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## In the Spirit of St. Peter Claver: Social Justice and Black Catholicism in San Antonio

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# In the Spirit of St. Peter Claver: Social Justice and Black Catholicism in San Antonio

Philip E. Lampe  
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## Abstract

The editors want to take the space reserved for the abstract to say that this is the final piece of research that Phil Lampe completed before his passing. We publish it here posthumously in tribute to Phil's tireless work for social justice, as editor of *Verbum Incarnatum*, as researcher of social-justice efforts in South Texas and Mexico, and as an educator committed to inspiring students to pursue justice in their lives outside the academy.

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One of the earliest dioceses to be created in Texas was the Diocese of San Antonio, which was established in 1867. Prior to the creation of the new diocese, San Antonio was part of the statewide Galveston diocese which had been created in 1847, but missions and churches in the area had existed long before that. However, prior to 1888 Black Catholics in San Antonio, unlike their white counterparts, had neither a church nor a school they could call their own. This situation was typical of the social climate at the time throughout the United States. Deprivation and segregation for slaves and, later, former slaves were widespread. In the early 1860's there were rumors of slave revolts which caused fear among segments of the general public resulting in the virtual elimination of many civil liberties and the suspension of due process for some people. These actions affected not only Blacks but some whites as well. Abolitionists and those suspected of being abolitionists were summarily expelled from the state.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> W. Marvin Dulaney, "African Americans," *Handbook of Texas Online*, accessed April 12, 2019, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/african-americans>.

Slavery continued in Texas longer than in other parts of the country. This is because slaves in Texas did not learn of the Emancipation Proclamation until June 19, 1865 when federal troops arrived in Galveston. The Proclamation was not well received by many whites, whether slaveholder or not. There was widespread fear that former slaves would seek revenge for the mistreatment they had endured at the hands of whites. This fear was especially common in parts of Texas which had large numbers of slaves, such as east Texas which had large cotton plantations. Harris County, which had a Black population of approximately sixty percent, felt the need to place strict controls on the newly freed slaves. Even areas with much smaller Black populations, such as San Antonio, followed suit. The city council of San Antonio imposed a nine o'clock curfew for all meetings held by Blacks.<sup>2</sup>

In San Antonio the size of the Black population rose from seven to sixteen percent between 1860 and 1870. However, residential segregation in the city was not complete at that time as can be seen in the percentage of Blacks in the various wards which ranged from twelve to nineteen percent.<sup>3</sup> During that same period Blacks reached their peak as a percentage of the total population of Texas, when it was approximately thirty percent.<sup>4</sup> Since then the percentage of Blacks began to decline due to the influx of non-Blacks. By 1960 it was around twelve percent, which was approximately the same as the United States as a whole.<sup>5</sup>

Racial segregation had been established in Texas in public and private life in the early 1900s. Some cities, such as Dallas, passed laws requiring residential segregation. *De jure* segregation did not exist in most Texas cities, however *de facto* segregation was found

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<sup>2</sup> Larry P. Knight, "Defending the Unnecessary: Slavery in San Antonio in the 1850s," *African-Americans in South Texas History*, ed. Bruce A. Glasrud (College Station, TX: Texas A&M UP, 2011), 29-45, 39-41.

<sup>3</sup> Alwyn Barr, *Black Texans: A History of Negroes in Texas, 1528-1971* (Austin, TX: Jenkins Publishing, 1973), 66.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Terry G. Jordan-Bychkov, *et al. Texas: A Geography* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1984), 40.

throughout the state. Blacks in Dallas, Houston and San Antonio were segregated by law in public accommodations, transportation, schools, and neighborhoods. As a result of discrimination and the urging of some newspapers, thousands of Blacks left the state. For example, an editorial in the San Antonio Daily Herald stated “this is our government and country and not his [Blacks’], if he don’t like it, he is at liberty to seek another.”<sup>6</sup> Those that remained established their own churches, schools, businesses, neighborhoods and even their own newspapers, San Antonio’s being called the *Register*.<sup>7</sup> As many as twenty percent of Blacks in San Antonio lived in wards by 1930.<sup>8</sup> During this period many Blacks were moving from rural areas into the larger cities thus compounding the problems they faced in Jim-Crow San Antonio. Over time different parts of the city were identified with specific ethnic groups. The east side of San Antonio became identified with Blacks while the west side was identified with Mexicans and the north side with Anglos. The south side was mainly populated by various poor residents.

As would be expected, Blacks’ struggles against racial discrimination fed into the desire for civil rights. This was the same situation faced by Blacks in other parts of the United States. A 1948 poll indicated that ninety-eight percent of Blacks in Texas desired equality while sixty-six percent of white Texans opposed equal rights for Black Americans. During the 1940’s, 1950’s, and 1960’s local protests and legal actions taken by the NAACP, the Colored Teachers State Association, the Texas commission on Democracy in Education, the Texas Council of Negro Organizations and other national, state and local organizations helped to bring about some desired improvements. Although most attempts to improve the situation failed, one attempt in

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<sup>6</sup> Barr, *Black Texans*, 55.

<sup>7</sup> W. Marvin Dulaney, “African Americans,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, accessed April 12, 2019, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/african-americans>.

<sup>8</sup> Barr, *Black Texans*, 164.

1948 was successful. This involved the cooperation of Blacks and Mexican Americans to elect G. T. Sutton, a Black businessman as a trustee of the San Antonio junior college system.<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile, the median incomes for Black Texans rose from thirty-seven percent of that for white Texans to fifty percent. Other successes included the desegregation of many public facilities. In Bexar county the hospitals were desegregated in 1955. However, for the most part public schools remained segregated. By 1970, with the aid of the federal government and a small number of white Texans most political and legal segregation was eliminated.<sup>10</sup>

Desegregation of schools was a concern for many whites. They believed the quality of education would diminish if Blacks were admitted into white schools. The 1954 Supreme Court decision, with but few exceptions, did not lead to the immediate desegregation of most public schools in Texas. It was not until the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, that authorized the federal government to withhold funds from school districts that failed to obey the Court decision, that there was widespread desegregation. However, in San Antonio, the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) estimated that as high as eighty-seven percent of Black students were still in predominantly Black schools in 1970. The situation was even more extreme in Houston and Dallas.<sup>11</sup> Undoubtedly, apart from the widespread racism which existed, another reason for this was residential segregation and neighborhood schools.

In San Antonio Archbishop Robert Lucey was a leader in preparing the way for school integration. He was speaking to Catholics on the moral issue of racism and racial segregation in the 1940's and promoted integrated activities between Black- and white-Catholic schools. By

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<sup>9</sup> Alwyn Barr, *Black Catholics: A History of African Americans in Texas, 1528-1885* (Norman, OK: U of Oklahoma P, 1996), 204-5.

<sup>10</sup> Barr, *Black Catholics*, 184-6.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

1954, although most Black students were still in segregated Catholic schools, at least 100 were attending previously all-white Catholic schools. Apart from the fact that the *Brown v. Topeka* decision had not yet been made, what made this more impressive was the fact that relatively few of these students were Catholic. Most were either Baptist or Methodist. Two years later, the number of Blacks attending Catholic schools exceeded 1,100. Thus, while Catholic schools in San Antonio were attempting to lead the way, and practice distributive justice by treating black and white students the same, the rest of the school systems in San Antonio and Texas failed to follow their example. Consequently, in 1970 Texas continued to have three of the most segregated major cities in the United States: Dallas ranked fourth, Houston ninth, and San Antonio fifteenth. While in San Antonio the number of Black students in predominately Black schools stood at eighty-seven percent, in Dallas the percentage was ninety-seven percent, and in Houston it was ninety-two percent.<sup>12</sup>

Catholic schools are commonly associated with a Catholic parish church. While it is typically the case that the establishment and construction of a church precedes that of a school, it is not always the case. Black churches and schools in San Antonio, and elsewhere, were weaker and more dependent than those of whites because they typically served lower-income people and were located in financially poor areas. Black churches, especially during times of extreme racism, served the following important functions for members of the Black community: religious, educational, social, political, financial, and as sanctuary.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, the three small Catholic churches in San Antonio which were created with the help of socially conscious individuals, were unable to fulfill all of these functions because of their size and dependence on

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 211-20.

<sup>13</sup> Ronald Johnson, *Religion in Society*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2007), 314-319.

outside resources. The Black churches, although relatively unimpressive compared to most white churches, did allow their members to leave the back pews and balconies of white churches where they had previously worshiped. Black Catholics were finally able to have a sense of belonging. In what follows I will combine research from other scholars with my own work in the archives of the Sisters of the Holy Ghost in San Antonio, using previously unpublished materials to furnish a fuller picture of the efforts to correct the many social injustices faced by Blacks in San Antonio.

### **I. St. Peter Claver**

In 1884 the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore had urged Catholics to spread their faith at home, in church and in school. The Council also directed that the Society for the Propagation of the Faith be established in every parish and a yearly collection be taken up to aid foreign and domestic missions. It was stated that domestic aid should benefit “Indians and Negroes.” In response, Bishop Neraz of San Antonio requested that appeals be made in all Catholic churches in the Diocese for assistance in aiding “Negroes.” The appeal was heeded by Mrs. Margaret Mary Healy-Murphy, the 54-year-old, Irish-born widow of John B. Murphy who had been Mayor of Corpus Christi. Both she and her husband had been active in working with the needy for many years. After his death she had moved to San Antonio where she continued to be actively involved in charitable work.<sup>14</sup>

In September of 1888 the first Black Catholic church in the Archdiocese of San Antonio and the first private institution dedicated to the education of African-American children in Texas were dedicated by Bishop Neraz. It was also the first church in the United States to be named in honor of Saint Peter Claver, a Spanish Jesuit priest who worked with slaves and is the patron of

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<sup>14</sup> Anne M. Butler, “Building Justice: Mother Margaret Murphy, Race, and Texas,” *Catholic Southwest: A Journal of History and Culture* 13 (2002): 13-36, 17-19.

missionaries to Africa. He had been canonized in 1885 by Pope Leo XIII. The dedication of St. Peter Claver proved to be significant for Blacks in San Antonio by focusing attention on an attempt to improve the lives of its minority members. Until this event the local newspaper *San Antonio Daily Express*, had previously made racist remarks with regard to Black delegates in the eighth ward and Republicans. When reporting on this event, however, the *Daily Express* described it in very positive terms of racial harmony and future progress. The newspaper even went on to predict that this event would lead to the establishment of a hospital and dispensary to complete the complex which was started with St. Peter Claver.<sup>15</sup>

St. Peter Claver was started as a mission by the Oblate pastor of St. Mary's Church, Father Richard Mahoney, O.M.I., a native of Ireland.<sup>16</sup> The purchase of the land in 1887 for \$2,800 and subsequent construction of the buildings were made possible due to the generosity and commitment to the betterment of Blacks in San Antonio of Mrs. Healy-Murphy, the moderately wealthy, middle-aged widow who moved there from Corpus Christi two years earlier. At that time, southern custom was for Black Catholics to sit in the last rows of seats in church. This discriminatory practice reflected the oppression Blacks faced nationwide at that time, but especially so in the South. In order to combat these injustices, Mrs. Healy-Murphy bought the land located at Nolan and Live Oak streets and paid for the construction of the church and a small school which offered free education to Black children. By this and subsequent actions Mrs. Healy-Murphy challenged the beliefs and practices of the eighteenth century regarding race, class, and gender. This white, upper-class woman did not conform to current societal norms.

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-16.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Lucey, *Diamond Jubilee, 1874-1949* (Archdiocese of San Antonio: Schneider Printing Co., 1949), 137.

An 1889 report by Bishop Neraz to the Commission for Catholic Missions among Colored People and Indians stated that there were 175,000 African Americans in his diocese, but of these there were only about forty or fifty families that were Catholic. He also said that in San Antonio there was only one church for them and one school which had 115 students. Bishop Neraz was referring to St. Peter Claver Mission. Previously Black Catholics had neither a church of their own nor a school.

During his time as pastor, Father Mahoney was successful in raising some funds and recruiting some volunteers to help provide food and clothing for those who needed help. He was pastor until his death in 1893, at which time he was succeeded by Father H.M. Barrett, O.M.I. St. Peter Claver was served by the Oblate Fathers until 1896, at which time a Diocesan priest, Father John Dumoulin, was assigned as pastor. He recognized another need in the Black community which had largely been neglected, namely a home for the elderly.<sup>17</sup> In 1901 Father Dumoulin obtained the use of four lots from the Diocese which were located on the east side of San Antonio. There he constructed a small building which was to be a home for elderly Blacks. The building, named Divine Redeemer Home, was opened on Thanksgiving Day of 1901. That same year he began corresponding with Father Slattery, S.S.J., a member of St. Joseph Society of the Sacred Heart, commonly referred to as Josephites. The Society's particular mission was working with African-Americans. In October of that year Father Frances Tobin, S.S.J., pastor of St. Nicholas Church in Houston, was sent to visit St. Peter Claver to report on the advisability of providing a priest to serve the San Antonio mission. The report was favorable and it was decided that the Josephites would provide staff when available. A priest, Father Thomas McCormick, S.S.J., was sent to San Antonio in 1903 to see if the south Texas climate would allow him to

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<sup>17</sup> Lucey, *Diamond Jubilee*, 138.

work there. He had been working in Mobile, Alabama, but was forced to leave there when it was determined he had tuberculosis and was sent to New Mexico for his health. Thus, he became the first Josephite available and took over the new assignment in January 1904. At that time the mission consisted of a small 30' x 60' church, two small brick houses which served as schools, a brick house which was the convent and a frame house used as a rectory. Mother Healy-Murphy deeded the church and rectory to the Bishop, but all other property remained in her name.<sup>18</sup>

Because of the relative dearth of Black Catholics in the area during this time, white Catholics began using the church because of its convenience. It appears that there had never been a real prolonged effort at evangelization in the local Black community. Consequently, the Black congregation was relatively small, around 140 members, and since it was located in a white neighborhood, white Catholics began to take over the church. Meanwhile, Father McCormick's health remained tenuous and in November 1904 Father Joseph Wareing, S.S.J. was assigned to assist him. In March of 1905 Father McCormick died and Father Wareing succeeded him as pastor of St. Peter Claver. He remained in that position for two years. Meanwhile, Father Lambert Welbers, S.S.J. arrived in San Antonio in May of 1905 and he soon activated the mission at Divine Redeemer Home by celebrating Mass every Sunday. A year later he opened Holy Redeemer School. Father Welbers became pastor of St. Peter Claver in 1907 where he remained until 1912 at which time Holy Redeemer became a second "colored" parish with him as pastor. Another Josephite priest, Father Henry Kane, S.S.J. succeeded Father Welbers as pastor of St. Peter Claver. By 1912 St. Peter Claver parish had a congregation of 230 parishioners and Holy Redeemer had a congregation of 45.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Unpublished archival materials of the Sisters of the Holy Ghost.

<sup>19</sup> Unpublished archival materials of the Sisters of the Holy Ghost.

In 1964, in an attempt to promote widespread integration among Catholics, nationalistic parishes identified with specific peoples were discontinued. Thus, St. Peter Claver was no longer designated as “colored” and ceased to be a parish. This led to the departure of the Josephites. The final parish Mass was celebrated on April 17, 1964. In all, the Josephites served St. Peter Claver parish for 55 years during which time they performed 1,310 baptisms which included 832 converts. St. Peter Claver became affiliated with St. Joseph Church and was served by diocesan clergy.<sup>20</sup>

## **II. The School**

St. Peter Claver Academy, which opened in September 1888, was the first Catholic school for Blacks in the state of Texas. Within the first month, 120 students had enrolled. Mrs. Murphy, the founder and benefactor, soon added another small school which allowed for separate schools for boys and girls. The schools were staffed by Mrs. Healy-Murphy and a small number of female volunteers. The site of the new Black church and school was located in a white neighborhood. Therefore, it was not surprising that from the very beginning there was opposition to St. Peter Claver by the white community, both Catholic and non-Catholic. As a result of criticisms and threats, volunteers began to disappear and it became extremely difficult to find and maintain teachers. Mrs. Murphy had been inspired and supported from the very beginning by an Oblate priest, Father Richard Maloney, O.M.I. It appears that Mrs. Murphy was inspired to undertake this apostolate because of an appeal made a year earlier in all local Catholic churches to help their Black brethren.

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<sup>20</sup> Lucey, *Diamond Jubilee*, 82.

It was Mrs. Murphy who contacted the Josephites in 1888 seeking their help in administering to St. Peter Claver. Because no priests were available at that time, they were unable to assist her as she had hoped. They did, however, give her encouragement in her endeavors and hope of future assistance. Later, in 1890, Mrs. Murphy wrote to Father J. R. Slattery, S.S.J. that she had been given permission from the bishop to form a community of sisters called the Congregation of the Sister Servants of the Holy Ghost and Mary Immaculate, commonly known as Sisters of the Holy Ghost, who, according to their constitution, would be dedicated to working for “the spiritual and temporal good of the Dark Races.”<sup>21</sup> The order received approval of Rome in 1889. Mrs. Healy-Murphy and two companions underwent novitiate training at the direction of Bishop Neraz and made their professed vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience in 1893 in St. Peter Claver Church.

Now, Mother Healy-Murphy thought that having a religious order dedicated to working with non-white members of society would help solve some monetary problems as well as her problem of staffing her schools. Local opposition to the Black school was apparent when a bank denied a loan request but offered the money if it would be used for a white school instead.<sup>22</sup> However, her biggest problem turned out to be recruiting women to join the new order. Some young women who felt they may have a religious vocation were somewhat reluctant to join a new order, while others were reluctant to join an order which was dedicated to ministering to the dark races. Some girls were sent from Mexico by an adopted niece who was a member of the Sisters of St. Mary of Namur to see if they would be interested in joining the new community of sisters in San Antonio. However, there was still a need for more members. In desperation, she

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<sup>21</sup> Butler, “Building Justice,” 23-24.

<sup>22</sup> Mary I. Turley, SHG, *Mother Margaret Mary Healy-Murphy, A Bibliography* (San Antonio, TX: Naylor, 1969), 18.

went to Ireland and had a little more success in recruiting young women. Nine women agreed to return with her. She also sought postulants from among Spanish-speaking Catholics. The problem then became one of keeping the recruits. Some decided they did not have a religious vocation after all or preferred to be members of a more established order which had a different mission. Meanwhile the enrollment in St. Peter Claver increased to approximately 200 students.<sup>23</sup>

Mother Mary Healy-Murphy died on August 25, 1907. Under her inspiration and supervision, the school had grown and prospered. After her death the sisters of the order remained faithful to the mission and the school continued to have a good reputation of service and academic integrity. In July 1913, a two-story brick addition to the Sisters' house was dedicated and by 1920 St. Peter Claver school included both grade school and high school. Two years later, a boarding school was added. The enrollment grew to 250 students and in 1946 a large house was purchased which was converted into a dormitory for male students. However, during this period Catholic schools in San Antonio began to integrate, and with the Supreme Court decision in 1954 all schools were ordered to desegregate. Although this order was not immediately complied with, it was finally implemented. Gradually, with the encouragement of the Sisters, students began to leave St. Peter Claver school and enter the public-school system. By the 1960s there was no longer a need for the school to exist as it had.

St. Peter Claver school closed after the 1969-70 school year. In its place the sisters responded to another educational need, that of providing an individualized high school program to a broader group of teenagers. This new educational facility was named the Healy-Murphy

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<sup>23</sup> Butler, "Building Justice," 24-30.

Learning Center. It was reorganized and incorporated in 1970 with a focus on social class rather than race. The Learning Center provides more individualized assistance to youths with various problems, including pregnancies, substance abuse, attempted suicide, school drop outs, mental health problems and juvenile delinquency. A day-care center was added in 1972 for the small children of the students. By 1973 the enrollment had reached 288 students. Of these, 275 were from the San Antonio Independent School District (SAISD). The Center gradually increased its services to include any students who were in need. The importance of the services provided were recognized and funds were provided by SAISD, the city and United Way. In addition to funding, as the program continued to grow, the SAISD also provided staff. In the mid 1980's a new day-care center was constructed to meet the growing needs of the community it served. In 1988 the 100-year anniversary of the St. Peter Claver/Healy-Murphy Center was celebrated.

### **III. Holy Redeemer**

In 1901 Father Dumoulin, S.S.J., pastor of St. Peter Claver Church, obtained four lots owned by the Diocese which were located at Gevers, Vargas and Nevada Streets on the east side of San Antonio. There he constructed a chapel for Black Catholics as well as a home for the poor, the elderly, and orphans. The home was named Charity Institute of the Divine Redeemer, or Home of the Divine Redeemer. For the first two years it was operated by lay volunteers. Later, in 1903 a second story was added to the building to serve as a chapel. The first Mass was celebrated there on Thanksgiving Day of 1901. Father Dumoulin wanted to have a more stable arrangement for the administration of Holy Redeemer and invited Mother Healy-Murphy and the Sisters of the Holy Ghost to take control.

In September 1903 Mother Healy-Murphy sent two sisters to live and work at the Institute of the Divine Redeemer. A third sister assisted them on Sundays and Holy days as organist and choir director. The Institute consisted of a house with two rooms and a kitchen. The larger of the two rooms served as a chapel, meeting area, and classroom. When school opened there were 20 students, of whom only two were Catholic. The arrangement proved to be untenable and the sisters did not return to teach the following September. The Home closed that year. One of the many problems was the number of duties expected of Father Dumoulin. In addition to being Pastor of St. Peter Claver, he was responsible for several missions, including Holy Redeemer, some of which were as far away from San Antonio as Cotulla. As a result, he was often away from the city and priests from San Fernando Cathedral had to attend to the spiritual needs of the people in his absence.

In 1905 Father Lambert Welbers, S.S.J. became pastor of St. Peter Claver and reopened Divine Redeemer. He renovated the buildings and offered the first Mass in the new setting in May of that year. The congregation consisted of 12 Anglos, six Mexicans and five African-Americans. San Antonio Bishop John Shaw, with tongue in cheek, referred to the white frame mission chapel as “The Cathedral,” which was the only place at that time where Mass was regularly celebrated in the Black community. In 1912, Father Harry Kane S.S.J., was appointed pastor of St. Peter Claver and Holy Redeemer which became an independent parish with Father Welbers as pastor. On May 29, 1913 the cornerstone was laid for a new 25’ x 57’ brick church. By July 13 of that same year the church was completed and dedicated by Bishop Shaw.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Unpublished archival materials of the Sisters of the Holy Ghost.

The following year, Bishop Shaw dedicated a newly constructed brick school which had an enrollment of 50 students. The Sisters of the Holy Ghost served there until September 1914 when Sisters of the Holy Family, a Black congregation from Louisiana, replaced them. The school building also served as a convent. A year earlier, on May 25, the cornerstone was laid for a new brick church. Then on July 13, 1913, the 29' x 67' church was dedicated by Bishop Shaw. An addition was added to the school in 1922 providing extra class rooms and improved accommodations for the Sisters. The church was later remodeled in 1927 and "The Cathedral" was converted into a parish hall. Six years later, a two-story rectory was added. Father Welbers died in 1947, thus ending 42 years of service to Holy Redeemer, including 37 years as pastor. At the time of his death, school enrollment was 250 and the congregation had reached approximately 400 parishioners, most of whom were either converts or the children of converts. Many of these converts appear to have been the result of having children in the Catholic school. Although Holy Redeemer church and school were served by dedicated priests and sisters there were the inevitable few parishioners and parents of students (both Catholic and non-Catholic) who were dissatisfied. This appears to have been a reason for replacing the Holy Ghost sisters with Holy Family sisters. Some believed that Black students could best be taught by Black teachers. Regarding the church, a complaint was made that too many white people were attending Mass and another was that too much time was spent by the priest at the Mexican missions and should be replaced.<sup>25</sup>

The school, which had been composed of grades 1 through 8 for most of its existence added a ninth grade in 1925 and later a kindergarten in 1949. A new modern brick convent was constructed in 1961 to serve the Sisters of the Holy Family who had been teaching in the school

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<sup>25</sup> Butler, "Building Justice," 33.

for over four decades. In 1966, when Father Bartholemew Endslow, S.S.J. was pastor, a Parish Hall and cafeteria were built on newly acquired land across the street from the school. Meanwhile, enrollment, which began to decline as public schools were more receptive to integration, decreased from 800 students in 1960 to less than 200 seven years later leading to the 1967 decision to close Holy Redeemer school and combine it with St. Gerard's School. The sisters who had been teaching at Holy Redeemer School were added to the faculty of St. Gerard's School. Catholic schools in San Antonio had been desegregated since 1953. The remodeled first floor of the Holy Redeemer school building was converted into a free public health care clinic staffed by the Sisters of Mercy of the St. Louis Province and the rectory was used as a convent. The project was funded by the San Antonio Archdiocese from 1968 until 1972 at which time it was taken over by a government agency.<sup>26</sup>

In light of the changes taking place in race relations in general and the decline in the specific need for services to the Holy Redeemer parish in particular, the Josephites decided their limited resources and personnel could be better utilized elsewhere. Thus, on June 7, 1968 the departure of Father John Lennon, S.S.J., ended 62 years of service by the Josephites. Holy Redeemer ceased to be a parish and became a mission of St. Joseph's Church. Although no longer a parish, a Diocesan priest offered Mass there every Sunday as a service to the community. In the 62 years the Josephites served Holy Redeemer there were 1,019 Baptisms of which 494 were converts.<sup>27</sup>

In 1979, Holy Redeemer was reinstated as a parish with Father John Wagner, a diocesan priest, as pastor. The location of the Church on the east side, which was identified with the Black

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<sup>26</sup> Lucey, *Diamond Jubilee*, 83.

<sup>27</sup> Unpublished archival materials of the Sisters of the Holy Ghost.

community, was undoubtedly a consideration in the decision to keep it in service rather than others in the city. It was later designated as “African-American,” the only one in San Antonio.

#### **IV. St. Catherine**

Like Holy Redeemer, St. Catherine owes its existence to St. Peter Claver and the Josephites. In 1912 Father Harry Kane, S.S.J., was appointed pastor of St. Peter Claver parish and the Holy Redeemer mission. In his concern to serve the Black community, he bought three lots on the west side of Leal Street in San Antonio in 1914, as there was already a small settlement of Black Catholics living there. This side of the city was generally identified with the Mexican community. After the purchase, Father Kane erected a small building which was used to celebrate Mass on Sundays, and served as a school during the week. The mission was named St. Catherine and was served by the priests of St. Peter Claver.

According to notes of the Sisters of the Holy Ghost, the purchase of the property, which contained a large house and a small three-room cottage, was made possible by a donation from Mother Katherine Drexel, Head of the Sisters of the Holy Ghost. The house was reconstructed as a hall which could be used to celebrate Mass on Sundays and as a school during the week. In order to help to finance the operation, the cottage was rented. Another set of notes indicates that the facility had formerly been a Methodist Church. Finally, the San Antonio Diocesan Chancery’s records simply say that originally a single building served as a school during the week and as a church on Sundays. The Josephites requested that the Sisters of the Holy Ghost teach in the school. In response, two sisters were assigned and resided at St. Peter Claver Convent. Years later the school was moved to another location and the original building continued to serve as the church.

The new school was opened in 1916 with the aid of two Sisters of the Holy Ghost who commuted every day from their motherhouse by streetcar. Later, from 1926 until 1936 the sisters lived in the Little Flower Convent. The school, which was blessed by Bishop Shaw on February 18, 1917, consisted of three classrooms and an auditorium on the second floor. One of the sisters taught grades one through three while the other taught grades four through eight. The total enrollment of the school was usually between 75 and 100 students. Those students who graduated generally enrolled in St. Peter Claver for high school.<sup>28</sup>

In 1941 the congregation numbered around 150 persons with 85 children enrolled in school. It was then decided that the mission should be an independent parish in 1942 with Father Ed Walsh, S.S.J., as pastor. He lived in St. Peter Claver rectory until the small cottage could be converted into a rectory. The school was added and was originally staffed by the Sisters of the Incarnate Word. Later, these were replaced by Sisters of the Holy Ghost.<sup>29</sup> Within two years there was some growth both in the parish and the school. Encouraged by this, Father Walsh made extensive repairs and improvements to the church and school. However, two years later the area surrounding St. Catherine underwent a demographic change. Many of the Black families were replaced by Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, resulting in a decline in church attendance as well as school enrollment. By 1955 the congregation of St. Catherine had fallen to 68 parishioners. In addition, some of the parishioners had begun attending Mass at St. Agnes Church which was located nearby. Meanwhile, others began attending Holy Redeemer Church which was located on the east side.

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<sup>28</sup> Unpublished archival materials of the Sisters of the Holy Ghost.

<sup>29</sup> Lucey, *Diamond Jubilee*, 138.

At this time, Father John Conlon, S.S.J., was pastor, and it was decided that due to several recent factors the school was no longer needed and should be closed. Possibly the first and most important consideration was the fact that San Antonio Archbishop Robert Lucey had already begun integrating local parochial schools. An additional consideration would have been the recent Supreme Court's decision in the case of *Brown v. Topeka* to desegregate public schools. The final reason would have been the recent demographic changes in the surrounding area resulting in declining enrollment. In 1957, Diocesan officials decided to close the church as well. The last Mass at St. Catherine Church was celebrated on March 1, 1957 by Father John Walsh, S.S.J., who was pastor at the time. During the time that St. Catherine existed as a parish, 124 baptisms were recorded including 51 converts.<sup>30</sup>

## **V. Summary and Conclusion**

Blacks in San Antonio were largely ignored both by the state and the Catholic Church until a wealthy, Irish-born, 54-year-old widow, Margaret Mary Healy-Murphy, moved to San Antonio in 1887 and heeded the call of the Bishops in Baltimore for all Catholics to aid their fellow men and women. At that time segregation was found in San Antonio, as well as throughout the country, and the education of Black students was not a major concern for the city leaders, as was made evident in an 1888 meeting of the city council when Alderman Gallagher, a Democrat, objected to the discriminatory distribution of educational funds for Black and White students. He argued that the city left almost eighty percent of Black youths to grow up in ignorance and poverty and that more Black teachers were needed as well as a Black public school, since only about 400 of the nearly 2000 potential Black students were currently being

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<sup>30</sup> Unpublished archival materials of the Sisters of the Holy Ghost.

accommodated. His opponents argued that there were probably no more than 50 Black children interested in entering school and therefore the funds would be better spent on adding more white teachers to serve the predominately white students already enrolled. While this debate was going on in city government, Mrs. Healy-Murphy was personally financing the purchase of land, the construction of a church and a free school for Black Americans regardless of religion. Within two weeks of the city council meeting, a celebration was held for the dedication by San Antonio Bishop John Neraz of the newly constructed St. Peter Claver Church.<sup>31</sup>

St. Peter Claver proved to be the first in a series of projects designed to meet the needs of the Black community of San Antonio. Most of these efforts to deal with the issue of social justice for Blacks were spearheaded by Mrs. Healy-Murphy, later to become Mother Healy-Murphy, foundress of the Sisters of the Holy Ghost, and by the Josephite priests who were requested to come to San Antonio and serve the Black community. These efforts included the establishment of three churches, three schools, a home for the poor, the elderly and orphans, a free health care clinic, the Healy-Murphy Center for unwed mothers and others who still needed to complete high school, and the founding of an order of Sisters who were dedicated to working with non-white minorities.

Many of these endeavors met opposition from both white and Black, Catholic and non-Catholic, members of San Antonio. There were even related problems within the local Church. There appears to have been tensions between the Sisters of the Holy Ghost and some of the members of Holy Redeemer. On one occasion the priest asked the Sisters to leave the church during his sermon, presumably to criticize them or listen to criticisms. They were later replaced

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<sup>31</sup> Butler, "Building Justice," 13.

by Sisters of the Holy Family. It has been suggested that part of the problem may have stemmed from the privileged background of Margaret Mary Healy-Murphy which included slavery. In her sincere desire to help Blacks, she became paternalistic, doing everything for them, rather than collaborating with them. Thus, some things that were done may have been considered demeaning and, therefore, racist.<sup>32</sup>

In 1914 Bishop Shaw wrote to the national administrator of the Indian and Negro Fund which was used by the Catholic Church to support projects for these minoritized communities. In his letter Bishop Shaw recommended that \$750 intended for the Black missions of the Holy Ghost sisters be diverted to Mexican missions instead. The reason given was that Mexicans were almost Indians and were already Catholics. He also stated the opinion that Mexicans had a greater need for assistance.<sup>33</sup> This belief may have been related to the relatively greater number of Mexicans in the area and the fact that Texas was once part of Mexico and at the time was generally considered to be the harshest state in its treatment of Mexicans whose basic rights and human dignity were ignored or denied. Whatever the reason, the action obviously had a negative impact on the work of the Sisters of the Holy Ghost.

Some unfortunate decisions were made in those early years, beginning with the location of Black churches in white and Mexican areas. This resulted in immediate conflict and opposition from both Catholics and non-Catholics alike. Although some decisions can be questioned, the motives of these religiously inspired men and women cannot. Many priests, religious and laity, in the spirit of contributive justice, heeded the call to aid their fellow men and women regardless of race or religion. Mrs. Healy-Murphy gave all she had of time, money and

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

talent in the pursuit of social justice for a segment of the population which had been largely ignored both by their own government and Church. Thus, the establishment of St. Peter Claver was a visible witness to the generosity and love of a white woman for her nonwhite brethren. This appears to have inspired others to emulate this example of racial harmony, social justice and Christian charity.

Besides the call in 1884 by the Third Council of Baltimore for Catholics to assist their Black brethren, the U.S. Catholic Bishops issued a number of statements and directives which were meant to bring about greater racial justice. These included the following:

1866 – following the end of the Civil War the General Council urged both clergy and laity to follow plans by individual bishops in their diocese to aid emancipated slaves.

1943 – they called for Blacks to receive fair educational and economic opportunities as well as political equality.

1958 -they issued a statement which called the race issue a moral and religious one indicating that discrimination is against the Christian conscience regarding human rights and our attitude towards our fellow men.

1979 -they released a pastoral letter entitled “Brothers and Sisters to Us” in which they state that racism is a sin which divides the human family and blots out the image of God, the Father of all people, among certain members of the family whose dignity as children of God is ignored.

1984 -the Black Catholic Bishops issued a pastoral letter of their own entitled “What we have Seen and Heard” in which they state that the Catholic Church is neither a White Church nor a

Euro-American Church, but a universal, hence catholic, Church. Black members within the Church are a precious witness and affirmation of the universality of the Church.<sup>34</sup>

Although Black Americans in San Antonio, and throughout the United States, are still suffering from lapses of social justice, there have been improvements, thanks to people of good will. Race relations in San Antonio have improved to the point where Blacks and whites have come together to form the largest MLK march in the United States.

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<sup>34</sup> <https://www.usccb.org/committees/african-american-affairs/demographics>