from pastors describing the dire financial straits of their parishes and their parishioners which, in some cases, resulted in parishes defaulting on their archdiocesan assessments. A major bonding agency of the Archdiocese collapsed in 1931 leaving its credit standing vulnerable. Then, the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist burnt down in early 1935. Stritch rebuilt only the minimum so as not to add more indebtedness on the archdiocese.

⁹⁶Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Benno Aichinger, May 1, 1933, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File File 9, St. Benedict 1932-1934, ACF.

⁹⁷Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Theodosius Foley, December 13, 1938, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 11, St. Benedict 1938-1940, ACF.

He also cancelled plans to build a new major seminary. Despite his policy of fiscal retrenchment, the charitable resources of the Archdiocese proved insufficient to meet the wave of Depression casualties. Church historian, Steven M. Avella, explained,

He (Stritch) steadfastly refused to spend archdiocesan monies on projects that might portray the Church as indifferent to the suffering of the poor and unemployed...But the policy of retrenchment was not enough to assist the struggling Catholic social welfare agencies hard-hit by the Depression. These operations included several infant asylums, orphanages, and the St. Vincent de Paul Society, all needed substantial transfusions of funds to remain afloat.⁹⁸

The archbishop, with the help of a few wealthy Catholics, organized an emergency relief committee, and made a special appeal in the community. They realized their goal of \$75,000. But, this modest amount could not adequately meet the overwhelming cries for relief. Still, Stritch continued tirelessly promoting the needs of the poor and became known in some circles as the “Archbishop of Charity.”⁹⁹

Another victim of the Depression was property prices. For St. Benedict, which was regularly buying property, this was advantageous provided they had the money to make the purchase. The Japps’ property was the last lot and house not belonging to St. Benedict in the “Mission block.” Before the Stock Market Crash and Depression, the Japps asked \$28,000 for their property. With the coming of the Depression, the price was lowered to \$25,000 and then \$20,000. It then fell to an asking price of \$14,000 and by August 1933, the sale price was \$12,500. The Mission then indicated their interest to

⁹⁸Steven M. Avella, “Samuel Stritch and Milwaukee Catholicism, 1930-1940,” *Milwaukee History* 13, no. 3 (Autumn 1990): 72.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 71-73.

purchase the property.¹⁰⁰

The Catholic African American Community in Milwaukee in 1935

While the size of the African American community in the city in the 1930s remained a very small portion of its total population and the number of Catholics within this minority was only a handful of people, it is worthwhile at some point to try to estimate the number of African American Catholics in Milwaukee and the nation. In the summer of 1935, a census was taken by several young Capuchins, going door to door. It reported 764 African American Catholics in Milwaukee. The largest religious denomination was Baptist with 1,320 members. Catholics were second largest, followed by 596 Methodists, 177 Holiness, 98 Spiritualists, 37 Episcopalians, 32 Seventh Day Adventists, 11 Lutherans, and the rest scattered in other religions. The census report also stated that 1,419 African Americans were not members of any religion and 51 people attended churches of several religions.¹⁰¹ In its *Status Animarum* report for 1934, St. Benedict parish claimed 640 parishioners or “Number of Souls.” There were 149 families, of whom 69 were Catholic (both parents) and 80 were Mixed (one Catholic parent and one non-Catholic parent). Perhaps one explanation for the discrepancy between the 764 Catholics found in the census and the 640 “souls” in the *Status Animarum* can be attributed to the Great Depression. Such an economic catastrophe adversely affected the numbers of congregants attending church because some could not possibly make any financial

¹⁰⁰Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Benno Aichinger, August 2, 1933 and August 8, 1933, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 9, St. Benedict 1932-1934, ACF.

¹⁰¹“Back to the Days of St. Paul.” July 1935, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 10, St. Benedict the Moor 1935-1937, ACF.

contribution, and, thus, chose not to attend.¹⁰²

In the city of Milwaukee in 1935, one can estimate its total population at 582,859 people and the African American population at 8,161, or 1.4 percent of the population.¹⁰³ Given 764 African American Catholics in Milwaukee in 1935 out of a city African American population total of 8,161, they represent 9.3 per cent of the group. While the total number of 760 African American Catholics may be small, the 9.3 per cent figure of the African American population in the city of Milwaukee is comparatively large. One year later, in 1936, in a letter to the American bishops from the Vatican's Sacred Consistorial Congregation, it stated there were 250,000 African American Catholics in the entire nation out of a total African American population of 13,000,000. This meant that African American Catholics comprised only 1.9 per cent of the total African American population in the United States in 1936. Milwaukee, having 9.3 per cent Catholic of its African American population is significantly larger and suggests greater efforts and effective church institutions and personnel actively reaching out and working with the city's African American community.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰²*Status Animarum* for 1934, The Provincial Files, Box 9, Files 9, St. Benedict the Moor, June 1923 to April 1924, January 1927 to December 1929, and 1932-1934, ACF.

¹⁰³Trotter, Table 5.1, 149. The census reported Milwaukee's population in 1930 at 578,249 people and in 1940 at 587,472 people. One can safely assume that there was little population influx or exodus during the Depression and the increase of 9,223 people between 1930 and 1940 was due mainly to the natural population growth rate. Distributing the increase of 9,233 people over the decade of the 1930s means approximately 923 additional people each year or 582,859 in 1935. The number of African Americans in Milwaukee in 1930, according to the census, was 7,501 and 8,821 in 1940. This means that from 1930 to 1940, Milwaukee's African American population increased by 1,320 or an average of 132 people each year or 8,161 African Americans in 1935.

¹⁰⁴Ochs, 353; "Back to The Days Of St. Paul." July 1935, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 10, St. Benedict the Moor 1935-1937, ACF; *The Messenger* 5, no. 10 (December 1935): 45-6.

Aftermath and Summary

Father Phillip Steffes proved to be a perfect fit for St. Benedict the Moor. Under his long-term leadership, St. Benedict was able to blossom. Steffes was born 28 January 1890 on a farm at St. Joseph, Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin. He was described as a shy and sensitive whose early life of hard farm work was compounded by the fact that his health was never robust. His desire to become a priest came in part from the fact that his uncle was a priest in the Grand Rapids (Michigan) Diocese. He entered the Capuchin novitiate in 1909 and struggled academically during his seminary years. His six year course of philosophy and theology was at St. Francis Friary under the guidance of Aichinger who was the head of the seminary at that time. His academic challenges bothered him so much that he even had nightmares at times. Steffes persevered and was ordained a priest in 1916. His first assignment was a five-year stay at Our Lady of Sorrows Church in New York. Our Lady of Sorrows was established in 1867 as a German parish. In the last part of the nineteenth century, a wave of Jewish immigrants arrived and the Germans moved out. At the turn of the century, Italian immigrants began to arrive. This became difficult for the Capuchins since the vast majority did not speak Italian. It was here that Steffes displayed an ability to make friends easily with children of the less privileged classes. In 1921 he was assigned to St. Elizabeth Church in Milwaukee. One year later, he succeeded Schaff as director of St. Benedict the Moor Mission. He accepted the post with mixed feelings. While he was pleased to work with African Americans, he had misgivings about taking charge while Eckert was also there. Though Eckert never showed any resentment over having to yield the direction of the Mission to someone else,

Steffes felt that he was taking over authority that rightfully belonged to Eckert. Steffes was at St. Benedict's from 1922 until his death in 1950, providing stability that enabled the Mission to re-constitute itself after returning from Corliss and undergo a remarkable period of growth and development. With determination, dedication, and hard work, Steffes grew into his position, becoming an effective leader of the Mission and in the Milwaukee community.¹⁰⁵ While Eckert received recognition for his critical role as the first resident pastor, Steffes was the unsung "second-founder" of the Mission.

St. Benedict survived the Great Depression and the many other challenges. As St. Benedict School became more widely known, it enjoyed a robust enrollment. (See Table 4 in Appendix) The number of applications surpassed available space and the school faced the "happy problem" of a waiting list. Based on the correspondence from the start of the school in 1913 to the 1950s, the quality of students steadily improved. The students in the first decades of the school were a challenging group. Several times in his letters to the Provincial, Steffes referred to this fact. In 1922 he stated,

Conditions, of course, are already a hundred percent better, but not by far as they should be....Perhaps you know that some of these children have already been in a reform school. Others were sent here because the parents themselves could not get along with them but did not want to have the disgrace of having them sent to a reform school.¹⁰⁶

Having a long waiting list of student applicants for many years and having students from as many as twenty-three different states suggested that many other dioceses in the

¹⁰⁵*The Messenger* 13 (1950): 153-155, ACF; Celestine Bittle, 171, 378, 392-395.

¹⁰⁶Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Benno Aichinger, October 17, 1922, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 3, Hosp ad S. Benedictum, April 1922 to July 1923, ACF.

country were simply not addressing in a comprehensive way the needs of the African American community in their locale. Steffes, as late as 1948, referred to this matter in a letter to his Provincial.

With only eight or nine small institutions for Negro children in the States for a population of 14,000 there will always be a dire need for institutions for children from unfortunate homes. We have never been wanting applications. Though I advocated repeatedly many more institutions of this nature to many clergy of the Clergy Conference on Negro Welfare, none of them have had the courage to establish an institution for fear of financial difficulties.¹⁰⁷

In a brochure prepared in January 1950 and entitled “What Have Your Alms Accomplished? A Prospectus – St. Benedict the Moor Mission,” Steffes gave more concrete data and statistics pointing to the needs of the African American community in the nation.

There are only eleven Catholic boarding schools and orphanages in the U.S. and most of these are comparably small. Yet, at present, these institutions must suffice one-tenth of the population of the U.S. More institutions are needed. 97 percent of the applications are from non-Catholics. We have to reject over 4,000 worthy applications. At present, the eleven Catholic boarding schools... are filled to capacity. All of these schools turn down applicants because of lack of space.¹⁰⁸

Perhaps the many struggles Steffes encountered during his tenure as head of St. Benedict the Moor Mission in the decades of the twenties, thirties, and forties took a toll on him, physically. He was never exceptionally robust. Some of his brother-friars were surprised that he was physically able to shoulder the various activities and responsibilities

¹⁰⁷Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Provincial, July 13, 1948, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 13, St. Benedict 1945-1949, ACF.

¹⁰⁸“What Have Your Alms Accomplished? A Prospectus–St. Benedict the Moor Mission,” January 31, 1950, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 14, St. Benedict 1950-1951, ACF.

of the Mission for so many years. However, in early February 1950, Steffes began to complain about fatigue and weakness which hindered his work. He thought he may have had the flu and tried to fight it off instead of going to bed. About a month later, a physical examination found his blood pressure at 208. Since his blood pressure had always been low, this was alarming. His doctor told him he must ease up considerably on his work or he would have face the possibility of a stroke or paralysis. He spent about one week in bed suffering from fatigue and from a lack of appetite. He experienced a marked difficulty in his speech and went for another examination by a heart specialists. The exam revealed heart damage had already occurred and he was ordered to bed. Almost immediately, he began to slip into a semi-comatose condition, the result of a stroke or of a brain tumor. He received the sacrament of Extreme Unction on Sunday afternoon from Father Celestine Berchmans and was conscious. He then slipped into unconsciousness and died in the early morning hours of Wednesday, 5 April 1950. Since his death occurred during Holy Week, the body did not lie in state in the church until Easter Sunday afternoon. The solemn Requiem High Mass was sung by Father Cyprian Abler, Provincial, on Easter Monday. Archbishop Kiley as well as many monsignori and about sixty priests attended. He was buried in Mt. Calvary.¹⁰⁹

Upon reflecting on the life of Steffes, he played a more important role than Aichinger, Schaff, and the Racine Dominican Sisters who pressured Thom to keep them at St. Benedict. It was understand the leadership of Steffes that St. Benedict the Moor became a stable institution that enabled growth and vibrancy to occur. The path leading to

¹⁰⁹*The Messenger* 13 (1950): 159-160, ACF.

such a viable institution meant overcoming what seemed to be an unending number of struggles and challenges: attempting to re-establish the school after the Corliss fiasco, securing a congregation of Sisters on a permanent basis, futile attempts to obtain assistance from the Drexel and the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, resisting pressure from Messmer and Grieb to purchase the Bohemian property, the threats from the city with the pre-groundbreaking work on the new church, not bending to the thinly-veiled racist motivations of city officials to condemn the Mission property because it bordered the new Civic Center, the canonical transfer of the Mission from the archdiocese to the Capuchins, the difficult negotiations with the Jesuits over the sale of Marquette Academy, the survival of the school during the Depression years, the establishment of a high school program, the constant struggle for money to sustain the Mission's operations while upgrading facilities, and the purchase of additional property. These struggles could be compared to potholes on the road that led eventually to the stabilizing of St. Benedict. In the end, St. Benedict the Moor would be recognized in the nation as one of the few comprehensive Catholic educational institutions in the Catholic Church's outreach to African Americans.

However, in addition to meeting educational needs of the African American community, Steffes was also interested in addressing social needs, particularly health care. Thus, in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, its ministry to African Americans at St. Benedict not only provided a top quality educational institution and a vibrant religious community in a new and beautiful church for worship, it also established a health care institution.

In a society that segregated people on the basis of race, St. Benedict the Moor stood as a highly desirable institution for African Americans. It helped realize the

decades-old desire of Catholic African American lay leaders to provide a Catholic education for African American children. It supported the continued urging of curia officials in Rome that American bishops give more attention to conversion and ministerial efforts to African Americans. By today's standards, one may be critical of a somewhat paternalistic attitude behind some motives. However, such paternalism was based on the recognition that African Americans were disadvantaged because they were denied opportunities and not because of some innate or biological inferiority as ascribed by some intellectuals of the time. Despite often-crowded and poor conditions, the Capuchin priests and Dominican Sisters who served at St. Benedict toiled with tremendous zeal in enabling St. Benedict to survive and prosper.

CHAPTER 6

ST. ANTHONY'S HOSPITAL

Besides providing education, an important feature of the Catholic Church's outreach to the African American community in Milwaukee was the ministering to various social needs. In this area health and medical care was a critical need of poor African Americans. In 1931 St Anthony Hospital was opened as part of the St. Benedict complex. On one level, the idea of a hospital was consistent with the philosophy of St. Benedict the Moor as far as addressing religious, educational, and social needs of the African American community that it served. However, the Capuchins had no experience in hospitals and financing such an endeavor seemed formidable at any time, especially during the Great Depression.

Milwaukee County as a Provider of Medical Care to the Poor

Milwaukee County was one of the early providers of medical care starting the mid-nineteenth century. When a cholera epidemic threatened Milwaukee from 1848 to 1850, there was no County hospital to care for the afflicted. Milwaukee County turned to St. John's Infirmary run by the Sisters of Charity for help. In 1852 the County purchased a one hundred-sixty acre farm in Wauwatosa and established a County Poor Farm or Almshouse. In 1860 construction began on a County hospital of thirty-one beds on this site as a refuge for charity cases only. While the hospital did separate the contagiously ill from the paupers in the Almshouse, it was plagued with some serious problems. First, there were the concerns about hygiene. Flaws in the ventilation and sewage systems

emitted foul and unhealthy odors and vapors. And, there was the problem of the location of the hospital in Wauwatosa, far away from the center core of the city where the poor lived.¹

Medical care provided by Milwaukee County was also usually plagued with severe overcrowding. As Milwaukee became a greater industrial center rather than just a commercial center in the last decades of the nineteenth century, thousands of southern and eastern European immigrants came to meet the demand for labor in the burgeoning factories. Milwaukee's population reflected these changes as the number of city residents jumped from 138,500 in 1880 to 300,000 in 1900. The large increase in population would soon be felt and strain the thirty-one bed capacity of County hospital. In 1892 the city of Milwaukee established Johnston Emergency Hospital, a twenty-four bed hospital, on the corner of Third and Michigan Streets. However, soon this facility became so overcrowded that it could no longer function effectively.²

Milwaukee County Hospital still received complaints that their services were not easily accessible to city residents, given their location in Wauwatosa. When a report stated that inspectors of the Wisconsin Medical Association were dissatisfied with outpatient care at County General, the State Board of Supervisors recommended that a County-run Dispensary be established. In 1919 enabling legislation was passed to open a temporary Dispensary in the city of Milwaukee in the Saxe Building on Fifth Street and

¹Steven M. Avella, "Health, Hospitals, and Welfare: Human Services in Milwaukee County," in *Trading Post to Metropolis: Milwaukee County's First 150 Years*, ed. Ralph M. Aderman (Milwaukee: Milwaukee County Historical Society, 1987), 199-203.

²Ibid., 204, 217, 228.

Grand Avenue. Due to a huge demand for medical care, the city of Milwaukee in 1925 offered to sell Johnston Emergency Hospital and to give the money to Milwaukee County for the establishment of a new Dispensary-Emergency Clinic. County-owned property on 24th Street and Wisconsin Avenue was selected as the site and the new Dispensary-Emergency Hospital opened in 1930, with physicians who donated their services in order to provide twenty-four hour care for the urban sick who did not require long term hospitalization. Meanwhile, Milwaukee County Hospital continued to suffer from overcrowding. Since it was constructed, County Hospital expanded in a piecemeal fashion to accommodate 350 patients. Finally, in 1930, a new hospital was built with 650 beds on the County grounds. By 1936 the new Milwaukee County Hospital was so overcrowded that they began to refurbish the old county hospital to be able to serve 400 more patients.³ Thus, health care for the poor in Milwaukee County from the 1880s to the 1930s was characterized as being terribly overcrowded, always lagging behind the demand for medical care, and inaccessible or too distant to many.

Private Hospitals as Medical Care Providers to Poor African Americans

Private hospitals in Milwaukee were somewhat better than the County hospital. As in all other American cities, they were affiliated and administered by some religious group, be they Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish. They generally believed that County hospitals had to handle the poor that could not afford medical care. If a private hospital accepted such patients, there was a quota or limited number that would be admitted. They also faced the white prejudice against African Americans in medical facilities. While there is not clear

³Ibid., 226-229.

proof that African Americans were excluded from white private hospitals, there are bits of evidence that point to problems African Americans faced in admission to hospitals and problems encountered by African American doctors and nurses. These bits of evidence are presented later in this chapter. However, when the Mayor's Commission on Interracial Relations was established in 1944, there was a resolution passed which recommended that all possible endeavors be taken to provide for hospital accommodations and nursing training for African Americans.⁴ This resolution suggests an exclusion or discrimination of African Americans in health care in the early 1930s when St. Anthony Hospital began. On the issue of white prejudice against African Americans, hospitals in the 1930s generally upheld a color bar. Some African Americans undoubtedly would be reluctant to go to a white Catholic hospital. If African Americans sought care at a white Catholic hospital and were accepted, they would be placed in segregated wards.

In 1930 in the city of Milwaukee, there were five Catholic general hospitals. St. Mary's Hospital on North Avenue and Lake Drive was the oldest Catholic hospital established in 1848. It was also the largest Catholic hospital boasting 5,430 patients per year. It was staffed by the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul. St. Joseph's Hospital on Reservoir and Fourth Streets, started in 1884, took 3,196 patients in a year and was run by the Franciscan Sisters from Wheaton, Illinois. Misericordia Hospital at 2224 Juneau Street began in 1908. It cared for 3,985 patients per year under the direction of the Sisters of Misericordia. St. Mary Hill Hospital began in 1912 and was a specialized

⁴Minutes of the Mayor's Commission on Interracial Relations (January 10, 1945), Legislative Reference Bureau, Milwaukee City Hall.

hospital for nervous, mental, and drug cases handling 662 patients in a year. Finally, in 1924, Marquette University Hospital, located at 200 Ninth Street, was started. It was staffed by the Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception with 2,387 patients in a year.⁵

The Idea and Motives for Starting a Hospital

There were several motives behind the decision of St. Benedict to establish a hospital. One motive stemmed from the shortages in medical facilities of Milwaukee County's health care system. As early as January 1925, Steffes began promoting the idea of a hospital to further serve the needs of the African American community of Milwaukee. The acute shortage of hospital care affected everyone in Milwaukee, especially African Americans. In a document dealing with a possible future hospital, Steffes clearly stated, "The Milwaukee colored colony has grown to some 12,000 persons. Practically no facilities have been provided for their race."⁶ The idea was enthusiastically received among doctors and medical personnel. They told Steffes that Milwaukee faced a critical shortage of hospital beds, having only half of what was needed. Doctors said that even white patients had a very hard time getting accepted to a hospital.⁷

There were other important considerations for the establishment of St. Anthony Hospital. The hospital was located on land of the Mission complex in the city and, thus,

⁵Avella, *In the Richness of the Earth*, 714; *The Catholic Directory*, 1930.

⁶Untitled statement dealing with the mission of St. Anthony Hospital by Fr. Philip Steffes, no date. The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 8, October 1929 to September 1931.

⁷Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Benno Aichinger, January 4, 1925, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 5, May 1924 to May 1925, ACF.

accessible to the African American community. Also, St. Anthony would accept some of the charity cases that otherwise would not receive any medical care. From his conversations, Steffes recounted to Aichinger, "There is the double difficulty with colored patients. The colored man is not yet in a position to pay for a private room. In the wards they have to bear besides their illness all kinds of insults, even, as doctors related to me, from the nurses."⁸

In a letter to solicit funds for furnishings for the hospital, Steffes stated other factors in his rationale warranting the need for a hospital. Given the great demand for hospital care in the city, he contended that it is imperative to have a special hospital for African Americans for "reasons obvious to every one." Steffes was no doubt referring to the prejudice African American patients encountered from white patients and hospital staffs.⁹ Furthermore, the hospital would also open doors and counter discrimination that African American doctors and nurses faced in Milwaukee. Hospitals in Milwaukee and elsewhere either refused to accept African American physicians on their medical staffs or did not permit them to perform surgeries. Comments of Steffes referred to such a state of affairs.

All of the doctors are unanimously clamoring for a Negro hospital. Their reasons are evident. It will also offer the colored doctor a chance to perform surgical operations, which he cannot perform now. They are not admitted into other hospitals.¹⁰

⁸Ibid.

⁹Fr. Philip Steffes to Dear Friend, July 2, 1925, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 6, July 1925 to December 1926, ACF.

¹⁰Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Provincial, March 3, 1926, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 6, July 1925 to December 1926, ACF.

Similarly, the hospital would give African American girls a chance be employed as nurses, who were in great demand.

Another compelling factor motivating Steffes' desire for a hospital involved religious considerations. First, the hospital, like the school, would serve as a vehicle to gain more converts.

It will bring us more contact with non-Catholics; consequently also in gaining more converts. Due to the mix-up of the marriages among the colored we are considerably handicapped in making of such converts who would be willing to join our ranks. However, if we are able to meet them in their last moments we will be able to offer them a last chance of being saved.¹¹

Second, Steffes saw the discriminatory treatment of African Americans in medical care as inconsistent with the most fundamental gospel values that exhorted Christians to treat others as they would want to be treated. In this way, a hospital for African Americans addressed not only social needs within the African American community which was consistent with the social outreach present from the beginning of this Capuchin ministry, but it also furthered the religious mission of the Catholic Church.

In planning to establish St. Anthony Hospital in 1931, Aichinger, Capuchin provincial, contacted several religious congregations who ran hospitals and sought out people who were involved in hospital work asking about their experience and seeking their advice in dealing with whites and blacks. Based on such input, one could understand how many private hospitals dealt with racism and the poor. Sister Mary Louise May was the administrator of Providence Hospital in Detroit, a large 400 bed general hospital.

¹¹Ibid.

Providence Hospital typified many other general hospitals in the nation in the 1930s with its color bar. In an interview with Aichinger, May described the hospital procedures in dealing with the race question and handling finances. African Americans were admitted to Providence Hospital, but served in separate wards. No African American nurses worked in the hospital because “the whites will not tolerate colored nurses to care for them.” Most of the African Americans patients were charity cases and such cases were “made possible through the benefactions of larger donations from whites.” May warned that one could not hope to maintain a hospital merely through revenues received from African American patients. She also claimed that most general hospitals do not work out effectively. “Either the whites will come in such majority as to crowd out the colored, or if the colored are in a majority the whites will not come at all and then the same condition prevails for the financial upkeep of the hospital.”¹²

Another person Aichinger contacted was Father Joseph Eckert, S.V. D. who served at St. Elizabeth Church on 41st Street and Wabash Avenue in Chicago’s “black belt.” He, the Sisters at Techny, Illinois, and Chicago’s Cardinal Mundelein were in the process of planning a hospital for African Americans in Chicago, a process which was not going well.¹³ After first doubting that a hospital in Milwaukee, with its small African American population, could ever succeed, Eckert addressed the question of integration.

Moreover, if I understand it right, you good Fathers in Milwaukee intend to receive both white and colored patients. To my mind, this will not work out

¹²“Interview with Ven. Sr. M. Louise, Sister-Servant, Providence Hospital, Detroit, Michigan,” no date, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 8, St. Benedict the Moor, October 1929 to September 1931, ACF.

¹³Based on the listing of Catholic hospitals in *The Catholic Directory* from 1930 to 1935, there is no evidence of an African American Catholic hospital in Chicago being established.

well. My experience is that white will not mix with the Colored unless you separate them in wards, etc., and then the cry of segregation will be raised, and the last thing will be worst than the first.¹⁴

On the question of financing the hospital, Eckert was equally pessimistic. He pointed out that if the hospital was only for African Americans, based on such hospitals he knew, they eked out a meager existence. He warned that the Capuchin hospital in Milwaukee would be “a tremendous burden for you and will perhaps not be appreciated by the people.” Finally, he referred to the efforts in Chicago to establish an African American hospital and said, “if the Cardinal, the Sisters and myself had foreseen all the difficulties, we would never have started this project.”¹⁵

From these views and the opinions of people who were consulted, a major controversy ignited over what type of hospital should be established. Should it be a hospital for African Americans only? Should it be a hospital primarily for whites that would take African Americans in segregated rooms or wards? Should it an integrated hospital? In the end, St. Anthony Hospital operated as a fully integrated hospital and appeared to be Milwaukee’s first fully integrated private hospital. Sister Anastasia Ohmann, OSF was a student at Marquette University and lived at the Franciscan convent at St. Benedict. She wrote in 1976 her memories of the opening of St. Anthony in 1931.

Though St. Anthony Hospital was intended primarily to serve the Black people of St. Benedict the Moor Mission, there was much pressure from the white people and doctors that white patients be admitted. Because of the depression of 1929-1939, many black patients were forced to go the

¹⁴Fr. Joseph F. Eckert, S.V.D. to Fr. Benno Aichinger, March 31, 1931, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 8, St. Benedict the Moor, October 1929 to September 1931, ACF.

¹⁵Ibid.; St. Benedict House Chronicle, April 11, 1931, 232-233, St. Benedict the Moor Parish (SBMP).

Milwaukee County Hospital. St. Anthony then opened its door to all black and white patients who applied for admission. Thus, St. Anthony became the first integrated hospital in Milwaukee.”¹⁶

Securing a Religious Congregation to Staff the Hospital

One of the major tasks facing Steffes in establishing a hospital was to secure a religious order of Sisters to administer and staff the hospital. Inquiries were made to the Franciscan Sisters of the Martyr of St. George in Alton, Illinois, the Mission of the Sacred Heart Sisters in Reading, Pennsylvania, and the Franciscan Sisters in Little Falls, Minnesota. Steffes eventually secured the Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception of Little Falls, Minnesota, to run an infirmary for the students of the Mission in the fall of 1929 as well as his new hospital. The Franciscan Sisters from Little Falls, Minnesota, initially came to Milwaukee in the 1920s to manage and staff Marquette University Hospital and its School of Nursing. Also, instrumental in getting the congregation to Marquette was Father Charles B. Moulinier, S.J. He was an outstanding leader in the healthcare field and President of the Catholic Hospital Association of the United States and Canada in the early 1920s. In this role, Moulinier worked with a group of surgeons in establishing standardization of the Hospital Movement. This included such tasks as establishing minimum standards to be observed by hospitals, starting a course of study in hospital administration, and the use of special consultants to deal with particular hospital problems. Moulinier served as one of these consultants to St. Francis Hospital in

¹⁶Sr. Anastasia Ohmann, OSF, “Origin of St. Anthony Hospital, Milwaukee, Wisconsin,” (given to Fr. Austin Schlaefer of Milwaukee for his research in 1976), St. Anthony Hospital Milwaukee Files, AFSLF.

Breckenridge, Minnesota, which was staffed by the Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls.¹⁷

The Franciscan Sisters agreed to staff Marquette University Hospital in July, 1924, after Moulinier spearheaded negotiations with the Jesuits. The hospital building had been Trinity Hospital at the corner of Ninth and Wells Street. The Jesuits leased the building from private owners and later the city of Milwaukee who charged exorbitant rent for it. The Jesuits at Marquette intended to erect a new hospital building within three years and connect it with a School of Medicine, a nursing program, and a Dispensary. However, after five years, the anticipated new hospital building did not materialize due entirely to the refusal of the Milwaukee County to sell nearby land to the university. By 1928 there also had been a change in the presidency of Marquette University. Father Albert C. Fox, S.J. was replaced by Father William Magee, S.J. In the meantime, the old building was condemned by the city of Milwaukee as a fire hazard. In light of these events, the Franciscan Sisters decided to withdraw from Marquette Hospital and left on November 9, 1929. With the coming of the Great Depression and the outstanding debts and expenses Marquette faced, the Jesuits decided to close their hospital.¹⁸

The Franciscan Sisters' withdrawal from Marquette University Hospital in Milwaukee was an opportunity for Steffes. He had seen the Franciscan Sisters from Marquette Hospital and was aware of their decision to withdraw. Steffes invited the

¹⁷Sister Mary Assumpta Ahles, O.S.F., *In The Shadow of His Wings* (St. Paul, Minnesota: The North Central Publishing Company, 1977), 322-324; Sr. Elizabeth Soenneker, "Saga of Sisters in Milwaukee," date unknown, 1-2, The Hospital Files #600, Folder # 2 – History, Archives of Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls, Minnesota (AFSLF).

¹⁸*Ibid.*; Thomas J. Jablonsky, *Milwaukee's Jesuit University, Marquette 1881-1981* (Milwaukee: Marquette University press, 2007), 157-159; Hamilton, 215.

Sisters to staff his proposed new hospital. In the interim, Steffes invited them to take up residence at St. Benedict the Moor Mission and staff the infirmary at for the children in the school. This arrangement also allowed the Sisters who were studying at Marquette to complete their studies. The staffing of the infirmary solved the vexing problem of finding a competent registered nurse to take care of the sick children of the Mission school. Soon, two houses in the "Mission block" on Tenth and Highland were selected for the infirmary and a connecting passageway was constructed for easy access from one house to the other house.¹⁹

The desire of the Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls, Minnesota, to work in a ministry to African Americans had deeper roots in the history of their religious order. The parent congregation of the Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls, Minnesota, was the Missionary Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception. Their foundress, Mother Mary Ignatius Hayes, came to the United States in 1875 at the request of Pope Pius IX for the purpose of helping priests in their missionary endeavors in the United States. One of the institutions established by Hayes in the early years was a boarding school and orphanage for African American girls in Georgia. Then, a series of unfortunate events nearly extinguished the congregation in the United States. There was a disastrous fire at their headquarters and boarding school in Belle Prairie, Minnesota, in April of 1889, leaving them in dire financial straits. A long and disabling illness of Provincial Hayes in Europe cut off communications during this critical time between the Sisters in the United

¹⁹"St. Benedict the Moor Mission, Milwaukee, Wis.," *The Messenger* 3, no. 10 (December 1929): 246-248, ACF.

States with their European superiors. An autonomous Sisterhood eventually was established in 1891 in the newly created diocese of St. Cloud, Minnesota, under Bishop Otto Zardetti. Now called the Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, they settled in Little Falls, Minnesota on donated land and were warmly welcomed by the residents. However, given their desperate circumstances, the Little Falls Franciscans had of necessity broken their direct ties to African American community in Georgia. With few African Americans in Minnesota, the order did not renew this type of apostolate. The request of Steffes to come to St. Benedict the Moor struck a resonant chord among the Sisters and re-kindled their interest in ministering once again to African Americans as envisioned and started by their Foundress. It also explained the entry made in the St. Benedict House Chronicle that “in reference to a colored hospital ... (the) Franciscan Sisters are anxious to take over as a missionary activity for their Sisters.”²⁰ The withdrawal from Marquette Hospital made personnel available to serve health needs at the Mission and later to administer and staff its hospital.²¹

Securing Permission for the Hospital

When the Franciscan Sisters moved into St. Benedict the Moor in November 1929, the Stock Market had crashed and soon the country’s economic picture darkened. The notion of building a hospital during such precarious economic times appeared to many ill-advised and foolhardy. With the beginning of the Great Depression, the health of

²⁰St. Benedict Capuchin House Chronicle, February 13, 1930, 212, ACF.

²¹Ahles, 324-325; Theodore Roemer, O.F.M. Cap, “In the Spirit of St. Francis,” *The Owl: A Capuchin Review* (July 1941), 7-8, The Hospital Files # 600, Folder # 2: History, File--History of St. Benedict, AFSLF.

Americans deteriorated and their ability to pay for medical treatment diminished. Again, these conditions were exacerbated in the African American community and noted by Steffes, "Practically no facilities have been provided for their race. Sickness is rife; poverty is extensive; unemployment, estimated at 50 percent of all workers at the present time, has aggravated this normal situation."²²

The Capuchin leadership took a very cautious approach to the idea of opening a hospital due to economic considerations. The lead source of funding the proposed hospital did not materialize. When Ernest Miller was still alive, he had promised to finance the hospital, but nothing came of the proposal because of Miller's untimely death. The desperate financial state of the Capuchin Order in the mid-1920s weighed heavily on Aichinger, the Provincial. In correspondence to Steffes, Aichinger told him to "get all information necessary" and to "have a clear outlook that you can take care of a little hospital financially (Sisters, nurses salaries, equipment, etc.)." Only after such information was known could Steffes try to secure an order of Sisters to staff the hospital. Uppermost in Aichinger's mind was the debt of the congregation during such an economically depressed time. He stated,

I think it is time that we check the contracting of new debts. We must try to reduce the standing debts as the interest money swallows up all income...I remind you of this in order to arouse you to prudent care in reducing the debts as much as possible. How many, also Catholic institutions went to the wall, because the management was based on debts only.²³

²²Untitled statement dealing with the mission of St. Anthony Hospital by Fr. Philip Steffes, no date, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 8, October 1929 to September 1931, ACF.

²³Fr. Benno Aichinger to Fr. Philip Steffes, February 28, 1926, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 6, July 1925 to December 1926, ACF.

Despite the Depression and its accompanying insecurity, Steffes seemed to lack any sense of uncertainty, fear, or hesitancy in his plans. He followed Aichinger's directives and obtained necessary information on the expenses for starting a hospital, developed a plan for fund raising, and secured an order of Sisters to staff the hospital. In such depressed economic conditions, the Provincial of the Franciscan Sisters indicated that their Community would be willing to take on the hospital as a charity case. Thus, the Sisters did not receive a regular salary, but rather just a small stipend. While the magnanimous offer of the Sisters would help financially in the running of the hospital, there was still overwhelming risk in starting such a building at that time. In a letter to Mueller, the Provincial who succeeded Aichinger, Steffes reminded him that five years earlier he received tentative permission from Aichinger to establish a hospital for the African American people in Milwaukee. In Steffes' mind, having the Franciscan Sisters solved the greatest difficulty in establishing a hospital.²⁴

At the Definitory meeting in June 1930 in Marathon, Wisconsin, Steffes was given actual permission to erect a hospital building for African Americans in Milwaukee. It would be located on the east side of Tenth Street between State Street and Highland Avenue. The hospital, like other buildings at St. Benedict the Moor, was designed by architects, E. Brielmaier and Sons in the Italian Romanesque style. The plans called for a forty-two bed hospital and housing for five Sisters.²⁵ In April 1931 the Definitory had

²⁴Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Benedict Mueller, February 1, 1930, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 8, October 1929 to September 1931, ACF.

²⁵Fr. Benedict Mueller to Fr. Philip Steffes, June 14, 1930; Mother Mary Teresa, O.S.F. to Fr. Philip Steffes, June 28, 1930; Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Provincial, July 30, 1930; "Milwaukee Hospital for Negroes," newspaper article with no date and no newspaper name given, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File

misgivings about the earlier decision. It grew more concerned about the debts the hospital project incurred and the risk this posed for the congregation if sufficient funds to pay for the hospital could not be raised. It even considered retracting its permission for the hospital and using the building for a dormitory until the economy improved. However, because there had already been considerable publicity about the new hospital and “to save face,” the Definitory decided to give “the project a trial since it had been advertised to the public.”²⁶

Early Problems in Getting the Hospital Established

Getting the hospital established involved many challenges after receiving permission from the Definitory. The construction of the hospital proved to be a much greater task than anyone expected and was racked by one surprise after another, usually costing more money than anyone first anticipated. A congratulatory letter from South Side Hospital in Milwaukee gave a slight hint of the herculean efforts of what was to come.

Relative to the publicity in the *Milwaukee Sentinel* about your hospital, I wish to heartily congratulate you on your success in getting the proposition under way. I fully realize from my experience here the effort it takes to plan and organize a hospital as well as getting the financial backing to carry out one's plans. This is a cause I am very much interested in – in fact some years ago I had ideas of starting a hospital for the benefit of our colored colony, but of course in a much more modest way than the splendid building you will have.²⁷

The first unexpected surprise came when St. Benedict applied for a building permit

8, St. Benedict the Moor, October 1929 to September 1931, ACF.

²⁶St. Benedict House Chronicle, April 11, 1931, 233, SBMP.

²⁷Edith P. Biel, R.N. to Fr. Steffes, August 11, 1930, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 8, St. Benedict the Moor, October 1929 to September 1931, ACF.

to erect the hospital. The city building inspector informed Steffes that fourteen feet of space was required to the north of the proposed hospital and eleven feet to the south rather than the two and a half feet in the Mission's plan. To comply with this change, one of the old rented houses, owned by the Mission next to the proposed hospital, would have to be demolished. Soon it was deemed advisable to demolish three old rented houses rather than only one to provide room for a future building south of the hospital in the future.²⁸

Two other challenges soon followed; there were reservations about the general contractor and the plans for the hospital were also enlarged. Due to the Great Depression, many construction firms competed to win such a contract for a large project which would provide income and jobs for their workers through the winter of 1930 and into the spring of 1931. P.W. Construction came in with the lowest bid of \$64,614. However, there were some concerns. Their low price seemed questionable to some. They employed mostly very young men and perhaps they were too inexperienced. Also, P.W. Construction had been in business for only six years. In the end, P. W. Construction was awarded the contract with the rider that they issue a one thousand dollar bond as a security measure. The second change was initiated by the Franciscan Sisters. They wanted another floor added to the hospital to make it more worthwhile. The cost of the hospital increased from \$64,614 to \$75,000. The Sisters claimed that debt on the building would be paid within five years. After some discussion, it was decided to add an additional story to the

²⁸Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Provincial, July 30, 1930, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 8, St. Benedict the Moor, October 1929 to September 1931, ACF.

building.²⁹

Another important consideration in selecting P. W. Construction for the erection of the hospital was that it was a local contractor rather than one from outside the Milwaukee area. Awarding the contract to a construction firm outside of Milwaukee, even though their bid might be lower, could easily have had bad public relations effects since construction firms and related trades in the city vied for work. Steffes faced a dilemma. His brother-in-law was the supervisor of Immel Construction Co., of Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. This company was the special choice of Steffes since it would mean livelihood for his sister's family. Without this job, his brother-in-law would be out of a job for the winter. In the end, Steffes chose to award the contract to a Milwaukee firm. In a letter to Aichinger, Steffes explained, "had we selected the outsider, it would have caused quite a stir among the contractors here in the city who would have held up to us that we look for their support of this Mission and by this action promote an outside concern."³⁰

There was also the question of whether to use union labor or non-union labor. Once again, Steffes faced a dilemma. On the one hand, unions for decades struggled to maintain adequate wages and working conditions for the rank and file. Non-union labor, who mostly worked for lower wages, was viewed as being detrimental to the struggling union movement, especially during a depression. On the other hand, unions excluded

²⁹Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Provincial, October 10, 1930, October 15, 1930, and October 17, 1930, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 8, St. Benedict the Moor, October 1929 to September 1931, ACF.

³⁰Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Provincial, October 23, 1930, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 8, St. Benedict the Moor, October 1929 to September 1930, ACF.

African Americans. Steffes decided to use non-union labor, despite misgivings expressed by Aichinger. Steffes demonstrated a balance between maintaining good relations for the Mission with organized labor and his opposition to the American Federation of Labor's racist and discriminatory stand of not accepting African Americans as members.

I directly asked two Union leaders whether they felt that we would have to suffer in consequence, to which they definitely answered, that since we are a charitable Institution, it could not be expected that we expend additional thousands of dollars on account of them. They assured me that no harm would come to us in consequence....The main factor however is this: No colored man is able to join the Unions....And, if we put up the building without giving the colored man a chance to help, we would lose their confidence.³¹

Another problem concerned the name of the hospital. Originally, the hospital was to be called Mt. Alvernia Hospital, which had a connection to St. Francis.³² The name was selected because it had a connection with St. Francis. Also, the name did not sound too Catholic since it wished to draw non-Catholic doctors and patients. As months passed from September 1930 to March 1931, some lay people thought the name should be changed. One of the doctors with whom the Capuchins consulted on various aspects of establishing a hospital was Dr. Alfred Merten. In a letter to Aichinger, he presented the case against the name, "Mount Alvernia Hospital." He believed it was a hard name to remember and a difficult one for the German population of Milwaukee to master. The name did not carry any significance for the public and its meaning would be hard to explain to non-Catholics. He stated that already people are calling it Mt. Alverna, Mt. Alverno, and even Mt. Vernon. Finally, Merten claimed a Catholic hospital should have a

³¹Ibid.

³²Mount Alvernia was a place of retreat for St. Francis and his early followers.

name that everyone knows is a Catholic hospital. Merten suggested that the name “Mt. Alvernia Hospital” be replaced with the name, “St. Anthony’s Hospital.” It was easy to remember and pronounce for both Catholics and Protestants and it was widely used in Milwaukee. St. Anthony was a member of the Franciscan Order and was associated with relief of physical ailments. In fact, many Catholic churches in Milwaukee had a statue or shrine to St. Anthony and it surely would give a more favorable publicity to the project. By March 1931 the name change to “St. Anthony’s Hospital” was made.³³

At various times there was also real doubts about the whole endeavor. Aichinger expressed misgivings about getting into the hospital business and eventually Steffes showed some regret. When discussing the organization of the Board of Directors, the hospital staff, and the business manager, Aichinger revealed his great unfamiliarity with such matters.

Shall a Father act in this (business manager) capacity? (We are practically ignoramuses in hospital affairs.) Or, is it best to hand over the management to the Sisters and let them conduct it as the Sisters do in other hospitals?... Bear in mind that the hospital is now a public undertaking of St. Benedict under the auspices of the Capuchin Fathers. If it miscarries in consequence of wrong organization, it will be to the disgrace of the Province.³⁴

In writing to his Provincial, Steffes expressed some misgivings, but laced with some optimism.

I am sorry to know that I am adding new worries to the many other problems you already have; and since I see you worried about the financing hospital, I

³³Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Provincial, September 19, 1930 and September 30, 1930; Dr. Merten to Fr. Benno Aichinger, March 4, 1931; Fr. Benno Aichinger to Fr. Philip Steffes, March 7, 1931, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 8, St. Benedict the Moor, October 1931 to September 1931, ACF.

³⁴Fr. Benno Aichinger to Fr. Philip Steffes, March 15, 1931, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 8, St. Benedict the Moor, October 1929 to September 1931, ACF.

am also more worried, and have many times regretted that I ever conceived the idea and was lead to proceed with it...The present world-wide depression has also greatly affected us. Had I only foreseen it. But even at that, should the proposition be a failure, the building will always be of use to us for other purposes. And, again should it come to the worst, possibly we might see a way out by again disposing of the corner... Every real estate dealer has his eyes on it.....³⁵

Merten quickly emerged as a consultant in setting up and equipping the new hospital. Merten, for example, suggested that Steffes purchase operating tables and other equipment from Marquette University Hospital, which was closing, instead of buying new items in order to save money. Aichinger also was worried about the large debt of the Capuchin Province and the unanticipated expenditures of St. Benedict in its hospital venture. In one instance, he told Steffes:

How we shall pull out of financial difficulties, is a mystery to me. Good St. Anthony must help us...Be now prudent...Nobody can expect us to furnish at once the whole hospital. Follow the advice of Dr. Merten. I think he understands and can appreciate our financial difficulties. Remember that our resources are very limited. Prudence forbids that we try to stretch beyond. It would mean a fiasco.³⁶

A conflict emerged soon between Merten and Steffes. Disagreements centered over the authority structure and control of the hospital as well as the nature or direction of the hospital. There was also a personal element. Merten contacted Aichinger on hospital-related matters. Soon it became habitual for Merten to bypass Steffes, the Director of St. Benedict, and deal directly with the Provincial. Such actions offended Steffes, making him feel as though he was being pushed aside and circumventing any chain of command.

³⁵Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Provincial, March 9, 1931, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 8, St. Benedict the Moor, October 1929 to September 1931, ACF.

³⁶Fr. Benno Aichinger to Fr. Philip Steffes, March 7, 1931 and March 15, 1931, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 8, St. Benedict the Moor, October 1929 to September 1931, ACF.

Merten, on the other hand, wanted to become the head of the hospital and have the hospital distinct from the Mission, not subject to any oversight or authority of Steffes. These motives and actions surfaced in some of the critical issues that emerged in the establishment of St. Anthony Hospital.

Merten also clashed over the incorporation of the hospital and its authority structure and lost on both counts. In March 1931, Merten suggested that St. Anthony Hospital be incorporated as a separate unit, distinct from the Corporation of the Province of St. Joseph of the Capuchin Order, for the sake of protection. In the event that at any time through carelessness of the doctors or Sisters a lawsuit would surface, the Province could not be held liable. He lost this argument and it was decided that a better method of safeguarding against lawsuits was to obtain insurance to cover possible future lawsuits instead of having the hospital incorporated as a separate and independent unit.³⁷ Merten next argued that there should be a separate head of the hospital rather than the director of St. Benedict Mission. This person who would act as an executive and supervise the business end of the hospital as well as performing public relations work and soliciting funds. Steffes and others, on the other hand, never viewed St. Anthony Hospital as anything but a part of the ministry of St. Benedict the Moor. While a hospital administrator was needed, it was still to be under auspices of the Mission and under his oversight. This conflict was eventually resolved in favor of Steffes' position.³⁸

³⁷Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Provincial, March 5, 1931, and Fr. Sebastian Schaff to Fr. Philip Steffes, March 11, 1931, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 8, St. Benedict the Moor, October 1929 to September 1931.

³⁸Dr. Merten to Fr. Benno Aichinger, March 14, 1931, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 8, St. Benedict the Moor, October 1929 to September 1931, ACF.

An Integrated General Hospital

In the beginning, there seemed to be two basic models for private hospitals, a general hospital or a colored hospital. In the 1930s general hospitals implied the use of the color bar where African Americans were segregated in hospital wards or just not admitted. Some general hospitals had African American doctors and nurses. However, in many of these cases, African American doctors were restricted, like not being allowed to perform surgeries. African American nurses would work only with patients in the black wards. The alternative for African American patients, doctors and nurses was to seek admission at a private hospital designated as a “colored” hospital. If St. Anthony was a “colored hospital,” it meant that the Capuchin Province would incur many more expenses because many African American patients would not be able to pay their medical bills.³⁹

Steffes’s vision of St. Anthony’s did not fit in either of the two models (a general hospital and a “colored” hospital) that were prevalent throughout the country in the 1930s. Steffes did not favor a hospital exclusively for African Americans, but neither did he favor a general hospital as envisioned by Merten. The distinctive charism of St. Benedict the Moor from its beginning was to the African American community. Thus, the hospital, in the mind of Steffes, was primarily, but not exclusively, for African Americans. Steffes wanted the hospital to be self-supporting and even to make money. At the same time, he intended the hospital to serve those who could not pay as well as those who could pay. Though remarkable for the 1930s, Steffes envisioned a general hospital without any color bar. He favored a hospital where integration was the order of the day, a hospital where

³⁹Ibid.; St. Benedict House Chronicle, March 17, 1931, 230, SBMP.

whites and blacks were integrated from patient wards and hospital rooms to the staffs of the doctors and nurses. While such a vision might have appeared unusual or impractical for hospitals in the 1930s, it was consistent with the philosophy of St. Benedict and its social programs in the community. Such an enlightened vision was expressed in Steffes' writings.

Located as it (the hospital) is, and under the auspices of the Mission, and though strictly as a General Hospital, without regard to race or creed, it must necessarily serve the urgent needs of the large group of colored people of Milwaukee....

Do not conclude that this is to be a "colored" hospital. We will provide a general hospital, open to all. But, we will give special service for the colored folks who are battling against the odds of climate, industrial conditions and racial prejudices and handicaps.⁴⁰

Steffes based his vision of St. Anthony Hospital as an integrated general hospital from the input he received from African Americans in Milwaukee and his own experience. African American doctors and many other African Americans opposed a hospital exclusively for African Americans due to their resentment of segregation. Steffes also received pressure from white people and doctors to admit whites as well.⁴¹ In writing to Aichinger, Steffes stated,

He (Dr. Merten) wishes the idea of a general, white and colored, hospital to be entirely forgotten....The amounts (of money) used for the construction of the building were given for the colored cause; and would it not appear ridiculous to the public to erect a hospital for the whites in the midst of a

⁴⁰Untitled statement dealing with the mission of St. Anthony Hospital by Fr. Philip Steffes, no date, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 8, October 1929 to September 1931, ACF.

⁴¹Milwaukee newspaper article clipping without full heading and no date, The Hospital Files #600, Folder 2 – History, File--History of St. Benedict, Building/Dedication; St. M. Anastasia Ohmann, O.S.F., "Origin of St. Anthony Hospital, Milwaukee, Wisconsin," 1-2, The Hospital Files #600, Folder # 2 History, File--History of St. Benedict, AFSLF.

colored Mission? The objection that no white person will come to the hospital if it is mixed, is, according to all past experiences, not based on facts.⁴²

Merten and others insisted that whites would not come to a hospital if whites and blacks were integrated. Steffes strongly disagreed. In his experience as pastor of St Benedict parish, the church was built for African Americans, but had always welcomed whites who chose to attend religious services there. In fact, Steffes claimed that many times for Sunday Mass the number of whites exceeded the number of blacks. This integrated Sunday congregation that emerged at St. Benedict parish was the prototype of what Steffes envisioned for the hospital. Like the parish, the hospital would primarily be an institution for African Americans that welcomed whites who chose to come, knowing that there was no color line. In other words, Steffes knew that there are some whites who were not racist or prejudiced against African Americans even though such forces were pervasive in society.⁴³

Administrative Issues

The Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls, Minnesota, influenced Steffes' position on some important administrative issues. Based on their experience at Marquette University Hospital, the Sisters told Steffes that they would never again be directed or managed by outsiders as was the case at Marquette Hospital. In other words, they wanted the day-to-day administration of the hospital. Second, the Board of Directors, according to the Sisters, should consist of a few Sisters, a few Capuchin priests, two doctors chosen by the

⁴²Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Benno Aichinger, March 17, 1931, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 8, St. Benedict the Moor, October 1929 to September 1931, ACF.

⁴³Ibid.

Capuchins who agreed with their direction, and a few doctors elected by the hospital staff. On the question of a general hospital envisioned by Merten, the Sisters sided with Steffes. They reminded Steffes that there were many general hospitals in cities throughout the country that they could staff. However, their choice of St. Anthony Hospital as their charity case was due to its preferential option for the African American. They suggested designating a certain number of beds (six or eight) for the charity cases – people who could not pay. They assured Steffes, based on their experience in other hospitals, that within five years the hospital would realize a profit.⁴⁴

The different views between Merten and Steffes mixed with the personal animosity each had for the other intensified to such a point that Father Roger Gans, a Definitor and the Provincial's delegate to St. Benedict, arranged a meeting with an admired and trusted physician in Milwaukee, Dr. Lambert Hargarten, and Steffes to recommend policies for the Defintory to approve. They suggested that St. Anthony would be known as a hospital for African Americans and for whites who choose to come. Hargarten reassured both Gans and Steffes that St. Anthony Hospital would succeed and fill its beds as an integrated hospital with both African American and white patients. On the topic of the management of the hospital, they recommended that the Franciscan Sisters be given management of the hospital with regular reporting to the Capuchin Order. There would also be a Board of Directors consisting of Capuchin priests, Franciscan sisters, and doctors who were generally in agreement with the overall direction of the hospital. On the question of

⁴⁴Fr. Philip to Fr. Provincial, March 18, 1931, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 8, St. Benedict the Moor, October 1929 to September 1931, ACF.

whether the hospital should be completely equipped and seek accreditation or gradually equipped with eventual accreditation, they favored the latter. Hargarten said service rather than equipment counted more. He pointed out that the old Misericordia Hospital was never accredited but did splendid work and was always full. At the end of the meeting, Hargarten promised to join St. Anthony hospital staff and even to serve on its Board of Directors if desired. Hargarten also indicated his willingness to speak to other physicians, like Drs. Felix and Louis Schmitt, who had a fine religious and professional standing in the community and invite them to join the hospital staff.⁴⁵

Aichinger and the Definitory agreed on several ideas or principles concerning the direction of St. Anthony Hospital. Clearly, the debts of the Province at this time motivated their cautionary approach to this new apostolate. The Franciscan Sisters would take charge of the hospital accounts and give reports to the Definitory every two months. Only one floor would be opened first and others added on a gradual basis. Another floor of the hospital building would be used as an infirmary for the children of the Mission School. And, since the future of the hospital was uncertain, any donations or donated furnishings to the hospital beyond the one story could only be accepted if the donor knew that the donation could be used to other purposes.⁴⁶

⁴⁵Fr. Roger Gans to Fr. Benno Aichinger, March 20, 1931, and Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Benno Aichinger, March 20, 1931, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 8, St. Benedict the Moor, October 1929 to September 1931, ACF.

⁴⁶Fr. Benno Aichinger to Fr. Philip Steffes, April 10, 1931, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 8, St. Benedict the Moor, October 1929 to September 1931, ACF.; St. Benedict House Chronicle, April 11, 1931, 233, SBMP.

St. Anthony Hospital and its Outreach and Ministry to the African American Community

On Sunday, 10 May 1931 in the midst of the Great Depression, St. Anthony Hospital was formally dedicated on Tenth Street near State Street. The Most Rev. Pietro Fumasoni-Biondi, papal delegate to the United States, officiated along with Milwaukee's new archbishop, Samuel A. Stritch. Fumasoni-Biondi preached the sermon at the dedication exercises. Archbishop Richard Gerrow of the Natchez archdiocese also took part in the program. After the dedication, the St. Anthony's Guild served dinner to 500 people in the dining room of the school building.⁴⁷

Within a few weeks St. Anthony Hospital opened its doors and received its first patients. Sister Mary Jerome Keppers, O.S. F. was appointed local superior and Sister Mary Cornelia Lee became the first administrator. Dr. Lambert Hargarten was named the first chief of the Medical Staff. The regular staff consisted of twenty-five doctors including African Americans doctors. Hospital rooms went for \$2.50 per day for wards, \$3.00 per day for a private room, and \$4.00 per day for a private room with bath. Charity patients were admitted when recommended by one of the Staff doctors. A doctor not belonging to the Staff had to give references before admitting any of his charity patients to St. Anthony.⁴⁸

⁴⁷"Papal Delegate Dedicates St. Anthony Home," *Milwaukee Journal*, May 11, 1931, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 8, St. Benedict the Moor, October 1929 to September 1931, ACF.

⁴⁸"Minutes of the First Meeting St. Anthony Hospital," May 15, 1931, The Hospital Files #600, Folder: Medical Staff, File--Minutes of first meeting, May 15, 1931; "St. Anthony Hospital ...Milwaukee, Wisconsin Report ...March, 1981, 50th Anniversary," The Hospital Files #600, Folder: Administration; Sr. M. Anastasia Ohmann, O.S.F. "Origin of St. Anthony Hospital, Milwaukee, Wisconsin," July 26, 1976, 1-2, The Hospital Files, Folder # 2 - History, File--Paper: Origin of St. Anthony Hospital by Sr. M. Anastasia Ohmann; "50 Year Anniversary, 1931-1981" booklet, The Hospital File #600, Folder # 1- Observances, File--50th Anniversary of St. Anthony Hospital, AFSLF.

After one year in operation, the hospital was well on its way of fulfilling its purposes and goals as a truly integrated hospital. From May 15, 1931 to May 15, 1932, St. Anthony had 862 total patients. They performed 422 operations and had 166 births. The racial breakdown of the 862 patients were 86 African Americans and 776 whites. Of the 862 patients, 346 were charity cases and the racial breakdown here was 64 African Americans and 282 whites.⁴⁹

The presence of the Franciscan Sisters at St. Anthony's Hospital instilled in the patients and the entire hospital staff a strong sense of community. The high level of personal care and concern of the Sisters was constantly attested to by patients. Notes and cards expressed how peoples' lives had been touched. In one note a father recounted his experience with his dying son:

Your acts of love shown my wife and I made lighter the agony of watching our son, Philip, die.... Our family still aches from the wound that it has suffered. But, like the surgical wound, its healing restores vigor, may the healing of this wound make us stronger. You, by your care of us, contributed to the beginning of the healing process. We, as our son Philip, love you.⁵⁰

In another letter, similar sentiments of appreciation were expressed to Sister DeSales:

I shall always treasure in my heart your group of Sisters who came to the funeral parlor and prayed the rosary for my mother. Also, the two who came to the funeral. I was so proud to have nuns there on both occasions. God bless you for your charity, one and all. You Sisters can be happy and grateful really for the many years of love and service for our Lord at St. Anthony's. It will never be forgotten in the annals of heaven and nothing

⁴⁹“Report for the Year May 15, 1931 to May 15, 1932,” The Hospital Files #600, Folder - Annual Reports, File--St. Anthony Hospital, AFSLF.

⁵⁰Thank You note. Name withheld by archivist. The Hospital Files # 600, Folder # 1--Public Relations, File – Sisters' Communications, AFSLF.

else matters.⁵¹

A letter written a month after the death of one's father offered these reflections:

Just one month ago today, my beloved Dad passed on to his eternal reward..... I wish to express my deepest gratitude to all of you who were so interested in my Dad, especially during his last days and hours of this life. Your constant interest in his welfare, in praying for him, and assisting him at all times was a real source of inspiration to me and my family.⁵²

And, Dr. Frank L. Ziehl, Chief of Pathology of St. Anthony and assistant professor of Pathology at Marquette University, described the Sisters, "Every one of them is a tremendous person. They are more than the driving force behind St. Anthony – the spirit of community service stems from them."⁵³

St. Anthony Hospital functioned as a truly integrated hospital in every sense of the word. The doctor staff, nursing staff, laundry, cleaning, business and secretarial staff, kitchen, and patients included both whites and African Americans. For some hospitals, integration meant admitting both whites and African Americans while having separate wards or rooms where the races were separate. This was not the case at St. Anthony's; there were no separate wards for whites and Africans Americans and patients were assigned to double rooms on the basis of illness without any consideration to race. To some extent, the problem of prejudice was lessened because the hospital clearly publicized they were a hospital specifically serving the African American community of Milwaukee

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Letter dated August 2, 1960, name withheld by archivist, The Hospital Files # 600, Folder # 1 – Public Relations, File– Patient Care, AFSLF.

⁵³"St. Anthony Bulletin" June 1965, 12, The Hospital Files #600, Folder–Brochures, File–St. Anthony Hospital, AFSLF.

and whites who choose to come.⁵⁴

Despite the publicity that St. Anthony was a fully integrated hospital, there were incidents where a white patient refused to be placed in a room with an African American or where white patients refused to have an African American nursing aide bathe them. When such objections were voiced, one of the Sisters or the chaplain would talk to these patients telling them that patients are assigned to double rooms on the basis of diagnosis rather than race. Likewise, hospital personnel are assigned to specific rooms and departments without any regard to race. They also explained that St. Anthony's Hospital was an integrated hospital. If patients did not want any contact with African Americans, they could have gone to some other hospital like South Milwaukee Cudahy Hospital which took only white patients. They also stated that at St. Anthony's there was Dr. John W. Maxwell who was African American, but had white clients and Dr. Ed Heip who was white, but had many African American clients. The Sisters also explained to objecting patients that African Americans were people just like them with feelings and sensitivities created and loved by the same God that created and loves them. They stated that such objections upset and hurt the feelings of the African American and were disappointed in such behavior by white patients. Finally, they urged the patients to at least "give it a try," try getting a bath by an African American aide or sharing a room with another African American patient. This approach used by the Sisters along with their kindness and sincerity and the sense of community they brought to the hospital environment usually

⁵⁴Telephone interview with Sr. Sharon Fyle, O.S.F.(at St. Anthony's Hospital from 1955 to 1960as Head Nurse of the Surgical Unit) and Sr. Patrice Kiefer, O.S.F. (at St. Anthony's Hospital from 1954 to 1960 as bookkeeper in the Business Office), July 15, 2002.

prevailed.⁵⁵

St. Anthony Hospital proved to be a beacon in race relations in other ways as well. In 1954, Dr. John W. Maxwell was the first African American chief of staff at a Wisconsin hospital when he was elected to the position at St. Anthony's Hospital. It was also the first predominantly integrated hospital in the United States to elect an African American doctor as chief of staff. In 1946 St. Anthony hired what is believed to be the first African American nurse in the city, Camille Bryant. In 1964 St. Anthony's patient population was 35 percent African American and 65 percent white. Its doctors staff numbered eighty, including half of the twenty African American physicians in the Milwaukee area. Dr. George Lane, an African American doctor at St. Anthony, claimed, "Anyone – from the North or South – can come here. They will see integration."⁵⁶ Sister Mary Assumpta Ahles, administrator of St. Anthony, reinforced this view, "Integration is an outsider's word at St. Anthony's. Nobody really thinks of the hospital in these terms. Certainly, there are whites and Negroes on the staff, in the beds, in the laundry room, at the snack bar, but this is the way it has always been."⁵⁷ Patients also commented on their experience of an integrated hospital. In writing a letter to the editor one white woman described her experience.

There is always an element of fear, when one registers as a patient in a hospital. But during the few days I spent at St. Anthony's Hospital every fear was quickly dispelled. As I joined the list of highly integrated patients, the experience became

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶"An 'A' for St. Anthony," *Let's See Magazine*, (November 1964), 25, The Hospital Files #600, Folder-Patient Care, File-St. Anthony Hospital, AFXLF).

⁵⁷Ibid.

actually a happy one.... Young Negro nurses were stepping in deer-like fashion... and were inspiring. The male aides and the highly qualified staff serve competently, sometimes superbly. But the greatest joy came from being with people of another race and finding there was no room for suspicion or fear. There was simply no awareness of color....⁵⁸

Most of its patients were drawn from an area bounded in the north by Capitol Drive, in the south by Clybourn Street, in the west by 60th Street, and in the east by the river.⁵⁹

St. Anthony was envisioned by Steffes as an agent seeking converts to the Catholic Church. While the hospital admitted patients regardless of one's religion, it did provide resources for inquiries patients might make about the Catholic Church and becoming a convert to Catholicism. Perhaps the most famous case is Henry Aaron, the outstanding baseball player of the Milwaukee Braves. Mrs. Aaron said they became interested in joining the Church when their twins were born at St. Anthony's Hospital. Both twins were baptized at the hospital and one died shortly after birth. Aaron and his wife began taking religious instructions from Father Matthew Gottschalk, a Capuchin priest at St. Benedict the Moor. In 1959 Aaron, his wife, and their two older children were received into the Catholic Church and were members of St Benedict.⁶⁰

St. Anthony also provided some innovative and vibrant programs. In February

⁵⁸"Peace and Good Will," (Letters to the Editor), *Milwaukee Journal*, July 26, 1966, The Hospital Files #600, Folder-Public Relations #2, File-St. Anthony Hospital, AFSLF.

⁵⁹"50 Year Anniversary, 1931-1981" booklet, 11, The Hospital Files #600. Folder #1 - Observances, File-Booklet 50th Anniversary of St. Anthony's Hospital Booklet; "An 'A' for St. Anthony," *Lets See Magazine* (November 1964), 24-25, The Hospital Files #600, Folder-Patient Care, File-St. Anthony Hospital; "Hospital Has Served Central City for 34 Years, St. Anthony Cherishes Integration," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, November 26, 1965, 1 and 7, The Hospital Files #600, Folder-patient Care; File-St. Anthony, AFSLF.

⁶⁰"Henry Aaron, Family Enter Catholic Church," newspaper title is not given, May 2, 1959, The Hospital Files #600, Folder-Public Relations #2, File-St. Anthony Hospital, AFSLF.

1964 the hospital inaugurated its music therapy program. Believing that music soothed the soul, a quartet from the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra or members of the Bel Canto Chorus would be invited to present a concert about five times a year to its ambulatory patients, visitors, hospital employees, and members of the hospital advisory board and their spouses. The concert was usually underwritten by two anonymous donors and was the first time Symphony members gave a performance for a private hospital in Milwaukee. Hospital administrator Ahles explained, "Such programs are an aesthetic experience for the patients. Music offers them something beautiful and wonderful to think about and in this way is an aid to recovery."⁶¹ In 1965, the hospital observed National Hospital Week in May by creating departmental displays showing the function of each hospital department. The display was made available in the business community of Milwaukee. The Hospital Council of the Greater Milwaukee Area used the display as an educational tool to illustrate job and career opportunities in hospitals and was on public view in the lobby of the Northwestern National Insurance Company.⁶² Ahles noted "it is significant that it is not the new equipment, the electronic devices, or the elaborate automatic patient monitoring system that is the heart of the hospital – but people. People, who are pulsing with kindness, understanding, the desire to help the patient adjust to his surrounding and his illness."⁶³

⁶¹"St. Anthony's Hospital Believes in 'Music Therapy' to Help Patients," newspaper title is not given, October 17, 1964, no page number available, The Hospital Files #600, Folder-Patient Care, File-St. Anthony Hospital, AFSLF.

⁶²Ibid, 1; "St. Anthony Bulletin," June 1965, 3, The Hospital Files #600, Folder-Brochures, File St. Anthony Hospital, AFSLF .

⁶³"St. Anthony Bulletin," June 1965, 3, The Hospital Files #600, Folder-Brochures, File-St. Anthony Hospital, AFSLF.

St. Anthony Hospital in the Years of Expansion

The original cost of the hospital in 1931, exclusive of equipment, was nearly \$100,000 and had a capacity of forty-two beds. After only a few years, the hospital was taxed to its full capacity, serving both African Americans and whites. The fears of financial disaster held by the Capuchin superiors were abated within a couple of years as the hospital ended “in the black” each year even with its charity cases. In 1936 the hospital ended the year with a cash balance of \$27,000. The cautious approach taken by the Definitory quickly ended. More surgical equipment was secured and more operations were performed. Hospital debts were paid. Soon hospital surpluses helped ease deficits from St. Benedict School. The demand for medical care created the need to expand the hospital. As early as 1937, some doctors urged Steffes to add a another story to the hospital. Others wanted a building addition that would double or triple the hospital’s original capacity. The Second World War prevented any further building due to shortages and rationing of various building materials. In the Spring of 1945 a hospital addition was started to enlarge the capacity to 125 beds by extending the building south along Tenth Street to State Street. The construction and equipment of this building addition took two years due to shortages of materials and strikes. The cost of the addition, estimated at \$325,000, actually reached the sum close to \$700,000.⁶⁴

On Sunday 10 May 1947 at 10 o’clock in the morning, Milwaukee’s Archbishop Moses Kiley, who had succeeded Stritch, dedicated the new addition of the hospital. After

⁶⁴*The Messenger*, 13 (1950): 157; Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Provincial Foley, January 19, 1937 and April 14, 1937, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 10, St. Benedict 1935-1937, ACF.

the dedication, a solemn High Mass was celebrated with the Archbishop. After Mass, dinner was served to the clergy, Sisters, doctors, nurses, and the lay staff of the hospital. Dedication services continued into the next day. A dinner was served at 5 o'clock in the Church Hall to guests, doctors, and benefactors. Among the honored guests were the Mayor of Milwaukee, John Bohn, Senator Bernhard Gettelman, Attorney Oliver O'Boyle and a host of other public officials. Phil Grau, a prominent layman, was the toastmaster. Mrs. William Knoerschild, president of the St. Anthony Guild, presented Steffes with a large check for the hospital. The following day, May 12, was National Hospital Day and the last day of the dedication celebration. From 2 o'clock to 5 o'clock in the afternoon there was an open-house for all former patients and the general public. Steffes received a generous donation of \$12,578.40 from Kiley. This was one of the largest donations the Mission had received to date from the Archbishop of Milwaukee.⁶⁵

About five years after the hospital's founding in 1930, St. Anthony began making a profit. St. Anthony Hospital proved to be their "golden calf" and heavily subsidized both school and parish operations. In 1954, for example, St. Benedict received \$4,350 from the Sunday collections, \$36,276 from bequests and donations, and \$7,000 from the Indian and Negro Commission. The balance of the fund needed to run the parish and school came from St. Anthony Hospital, namely \$40,000.⁶⁶

⁶⁵*The Messenger* 10, no.4 (July 1947): 180, ACF.

⁶⁶*The Messenger*, Vol XVII, No. 6 (November 1954), 189; Vol XVIII, No. 4 (July 1955), 107-109; "The Province of St. Joseph of the Capuchin Order Chapter Report, 1955-1958," Vol XXI (1958), 14-15, ACF.

The Aftermath and Demise of St. Anthony Hospital

The highpoint of St. Anthony Hospital was in the 1940s. However, by the late 1950s and 1960s, a set of internal and external factors ignited a crisis. St. Anthony was built primarily to serve the underprivileged, providing quality service, but functioning as economically as possible with few luxuries. As more and more patients were getting a financial boost through some phase of health insurance, they looked for hospitals that offered more amenities, like more luxurious rooms. A second problem was that St. Anthony was no longer attracting a sufficient number of younger doctors. They, too, were seeking out hospitals that had been able to update their service areas.⁶⁷

Recognizing the imminent need to expand and improve its facilities, the administrative staff of St. Anthony proposed a five to six million dollar building program which sought to expand the hospital bed capacity to two hundred and renovate the existing facilities. They conducted a feasibility study and found that there was the potential to raise only one-and-a-half million in a public drive, far short from the six million needed. The Capuchins were no longer interested or able to take this challenge and turned to the Franciscan Sisters. They offered the deed to the hospital property to the Sisters for a legal transaction of one dollar. Mother Thomasine Schmolke, Franciscan provincial, turned down the offer because the amount of money needed for the St. Anthony could not be raised in a public drive.⁶⁸

Another factor contributing to the viability of St. Anthony was the decline in

⁶⁷Ahles, 326.

⁶⁸Bishop Atkielski to Archbishop Cousins, November 3, 1965, AS 91 (St. Anthony Hospital), Box 1. Folder 4, AAM.

numbers in religious congregations after the Second Vatican Council starting in the 1960s. With the changes brought in the wake of Vatican II, there were record numbers of religious leaving their congregations starting in the mid-1960s. There was also a sharp decline in the numbers of new people entering religious orders. At the same time, opportunities for individual apostolates emerged which decreased the strength and number of people in community apostolates. This meant that there would be fewer sisters and priests in the religious congregations staffing St. Benedict and St. Anthony Hospital. The result was a reduction of amount of the contributed services of the religious who staffed the particular apostolate. It also meant that additional lay people would be hired to take the job previously held by a religious, resulting in higher salary costs for the hospital.

In the city of Milwaukee there were also demographic and social changes that also impeded the future of St. Anthony Hospital. First, the African American ghetto continued to move northward and westward which left St. Anthony at a disadvantaged location. The coming of interstate highway called for an expressway running directly west of the hospital, limiting their space for future expansion and parking. The emerging Civil Rights Movement exerted pressure and eventually federal legislation that limited and eventually prohibited discrimination in admission procedures and treatment of African Americans in Milwaukee hospitals.

Even more significant was a transformation in medical care sweeping the nation since the end of the Second World War. The growth of population after the war necessitated the construction of new hospitals and the expansion of existing hospitals. The federal government made funds available to subsidize the construction of new hospital

facilities under the Hospital Survey and Construction Act of 1946. In the 1950s hospital care doubled in price. The introduction of both Medicare and Medicaid in 1965 invested the federal government more in medical care and increased the demand for medical services. The growth of medical expenditures put severe strains on the medical system. As medical costs skyrocket, hospital consolidations and large for-profit hospitals began in many cities. In the early 1970s, health maintenance organizations (HMOs) emerged as a major innovation for medical care to get away from hospital-dominated care into a more efficient system. The “HMO strategy” called for stimulating private initiative rather than relying on government and large public expenditures. It welcomed profit-making corporations as part of the health maintenance industry. HMOs became a field for business investment and the efforts to contain medical costs set off a wave of acquisitions, mergers, and diversification in the nonprofit as well as the profit-making sectors of the medical industry. The growth of corporate medicine resulted in a decline of freestanding hospitals and a shift away from nonprofit and government organizations to for-profit companies in health care. St. Anthony, a small independent nonprofit hospital, became a victim of these larger national forces that were transforming the delivery of medical care across the nation.⁶⁹

Faced by the demand of expensive upgrades and modernization of St. Anthony’s and lacking the funds and personnel to do this, the Franciscan Sisters and the Capuchins turned to the Archdiocese of Milwaukee for help. At first, Archbishop William Cousins

⁶⁹Paul Starr, *The Social Transformation of American Medicine* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1982), 368, 379, 394-396; 421, 428-429; Christopher J. Kauffman, *Ministry and Meaning: A Religious History of Catholic Health Care in the United States* (New York: Crossroads, 1995), 168-192; Avella, *In The Richness of the Earth*, 710-712, 714-718.

turned them down, explaining that the archdiocese could not afford the considerable costs involved in keeping St. Anthony's alive. However, when it appeared that the hospital might close, the archdiocese attitude changed somewhat. Perhaps pressure came from civil rights activists among the clergy and laity in Milwaukee who complained that the archdiocese was abandoning health care for African Americans in the central city. In fact, Misericordia Hospital, a long-time hospital at 1255 N. 22nd Street had plans to relocate to the suburb of Brookfield by 1969, leaving only St. Anthony's as the sole Catholic hospital in the near-downtown area of the city. Cousins switched gears and, while he did not agree to underwrite the extensive renovation which St. Anthony's needed with archdiocesan funds, he did take a more visible role in trying to save the hospital.⁷⁰

On May 27, 1966, Cousins decided to publicly announce the closing of the hospital as of July 1, 1966, in hopes of gaining public support and dollars to save the facility. A press release stated the concern of the archdiocese that the closing of St. Anthony would have on the community and then stated the problem the old hospital posed.

At a time when either extensive and expensive remodeling, or an entirely new facility, is mandatory to meet modern hospital requirements, both religious communities find it impossible to assume additional debt obligations. Hospitals in the Archdiocese are in every instance properties of individual religious orders responsible to their own Superiors in matters of financing and financial policies....⁷¹

The press release ended with a promise by Cousins to seek other religious groups or

⁷⁰Bishop Atkielski to Archbishop Cousins, November 3, 1965, AS 91 (St. Anthony Hospital), Box 1, Folder 4, AAM; Mother Mary Thomasine to Archbishop Cousins, June 18, 1965; Press Announcement Regarding the Continuance of St. Anthony's Hospital, June 1966; Msgr. Edmund Goebel to Archbishop Cousins (Vatican Council), September 17, 1965, AS 91 (St. Anthony Hospital), Box 1, Folder 4, AAM.

⁷¹"Hospital Will Close July 1, 1966," Press Release, May 27, 1966, AS 91 (St. Anthony Hospital), Box 1, Folder 1, AAM.

interested citizens who might help solve the problem. By June 17, 1966, Cousins announced that “an awakened community has become increasingly aware of the tragic consequences attendant upon the loss of this facility. Interested citizens, doctors, professional men, hospital consultants have joined in a last-ditch effort in what was apparently a hopeless cause.”⁷²

The Archdiocese support for St. Anthony did not come in the form of financial aid to the Franciscans and Capuchins, but by assuming the role of leadership. The Archdiocese leased the hospital building from the Capuchins and negotiated with the School Sisters of St. Francis on Layton Boulevard in Milwaukee to come to St. Anthony. The School Sisters of St. Francis did not assume any financial, administrative, or staffing responsibilities. These duties were to be done by a Board of Directors appointed by Cousins. The nursing was to be done by laywomen. The Sisters who came to St. Anthony were to visit the patients and offer spiritual assistance.⁷³

Cousins was able to postpone, but not prevent, the closing of St. Anthony Hospital. Eventually, the Capuchins sold St. Anthony Hospital with its real estate, buildings, and all its other assets including cash and furnishings for \$500,000 to the Archdiocese. The hospital was remodeled for a cost of \$1.6 million dollars. However, this was nothing more than a small bandage on a massive wound than required many more millions of dollars to solve, as the Franciscan Sisters had earlier maintained. The hospital lingered for several more years, continuing its gradual decline. Finally, in the mid-1970s the Archdiocese of

⁷²Ibid.; “Statement on St. Anthony’s Hospital,” June 17, 1966, AS 91 (St. Anthony Hospital), Box 1, File 1, AAM.

⁷³Ahles, 327.

Milwaukee was offered \$5 ½ million for the property by Milwaukee County for an extension of the Milwaukee County Jail and the hospital was sold. The march of time, the limitations of the old building, the need for modern equipment and facilities, the inability to raise sufficient funds, and its cramped location on the edge of Interstate 94 expressway preventing adequate space of future additions and parking all prevented St. Anthony from remaining a viable institution and led to its demise and eventual closing.⁷⁴

Summary

Unlike the usual models for medical care, St. Anthony Hospital effectively served African Americans in an interracial setting. The Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception from Little Falls, Minnesota played a seminal role in the ministry of the Catholic Church of Milwaukee to the African American community. At a time when the entire nation remained segregated by race, St. Anthony Hospital, staffed and administered by the Sisters, provided medical care in an integrated setting since its founding in 1931. The leadership of Steffes along with the encouragement and support he received from Aichinger, Capuchin Provincial, were also paramount in the success of the hospital. Their vision of “church” included a multitude of activities and programs. Worship and religious instruction, a grade school and high school for boarding and day students, a day-care nursery, and a hospital were all part of St. Benedict’s vision of “church.” Conversion, education, and an array of social outreach programs and institutions, especially St. Anthony’s Hospital, were the hallmarks of the St. Benedict experience. At a time when

⁷⁴“Agreement Between Capuchin Fathers and Archdiocese of Milwaukee Re St. Anthony’s Hospital,” June 3, 1966, AS 91 (St. Anthony Hospital), Box 1, File 1; “Memo to Weakland Re St. Anthony,” February 23, 1979, AS 91 (St. Anthony Hospital), Box 1, File 5 (Correspondence 1968-1979), AAM.

racism, prejudice, and discrimination was evident, St. Benedict worked successfully against these forces and strove to foster sensitivity, respect, and dignity.

CHAPTER 7

THE EDUCATIONAL LIFE OF ST. BENEDICT THE MOOR

While St. Anthony Hospital was the mainstay of St. Benedict's social outreach to the African American community of Milwaukee, the school continued to be the primary vehicle for conversion work. During Steffes' tenure, St. Benedict the Moor School was re-constituted and emerged into a very viable Catholic institution for the African American community of Milwaukee. Despite numerous difficulties, especially in the early years, and financial constraints and pressures throughout its existence, a high quality educational program was established. It included a strong academic curriculum, a variety of extra-curricular activities, commercial and technical skills training, and religious instruction and formation. The educational program received widespread approval and support of African Americans and the larger Milwaukee community. In the first half of the twentieth century, it was primarily through its ministry at St. Benedict the Moor that the Catholic Church of Milwaukee engaged the African community, shaping the intellectual growth and spiritual development of African Americans. Education and conversion emerged as twin goals in this ministry and were very consciously connected in the minds of the religious who served at St. Benedict the Moor. The fact that St. Benedict was a boarding school meant that it provided a total environment for Christian values to be formed and mature. In many ways St. Benedict was similar to other Catholic schools for African Americans and in certain ways St. Benedict was distinctive.

An Overview of Catholic Education and Boarding Schools for African American Children

The Vatican continued to be concerned about the conversion and educational efforts of the Catholic Church in the United States to African Americans. In 1936 the Vatican's Sacred Consistorial Congregation issued a letter that emphasized the need of schools for African Americans.

The education of the Negroes, on account of their social condition, has met with many great obstacles. Nevertheless, even among them, progress and advance are noted more and more, and proof of this is given by many of these who hold positions of culture and leadership. The Catholic Church desires such progress for all desires that it be in the full light of the Gospel.¹

The letter gave examples of what had already been accomplished in the field of Catholic education for African Americans, but noted that the need was still so great and so urgent. Specifically, the letter urged that more churches and schools be established, more financial resources and personnel be allocated, and more attention be given to conversions and religious vocations of African Americans.²

One of the early surveys of African American Catholics in the United States was conducted in 1940 by John Guillard. He reported that there were few Catholic schools for African American children. In 1940 there were 237 Catholic grammar grade schools with a total enrollment of 41,050 pupils.³ On the high school level, there were 48 complete Catholic high schools for African Americans having 4,292 students. And, on the college-

¹Cardinal Raffaello C. Rossi to their Eminences, Cardinals, and their Excellencies, the Archbishops and Bishops of the United States of America, August 24, 1936, copy in St. Augustine Seminary Archives in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi (SASA), provided by Stephen J. Ochs.

²Ibid.

³John T. Gillard in his book *Colored Catholics in the United States* points out that this number of African Americans does not include those who may have been enrolled in predominantly white Catholic schools in the North, where the numbers of African Americans did not necessitate a separate school.

level in 1940, 38 Catholic colleges and universities had accepted and enrolled 182 African American students.⁴

There were only ten Catholic boarding academies in the United States in 1940. Eight of the ten boarding schools were for girls only and only two for boys, St. Emma's Industrial and Agricultural Institute in Rock Castle, Virginia, and St. Benedict the Moor in Milwaukee. Of the ten boarding schools in 1940, five were just grammar schools and the remaining five had a grammar school and a high school program. The school with the largest enrollment of boarders in 1940 was St. Francis de Sales High School in Rock Castle, Virginia, with 154 girls. St. Benedict the Moor was tied for having the second largest number of student boarders with St. Emma's, both with 125. However, when counting boarding students and day students, St. Peter's Academy in Dallas with 430 students had the largest enrollment followed by St. Mary's Academy in New Orleans with an enrollment of 350, and St. Peter Claver's Academy in San Antonio with 311 students. St. Benedict the Moor, with its total enrollment of 237 students in 1940 was fourth largest in the country.⁵

An investigation of some Catholic boarding institutions reveals some common features or characteristics. The first important characteristic of Catholic boarding schools was that they were usually established by concerned individuals or a religious congregation, and not by diocesan or archdiocesan hierarchy.

⁴John T. Gillard, S.S.J., *Colored Catholics in the United States* (Baltimore, The Josephite Press, 1941), 204, 207, 212.

⁵Ibid, 216; "What Have Your Alms Accomplished? Prospectus," January 31, 1950, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 13, 1950-1951, ACF.

Table 5: Catholic Boarding Academies for African Americans, 1940

Location	School Name	Religious Congregation that Staffs the School	Gender of Students	Grades	Number of Boarders	Total Enrollment (Boarders and Day Students)
Baltimore, Maryland	St. Francis Academy	Oblate Sisters of Providence	Girls	5 - 12	75	145
Chicago, Illinois	Illinois Technical School for Colored Girl	Sisters of the Good Shepard	Girls	1 - 8	60	Not Given
Dallas, Texas	St. Peter's Academy	Sisters of the Holy Ghost (San Antonio)	Girls	1 - 12	40	430
Lafayette, Louisiana	Holy Rosary Institute	Sisters of the Holy Family (New Orleans)	Girls	1 - 12	46	176
New Orleans, Louisiana	St. Mary's Academy	Sisters of the Holy Family	Girls	1 - 12	40	350
Milwaukee, Wisconsin	St. Benedict the Moor	Capuchin Fathers and Dominican Sisters (Racine, Wisconsin)	Boys and Girls	1 - 12	125	237
Rock Castle, Virginia	St. Emma's Industrial and Agricultural Institute	Benedictine Fathers (Latrobe, PA)	Boys	9 - 12	125	125
Rock Castle, Virginia	St. Francis de Sales High School	Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament (Cornwells, PA)	Girls	9 - 12	154	154
St. Louis, Missouri	St. Rita's Academy	Oblate Sisters of Providence (Baltimore, MD)	Girls	5 - 12	24	43
San Antonio, Texas	St. Peter Claver's Academy	Sisters of the Holy Ghost (San Antonio)	Girls	1 - 12	40	311

Source: John T. Gillard, *Colored Catholics in the United States* (Baltimore: The Josephite Press, 1941), 216; *The Official Catholic Directory* (New York, P.J. Kennedy), 1940.

While this underscores the insufficient ministerial commitment of many dioceses and archdioceses to the African American community, it also points to a difficult situation some bishops faced. In many dioceses, there was sometimes opposition in the white community to African American Catholic institutions. Having a religious congregation running an African American school shielded, to some extent, the local bishop from white opposition and prejudice since he did not have as much control over the congregation nor did he own the school property. In Milwaukee, this was evident when Messmer encountered pressure to move St. Benedict away from the newly proposed Civic Center.

A lack of hierarchal leadership and white opposition was evident when Illinois Technical School for Colored Girls opened in Chicago in 1911 by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd at Forty-ninth Street and Prairie Avenue. The school started with no encouragement by the Chicago archdiocese and encountered protests from their white neighbors since Chicago's Black Belt had not yet reached Forty-ninth Street in 1911. The boarding school and orphanage initially took both black and white girls from families of medium or small income and girls whose homes were disrupted by death or divorce. It quickly became apparent that state agents, who inspected industrial schools that received public funds, and Cook County Juvenile Court judges, who determined the disposition of dependents, exerted considerable pressure that the "color line" be drawn. After consultation with state officials, the Sisters restricted their new school to African Americans only and then easily obtained a charter.⁶

Of all of the religious congregations that worked with African Americans, the most

⁶Hoy, 103-107, 116.

famous one was the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. The order was founded in 1891 by Katharine Drexel to work with Native Americans and African Americans. With the death of her father, Francis Anthony Drexel in 1885, Katharine along with her sisters Louise and Elizabeth inherited his fourteen million dollar fortune. Much of these funds were used to support the many ministries of the congregation. The Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament ran St. Francis, a girls boarding school and sponsored St. Emma's for boys, but did not actually teach there. They did secure the Christian Brothers, Benedictine Brothers of St. Vincent Abbey in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, and Holy Ghost Fathers to staff the school. The Sisters continued to be connected to the work at St. Emma's and shared the same philosophy of Catholic education for African Americans.⁷

Like St. Benedict the Moor, many of the other Catholic boarding schools took a holistic approach to education. They had a solid academic curriculum, commercial and industrial (or agricultural) offerings, many extra-curricular activities, and instruction in some basic life skills. Patricia Lynch in her history of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament stated, "Educators in the 1890s supported a mixture of academic and industrial education for most pupils."⁸ At the Illinois Technical School for Colored Girls, the students learned the fundamentals of reading, spelling, grammar, and arithmetic. They later studied geography, history, civics, literature, health, and penmanship. The girls also took classes

⁷Sr. Patricia Lynch, SBS, *Sharing The Bread In Service: Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, 1891-1991* (Bensalem, Pennsylvania: Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, 1998), 50, 90-91; Cecilia A. Moore, "Ethnicity and Parish Schools," in *One Hundred Years of Catholic Education: Historical Essays in Honor of the Centennial of the National Catholic Educational Association*, eds. John Augenstein, Christopher J. Kauffman, and Robert J. Wister (Washington, DC: National Catholic Educational Association, 2003), 245-6.

⁸Lynch, 75.

in millinery, embroidering, lace-making, and fine sewing. Extra-curricular activities included dance lessons such as ballet or tap, music lessons in piano or violin, and singing in the choir. During days of good weather, the girls skated outside on the sidewalks and played softball in the “yard.” Students took turns on swings, the maypole, and parallel bars. They took hikes and picnics to Washington Park and made trips to the Museum of Science and Industry. Life skills were taught to seventh and eighth grades. They learned the basics of cooking as well as the intricacies of sewing. The final sewing project was making one’s graduation dress.⁹

The curriculum at St. Francis DeSales included the basics and some extras. Young women studied grammar, spelling, and phonics. Everyone took Christian Doctrine and Bible Study. High school subjects include English, Algebra, Geometry, Botany, Chemistry, Physics, as well as Medieval, Modern, and American History. Commercial courses in typing, shorthand, and Business English were offered. All girls took “domestic economy” which covered home making, cooking, and sewing. Some of the extra-curricular opportunities included recitation and part singing, making costumes for plays, dressmaking, training for formal dinners and formal entertainment. Not everyone was expected to complete the rigorous academic program. Industrial courses in Domestic Art, Domestic Science, and Home Nursing were introduced. A fine arts program and sports program also thrived. By the 1930s the school had a full orchestra, a choir, and chorus. St. Francis offered both industrial and normal school education.¹⁰

⁹Hoy, 104, 112, 118-120.

¹⁰Lynch, 90, 97-98; Moore, 246.

Two other common features of the Catholic boarding schools included the attempt to develop a sense of community among the student body and to instruct one in religion and develop character formation. Everyone had a community manual labor job to do each day and good order was maintained through regimentation and rules. At Illinois Technical School, the girls served at meals, washed dishes, swept rooms and stairways, and helped with the laundry. It was believed that rules and routines ensured the common good, provided a stable environment, and furthered shared goals. Individual rights and personal freedoms were not a priority. To further the goal of Christian formation, religion was taught in every grade, either Christian doctrine or Bible study.¹¹ At St. Francis, Drexel thought it was important for the girls to live with the sisters during their high school years so they could learn the Catholic way of living and the Catholic outlook.¹²

Another characteristic of the boarding schools was the goal to have its graduates be self-sufficient. The Sisters of the Good Shepherd at Illinois Technical School wanted their students in time to contribute to their family's income or take care of themselves. The school stressed work and self-sufficiency rather than marriage and dependency.¹³ Drexel also intended that St. Francis would be a normal school so that upon graduation the young Christian women of character could go and teach African American children in Southern schools.¹⁴

¹¹Hoy, 116, 118-120.

¹²Lynch, 90.

¹³Hoy, 118.

¹⁴Lynch, 97.

A final characteristic deals with the demise and closing of these schools. As the Civil Rights Movement emerged in the fifties and sixties, the so-called “march of time” made these schools appear anachronistic. By the 1950s, the nuns at Illinois Technical School realized that the school was increasingly viewed as a segregated institution and decided to close after forty-two years of service. The building and grounds were sold in 1953 to the Archdiocese of Chicago for one dollar and the property, in turn, was given to the Franciscans at Corpus Christi parish so they could expand their school and open a day nursery for neighborhood children. Time had changed and “the special need” to which the school had been dedicated had “now passed.”¹⁵ Like many other African American boarding schools, changing times brought integrated schools and both St. Francis and St. Emma closed in the early 1970s.¹⁶

The Philosophy of St. Benedict the Moor School

The Catholic African American boarding schools shared many common characteristics and ideas. As schools, they all had high expectations of their students and a rigorous curriculum. There were the standard academic courses as well as commercial and industrial (or agricultural) classes. St. Benedict the Moor and other boarding schools were also influenced to varying degrees by the two quintessential African American ideologues, Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois, and, to a lesser extent, by the black nationalist Marcus Garvey. Although Washington stressed the industrial education path evident at Hampton and Tuskegee Institutes, DuBois emphasized a classical education for the

¹⁵Hoy, 120-121.

¹⁶Lynch, 527-8; Moore, 246-7.

“talented tenth” as seen at Atlanta and Howard Universities. St. Benedict created a hybrid model. A curriculum of both academic and industrial courses was the most practical response to the needs of their students.¹⁷

St. Benedict and other Catholic boarding schools took a holistic approach to education which included the development of the mind, body, and spirit. Some of the elements observed in other schools were found at St. Benedict. Along with their classes, students also had opportunities for many athletic and artistic activities. These girls and boys were supported with a nurturing community of devoted religious women and men. Character education along with a first-rate academic program was important. Such schools sought well-rounded graduates who carried with them a sense of pride, confidence, and commitment to serve others. These institutions furnished a well-ordered and stable environment. There were strict rules and clear punishments. There was little interest in individual rights and personal freedoms. Instead, the common good and shared goals were stressed. There was a daily schedule that provided a routine and regimentation. All students were given daily chores to do at specific times which included serving meals, washing dishes, or sweeping rooms and stairwells. Such manual labor assignments were seen as essential in building character and keeping the school in good order. There was also a regimen of daily religious services and prayers. The school enabled its graduates to be good self-sufficient workers who possessed marketable skills. The religious women and men who staffed these schools overwhelmingly found the ministry to be very hard

¹⁷Vernon C. Polite, “Making a Way Out of No Way: The Oblate Sisters of Providence and St. Frances Academy in Baltimore, Maryland, 1828 to the Present,” in *Growing Up African American in Catholic Schools* by Jacqueline Jordan Irvine and Michele Foster, eds. (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996), 65.

work, but work that they liked to do. They would frequently boast of their pupils' achievements in letters to their fellow religious.¹⁸ And, while some of these institutions were color blind and never or seldom spoke of race, St. Benedict the Moor fostered among their students a strong identity as African Americans and a sense of racial pride.¹⁹

St. Benedict the Moor, like the other Catholic boarding schools, had components in its philosophy shaped in part by the charism of its particular religious order and the circumstances and personalities of its founding and early days. Eckert placed education as the priority in the mission ministry. While he did not start the school, Eckert saw education as the key to his ministry. He viewed the primary ministerial thrust of conversion of African Americans to be complemented first with a Catholic school for proper Christian formation and second, social programs. From his experience in parishes in New York, he was convinced that proper religious training was not only necessary for children, but was also an effective way of gaining converts among their parents. When Eckert visited the homes of African Americans shortly after his arrival in Milwaukee, he found some families did not provide the structure or the direction necessary for children to grow into moral and responsible individuals. He believed African American mothers were forced to seek employment outside the home, given their abject poverty. African American fathers many times worked at low-rung jobs in the evening. As a result, their children became, in a sense, orphans who lived mainly on the street and neglected by

¹⁸St. Benedict House Chronicle, *passim*.

¹⁹Hoy, 116-119; Moore, 245-248; Janice Jackson, "Forward" in *Growing Up African American in Catholic Schools*, Jacqueline Jordan Irvine and Michele Foster, eds. (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996), x, xi.

society. In Eckert's mind, because a dichotomy existed between the child's hours in the school environment and the home environment, the boarding school could remove any corrupting influences from the social environment.²⁰

Eckert believed the boarding school was the ideal institution to raise children in the wholesome atmosphere of religion. It provided discipline and inculcated good habits through a regular regimen and schedule. Eckert and the other missionaries of his time also saw the boarding school as a "nursery of the Faith." While most of the students were not Catholic when they first arrived, there were many who became converts to Catholicism during their stay. The school was viewed as the primary vehicle for conversion of African Americans. Once children were converted, many would then bring their parents to the Faith. Eckert also envisioned its graduates would form a "nucleus of Catholicity", wherever they settled in the country, which would then grow. Eckert encapsulated this view by frequently saying, "More good can be done in one year by a boarding school than in five years by a day school."²¹

The emphasis of teaching practical skills, advocated at the time by many African American leaders like Booker T. Washington, was also favored by Eckert. He was partly motivated by pragmatic factors like being able to mend the children's clothes and repair their shoes "in-house." On 19 July 1915 a shoemaking shop was opened. A retired shoemaker offered to teach interested students the skill of repairing and making shoes. Likewise, a Sewing Circle was started with a core of women volunteering their time once

²⁰Berchmans Bittle., 97-99.

²¹Ibid., 121-122.

or twice each week offering sewing instructions to students.²²

The philosophy and rationale underpinning the mission of St. Benedict School was first formulated by Eckert's "Rules for Students." Trying to foster religious growth, discipline, and good habits, his view of the school and its students reflected the missionary spirit seen among foreign missionaries at the time of going to help the less fortunate.

You are here to profit by a Christian education and therefore to become good Christian children and good men and women some day, and also a great blessing to your race on account of the good education you received. We are here to help you: those who do not appreciate our service should not be here. We are willing to give every child a chance....²³

He then called on the students to obey their teachers "promptly, exactly, and cheerfully" and to obey when the bell rings for work, play, or prayer. Refusing to obey, "murmuring, complaining, talking back" were actions to be punished. Quarreling, name calling, fighting, lying, and stealing were forbidden behaviors and reasons for unacceptable behavior were justified in religious terms. For example, when he condemned lying, Eckert wrote,

...Be truthful. The first liar was the devil, so when you lie, you do what the devil does; hence God hates lying, and even if it were not a sin, nothing is more hurtful,.... Therefore, if you have done wrong, own up to it. Because it is so bad to lie, we must punish those who are found lying.²⁴

He urged students to take proper care of their books, clothes, shoes. He outlawed throwing stones, sticks, or coal. He warned students not to waste any of their food. He

²²St. Benedict House Chronicles, 1915; Berchmans Bittle, 104-105.

²³"Rules for Students," St. Benedict the Moor Files, File 1 "St Benedict Programs and booklets, 1921-1928," ACF.

²⁴Ibid.

forbade them to leave school grounds without permission. And, he told them, that the rule of all rules was to do nothing without permission. This would keep them out of trouble. He expected the older children to set a good example to the younger children and wanted experienced students to help out the new students in the school. Near the end of his written rules, Eckert said that if they followed the rules, studied hard, did their duties, and were obedient and respectful, St. Benedict would be a pleasant home for them. But, if they continually violated the rules, St. Benedict would be less than pleasant and their misconduct would result in punishment. In conclusion, he reminded them to say their daily prayers and pray to God with devotion.²⁵

Complementing the “Rules for Students” was a similar tract entitled “Considerations for Teachers.” Eckert began by first giving his view of African American children.

Children are regarded as a blessing to the home, and they surely are, if they are good. Children as a rule are as they are trained by their parents. We take the place of the parents, and it is for us to train the children... During all the years of my experience with the colored children, I have found very few that could not be trained. No matter how old, they are children and are generally not bad because they want to be good....²⁶

An important understanding of Eckert and his cohorts was the notion that they were the substitute parents for “their” African American children at the boarding school and they were responsible to train the children. Eckert saw the work as something given by God to everyone at the boarding school who labored there regardless of whether one was

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶“Considerations For Teachers,” St. Benedict the Moor Files, File 1 “St. Benedict’s Programs, booklets, 1921-1928,” ACF.

religious or lay or whether one taught school or prepared the meals. He believed that all must be committed to train the children and correct their faults.

It is for us then to train the children; one, two, or three cannot do it; it needs the cooperation of all. No matter what position we hold, one is as important as the other. We all take the place of the parents of the children...God has chosen us who are here through obedience for a most wonderful work, namely the reformation of many children, and to make this an ideal Christian home.²⁷

Teachers were there to bring the children to God in a loving way and punishment needed to be tempered and properly directed.

We must act toward the children as a good father and mother would act toward their own. The first thing which good Christian parents do is to instruct their children about God, (our) relation to Him, His rewards and punishments,...His commandments, sin and virtue, grace, its necessity and the means of obtaining it. This must be done in the language of a loving mother....

...When punishing, we must have the same object in view as the physician, namely to cure. We should never punish in the heat of passion, for an angry person, says St. James, does what is sinful. We should ask ourselves before, will the punishment correct the child? If not, there is hardly any purpose in inflicting it....

As to corporal punishment, which according to Scripture at times must be used to drive the folly out of the child, let me say that in general it should be the last kind to be inflicted and only after a second or third admonition for direct disobedience, stubbornness, talking back, lying, stealing, filthy speech, throwing stones,...or for anything of a serious nature or consequence.²⁸

Some doctrines for the teachers were very specific and prescriptive. For example, Eckert told the teachers to use candy as rewards or incentives for good behavior and to give the children candy on special feast days. Teachers were admonished to keep their classrooms

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid.

neat and clean and to be present in the rooms by 8:30 AM. Children always need to be supervised and teachers should not send students on errands out of their classroom unless absolutely necessary. He prescribed starting each day with a reading of a short sketch of the life of a saint and twice a week a chapter of the New Testament.²⁹

Eckert believed that the white man had a debt or duty to fulfill to the African American. The white man, who first enslaved and then brought freedom to African Americans, had the duty to help them spiritually and materially until they could take care adequately for themselves. The twin-forces of prejudice and discrimination resulted in a lack of opportunities for African Americans and thwarted this end from being realized. Thus, Eckert perceived his boarding school, along with his appeals for charity to white Catholics and their priests, as an appropriate duty of whites in addressing this social issue.³⁰

In Eckert's view, the Mission boarding school would shield the children from the contaminating influences which they would face at home that he believed were beyond the control of well-intentioned parents. It would also protect them more from the worst of the racial prejudice and discrimination of the larger society. Also, when societal influences were diminished, the school would promote racial pride and accomplishment. It would foster a sense of self-worth, dignity, confidence, and respect in its students. It would seek to make its students economically successful, moral, confident, and wholesome individuals. Finally, his vision of the boarding school as a "nursery of the

²⁹Berchmans Bittle, 116-117.

³⁰Ibid., 101.

Faith” would become someday a “nucleus of Catholicity.” After several years at St. Benedict, Eckert could point to fairly large numbers of boys and girls who attended the Mission school and then returned to various parts of the country. As adults, they formed a “nucleus of Catholicity” with their parents and some of their friends, who were won over to the Faith through the efforts of these children. In this sense, the Mission boarding school was a training ground of lay disciples who helped evangelize in the larger African American community.³¹

Similarly, in a study of African American parishes in the diocese of Cleveland, Ohio, Dorothy Ann Blatnica described the role of the Catholic schools for African Americans in Cleveland. Her statement would also be true of St. Benedict the Moor in Milwaukee.

[The schools], in particular, were the seed beds of innumerable conversions not only on the part of students, but their parents as well. They were sources of spiritual and intellectual learning, but they were also sources of a compassionate caring....³²

While Blatnica’s findings dealt with day schools for African American children, the boarding school environment of St. Benedict the Moor provided a holistic approach with even greater intensity of structure, discipline and nurturing.

The Curriculum

The positive impression of the public to St. Benedict School was largely due to an excellent academic and extra-curricular program tailored to the needs its students in an

³¹Ibid., 121-122.

³²Dorothy Ann Blatnica, *“At the Altar of Their God”—African American Catholics in Cleveland, 1922-1961* (New York: Garland Publishers, Inc., 1995), 108.

environment where committed and nurturing adults instilled in the students a sense of respect, self-confidence, and pride in their school, their church, and their race. Unlike some other Catholic boarding schools, St. Benedict offered courses in African American history and literature and fostered black pride through many observances and activities.³³ The graduates of St. Benedict the Moor were professional, socially-conscious, well mannered, and skilled and educated people whose experience provided them a gateway to move into American society. In a society that segregated and subordinated African Americans, the students of St. Benedict were probably some of the best equipped African Americans to succeed. Some of the students of St. Benedict who achieved notoriety include former Chicago Mayor Harold Washington, comedian Red Foxx, jazzman Lionel Hampton, Harlem Globe-trotter Charles Holton, basketball star John Johnson, and Hollywood screenwriter Michael Schultz. Sister Barbara Wildenberg, who spent many years at St. Benedict stated years later that “the Dominicans and Capuchins always taught that race should be no obstacle to moving ahead. Many of the school’s graduates went on to success in the professions.”³⁴

One factor that influenced the educational program at St. Benedict was a visit Steffes made to Tuskegee Institute in Alabama on 3 and 4 November 1924, just a couple of years after his appointment as director of the Mission. He was very impressed with the highly successful institution Booker T. Washington had established. At this time Tuskegee formed a city of its own with over 3,000 inhabitants, with its trade schools,

³³Hoy, 116.

³⁴(*Racine*) *Journal Times*, “Remembering Harold,” April 23, 1983, St. Benedict the Moor Papers, ARD.

hospital, bank, foundry, and many buildings. He was particularly impressed with the Tuskegee students. They were “studious, diligent, courteous, and their cleanliness was striking.” Smoking was not permitted on the premises and entertainments were “unobjectionable, usually musical in character.” Tuition was not required at Tuskegee, but good will was necessary. The visit to Tuskegee Institute reinforced Steffes’ belief that the sad condition of the African American race was “due to the fact that it has had no fair chance,” and that the African American “is intellectually able to compete with the white, and that this is verified at Tuskegee.” Like Eckert before him, Steffes also believed that the whites had a duty towards the African American, who was brought here against his will as a slave, and “is a creature of equal standing with the white man, for the Negro was created by the same Creator.”³⁵ Steffes believed that African Americans could embrace Washington’s self-help philosophy provided that they were given a fair chance or opportunity.

The academic program emphasized what Eckert called the “4 R’s,” reading, writing, arithmetic, and religion. On each level, the pedagogical approach called for some new material to be introduced. Then, material already introduced was reinforced, and, finally, reinforced material was reviewed to obtain mastery. The introduce-reinforce-review approach was used between grades as well as within the day-to-day lessons of students. As was typical of the times, the pedagogy consisted largely of rote

³⁵“Relates Impressions of Visit to Tuskegee Institute,; *Milwaukee Enterprise*, December 6, 1924, and “Impressions of Southern States by Rector of St. Benedict the Moor’s Negro Mission,” *Catholic Citizen*, November 27, 1924, St. Benedict the Moor Papers, Box 1, File 8, “Newspaper Clippings,” ACF; Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Benno Aichinger, December 18, 1924, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 5, St. Benedict the Moor, May 1924 to May 1925, ACF.

memorization and repetition with the material usually sequenced in order of difficulty or importance. For the higher grades, the basic curriculum was supplemented with the fine arts of music, art, public speaking, drama, band, orchestra, choir, and the practical arts of sewing for girls and printing and manual arts for boys. The educational program at St. Benedict clearly emphasized both academic and vocational or technical training.³⁶

Lionel Hampton, renowned jazz musician, attended St. Benedict and attributed much of his success as a musician to the training and discipline he received from Sister Petra LeFevre.

All the teachers were nuns—Dominican Sisters. They wore white habits. The one who made the biggest impression on me was Sister Petra, and she would be my guiding force while I was (there). She was a hard-hitting, no-nonsense type of person who also happened to be a virtuoso on the drums, and she taught me some musical lessons that I will never forget...

The school was forming a drum and fife corps...So they got instruments donated from Catholic organizations and started their group. Sister Petra was in charge. I applied for drums. I didn't know what I was getting into. Her philosophy was to impose the rudiments, you know...She was great. You're supposed to play drums holding the sticks evenly, but most people favor one side of the other. I'm right-handed, so I favored the right-hand side, and I held the right stick the way I should have been holding the left stick. Boy, when she saw me doing that, she'd make me stand up. And then she'd take and kick me in the behind, and she wore pointy-toed shoes, too. So that's where I got my rudiments on drums, and I played drums in the drum and fife corps.

We practiced four hours a day...And when we weren't serious, we'd get hit on the knuckles or kicked in the behind. It's a wonder any of us lived to get to Kenosha, Wisconsin, about two months later for our first Catholic band competition. We won second prize! Out of all those bands, we won second prize, and after being together only two months. That was due to Sister

³⁶Sr. M. Cordia to Fr. Stephen Eckert, September 15, 1920, "Fr. Stephen Eckert Papers," File 9, Letters to Him 1905, 1915, 1921, 1922, ACF; Steven M. Avella, "African American Socialization in Milwaukee: The Role of the Catholic Church," *Kansas Quarterly* 25, no. 2 [1993]: 23, ACF.

Petra, who made us practice and made sure we were correct.

I played other instruments—xylophone, orchestra bells, snare drums, and timpani. I loved everything about music, and I'd pick up any instrument I found. I was getting good at reading music, too, thanks to old Sister Petra.³⁷

St. Benedict offered an educational program that gave students a wide variety of opportunities and frequently had some event, exhibit, or other mechanism to display their talents. Students were taught music, sewing, art, and cooking. Some students became involved Catholic Action on Saturdays as an extra-curricular activity. In the 1924-1925 school term, Sister Georgene Bilecke organized a drama club and presented a play. The club received several requests from the community to act and sing. In the 1926-1927 school year, a band was organized and played for the first time for the breakfast following First Communion Day. It was also chronicled that students from State Teachers College did their practice teaching in music with the band and at the conclusion give a band concert. "The children enjoy listening to marches played by the band and feel like stepping in line and marching along...The children appreciate the opportunity of learning what real music is and hence choose between overtures and jazz." The 1927-1928 school year had the eighth grade pupils circulating a publication, *The Bee Hive*, recording most of the major activities of each room. In 1928-1929 the faculty decided to have a minstrel show with a program of dances, jigs, musical numbers, songs, comedy, and a magic act. It was performed for the public and the hall was filled to capacity.³⁸

³⁷Lionel Hampton and James Haskins, *Hamp—An Autobiography by Lionel Hampton and James Haskins*, an excerpt of pages 18-19 describing Hampton's year at St. Benedict, distributed at the St. Benedict Alumni Meeting, 1997, St. Benedict the Moor File, ARD.

³⁸"History of the Dominican Sisters in charge of the School for Colored Children, St. Benedict's School, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1920-1936," 10-11, 14, 16, 18-19, 22, St. Benedict the Moor Files, ARD.

In response to unemployment and job shortages, vocational guidance education was introduced into the curriculum in 1933-1934 as a formal course. Each of the upper grades made a study of a particular phase of work, such as clothing, architecture, and forestry and then presented an exhibit. Mechanical drawing was introduced the following year in grades five to eight for boys to prepare them for possible future work. Their work went on display in a general exhibit for all the parochial schools of Milwaukee country. Likewise, sewing was taught to the girls in grades five to eight. They also exhibited their work in December at St. Benedict's School and in May at the Knights of Columbus Hall. St. Benedict also had a booth at the Eucharistic Congress in Chicago in 1926. When journalism was introduced in the high school, St. Benedict's *Trumpet* (student newspaper) started and reported on the monthly activities of the school, generating school spirit among students and teachers.³⁹

A Typical Day

Habits of self-discipline and responsibility in the students were bred by a strict daily schedule. Moreover, it was probably the only way that an under-staffed group of Sisters could supervise and control children and adolescent boarders in overcrowded facilities.

The boarding students were awakened at 5:30 A.M. The Sister-supervisor designated one early-rising, responsible student as the bell ringer. He or she would ring the bell to wake the students. The Sister-supervisors made sure everyone had risen, washed, and properly dressed and then everyone marched to the chapel at 6:30 A.M. for

³⁹Ibid.

morning prayer and Mass. Then, the pupils went to the dining room for breakfast. Being a member of the school community, every student had an assigned manual labor task and was responsible to do it each day. These tasks were performed usually during one of the recreation periods. One of the prefects would be with the students at recreation and another prefect was with the students doing their manual labor assignments. Students who were assigned breakfast dishes and cleaning the dining room after breakfast stayed behind while the rest returned to their dormitory. At this time students made their beds and straightened out their area and then had some free time for recreation before school. School began at 8:30 A.M. with a study period and classes started at 9:00 A.M. Around noon there was a break for lunch and a recreation period. The school day ended by 4:00 P.M. (3:30 P.M. for the younger children) and was followed by recreation until supper at 5:00 P.M. and then another short recreation period. Again, if a student was assigned to sweep a classroom floor or a stairwell after school or do supper dishes, these tasks were done while the rest of the students had recreation. At 6:30 P.M. there was night prayer in the chapel for everyone. At 7:00 P.M. the children in the first three Grades retired while the others had a Study Hour and then retired by 8:30 P.M.⁴⁰

The life of the students was carefully regulated on weekends with supervised activities for the children. A movie was shown every Sunday evening in the hall under the church. Parents were permitted to visit their children on holidays and on the first Sunday of each month from 2:00 P.M. to 4:00 P.M. Letters to home were written by

⁴⁰“Prospectus of St. Benedict the Moor Institute” booklet, 10, in tied Folder titled “Indian and Negro Missions, 1898-1934,” ACF; Conversation with Sr. Theresa Ulrich, O.P., ARD.

students on weekends, generally, and placed in a letter-box, unsealed. Father Rector had the authority to read any letter written by the children or sent to them. Correspondence was not permitted with students who were dismissed from the school. The students were required to write home at the beginning of each month and to enclose their report card which was then signed by the parents and returned. If parents or relatives wanted to give their children money, gifts, or treats, like candy, it had to be given to the Institution, not to the student, and then it would be given to the intended child at the discretion of Father Rector or the Sister-prefect.⁴¹

Parents were given a list of clothing and other articles to provide for their children during their stay at the Mission. Boys were supposed to have three pairs of shoes, one pair of rubbers, six towels, three wash cloths, three coveralls, two tooth brushes, three tubes of toothpaste, comb, shoe-brush and polish, and six pairs of socks. Other items on the list included one dozen handkerchiefs, two caps, bathing tights, three shirts, one sweater, two pairs of light and heavy underwear, two pairs of pajamas, one overcoat, two suits for everyday wear, and one suit for Sundays. Girls were asked to bring two hand towels, two bath towels, three wash cloths, one tooth brush, one hair brush, one comb, two bars of soap, two tubes of toothpaste, and a jar of vaseline. In addition, the girls' list called for one rain coat, one heavy coat, one sweater, one pair of rubbers, three suits of light and heavy underwear, two gingham aprons, two night gowns, one laundry bag, one dozen handkerchiefs, three washable dresses, two Sunday dresses, four napkins, one bath robe, one bathing suit, six pairs of stockings, three pairs of shoes, one pair white and four

⁴¹"Prospectus of St. Benedict the Moor Institute" booklet, 5, 11.

pairs of black bloomers, one white and two colored petticoats, and two caps for night wear. All clothing articles should have the student's name written on them in indelible ink.⁴² It is difficult to imagine that many of the poor children had such an extensive wardrobe or that parents could afford to purchase everything on the list.

Admission procedures became formalized in the 1920s. A written application was first completed by the parent and a letter was needed from the applicant's previous teacher telling of the student's moral character, deportment, progress, and application. A physician's report on the applicant's medical standing was required along with a parent consent form for vaccination of the child and other preventive measures deemed necessary by health authorities at the Mission. The monthly expenses included twenty dollars for board and tuition, three dollars for violin, piano, or organ lessons, and one dollar for lessons for brass instruments. Concessions of reduced payments were made for cases of real need.⁴³

Discipline

Discipline was very strict. George Gaines, a boarder from Detroit, said, "When I came to St. Benedict's, I felt as if I had been transported to another planet." Harold Washington, former mayor of Chicago, once said, "St. Benedict's got me ready for the army."⁴⁴ Sister Bernadette Marie Kolvek recalled a humorous anecdote of a young boy who was going to be disciplined.

⁴²Ibid., 12.

⁴³Ibid., 7, 13.

⁴⁴Sr. Agnes Simmon, O.P., "History of Racine Dominicans at St. Benedict the Moor in Milwaukee," 10, St. Benedict the Moor Files, Archives of the Racine Dominican Sisters (ARD).

One day a youngster was naughty and I told him that I would see him at night. As the children were going to bed, I missed the boy. The others informed me that he had not been at supper, at night prayers, and at play. It was Fall and getting cold. In my worry I notified Father Philip Steffes, who in turn called the police. In the meantime the boys and I prayed the Rosary so that no harm would come to him. The children went to bed and I paced the floor wondering why the lad was so afraid of my warning. After some time I again made the rounds of the sleeping children. To my great joy, there was the missing child fast asleep in his bed. I woke him and asked him where he had been. He said, 'I hid behind the door.'"⁴⁵

Corporal punishment and dismissal occurred at St. Benedict for what was regarded as serious or continued infractions of the rules. The House Chronicles records some of these instances.

Three boys were dismissed from school and sent home: Howard Jones, Kyle Turner, Esterlene Wilford. Two are of Chicago and the latter of St. Louis. Conduct unbearable and language obscene. An example had to be made; these three brought things to a climax by refusing to take a deserved punishment with a hose.⁴⁶

Another entry dealt with the "Lee brothers," four brothers attending St. Benedict in the early years, who were regarded as the "terror" of the school until one day when two of the brothers went too far and encountered Sister Marie Kronki.

The crucifix...was also a much hated and objectionable thing in the room for two of our heathen boys, Murray and William Lee. They threatened to tear it down, made grimaces whenever it fell into their view, and could not bear the sight of it. Today when Sister Marie came back into her classroom, she found William standing on her desk, trying to throw the crucifix down with a stick. She downed him and gave him and the others an object lesson they would not soon forget. From that time, the crucifix remained unmolested in its place of honor.⁴⁷

⁴⁵Ibid., 10.

⁴⁶Capuchin House Chronicle, St. Benedict the Moor, March 2, 1922.

⁴⁷Ibid., January 17, 1913.

The Lee boys were said to be the worst. There were times in the beginning when Sister wanted to see the work of the Lee brothers. They did not wish to show her their work (probably because it was not done). They would kick, scratch, spit, and cry to prevent her inspection. However, the chronicle stated that three months later the Lee boys finally “came around.”⁴⁸

The stories of the Lee brothers as well as others like them showed the priests and sisters striving for a balance between strictness and compassion. Corporal punishment was meted out with more frequency in the early years of the Mission and began to decrease by the later 1920s. In most discipline cases, punishment was swift, but not vindictive. As illustrated in both the case of the Lee boys, there was the belief that the unacceptable behavior was correctable with persistence and punishment. And, like a parent, one had the child’s best interest in mind in the long run or, in the case of dismissal, the best interests of the group. Then there were individual misconduct that were serious infractions of the rules that resulted in expulsion in order to protect the student body as a whole. One needed only to recall Eckert’s exhortation that it is everyone’s job to correct and deter inappropriate behavior in order to form a Christian character in the children which in turn would save their souls.

Faculty Life and Expectations for Sisters

The first decades of the school were difficult and required much hard work with some great inconveniences. Sister Agnes Simmon’s 1987 memoir contained excerpts of Sisters’ experiences who had served at St. Benedict. It relates some of the hardships in

⁴⁸Ibid., January 28, 1913.

those early years. Sister Mary Ida Sol was sent to St. Benedict in 1925. She was given charge of thirty boarding girls from first to fifth grade and recalled her experience.

I slept in the cupola on the third floor near the girls' dormitory in order to supervise them for the night." From 1921-1925 those houses on 9th and Highland were school and living quarters for both children and Sisters.⁴⁹

She also helped with the washing of the children's clothes. She recalled,

This meant that I had to get up very early, cross the lot to the Main Building at 3:00 AM, where I often saw rats scurrying into a hole. We rubbed the children's under-clothing by hand before it was put into a hand-operated washing machine. By 5:30 AM I had to be back at the girls' house to wake the girls for Mass.⁵⁰

Sister Bernadette Marie Kolvek came to St. Benedict in 1928. She described the never-ending duties of the Sister-prefect of forty or more boys along with Sister Augusta Feucht. The children were always supervised by one or two adults when not attending classes.

While the children were in school we sewed and mended the children's clothing....Weekends and free days from school were really hard.... Sometimes, Brother George, a Capuchin Lay-Brother, took the boys for a ride in an open truck. A blessed relief for us! At other times he or we took them for a long walk – sometimes to Lake Michigan or the Milwaukee Zoo. Most of the time, however, the children played in the yard. Then we had to be arbiters to settle fights or quarrels, or nurses to mend hurt knees, arms, or heads.⁵¹

Sister Carolyn Hageman's entry shed further insight on the opening of the high school, continuing study, and Thom's interest in providing good education for African American children at St. Benedict.

⁴⁹Sr. Agnes Simmon, O.P., 5-6 (ARD).

⁵⁰Ibid., 7.

⁵¹Ibid., 7-8.

In 1934 we started the High School at St. Benedict. Mother Romana was very concerned and very supportive. She often came to visit classes. Students loved her and she them. Most of us had not taught high school before, but we started from the basics. We each taught five to seven subjects. We prepared for our classes while supervising evening study periods and after the children were in bed.⁵²

Simmon's account provided the historical context for understanding what academic qualifications were necessary for teachers in the 1930s.

As we approach the twenty-first century, we may be tempted to look askance at the degree of educational preparation of our sisters in those years. Previous to World War I, however, an eighth grade education was considered sufficient for most people in the United States. For farm children and for girls, especially, high school was not necessary.⁵³

From many of the above quotations, it was clear that the Dominican Sisters and, probably the School Sisters of Notre Dame before them who were assigned to St. Benedict, did not receive any special training in running a boarding school or teaching African American children. However, they did possess certain qualities and experiences as religious Sisters that would help them immensely in their work and enable them to structure an effective boarding school. First, the Sisters were committed to their work at St. Benedict as an apostolate and had a real affection toward their African American children and believed in them. They certainly believed that their students at St. Benedict could succeed and they were determined to give them the tools, knowledge, confidence, and pride in themselves to strive for success. Second, by living in a community of Sisters, they had the advantage of a continual in-service program to help individual Sisters deal with any school and supervision issue that arose. The community was

⁵²Ibid., 11.

⁵³Ibid., 12.

composed of several Sisters with a depth and wide variety of teaching and supervision experience. Any Sister, especially a young, new, or inexperienced Sister easily could get advice and help in any school situation she faced from such a pool of talent and experience. Third, the Sisters lived or functioned as a community or group rather than as individuals. They lived in a religious community and generally all rose at the same time, prayed together at the same times, ate together at the same times, and taught their classes at the same time. Thus, the Sisters were familiar with “group living” and experienced it personally from the time of their novitiate where one’s daily activities were as a member of a group set in a regimented, well-paced, and orderly manner. At St. Benedict they merely transposed this same approach in structuring the boarding school, making appropriate adjustments for ages of the children. To a large extent, the lives of the students at St. Benedict resembled the lives of novices in a religious congregation with a daily regimen of prayer, study, nourishment, recreation, and work, all done in sync as a group.

Special Issues

Being a boarding school, there were some special and more serious matters involving the court system or public health. Sharing the docket of misbehaved students with the Lee boys was Roy Mitchell. He was the subject of several entries in the house chronicles of the Capuchins at St. Benedict. Mitchell used to run away and eventually his truancy became a court case. The House Chronicle describes the incident.

As Father Sebastian was riding home on a Third Street streetcar, he passed an auto-truck, and there was Roy (Mitchell) riding leisurely through the world. Father gets off the car at Galena Street, stops the truck, and as soon as Roy beholds Father, he jumps from the wagon and dashes up the

street, Father after him. Howling half the way, he was taken to St. Francis school, where, after a good flogging, he was kept at the monastery until the Probation Office notified us what to do with him. Father makes application to have the boy remanded by the Court to St. Aemillian's Orphanage Asylum, the boy having no home training and no decent care.⁵⁴

Roy Mitchell's case was heard in Juvenile Court on July 2, 1913, and the house chronicle describes the proceedings and the young boy.

Roy Mitchell's case brought up before Judge Donnelly in Juvenile Court at 2 P.M. Father Sebastian had quite a talk with Mr. Mehl, probation officer, before the case was called. Told him how the boy was neglected, continually on the street, dances and sings in saloons for money, a frequenter of Nickel Shows, his adventures of reproducing what he sees there (He once set fire to a barn.), his acts of theft on several occasions;...but that little fellow had a good heart and could only be saved from total ruin if he was under continual supervision....Mr. Mehl pleaded the case and recommended the suggestions of the Fathers....The judge then committed the little fellow to the Catholic Home Finding Association, with the recommendation to send him to the (St Aemillian) Asylum.⁵⁵

St. Benedict had its share of some very tragic cases involving the students entrusted to their care. In January 1915, Eckert received a letter from a Mr. G. Green in Chicago asking the Mission to care for his children without pay for a while since he was being treated for tuberculosis. He grew more ill and died by mid-April after having legally transferred custody of his five children to the care of the Mission.⁵⁶

Like any school, then or now, St Benedict had to confront all of the adolescent social problems ranging from unwanted pregnancies to syphilis and from drunkenness to premarital sex. Steffes wrote about one such case in 1922.

⁵⁴Capuchin House Chronicles, St. Benedict the Moor, June 23, 1913.

⁵⁵Ibid., 512.

⁵⁶Ibid., January 25, 1915 and April 19, 1915.

Today we detected an unfortunate girl among our children. She was only 13 years old in May. Within about four months she will become a mother. Luckily it did not happen here but at her house about a month before she came here. We are still debating what to do with her, since her parents have no home but are working for a rich family.⁵⁷

Until just the last few decades, the most common and pervasive practice of Catholic schools in dealing with a pregnant student was to remove her quietly from the school. Here Steffes considered what might be in the girl's best interests, given her family's circumstances.

Monday night I had a sudden telephone call from the Misericordia hospital where one of our (only thirteen years old) girls who came here last September from South Carolina gave birth to a child in excellent good health. I placed her here last October. (This is the second case. Both of the children are living now at the St. Vincent's Home.) An hour after giving birth to the child, she became breathless and within an hour was a corpse. I came too late to find her alive. She died without the Sacraments. The parent of the girl had changed her address in Chicago. It took me hours to inform her of it. And in the meantime I had to have her body removed from the hospital. It was a terrible night....⁵⁸

What was interesting in Steffes' comments was that the unwanted pregnancy was apparently the second one that occurred in the current school term. The missionary zeal of conversion and saving souls was evident in the anguish Steffes expressed over not getting to the hospital in time to either have baptized the girl or to have administered the Last Rites.

Steffes encountered many challenges. He describes one tragic event that could have had detrimental effects on the health and safety of the entire student-body..

⁵⁷Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Benno Aichinger, December 21, 1922, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 3, Hosp. ad S. Benedictum, April 1922 to July 1923, ACF.

⁵⁸Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Benno Aichinger, February 8, 1926, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 6, St. Benedict the Moor, July 1925 to December 1926, ACF.

One of the boys, who should have been sent away from here long ago, I had examined in a clinic. He was found a syphilitic in the highest degree and, as the doctor expressed himself, a number one contagious (case). He even added that we could be fined for keeping him here so long. The poor boy seems to be rotten through and through, for he can't keep his urine for a minute. He went behind the beds, cabinets, etc., and, oh, I can't tell you all else. The nurse even got the disease from him on her face. Of course, it's not bad. Though he might perhaps be cured, I do not feel as though I should even take him back. His two sisters just came back from the hospital where I now put him. They had the same thing. They seem to be cured.⁵⁹

There was also the problem of sexual promiscuity and drunkenness.

We have a girl here, who as Miss Zimmermann tells me, had doings with men. Last Saturday she asked to go home to get her wash. She was brought back in an automobile half drunk. Should we keep the girl here?⁶⁰

Another serious incident involving the infraction of rules occurred when Steffes learned that for some time a few of the older boys were sneaking out of their dormitory at night and going to the girls' home and getting into bed with four of the girls. The Sister in charge of the girls was almost deaf and never heard any noise. The escapades were finally discovered when one of the new girls, who was the ringleader and enticed the boys to come, sent another girl to the drugstore to purchase some abortive medication. This girl brought the medication to Steffes and the incident was uncovered. The boys were sent home as well as the new girl. The House Chronicle reporting the incident then stated, "this incident shows the wisdom of not taking older boys and girls, because as a rule they are corrupt. Two of the boys had been sent home before and taken back, or rather they

⁵⁹Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Benno Aichinger, October 17, 1922, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 3, Hosp ad S. Benedictum, April 1922 to July 1923, ACF.

⁶⁰Ibid.

had run away.”⁶¹ This reinforced the belief that one’s behavior must be formed at a young age and older children who are not in a somewhat “cloistered” environment are exposed to society’s corrupting and evil influences.

The discipline problems at St. Benedict the Moor involved the entire array of problems and issues associated with adolescence. As was the case in many Catholic schools of this time, discipline was strict and corporal punishment was used. A boarding school, by its very nature, called for an even more regulated and structured regimen than a day school.

Encountering Racism

The difficulties or problems that confronted St. Benedict School unfortunately were not limited to adolescent social problems. Throughout the decades of the twentieth century, the issues of discrimination, prejudice, and race frequently reared their ugly heads despite St. Benedict’s desire to provide a shield for the children against such forces in society. Simmon stated that “many parents sent their children to St. Benedict the Moor to be protected from hostile racial environments.”⁶² However, she also asserted that few students escaped the injustices of racial bigotry. Some forms of racism existed in Catholic institutions. St. Benedict sports teams, for example, were not allowed in the Catholic League before 1940. The Blessed Virgin’s Sodality, a very active archdiocesan Catholic youth organization in the 1930s and 1940s, was hesitant to accept St. Benedict’s sodality members. It was only after the Dominican sisters from St. Benedict met with the

⁶¹St. Benedict House Chronicle, December 27, 1928, 185-186, SBMP.

⁶²Simmon, 15.

faculties and Sodality leaders of various Catholic high schools in the city that membership extended to African Americans.⁶³

One particularly unusual incident allied racism and the Ku Klux Klan. The Mission always had some runaway students. In October 1924 six boys ran away from St. Benedict. They were apprehended in Racine by the police department. The boys claimed they ran away because they were not getting enough to eat at the Mission. Immediately, the full-blown story was carried in the Racine newspaper, *Times-Call*, giving adverse publicity for the Mission. Steffes and Aichinger, the Provincial, were upset with the Racine police and the newspaper editor for the printing of such a public slur and slanderous accusations without investigating the accuracy of such charges. Steffes contacted the newspaper editor and explained that the children at the Mission eat the same food as the staff eats. It is cooked in the same pots. Three times each day the children are given pure milk. He also insisted that they do not inflict corporal punishment on the children, except by him on a few occasions. Steffes also reported that three of the boys were charity cases and sent to the Mission because their parents were unable to control them. There were instances of truancy and running away reported by their parents when the boys lived with them. Dr. Lambert Hargarten, who served as a house physician for ten years, and Dr. Edward Evans, who also treated the children for three years, both stated that they had not observed any problems in the diet or health of the children. In fact, Evans said he saw children in the Mission who suffer from overeating rather than malnutrition. Upon investigating further, Steffes met a gentleman, Mr. Gales, of Racine

⁶³Ibid., 15-16.

who informed him that the Ku Klux Klan in Racine was responsible for making the story public before checking any facts. The KKK reportedly was strong in the Racine area and recently had a parade where 20,000 men participated. Their intent behind the story was to make the African American race look ominous. When the boys returned to the Mission, they were repentant and the incident was treated as a “boyish prank,” giving the boys another chance rather than dismissing them from the Mission.⁶⁴

Usually the issue of racism was experienced more directly. In his autobiography, *Hamp*, the famous jazz performer, Lionel Hampton, described his journey to St. Benedict during the year the school was located in Corliss. His mother worried for Lionel’s safety at Doolittle School in Chicago with the gangs and fights and did not want him growing up in the city with the gangsters and mobsters. Somehow she found out about St. Benedict and asked his uncle Richard to drive her and Lionel to Corliss in his new car. It was a ninety mile trip requiring stops for meals and an overnight at a time when the color bar proscribed behaviors for African Americans.⁶⁵

No matter how elegant we looked, we still had to eat a lunch brought from home. And that night, we threw blankets over the car, wrapped ourselves up in other blankets, and slept on the seats. Blacks couldn’t get rooms for the night in the towns we were driving through.⁶⁶

For the children at St. Benedict School, the racism they experienced occurred sometimes in unexpected ways and sometimes resulted in children displacing their anger.

⁶⁴“Hunger Story Told By Boys Is Refuted At Mission School,” October 15, 1924, *Times-Call*, The Provincial Files, File 5, May 1924 to May 1925, ACF; Fr. Benno to Fr. Philip, October 20, 1924 and Fr. Philip to Fr. Provincial, October 21, 1924, The Provincial Files, File 5, May 1924 to May 1925, ACF.

⁶⁵ Lionel Hampton, 17-20.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 18.

On the evening of 30 November 1923 the school children were invited to attend a minstrel show at Gesu where the players tried to make a laughing stock out of the African American man with derogatory comments about living in the slums and stealing chickens. About half of the staff at St. Benedict, which consisted of eight African American and two white lay persons and eight Sisters, became terribly upset and left with their children in the middle of the program. The other half stayed and endured the program. This formed two opposing groups – the ones who left and the ones who stayed. The first group returned to the mission emotionally distraught and immediately ran to Steffes saying they were insulted. After Steffes tried to console them, the group left. While crossing the playground to their dorms, they met the second group returning from the show and a highly-charged, emotional fight erupted. A fight broke out between the two groups. The group that left early was infuriated at the group that did not leave the insulting program. Two of the teachers thought the children were going to kill each other and even feared for their lives and fled from the near riot. Steffes was immediately summoned and stopped the fighting. He realized emotions were too raw at the time to talk to them; the harm had already been done. He and the remaining staff escorted the students to bed while some continued to sob for hours. Steffes stayed up to after eleven o'clock that night to prevent any another fight. The next morning after Mass, he gave the students a lengthy talk to prevent further quarrels and the displaced anger.⁶⁷

There was an instance where racial tensions were stoked by an incident at St.

⁶⁷Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Benno Aichinger, November 30, 1923, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 4, St. Benedict the Moor, June 1923 to April 1924, ACF.

Benedict School involving Steffes and Sister Bernard Eich, a Franciscan sister who worked in the operating room at St. Anthony's Hospital. Eich was regarded as a disruptive element among the hospital employees and her job performance was unsatisfactory. A disruptive boy in the school was sent by his teacher to Steffes who chastised him. When the boy resisted, Steffes struck the boy, leaving a cut on his head. Another lay teacher sent the boy to the infirmary where Eich just happened to be working there that day. She proceeded to show the boy to African Americans who were visiting at the time and other people as evidence of mistreatment and cruelty at the Mission. News of the incident spread through the city.⁶⁸ In a letter to Aichinger, Capuchin Provincial, Steffes explained the incident.

I have a boy who was incorrigible to the extent that he absolutely defies his teacher (and even the Father in catechism class) to the extent of even firing books at her during class periods. The parents ordered me to strike him when he does not mind. However, this time (the first time I ever did strike a child in years) the child resisted and received the strap in the face which left a mar....Sister Bernard who then exposed him to colored people who were visiting the Mission. They at once had the mother come (she is known as a prostitute...) and upset her so as to take steps with a lawyer. She came to see me a day later and was very sorry that her friends urged her to do this....And it will take a long time before we have all matters readjusted....⁶⁹

Based on the facts and correspondence of this case, it appeared both Eich and Steffes over-reacted. Steffes lost his temper and struck the boy hard enough to cause injury and bleeding. While such behavior is inappropriate, it was not characteristic of Steffes. Eich

⁶⁸Fr. Berchmans Bittle to Fr. Benno Aichinger, March 4, 1932, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 9, St. Benedict the Moor, 1932-1934, ACF.

⁶⁹Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Benno Aichinger, February 1, 1932, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 9, St. Benedict the Moor, 1932-1934, ACF.

also reacted inappropriately by publicizing the incident to visitors and maybe others in the community to such an extent as to become known in the urban community instead of reporting the incident and her concerns to her supervisor.

While the Mission tried to shield the children from some of the racism present in American society, there were times when the children struggled with the notion of being African American in a white-dominated society that subordinated their race. Roy Mitchell was the young day student at St. Benedict who was placed in St. Aemilian Orphanage after being truant many times. On one occasion in 1912 Sister Marie Kronki noticed Roy fumbling in his pocket and then rubbing his face with white powder. Upon questioning him, he replied that he wanted to be white like her. Another time, some of the children approached Kronki and asked why did God not make them white like her. Such wrenching incidents reflect the social forces that prevailed in spite the good St. Benedict achieved.⁷⁰

While St. Benedict dealt with adolescent social problems, racial issues, and student misbehavior, there were other elements in the school program that had some very positive effects. In one of his letters, Steffes described three different events in a short time period that indicated the fact that St. Benedict did have a positive effect on their students.

A man came to the Mission with some clothes for the children and said that his brother saw some of the children crossing the street. They were in such fine order that he took them all into a store and bought all of them a banana. He claimed he never saw any other class of children behave so fine.

⁷⁰Capuchin House Chronicle, St. Benedict the Moor, December 18, 1912, ACF.

Some days ago the Jesuits invited them (the children) to a football game on the Marquette Academy grounds. A man stepped up to them and asked them where they come from. Upon this answer he remarked that there must be a wonderful leader at their head who knows how to train gentlemen. They could not come home quickly enough to tell me.

A priest met Miss Zimmermann last week and stated that he never saw white children behave on the street as nicely as ours. I myself must really acknowledge that we have a very nice set of children here now. Of course, here and there misdemeanors will occur. We cannot expect them to be angels all the time. Have at present 78 boys and 17 girls as boarders. Are having new applications daily⁷¹.

A Distinctive Characteristic: Building Racial Pride

Among historians and educational researchers, there were differences in opinion over whether African American Catholic schools from 1930 to 1960 helped create and maintain a positive “African American identity.” Gary Wray McDonough examined three African American Catholic schools in Savannah, Georgia, in 1958-1959, before the official desegregation of Catholic schools in the South. In his book, *Black and Catholic in Savannah, Georgia*, he argued that these schools were important in developing a significant “black Catholic identity.” Concurring with McDonough is V.P. Franklin who studied separate African American public and Catholic schools in Philadelphia during the first half of the twentieth century. He found in the Catholic schools virtually all of the nuns and lay teachers were white, but they celebrated African American cultural events, such as Negro History Week, and offered many educational programs and conferences

⁷¹Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Benno Aichinger, December 2, 1922, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 3, Hosp ad S. Benedictum, April 1922 to July 1923, ACF.

aimed at the entire African American community.⁷² However, there were many other schools where there was no attempt to inculcate a positive African American identity.

St. Benedict the Moor was an exception to most Catholic African American schools in the variety of ways it used to instill a sense of racial pride in its students.

Visits by prominent African Americans frequently occurred. Marcus Garvey spoke to the students the day after Christmas in 1916 about Catholicism in Haiti. Harlem Renaissance poet Claude McKay spent a day at St. Benedict in 1944 reading his poetry and explaining to students why he recently converted to Catholicism. Milwaukee lawyer and St. Benedict parishioner, James Dorsey, attended many school functions dealing with issues of race, African American heritage, and Catholicism. In 1940 Dorsey spoke on the topic of "Meeting the Race Situation" during African American History Week. Immanuel Caldwell, a promising young African American pianist from Chicago, gave a concert to students and faculty in 1944. Father William Lane, an African American priest, conducted student retreats at St. Benedict and was very popular among the students.⁷³

From the very beginning of the school, lay teacher positions were filled with both white and African American teachers. African American history and literature were included in the curriculum and eventually an African American history course was introduced with an African American teacher, Charles Madison. The main thrust of the African American history class seemed to have been on accomplishments of African

⁷²V.P. Franklin, "First Came the School: Catholic Evangelization Among African Americans in the United States, 1827 to the Present," in *Growing Up African American in Catholic Schools*, eds. Jacqueline Jordan Irvine and Michele Foster (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996), 54-56.

⁷³House Chronicle of St. Benedict the Moor Mission of the Racine Dominican Sisters, ARD.

Americans with little or no attention paid to social, legal, and political injustices thwarting the race's opportunities and mobility.⁷⁴ Sister Carolyn Hageman recalled that "black history and black literature were taught at St. Benedict as early as the 1930s long before it became an educational fashion."⁷⁵ The course drew attention to the African American as a dignified, respectable, and contributive member of American society which served as a guide and source of racial pride in shaping minds of the students of St. Benedict.

Charles Madison, one of many African American teachers at St. Benedict over the years, served as a most desirable model for the students. He coached football, boxing, and track at the school and had at least one championship football team. He taught biology, general science, physical education, and the course in African American history. He lectured on African American achievements or current Catholic Action at various locations including the Wisconsin Catholic Action Convention, the Hartford P.T.A., B'nai B'rith, the Calvary Baptist Religious Institute in Milwaukee, and Sacred Heart Home and School Association, St. Catherine High School and St. Mary School in Racine. His subject at most talks was on African American achievements or Catholic Action Today.⁷⁶

The high school yearbooks of St. Benedict presented a student body that had a

⁷⁴Capuchin House Chronicles, St. Benedict the Moor, ACF; *The Greystone 1946, 1947*, St. Benedict the Moor High School Yearbooks, ARD.

⁷⁵(*Racine*) *Journal Times*, "Remembering Harold," April 23, 1983, St. Benedict the Moor Papers, ARD.

⁷⁶*1947 Greystone*, St. Benedict High School 1947 Yearbook, ARD.

solid foundation on African American history and also on current issues involving race. The 1947 yearbook listed Catholic Sodality as one of the school's organizations and noted that the sodality included the Interracial Committee. They had joint meetings with Holy Angels Academy and discussed current topics of interest with an emphasis on better race relations. This was significant because Holy Angels was an all-white girls school and suggested that racial issues such as prejudice, discrimination, and racial stereotypes had a forum for discussion at a time when few opportunities existed in America's "separate but equal" society of that day. It also provided the students of St. Benedict the occasion to formulate and articulate their views and to respond coherently to other points of view. Clearly, such occasions could be seen as a type of "training session" for these young African-American students for the decades of the fifties and sixties when racial issues exacerbated. At the Wisconsin Catholic Speech League tournament held on 19 April 1947, Jack Porche and Charles Holton competed in the division of original oratory on the topics of "The American Negro in our Democracy" and "The Catholic Church and the Negro," respectively. Jack Porche was awarded first place.⁷⁷ The 1946 *Greystone*, the yearbook, was dedicated to Blessed Martin de Porres who was described as a saintly lay-brother of Lima, who in 1939, three hundred years after his death, was proclaimed patron of social justice by Pope Pius XII. Throughout the yearbook, names of African Americans who made some noteworthy accomplishment ran across either the top or bottom of the pages beginning with Alonzo Pietro, who navigated Columbus' *Pinta* across the Atlantic. And, at the end the student section, the yearbook exhorted students to

⁷⁷Ibid..

continue their work so that some day their names would also be remembered.⁷⁸

The high school yearbooks also indicated that African American History Week was observed each year in the school. In 1946 St. Benedict sponsored bulletin board displays, class discussions, and an assembly program. St. Benedict students led a panel discussion on education and the African American. Students from St. John's Cathedral High School were invited guests in the audience and participated in a question-and-answer session after the panel. The students also ran an all-school assembly where a quiz contest on African Americans in history and the arts was held. The questions were written by students with a student serving as quiz master and some faculty members serving as judges. Two movies were shown during the week, "Black Napoleon—Henri Christophe of Haiti" and "Negro Colleges During the War."⁷⁹

The educational program went well beyond instruction in the basic subjects. It was augmented with a wide range of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities designed to give students opportunities to develop various talents and skills and to distinguish themselves. Teachers assumed the role of the "guide on the side" by having students serve as emcees, lead discussion groups, preside over student assemblies, or deliver speeches. St. Benedict students sponsored events where they interacted with students from white schools. Such opportunities for student initiative engendered individual self-confidence and greater comfort when assuming an active role in later real life settings. By participating in group activities like the choir, band, drama, and sports, students felt a

⁷⁸1946 *Greystone*, St. Benedict the Moor Yearbook, ARD.

⁷⁹Ibid.

greater sense of belonging to the school, resulting in a good school spirit and a heightened sense of community. Contributing to this sense of community were the many examples of dedicated priests, sisters, lay teachers, and staff personnel treating their students and the African American race with dignity and respect. Whenever appropriate, a deliberate attempt was made to instruct students on the noteworthy role of African Americans in the history of the nation and the Church and to instill in the students a sense of racial pride. St. Benedict was not training future radical civil rights leaders. However, they were forming young African American men and women who were grounded with a sense of Christian morality while possessing a positive self-image, confidence, and a “can-do” spirit. They expected and accorded dignity, respect, and fairness when dealing with others. In these ways the students of St. Benedict the Moor stood in contrast to the dominant society’s subordination of the African American race and its preferred passive-resignation response to injustices and inequities from African Americans.

Summary

The educational program of St. Benedict the Moor was primarily aimed at gaining converts for the Catholic Church and strengthening the faithful. However, the education program had many other significant and positive outcomes. Students attending St. Benedict the Moor received an excellent education in both academic subjects and in the practical or vocational courses. They were taught by women religious who were real professionals and strongly committed to their work. The sisters had a genuine affection for the children while having high expectations and standards and believing these were achievable. The boarding school ran in a regimented, well-ordered way where a true

sense of community and an understanding of the common good prevailed.

Extracurricular opportunities in sports, drama, music, art, public speaking developed well-rounded individuals and imbued within them a sense of confidence and success. St. Benedict the Moor dealt squarely with the African American identity, racial pride, and the color line. In their publications, like the yearbook *Greystone*, and their activities, like African American History Week, students gained an important understanding and pride in the accomplishments of earlier African Americans as well as the prejudice and discrimination of the dominant society. By offering African American history and literature in the 1930s, St. Benedict was at least three decades ahead of most educational institutions in fostering African American heritage and pride. St. Benedict clearly graduated successful, articulate, self-sufficient young men and women who were well qualified and well prepared to assume leading roles in breaking down misconceptions and stereotypes of African Americans when the Civil Rights Movement would blossom.

CHAPTER 8

THE SPIRITUAL LIFE OF ST. BENEDICT THE MOOR

The spiritual life of St Benedict the Moor complemented its educational life. Its spiritual life emphasized traditional Catholic instruction in the sacraments and doctrine. Prayer and worship services, attended by the student body, was an integral part of the daily regimen and sought to promote a sense of community. The boarding school was viewed as a primary vehicle for conversions. For the religious staff at St. Benedict, the day of baptizing new student converts may have been as significant, if not more, than the day their students graduated. The religious life at St. Benedict also raised the students' consciousness of their race and heritage. There was a deliberate attempt to present strong African American Catholic role models to the students, mainly through guest presentations and its religious iconography in church. It made the students aware of the African roots in early Christianity and taught them that all humans are equal with dignity before God. It underscored the fundamental Christian principle of treating others as one desired to be treated. The religious or spiritual life, along with the classes, supported African American community events and conveyed a sense of racial pride while fostering one's self-worth and dignity. In a society that loathed and discriminated against African Americans, St. Benedict achieved no small success.

St. Benedict in the Era of the Immigrant Church

As noted earlier, St. Benedict the Moor was founded in 1908 in the era of the immigrant church. Catholic parishes and schools in the age of the immigrant church had a

model that was “separatist.” Using this historical perspective, the Catholic Church had a long history of providing worship services and education to numerous ethnic groups in a separatist manner. When immigrants arrived from several predominantly Catholic nations, they went to an ethnic Catholic church in their neighborhood. For example, Polish parishes had Polish-speaking priests and sisters; German parishes had German-speaking priests and sisters. While these churches were united to the universal Catholic Church by the Latin liturgy, there were many distinctive ethnic components. The sermon at the Sunday High Mass and many church devotions were preached in the native language. The church had architectural styles, music, and statuary that reflected the national and ethnic preferences of each immigrant group. Many religious congregations were comprised mostly of members from one particular nationality until at least the 1920s. Ethnic customs were observed making one who was not of that ethnic group feel very unconnected with the rest of the group. When Catholic churches and schools tried combining with different Catholic ethnic groups, there was the potential for tension and unrest among these Catholic, but ethnically distinct groups. Thus, in one city or neighborhood, there could easily be many different “national” Catholic churches and schools, each representing a different Catholic ethnic group with its own language, traditions, and culture.¹ In Milwaukee, St. Benedict the Moor was designated for African American Catholics in the same way that other parishes were founded for particular immigrant groups like St. Gall’s for the Irish, St. Boniface for the Germans, or St. John

¹Darlene Eleanor York, “The Academic Achievement of African American in Catholic Schools: A Review of the Literature,” in *Growing Up African American in Catholic Schools*, eds. Jacqueline Jordan Irvine and Michele Foster (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996), 19-20.

Nepumoc for Bohemians.

Instilling a Sense of Racial Pride and Belonging in the Catholic Church

There was a conscious attempt in ethnic parishes to instill a sense of identity and pride in one's ethnic or racial group. The difficulty, of course, in pursuing this goal at St. Benedict was that it did not have African American priests or sisters. As a rule, African American Catholics were usually discouraged or refused from pursuing religious vocations. While there is no doubt that the Capuchin Fathers and Dominican Sisters made many noteworthy efforts at St. Benedict to instill a sense of pride in being African American and a sense of identity and belonging to the Catholic Church, their success was limited mainly by societal mores and law as well as racial prejudice of whites.

The Capuchins sought out the few African American priests to come to St. Benedict for a parish mission where their African American congregation could see a member of their own race function in this esteemed position within the Catholic Church. Even before Eckert was appointed first resident pastor of St. Benedict in July 1913, Father John Henry Dorsey, an African American Josephite Father, conducted a parish mission in December 1912. Dorsey was from St. Joseph's College in Montgomery, Alabama. The purpose of a parish mission was to draw new converts and to strengthen and bolster the faith with religious instructions of the Catholic congregation. A parish mission usually lasted one week or two weeks (one week for men and one week for women) starting on a Sunday when the visiting mission priest was introduced to the congregation. There was a service each evening, consisting of an instructional, and sometimes entertaining, sermon followed by prayers and Benediction. St. Benedict

advertized their upcoming mission by taking out an ad in the newspaper which included a picture of Dorsey. At the time Dorsey was one of only a handful of African American priests in the United States. When Eckert was pastor, he and Father Stephen Theobald, another African American priest from St. Peter Claver Church in St. Paul, Minnesota, exchanged giving a mission in each other's parish. Theobald preached on faith and what it would mean for the uplift of his race on 13 September 1916.²

St. Benedict supported and participated in community events that furthered the interests of the African American community. An Emancipation Jubilee was held on 29 and 30 May 1913 in Milwaukee to commemorate the golden jubilee of freedom of African Americans. The two-day celebration was held at the Milwaukee Auditorium and sponsored by the Women's Improvement Club, Phyllis Wheatley Embroidery Club, Men's Forum, and Women's Club of St. Benedict the Moor. The program consisted of addresses (one given by Archbishop Messmer), musical selections, readings, and responses. Captain Lincoln Valle introduced the Master of Ceremonies on the first night and the children of St. Benedict presented a musical program. The two-day celebration climaxed with a reception in honor of Booker T. Washington on the second day. A second community event pertained to the film, *The Birth of a Nation*, and the response of the city's African Americans. When it was to open in Milwaukee at the Davidson Theater on 3 July 1914, a mass meeting was called at St. Mark African Methodist Episcopal Church to protest the play as immoral and prejudicial to the race. Upon the invitation of Rev. Jesse Woods, chairman, Eckert did attend the meeting and supported

²St. Benedict Capuchin House Chronicle, 1912, 1914, 1916, ACF.

the protest efforts. A third community event occurred in August 1914 when Eckert and St. Benedict the Moor participated in the Half-Century Celebration of Negro Freedom in Chicago. Eckert attended the opening of the convention and St. Benedict had an exhibit of their school and industrial work. The children gave an instrumental musical program on Wisconsin Day, September 9, from 4:30 PM to 6:00 PM in the coliseum in Chicago. After the concert Eckert gave some remarks outlining the work, proficiency, and progress of St. Benedict School as a part of Wisconsin and the Catholic Church. And, last, on 16 May 1922 Eckert even attended a meeting at the Frei Gemeinde Hall called by Marcus Garvey to set up a Provisional Republic of Africa government.³

The building of the new chapel of the Mission in the mid-1920s also brought opportunities to instill a sense of pride in the heritage of African Catholics. Some of the pictures and statuary for the church were deliberately chosen to appeal to African American Catholics. In 1926 Aichinger, then Capuchin Provincial, bought an exact copy of the statue, the Black Madonna of Altotting. The original statue was found in a shrine in town of Altotting in Bavaria dating back to the eighth century. The Madonna's face was not originally black but has been darkened by the ages and the millions of candles burned around her. She is depicted as smiling at the Child she holds and appealed to humble and poor people for centuries.⁴ Aichinger explains,

As you know, this Madonna is black. While praying in the sanctuary the thought struck me if this Madonna might not bring a special blessing to our Colored Mission if I could get a good copy of it. May the Blessed

³St. Benedict Capuchin House Chronicle, 1913, 1914, 1922, ACF.

⁴Zsolt Aradi, "The Shrine That has Never Been Destroyed," 1954, < http://www.catholicculture.org/docs/doc_view.cfm?recnum=2994 > (19 July 2006).

Mother who scatters so many graces among the thousands of pilgrims visiting her holy shrine, also bless you and all those connected with the Mission.⁵

There were also opportunities to instruct the students of St. Benedict about the African heritage of the Catholic Church. On another occasion Aichinger obtained a precious relic of Blessed Charles Lwanga, one of the twenty-two Ugandan martyrs, that he gave to the Mission. Aichinger told Steffes how the relic could be used at the Mission in order to make the children proud of this African martyr of the faith.

Use the opportunity to tell the children again of the glorious martyrdom of these colored boys and youths, their sacrifices in order to preserve chastity. Bless them often with the relic, impose it on the heads of the severely tempted and unruly.⁶

The most impressive example of giving the church a distinctively African touch was the main altarpiece. A beautiful wood-carved altarpiece depicting the twenty-two martyrs of Uganda with the Blessed Mother as the central figure and St. Benedict the Moor in Franciscan garb, the patron of the chapel, positioned above the martyrs. The selection of this type of frieze was timely since the twenty-two martyrs were recently beatified as "Blessed" in 1920 by Pope Benedict XV and afforded the African American community of believers a most impressive and meaningful model of African saintliness.⁷

⁵Fr. Benno Aichinger to Fr. Philip Steffes, September 2, 1926, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 6, St. Benedict the Moor, July 1925 to December 1926, ACF.

⁶Fr. Benno Aichinger to Fr. Philip Steffes, April 12, 1927, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 7, St. Benedict the Moor, January 1927 to December 1929, ACF.

⁷The story of the Ugandan martyrs was both compelling and inspiring. King Mwanga of Buganda felt humiliated when his young Christian pages resisted his homosexual advances. Although homosexuality was abhorred in Buganda, it was unthinkable for mere pages to reject the wishes of a king. Mwanga soon regarded all Christians as "rebels" who transferred their loyalty to their new religion and its new moral and religious standards and abandoned tribal traditions and obedience to the king. The twenty-two Catholic martyrs were mostly children and adolescents, newly converted missionaries of their faith, who were

The importance of the main altarpiece was not just the beauty of the craftsmanship, but also in the message it conveyed. These twenty-two persons positioned were African and they were martyrs. They were the successors to the great African martyrs of the first centuries, like Cyprian, Felicity, and Perpetua. For African American Catholics, the strength, courage, religious zeal, conviction, and faith of the blessed Ugandan martyrs provided an inspiring model and was a genuine source of racial pride within Catholicism. The carving was also attentive to African religious traditions. In accordance with the custom of Catholics in Africa, the carvings of the twenty-two martyrs were shown wearing a rosaries around their necks as an outward sign of their loyal devotion to the Blessed Mother. For this reason, the wood carving placed the Blessed Mother as its central figure. Prominent in the carving was St. Benedict the Moor in Franciscan garb, the Patron of the chapel. The main altarpiece was distinctively African and was most appropriate for an African American congregation enhancing their prayer and worship.⁸

Aichinger, having an artistic talent and some experience as a painter, wrote to Steffes of his reaction after seeing a sketch of the picture for above main altar.

The picture of the High Altar is truly inspiring in its general construction.

executed on June 3, 1886. They had much to lose by refusing to abandon their faith. Being present at court was an opportunity for many young people to be launched on political and military careers. Perhaps, the most famous in the group of twenty-two was Charles Lwanga, who served the king as head of the royal pages. See Filippo Ciantia, "Witnesses from the 'Pearl of Africa,'" n.d., <<http://www.traces-cl.com/nov05/witnesses.html>> (19 July 2006); "The Christian Martyrs of Uganda," n.d., <<http://www.uganda.com/martyrs.htm>> (19 July 2006); Thurston and Attwater, 468-470.

⁸A photograph of the Main Altar of St. Benedict the Moor Chapel along with an explanation of the wood carvings is contained in the newspaper clippings file, but the name of the newspaper and the date is not given. St Benedict the Moor Papers, Box 1, File 8, "Newspaper Clippings," ACF.

But the grouping of the figures in the picture does not appeal to me. Too stiff. The martyrs ought to form groups of three or four, in brotherly love encircling each other with one arm, holding with the other a branch or palm swinging it toward their Virgin Mary in happy homage. That would get some life into the rows of figures. Clothing – as they use it in Africa: white or light colored tunic, flowing cloak – as pictures show of Uganda Mission. St. Benedict is represented as one of them. Ought to be raised somewhat out of the group; should have a halo as sign of distinction. The Negroes in Africa wear the rosary around their neck.⁹

In a later letter Aichinger discussed the religious importance of having an attractive chapel.

...we are obliged to make the chapel attractive to the colored people, otherwise they stay away. Therefore, surely nobody can condemn us for ordering beautiful altars, etc., even though this increases our debts. As long as we avoid extravagance, St. Francis will bring us benefactors in good time.¹⁰

The reaction of the people to the new altar was just as Aichinger had hoped. Steffes described what he observed.

Now we have our new high altar...It is very very beautiful. This afternoon some city children happened to see it. Soon after we had all kinds of people, even Jewish women from the neighborhood with their little babies on their arms come into the Chapel. I never saw anything more attractive. Several women folks began to cry almost aloud when they beheld it...One woman was so touched at its sight that she prepared for a good confession, and it was a sincere one. I can't keep our children out of the Chapel anymore. I am sure this news will please Father Provincial. If this won't bring the colored people into our church then I don't know what will. Our first Mass on Sunday morning is almost entirely filled already."¹¹

⁹Fr. Benno Aichinger to Fr. Philip Steffes, November 13, 1923, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 4, St. Benedict the Moor, June 1923 to April 1924, ACF.

¹⁰Fr. Benno Aichinger to Fr. Philip Steffes, April 12, 1924, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 4, St. Benedict the Moor, June 1923 to April 1924, ACF.

¹¹Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Benno Aichinger, July 10, 1924, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 5, St. Benedict the Moor, May 1924 to May 1925, ACF.

It was hoped that the African Americans at St. Benedict the Moor would have been inspired by the statues, pictures, and relics of African American saints. It told them that their race was not only included in the Catholic Church, but their achievements were also recognized and celebrated through the canonization of African saints. This would have been a real source of racial pride. Also, sainthood was the highest honor or recognition of one's faith and good works in life. Since Catholics viewed saints as intercessors between God and those on earth, African American saints appealed to St. Benedict's congregants as ready helpers in answering their prayers to God. Finally, the statues of these saints also served as role models. They would have reminded and encouraged parishioners to remain faithful and to live a good and moral life.

The Storm Novena

In the pre-Vatican II Church, a significant portion of worship consisted of public devotions. Such devotions as the rosary recitation before Mass, Stations of the Cross on Fridays in Lent, Our Lady of Perpetual Help Novenas, Holy Hours, Forty Hours, Sunday afternoon Vespers, Benediction, and Parish Missions were among the commonly-known forms of public devotional services that Catholics were encouraged to attend.

The so-called "Storm Novena" emerged at St. Benedict the Moor as a hallmark religious devotion. The Storm Novena generally was not known in Catholic circles in the United States although Catholics were familiar with the private or public nine-day novena. Here one said certain prescribed prayers repeatedly for nine consecutive days for an important intention. Like the traditional nine-day novena, the Storm Novena was used in extraordinarily difficult situations where a situation seemed hopeless or very difficult

to resolve in a favorable way.

Unlike other novenas, the Storm Novena consisted of nine visits to the church in one day. The praying position for Storm Novenas was also very unusual for Catholics at this time. Praying on one's knees was common, but having one's arms outstretched in a Pentecostal-like style was not done by Catholic congregations at this time. Just as a storm is a sudden and forceful event, it was akin to the forceful assault of prayers for a particular intention that heaven would experience in the Storm Novena.¹² The scriptural basis of the Storm Novena was the efficacy and power of prayer as found in Luke 11:5-13 and includes, "For everyone who asks will receive, and he who seeks will find, and the door will be opened to anyone who knocks....How much more, then, will the Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

The prayers recited aloud in the Storm Novena varied to some extent, but the first visit to the chapel always was introduced by the prescribed act of contrition followed by invocations to the Sacred Heart and Our Lady of Perpetual Help. Each visit usually included the *Memorare*, a prayer to the Virgin Mary, and then a litany of saints.¹³

In the Catholic tradition, saints, and especially the Blessed Mother, were venerated and were prayed to because they were viewed as intercessors to God to grant particular intentions of the faithful. Certain saints were remembered for particular causes or dealing with particular difficulties. In the litany of saints, prayed by the children at St. Benedict, St. Joseph was always invoked because he was the provider for the poor and a

¹²*The Storm Novena* (Milwaukee: St. Benedict Press, 1947) 21-22, ACF.

¹³*Ibid.*, 24-32.

powerful saint to help answer prayers. St. Jude was included for he was the patron of desperate and hopeless cases. St. Benedict the Moor was always mentioned because he was the patron and namesake of the Mission and, thus, its special protector. Blessed Martin de Porres, though not a canonized saint at this time, was remembered since his power of intercession was believed to have helped the Mission earlier. For example, the children prayed to Blessed Martin de Porres for years to get a gymnasium and their prayers were eventually answered. St. Dominic and St. Francis were always invoked since they were the founders of the two religious orders engaged in the work at the Mission. The Blessed Martyrs of Uganda were included because they were seen as protectors of all African American youth. Finally, a Hail Mary, recited in memory of holy Father Stephen Eckert, concluded the novena session. Eckert was so esteemed by the parish community for his holiness and kindness that many believed he was a very desirable candidate for the process leading to canonization as a saint of the Catholic Church.¹⁴

The Storm Novena was popularized at St. Benedict the Moor in Milwaukee. It appeared first to have been used in March 1922 after St. Benedict suddenly lost its third-grade teacher. After contacting the school board, the school superintendent sent out notices of the opening to non-employed teachers in the Milwaukee area, but there was no response for three weeks. In a desperate move, the Rector recalled the Storm Novena that was introduced about ten years earlier by two Franciscan Sisters from Vienna, Austria, who had visited St. Francis Monastery in Milwaukee. The third graders “stormed

¹⁴Ibid.

heaven” by making nine visits in one day to the church, saying specific prayers while kneeling with the arms outstretched. That very evening two long-distance phone calls and one telegraph arrived from Chicago from teachers applying for a position as a teacher. The next morning, one of these teachers and five other local teachers applied in person for the job.¹⁵

Storm Novenas also were used to further the interests of the Mission. When the property owners in the “Mission block” entered a gentleman’s agreement not to sell their individual property lots to the Mission, a Storm Novena was undertaken to secure additional lots. On the day following the novena, one of the owners notified the Mission that his property was for sale. Another Storm Novena brought another property lot directly north of the previously purchased lot. After plans were made for the construction of the new chapel, a Storm Novena was conducted for needed funds. The very next day Ernest Miller came and offered to pay for the chapel. Such occurrences raised the confidence level of the Storm Novena’s efficacy.¹⁶

A Storm Novena was used during times of crisis. When the Mission school was threatened to close in 1922 because the provincial the Dominican Sisters announced that the Sisters would not be returning to St. Benedict and no other religious order could be secured to staff the mission school, the children stormed heaven to save their school. Steffes explained,

Father Stephen received a letter from Mother Katherine Drexel, stating that she cannot offer us any help...We will therefore have to look for other sisters,

¹⁵Ibid., 7, 11-13.

¹⁶Ibid., 14-16.

since Mother Romana also, and definitely, stated that she will not offer us any of her sisters for the coming school year. Suppose the only thing left for us to do is to make a Storm novena to St. Anthony to this end.¹⁷

As already mentioned, Mother Romana Thom soon relented and the Dominican Sisters continued their service and ministry at St. Benedict.

Steffes' usual optimistic attitude was bolstered by his belief in the power of prayer. In his own personal life, Steffes believed that if it were not for his determination and his prayers, he would never have succeeded in the seminary and have been ordained a priest. Such a conviction in the power of prayer was transferred to the children in the Mission. In fact, their schedule at the boarding school called for chapel prayer twice each day and four times on Sundays. One of many examples of Steffes' strong belief in the power of prayer and of the Storm Novena was evident in his correspondence with the Provincial.

I visited a certain Mrs. M. L. Merkel who did much for Father Stephen and had once been a parishioner of my Rev. uncle in Manistee (Michigan). She promised us a hundred thousand dollars if by means of our storm novenas she is enabled to sell her two million dollar property in California for five or six hundred thousand dollars during her lifetime. She has it on sale for years already but cannot dispose of it. Please have everyone pray that it may turn out in our favor.¹⁸

About two and a half months later, there was an indication that the storm novena worked, at least partially. In a letter to Aichinger, Gans from St. Elizabeth in Milwaukee noted, "Mrs. Merkel, the wealthy lady who owns the big estate in California came in and handed

¹⁷Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Benno Aichinger, November 12, 1922, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 3, Hosp. Ad S Benedictum, April 1922 to July 1923, ACF.

¹⁸Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Benno Aichinger, July 22, 1923, The Provincial Files Box 9, File 4, St. Benedict the Moor, June 1923 to April 1924, ACF.

Father Philip a \$100 bill with the glad news that part of her property was sold, so we can soon look for a little life from her.”¹⁹ There is no following entry concerning Merkel so one is not sure if the large sum of money she promised ever came to the mission.

People affiliated with St. Benedict learned about the Storm Novena. They requested that the children at the Mission make a Storm Novena for their intentions. One example appeared in a letter where Steffes wrote, “ Father (August) Salick...promised the Mission a thousand dollars under the condition that our children make a storm novena for a very urgent request. He wants this to be strictly confidential.”²⁰ Some people knocked at the Mission door and made such a request. Appeals also came by mail, phone calls, and even telegrams from distant places in the country as well as from foreign nations. Unofficially, St. Benedict is said to have become “The National Shrine of the Storm Novena.”²¹

Baptisms

If the Storm Novena was the most memorable devotion in the spiritual life of St. Benedict, the administering of the sacrament of Baptism proved to be most important and very controversial. The large number of children baptized each year from the Mission led to questions and concerns. Eckert always contended that the students were never forced to become Catholics and Steffes asserted that St. Benedict carried out the sacrament of

¹⁹Fr. Roger Gans to Fr. Benno Aichinger, October 7, 1923, The Provincial Files Box 9, File 4, St. Benedict the Moor, June 1923 to April 1924, ACF.

²⁰Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Benno Aichinger, October 26, 1923, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 4, St Benedict the Moor, June 1923 to April 1924, ACF.

²¹*The Storm Novena*, 17.

Baptism according to Canon Law. The areas of controversy included such concerns as whether or not St. Benedict baptized children at too young of an age, whether the children really had their parents' consent, whether children should be required to spend one year at St. Benedict before being eligible for baptism, whether there was sufficient support for a baptized Catholic child who did not return the following year to St. Benedict, but lived at home with non-Catholic parents.

The number of baptisms was staggering. For example, Eckert reported that in the nine years from 1913 to 1922, there were 450 school children baptized.²² In February 1925 sixty-six students at St. Benedict were baptized with nine priests administering the sacrament. And, in 1927 one hundred children of St. Benedict were baptized along with several adults, including a mother and her seven children.²³

However impressive these numbers were, the methods Eckert used seeking converts among the children in the school and adults in the community remained controversial. Some of his fellow-Capuchin friars and some of the School Sisters of Notre Dame questioned Eckert's methods of conversion and charged that children were being baptized without proper instruction and lacked support from the children's home to persist in practicing the Catholic religion. Some believed that students at the boarding school felt pressure to convert when their other classmates were becoming baptized.

²²Fr. Stephen Eckert to Msgr. Noll, (appeal letter and report on the needs of St. Benedict the Moor), in *Our Sunday Visitor*, September 24, 1922, St. Benedict the Moor Papers, Box 1, File 8, "Newspaper Clippings," ACF.

²³"Nine Priests Pour Waters of Baptism on Negro Children," *Catholic Herald*, February 18, 1925, and "Baptism of Hundred Children at Negro Mission Here Friday," *Catholic Citizen*, no date, St. Benedict the Moor Papers, Box 1 File 8, "Newspaper Clippings," ACF.

Sister Medulpha Ebner, a member of the provincial council of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, was asked for her opinions concerning the Mission. In a written summary of a conference between Ebner and the Capuchin provincial, Ebner stated,

Children are baptized too early, and without consent of parents...Children should be one year at the school before they are baptized. Adults should have received instructions for six months.²⁴

The Capuchin Provincial made Eckert aware of the matter and requested a written response from him explaining his methods. In a letter to the Provincial on 14 November 1916 Eckert stated that "I never ask a child to become a Catholic." He claimed that he accepted only children when he was convinced they have faith and were anxious to join the Church. Then, he got the parents' consent and their promise that they would see to it that the children complied with their religious duties when they were in their homes. In terms of having sufficient and proper religious instructions. Eckert said he taught the children how to make a good confession and an understanding of the Catholic Church and the Eucharist. The Capuchin Superior accepted Eckert's explanation and allowed him to continue seeking converts to the faith. However, criticism of Eckert's methods continued among his fellow-Capuchins.²⁵

There was even disagreement over some of these issues between Eckert and Steffes. Eckert favored baptizing children as soon as possible. In many cases, if a child arriving for the first time at the Mission in September expressed an interest to become a

²⁴"Conference with Sister Medulpha on January 17, 1917, concerning the Negro Mission," The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 1, Hosp ad S. Benedictum, 1910-1926, ACF; Sr. Medulpha to Fr. Provincial, January 17, 1917, in The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 1, "Hosp ad S. Benedictum, 1910-1926," ACF.

²⁵Celestine Bittle, *Romance*, 434-435.

convert to Catholicism; he or she would be baptized before Christmas. Steffes questioned the prudence of such a timetable as the following letter to the Provincial reveals.

Father Stephen wishes me to have the children of this year baptized now. I imagine that it would be more prudent to wait until the second part of the year, because some of them are liable not to return after Christmas and thus never again see the inside of a Catholic church. One cannot expect them to become practical Catholics in such a short time.²⁶

Another troubling issue was whether or not a child could be baptized without the consent of the parent. In 1922 Steffes wrote,

Do we baptize children who can't get the consent of their parents? I wish to consult you also regarding those children who cannot get their parents consent. We have one very good girl here 14 years old who cannot get her father's consent. She is very anxious to be baptized. What am I to do?²⁷

An example that raised the concern of whether a non-Catholic home could provide a necessary support base for a baptized student who did not return to St. Benedict the following school year was the case of Ed Jones in 1924. In a letter to the Provincial, Steffes described what happened.

While at supper I had a telephone call. It was the Travelers Aid Bureau of the St. Paul Line. They asked...if I knew a little colored boy by the name of Ed Jones. (He was one of our pupils last year and is nine years old. I did not permit him to return this year on account of the many epileptic fits he had here.) He had run away from his mother (living in Chicago) on that day and booked a train to Milwaukee, although he had no ticket. He was now here at the depot....they found out where he was destined for, and called our Mission....We asked him why he ran away...His answer was: "My mother always wanted me to go to Protestant churches and I did not want to do that because Father told all of us we should never do that. At home,

²⁶Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Benno Aichinger, December 2, 1922, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 3, Hosp ad S. Benedictum, April 1922 to July 1923, ACF.

²⁷Ibid.

I can't go to the Catholic Church every Sunday....I told the graduates that we hope to hear similar good reports of them in the futures.²⁸

The baptismal ceremony was the high point of the year for the Capuchins and Dominican Sisters of St. Benedict the Moor. It represented the fruition of the prime purpose their work – to win Catholic converts and save souls as domestic missionaries of the Catholic Church. In February 1926 there were sixty-six pupils baptized from St. Benedict School. Steffes provides the following description.

We had ten priests baptizing our sixty-six pupils. Msgr. (Edward) Blackwell led the ceremonies. It was one of the most touching services the people present ever witnessed. The Monsignor also gave a grand sermon on the occasion. What greatly added to the solemnity was that the church was decorated most beautifully as never before. We had at least a hundred dollars worth of flowers donated for the occasion. It was touching to see how the little ones were moved to tears. The impression it all made on them will never be wiped out. The church was packed full with people as never on any other occasion.²⁹

Steffes then went on to explain the importance of such occasions for the priests and sisters at St. Benedict. He called such occasions “real harvest days when we see the fruits of our labor. In this one day of the year we long for the work.”³⁰ And, from the account of the same ceremony given by one chronicler,

The Baptismal and First Communion Day of 1926 was a gala event for all at the mission. The sincerity of the large number of children to be baptized convinced everyone that no labor nor trouble is too great when it is used to

²⁸Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Benno Aichinger, June 23, 1924, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 5. St. Benedict the Moor, May 1924 to May 1925, ACF.

²⁹Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Benno Aichinger, February 8, 1926, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 6, St. Benedict the Moor, July 1925 to December 1926, ACF.

³⁰Ibid.

turn little souls heavenward.³¹

Vocations

In the area of vocations, African Americans were not readily encouraged or welcomed to pursue an interest in the priestly or religious life of the Catholic Church. There were three congregations comprised solely of African American women religious, the Oblate Sisters of Providence, Sisters of the Holy Family, and Franciscan Handmaids of Mary. A couple of religious orders, like the Josephites, did accept African American candidates in the first part of the twentieth century. However, overall, religious orders as well as dioceses were at best ambivalent in accepting African Americans.

Acceptance of African Americans in the Capuchin order at first seemed to depend on the provincial. In 1925 the first African American joined the Capuchin congregation. Aichinger, the Provincial during this time, expressed his sentiments about the candidate and African American vocations in general in a letter to Steffes.

It will undoubtedly interest you to know that yesterday the first colored brother candidate was received within the cloister. His name is Richard Michael Thomas, born in Tennessee, educated and baptized three years ago in Detroit. He is over fifteen years old. He is so dark that you cannot see him in the dusk. Our young brother-candidates and the novices seem to take to him nicely. He will get the Tertiary habit next week. Let your children pray for his perseverance.³²

However, Aichinger's hope for African American vocations was not shared by some of his successors. When Leo Powell, an African American, wrote to Steffes in 1928

³¹“History of the Racine Dominican Sisters in Charge of the School for Colored Children, St. Benedict's School, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1920-1936,” St. Benedict the Moor Files, ARD.

³²Fr. Benno Aichinger to Fr. Philip Steffes, March 14, 1925, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 5, St. Benedict the Moor, May 1924 to May 1925, ACF.

inquiring about joining the Capuchin Order, Benedict Mueller, the Provincial at that time, refused him because of some special requests that Powell made and also because he was African American. In very clear language, Mueller wrote,

He makes special requests in his letter for lessons in Latin, etc. We cannot begin with that. Besides you know that I am not inclined to take any Colored Candidates. Simply write him that Father Provincial refuses to take him.³³

Just over a year later, there was a strange incident at St. Benedict where an African American Capuchin, Brother Arsenius, and a Dominican Sister both left without telling anyone. For a time, it was suspected that the two might be involved in some sort of romantic liaison. Later, this would turn out to be an unwarranted suspicion. The sister was found in North Milwaukee and Br. Arsenius appeared in Chicago. However, during the time of suspicion and uncertainty, Mueller reveals that he, like many white people in the country, clung to the belief of the immorality of the African American race. Mueller stated,

Your letter with the sad news of Br. Arsenius' disappearance and also the missing of a Sister was received, and my heart goes out to you in sympathy. It seems that the Colored cannot be trusted especially in two things, namely their honesty and their purity....Now, what about the new candidate. From past experience would it not be better to shake him off. I think the Sisters, also their Mother, would prefer that we have no Colored help, at least not men. Mother Raymund (Romana) once told me that the Sisters were afraid of them.³⁴

By the 1940s, the Capuchin order had a different policy as indicated in the

³³Fr. Benedict Mueller to Fr. Philip Steffes, June 4, 1928, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 7, St. Benedict the Moor, January 1927 to December 1929, ACF.

³⁴Fr. Benedict Mueller to Fr. Philip Steffes, July 19, 1929, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 7, St. Benedict the Moor, January 1927 to December 1929, ACF.

following letter by Steffes to the Provincial, Father Edmund Kraemer.

The Marianist Brothers have decided to accept Colored candidates into their Community. One of them...from St. Benedict's, Kermit Killough, has likewise applied and received a favorable response. He had written to other Communities and was refused. This boy graduates from our high school next week. He has been a Catholic for four years and has no Catholic family background, but has always been an ideal boy and most trustworthy. He first requested to join Community and, since we decided only to accept the third generation of Catholicity, we informed him that he could not be admitted unless he would be willing to become a Tertiary.³⁵ This he was willing to do. Since, however, he received such a favorable letter from the Marianist Fathers, he may change his mind... I would gladly accept him... He could be quite an asset here as a porter.³⁶

By the 1940s one of the requirements for acceptance in the Capuchin order was that the applicant must be at least the "third generation of Catholicity." This mechanism seemed strangely reminiscent of the grandfather clause used in voting. Just as most African Americans' grandfathers were not eligible to vote under the grandfather clause and remained, unlike poor or illiterate whites, disenfranchised, so here many (or most) African American Catholics did not come from families who were Catholic for three generations, dating back to their grandfathers. The "third generation of Catholicity" provision, of course, did not prevent white European immigrants or children of immigrants from joining the Capuchin Order since most of their grandfathers were

³⁵According to Br. Patrick McSherry, Provincial Archivist of the Capuchin Province of St. Joseph, a tertiary is a Third Order Franciscan. The Capuchins are Franciscans and adhere to the three orders established by St. Francis. The First Order are men (priests or brothers) who wished to live together in fraternity and take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. The Second Order are women who wanted to dedicate themselves as cloistered nuns and also take the three vows. The Third Order, or tertiaries, are lay people living in the world who formally commit themselves to live the Gospel, but do not take vows. They do receive a religious habit that is similar to those in the other orders. Historically, they were men who wished to live as part of the Capuchin community without vows.

³⁶Fr. Philip Steffes to Fr. Edmund Kraemer, January 28, 1947, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 13, St. Benedict the Moor, 1945 to 1949, ACF.

Catholics back in Europe.

There are a few other disturbing notions revealed in the 1940s letter excerpt. Steffes, like Eckert before him, seemed willing to accept a first generation Catholic into the Order because he saw the religious fervor and a pattern of behavior in the young man that would make him suitable for religious life. However, the door apparently was opened only partially. From the correspondence, African American applicants were all for the brotherhood, not for the priesthood. The evidence indicated that lower-rung positions, like that of a porter, were accorded to African Americans. In this way, the religious congregation reflected the larger society with its restrictions and subordinate positions given to African Americans.

Kermit Killough was an example of a common pattern in all Catholic high schools for most of the twentieth century. Vocations to the priesthood, brotherhood, and sisterhood emerged or, in many cases, were actively recruited among Catholic high school students. The Capuchins did have other young men from St. Benedict join them. And, there was at least one young girl from St. Benedict, Rose Ann James who joined the Franciscan Sisters from Little Falls, Minnesota and became Sister Mary Martin, O.S.F. In 1945 she returned to her alma mater for her first "home visit" and was the first African American to be received by the Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls, Minnesota.³⁷ However, there was no evidence that the Racine Dominicans had any girls from St. Benedict to join their congregation. It would be utterly naive to think, that in the five decades that the Dominicans staffed St. Benedict School, no African American girls would have wanted to

³⁷*The Messenger* 9, no.2 (December 1945): 71.

become Dominican Sisters and would have made good candidates. Yet, there is no record or recollection of African American girls from St. Benedict joining the Racine Dominican congregation. It is not known how overt or how subtle objections were given when an African American girl expressed an interest in becoming a sister. And, it is important to note that such policies or responses to African American vocations by the religious congregations who staffed St. Benedict the Moor were in all likelihood typical of the many other religious congregations in the county. As noted earlier, even Mother Katherine Drexel wrote to Archbishop Sebastian Messmer in the 1920s that her congregation, the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, founded to work with Indians and African Americans, did not accept African American candidates. The Archdiocese of Milwaukee did not ordain any African American priests until Marvin T. Knighton and Joseph N. Perry were ordained by Archbishop William Cousins in 1975.

Christian Formation Through Sermons

Another source to retrieve a glimpse of the spiritual life at St. Benedict the Moor was in the sermons delivered to the congregation. In the early years of the Mission before Eckert became the first resident pastor, Capuchian friars from St. Francis Monastery would celebrate Mass, administer the sacraments, and preach at St. Benedict. One of these priests was Aichinger who was director of the Capuchin seminarians in Milwaukee in those years and later would serve three terms as Provincial of the Detroit Province. Some of the sermons he preached at St. Benedict the Moor, written in his own handwriting, have been preserved and provide a wonderful insight into the way the gospel message and Catholic doctrine was presented to the early community of African

American Catholics in Milwaukee.

The sermons reflected to some extent the dual opposing forces of defensiveness and confidence that characterized the Catholic Church in the first part of the twentieth century. The defensiveness of the Catholic Church against Protestantism was evident in the way some of the emotionally-laden African American Protestant Sunday services were depicted and how anti-Catholicism, with strange rumors about convents and monasteries, was dispelled. Likewise, the confidence of the Catholic Church also was seen where the Church was presented as the only way to save one's soul if one has faith and lives a worthy life of good deeds, prayer, and the sacraments.

However, the most important feature of the homily was to teach or to present the Catholic faith. This is readily evident by the titles of various sermons – The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, Save your Soul, The Rule of Faith with Protestants and Catholics, Inconsistency—Our Faith and Practice, On the Ten Commandments, Passion Sunday, Real Presence, Trinity Sunday, Teach all Nations, Sacrament of Penance, On Purgatory, Purpose of Amendment, and “I go to Him that sent me.”³⁸

The sermons made frequent use of stories, analogies, or real-life examples to illustrate some truth or belief. For example, in one sermon, Aichinger compared getting to heaven like crossing a street in the business section of a big city. He said,

Cars, wagons, people are coming from all directions, crossing and re-crossing your path. How cautious and vigilant you have to be to avoid mishaps! But your road to Heaven is as much beset; for the world, the Flesh, and the Devil are constantly crossing your paths, and threatening to trip you up or knock

³⁸The hand-written sermons of Fr. Benno Aichinger are contained in a file named “Indian and Negro Missions, 1898-1934,” ACF.

you down.³⁹

When addressing the topic of conscience, Aichinger told the story of an old Indian who asked a white man for some tobacco for his pipe. The white man gave him some, but, the next day the Indian came back and said he found a quarter in the tobacco. A bystander asked the Indian, “why didn’t you just keep the quarter?” The Indian replied saying he has a good man and a bad man in his body and the good man said “it is not yours, give it back.” The bad man inside said “never mind, it is yours now.” The Indian did not know what to do. At night when he went to sleep, the good man and bad man kept fighting and kept him awake all night. So now the Indian said he is bringing the money back so he can feel good again. “Like the old Indian, we have all a good and bad man with us. The bad man is temptation, the good man is conscience, and they keep talking for and against many things that we do every day.”⁴⁰

The sermons sometimes included information dealing with African American Catholicism and other information on the race. Along with the sermons of Aichinger were data and statistics of African Americans at that time and in the past. Such information included listings of African American philanthropists, Catholic institutions serving African Americans in the country, Missions established in various parts of the United States for African Americans, and Protestant denominations consisting entirely of African American organizations like Reformed Zion Union Episcopal Church, Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, Evangelist Missionary Church, and many others. On

³⁹Fr. Benno Aichinger, “Did It Ever Occur To You,” a homily delivered at St. Benedict the Moor, no date given, Indian and Negro Missions 1898-1934 File, ACF.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

occasion, some of this information would be inserted into sermons.⁴¹

An examination of one homily illustrates how the various components just described were interwoven. The homily was entitled "Save Your Soul" and delivered on 22 January 1911 at 7:30 PM, what must have been a Sunday evening service. First, Aichinger dealt with anti-Catholic sentiment present in the country and how outlandish notions are sometimes believed by uninformed people.

In Virginia colored parents were refused permission to send their children to the Industrial School conducted by the Brothers for the Boys and by Catholic Sisters for girls, and their reason? Because they fear that the children are killed and devoured by the priests and nuns. Such ridiculous slanders are propagated and form a great obstacle for the conversion of the poor, well-disposed, but ignorant people.⁴²

Second, Aichinger spoke on the appeal of the holiness churches with their emotion-charged services and then explained why the Catholic Church has a different style.

If the Catholic Church would confine religion to the four walls of the church in which we worship, our churches would be crowded; everybody would become a Catholic....We do not preach purely emotional religion that evaporates into thin air and leaves man the slave of his passions. No, we are taught, that we must have a practical religion, that is, the Christian spirit with which we are imbued, must show itself in our daily actions, must hold in check our passions, must guide us in our public and private life, in church and at home, at work and in our recreation hours. This costs many sacrifices, and these are shunned. Therefore, people join any other Christian denomination rather than the Catholic. But let us pray and hope, that this little Mission may become the nucleus from which true Christian life may flow with its influence into

⁴¹Such hand-written data sheets were found along with the sermons in the file entitled "Indian and Negro Missions 1898-1934," ACF.

⁴²Fr. Benno Aichinger, "Save Your Soul," a homily delivered at St. Benedict the Moor on January 22, 1911, Indian and Negro Missions 1898-1934 File, ACF.

many homes of colored people in this city and this state.⁴³

The theme of the sermon was to keep your eyes of the important things in this life – saving your soul. Material and worldly rewards were transient. A frequent technique used to convey an idea was to use an analogy. Here, Aichinger used the analogy of children playing in the sand. He asked the congregation to picture the children digging holes with a spoon in the sand and building imaginary castles and walls. They become so totally absorbed in this trivial world that they are unaware of anything else.

The smallest trivialities suffice to amuse and entertain a child...The grown-up man, on the contrary, can no longer find any pleasure or interest in the plays of a child.... And yet, from a spiritual point of view, the great mass of mankind closely resemble children playing upon the sand. They, too, occupy themselves with trivialities. All their thoughts, desires, are centered on the passing and unstable things of times. Some deliver themselves up, body and soul, to money-making, much as a child collecting shells or marbles; others engage themselves in seeking honors, distinctions, or decorations,.... The world, its pleasures, riches, honor, glory – such things gain possession of the hearts of the multitude.... Perishable goods, fleeting pleasures, transitory fame!... The deepest problems of life, the momentous questions of a future state, the solemn facts of the eternal world, awake no interest – of a heaven to be won, and a hell to be avoided...On earth there is nothing great but man; in man there is nothing great but the soul!⁴⁴

Aichinger, having made his point, then moved to the application of the homily's message. He asked,

What can the layman do?...1. By preaching, not in words, but by the far more efficacious means of example, a good life is a continuous exhortation, inspires respect and invites emulation. 2. Show in a practical manner real interest in the spiritual welfare of others and desire to be of use to them.... Last, but by no means the least important means of cooperating with and in the work of saving souls

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid.

is frequent and fervent prayer.⁴⁵

The homily ended with a reference to Africans in the Catholic Church in the past that could serve as a spiritual model or source of pride to African American Catholics.

Aichinger stated,

Dr. Blyden, a native African said Negroes owe a debt of gratitude to the Roman Catholic Church. The only Negroes who have had the power successfully to throw off oppression and maintain their position as free men, were Roman Catholic Negroes – the Haitians; and the greatest Negro the Christian world has yet produced was a Roman Catholic, Touissant L'Ouverture. At Rome the names of Negroes, males and females, who have been distinguished for piety and good works, are found in the calendar, under the designation of "saints." Protestantism has no Negro saints.⁴⁶

Summary

Like its educational life, the spiritual life of St. Benedict the Moor also played significant roles. The church instructed the faithful in Catholic teachings. Sermons and religious instructions provided a guide to Christian living, used African American role models, and illustrated ideas with practical examples. St. Benedict participated in community events pertaining to African American causes and objected to racial slurs and prejudice. The Capuchin Fathers looked for ways to engender a greater sense of belonging among African Americans to the Catholic Church in the worship services from the main altarpiece depicting the twenty-two martyrs of Uganda to statues, to relics, to securing African American priests for parish missions, retreats, and Forty Hours Devotions. However, in the area of vocations, the African American Catholic was, for

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid.

the most part, excluded. Along with the discipline the experiences of the total educational program, the priests and sisters did more than plant and deepen the roots of the moral character of a good Catholic. They also produced individuals who were confident, knowledgeable, and successful enough to stand firm in the face of racism within their society and their Church.

CHAPTER 9

DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFTS AND A CONCERN FOR CIVIL RIGHTS, 1945 - 1963

The period of 1945 to 1963 signaled an important transition for the Catholic Church in its function of African American ministry. Prior to the Second World War, Catholic ministry aimed at conversion and evangelization of the African American community. The black Catholic church, the parochial school, and various social services and institutions were the main vehicles to accomplish its aim. With the Great Depression and World War II, an increasing awareness and interest in social issues and social justice emerged, appealing especially to the liberal groups in the Catholic Church. Racial prejudice, discrimination, and segregation that long had been part of American life became more troubling for some Church leaders and members. One church member, for example, decried the hypocrisy of discriminatory treatment of African American soldiers in World War II.

Again, this country is professedly at war with Axis nations to end racial supremacy. One feels like a hypocrite in discussing that with a Negro. Imagine the thoughts of colored American soldiers who, while passing through the South recently on a troop train, were forced to eat a meager meal standing in the kitchen of a railroad station restaurant whence they could see enemy prisoners being royally dined in the restaurant itself.¹

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the institutional convert-seeking approach continued, but a new function of Catholic ministry evolved that focused on civil rights and called for a more activist ministerial thrust.

¹Joseph B. Schuyler, "The Negro Problem American and Catholic," *The Holy Name Journal* (May 1945), Catholic Interracial Council Papers, Box 1, "1932 to July 1950," File 1, "1932 to 1945," CHS.

The emerging civil rights activist approach of the Catholic Church to its ministry was clearly influenced by several developments and events in the postwar world. The end of World War II marked the ascendancy of the United States as a superpower and leader of the Free World in the Cold War. The Soviet Union was quick to point out that the United States could hardly pose as the leader of the free world or condemn the denial of human rights in eastern Europe if it practiced segregation at home. Likewise, the United States found it hard to convince new nations in Africa and Asia of its commitment to human rights when African Americans were subjected to discrimination, segregation, prejudice, and disfranchisement. President Harry Truman believed it was the federal government's responsibility to protect African Americans and strive for racial equality. With two executive orders in 1948, Truman declared an end to racial discrimination in the federal government and ordered the desegregation of the armed forces. At the same time, African Americans were successfully challenging racial discrimination in the courts. In 1948 in *Shelley v. Kraemer*, the Supreme Court ruled that racially restrictive covenants (private agreements where white homeowners do not sell to African Americans) could not be legally enforced. Then, in 1954 came the Supreme Court's unanimous decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, declaring the nearly sixty-year-old doctrine of "separate but equal" segregation to be inherently unequal in public education. The decision galvanized African Americans to challenge segregation in other areas.²

White resistance to civil rights gained strength in both the North and the South. In

²Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63* (New York: sinom and Schuster, 1988), 13, 66, 112, 124-125.

northern cities, the rising African American population faced thousands of angry whites who were determined to keep blacks out of their neighborhoods. In the South, the Klan experienced another resurgence and white violence against African Americans increased. In 1955, Emmett Till, a fourteen year old from Chicago, was murdered in Mississippi by white men who objected to the way he spoke to a white woman. In 1957 whites in Little Rock, Arkansas, attempted to defy a court-ordered desegregation plan for Central High School. Finally, after two weeks of tension, President Eisenhower intervened and nine African Americans students began to attend classes with protection from federal troops.³

By the mid-1950s, a growing number of African Americans were directly involved in a grassroots struggle for civil rights. In 1955 Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her seat on a city bus erupted in a mass boycott against segregated seating on buses in Montgomery, Alabama, led by Martin Luther King, Jr. After a year of boycotting the busses and enduring harassment tactics from city officials, the boycott ended successfully with the Supreme Court declaring Alabama's bus segregation laws unconstitutional. The bus boycott propelled Martin Luther King to the forefront of a new, grassroots civil rights activism in which black church played a major role.⁴

Milwaukee in the Postwar Years

In Milwaukee and throughout other northern industrial cities in the nation, the postwar years was a time of remarkable demographic change and transition. It witnessed an exploding population and the start of the baby-boom generation as the Second World

³Ibid., 181-182, 222-224, 257-258.

⁴Ibid., 143-168 passim.

War GI's returned to civilian life and started families. The postwar period saw white flight from the cities to the suburbs as African Americans, many who recently migrated into northern cities for jobs, expanded into older white-ethnic neighborhoods. In Milwaukee the exploding African American population in these postwar decades marked the beginning of race as a significant issue in city life. African Americans newcomers exerted tremendous pressure on housing and neighborhoods. Areas that had previously been designated as the "black belt" or the "Negro district" expanded beyond their borders into white ethnic Catholic neighborhoods.

Starting with the Second World War and continuing in the post war years, employers began to hire African Americans to fill work orders for the war effort. In the 1950s the growth of the African American population skyrocketed due to the opportunities for steady factory work and the commitment to fair treatment from Mayor Frank Zeidler and his Socialist municipal administration. African Americans in 1940 numbered 8,821 in the city of Milwaukee. By 1950, the number swelled to 21,772 African Americans and nearly tripled to 62,458 by 1960. In 1940, African Americans comprised only 1.5 percent of Milwaukee's total population. By 1950, this figure stood at 3.4 percent and in 1960 it bounded to 8.4 percent of Milwaukee's total population.⁵

African Americans who came to Milwaukee found in 1940 a wall of *de facto* segregation that confined them to a residential area on the near northwest side bounded by Kilbourn Street on the south, Walnut Street on the north, Third Street on the east, and

⁵Washington and Oliver, 44; Avella, "Milwaukee Catholicism, 1945-1960: Seed-Time for Change," 163-164.

Eighth Street on the west. The rising African American population in the 1940s pushed the boundaries of the “colored district” further northward to Wright Avenue and also westward to Twelfth Street. By 1950, the boundaries of the African American neighborhood claimed Locust Avenue on the north and Twentieth Street on the west. White landlords and white homeowners yielded the border areas to the north and west of the “colored district.”⁶

Catholics and the Catholic Church of Milwaukee in the Postwar Years

Between 1945 and 1963, the most noticeable change in the Catholic community of Milwaukee was its remarkable growth. During these years over 100,000 new Catholics would be added in the Archdiocese as the overall Catholic population swelled from 457,397 to 567,440.⁷ The post-war baby boom drove the number of Catholics upwards and necessitated building expansion programs in parishes as well as the construction of many new churches and schools. In this period of rapid growth in the archdiocese, seventy-four new Catholic grade schools and three new high schools were constructed and twenty-two building additions were completed. It boasted five colleges and was the home of Marquette University. Founded in 1881, Marquette emerged from the Second World War as one of the nation’s leading Jesuit academic institutions with an enrollment of nearly 8,000 students in 1953. The Archdiocese of Milwaukee also supported numerous institutions for social welfare such as homes for orphans and the elderly and

⁶Ibid.

⁷Of the 567,440 Catholics in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, fifty-six percent lived in the Milwaukee metropolitan area. From 1946 to 1960, enrollment in Catholic grades schools jumped from 27,423 to 41,673 and high schools swelled from 6,340 to 9,794.

thirteen hospitals.⁸

The postwar years was a time of prosperity, rising social mobility, and greater affluence for white Catholics in Milwaukee. Catholic urban workers benefitted from higher wages in industrial unions and the explosion of lower-management positions in the 1940s creating great affluence. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the average Catholic lay person was a blue-collar worker, living in an urban area, and may even have been an immigrant. By the 1960s, many of the sons and daughters of those early Milwaukee Catholics rose on the social and economic ladder and had earned college degrees and professional training. After the war, college enrollments soared across the country. In 1944-1945 school term, there were 92,000 students registered in Catholic colleges alone. Three years later, this figure leaped to 220,000 students. In both income levels and education levels, Catholics began to rise faster than the national averages and eventually surpassed the national averages by the mid-1960s.⁹ Their upward mobility and accompanied affluence pulled many Catholics into the ranks of the growing middle class. After the war, many of these second or third generation Catholic immigrants moved into new homes in the suburbs.¹⁰ Rapid suburban growth translated into huge leaps in

⁸Avella, "Milwaukee Catholicism, 1945-1960: Seed-Time for Change," 151-154; "Review of Archdiocesan Construction in the Past Year—Parish Church, Schools, and Institutional Buildings," *Catholic Herald Citizen*, July 1, 1961, 1; Kevin D. Smith, "In God We Trust: Religion, The Cold War, and Civil Rights in Milwaukee, 1947-1963," (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1999), 125.

⁹John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter With Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 80.

¹⁰Avella, "Milwaukee Catholicism, 1945-1960: Seed-Time for Change," 151-154; Smith, 125.

membership of Catholic suburban parishes.¹¹

For the period of 1945 to 1963, the church of Milwaukee would be headed by three archbishops. Moses Elias Kiley, former Bishop of Trenton, New Jersey, succeeded Archbishop Stritch in 1940 and served until his death in 1953. Kiley possessed an authoritarian leadership style and was conservative in his outlook in both spiritual and secular affairs. Albert Meyer, a native son of Milwaukee, returned home from his tenure as Bishop of Superior, Wisconsin, to head the Milwaukee Archdiocese in 1953. With Meyer's appointment as Archbishop of Chicago in 1958, the Milwaukee see was again vacated. William E. Cousins, former Bishop of Peoria, Illinois, and auxiliary bishop of Chicago, succeeded Meyer in 1958 and held the post until 1977.

Blessed Martin de Porres

As African Americans expanded north and west in the 1940s, St. Benedict the Moor stood on the far southeastern end of the African American settlement district, becoming more and more distant from the vast majority of African American residents and making it difficult for some to attend religious services. At the same time, as Catholics flooded into suburbia, they left behind the ethnic neighborhoods that had been the center of Milwaukee Catholic life for generations. African Americans began to move into the old German parishes of St. Francis of Assisi, St. Boniface, and St. Elizabeth on the near north side and into St. Rose on west Michigan Street. Soon these parishes began to lose more white parishioners, stimulating further white flight to the suburbs.

In 1948, Archbishop Kiley began negotiations with the Father Cyprian Abler,

¹¹St. Jude the Apostle in Wauwatosa, for example, increase from 316 families in 1945 to 850 in 1949.

Capuchin Provincial, to open a new parish for African Americans in an attempt to discourage them from making further inroads into predominantly white parishes and to preserve the segregation of whites and blacks.. The site of the proposed new parish was an abandoned Croatian church, Sacred Heart, on Seventh and Galena Streets in the heart of the African American district. Kiley offered the Capuchins a sizeable subsidy for major repairs that were needed for the dilapidated building. The Capuchins accepted the offer and opened Blessed Martin de Porres parish in 1950.¹²

The parish was appropriately named because Martin de Porres was of mixed race, born in Lima, Peru in 1570, and raised in poverty. He entered the Dominican Convent of the Rosary and at twenty-four years old became a professed lay-brother. He established an orphanage and a children's hospital. His worked on behalf of the poor was tireless; he took care of slaves brought from Africa and fed 160 poor people with alms he had collected. He served as spiritual director to many of his fellow religious. He died in 1637 and canonized a saint in 1962 by Pope John XXIII.¹³

As was the case with the establishment of St. Benedict the Moor with Eckert and Steffes, the Capuchins sent capable and enthusiastic friars to Blessed Martin de Porres who quickly won the respect and esteem of the African American community. The parish soon became a hub of activity under the leadership of dynamic Capuchin pastors such as

¹²Fr. Cyprian Abler to Archbishop Kiley, January 21, 1950; Archbishop Kiley to Fr Abler, July 29, 1950; Archbishop Kiley to Fr. Kraemer, November 6, 1950, "Blessed Martin de Porres Parish File," Archives of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee (AAM); Avella, "Milwaukee Catholicism," 165; Smith, 132.

¹³"Martin de Porres," n.d., <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_de_Porres> (3 July 2007); "Saint Martin de Porres," n.d., <<http://www.magnificat.ca/cal/engl/11-03.htm>> (3 July 2007); "St. Martin de Porres," n.d., <<http://www.americancatholic.org/Features/SaintOfDay/default.asp?id=1188>>; Thurson and Attwatter, 269-270.

Father Julian Phelan. Unlike St. Benedict the Moor or other parishes, Blessed Martin never had a school attached to it. Consequently, the mission's ministry had a strong emphasis on social activities, sports, and summer programs for African American youth. "Father Stephen's Day Camp" was one of the most successful summer activities, drawing around 400 African American youths. The summer camp began in 1953 and was funded by philanthropist and Miller Brewing heir, Harry John. Young Milwaukee seminarians were recruited to assist the Capuchins and receive a first hand experience of interacting with African American youth and sensitizing them to race issues. Crafts, recreational and field trip activities provided social outlets for the young people. One of these white seminarians was young James Groppi from Immaculate Conception Parish in Bay View who would become the most nationally renowned figure in Milwaukee's Civil Rights Movement.¹⁴

With Kiley's death in 1953, his successor, Archbishop Albert Meyer, continued to encourage and generously subsidize Bl. Martin de Porres. But, in 1955 Meyer was forced to confront the racial issue. The Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee began laying plans for the revitalization of selected areas of the African American district. The Hillside Neighborhood Redevelopment program, which had begun after the war, expanded its plans for urban revitalization to include the areas in which Blessed Martin was located. Writing to Meyer, city officials asked the archbishop what his intentions

¹⁴Avella, "Milwaukee Catholicism," 165; William J. McCauley (District Attorney) to James Dorsey, March 16, 1954, a copy of his letter sent to Fr. Adrian urging retention of Fr. Julian as Pastor of Blessed Martin de Porres Church, James Dorsey Papers, Folder 1, Milwaukee County Historical Society (MCHS); Archbishop Meyer to Fr. Abler, July 9, 1954; Fr. Abler to Archbishop Meyer, July 12, 1954; Archbishop Meyer to Fr. Abler, July 17, 1954, "Blessed Martin de Porres Parish File," AAM.

were for the future of the parish in the light of redevelopment plans. The issue was clear: if Blessed Martin closed, its African American parishioners would then have to be integrated into the neighboring white parishes. A report of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee in 1959 to the Indian and Negro Collection Fund set forth the future prospects.

Blessed Martin de Porres will be taken over by the Urban Renewal Program. While no decision has been made, it seems unlikely that these facilities can be replaced and that provision will have to be made for the colored Catholics in the area either by assigning them to neighboring parishes or finding a new location for new adequate facilities.¹⁵

The same report also indicated that a new expressway was cutting through the city resulting in significant changes in Catholic parishes. For example, the church, school, convent, and rectory of St. Joseph on Eleventh and Cherry Streets, which had a large African American constituency, was to be completely absorbed by the expressway. This would also mean African Americans coming to other white parishes. Meyer soon informed the Housing Authority that he did not want Bl. Martin Mission to be torn down. This delay enabled Meyer to “buy some time.” By 1961, Meyer’s successor, William E. Cousins, after consulting the neighboring pastors, decided to let all of the parish buildings of Bl. Martin be torn down and the land incorporated into the slum clearance project. The church remained on its site until 1963. By that time, the wave of African Americans moving into former all-white Catholic parishes could no longer be delayed by the

¹⁵Catholic Indian and Negro Collections and Reports, GA-8, AAM.

existence of Blessed Martin de Porres.¹⁶

While one could argue that the establishment of Blessed Martin de Porres was an attempt to hold on to an outdated “separatist” model of church organization that prevailed in the era of the immigrant church, by the 1950s times were changing. The establishment of Blessed Martin de Porres was segregationist in its motivation to preserve the status quo and slow the march of integration. Blessed Martin de Porres opened in 1950. By this time, the barriers between national groups had weakened. The old pastors of national parishes who had immigrated with their parishioners in the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries had retired. Back in the 1920s and 1930s, priests from the various national parishes rarely addressed one another on the street and refused to cooperate in community affairs. But, in mid-century American society, such sensibilities toward “separatism” and having no contact with other ethnic groups seemed out of place. In many dioceses, priests from different ethnic parishes who never communicated with each other in the 1920s were by the mid-1940s attending common retreats and interacting with each other in other ways.¹⁷ The change was seen in 1945 when Cardinal Stritch of Chicago refused a request from one Italian national parish for increased financial support. In his letter to the pastor, Stritch stated

It is a fact national groups are a passing phenomena in our cities. In time these groups no longer use their own vernacular and they become part of the general Catholic faith. We should not make this mistake of building

¹⁶Avella, “Milwaukee Catholicism,” 166; Smith, 133; Catholic Indian and Negro Collections and Reports, GA-8, AAM.

¹⁷McGreevy, 82-83.

chapels not urgently needed which will in time become problems.¹⁸

Thus, by the mid-1940s the integration of various nationality groups within the Church had started along with the integration of Catholics into the larger American society. In this light, Blessed Martin de Porres could be seen as delaying the inevitable. The parish fit the “separatist” model of an earlier time. The parish did slow down the inevitable entrance of African Americans into white parishes of Milwaukee. The era of the immigrant church had ended and its models and structures were viewed increasingly as segregationist and opposed to integration.

Changing Parishes and Schools: An Appraisal

The dramatic growth of the African American population in Milwaukee in the 1940s and 1950s brought African Americans into new neighborhoods and ethnic parishes. The arrival of African Americans in white ethnic parishes, like the German St. Boniface, the Irish St. Galls, and many others brought many new challenges for the Catholic Church.

The first ethnic parish in Milwaukee reflecting the presence of African Americans in its parish boundaries was St. Francis of Assisi, a former German Catholic stronghold. In a speech entitled “The Negro Catholic in Milwaukee” to the Pere Marquette Council of the Knights of Columbus in May 1961, Father Matthew Gottshalk, a Capuchin priest on Milwaukee’s north side, stated that the first African American child enrolled at St. Francis school in 1931.¹⁹ The number increased and the beginning of this demographic

¹⁸Stephen Joseph Shaw, “Chicago’s Germans and Italians, 1903-1939: The Catholic Parish as a Way Station of Ethnicity and Americanization” (University of Chicago, Ph.D. diss., 1981), 257.

¹⁹House Chronicle of St. Francis Friary, May 21, 1961, ACF.

change was noted in the chronicle of the School Sisters of Notre Dame who staffed the school in 1939:

September brought us the increase of about one hundred pupils over last year, including quite a number of colored children. This increase is partly due to the untiring labor of Father Bernardine.... We need not apply to be sent to the African Missions, Africa is coming to us.²⁰

By 1944, the Capuchin chronicler at St. Francis noted that “much of our Parish District is in the Colored Belt now and it seems it will eventually become all colored. So far, very few are Catholic and the rest show no leaning towards Catholicism.” When school opened in September 1944, St. Francis had an enrollment of 478 pupils, of which forty-three were African American. The chronicler stated that this number is a considerable drop from last year’s enrollment of 540 pupils. He then explained, “Many Catholic families moved out of the parish in the streets west of the church where everything is becoming colored. Within the last few years there has been an unusual increase of colored moving into the Parish District and we feel that within five years or so it will all be colored.” On October 17, 1944 a near race riot erupted eight blocks from St. Francis. The disturbance arose from a fight between two boys and soon about forty to fifty whites and African Americans were in the melee. There were no casualties, but, the chronicler noted, “it shows something is smoldering underneath the quiet everyday appearance and that it doesn’t need much to fan it into a blaze. Many Negroes here came to Milwaukee in the past years for war defense work and the housing problems cause race

²⁰House Diary of St. Francis Convent, 1936, as quoted in Avella, *Milwaukee Catholicism*, 165.

friction.”²¹ The events and happenings recorded at St. Francis were harbingers of what would be found later in many other ethnic parishes. Many whites moved out and left the parish as African Americans moved into the neighborhood. School enrollments declined and tensions between whites and African Americans smoldered in the neighborhood.

One indicator of the path of African American advance into various Catholic parishes on the north and west sides of Milwaukee could be seen in the annual application form that the Archdiocese completed requesting monies from the Indian and Negro Home Mission Fund. These revenues came from a special collection taken in all Catholic churches in the United States on the first Sunday of Lent. When applying for funds to the Indian and Negro Mission Board, the diocese had to state on its application which churches and schools were “predominantly” African American and which ones had a “large number” of African Americans. By reviewing the years from 1955 to 1970, one could see which parishes experienced the influx of African Americans in what years as well as the path of the African American advance into the formerly German and Irish ethnic parishes of Milwaukee’s northwest side.

In 1955, St. Benedict the Moor and Blessed Martin de Porres were listed on the application form of the Milwaukee archdiocese as predominantly African American while St. Francis Assisi on Brown and Fourth Streets and St. Boniface on Eleventh and Clarke Streets had large numbers of African Americans. In 1955 St. Francis had a school enrollment of 425 students of which 42 percent were African American. Two years later in 1957 it had 400 students and 55 percent were African American. In 1952 St. Boniface

²¹House Chronicle of St. Francis Friary, July 15, 1944, 168; September 25, 1944, 180; October 17, 1944, 182, ACF.

had thirty-two African American students. Six years later in 1958 the number stood at 181.²²

In 1958 St. Joseph on Eleventh and Cherry Streets was listed as having a large number of African Americans. The report also stated that there were 573 African American Catholics in St. Boniface and 500 in St. Francis. The next year, 1959, St. Gall on Third and Clarke Streets was added to this category of having a large number of African Americans. Also, St. Francis School had the largest percentage of African Americans with 80 percent, St. Boniface with 60 percent, and St. Joseph with 50 percent. In its 1959 application for funds from the Indian and Negro annual collection, the Archdiocese report stated,

The sudden removal from rural Protestant areas of the South to an unsympathetic Protestant North has created an unprecedented interest in the Catholic Church because of the genuine concern shown by the Church. The Protestant African Americans are most frequently drawn to the Church through the Catholic school...There is no doubt that the harvest is as ripe as it will ever be. African American people here form the nucleus of tomorrow's best Catholics; provided the Catholic clergy and laity are aware of the tremendous opportunity existing today.²³

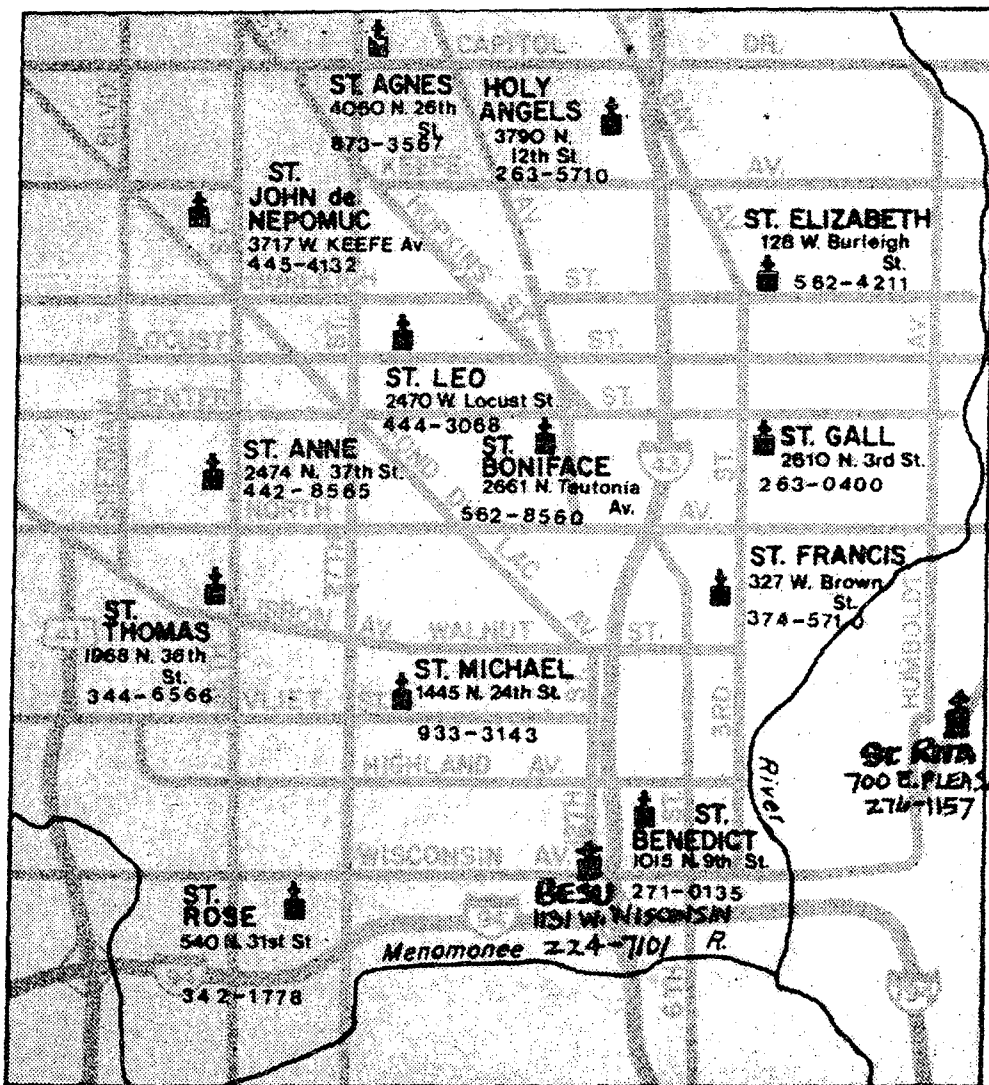
In 1961, St. Francis moved from the designation of having a large number of African Americans to being predominantly African American, thereby joining St. Benedict the Moor and Blessed Martin de Porres in that category. The following year, 1962, Blessed Martin closed. In that year St. Boniface moved from having a large number of African Americans to the designation of being a predominantly African

²²Catholic Indian and Negro Collections and Reports, GA-8, Archives of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee (AAM); Avella, "Milwaukee Catholicism," 166.

²³Catholic Indian and Negro Collections and Reports, GA-8, AAM.

American. The 1962 report also indicated that over sixteen churches in Milwaukee had a noticeable number of African Americans attending Mass in their parishes.

Table 6: Milwaukee Parishes (North and West Side), 1960



Source: "St. Gall Good News Reach Out," Vol. III, No. 3, March 1984

In 1964, St. Benedict the Moor, St. Francis, and St. Boniface were predominantly African American and St. Gall, Holy Angels at 3790 N. Twelfth Street, and St. Michael on Twenty-fourth and Cherry Streets were reported to have large numbers of African Americans. St. Elizabeth's Parish on Second and Burleigh Streets along with St. Leo on Twenty-fifth and Locust Streets also gradually had witnessed more and more African American parishioners and students in the parish schools as neighborhoods surrounding the parishes changed.²⁴ In 1965, St. Gall moved from largely African American to predominantly African American. And, by 1968, the schools listed as predominantly African American were St. Leo, St. Elizabeth, St. Gall, St. Boniface, St. Francis, Urban Day School (formerly St. Benedict the Moor), and the latest additions of St. Michael and Holy Angels.²⁵

The reports of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee completed each year for financial assistance from the Indian and Negro annual collection revealed some changes, concerns, and dynamics occurring in the city that would have an impact on the Catholic Church of Milwaukee. In 1955 St. Francis reported that many of the new African Americans who moved in their neighborhood were Baptists from the Deep South, who never saw a priest or nun. "Right now we are equipped to take in (to the school) more of these non-Catholics, but we cannot. The whites who remain cannot support the education of Negro children. We get little or no financial assistance from the Negroes at large." Two years later in 1957, St. Francis stated that their parish district was predominantly African

²⁴Ibid.; Avella, "Milwaukee Catholicism," 166.

²⁵Catholic Indian and Negro Collections and Reports, GA-8, Archives of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee (AAM); Avella, "Milwaukee Catholicism," 166.

American. "There is very little support from Negroes. They are of the poorer class and many are on relief."²⁶ In its 1961 report, the Archdiocese of Milwaukee stated,

The two greatest obstacles to conversion of the colored people are the prejudice of Catholics and the lack of funds. Although we try to sell a philosophy of financial independence for the church and school, most Negroes have inferior jobs which do not pay well. Besides about one out of five families in the parishes lives totally on State Aid of County Relief. That fact...makes it difficult to keep a Negro parish on a self-sustaining budget....Much more could be done if whites were made more conscious of their obligation to erase prejudice and to support this important apostolate spiritually and financially.²⁷

Thus, as more and more poorer African Americans moved into the neighborhood of St. Francis, a financial concern was raised. Many newcomers were non-Catholics who migrated from the Deep South and some wished to enroll their children in St. Francis School without sufficient financial means. With the loss of white families, it became more of a financial burden to support the Catholic school as more financial needy non-Catholic students sought admission. The financial viability of Catholic schools with an increase of poor non-Catholic students and a shrinking its white support-base would worsen in the late 1950s and reach a crisis in the 1960s and 1970s.

Some African Americans, attracted primarily by the belief that parochial schools offered the best education for their children, continued to seek parishioner status in all-white or nearly all-white parishes. In 1961, the archdiocesan report reiterated that "the school is, in fact, the greatest source of conversion. Parents notice the decided difference

²⁶Catholic Indian and Negro Collections and Reports, GA-8, AAM.

²⁷Ibid.

when their children attend Catholic schools, and their interest is aroused.”²⁸

The reception African Americans received in white parishes in Milwaukee depended to a large extent on the respective pastor. Since the 1930s, St. Francis had welcomed African American newcomers. St. Boniface remained a thriving and an integrated parish in the 1950s under the influence of its pastor, Father Lawrence G. Kasper. As some downtown parishes considered closing or consolidating their schools, St. Boniface built a new school and dedicated it in March 1955, knowing that it would very likely be filled with African American children. Kasper played a crucial role taking the “high road” with the stand that “as long as there were children in the neighborhood, there was a need for a Christian school.” When the parish gained fifteen to twenty adult African American converts each year, Kasper stated that he believed this was due to the children in the school bringing home the religion they are taught and their parents become interested. In 1963, Kasper recognized that the neighborhood was becoming more African American with young white families moving and older whites mostly remaining. Kasper said “as the neighborhood became more colored, our members were troubled by the changes and their own prejudices,” but now “some of my white parishioners tell me the Negroes who moved next door are the best neighbors they ever had.”²⁹

As African Americans continued to expand northward and westward from the inner core, the parish bulletins reflected some of the dynamics taking place in parish boundaries as prejudice and white flight became more apparent. St. Elizabeth Parish

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹St. Boniface Church, “75th Anniversary Celebration,” (Milwaukee, 1963), unpaginated, AAM.

undertook a study of its neighborhood and in January 1963 reported to its parishioners.

An analysis of the report might indicate that we are slipping. True, we are losing numbers. People are moving out and the replacements are not always Catholic. They refuse to live with people of other races. Such prejudice disqualifies them as followers of Him who embraces all nations!.... But, we refuse to be discouraged....The fact that we still have perpetual adoration in spite of our dwindling numbers, we still send boys and girls into religious life, we still fill the Communion railing....those facts indicate an intense spiritual life.³⁰

Later in July 1963 St. Elizabeth addressed the issue of prejudice and exhorted its parishioners to conduct themselves in an appropriate and Christian manner.

Prejudice Is Painful! Sticks and stones break my bones, but words and glances and silent snubs and refusal to show even common signs of friendship – these can hurt even more. It's true that some Negroes (and plenty of whites) stand up vigorously for their rights, but fall down on their duties....However, it's also true that some people who plead for their civil rights, prove themselves to be very deserving of them. They do take care of their property; they do discipline their children. When you meet such oft-persecuted people, be-friend them. Compensate for the kindness they should but don't receive from quasi-Christians. God permits us to be prejudiced from dirt and filth and immoral conduct and laziness. But we may never be prejudiced against a man's color alone.³¹

On one occasion the bulletin reported a racial incident that occurred in the church and scorned the perpetrator.

Most of our parishioners do have a Christian attitude toward those of other races. But some don't. Like the woman who called two women of darker complexion an abusive name. That was last Sunday – in church – during the Mass. For shame! The pastor hereby apologizes to the women thus insulted in God's house, and publicly rebukes the offender. While pleading with the latter to seek God's pardon for the scandal given....³²

³⁰St. Elizabeth Bulletins, January 6, 1963, AAM.

³¹St. Elizabeth Bulletins, July 21, 1963, AAM.

³²St. Elizabeth Bulletins, September 22, 1963, AAM.

Unlike the approach and tenor in the bulletins of St. Elizabeth, the bulletins from St. Leo Parish sounded an alarm of fear from rising crime, lack of proper parental rearing of children, and other changes occurring as African Americans moved into its neighborhood.

All outdoor play areas on parish property are closed. This includes the playground, spaces between the buildings, and areas next to parish buildings....If playing had been all that took place on the playground, there would have been no problem and no closing, but here are examples of things that have happened, some observed by parish personnel and other reported by neighbors: damage to parked cars, stealing of cars, stealing parts of cars, windows broken, shrubs broken, bad language, smoking by children (boys and girls as young as seven), children of pre-school age on the playground as late as 9:30 p.m., disturbance of church services, stealing in church, breaking into the school, stealing in school.³³

Along with vandalism and inappropriate behavior, St. Leo gave many warnings to parishioners such as the following:

Lock Your Car Door and Windows. It's too bad such a reminder is necessary, but recent experiences prove that a church parking lot guarantees no immunity from theft. It is a good idea to lock your car when parking it unattended and not leave valuables in it visible from the outside.³⁴

While the pastors of St. Francis, St. Boniface, and, in later years, St. Elizabeth displayed a willingness to accept African Americans and tried to make them feel welcome, other pastors and parishioners were fearful of the African American advance and, directly or indirectly, urged them to go elsewhere. St. Leo's, for example, a parish on the lower northwest side, was still one Milwaukee's largest Catholic congregations in

³³St. Leo Bulletins, March 28, 1965, AAM.

³⁴St. Leo Bulletins, September 26, 1965, AAM.

the mid-1950s. Its pastor, Msgr. George A. Meyer, did little to encourage African Americans who sought to enroll their children in the parish school. By 1957, First Communion among children had begun to decline precipitously, reflecting the departure of many young families to the suburbs. According to Father Richard Walsh, Meyer's successor at St. Leo's, many older parishioners refused to welcome newly-arrived African Americans into their church and, instead, "retreated more and more into their own self-made ghetto." Consequently, St. Leo's, like other Catholic churches in Milwaukee's inner city, experienced a steep drop in membership, never to recover its position as one of Milwaukee's leading churches.³⁵

St. Gall on Third and Clarke Streets, like St. Boniface and St. Francis, also appeared to have welcomed African Americans into their congregations. However, financial problems and a declining enrollment plagued this once Irish parish. In the chronicle of the Sinsinawa Dominicans, who staffed the school, the first two African American children were enrolled in school in September, 1954. At that time the school enrollment stood at 301 pupils. "The racial attitude of the children has been above reproach. Both (African American) children are accepted and have become an integral part of their respective classes." The pastor, Father John T. Cullen, apparently realized that a large influx of African Americans coupled with white flight will result in an all-African American parish. In 1954, Cullen said, "It (St. Gall) will make a fine Negro

³⁵"Observations of Fr. Richard Walsh, Re: St. Leo Parish - Milwaukee," circa 1970, 1, St. Leo Congregation, MC 70, Box 2, Folder 8, AAM, in Smith, 133.

parish.”³⁶ Four years later in October 1958, the chronicle stated,

It is quite apparent to the teachers here that we are fulfilling Our Lord’s command to “Go teach all nations” when we came to St. Gall. We are in a changing neighborhood. Most of the homes surrounding the convent are occupied by colored families, few of whom are Catholic. In our school we have a few colored children in most of the grades. There are a few Puerto Rican families, also. In the meantime, many of the families who have moved to newer neighborhoods send their children back to our school to graduate.³⁷

By 1962, the parish faced a financial crisis as parishioner contributions dropped significantly. The Sinsinawa Dominican chronicle stated,

Father Restle preached at all the Masses today about the financial needs of the parish. He told the people that the contributions have dropped 50 percent and that the next six months would be a critical time for the parish. We knew from this, that the parish must be in dire need of funds as Father never preaches money.³⁸

As the number of African American children in the school rose each year, the number of white children declined, and the overall school enrollment dropped. In 1956 the school enrollment was 300 students with only three African Americans and some Puerto Ricans. Seven years later in 1963, St. Gall opened with 232 pupils of which 52 percent were African American, representing a decline from 1956 of 23 percent.³⁹ Two years later in 1965, the enrollment plummeted to 201 students of which 65 percent were African American and 22 percent were non-Catholic. As expected, the percentages of African

³⁶Annals for the Sisters of the Third Order of St. Dominic Forming the Congregation of the Most Holy Rosary, Sinsinawa Mound, Wisconsin,” September 8, 1954, 73, Archives of the Sinsinawa Dominicans (ASD).

³⁷Ibid., October, 1958.

³⁸Ibid., December 16, 1962.

³⁹Ibid., September 4, 1963.

Americans in the younger grades were considerably higher than in the older grades.

African American students in grades one, two, and three were 79 percent, 78 percent, and 77 percent respectively. So, from 1956 to 1965, the school enrollment dropped from 300 to 201 or 33 percent overall with an accelerated decline in the last two years of 17 percent. In this ten year period the African American school enrollment jumped from one percent to 65 percent. The Sinsinawa Dominican chronicle offered this observation:

Our neighborhood is predominantly Negro. Although we live in the area designated as Core or Inner City (Walnut to Burleigh: North and South, Holton to Twenty-seventh: East and West), our neighborhood is not a slum area. In fact many of the home owners on our block have painted their houses, laid grass, and made other improvements on their property. The parish is evenly divided because of many parishioners who, although not living in the parish any longer, are still faithful in attending Mass here.⁴⁰

Historian John T. McGreevy examined why Catholic parishes in urban areas resisted the advance of African Americans. He found that a large number of Catholic immigrants owned property. Pastors exhorted their congregations from the pulpit to purchase homes within the parish since home ownership was perceived as insuring a stable and active parish life. Thus, the large economic investments of Catholic immigrant groups gave them a greater stake in resisting changes in their neighbors. McGreevy also argued that the structure of Catholic parishes was a contributing factor. Unlike Jewish or Protestant congregations, Catholic parishes were owned by the diocese and defined by geographical boundaries. Even in the case of nationality parishes, they, too, tended to have geographical boundaries and operated under the assumption that the vast majority of parishioners lived in the immediate neighborhood. On the other hand, Jewish synagogues

⁴⁰Ibid., September 8, 1965.

and Protestant churches were defined by congregation, not by parish boundaries, drawing members from a large area and competing with other neighboring churches or synagogues for members. Also, Jewish and Protestant church buildings were owned by the congregation, not by the diocese. Thus, in the wake of the African American expansion into white neighborhoods, Protestant and Jewish congregations could easily sell their church buildings for equity and re-locate away from the emerging African American ghetto. Catholic parishes, owned by the diocese and defined by geographical boundaries, could not move; they were permanently anchored to a specific neighborhood. Finally, Catholic parishes, due to their sheer size and community base, helped define what neighborhood would mean. For many Catholic parishioners, their neighborhood was nearly all-Catholic and they lived in a cultural ghetto constructed by the parish. The result of these Catholic efforts was a merger of educational, religious, and social communities. Catholics were more apt to form friendships and social networks based on ethnic and religious ties rather than on occupational connections. Catholics stayed longer in urban neighborhoods and were more likely to be involved in neighborhood institutions, especially the local parish Church. Because ethnic groups built their world around the culture of their ethnic parish, there was little contact with “outsiders” and resistance to multi-ethnic and multi-racial intrusions into their turf.⁴¹

The major challenges and problems in the integration of Milwaukee’s parishes and schools included declining numbers of whites, financial difficulties since some African Americans could not afford to contribute to the parish or pay school tuition,

⁴¹McGreevy., 4-5, 18-20.

instances of hostility between whites and blacks in churches and neighborhoods, some instances of violence and crime, and fear and prejudice. In the 1950s and 1960s, many African American parents believed that parochial schools provided a suitable learning environment for a good education with appropriate discipline. In spite of such challenges, many parish diocesan priests and religious women and men provided leadership and a voice of morality and conscience in meeting the social changes and transitions. While the Catholic school remained the chief vehicle of conversion, there was a new priority emerging and soon a social justice agenda would eclipse conversion.

St. Benedict the Moor in the 1950s and 1960s

The post-World War II era brought major changes to St. Benedict the Moor and many other Catholic parishes. Catholic ministry to African Americans had been centered at St. Benedict in a segregated model with convert-making as its aim. In the postwar era, this shifted to caring for African Americans in existing parishes and insisting on social and civil rights. In an earlier time, St. Benedict was an effective Catholic institution. However, in the postwar era, changing times required a different model of the Catholic Church. The chancellor of the Milwaukee archdiocese summed it up well when he stated, "The only reason to fear that the Negro will be lost to the Church is the old and bitter evil of segregation....It is clear that little lasting work can be done in a colored mission if the colored converts are not permitted to attend other white churches when they move elsewhere."⁴²

⁴²Msgr. Roman Atkielski to Fr. Louis Pastorelli, January 12, 1940, St. Benedict the Moor File, AAM.

St. Benedict the Moor School continued to have a stable enrollment in the 1940s and 1950s. In 1944 Steffes told Kiley that St. Benedict received 2,000 applications. He also reported that only three percent of the students arrive as Catholics, but ninety percent convert before graduation.⁴³ Then, the high school program abruptly ended in 1948 as a result of a sudden decision by the Racine Dominican provincial administration. The high school re-opened a year later with freshmen only and added an additional level each year so that by September, 1952, it was back to a full four-year high school. Two years later, the Mother Superior of the Racine Dominicans informed Father Edmund Kraemer, director of St. Benedict, that the required number of Sisters to run the boarding school would not be available for the next school term. The Capuchin Definitory met and decided to discontinue the boarding option starting with the 1954-1955 school year.

Even with an occasional transfusion from the hospital, St. Benedict had been a financial burden to the Capuchin Province since the start of World War II. Both the church and school never realized sufficient income from the contributions of their parishioners or the parents of their school children to meet their expenditures. One reason why the grade school and high school were heavy financial burdens was that the students did not pay any tuition. In September 1958 an attempt was made to gradually charge students various fees for laboratory work, activities, typing material, and the like in order to make parents help a little to pay for the education of their children. However, by not requiring such payments for so many years, it proved very difficult to insist on, and to collect, such fees. The fact that St. Benedict depended so heavily for support from the

⁴³Fr. Philip Steffes to Archbishop Kiley, April 11, 1944, St. Benedict the Moor File, AAM.

hospital's surpluses other than their own parishioners was an increasing concern.⁴⁴

In the 1950s, African American parishioners wanted to be their own parish and not regarded as merely a mission. The Capuchin newsletter, *The Messenger*, reported in 1955, "...colored Catholics do not like the idea of being members of a colored mission, but would like to be rated as members of St. Benedict the Moor Parish...."⁴⁵ At the same time, African American Catholics were moving into several white ethnic parishes. The estimated number of African American Catholics in 1960 was 3,500 and they belonged to some fifteen different parishes. St. Francis and St. Boniface had become largely African American parishes and African American presence increased at St. Elizabeth, St. Gall, and St. Rose. The eventual fate of St. Benedict School was similar to other Catholic African American boarding schools. While they had performed exemplary service in a racially-segregated society, changing social and racial conditions in the 1960s with its accompanying drive for racially-integrated education meant that they had served their purpose and their time had now passed. In 1965 St. Benedict School closed the high school division and in 1969 the grade school ended. Meanwhile, the work of the Capuchins at St. Benedict was changing. They became more involved across State Street at the various institutions in the Civic Center. In 1957, Capuchins from St. Benedict made 107 trips to administer the Last Rites at the City Morgue. They heard confessions and celebrated Mass each weekend at the city and county jail. Capuchins also visited the

⁴⁴*The Messenger*, Vol XV, No. 6 (November 1952), 204; Vol XVII, No. 6 (November 1954), 189; Vol XVIII, No. 4 (July 1955), 107-109; "The Province of St. Joseph of the Capuchin Order Chapter Report, 1955-1958," Vol XXI (1958), 14-15, ACF.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, Vol XVII (July 1955), 109, ACF.

county hospital and tuberculosis sanitarium.⁴⁶

An Emerging Concern for Civil Rights in Milwaukee

The response of the Catholic Church in Milwaukee to these social changes would significantly alter its previous ministerial efforts. In this period, St. Benedict became less and less the center of African American Catholic life. The boarding school eventually was discontinued as segregated institutions yielded to the forces of integration. As African Americans moved into white parishes north and west of the old black district, they were met with a variety of reactions from white parishioners and pastors. Urban renewal programs and the re-configuring of the city's highways would also impact Catholic institutions. And, within the archdiocese, there emerged organizations and individuals that embraced interracialism and provided direction and leadership for the Catholic and civic community. This period from 1945 to 1963 marked a watershed transition for the Catholic Church's outreach to African Americans as its ministerial thrust shifted from an emphasis on conversion to social justice, without discarding conversion. This transition time or "seed-time for change" laid the foundation for the Church's involvement in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

What emerged in the Catholic Church in the fifteen years after World War II was a fractured or divided Catholic community. Within the Church, several Catholic institutions publicly denounced segregation and accepted Catholics of any race. A new emphasis on interracialism was apparent in Catholic life. On the other hand, other

⁴⁶Tbid., Vol XVIII, No. 4 (July 1955), 109; "The Province of St. Joseph of the Capuchin Order Chapter Report, 1955-1958," Vol XXI (1958), 14-16; "The Province of St. Joseph of the Capuchin Order Chapter Report, 1958-1961," Vol 24, 24-25, ACF.

Catholics persistently refused to admit African Americans to particular neighborhoods, schools, and churches. Within this white northern urban Catholic segment of the population was an incongruity between racial tolerance in some areas, as in the workplace, and opposition to integrated neighborhoods.

While the Civil Rights Movement is generally associated with the mid-1950s and 1960s, there were earlier antecedents advocating racial change. There were organizations, groups, and individuals in the Catholic Church that helped lay the groundwork for the coming social justice emphasis of Catholic ministry to African Americans in the 1960s. Some organizations had a much larger focus or purpose and only part of their endeavors bore upon the race question. Also, the Church's goal of conversion of African Americans continued as some people moved in the direction of civil rights and racial justice. With the significant demographic changes in cities in the aftermath of the Second World War and the impact it had on Catholic parishes, the Catholic Church would play an increasingly-important role in promoting civil rights and more whites became involved mainly through the formation of various groups. While the archdiocese of Milwaukee approached interracialism very slowly, there were individuals and local chapters of national organizations spearheading this drive.

The Catholic Interracial Council

Although Milwaukee did not have its own chapter until 1959, the thinking and influence of the Catholic Interracial Council (CIC)⁴⁷ played an important role in

⁴⁷A forerunner of the Catholic Interracial Council was the Federated Colored Catholics (FCC) organized by Thomas Wyatt Turner, an African American, during World War I. The purpose of the FCC was to seek support of the hierarchy and operate as a Catholic African American pressure group opposing acts of discrimination within the Church. Under Turner, the FCC was African Americans in its leadership

sensitizing Catholics to issues of racial justice and encouraging an end to segregation. Founded in 1932 by Jesuit John LaFarge in New York, this group opened chapters in many large cities with African American communities, including Chicago. In 1934, this organization began *Interracial Review*, a journal which became its official voice and an important source for the African American and Catholic press on the issues of interracial justice from a Catholic perspective. It also assisted writers and editors who prepared books, articles and pamphlets dealing with African Americans. Its speakers' bureau provided lecturers on the race issue for parishes, schools, and group meetings. It also conducted conferences, seminars and discussions under its own auspices. In its numerous publications, the CIC stated its purpose to "promote in every practical way, relations between the races based on the Christian principles of interracial justice and charity which upholds the God-given dignity and destiny of every person."⁴⁸

While Milwaukee did not have its own chapter of this influential group until 1959, no doubt those who worked with black Catholics were aware of the CIC's efforts and its educational outreach. Some of their positions dovetailed with positions about segregation and racism that had been taken long ago by Eckert, Steffes, and others who worked at St. Benedict's.

When the Catholic Interracial Council opened a chapter in Milwaukee in 1959, it

and problem-orientated in its purpose. Jesuits John LaFarge and William Markoe challenged Turner on these points seeking instead an interracial organization and broader purpose. In 1932 the FCC split. The Turner faction declined while the LaFarge-Markoe faction became the Catholic Interracial Council. See Marilyn Nickles, *Black Catholic Protest and the Federated Colored Catholics, 1917-1933: Three Perspectives on Racial Justice* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1988).

⁴⁸Thomas Doyle, "The Catholic Interracial Council—A Story of Achievement," Catholic Interracial Council Papers, Box 2, "August 1950 to March 1952," File 1, "August to December 1959." Chicago Historical Society (CHC).

had less effectiveness than other chapters of the organization. It was largely an educational organization of the laity that sought to improve relations among all ethnic and racial groups of the Archdiocese. The members received some instruction on the Church's teachings on justice and charity. Primarily they worked on the parish level although they did become involved with public and private agencies in promoting improved human relations. Msgr. Franklyn Kennedy, editor of the archdiocesan newspaper, spearheaded the effort to establish a Milwaukee chapter of the Catholic Interracial Council and won the approval Archbishop Meyer. James Dorsey, a prominent African American Catholic attorney, was elected its first president while Kennedy served as chaplain. Under the leadership of this duo, the Catholic Interracial Council of Milwaukee (CICM) sponsored numerous events and programs ranging from Sunday Communion Masses and breakfasts at the Cathedral to programs where prominent speakers addressed civil rights issues of discrimination and segregation.⁴⁹

One reason for the CICM's limited success was that it found itself on opposite sides of the Wisconsin Catholic hierarchy on the issue of fair housing, a key debate in the civil rights era in many states. When the Wisconsin state legislature considered a fair housing bill, the CICM favored its passage and Kennedy even used the archdiocesan paper promoting its passage. However, the Wisconsin Catholic Provincial Conference, a body composed of bishops from the five dioceses in the state, claimed that the bill would give judicial authority to a voluntary organization, namely the Governor's Commission on Human Rights. Bishop Stanislaus Bona of Green Bay exemplified this position when

⁴⁹“Council Formed for Promoting Racial Justice,” *Catholic Herald Citizen*, October 10, 1959, 4.

he stated in a somewhat simplistic manner, “you shouldn’t force the people to sell if they don’t want to.” The position of the Wisconsin Catholic Provincial Council triggered an angry reaction by the members of the Catholic Interracial Council of Milwaukee, accusing the bishops of ignoring the teachings of the Church. Clearly the weight of the collective opinion of the state’s Catholic hierarchy helped crushed the prodding of a few “lone wolves,” like Kennedy and Dorsey, and contributed to the defeat of the fair housing bill in committee near the end of 1961.⁵⁰

This episode of seeming betrayal by the Wisconsin Catholic hierarchy suggested something even more serious. The most liberal clergy and the members of Catholic lay organizations were many steps ahead of the Catholic hierarchy and most ordinary churchgoers. This gap between liberal elements among the clergy and laity and the larger, more conservative elements of clergy and laity would increase in the 1960s. When Catholic liberals, like Kennedy, became convinced that persuasion alone was insufficient to affect societal change, they began advocating legal remedies. However, Kennedy and other liberals gradually realized that legal remedies, like a fair housing law, would not occur merely because from the strength of its moral weight. Such a realization, that the moral weight or strength behind a race issue was insufficient to bring about proper legal remedies, would drive some of these liberals to advocate direct and active protest. Like a stone creating radiating waves in a pond, many liberal Catholics jumped from favoring persuasion to favoring legal remedies, and then from favoring personal direct intervention to favoring mass action as the only means left to bring long-overdue changes on behalf of

⁵⁰Racial Measure Splits Church Leaders, Laity,” *Milwaukee Journal*, October 24, 1961, 1, in Smith, 220.

social justice that was an integral part of their Catholic-Christian identity.

The Midwest Clergy Conference on Negro Welfare

The Midwest Clergy Conference on Negro Welfare was organized in 1938 for priests who were actively working with African Americans. They gathered to discuss common problems and concerns. They modeled their organization after the Clergy Conference on Negro Welfare in the East that LaFarge started in 1933.⁵¹

The Midwest Clergy Conference on Negro Welfare seems to have gone through three distinct phases. The early years of the Conference can be termed the “priest phase.” Priests wanted to know what ideas and techniques worked for others in African American parishes that they could try in their parish. Some priests came from dioceses where they were the only one assigned to an African American parish. In this sense, the Conference became a support system for priests. Some examples of the topics taken by the conference included “Parishioner Cooperation in the Parish,” “How to Finance a Negro Parish,” “Home Visitations by Pastors,” and “How and the Way of Taking a Parish Census.” Members left the Conference with practical and helpful ways to increase their effectiveness and a renewed sense of dedication after having met and interacted with others who did the same type of work.⁵²

A second phase came with the Second World War and spans from 1942 to 1945. The focus of the Conference turned from the priest working in the field to the African American as a vital part in the community. The new focus was fueled by the changes the

⁵¹Fr. Capistran J. Hass, O.F.M., *History of the Midwest Clergy Conference on Negro Welfare* (Chicago: Franciscan Press, 1963), 3-4.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 24-25, 30-31.

war brought to the African American community. African Americans came in large numbers from the South to meet the labor demands of northern urban economies geared for wartime production. Some entered semi-skilled and skilled jobs and worked in defense plants. Young African American men served with distinction in the armed forces. While prejudice and discrimination still prevailed, there was the notion that the African American played an integral and productive role in society. The second phase could be termed the "African American life" phase and conference topics included "The Negro in America," "The Negro Soldier," "The Negro in War for Freedom," and "What the Negro Thinks." Topics also dealt with the interaction between whites and blacks with such titles as "Segregation in Catholic Churches and Schools," "Housing and the Negro," and "The Preservation of the Negro Family Life." Thus, in the second phase there was the shift to ways the Church could better enter into African American life and sought to improve the overall quality of life by addressing issues of dignity, unfairness and injustice.⁵³

The third phase of the Midwest Clergy Conference on Negro Welfare began in the postwar years, triggered again by societal changes. The "color line" in the job market and in education eroded as colleges and training schools were opened to African Americans. Some African Americans moved from the blighted neighborhoods of the ghetto to better residential districts in white parishes. The Clergy Conference spoke about changing parishes. In this phase, lay leaders in the church were invited to participate in discussions. Topics discussed included "The Priest's Attitude toward the Conversion of

⁵³Ibid., 32-33.

the Negro,” and “The Priest’s Relationship with Community Leadership.” The Conference also looked to the future. What could the Church do to deal with the problems of discrimination and prejudice within the Catholic community and the society as a whole? Can the Church influence municipal government to respond to the needs of African Americans? Members also realized the need to disseminate relevant information to other priests, seminarians, and religious communities. Thus, the organization became another voice promoting a social justice agenda for the Catholic Church.⁵⁴

In 1963 the Midwest Clergy Conference on Negro Welfare celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary. At that time the Conference boasted 341 member priests. Of this number, there were fifty-eight from Milwaukee, representing 17 per cent of the membership. Some Milwaukee notables included Bishop Roman Atkielski, Msgr. Brust, Archbishop William Cousins, Fathers Raphael Fliss, Patrick Flood, James Groppi, Lawrence Kasper, Franklin Kennedy, Simeon Keough, O.F.M. Cap., William Restle, Cyril Spiegelhoff, and William Whalen. Milwaukee priests, at fifty-eight, had the second highest number of members following Chicago’s eighty-seven members. It was followed by Cincinnati with thirty-five members, Kansas City with twenty-nine members, St. Louis with fourteen members, Indianapolis with eleven members and Detroit with ten members and nearly seventy-five other towns and cities.⁵⁵

Specialized Catholic Action

“Catholic Action” is a diverse term and was involved in youth programs,

⁵⁴Ibid., 12, 14, 33-34.

⁵⁵Ibid., 36-48.

catechetics, and sports. “Specialized Catholic Action” was started by a Belgian priest, Joseph Cardijn, in 1913 who tried to meet the needs of the young workers who were leaving the Church in large numbers. The movement came to the United States in the 1930s and became popular in the forties and fifties. Cardijn’s idea was to make Catholic Action work with specialized groups or “cells,” like workers and students, who worked in the larger society like yeast in dough. Cardijn used a simple method of inquiry known as, “Observe-Judge-Act.” After identifying a social issue or concern, one would observe what what needed to be done in society. One would then study or judge what scripture says and what the Church teaches on the issue. Then, one would act or formulate an action plan to bring about some change.⁵⁶ Some of the individuals in these “cells’ in the United States were interested in the race issue.

Specialized Catholic Action was an umbrella-term and included the Young Christian Workers (YCW), Young Christian Students (YCS), and the Christian Family Movement (CFM). The Young Christian Workers was the first of the three groups formed. It was a movement of the laity in a variety of occupations and professions to “bring Christ to the marketplace” and apply the teachings of the Church to human affairs. The Young Christian Students, organized for Catholic high school students, was designed to encourage Christian-lived values. Later, as the young people in YCW and YCS began to marry, the Christian Family Movement emerged. All three groups followed a similar format which involved group discussions on relevant issues, some biblical and liturgical

⁵⁶Mary Irene Zotti, *A Time of Awakening—The Young Christian Worker Story in the United States, 1938 to 1970* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1991), 2-3.

instruction, and an action plan to address some situation at hand.⁵⁷

Racial injustice was an important issue that was often discussed in cell meetings of Specialized Catholic Action. Racial problems in Milwaukee and other large northern cities would continue to fester long after Catholic Action had declined. There were many socially-conscious YCW members who played leadership roles with the social upheaval created by white flight to suburbia and the influx of African Americans into white ethnic neighborhoods. Some developed interracial discussion groups and social events. Others helped families in need such as painting the house of an elderly African American couple. Some conducted neighborhood surveys on discrimination in housing, employment, education, and public places including restaurants, theaters, and hospitals. In Detroit, former YCW members in affluent white parishes fought to halt block-busting by cynical real estate agents who played into racial fears for the sake of profits. Along with like-minded community groups, former YCW members developed ambitious programs to educate people to accept integration and learn to live with African Americans. In the inner city, YCW groups grappled with rapidly decaying neighborhoods, an astronomical rise in crime, and the weakening of community services and education. The YCW organized such things as sports teams and tutoring programs for teenagers and hosted federation meetings and other events at different locations throughout the city and suburbs in hopes of bringing people together.⁵⁸ As the Civil Rights Movement came into its own in the early 1960s, YCW leaders participated in sit-ins, wade-ins, and Freedom

⁵⁷Steven Avella, "Milwaukee Catholicism, 1945-1960: Seed-Time for Change," in Steven Avella, ed., *Milwaukee Catholicism* (Milwaukee: Knights of Columbus, 1991), 154-155.

⁵⁸Zotti, 186-187, 251-252.

Rides. In a summary of civil rights action resulting from the 1961 program, YCW

President Mike Coleman wrote:

The program served as an instrument of education for all members in the YCW, helping them to uncover truth regarding the problems of minority groups, like NAACP, Catholic Interracial Council, Urban League, and B'nai B'rith. Our members discovered that many people were afraid of the race issue, but slowly through education, they found it easier to converse about it. They began to understand the Negro and his contribution to our society. They realized, also, they had to begin to know Negroes as people and not as problems.⁵⁹

The rise of the Specialized Catholic Action movement in Milwaukee in the 1945-1963 period brought a significant change within a small group in the Catholic community. They formed a tightly-knit and well-instructed corp of Christian activists who sought to spread the Catholic faith and to apply the teachings of the Church to human affairs. However, they did not have large support among the clergy and only tepid approval from the hierarchy.

The founder of Specialized Catholic Action in Milwaukee was Father John R. Beix. A hard working and energetic man, Beix was deeply interested in social questions and the Catholic Action movements. After his ordination in 1935, Beix was assigned to St. John the Evangelist Cathedral as assistant pastor where he organized in 1939 the first Young Christian Students (YCS) group among the students at Cathedral High School. In 1942, he joined the faculty of the minor seminary and organized groups or "cells" of Young Christian Students from the seminary. The Young Christian Workers (YCW) soon followed and mobilized young working Catholics in several different occupations

⁵⁹Mike Coleman, "Young Christian Workers Activities in the Field of Human Rights," 1961, as quoted in Zotti, 187-188.

and professions. Beix started the Christian Family Movement (CFM) in 1948 when these people began to marry and have families.⁶⁰

Having received approval from Archbishop Kiley in January 1949, the Jocists,⁶¹ as they were called, rented the third floor of a former “flophouse” at 787 North Water Street in Milwaukee and opened the Cardijn Center. It served as a meeting place for YCS, YCW, and CFM. The center also ran a cooperative Christian bookstore specializing in liturgical and social-apostolic literature that explained the Church’s position on contemporary social and political issues. It offered a full program of adult education taught by local priests and religious. The center also sponsored days of recollection, study days, and an impressive array of guest speakers.⁶²

The courses offered at the Cardijn Center covered a wide range of topics that dealt with realistic and practical ways that Catholics might apply their faith for the improvement of society. Believing that social action depended on a firm understanding of Catholic doctrine, many of the courses dealt with religious subjects. After the study of a social issue, an action plan was devised where members were assigned something to do as an application of their topic. For example, Mary Agnes Blonien attended a union meeting as her action plan from a course dealing with papal encyclicals on labor. She later became the secretary of the union and spent many years as a full-time worker for the Communications Workers of America where she helped negotiate contracts of the

⁶⁰Avella, “Milwaukee Catholicism, 1945-1960:Seed-Time for Change,” 154-155.

⁶¹The Young Christian Workers began in Belgium and was called the Young Christian Movement. In French they were known as *Jeunesse Ouvriere Chretienne*. “Jocism” or “Jocists.” is derived from the first letter of these three French words.

⁶²Smith, 188-189; Avella, “Milwaukee Catholicism,” 155-156.

secretaries' local of Milwaukee. John L. Czarneczki became involved in local politics as one of his action plans at the Cardijn Center. He later became a Milwaukee alderman in the 1960s.⁶³

The Cardijn Center hosted prominent speakers who addressed a wide range of theological and social justice issues, some of whom urged quite radical approaches to the solutions of social problems. In 1949, the prominent French philosopher Jacques Maritain conducted a question-and-answer session on "Spiritual Life and Prayer." In that same year, Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker, spoke on the social order, decrying finance capitalism, communism, and an economy built on war, and calling for a new distributive order of widespread ownership of resources. In 1950, Catherine Doherty, the former Baroness de Huck, from the nobility of tsarist Russia, spoke at the center as the founder of Friendship Houses in Canada and the United States. She told the Jocists that "if people really accepted Christ's teachings,...there would be no restrictive covenants and no separate Negro areas," but instead, a "real brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God."⁶⁴

While Specialized Catholic Action engendered great enthusiasm and good will among the involved laity and their chaplain-advisors, it received a jaundiced reception from many priests and the hierarchy of the archdiocese. Archbishop Kiley approved the opening of the center, but was wary about groups of lay Catholic activists. He required

⁶³Eugene Bleidorn and Mary Agnes Blonien, interview with Kevin Smith, May 16, 1997, in Smith, 190-192.

⁶⁴Smith, 191; "N.Y. Hospitality Group Opposes Present Order," *Milwaukee Journal*, March 17, 1947, 1; "Living in Poverty to Aid Poor, Baroness Relates Her Creed," *Milwaukee Journal*, February 12, 1950, 16, in Smith, 192.

monthly reports from Beix of Catholic Action activities and never endorsed the movement or visited the center. Archbishop Meyer, who succeeded Kiley in 1953, also wanted to be kept informed of the groups' activities and resisted giving the movement any publicity or encouragement. In his two visits to the center during his six year tenure in Milwaukee, Meyer refused to have any photographs taken of him there. And, many priests of the archdiocese also were critical because the movement often transcended parish boundaries and direct control by a local pastor. The untimely death of Beix to leukemia in 1952 was a setback for Specialized Catholic Action. Father Vernon Kuehn succeeded Beix as chaplain and in 1956 Meyer appointed Father Eugene Bleidorn as full time chaplain. However, when Bleidorn was made a pastor in Bristol, Wisconsin in 1960, the movement declined. By 1961, many of its programs were subsumed by other archdiocesan agencies. Youth gatherings became primarily social events without the action-oriented thrust of the Specialized Catholic Action movements. Finally, the unwillingness of the Archdiocese to continue funding the Cardijn Center was largely responsible for closing its doors in 1961.⁶⁵

The decline of Specialized Catholic Action in Milwaukee slightly preceded its decline in other cities in the country. Mary Irene Zotti's study of the Young Christian Worker movement in the United States offered an explanation. She found that membership in the YCW peaked by the end of the 1950s with 3,000 and the decline started in the early 1960s. As more young people opted for higher education, it became harder to attract new members from the shrinking pool of young workers. In the early

⁶⁵Avella, "Milwaukee Catholicism, 1945-1960: Seed-Time for Change," 156-158; Interview with Eugene Bleidorn and Mary Agnes Blonien, May 16, 1997, as cited in Smith, 77.

1960s some YCW members joined the Peace Corps which sent thousands of Americans to help people in developing countries in the world to improve their standard of living. Also, the average marrying age by the late 1950s reached an all-time low of 22.6 years for men and women, reducing the number of available single young workers. However, the more important or specific reasons for the demise of the movement were attributed to middle class affluence, increased social and occupational mobility among young people, the lack of positive support from the hierarchy, the lack of full time chaplains, internal problems in the quality of leadership, changes in societal values, and the youth rebellion against authority in the 1960s.⁶⁶

Despite the closing of the Cardijn Center in Milwaukee, religious historian Steven Avella contended that the center had done its work. The adult education classes, which attracted over 16,000 participants over a period of ten years, was its most important feature and constituted its greatest impact in Milwaukee. In an era when most religious education was confined to the grade and high school years, these programs were among the first in Milwaukee to offer ongoing religious education to Catholic adults and, thereby, furthered the goal of developing a lay apostolate. The religiously-based intellectual formation it had given to many young Milwaukee Catholics remained with them all their lives and dovetailed with their enhanced social, educational, and economic status. Moreover, these lay people were not docile cooperators “in the apostolate of the hierarchy” that had characterized the Catholic Action movements of an earlier generation. Rather, they were well educated, socially mobile, middle class citizens who were

⁶⁶Zotti, 225, 228, 282.

articulate and did not respond favorably to authoritarian, heavy-handed tactics. The expanded educational opportunities after the war introduced these Catholics to new ideas and often brought them in conflict between the social teachings of the Church and the real practices and situations they witnessed in their lives in Milwaukee. The increasing involvement of the laity in Catholic Action laid the foundation for divisions between those who viewed the Church as a devotional institution dedicated to work for the salvation of souls and those who believed that the Church had an obligation to work toward the achievement of a more just society. The needs of these lay people represented one of the challenges Milwaukee Catholic leaders faced in adapting the teaching of the Church to new situations.⁶⁷

Although the full effects of this transformation of Catholicism in Milwaukee and elsewhere would not be felt until after Vatican II (1965) when Catholic life began to change so dramatically, it is clear that the Cardijn Center had laid the foundations for the changes with at least a portion of the Catholic community. When the era of Vatican II-inspired reform came to Milwaukee Catholicism, former YCS, YCW, and CFM members were among the first to assume leadership in their parishes becoming commentators, lectors, parish council presidents, and pastoral ministers. In the larger community, former Catholic Action members were so moved by the social teaching of the Church, as they heard it at Cardijn Center, that they became members of community organizations, the school board, and even ran for city council. They also assumed participating and

⁶⁷Avella, "Milwaukee Catholicism, 1945-1960: Seed-Time for Change," 155-158; Smith, 77-78, 191.

leadership roles in social action movements that called for reform in secular society⁶⁸.

Two New Catholic Leaders in Milwaukee Promoting Civil Rights

Within the city, the Catholic community, already fractured by the influx of African Americans into the white ethnic parishes, split again over the issue of the Church's proper role in the secular society. While Catholic pastors, in principle, overwhelmingly opposed racism and prejudice, many were unwilling to involve themselves and the Church in any secular or social matter. They believed that the proper role of the Church was limited to its traditional role of saving souls and dispensing the sacraments. The more liberal clergy in the Church spoke out against racial prejudice, discrimination, and segregation and tried to convince their congregations to embrace their vision of justice and equality for all in society. Like their clerics, Catholic congregations split over the same question of the proper role of the Church in society. Jocists and other liberal Catholics favored an active Church role to bring a just society based on the Church's social teachings and the gospel. Conservative Catholics, on the other hand, asserted the traditional sacerdotal role for priests as well as the traditional teaching and nursing roles for Sisters and bolster the Church's traditional roles of conversion, saving souls, and bringing salvation.

After World War II, social justice and civil rights issues would attract interest and concern of two prominent figures in the Milwaukee Catholic community. Father Claude Heithaus, S.J. was active in the late forties and Msgr. Franklyn Kennedy emerged by the late fifties. They believed that racial discrimination violated the American ideal of

⁶⁸Avella, "Milwaukee Catholicism, 1945-1960: Seed-Time for Change," 158-159.

equality under the law as well as the word of God. Heithaus and Kennedy saw civil rights activism as part of their priestly vocation.⁶⁹ The activities of such leaders in Milwaukee along with several national events put the Catholic Church of Milwaukee on the transition road to its new role as an active advocate of social justice.

Father Claude Heithaus, S.J.

One of the earliest city-wide civil rights leaders after World War II was Father Claude Heithaus, a Jesuit professor of anthropology at Marquette University. He was transferred to Marquette University from St. Louis University by his Jesuit superiors due to his controversial role in the integration of St. Louis University. In Milwaukee, he frequently spoke at conferences and institutes dealing with human relations and served on both the governor's and mayor's commissions on human rights. The son of a farmer, this plain-speaking Missourian encountered religious prejudice in his youth and credited this experience for his tenacity in fighting against racial discrimination.⁷⁰ Like other white religious advocates of racial justice in the late 1940s to the early 1960s, Heithaus focused on education and persuasion. In a lecture series at Marquette University on "Catholics and White Prejudice" in the summer school program of 1947, Heithaus insisted that "Jim Crowism is not confined to the South...We do not lynch Negroes in Milwaukee,...(but) we torment (them) in a thousand other ways." Racism has "the approval of an immense number of whites who believe, rightly or wrongly, that any change in the established

⁶⁹Smith, 210.

⁷⁰"Hail Priest's Racial Amity," *Milwaukee Journal*, February 1, 1948, section 2, 1, as quoted in Smith, 211.

pattern of Jim Crowism would cause them some financial loss or social inconvenience.”⁷¹

Decrying “those Christian race bigots who protest when some proposal is made to give the Negroes a square deal,” Heithaus called on Milwaukee Catholics to live up to the teachings of their faith and to “condemn any form of prejudice, segregation, or discrimination by which Negroes are artificially separated from their white brethren.”⁷²

Heithaus criticized a wide-range of targets in his push for civil rights education. In the early 1950s, for example, he ran “rumor clinics,” designed to demonstrate how people’s attitudes toward race affected their perception of events. At Christmas time in 1952, he spoke on the likelihood that Jesus Christ had very dark skin. What would happen, he asked, “if He were to appear...in the United States and work no miracles to prove that He was God?” If Christ looked for housing in Milwaukee, “a great many property owners would discover that their empty houses and apartments have suddenly been rented.” If Christ “did manage with great effort to rent a place outside of the slums, a crowd might gather outside and welcome Him with a shower of brickbats.”⁷³ His targets even included the American hierarchy. In an article in *America* in 1950, Heithaus decried the refusal of the vast majority of diocesan and religious seminaries to accept African American candidates. Most African Americans, he charged, prefer a church headed by an African American minister “even to our so-called ‘Negro’ churches in which an all-Negro congregation is served by all-white priests.” He contended, “No

⁷¹“Racism Is Laid to White Folk,” *Milwaukee Journal*, July 16, 1947, section 2, 7, as quoted in Smith, 211.

⁷²“White Racism Called Crime,” *Milwaukee Journal*, July 9, 1947, 20, as quoted in Smith, 211.

⁷³Heithaus, “Christmas Commemorative,” 1952, Zeidler Papers, Box 106, Folder 3, Milwaukee Public Library, as quoted in Smith, 214-215.

matter how shabby a 'store-front' church may be, most Negroes would unhesitatingly prefer it to the most magnificent Catholic church in which a Negro would be shunned, stared at, or given the deep-freeze treatment."⁷⁴ Eventually, Heithaus's outspoken attacks attracted the disapproving attention of his Provincial superiors in 1954. He was effectively silenced with an assignment as chaplain of Misericordia Hospital with a twenty-four hour on-call duty when he was not teaching at Marquette.⁷⁵

In his years at Marquette University, Heithaus' influenced many students. He became the moderator of the Inter-racial Study Club which sought to connect faith to social action. The club took on several ambitious projects. It proposed a survey to examine racial discrimination in Milwaukee's public schools. It sought to examine Marquette's housing, hiring, health service, and scholarship programs for racial discrimination. It examined racial clauses in membership rules of Marquette's fraternities and sororities. It made allegations of segregation on the university's football and basketball teams. It partnered with like-minded students in neighboring Catholic colleges over the issue of racial justice. Thomas J. Jablonsky in *Milwaukee's Jesuit University, Marquette, 1881-1981* stated, "Never before had Marquette students so passionately connected the instructional side of their lives as college students with a moral issue of national importance."⁷⁶

While Heithaus mainly used an educational forum to urge racial change, there was

⁷⁴Claude H. Heithaus, S.J., "Does Christ Want This Barrier?," *America*, February 11, 1950, as quoted in Smith, 215.

⁷⁵Smith, 216.

⁷⁶Jablonsky, 228.

at least one incident in Milwaukee where he took direct action. In February 1949 Heithaus and Kennedy played a central role in the Saunders case, Milwaukee's first major postwar race incident. An African American veteran from Louisiana, Albert Saunders, attempted to move his family into the Greenfield Trailer Camp, a temporary housing facility for veterans in Milwaukee. Saunders was merely following the assignment he received from the director of the county veterans' housing agency. Immediately a petition was circulated among the white residents calling for Saunders' removal. A camp meeting that evening degenerated into a brawl between supporters and opponents of the petition and a mob of over one hundred protestors gathered in front of Saunders' trailer, shouting insults and threats. Despite the arrival of the sheriff's deputies and their promise to protect him, Saunders left the camp, fearing for his family's safety. The next morning, Kennedy assembled a group of local civil rights activists which included Heithaus, Dorsey, Bruno Bitker, a member of the Mayor's Commission on Human Rights, and William V. Kelley, Milwaukee Urban League president. After having secured the promise of the District Attorney, William J. McCauley, to enforce the state civil rights law, the group urged the Saunders' family to move back to the camp under the sheriff's protection and then called a meeting of the camp's residents. The Veterans Emergency Committee, the name of the group who sought to expel Saunders, justified their action by citing that segregation is practiced in the American military and that, if they were to concede now, it would lead to an influx of unwanted African Americans into the trailer camp. Urging acceptance of Saunders, Bitker appealed to the residents' patriotism and Heithaus, in his usual forthright style, said that those who instigate intolerance are

betraying the principles of Christianity. The meeting ended inconclusively. Kennedy, Bitker, and Heithaus remained at the camp urging residents to act with reason and to comply with the Wisconsin civil rights law. Meanwhile, the Saunders' family returned to their trailer, protected by sixty-five deputy sheriffs. The next day another meeting was called and it was clear that, except for a few ringleaders, a majority of the trailer residents now sided with the Saunders family. By Sunday, the hardcore group of ringleaders, facing the prospect of arrest, informed Kennedy that they wished to end their protest. That afternoon, the leaders of the Veterans Emergency Committee apologized to the District Attorney for the incident, claiming that their frustrations over sanitation conditions in the camp had found an outlet in their attacks on the Saunders family. Thus, both Heithaus and Kennedy were instrumental in peacefully resolving the racial incident.⁷⁷

Msgr. Franklyn Kennedy

As a civil rights leader, Msgr. Franklyn Kennedy was more circumspect in his language than Heithaus. He became one of the first diocesan priests who expressed an interest in the cause of civil rights for African Americans in Milwaukee. During the Depression, he became actively concerned with social issues, in particular the cause of organized labor. He was helpful in establishing a Catholic Worker House in the city in the late thirties. In 1935 Kennedy was appointed by Stritch to be the editor of the newly merged *Catholic Herald-Citizen*, the official archdiocesan newspaper. He became a member in 1945 of the Milwaukee County Interracial Federation, a private organization

⁷⁷"Given Pledge of Protection," *Milwaukee Journal*, July 8, 1949, 1, as quoted in Smith, 212; Smith 212-214.

to promote racial harmony. In 1948, he was appointed to the Milwaukee Commission of Human Rights and a year later to the Governor's Commission on Human Rights. With the archbishops's approval, Kennedy and Dorsey founded the Milwaukee branch of the Catholic Interracial Council as late as 1959. The Council would help spearhead the growing Catholic interest in racial justice.⁷⁸ In public speeches and his editorial column, Kennedy addressed the race problem as a moral issue and used Jocist ideas in his analysis and approach. He also intervened in racial discrimination incidents. As the race problem ballooned in the country and Milwaukee in the 1950s, Kennedy selected race-related topics more frequently as the subject of his editorials, attacking segregation and discrimination in Milwaukee and elsewhere.

In one editorial in 1950, Kennedy attacked the discriminatory practice of the American Bowling Congress that excluded non-white men from participation. His editorial utilized the Cardijn method of "observe-judge-act" with Christian principles and the Church's social teachings. He stated, "As a Catholic, I judge all situations and actions in the light of Christian principles....As a Catholic, I have to know the teachings of Christ's Church and conform my actions to it. When I act contrary to what I know is right, I am guilty of sin." He then asserted that racism is a moral issue.

Now there are a few reasons for believing racism or racial prejudice is morally wrong. We are all children of God, members of one human family. God has created all men – white, black, yellow, red, brown – and all are equally precious in the eyes of God..

I have Christian principles to judge by. I know racial intolerance is morally wrong. I have specific facts about the discriminatory practices of the ABC (American Bowling Congress). In light of

⁷⁸Avella, "Milwaukee Catholicism," 166-167.

Christian principles, I am forced to conclude that the discriminatory practices are morally wrong.⁷⁹

After the Supreme Court handed down the landmark decision of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* in 1954, Kennedy began his editorial by saying “at long last, the Supreme Court of the United States has outlawed segregation of colored and white children in public schools....” He then turned to racial segregation in housing and said, “There are too many Catholics who feel that colored citizens should have the right to choose a “separate but equal” place of residence. By that, they mean that they don’t want them to live in their neighborhood – “equal,” yes – but in some other part of town.” And, then coming back to his method of making judgments in the light of Christian principles and the Church’s social teachings, Kennedy concluded the editorial by saying, “Perhaps the actions of the Supreme Court in putting segregation into the headlines will cause all Catholics to re-examine their thinking on this matter in the light of the teachings of Christ and His Church.”⁸⁰

Kennedy continued to hammer away on housing discrimination. Unwilling to accuse Milwaukeeans directly of discrimination, he provided examples of racial justice and appealed to his readers to live up to them. In the spring of 1958, he stumbled upon a real life situation that resulted in a spectacular series of columns in the *Catholic Herald Citizen*. This may have been Kennedy’s “finest hour.” The series was called “No Room in the Inn for Christ; No Farm for Sale to Colored.” It started when an African American

⁷⁹Kennedy, “A Letter to the Readers—Why I am Opposed to the Discrimination Practiced by the American Bowling Congress,” editorial, *Catholic Herald Citizen*, February 4, 1950, 1.

⁸⁰Kennedy, “Segregation—Brown v. Board of Education,” editorial, *Catholic Herald Citizen*, 4.

family from Racine wanted to purchase a farm in central Wisconsin and a real estate agent told them “owners won’t sell to Colored people.” The family contacted Kennedy and he took on the task of finding a farm for the family to buy. He became personally involved in the case and reported each week on the latest developments. Writing editorials week after week in an almost parable-like style, reminiscent of the Good Samaritan, Kennedy detailed the events, reactions, ploys, and tricks the African American family encountered in trying to purchase a farm, praising and condemning individuals (not by name) and situations along the way. First, Kennedy contacted the realtor who repeated his statement that each of the fifteen or twenty owners he had with farms for sale would not sell to African Americans. Kennedy then accompanied the African American family upstate to look for a farm for sale in Wisconsin with the realtor. Soon, they found a farm whose owner lived in Chicago and did not object to selling to an African American family. A few days later the realtor notified them that the owner changed his mind. Kennedy then exhorted his readers by saying, “I write these words to remind our readers of the duty that Christ expects of them is simple and direct: ‘What you have done to the least of these, My brethren, you have done to Me.’ These colored people could not buy the farm they wanted because their skin was dark.”⁸¹

A week after Kennedy’s column in the *Catholic Herald Citizen*, he received nine offers from people who were willing to sell their farms and two phone calls from real estate agents saying they would be willing to help find a farm for the African American family. Kennedy reported the next week to his readers, “Never before has an article

⁸¹Kennedy, “No Room in the Inn for Christ; No Farm for Sale to Colored,” editorial, *Catholic Herald Citizen*, March 22, 1958, 2.

brought in so many letters. All writers expressed their deep sympathy for the African American family. Many also wrote they were shocked that such a thing would happen in Wisconsin.”⁸²

In the meantime, Kennedy spoke to the Chicago owner who originally agreed to sell his farm to the African American family. He told Kennedy he was willing to sell, but he believed that the owners of the adjoining farms would object. In desperation, Kennedy offered to meet with the neighboring farmers and seek their approval and the owner accepted the plan. In vivid detail, Kennedy described his trip to central Wisconsin to speak to the four families of the neighboring farms. All four families gave their consent and were willing to put it in writing as requested by the Chicago owner. Once again, Kennedy praises these people and exhorts his readers.

These four families – not wondering about what others would do or say, not giving a thought to conforming to what others might do – these four families decided the issue on principle: the American principle that all citizens have equal rights under the law, including the right to the pursuit of happiness in whatever place they want to live.

I am equally sure that their decision was also based on their religious conviction that we are all children of God, equally precious in His sight; that discrimination is wrong and displeasing to God.⁸³

After sending the written statements to the owner, the owner said he would not sell to the African American family. He was taking his property off the market and might move back to his farm later.

Eventually, the African American family found another farm about 125 miles

⁸²Kennedy, “Will Sell Farms To Colored,” *Catholic Herald Citizen*, March 29, 1958, 2.

⁸³Ibid.

from Milwaukee which they liked even better than the one they could not buy. The story was picked up by *The Capital Times* of Madison as well as *The Milwaukee Journal* and *Milwaukee Sentinel*. In a section of the editorial entitled "Conclusion for Catholics," Kennedy stated that the Operation-Find-a-Farm-for-a-Colored-Family now comes to a close with the final tally of 29 to 2 favoring the sale.

Twenty-nine people from various places in Wisconsin offered either to sell farms to the Colored family or to help them acquire one. Only two objected. That's a fine batting average in the field of human relations.... The fact is: most people think it's all right; the vote was 29 to 2.

This experience has been shared with our readers so that all might examine their conscience on the race question....If, unfortunately, you have been influenced wrongly in the past on the matter of race relations, now is the time to face up to what Christ expects of you. "What you have done to the least of My brethren, you have done to Me."⁸⁴

Kennedy understood the history of the African American and saw the race problem as America's greatest trauma. He supported the emerging Civil Rights Movement and believed it was unstoppable.

America's racial problem is its greatest trauma....The lunch counter demonstrations now taking place in the South are not the work of a few hot-headed youths: they are a historic sign that the American Negro is finally, a hundred years after emancipation, demanding first class citizenship.

The Negroes' struggle...calls for an immediate and personal response from the nation's white majority. The time when this majority could be...content with the "status quo"— is forever passed. On the Negro question, there is no status quo: all is in ferment.⁸⁵

By the early 1960s, Kennedy, like many other leaders, was convinced that persuasion would not end housing discrimination. Kennedy then turned to legal remedies

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵Ibid.

and became a leading advocate of fair housing legislation. He permitted the Governor's Commission on Human Rights to use the *Catholic Herald Citizen* as its voice educating Milwaukee Catholics on the need for such legislation. When the Wisconsin state legislature debated a fair housing bill in 1961, Kennedy confronted the issue on the front page of the archdiocesan paper. In an article entitled "Fifteen Questions on Wisconsin's Fair Housing Bill – Need for Such Legislation; How Like Laws Work In Other States," he explained how the law worked in the five states and two cities that already had similar legislation. He wrote how the proposed legislation was fair to buyers, sellers, real estate dealers and businessmen. Refuting the popular notion that property values decrease when an African American family moved into a neighborhood, he cited recent studies done in Milwaukee and similar cities to show that the absence of panic selling in mixed neighborhoods were more likely to see property values increase more than in all-white neighborhoods.⁸⁶

In one editorial, Kennedy gave an example of Joseph Harris to show the necessity of state fair housing legislation. Harris, an African American, and his family moved from Georgia to Green Bay, Wisconsin, because he felt that there be would better opportunities for himself. He was hired as a social worker at the Green Bay reformatory two years earlier. He held a post-graduate degree, served in the navy for three years, and had been a trombone player in the Green Bay Symphony for the last two years. Harris and his family had been trying to purchase a new home unsuccessfully for six months.

He moved from Georgia to Wisconsin because he felt the opportunities

⁸⁶Kennedy, "Fifteen Questions on Wisconsin's Fair Housing Bill – Need for Such Legislation; How Like Laws Work In Other States," *Catholic Herald Citizen*, 1.

for him would be available in all fields. In the field of employment, this was true; the Fair Employment Practices Law saw to that. In the cultural field, this was true; he was accepted to the Green Bay symphony as a member. In the religious field, this was true; he was welcomed by the Baptist church. In all of these areas, he was accepted on his individual worth.

Unfortunately, this same process does not work for people who happen to be colored (with housing), no matter their economic, cultural, or educational status, they are discriminated against when it comes to housing. This is why a Fair Housing Bill is needed in Wisconsin.⁸⁷

Kennedy was an individual who was at the forefront of the transition in the Catholic Church of Milwaukee that was expanding its scope in ministry from only saving souls and dispensing the sacraments to becoming actively involved in social concerns with an undergirding moral issue. Through his coverage of news items and editorials on civil rights issues in the Archdiocesan paper, Kennedy used education, persuasion, and legal means as a Catholic leader to bring about change. He also did this through direct action as in the Saunders case and “Operation-Find-a-Farm” crusade. Through such direct personal intervention, Kennedy was a forerunner of the activist priests of the later 1960s. And, like the followers of Cardijn, Kennedy was guided by moral principles found in the gospel and Church teachings on social justice. He used the Cardijn’s method of “observe-judge-act” and his various “action plans” in Milwaukee increased his visibility as a priest involved in social justice issues. From his editorials, it is clear that Kennedy saw his racial justice involvements as part of his identity as a priest of the Catholic Church.

Between 1945 and 1962, Catholic religious and lay leaders contributed to the development of the city’s postwar Civil Rights Movement. Most clerics, relying

⁸⁷Kennedy, “The Need Is Evident,” editorial, *Catholic Herald Citizen*, February 26, 1961, 2.

primarily on education and persuasion, expressed their opposition to racial discrimination in employment and housing. Some, such as Heithaus and Kennedy, made civil rights a priority in their life's work. Specialized Catholic Action groups represented a small, but important, lay minority in the Church of Milwaukee and joined organizations promoting racial equality and social justice. Continued patterns of housing segregation coupled with opposition to the state's fair housing bill suggested that many whites remained unwilling to practice racial justice in their own neighborhoods. Some Catholic leaders stood at the forefront of white opposition to racial discrimination, insisting upon the incompatibility of religious values and American democracy or "the American Way" with racial prejudice. In Milwaukee there was the Specialized Catholic Action groups, the Catholic Interracial Council of Milwaukee, and individuals like Kennedy and Heithaus who identified racial justice as a religious obligation and then acted on that obligation. In this way, the Civil Rights Movement helped to define the postwar Catholic Church and its outreach to the African American community as one of the ways the Church asserted its active social justice role in American society while facing opposition from both white clerics and laity.

Milwaukee Politics and Civil Rights in the 1950s

After World War II, the issue of race discrimination increasingly dominated Milwaukee's public discourse. In the 1950s Milwaukeeans had become convinced that the city faced a serious "Negro problem." Some held the tensions were due to the huge influx of African Americans year after year into the city. Some blamed Mayor Frank Zeidler for the influx and its resulting problems. In the 1956 mayoral race between the

incumbent Zeidler and Milton J. McGuire, critics charged the socialist Zeidler of putting up large billboards in the South inviting African Americans to move to Milwaukee. Some attributed the increasing racial tensions and disturbances to the unfamiliarity of African American rural migrants to urban life while others claimed racial inferiority caused the problems. Some pointed to the confined and segregated residential district for African Americans with the oldest and most dilapidated buildings.

The city of Milwaukee established the Milwaukee Commission on Community Relations to deal with civil rights issues and solicited the help of the clergy and prominent citizens. The organization was first established in 1944 by Mayor John Bohn and then was called the "Mayor's Commission on Interracial Relations." It then underwent several name changes. In 1948 it became the "Mayor's Commission on Human Relations;" in 1949 it was called the "Mayor's Commission on Human Rights." Then, in 1954 the name was changed again to the "Milwaukee Commission on Human Rights" and finally in 1961 it became the "Milwaukee Commission on Community Relations."

The Commission on Interracial Relations was comprised of twenty-five to thirty members appointed by the Mayor (later, some members were elected at large) who served without compensation and broadly represented the religious, racial, and ethnic groups in the city. The Commission's charge was to recommend to the Mayor and Common Council the enactment of ordinances which would promote greater social harmony and more amicable relations among citizens of varying racial, religious, and cultural backgrounds. The Commission would examine and analyze factual data relating to

intergroup relationships. It would also study discriminations against groups or races and related subjects as may be referred to the Commission by the Mayor or Common Council and then to report back on its findings. The Commission had eight standing committees: Civil and Religious Committee, Fact Finding Committee, Fair Employment Committee, Housing Committee, Legislative Committee, Planning and Program Committee, Public Relations Committee, and the Executive Committee. Catholic leaders who served on the Commission included Fathers Philip Steffes, Celestine Bittle, Claude Heithaus, Franklyn Kennedy, and others. Other notable members were Police Chief John Polcyn, Bruno Bitker, William Kelley, George Brawley, Rabbi Samuel Hirshberg, and Rev. Thomas Lyter.⁸⁸

Since its establishment in 1944, the Commission on Interracial Relations tackled a variety of issues. In the 1940s, the Commission worked to provide accommodations for African Americans in Milwaukee's private hospitals and nursing training for African Americans, thereby relieving some pressure on the fully-integrated St. Anthony Hospital and the county hospital. It also pushed the Milwaukee Housing Authority to build interracial housing units. It urged non-discrimination for racial differences in employment practices. It noted the breaking of the "color-line" with the hiring of the first African Americans in the city bus company and the telephone company while urging department stores to follow suit. Members divided over the question of restrictive covenants and whether the city could legally sell lots without race restrictive covenants, if those lots, acquired through tax delinquency, formerly had such restrictive covenants in

⁸⁸ "Handbook Commission on Community Relations, 1961," 325, M 64th; Minutes, 305.8, M64m, Archives of City Hall of Milwaukee (ACHM).

the deed. A few members spoke to Milwaukee newspaper executives concerning the manner of reporting assault cases and the way it identified the race of an individual. Members recommended that newspaper not use race labeling since the major issue was behavior rather than race. The Commission received reports on the Milwaukee police force and the training given to veteran officers on the impartial treatment of citizens and the department's employment of African Americans. It investigated a department store's appeal for Christmas help in the city that omitted the African American district. It monitored recreational facilities and athletic activities in the Sixth Ward where African Americans mainly lived. It drafted a letter to a commander protesting Jim Crow in the Marines when an African American who had over four years of military service was denied entry to the Marine Corps Active Reserve on the basis of color. It urged the governor to integrate the state's National Guard as Minnesota and New Jersey had already done. It sent a telegram to the American Bowling Congress (whose tournament was in scheduled to be in Milwaukee) urging them to eliminate discrimination against non-white bowlers. Finally, the Commission spent a large amount of time dealing with methods of segregation in the placement of veterans in housing projects. In 1949, Ziedler praised the Commission for its work and claimed that its work in housing segregation was largely responsible for the Wisconsin senate passing a bill forbidding segregation in public housing.⁸⁹

Starting in the 1950s, the Mayor's Commission of Human Rights helped John Curry break the color-line and become the first high school African American teacher

⁸⁹ Minutes of the Mayor's Commission on Inter-Racial Relations, 305.8, M64m, ACHM.

hired by the Milwaukee public schools. The Commission was pleased from their efforts to provide a warm reception to the National Baptist Convention in 1952 in Milwaukee. The Commission also welcomed Eleanor Roosevelt who spoke about her work at the United Nations and its document "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights." She compared some elements from that document for sixty world nations to the Annual Report of the Commission and the police department's "Guide to Understanding Race and Human Relations." She emphasized the struggle on the international, national, and local levels to move forward a human rights agenda. At the request of the Mayor, the Commission studied property values in changing areas, particularly the lower north side. The study included property values in transitional areas and the development of techniques essential to the conservation of neighborhoods and property standards. The Commission frequently heard reports of high pressured sales tactics used by unscrupulous real estate agents. It also spent a huge amount of time dealing with the Hillside Annex and the moving of 274 African American families to make room for the construction project. The innumerable problems of relocation of families, problems with the Federal Housing Authority's (FHA) practice of not guaranteeing loans to minority groups that move into a predominantly white area, and the placement of families in low rent public housing projects were among the many topics that consumed the Commission.⁹⁰

Despite the efforts of the Milwaukee Human Relations Commission, there was an increasing sense of desperation in the African American community by the late 1950s. While the seeds of frustration and discontent were endemic in the long-standing prejudice

⁹⁰ Ibid.

and discrimination operative throughout the twentieth century in Milwaukee, it reached a feverish point in the 1950s as residents became aware of crime as a city problem. While the people who committed such crimes were both white and African American, many whites in Milwaukee blamed the increases in crime on African Americans. In 1957 this white perception was reconfirmed in the report on the Inner Core of Milwaukee prepared for Zeidler. It found 48 percent of those arrested for rape in the city, 21 percent of those arrested robbery, and 69 percent of those arrested for aggravated assault lived in the city's Inner Core. The boundaries of the Inner Core, according to the Zeidler report, were Juneau Avenue on the south, Keefe Avenue on the north, Holton Street on the east, and Twentieth Street on the west. As African Americans expanded into many previously white neighborhoods in Milwaukee, a cloud of tension and fear gripped neighborhoods in the city.⁹¹

The sense of desperation in the inner core were rooted in several practices of landlords, homeowners, real estate agents, and financial institutions to discourage African Americans from expanding into certain neighborhoods. In some areas, homeowners and landlords simply refused to sell or rent to African Americans. In other places, when the first African American family moved into a neighborhood, it triggered a landslide of white panic-selling of their homes. Some unscrupulous real estate agents engaged in the practice of "double sales" whereby they would buy a home at an extremely low price, usually from a fleeing white family, and then immediately sell it to an African American family for double the price. Harold King, a City of Milwaukee tax assessor the North

⁹¹Thomas L. Tolan, *Riverwest* (Milwaukee: The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and the Milwaukee Humanities Program, 1984), 6-7.

Side in the 1950s and 1960s, compiled a list of more than one hundred “double sales” in one year. Furthermore, banks and savings and loan associations stopped lending money for home purchases in much of the North Side, resulting in home sales made on the basis of “land contracts.” Under the agreement of a “land contract,” the buyer agreed to pay a fixed number of installments for the property. The white sellers, eager to flee the neighborhood, many times sold their homes to African Americans who could not afford the payments. According to Mayor Zeidler’s Inner Core report, the practice of “land contracts” produced a “hard core of disgruntled, hopelessly saddled, incapable ‘home buyers’ unable to keep abreast of the more pressing repairs and replacement problems, much less the maintenance of desirable neighborhood standards.”⁹²

Antagonism intensified from many different sectors in the African American community. For moderately affluent African Americans, who could afford to live outside the poor neighborhoods of the North Side, they were refused housing in white neighborhoods. For poor African Americans, who recently migrated to Milwaukee from Mississippi or Arkansas, they came north expecting to escape racial prejudice, only to find it again, but in a northern package. And, percolating close to the surface of the African American community was an animosity toward the city police. There were several times in the late 1950s of near-mob action in the African American community from what it perceived as unfair arrests by police. Officers in patrol cars found it harder to distinguish between criminals and innocent civilians in the inner core than the beat patrolmen who walked the streets. African Americans believed police responded in

⁹²Ibid., 7-8.

tougher and harsher ways and were more likely to arrest innocent people in the inner city than in other parts of Milwaukee.⁹³

By the early 1960s the practices of “double sales” and “land contracts” in some areas of the city along with the simple refusal to rent or sell to African Americans left Milwaukee’s housing market riddled with racism from white homeowners, real estate agents, and financial institutions. While blaming the rise in crime on African Americans, the white community also ignored any contributing factors such as the overcrowded and desperate living conditions, the harsh and heavy-handed treatment of African Americans by the police, and the arrest of innocent victims. All of these factors contributed to a growing sense of desperation, entrapment, frustration, and outrage in the African American community by the early 1960s. Milwaukee’s African American community also identified such feelings with struggles of African Americans in the South and the emerging Civil Rights Movement.

The Catholic Response to Civil Rights Concerns

In the early 1960s Milwaukee, the nation’s twelfth largest city, had a long-lasting tendency of favoring the status quo and avoiding controversy. Milwaukee also had a long-standing powerful conservative force that traditionally drew heavily from Catholics who comprised 42 percent of the city’s population in 1965. The demographic changes in the city with African Americans expanding into traditionally white neighborhoods and whites fleeing to suburbia coupled with the emerging Civil Rights Movement and the impact of Vatican II created tremendous uncertainty and insecurity among conservative

⁹³Ibid., 8.

Catholic elements. As major changes came in their neighborhood life and church life, conservative Catholics allied with the right-wing political faction in the city more firmly than in the past. What made Milwaukee distinctive from other cities at this time was that the coalition of political ultra-rightists and Catholic conservatives was proportionally so large in its size, well-organized in its causes, and proved very effective in blocking a civil rights agenda in the city.⁹⁴ In an article entitled “Portrait of the *Gemutlichkeit* City – Old vs. New in Milwaukee,” *The National Catholic Reporter* recognized the significant power wielded by conservative Catholics in Milwaukee.

The problem of the relationship of people, priests, and prelaty within the Church in this season of change is not more acute in Milwaukee than in the rest of the country. But in Milwaukee the far right faction of the community has managed to impose its image, if not its power, on the over-all authority of the Church and has stifled the natural contributions of the remaining part.⁹⁵

The conservative stamp on Milwaukee Catholicism was evident in actions of episcopal leadership in the past. Such liberal notions as social action or lay initiative in the pre-Vatican II Church was generally not pushed by the Catholic hierarchy of Milwaukee. Under Archbishop Stritch, a Catholic Worker house opened in October 1937 in Milwaukee’s African American district and was the only relief operation for migrant workers in the city for the four last years of the Depression. However, it was never reported locally in the religious or secular press. The *Catholic Worker* provided this description of their Milwaukee house, “The poor man is a bum to the smug citizens of

⁹⁴Jane Berdes, “Portrait of the *Gemutlichkeit* City – Old vs New in Milwaukee,” *National Catholic Reporter*, July 21, 1965, 1, 7, in Bleidorn Papers, MC 51, Box 14, Folder 1 (Articles: Newspapers, December 1942–April 1991), AAM.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, 7.

Milwaukee....Because our house is the only place in Milwaukee where transients are harbored, police accuse us of harboring criminals. We are called “Reds” by the police.”⁹⁶

At the same time the atmosphere in Milwaukee for the lay organizations was regarded with more hostility under Kiley, who headed the Milwaukee church from 1940 to 1953. While some lay organizations in Milwaukee became noteworthy, none lasted very long. The Cardijn Center of Milwaukee, organized in 1947, never met with hierarchal enthusiasm. Kiley suspended its publication, *Vivant*, and placed the CFM under the rival jurisdiction of the Cana Conference, thus curbing Specialized Catholic Action. Many pastors viewed these inter-parish lay groups as competition with parish structures for lay activities. When the Cardijn Center closed in 1960, its director, Father Eugene Bleidorn, explained the closing this way:

Our diocese is quite conservative. This is probably due to our nationality backgrounds as well as to the kinds of men who have held and are still holding the key positions and appointments Although Rome has spoken out for several decades on Catholic Action and on the lay apostolate, certainly we were given almost nothing on this...Even the great and much-needed social doctrine of the Church has been largely neglected. Conservatism, I think, is the deeper psychological reason for the closing of the center.⁹⁷

Thus, with the dawning of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, the Catholic Church of Milwaukee displayed an ambivalent stand. On the one hand, there was the legacy of numerous groups, organizations, and commissions promoting civil rights issues. It is in this context of racial justice that Father James E. Groppi, a Catholic priest of the Milwaukee archdiocese, would emerge as the leading force behind Milwaukee’s Civil

⁹⁶Ibid.

⁹⁷Ibid.

Rights Movement. On the other hand, prejudice and the conservative proclivities of the community resisted change and favored “status quo.” The civil rights era in Milwaukee would find the Catholic community and Catholic leadership split over the goals, methods, and pace of change. It would confront the Church in the thrust of its ministry to African Americans as conversion only versus involvement in racial justice.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has placed Milwaukee's African American Catholic community in the historical context of the development of the city's African American community and the development of the American Catholic Church's ministry to African Americans. A number of conclusions can be made about their history. The archdiocese of Milwaukee took steps to minister to its small but growing African American population, just as did other areas in the nation where there were sizeable numbers of African Americans. In these early days, black Catholic Milwaukeeans were discriminated against by their fellow Catholics and faced segregated seating in white churches. Recognizing the full acceptance in white churches was not likely to occur, Lincoln Valle prevailed upon Archbishop Sebastian Messmer to open a small store-front mission. It was Valle, an African American layman, who launched this ministry, not a priest or sister. St. Benedict the Moor Mission marked the beginning of a permanent African American Catholic community in the archdiocese of Milwaukee. The very existence of such a parish is first evidence that pressures against integration remained intact within the Catholic community. Also, the existence of such a parish demonstrated the initiative on the part of the African American Catholic laity to encourage and pressure American bishops to seriously work at evangelization of African Americans as urged by Rome.

Lincoln Valle is a prime example of black agency. While Valle had his faults and little is known about him, what this dissertation uncovered about him is significant. He was a member of the African American Lay Catholic congress movement and exemplifies

the fact that African American Catholics have often been their own best advocates. Unlike immigrant groups who had their ethnic priest to represent their needs in the Church, African Americans were blocked from seminaries and, thus, had to stand and speak for themselves. Valle, like others in the African American Catholic lay congress movement, was well versed in the history and doctrines of Catholicism and was highly literate and very articulate in expressing his views. His winning and pleasant personality, his single-mindedness and dedication, his resourcefulness, and his devotion to his faith made possible the successful launching of St. Benedict the Moor Mission.

St. Benedict the Moor offered one of the more successful models of the old form of ministry. Identified as a “mission church” by the clergy and hierarchy of the archdiocese meant that its primary focus was to promote the conversion and evangelization of non-Catholic African Americans. The chief means to achieve such goals was through education, namely the establishment of St. Benedict the Moor School. The number of conversions among the student body at St. Benedict the Moor was very important in its philosophy. It was believed that if the children wished to convert to Catholicism, this would also influence their parents. It is also a recognition of the contribution made by the Capuchin Fathers, who staffed the parish as a “charity” apostolate, and who remained committed to the African American community of Milwaukee from that time to the present day and the Dominican Sisters of Racine who staffed the school also as a “charity” apostolate.

As a boarding school, St. Benedict was very popular among African Americans as evidenced by the fact that it drew students from twenty-three states at one time. It also

met with success in creating opportunities for graduates and instilling a sense of racial pride among its students. While providing a first-rate educational experience, the boarding and day school also immersed one into a total Catholic environment of study, prayer, work, and recreation that fostered a strong sense of community. In their curriculum and school activities, they encouraged self-confidence, self-sufficiency, and respect in their students. St. Benedict seems to be less punitive than some other boarding schools with a diminution of corporal punishment and more interested in building racial pride and accomplishment in their young charges. African American History Week, curriculum courses in African history and literature, the hiring of African American teachers, and promoting interactions with Catholic white schools were some of the strategies used. In the age of segregation, St. Benedict the Moor School was a highly desirable institution among African Americans and provided numerous role models among its graduates of articulate, successful, and responsible African Americans for the coming Civil Rights Movement.

While there were attempt to provide social services and social organizations, such as day care and job placements, to the larger African American community in the city, the culmination of such a community social outreach dimension was the founding of St. Anthony Hospital. As another institution of the St. Benedict the Moor complex, St. Anthony was founded because African Americans were in part shut out of the system of decent health care. It served as a beacon of hope in a segregated society. St. Anthony stood as a harbinger of a successful integrated institution in the city. From its beginnings in the Great Depression, St. Anthony was a fully integrated hospital; the doctors, nurses,

administrative staff, wards and patient rooms witnessed both races together. Clearly, this was an example where religious convictions trumped social forces of the day. The entire hospital staff was integrated along with the wards, including patient rooms. In retrospect, St. Anthony Hospital showed daring leadership on the part of the Capuchins and the Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls, Minnesota, who staffed and administered the hospital and remained an example of how integration could work.

This dissertation offers insights on how white Catholics, who were sympathetic to the plight of African Americans, viewed them as an object of ministry. While their motives were altruistic and genuine, many had the pervasive paternalistic view of African Americans as social inferiors who will benefit and advance through their efforts. Stephen Eckert, for example, viewed African Americans as needing help to raise their children in a boarding school environment because they had work long hours while their children were unsupervised and subject to the evils and corruption of the neighborhood.

This study also focused on racism in the city of Milwaukee. The attempt by the city of Milwaukee (with the building of its new Civic Center in the 1920s) to move St. Benedict the Moor served as one example of this Catholic institution standing firm in the face of racism. It was not until after the Second World War that racism would become more virulent in Milwaukee. As African Americans migrated from the South during and after the war years, African Americans encroached into white neighborhoods and into predominantly white parishes. Race becomes an important and controlling aspect of Milwaukee's society and politics. Many white Catholics fled to the suburbs in fear and abandoned their parishes. Racial discrimination in housing, education, and employment

had been building from the earliest decades of the twentieth century. Because of the changing demographics, Catholics and the archdiocese had to confront racial issues more directly than it had to in the past. At this time, a new form of Catholic ministry to the African American community emerges based on social justice and according civil rights to African Americans. The result was a severely divided Church. Some religious leaders and congregants opposed this more “activist” approach to Church ministry and instead saw the Church’s role as merely a dispenser of sacraments. Others embraced the religious and moral underpinnings of the dawning Civil Rights Movement. Despite the religious teachings of the Catholic tradition, the Catholic hierarchy of Milwaukee generally remained ambivalent over what to do. However, in the urban neighborhoods of the 1940s and 1950s, there were parishes that worked at integration with its community. There were some individual clergymen and lay men and women who rose to meet the challenges and identify the racism. They provided both courageous and moral leadership. In some cases, they established organizations seeking peaceful integration and racial understanding and harmony. But, in most white ethnic Catholic parishes, the arrival of African Americans into the parish was difficult. It appears that whites did not wish to interact with blacks. The number of white parishioners in church and the number of white children in the school continued to decline over the years. In the end, African American Catholics in Milwaukee created vibrant parish communities, largely separated from the white Catholic community in the years from 1908 to 1963.

St. Benedict the Moor School was an important social institution for the city of Milwaukee and the Catholic Church. It offered Milwaukee an important social institution

in caring for its growing black population. It also aided Milwaukee for a time during the Great Depression by accepting orphans and the placing of some juvenile delinquents. As a Catholic institution, the Capuchins, the Racine Dominican Sisters, and the Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls, Minnesota, provided over the years scores of dedicated and hard working men and women whose contribution is most significant. But, there were problems. Other Catholic parishes and officials of the Milwaukee Archdiocese did not seem too interested in the school or the parish. In the days of segregation, whites did not wish to interact with blacks. Thus, compassionate whites, the religious congregations who served St. Benedict, created for African Americans their own space. Perhaps, St. Benedict the Moor Mission was more than just ministry on the ethnic-parish model. The nature of discrimination and the racial feelings were far more deep-seated than prejudice experienced against European immigrants. The bitter reactions of whites to African Americans moving into their neighborhoods and their parishes attest to this fact. The history of the Catholic Church's ministry reveals that race has been the determining factor in how lay white Catholics and clergy have viewed Milwaukee's African American Catholics over the last hundred years. They were black first and Catholic second in the eyes of many.

APPENDIX

Table 4: Enrollment of St. Benedict the Moor School, 1913 - 1968

Year	Enrollment	Year	Enrollment	
			Grade School	High School
1913	14	1936	219	13
1914	39	1937	253	17
1915	65	1938	267	23
1916	65	1939	285	25
1917	65	1940	237	25
1918	58	1941	244	87
1919	74	1942	206	104
1920	138	1943	303	97
1921	15 (Holy Rosary Academy)	1944	281	97
1922	97	1945	283	98
1923	100	1946	279	86
1924	130	1947	254	99
1925	122	1948	228*	
1926	220	1949	249	14 (9 th grade)
1927	237	1950	297	15 (9 th grade)
1928	268	1951	333*	
1929	235	1952	348*	
1930	235	1953	331*	
1931	306	1954	342*	
1932	285	1955	287*	
1933	279	1956	312	63
1934	210	1957	306	69
1935	220	1958	292	69
		1959	275	84
		1960	298	82
		1961	282	82
		1962	298*	
		1963	300	86
		1964	301	108
		1965	298	
		1966	248	
		1967	230	
		1968	230	

Source: *The Official Catholic Directory*. (New York: P.J. Kennedy), 1913 - 1968.
 (Note: * Grade School and High School enrollment numbers were not indicated separately, only total enrollment number provided)

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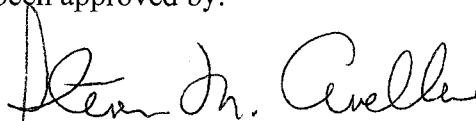
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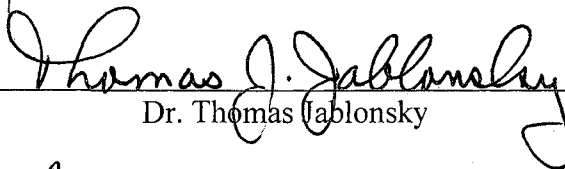
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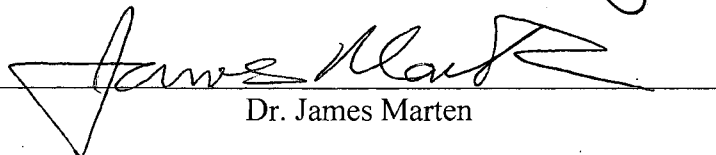
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