

'WHAT WE HAVE SEEN AND HEARD'

A Pastoral Letter on Evangelization From the Black Bishops of the United States

INTRODUCTION

On September 9, 1984, the ten Black Bishops of the United States published this document as a witness to the Black community. The Bishops sought to explain that evangelization is both a call and a response, it means not only preaching, but also witnessing. The first part of the document is about the shared gifts rooted in the African heritage. In part two, they discussed the obstacles to evangelization that still must be overcome.

Part One - The Gifts We Share

We have many gifts from our African past that we must share. Our Blackness is a gift as well as our Catholic faith. By sharing we will enrich our community, our Church and ourselves.

Scripture: African-American spirituality is based on Sacred Scripture. From the dark days of slavery, we heard Bible stories repeated in sermons, spirituals and shouts. God will protect his people and preserve his children. For Blacks, this Bible promise is a message of liberation and hope. "You will know the truth," Jesus said, "and the truth will set you free" [John 8: 32].

For Black people freedom is a cherished gift from God, never to be abused or taken for granted, but freedom brings responsibility too. We oppose oppression for, unless all are free, none are free. We must teach others to value freedom and work to see that none are denied its benefits.

The Gift of Reconciliation: The Gospel message calls us to forgiveness and reconciliation. This value comes from our Black heritage. True reconciliation arises only where there is equality. This is justice and justice safeguards the rights of all. People must respect the cultural values of others, which will result in an authentic Christian love.

Our Spirituality and Its Gifts: "Black Spirituality" has four major characteristics.

1) Black Spirituality is contemplative. Prayer is spontaneous and pervasive in the Black tradition. Our ancestors taught that we cannot run from God, we must lean on him and surrender to his love.

2) Black Spirituality is holistic. The religious experience is one of the whole human being - feelings, intellect, heart and head.

3) Black Spirituality is joyful, a celebration in movement, song, rhythm, feeling and thanksgiving. This joy is a sign of our faith.

4) Black Spirituality is communal. In African culture individual identity is found within the context of the community. The good of the community must come before personal profit and advancement. In the same way worship is a celebration of community with no one being left out or forgotten. Community also means social concern and social justice. Our spiritual heritage always embraces the total human person.

The Family: The heart of the human community is the family and the Black family has been assailed. In the African tradition, family has always meant "the extended family" -grandparents, uncles, aunts, god-parents, all related kin and close friends. Circumstances often required childcare to be the responsibility of many. Despite the erosion of our family life we as a people still have a strong sense of family bonds. This carries over to our Church where we see ourselves as brothers and sisters to one another.

For historical reasons the Black man was the object of racial hate, stripping him of his dignity. We must reevaluate the vocation of fatherhood and the importance of the Black man in the context of the Black family. We challenge Black men to assert their spiritual strength and sense of responsibility. They must be models of virtue for their children and loving partners for their wives. Without a father, no family life is complete.

In Black history, women have been sources of strength and examples of courage and resolution. They have had to assume responsibilities within the family and the community. Black women have not been subordinates to Black men, but they have served a complementary role. Black women have always been influential within the Black tradition.

Abortion and Black Values: Black cultural tradition has always valued life. Children conceived outside of marriage became part of the extended family. Children have always been a sign of hope, but this perspective has been lost and is a cultural and spiritual impoverishment for us as a people. As a people of faith, we must fight for the right to life of all our children.

Ecumenism: There exists a reality called "The Black Church." It has no denomination, no formal structure. Black Christians feel at ease joining in prayer with one another. The Black Church is a result of our common experience and history - it allows Blacks to understand and appreciate each other, but Blacks are loyal to their respective faith communities. Black Catholics, most particularly, insist upon total loyalty to all that is Catholic. As Black Catholics, we are in a special position to serve as a bridge with our brothers and sisters of other Christian traditions. We encourage all Black Catholics to deepen their awareness and understanding of the whole Black Church.

Part Two - The Call of God to His People

Perspective: The historical roots of Black America are intimately intertwined with those of Catholic America. As Black Americans and Black Catholics it is time for us to reclaim our roots and to shoulder the responsibilities of being both Black and Catholic.

This responsibility is to our own people whom we owe the witness of our Faith in Christ, to his Church and to our Church we owe our witness of faith, as well as denouncing racism as a sin while fighting for justice and inner renewal.

Black Initiative: We now have a solemn responsibility to lead the Church's work within the Black community. We must counter the assumption that to become Catholic is to abandon one's racial heritage and one's people! The Catholic Church is not a "White Church." It is universal and, hence, Catholic. The Black presence in the American Catholic Church is a precious witness to the universal character of Catholicism.

The Catholic Church, however, must preserve its multi-cultural identity. In this country it must reflect the richness of African-American history and its heritage. This is our gift to the Church in the United States.

Authorization and Encouragement: We must encourage Black leaders in the American Church - clergy, religious and lay. Unhappily, we must acknowledge that the major hindrance to the full development of Black leadership within the Church is still racism. Blacks and other minorities are meagerly represented on the decision-making level. Inner-city schools are disappearing and Black vocational recruitment lacks support. This subtle racism still festers within our Church as it does in society. Some progress has been made, but much remains to do. This stain of racism, which is so alien to the Spirit of Christ, is an opportunity to work for renewal through evangelization.

Opportunities for Evangelization: Many opportunities exist for evangelization within the Black community. Parents, teachers and educators must encourage our young men and women to follow Christ in the priesthood and in the consecrated life. And after entering seminaries or novitiates we must help those students maintain contact with their Black communities by renewing contact with Black culture, history and theological studies.

Every effort should be made to recruit qualified candidates for the Office of Deacon from our Black parishes. Many permanent deacons continue to pursue their occupations in the work place and this gives them opportunities for evangelization, where a priest or religious might find entry difficult.

Our youth should be taught they have an opportunity to evangelize their peers. In our urban areas despair, desires, drugs and poverty entrap our youth. Adults and mature youths dedicated to Christ are needed as counselors. We can institute youth programs such as retreats, camps and recreational facilities.

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults could be a powerful instrument of evangelization if adapted to the life and culture of Blacks.

The Catholic school system offers an opportunity for quality education and character development, as well as a sign of stability in an environment of chaos and flux. Catholic schools in our neighborhoods should be a concern of the entire Black community.

Liturgy: The celebration of the Sacred Mysteries is that moment when the Church is most fully actualized and most clearly revealed. In the African-American tradition communal worship has always been an experience of God's power and love. From the standpoint of evangelization, the liturgy of the Catholic Church has always drawn the Black community to the Faith. In recent years talented Black experts have adapted the liturgy to the needs of the African-American community without compromising the essential qualities of the liturgical celebration. The Mystery of Christ transcends all cultures; the way the Mystery is expressed is mediated by culture and tradition. In this way we can speak of an African-American style in music, preaching, bodily expression, vestment and tempo. There is a splendid opportunity for the vast richness of African-American culture to be expressed in our Catholic liturgy.

The Social Apostolate: Finally, the causes of justice and social concern are an essential part of evangelization. To preach to the powerful without denouncing oppression is to trivialize the Gospel. As Black people we must have concern for those who hunger and thirst for justice throughout the world. We must not ignore those whom others tend to forget, and even contribute our efforts and money. When we share our talents and our possessions with the forgotten ones of this world, we share Christ. This is the essence of evangelization itself.