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St. Peter Claver Church, Huntington, WV

by Sandra Clements (June 2019)

The history of St. Peter Claver Catholic Church is a rich one. With the permission of Archbishop John J. Swint, Monsignor John Newcomb, pastor of St. Joseph Church, petitioned the Most Precious Blood Fathers of St. Louis, Missouri to help establish a church in the black community. Monsignor Newcomb was motivated by a desire to see those first few parishioners, Mrs. Olivia S. Roberts, her daughters, Imalle and Merl, her son Paul and his granddaughter, Ferne Holley, enjoy a more active and fulfilling parish life. So, the church began as a 'mission' church on February 7, 1937 when Father Leo Landoll celebrated the first mass in a structure that at one time had been a boarding house. Several sites for the new mission were considered, before the property on Ninth Avenue and Fifteenth Street was finally selected with the help of Mr. John Holley, who knew the owner of the property, Traveler Smith. In keeping with his promise, John Holley became the first baptized member. His baptism was followed by those of Mrs. Alberta Dickenson, Mrs. Virginia Smith, Mrs. Vera Dickenson and Miss Pauline Dickenson. In the first year of Father Landoll's pastorate, the membership grew to thirty members. Soon after the parish was established, the upstairs was renovated to provide classrooms for a school serving grades one through eight. For twenty-five years the Palatine Missionary Sisters of St. Mary's Hospital convent taught hundreds of children. The school was open to children of all faiths. The children placed in the care of those first Sisters Pulcheria, Innocentia, Mary Agnes and Celine, would agree that the individual attention, sense of self-worth and motivation instilled in them by the Sisters helped them to mature and take their places in the field of medicine, education, law, engineering and business.

Father Landoll was very busy those first year years with renovations to the church and rectory and administering to all the parishioners, but he found time for the children. The students went to the rectory every morning, where Father Landoll taught them catechism. Father Landoll served the parish until June 1942, when he was succeeded by Father Jerome Wolf, who was pastor until June 1945. His successor was Father Jerome Hoepf. Father Hoepf soon became a very popular man in Huntington, known by Catholics and non-Catholics alike as 'Father Jerry.' Father Jerry's abilities as a carpenter, inventor and artist enable him and his assistant Brother Raymond, to embellish the church with many beautiful articles and much artistic handiwork, including the canopy over the altar. Father Hoepf held the pastorate for almost twelve years, until January 1957. After a very brief pastorate by Father E. B. Oberding, Father Vincent Parr became the new pastor in 1957. That same year the parish marked its Twentieth Anniversary. The parish had grown to seventy-five members and the school now enrolled more than 40 students under the tutelage

now of Sister Mary Ignatia and Annunciata. The end of Father Parr's brief pastorate caused a crisis. The Congregation of the Most Precious Blood Father decided that they could no longer supply priest to the Diocese of Wheeling, so St. Peter Claver mission was left without a resident pastor.

For two years Father Peter DeMeester served the mission from St. Joseph Church until in November of 1960 when Archbishop John J. Swint appointed him as the pastor and elevated the 'mission' to the status of a parish. For over fourteen years he led the parish to its greatest growth and development. He initiated classes for converts and led discussion groups to help parishioners through the new changes of Vatican II - some of the most sweeping changes at that time in the Catholic Church. He organized the Christian Mothers with Mrs. Arminthia Matney as the first president and the Holy Name Society with Mr. Robert Pendleton as the first president. Father DeMeester worked hard to encourage these group members to have parish activities and to participate in all deanery and diocesan meetings. He guided the parish through the changes of Vatican II and organized the first Parish Council with representation from all parish members. Under his pastorate, the parish school grew, and a parish hall/classroom was constructed to accommodate the increased enrollment. Sister Gottfreida and Roseann were joined by lay teachers Mrs. Miros and Mrs. Edna Ross. Following Civil Rights Legislation, the school was closed in June of 1964. The children were integrated with St. Joseph and Our Lady of Fatima Grade School. Father DeMeester visited both schools on a regular basis to make sure the parish students were being treated well. Father DeMeester served the parish until his retirement in 1974. With his retirement the parish was again without a pastor until Monsignor Burke from St. Joseph's petitioned Bishop Joseph Hodges to assign Father Patrick McDonough to the parish. Father Patrick McDonough, 'Father Pat' had a great interest in the youth, the poor and the needy of the community. With the help of the church youth, he renovated the, then empty classroom upstairs, to provide a gathering place for the youth. With the help of the diocese he began the Christian House, which distributed food and clothing to the community - The house was run by Mary Jones and Earl Smith. In January of 1980, Bishop Hodges granted \$100,000 to build a new \$180,000 church. Groundbreaking ceremonies were held in October 1980 and on September 9, 1981 Bishop Hodges led the Church Dedication Celebration. Father McDonough was well liked because of his amiable personality and humorous nature and many guests attended Mass just to hear him preach. Father Pat served the parish and community until he was transferred in 1984. Bishop Hodges appointed Father George Manjadi as administrator and he served the parish from 1984 until 1993. When Father Manjadi left the parish we no longer had a resident pastor - Father Andy Kranyc, from Sacred Heart Parish came to say Mass on Sundays and two sisters - Sister Patricia Burke and later Sister Katherine Shreve - lived in the rectory and carried out the day to day operations of the parish. Father Andy

was a historian and offered a series of lectures on the history of Blacks in the Catholic Church. In 2003 Father Livinus Uba became the Administrator of Sacred Heart and St. Peter Claver parishes. His African customs and elaborate dress were new to the city but his hard work and compassion for people was never in doubt. Under his guidance the parish received a grant for \$150,00 from Bishop Bransfield and the parish borrowed an additional \$100,00 in 2007 to build an addition to the parish hall which included accessible restrooms, a new kitchen and office space.

In 2011 Elizabeth Hoffman and community outreach group planted the community garden. The garden grows flowers, fruits and vegetables that can be enjoyed by anyone in the community and the raised beds make it possible for everyone to assist in the planting and harvesting.

In 2012 we renovated the parish hall replacing old wiring, insulating walls and laid a new floor. The parish undertook a brick campaign remembering past and current members to help pay for the renovation. In 2013 Father Uba was transferred to another parish and Father Charles McGinnis was named the administrator. Since we no longer had a resident priest and due to several break-ins and estimated costly repairs the decision was made to tear down the rectory in 2016. In 2018 Father Doug Ondeck was assigned as the new pastor of St. Peter Claver Parish carrying on and supporting the traditions and works of the parish. Our parish has been truly blessed and at this writing will be celebrating 82 years of serving the community.