

Stephen J. Ochs, **DESEGREGATING THE ALTAR: THE JOSEPHITES AND THE STRUGGLE FOR BLACK PRIESTS, 1871-1960**, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993, 500pp., £15.95.

Stephen Ochs describes in fine detail the slow process by which the Roman Catholic priesthood in America opened its doors to African Americans. His focus is the St. Joseph's Society of the Sacred Heart or Josephites, whose member, Archbishop Eugene A. Marino, in 1988 became the first African-American prelate to lead an archdiocese in the United States. Founded in Mill Hill, England, in 1866, the society attempted to expand the black Catholic presence in America by establishing churches and schools throughout the Reconstructed South, and later, when the American Josephites established their independence from the British community, by championing the cause of black clergy.

Ochs's work concentrates on this later undertaking. He follows the vigorous but conflicted efforts of the first superior general, John R. Slattery, and the more half-hearted ones of his successors, Thomas B. Donovan and Justin McCarthy. He then turns to the work of Louis B. Pastorelli, who brought the community out of a 'period of the chaos', but who, between 1918 and 1942, remained hostile to efforts to ordain African Americans. Changes did begin to occur under his direction, but these resulted from the protests of black Catholics who by the 1930s were demanding change. In the meantime, the Josephites were being eclipsed by the predominantly-German Society of the Divine Word and the French Society of African Missions. Fortunately for the Josephites, Slattery's cause was reborn with the appointment of Edward V. Casserly, who, in a brief period after World War II when a new respect for blacks surfaced in the nation owing to their contributions to the American war effort, redirected the Josephites towards the goal of ordination of black Americans. The Josephites, Ochs writes, 'demonstrated varying degrees of courage and vision, timidity and accommodation. Although insensitive and flawed at times by their own unconscious racism and paternalism, [they] never completely abandoned their ideal of integrated seminary education' (8).

As these words suggest, Ochs describes a movement towards desegregation that, while slow, is sure. Racism is an ever-present force to be combated throughout this work, but it is something that is seen to be on the wane, rendering the present state of affairs of racial inequality and discord an 'unfinished mission'. Such a description might be complicated by a number of factors, not least the behaviour of African Americans themselves. Several times Ochs mentions the 'canard' that blacks did not want ministers of their own. Perhaps this was deceit on the part of Catholic leaders, but black Catholics had different backgrounds from other black churchgoers, which, while not necessarily leading them to discount the possibility of being preached to by black men, might have led some of them to attribute some of their prestige to belonging to white-led church. The fact that for many black Catholics, and other black Christians, Christ himself would be represented as a white man, reveals that this may be more than just a canard for some

people and assumptions about the movement towards integration may be problematic. The social backgrounds and beliefs of the black Catholics to whom the Josephites were attempting to minister needed further exploration.

Throughout Ochs's account, certainly, the struggles of the individual black priests and seminarians are evident. The successes and failings of Augustine Tolten, John Henry Dorsey, and Charles Randolph Uncles are seen by their white colleagues as the achievements or limitations of 'the race'. Ochs describes the many 'purgatories' these men went through and the crosses they had to bear, from doubts about their religiosity, to the belief that black men under thirty ought not to be seminarians as 'virile black men would be unable to remain celibate', to accusations, when they were successful, that they were 'as conceited as a peacock'. We also learn of the important work of Federated Coloured Catholics in putting pressure on Pastorelli to bring about reform in the 1930s, who was able to do so, in part, because black Catholics in the United States by 1928 numbered as many as 200,000. But, what is missing is a sense of the relationship between seminarians and the black Catholic communities in the United States over the whole period covered by the book. The focus is so heavily on the Josephite leaders that the movement towards desegregation appears as one movement, accelerated when the leader is committed to the cause, stalled when he is not. What the work of black Catholics themselves may suggest is that the post-1930 efforts to secure black seminarians may have been qualitatively different from earlier endeavours. Slattery's approach, shaped by what Ochs sees as his racism, seemed designed to enable the Church to better evangelize among 'benighted souls', whether they were in Africa or the American South; later efforts were clearly more responsive to the demands and needs of a community of Catholics.

The extent to which this is a work about desegregating the altar, then, is questionable. After all, the emphasis on getting black priests to go to African and African-American communities to preach to 'their' people, indicates a degree to which it is certainly about inclusion of blacks in the priesthood, but this is to be a largely segregated priesthood.

Finally, a large number of other conflicts get left out of the picture which might further complicate the image of a process towards integration. One of the more important of these was the history of ethnic (considered at the time, racial) conflicts between the Germans, Irish and Italians for domination of the Church. The ethnicity of men like Slattery and Pastorelli, while mentioned by Ochs, is never considered fully and they are seldom separated from an undifferentiated group of white Americans. As such, the way in which the attempts by blacks to gain representation is a continuation of earlier efforts of the Irish and Germans to wrest control from the French, and Italians to wrest control from the Irish, which were determined more by the efforts of the churchgoers themselves, than from the beneficence of superiors, remains unexplored. The existence of such conflicts might confound the view that racism was the single obstacle blocking African-American advance.

Ochs provides rich material for the Josephite Fathers, who, along with other Catholic clergy, have escaped historians' notice in the past. He leaves a number of questions unanswered concerning the kinds of changes for America's black Catholics that they helped to bring about.

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