

## **Father Vernon Huguley and Two Catholic Parishes**

### **A Case Study Prepared by Sarah Shelton**

The stories that swirl around Father Vernon Huguley have made him a legend in the city of Birmingham. A native of Mobile, Alabama, the historical home of the first Mardi Gras, Father Vernon grew up with the annual excitement of the city's Mardi Gras celebrations. To this day, Father Vernon faithfully makes an annual trip to Mobile to ride a float, toss beads and throw Moon Pies to the crowds that gather in the streets. In fact, he often wears a Jesus t-shirt under his street clothes so that he can "flash Jesus" from the float before an over-exuberant parade go-er might decide to flash Father Vernon with something no one would normally think of showing a priest! It was logical, therefore, for Father Vernon to celebrate his tenth anniversary as a priest Mardi Gras style. Following the Anniversary Mass during the Sunday morning service, Father Vernon changed into a tuxedo replete with a top hat, cane and cape. He jumped onto the back of a church member's decorated flatbed truck and threw beads and Moon Pies from Our Lady Queen of the Universe Catholic Church up Center Street one mile to The First Congregational United Church of Christ. Upon arrival, he marched into the highly decorated fellowship hall to the tune of "When the Saints Go Marching In," and the celebration erupted.

This celebration was the antithesis to the one I experienced when I visited Our Lady Queen of the Universe Catholic Church one Sunday morning for worship. In the quiet, velvet murmurs of the gathering parishioners, Father Vernon came onto the scene. He walked down the aisles greeting and teasing, or offering comfort and a listening ear. His laughter or favorite expression, "Well, do Jesus!" would often rise above the hushed conversations of those already seated. The service was a mix of Catholic liturgy and southern gospel. It was evident that Father Vernon would not deny his southern heritage while enacting loving respect for the formal protocol of the Catholic Church. The elements were delivered with the warmth and grace of Southern hospitality while the priest was donned in the traditional vestments of the Church.

He was not far into his sermon when he stepped from behind the pulpit and began to walk out into the congregation. His conversational style of preaching soon became a dialogue with those present. Focusing on Matthew 9:36ff, Father Vernon talked of being

a shepherd, of being a laborer, and of being a disciple. Speaking confessionally, Father Vernon told his flock, “When you have a call placed in your spirit, that is where you will find happiness.” Father Vernon’s life has been graced with happiness because of his dedication to the call he feels within his spirit. This has not come without a price, however.

Born on April 2, 1959, as the youngest of eight children, Father Vernon was raised in the practices of the Catholic Church by his proud parents. He was baptized at Most Pure Heart of Mary Catholic Church in Mobile, Alabama, as Vernon Francis Huguley. His parents, William and Aline Huguley, dedicated themselves to teach Catholic practices at home, as well as to be sure that Father Vernon attended Religious Education classes on the weekend. Father Vernon says that the first gesture he was taught was how to make the sign of the cross. The first prayers he learned to give were blessings for family meals, the Lord’s Prayer and the Hail Mary.

William Huguley was a cook for The Battle House Hotel’s restaurant until its management discovered that he was black and dismissed him. During the summer, he would cook on a pleasure boat. Aline Huguley was employed by white families to take care of their children and to cook for their meals. She would not get home until early in the evening, so Father Vernon was often left in the care of his older siblings, of which there were many. Bobby, the oldest, lived with his aunt on Mon Luis Island. Betty was left to be the disciplinarian in the household while her mother worked. Aline and William were twins. Aline played the role of protector for Vernon, which often placed her at odds with Betty and brought arguing into the house. Brothers William, David and Glenn left home to serve in the military: Air Force, Navy and Army, respectively. Frank and baby Vernon were the youngest and were encouraged by their sisters to do their homework. Vernon was a quiet child. This worked to his advantage when he felt resentment build inside as the children in the house where his mother worked were disrespectful to her. He also missed her presence in their own home. In his adolescent years, he would resist his older siblings’ attempts at discipline.

It was about this time that Father Vernon began to realize that he was the darkest skinned member of his family. Aline Chastang Huguley, Father Vernon’s mother, was a Creole. Mobile, one of the earliest French settlements, was also a harbor with a small

trading center that was captured by the Spanish in 1763. (This current paragraph is taken from Cyprian Davis, The History of Black Catholics in the United States, New York: Crossroad, 1996, pp. 77 – 78). At the end of the eighteenth century, three brothers from France, by the name of Chastang, came to settle in south Alabama. The name, Chastang, plays a vital role in the history of black Catholics in Mobile. Two of the Chastang brothers married white women. The third brother, Dr. John Chastang, married a slave. The mulatto descendents of this marriage formed a tightly knit community of light-skinned blacks who spoke French, had a good grade of hair, and were practicing Catholics. Dr. John Chastang settled and raised his family north of Mobile. However, at the entrance of Mobile Bay there is a small island, Mon Luis Island, where a young mulatto slave, Maximilien Colin, became the head of a black Catholic family-based community. The name Colin (and its related forms of Colen, Collins, and Colins) appear repeatedly in this community's history. Vernon's grandmother, Mary Magdalene Collins, married Frank Peter Chastang. This marriage resulted in the birth of six children. The oldest was Aline Chastang Huguley, Father Vernon's mother. Father Vernon says that he has never felt comfortable with the maternal side of his family because of his dark skin. They valued lighter skin tones and some of his family preferred to associate only with whites. "Because I was a shade darker, I took my family's associations with whites as a denial of me. My mother would often comment on the darkness of other people's skin, and I would challenge her." These early influences left marks on Father Vernon's soul that he has carried to encourage him as he represents a minority within a Church that is predominantly white.

In 1963, when Father Vernon was four, William, his father, died of an intestinal blockage in the Veterans Hospital of New Orleans. His mother continued to be a housekeeper. With children at home, this made finances extremely tight. Vernon prepared for the Sacrament of his First Holy Communion and Reconciliation during weekend classes at his church. It was during that time that he was introduced to some Dominican sisters from Sinsinawa, Wisconsin. The sisters taught the basics of the Catholic faith: prayers, gestures, Bible stories, songs, and sacramental preparation. It was also Father Vernon's first time to see a black nun. Her name was Sister Rosetta and she taught music.

In the fourth grade, Father Vernon received his First Holy Communion. In addition, Father Vernon and brother Frank were enrolled in The Most Pure Heart of Mary Catholic School. His mother paid the subsidized tuition of \$29 per month per child. Father Vernon qualified because he was a cradle Catholic. In addition, his mother gladly baked for school functions and fundraisers as the proud mother of her sons. Father Vernon also did his part. He was enlisted as an Altar Server to serve Mass on Sundays. During summers, he would come to the school and work with the sisters to prepare the classrooms for the beginning of school. This experience taught Father Vernon the value of work and the business of serving and helping others. It also began a discernment process in Father Vernon where he considered the possibility of a vocation; in other words, that he might become a priest.

The sisters taught a consistent theme: be proud of who you are. For the first time, Father Vernon began to understand that he was a person of value created by God. At his eighth grade graduation, the call of God on Father Vernon's life began to take shape as he sang the words: "Don't you know black is beauty? Certainly, Lord! Don't you know you got the power? Certainly, Lord!"

Father Vernon's love for the ritual and tradition of the Church had begun to blossom. With the advent of high school, however, the family was faced with financial decisions once again. Tuition to attend McGill Toolen Catholic High School was beyond their reach at over \$400 a year. In spite of his pleas and tears, his mother enrolled him at The Murphy High School. Father Vernon says of this experience that it taught him flexibility and how to make difficult transitions. While it took some time, he soon was over his disappointment and busy with friendships and activities. While in high school, Father Vernon continued to discern his call to the priesthood. He often assisted in Mass as an altar server and participated in the Catholic Youth Organization. A part of his preparation for the Sacrament of Confirmation was to attend classes on this Sacrament as well as attend a charismatic prayer group that the priest of his parish led. It was the first time that Father Vernon has a remembrance of white people attending his church. In addition, these meetings were frightening because of Father Vernon's unfamiliarity with "speaking in tongues" and the "laying on of hands" for healing. It was an exposure to different expressions of personal faith and spirituality.

God's call continued to nudge Father Vernon's soul. After discussions with a vocation director about the priesthood, he attended a weeklong conference in Beaumont, Texas. While he learned many things about the priesthood, the primary attribute of a priest that he took to heart was that a priest must be a person of prayer. He began, therefore, to increase his comfort level with spontaneous prayer and the ability to express his faith with words.

Following high school, Father Vernon attended The University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. He graduated in Human Development and Family Life through the School of Home Economics. Father Vernon worked his way through undergraduate school. One of his favorite jobs, which continues to be a hobby and part of his ministry today, was being a baker in the cafeteria of The Ferguson Center (student center). He earned a Bachelor of Science degree in 1983. At the University of Alabama, Father Vernon began to bring together his heritage and faith. With the skills learned from his parents' kitchen, Father Vernon found a way to continue to prepare himself for the calling that tugged at his heart.

He joined the student chapel on campus and for the first time worshiped in a church whose members were not black. While the music and its presentation were different, Father Vernon found comfort in the liturgy and practice that were the same. While it felt "different" to Father Vernon to worship with the white students, no doubt it was a new experience for them to have a black Eucharistic Minister, Lector and Religious Education Instructor! These days were formative for Father Vernon. They continued to confirm his conviction that black congregations need black priests. It provided an early exposure to his minority presence within the larger church and gave a preview of the racial challenges that he would face as a priest. It increased his sensitivity to the issues between blacks and whites, so that he would take on the responsibility of speaking out for the black communities of faith. While Father Vernon admits that he has to be careful about when and how he speaks out, his educational experiences taught him not to deny who he is nor to those whom he feels called to serve. It began the struggle of knowing that he is called to preach a gospel of reconciliation, but finds reconciliation often a challenge within his own heart and soul.

Also during his college days, Father Vernon responded to a request made by the Consalata Sisters of Greene County, Alabama. They needed a teacher for children's religious education on Saturdays for Advent and Lent. Father Vernon was willing. For all four years that he attended the University of Alabama, plus one summer after graduation, Father Vernon traveled to Greene County to teach the children Bible stories and religious songs. He says that the Consalata Sisters provided the backbone of his vocation. In particular, Sister Elisa gave Father Vernon the good advice to "let your anger and frustration run off your back like water off a duck's back." This missionary group of nuns, recognizing Father Vernon's gifts and abilities, took it upon themselves to pray for Father Vernon in his formative years and continue to do so to this day.

In 1987, Father Vernon entered Saint Meinrad School of Theology, located in southern Indiana. He was drawn to this seminary because it was racially mixed (there were about a dozen blacks in the seminary; they were also the only blacks in the adjacent town.). An additional attraction was the presence of a black, church history professor, Father Cyprian Davis. Father Davis spent a lot of time mentoring and shaping Father Vernon. Father Davis also provided advice for Father Vernon's academic choices and spiritual direction.

While in seminary, Father Vernon found his voice. He was often outspoken in regard to black and white issues including a confrontation with one of his professors about the annual Martin Luther King Celebration that was to be held on campus. One of Father Vernon's class presentations included his singing "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" as an expression of how alone and far from home he felt. When he would talk with Father Davis, his beloved professor, Father Davis would advise: "Remember Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration? Peter, James and John were all there. They looked up and saw Jesus. That is what you need to do Vernon. You need to look up and see Jesus."

Father Vernon was sustained through his seminary days by some advice that he received from a spiritual director prior to entering the seminary: "Your vocation is not to the seminary. Your vocation is to the people of God. You are not meant to stay at the seminary."

In order to bring some balance to these predominantly white educational experiences, Father Vernon enrolled at Xavier University, the only black Catholic university in the United States, to pursue a Black Catholic Theology Master's degree. He attended during the summers, and completed all the class work but did not graduate due to an incomplete master's theses. In addition to these stressors, Vernon began to experience some outright rejections. He listened carefully to the encouragement of friend and mentor, Sister Rita Washington, Director of the Office of Black Catholic Ministries in the Diocese of Birmingham, who said, "When God closes a door, God opens a window." Consequently, he applied to the Josephite Order of Priests and was denied. This began his inquiries to become a Diocesan Priest in Birmingham, Alabama, where he performed several summer internships. He purposefully rotated between white and black parishes. They included: Holy Spirit, Holy Family, St. Francis Xavier, Our Lady Queen of the Universe, and Sacred Heart Catholic Churches.

It was at Queen that Father Vernon heard how Father Harper had thrown his vestments onto the floor during the Palm Sunday service before the congregation. Father Harper chastised the congregation by saying, "If you want to be the pastor of this church, then you can!" In September, 1990, Father Vernon began his pastoral internship at Our Lady Queen of the Universe Catholic Church and at Sacred Heart of Jesus. In October, 1990, Father Harper resigned and Father Vernon was sent, in tears, to St. Francis in Bessemer.

In 1993, Father Vernon was ordained a priest in the Diocese of Birmingham. This wonderful event took place at St. Paul's Cathedral. It was the first time that four priests were ordained at the same time for the Diocese of Birmingham. Thirteen African American priests were in attendance to specifically support Father Vernon. Bishop Boland offered Father Vernon the chalice with wine and the paten with the bread and spoke words that Father Vernon has never forgotten:

"Accept from the holy people of God the gifts to be offered to Him. Know what you are doing, and imitate the mystery you celebrate: model your life on the mystery of the Lord's cross."

As his vestments were placed around his shoulders, Father Vernon's body became racked with sobs at the joy and certainty of being in the right place at the right time with

God's blessing. The congregation was so moved that tears swept through those gathered. Father Vernon has been the faithful leader, friend, pastor and priest for Our Lady Queen of the Universe Catholic Church and Sacred Heart of Jesus Catholic Church since 1993. Both congregations are predominantly black. He has served as the Spiritual Moderator for the Cursillo Movement in Birmingham and has served on the Priest Council for the Diocese of Birmingham. He is an active member of the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus. He continues to bake for his congregation and friends, and claims as his favorite verse, Psalm 139, "I give You thanks, O God, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made."

### **History of the Congregations**

When Birmingham emerged as a city of the New South in 1871, the lessons of the Civil War were still fresh on the minds of the city's developers. They, therefore, placed their confidence in industrialization. Rich mineral deposits of iron ore were buried beneath the Red Mountain of Jones Valley. Coal and limestone lay nearby. These combined resources were the raw materials needed for making steel and pig iron; consequently, foundries, rolling mills, blast furnaces, coke ovens, and other industrial concerns began to emerge in the Birmingham District. The blast furnaces were located to the east and west of the city's core. Foundries and furnaces were within a two-mile radius of downtown. Thousands of black and white migrants came to the city looking for economic opportunities and advancement. (Lynne B. Feldman, *A Sense of Place: Birmingham's Black Middle-Class Community, 1890-1930*, Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1999, p. 6)

To the west of the industrialization of Birmingham, was the community of Elyton. Elyton was named for Captain William Ely of Connecticut who came to Alabama in 1820 to find a site for the American Asylum, an institute for the deaf and dumb. He purchased the community of Frog Level Race Grounds and gave 160 acres for a courthouse. The residents, out of appreciation, named the town Elyton. For fifty years, Elyton, the largest town in Jefferson County, was the County Seat. (Carolyn Green Satterfield, *Historic Sites of Jefferson County, Alabama*, Gray Printing Company, Inc., Birmingham, Al, 1976, p. 51)

The third white child to be born in Jefferson County was Joseph Riley Smith, who became one of Elyton's most prominent citizens. A well-educated doctor/physician who practiced all over the county, operated a drugstore and established two schools: one for the white children and one for the black children. Smith donated the land for the first hospital in Birmingham and upon his death in 1905, Smith was the largest taxpayer in the area. Smith had twelve children. He used their names for the naming of the thoroughfares for the community he developed: Smithfield. Once a cornfield, Smith developed Smithfield into one of Birmingham's earliest subdivisions. (Satterfield, p. 52) In the late nineteenth century, the 500 acres that made up Smithfield caught the attention of city boosters who were striving to improve Birmingham's status. Being west of the city limits, Smithfield provided alternative housing for those black and white residents of the city that were in cramped living conditions. With physical separation from the city came a feeling of control and influence. This resulted in an elevated self-esteem and sense of status. The black residents of Smithfield could move freely within their own neighborhood without the consequences and restrictions of segregation that existed within the city limits. (Feldman, p. 1) Middle-class blacks achieved a place of belonging in Smithfield.

This coincided with the strategies of African Americans on a national basis who were adopting a strategy of self-segregation. It emphasized self-reliance in that viable communities were being developed that supported their own businesses, clubs, and private institutions. It created a protective environment in which the residents could assert independence, nurture personal and business relationships, and create strategies to further issues that were unique to blacks. (Feldman, p. 3)

As a consequence, varying classes within the culture of African Americans began to surface. With infrequent interactions with the city of Birmingham's residents, a social stratum within the Smithfield community, in particular, began to emerge. Intolerant attitudes that are characterized in statements like "the other class of Negroes," "the less fortunate," and "Negroes we refuse to know socially" began to surface. (Feldman, p.3) The upper crust became known for their refined behavior, modest accomplishments, value of education, work within the black economy, home ownership, and professional positions. The main thing that held this group together was its interest in putting their

race ahead. Members spoke out against racism, organized protests and signed petitions in the hope that it would bring about change. (Feldman, p. 4)

Smithfield, therefore, developed into a community that was a most desirable place to live. It was a place where African Americans achieved a feeling of belonging and a sense of personal and professional identity. As one long term resident of Smithfield put it: "if you were in Smithfield, you were an 'A Number One Black.'" (Feldman, p. 24) Also at the turn of the century, on the northeast side of Birmingham, another community was growing. Local industries, such as L&N and Southern railroads, U.S. Pipe Company, Jim Walters Corporation, GATX Tank Corporation, and Sloss-Sheffield Furnace had built factories. Nearby were company houses, apartment dwellers, and eventually, a 550-unit public housing project was built in 1964. Collegeville sprang to life in Birmingham's industrial north side. The neighborhood received its name from an elementary school, Lauderdale College, which was destroyed by fire in 1916. (Mitch Mendelson, "Collegeville Has Essence of Small Neighborhood Life, The Birmingham News, November 7, 1980)

The community was surrounded by rail yards and factories. The air was often thick with sulfurous vapors from the factories. Behind each home, were gardens with dense rows of collard greens and beets. The streets were bad and open drains in the neighborhood created health and drainage issues.

The city of Birmingham was more than happy to keep this all-black community neatly tucked away out of the sight and minds of most of the larger city's citizens. ("Collegeville Makes Beginning at Cleaning Up Streets, Crime," The Birmingham News, Sept. 3, 1971) Collegeville, therefore, developed a vitality that came from its own cultural integrity. When integration was creating conflict in many areas of the city, Collegeville remained virtually 100% black. The residents faithfully labored to keep a sense of neighborhood alive with front porch visiting and knowledge of who your neighbors were. While the factories and rail yards kept the residents geographically isolated, it also kept the residents socially intact. The areas' 23 churches have been instrumental in keeping this sense of unity alive as well.

Along with the redeeming qualities of community living, there were also the other realities. Shot houses, illegal gambling, gangs, houses of prostitution, and illegal drug-

dealing were so prevalent that police and other city services were not willing to go into Collegeville. Therefore, yards and alleyways filled with trash until 1970 when the Community Action Committee of Operation New Birmingham made a tour of the area and demanded that changes be made. (Geraldine Moore, "Collegeville of Today is New Community in Every Sense," The Birmingham News, April 28, 1974) When a street gang killed a member of the North Birmingham Youth Council, the community's leaders went to the Birmingham City Council with two requests: send more police patrols and send them with a changed attitude. ("Collegeville Makes Beginning at Cleaning Up the Streets," The Birmingham News, March 9, 1971) In addition, the residents of Collegeville began a major Cleanup Drive. For months, crews worked block by block to haul away trash, cover ditches, and expose drug dealers. While Collegeville has worked hard to improve its image, it is still regarded as a high crime area of the city.

In 1938, Father Frank Giri and Sister Mary Alice Vose founded the North Alabama Mission Band as a ministry of the Mobile Diocese. (The Birmingham Diocese was not established until December, 1969. At that time, the northern half of Alabama became the Birmingham Diocese under the leadership of Bishop Joseph Vath.) They were joined by Father Joseph Durick in 1940. These three missionaries were totally devoted to the vocation of offering the Catholic doctrine to the Graymont, Collegeville and Smithfield areas. Anticipating an increase of Catholics due to these missionary efforts, Archbishop Thomas J. Toolen purchased property in Smithfield on Center Street and Tenth Avenue South in 1941. It was to be the future home of Our Lady Queen of the Universe Catholic Church. Archbishop Toolen decided to include the Negro Apostolate and appointed Father Edward L. Foster to organize and evangelize the Smithfield area in particular. (An apostolate is a ministry to the poor, minority communities within the Church.) Durick and Vose joined in wholeheartedly. Father Foster, a tall Irishman from New York, was known for his street preaching. From these combined efforts, a first official meeting was announced and held.

The first meeting of Catholics in the area was held at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Allen, 984 North First Street. Those present were: Father Foster, Sister Mary Alice Vose, Mr. and Mrs. Robert A. Jones, and Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Allen. Their first objective was to locate a place where Sunday Mass could be celebrated. Through the

courtesy of Mr. Virgil Harris, Mass was held each Sunday at the Davenport and Harris Funeral Home. As the congregation of Our Lady Queen of the Universe Catholic Church grew, a few services were held at the Bethlehem House in the Smithfield Court Housing Project. During Lent of 1955, the Mass site was moved to the Chapel of Poole Funeral Home. Mrs. Lillie Bell Perry, a Catholic convert and employee of the Poole Funeral Home, made sure that everything was in order for Mass each Sunday.

In the meantime, a small store owned by Mrs. Beatrice Hardaman became a converted chapel for the celebration of Mass for another new Catholic church start, Sacred Heart of Jesus. It was located nearby in the community of Collegeville when street preaching missionaries and Trinitarian Sisters surveyed the area and found two Catholic families in residence. The street services attracted about 200 people. Six Negroes took instruction and by December of 1955, the little chapel was used for Mass. The first group of converts was baptized before Christmas in 1956. Mrs. Ruth Zimmerman and her children, James and Inez, Rickey Hinley Martin, and Barber Springer Sims joined the newly Baptized Catholics. When rain storms brought mud into the chapel, the group would assemble in the home of Ruth Zimmerman to hold Mass. Plans for Our Lady Queen of the Universe were being drawn by architect Wilmot Douglas for a church building that would seat 300 in its sanctuary. Archbishop Toolen broke ground for the present church on March 14, 1955. Participants in the ceremony were Father Foster, Wilmot Douglas, Joseph Kurts (contractor), Rev. Guida D'Amore (a Salesian Father who organized the community youth into the Catholic Youth Organization and sports program), Robert A. Jones, Sister Mary Alice Vose, and other members and friends. Sister Mary Alice, assisted by Sister Joan Thomas, made house-to-house visitations and taught Catechism to the children. Sister Mary Alice also began the first choir.

As the building of Our Lady Queen of the Universe progressed, members helped to meet the financial responsibilities by selling bricks and many other fund-raising events. Area churches, Father Foster's family and Father Foster's friends gave many of the adornments. The first Mass in the new church building was offered on November 6, 1955. Archbishop Toolen dedicated the building on January 22, 1956.

In March of 1957, Archbishop Toolen visited the mission site for The Sacred Heart of Jesus. He promised an elderly, ill lady (a mother of one of the Catholic families involved in the mission) that there would be a Catholic church built in the community of Collegeville. In May of 1957, Archbishop Toolen named Father Foster to be the Director of the North Alabama Mission Band. This would be in addition to Father Foster's pastorate at Our Lady Queen of the Universe and two mission sites which were in Parker Heights and Collegeville. Father Foster had two associates: Father Michael Quealy and Father Robert Campbell. Another devoted helper was Brother Larry Johnson. Father Foster and his associates resided at St. Margaret's Parish. Father Foster's mother, Mrs. Alice Foster, promised to donate \$1,000 to purchase the land for Sacred Heart of Jesus, if the parishioners would match her gift. The money was raised, and Mrs. Foster sent her check. Within the year, the promise was fulfilled. Sacred Heart of Jesus Catholic Church, located on 34<sup>th</sup> Street and 27<sup>th</sup> Court North was in the heart of Collegeville. It was dedicated on June 8, 1958. Within three years' time, there were eighteen Catholic families representing a total of 65 Catholics. Membership also increased at Our Lady Queen of the Universe with much leadership given by the Lades Sodality and Holy Name Society.

Father Foster continued his parish and community work for twelve years. While he was known for his Sunday afternoon visits to those who failed to attend Mass, he also instilled pride in the people for their Black heritage. He was intentional in his efforts to integrate the Catholic schools of Birmingham as well as to encourage his parishioners in the search for jobs and the adoption of children. He continued to be involved with street preaching, but in a bit of different mode. He was quick to participate in the Civil Rights marches in Birmingham that so defined the city in the 1960's. He would often call his parishioners to come with him as they protested the treatment of Blacks. His involvement in these events brought frightening attention to Our Lady Queen of the Universe. When the Ku Klux Klan was busy seeking out blacks and bombing their homes, Our Lady Queen of the Universe also had a scare. Located near the homes of Attorney Arthur Shores and activist Angela Davis, whose homes had already been bombed, Our Lady Queen of the Universe was included in a weekend bombing attempt. Seven locations in the city had dynamite placed on their property by the KKK. One of

the members of Our Lady Queen of the Universe, Mr. Fred Calhoun, spotted two green boxes containing 50 sticks of dynamite each on the curb close to the church house. It was set to go off during Mass or shortly thereafter. Father Foster quickly moved those who had assembled for Mass to the front of the rectory. The bomb, fortunately, did not explode. The Bethel Baptist Church in Collegeville was the site that received bomb threats and, ultimately, was bombed. Sacred Heart had no specific scares.

Following Father Foster has been a long list of priests and administrators. Sacred Heart of Jesus remained a mission and under the care of nearby parishes until the North Alabama Mission Band was dissolved. In January of 1981, Our Lady Queen of the Universe became an independent parish. At that time, Sacred Heart of Jesus was attached to the Cathedral of Saint Paul. With the exception of this brief period and a few others, both churches have continued to share the same priest.

With concerns for Civil Rights and cultural uncertainty, it was the practiced expectation that when blacks visited in other congregations they blacks were to be seated in the back of the sanctuary and receive communion last. Therefore, when discussions were held Sacred Heart might be connected to a larger white parish, there was fear that they would be denied cultural comforts (like the use of an African American hymnal) and would not be allowed leadership opportunities.

The following priests and administrators have served either one or both congregations of Our Lady Queen of the Universe and Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Father Paul Donnelly, pastor, September, 1966

Father James Mulvaney, pastor of Sacred Heart, 1970

Father Charles V. Cross, administrator of Queen, 1971

Father George Fitzpatrick, administrator of Queen, 1972

Rev. Monsignor Edward Foster, pastor, June, 1973

Father Paschal Rys, pastor, 1977

Father Charles Kennedy, pastor, 1979

Father Peter McCarthy, pastor, 1981: At this time, Sacred Heart was no longer a mission attached to Our Lady Queen of the Universe.

Father Kenneth Prater, administrator and pastor, 1982: Sacred Heart and Our Lady Queen of the Universe became aligned again and shared this pastor. Bishop

Boland also appointed Sister Maria Dina Puddu, M.C., to be the administrator of Sacred Heart of Jesus. The parish thrived under Sister's administration until 1993.

Father Louis Giardino, administrator, 1986

Monsignor Michael Sexton, administrator, 1988

Father Wayne Harper, pastor, 1988

Mrs. Elizabeth Bell, administrator of Queen, 1990

Father Max Offor, pastor of Queen, 1991

Mr. Cleophas Vann, administrator of Queen, 1993

Father Vernon Huguley, pastor, 1994

Both congregations continue to meet in their original buildings founded in 1955 and both are served by Father Vernon Huguley as priest. While there has been conversation through the years regarding a combination of the congregations, there is tension that keeps this from occurring. While there is a similar history and shared leadership through the years, the cultural context of each church's geographical location, in this writer's opinion, prevents the joining of these congregations.

Sacred Heart of Jesus is located in the Collegetown community of Birmingham. It is near several industrial parks and is a flood zone of the city. It is surrounded by railroad tracks, and is difficult to get in and out of. This is especially true for emergency vehicles who might be responding to a crisis in the community. The Census Bureau notes that the community is 93% African American and is fairly diverse in regards to age. Forty percent of the residents live below poverty level, and 59% are single mothers with children. Father Vernon notes that the idea of living within and attending a church within a local parish does not apply to Sacred Heart. Twenty-one of the 75 families do not live in the parish.

Our Lady Queen of the Universe is located in Smithfield. The Census Bureau indicates that it is a community on the decline, with large ethnic diversity, a heavy child and elderly population and low educational achievement. About 40% of the population lives below the poverty line (\$15,000 annual income) as compared to the American average of 14%. Father Vernon points out that the church sits on the corner of Center Street which divides the black professionals from the low income, empty, and often broken down homes. Out of 125 families, only 34 families live in the area. The others

have moved out in search of access to better homes, jobs and educational opportunities for their children. They continue, however, to return to the church of their roots. Therefore, the church population is not totally representative of the population that surrounds it. In addition, those that return, do so with the attitude of the original Smithfield residents of being self-reliant, proud, informed, and elite. It is this writer's opinion that Our Lady Queen of the Universe, while it is not publicly spoken, believes that Sacred Heart of Jesus should not be a mission any longer. Instead it should be an independent, self-supporting parish that is able to have its own priest. This is evident on fifth Sundays when both congregations meet together to celebrate Mass. When mass is held at Our Lady Queen of the Universe, it is well attended by the Sacred Heart members. When, however, Mass is held at Sacred Heart, the attendance from Our Lady Queen of the Universe is a sparse minimum. Perhaps the members of Sacred Heart are seen by the members of Our Lady Queen of the Universe as "the other class of Negroes," "the less fortunate," and "Negroes we refuse to know socially," a historical and geographical attitude.

From time to time, the Diocese of Birmingham talks of merging these two congregations. The possibilities that a white priest would be appointed to serve these congregations and the threat of merger, keeps Father Vernon committed to serving dual parishes. It causes him concern as he contemplates a new appointment with the arrival of a new Bishop. The histories of their communities as well as the experienced perspective of their shared priest(s) need to be considered in this conversation.

### **Leadership**

At Father Vernon's ordination, the congregation and family members gathered to watch and support Father Vernon as he was taken through the process. From lying on the floor prostrate to being anointed with oil by the Bishop, Father Vernon walked carefully and thoughtfully through each step. Sitting at the front of the sanctuary with Father Vernon's "spiritual mother," Mrs. Watts, was Father Vernon's biological mother. When the service was over, in a voice just loud enough to be overheard, Father Vernon's mother leaned over to Mrs. Watts and said, "*Y'all got somethin' on y'all's hands now!*"

It is undeniable that Father Vernon has a colorful personality. From his gregarious smile to his thoughtful sermons, Father Vernon is uniquely his own person. As with all persons, however, there are some realities that balance the courageous and lighter sides of their lives. In the fall of 2005, separate meetings were scheduled for the lay leadership of Sacred Heart and Our Lady Queen of the Universe. They were held in the Parish Halls of each church and lasted for about two hours. Initially, general questions about leadership styles were asked, but gradually the discussion moved to how these lay leaders experienced Father Vernon's leadership.

Being the priest of one parish is demanding, but to be the priest of two parishes is twice as difficult. There is a constant question in the mind of the priest that if he is at one site, he feels he should be at the other site and vice versa. The questions of balance and of burnout are prevalent. In addition, Father Vernon quickly learned that both the Smithfield and Colledgeville Catholics were proud of their status within their churches. They asked questions, expressed opinions and assumed responsibilities for the routine activities of the parish. Too often this attitude caused problems for new leaders. Additionally, there is an element of cultural competition between the two communities that make up the parishes of Queen and Sacred Heart, Father Vernon is easily caught in the question of **partiality**. Consider these statements offered by members who were interviewed:

**Voice 1:** *When he's here, he's the happiest priest you've ever seen in your life because we all communicate well with him and he communicates well with us. ...when he leaves here, he's all frustrated because he knows he's got to jump in the lions' den over there.*

**Voice 2:** *"Father, you are married to the Queen, but you are shackin' with Sacred Heart!"*

In addition to partiality between congregations, the question of partiality also appears in personal relationships. Consider these statements:

**Voice 1:** *“...Father will oftentimes make revelations almost like it’s certain people in the church that he likes. To me, if you are feeding your flock, a good leader needs to be versatile enough to treat everybody the same and not make me feel that when I sit in church Sunday that there are other people who are more important than me.”*

While the groups met independently of one another, they were consistent in pointing out and in agreement that Father Vernon is a **micromanager and often fails in delegating tasks**. This was frustrating for both groups of lay leaders. While trust was often mentioned, it seemed that several felt a personal affront that Father Vernon would not leave tasks with church members to handle.

**Voice 1:** *“If I’m assigned to do something, it’s okay to give me constructive criticism on how to finish this project but let me get there first and show me where I made a mistake along the way and help me correct, then I still move on to finish it.”*

**Voice 2:** *“One of the biggest things I used to tell him when he first got here, ‘Father Vernon, before you came the grass was being cut. The power was being paid. The rent was being paid. What makes you so special that all of this was being done before? Let it go and let us continue doing it.’”*

The other theme that rose to the surface regarding Father Vernon’s serious realities was **his habit of procrastination or inability to follow through with commitments**. This is especially frustrating to those who felt they were micromanaged at one time or another. When Father Vernon takes the task back, occasionally, he falls prey to the very same foibles of the laity.

Both sets of leaders also made reference to their concern about Father Vernon’s health. A diabetic, their loving respect for him spoke to their desire that he experience a long life of leadership. Concern was expressed for his ability to care for himself through diet, exercise, and friendships beyond the church.

The Birkman Personality Profile (taken by Father Vernon at Vantage Associates, Inc. on June 21, 2005), supported that Father Vernon finds it important to have the

respect of key individuals; that he can be domineering and controlling; he has weakness in follow-through; fails to delegate; can worry unnecessarily; and can be indecisive when pressured. While Father Vernon's Usual Style is that he prefers to be organized and concentrative, when he is unduly stressed, he can be dominating, self-protective, easily distracted, disorganized and argumentative. He likes to know who is in charge and performs best when given personalized incentives. He is normally openly enthusiastic and a team player, as long as the rules are kept to a minimum and the tasks are varied. His preference is to schedule things, draw up the rules and procedures, and have a way to measure the results of his efforts. He is often direct, to the point, decisive and busy. The Birkman Inventory also supported areas of strength that the parishioners of Queen and Sacred Heart named about Father Vernon. In general these include that he is usually direct and straightforward; friendly and easy to know; oriented towards general benefit; and allows opportunities for individuality.

Father Vernon was the intern and "cut his teeth" on the parishes of Sacred Heart and Queen. The members have watched and experienced his leadership from the first day of assignment until twelve years later. They often comment on the ways they have **seen him grow and express appreciation for his openness to continued learning.**

***Voice 2:** Father is changing daily. ...He's learned how to give each church their empowering and just come along and encourage them. If we let that keep going, that is a great leader. ...You don't want to remain Peter. You want to become Christ. That's what a good leader does. They learn to turn loose but to be there."*

Another strong suit mentioned was his **pastoral care and his ability to express compassion to his parishioners.** He possesses an unusual ability to listen with encouragement that often puts his parishioners at such ease that they are able to relate their concerns with the assurance that they can trust the one who is listening. His presence at funerals and with the sick and dying are full of comfort. He is especially gifted in nurturing relationships with the elderly, often taking them along with him on trips. His ability to offer the traditional liturgical expressions of the Catholic church bring the assurance of God's comfort and lends the strength of the larger church at these

critical times. Father Vernon is so intentional about representing God's care that he is also willing to participate in non-Catholic funerals. For his own parishioners he often places symbols on the casket of the deceased in order to help family members have tangible, visible reminders of the life that they have gathered to celebrate. Other words that were used to describe his pastoral care were: compassionate, servant of the people, trustworthy, confidential, a presence, a bridge builder, and big-hearted.

In addition to these gifts of pastoral care, the parishioners expressed a great appreciation for Father Vernon's **preaching and his approach to educate them about the practices of the Catholic Church and faith.**

**Voice 1:** *"I have never seen him read from a text or sermon, which makes me feel that...he is talking from his heart. And even in the sermon, he does the serious and the humorous side to drive his point home. ...he starts his sermon by asking a question. So, he puts you on notice from the very beginning of his sermon, 'I'm going to answer this question in this sermon, so you need to listen.' He even allows the parish to respond...he doesn't have to stand up in the pulpit, he becomes one of us when he comes down into the congregation and doesn't tell us, but shares WITH us..."*

**Voice 2:** *"Father Vernon is a good technician. He knows rituals, rites, how to perform certain things and I've seen him do this ,like in the anointing of the sick. I've seen him do baptisms. He came out to bless my house and he had a prayer for every room. I mean there was even a prayer for blessing the bathroom and all who used it!"*

As both parishes have experienced white and black priests, it was asked how **Father Vernon's race** was an asset in terms of his ability to lead two predominately African-American congregations. The response was overwhelming in that the congregations felt an immediate connection and trust with Father Vernon because he is black. The shared historical, collective experiences of segregated public restrooms and water fountains, in addition to having been called names makes a bond that creates closeness rather than a barrier which always present and being constantly overcome. One church member expressed it as:

**Voice 2:** *“Father Vernon knows us. He’s one of us and I don’t care how white you are, you are not black. You don’t have that experience. It comes down to really being one of us.”*

Another strength that the congregations appreciate is Father **Vernon’s ability to see the larger picture within the city of Birmingham and within the Catholic Church.** They respect that he is often in demand to lead revivals all over the United States and that Father Vernon is not afraid to represent their concerns to the Bishop and Diocese in honest, but non-confrontational ways. Father Vernon has also involved his congregations in an ecumenical exchange with the other churches in the community. During the Wednesday nights of Lent, all of the congregations of the Smithfield community come together for meals and spiritual reflection. The location is rotated between the congregations. Such events, and participation in programs like Samford University’s Resource Center for Pastoral Excellence, have given Father Vernon and his congregations a visibility in the Birmingham area that they have not had before. While often a logistical frustration for Father Vernon, his parishioners are grateful for making their presence known in a larger context.

Often congregations experience **critical turning points.** When asked to name some of these and how Vernon’s leadership shone in positive ways, the congregants responded with **“The building of the parish hall.”**

**Voice 1:** *“Almost fifty years after the church was originally built, Father became obsessed with completing the initial plans and specifications. It was like a pit bull biting into your you-know-what with Father. He wouldn’t turn loose. He had a lot of faith because we didn’t have the money. ...if it hadn’t been for Father, I don’t know if we’d be sitting in this parish hall.”*

Another critical turning point was **the dream of bringing the two churches together and merging them into one congregation.** Recognizing that the movement within the diocese to merge African American congregations would not pass by Our Lady Queen of the Universe or Sacred Heart, Father Vernon gathered the council

members of both churches to dialogue. The idea was met with such strong resistance that the conversation was concluded. Father Vernon, rather than isolating or punishing his parishioners, continued to love them. His ability to respond redemptively endeared him to his congregants.

In the Diocese of Birmingham, priests are assigned to a parish for commitments of six year blocks of time. They may renew for an additional six years. In 2008, Father Vernon will complete a total of fourteen years of service to Queen and Sacred Heart. (The first two years were not as pastor.) With his tenure complete, a new priest will have to be appointed, as well as Father Vernon will be re-appointed to a new parish. While Father Vernon often expresses concern that Queen and Sacred Heart remain separate, viable parishes with African American leadership, his congregants expressed **deep hopes for the personal satisfaction for their priest, even at their own risk and loss.**

The bi-monthly meetings I have experienced with Father Vernon, conversations with church members, and observation have all combined to reveal a leader who is genuinely committed to “do Jesus” and live the principled, disciplined life of a priest. Often confiding his loneliness, disappointments, and frustrations, Father Vernon is also quick to laugh and respond with warm compassion to those who are in physical, spiritual or emotional need.

A priest in the Catholic church, one that specializes in history and hierarchy, Father Vernon has continued to be a change-agent and powerful presence as a black, diocesan priest. However, he is not afraid to speak on behalf of his congregations or to be a minority presence. In fact, if anything, this minority presence is often what motivates him to lead with integrity, honesty, and directness.

In assessing Father Vernon’s leadership capabilities, it seems that he is like the Old Testament character, Joshua. Not a Moses, who led the children of Israel out of Egyptian bondage (a description more apt of Monsignor Foster); rather, Father Vernon appears to be the leader that grew up in the ranks, believed God’s promise that if you will be “strong and courageous,” then “the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.” (Joshua 1:6,7,9,18) It seems that Father Vernon is the leader who has taken his people across the Jordan to figuratively claim their Promised Land.

In these last months of his tenure, one cannot help but wonder how Father Vernon will help his congregants to build a memorial to his legacy, just as Joshua had twelve stones erected as a memorial for the crossing of the Jordan by men who represented one of each of the twelve tribes of Israel. (Joshua 4) Perhaps Father Vernon has already erected this memorial, for through his leadership both congregations have remained fiercely independent, made great strides in being debt free, and have grown in their identity as predominantly African American parishes.

In addition, Father Vernon's compassion has nurtured many individuals. Often presenting his own life as an example, Father Vernon has exemplified a life devoted to the church, the principles of the Kingdom of God, and faith in Jesus Christ. One of his parishioners may have described Father Vernon at his best when she said: "*A priest's hands are sacred because they bring Jesus to us.*" In this partnership, this is the very essence of who I have observed Vernon to be...a dedicated servant of the Lord who desires to bring Jesus to those in need of encouragement and hope. Through his presence, spoken word, laughter and attention to detail, Father Vernon Huguley is one who brings Jesus to those that he encounters.