



BLACK CATHOLIC MESSENGER



HISTORY

First Black Catholic parish in Cleveland celebrates centennial

By Nate Tinner-Williams - May 04, 2022

CLEVELAND — [St Adalbert/Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church](#), the oldest African-American parish in Cleveland, [celebrated](#) its centennial last month, marking the latest step in a long history of struggle and triumph.

“Your parish holds a very special place in the history of the diocese and of Cleveland,” said Bishop [Edward Malesic](#), who was on hand for the celebratory liturgy on Sunday, April 24th.

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✓ April 11th marked 100 years since the creation of Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament, erected in 1922 for Black Catholic Clevelanders who requested a parish after suffering discrimination in a number of the city's White congregations.

OLBS was the first personal parish for African Americans in the diocese, and would soon be served by the [Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament](#), a religious order dedicated to Native and African Americans and founded by St [Katharine Drexel](#).

As with the other churches and schools run by the sisters, Drexel was known to visit OLBS often, according to [a piece](#) published by the diocese last year.

St Adalbert's was founded in 1883, as a parish for Catholics of Czech descent who had settled on the east side of Cleveland around the turn of the 20th century. White Flight led to the parish becoming predominantly Black after World War II, and OLBS was merged there in 1961.

The first Black priest ordained in the Diocese of Cleveland, the late Fr [Gene Wilson](#), CPPS, served at the parish beginning in 1969. He was a member of the [Missionaries of the Precious Blood](#), who had arrived at OLBS in 1937. The congregation also boasts of Fr [Clarence Williams](#), CPPS, the only priest alum of [St Adalbert Catholic School](#).



Fr Gene Willson, CPPS (left) and Fr Clarence Williams, CPPS.

Members of the Precious Blood congregation were on hand to concelebrate last month's liturgy alongside Malesic.

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✓ Protests would ensue, before parishioners from several local parishes appealed to the Vatican on the grounds that proper canonical procedures were not followed.

Their appeal succeeded in 2012, and St Adalbert was among the parishes reopened that summer under Fr Gary Chmura, a priest of the diocese who volunteered for the work and accepted the Precious Blood spirituality. He was soon joined by members of the Evangelizing Sisters of Mary, a congregation based in Uganda. Both the sisters and Chmura remain at the church today.

“Parishes don’t run themselves,” Malesic said.

“It takes many talented people—clergy, religious and laypeople—working together to make a parish a vibrant place with a sharp focus on bringing people closer to Christ.”



Malesic with parishioners and supporters at the centennial celebration. (Diocese of Cleveland)

The parish’s history [has been compiled](#) on the website of the parish school, and features videos, photos, articles, and records dating back to the founding of both parishes before the merger as well as from the past 61 years as a single community.

June 24th, 2023 will mark the 100th anniversary of the parish’s dedication and first Mass, making for over a year’s worth of time to continue celebrating in the months to come.

“Congratulations once again to all of you,” Malesic said at the centennial Mass.

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