

OUR LADY OF PERPETUAL HELP CATHOLIC CHURCH
OUR ROOTS RUN DEEP; OUR SOULS ARE A GLOW AND OUR LEGACY CONTINUES

October 3, 2005 marked the 85th Anniversary of the laying of the cornerstone for Our Lady of Perpetual Help Catholic Church in Anacostia, Washington, D.C which was erected for the exclusive use of “Colored” Catholics. The parish possesses a rich Black Catholic history in the development of the Anacostia community, the Church and Washington, DC.

It should be noted that originally the “Colored” Catholics petitioned the name of Blessed Martin DePorres for the name of their church. Blessed Martin was a man of color from Lima Peru and a Dominican Brother. However, because Blessed Martin had not been canonized at that time, only the Dominicans were permitted to use his name in the dedication of a church.

On the occasion of his 25th Anniversary to the priesthood in 1940, Fr. Franz M. W. Schneeweiss, founding pastor of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, wrote, “The pages of our parish history are yellow with time, but the characters stand out clearly and defined, challenging us who enjoy the fruits of untold labor to guard the priceless heritage which is our.”

As far back as 1911, after years of having to sit in the last two pews of the church, being excluded from an active role in the Mass, participating in church organizations or having religious education for their children, the “Colored” Catholics of St. Teresa Church decided they wanted their own parish church.

For several months people gathered in one of their homes to pray the rosary, sing hymns and hear words of encouragement. When Father Bart, the pastor of St. Teresa, learned what they were doing and why, he wrote a letter to the Archbishop requesting the formation of a parish community for the “Colored” Catholics. Mr. Louis Cooke and Mr. Charles Edelin, with the letter from the Pastor, set out for Baltimore to see Cardinal Gibbons. At that time, the District of Columbia was included in the Archdiocese of Baltimore. The early beginnings of the parish were slowly being formed.

On Saturday, May 29, 1915, Franz M. W. Schneeweiss was ordained a priest by His Eminence, James Cardinal Gibbons in the Cathedral of Assumption in Baltimore and was assigned to St. Teresa’s Church on July 9, 1915. With the arrival of Fr. Schneeweiss at St. Teresa, the movement to found a parish was given new impetus. He gave the movement of the “Colored” Catholics his whole-hearted support and encouraged them in their efforts.

The hopes of many years began to be realized, and plans began to take shape. On Sunday, April 30, 1916, the first High Mass was sung in the remodeled church basement of St. Teresa, which served the newly formed “Colored” Catholic Community

of Anacostia. On May 11, 1918, Cardinal Gibbons granted permission to purchase property for a church to be built and appointed Fr. Schneeweiss as Pastor.

The property of Fort Stanton, known as "Chichester", was purchased from Dr. J. C. Norwood, a "colored" physician on May 16, 1918. The men of the parish worked feverishly and cleared away the underbrush in about 6 weeks. A cross of about 25 feet with a shrine in honor of Our Lady at its base was erected on the grounds. On Sunday, June 20, 1918, the new church grounds were blessed and services closed with a Benediction of the Most Blessed Sacrament.

Under that beautiful cross, many came all that summer for fervent prayer to God for their many blessings and thanksgivings. The building of the new church began in August 1920 with the digging of ditches, mixing and pouring of cement and hauling water by horse and wagons for the foundation by the faithful men of the parish. These men carried on this work after they had completed their regular days' work. By doing this, the men saved the church about \$10,000 in labor. The women of the parish supported the men through their inspiration, devotions and meals.

On a beautiful Sunday, October 3, 1920, the Elks band led a procession from St. Teresa up "The Hill" to lay the cornerstone for Our Lady of Perpetual Help Catholic Church. Bishop Thomas J. Shaha, D.D, Rector of Catholic University, officiated and the Sanctuary Choir of St. Augustine's Catholic Church provided the music. The Very Reverend John Cavanaugh, CSC, former President of Notre Dame University preached the sermon.

Seven months later on May 8, 1921, the church was blessed with an overflowing crowd for the occasion of its first service, a Solemn High Mass. The dream was now a reality. The formation of a strong Catholic community was taking root upon "The Hill."

The parochial school in the basement of the church opened on Tuesday, September 16, 1921 with 35 students. By Thanksgiving, under the leadership of Sister M. Adelina, of the School Sisters of Norte Dame (SSND), the enrollment rose to 85 students. The Sisters accomplished marvelous things in facing the challenges of a newly created parish.

In the winter of 1921, the Co-operative Bakery Association was formed as a fundraiser for the parish; however, it was short lived. Mr. Alphonsus Edelin, an experienced chef in the Capital Building, agreed to be the manager of the bakery. Unfortunately, Mr. Edelin was hit by a delivery truck and died of his injuries three months later.

The first field Mass was celebrated on the grounds of our church on September 24, 1922 and all the organizations from the Black parishes in the city attended.

The year 1928 was full of excitement; the first celebration of the Sacrament of Confirmation was administered to a class of 52 candidates; the convent was remodeled; and many active parish organizations were established. The parish organizations were

the Holy Name Society, Knights of St. John, the Sodality of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Ladies Auxiliary of the Knights of St. John, Missionary Guild for the Women, the Children of Mary, Boy and Girl Scouts, and the Junior League for the younger children. Parish life was becoming more and more vibrant.

In December 1928, Fr. Schneeweiss became ill and the first Josephite priest, Father Joseph Murphy, came to "The Hill" to assist for 6 months. Fr. Schneeweiss resumed his duties beginning with the celebration of Mass on the Solemnity Feast of Our Lady of Perpetual Help on June 30, 1929.

In March 1933, the men of the parish began building the Parish Hall. Once again the building skills of the men of the parish saved our church the cost of labor. A generous benefactor enabled the church and rectory to be repaired and stuccoed in June 1935.

The honor of being the first to hold its graduating exercises in the new parish hall belongs to "the Class of 1936." A long-standing custom was broken at this time – the girls were permitted to wear dresses instead of the usual skirt and middie blouse.

Fr. Schneeweiss and the parish were blessed to witness one of the parish sons, Mr. John Walter Bowman, ordained to the priesthood on January 6, 1939 in the Society of the Divine Word at Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. Shortly after his ordination Father Bowman returned for the celebration of his First Mass. The following summer, Fr. Bowman was the administrator of the parish while Fr. Schneeweiss was on vacation, thus serving as the first acting "colored" pastor.

In 1941, Father John Cato de Minsche, a convert from an Egyptian-Jewish heritage came to assist Fr. Schneeweiss, whose health was beginning to falter. On November 24, 1942, Fr. Schneeweiss died in the rectory of the parish he served for almost twenty-five years.

In the spring of 1942, the Archdiocese requested the St Joseph Society of the Sacred Heart, Josephites, to assume the pastoral responsibility of the parish. The first Josephite priest to arrive as pastor was Father Patrick Bradley. He brought his warm Irish wit and personal touch to winning the hearts of the parishioners. His faith and determination greatly enhanced parish life during the War and Post-War years. During this period, the mortgage on the land was paid off.

A succession of pastors came to "The Hill"; each bringing his own unique personality and gifts. Father Arthur O'Leary was an administrator. Father Rupert McDonald was a people-style priest. During his term as pastor, the new school and convent on Morris Road were built in 1957. Father Charles Brown was a thrifty pastor who could determine how much could be realized from the sale of slice cake to the energy cost of a light bulb. Father John Charles O'Shea was a gentle, kind man who possessed a strong bellowing preacher's voice.

Father Peter Kenney was appointed pastor in 1966. The twelve years of Fr. Kenney's leadership was indeed a period of growth in the parish plant, membership, and spirit. It was his vision that inspired the Panorama Room which brought the city to the doors of the parish with its active life of social, religious, and educational affairs. Less than two years later the school enrollment was doubled through receiving St. Teresa's school and convent. Four years later a new church was constructed.

Additionally, in April 1973, the Pro Ecclesia Et Pontifice Award was conferred upon Mrs. Laretta B. Sullivan and Mr. Leo Butler. This prestigious award from the Pope was awarded to them by His Eminence, Patrick Cardinal O'Boyle, Archbishop of Washington, for their outstanding work in helping needy families in the church and the community. Mrs. Sullivan and Mr. Butler were members of Our Lady of Perpetual Help's Ladies Charity and St. Vincent de Paul's Society respectively.

Father Joseph Waters succeeded Fr. Kenney in 1978. Fr. Waters had a strong commitment to develop parish life. His greatest challenge was to reduce the parish debt in the midst of higher interest rates. He implemented a process of payment for the parish buildings.

In the fall of 1980, the first permanent Black pastor, Father John Ricard was assigned to Our Lady of Perpetual Help. During this period of time, parish life realized great strides in liturgical reform and in empowering lay leadership. Renovations were made to the rectory. New school programs such as HAP and the "Before and After" School Program were introduced to assist students in the school. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) became the process by which un-baptized and baptized adults join the Catholic Church. New parish leadership roles were established and guidelines were formulated for the parish operations.

The parish was both overjoyed for and saddened by the loss of Fr. Ricard when it was announced in 1984 that he would be raised to the rank of bishop. In July 1984, Bishop John H. Ricard was named the Auxiliary Bishop of Baltimore, Maryland, the first Black to fill that office.

Deacon Samuel Johnson came to serve the parish in 1983, having been ordained a Permanent Deacon on April 30, 1977. Our parish was doubly blessed when members Deacon Ira Chase and Deacon Reynaldo Thurston were ordained on September 14, 1985 and September 15, 1990 respectively. All three were expressive of the spirit of Vatican Council II, which had engulfed the parish.

Along with Fr. Bowman, Deacon Chase and Deacon Thurston, the parish was blessed to have the following members enter into religious life: Sister Mary Fidelis Craig, OSP, Sister Mary Carmel Curtis, OSP, Sister Mary Magdalen Proctor OSP, Sister Mary Alphius Gross, OSP, Father Robert Pittmans, SS, Father Kenneth Westray, Deacon Ambrose Harley and most recently Deacon Thomas Jones.

Father John Harfmann served as pastor from 1984 to 1985. His time was short, but he sought to develop the unity of parish through social and recognition activities. He expressed great dedication to the Family Development Program and sensitivity to the Separated and Divorced Program.

In October 1985, Father James McLinden was named pastor to the parish. "Fr. Jim" as he was most commonly called, was present on "The Hill" from 1970 to 1976. Fr. Jim was ordained a Deacon in November 1970, subsequently ordained a priest on June 5, 1971. After his ordination, Fr. Jim was assigned to the parish as Associate Pastor until September 1976. He returned to Our Lady of Perpetual Help as Pastor in October 1981 until 1993. During his assignment as pastor he implemented scholarship programs for youth, bible study, affordable family vacations, an active Teen Club and fully implemented the RCIA.

Father Thomas Frank was assigned as Pastor in 1993. Fr. Frank was ordained a Deacon 1977 at Our Lady of Perpetual Help, subsequently ordained a Priest in 1978. Under the leadership of Fr. Frank, the Dance Ministry was formed as well as launching a dynamic youth choir. He encouraged discernment and evaluation in all ministries. He introduced Marriage and Engagement Encounter for couples and forged a vision of where we need to go and grow through the first parish convention that was a blue print for moving the parish into the 21st century.

Father Lowell Case arrived in 1996. Fr. Case spearheaded initiatives that led to substantial debt reductions. He energized the Finance Council and openly shared operational and financial information with the parishioners. He introduced Parish Finance Meetings for the education of parishioners. He demonstrated compassion and sensitivity to senior citizens and families in times of illness and death. He led the parish in completing the development of a vision statement and instituted a new marriage preparation process.

Father Donald Fest became pastor in February, 2003. His goals have been liturgy, evangelization and Religious Education. He has been empowering the laity to perform other aspects of their ministers including taking Communion to the sick. He has been instrumental in the development of Standing Operating Procedures for parish organizations. The parish broke new ground by developing, organizing and hosting the 1st Archdiocesan Women's Sexuality Conference. It is still too early to write about this segment of time in the life of our parish. We leave this chapter to be written for future parish historians.

An important note should be mentioned before closing this chapter of our parish history during this 85th Anniversary celebration - the untiring work of our Associate Pastors, Priests in Residence, School Sisters of Notre Dame and the hundreds of lay people who have played a truly significant role in the life of "The Hill." To them Our Lady of Perpetual Help owes a tremendous debt of gratitude.

The work so notably begun is being carried on with thanksgiving to Almighty God for His many blessings with a firm trust that He will continue to watch over and provide for us. With high hopes for the future, we celebrate on this third day of October, 2005, the 85th Anniversary of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Catholic Church; Our Legacy Continues...

