The enduring parish of Saint Peter Claver, Macon, continues to “bloom”

When Saint Peter Claver Church was founded in Macon, there was no annual Cherry Blossom Festival, but there were black Catholics who needed their own church in their own community. In 1892, many years before tourists began traveling to Macon each spring to see its 275,000 Yoshino Cherry trees, Jesuit priests from Saint Stanislaus Seminary were saying Mass for the city’s African-American Catholics. One of those priests—Father Michael Kenny—returning to Macon in 1902 after being away for ten years, was disappointed that so little was being done to sustain the faith of Macon’s black Catholics.

A man seeking results, Father Kenny was soon teaching Catholic catechism to black children in private homes and earning the approval of Bishop Benjamin J. Keiley of the Diocese of Savannah. In late 1902, Bishop Keiley wrote that he was “delighted” with Kenny’s efforts and promised to send a Franciscan Sisters to help him. On January 10, 1903, a property belonging to Father William Powers, father superior of the Jesuit Mission of New Orleans, promising $4,000 for funding of a “Catholic school for the Colored People of Macon, Georgia.” Meanwhile, impressed with the progress of his catechetical students, Father Kenny became the little mission church’s first pastor.

Mother Drexel and the school

On July 8, 1903, Mother Katherine Drexel and the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament for Indian and Colored People signed a written agreement with Father William Powers, superior of the Jesuit Mission of New Orleans, promising $4,000 for funding of a “Catholic school for the Colored People of Macon, Georgia.”

The zealous Father Lissner, provincial of the Society of African Missions, was convinced that black Catholics should have their own churches situated in their own traditionally black neighborhoods. In keeping with this philosophy, Father Lissner soon turned his attention to Pleasant Hill, a historically African-American community in Macon. Asking and receiving financial support from the Sisters, Father Lissner next finalized plans for a school, convent and rectory to be built on a two-acre lot on Ward Street.

The new Saint Peter Claver Catholic School for Negro Children opened its doors on Monday, September 28, 1914. The two-story building was constructed of brick because Father Lissner was taking no chances. Having lost a church in Savannah to fire, Lissner was determined to have no repetition of that unfortunate happening. Father Dahlen was named manager of the school and was assisted by four female teachers during the school’s first year. A large classroom in the school was used for church services until the erection of a new church, a project halted by scarcity of materials during World War I.

In response to an appeal from Bishop Keiley to the Society of African Missions in 1909, the Jesuits—after losing several members of their faculty at Saint Stanislaus to yellow fever—officially released the property containing the mission church and school to the Society of African Missions.

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(Saint Peter Claver Church was completed and dedicated in 1928.) In 1915, the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament arrived in Macon to live in the convent built for them and to teach in the new school. Sisters of this order remained in Macon until 1987.


Diocesan priests arrive

Diocesan priests who have served Saint Peter Claver since it came under diocesan aegis are Fathers Michael O’Sullivan, Michael Delea, Richard Keil, Liam Collins, Jim Kirchner, James Walker, Brett Brannen, and Adam J. Kasela, present pastor. Saint Peter Claver Catholic School is still in operation in Pleasant Hill, though it is no longer staffed by the Blessed Sacrament Sisters, but by Daughters of Charity and lay teachers. Saint Peter Claver Catholic Church, built of sturdy brick at Father Lissner’s direction, still stands at 131 Ward Street in Macon where it serves as a reminder of the hardy faith of its African-American parishioners.

Unlike the passing blooms of this month’s International Cherry Blossom Festival in Macon, Saint Peter Claver’s “bloom” is of the lasting variety.

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