

*'The Lord has turned me around to be a role model for young people. I'm here to make the Catholic Church make sense to black folks, especially young black folks.'*



**Father Thomas Usher**  
**St. Francis Xavier Parish**  
**Mobile, Alabama**

## Father Usher

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corner drinking wine," he said. "The Lord has turned me around to be a role model for young people. I'm here to make the Catholic Church make sense to black folks, especially young black folks."

Father Usher grew up in Harlem, where he ran with a gang, pushed drugs and, for a time, even worked as a pimp. Throughout those troubled years, he credited his mother's prayers and unflagging hope with keeping him alive.

At the age of 16, he found his life beginning to change, when a close friend named Joey died from a drug overdose.

"Sometimes the Lord has to use tragedy to turn us around," Father Usher said. "If Joey had not died, I would not be alive today."

By the time he turned 19, Father Usher knew he wanted to become a priest. But he faced a double handicap — a weak academic background and the racist attitudes prevalent in most seminaries to which he applied.

"I received a letter from one seminary that said, 'We don't accept colored here,'" he recalled.

Even at a Divine Word Seminary that eventually accepted him, Father Usher found little support or understanding for his particular circumstances. He quickly flunked out.

"Seminaries at that time were very insensitive to the needs of a kid from the street," he said. "I learned that if you want anything in this life, you've got to fight for it."

Encouraged by a young Irish priest from New York City who "brought (him) back into the life of the Church," Father Usher then applied and was accepted to a seminary in Honduras. Ordained in 1976 at the age of 25, he spent the next eight years working in various Honduran parishes.

Nearly three years ago, Father Usher's bishop released him to serve as a mission priest in the United States. He served for two years as associate pastor at Chicago's Holy Angels — one of the largest black Catholic parishes and schools in the United States.

"He's a very fine young man," said Father George Clements, who continues as pastor at Holy Angels. "He was very zealous, and I was quite pleased with his work."

Although he's been in Alabama only six months, Father Usher said he would not hesitate to move to Rochester for the right offer.

"I am a missionary priest. My job is to inspire people, and then they've got to continue on from there," he said. "That's the challenge of priesthood — being willing to go where you're needed."

"I'm open to anything," he added. "It depends on what the Diocese of Rochester has to offer, and it depends on whether the Diocese of Rochester is really interested in evangelization. A change is not going to take place until there are black priests and sisters here."

Father Usher believes that Rochester needs black religious and clergy to fill what he terms "empty barns in the ghetto."

"The constituencies of most of these churches are white on a Sunday morning, but they're sitting in the heart of the black community," he said. "If there was a black presence there, those churches would be filled."

Black pastoral leadership would not only provide role models for young people, Father Usher said, but would also fill a cultural gap that few white clergymen can span. Last week in Rochester, that gap was evident at many of Father Usher's services, during which he verbally poked and prodded the predominantly white audience to respond.

"We are a spiritual people, an emotional people," he explained. "A white priest can't stir up our souls. We believe that serving the Lord is a joyful business. We don't want to hear funeral songs in Church."



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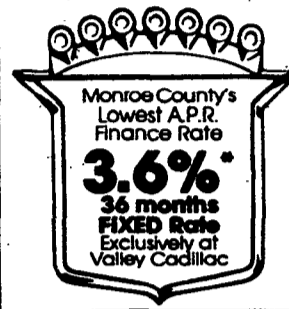
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