



**CATHOLIC
HOME
MISSIONS**

We Are a Vital Part of the Church: Sharing and Renewing Faith at the National Black Catholic Congress

Bishop Curtis John Guillory, SVD, bishop emeritus of Beaumont, and the delegates from the Catholic Home Mission of Beaumont enjoying the National Black Catholic Congress.



By Rhina Guidos

As a Black Catholic in Birmingham, Alabama, James Watts has heard the question over and over: “How did you become Catholic?” And he responds: “I always was.” In a region where the entire Catholic population hovers around 3% and the Black Catholic population is even smaller, he’s a rarity. “I’m 3% of 3%,” James jokes.

But from July 20 to 23 of this year, he didn’t feel so rare. He was one of 3,000 attendees at the National Black Catholic Congress XIII, held this year at National Harbor in Fort Washington, Maryland, a short distance from Washington, DC. Among the attendees was the archbishop of Washington, Cardinal Wilton D. Gregory, who in 2020 became the first Black American elevated to the College of

Cardinals. “It just made you feel like you belong,” said James, director of the Office of Black Catholic Ministry at the Diocese of Birmingham.

Catholic Home Missions funding allowed 20 participants from five home mission dioceses, including Birmingham, to attend the four-day event. “We are truly thankful,” said James, who traveled with a contingent of young and older parishioners to the event. “Some of them were like ‘wow.’ For a lot of my folks, this is the first time a lot of them have seen that many Black Catholics at one time.”

Along with enjoying opportunities to pray together, attendees took part in sessions on topics including evangelization, synodality and racial divide, gentrification, engagement of younger generations, and ways to create unity in shared parishes.

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Neighbors

ISSUE 4 2023

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FROM MISSION AMERICA

FROM THE CHAIRMAN



Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

From its original meeting in 1889, organized by Ohio journalist Daniel Rudd, to its July 2023 meeting at National Harbor in Fort Washington, Maryland, the National Black Catholic Congress has been bringing together Black Catholic laypeople, clergy, and consecrated religious sisters and brothers from across the United States.

At the congress, Black Catholics have the opportunity to share their faith, discuss the joys and challenges that they experience as Catholic believers, witness to the transformative power of Christ's love, and call for justice in overcoming the sins of racism and division that have been carried down through American history to the present day.

This year's congress was marked by the joyful presence of my brother bishop Cardinal Wilton D. Gregory, the archbishop of Washington and the first Black cardinal from the United States. In his keynote address to the participants, Cardinal Gregory called to mind six Black American Catholics whose causes for canonization are ongoing, including Fr. Augustus Tolton, who celebrated Mass at the first congress in 1889, and Sr. Thea Bowman, who addressed the congress almost a century later in 1987.

In this issue, you will learn how delegates from home mission dioceses were able to participate in this extraordinary experience with special grant funding from Catholic Home Missions. They experienced joy and fellowship and hope for the future, and they returned home with renewed enthusiasm for sharing the Gospel with their families, friends, and neighbors.

Your support for Catholic Home Missions helps the Church support ministries that reach the hearts and strengthen the faith of all people, and you help foster stronger bonds of unity and justice among Church members. I am grateful for your support and dedication to our home mission dioceses.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Most Reverend W. Shawn McKnight

Bishop of Jefferson City

Chairman, USCCB Subcommittee on Catholic Home Missions

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"I was just blown away," said Veronica Boykin, a member of Our Lady of Fatima Parish who joined the Birmingham diocese's delegation. "It was as if you're in the water, you go swimming and you've never gone underneath in the sea, and you've got goggles and everything just opens up. It was just beautiful. It was the most beautiful experience."

Veronica said she came back to her parish with ideas about how to reach out to younger generations, how to make Scripture come alive, and how rich small groups can be. But her experience went beyond the knowledge and skills she walked away with. There was something special about being in the same room with people with whom she could discuss unique shared experiences. "It was such cohesiveness. Everybody was together. I mean, we were there for a purpose," she said.

At the national level, 6% of Black Americans, or 3 million, are Catholic, and they make up 4% of the Catholic Church in the United States, according to figures from the Pew Research Center's 2022 report titled "Black Catholics in America."

Even in small numbers, "we're not a subgroup, we are a vital part of the Church," said Deacon Melvin Payne of the Diocese of Beaumont in Texas, who attended the congress. That sentiment led to the founding of the National Black Catholic Congress more than a century ago, in 1889, by Black Catholic leaders. These leaders included journalist Daniel Rudd, who convened the first gathering in Washington to address issues faced by the group.

Since then, the congress has helped Black Catholics like Deacon Melvin in matters of evangelizing, collaborating with other national Catholic organizations, and improving the lives of Black Catholics in the Church. Deacon Melvin said the event gave him an added sense of mission and urgency in spreading the faith, and he explained that he was thankful for the opportunity of the "powerful experience."

"It keeps you going," James agreed, "particularly when others question Black Catholics' decision to stay in the Church. Some people look at you like you're not supposed to be Catholic for a number of reasons."

"One of the sessions brought that out into the light," added Veronica. "Sometimes when we say that we're Catholic, we kind of whisper that 'we're Catholic.'" But one of the presenters talked about "how everybody should be proud to say you're Catholic, proud to show your faith, proud to be involved in it," she recalled.

And Veronica and the others pointed out that a big point of pride at this congress was having the first opportunity to



Very Rev. Vernon Huguley, vicar of Black ministry (left), and James Watts represent the Diocese of Birmingham at the National Black Catholic Congress.

listen to an African American cardinal, one who understands their experience. “We have kept the faith, even when many could not understand why or how we have kept the faith,” Cardinal Gregory said to them in his keynote address, adding that even in challenging moments, “the Eucharist gives us the energy and the impetus to continue to strive for justice. The Eucharist nourishes us.”

The cardinal spoke to them of the six Black candidates who are currently being considered for canonization. They include Pierre Toussaint, Mother Mary Lange, Henriette DeLille, Julia Greeley, and two candidates with a special connection to the congress: Fr. Augustus Tolton, who celebrated Mass at the first congress in 1889, and Sr. Thea Bowman, who spoke at the 1987 congress.

The congress meets every five years in different cities. It was supposed to meet in 2022 but was delayed by a year due to pandemic precautions. But the delay didn’t dampen the spirits of those who attended. “It was a real rewarding experience, as far as seeing that many Black Catholics come together along with the cardinals, bishops, priests, and just really uplifting and inspiring, encouraging,” Deacon Melvin said. “It gave me a great hope for the future, not only [for] Black Catholics in the Church, but of the Church in general, and the energy that was there.”

That sense of hope comes even after the painful moments Black Catholics have faced in the Church. Deacon Melvin recalled growing up in a place where Black and white Catholic communities didn’t mix. Growing up Catholic in the city of Orange, Texas, meant dealing with racially segregated churches, he said. “I can recall my mother telling me stories about going to the parish that I’m assigned to right now, back in the earlier years, having to sit in the back of the church,” he recalled.

That parish is where he now serves as deacon. Today she watches him serving “at the altar now in the same church where she had to sit in the back of the church at one point.” These days, she sits in the front to watch her son, the deacon. “And that gave her tremendous pride as far as where Black people had come from in our community,” he said.

For those Black Catholics, like James, who have attended previous congresses, the event offers opportunities to see themselves in

positions of leadership in a parish or a diocese and also to help with vocations. One of the main objectives of this congress, James said, was to work on a national pastoral plan to identify key objectives for the Black Catholic population. For him, urgent objectives include fostering leadership and making people feel welcome. “We got a lot of people leaving the Church now, a lot of young folks,” he said. “But when they go to something like [the congress], it makes them come back and it makes them want to work.”

Veronica shares some of those worries, but she also found inspiration among those gathered. Mass attendance at her parish has not rebounded to pre-pandemic levels, she said, but the congress helped her brainstorm ideas about initiatives she can implement. “I’m thinking, why not do something now to get the ball rolling and to reach our youth?” she said.

**“We’re not a subgroup,
we are a vital part of the Church.”**

Deacon Melvin said the gathering provided him with an added sense of mission and urgency about spreading the faith to other African Americans. “It’s important for us to come away from the congress and put our faith into practice and just reaching out, witnessing, evangelizing, just going out to the public and just witnessing our faith, coming out of the confines of the church buildings,” he said. “It is important for us to actually meet people where they are and just bring the presence of Christ to people as we encounter them.”

For James, gathering to tackle common challenges and draft a pastoral plan together is invaluable for the future of the Church. But the most wonderful byproduct of that process is the gift of unity. “It’s also like a big revival, it energizes people so much,” he said. “We have really good speakers and we have really good workshops. So, between that and the fellowship it was just an amazing event. And I know my people were really blown away with it.”

Veronica said she was glad her son had the opportunity to attend as well and see someone like Cardinal Gregory, especially his engagement with youth. “The young people were so proud,” she said.

She’s looking forward to another gathering in five years. The sentiment is shared by Deacon Melvin, who said he also wants to return and to share the experience with his wife next time. “It was truly a blessing to have had the opportunity, and I’m thankful to the diocese and those involved for allowing me to participate in this congress and give me that opportunity to be in that environment of energy, of love, of faith,” Deacon Melvin said. ■



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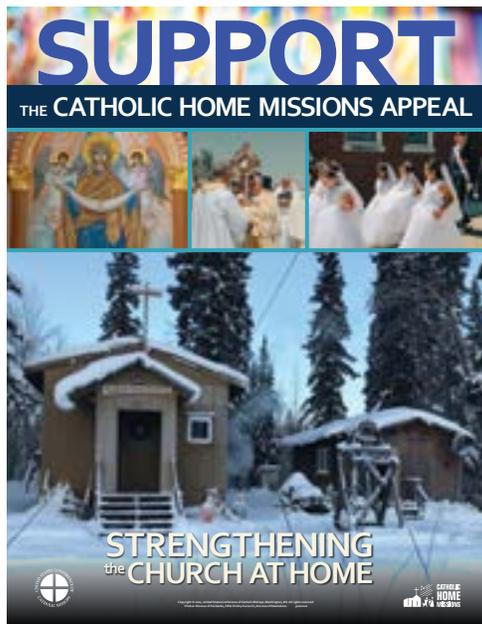
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DID YOU KNOW?

- 6% of Black adults are Catholics, while 4% of Catholic adults are Black, according to a [2022 Pew Research study](#) titled “Black Catholics in America.”
- The Black Catholic population of the United States numbers approximately 3 million, according to the same study.
- The National Black Catholic Congress began in the late 1800s and held congresses in 1889, 1890, 1892, 1893, and 1894. Almost a century later, the congress resumed in 1987 and has met every five years since then. This year’s congress was delayed from 2022 until 2023 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- For more information about the National Black Catholic Congress, please visit nbccongress.org.

Our work is supported by the annual collection taken up in U.S. parishes. If you missed your parish collection, you may send your donation to: USCCB Office of National Collections | P. O. Box 96278 | Washington, DC 20090-6278. Please make checks payable to USCCB-Catholic Home Missions Appeal. iGiveCatholicTogether also accepts contributions to support the Catholic Home Missions program: <https://usccb.givecatholictogether.org/organizations/usccb-catholic-home-missions>

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