

## RESEARCH NOTE

### FROM MISSION TO PARISH: ST. PETER CLAVER CATHOLIC CHURCH, LEXINGTON, KENTUCKY<sup>1</sup>

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The sweeping economic and demographic changes that have transformed the post-World War II South into a diverse, economically vital region have, among other consequences, prompted the marked growth of the Catholic Church in that region (Webster, 2000). In Lexington, Kentucky, no fewer than eight parishes, all of them built in the city's suburbs, have been created over the past 50 years, and there are plans for more in the near future (Weglicki, 1993). Not surprisingly, given American Catholicism's European heritage, the vast majority of worshipers attending these parishes are White. In light of these trends, St. Peter Claver<sup>2</sup> church, an inner-city, century-old African American parish in Lexington, offers a point of contrast that illustrates the contours of the evolving verities of race and religion in the South.

In addition to constituting a minority among Catholics, the Black parishioners of St. Peter Claver are also a minority among Black Christians more generally, most of whom belong to Protestant denominations (Maring, 1967; Lincoln and Mayima, 1990; Raboteau, 1995). Further differentiating St. Peter Claver is the fact that, unlike other Catholic parishes, which are spatially delimited and must draw their parishioners from within a given geographic area, St. Peter Claver is considered by ecclesiastical authorities to be an "ethnic" parish and, as a result, has no spatial boundaries. Rather, St. Peter Claver draws its parishioners from throughout the diocese. Since almost all of its parishioners claim some African American ancestry, the parish indeed has "boundaries," albeit ones associated with racial identity rather than with lines on a diocesan map. Finally, St. Peter Claver differentiates itself from other churches in the South—Catholic and Protestant—inasmuch as the presence of a thriving Black parish in a White-dominated organization contradicts the acts of personal and institutional racism that mar the history of Catholicism in the United States (Lucas, 1970; Zielinski, 1988; Davis, 1990; Ochs, 1990; Woods, 1993).

*BLACK AND WHITE IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH.* As of 1990, the 2 million black Catholics in the United States accounted for nearly 10% of all African Americans who attended church (Davis, 1990; Greeley, 1990). Although many of these 2

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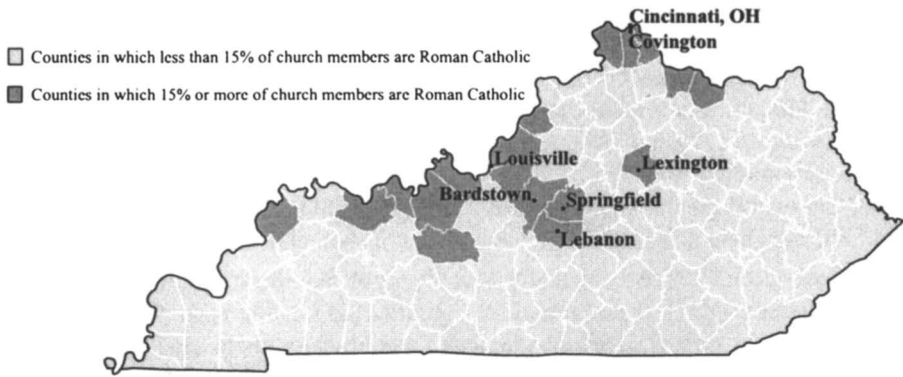


Fig. 1. Concentrations of Roman Catholics in Kentucky.

million are recent immigrants from Haiti and the Caribbean, Catholicism has a long history in the African American community, stretching back to colonial times (Maring, 1967; Miller and Wakely, 1983; Miller, 1988; Davis, 1990; Raboteau, 1995). While small in comparison to Protestant denominations, Catholic slaveholders in Louisiana, Maryland, South Carolina, and Kentucky established Catholicism among their African slaves. In Kentucky, Black Catholics were initially concentrated in the Bluegrass region as a result of the migration of Maryland planters and slaves who arrived in the late 18th century in search of fecund soils (Bowles, 1976). This spatial distribution contrasts with that of European Catholics who immigrated to the Ohio River Valley in the 19th century, settling in the manufacturing centers of Louisville, Covington, and Cincinnati (Fig. 1).

Throughout the 19th century, the number of Black Catholics in the United States remained small. For instance, immediately following the Civil War and Emancipation, there were less than 50,000 Black Catholics in the United States (Davis, 1990). In response, Catholic leaders established charitable and missionary organizations to attract African Americans to Catholicism (Ochs, 1990). These evangelization efforts, however, were undermined by racism: while Catholic leaders saw in African Americans a remarkable missionary opportunity, they considered Blacks unfit for leadership positions within the church. The informal policy of denying Blacks access to the priesthood illustrates this tension (Davis, 1990; Lucas, 1970; Ochs, 1990). In the context of recent European immigrants striving to secure jobs, housing, political influence, and social status, often at the expense of Blacks, Asians, and Mexicans, Catholic clergy argued that the laity would not respect African American priests. Confronted with the opposition of nativist political forces, White Catholics in both the North and the South consistently supported White supremacy in an attempt to secure their place in society (Roediger, 1991; Ignatiev,

1995). Black priests, who continue to be small in number, were not ordained to any significant degree until after World War II.

Nevertheless, some African Americans did join the church and actively protested racism within it. For instance, annual meetings of African American Catholics convened between 1889 and 1894, and the creation in 1909 of a national Black fraternal organization, the Knights of St. Peter Claver, marked significant moments of activism. Through these initiatives African American Catholics, who numbered 100,000 in 1910, sought to make their churches a source of community strength (Davis, 1990).

During the 20th century, and especially since the Second Vatican Council of 1963, the number of African American Catholics has steadily risen. Inspired by the Civil Rights movement, African American Catholics have challenged racism within the Church and have assumed more leadership positions. One result has been pastoral letters issued by the American bishops on the issue of racism (Nolan, 1983, 1984). In these letters, the bishops have acknowledged the existence of discrimination within the Catholic Church as well as the need to allow African Americans to foster their own identity within the Roman Catholic tradition. Still, the challenge of being Black in a White-dominated church has continued. St. Peter Claver's journey from mission to parish vividly illustrates these struggles.

*THE MISSIONARY ORIGINS OF ST. PETER CLAVER PARISH, 1887-1942.* The early days of St. Peter Claver parish were marked by its origins as a missionary effort undertaken by the Diocese of Covington (Ryan, 1954; St. Peter Claver Parish, 1987). In the wake of the Civil War, southern urban centers like Lexington were the destination of increasing numbers of rural African Americans (Davis and Donaldson, 1975; Groves and Muller, 1975). Lexington was popular, given its promise of jobs, an extant community, and the protection offered by Federal troops and a Freedman's Bureau office (Kellogg, 1982; Schein, 1994). Lexington's Black migrants lived largely in segregated neighborhoods on the city's outskirts and, by the early 1890s, made up 40% of the population. One of these neighborhoods, Smithtown, was chosen in 1887 as the site for a mission church and school (Fig. 2). A two-story, red-brick building, St. Peter Claver, was erected at the intersection of 4th and Jefferson Streets in Smithtown. Until a separate church building was opened on the same block in 1948, this was the center of Lexington's African American Catholic worship and education.

During its mission phase, the number of Black converts to Catholicism remained very small—less than a dozen in any year.<sup>3</sup> In comparison, the White Catholic population in Lexington was growing rapidly and Black Protestant churches were thriving (Lincoln and Mayima, 1990; Ryan 1954; Weglicki, 1993). Several factors were responsible for the failure to attract converts. Prominent among these factors was racism on the part of clergy. A report on the progress of the school from the diocese's bishop is illustrative of the White clergy's paternalistic attitudes toward Blacks:

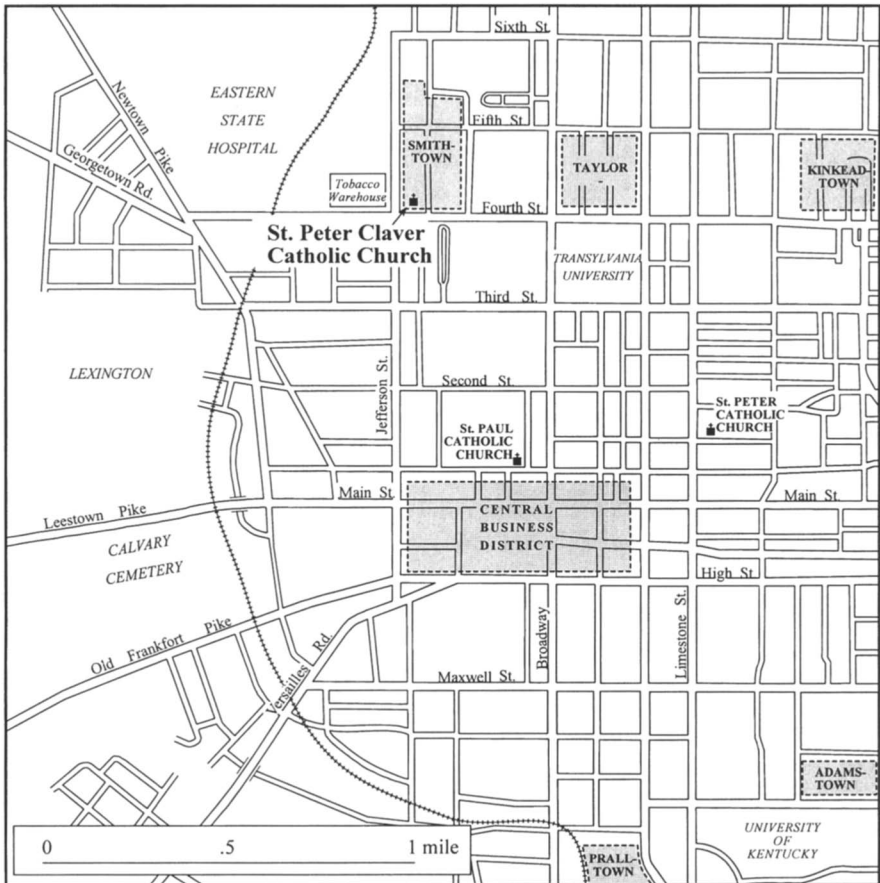


Fig. 2. Downtown Lexington, depicting St. Peter Claver in relation to Lexington's other downtown Roman Catholic churches, the central business district, and historically Black neighborhoods.

By working on its merits, she [the Catholic Church] will slowly gain a hold on the black population and finally bring it into the fold. Their listlessness and love of pleasure are, of course, great obstacles, but it seems to be dawning upon them at last who their real benefactors are (Maes, 1905 p. 81DY20).

While typical of the time and place, comments such as these suggest the degree to which Catholic clergy blamed Blacks for the mission's failure. As a result, the

church and school labored under the suspicion on the part of Blacks that Catholicism was "White man's religion."

Further contributing to the mission's failure was the opposition of Lexington's Black Protestant leaders to the church school. The school provided a popular alternative to Lexington's underfunded public schools for Blacks (Fouse, 1937). Shortly after opening, the school had attracted 200 children, a fact which pleased Catholic clergy but was noticed with dismay by African American religious leaders. The priest in charge of the school reported this opposition to his bishop:

When school had been three months in operation, the colored Ministers, urged and encouraged by others, held weekly meetings and passed resolutions to the effect that parents should be compelled to withdraw their children. The Sisters say that this procedure has had some effect, inasmuch as the average daily attendance is now one hundred and forty (Berry, 1889).

This opposition continued and the number of pupils declined significantly until the school eventually closed (Ryan, 1954). While a small minority of Lexington's African American community joined the church or participated in its activities, the majority worshipped and educated their children elsewhere.

*THE EMERGENCE OF AN AFRICAN AMERICAN CATHOLIC IDENTITY IN LEXINGTON, 1942-1996.*<sup>4</sup> St. Peter Claver's transformation from an imposed mission to a thriving parish commenced with the migration of African American Catholics from rural Kentucky to Lexington during and immediately following World War II. Since they were not welcome at Lexington's White parishes, they joined St. Peter Claver. Most of the new parishioners came from central Kentucky, primarily from the towns of Lebanon, Springfield, and Bardstown, the earliest centers of Catholicism in Kentucky (Fig. 1).

Life-long Catholics, trained in the church's catechism, these new parishioners invigorated the parish, bringing with them a sense that it was possible to be both Black and Catholic. Under the leadership of Rev. Frederick Bamberger and the nuns from the Congregation of the Divine Providence, St. Peter Claver school was reopened in 1942 and expanded in 1948 to include a high school curriculum. A 1946 church census counted 61 students enrolled for classes, most of whom lived in neighborhoods near the school, an increase in the number of baptisms and confirmations, and 76 families in the parish (Diocese of Covington, 1946; St. Peter Claver Parish, 1961-1996). This growth culminated in the dedication of a separate church building in 1948, further substantiating St. Peter Claver's status as a parish.

Though the parish and school were growing, St. Peter Claver still had to contend with its status as a small, Black parish in a large, predominantly White diocese. The difficulties of this situation became apparent during the integration of

Lexington's Catholic schools in the 1960s. Full integration of Lexington's Catholic schools was mandated by the bishop in 1966, over the vigorous protests of St. Peter Claver's parishioners who feared that they would lose a valuable community resource (Ackerman, 1967). The removal of the school from the neighborhood significantly decreased the parish's ability to serve the larger Black community. Parishioners continue to complain that the integrated Catholic high school, where their children are a distinct minority, was not as hospitable to blacks or Protestants. Coupled with the higher tuition and a cross-town commute, the net result was a marked decrease in attendance by African Americans.

Despite this setback, and at a time when other inner-city and Black parishes across the United States were closing, St. Peter Claver parish remained open through the 1970s and 1980s. When it was threatened with closure, parishioners fought to keep the parish alive. As the bishop explained in a letter seeking financial support for the parish, "While all parishes in the diocese are open to the blacks, they, by their own choice and insistence wish to retain their parish churches and centers in the larger populated areas" (Ackerman 1974).

Changes at St. Peter Claver since the mid-1980s demonstrate how far the parish has grown beyond its missionary roots. Supported by sympathetic parish priests, parishioners have fashioned a distinctly African American Catholic identity. Gospel music has been integrated into the mass and an African American Catholic hymnal has been adopted. The priest and the deacon wear mass vestments made from African kente cloth. Several of the statues within the church, including the crucifix, which in the past represented European figures, have been replaced with African figures. Significantly, a long-time parishioner became the church's permanent deacon in 1985, in the process becoming the first African American clergy member to serve at St. Peter Claver. As a result of these changes, which have increased the parish's profile among African Americans, there has been an increase in the number of families, from 75 in 1981 to 125 in 1995 (Johnson, 1995).

The parish has strengthened its connections to the broader African American community in recent years, particularly through the forging of new ties with other Black churches. In addition to participating in the Lexington Black Church Coalition, the parish participates in the annual Martin Luther King, Jr., march and takes part in interdenominational worship services (Hayden-Whitley, 1989; Moss, 1990). Parishioners from St. Peter Claver were a leading force in the creation of a committee to address the concerns of African American Catholics in the Dioceses of Lexington and Covington. Members of St. Peter Claver have attended national meetings of Black Catholics and formed a local chapter of the national Black Catholic fraternity, the Knights and Ladies of St. Peter Claver ("Chapter Organized," 1982). The parish hosts yearly revivals at which nationally known Black Catholics such as Rev. Cyprian Davis and Sister Thea Bowman have encouraged the parish in its quest to worship as African American Catholics (Schremly, 1987). At one such revival, Bowman stated that cultural differences in worship and spirituality should

be respected and nurtured as a strength within the Catholic Church (Clarke, 1985). At another, Davis spoke to the issue of difference and its impact on Black Catholic identities:

Black Catholics are a minority in a minority. Blacks who are not Catholic say we belong to a white Church; whites say we've just recently come to the Church. . . . We're no longer a mission people with a mission mentality who are poor, dependent and need others to lead us. We must take charge and be responsible for ourselves. We must take ownership of our Church. We're as much Catholic as anyone else (Clarke, 1986, p. 8).

The injunction, "We're no longer a mission people with a mission mentality . . .," was put into practice in 1993 by St. Peter Claver when it hosted the first African American mass held in the diocese. A small notice in the diocesan newspaper described it as follows:

A choir from Charlotte, NC, will participate. This will be an inspirational historical event, unique in nature and timely in delivery. . . . The wearing of ethnic garb is suggested. The purpose of the Mass will be to recognize the value of our different gifts and to produce spiritual enrichment and increase our sense of unity (First, 1993).

The parishioners of St. Peter Claver, through their actions, have demanded that the Catholic Church recognize the diversity of cultural traditions within Catholicism, as well as the strength and richness of this diversity. In so doing, the parishioners of St. Peter Claver have laid down an explicit challenge to the notion that to be Catholic is to be White.

*CONCLUSION.* The transformation of St. Peter Claver from mission to parish signals the progress of African American Catholics toward the creation of an institutional space that affirms their religious and racial identities. Since their inception, African American religious institutions have been a bulwark in their community's resistance to racism (Raboteau, 1995). As one historian of the Black church, C. Eric Lincoln, expressed it, to belong to an African American church in White America has always been a defiant statement of opposition to the state of racial oppression (Lincoln, 1990). The transformation of St. Peter Claver from a mission that held its Black parishioners in disdain into a parish church that affirms its African American heritage began in the late 19th century and continues as the 21st century opens. In the process, Black Catholics have accomplished what African Americans more generally have long done with Protestant denominations: the nurturing of independent and vibrant African American identities.

Throughout this transformation, St. Peter Claver's parishioners have faced the challenge of being a minority within a minority (Davis, 1990). In response to their White co-religionists, they resisted the notion that the only viable Catholic tradition is rooted in a European heritage. Among African American Protestants, they have sought to present Catholicism as a religious tradition which affirms their racial identity. In effect, they have declared to both White Catholics and Black Protestants that it is possible to be both "Black" and "Catholic."

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>This report could not have been written without the kind indulgence of the parishioners of St. Peter Claver, who patiently answered all of our questions. Interviews were conducted with the Chancellor of the Diocese of Lexington, current and former parish priests, the parish deacon and administrative assistant, current and former parishioners, and nuns who worked in the parish school. We also attended a number of parish events, including Mass and social gatherings. In the course of this research the following archives in Kentucky were consulted: Diocese of Covington (Erlanger), Diocese of Lexington (Lexington), Sisters of Divine Providence (Melbourne), Sisters of Charity of Nazareth (Nazareth), St. Peter Claver parish (Lexington), as well as St. Joseph's Society of the Sacred Heart (Baltimore, MD).

<sup>2</sup>St. Peter Claver, after whom the parish is named, was a Spanish priest who baptized slaves in the West Indies in the 17th century.

<sup>3</sup>Information regarding the size of St. Peter Claver's congregation, in the absence of a single definitive source, has been culled from the following sources: Ryan (1954); *St. Peter Claver Parish Directory*; and St. Joseph's Society of the Sacred Heart, Inc., *Parish Annual Report by Year, 1907–1919*.

<sup>4</sup>The information for this section is derived primarily from interviews conducted by the authors. Citing "Church law," the archivist at the Diocese of Covington barred access to any documents created since 1961.

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