

on the MOVE

Black Catholic teens: D

Do you only use your eyes to form impressions of other Catholics? If so, then you'd probably say that black Catholics are different.

On the other hand, do you use the eyes of your faith when you view ethnic groups? If so, then racial matters would never even come into play.

That's the opinion of Tony Salamida, a 16-year-old Palmyra resident who attends Geneva DeSales High School.

"If you're Catholic, you're not supposed to pay attention to the color anyway," Tony stated. "If you do, you're a 'cafeteria Catholic.' You pick what you want and if you don't like it, you leave the rest behind."

Yet Tony can't always escape issues of color: He is one of only two blacks attending DeSales. The sophomore said that when his varsity basketball team travels to opposing gyms, eyebrows shoot up when he takes the court.

"There's a curiosity toward me," Tony said.

Stephanie Kelly, 17, the other black in the 145-member student body, attracted similar attention as a member of her varsity soccer squad this past fall.

"It's kind of strange," remarked Stephanie, a senior. "Other teams would be like, 'Wow, there's a black person who goes to DeSales?'"

However, Tony and Stephanie — who are both practicing Catholics — say they have never encountered racism among the students and teachers at DeSales.

"There were a lot of people who reached out to me. I didn't really feel out of place," Tony stated. He added that the person most likely to comment about his skin color "would probably be me. We just kind of joke about it."

Stephanie, meanwhile, said that "everybody's accepted me, and wants to get to know me here."

Do the experiences of Tony and Stephanie mean that blacks can automatically feel comfortable within any Catholic setting? Camille Williams only wishes that was the case.

When Camille and her family moved to the Finger Lakes area seven years ago, they endured some tense experiences at their Catholic parish.

"There was a lot of prejudice. The first time we attended church, there were a lot of looks," recalled Camille, 17, a senior at Our Lady of Mercy High School.

More often than not, she said, her family has been the only group of blacks in the pews — and the cold looks have not stopped. Camille still attends that church occasionally with her younger sister, but her mother refuses to go any longer.

Perhaps people form unfair opinions of Camille based on her color. Yet it's hard for Camille and other black Catholics in the Rochester diocese to go unnoticed, mainly because their numbers are so few.

According to Jacquelyn Dobson, diocesan Office of Black Ministries director, there are 4,000 registered black Catholics in the Rochester diocese — approximately one percent of the overall diocesan figure of 390,000. Most of these blacks, Dobson said, reside in the city of Rochester.

Not all black Catholic teens have experienced problems similar to Camille's. Rochester resident Matt Porter, for instance, reports a strong air of acceptance in his parish. Matt belongs to Ss. Peter and Paul Church in Rochester, where he is usually one of the few blacks in attendance, he said.

"When I go, I don't feel paranoid or anything. The people are usually pretty friendly," said Matt, 16, a junior at McQuaid Jesuit High School.

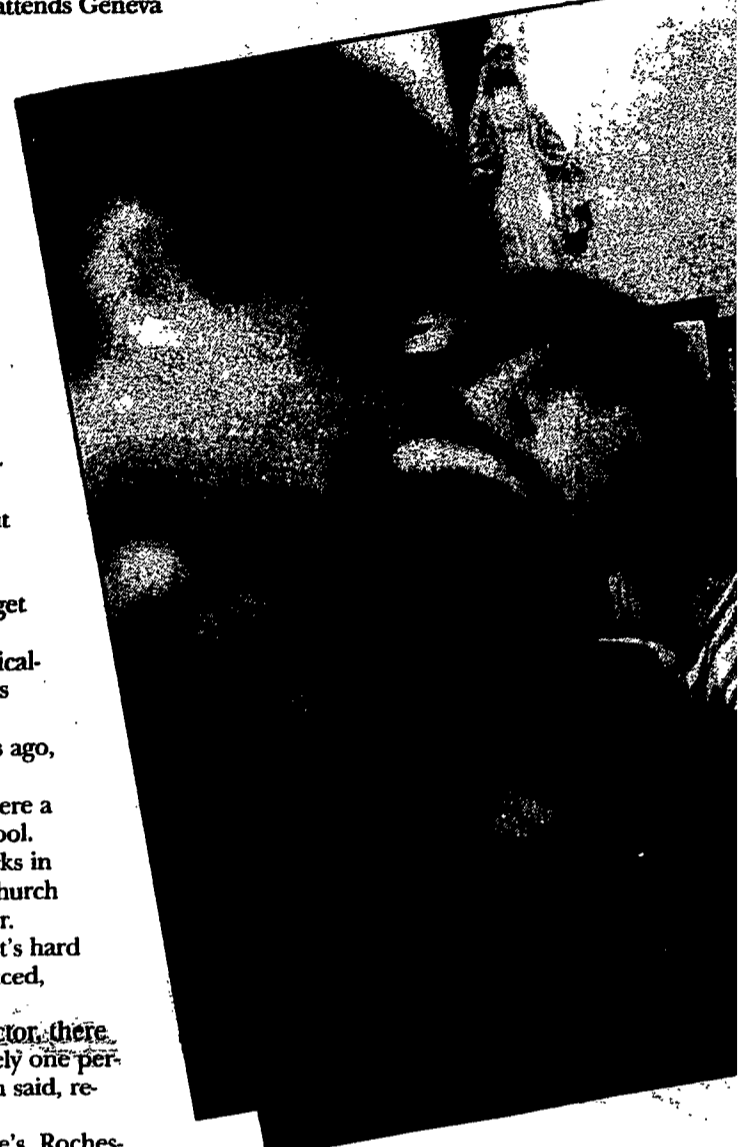
Matt Budd, 17, a senior at McQuaid, remarked that his colorful, casual wardrobe draws more attention than his skin color when he attends Mass.

"The only way I've felt different is if people at some churches dress up," said Matt, a parishioner at Rochester's Blessed Sacrament Church.

The McQuaid senior stated that if skin color ever became an issue with people he encountered, "I wouldn't care. It would be the other person's problem, not my problem. So I don't really care."

Cliff Dinkle, 17, a senior at Bishop Kearney High School, says worship takes precedence over race at his parish as well. He belongs to Immaculate Conception Church in Rochester,

PHOTOGRAPHS BY STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
STORY BY STAFF WRITER



(Top photo) Tony Salamida, one of two blacks at Geneva's DeSales High School, focuses on a quiz. (Photo at right) Tony and lab partner concentrate on dissecting a frog in biology.

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