

# Church's roots run deep into African soil

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igion books that would depict St. Augustine in a dark hue," Carroll observed. She said some people attribute this suppression to racism, others to indifference.

When he began research for his book, "I knew that there was a history there," Father Davis recalled. "But the problem was it was a history, like a lot of African-American history, that had been ignored."

However, Father Davis noted, the church has always acknowledged its African connection.

"The Catholic Church has never hidden the fact that there were African saints and black popes," Father Davis remarked. "We've just never been overt about it."

Part of the problem is perceptions, he suggested.

"When we look at early church history, we presume it had a European origin," Father Davis said. But, he continued, "You're talking about a church that was in the Mediterranean world. It included North Africa. We know historically there was a black aspect to this world."

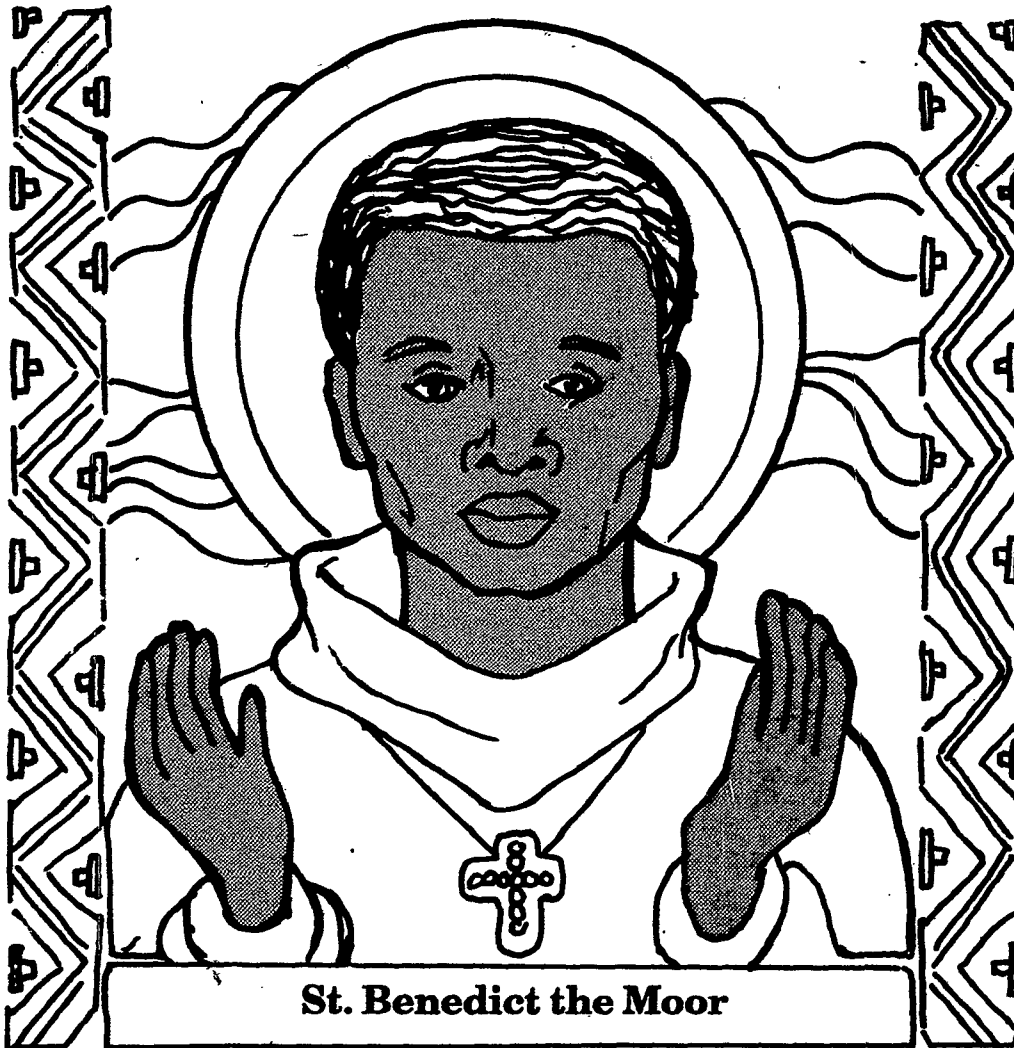
Indeed, Father Davis remarked, because church history has often been perceived from this European perspective, it is easy to overlook that one of the early converts to Christianity was an Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40). In fact, the priest observed, the eunuch converted before St. Paul or the Roman centurion Cornelius.

"Ethiopia was converted to Christianity by the end of the fourth century — before Ireland, Anglo-Saxon England or Poland," he noted.

To foster awareness of these African roots, Father Davis began his history of black American Catholics with an overview of African involvement in the early church.

His book, for example, points out that the monastic tradition began in Egypt with St. Anthony of Egypt. One of the leaders of this early monastic movement was St. Moses the Black.

"The monastic writings of the early monks in the period between the fourth and seventh centuries have had a great influence on the spirituality of the church," Father Davis wrote. "Both in the East and in the West, these writings laid the foundation of future ascetic and mystical writings."



St. Benedict the Moor

Illustration by Mary Kay Williams

His book also notes that another African saint, Pope St. Gelasius, helped define the nature of papal authority. "In a sense," he wrote, "he laid the foundation for the primacy of the see of Rome."

But, Father Davis remarked in the interview, Africa's contribution to the church is not limited to the church's early days. Islam's rise in the seventh century led to the occupation of North Africa and the virtual elimination of the church in the region, but Christian communities survived in Ethiopia. The survival of the faith in Africa after it was cut off from the rest of Christian-

ity has not been adequately explored, he observed.

Meanwhile, in Europe, African saints and the involvement of blacks in the church began again to reappear after the 15th century, Father Davis told the *Courier*, citing the example of St. Benedict the Moor.

During this re-emergence, some of the black Catholics had American connections as well. Among them were St. Martin de Porres in Latin America and Pierre Toussaint, whose cause for sainthood has already begun in the United States.

Black Catholics actually came to the Americas long before any other Catholic group except the Spanish, Father Davis continued. Blacks were among those who settled St. Augustine, Fla., in 1565, he reported, and they helped to found the city of Los Angeles in 1781.

"I think it is necessary that American Catholics be taught that," the priest said during the interview.

American blacks formed two congregations of women religious in the 19th century — the Oblate Sisters of Providence in 1829 and the Congregation of Sisters of the Holy Family in New Orleans in 1842.

The first African-American priest was Father James Healy, the son of a slave, ordained in 1854. He became the first black bishop in 1875.

Father Davis told the *Courier* that his book and other studies had "only scratched the surface." He said he hopes that further research will be done, and the education of all Catholics about black Catholic history both in the early church and in the United States would continue.

Carroll pointed out that attempts to educate Catholics about the church's black heritage are indeed underway. Some colleges and groups are attempting to do this through workshops, programs and summer institutes. In 1987, the national black Catholic congress movement was revitalized with its first gathering since 1894.

In addition, Carroll said, research has begun into the possibility of creating an African-American rite. Such a rite could be liturgical — a Mass for black Catholics — or possibly even canonical, joining the 18 rites that already exist within the Catholic Church, ranging from Roman to Melkite to Ukrainian.

Support for these efforts crosses racial boundaries, Carroll observed.

"I think there is an interest among Catholics in general to discover black contributions to the church," she concluded.

## Compensation

Continued from page 3

plan, allowing employees to put aside pre-tax dollars to help pay for medical costs. These costs could include dental work not completely covered in the dental plan, as well as the employees' share of health and dental insurance premiums.

Another new component of the compensation package is a three-year plan

to increase the housing stipends for women religious, then to eliminate the stipend and have the money made a part of their overall salary, beginning July 1, 1996.

The stipend's increase, as of July 1, 1993, is from \$1,000 to \$1,500 per year. That figure will rise to \$2,000 in July, 1994, followed by an increase to \$2,500 in July, 1995.

Father Mulligan explained that the stipend had been inadequate to meet actual housing costs for both the

women religious living in convents and those sisters who choose alternative arrangements. The three-year plan ends annual negotiating over increases, and, once the stipend is incorporated into the overall salary, housing costs will be covered by the annual salary increases.

"I feel satisfied with the plan — I think it's excellent," noted Sister Ann Miller, RSM, president of the Sisters of Mercy of Rochester.

Sister Miller added that the new policy will enable parishes to receive more just compensation for renting convents to women religious, and will provide congregations with more income for housing.

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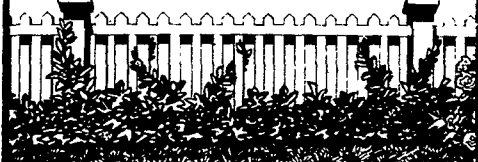
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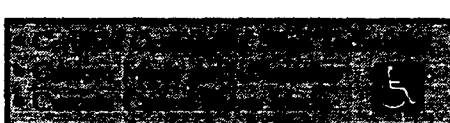
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## World Day of Prayer set

IRONDEQUOIT — Twenty area churches, including six Catholic parishes, will participate in the annual World Day of Prayer on March 5. Scheduled to begin at 1 p.m., the event will take place at St. John's Lutheran Church, 800 Ridge Road E.

The theme for this year's celebration, sponsored by Church Women United, will focus on the difficult social conditions in Guatemala and was written by women of the Mayan culture.

Marilyn Anderson, photographer and author of *Granddaughters of the Corn* lived among the Mayans while studying textiles in the region. She will speak on the difficulties Guatemalan refugees face. A coffee hour and slide show will follow.

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