

DIOCESAN FEATURE



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

In addition to her governmental duties, Rochester City Council member Maxine Childress Brown, a parishioner at St. Augustine's Church in Rochester, has been active lobbying for the construction of the Frederick Douglass Museum and Cultural Center.

Black Catholics focus on increasing visibility

By Lee Strong
Senior staff writer

Rochester City Councilwoman Maxine Childress Brown has been busy during Black History Month this February.

In addition to her governmental duties, Brown has been lobbying for the construction of the Frederick Douglass Museum and Cultural Center, in memory of the abolitionist who lived in Rochester.

But even as she is working toward the

creation of this center to help celebrate her black heritage, Brown makes time to honor another heritage in her life.

She is a Catholic, having converted some 10 years ago.

Formerly an Episcopalian, Brown was drawn to the Catholic Church because of its commitment to social justice and to serving the poor, and because of its contemplative dimension.

Although as a black she's a minority in the church, Brown noted that it's that contemplative dimension that has

helped to sustain her in the faith. "The contemplative, meditative facet of the church acted as such a magnet to me that I felt the paucity of blacks in the church would not be a hindrance to me," noted Brown, a parishioner of St. Augustine's Church, part of the Roman Catholic Community of the 19th Ward.

Still, Brown acknowledged, "At times there have been times (in church where) I've seen people's faces look like, 'What are you doing here?'"

So she makes a conscious effort to attend a number of Catholic churches — especially ones that are predominantly white — and encourages whites to attend churches that are largely black.

"That's really a challenge for me to go to churches and they can see a black

person can sit with them and worship with them in a spirit of love, and they will see there is no difference in the way we worship God," Brown said.

Indeed, a black face would stand out in many churches throughout the Rochester diocese. According to Jacqueline Dobson, director of the diocesan Office of Black Ministry, there are approximately 4,000 black Catholics in the diocese — compared to an overall Catholic population of some 390,000. And of those 4,000 black Catholics, Dobson estimated, approximately half are unchurched or are attending churches of other denominations.

Except for a few parishes in Rochester, the black Catholic population in most parishes is small or almost nonexistent.

But that has not prevented some black Catholics from taking active roles in their parishes.

Theodora Bragg, for example, has for many years played an integral role at Ss.

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