



Bruce Hager, Messenger-Inquirer
The Rev. William S. Odom-Green is the first black diocesan priest.

'I felt God asked me to stay here, bottom line'

By Karen Owen

Messenger-Inquirer

Someone strolling by SS Joseph and Paul Church during one of the new associate pastor's services might wonder if a prankster has switched the sign outside.

Joyous responses of "Amen!" come after the preacher's comments in this Catholic church.

The responses, more or less spontaneous, are encouraged by the Rev. William S. Odom-Green, the new associate pastor and the first black diocesan priest in western Kentucky.

He wants the people to respond aloud — and feel good about it, said Odom-Green, who was sitting in a small office decorated with scenes of Jesus with dark skin, growing up in an African village.

Since arriving in mid-June, he also has introduced some music from the African American Catholic hymnal into SS Joseph and Paul's worship services, he said.

Reaching blacks who don't attend church anywhere has been an increasing emphasis in the Catholic church the last several years. So has giving black Catholics greater expression within church services.

But Odom-Green is stationed in a

parish with no black members.

"It's worked out just great," he said. "The people have accepted me for what I am."

The parishioners he's heard from have all responded favorably, said the Rev. Kevin Karl, pastor at SS Joseph and Paul. "I think the fact he's a black man is no issue at all for most of them."

Odom-Green grew up Catholic in Stroudsburg, Pa., an area with few black members of the church. When he decided to become a priest, he transferred from a seminary there to St. Meinrad, Ind., because he wanted to be near more black Catholics, Odom-Green said.

His first stint in Owensboro was at St. Stephen Cathedral and Blessed Sacrament Chapel as a seminarian. He's also worked in Hardinsburg, Paducah and Henderson.

About 500 of 50,000 church members in the diocese are black, said the Most Rev. John J. McRaith, bishop for the diocese. "While there are not a lot of African American Catholics, we have a lot of African Americans," he said.

"He could have gone lots of places," McRaith said. "There are not very many African American

priests, and some areas have lots more African American Catholics than we have here."

Odom-Green said he wanted to work in the Owensboro Diocese because "I fell in love with Kentucky." Also, "I felt God asked me to stay here, bottom line."

He said he can be a role model in the black community here. "I also like the slow pace," Odom-Green said.

"What I bring are my gifts, my enthusiasm for the church, my enthusiasm for young people. I bring to this parish community somewhat of the African American Catholic perspective," Odom-Green said.

"He's delightful," Karl said. "William is full of energy. He works very hard."

Dressed in a T-shirt instead of his clerical collar, Odom-Green was manning the phones at the parish office while Karl was on vacation. He talked to a constant stream of people who needed help with their bills or just someone to listen.

The new associate pastor is in charge of liturgy and hospital visitation for the parish and also visits

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shut-ins each week.

"He's very good with young people," not just teens but also children, Karl said. "They flock to him."

But it's Odom-Green's preaching style that sets him apart.

"He does very well ministering to anybody," McRaith said. "He's a very effective preacher. He has that ability to get people involved."

Odom-Green always uses a prop, such as a regular and a diet soft drink, to make a spiritual point, Karl said. The soft drinks helped illustrate the need to make choices in life.

Then there are those "Amens." Odom-Green said he sometimes raises his left hand to solicit responses from those on the left side of the church, and does the same for those on the right side. "They are very relaxed with it. They enjoy it," he said.

Some people are still getting used to it, though. "Many are not sure how to take him yet," Karl said.