



Pensacola News Journal

Born in segregation, St. Joseph's now a beacon for all

By Troy Moontmoon, November 28th, 2016

That old cliché about Sunday being the most segregated day of the week in the United States definitely doesn't apply at historic St. Joseph Catholic Church in downtown Pensacola. At least it doesn't apply any longer. Look around the pews at the 11 a.m. Sunday service and you'll see a diverse congregation that is about 60 percent black and 40 percent white. There's no self-segregation — blacks sitting together; whites sitting together.

"The cliché doesn't apply here," said Ronald Townsend, 83, a lifelong parish member of St. Joseph's Church, which was opened in 1891 by the Sisters of Mercy to serve Pensacola's black population. At that time, blacks were largely excluded from attending churches with white congregations. If you were a black Catholic in Pensacola in the days of segregation, St. Joseph's is where you worshiped. Today, many of the parish members who first attended because they had no other option still make the church their home.

"Before, this is where you had to worship," Townsend said. "Now, we can worship wherever we want, but we still come to St. Joseph's because it's home. It gives you that warm, fuzzy feeling whenever you're here."

The first church was a two-story frame building, but in 1894 the current Gothic revival style church structure was built. The church initially was made up of black residents, Creoles and immigrants. The Sisters of Mercy also had established a school — St. Joseph's Colored and Creole School. In 1939, St. Joseph's High School opened, and was the only Catholic High School for blacks in Florida at the time. It was in grade school at St. Joseph's that Townsend met his future wife, Lily, whose family has attended St. Joseph's since its inception 125 years ago. She was one year younger than Ronald, but also a year ahead of him in school.

"Younger and smarter," said Townsend, a former Pensacola City Council member.

Lily Townsend said her blood runs through the parish.



BLACK HISTORY month

"My family came here with the church," she said. "This is mine. This is my home."

Catholic High woven into Pensacola history

She noted that the education was on par with — or better than — any segregated white school in the area.

"The nuns were wonderful and truly prepared us and gave us great educations," she said. "We were competitive academically with schools across the country. I loved it."

After school segregation ended, St. Joseph's High School closed in the 1970s, while the elementary school closed in the early 1980s.

Church members stress that St. Joseph went far beyond just administering to the spiritual needs of its congregation. The parish also has been vital in offering help to those in need. The parish once operated an orphanage for young black children. It operated a maternity hospital for black women.

Today, the church's outreach ministries include a soup kitchen and Our Lady of Angels St. Joseph Medical Clinic, which offers free care to the poor.

Last week, Dee Dee Green, 57, sat at a table in the church narthex collecting donations to feed the poor during Thanksgiving. Green's mother, Gloria Green died Aug. 7 and had organized the first Thanksgiving meals for the poor at the church 25 years ago. She also operated the church's Caring and Sharing Ministry, which distributed food and other items to the poor. The ministry is now called the Gloria Green Caring & Sharing Outreach Ministry.

"I'm just trying to carry on her work," said Green, who also attended the parish's elementary school as a child. "The church has a history of helping the needy. It always will."
Green is a past-president of the St. Joseph Pastoral Council.

"St. Joseph's is a part of African-American history," she said. "And it's a part of Pensacola history."

