

Profiles

Brother Grant-Michael Fitzgerald SDS

Biography

Grant-Michael Fitzgerald was born on September 11, 1947 in Kingston, New York and baptized in a Catholic church in Philadelphia in May 1953. His father Eugene was a bar and restaurant owner and his mother Mary worked for RCA Victor for some time. After graduating from a Catholic high school in Philadelphia, he explored entering a seminary and chose the Order of the Salvatorians. The Salvatorians, founded in Rome in 1881, is comprised of a congregation of priests and brothers, another of sisters, and a lay community. Salvatorians live out their call to embody God's love in a variety of community ministries and service projects. Its U.S.A. province is headquartered in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.



Fitzgerald entered as a candidate for the Society in Lanham, Maryland in September 1967. He then moved to Mount St. Paul College in Waukesha, Wisconsin, where he spent his Novitiate year. He made his profession of vows on July 26, 1969. He continued his college studies at Mount St. Paul and when that school closed because of financial difficulties, he transferred to Dominican College in Racine. There he majored in sociology and psychology. Being one of the few African Americans in the Salvatorian community Fitzgerald delved into issues of race and justice in his studies and work. He also was relatively open about being gay in his college and religious communities.

After college Brother Grant-Michael moved to Milwaukee in 1972. Following his desire to serve urban youth, he found a teaching position at a predominately black high school, the Harambee Education Center. Fitzgerald also began attending meetings of the Gay People's Union (GPU) at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee. Conflict arose at the Harambee Center over suspicions by both students and administrators that Fitzgerald was gay. Grant-Michael tried to walk the fine line between being a strong advocate of justice for gay persons while not explicitly identifying himself as gay. His requests to bring in gay speakers to educate the students were rebuffed by the administration. Fitzgerald grew frustrated and resigned his position.

After a short respite, Fitzgerald secured a position as a resident counselor at a group home for troubled teen-aged boys, Southeastern Wisconsin Homes in Milwaukee. His three years there (1973-76) was his longest period of sustained employment. Brother Grant-Michael also heightened his gay activism during this period—continued involvement with the GPU and became an identifiable leader in the Milwaukee branch of the Council on Religion and the Homosexual (CRH). One month the GPU ran a feature story on him on the cover of their newsletter. He was also featured in a long article in *The Advocate* (national gay newspaper) that portrayed his position as a person of faith who was Black and gay.

Brother Grant-Michael also began to address gay issues through his religious community. Through the Salvatorians' affiliation with the National Federation of Priests' Council (which developed after Vatican II proposed more collegial elements in the church), he helped form a Gay Ministry Task Force. Through the Task Force Fitzgerald developed resources and position papers that would lead the church to more open attitudes and practices toward gay persons. The work of the Task Force received widespread recognition and numerous inquiries. While progressive brothers defended Brother Grant-Michael and the Task Force, a backlash grew within the Salvatorian community that led to the dissolution of the Task Force within a couple years.

Still Fitzgerald maintained a profile as a Black gay activist, appearing on a public television show in Milwaukee in a clerical collar. He returned to his hometown of Philadelphia in late 1974 to support a political drive for a gay rights ordinance which was opposed by many religious leaders, particular those from the Black church. Brother Grant-Michael testified in a City Council hearing as representative of Black gay liberation. However, the gay rights measure was defeated.

Fitzgerald retreated from the public spotlight for a while and lived quietly in the Salvatorian headquarters. Then from 1977-79 he departed for a period of discernment in Philadelphia and other locales to test his vocation and engage in different forms of youth counseling. He worked on a U.S. Army base in Stuttgart, Germany; was a teacher at the Philadelphia Day Care Center; served as a case worker with immigrants; and worked in a nursery and a home for teen-aged boys in New York.

He returned to life with the Salvatorians and in 1982 was assigned to the Society of the Divine Savior (SDS) house at the St. Joseph's parish in Huntsville, Alabama. Soon thereafter he was diagnosed with AIDS. In 1984 he returned to Wisconsin to live with the retirement community in St. Nazianz, Wisconsin. Between several hospitalizations in Milwaukee, he returned to Philadelphia to spend time with his family. In later 1986 he was placed in hospice care and died on November 10, 1986. His body was cremated and his ashes were buried in the community cemetery in St. Nazianz. Family and friends in Philadelphia also provided a memorial service there with Rev. James Tinney giving the eulogy.

(This biographical statement written by Mark Bowman from information found at <https://gayhistory.wikispaces.com/Fitzgerald%2C-Grant-Michael> and in *Not Straight, Not White: Black Gay Men from the March on Washington to the AIDS Crisis* by Kevin J. Mumford (University of North Carolina Press, 2016) which includes a chapter on Fitzgerald's life and work.)

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