

FROM ST. BENEDICT CENTER TO ST. JUSTIN-ST. MICHAEL: A BRIEF HISTORY OF BLACK CATHOLICS IN THE CITY OF HARTFORD, CT

In 1945, after World War II, Blacks began moving into Hartford from various points in the South, the Caribbean Islands and Cape Verde.

They came seeking jobs at defense plants, tobacco farms and fruit orchards. They were hopeful of finding a better way of life for themselves and their families.

At that time the established Roman Catholic parishes in the city were ethnic: German, Italian, Polish, French, Portuguese; and very territorial!

Two young Catholic priests, at St. Thomas Seminary in Bloomfield, Fr. John Loughlin and Fr. Robert McGrath, became aware of these newcomers to the City and made an effort to reach out to them. A few of them were Catholic but most of them were unchurched. They met with them, welcomed them, prayed with them and followed up with their concerns by petitioning Bishop Henry J. O'Brien to open a center for Black Catholics on Main Street in the North end of Hartford. Bishop O'Brien responded positively to their request and gave them his blessings as well as his financial support.

On March 5, 1948, St. Benedict Center was founded. Meanwhile Fr. Loughlin resigned his position as professor of Greek and Church History at St. Thomas Seminary and his directorship of the Diocesan Religious Education Program (CCD) to be priest director of the newly established St. Benedict Center. He was assisted by Fr. Robert J. McGrath.

For the next seventeen years Fathers Loughlin and McGrath served the Blacks well by welcoming them to The Center, preaching the Gospel, teaching and preparing converts to receive the Sacraments, counseling and advocating for them both spiritually and socially. Helping and empowering the members to deal with the challenges faced in their new environment.

“The Center,” that three-storied ‘home away from home’ was my first introduction to the Roman Catholic faith. It has been and still is the ‘mainstay’ in my life,” wrote Mrs. Evelyn Green, (now deceased) one of the over 1500 people who were Baptized during the outreach ministry at The Center.

Mrs. Joenette Franklin wrote: So many people came to The Center seeking personal counsel and spiritual fortitude. They were welcomed with Christian charity, respect and human dignity. In 1959, Fr. Laughlin left St. Benedict Center. Fr. McGrath remained at The Center and was joined by Fr. Leonard J. Tartaglia. The spirituality and social activities remained.

In 1962, the Archdiocese closed St. Benedict Center and transferred Fr. McGrath and Fr. Tartaglia to St. Michael Parish on Clark Street. St. Michael became the first racially integrated parish in the City of Hartford as the constituency of St. Benedict Center merged with St. Michael Parish. There were social issues at a time when St. Benedict Parishioners were moving into St. Michael Parish; St. Michael parishioners were moving out to suburban parishes. Fortunately, Fr. McGrath and Fr. Tartaglia had the leadership skills and abilities to appeal to both factions and bring about acceptance, truce and peace in the parish. The spirit of faith was translated into steady support for the advancement of the poor and dispossessed. The deep spirituality, the crusading commitments to faith-in-action and human rights, first fostered by St. Benedict Center in the era of Frs. Loughlin and McGrath continued at St. Michael Parish.

The Archdiocesan Synod of 1996, among many recommendations, called for an ongoing study of parishes throughout the Archdiocese of Hartford. In light of this call, Archbishop Daniel Cronin established the Committee for the Study of the Restructuring of Parishes. This committee was charged by the Archbishop to study, analyze, consult and recommend ways to reconfigure the spiritual, physical and financial resources of the Archdiocese

so that parish life would remain strong and vibrant in all areas of the Archdiocese now and well into the future.

On April 23, 2001, The Committee for the Restructuring of Parishes organized the Hartford Project North to study the parishes of St. Justin, St. Michael and Sacred Heart. Archbishop Cronin read the final report of the Hartford Project North Study and had Rev. Robert B. Vargo issue "Parishes Entrusted in Solidum," a document linking (clustering) St. Justin, St. Michael and Sacred Heart parishes. Under Archbishop Mansell, St. Peter was added. However, on December 8, 2008; St. Peter and Sacred Heart were de-clustered during the pastorate of Fr. Emmanuel Ihemedu.

During this time Fr. Ihemedu was pastor of the linked parishes of St. Justin and St. Michael and on the Archdiocesan Pastoral Planning Committee. He became aware of the new archbishop's plans relative to the linking, merging and closing of parishes in the archdiocese.

In his wisdom, he conducted a survey in both parishes to determine what the parishioners were thinking about the future of their parishes. Seeing the results of the survey, he appointed a proactive committee with the proposal to unite St. Justin and St. Michael as one family (merger).

The committee was composed of ten members and chaired by the presidents of each parish council. This committee met weekly addressing questions and concerns relative to the future of the two parishes and with the awareness of future plans of the Archdiocese to close and merger parishes throughout. The committee conducted a SWOT Analysis of the combined parishes as an opportunity for the participants to express what each believed to be the strengths, weakness, opportunities and threats relative to the way the Archdiocese ministers to Black Catholics. The information derived from this function assisted the committee and eventually the collaborative of the parishes to understand how it could be more effective in their efforts to move or merge the parishes.

The work of this committee became known as the Pastoral Planning Process met weekly sharing its findings collaboratively with both parishes.

After a year of study, planning and deliberations, a final decision was made by the Pastoral Planning Committee and approved by the collaborative to recommend the merger of St. Justin and St. Michael into one corporation to be known as St. Justin-St. Michael Parish. This proposal was submitted to a joint meeting of both parishes and was approved. Fr. Ihemedu then submitted the proposal for the merger of the two parishes to Archbishop Leonard P. Blair.

Archbishop Blair responded positively to the request to merge the two parishes. According to the Decree to Merger read by Fr. Ihemedu on Palm Sunday, April 9, 2017: "St. Michael Parish will be subsumed into St. Justin Parish and will be known hereafter as St. Justin – St. Michael Parish. This decree was read at the last Mass to be held at St. Michael Church. After the Mass, a pilgrimage of those assembled made their way to the new St. Justin-St. Michael Parish at 230 Blue Hills Avenue in Hartford. A Welcome Reception was awaiting the pilgrims at the Church.