



# Religion

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## FOCUS ON RELIGION

### Black Catholics find diverse faith enlightening

ROBIN BARKSDALE  
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Roman Catholicism rarely is mentioned in Afro-American religious circles -- largely because, relatively speaking, few Afro-Americans are Catholic. But Catholicism is far from a foreign religion for blacks around the world. And the religion has strong and significant ties to the black population. But although the number of Afro-American Catholics is growing in this country, Catholicism still is not viewed favorably by many members of the more traditional Afro-American communities who do not accept the practice of Afro-Americans belonging to a "white church."

Afro-American Catholics argue that the charge at they belong to a "white church" is incorrect and

was made of it. Growing up and attending Masses at school with people of different colors had an impact on her, she said.

"I think it's a very good experience for young people," said Mrs. Douthit. "It's good that people can come together and worship and not think about their race."

St. Benedict the Moor Church, located on the corner of 12th Street and Hattie Avenue, has occupied its position in the heart of the Afro-American community since 1940. At that time, the bishop of the diocese determined that churches should be built in Afro-American communities in the state to reach out to black Catholics. From that declaration, Holy Cross Church in Durham and St. Benedict's in Winston-Salem were established.

In Winston-Salem, Mr. and Mrs. Hosea V. Price organized a group of 10 other Afro-American Catholics and laid the groundwork for the formation of the new parish. The church was started under the auspices of the Franciscan priests and remained that way until the 1960s. The Diocesan priests took over the ministry of the church in the 1960s. Father Tom Gaunt, the current pastor of the church, is St. Benedict's first Jesuit priest. Soon after the opening of the church, St. Benedict's School was established and served children in grades one through eight. St. Anne's Academy was the

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Catholic all-girls high school.

Father Gaunt said that from the beginning it was intended that St. Benedict's would service the growing population of Afro-American Catholics in Winston-Salem. He said that the church is named in honor of Benedict the Moor, an African leader, who was canonized by the Roman Catholic Church in recognition of the leadership and spiritual direction he offered.

He said also that, historically, blacks have made up a large part of the Roman Catholic Church throughout the world.

"The Roman Catholic Church is a diverse church and there is a strong cultural diversity of the Catholic Church," he said. "As a 'catholic' church the emphasis is that it is a church of many different cultures and peoples. The vast majority of Catholics are Latin American and African."

There are more than 50 million Catholics in the United States: five to eight percent of them are Afro-American. There are 12 Afro-American bishops within the Catholic Church in America, the newest of which is Archbishop Marino of Atlanta, who oversees the Charlotte diocese.

Catholics recognize seven blessed sacraments: baptism, the Eucharist, reconciliation (confession), confirmation, marriage, the anointing of the sick and orders (the priesthood). Father Gaunt said the emphasis on sacraments is "one of the most distinctive parts of the Catholic Church compared to other Christian churches."

Roman Catholics recognize the Pope as the leader



photo by Mike Cunningham

Above, the interior of St. Benedict the Moor Catholic Church features all of the usual adornments and symbolic representation of Catholic churches. Below, the church's pastor, Father Tom Gaunt, dons the vestments Catholic priests wear for Masses.

of the bishops of the world. As leader of all bishops, Pope John Paul II, the current pope, is united with Catholics throughout the world, Father Gaunt said.

Because it is not what is considered a traditional Afro-American denomination, Catholicism is a source of much curiosity for many in the Afro-American community. Mention that you're Catholic and you're often told, "oh yeah, you're the ones that don't eat meat on Fridays" or "You're the ones that worship those statues and don't believe in God."

Such misconceptions are at the same time puzzling and disappointing to Afro-American Catholics.

"The biggest misconception I hear all the time is that we worship statues," Mrs. Douthit said. "It's the same as having a portrait of your loved one. It's symbolic and it's representative of the spirit of that person. I think people, who don't know, see us kneel and it may seem that we're praying to idols or something."

Father Gaunt is baffled by some of the notions other Christians have about Catholicism. When pressed, he is unable to point to any specific belief or practice of the faith that would bring about the claims that Catholics are not Christians or that they belong to some strange cult.

"The one thing I think Protestants should understand is that we are not 'some other religion,' we're a denomination of Christianity just like they are," said Father Gaunt. "A lot of people don't understand our statues or the designs on the windows. It follows the point that we believe in the communion of saints. The emphasis on the saints is to make us aware of the Christians who have gone before us and who have lived their Christian life in a manner that should be an inspiration to us. It's just a special way of remembering

our Christian heroes."

Although the majority of its members in this country are white, the Catholic Church has fallen victim to much religious prejudice over the years. Father Gaunt said much of that prejudice is a result of the fact that people simply don't know a lot about the faith. That kind of prejudice, he calls "more of a small annoyance than a big problem anymore."

When large numbers of Polish and Italian immigrants came to America, they were seen as something "different" and "unknown" by the Anglo-Saxons in the country. Most of the immigrants were Roman Catholic, a relatively new faith in the country at the time, and all kinds of labels were attached to the Catholic Church.

During the slavery years, Catholic slave owners were required by the laws of their church to baptize and instruct slaves in the Catholic faith and to recognize the Catholic sacrament of marriage among slaves. Father Gaunt said that not all of the plantation owners adhered to the church's mandate, but that many of them did.

"They (slave owners) were obligated under church law not to deal with slaves as their personal property and remain in the church," he said. "Certainly not all of them followed the church's instruction, but the church did require it."

While some of the stereotypes surrounding the Catholic faith have died down, Father Gaunt said that there still exists a danger more threatening than misconceptions caused by a lack of knowledge: out and out religious hatred. Many religious hate groups, he

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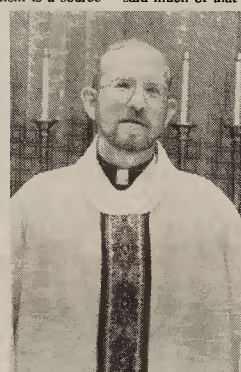
photo by Mike Cunningham

Arnease Douthit studies one of the patterns in the stained glass windows at St. Benedict the Moor Catholic Church.

at much of the objection to the Catholic faith as a whole stems simply from misconceptions.

"I don't go to a 'white church'. It's not a white church or a black church. It's a non-racial church," said Arnease Douthit, a member of St. Benedict the Moor Catholic Church. "It's a melting pot at my church. Race is not the issue."

Mrs. Douthit said she has been exposed to Catholicism every since she can remember. She attended kindergarten and grade school at St. Benedict School, which closed in the late 1970s, and continued at a Catholic school through high school. Although not Catholic during her school years, Mrs. Douthit said she converted to the religion in 1971. The Catholic schools she attended had students from a variety of religions and ethnic backgrounds, and Mrs. Douthit said that while she noticed a difference in people, no big deal



Father Gaunt file photo

## Back to Life Center offers community a second chance

By ROBIN BARKSDALE  
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Although it would be easy to wait for someone to handle things for them, residents in the East 21st Street area wanted to take charge of their own lives and to be responsible for bringing about changes in their neighborhoods.

Enter the Back to Life Center, with a mission of giving residents of the Afro-American community a second chance with their lives. The center, which will hold its official grand opening ceremonies Sept. 11, operates on the belief that if neighbors help neighbors the community at large will be better able to thrive. The Back to Life Center is the brainchild of Evangelist Lee Faye Mack, who said she established the center to fill a need she saw for good old fashioned concern for one's neighbor.

"I could see the needs of the people. The Lord has given me the vision," she said. "There is a need for a program of this kind to be here in the community."

The location of the center, right in the middle of the community it serves, Mrs. Mack said, makes it even more beneficial as an outreach agency. The center will provide services such as motivational seminars, Bible study, after-school programs, the NAACP Learning Center program, and a food bank.

The center also will implement two relatively new programs, Life Line and Adopt A Family. Mrs. Mack said both programs are intended to encourage the more advantaged members of the community to reach out and lend a hand to those who are disadvantaged.

"Life Line is a program that allows families to take a person who has been displaced and work with that person on getting back into the mainstream of life," Mrs. Mack said. "The family will be the bridge back for a displaced person, and they'll be the instrument for giving support during a displaced person's period of transition."

Lifeline is designed to combat what Mrs. Mack said is the popular misconception that homeless people want to be in that condition.



photo by Mike Cunningham

The Back to Life Center has set up shop in the heart of the E. 21st Street area and its organizers hope to have a significant impact in the area.

"Everyone in the street doesn't want to be there," she said. "They fell into a situation over which they had no control."

Adopt A Family will work along the same principle, but will encourage one family to "adopt" another and to spend time with that family. The adoptive family, Mrs. Mack, said also will help out at Thanksgiving, Christmas or whenever the adopted family is in crisis.

The Back to Life Center is different from other service centers in that it is operated completely by volunteers from the East 21st Street community. It has no large grants or funding resources. Mrs. Mack said the center operates "from one day to the next on whatever our volun-

teers and supporters can offer."

The house it currently occupies was a donation. Volunteers staff the center during its hours of operation. But Mrs. Mack said that kind of support is encouraging because it shows that people are there because they believe in bettering their community and not because they're being forced to pitch in and help.

"We're different because we don't get a dime," she said. "It's run completely by volunteers and gifts from the community. Someone gave us this house and we came in and renovated it. We painted, we cleaned. But we need places that can offer jobs to the people that come in here and learn how to work."

After living in her neighborhood for three years and seeing no real progress, Edna Gerald was happy to lend her home to the Back to Life Center.

"Basically, I volunteer here because I've lived in the community and I've seen that there is a lot to be done," she said. "Money is always spent but very seldom does that money filter out to the black community. If anything is going to change, I believe we are going to have to do it ourselves. We can no longer rely on anyone else to do anything for us. We've got to do it for ourselves."

Mrs. Mack said the benefits of the center may help the entire area to progress. She said also that she hopes to be able to open similar centers in other neighborhoods in the near future.

"It's one thing to plan programs for people, but it's another for people to plan programs with you," she said. "We're hoping this will help unite the black community by encouraging people to help themselves."

The Back to Life Center is open for intake and referral and food distribution from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Monday through Thursday. Bible study classes are held Tuesday nights from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. and Saturdays (after Sept. 11) from 3 p.m. to 4:30 p.m.

The center will hold its grand opening ceremonies Sunday, Sept. 11, at 4 p.m. at 927 E. 21st St.