

San Antonio People of Faith Historical Museum

When God Calls

In 1926, African-American Edwin “Eddie” Johnson was born in San Marcos, Texas. At that time, the state and indeed the nation remained hostile toward and insensitive to the rights of black Americans. Legal segregation of schools, churches, residential districts and most public places enacted in the late 19th century had carried over into the 20th century. According to the Texas State Historical Association, most Texas cities and towns had “Negro quarters”; the educational reforms put in place by the 1920s failed to improve the deplorable educational facilities, racist curriculum, and inadequate funding provided to “black schools.” While many “white” churches, including the Catholic church, urged desegregation during this period, their efforts were on conversion and focused on their creeds and rituals. African-Americans instead began forming their own churches to help them not only celebrate and exercise their faith but also to focus on social injustices and racism. Eddie Johnson, born into an evangelical Christian family, probably sensed little of the bigotry he would encounter as he grew, nor could he or his parents know that one day he would answer God’s call to the Catholic priesthood.

Little is recorded of Eddie Johnson’s early life, but we can infer from his scholastic achievements that he was extremely motivated and that his parents put a great deal of emphasis on education. Despite beginning life in San Marcos, at some point the Johnson’s moved to San Antonio, where Eddie was raised. He attended St. Peter Claver Academy, Texas’ first privately funded school for African-Americans. Founded in 1888 and staffed by Sisters of the Holy Ghost, the school had earned a reputation for academic excellence by the time Johnson enrolled. Upon graduation, he continued his studies in San Antonio where he eventually earned an undergraduate degree in English at St. Mary’s University and, in 1960, an M.A. in English from Our Lady of the Lake University. At some point during his college studies, he also served as a lay teacher at St. Peter Claver Academy. Also at an unknown time during his entire scholastic career, he converted to Catholicism. Brother Ed Loch, SM, retired archivist of the Archdiocese of San Antonio, reports that Edwin Johnson is listed as “witness” for many converts in the Baptism book of St. Peter Claver Church.

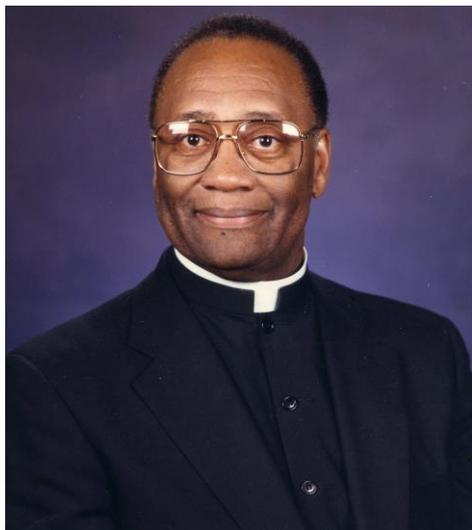
Johnson’s response to his religious calling occurred in 1961, when, according to Marianist Province Archivist Mary Kenney, he entered the Society of Mary’s Novitiate, St. Louis Province. Brother Edwin B Johnson then professed his first vows in 1962, followed by his perpetual vows in 1965. He went on to inspire many young Catholics in his long career in education in Catholic and Marianist institutions. His first assignment was at Don Bosco, an all white boys’ school in Milwaukee where he was loved and respected. He next served at St. Michael’s School in Chicago (where he would later return as principal), and then to the Vincent Gray House in East St. Louis, a Marianist alternative school much like today’s Healy-Murphy Center in San Antonio. It is interesting that the Vincent Gray House was named in honor of the first African-American Marianist, Brother C. Vincent Gray who had died in 1967. Throughout his career, Brother Eddie variously served as teacher, principal, guidance director and campus minister. His friend and fellow Marianist Brother Ed Loch also remembers “Brother Eddie” as having been active in jail

ministry. In whichever local community he was assigned, Edwin Johnson involved himself in the quest for civil rights of his fellow African-Americans.

Eventually, Brother Johnson's calling progressed to his attending St. Michael's Seminary in Toronto. These studies led to his ordination to the permanent diaconate in 1981 while he served as principal at Junipero Serra High School in Gardena, California; in 1986 he was ordained Father Edwin B. Johnson at Queen of Apostles Church in San Jose. His final assignment before his death in 2007 was his eleven years as chaplain at Chaminade College Preparatory High School in West Hills, California.

Father Edwin B. Johnson's legacy was attested to by many former students whose lives he touched. One wrote in the funeral guestbook, "You will never know how much you influenced my life. I can still see your smile, your closed eyes, your swaying to the music as the choir sang. Your words will continue to inspire me in spirit. Your love of music as prayer will continue in my song and warm my heart."

In 2019 the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops reported in the *Angelus News* that, "Today, of the 3 million African-American Catholics living in the United States, only eight are active bishops, 250 are priests, and 75 are seminarians in formation for the priesthood." Thankfully, Father Eddie was one who listened to his heart and heeded God's call. If you have stories to share of special priests from San Antonio who overcame social barriers in order to follow their vocation, the San Antonio People of Faith Museum would like to hear from you at 210-733-7152.



Fr. Edwin B. Johnson, S.M. (1926-2007). Photograph Courtesy of the National Archives of the Marianist Province of the United States.