

CHAPTER FOUR

AFRICAN AMERICAN PRESENCE IN THE USA AND IN THE CHURCH

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Provenance and History:

Although I had never studied under John Tracy Ellis I had appreciated him from afar. Upon meeting him, I asked where I should begin research on black Catholics in American history. He told me that unfortunately there were practically no sources for the early beginnings of black Catholics in the United States. I began to reflect on this. At the time I studied at the University of Louvain, a place noted for its historical methodology. We were taught that one could always find sources because people always leave traces. Reflecting on all this, I recalled what one of my professors told the class. He had told us that one of the important sources, often overlooked is the Canon Law, which demanded that every parish was to keep a registry of baptisms. This statute dated back to the 15th century. The register of baptisms provided even more information than the census entry including names, relationships and birth places.

The Spanish arrived in Florida in the 16th century. The archivist of the diocese of St Augustine in Florida was very helpful. They had the oldest ecclesiastical records in the United States. I learned that on the first page of the 16th century baptismal register, the names of baptized infants are listed. Blacks and mulattoes were indicated on the margin. Some were free; some slaves. The Spanish, in order to weaken the British colonists, invited their slaves to flee to Florida. If they converted to Catholicism, they were to be freed. There were many who came.

In the Death Registers for Blacks, we have the lists of black soldiers garrisoned in St Augustine. Many of those who died in Florida were soldiers who belonged to the company of black men stationed in Havana. Some had been born in Africa; others were Afro-Latinos whose parents had been in Spain since the 15th century.

In 1781, ordinary families from Sonora and Sinaloa in northern Mexico were sent to establish the newly formed city of Los Angeles. The authority desired farmers who were both black and Indian who would work the land. Likewise, many Spanish soldiers in the Southwest were mulattoes.

In the 18th century, African slaves were imported by the French to farm the land. The *Code Noir* imposed baptism on the slaves, and some were catechized. The black community comprised slaves and the Free People of Color. Inhabitants, black and white, developed a culture that was African, Latin, Catholic, and basically immoral. Henriette Delille (1812-1862), a free woman of color, began a work of service and love for the slaves and the poor with Juliette Gaudin and Josephine Charles. They gradually evolved into a religious community sometime in the 1840s.

By 1785, John Carroll, the first bishop of Baltimore, wrote to Rome that there were 3,000 slaves in Maryland and neighboring areas. The estates of the former Jesuits (suppressed in 1773) had slaves work their land. As landholders they were faced with the problems that all Catholics faced in regard to slavery, economic necessities, and pastoral concerns. With the aid of their Sulpician chaplain, Jacques Joubert; Haitian women of color, Elizabeth Lange and four other companions, began the first black religious community in the Church called The Oblate Sisters of Providence (1829).

They catechized and nurtured black orphans and black children. Along with the Sisters of the Holy Family, the Oblates of Providence were a sign that black Catholics had a faith and piety that prompted former slaves to give all they had. These black Catholics had a piety that prompted them to form mutual benevolent societies such as the society of the Holy Family-some 100 to 200 men and women assembled weekly from 1843 to 1845 in the old cathedral in Baltimore. They listened to the chaplain, sang hymns, prayed in the Spirit, collected funds and recited rosaries. A small notebook in the Sulpician archives lists the names of black women and men, some slaves and some free persons, who added their names to confraternities whereby promising prayers and devotions. The Confraternity of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, for instance, began in 1796. This little book listed over a thousand names, one third of which were black. It tells us that black Catholics had the same level of piety as their white counterparts.

The Catholic Church in the United States was implicated in slavery. Some even defended it. Some black Catholics lived a holy life despite everything. Others defended their Faith. Pierre Toussaint (1766-1853), a Haitian, came to New York with his owner in 1787. After his owner died, Toussaint began a lucrative profession as a hairdresser. Toussaint used his money to support his owner's wife without her knowledge. He used his money to nurse those who were infirm (e.g. victims of cholera), to support the abandoned and to aid men, women, white, black, enslaved and free. He did this humility, concern, generosity, and very simple piety. Harriet Thompson, a black woman of New York, wrote a letter to Pope Pius IX in 1853. She wrote: "Most Holy Father Visible Head of the Church of Jesus Christ." There seems to have been no answer, we are not sure the pope saw it. But the letter is to be found in the archives and had an impact, it seems, some years later. Harriet Thompson wanted to tell the pope that black children were not permitted to go to Catholic schools in New York. She pointed out that the teachers in the public schools ridiculed the Catholic Church. She realized that the archbishop of New York did not like blacks, but she feared that their children would give up their Catholic Faith. She mentioned by name the white priests who did give help to black Catholics. The letter was simple, without rancor, sad with little hope for their children. The letter is signed by 28 men and women.

Daniel Rudd (1854-1933), born in Bardstown, Kentucky, was reared a Catholic. After the Civil War he traveled to Springfield, Ohio. After he finished high school, he began a weekly newspaper in Cincinnati which is known as the "first black Catholic newspaper owned and published by colored men." Rudd used his newspaper to educate, to disseminate, and to defend the Catholic teaching as far and as wide within the black community as he could. He was absolutely convinced that the Catholic Church was going to elevate the black race. His newspaper had correspondents in much of the country. Rudd was responsible for bringing black Catholic men together for five black Catholic Lay Congresses. The first was in 1889 in

Washington, D.C.; 1890 Cincinnati, 1892 Philadelphia; 1893 Chicago; and 1894 in Baltimore. Ordained in Rome in 1886, Augustus Tolton (1854-1897) was the first African American whom all recognized and truly loved.

St Katherine Drexel and the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, the Josephites and their ministry, the Society of the Divine Word and their missions, all planted the seed and the sons and daughters of Africa brought forth a hundredfold.

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Demographics and Context:

There are 3 million African American Catholics in the United States. Of Roman Catholic parishes in the United States, 798 are considered to be predominantly African American. Most of those continue to be on the East Coast and in the South. Further west of the Mississippi, African American Catholics are more likely to be immersed in multicultural parishes as opposed to predominantly African American parishes. At present, there are 16 living African American bishops, of whom 10 remain active. Currently, six U.S. dioceses are headed by African American bishops.

There are 250 African American priests in the United States and 75 men of African descent in seminary formation for the priesthood. There are about 400 African American religious sisters and 50 religious brothers. The Black population in the United States is estimated to be just over 36 million people (13% of the total U.S. population). By the year 2050, the Black population is expected to almost double its present size to 62 million, and it will increase its percentage of the population to 16%.

Gifts They Bring:

The heart of the human community is the family. In our society today, traditional family values are openly questioned and rejected. For many reasons, the Black family has been especially assailed, despite the importance that families still have in the Black cultural and spiritual tradition.

For us the family has always meant “the extended family”- the grandparent, the uncles, and aunts, the godparents, all those related by kinship or strong friendship. This rich notion of family was not only part of an African tradition but also was our own African-American experience (USCCB: *What We Have Seen and Heard*).

African American Catholics have the gift of a deep and abiding love for sacred scripture. The power of God's Word captivates us. Scripture helps us to "wake up" and see God's glory! The living Word of God offers staying power, praying power and aids us in discovering the saving power made known to us through Jesus, the Redeemer. "The words of the Bible involve us today. Christ is on His cross down the street. The Samaritan woman is at Jacob's Well on the

corner. Moses goes down to Pharaoh at the state capital (Rev. Cyprian Davis, OSB)." God's Word provides clarity for life. It brings hope, comfort, direction and instruction.

There is also the gift of compassion for the struggle of poor people and a zeal for the liberation of all people: "The Lord hears the cry of the poor." We, His people, have heard that cry too and our response to it is written in the pages of our history, a history of sharing and caring (The Working Document for the 1987 National Black Catholic Congress, pg. 56). We can still hear Jesus say, ... "I have come to set the captives free" and as His disciples we strive to please our God by working towards the liberation of all people.

The gift of spontaneous prayer, storytelling, sacred song and joy-filled praise and worship is prominent among African American Catholics. We are called to proclaim in ritual the age old story of God's unending and intervening love. We want to celebrate every resurrecting and life-giving action in our community in a way that reflects our gifts and our Blackness and the special saving love that the Lord has for each of us. Our celebration must be an expression of our story that gives witness to our music, our prayer forms and our preaching style (The Working Document for the 1987 National Black Catholic Congress, pg. 26).

The story of African American Catholicism is a story of a people blessed with the gift of perseverance. African American Catholics obstinately clung to a faith that gave them sustenance, even when it did not always make them welcome.

Challenges:

Evangelization is challenging. We need to reclaim apathetic or alienated Black Catholics, as well as to strengthen the faithful, by helping our people to appreciate what God has given to us in the Catholic Faith. We will continue to promote liturgical celebrations that are "authentically Black" and "truly Catholic." Reports from Diocesan Days of Reflection affirm a continuing need, addressed in previous Congress documents, to reflect the genius of our cultures through our liturgies, catechetical instruction, spiritual direction, and pastoral counseling for formation in Christian discipleship.

The specific challenges to our mission of evangelization are many--some longstanding and well known; others still evolving. My list here is not exhaustive, but I urge your prayerful awareness and active attention to the following realities:

African American Catholics are challenged by the declining numbers of predominantly-Black Catholic parishes. This nationwide trend results partly from parish closures and mergers, but also from people moving to new neighborhoods and joining parishes there. In decades past, Black Catholics more often stayed with their parishes of origin regardless of where they lived. Consequently, today's Congress Movement encompasses Black Catholics from various parochial settings, including multicultural and predominantly white or Hispanic parishes. In some ways, it is progress that our people are feeling at home in many parishes. Nevertheless, Black parishes have been at the heart of the Congress Movement to evangelize Black Catholics, through enculturation of music, liturgy, and stewardship. We must discern how to sustain traditionally

Black Catholic parishes and also how to bring our unique traditions to other parishes.

Promoting vocations in the black community is also a challenge. Our community needs vocations to the priesthood, diaconate, consecrated religious life, and lay ecclesial ministry (such as the ministries of pastoral associates, directors of religious education, or youth ministers). Celebrating the Sacraments requires ordained clergy. A strong Congress Movement requires leadership rooted in our own experience (even as it welcomes solidarity by clergy, religious, and laity of non-African descent). Vocational discernment and training take several years, so we have no time for indifference or delay. Because God often calls men and women to ministry through family, mentors, and neighbors, Black Catholics must be proactive in identifying candidates for vocational ministries, helping them to discern whether God is calling them, and providing encouragement and support to those who are called.

There are challenges associated with sustaining Catholic education in the Black Community. Catholic schools have been a source of strength and stability in our community. Education is an integral part of the Catholic mission in a neighborhood, introducing many to the Catholic Church and inspiring many to academic achievements that create promising futures for individuals and their families. So the closure or merger of Catholic schools, often in urban areas, creates grave concern. We must also increase the number of people who are pursuing continuing education and master degrees in the interdisciplinary theology program at the Institute of Black Catholic Studies. Such study is necessary to address the issues facing today's Black Pan African Catholics in the United States and to enhance more effective Catholic ministry to the Black community in Black and multicultural parish communities.

Assuring the inclusion of that Black Catholics in pastoral planning creates challenges. Due mostly to budgetary concerns, a number of diocesan Offices of Black Catholic Ministry are being merged into offices for multicultural ministry. This is occurring, as well, at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). We must discern prayerfully the ways that this trend helps or hinders the work of Catholic evangelization in the Black Community.

Finally, we are challenged to incorporate immigrants of African descent into the Black Catholic Movement. While our primary reference point as a Congress Movement has been African Americans, our challenge today is to act with consideration of the diverse cultural backgrounds among Black Catholics in our pews. Immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean enrich the Church in the United States. Among these are many members of the clergy and the consecrated religious life, who bring their unique backgrounds to pastoral leadership.

Questions for discussion:

1. What are the characteristics of black Catholic culture?
2. What is the spirituality of black Catholics?
3. What did Rudd mean that black Catholics should be the leaven in the community?