Culture

People at the Cathedral of the Most Blessed Sacrament in Detroit hold candles April 16, 2022,

People at the Cathedral of the Most Blessed Sacrament in Detroit hold candles April 16, 2022, during the start of the Easter Vigil with then Detroit Archbishop Allen Vigneron as presider. (CNS/Detroit Catholic/Rosa Maria Zamarron)

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Looking back on her grammar school days in Detroit, Michelle McKinney recalled one particular "white haired nun."

"She used to teach us all the Irish songs," McKinney says, in Episode One of "The City and the Cross," a powerful new podcast about the tumultuous history of Black Catholics in the Motor City.

McKinney then goes on to perform an energetic rendition of the George M. Cohan classic "Harrigan (That's Me)," complete with the rolling Rs of a stage-Irish brogue.

The nun "was a real sweetheart," McKinney says, before also suggesting that Black students could, and should, have been studying material that was far more culturally relevant.

"The City and the Cross" is filled with such vivid personal recollections, chronicling more than a century of religious life in what writer/narrator Aaron Robertson calls

"one of the most misunderstood cities in America."

The three-episode podcast produced by Commonweal magazine culminates in a parishioner-led fight against dozens of proposed church closures in the late 1980s, which "disproportionately affected Black parishes in the inner city," and became "the model for urban parish consolidations across the country, which continue to this day," as the podcast summary puts it.

"The City and the Cross" arrives at a charged moment in U.S. history, amidst ongoing battles over diversity, voting rights and Catholic identity, with Pope Leo XIV, U.S. Vice President JD Vance and U.S. President Donald Trump among the high-profile figures who have engaged in recent public theological debates.

For creator Robertson, "The City and the Cross" is a blend of political and personal history.

"I grew up Baptist … in and around Detroit," he said in a recent interview with NCR. "I was always very familiar with the Black Protestant tradition in this country."

Family history makes up a significant portion of Robertson's 2024 debut book *The Black Utopians: Searching for Paradise and the Promised Land in America*, a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for History.

It was while conducting research in the Detroit Archdiocese archives that Robertson came across impassioned letters written to Archbishop Edmund Szoka four decades ago, opposing the closure of traditional Black parishes.

"That told me there was a real story here," he said, adding later: "I was wondering, frankly, why Black Americans would even be Catholic."

"The City and the Cross" provides an array of complex answers to that question.

"There's still a real belief in the universality of the faith," Robertson said in our interview, even if the church — not unlike the United States itself — is "imperfect and flawed, and has never really lived up to its aspirations."

The Cathedral of the Most Blessed Sacrament is pictured against the Detroit skyline in this un

The Cathedral of the Most Blessed Sacrament is pictured against the Detroit skyline in this undated photo. (OSV News/Courtesy Archdiocese of Detroit)

"The City and the Cross" spirals back to the early 20th century, when Detroit parishes, like most others across the Northeast and Midwest, were mainly a refuge for Ellis Island's tired, poor huddled masses.

By the 1920s, another group of refugees began flowing into the city: African Americans fleeing Jim Crow-era violence in the South and seeking work in the nascent auto industry.

Robertson's family has its own strong ties to the Great Migration.

"I didn't think of heaven like any good Christian boy should," he writes in *The Black Utopians*. "I thought of my paternal grandparents' ten-acre plot of land in the middle of Tennessee, in a historic all-black town called Promise Land," to which Robertson made many summer "pilgrimages."

While a majority of Detroit African Americans were, like Robertson's family, not Catholic, a lively parish life developed northeast of downtown, in and around Sacred Heart Church, later to be known as "Detroit's Black Catholic Cathedral."

On the city's west side, meanwhile, St. Benedict the Moor nurtured Marjorie Gabriel-Burrow's family when they moved north from New Orleans.

Her father and uncles literally built the parish school foundation, Gabriel-Burrows explains in "The City and the Cross," before Marjorie went on to become a longtime music minister at the St. Augustine-St. Monica Parish.

By the 1950s, Detroit's population topped 2 million, and the booming postwar economy contributed to the development of a sizable Black middle class in and around the city.

Longstanding tensions and inequities, however, began to boil over in the 1960s.

The openness and optimism of Vatican II, followed by the Civil Rights Movement, did not alter certain realities of Black Catholic life in Detroit: Church leadership remained entirely white, and was often either oblivious or openly hostile to Black parishioners.

The National Black Clergy Caucus and other activist coalitions made up of priests, parishioners and nuns called out racism more forcefully, especially as the tumult of

the late 1960s deepened.

As historian Shannen Dee Williams declares in "The City and the Cross": "Black Catholics do not need the Second Vatican Council to teach them that racism is wrong. Dr. King's assassination, and the anemic responses of white Catholics to that national tragedy, compel people to think a different kind of way about freedom."

Robertson also points to Lawrence Lucas' 1970 book *Black Priest/White Church: Catholics and Racism* as both a revealing document from the era and a deep personal influence.

"The City and the Cross" ultimately becomes a story about "race and religion, loyalty and dissent … white flight and corporate downsizing," Robertson intones in Episode One, all of which played a role in later proposals to close — and protests to save — Detroit's Black parishes.

Audio storytelling was a new challenge to Robertson, who last year was awarded Commonweal magazine's inaugural Centennial Fellowship, which came with the opportunity to produce a long-form podcast.

"My heart is always with the written word," said Robertson, a former book editor, journalist and translator (from Italian). "But there is something to hearing the voices of people who lived through this history. One of the things I wanted to convey with this podcast is just how emotional this was for Catholics who lost their church homes."

To be clear, Robertson currently "identifies as agnostic," yet at the same time is deeply aware of the profound role faith has played in his family’s life.

"So many Black Americans owe their creativity and sense of selves, in part, to their experiences in the Black church — including me," he said.

When he left Michigan to attend Princeton, he heard more than a few family warnings about "secular influences." And after living for a number of years in New York City, he sees that his family was on to something.

"I was surprised by the disdain or indifference (people showed) at the idea of why someone would be religious," Robertson said. He added that he was often compelled to note that his African American family is not only steeped in faith, but also has its share of Trump supporters.

With "The City and the Cross" now completed, has Roberson arrived at an answer to a question he posed a long time ago: Why would Black Americans be Catholic?

"It’s honestly a question I'm still exploring," he said. His next project is a novel that explores similar concepts and conflicts from new and different angles.

In this sense, Robertson is like many of the parishioners whose voices make up "The City and the Cross": inquisitive, reverent, persistent and profoundly aware of storytelling's power.

As one parishioner in the podcast puts it: "You don't know anything if nobody tells you."