

African American Catholics in Cleveland, 1922-1961

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African American Catholics in Cleveland created vibrant and lasting parish communities in the face of strong social forces and racial attitudes in the first half of this century. They both claimed and shaped their own racial and religious identity in accord with their religious convictions, and negotiated the difficult task of being a double minority in their racial and religious spheres. In the years prior to the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) of the Roman Catholic Church this was a particularly challenging and often painful achievement. The years 1922-1961 mark the beginning of Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament Parish, the first African American parish in the diocese of Cleveland, and its subsequent merger with the Bohemian national parish of St. Adalbert. A second African American parish, St. Edward, was established in 1943 and is also central to the growth of the African American Catholic community as it expanded into fourteen other parishes in the city during these years. The impact of their parish schools, the number of African American conversions to Catholicism, and the absence of religious vocations constitute three significant dimensions through which the reality of their experience can be interpreted. Although institutional considerations capture some aspects of African American Catholic life, the depth of that reality is best understood through the lived experiences of the people themselves as those experiences are interpreted in their own words. Consequently, oral histories constitute the major portion of the research completed for this forty-year period.