

Fr. Egbert A. Figaro (1926-1999) "A Born Leader"

Both of his parents were born in Trinidad before they moved to the USA and settled in Atlantic City, NJ. There Egbert was born on February 16, 1926, and baptized on April 25 of the same year. After receiving his primary education at a local public school, he enrolled in Holy Spirit parochial High School, 1939-1943, while earning some money in his spare time working at the Embassy Theatre. He also briefly attended Trinidad's prestigious St. Mary's College.

He saw the Holy Ghost Fathers at work in the school and also a distant relative, who had become a diocesan priest in that archdiocese. When his father sold his house to the African-American group of Catholics and in its basement Fr. Leo Hudzik, a diocesan priest, opened the St. Monica mission for them. Young Egbert assisted him; and when the priest had to be absent to preach missions, the young boy performed clerical and other duties until the priest returned. Thus his own vocation was born.

It was not easy, however, to fulfill his dream. He applied to the Camden diocese, but was told that it did not accept colored candidates. He received the same reply from other seminaries until he wrote to the Spiritan seminary at Cornwells Heights, near Philadelphia. There he was accepted without any fuss for its college level programs

The bishop of Camden spontaneously offered to pay for the expenses of his college studies at Cornwells. Two years later Egbert was told that if he preferred to serve as a secular priest in the Camden diocese, he would be welcome there. The diocese had dropped its segregation stand and in the future would have ten African-American priests.

Professed on August 15, 1946 at Ridgefield, CT, he did his senior seminary studies at Ferndale, Norwalk, CT, 1948-1952 and was ordained there on June 8, 1951. His evaluations during his formative years were constantly very good for ability, piety, judgment and regularity. He was considered to be "a born leader" who would perform well in any of the Congregation's works, though one Father added a precautionary note saying that his unlimited energy might make it difficult for less-gifted men to work with him; so he should be told not to push them beyond their abilities. Meanwhile he had earned his B.A. and B.D. at Ferndale. In later years he would add an M.S. at the University of Michigan in 1954 and an M.Ed. from Eastern Michigan State University in 1958.

His first assignment sent him to the newly-opened Spiritan junior seminary in Ann Arbor, MI. He taught there to everyone's satisfaction for six years and engaged also in parochial ministry in the area, doing it so well that he earned respect among clergy and laity, "He did a marvelous job with the Lenten course we have at Ypsilanti" his Superior wrote in 1955. It broke the "color bar" of the Knights of Columbus, when they admitted him and another African-American, a physician.

In 1958 he was transferred to St. Emma Military Academy, Powhatan, VA, where he remained for fourteen years. This academy had been sponsored by Louise Morrell, a daughter of Francis A. Drexel, and her husband Colonel Edward Morrell. They bought the 1600-acre Belmead Estate and the adjoining Mount Pleasant property to establish schools for African-American boys and girls. At the insistence of the Drexel-Morrell couple, the Spiritans accepted the responsibility to perform chaplain duties at both schools in 1895. They stayed, with a four-year interruption, until 1929 when Benedictine monks took over. They changed the boys' school into a military academy, but in 1947 the Spiritans returned to the Belmead school to staff it with ten priests and four brothers.

Fr. Figaro arrived at the time when the Academy was entering its full bloom. The school's enrollment was rising and would reach its peak in 1964 with 370 cadets. It became so well known that sons of embassies personnel in Washington would send their sons to the Academy. Father began there as a teacher of physical science, became assistant to the school's principal,

and in 1966 Commandant of the Academy as well as Superior of the community. The decision was made in 1970 to close the school which had existed for 75 years. Its companion school for girls, St. Francis de Sales High School, had already done the same. Its Alumni Association, however, continued to function, and he participated in its meetings as long as he lived. His former cadets loved him and honored him constantly. Throughout his years in the Academy he participated in peaceful demonstrations and marches in Washington for civil rights; in Virginia he took part in attempts to end segregation in hotels and athletic events. He was also a very active member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

In 1972 he became pastor of the African-American St. James Parish with a congregation of 250 families in Dayton, OH. He was the first ever Black priest in Dayton, but told his people that he never referred to himself as a Black priest and wanted to be known to them simply as a priest who would lead them - be it one with a social conscience. While still there, he became a member of the Board of Directors of Duquesne University for three years, 1973-76, and also of the Provincial Council. In July 1975 he conducted a pilgrimage of some 50 Blacks to Rome and Africa. In 1978 he became the first Black pastor of a Catholic church in South Carolina when he was transferred to St. Patrick's Parish, Charleston. It was an integrated congregation in the inner city area. Understandably, many parishioners, both Black and White, had moved out to better areas, and only about 120 people still lived in the parish. However, some 300 African-Americans who had moved away continued to attend its Sunday services. Resolutely Fr. Figaro set to work and by 1983 he reported that his congregation had grown again to 159 families or 916 people. He managed also to keep the parochial schools open, thanks to generous support from the Sullivan Fund administered by the Spiritans. He also refurbished the old church, dating back to 1837. Much of the work was done by the parishioners themselves. It was edifying, wrote a newspaper, to see a judge working side by side with a man whom he had sentenced to prison in the past.

His last major additional concern was with the victims of hurricane Hugo, which struck Charleston severely. He rendered valuable assistance to its victims. By then he was really worn out, and in December 1992 after serving 12 years in Charleston, he was transferred to Our Lady of Lourdes in Monroe, NC, as associate pastor. While en route to say Mass at Wadsworth in February 1991 he blacked out and went across two opposite lanes until he crashed into the steel restraining bar. Only slightly wounded, he was treated at a hospital. The Provincial, however, decided to send him for rest and further treatment to a guest house. In April 1992 he was assigned to St. Mary Magdalene Parish, Chicago, IL, as associate pastor. After a brief stay in 1993 as pastor of St. Joseph Parish in Bay City, MI, he returned to Chicago as associate pastor in April 1994.

Early in March 1999 he was hospitalized for aggressive chemotherapy treatment. It failed, and on July 24, 1999, he died at the age of 73. Interment took place at the community cemetery of Cornwells Heights.