

One year later: Looking at Pittsburgh's Black Catholic parish

A pandemic and an ongoing [national reckoning](#) with systemic racism made for a memorable and at times challenging first year for St. Benedict the Moor Church as a personal parish for Pittsburgh's Black Catholic community.

"Traditionally, an African-American cultural parish is very big on hospitality, very big on welcoming, very big on social interaction, and because of the restrictions under COVID, we really haven't been to, in that sense, play to our greatest strengths as a parish," said Father C. Matthew Hawkins.

Father Hawkins, a parochial vicar at St. Benedict the Moor, told Our Sunday Visitor that the pastoral team is looking to restart several parish ministries as COVID-era restrictions are loosened. In recent weeks, he has already seen people return to church who he last saw more than a year ago, when Bishop David Zubik of Pittsburgh established St. Benedict the Moor Church as a personal parish for Black Catholics.

"It's a welcoming parish. It's not exclusively African-American. There's a good racial and cultural mix," Father Hawkins said. "What we hope and expect to see in the weeks and months ahead would be the same kind of diversity, even [within the African-American community](#), that we've experienced in the past."

Established in 1889, St. Benedict the Moor Church's roots run deep in Pittsburgh's Hill District neighborhood. From its earliest days, the parish focused on serving Black Catholics. Holy Ghost College – present-day Duquesne University – founded the parish in response to the first National Congress of Black Catholics' call for greater recognition in the Church and to

demand an end to racism.

The parish merged with other churches over the decades. In January 2020, amid changing demographics impacting the entire Northeast region, the Diocese of Pittsburgh merged St. Benedict the Moor Church with two other downtown parishes, naming it Divine Mercy Parish.

However, the Black Catholic community that had long been served by St. Benedict the Moor did not feel that the newly-merged parish met their spiritual needs.

“It just didn’t go over well. ... The African-American people didn’t feel loved and felt like they were losing their Black Catholic identity,” said Father Thomas J. Burke, the pastor of St. Benedict the Moor Church and St. Mary Magdalene Parish in Pittsburgh’s East End.

The Black Catholic parishioners petitioned Bishop Zubik to reconsider the merger, and to establish a personal parish for their community. In February 2020, the bishop celebrated a special Mass and convened a town hall-style listening session at the parish. Several attendees wore “Black Catholics Matter” T-shirts.

“I think the bishop listened very attentively to them. I think that was one of the big things that sparked his decision to establish the personal parish,” said Father David Taylor, the senior parochial vicar at St. Benedict the Moor Church.

“It was a hard and difficult meeting,” Father Taylor said. “A lot of hurt and pain were expressed that night. There was a great need for a personal parish for Black Catholics, to allow the fullest expression of African-American Catholics’ gifts and talents that can be given to the Church. I congratulate Bishop Zubik for having the vision to see that.”

A task force of clergy and parishioners from St. Benedict the Moor followed up that listening session by issuing a report

that called for the creation of the personal parish. The report said the parish was not a call for separatism but instead “a pledge of commitment to the Church and to share in her witnessing to the love of Christ.”

After ensuring that canon law requirements were met – including the presentation of a formal petition by the pastor and parish finance council – Bishop Zubik on June 19, 2020, announced St. Benedict the Moor Church would be established as a personal parish for the local Black Catholic community, effective July 13, 2020. Whereas most parishes are territorial – they serve a geographic territory – personal parishes minister to Catholics from a particular cultural tradition.

“As most people know, very few African-Americans are Catholics, and [very few Catholics](#) are African-American, and this is something that we really have to work to remedy,” said Father Hawkins, who is Black and was raised in a Protestant tradition until becoming Catholic.

Ordained as a priest last year, Father Hawkins said Catholic evangelization to the Black community “requires outreach and it also requires the celebration of the liturgy in a way that resonates” with African-American communities.

“That is a primary reason for needing a personal parish that appeals and draws on African-American culture,” he said. “One of reasons why the historically Black-Protestant tradition has been so effective in its work in African-American communities is because it provides, both in the leadership of the churches as well as in the congregation, as well as in the way they approach the sacred Scriptures, good role models so people can see themselves in the incarnate faith.

“Incarnation is a very important part of the Catholic experience, but for most of our history in the United States, Catholic churches have predominantly identified with European cultural origins,” Father Hawkins added. “And while that has

made the understanding of the Faith accessible to many parishioners, it has inadvertently excluded those who don't appear in those religious images and narratives."

Father Taylor, the senior parochial vicar, who is also Black, said a personal parish like St. Benedict the Moor provides a new opportunity for Black Catholics to express their faith.

"And although it is a personal parish for African-American Catholics, many white Catholics have joined and become a part of the ministry as well, and they are always welcome," said Father Taylor, who has been a priest for 47 years.

Father Burke, who is white, spoke of his experiences being the pastor of a personal parish for Black Catholics.

"Being a Caucasian priest, they've been very welcoming to me," said Father Burke, who added that ministering to Black Catholics "wasn't like foreign territory" to him since he grew up in Pittsburg, lived in the Hill District after college and has Black parishioners at St. Mary Magdalene Church.

"But is it different? It definitely is different ministering to a predominantly African-American parish," Father Burke said. "The style is totally different. The music, the liturgy, the homily. It's all different. It's challenging. They're very vocal. They speak their minds. But it's been a very good year for me to grow in my priesthood."

Being the pastor of St. Benedict the Moor has also included typical tasks like restarting the religious education program, recruiting volunteers for ministries, selling unused church property, opening up a new parish checking account, and dealing with maintenance issues.

"It's been working out, even despite the limited number of people that were coming to Mass over the past year," Father Burke said.

A few weeks before Bishop Zubik's announcement last summer, the nation became embroiled in the still-ongoing reckoning with racism spurred by the [murder of George Floyd](#) and other incidents of police brutality against Black people. In Pittsburgh, parishioners of St. Benedict the Moor participated in an interfaith service in the Hill District where they discussed how they could work together with others in the [struggle for racial justice](#).

"African-Americans are people like everybody else. They have a cultural context," Father Hawkins said. "We can't suddenly ignore that when it comes to African-Americans, but celebrate it like we do when it comes to everybody else."

Brian Fraga is a contributing editor for Our Sunday Visitor.