

St. Joseph Mission and the Integration of Holy Family Parish
By Ellen Skerrett

In the 1920s, members of the Catholic Instruction League, headquartered at St. Ignatius High School, began reaching out to African-American families who had settled in the Maxwell Street district south of Roosevelt Road. In addition to organizing catechism classes for children attending local public schools, CIL instructors opened a Vacation School in 1928 at 13th and Loomis Streets. The site was a former branch school of Holy Family parish, known as St. Joseph's, which had been built in 1876.

The Jesuits' decision to reopen St. Joseph's as a Colored Mission in 1933 rather than integrate Holy Family parish reflected segregated practices of the day. African-American "Cradle Catholics" from New Orleans who had moved north in search of a better life in Chicago found they were unwelcome in Catholic churches and schools on the Near West Side. These families traveled far distances to attend Mass in the black parishes of St. Elizabeth, Corpus Christi, or St. Anselm on the South Side.

While St. Joseph Mission testified to the realities of "Jim Crow" in Chicago, Rev. Arnold Garvy, SJ, the first pastor, and Sister Melitona Mach, CSFN, the first superior, were indefatigable in their efforts to serve the spiritual needs of African American families. The Polish-American Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth regarded their commitment to St. Joseph's as a "high honor," even though it meant living in modest quarters without adequate heat in the winter.

Father Garvy (1868-1950) was born in Holy Family parish and named after its legendary founder, Arnold Damen, S.J.. As a librarian at Loyola University he compiled a “Negro bibliography” to aid African-American students and by 1945, his project included 24,000 entries. Fr. Garvy was not shy about tapping his relatives and friends for contributions to St. Joseph Mission. Fund raising efforts included constant rounds of card parties and appeals for donations, food, and clothing, especially from wealthy families and students at Sacred Heart School on North Sheridan Road.

St. Joseph students also did their part through talent shows that combined classical pieces with gospel music. Among the school’s most famous graduates was Bobby Short (1924-2005), who became an internationally-known pianist in New York City.

So convinced was Father Garvy of the essential work being done at St. Joseph’s Mission that in 1938 he encouraged Dewey Jones, an African-American resident of Hull-House, to visit. Afterwards, the priest recorded the remarks he made to Jones and members of the Works Project Administration (WPA) tour in his diary.

Efforts to end segregation in Chicago’s Catholic churches, schools, and hospitals gained momentum in the 1950s, but it was the tragic fire at Our Lady of the Angels parish on the far West side on December 1, 1958, that ultimately led to the closure of St. Joseph’s Mission. The deaths of 92 children and three Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVMs) shocked the city and nation and resulted in new stringent fire codes. As a result, the 1876 brick chapel and school of St. Joseph’s was shuttered and its students

marched in procession to Holy Family School where they joined Italian-American children in classrooms taught by the BVMs. The integration of the parish school also ended the custom of racially separate First Communion ceremonies.

At the same time that plans were under way in 1959 for a new grammar school in Holy Family parish, the Jesuits of St. Ignatius High School were debating whether to build a new high school at Harrison and Morgan Streets in the city's newest urban renewal district. Although those plans never materialized, a modern grammar school was completed at 1029 S. May Street and dedicated by Albert Cardinal Meyer on September 16, 1962.

As Mario DiPaolo (father of Mario, SICP 2007; Davina, 2010; and Marco, 2012) recounts in the recent history of Holy Family parish, in the sixth grade he became best friends with the late Steven Broussard, whose family had deep roots in St. Joseph Mission. By the time they graduated in 1962, however, their neighborhood was experiencing rapid racial change as well as the displacement of families to make way for the new campus of the University of Illinois. Ironically, their friendship outlasted the "new school" on May Street that was razed.

Seventy-five years ago it would have seemed unlikely that former members of St. Joseph Colored Mission would transfer their deep love and affection for their small chapel and school at 13th and Loomis to Holy Family parish. But that is precisely what happened.

Not only did African- Americans breathe new life into the old Jesuit parish, but they

claimed the 1860 Gothic church as their own. And none fought harder to prevent Holy Family's demolition in the 1980s than Broussard, who graduated from Northwestern University Law School and became a criminal defense attorney and president of the Parish Council. Stricken by a brain tumor, he died in 2005 and was buried from Holy Family in a ceremony that brought together hundreds of old and new parishioners.