NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

African-American Catholics from across U.S. pack Philadelphia cathedral

Lou Baldwin Catholic News Service | Jul. 25, 2013
Philadelphia

Almost 1,000 members of the Knights of Peter Claver and Ladies Auxiliary filled Philadelphia's grand Cathedral Basilica of SS. Peter and Paul on Sunday for an opening Mass of thanksgiving as part of their annual convention, the first to be held in the archdiocese of Philadelphia.

Most other events took place at the Philadelphia Marriott Hotel.

"The entire church of Philadelphia rejoices with you as you come for your assembly in our city," said Philadelphia Auxiliary Bishop Timothy Senior, the principal celebrant of the Mass. He represented Philadelphia Archbishop Charles Chaput, who was on his way to Rio de Janeiro for World Youth Day.

Senior said the archdiocese was blessed to be the site of the African-American organization's 98th Annual Convention and Supreme Assembly. "Your order is a great blessing to our parishes and churches; our schools and other ministries," he said.

"In Philadelphia, the city of St. Katharine Drexel, we treasure the great blessing of racial diversity and ethnic diversity because diversity in our church enriches everyone's life in the community," the bishop added, referencing the saint who dedicated her life to ministering to African-Americans and American Indians, building missions and schools around the country.

Joining Senior and other clergy on the altar was Auxiliary Bishop Shelton Fabre of New Orleans and Msgr. William Norvel, superior general of the St. Joseph's Society of the Sacred Heart, better known as the Josephite Fathers and Brothers.

The Knights of Peter Claver was founded in 1909 in Mobile, Ala., at the urging of the Josephite Fathers who ministered almost entirely to the African-American community. In structure they mirrored the Knights of Columbus, which at the time had very few African-American members and none in the strictly segregated Deep South.

The Ladies Auxiliary was organized in 1922. While they still are very much part of the organization, today they vastly outnumber the men.

The most striking feature of the cathedral Mass was the presence of about 600 auxiliary members in the regalia of their order -- white-skirted suit, white fez, white pumps, gloves, purse and button earrings. All, except those in the procession, were seated a full hour before the liturgy began.

The Knights and Ladies as a whole definitely were committed Catholics.

"I'm pleased with the turnout," said Supreme Lady Vertelle Kenyon, who came from Charleston, S.C. "We have

a very full week of workshops here. We have Knights, Ladies, Junior Knights and Junior Ladies. Our mission is to serve the church as well as members of our organization."

Overall, the Knights are not a large organization, with perhaps 17,000 members, something for which they compensate by dedication.

"My family had founding members," said the organization's public relations director, Athanase Jones. "We have five generations in the Knights."

Although the orders were founded in Mobile, their headquarters are now in New Orleans because it has a heavier concentration of black Catholics. "We are strong there and in Atlanta, and also in Los Angeles and Houston," Jones told CatholicPhilly.com, the news website of the Philadelphia archdiocese.

Although not many members are in the North, he believes Philadelphia was a good choice because the cathedral was large enough for a group Mass.

"When there is a cathedral we try to use it, and it was full and the Mass was streamed live," he said.

Supreme Knight F. DeKarlos Blackmon was just as enthusiastic at the Mass. "What a joy it is to be here, to renew old friendships and make new friendships and to share with one another our desire to serve the Lord and to serve his church," he said.

Locally, there are about 10 councils or courts in the Philadelphia area, according to Deacon Bill Bradley, director of the archdiocese of Philadelphia's Office for Black Catholics and himself a Knight.

"It was a beautiful Mass with an excellent homily by Bishop Senior," he said. "I'm happy to see all this great gathering of the Knights and Ladies of Peter Claver. We are blessed."

[Lou Baldwin writes for CatholicPhilly.com, the news website of the Philadelphia archdiocese.]

Source URL (retrieved on *02/19/2017 - 07:05*): https://www.ncronline.org/news/faith-parish/african-american-catholics-across-us-pack-philadelphia-cathedral