

# Fr. Johnnie Smith and his Two Vocations

When Johnnie Smith graduated from Benedictine High School in 1959, he had no idea of the unique journey God had planned for him. But looking back six decades, he can clearly see Divine Providence involved at critical moments. These mysterious interventions would result in Johnnie being ordained as BHS's first African-American Catholic priest alumnus in 2010 on his 70th birthday.

Born in Alabama as one of six children of Johnnie and Nancy Smith, he moved north as his family migrated to Cleveland during World War II. His mother was a strong practicing Baptist and his father's family was involved in the Church of God in Christ. However, his dad later converted to Catholicism and even became a Fourth Degree Knight of Columbus.

For seventh grade, Johnnie was able to transfer from public school to St. Edward's Elementary School on Woodland Avenue because he had attended and enjoyed its summer Bible school. St. Edward's Parish was known as the Mother Church for African-American Catholics in Cleveland. One of the Precious Blood priests who ran the parish and one of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament (St. Katherine Drexel's order) who taught in the school took a special interest in Johnnie and he converted to Catholicism in seventh grade.

Johnnie was urged to go to the high school seminary conducted by the Precious Blood order when he graduated from eighth grade, but he made it known that he was more interested in attending Benedictine High School – even though Holy Name High School offered him a scholarship. His favorite nun called **Abbot Theodore Kojis, OSB** and before long Johnnie was accepted by BHS principal **Fr. Benedict Dobrancin, OSB** and became a freshman in 1955.

During his four years at Benedictine, Johnnie's interest in the Catholic faith

deepened, especially through his contact with the Benedictine monks whose life intrigued him. To offset his tuition, he was assigned to help **Brother Patrick Ryan, OSB** in cleaning the buildings after school. He enjoyed his conversations with Brother Pat, especially about religious life. However, he began dating in his junior year and met Octavia Hawkins, who later became his wife. That seemed to bring an end to his possible call to the priesthood.

After his marriage and the birth of his first son, Johnnie graduated from Kent State University with a degree in accounting. He continued to stay involved in parish activities serving on the parish council when St. Edward's was merged with Holy Trinity Church also on Woodland Avenue. His work in public accounting took him to Rochester, New York and his family grew to include two more sons. After a particularly bad winter, Johnnie moved his family back to Ohio in 1978, buying a house in Mentor and joining TRW as a financial analyst.

His spirituality developed under the guidance of a priest at St. John Vianney Parish in Mentor until he took a job as an audit manager with Hammermill Paper Company in Erie, Pennsylvania. At Holy Cross Parish there, Johnnie began teaching PSR (Parish School of Religion) classes and he and Octavia became active in the Renewal and Stewardship programs. Eventually his company transferred him to Memphis, Tennessee. In 1988, his wife had



*Graduation from BHS in 1959*

surgery for breast cancer and a successful rehabilitation. During the ten years he lived in Memphis, Johnnie attended daily Mass, became a Eucharistic minister, made a Cursillo retreat, and joined the Knights of Columbus.

Seeking a position in his company that would involve less traveling, Johnnie applied for the job as the construction controller for a new paper mill converting center that his company was building in Ashtabula, Ohio. He and a team of three engineers built a \$12 million facility with a budget of \$27 million in equipment on time and under budget. After that project was completed, he was promoted to facility controller.

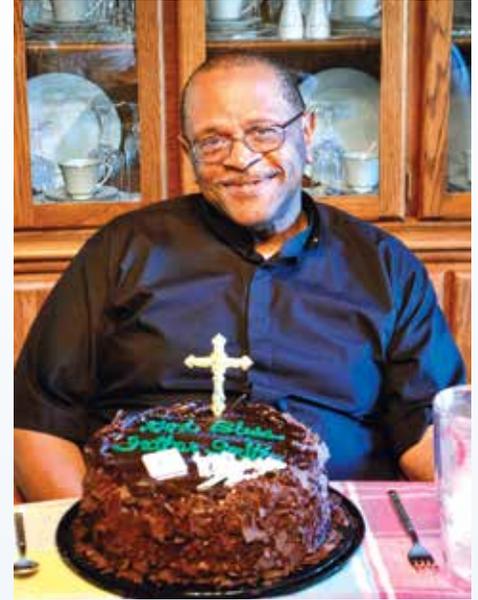
However, the cross fell abruptly upon the Smith family when Octavia's cancer returned after 11 years. Johnnie recalled, "Her suffering brought us closer to God, even to the point of experiencing her pain going away during our prayer together." Octavia died in 2005 at the age of 64. Around this time, his company sold their operation in Ashtabula to Mohawk Paper. The new owners were practicing Catholics who promoted Johnnie to manager of the internal audit.

At one point after his wife’s death, his son asked him, “Dad, what are you going to do now?” That question brought back thoughts of the priesthood and after much prayer and discerning, Johnnie decided to see if that dream was still possible to fulfill at the age of 65. To his surprise, the owners of his company fully supported his vocation plans and at his retirement party even presented him with a \$10,000 check. They would continue to send him occasional checks when he was in the seminary.

He decided to return to the diocese of Memphis, Tennessee where he had a number of priest friends. He was accepted by Bishop James Terry Steib, SVD, the first African-American Bishop of Memphis and sent to Sacred Heart Seminary outside of Milwaukee, Wisconsin which has a special focus for second-career vocations to the priesthood. Because of his many life experiences and training, he was exempt from his fourth year theological studies and was ordained a priest on June 5, 2010, which happened to be his 70th birthday.

After only one year as an associate pastor, Fr. Smith was appointed pastor of a very diverse parish of 400 families that also had an elementary school. The parish had many financial challenges which Fr. Smith was able to successfully address. After five years, he reached the retirement age for pastors (75) and became a senior priest at St. Francis of Assisi Parish in Cordova, Tennessee where he continues in active ministry. Since his ordination, he has celebrated the funerals of two of his sisters, his brother, and his oldest son. He has nine grandchildren, most of whom live in the Cleveland area. Two of Fr. Smith’s nephews are graduates of BHS: **Christopher Eggleston, Class of 1985** and **Jonathon Smith, Class of 2001**.

As he prepares to celebrate the 11th anniversary of his ordination this June, Fr. Smith looks back and points out, “I can see God’s hand in my life over the past 80 years. I see my life as the reception of God’s love, grace, and mercy.”



TOP LEFT: The Smith family in 1990 (l-r): Thomas, Jeffrey Lawrence, Gregory Bernard, Octavia, and Johnnie Smith.

TOP RIGHT: Fr. Smith in his rectory.

MIDDLE: Bishop Steib ordains Fr. Smith in 2010.

BOTTOM: Ordination Day with his sons and friend Bro. Hugh (far right).