

Excerpt from Ministry in the Black Catholic Community

by Rev. Scott A. Bailey

Black Culture

In describing Black culture here, the focus will be on the culture of those of African descent and roots in the United States of America. This excludes African Americans who are of Caribbean descent, as well as those native to Africa. The following are some of the defining features of the African-American Catholic culture, as identified by Black bishops and theologians. African American culture is informed by faith. Regarding the relationship between faith and culture, the Second Vatican Council says, "The mystery of the Christian faith furnishes [man] with excellent incentives and helps toward ... uncovering ... a meaning which gives human culture its eminent place in the integral vocation of man." The Christian faith gives meaning to human culture which in turn leads men to Christ. One of the great gifts of African American culture is precisely this. According to the Black bishops of the United States, it is the sharing of "Blackness" with the Church that enriches the Church and vice-versa: "Just as we lay claim to the gifts of Blackness, so we share these gifts within the Black community at large and within the Church. This will be our part in the building up of the whole Church." Black culture values freedom. In many ways, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is a message of freedom: "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (In 8:32 RSV). For Black Catholics, there is a deep appreciation for the gift of freedom in Jesus Christ. They have a strong remembrance of slavery, racism, and oppression. They understand well the meaning of freedom in Christ because they know the sadness of being denied freedom. "Even before emancipation they knew the inner spiritual freedom that comes from Jesus ... They left us the lesson that without spiritual freedom we cannot fight for that broader freedom which is the right of all." In gratitude for the gift of freedom given by God, Black culture seeks to proclaim and preserve freedom. Finally, the Scriptures are deep in the hearts and minds of Black Catholics. In the days of slavery, the stories of the Bible were told and retold through preaching and spirituals. These stories nourished and sustained the people in times of oppression and pain. The story of Israel - as a story of bondage and liberation - resonates deeply in the hearts and memories of Black Catholics. But more importantly, the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus offer hope in the face of tragedy. This has led to a deep reverence for the Word of God and a longing to hear the Good News proclaimed.

Black Spirituality

While generalizations always fall short of capturing the full dynamism of what is described, it seems necessary here to outline a few general characteristics that seem to describe Black spirituality. This will be necessary in later defining some of the challenges and opportunities in Black Catholic ministry. These characteristics of Black spirituality are drawn from materials written by Black theologians, pastors, and bishops. One of the defining aspects of Black spirituality is joy. According to the Black bishops, "Joy is a hallmark of Black Spirituality." In the midst of slavery, oppression, and the difficulties of ordinary life, Black men and women have historically found great hope and joy in the Christ who frees them. This joy is often expressed in song, dance, colors, and prayers of praise and thanksgiving. It is an expression of their faith in the Good News, and it is a gift they offer to a world that is increasingly surrounded by disconnect and sadness. It has already been stated here that Black culture is steeped in the Scriptures. But without preaching, the Scriptures would never have taken root in the hearts of men and women. Black culture grows out of a strong preaching tradition: "Preaching sustained and nurtured them during the days of slavery." Even today, there is a longing for the Word of God to be proclaimed in a way that is applicable to daily life. There is a longing for an encounter with Christ in the Scriptures, not only through

the readings at Mass, but also through the homily which should open up the Word. Preaching in Black communities, therefore, must be done with cultural consciousness and it must be dynamically Scriptural.

Finally, there is in Black spirituality a deep love for community. African cultures have traditionally valued the community over individuality. This is a value that is still present in African-American Black culture and spirituality today. It can be seen in the liturgy and worship of Black communities, but it extends even into family life as "each one supports, encourages and enriches the other and is in turn enriched, encouraged, and supported."? The inherent communal aspect of Black spirituality is in many ways a fruit of, and seed for, life in union with the Trinity (which is the eternal Communion of Persons). A debt of gratitude is owed to those who have nourished the faith of Black men and women from the beginning of the United States' history. Today there are over three million Black Catholics in the United States and this would not be the case if it were not for the work of so many faithful men and women committed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. A particular mention must be made of the Black religious orders (i.e. The Josephites and the Oblate Sisters of Providence), those involved in the National Black Catholic Congress, and the bishops of the United States who have, in recent years, promoted Black ministry through The National Black Catholic Pastoral Plan.

SOURCES: <https://www.nbccongress.org/history-of-black-catholics.html>

Discussion Questions

Have you ever experienced a Black expression of Catholic liturgy? What was it like? What was your reaction?

What were the key points of Black spirituality that Reverend Bailey points out? In what ways do you value these in your religious experience and what strikes you about how the Black community values them?