

History of Holy Comforter Parish 1904 - 1966

With the celebration of High Mass on a snowy November 13, 1904, the history of Holy Comforter Church formally began. Under the spiritual leadership of Reverend Joseph McGuire, services were first held in a former pool hall(!) at 14th and East Capitol Streets. Reverend McGuire also served as the chaplain for the District of Columbia Jail.

Indeed, the story goes, it was Father McGuire's work within the prison system that led to the name for the new church. As Father McGuire was making his daily rounds at the jail, an inmate called out, "Here comes the Holy Comforter." Father McGuire was inspired to use the term for the new church as a dedication to the Holy Spirit.

The neighborhood of Capitol Hill around Lincoln Park was growing rapidly and it quickly became evident that a new and larger church building was needed. In 1906, architect B. Stanley Simmons drew plans for a Spanish-mission style building that stood on the site of our present Church at 14th and East Capitol Streets. The cornerstone was laid on March 18, 1906 and the building of the Church and rectory were completed within nine months at a cost of \$42,500. The first Mass was said in the church on Christmas Day, 1906.

Father McGuire died in 1908 and was succeeded by one of his former classmates, Reverend Clarence Wheeler. Under Father Wheeler's leadership the parish school was built at 15th and East Capitol Streets at a cost of \$230,000 and dedicated on October 2, 1921. Classes in the new school started the next morning with an enrollment of 330 students in the first six grades. The students were taught by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Chestnut Hill, from Philadelphia. The school building still serves the parish today.

Throughout the early years of this century, the parish of Holy Comforter continued to grow. In 1906 only one Mass had been necessary; by 1924, there were six masses offered each Sunday. The school grew as well and the children now numbered over 700.

When Father Wheeler died in 1929, he was followed by Reverend James E. Connell who remained pastor until his death in 1935. In June of 1936 Cardinal Gibbons appointed the Reverend Charles O'Hara as Pastor.

Fr. O'Hara quickly realized that, as the parish was continuing to grow, an even larger church building would be necessary. In 1937, he commenced a building drive that would result in the construction of the church building we presently have today. On July 31, 1938 ground was broken for the new Church and rectory. These buildings were completed at a cost of \$200,000 and dedicated on December 3, 1939.





Rev. Joseph McGuire. Founding pastor of Holy Comforter.

For ten years, from 1936-1946, Father Charles O'Hara served the Holy Comforter Church. Upon his death, Reverend Henry Graebenstein, who for a time, had served at St. Cyprian's Church, became pastor of Holy Comforter. It was under Father Graebenstein's leadership that the beautiful interior murals of the church were completed. Father Graebenstein remained at Holy Comforter until 1950. The pastors who succeeded him included Reverend Lawrence McGlone, Reverend Joseph Gedra, Father Joseph Eckert, and Father George Joyce.

Holy Comforter remained at largely white parish prior to the Second World War. As has already been remarked in these pages, African American Catholics were often actively discouraged from attending Holy Comforter and were referred to St. Cyprian's. However, after the war, large demographic changes swept Capitol Hill. Large numbers of white families began to move out to newly built suburbs. African American Catholics began to attend Holy Comforter Parish and the racial barriers began to fall; slowly. One parishioner of Holy Comforter who traces his membership back to 1951 recalls that although he and his family attended weekly the ushers would tend to encourage them to sit in the back. Nevertheless, he also recalls with glee how his parents would often walk by those ushers and take their seats near the front anyway. Another parishioner of the same era remembers also being encouraged to sit in the back. He also recalls however, that when the priests found out about it they became very angry at the ushers involved and reprimanded them. Thus, the barriers were breaking down, but it was a slow and painful process and many African American Catholics still had to face resistance.

It was perhaps as a legacy of racism and segregation that Holy Comforter parish suffered a rather sudden and steady decline in membership in the years after the Second World War. The white parishioners who had been its base were moving in large numbers to the suburbs and many African Americans who were moving into the neighborhood were not Catholic. Those who were Catholic did not always feel welcome. All of this placed the parish in a difficult financial and pastoral situation. By 1956, Cardinal O'Boyle conceded in his letter appointing Fr. Eckert as administrator that Holy Comforter would not be an easy assignment. As was seen above, the priests made efforts to end break down some of the racial barriers but attitudes are often slow to change and memories are a long time healing.

Nevertheless, through the 1950's and early sixties, the demographics continued to shift and by 1966 Fr. Burke could describe Holy Comforter parish as increasingly African American. Although there are no photos of the congregation available from this time, the photo of the 1966 Graduating class of Holy Comforter - St. Cyprian School, reflects this reality.



The cornerstone of the second church was laid on March 8, 1906.



Our present church was dedicated on December 3, 1939.





Father Burke with the first graduating class of the merged schools.



CLASS '66

CAPITAL PHOTO
MAY 1966



Our ushers preparing us for Mass.



The celebration of Kwanzaa.



100th Anniversary Gala, September, 1993.



Father Tolentino and Father Pope, 1995.

Christmas, 1995.

Comforter - St. Cyprian has held fast to the visions and ideals not only of the Roman Catholic Church but also of its founding members. Continuing to thrive, just four years short of the twenty-first century, Holy Comforter - St. Cyprian is a caring community that reflects the neighborhood in which it stands. From a time when African-Americans were unjustly shunned within their own Church to our present-day congregation, led by Reverend Eddie Tolentino, III, the membership of Holy Comforter - St. Cyprian's has stood firm in the face of challenges that would have shaken other parishes to the core.

When the church doors open every Sunday, the members of Holy Comforter - St. Cyprian Parish know that they are welcomed and valuable participants in a church that remains vital and active, yet solid and steadfast.

Holy Comforter - St. Cyprian is a caring Catholic community that worships God through the expression of its African-American heritage. In its Centennial Celebration statement, Holy Comforter - St. Cyprian declared through its vision statement:

Our faith prompts us to reach out to those members of our community who seek to worship God in spirit and in truth. The Parish Staff, Parish Council, and Finance Council are deeply committed to the mission of the church. Parish ministries and organizations focus on liturgical life. Through our school, CCD, and youth programs, we are striving to teach the youngest members of our parish the values of our Catholic faith.

Our faith calls us to attend to the needs of those who suffer the ravages of addiction, the pain of hunger, the loneliness of the sick, the indignity of the unemployed and homeless, the alienation of families in turmoil and the disenfranchisement of incarceration. Under the patronage of the Holy Spirit and Saint Cyprian, the parish community of Holy Comforter - St. Cyprian continues its mission of proclaiming the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ.

This vision is also echoed in the Parish Mission Statement:

Holy Comforter - St. Cyprian Parish Mission Statement

Adopted September 1992

Holy Comforter - St. Cyprian parish shall advocate Christian principles and promulgate the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church through celebration of word and sacrament. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, HCSC will work vigorously toward the upbuilding of African-American Catholic community through the effective use of the time, talent, treasure of its people, steadfast commitment to Catholic education and spirited worship. The HCSC community of faith will be light in the darkness of this day; advancing the mission of the gospel, reaching out to the poor and those captive in mind and spirit, it will be a balm to the sick, a shelter to the homeless, a witness to everyone deprived of the healing power of God's tender love and mercy. HCSC, grounded in faith and enriched by its history, shall continue the journey, fervent and fearless under the protection of our patron, St. Cyprian and our advocate, the Holy Comforter.



Epilogue

Over one hundred years have passed since the founding of St. Cyprian parish. Stony the road we have trod and yet full of glory every step of the way for this parish has been, and must remain, God's work. Each of us today must acknowledge that we stand upon the strong shoulders of our ancestors; ancestors who knew sacrifice but more importantly, knew the Lord. Their faith was strong even in the face of disgraceful treatment in the very Church they loved. Rather than react with bitterness or by walking away they heard the voice of love which called them to work within and our parish today is the fruit of that work of love by God's grace. The spirituals which have so much to teach, remind us:

What a fellowship, what a joy divine, leaning on the everlasting arms!

Some of us still carry painful memories but we carry them in faith:

Trials dark on every hand and we cannot understand all the ways that God's would lead us to that blessed promised land. But He guides us with His eye and we'll follow till we die and we'll understand it better by and by.

As we look then upon our past, we give thanks to those who have gone before us standing tall and holding high the lamp of faith. As we look to the future, we beg God's grace that we carry forth the great legacy we have received and hand it on to generations yet unborn. And we have this blessed assurance: Jesus is ours.

Let this be our story; let this be our song, praising our savior all the day long.