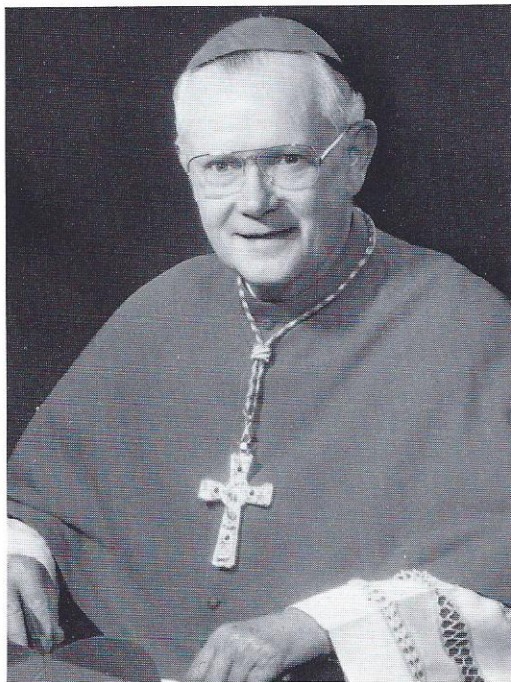


# A History of Holy Comforter Saint Cyprian Parish



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OFFICE OF THE ARCHBISHOP

ARCHDIOCESE OF WASHINGTON

5001 EASTERN AVENUE  
POST OFFICE BOX 29260  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20007

March 22, 1996

Dear Friends in Christ,

I want to offer you my greetings and prayers on the publication of your parish history. With you I give thanks to God for the blessings He has bestowed on the people of Holy Comforter-St. Cyrian for over one hundred years.

It is important that, through this history, you celebrate and proclaim the faith and perseverance of the people of Holy Comforter-St. Cyrian. Their faith remained strong despite racial discrimination and hardship. With Fr. James Matthews and the encouragement of Cardinal Gibbons, the first parishioners of St. Cyrian founded a parish to serve the needs of African-Americans on Capitol Hill. With deep faith and generosity, former slaves and descendants of slaves built a beautiful church, a rectory and supported a school under the leadership and care of the Oblate Sisters of Providence. Even after the difficult events surrounding the merger of the two parishes in 1966, the commitment to the faith remained strong and the parish has continued to grow and joyfully proclaim the Good News.

The history of Holy Comforter-St. Cyrian is an integral part of the story of African-American Catholics in the Archdiocese. It is important, not only for your parish to know its own story, but that it be known by all in the Archdiocese. Despite our diverse backgrounds, we make up one mosaic of faith. The story of your parish is an important part of the story of this Archdiocese and the universal Church.

It is appropriate to honor and thank the Josephites who staffed your parish community for many years. Together with the Oblate Sisters of Providence, they helped keep the flame of faith strong within this parish community. So many minds and hearts were touched with love of Christ through the ministry of these religious communities. Likewise, we honor the memory of the many diocesan priests who have served your parish community.

The story of faith told in these pages reminds us not only to honor the memory of those who have gone before us in the faith, but to imitate their example. We do this by opening our hearts to Christ in faith. Holy Comforter-St. Cyrian has been built on the firm foundation of Christ, so must the future be rooted in Christ and His Gospel as it comes to us through the Church. As the beautiful spiritual proclaims. *We've come this far by faith, leaning on the Lord!* With you I join in giving thanks for the gifts of the past, and with you I stand looking to the future filled with challenges, but bright with God's promise.

With kind personal regards, I am

Sincerely in Christ,

*James Card. Hickey*  
Archbishop of Washington





**ARCHDIOCESE OF WASHINGTON  
OFFICE OF THE REGIONAL BISHOP**

3340 St. Peter's Drive  
Waldorf, Maryland 20601-2359

(301) 843-1388

Fax: (301) 843-1041

March 21, 1996

Dear People of Holy Comforter-St. Cyprian,

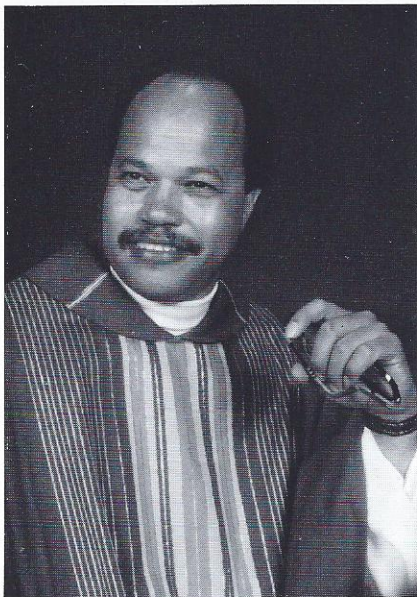
The publication of this parish history offers the opportunity to reflect joyfully on the blessings God has bestowed on your parish. The story told in these pages is a remarkable one. It is a story of the tenacity and courage of African American Catholics who would not let their faith be diminished by the obstacles or injustices they experienced. Together with their priests and the Oblate Sisters of Providence, they forged a strong and vibrant community of faith on the firm foundation of Christ. Here is a story of the hard work and the unselfish love of so many men and women whose sacrifices still enrich us today. Here, too, is a story of God's manifold grace, for everything that has been accomplished is his gift.

The history of Holy Comforter-Saint Cyprian Parish should also be an inspiration as you look to the future. Your forebearers have given you an example of faith and generosity which must be imitated and a legacy which must be handed on. You do well, then, to cherish the memories enshrined in this book and to tell the story of faith contained in these pages, for they proclaim not only the faithfulness of parishioners down through the generations, but especially the faithfulness of God: **Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow; Blessings all mine and ten thousand beside! Great is thy faithfulness, Lord unto me!**

I am very grateful to have been a small part of your wonderful history and hope to continue doing so. May the Lord continue to bless you all through the intercession of your patron, St. Cyprian.

Sincerely in Christ,

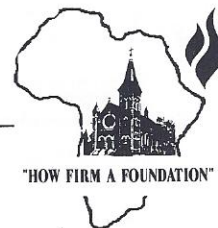
*+ Leonard Olivier*  
Most Reverend Leonard J. Olivier, S.V.D.  
Auxiliary Bishop of Washington



**HOLY COMFORTER-SAINT CYPRIAN  
ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH**

1357 East Capitol Street, Southeast  
Washington, District of Columbia 20003

202-546-1885  
202-544-1385 (fax)



Dear Parishioners:

April 14, 1996

When the Church celebrates the Vigil of Easter, she gathers in the darkness of the night. We gather as a watchful and expectant community waiting for the advent of that light that will dispel all darkness forever. We profess that Jesus Christ is that light. In the paschal mystery of his passion, death, and resurrection from the dead all salvation history is caught up in an eternal moment of redemption.

The history of salvation is not easy reading or easy remembering. How could it be? It begins after all with the fall of Adam and Eve from grace. But salvation history continues with God's promise to send us a savior. Time and time again God enters into covenant with us. Time and again we betray him. The cost has been high. We have all endured humiliation and suffering, but God's mercy has been extravagant. We have all been blessed.

The history of Holy Comforter - Saint Cyprian Parish is a part of the history of salvation. From the founding of the Parish of Saint Cyprian in 1893 to its merger with the Parish of Holy Comforter in 1966 God has been working out the salvation of all of us whose lives have been touched by these once separate parishes.

They were once separate for the same reason that Saint Cyprian Parish was founded. Catholics of African descent were not welcome to practice their faith with white Catholics. It is a reality recorded here solely to invite everyone who reads these pages to see what God has brought out of our weary years and our silent tears. It is an invitation for our now multi-ethnic and multi-racial community of faith to find strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow by remembering the labors our ancestors undertook to lay for us a firm foundation of faith in God.

Be encouraged by the memories and history recorded here. It is a living memory and a living history. God is still building a community of faith here. During our Easter Vigil twenty-two persons were baptized into the faith. Five completed the sacraments of initiation and five more entered into full communion with the Catholic faith. On Easter Sunday eleven came forward to join our community of faith. Today, on the octave of Easter, 17 infants were baptized.

There is great cause for us to find joy in these pages. But there is no cause greater than the realization that God is still working out our salvation here at Holy Comforter - Saint Cyprian.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

*F. Eddie Tolentino*

Rev. Eddie Tolentino  
Pastor





# Holy Comforter - St. Cyprian Parish

The parish known today as Holy Comforter - St. Cyprian can trace its beginnings to two distinct churches — St. Cyprian, established in 1893, and Holy Comforter established in 1904. Joining together in 1966, St. Cyprian and Holy Comforter each brought more than fifty years of tradition and service to God and the community. This blending has continued to serve parishioners well, as the foundation of today's church rests on more than a century of faith that has remained steadfast and unbroken. It is also a foundation stretching back to our African ancestors and to our Lord Jesus Christ, the solid rock on which we stand: How firm a foundation.

## African-Americans and the Catholic Church

The story of African-American Catholicism stretches back centuries to Africa itself. There, in many great nations, a people dwelled of which volumes have been written. But the true glory of any people will always be that they have been called by God and have generously responded to that call. The Holy Scriptures then tell their truest glories. The Queen of Sheba yearned for the word of God and found it in the wisdom of Solomon. In praise of this great woman of faith, Christ said the "Queen of the South," who came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, would arise at the last judgement in condemnation of the faithless generation (Matt 12:42). Through the Prophet Isaiah, the Lord speaks His desire that his word go forth to the Ethiopians (in the ancient world the word Ethiopian designated black skin color and not a nationality): *Ah land of whirring wings which is beyond the rivers of Ethiopia; which sends ambassadors by the Nile, in vessels of papyrus upon the waters! Go, you swift messengers, to a nation, tall and smooth, to a people feared near and far, a nation mighty and conquering, whose land the rivers divide* (Isa. 18:1-2). The Psalms too count Ethiopia among the Children of God: *Babylon and Egypt I will count among those who know me; Philistia, Tyre, Ethiopia, these will be her children and Zion shall be called "Mother" for all shall be her children. It is He, the Lord most High who gives each his place.* (Ps 87:4-5) How fitting then, that in the opening days of the proclamation of the Gospel, our Lord should draw our attention to the faith of an Ethiopian. We find him in the eighth Chapter of the Acts of the Apostles studying the Word of God. The Angel of God bids the deacon Philip to proclaim the Good News to Him. The faith of this Ethiopian is clearly shown in his response: *"See, here is water! What is to prevent my being baptized?" And he commanded the chariot to stop and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him.* (Acts 8:36-38).

Here then is where our story begins: in the call of God and the grace-filled response of our ancestors. The seed of God's word found rich soil on the continent of Africa and faith grew and spread. In North Africa, extending to the south into Nubia, a great Christian civilization existed. This faith would be sorely tested in the centuries to come: from the emergence of Islam to the looming and ominous clouds of the slave trade. And storm it did, but God's call was never revoked and



He continued to call to his children even in the midst of oppression.

In the Americas the story of African-American Catholicism begins with the settlements and first introduction of the Church by the Spanish, French and English settlers on these shores. Black Catholics were to be found in most of the Catholic settlements. By the year 1800 there were sizeable communities of Black Catholics, especially in southern Maryland, southern Louisiana, southern Missouri, and western Kentucky. Slavery stains the history of American Catholicism just as it stains the history of the rest of America. A significant portion of the Catholic Church before the Civil War was enslaved, a Church in chains. Yet these ancestors would not be relegated to an insignificant role in the Church. Rather, they contributed to the building up of the Church from their own resources. They built churches, and provided material and spiritual support to the clergy and sisters, and to their own children they handed on the faith. In so doing they boldly proclaimed the mystery of the Gospel for which they were ambassadors in chains (cf Eph. 6:20). After the Civil War, steadfast adherence to the faith would continue and grow even deeper in the midst of the constant necessity and unremitting efforts to counteract racism and indifference within the Church. It would be a story of courageous action combined with sincere piety and unswerving devotion to the Church: *This is my story, this is my song; praising my Savior all the day long!*

This same courage and tenacious faith brings us to Washington, D.C. in the years following the Civil War. Those years saw a large movement of African-Americans from the south into the cities, especially to the north, and many came to Washington. They came from southern Maryland, but also from many other areas of the country. Among the areas in which they settled was the Capitol Hill neighborhood. The Black Catholics who moved into this area began to attend mass at St. Peter's Church at Second and C streets, Southeast, and it is here that our immediate story begins.

## Capitol Hill in the 1890s



*Father James Matthews, founding Pastor of St. Cyprian's Church*

Throughout the later half of the nineteenth century, St. Peter's Parish continued to grow and prosper, yet the African-Americans who worshipped there were never fully accepted as members of the church community. They were made to sit in the back of the church, use different doors from the white church members and, eventually, were excluded from the main sanctuary and forbidden to be married or baptized at the main altar.

Though there was precedent for African-Americans to break away and form their own churches — the Protestants had been doing so since the eighteenth century — the members of St. Peter's were unable to form a separate African-American Catholic Church because there were so few African-American Catholic priests in the United States. The African-Americans of St. Peter's were frustrated and found themselves unable to alter their condition.

In 1887 Father James R. Matthews came to St. Peter's as the assistant pastor. Father Matthews was not himself an African-American, yet in the three years that he served St. Peter's, he worked diligently to pave the way for an African-American Catholic parish.

Father Matthews was transferred from St. Peter's in 1890 to Anne Arundel County where he founded and built St. Athanasius Church. Before he left, however, he had Fr. J. M. O'Brien write to the Archbishop of the Catholic Diocese in Baltimore requesting



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permission for the African-American members of St. Peter's to build their own church.

"Your Eminence, at the solicitation of Mr. Burgess and a large committee of respectable colored Catholics of Capitol Hill, who earnestly petition you for a distinct church and priest of their own, I send you this note giving to this enterprise my hearty approval.

There are about 1500 colored Catholics in Capitol Hill and if we desire to preserve them in their faith and transmit it to their children it is necessary to have a priest to take exclusive control of them and have a church where all can meet amongst themselves.

The priests of St. Peters have been doing their best according to circumstances that could be done—always ready to serve them but I'm fully convinced that a separate church will serve them much better.

Capitol Hill is the home of the colored people as they come from the Counties of Maryland and unless they are taken in hand at once they stray away from the fold and are lost to the church.

As their children are educated in the public schools filled with ambition and seeing they cannot occupy the first places in the church by degrees drop off and do not go at all.

Moreover we have no accommodations for the large number of colored Catholics who come to our church and if we desire to hold them another church is absolutely necessary for them.

They have now something over \$3000.00 to begin with and if they had a pastor of their own they would soon double it.

In the meantime they could occupy our school hall where they could worship until such times they could build their own church. But to be a success it is necessary that they should have a pastor of their own. Having now given you my conscientious opinion I submit the whole matter to your consideration. The delegation will explain to you their difficulties. This delegation has not been formed by me. They, prompted by the necessity of their situation, have voluntarily taken the matter in their own hands and are consequently ready to go to work at once if you only encourage them."

Cardinal Gibbons, the Archbishop of Baltimore, feeling that the time for such a move was right, transferred Fr. Matthews back to Capitol Hill; thus he was able to keep his word to help establish this new church. In 1892, Fr. Matthews set to work helping the African-American members form their own congregation. At this same time, Miss Mary Atkins, who had a sister in the Oblate Sisters of Providence in Baltimore, Maryland, offered to Fr. Matthews a plot of ground on which to erect a school for African-American children. The land was located at 8th Street Southeast, south of D Street. Miss Atkins also gave her home at 300 8th Street for the same purpose. Fr. Matthews then invited the Oblate Sisters of Providence in Baltimore to take charge of the School and this property was conveyed to that community. The first classes were held in the Atkins home



*Miss Mary Atkins donated the ground for our first school.*





beginning in 1892. Within a year 160 children (including some non-Catholics) were enrolled. By 1894 a larger building was erected at 310 8th Street and named St. Ann's Academy.

In the meantime Fr. Matthews was assembling his Catholics in St. Peter's Hall on E Street, East of 3rd Street Southeast. The name selected for the congregation was St. Benedict the Moor. Mass was celebrated each Sunday for this congregation and Sunday School was held there. The congregation continued to meet there until the new church was built — the church that was to be renamed, St. Cyprian.

*An early photo shows the original habit of the Oblate Sisters of Providence.*

*St. Ann's Academy in late 19th century. The Academy later became St. Cyprian's School.*





# St. Cyprian — Bishop and Martyr

St. Cyprian's full name was Thascius Caecilius Cyprianus. He was an African nobleman born in Carthage, North Africa, about 200 A.D. Cyprian was born of a wealthy noble family. He was a skilled master of rhetoric and had taken up a career in law before his conversion to the Christian faith from paganism. Despite his high social rank and seemingly care-free life, he was besieged by a feeling of emptiness and, as he described it, a "hidden desperation." It was in these circumstances that, at the age of 35, he embraced the faith and was baptized on Easter Day of 246 A.D. He marvelled over the dramatic change the faith brought about in his life and so impressed the Christians of Carthage that a mere three years later, when their Bishop Donatus died, they requested Cyprian as his successor! No sooner was he elected than a savage persecution broke out against the Christians all throughout the Roman Empire and Carthage was no exception.

Nevertheless, Cyprian took the helm and held his community together. From a self-imposed exile he wrote hundreds of encouraging letters to those enduring the ordeals and gave them a shepherd's care. Within two years Cyprian was able to return to Carthage where he zealously and pastorally led his Church. Cyprian was a dedicated student of the Scriptures and read closely the works of the theologians and philosophers of his time. Cyprian himself was a writer and addressed some extremely important issues in the early Church. Some of his most influential works were: *The Lapsed* (concerning those who had lapsed from the faith), *The Unity of the Catholic Church* and his *Treatise on the "Our Father,"* considered by many to be a work of genius. Through these works and his leadership St. Cyprian had a very important influence on the teachings of the Catholic Church. He is numbered among the "Fathers of the Church." This term describes those who, through the exercise of their pastoral office and by their teaching and preaching, decisively influenced the development of Christian doctrine and the understanding of Sacred Scriptures in the first centuries of the Church.

In the year 257 A.D. persecutions once again broke out against the Church. Cyprian was arrested and then exiled. Refusing to recant his faith Cyprian knew his time had come to make his supreme witness to Christ. When the death sentence was pronounced he cried out, "Thanks be to God!" and that same day September 14, 258, he was beheaded. He was the first African Bishop to be martyred for the faith.

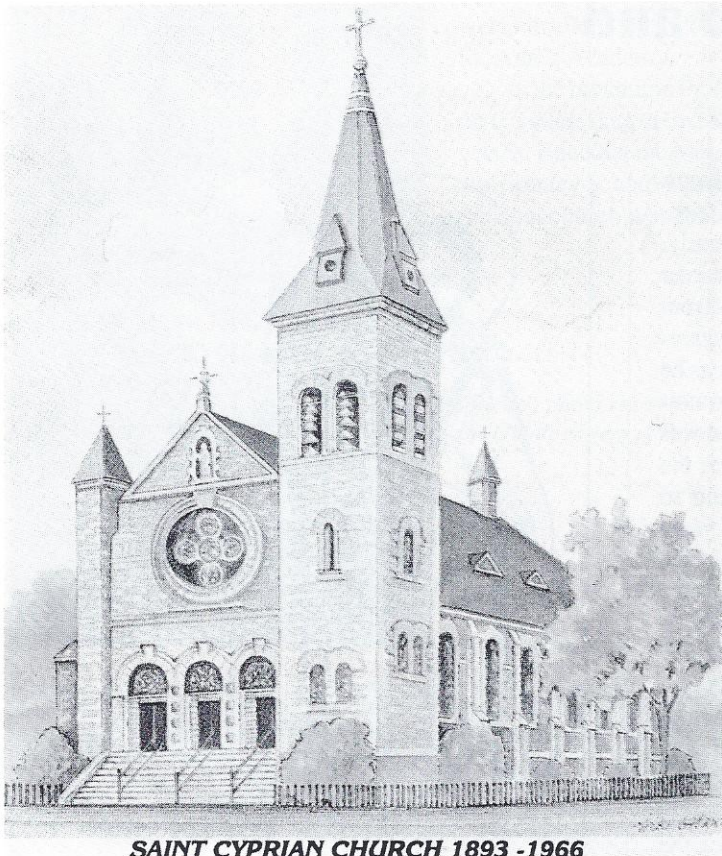


An artist, Persis Jennings, depiction of St. Cyprian from Bulletin cover in mid-1980's.

All Christ did, all he taught, was the will of God. Humility in our daily lives, an unwavering faith, a moral sense of modesty in conversation, justice in acts, mercy in deed, discipline, refusal to harm others, a readiness to suffer harm, peaceableness with our brothers, a whole-hearted love of the Lord, loving in him what is of the Father, fearing him because he is God, preferring nothing to him who preferred nothing to us, clinging tenaciously to his love, standing by his cross with loyalty and courage when there is any conflict involving his honor and his name, manifesting in our speech the constancy of our profession and under torture confidence for the fight, and in dying the endurance for which we will be crowned — this is what it means to wish to be a co-heir with Christ, to keep God's command; this is what it means to do the will of the Father.

From a *Treatise on the Lord's Prayer* by St. Cyprian, Bishop and Martyr.





**SAINT CYPRIAN CHURCH 1893 -1966**

## St. Cyprian Parish 1893 - 1966

On March 12, 1893, the group of African-American Catholics who had been meeting in St. Peter's hall were officially organized as St. Cyprian Parish and recognized by the Archdiocese. By April 18, 1893, a tract of land at 13th and C Streets Southeast was purchased for the sum of \$12,480. The funds were raised through donations by the parishioners, and loans from the Cardinal as well as from societies that were in existence to aid the Black community. It was on this land that the Church and the rectory would be built.

An architect, John K. Stack Jr., of Baltimore, was selected, and Owen Donnelly of Washington, D.C., was chosen to be the builder. Ground was broken on July 31, 1893, and the cornerstone was laid on September 24, 1893. A ceremony to celebrate the laying of the cornerstone of the new church included a parade witnessed by more than 10,000 people who turned out for the occasion. Cardinal Gibbons marched with the parishioners to the site of the new church and spoke at the dedication:

When He [Christ] came into the world, He came to bring freedom to men. He broke down the partition walls of caste and race. No matter now what a man's race or color, he can if he will, become a Son of God.

Some selections from The St. Joseph's Advocate (a local Catholic periodical of the time) will help us catch a glimpse of the event:

Last Sunday, September 24, his Eminence the Cardinal, assisted by many priests, laid the cornerstone of the new church so long wished for, because so long needed, on Capitol Hill. The sight selected is far distant from St. Augustine's, emphatically the most beautiful and costly colored church in the United States. Hence the need long felt of this second church in a section of Washington abounding with colored people . . . St. Cyprian's is to be on a fine scale, not very much inferior to St. Augustine's . . . The foundation story is already completed up to the first floor . . . It is quite true . . . that it had originally been proposed to call the call the new church St. Benedict's; but a change was made and the new parish will be under the invocation of St. Cyprian of Carthage, one of the early bishops of the African Church.

The pioneering members of St. Peter's Church, who had the courage and vision to establish the parish of St. Cyprian, were rewarded for their dedication when St. Cyprian's opened the doors to its new church building on June 2, 1894, just eight months after the laying of the cornerstone in March 1893. It was a day of celebration attended by an overflow crowd. In the morning the Church was dedicated by Cardinal Gibbons and a Solemn High Pontifical Mass followed the

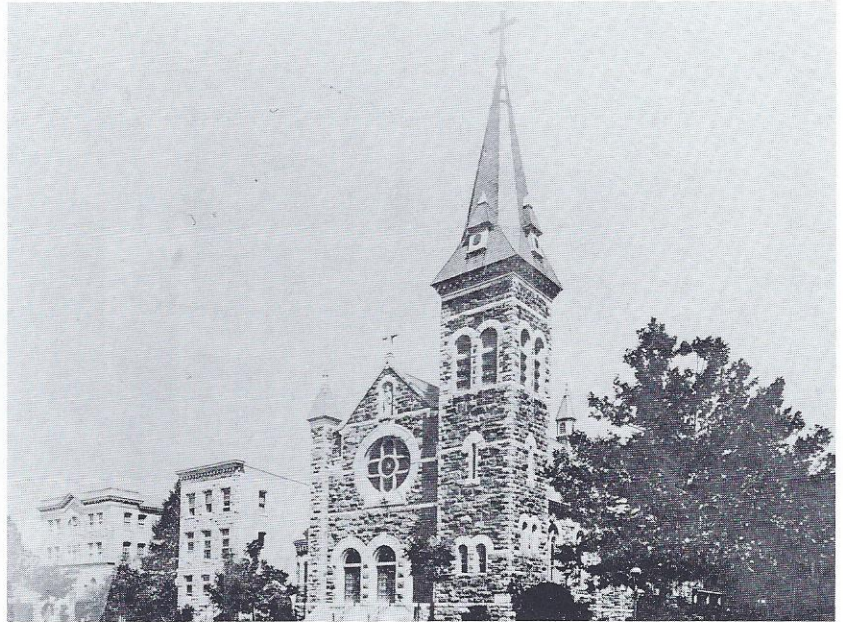


dedication. That afternoon 200 children were confirmed in the new church by the Cardinal and the evening was topped off with solemn vespers. Cardinal Gibbons congratulated the members of the new parish: "Rejoice most that this building has been erected by your own generous contributions, unaided by outside help. You will enjoy the church all the more that it is all your own."

Indeed, the founding members of St. Cyprian's, none of whom were wealthy, raised \$35,000 to build the church, and later another \$6,000 for the rectory and \$6,000 for the two-story parish hall. Long-time St. Cyprian's parishioner Anna Ford Harris, born in 1905, recalls how her grandfather, Charles Ford, his brothers, and his sons, all helped build St. Cyprian's Church. The building was described in an article in The Catholic Mirror in the following terms:

The new church is a structure of Potomac bluestone with basement of granite and Baltimore County marble. It has a commanding site in a part of the city which has recently been considerably developed. The dimensions are 103 X 56 feet and the height from the basement to the pinnacle of the steeple which rises from the slate covered roof is 113 feet. An oriel window projecting from the wall adds to the architectural beauty and provides room for the sanctuary. The approach is from the south. The church is entered by three doors of easy access from the street.

The interior is beautiful in design and finish and splendidly adapted to the comforts of the parishioners. The basement is provided with ample accommodations for the Sunday-school. The large audience room above, which will seat about 600, is ornamented with gothic columns that support a ceiling delicately stained. The walls are colored with tints of olive with gold trimmings. These and the cathedral windows produce a beautiful setting for the brilliant ceremonial of the Catholic service. The church furnishings are equally attractive. The altar is constructed of solid marble while at the other end of the Church is the choir loft excellently



*St. Cyprian's Church, Rectory, and Hall.*

## Dedication of St. Cyprian's

### A New Church Dedicated by His Eminence in East Washington

The new church erected by the colored Catholics of East Washington, was dedicated last Sunday with impressive ceremonies. Only eight months ago His Eminence laid the cornerstone of this church, which will be the religious home of the colored Catholics formerly affiliating with St. Peter's and St. Joseph's parishes. The clergy of Washington and a large representation from this city were in attendance. The edifice was thronged and the perfect day lent a charm to the beauties of the service. A number of colored organizations were present notably; the Knights of St. Vincent, and those of St. Augustine. Among the Washington clergymen were Rev. M.P. Sullivan of St. Peter's; Rev. John Gloyd, Pastor of St. Patrick's; Rev. J. Richards of Georgetown University; Rev. V.F. Schmidt, Pastor of St. Joseph; Rev. P. Griffith, Pastor of St. Augustine's . . . [Numerous others are mentioned]. Promptly at ten o'clock the procession was formed and the Cardinal preceded by the clergy and the altar boys passed around the Church sprinkling the walls with holy water and dedicating the church to the service of God.

Pontifical high mass was then celebrated by Bishop O'Sullivan of Mobile, Alabama who had come a thousand miles to show his appreciation of the efforts of these people, with whom he was formerly connected. He was assisted by Rev. V.F. Schmidt of St. Joseph's as deacon, Rev. Paul Griffith of St. Augustine's as sub-deacon. The responses of the mass were sung by the choir of the church.

*Article from the Catholic Mirror, May 1894.*





*Sanctuary and interior of St. Cyprian's Church*





PHOTOGRAPH,  
BY MARKIEWICZ.  
BALTO, MD,

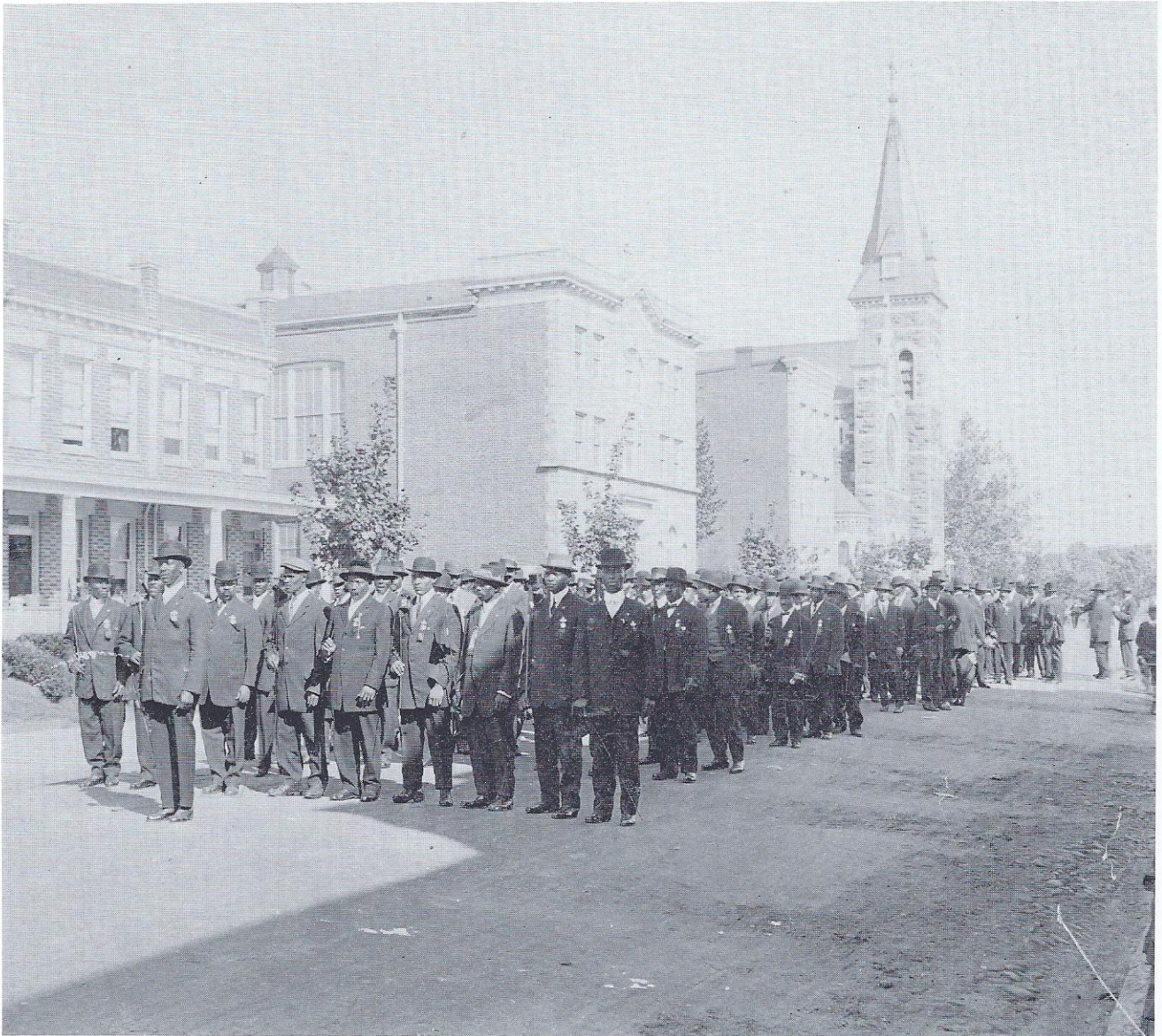


finished which contains a new pipe organ. The church is also provided with a bell weighing 1650 pounds and bearing an engraving which tells the history of the parish. The residence for the pastor, also constructed of stone, is on the adjoining lot . . .

St. Cyprian's became a thriving force in the community. During the church's first year, there were 1500 members, with 250 children attending Sunday School. That same year over 100 people were baptized in the church. And in the early part of this century, St. Cyprian's became the only Catholic parish in the country to provide its members with an adult night school.

During those early years, the parish was blessed by the efforts of many of its dedicated parishioners who worked closely with founding pastor Father (later Monsignor) James Matthews, who served the church from 1893-1934.

Father Matthews was beloved by all his congregants at St. Cyprian's. Parishioners remember him as a big-hearted man with a strong voice. The church



*A photo from the early years showing an unpaved "C" Street*



has long treasured a letter written to the Pastor by James Cardinal Gibbons, praising him for his loyalty and devotion to the St. Cyprian parish when Father Matthews declined to be transferred to another parish.

Dated February 3, 1914, the letter read:

Dear Father Matthews:

I just received from Monsignor Russell a letter in which he informs me that you would prefer not to make any change and that it is your wish to remain at St. Cyprian's.

I wish to assure you that I approve most highly the sentiments which have prompted you to choose to stay at St. Cyprian's. I admire greatly your spirit of disinterestedness and loyalty and devotion to your people. May God bless you for this noble spirit you have shown.

Faithfully yours in Christ,  
James Cardinal Gibbons

In addition to Monsignor Matthews other Archdiocesan priests who served St. Cyprian's included Monsignor Henry Graebenstein, Monsignor William McVeigh, Monsignor J. Maurice King, Monsignor Joseph Moran, Monsignor Walter Read, and Father Louis Troch.

In 1943 St. Cyprian's was transferred to the Josephites. The Josephites were organized in 1893 as an American missionary group devoted to evangelizing African-Americans.

A look back at the histories recorded of St. Cyprian's shows just how central the church became to the lives of its members. In 1923, for example, thirty years after the founding of the parish, approximately 500 children attended Sunday School at St. Cyprian's, while more than 400 children were enrolled in the parish school which continued to be run by the Oblate Sisters of Providence. The sisters at St. Cyprian's school are fondly remembered by generations of their students who, many years later, can recall the lessons taught by Sister Alphonsa, Sister Irene, Sister Clementine, Sister Mary of Lourdes, Sister Percy, and Sister Carmel among a host of others.

An active choir, directed by Sylvester Thomas, and a Junior Choir, led by Sister Irene Jackson, stirred the souls of the church members with their faithful interpretation of church music.

Music has always played a significant role at St. Cyprian's and that is still



Father Graebenstein with St. Cyprian graduates of 1932.

(Text Continued on Page 26)



# Josephite Fathers

In 1866, at the Missionary College at Mill Hill, London, England, Herbert Vaughan founded the St. Joseph's Society of the Sacred Heart for Foreign Missions. Vaughan, who would later become cardinal archbishop of Westminster, envisioned a society of priests performing missionary duties in foreign lands. By 1871 the society had four missionaries ready to assume their roles and a suitable area was sought. India was the land thought most in need, however, the mission was deemed too large for just four missionaries, so the search continued.

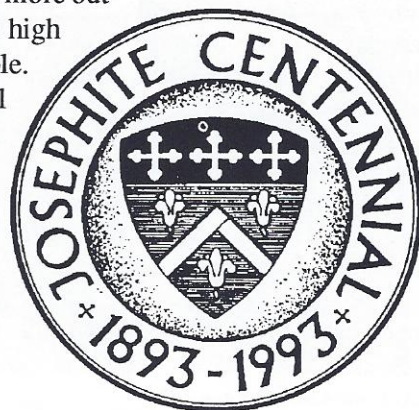
Meanwhile, in America two men on parallel courses were helping to chart the future educational and religious path for African Americans. Father Michael J. O'Connor, long an advocate of African American parishes, had a history of involvement with overseeing and insituting a number of parishes in Pennsylvania. Another individual was Martin John Spalding, Archbishop of Baltimore who was dedicated to bringing about a community of priests who were dedicated to the evangelization of African Americans, especially the multitude of released slaves. Spalding had written to Rome, speaking of the opportunity to maintain those already Catholic and of reaping "moral and religious betterment" for the former slaves. His pleas were partial answered after a personal visit to Vaughan by O'Connor to describe the needs and opportunities, and after a suggestion from the Pope that America would be suitable field mission, it was agreed that four missionaries would be sent before the end of 1871. The search had ended.

Over the next twenty years, the mission expanded as more missionaries arrived from Mill Hill. Growing from a hub around Baltimore to surrounding states and farther deep into the south, the missionaries found acceptance earned the respect of the African American community. However, the growth was not trouble free and began to take a toll on the society members in America and with those at Mill Hill. The hard work and poverty that usually accompanied the missionaries in America, along with a growing discontent with Mill Hill, which had expanded their missionary mission to other parts of the world, led to a movement to establish an American community, separate from Mill Hill.

In 1893, during bleak financial times, a trend of worsening racial tension, and severe manpower demands, the Society of St. Joseph under Cardinal James Gibbons of Baltimore. The Mill Hill society contued to flourish in England and around the world while the new Josephites began their work in America. While the troubles were many, the number of missions steadily grew and spawned new missions, by 1903 there were twelve missions from Delaware to Texas. In 1932, the Josephites received the decree of praise, officially establishing them as a pontifical society.

Besides the fundamental importance of religious education, the Josephites were equally driven by the need to provide basic and complete education to all that it serves. It is a proud fact, for example, that in 1918 each of the thirty-eight missions had a school and in some cases one or more out-schools. In 1993 there were more than one hundred elementary and high schools providing education to hundreds of thousands of young people.

1993 marked the centennial of the Josephites. During a Centennial Mass celebration, Bishop Joseph Fiorenza of the Galveston-Houston Diocese said, "Today there are 3,000,000 African American Catholics and that it due to the Josephites. They are reponsible for the Faith in African Americans today. We are grateful for their ministry. We look forward to another one hundred years of service from the Josephites. We place our hope in Jesus Christ. He brought the Josephites through 100 years."







*A very large first Communion class in 1933.*



*The Oblate Sisters of Providence at Mass in St. Cyprian's Church.*





*Sister Irene Jackson, O.S.P.*



*Sister M. Carmel Curtis, O.S.P.*





*A view of the choir loft in St. Cyprian's.*

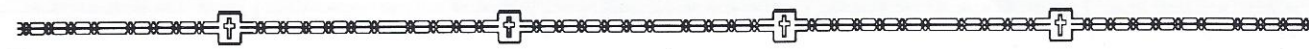


*Our Holy Name Society in a 1950's May procession.*





*Knights of St. John.*











*"Tom Thumb" Wedding, 1930's.*









*An early school photo.*







true today. The traditional Latin of the liturgy has given way to a diverse repertoire of hymns, African-American spirituals, and traditional Gospel songs. A parishioner remembers that St. Cyprian's was famous for its choir. She recalls a Sunday morning when some passersby lingered in front of the church for a long time and then called her over. "Please, do us a favor," they said. "Tell your pastor for us. We think your choir makes the loveliest music."

St. Cyprian's was more than a religious house of worship. The religious, beneficial, and social societies that met there forged a strong link among the church itself, its parishioners, and the community it served.

The early religious societies included the Senior Holy Name Society, the Junior Holy Name Society, and the Sodality of the Blessed Virgin, Knights of St. John, the Children of Mary, and the League of the Sacred Heart.

The Beneficial Societies of St. Cyprian's helped the parish take care of its



*Many plays were performed in our old hall.*



members who were suffering through hardships such as family illness or death. The St. Vincent de Paul Society, for instance, collected twenty-five cents a month from its members. Should a member become ill and unable to work, the Society would pay the family four or five dollars a week, a substantial sum in those days, to take care of the family's needs until the worker was well again. The financial and emotional support offered was yet another symbol of the bonds that St. Cyprian parishioners were working hard to establish and maintain.

With all their attention to good thoughts and good deeds, the members of St. Cyprian's also looked to their church for their recreational activities. Such groups as the Senior Men's Institute, the Young Men's Institute, the Senior Ladies Institute, the Union Ladies Institute, the National Council of Catholic Men, St. Cyprian's Dramatic and Musical Guild, St. Cyprian's Social Club, and the Boy Scouts of America, and Girl Scouts continued the efforts at building community spirit that had been the hallmark of St. Cyprian's founders.



*Our Girl Scouts.*



# School Day Memories From Our Past

*The graduates of 1921.*



Certainly chief on the list of the parish activities and priorities was St. Cyprian's School. In fact the School traces its origins to a time before the founding of the parish. It was on September 16, 1892, that a small group of African-American Roman Catholic Sisters made their way through the streets of Washington, D.C., to the corner of Eighth and C Streets, Southeast. There, the Oblate Sisters of Providence met Miss Mary Atkins who had promised to provide them with a place to establish a school for African-American children. The Oblate Sisters of Providence, a Baltimore congregation of Black Sisters dedicated to the Catholic education of Black children, was established in 1829 by Sulpician Father James Nicholas Joubert and by Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange, a French-speaking Catholic political refugee from the island of Haiti.

On October 2, 1831, the Oblate Sisters of Providence received official approval from Pope Gregory XVI that "... the special end of the members of the Congregation is primarily for Christian education of colored children. However, they may not refuse their ministrations to children of any nationality."

Under the patronage of Saint Ann, the sisters opened the doors of their school on October 2, 1892, in the basement of the building in which they lived. The following day the first school year began with thirty-five students in two classrooms.

At the founding of Saint Cyprian's Parish, Father Matthews recognized the value of the sisters' school. The Oblate Sisters offered the use of the school to the parish as a parochial establishment. The school took the name of the new parish and in 1894, a school and convent were built on a site of land donated by Miss

Atkins at 310 Eighth Street, Southeast, in Washington, D.C. On September 9, 1895, the sisters opened a boarding school for girls. In 1898, the first class graduated. This class included the parish's first vocation to the priesthood, Reverend Joseph Burgess, CSSP.

Over the years, the student enrollment of Saint Cyprian School reached a maximum of 430 pupils. The Oblate Sisters of Providence continued to direct the school that grew to eight elementary grades and two years of high school.

The Oblate Sisters were loved by the parishioners for their devotion to the parish children. Especially remembered is the devotion of Sister Irene Jackson who came to the school as a substitute teacher in 1894 and taught as many as four generations of some families until her death in 1964.



*The Chapel of the Oblate Sisters in St. Cyprian's Convent.*



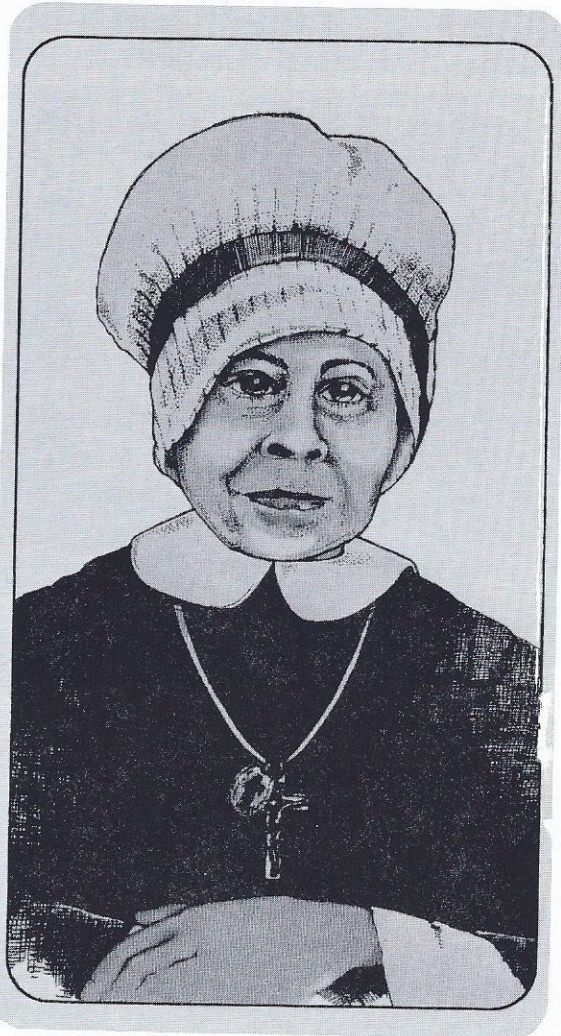
# The Oblate Sisters of Providence

The Oblate Sisters of Providence trace their origins to the pioneering work of the foundress of the congregation, Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange. Mother Lange was born in 1784 on the island of Hispaniola. A revolution on the island forced her family to flee to Cuba. In the early 1800's Mother Lange moved to Baltimore where there was a large population of French-speaking refugees from Hispaniola. Mother Lange soon saw the need to provide education for the children of these refugees and began to do so in her own home. This charitable work was not without risk since Maryland, being a slave state, forbade the teaching of black children. Mother Lange undertook this work for ten years until she exhausted her financial resources and was forced to close the doors.

Nevertheless, God opened another door when Sulpician Father, James Hector Nicholas Joubert, under the direction of the Archbishop of Baltimore asked Mother Lange to found a religious congregation especially dedicated to the education of black children. On July 2, 1829 Mother Lange and three other women, Marie Magdalen Balas, Rosine Boegue, and Almaide Duchemin, pronounced their first public vows. The order quickly expanded its efforts from the education of youth to include the providing of a home for orphans, sheltering the elderly, and caring for the terminally ill.

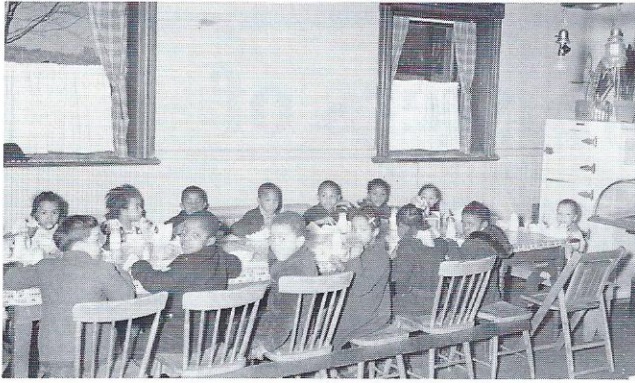
Guided by Mother Lange and Fr. Joubert the sisters extended their efforts to areas beyond Baltimore. By 1900 they were established in rural Maryland, Washington, DC, Missouri and Kansas. Today there are 129 Oblate Sisters of Providence, of various races and nationalities in eight states, the District of Columbia, Costa Rica, and the Dominican Republic.

Never forgetting the congregations's special apostolate of serving the education of young African Americans the sisters have served where needed in many roles for children and the community. They can be found in both elementary and secondary schools, and catechetical, retreat and day-care centers.

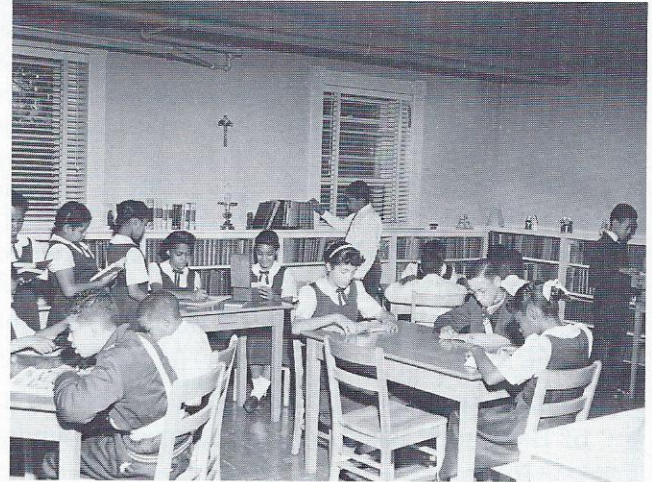


*Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange*





*Typical school lunch program at St. Cyprian's in the late 1930's and early 1940's.*



*The school library was a center of learning.*

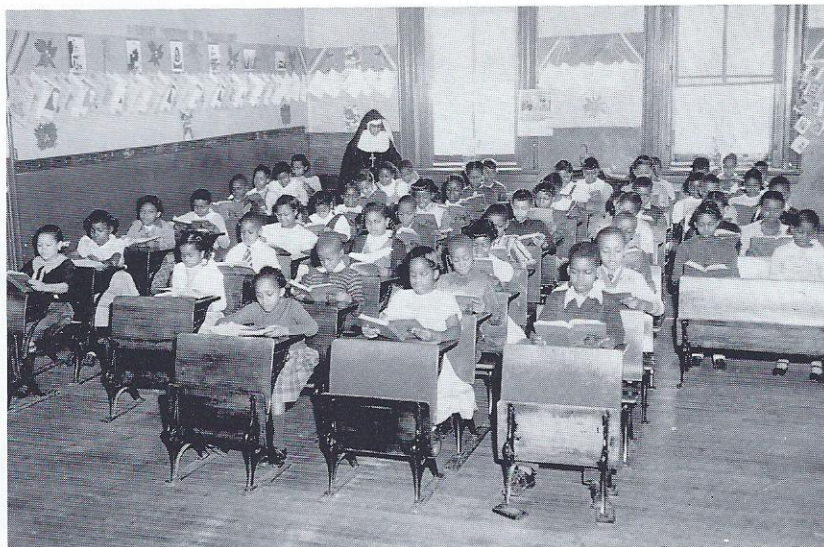


*The final graduating class of St. Cyprian's school. The following year the school was merged with Holy Comforter.*



# Classroom Remembrances

*Sister M. Dorothy Burks, O.S.P.*



*A sixth grade class of the St. Cyprian School at their study of the Mass.*



*Sister M. Stephana Smith, O.S.P.*



# *Drama And Music From The Past*



*Mrs. Goins organized this toy symphony orchestra in 1944.*

*St. Cyprian's School Rhythm Band, 1952-53.*

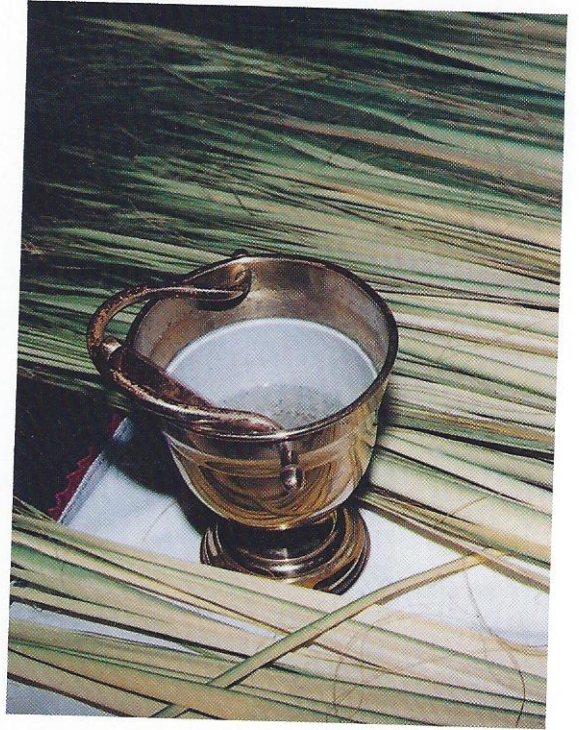
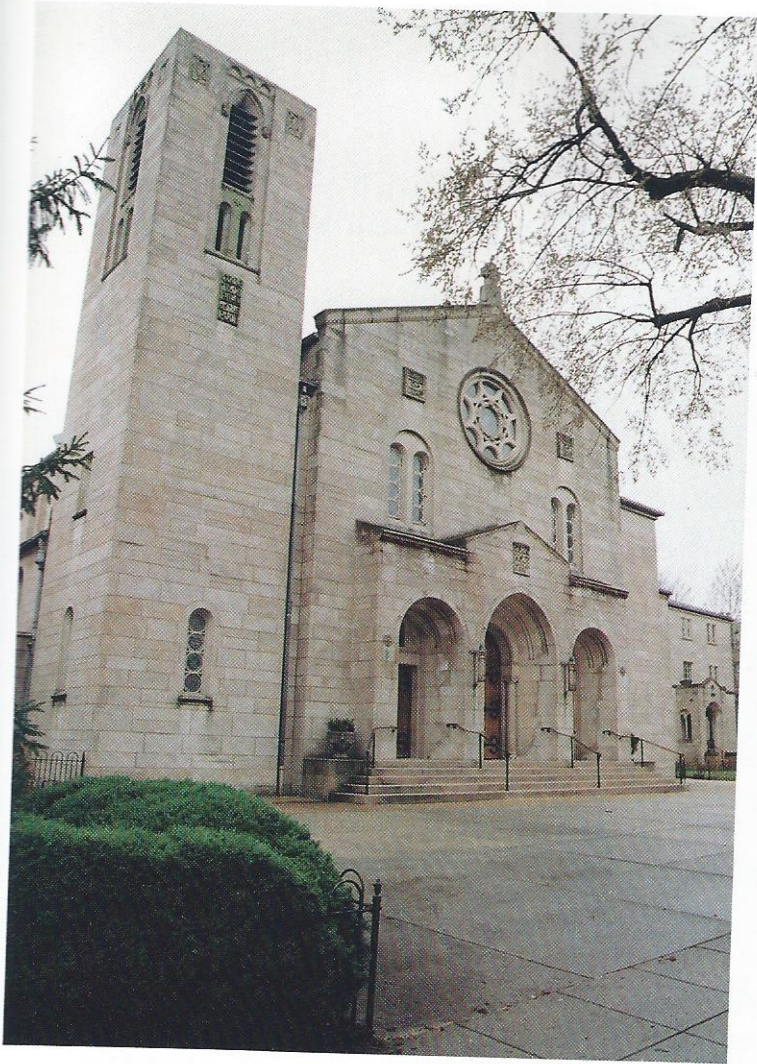


*St. Cyprian's Melody Flute Band, 1952-53.*

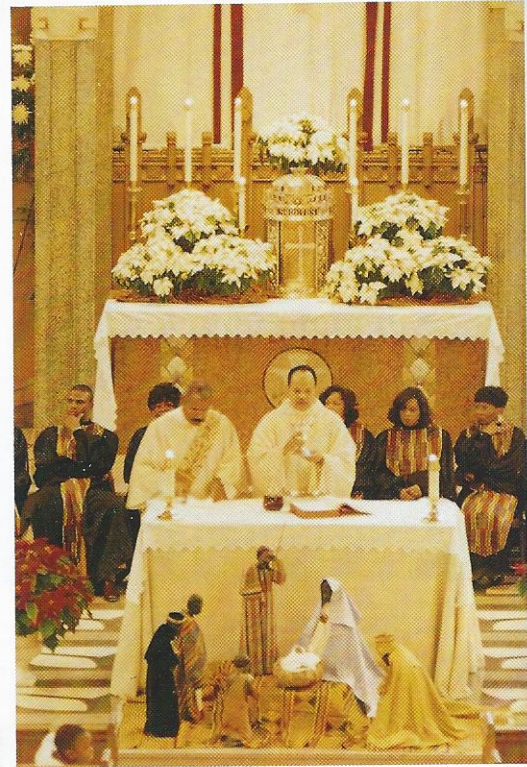
*A second grade Christmas play, 1957.*





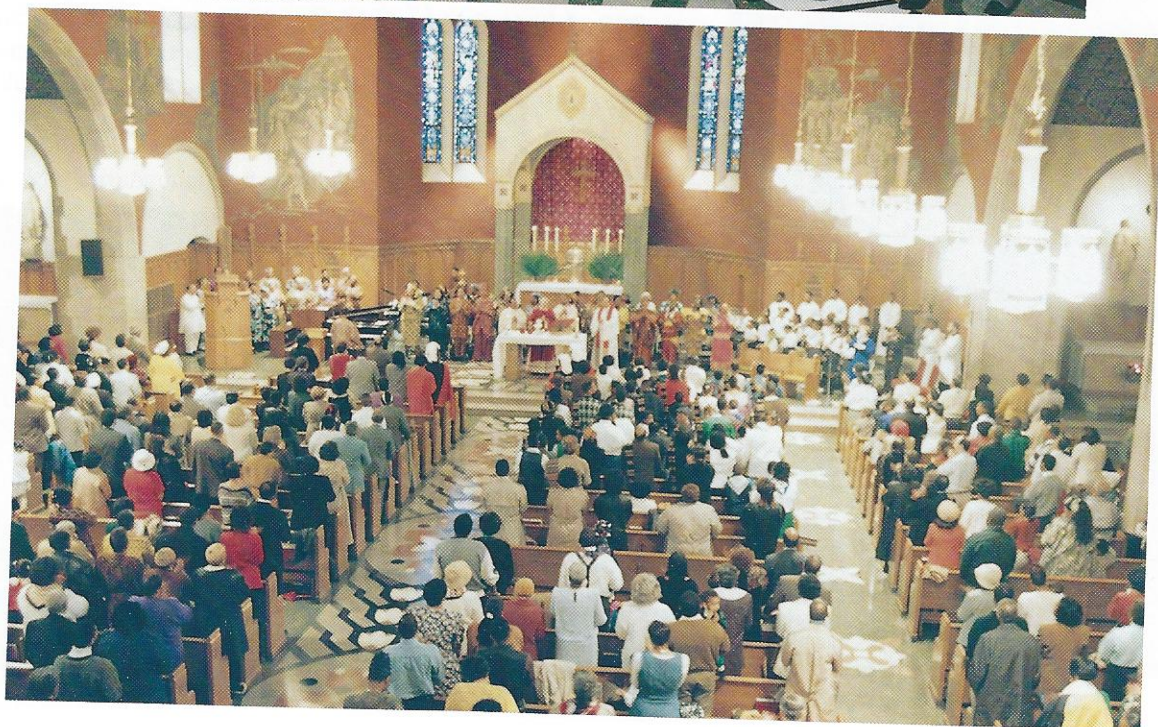




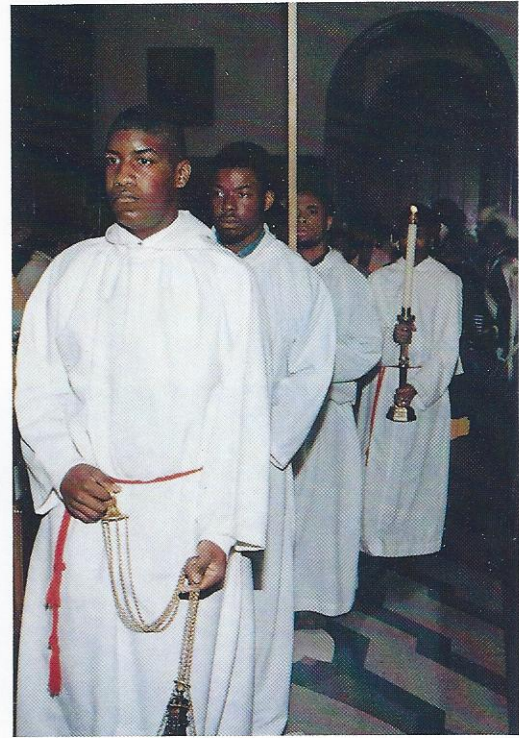




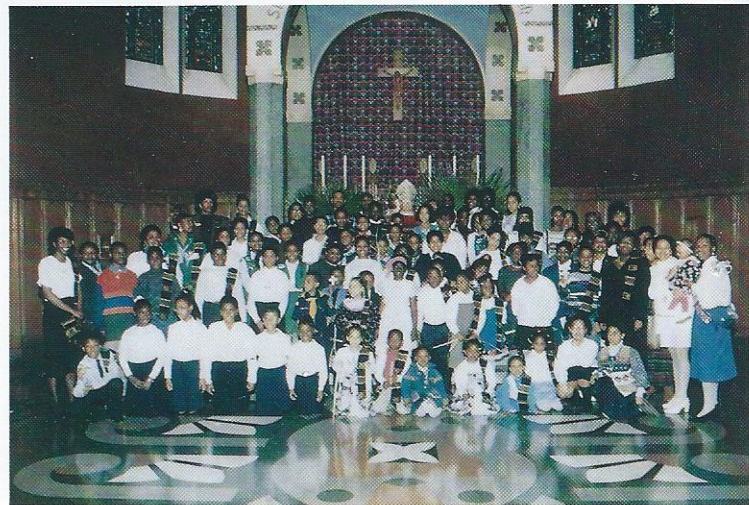
*What a Fellowship,  
What a Joy Divine,  
Leaning on the Everlasting Arms.*







*It takes every family in the village to raise every child in the village.*







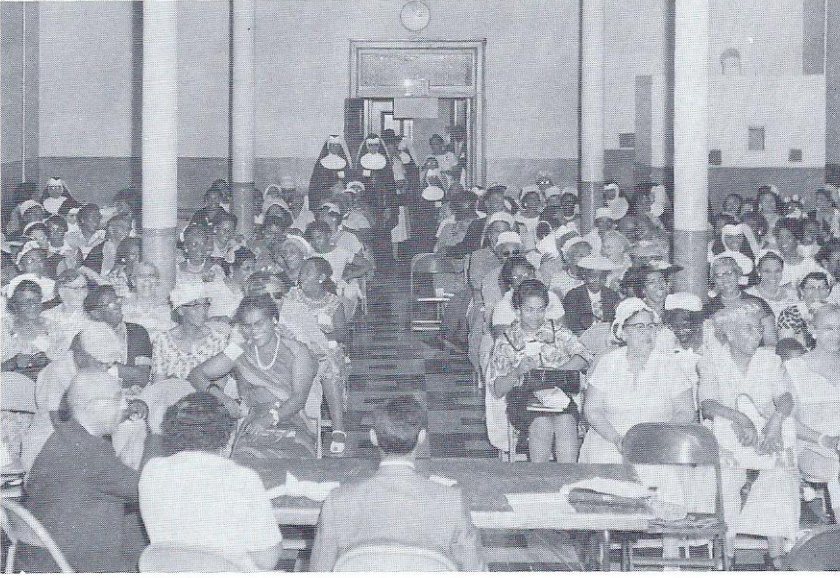
# The Hub of the Community

A long-time parishioner who, years later, ran into acquaintances wherever she went, was asked by her granddaughter, "Do you know everyone in the world?" "No," the grandmother replied, "but I knew everyone from St. Cyprian's parish."

The tight-knit community that sprang up around St. Cyprian's considered the church both its spiritual and social home.

Weekend social activities were held at the parish hall and those that were not were still usually sponsored by the church. Saturday night dances, Sunday evening potluck dinners, and other organized card games, wedding receptions, summer picnics, monthly amateur plays, and day-long excursions gave everyone something to do. The May procession was also a major community event.

Music for the Saturday dances — which ended promptly at midnight so everyone would be well-rested before Mass the next morning — was provided by



*One of the many meetings and gatherings in the church hall.*







*A musical presentation in the parish hall.*

Sylvester Thomas and his eight-piece band. During church services Mr. Thomas was the St. Cyprian organist, but on Saturday nights he and his fellow musicians livened things up with popular tunes laced with a jazzy beat.

Once a year in July, a week-long bazaar was held in the basement of St. Cyprian's to raise funds to pay off the church mortgage. Individual booths lined the walls, offering tempting cake and ice cream, dollar-a-plate dinners, as well as glassware, bedspreads, quilts, ceramics, and religious items. The women of St. Cyprian's were in charge of these booths, while the men ran the amusement booths that featured darts, horseshoes, and the wheel of fortune. The week would always end with the drawing of a grand prize winner in the church raffle—in later years, the lucky winners got to drive away in a new automobile.

Sunday evening dinners were another popular fund-raising activity. The day before the dinner, the women of St. Cyprian's would clean and prepare the Parish Hall, and then on Sunday, cook the dinner. For a small fee, parishioners enjoyed chicken, salads, greens, bread, ice cream and cake. These fund-raising dinners helped the parishioners pay off the church's debts.

Everyone in the St. Cyprian parish neighborhood enjoyed the annual block party, held each autumn. Temporary wooden fences blocked traffic, Japanese lanterns were strung across porches, phonograph speakers were tied to the



sycamore trees that lined the street, and delicious refreshments were served on the neighbors' porches, topped off by cake and homemade ice cream from the popular Krahlins' Bakery on C Street. After everyone had finished eating, the music was turned on and the dancers jitterbugged through the night.

The youngsters of St. Cyprian's were also included in many church activities. Since the completion of the parish hall in 1907, St. Cyprian's had always had an active program for youth including a Little League baseball team for both boys and girls. School plays in the parish hall were especially well attended by proud parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles.

In 1945 St. Cyprian's established a Recreation Club. Mondays, Wednesdays, and Sundays the adults met to participate in dramatics, dancing, music, or arts and crafts workshops. But on Friday nights, St. Cyprian's youngsters could pay a quarter to watch the antics of Laurel and Hardy, Abbott and Costello, and the Bowery Boys.

In 1956 the parish became affiliated with the Archdiocese's still largely segregated Catholic Youth Organization (CYO). In 1959 the girls' CYO track team entered the Archdiocesan CYO meet and the CYO Middle Atlantic Championships, winning many of the awards at both meets. There were also boy's football and basketball teams. On the social side, parents volunteered to supervise CYO dances where many young people met their future husbands and wives.

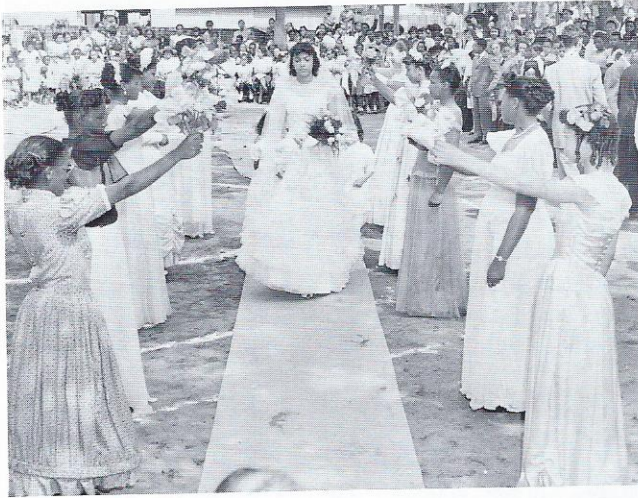
In these, and so many other ways, St. Cyprian's long served as the community's foremost social institution.



*One of our many boys basketball teams in the 1950's.*



# Memories . . .

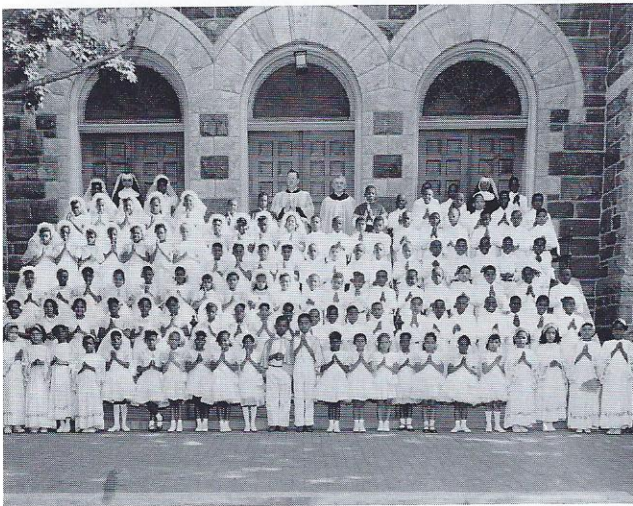




# Memories . . .



*Father Tighe giving Holy Communion to First Communicants. St. Cyprian's May 18, 1958.*



*First Communion May 18, 1958.*



*Our children receive Our Lord for the first time. St. Cyprian's Church May 14, 1958.*



# Memories . . .





# Memories . . .



*St. Cyprian's Graduation Class of 1922.*



*St. Cyprian's Graduation Class of 1935.*



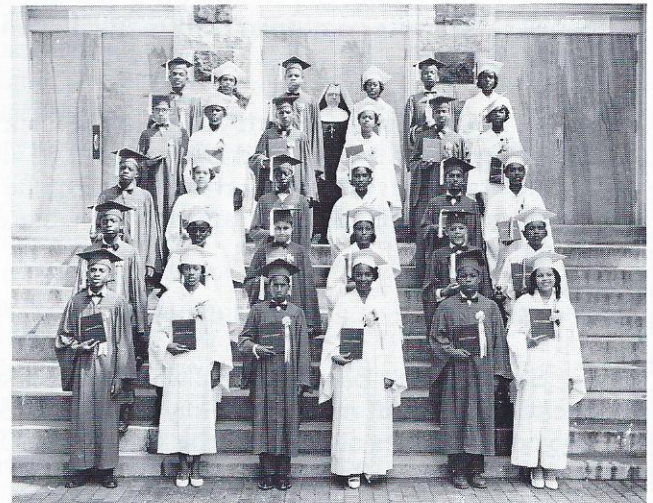
*St. Cyprian's Graduation Class of 1950.*



*St. Cyprian's Graduation Class of 1955.*



*St. Cyprian's Graduation Class of 1958.*



*St. Cyprian's Graduation Class of 1959.*



Throughout the years, St. Cyprian's continued to be the focal point of the Capitol Hill African-American Catholic community. In 1966, however, this pivotal force faced a serious challenge when it would be see its church buildings closed and the parish merged with nearby Holy Comforter Parish. The magnificent church building needed extensive repairs that proved too expensive to undertake. Fr. Burke, the pastor at the time the closing, explained in an interview conducted years later (and now on file in the Josephite archives) that the estimated cost to repair St. Cyprian's Church and Hall and bring it up to code as required by the city

would amount to over \$350,000. In 1966, such a sum was large indeed. Among the repairs and renovations required to bring the building up to code were: installation of restrooms in the Church, a completely new boiler and heating system, fireproofing the ceiling in the basement of the Church and the removal of the old septic system. Equally extensive repairs were required in the hall.

It was Fr. Burke who first approached the Archbishop, Cardinal O'Boyle with the problem and suggested a possible merger with Holy Comforter. To Fr. Burke this made sense since, by that time, Holy Comforter had suffered a serious decline in membership. In addition, by 1966 it was an increasingly African American Parish. The previous year the two schools had merged and that process had gone rather smoothly. Fr. Burke explained to the Cardinal and diocesan officials that it made little sense to spend such an enormous amount repairing the buildings at St. Cyprian's when the buildings of Holy Comforter in relatively good shape were sitting nearly empty just four blocks away. Cardinal O'Boyle expressed his reservations by wondering aloud with Fr. Burke as to how the parishioners of St. Cyprian would accept the change. After receiving assurances from Fr. Burke the parishioners would handle it well, Cardinal O'Boyle agreed to allow the merger to take place.

Yet it must be said that things did not go smoothly and many parishioners today still express concern over the way the whole matter was handled. The announcement of the closing came suddenly on a Sunday in late August 1966. The parishioners were told that within just two weeks their parish buildings would be closed and that St. Cyprian would merge with Holy Comforter. The

## Two D.C. Parishes United

### Holy Comforter, St. Cyprian's Parishes merged

A union of two parishes in the southeast section of Washington has been announced this week by Archbishop O'Boyle as part of a series of Pastoral changes.

The union involves Holy Comforter parish at 14th and East Capitol Streets and St. Cyprian's 1242 C Sts. S.E. The new parish will be known as Holy Comforter and St. Cyprian's parish.

#### Josephite Fathers

The combined parish will be under the administration of the Josephite Fathers who formally conducted St. Cyprian's parish. Fr. Thomas E. Burke, S.S.J., pastor at St. Cyprian's for the last two and a half years, will be pastor.

This is the second such union of two parishes in the Archdiocese. In 1961 St. Paul's parish at 15th and V Streets, N.W. and St. Augustine's parish, 1715 15th Street N.W., were combined to form Sts. Paul and Augustine parish.

Holy Comforter Church will be used for all services. Holy Comforter rectory and convent will be used by the parish staff and Holy Comforter School will be the parish school under the administration of the Oblate Sisters of Providence.

#### School Closed

St. Cyprian's parish school was closed last year with the teaching staff moving to Holy Comforter School with two communities of nuns on the staff — the Oblates and the Sisters of St. Joseph.

*From the Catholic Standard, September 8, 1966.*





*The Closing Mass of St. Cyprian's Church.*

parishioners were shocked by the announcement. While the description of the necessary repairs was sketchy, the general feeling of the congregation was that with a little time, they could have raised the money to repair the building and keep the church open. But that was not to be, the merger was an accomplished fact. With just two weeks' notice and no opportunity to try to raise funds to complete the repairs, the members of St. Cyprian's Church were told that they would be moving. Reactions ranged from resignation to anger but the decision was final. The whole matter was even more hurtful because many of St. Cyprian's had the experiences of of being unwanted at Holy Comforter. Particularly before the war, many African American Catholics were told at the door of Holy Comforter that they did not belong there. Rather, they should go over to St. Cyprian. More than a few parishioners remembered with sadness how they would have to walk past Holy Comforter even in the worst weather to find a Church where they were welcomed. These memories, coupled with the sense of loss of the St. Cyprian's buildings, left many feeling bewildered and hurt. Many still recall the events with sorrow but can point with satisfaction to the fact that the parish survived and moved forward.

St. Cyprian's church was filled to capacity for the closing mass which is remembered as an especially beautiful one. It was a day parishioners shared





*Following the Closing Mass, St. Cyprian's Church doors are closed for the last time.*

memories and reluctantly left the church building for the last time. The buildings stood empty for some five years. In 1971 however, they were demolished and the beautiful gothic church of 13th and C streets southeast was replaced by a series of non-descript townhouses. In the park across the street a small plaque commemorates the site of St Cyprian's which, for close to 80 years, played such an important role in the lives of its parishioners and the local community.



*Doris Edelin, Parish Council President participates in the plaque ceremony.*

