

"St. Adalbert's is the progeny of the only church built for Cleveland's African-American Catholics. We need that African-American presence. We need that connection to our history."

Phillip Clipps, parishioner



Thomas Sutton-Lovett, a seminarian who grew up in St. Adalbert Church, holds the Easter candle as it is lit before the Holy Saturday Vigil, which included a baptismal service.

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FROM A1

Closing saddens black parishioners

Now the diocese, undergoing a massive downsizing, is closing St. Adalbert, and longtime parishioners like the Shealey family — four generations of them at the two churches — are feeling a great sense of loss.

"I feel that our history is being erased," said Joyce Sanders, 70, also a Shealey daughter. "St. Adalbert's is my home, my family. I don't know where I'll go from here."

The congregation at one time numbered more than 1,000. Today, it is about 225.

Following Bishop Richard Lennon's March order to close St. Adalbert, parishioners appealed to the diocese but were denied. Although St. Adalbert elementary school will stay open, the church is to close next May. But the parish has vowed to fight.

At a recent Sunday Mass, those in attendance voted 63-13 to challenge Lennon's order by appealing to the Vatican.

St. Adalbert's pastor, the Rev. Kenneth Pleiman, and his assistant, the Rev. Thomas Bohman, both of the Precious Blood order, are not taking part in the appeal.

"We keep them out of it," said parishioner Phillis Fuller-Clipps, 52. "They have to be obedient to the bishop. We don't."

St. Adalbert was established in 1883. The existing church, a twin-towered, brick-and-stone edifice, was built in 1911.

By the 1960s, the neighborhood was solidly black, and Cleveland's first black Catholic congregation moved into its new home, painting the faces black on the statues left behind by the Bohemians.

Life-size statues of Jesus, Mary and Joseph are now Africans.

"It helps us to relate our spirituality with our natural being," said church secretary Linda Gamble. "If God made us in his image and likeness, he's got to look something like us."

Gamble, 60, said that if Adalbert's parishioners can't save the church, they would like to find a home where they can all be together.

"If we can't save the physical building, we want to save our spiritual family," she said. Ideally, they want a black church, but Lennon closed two others — St. Cecilia at East 152nd Street and Kinsman Road and Epiphany at

East 119th Street and Oakfield Avenue, so choices are limited.

Gamble said parishioners are planning to visit other churches as a group to see whether they will be welcomed.

"Often there's not a welcoming atmosphere with other congregations, especially if they're not of your race," she said.

Gamble, like many parishioners in the 50 churches ordered closed by Lennon, is asking "Why?"

Although he has refused to publicly discuss individual decisions, Lennon said when he announced the closings that they were the result of shortages of priests, cash and people in the pews.

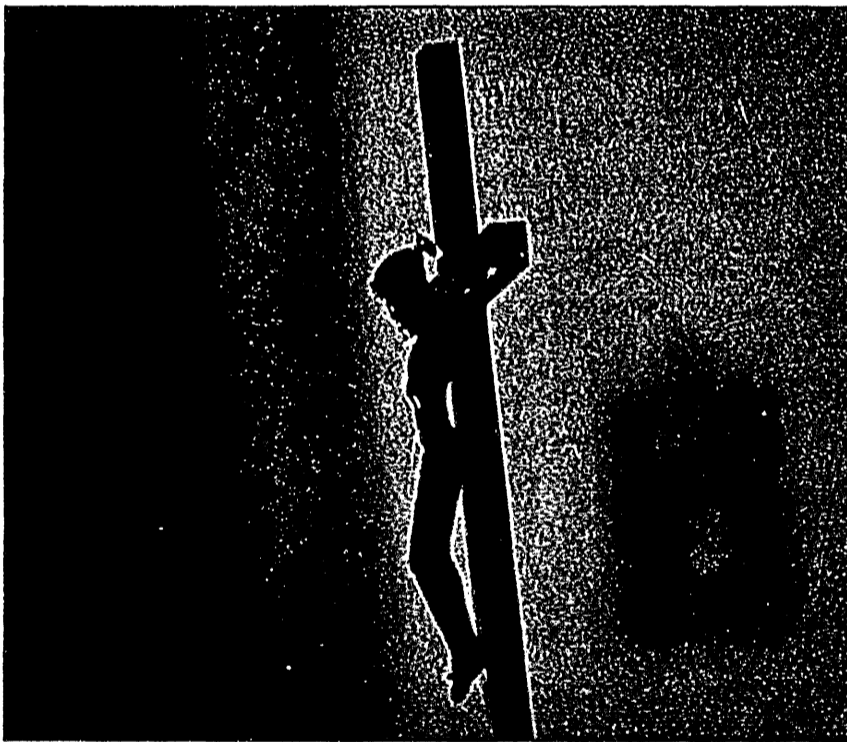
But Gamble, who helps with the parish's financial books, argues that St. Adalbert has a full-time priest and is financially stable and that its buildings are in good condition.

"We don't even owe a light bill," she said.

Parishioner Phillip Clipps, 58, said that as long as the parish is able to sustain itself, it should be allowed to live.

"Don't euthanize it," he said.

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A black Jesus on the cross is a powerful symbol at St. Adalbert Church during an all-night prayer vigil in April. Parishioners prayed that Bishop Richard Lennon would change his mind and allow the church to remain open.



George Gamble, carrying the cross, takes part in an all-night prayer vigil at St. Adalbert Church in April. That was shortly after Bishop Richard Lennon ordered the church closed as part of the Cleveland Catholic Diocese's downsizing.

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That history, mostly told by church elders, includes how the parish struggled in the face of racism, how it was set up as a "mission" staffed by nuns from Ireland.

There are stories about chicken dinners, operettas and St. Patrick's Day card parties in the church basement. On May Day, the kids crowned a Blessed Mother statue, a celebration that ended with homemade cookies and lemonade.

The history also includes Blessed Sacrament going into foreclosure during the Great Depression.

And it includes the move to St. Adalbert, when the schoolchildren walked from Blessed Sacrament carrying books and desks.

Much of the history is still alive in the keen mind of Katherine Butler, whose parents were founding members of Blessed Sacrament.

She remembers as a kid cleaning the church and doing laundry and ironing for the nuns.

She remembers making her First Communion at Blessed Sacrament and getting married there.

And she remembers the congregation building a new school on St. Adalbert's grounds.

"That brick school was built by people of color," she said. "We have been a cornerstone, an anchor and a gift to our Catholic faith."

Butler was among a group of parishioners who held an all-night prayer vigil in St. Adalbert shortly after Lennon ordered the closing. The elderly woman, who doesn't give her age, was just getting over pneumonia that night, but she prayed until the sun rose.

On a recent day, Butler sat in a pew and talked about her life in a community on the verge of death. Her voice echoed in the huge sanctuary.

"I saw it coming, but it was still a shock," she said. "My first thought was, 'Whatever.' But the fat lady hasn't sung, so I haven't given up hope."

"It's very traumatic," she continued. "But we're modern enough to know that change comes. I will lose my friends. I will lose my ability to sit in my church. But I'm ready to wrap it up and take it with me."

The old woman then paused, looked to the black Jesus and said, "I'm scared."

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