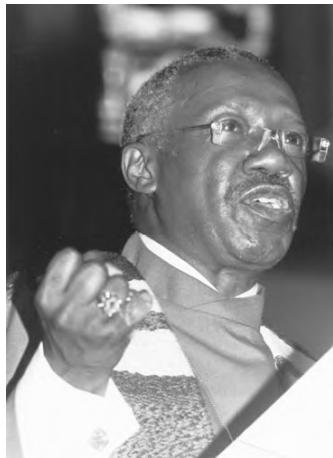


FATHER CLARENCE JOSEPH RIVERS

FATHER RIVERS WANTS TO SHARE HIS "GIFT OF BLACKNESS"

Taken from *the Catholic Telegraph* – November 11, 1977

"I don't fit easily into a category." Father Clarence J. Rivers is talking as he relaxes in his Cincinnati home, which he shares with his mother and other family members, folds his arms across his yellow sweatshirt and props his tennis shoes on a coffee table. It's not just the absence of a Roman collar and a rectory setting that prompts Father Rivers' remark. Nor is it the fact that he is the first black to have been ordained a priest of the Cincinnati archdiocese [in 1956] and the only priest of the archdiocese to have formed his own corporation. It's all of these things — and more — that make him hard to categorize.



But as a priest and as a man, Clarence Joseph Rivers thrives on being himself. And who he is, in his own words, is a liturgical artist, composer and dramatist, "basically a priest artist." Asked by the late Archbishop Karl J. Alter in the early 1960s to use his talents to promote active congregational participation in worship in the Cincinnati area of the archdiocese, Father Rivers has been doing just that ever since, although he notes with disappointment that he is more frequently invited "to share what I have to share" outside the archdiocese than in it. A "liturgical nut" since his seminary days at St. Gregory's and Mt. St. Mary's he started his own corporation, Stimuli, Inc., in 1965. His goal is to share his "gift of blackness" with fellow Catholics and members of other denominations as well, often using his own musical compositions as a vehicle.

Considered a pioneer in the introduction of Afro-American culture into Catholic worship, his ministry is "still controversial," he feels, citing the large number of people who feel there is no such thing as different cultures in the church. To such people, he says, the church is "one big happy family and any 'giving in' to ethnic concerns is wrong. To them there is one faith, one Baptism, one church and one culture – namely, European." But Father Rivers, along with other black liturgists, has shown this is not so, that the Catholic Church has much to gain from "refreshing, renewing, and inspirational experience" that black worship is and can be. Through the concerts, lectures and workshops he conducts around the country, he has "moved" countless numbers of people to that experience. And as an artist, that is his goal, he says, describing himself as a "cheerleader" who tries to "enliven" congregations rather than instruct them in the technicalities of music and worship, instruction and explanation being uniquely Western approaches, he feels.

In his role as "priest-artist" Father Rivers has been able to move people – move them to make such statements as "This is the first time I think I've ever really prayed" and "I thought I would really have to join a different church but now I know something is possible in the Catholic Church." Convinced that "people are hungry for something and not being fed," he sees the charismatic renewal within the Catholic Church as "the healthiest thing happening in the white middle class structure." It's also a phenomenon that encourages him to continue his work with Stimuli. At the same time, he is expanding his horizons beyond the music and liturgical work he has been concentrating on over the past decade, partly out of economic necessity and partly out of a desire to use his talents in new ways. His first play, *Turn Me Loose!* [based on the life of Frederick Douglass], is one of his most recent accomplishments. In addition, he is working on a TV series for the Public Broadcasting System on "The Continuity of African Culture in the Western Hemisphere." But his heart is in liturgy and worship, not only because he is at home with it as an artist but because he sees it as "the only specific priestly work there is."

And it's a priestly work he hopes to be able to continue — helping people not just talk about celebrating liturgy, but actually experiencing it as celebration. For him, there is no doubt that his work with Catholic and non-Catholic congregations can indeed enliven them and their experience of worship. For Father Clarence Joseph Rivers, helping to make that happen is the most priestly, and important, service he can offer the church.



FATHER CLARENCE JOSEPH RIVERS

"NO PREJUDICE IN SEMINARY, WRITES NEGRO"

Taken From *the Catholic Telegraph* – July 8, 1949

What does a boy think of when he enters the seminary; especially if his parents are not Catholic, he himself is a convert, and at the same time a Colored boy? It so happens that I am that boy. Having finished my grade school course at St. Ann's School, Cincinnati, I attended Madonna High School, a coed school run by the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. In my freshman year at Madonna, a vocational talk given by the

spiritual director of St. Gregory Seminary renewed my desire to be a priest. The following year, my sophomore year, was spent at Elder High School.

One day, in the summer vacation following my sophomore year, I was asked by my pastor whether I would still like to be a priest. He then went on to say that he had received application blanks from both St. Gregory's and St. Augustine's seminaries and he asked whether I would like to enter the seminary the following school term. Having thought it over, I answered that I would. He then asked which of the seminaries I should enter and also explained that if I went to St. Gregory's and found it unsatisfactory, I could still enter St. Augustine's but I could not do the reverse because the diocese did not accept boys from other seminaries. I therefore decided to go to St. Gregory's, although I had decided before that if I enter the seminary I would go to St. Augustine's [St. Augustine's is a seminary in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi run by the Society of Divine Word for Negro boys].

Now that my own mind was made up, it was necessary to get the permission of my parents to allow me to enter the seminary the following term. Now if a boy whose parents are Catholic finds it hard to make known his desire to them, because of his shyness, think how much harder it must be for a boy who has neither father nor mother, nor any relatives who are Catholics. But the permission was granted, and by the grace of God I am here. Difficulties other than that of shyness may confront a boy endeavoring to heed the divine call.

For example, an inferiority complex arising from a spirit of unworthiness may present itself to the boy. The boy might think of himself unworthy of such a great and holy office, but after all, none of us is really worthy of the priesthood, and God chooses us not on account of our worthiness, but because He has a job for each of us to do. Christ himself said, "You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you." But suppose that added to this inferiority complex was a question of race. Then to the Colored boy entering a seminary where he would be the only one, the rest being white, there is in his own mind, as I can assure you, an enormous feeling of uneasiness and insecurity regardless of the circumstances.

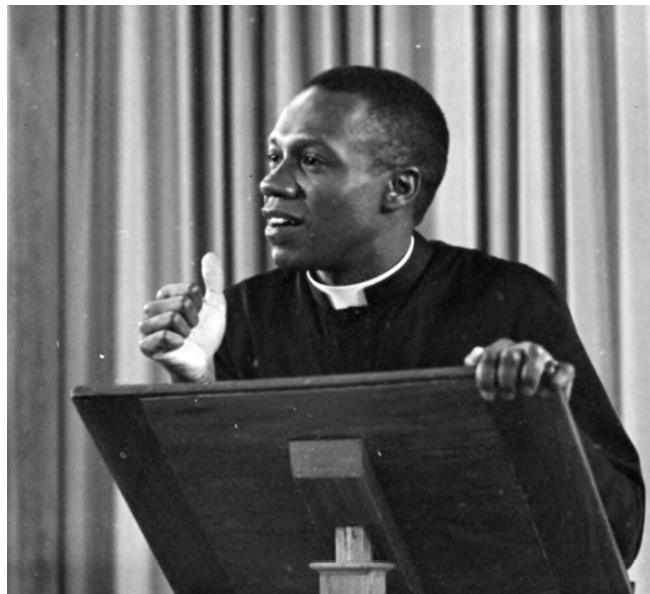
On September 2, 1948, I began my junior year of high school at St. Gregory's. When I entered the door every eye seemed turned toward me, so that for a brief period I was more uneasy than ever before. After a little while, however, my fear disappeared, and somehow how I mustered up enough courage to take a quick glance at one or the other of those who seemed to be staring holes through me. It was only then that I discovered that they were not really staring, but merely being inquisitive. If one might call it staring at all, it was a friendly "What's your name?" staring. It was only afterwards, when I caught myself staring at a newcomer, that I fully realized what was behind one of those stares. Before long I had met most of my classmates and had become, as the saying goes, "one of the boys."

In the seminary when boys live together, sleep, work, play and pray together, they cannot help becoming acquainted with each other, thereby dropping all prejudices that might have been entertained beforehand. The book that before was judged by its cover is judged rather by what it contains. When a seminarian goes home for the first time, the first question usually asked by inquisitive relatives and friends are "When did you get home?" and "When are you going back?"

In my case there was usually another questions asked, "How did the white boys treat you?" Such a question might seem strange to some people. On the contrary, it is not strange at all; it is quite a natural one, since today so much racial conflict prevails. Yet, I can say with a sincere and grateful heart that here I have been treated by the students and faculty alike better than I can recall being treated any place else, even at places entirely

Colored. I know that to many this indeed is "a strange saying;" by the unity in striving for one goal, and in working for one Master, we are bound together in one cause; we are spiritually in one. Where there is a spiritual oneness or unity, there is no physical separation of race.

Would to God that there were more Colored seminarians here studying to be priests. I say this not because I am lonesome for the companionship of others of my race, for true companionship does not consist of racial bonds, but in the virtues, especially charity. I say this because I wish that there might be unity between my church and my race, that there be not the Colored and the white, and the Chinese churches, but that there may be one universal, one Catholic Church; in the words of Christ himself, "That they all may be one..." If it so happens that any Colored boy who reads this article finds in himself the call to the priesthood, he should at least give it a try. If he hesitates at all because of racial strains, let him remember that where unity begins, discrimination ends.





PURCELL PRIEST, TEACHER WRITES ON RACE EQUALITY

Taken from *The Catholic Telegraph* – October 16, 1964

Father Clarence Rivers, a teacher at Purcell High School, Cincinnati, and author of an African American Mass, has written the cover story for the Oct. 11 issue of *Witness*, a new CCS weekly published in Dayton by Geo. A. Pflaum, Publisher, Inc. Titled "The Shame of Segregation," the article reflects some of Father Rivers' experiences of the past year which he spent in Washington, D.C., completing work for his master's degree at Catholic University.

"The black ghetto," Father Rivers says in the article, wherever it is, is a shame." It tells all the world that in America you are equal – only if you are white. To me this is most painful, because I am an American and I am a Negro.

"It is now 188 years since the Declaration of Independence proclaimed the political equality of all men, and 101 years since President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation freeing the Negro from the chains of slavery. Yet it is only now, 1964, that the government of the United States has finally enacted a law that guarantees political equality and freedom to the American Negro. But even though the Civil Rights Bill of 1964 has passed, not all Americans understand why it should have been passed."

He continues: "Some think it was enacted because politicians wanted the support of Negro voters, or to prevent fighting and bloodshed between the races. But the really important reason we needed the Civil Rights Bill is this: Segregation is wrong: it is immoral; it violates justice and charity." The article, directed to boys and girls in grades 7, 8 and 9, concludes: "This is a point to remember: If you are really alive in Christ, you need to love and be loved. In these days, the Negro needs badly the love of his fellow Americans, his fellow Christians; need badly the opportunity to give him this love. In a word, we all desperately need each other.

"The words – 'I love you' – can change misery into joy, hate into brotherhood, poverty into plenty. And why not? We are all children of the same Father, brothers and sisters of the same Christ who is neither black nor white."

Communion Song at the opening Mass of the 1964 Liturgical Week

in St. Louis was sung by its composer, Father Clarence Rivers of Assumption church, Cincinnati. The "congregation" of 11,000 who participated in the Mass in Kiel auditorium sang the refrain: "God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him."