

Black Catholic Congress IX and Future Directions

Bishop Joseph N. Perry

An African American bishop reflects on the themes and issues raised at the last National Black Catholic Congress in 2002. He identifies areas of importance for the ongoing pastoral and spiritual life not only of the black Catholic community, but for the larger Catholic community in the U.S. as well.

Catholics of African descent gathered in Chicago from August 29 through September 1, 2002, for the meeting of Black Catholic Congress IX. Chicago hosted the event for the second time, the first being Congress IV, September 4–8, 1893, alongside the Columbian Exposition that was also being celebrated in Chicago then. Daniel Rudd, an African American businessman and a staunch Catholic from Bardstown, Kentucky, was the founder of the Congress movement. At a time when black Catholic leadership was not visible in the church in the United States, Rudd began a newspaper in 1886 first titled *The Ohio State Tribune*, which was later changed to *The American Catholic Tribune*. It was the only Catholic journal owned and published by African American men. Today it is published out of Congress headquarters in Baltimore in the form of a news bulletin called *The African American Catholic Tribune*.

The first National Black Catholic Congress was held at St. Augustine parish in Washington, D.C. Distinguished men of African descent came from all over the country to participate in that historic event. President Grover Cleveland invited the delegation to the White House for a meeting. Father Augustus Tolton of Chicago, the first recognized black priest in the U.S., celebrated a High Mass for the assembly.

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The Congresses have served several purposes: to secure the unity of black Catholics living across the nation, to appeal to the bishops of the nation to receive the contribution of blacks in all facets of church life, and to address the human and political issues that impact on the health and viability of the black community. Rudd organized the first five Congresses held almost annually from 1889 through 1894, which then went into hiatus for almost a century.

Different dynamics of assembly were at work in the black Catholic community following Reconstruction. The Knights of St. Peter Claver was founded in 1909. In 1925 the Federated Colored Catholics held a national convention that met annually until 1949. 1960 saw the founding of the National Office of Black Catholics (NOBC) which sponsored national conferences in Chicago in 1980, Houston in

1982, and New Orleans in 1984. Then, Congress VI was held in May 1987 in Washington, D.C., Congress VII in New Orleans, July 1992, and Congress VIII in Baltimore, August 1997, which featured the solemn dedication of the Mother of Africa Chapel in the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C. Under its present organization future Congresses will take place every five years. Congress X is scheduled for Buffalo, New York, in 2007. Bishop John H. Ricard of Pensacola-Tallahassee is president and chair of the board of trustees of the present day Congress movement. Congresses today, as in the past, are celebrations of faith

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and culture, affording an educative exploration of issues for the life and preservation of Catholic faith among peoples of African descent.

Black Catholic Congress IX is now remanded to history for the children of the faith to study and comment upon. In between, of course, we have the task of giving the children something to hold on to, by sewing the resolutions of Congress IX into the fabric of African American Catholic life. This is the work of evangelization. We sew the seeds and cultivate. Someone else reaps the harvest. That is how the church has worked since its inception.

Each of the modern day Congresses issues a *Pastoral Plan of Action*. The later Congresses have held a series of training programs offered for clergy, religious, and lay leaders designed to foster greater evangelical movement in the African American community. These programs include: the Pastoring in African American Parishes Workshop, the African American Catholic Ministries Program, Regional Lay Training Workshops, and the High School Consortium Project. The programs involved in these workshops include approving lay leadership, direction and formation, evangelization training models, and ministerial strategies for use at the diocesan and parish levels.

The purpose of this article is to identify the themes explored at Congress IX and to provide commentary on the issues surrounding these themes. Congress IX set forth the following themes, and enunciated under each a principle: Spirituality, Parish Life, Youth and Young Adults, Racism, Catholic Education, Africa, HIV/AIDS, and Social Justice.

Spirituality

Principle: Inasmuch as all people are called to a life of holiness, we as a black people faithful to the Holy Spirit and our church's teachings, must seek to pray and work in the spirit of our ancestors in the faith.

Spirituality is spontaneous to black cultures, but until recent times little has been written about it nor has it been critically analyzed. A mature spirituality is vitally important to the black community because our spiritual vision has been the food of our survival through the saga of slavery, legalized segregation, and the Civil Rights struggle. A vital religion has provided a compass to our freedom. Without a sound spirituality black people would have lost their way on the sea of life. With one we are constantly connecting the experiences of this world with the world promised us following this sojourn. Our Catholic faith provides a rich spiritual framework within which to work out this life and arrive at that kingdom described in Jesus' own words.

Although an older spirituality is gleaned easily enough from the oral sayings, spirituals, hymns, and narratives of the recent past, progress, integration, and assimilation into American life forge a wedge between us and the ancestors whose struggle and martyrdom laid the foundation for today's progress. We are as inclined to rely solely on our individuality, personal wealth, and ingenuity as any one else who has drunk of the American dream. Preaching and catechesis must continue to set before the minds and hearts of today's generation the bridge of faith and endurance, which forged African American history in this country. We, the Diaspora, come from a past where blacks were denied participation in the institutions and structures of American life. In an environment that mandated separation of the races, the black church soon arose as the singular institution created, owned, and operated by blacks and where black men, especially, could emerge as leaders. The black experience, from the beginning, was framed and articulated within the biblical experience of God's people enslaved and brought to freedom by the expressed will and actions of God. Yet, African Americans perceive that their spirituality is neither understood nor appreciated. We pine for acceptance and an integration of black spirituality into the weave of Catholic pieties that have shaped the church in America. Every group has its own suffering chapters and sagas of passage. Black spirituality is one strand of wisdom along the path of discipleship that can assist others in their search for God.

Parish Life

Principle: Black Catholics must assume greater responsibility for the welfare of the parish community to which they belong and the church must provide the resources and opportunities for them to contribute and develop their talents and leadership for the good of the entire faith community.

We continue to put forth heroic efforts to vitalize and re-vitalize parish life. We do this, in some instances, against great odds, for we work with an infrastructure, in the larger cities especially, that saps much of our resources. Often the infrastructure is old, having served earlier European-American congregations ten times the size of our present parish communities. Keeping multiple buildings up to code and maintained prevents us from spending resources in other needed areas of ministry, evangelization, and education. Diocesan finances are limited in what they can reasonably provide in subsidies, while dioceses face needed expansion in other directions. Diocesan planning is often caught in a quagmire of needing to realign parishes that have shrunk in size and refashioning viable congregations that can care for themselves. This effort often means closing, consolidating, and merging parishes and walking with parishioners until they are re-situated and genuinely welcomed in another Catholic faith community. This proves to be emotionally draining work.

We continue to need to evangelize parish members to come forward and provide the stewardship and excitement to keep the church strong. We need leaders among us who are ordained, vowed in service as religious, and lay leaders who bring the beauty of Catholic life to focus. The European immigrants crafted a sense of ownership by reason of having built their parishes from the ground up and, in some instances from the beginning, by bringing their own clergy with them. Native Americans, African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians have historically been on the receiving line of services provided by missionaries and religious. Often they have moved into areas formerly occupied by Catholics of European descent. Different historical journeys produce a different sense of church. Even so, when a diocese can arrange effective participation and the creation of parishes and other ministries by people of color, a stronger sense of stewardship is bound to happen. This calls for a concerted diocesan program of fellowship and education at all levels.

Youth and Young Adults

Principle: Black youths and young adults who hunger for intimacy, community, and spirituality need the Catholic church to engage them in social justice activities and programs that promote their spiritual maturity in a way that is relevant to their culture.

African American youth, like the youth of the dominant community, are bombarded by images from popular culture that can lure them away from a spiritually focused life. They intuit the religiosity of their African American culture and its strong sense of God's presence in life. Nevertheless, they can be easily enticed by the individualism of our age, the situation-ethics espoused by the secular society, and certain influences from a "protestantization" of values. We are troubled by the defection of some Catholic African American youth to Protestant communities or, in some instances, their syncretization of the two traditions where the more challenging aspects of Catholic life and discipline are traded for a "me-and-God-alone" ethic. We need to embrace our teenagers and young adults so that they take hold of their baptism and confirmation commitment to the Catholic faith. Our youth need to be positioned in parish ministries appropriate to their age. They need the witness of our energetic commitment to the Catholic faith so that they will want to pick up the baton and race forward.

While affirming the Protestant traditions of their family members, our young people need to understand how the seven sacraments anoint their personal lives and indeed the whole of society. Our youth should understand the advantages of a Catholicism which embraces them and a variety of peoples. While endorsing the psychological comforts involved in a homogenous black church experience, we need to help our young people appreciate the benefits of the Catholic experience which is multicultural, integrated, and universal. Our youth need to see the church's involvement in the world, in social justice, and in service to the poor, and to follow through with their own participation. Our youth need to understand how much the church needs them. On the other side, the church, at every level, needs to affirm their experience as youths shaped in an African American context, while summoning them to excellence in all parts of their lives. While many African American youth move on to successful lives, an equal number of their peers surrender to the belief that society will always reject them because they are black.

Racism

Principle: Racism, which continues to be prevalent in our society and in our church, must become a primary concern for all U.S. Catholics.

Not far behind the works of social justice in the church is the issue of racism as it continues to demarcate our lives on just about every level of American society. Racial tension continues to surface in some ugly incidents reported in the press and media. America has come a long way since the historic civil rights struggle and the politics of race has undergone dramatic change. Here and now, the twenty-first century testifies to the worst of times and the best of times.

African Americans are participants in almost every arena of endeavor and opportunities have opened up that just three decades ago were unimaginable. A small group of African Americans is found at the heart of the political establishment and at the pinnacle of corporate America, in the sports arena, and on TV and movie screens. Still, many question whether this new black power elite represents genuine progress for black America as a whole. Despite these advances some huge obstacles remain.

Many African Americans say they still feel excluded from mainstream American life. And one-fifth of all black Americans currently live below the poverty line. Cities like Memphis, Birmingham, and Atlanta, once the battlegrounds on which civil rights were won for black southerners in the 1950s and 1960s, the

very cities from which blacks fled during the era of legal segregation, are today drawing them back by the tens of thousands. But how much have these cities really changed since the civil rights era? There are those who continue to find people of color an obstruction to their own progress and security and these fears taint the church in the form of silence, indifference, and an organization that excludes effective participation of persons of color. We continue to need to strategize to attack this dogged remnant of original sin. We continue to need to show off the Pentecost portrait of the church as one that reveals the many colors of God.

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The Catholic church says all the right things about the evil of racism. The documents are eloquent and without rival from other civic contexts. The church has witnessed some heroic individual Christians who have fought against bias in all its forms. Yet, on Sundays, our worshiping assemblies are segregated on most counts. And we tolerate this situation as normative. Issues surrounding a lack of genuine interaction of the races are complicated further by economic differentiation, unfamiliarity, and fear. The laws for impartial use of public space and civic opportunity have been in place for forty years. But we have yet to evangelize our private space. In some places our children can go to school together. We can eat in the same restaurant together and sit together in public transportation venues. The work place is integrated to some degree in many places. But, when the day is done, we return to our neighborhoods where diversity is not found, largely by choice. We settle on the rubric of personal resources and opportunity and entitlement as justifying this social separation.

Bishops bear the responsibility of bringing their people together and annihilating all that divides the church. In this effort we often run up against misunderstanding and resistance on part of those who view any evangelical social

witness as an encroachment upon their livelihood and personal comfort zones. The crafting of separate space is a serious concern for the church. Parishes are all white, or some are left to be all black, or all Hispanic, or Native American, or mostly Asian. And few people find this unusual. In effect, we succumb to segregation by race and ethnicity as a result of where people can afford or are condemned to live. The reality of segregated living and worship space challenges the implementation of the church's social teaching. This is our other scandal that has been around for some time.

No one can cast doubt about the genuineness of the church's concern about racism and its commitment to relieve marginalized peoples. Dioceses and parishes are asked to witness to a greater integration and cooperation of peoples who make up the church. Given the increasing multicultural portrait of American society, an all white church environment is no longer an honest symbol of the Catholic church in America. Indeed, it never was. Equally, we should be concerned about an all black, all Hispanic, or all Asian church environment where other church members are never or seldom seen.

Pentecost affords us a template of the face of the church. On that day, the church was a mixture of people with different shaped noses, different colored eyes, different hues of skin, and speaking different languages, all understanding one another and all professing faith in Jesus Christ. If this is the primordial ordering of church, then our social patterning, our patterns of housing, and arrangement of space and worship routinely fail to give testimony to this apostolic witness. By force of the New Testament, Christians do not choose who their neighbors are. All who come are neighbors. The church should lead in modeling communities that improve on what actually exists in society.

Society is begrudgingly slow in appreciating the benefits of an integrated society. Catholics are called to cross boulevards, railroad tracks, and expressways, and enter neighborhoods with pejorative street names, and there to practice, live, and worship with people from *Nazareth, whence no good is thought to come* (see John 1:45-6). But Jesus is from there. Jesus is found visiting there. Until we can do this, our parishes are consistently incomplete representations of the church that emerged at Pentecost.

In all our church gatherings, formal and informal, we have to be on the front lines with a commitment to neighborliness when other peoples and cultures

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move in: coaching people to stand their ground and not give in to fear; having a willingness to confront individuals when their attitudes and choices are less than Christian; forming alliances with other churches, neighbors, and individuals who are willing to participate in forging welcoming Christian communities. The church must be a source of healing and hope for people. We continue to need prophets and agents of reconciliation, individuals and groups, laity and clergy and youth who make it their responsibility to break down barriers of separation especially where separate space shows up in our church gatherings.

Catholic Education

Principle: Catholic education continues to be one of the best means of evangelization and social justice in the black community. Efforts must be made to create and expand religiously sound and academically effective Catholic primary and secondary schools in the black communities of our nation.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to underwrite financially our parochial schools and for average working parents to meet the rising tuition costs of our elementary and secondary schools. Even parishes with a large membership are confessing to annual budgetary challenges with schools. As dioceses adjust to financial constraints, there is the perception that parishes in the urban centers carry the larger burden of cuts, closures, and realignments. For the longest time, our Catholic school system operated relatively inexpensively due to the important contribution made by the religious sisters, brothers, and priests who so generously served it. We were not prepared for the costs resulting from the transfer from a religiously-managed-religious-taught school system to a lay-managed-lay-taught system with the necessary compensation of both laity and religious now called for in justice. We continue to be unable to come reasonably close to our competition with wages and benefits for our lay staffs. Added to this are costs connected with modern methods of education, technology, and building upgrades.

Catholic schools have been a significant means of self-improvement and survival for many blacks in our urban centers. They have also been a door through which the unchurched and the unsure have passed to find an attraction to the Catholic religion. Converts are not as many as they were in the 1940s through the 1960s, but we need to continue offering our religion as a life-giving alternative.

We need new and innovative ways to meet the cost of running schools with scholarships for worthy students desiring Catholic education. This is a worthy mission of the church. Some dioceses benefit by corporate business and individual sponsors who donate to Catholic education, or provide for scholarships and capital improvements. In the meantime, we continue to lobby our state legisla-

tures for accommodation via the use of vouchers and tuition credits. But this remains a hard struggle in most places where public school unions fight the appeals of private and parochial school systems for some recognition of the contribution these schools make to the fabric of American life. These lobbying efforts must continue in the hope that a breakthrough will occur. Until then, the final bill for parochial education is ours alone.

In the future, the Catholic school system will be smaller so as to be manageable and affordable. Most parishes cannot run schools much longer. Regional schools are one possible option, strategically anchored in areas of a diocese where the church can target its resources to assure excellence in faculty and administration, academic programs, building upgrades, transportation, and management. New models of academic and financial administration must be experimented with, while keeping our elementary schools attached to a Catholic community and thus anchor children, youth, and their families in the practice of the faith. Racism will remain an elusive evil in our society until we can close the gap between blacks and whites regarding educational opportunity and academic achievement. Catholic schools have been strategic in shrinking that gap.

Africa

Principle: As members of a world church, black Catholics and all other U.S. Catholics must work for justice and exercise compassionate love for our brothers and sisters who are suffering in Africa.

The presence of continental Africans was significant at Congress IX. Bishop Charles Palmer-Buckle of the diocese of Koforidua, Ghana, gave an impassioned address to the assembly. African Americans do not travel extensively so we don't know Africa, even though we might romanticize it. Therefore, we are left with certain unenlightened images about the motherland. We need to sacrifice and go see for ourselves the power and the glory of Africa, for we are fed some half-truths about life on the "dark continent." We need to witness the church there, which is, in most ways, indigenous. We need to see our brothers and sisters who do not have to offer excuses for or be shy about being black and Catholic. African Catholics live their Catholicism even to the shedding of their blood. They are comfortable in the faith which has replaced their tribal cults, albeit brought to them by European missionaries. Needless to say, the Evangelical and Pentecostal missionaries to Africa now encroaching upon Catholic territory are a recent phenomenon and of concern for the African Catholic bishops.

We must bridge the differences between African Americans and Africans by an exploration of our respective historical sagas and the correction of our perceptions of one another. These differences are exacerbated by the bias against

black skin found in the Western world and the condition of the diaspora that has created new cultures of peoples of African descent. The degradation of slavery and discrimination has left African Americans in confusion regarding their past and lacking the self-esteem with which to shield ourselves from the emotional consequences of racism over the ages.

This issue of self-identity is a wedge hindering familiarity between continental Africans and African Americans. But we have every reason to appreciate fundamental commonalities of African-based spirituality, human dignity, and creativity. We share a common strand of experience with colonialism, slavery, and migration. We have every reason to refuse to let petty differences and suspicions separate us. Extolling the glories of Africa or using the symbols of Africa is different than actually meeting an African. We need to be open to one another. We need to clasp the hands of our African brothers and sisters and try to understand them. Africans know little of color discrimination until they arrive in this country and meet the hesitancy and social resistance endemic to American society. There is a great deal we can learn from African peoples and their pride about themselves. There is much from our social saga they can learn from us.

The African American bishops routinely travel to Africa and are in dialogue with and assisting the bishops of the various African countries. The National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus and Black Seminarians Association have sponsored regular meetings of the Pan-African Catholic Clergy summit for over thirty years. The National Black Sisters Conference has been engaged in conversation with African religious communities of women. These contacts are especially useful now that more African priests and religious are working alongside us in pastoral ministry. These contacts are forging mutual understanding on both sides. Much more needs to be done with the laity along similar lines. Together, Africans and African Americans can be a force for greater solidarity and racial harmony among the world's communities.

HIV/AIDS

Principle: Since HIV/AIDS is one of the most devastating diseases confronting the African and African American communities, black Catholics and other Catholics in the United States must engage in efforts to assist in the research, treatment, education, and elimination of this disease.

HIV/AIDS is a plague the world over, with significant scourges in Africa and in communities of the poor and misinformed in this country. We need to vote for and encourage those in a position to assist in the research, treatment, and annihilation of this dreaded disease, and educate our youth regarding responsible Christian lifestyles.

Social Justice

Principle: Black Catholics, as heirs of a rich faith-based tradition of concern for justice, must become more knowledgeable about the principles of Catholic social teaching and use this teaching to evaluate their economic, political, and social decisions and the policies of their communities.

Black Americans are scholars when it comes to the topic of social justice. We paved the way for the maturity of the concept in this country with the blood of our martyrs and leaders. Catholic social teaching offers moral and social concepts that undergird a Christian philosophy of social relations that even adherents of others faiths consider. The world and individual societies can never be left alone to secure the path of justice by themselves. They too often lose their way. Christians are heralds of justice in Christ. And social justice too often demands that some one lays down his or her life for our freedom in Christ.

Conclusion

The Black Catholic Congresses VIII and IX were showcases of African American Catholicism. The impressive numbers of black Catholics who assembled exhibited a strong show of faith and spiritual dynamism. These Congresses every five years are important for providing fellowship, education, and a strong dose of heritage and faith. These assemblies are especially important after we return to our dioceses and parishes and suddenly the numbers shrink and we feel alone and isolated. For then the memory of the important issues we discussed during the Congress can return and remind us of what we still need to do in the days ahead.