**Full & Authentic Connections with Black Catholic Families**

-Efran Menny (Archdiocese of Galveston/Houston)

As my wife and I exited the church, we were always greeted by a familiar church staff that rushed to greet us with great enthusiasm. “Always a pleasure to see you and your wife,” they would exclaim with a smile wide from cheek to cheek. Initially, when my wife started accompanying me to Mass, it felt like a jovial encounter of genuine appreciation but overtime, enthusiasm morphed into a performative embrace as we were one of the few, if not only, Black American Catholic married couples in our diverse parish.

Though you would expect my experience to be an anomaly, in plenty of Catholic parishes across the country, Black Catholic families experience this type of treatment: generous greetings without any meaningful relationship. As a result, this type of outreach by church staff can seem like tokenism that is disingenuous. The challenges highlighted by Black Catholic families in the Church reveal significant barriers to being fully immersed into the Christian experience.

In plenty of church spaces, Black Catholic families are used for the look of diversity rather than for their God-given gifts. We might find Black Catholic families participate during sacred occasions or during the Holy Mass in the offertory procession; however, rarely are they integral in leadership or ministries such as family or youth formation. Research from Pew [suggests](https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/03/15/black-catholics-in-america/) that Black Catholics have higher religious expression than other Catholic groups, so those involved with faith formation could gain invaluable insights on how to nurture crucial faith building habits if given the opportunity to lead in the Church.

Many Black Catholic families are part of community churches that have long standing familial ties. Though this can be an enriching aspect for longtime members, embracing younger Black Catholic couples’ approaches and ideas might seem like a challenge when tradition has dictated the church for so long. By having this stronghold on how the church operates, a power struggle develops which creates a culture of isolation for younger couples that want to be part of a Catholic community.

Lastly, for many Black Catholic families, invisibility is a normal aspect of church experience that maintains barriers to integration in the Christian experience. Simply put: Black Catholic families are not actively seen, integrated, or valued in church spaces. In our own sacred Black Catholic spaces, we may just be another worshiping face in a sea of parishoners. On the other hand, in a diverse community or being underrepresented in another ethnic/racial group’s parish, it’s easy to be viewed as a “good” Black Christian that’s not aggressive and easy going which eases the consciences about several damaging anti-Black stereotypes. In either setting, this invisible presence makes the Christian journey constrained with experiences that stifle the Holy Spirit’s true work.

Being vocal about these experiences ensures that we have a Church that doesn't have atrophy. To truly be the hands and feet in the Body of Christ, genuine fraternal love must be at the center of our commitment to Black Catholic families.