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Chapter 3

A First Love: USA Spiritans and African Americans

Introduction

From the very beginning of the USA Province in 1872, Spiritan missionary solicitude always focused on African Americans, the sons and daughters of Africa then recently freed from slavery.¹ This mission was a first love.

Already during his time at St. Sulpice, Fr. Libermann expressed concern for enslaved Africans in the United States, knowing their plight via two of his brothers who emigrated to America, one to New Orleans.² The Venerable Father laid out a plan for the evangelization of African peoples, which always included education adapted to the needs of the people.³ Evangelical and educational outreach to African Americans followed the pattern of action by Spiritans in Africa.

Fr. Libermann recognized the need for a vibrant church with indigenous clergy. Burke writes, “Foreign missionaries might plant the seed, but the harvesting would be done by the local people. From the beginning the basic structures had to be established to train leaders for the various tasks to promote integral development.”⁴ Over the years, the generalate encouraged Black vocations in the United States, but ended up following the cautious approach of the Josephites which fell somewhere between prudence and paternalism. Meanwhile, the

1. Spiritans’ racial identities are mentioned only to illuminate progressive change in the world and specifically in our Order.

2. Henry J. Koren, *The Serpent and The Dove: A History of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost in the United States 1745–1984* (Pittsburgh: Spiritus Press, 1985).

3. Christy Burke, *No Longer Slaves: The Mission of Francis Libermann 1802–1852* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2010).

4. *Ibid.*, p. 87



8th grade, St. James, Alexandria, LA, 1911–1986

Black faithful “obstinately clung to a faith that gave them substance, even when it did not always make them welcome.”⁵

More than 150 years ago, the end of the Civil War freed four million enslaved Africans. The Thirteenth through Fifteenth Amendments to the United States Constitution guaran-

teed their liberty, citizenship, and right to participate in political, economic, and civic life. Then came the Reconstruction years that witnessed a concerted effort to restrict these rights through “Jim Crow” laws and suppressing the Black vote and voice. Only 100 years later, in the 1960s, did the Civil Rights Movement embrace Jesus’s prescription of non-violence to unravel the legal shenanigans of the segregationists. Laws may have changed, but racial attitudes persisted. In 2021, America still confronts racism and inequality that cry out for healing and reconciliation!

This reflection on US Spiritans and African Americans comes from the participant observation of one ordained to the diaconate in 1978 by the first African American Catholic bishop, the Most Rev. Harold Perry, SVD, then Auxiliary Bishop of New Orleans. With Father Michael Carr, CSSp, as pastor, and Fr. Thomas Byrne, CSSp, assisting, I began my tenure at Immaculate Heart of Mary parish in Lake Charles, Louisiana—a parish of young black families, energized by the efforts of Bro. Gregory Broussard, CSSp, an African American from New Iberia, who was on fire with love for the Lord.

In 1978, on a grant from the Campaign for Human Development, a white Spiritan, Fr. Tom Byrne, established a local chapter of the Association of Communities Organized for Reform Now (ACORN) to serve the Black community. Immaculate Heart became the center of neighborhood improvement for the neglected North Lake Charles area. A significant movement was the

5. See Steven Ochs, *Desegregating the Altar: The Josephites and the Struggle for Black Priests, 1871–1960*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990); Cyprian Davis, OSB, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States*, (New York: Crossroad, 1990).

“Christmas March” staged on City Hall to demonstrate the need for improvements in the area. Fellow marchers and parishioners related that such an event would not have gone so smoothly in the very recent past. Marching beside these brave individuals underscored for me the importance of Black churches, where congregants could and did speak their minds—for “the establishment,” was always a threat.

1872: Spiritan Refugees Arrive in Reconstruction America

Fr. Joseph Strub arrived on these shores in 1872 as the superior of the German Spiritans who came as refugees from Chancellor Bismarck’s *Kulturkampf*.⁶ They joined other German settlements along the Ohio River in Ohio and Kentucky. The region’s bishops welcomed these Spiritans and readily assigned them, individually, to scattered communities. This was neither conducive to religious life nor to cohesion in a new land. Fr. Strub was forced to pull the confreres back to Pittsburgh and, later, to move out onto the frontier, to develop the St. Joseph Colony in Arkansas.

Arkansas was part of the Deep South where, prior to the Civil War, Catholics made up perhaps 6% of the population, concentrated near New Orleans and Baltimore. Following the war, the Catholic Church in the South generally accommodated the inequalities of the local society, accepting Jim Crow inequities well into the mid-twentieth century. When allowed to attend Mass, Black Catholics were often relegated to segregated seating in the back of the church or in the choir loft. They were last in line for Holy Communion, or the white priest went to the segregated area; they had to yield to White penitents in the confession line. No wonder Blacks yearned for a church and a priest of their own!

In the 1870s, travel from Little Rock to Fort Smith was serviced by a new railroad which offered land for settlers who would presumably become future customers. The St. Joseph Colony that Fr. Strub built up with the help of the railroad was fifteen miles wide by seventy-five miles long on either side of the tracks and north of the Arkansas River. This was virgin land, partly forested, requiring the efforts of family and community working together.

Fr. Strub is often heralded for attracting Germans and Alsatians to the wilds

6. Bismarck’s conflict with the papacy from 1872 to 1887 over control of schools and church appointments.

of Arkansas. Not so well known is that he also welcomed Black farmers from Tennessee and assigned them land between Conway and Morrilton. Their communities of Plumerville and Menifee still exist. According to Koren, in Strub's eye, the whole idea of a colony of immigrants in Arkansas was intimately linked to the mission among the Blacks: "Without a work among the Blacks, I would hardly dare to found a colony so far away from our headquarters in Pittsburgh."⁷ Strub's zeal for Black justice grew from his youthful work as a missionary in Africa, where he graduated from Africa's oldest major seminary in Senegal. The Spiritans ordained their first black priests⁸ in Paris in 1842, assigned them to Senegal, and opened a minor seminary, then a major one in 1857.

In Arkansas, a Brother's Novitiate established at Monastery Ridge near Morrilton in 1879 admitted two Black postulants the same year. They did not persevere. Neither did the novitiate; after three successive tornadoes devastated the property, the novitiate was closed in 1884 and its remaining Brothers moved to Pittsburgh. Over the years, Spiritans opened parishes and schools in the region: Good Shepherd Church and School served African Americans in Conway, others opened in Fort Smith, Helena and Hot Springs.

Meanwhile, back in Pittsburgh, Spiritans were directing their attention to African American neighborhoods. With the assistance of the Mercy Sisters, Fr. Patrick McDermott, a staff member of Holy Ghost College (now Duquesne University), began St. Benedict the Moor parish and school in Pittsburgh (1888). Aided by St. Katherine Drexel, the next year he began St. Peter Claver, Philadelphia.

Planting the Kingdom: Hope and Threat

The people of the Greenwood District of Tulsa, Oklahoma, probably never thought of themselves as a threat. "The Black Wall Street" was a neighborhood of prosperous African American homes, businesses, and schools. Unknown to inhabitants, their success was viewed as a total aberration by jealous and envious Whites. Rumors of a black man attacking a white woman set off a murderous two days of violence in 1921. Thirty-five city blocks became charred wreckage, 800 victims were treated for injuries. The official death totals of twenty-six black

7. Koren, *The Serpent and the Dove*, 119.

8. Ochs, *Desegrating the Altar*, 53.

and ten white citizens were vastly understated. An estimated 300 black citizens were killed and buried in unmarked graves only now, in 2021, being unearthed! No one was ever prosecuted. Designated a “riot,” insurers paid no restitution. For 100 years, as horrific as the story was, the massacre was “hushed up.” It was only in 2001 that an official Race Riot Commission was formed to look into the tragedy. It took twenty more years for officials to finally confirm the rumors of mass graves.

Five years after the massacre Spiritans rode into Tulsa to help in the building of the Kingdom of God! A local diocesan priest, Fr. Heirling, pastor of what is now Holy Family Cathedral, had opened his church to protect, house, and feed 400 victims of the rioters. With memories of the tragedy fresh in mind, Fr. Heirling helped Fr. James McGuire, CSSp, and later, Fr. Dan Bradley, CSSp, to establish St. Monica’s Church and School in the ashes of the Greenwood District. In the face of threats from the Ku Klux Klan, Frs. Robert Wall, Tim Murphy, and Jim Maguire arrived to establish Uganda Martyrs in Okmulgee, St. Peter Claver in Oklahoma City, and later St. Augustine in Muscogee. The Sisters of the Holy Ghost from San Antonio taught in the schools.

Despite the anti-Catholic religious prejudice of the general populace and in the face of outright threats to body and property by white supremacists, hopeful Spiritans continued to plant the seed of the Catholic faith. Eventually Spiritans would staff six parishes, ten missions, and three schools across Eastern Oklahoma. The pattern of Spiritans arriving and living among what were initially very small communities of African Americans and building them into communities of faith who sacrificed to educate their children was repeated across the South.



St. Katherine Drezel

Seats of Faith and Knowledge

As early as 1870, the Congregation accepted to open a mission to serve Black people in Beaufort, South Carolina, but the Franco-Prussian War curtailed it. Spiritans began their long-lasting ministry to African Americans in the North, in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Detroit, Dayton, and New York City. Mother

Katherine Drexel⁹ was largely responsible for funding the growth of many of the parishes. She and her sister, Louise Morrell, were foundational in directing the attention of the American hierarchy to Black people.

Along with the establishment of parishes in Arkansas and Oklahoma, the decades of 1910 and 1920 witnessed an enormous wave of new parishes in southern states, from South Carolina, North Carolina, Alabama, to Virginia. Some years on, funds from Mother Drexel and her sister assisted the development and maintenance of a military school for Black youth, St. Emma Military Academy in Powhatan, Virginia. The Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament ran a boarding school for girls, St. Frances de Sales Academy, just across the river. Fr. Egbert Figaro, CSSp, an African American of Trinidadian background, was transferred to St. Emma in 1958 where he served during fourteen years of the school's great years. Social and political realities of the Vietnam years brought the idea of military schools to a close and St. Emma closed in 1970.

The "crown jewel" of Spiritan African American ministry is in Louisiana. In 1911, we began the first parish in Louisiana in Alexandria, St. James Memorial Catholic Church. Our parishes, designated ethnic parishes, were often situated right down the street or across the cemetery. St. Paul's in Lafayette, in the heart of Cajun Country followed, attached to the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist. The baptismal register of the cathedral contains a reference to the tower bells, one donated by St. Paul's parishioners.

In time, more than forty Louisiana parishes and missions would be started, basically north and south along the Red River from Shreveport to Avoyelles and St. Landry parishes, and east and west along I-90, from Lake Charles to New Orleans. Four major Black high schools, affiliated with Xavier University of New Orleans, were started: St. Edwards in New Iberia, Holy Ghost in Opelousas, Sacred Heart in Lake Charles, and St. James in Alexandria. Holy Ghost Parish in Opelousas would long be distinguished as the largest (by population) African American parish in the country.

Priests of Our Own

The first African American priest in our time is the Servant of God, Fr. Augustine Tolton, who was never accepted into an American seminary, was educated and ordained in Rome, 1886. Despite his ordination and his priestly standing,

9. Foundress of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament for African American and Native American Peoples.

Fr. Tolton endured tremendous discrimination. Cultural norms and racism stymied opportunities for parish ministries for Black priests, including our own, Fr. Joseph C. Burgess, CSSp, ordained 1907 in Paris. The idea that a White person would kneel for absolution from a black priest was too much for people to take. Fr. Burgess spent most of his priestly life teaching at Cornwells, with a short stint assisting the American Marines in Haiti. He died serving the People of God in Inkster parish, Michigan.

Although, Cornwells Heights originally welcomed African American seminarians, the Spiritans soon decided to accept the model of the Josephites and to decline Black vocations. The Josephites opted out, as they found that Black priests were unable to find a place to minister, especially in the American South. Understandably, Black Catholics and their leaders challenged the decision of the Josephites and the Spiritans.

In the meantime (1923), German Divine Word Fathers developed a seminary in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, where Black men could become priests and serve their community. Thanks to Bishop Jules Jeanmard, Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish, Lafayette, was formed in 1934 from the Spiritan parish of St. Paul's as their place of ministry. Over the years, Bay St. Louis became the seminary from which most Black priests and bishops were prepared to lead American Catholicism into a new life. Auxiliary Bishop Herold Perry, SVD, who ordained me deacon, was from our Sacred Heart parish of Lake Charles. Many Black SVDs say they would have joined the Spiritans given the chance.

Some African Americans did join our community. Fr. John Burgess studied with the Josephites but was ordained a Spiritan. Fr. Joyner and Fr. Albert Benny McKnight were from St. Mark's in New York. Fr. Figaro was from Atlantic City, NJ, and was the Commander at St. Emma Military School when it closed. Fr. Lawrence Cunningham joined the Trappist Abbey at Moncks Corner, South Carolina, in 1960. Fr. Freddy Washington, hails from our parish in Charleston and has also served in East Africa. Brother Gregory Broussard was from our parish, St. Edwards, in New Iberia, Louisiana.



Fr. McKnight receives Honorary Doctorate,
Duquesne University, 1993

Fr. McKnight was appointed pastor of the parish in Delcambre, Louisiana in mid-1960s. He quickly grasped that economic and political empowerment was necessary for African American development. He had spent a decisive formative period learning cooperative economics in Kibbutzes in Israel and in Antigonish, Nova Scotia. He saw cooperative economics, based in African communal living, as the key to progress for African Americans. The Southern Consumer Cooperative, later based in Lake Charles, was the fruit of his efforts. Bearded and graying, but always a formidable presence, Father McKnight observed, "The thing that has really amazed me in this whole self-help activity is the hostility that is created and how people feel threatened when poor people start helping themselves. We've had motions passed in the Louisiana State Legislature to investigate us, the DA has raided our offices and seized out books."¹⁰ He was Executive Director of the newly formed National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus, later pastor of Holy Ghost Church, Opelousas. He formed Black Unity and Spiritual Togetherness (BUST) as a means of continuing the cooperative approach among all black people. BUST continues even after his death!

Women Doing Incredible Things

Spiritans were vastly aided in mission by women, both religious and laity. The two oldest American Black religious communities of women taught where Spiritans pastored. The first Black religious community in the US, the Oblate Sisters of Providence of Baltimore, was founded in 1829. Two devout West Indian women, Elizabeth Lange (later Mother Mary Lange) and Maria Balas, formed a Catholic Sisterhood to assist in the education of Haitian children in Baltimore. Spiritans would serve with them in Charleston, South Carolina. In 1852, Venerable Henriette Delille, a free woman of color, established the Holy Family Sisters of New Orleans. Their schools and religious example in towns like Opelousas and Marksville provided fertile ground for the growth of the Catholic faith in the Black community in the 19th and twentieth centuries.

The pivotal role of St. Katherine Drexel in the work of Spiritans for African Americans was mentioned above. She founded Xavier University of New Orleans in 1915. Two years later, a Normal School was added for the training of teachers, one of the few career fields then open for blacks. The influence of Xavier graduates on the establishment and maintenance of schools in parishes across the South cannot be underestimated.

10. Quotation from Fr. McKnight's Reminiscences at the Co-Op.

All the teachers and evangelizers were not necessarily vowed religious! Many were graduates of Catholic schools including the Normal School of Xavier University of New Orleans. Ms. Eleanor Figaro was a 19-year-old recent graduate of St. Paul High School in Lafayette when in September, 1908, she stepped off the train and the next day began teaching in what would become Sacred Heart School. Black Catholics in Lake Charles, prompted by the pastor of Immaculate Conception Church, secured the property for the school, built later with the assistance of Saint Drexel. “First the school and then the parish” was part of the pattern for Spiritan growth in the African American community and followed across the South. In 1919, Fr. Anthony Hackett, CSSp, arrived to found the parish, followed by the Blessed Sacrament Sisters to staff the school. Today, many of the schools and parishes have transitioned. Parish life takes place where the people are and so many of the old parishes are a shell of their former life. Younger Black Catholics have moved out of their old neighborhoods on to parishes in the suburbs and the exurbs.

Exploring the dynamic of Black Catholic parish life is a focus of advanced study today. Dr. Kathleen Dorsey Bellow is Director of the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University. Originally from Baltimore, she is a direct relation of Fr. John Henry Dorsey, one of the first African American priests ordained in the United States, in 1902. She married and settled at Immaculate Heart of Mary parish, Lake Charles. In the 1980s she became very involved in the pastoral growth of Spiritan-staffed IHM parish. Today, her work advances the pioneering work of young Ms. Eleanor Figaro, responding to the needs of the Black Catholic community.

Direction for Today

Throughout the past two decades, despite the election of the first African American president, racial tension has been palpable throughout the country—heated by the tragic encounters of Black men with the police (Michael Brown, Eric Garner, George Floyd) and sometimes by the actions of white, neighborhood vigilante “security guards” (Trayvon Martin, Ahmaud Arbery). The police have mostly faced minimal official scrutiny. Today, it is tragic but necessary for African American parents to have “The Talk” with their young children, especially their sons, stressing the need to exercise restraint, patience, courtesy, and obedience whenever confronted by a police officer.

A wealth of data reveals the level of inequality between Black and White on almost every scale—social, educational, and economic. More than anything

else in recent history, the murder of George Floyd while Officer Derek Chauvin knelt on his neck for more than nine minutes made clear to most people in this country, and the world, the danger of “Living While Black in America!”

Less than 100 years after the Civil War, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and a wide coalition shed their blood, sweat, and tears in the Civil Rights Movement that yielded the Voter’s Rights Bill. There followed many legislative, judicial, and executive actions that brought Jim Crow laws and other officially sanctioned discriminatory practices to an end. Sadly, sixty years after Dr. King’s martyrdom, we have not, as a nation, come to terms with the legacy of slavery, Reconstruction, lynchings, Jim Crow, “Red Lining,” voter suppression, and inequities in education and job opportunities.

Spiritans: Reconciliation Begins in the Heart

Spiritans, despite their long experience of ministry in the African American community, are not vaccinated against conscious or unconscious biases inherent in American history and culture. The Black Lives Matter movement, the trial of Officer Chauvin, and the constantly unfolding stories of injustices against Blacks made it sufficiently clear that Spiritans needed to come together and talk about our personal and collective response to the sin of racism. Thankfully, last year, technology provided the means to do so. The US Province, joined by confreres and Lay Spiritans from the Canadian and Trans-Canadian provinces took part in a Zoom enabled “Spiritans Town Hall on Racism.” Participants joined across state and national boundaries for the opportunity to share in prayer, to listen to the prepared remarks from confreres, and to engage in spirited conversation. One of our conclusions after the last session was that *there would be no final conclusion to our conversation!* We will need to continue some form of Town Hall model so that, as a community, we may more readily identify and confront racism in our midst and thereby more truthfully be able to ask for the grace to deepen our conversion to the Lord and his Kingdom.

This past June, in 2021, the US Province met in general assembly. We were most fortunate to have Bishop Fernand Cheri, OFM, Auxiliary Bishop of New Orleans, present the keynote address. A musician, he begins and ends his talks with song, often one of the old Negro Spirituals. He led us swinging and singing, “If anybody asks you who I am, tell ‘em I’m a child of God!” In his address,

the bishop reminded us that the waters of Baptism make real the perpetuation of the Incarnation for all time. When we receive Baptism, we are to reflect Christ and help to perpetuate his mission in the world. We cannot bear his name and at the same time ignore his mission. When we reject anyone, the bishop reminded us, we reject Him. We do this when, as Christians, we judge others by “the fallacious scientific concept of multiple races and hierarchical structures based on the amount of pigmentation or lack thereof in the human skin,” adding that, “Structural racism is the most insidious attack on the most profound purpose of creation!” The bishop continued, “Racism is the ultimate repudiation of the creative wisdom of God and the most profound and devastating assault on the redemptive work of God expressed in the Incarnation of the Divine Son!” He called on the Catholic Church to examine how the US focuses so much attention on one race in the absence of similar concern for African Americans.

Conclusion

We still serve in the African American community in New York, Baltimore, Houston, Dayton, Arkansas, and Virginia.

I recommend that we need to not just know our story but have it researched. Spiritans who have served in African American parishes are diminishing in number—let us hear their stories and the stories of those who worked with them while they are still alive.¹¹ Let us encourage doctoral dissertations on Spiritan African American mission from History, Sociology, and Political Science students.

African American parish life is changing particularly as the young people attend more mainstream colleges and move to newer parts of cities. The Congregation needs to maintain our relationship with the national Black Catholic offices, BUST, and other organizations promoting equality.

Finally, Spiritans need to promote healing. *Open Wide Our Hearts*¹² calls for such a moment of atonement, a national process of reconciliation. In the late twentieth century, the Catholic Church in Chile and Argentina was formative

11. The USCCB pastoral, *Open Wide Our Hearts*, completely overlooked Spiritan historic presence in the Black Catholic community, mentioning only the Josephites and Divine Word Missionaries!

12. *Ibid.*, 10.

in the development of the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions that helped bring healing to families and the nation. This model would later be used in South Africa to great effect. Would the United States have the moral strength to call upon our nation to reflect on and bring healing to the sin of racism?

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