News

St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception, Norfolk, Virginia (Robert McCabe)

by Robert McCabe

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"This isn't new," said Oretha Pretlow, a 71-year-old, African American parishioner at the Basilica of St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception in Norfolk, Virginia, about the death of George Floyd under the knee of a Minneapolis police officer in late May.

"This isn't something that just came up," she added, noting that Black Americans have been dealing with this kind of thing for hundreds of years: "This is the life we've been living. This is our norm."

Heading north over a bridge to the port city, you can't miss the profile of Pretlow's 162-year-old church rising beyond the exit ramp, its white steeple soaring atop a Gothic structure that looks like it might have been lifted from the French countryside.

The steeple holds four clocks, one on each side, each of which tells a different, wrong time, as if to suggest that time, for this place, doesn't really matter much anymore.

Built a few years before the start of the Civil War, the church is now home to a vibrant, predominantly Black community whose parishioners come from all over southeastern Virginia and northeastern North Carolina.

As of late June, it was still relying on the live-streaming of its Sunday liturgies because of the greater risk the coronavirus poses to people of color. On Sunday, July 12, the parish plans to celebrate its first public Mass since the lockdown began.

Over a century ago, a prominent U.S. architect called St. Mary's the best example of antebellum Gothic workmanship in the South.

Nearly 30 years ago, it became a minor basilica, the only Black basilica in the nation.

Today, it's a 1,000-family regional parish known for its high-energy, gospel-choir-driven worship, rich history, welcoming culture and generous outreach to the poor who surround it.

Ercelle Drayton, who is African American and oversees the parish's nearly 40-year food ministry in the city, said that when federal stimulus checks dropped this spring, the hundreds of families calling on her soup kitchen and grocery pantry dropped by about half.

Now that the stimulus money has dried up, that's no longer the case.

"We're right back to almost the same thing," she said.

Against the backdrop of a global pandemic that has been especially hard on Black Americans, followed by Floyd's death and the nationwide convulsions it has generated, the St. Mary's community is facing big changes and demographic shifts, even as it clings tenaciously to its heritage.

At first glance, the basilica may not seem much different than other Black U.S. Catholic churches in cities across the country.

As of 2018, Black Catholics made up just a tiny sliver of the overall American Catholic population — about 3.4% if limited to non-Hispanic Black, African American or Afro Caribbean parishioners, according to a 2015 Pew Research study.

Yet Darren Davis, a professor at the University of Notre Dame, and co-author of a recent book about Black Catholics, says African Americans, despite years of institutional marginalization and discrimination, punch way above their weight because of the depth of their faith.

"African Americans today are what I consider to be the backbone of the Catholic Church because of their intense spirituality and their devotion to their parish and their engagement in the parish," he said. "African American Catholics have a much stronger, enriched, engaged faith than white Catholics who have been peeling away from the church for the past two generations."

St. Mary's is well into a $6.7 million renovation, the most extensive in its history, funded in part by the parish, the Diocese of Richmond, private donors and historic tax credits.

Wedged, implausibly, between an elevated bridge ramp that nearly scrapes its façade and a sprawling 1950s-vintage housing project, St. Mary's is essentially cut off from the rest of the city, collateral damage from decisions made 60 years ago when urban renewal transformed Norfolk's downtown.

Wedged between an elevated bridge ramp that nearly scrapes its façade and a sprawling 1950s-vintage housing project, St. Mary's church is essentially cut off from the rest of the city of Norfolk, Virginia. (Robert McCabe)

The renovations under way at St. Mary's will soon be followed by the first phase of a massive, federally funded redevelopment program that will raze all 618 existing units in the housing project, inhabited mostly by African Americans but where the poverty rate has hovered at about 75%. The development will build instead more than 700 mixed-income units.

Roughly 200-plus units will be reserved for current residents who want to come back.

The plans had been set to unfold over the next five years. Yet a federal lawsuit challenging the program, seeking modifications, was filed in mid-January. The two sides agreed this spring that any further action will be on hold until the fall, due to the coronavirus.

Ironically, the same organization planning the new redevelopment project — the Norfolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority — oversaw the building of the existing development in the early- to mid-'50s as part of the sweeping makeover of the city at the time.

Though the planned improvements to the church have created a sense of excitement and anticipation, there is also concern about the looming changes in the community of which it's a part.

Some worry it may jeopardize the black DNA of St. Mary's, acquired over decades of struggle with racism, poverty, indifference and, for some, a sense of betrayal.

"We stand proudly and beautifully in the midst of the poor," said Fr. Jim Curran, St. Mary's pastor. "Who are we when we just stand in the midst of the middle class? Will we be the same people? I'd like to be, but I don't know."

Curran, who is of Irish descent , said that to be a Black Catholic, especially in the South, is a deeper identity than being an Irish Catholic: "When you're Irish, it's assumed that you're going to be Catholic. And it's not the same. When you're Black, the assumption is that you're Baptist."

The renovations under way in the basilica will keep or enhance the features that underscore the church's Black identity, such as the altar and the Stations of the Cross, Curran said.

Pastor of St. Mary's Parish in Norfolk, Virginia, Fr. Jim Curran (Robert McCabe)

"We're very aware of what the redevelopment is going to do and that new people will be around and it could very well impact the congregation. … But it is an African American church; it is a black Catholic church and you'll know that as soon as you walk in," he added.

Pretlow is among longtime St. Mary's parishioners who share Curran's concern and, while open to all new parishioners, they are determined to preserve the church's Black heritage.

"If anything happens with the complexion of the surrounding neighborhood, this will always be an African American church, always," she said. "If there's one of us here, it will be an African American church."

While St. Mary's wasn't always a predominantly Black church, its most recent filing with the National Register of Historic Places, where it's been listed since 1979, states that as early as 1842 Blacks were among the parishioners at St. Patrick's Church, a

predecessor church that was burned in December 1856, long thought to have been the work of arsonists. Less than two years later, the church that stands today opened.

Attending Mass at St. Mary's is a sensory experience, a weave of often searingly beautiful music, some locally composed, and the clapping of hands, moving homilies and lively greetings of peace that occasionally can last for minutes.

"You get here and you see people who are intellectually engaged, emotionally engaged, physically engaged, spiritually engaged, this whole-person experience of grace and spirit," Curran said. "And it does change you, just to be in this."

One Sunday last fall, a visiting white couple from Houston, dropped by — on scooters — to attend the 9 a.m. Mass.

"We go to a very traditional Catholic church, in a very diverse community," said Bill Halmon afterward. "We've been to Mass all over the place, and I've definitely — yeah, I've been all over the world — and I've never been to a Mass like this."

His wife, Lindsey, said: "Joyful — joyful is the word I think I would use."

David Sanchez, who also is white and a Navy officer stationed in the area, has been attending St. Mary's for about a year.

"I've been going to church for 36 years," he said. "My parents were pretty Catholic, so we'd go every Sunday. And this is an experience, every time. … In other churches, you go because you have, like, a sense of obligation. It's the Catholic thing to do. Here, I feel like it's something I want to do. I want to be here."

Sammie Logan, who directs the music at St. Mary's and who grew up just down the street from the church, said that while St. Mary's bears similarities to other Black Catholic parishes, he believes it's different.

Oretha Pretlow inside the Basilica of St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception under renovation (Robert McCabe)

"We let ourselves be who we are," he said. "We don't try to be African American Catholics. We just try to be authentic worshippers, and who we are comes through. I mean that's just what we do. ... I feel the responsibility of the ministry is to provide music that best enhances the liturgical worship experience for all gathered, even if some selections need to be composed or rearranged."

Logan's hunch about the distinctiveness of St. Mary's seems consistent with the research that Davis, the Notre Dame professor, has done.

While the number of black Catholic parishes in the United States, according to some counts, ranges from about 500 to more than 800, Davis said he has vetted the lists and puts it in the 230 to 300 range, warning that even that may be high.

"It is not straightforward because, you know, there are some Black Catholic parishes that used to be Black Catholic that are not predominantly Black Catholic anymore,"

he noted, adding, "Many have closed. Many have merged with other parishes. And many were just mischaracterized as Black. So it's a difficult thing to measure."

There is little question, though, that the Black parishes that remain are home to a high-octane form of Catholicism, he added.

Asked why, Davis was direct: "I have a simple answer for you. And that is because African Americans, overall, tend to be more religious. So you actually see this with Baptists, you actually see this in other denominations — that African-Americans have always expressed a greater sense of religiosity and spirituality."

Taking away Mexican immigrants, looking only at the composition of white Catholics today, it's a very bleak picture, Davis said.

"White Catholics have been peeling away for quite some time, and it hasn't been directly related to the sex-abuse scandal in the church; it all predates that," he stated. "So, Black Catholics end up being, sort of, a group that is very durable, that has very strong, committed faith, certainly stronger than most other Catholic groups."

Several years ago, when the seriousness of St. Mary's infrastructure problems became known, closing the church was under consideration, Curran said recently.

Since then, a groundswell of support has given it new life.

A tunnel found during renovations of St. Mary's church in Norfolk, Virginia (Robert McCabe)

Will McCadden, a parishioner himself and the project manager overseeing the renovation of the church, said that work had begun to shift from the exterior of the structure to the interior.

Because the church seeks tax credits through the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, the agency must sign off on the plans. The Diocese of Richmond also has a say.

Earlier this year, he estimated that the church could be ready to reopen around the fall of 2020, but now it's hard to be more specific as one new problem invariably spawns others, and the $6.7 million projected cost — as of now — gets tougher to guarantee.

As problems are discovered, the parish doesn't just want to patch them, McCadden noted: They want to fix them.

Masses have been held in the connecting church hall since June 4, 2017, after a chunk of plaster fell from high up on a wall in the church during a Sunday morning Mass the previous week.

The relative speed with which the 19th-century structure went up — as well as its age — may have a bearing on its fragility.

The cornerstone for St. Mary's was laid in March 1857; the church was dedicated in October 1858.

Among other complications: At least 14 graves dating to the early 1800s have been found under the rear of the church's worship space. Scores of others are "honeycombed" under the main section of the basilica, said David Brown, an archeologist who is consulting with the church.

McCadden, who has worked on other historic churches in the Norfolk area, said he is committed to seeing the project through: "This is my church, so I personally have a vested interest in this."

McCadden said the redevelopment authority, based on his meetings with its leadership, sees St. Mary's as a historic icon in downtown Norfolk. They want to make sure that visitors who come to Norfolk have a straight path to it, he added.

"We absolutely agree that this is a beautiful structure that needs to be highlighted," said Susan Perry, the city official directing the redevelopment project, noting that plans call for the realignment of a street that would lead to a piazza in front of the church.

What about the bridge exit ramp that curves less than 100 feet from the church's front door?

"Great question," said John Kownack, the authority's recently retired executive director. "We don't know — it is the biggest isolator there is. … It's a bridge too far for this project, but our ultimate goal is to get rid of that ramp and not isolate this community."

For Curran, St. Mary's pastor, the isolation of the church and the projects that surround it are no accident.

"All of that was to segregate and to kind of push out of the way the Black community," he said. "It was all intentional, and it was all racist when that happened."

Pretlow said the ramp was "created to kind of corral us into one little area," leaving only one way out.

"Here we are, this beautiful antebellum church, in this middle of this," she added. "You build a ramp perilously close to irreplaceable stained-glass windows — how do you do that?"

On the occasion of St. Mary's being named a minor basilica on Dec. 8, 1991, Fr. Tom Quinlan, pastor from the mid-1970s to mid- '80s, observed in a letter to the parish community how the ramp served as a counterpoint to the spirit it attempts to cut off:

> Although your church now stands on a dead-end street and smack up against the new tunnel ramp, the opposite is true of the people of St. Mary's — they are open-ended, open-minded, just plain open to all: the poor who come to the Soup Kitchen, the young who come for day care and primary education, the traveler, indeed all!

The openness Quinlan cited a few decades ago may have had deeper historical roots than he or anyone else knew.

Last fall, while using a jackhammer to remove some old concrete flooring near St. Mary's main entrance, a construction worker suddenly punched through into open space: a roughly 4-foot-by-3-foot brick tunnel, big enough for people to move through.

The discovery of the tunnel is in addition to those of the graves recently found under the church.

News about the tunnel set the St. Mary's community abuzz with speculation that the church could have been part of the Underground Railroad, which was still in its heyday when St. Mary's was built in 1857-58 and which connected with Norfolk because of its port and access to points north.

The consultations with archeologists to learn the truth continue. The findings could generate further delays and higher costs.

But even the possibility that the tunnel somehow played a role in leading slaves to freedom seems to have confirmed the core identity of the parish and its link to the African American story.

Karen Paige Womack*, 71, a lifelong Catholic and St. Mary's parishioner, says that while she's skeptical about the tunnel, she's confident the church is linked to the Underground Railroad, perhaps through other hiding places within the church's walls near the choir loft: "My theory is that there was a connection because of the proximity to where ships would come in and go out."

St. Mary's was built from 1857 to 1858 and is undergoing renovations in 2020. (Robert McCabe)

As the parish awaits its formal reopening to live liturgies next week and, eventually, the completion of the basilica's ongoing renovations, Curran has encouraged members of the St. Mary's community to speak out about Floyd's death, Pretlow said.

He began his livestreamed homily on Pentecost Sunday, days after Floyd's death, with the three words that have reverberated around the world: "I can't breathe."

"Oh, my God — he just — he gave us hope," Pretlow said.

"What he's trying to do is help people, help us, to work towards a better understanding, to share the story, to help people understand what it is and to do it in a way that everybody can buy into," she added.

"That's his role right now — he can't fully empathize with us, but he's open to the possibilities. And he helps us by giving voice to it so that other white people can understand what it is you thought you knew, but you really don't."

**An earlier version of this story omitted Karen Paige Womack's last name by mistake.*

[Robert McCabe is a former reporter for The Virginian-Pilot.]

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