

# "Take Into Account Various Situations *and* Cultures

BY MOST REV. EDWARD K. BRAXTON

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Dear Brother Bishops:

Our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, states in *Fidei Depositum*, his apostolic constitution which introduces the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, that those who use it must "take into account various situations and cultures." If the *Catechism* is to have any impact on our efforts to preach the Good News of Jesus Christ more effectively to African Americans, we must take the Holy Father's words very seriously. The pope's challenge is unambiguous. We cannot be effective evangelists if we are unwilling to learn firsthand about the fabric of the everyday lives of the people we hope to welcome in the name of the Lord.

I have written and spoken often on the subject of evangelization and African Americans, offering a variety of specific suggestions that might make our ministry of evangelization more effective. Rather than repeating those suggestions in this [National Black Catholic] Congress presentation prepared specifically for fellow bishops, I wish to invite you to reflect at a deeper level. Today I hope to contribute to a radically honest and genuinely realistic evaluation of what we must do at the dawn of the third millennium of Christianity if we

are serious about reaching Black Americans. Knowing that this attempt to suggest implications of John Paul II's instruction to "take into account various situations and cultures" runs the risk of over-simplification, I will be satisfied if I can uncover the roots of fundamental concerns.

This will be done first by visiting a barber shop; second, by reflecting briefly on the meaning of evangelization; third, by examining the cultural divide that separates most potential Black converts from the fundamentally White world of the Catholic Church; and fourth, by offering specific recommendations for bishops to consider that might help create the rapport the Church needs with Black people before we even begin to talk about effective evangelization.

## II. THE BARBER SHOP

The neighborhood barber shop is often the center of life in poor Black communities. The beauty parlor is across the street. A laundromat, a currency exchange, a barbecue restaurant, a pool hall and a liquor store are within a few blocks. The vacant lot, where teenage boys play basketball, begins in the alley behind the barber shop. There are several boarded-up apartment buildings in the neighborhood. One is a crack house. The storefront Baptist church and the funeral home are on the corner. The bus to the clinic and the unemployment office stops nearby. The all-Black Catholic school is



outside of the neighborhood. Though they are not Catholics, some parents drive their children there in spite of increasing tuition.

For most of my life as a priest and as a bishop, I have deliberately frequented these "neighborhood centers." Eventually just about everyone comes to see the shop, especially on a Saturday. The atmosphere is congenial. Addressing one another as "Brother Austin" or "Brother Braxton," everyone speaks his mind. Copies of *Ebony*, *Jet*, *Black Enterprise*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Essence* and the local Black newspaper are scattered about. Old, fading pictures of famous Black athletes, politicians, entertainers and civil rights leaders are on the walls. There is also a dramatic painting of a militant Black Jesus Christ, eyes ablaze with righteousness, fist clenched in the Black power salute.

The enthusiastic conversation of the patrons and barbers moves randomly from topic to topic. Listen to what they say: "Biting Evander's ear was wrong and Mike Tyson should have known better. Evander Holyfield is a real class act. I'd like to see them fight again." "How can we keep our children in school, so that they can get good jobs?" "What can we do to get the landlords, the city and the residents to combat the continuing deterioration of housing in our neighborhood?" "White people will never understand the way most Black people feel about the Rodney King beating and the O. J. Simpson trial and that's that!" "Let me tell you about the problems I am having at home with my wife and children." "Do you know what the Man did at my job last night? It was an act of blatant racial prejudice. If I had the seed money or if I could get a loan, I would start my own small business." "We have our share of violence and crime here. But it's nothing compared to the 'White collar' crimes being committed by the invisible criminals, who control the economic system that make it impossible for us to get ahead." "Why did the police come down so hard yesterday on the Black brother, who was a \$1,000 crack dealer on the street, and let the \$500,000 supplier from outside the neighborhood sleep in a comfortable suburban

bed last night?" "What can I do to help my young unmarried granddaughter, now that she is pregnant?" "My eighteen-year-old son was shot and killed last night for his Nike sneakers. Lord, what is this world coming to?"

Someone turns on the television. There are some loud complaints about the many superficial comedies on the Fox TV station featuring all-Black casts. "Sure, they will pay Black people to be on TV as long as we play prostitutes and murderers or make fools of ourselves. It's *Amos 'n Andy* in living color." "Show me one Black character on TV living a normal life, someone you can look up to as a role model for our children." Surfing with the remote, one of the barbers stops at a Catholic program. "The Catholic channel on TV is something else. There is never a Black person on that show. No Black people in the audience. No Black people attending the church services either. And that tired music! They never talk about anything related to being poor or Black. And they wonder why we don't join their church?" The barber cutting my hair informs the speakers that I am a Catholic priest. A relatively young man observes, "Well, well, well, I didn't know there were any Black priests. I didn't think the Catholic Church even allowed them." He asks why he hasn't seen one before. "There are not many of us," I explain. I told him that many priests and sisters, Black and White, do not wear distinctive garb today when they are not directly involved in their ministry. "Then, how are we supposed to recognize them?" he asks.

Brother Austin, who owns the shop, turns on a Black call-in radio station where there is a heated debate about what color Jesus was. One participant argues loudly that Jesus and the apostles were definitely Black. Another says if He was Jewish, He probably was not brown haired and fair skinned the way He is usually pictured. One of the men waiting for a haircut dismisses the radio debate saying, "No self-respecting Black man could fall on his knees before a White Jesus, when the White Man was and is the oppressor."



At that point, a group of basketball players comes in to quench their thirst. They are wearing the jerseys of Michael Jordan, Shaquille O'Neal, Dennis Rodman and other basketball "gods," who, they argue, inspire them more than any religion could. Their astronomical incomes and dazzling feats on the courts convince these teenagers that if they can play great ball, they do not need to go to college. They turn the radio to a rap, hip-hop and gangsta rap station. You may have managed to ignore this "in your face" confrontational and often vulgar music by such famous performers as the late, recently murdered Tupac Shakur, the late, recently murdered Notorious B. I. G., Snoop Doggy Dogg, Ice Cube and Queen Latifah. However, this music idiom is the lifeblood of these young men, more meaningful to them than even the most energetic Black church music. They know the lyrics by heart and sing along, as they pound out the beat with their whole bodies.

As the ball players make their way back to the court, I ponder these rap lyrics and the culture of the streets which they powerfully convey. Sometimes violent, bluntly sexual and almost always anti-White establishment, they feed a smoldering rage and an impatient materialism that dictates how these young men walk, talk, dress, eat and think; yes, even about God and the Christian faith. Because of circumstances too complex for easy analysis, many young Black males and more than a few females believe that everything of value for them can be found in the company of their "home-boys" on the street. Everything truly Black is there. The sometimes searingly brilliant poetry of rap lyrics provides the clearest expression of how they feel.

Two brothers take the chairs on either side of me in the barber shop. They are in a serious conversation about Spike Lee's new documentary *Four Little Girls*, which is about the children who were murdered in the 1963 Birmingham, Alabama, church bombing, and his provocative film *Get on the Bus*, which examined the Million Man March. The Catholic Church had no formal participation in this watershed event in the

Black community, though Black Catholic laymen and priests were certainly there. The conversation turns to John Singleton's powerful movie *Rosewood*, a mythological retelling of the true story of an attempt to annihilate a prosperous Black town in Florida in 1923 by a White mob. One brother who looks directly at me says, "This movie gave me more hope than any church service."

They ask me if I have heard of *Bring In da Noise, Bring In da Funk*, George C. Wolfe and Savion Glover's astounding Broadway phenomenon, in which tap dance is used to tell the story of a people from the slave ships to the present day. When I tell them I have seen it, they hang on my every word. As they are leaving, they give me a flier about Wynton Marsalis's Pulitzer Prize-winning jazz oratorio "Blood on the Fields," which explores the impact of slavery on Black people today.

A group of Black women come in from the beauty parlor, which has no TV, to watch the funeral of Dr. Betty Shabazz, widow of the murdered Malcolm X. They are caught up in a sisterhood of sorrow, as they contemplate the tragedy of this singular light extinguished by the hand of a troubled grandson. Their hearts are broken as they watch Coretta Scott King, widow of the murdered Martin Luther King Jr., comforting Myrdie Evers-Williams, widow of the murdered Medger Evers, as poet Maya Angelou tearfully embraces each of Dr. Shabazz's six weeping daughters.

This untimely death caused a great mourning among Black women, including many Black Catholic women. But this death was not lamented in most Catholic churches because it was not a significant event for most Catholics. As they depart, one woman remarks to me, "Reverend, I go to Rev. Hampton's A.M.E. Church myself, but I send my son to the Catholic school for education and the discipline. But I would not want him to become a Catholic and become a priest. You can't get married and you can't have children. As badly as we need good Black husbands and fathers, I think that is such a waste and a shame."

Later, a senior from Howard University settles in for a haircut and turns the public radio station to a round table discussion about Black intellectuals and their books. The session begins [with] praise for a new edition of the writings of James Baldwin. They assert that it's time for Black and White Americans to re-read (or read for the first time) his classic essay *The Fire Next Time* and heed its warning: "God gave Noah the rainbow sign. No more warnings, the fire next time!"

The radio commentator turns to the growing African American intellectual presence at Harvard University. At the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for Afro-American Research, Henry Louis Gates Jr., the cultural analyst, has assembled such scholars as William Julius Wilson, sociologist and public policy expert; Cornel West, philosopher; and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Black women's history expert. Everyone agrees that their new books are having a significant impact on Black thinkers.

The next radio panel gets into an angry exchange about Keith Richburg's *Out of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa*. This largely negative analysis of Black African politics and life brands Black Americans, who have come to identify deeply with Africa, as naive romanticists. Such "Afrocentrism" is laughable in the author's view. Black Americans ought to be thankful that they are not in Africa with its crime, Black political corruption and widespread disease. He urges Black American civil rights leaders to stop praising African politicians indiscriminately. He thinks some should be in prison for their treachery.

Then Martin Bernal's book *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* is briefly discussed. This ambitious scholarly work proposes a more radical Afrocentrism than the one rejected by Richburg. It has as its much debated thesis the belief that the best of ancient Greek and Roman cultures, which are the foundation of western European cultures, is profoundly influenced by even more ancient Egyptian cultures, which in turn have been shaped by sub-Saharan Black African cultures.

When the radio program ends, one of the Howard University students provokes a discussion about Black identity. One man observes that no sooner than White people have adjusted to calling us "Afro-American," they are expected to change to "African American." What are they to make of current expressions such as "Americans of African descent" and "Africans in America"? He says some White people are bewildered. They have begun to think the question of naming has become a tiresome game of political correctness. The university student interrupts him asserting that the matter is not so simple. "It is tied to the story of how our people came to be in the United States against their will and how they have been treated here since the end of slavery." He recommends the W. E. B. Du Bois 1903 classic, *The Souls of Black Folk*, which explores this dilemma of Black identity.

The student continues, "This long history is the reason why different groups and individuals use different designations based upon their experience. As a result, colored people, Negroes, Blacks, Black people, Afro-Americans, African Americans, Africans in America, Americans of African descent, Africans in the Diaspora, Americans, People of Color and yes, even 'niggah' in the world of hip-hop and rap are all used, depending on the context of lived experience. One of the reasons for the emergence of 'Americans of African descent' is the search for an inclusive expression that would be appreciative of the unique history of the various Caribbean peoples." A Catholic gentleman from Haiti spoke up. "Our people think of themselves simply as Haitians, not as African Americans."

One of the barbers asks, "Why can't we let go of all of this tortured history and simply call ourselves—Black and White—what we now all are: proud Americans?" Then he answers his own question. "Sadly, this is not true to what people experience each day. It is similar to asking why the Jewish people cannot put the Holocaust behind them as simply a tragic episode of past history. They cannot do this because it was and is too traumatic. Slavery and its unending aftermath,

like the Holocaust, are an unresolved and unreconciled memory of the past that informs how people wish to name themselves today."

As Brother Austin finishes my haircut, I think to myself that not one of the Black authors, artists, scholars, actors, politicians or athletes discussed is a Catholic. I wonder if it is possible that being Catholic inhibits Black women and men from playing pivotal roles in the shaping of Black culture? As I leave, the shop is filled with the rich aromas of soul food. A nearby restaurant chef has just brought dinner for the barbers so that they can take a much-needed break. As you leave the barber shop, you might ask yourselves, as Catholic bishops, how familiar or unfamiliar you are with the "various situations and cultures" that are revealed there.

### III. WHAT DO WE MEAN BY EVANGELIZATION?

There are between 35 and 40 million Americans of African ancestry. By our imperfect count, between 1.3 and 2 million of these are members of the Catholic Church. Millions of Black Americans over thirty are members of Black Christian traditions, especially Baptist. At least half of the total population, or between 17 and 20 million, are under thirty. Many of those under thirty are not members of any faith tradition. Young Black people who are attracted to religious faith, especially if they have been in prison, are far more likely to be drawn to some form of Islam, including Louis Farrakhan's Nation of Islam, than to the Roman Catholic Church. Yet, as in all communities, it is this younger, non-affiliated group that we most urgently need to reach.

Some of the parents, grandparents and aunts of the youthful devotees of popular Black culture may well be Catholics. Though they have found it difficult to pass their faith on to the younger generation, African Americans who are long-standing Catholics are often among the most devout and the most tenacious in holding on to their faith. Some have made their own a traditional Catholicism that makes them long for the

day when the Church was more uniform. They prefer the polyphony of Palestrina over the hand-clapping rhythm of gospel music. They might throw up their hands in disgust at the mere mention of the Black Christ. The majority embraces the reforms of the Second Vatican Council and believe that the Church has only just begun to appreciate the powerful contributions that the cultures and experiences of Black people can make to Catholic worship and to all aspects of Catholic life. They are anxious to do more and be more in the Church.

But how do we reach the millions of younger Black people for whom the Catholic faith seems irrelevant? I am not sure that any of us can answer that question. Before discussing some of the reasons why this question is so difficult to answer, we must ask ourselves what do we, as committed Christians and as bishops, really mean by evangelization. What do we expect to be different about the person who has been evangelized? Surely we expect more than mere church affiliation. We all know people who register in a Catholic parish, identify themselves as Catholics, go to Mass a couple of Sundays a month, put their envelopes in the collection basket, have their children baptized and live lives that seem much more focused on the "gods of secularity" than on the God of Jesus Christ. We would call them members of the Church in a minimal sense. But would we call them evangelized?

I think we mean much more than that. Jesus Christ is at the center of the life of the person who has been effectively evangelized. The whole life and lifestyle of the evangelized person is gradually changed and transformed. This is because true and radical conversion is taking place. When the hearts and minds of women and men are evangelized by the Good News, they become able to affirm the good and gracious nearness of the Mystery of God in their lives, even in the face of pain, suffering and confusion. This Divine mystery, revealed in the depths of their being, in nature, salvation history, tradition, Scripture and uniquely in Jesus Christ and His Church, becomes

intimately present in the lives of those who have put on Christ.

The Holy Spirit calls the truly evangelized to participate actively in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ through authentic personal prayer and the sacramental and liturgical life of the Church. This paschal mystery converts their personal lives, calling them, as St. Paul writes to the Romans, to do the things they know they should do and not to do the things they know they should not do. Those for whom the Good News has fallen on rich soil live out their converted lives nurtured by genuine Christian example. As they grasp the radical catholicity of their faith, they seek to live lives of service to others, especially the poor. They strive to purify their hearts, uprooting biases and prejudices against any group or people, because these attitudes are incompatible with the love of God that fills their hearts. As they mature in faith, they develop an intellectual and emotional integration of what they believe, and they become eager to share this faith with others. Rooted in Christ, they look beyond the certainty of death to the "life of the world to come."

If this is what we hope is unfolding in the life of a truly evangelized person, we must acknowledge the painful truth that many Catholic people, like many Christians of other traditions, are not truly evangelized. The Catholic faith, which has come to them as a part of their ethnic and cultural heritage, has never been personally appropriated and made their own. This reminds us that evangelization is an ongoing reality in our own lives as well. An important part of the "new evangelization," to which John Paul calls the Church as we approach the year 2000, must begin with ourselves and our people.

As leaders of the Catholic Church in this country, we are all aware of the fact that the annual increase in the number of Catholics is primarily due to baptism of the children of Catholic couples and to the fact that Christians of other traditions who marry Catholics

often decide to join the faith of their spouse. Only a small number of new Catholics are completely new, people who have heard about the faith from a friend or neighbor and want to learn about joining the Church themselves.

Catholic bishops, priests, deacons, religious and the Christian faithful have not, for the most part, been public evangelists. We do not see them visible on street corners, in shopping malls, at neighborhood social events eagerly telling strangers about Jesus and His Church. Nor do we tend to be door-to-door evangelists, knocking on doors for Jesus, putting fliers on car windshields or placing signs on neighborhood bulletin boards with our tear-off phone numbers, so that people call us if they want to know about Jesus. Most of our people do not seem to be inclined to take out their Bibles, Council documents, *Catechisms of the Catholic Church* or rosaries at lunch time in the office, in the warehouse or in the factory where they work, in order to share their Catholic faith. Some Catholics might actually find this offensive.

Several points can be drawn from this. When we speak about evangelization and African Americans, our ultimate hope must certainly be for something more profound than a superficial denominational affiliation. We do not have large communities of Black Catholics with young couples having their children baptized as infants. Nor do we have large numbers of Black Catholics marrying Christians of other traditions, who subsequently become Catholics. As a result, we do not experience a significant increase in White Catholic communities.

Thus, when we say that the Church or Black Catholics must evangelize in Black communities, are we asking that something be done that we are not doing in other communities? Are White Catholics evangelizing in White communities? Are we asking that Catholics open themselves to real changes in the way they see themselves, their relationship to their faith and to others? Are we asking Catholics to become involved with

some form of public evangelization, be it on the street, door-to-door or at work? Our people will not become more open to sharing their faith with people of different races until questions such as these are answered.

#### IV. WORLDS APART: THE CULTURAL DIVIDE

Even if we could stir up an evangelizing spirit in our people, it might not result in a significant number of Black Americans embracing the Catholic faith in the decades to come. The reasons for this are manifold and as complex as those that have prevented the Church from attracting significant numbers in countries such as Japan, China and India for centuries. The greatest obstacle to the evangelization of Black Americans may be the fact that the cultural, educational, economic and political situations that define the relation between the Catholic Church and most African Americans constitutes a radical cultural divide.

The cultural divide is particularly acute between the Catholic Church as we know it and the culture and lived experiences of the vast majority of poor, younger, urban and rural Black people who usually are not attracted to the Catholic faith. Jesus Christ clearly commanded His followers to teach all nations. Nevertheless, this universal faith as it is embodied by the Catholic Church in the United States has been profoundly shaped by "various situations and cultures" foreign to the contemporary Black experience. These are essentially the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome that became the foundations of western European cultures. The structure of Catholic theological reflection; the aesthetic principles by which religious art, music, literature, architecture, liturgical vestments and the environment for worship are measured; the prism through which Sacred Scripture is read; and the ascetical ideals which inform our understanding of spirituality, prayer, the interior life, the experience of God, our relationship with Christ, sin and the work of God's saving grace in the sacraments; have been primarily shaped by this western European culture. This is inevitable because the Church and the life of faith exist in time and space. The Church trans-

forms and is, in part, transformed by the "situations and cultures" in which it finds itself.

Anthropologists and philosophers of religion have traditionally argued that within the human spirit there are recurring questions of meaning dealing with the purpose and destiny of the human person. For many people, the themes addressed by religion (God, eternity, moral judgments, afterlife, mystery, prayer, sacred time, sacred space, sacred narratives, sacred persons and sacred ritual) have provided the context for seeking answers to these questions. Students of religion are always interested to know why certain religious traditions seem to illuminate these questions more adequately than others for individuals and people in different cultures, ethnic and racial groups, and historical contexts. We bishops also have reason to be interested in this question.

This relationship between the questions human beings ask and the answers provided by a particular faith tradition has sometimes been called the "existential fit." There have always been people who held that the questions themselves were absurd or at best they could not be answered definitively, embracing atheism and agnosticism. Large numbers of young Black Americans say or imply that the questions are irrelevant to the struggles of their everyday existence. Or, if they are relevant, the Catholic Church, looked upon with suspicion as a largely White, racist middle-class reality, has not been able to raise the questions and illuminate the responses of its tradition in a way that touches the minds and passions of Black people. There is no "existential fit." This lack of "fit" does not mean that the truths of faith and the degree of welcome that Catholics convey do not communicate the heart of the faith effectively to potential converts.

The basketball players in the barber shop are not likely to be engaged by an otherworldly apologetic that presents a Catholic Church unwilling or unable to do anything to help alter their present economic, political and social plight. A church that offers little sustained

help in the struggle and promises the joy of eternal life after they die is not an "existential fit" for the life experiences of these young people. Any preacher they follow will have to be at their side engaged in the struggle, helping them find a God of the oppressed and an angel of freedom and justice, articulated in a theology that embraces, celebrates and is informed by the Black experience. If God is to really be God for them, He must be God the liberator, who uproots injustice and oppression by His mighty power. A god of the status quo is dead for them.

There are many important, related implications of this cultural divide. Three of them have a negative impact upon evangelization. These are our segregated neighborhoods, our segregated Catholic schools, and, perhaps surprisingly, our segregated Catholic art.

### *Segregated Neighborhoods*

Since most Catholics are White and since most Black people are not Catholics, the Church's effectiveness in evangelizing Black people would almost certainly be greater if people of both races lived next door to one another as friends and neighbors. But this is rarely the case in the United States. Neighborhoods, like the imaginary one in which the barber shop is located, are all Black as a direct result of the cultural divide. These neighborhoods and the all-Black parishes in them were formed by the systematic segregation and resegregation of our large urban communities. As Black people moved from the south looking for employment in northern cities in the 1930s, '40s and '50s, many factors fed a xenophobic dread of economic, cultural, religious or racial diversity in city neighborhoods. Because the Catholic Church itself did not know the world of these Black, largely, but not exclusively, Protestant migrants, it does not have a record of prophetic leadership during this time. John T. McGreevy's *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North* documents the rapid movement of White Catholics to the suburbs to escape neighborhoods that were changing racially, economically and culturally. Due in

part to the cultural divide, White congregations and their pastors, often recent immigrants from eastern or western Europe themselves, did not find in their Christian faith an inspiration to welcome their new neighbors.

In spite of this, we must not diminish the enviable record of exceptional service of the White and Black bishops, priests, brothers, sisters and Christian faithful, past and present, who have eagerly committed their entire lives to ministry in African American parishes. We think immediately of the Josephites, the Society of the Divine Word, the Oblate Sisters of Providence, the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament and the many diocesan priests and others, who have been unselfish in their generosity. In and through God's grace, they have accomplished and continue to accomplish great things in our local church communities.

Nevertheless, we are forced to acknowledge that there are a significant number of White priests today who make it clear that they do not wish to serve in Black parishes at any time during their ministry. This may not be due primarily to racial prejudice. It may be due in part to the real or perceived extreme differences between Black and White neighborhoods and their uneasiness about crossing the cultural divide. These priests may prefer suburban parishes where there are more people, more resources, better parish facilities and more trained personnel because they are more like the communities in which they grew up and because they think it is easier to build post-Vatican II faith communities in such areas.

Some of our Black priests may feel the same way, wondering why they are expected to serve in what others consider undesirable parishes, simply because the parishioners are "their people." Meanwhile, since the need for priests is great, bishops do not have the luxury of sending extra priests to be evangelists in Black parishes where there are only a few Catholics, when they are so needed in the suburban parishes where there are so many Catholics. We are a long way

from the day when White Catholics from the suburbs will cross the cultural divide and come eagerly to the city as evangelists and missionaries.

### *Segregated Catholic Schools*

In the past the all-Black Catholic schools that resulted from our segregated neighborhoods played a central role in the evangelization of African Americans. Black parents, seeking an alternative to the public schools and admiring the value formation for which the Catholic schools were renowned, sent their children to these schools. The pastors required the parents and the children who were not Catholic to study the Catholic faith. These adult "convert classes" resulted in the baptism of significant numbers of children and parents each year for almost a quarter of a century. But this trend was definitely reversed by the mid 1960s.

Today in our all-Black parish schools where most of the students are not Catholics, there may be only one or two religious sisters, if any. There are almost no Black, Catholic, male teachers. Most of the lay teachers are White women who live in other neighborhoods. They may feel ill at ease about going beyond teaching general Christian values to actually enthusiastically urging the students to become Catholics. In some schools, there seems to be an unwritten policy not to evangelize even if the children are unchurched. Many principals and pastors are uncomfortable with the old system of mandatory attendance at religion classes by parents. They also argue that it is un-enforceable.

Even if pastors and catechists sense an openness to the Catholic faith on the part of a student, they may deem it unwise to prepare that child for baptism. Many Black children are brought to Catholic schools by working parents who live a considerable distance from the parish church. When not even one member of the family is committed to the faith, it will be impossible for the sixth, seventh or eighth grader to get to Sunday Mass and participate in the life of the Church. With no support at all, it is unlikely that this

fragile faith will survive, especially with the prospect of a public high school. In these circumstances only the smallest number of Black students become Catholic each year.

Real as these difficulties may be, our Catholic schools must never be reduced to mere instruments of social progress. They have the great potential of becoming once again true and effective instruments of evangelization. If we abandon this confidence, we risk undermining the essential nature and purpose of the Church's involvement in the ministry of education, which is to share the light and love of Jesus Christ with all.

### *Segregated Catholic Art*

When I was the pastor of a parish in the Archdiocese of Chicago, I used to take the children from our all-African American school on a tour of our church three times a year. One of the first questions was always, "Father, why are all angels and saints White? Aren't there any Black people in Heaven?" I thought of these children last month when I had quite a discussion about our beautiful new Mary, Mother of Africa chapel with a young Black man who had recently left the seminary. He asked, "Why should Black Catholics be so grateful for one chapel in our National Basilica while the vast majority of the art in the Basilica and in all of Catholic churches present an image of the Kingdom of Heaven that is exclusively White?"

He continued, "Why can there not be Black angels, cherubs and saints in all of our churches, Black and White? Imagine the impact on Black and White men and women if they saw images of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit represented in the deep mystery of what Paul VI called 'the gift of Blackness.' In western iconography, darkness usually represents sin and evil. Demons, devils and Satan are often presented in dark hues. Show me a church in which Satan is pictured as White! Would not our catholicity be well served by the common experience



of seeing Jesus, Mary, Joseph and the saints in different ethnic and racial appearances in all of our churches?"

The former seminarian asserted, "It cannot be argued that it is a matter of historical accuracy. Angels are pure spirits, without race, nationality or gender. Western Christian art has never represented Jesus Christ, Mary or the Apostles as Jewish. God the Father is Absolute Spirit. He has no race or nationality. Scripture never describes Him as an elderly, European-looking man. We know and understand the historical and cultural reasons for what was done in the past. But why should we perpetuate this all-White image of heaven in the present and the future? What would happen if the bishops recommended, even mandated, such diversity in all of our future churches, seminaries, chancery offices and other institutions to convey a more authentically universal vision of the heavenly Jerusalem?"

"Is this an insignificant issue?" asked the former seminarian. "What if the situation were reversed? How would Catholics of European origin feel if, starting tomorrow, all of the images of the Trinity, Jesus, Mary,

Saints, Angels and all the inhabitants of heaven in their churches had Black, Hispanic, Asian or Native American features and none were White? Would they feel fully at home and welcome? Is this not what Black Catholics have lived with for generations? Is this not what they are going to live with for generations to come? Surely, the total absence of images of the holy and the sacred from a Black perspective in our churches has a negative impact on the Church's efforts to evangelize Black Americans. The image of a magnificent Black angel in a cathedral might do more for the evangelization of Black people than handing out copies of a prayer book at the door.

Who would want to join a faith, in which all the spiritual 'personalities' are visualized to look like the very people who enslaved and oppressed them?"

The thoughts of this young man are spoken in part from anger, hurt and disillusionment. They may sound too strong and unrealistic to many of us. Nevertheless, we must hear these thoughts because they represent the deep-seated feelings of many Black people, young and old, that we wish to reach. These same feelings are shared by growing numbers of Black Catholics. They are often expressed at gatherings such as this Congress. We must also hear them because they are a painful reminder of talented people like Brother Cyprian Rowe, who left the Catholic Church, in part because of issues dealing with liturgy, art and racial inclusiveness.

This examination of the cultural divide and some of its implications has been attempting to approach a very difficult question from a moving viewpoint. That question is not how do we make existing Black Catholic parishes more vital. Nor is it how can we make the liturgies in which Black Catholics worship more vital or more spiritually nourishing for those



who are already coming to church. The question has been how can we reach the Black people, especially young men, who pass by our churches week after week on their way to the barber shop without even noticing them.

## V. SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

It may be useful to consider specific pastoral recommendations for the American bishops that may aid us in creating a greater atmosphere of openness to Black people on the part of the Church and a greater openness to the Church on the part of Black people. This openness and respect are part of the foundation that is necessary for crossing the cultural divide before the work of pre-evangelization can begin.

Perhaps no private institution has done more than the Catholic Church to secure a more just society. The Church expends large sums of money each year in Black communities subsidizing Catholic schools and in the work of Catholic Charities, and a vast network of social service programs whose positive impact cannot be measured. Yet the Church, as the Church, is not a strong, visible presence to ordinary Black people in their neighborhoods. There are things that we could do, perhaps as a conference, to make our presence better known and make our desires to cross the cultural divide more apparent.

1. We should give serious attention to our relationship with the Black media. Local dioceses and, where appropriate, the bishops' conference itself should consider preparing press releases tailored for *Ebony*, *Jet*, *Black Enterprise*, local Black newspapers, Black radio stations, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and traditional Black churches. Imaginative advertisements on Black-oriented radio and TV stations would also make the Church more present to people who literally do not know who we are. Visible neighborhood signs directing people to the nearest parish and announcing "THE CATHOLIC CHURCH WELCOMES YOU!" establish immedi-

ate contact with the people on the street. A Catholic invitation to join the Church on the sides of buses and in subway stations in Black neighborhoods would be seen by all.

2. The bishops of the United States should seriously consider leading the way in the elimination of the practice of calling people "minorities" and "minority groups." Most people of color find these words very offensive. African Americans almost never refer to themselves with these terms except when they are forced to do so by legal language. Editorials in national newspapers, TV documentaries and government studies use these expressions frequently, oblivious of or indifferent to their negative connotations.

These terms do not simply convey the neutral idea of numerically smaller groups in a given population. We have been conditioned to think of very specific groups in our culture when we hear these terms. Just as we no longer call Christians of other traditions "non-Catholics," which describes them as what they are not, we should also avoid calling people "minority groups," which describes them as what they are not, namely not the majority. The majority of the world's population is not European. Similarly, no particularly European ethnic or national group constitutes the majority of the population in this country. In his call for candid discussions on the topic of race relations in the United States, President Clinton has pointed out that in the coming decades, there will be no majority race, nationality or ethnic group in America. We would do far better to refer to groups of people as who they are.

3. Think, for a moment, about the chancery offices, cathedrals, bishop's residences, seminaries and parish plants in your diocese and ask yourselves how many Black people are employed as secretaries, custodians, cooks and housekeepers. If our diocesan institutions and parishes hire only



- White-owned companies (with all White workers) for building, tuck-pointing, landscaping and painting; if all the electricians, plumbers, carpenters, carpet layers and window washers are White, it is noticed. No matter where our catholic institutions are located, the presence or absence of Black workers is observed and thought about by Black and White people. The only way to ensure racial diversity in these work forces is to have someone who personally oversees and enforces the Church's frequently stated commitment to this diversity. Think also of social gatherings at the bishop's residence. How often do White guests encounter Black guests there?
4. We should feature articles about African Americans frequently in our diocesan newspapers, whether or not we have a significant number of Black Catholics or even Black people in our dioceses. The articles would be primarily for the benefit of our Catholic people who are not African American. These articles need not always be religious in nature. They could challenge stereotypes and help people learn about the Black experience. Many White suburban Catholic teenagers form most of their impressions of Black people from TV and movies, which usually reinforce prejudice and fear.
  5. We must go beyond volunteerism. If the vision of this eighth National Black Catholic Congress is to be implemented, additional resources must be provided to support ongoing, organized efforts. If we are to make progress in getting to know the African American communities around us, we must be willing to invest greater resources and personnel over the long run. We cannot propose teams of full-time, well-trained door-to-door evangelists in Black neighborhoods without acknowledging that such persons must be adequately compensated. Very few of our Black parishes, if any, have the income to pay for this training and compensation. Funding will have to come from the larger Church.
  6. Our usually imposing parish plants may intimidate many people. Could we consider several strategic experiments with neighborhood store-front community development and self-help centers? These could offer a wide range of recreational activities, social services, counseling, employment guidance, Bible classes and simple non-eucharistic worship services tailored to meet the needs of young Black people right off the street. These experimental centers in three or four dioceses would need to be staffed by trained, paid, full-time deacons, sisters or lay persons.
  7. Our Catholic Campaign for Human Development does exceptional work in helping people to help themselves in many situations around the country. Many of us visit these sites and preside at the distribution of funds. Often the beneficiaries of CCHD do not even know what the Catholic Church is and they have no idea that it is the generosity of Catholic people that funds the CCHD. There are obvious pre-evangelization possibilities in the midst of this good work which often takes place in Black neighborhoods. CCHD is not the activity of sincere social workers. It is the work of love of neighbor that flows directly from our commitment to Jesus Christ.
  8. The year-long preparation for baptism mandated by the Rites for the Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) is an exceptional resource for renewal in the Church. Yet it may need to be adapted to be attractive to poorer, younger people. The RCIA is sometimes experienced as too long and involved. If this becomes discouraging, catechumens tend to drop out. Careful attention needs to be given to appropriate ways to adapt this very important process of entering into the life of the Church, without diminishing in any way the real and in-depth instruction and Christian formation that are essential for a life of faith.

9. Our Episcopal Conference has produced a number of detailed statements containing specific proposals, goals, agendas and resolutions addressing the question of the Church in Black communities and the concerns of this Congress. If you re-read them, you might be surprised and disappointed to note how many excellent ideas have been formulated that have never been systematically implemented. These documents include: *Brothers and Sisters to Us*, our 1979 pastoral letter on the sin and heresy of racism that endures in our Church and in American society; *Here I Am, Send Me*, our 1989 conference response to our mission of evangelizing African Americans and the National Black Catholic Pastoral Plan; *Go and Make Disciples*, our 1992 national plan and strategy for Catholic evangelization in the United States; and our 1997 statement, *A Pastoral Plan for Communication*, with an extensive section on evangelization. While there is no need to say more, there is a great need to do more. Is this really a priority for the Church in the United States?
10. My final recommendation may be the most important. We need to pray. I do not speak of occasional, vague, general prayers. I speak of regular, specific prayers focused on conversion. First we should pray for ourselves and our people that God will bring about a true conversion of our hearts, our attitudes and our way of doing things so as to remove any obstacles that we may unintentionally place in the way of evangelization. We should pray that the Holy Spirit help us announce the Gospel in the way of evangelization. We should pray that the Holy Spirit help us announce the Gospel in ways that speak to Black people who really are brothers and sisters to us. We should pray for vocations from African American families to the religious life, the diaconate and the priesthood. We should pray as well for vocation directors and seminary and convent leadership that they will take special care to nurture potential vocations that come to them. We should also ask

our people to pray for these concerns, at home, at Mass and at our chapels of perpetual adoration of the Eucharist.

## V. CONCLUSION

You would not be attending this eighth National Black Catholic Congress unless the relationship between the Catholic Church and Black Americans was a matter of great importance to you. We pray together that the Holy Spirit will guide and inspire us. We can never limit the providential work of the Divine Spirit. While we may not always see in what precise way the Spirit is moving in the work of evangelization, we can be confident that the Spirit whom Christ Himself breathed on the apostles is never working against the authentic efforts of the Church. It is that Spirit who fills us with genuine love for those we wish to call in the name of Christ and fills those who be called with love for us in return.

My brothers, I have spoken to you forthrightly about the challenges that the Catholic Church must face if we are to examine honestly the questions raised by serious reflection on evangelizing African Americans effectively. If the analysis presented here is fundamentally correct, then we can expect no overnight change in the present situation. I firmly believe that we must decide to act in new ways. Otherwise, someone will be giving a similar address ten years from now and the challenge will be greater because the situation will be worse: Why not act now?

Some of what I have said may be discouraging. Let us not be discouraged. When we are discouraged, let us recall the powerful, prophetic words of Pope Paul VI's landmark apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*:

Let us therefore preserve our fervor of spirit, Let us preserve the delightful and comforting joy of evangelizing, even when it is in tears that we must sow. May it mean for us—as it did for John the Baptist, for Peter and Paul, for the other Apostles and for a multitude of splendid evangelizers all through the

Church's history—an interior enthusiasm that no one and nothing can quench. May it be the great joy of our consecrated lives. And may the world of our time, which is searching, sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope, be enabled to receive the Good News not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervor, who have first received the joy of

Christ, and who are willing to risk their lives so that the Kingdom may be proclaimed and the Church established in the midst of the world. Mary, Mother of Africa and Mother of the Church, pray for us! (63-64) ■

Most Rev. Edward K. Braxton is the bishop of Lake Charles, Louisiana, and chairman of the bishops' Committee for the American College of Louvain.

## **BISHOP BRAXTON OFFERS IDEAS FOR GREATER BLACK, WHITE OPENNESS**

BY NANCY FRAZIER O'BRIEN, CATHOLIC NEWS SERVICE • JANUARY 1999

BALTIMORE (CNS)—Auxiliary Bishop Edward K. Braxton of St. Louis outlined ten specific "ways to develop greater openness to Blacks by the Church and to the Church by Blacks" in a January 22 talk in Baltimore.

One of thirteen active Black bishops in the United States, Bishop Braxton was addressing a January 21-22 national consultation sponsored by the National Black Catholic Congress.

Bishop Braxton's talk and others at the 1999 meeting were follow-ups to an address he gave two years earlier at the eighth National Black Catholic Congress, also held in Baltimore. In the 1997 talk, he suggested that the Catholic Church's failure to gain substantial membership in the Black community could be due to the fact that "the way the Church articulates its faith and the degree of welcome that Catholics convey do not communicate the heart of the faith effectively to potential converts."

Bishop Braxton noted that his 1999 speech came at the convergence of four very different events: the seventieth anniversary of the birth of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, discussions in the

Senate of "grave matters of state" involving President Clinton, and the twenty-sixth anniversary of Roe vs. Wade.

The link among those events, he said, is that "they all have profoundly different meaning for African American Catholics and the Black community in general than for the White community."

Commenting on President Clinton's call for a "serious and sustained national conversation" on racism, Bishop Braxton said it "has not been a very loud conversation" and has been "met with indifference and cynicism" on all sides.

In the Catholic Church, he said, there has not been a "great record of prophetic leadership" in response to what he called "the systematic and systemic segregation and resegregation of our cities."

White Catholics who fled to the suburbs when Blacks began moving in next door "did not find in the Catholic Church the inspiration to welcome their new neighbors," he said.