


in a
WordTM

A Publication of The Society of the Divine Word, Southern Province

Volume 30, No. 8, October 2012

Photo by: Father James Pawlicki, SVD

A woman with dark hair, wearing a red polo shirt and a blue lanyard, is speaking at a conference. She has her hands raised in a gesture of emphasis. The lanyard has text that reads "The National Black Catholic Congress • NBCC". The shirt has text that reads "DIVERSITY OF GOD AND".

Overwhelmingly, and in every age group,
African American Catholics declare religion
an essential part of daily life.

-from National Black Catholic Survey

WHAT YOU DEMEAN MAY BE THE REAL THING

by
Father Jerome Ledoux, SVD

“Holding hands and such things come from the low part of the Church,” stated a deacon about the custom in some churches of holding hands during the Our Father.

Could the deacon have rather stated much more accurately that holding hands and such things are of cultural origin, especially in black churches, and originate from the grassroots?

When the deacon said “from the low part of the Church,” he evidently was not aware that he was talking about that part of the Church from which the most dynamic liturgy comes. Saying “from the low part of the Church” in a disparaging way, he betrayed a puzzling ignorance about the true nature of liturgy, “the action of the people.”

In the act of demeaning them, the deacon was saying that such customs are actually a part of liturgy that by definition comes from the very grassroots about which he says with disdain, “Holding hands and such things come from the low part of the Church.” According to that reality, “the high part of the Church” should take notice.

Quite often, “the high part of the Church” is too far removed from the grassroots to be aware of the mainstream thrust of various ethnic groups. If people in “the high part of the Church” consider themselves elite, they must remember that Jesus did not consider himself elite. Rather, Jesus says in Matthew 20:28, “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Nevertheless, we are not engaging in class warfare here by comparing “the high part of the Church” to “the low part of the Church.” We are trying to affirm that all of us have much to learn from each other, no matter what our ethnic or cultural roots are.

Jesus exploded once for all the ethnic/ sexual/ denominational/ class myth in John 4. In his epic encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, the very earthy woman threw all our human problems at Jesus, beginning with her first question, “How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?” That toxic mix of ethnicism and sexism were followed by a reality check into religious bigotry and family issues.



“Our ancestors worshiped here,” the woman continued, “but you people say that the place to worship is in Jerusalem.” Jesus’ timeless response was, “Believe me, woman, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem... the hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth.”

Those who are in “the high part of the Church” had better take notice of what Jesus says about the place of worship as well as the manner of worship. The place is totally secondary since the assembly – ecclesia in Greek – is really the Church. **The only manner that counts is that “true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth.”**

The Samaritan woman at the well is an eloquent spokesperson for “the low part of the Church.” All the everyday human issues in the dialogue of Jesus and the Samaritan woman make this arguably the second-most powerful story in all the Bible. By sincere dialogue and healing from Jesus, she became a heroine in “the low part of the Church.”

Sure, the Samaritan woman was damaged commodity, but so was tarnished Mary Magdalene who is one of the all-time superstars of the Bible and the lore of Christianity. There are no rejects in our Father’s kingdom, for Jesus transforms rejects into saints.

Paul touts this in 2 Corinthians 12:9-10, when the Lord told him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” Paul answered, “I will rather boast most gladly of my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me... Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and constraints for the sake of Christ; for when I am weak, then I am strong.”

We must be ever knowledgeable of and sensitive to the cultures, shortcomings and family history of others. We offend them and even anger them by disrespecting beliefs, narratives and procedures that are very dear to them as part of the fabric of their lives.

What we berate, demean and demonize may embody the very truth we claim to pursue. In fact, according to “The Little Way” of Paul, St. Therese of Lisieux and Jesus “meek and humble of heart,” God works wonders through “the low, weak Church.”

*“God is love, and all who abide in love abide in God and God in them.”
(1 John 4:16)*

As mentioned in last month's issue we we will look at the National Black Catholic Pastoral Plan item by item each month. In this issue we look at the first section titled HOLINESS OF LIFE.

*This Pastoral Plan of Action is an organizational tool, offering guidelines and resources for the faithful, so that we may engage and spread the Good News. It is also a focal point for reflection on ten core elements in our faith lives as Black Catholics. We recognize that each parish and diocese will adapt the plan to the particular needs of their local church.
(from introduction to Congress XI Pastoral Plan)*

I. HOLINESS OF LIFE

Introduction

I am the LORD who brought you out of Egypt so that I could be your God. You must be holy, because I am holy. (Leviticus 11:45)

We affirm our faith in Jesus Christ, true God and true man, and the Holy Catholic Church, his bride and mystical body. We strive for holiness of life and health of mind and body. We affirm the Holy Eucharist as the “source and summit” of our lives as Catholics (CCC 1324), empowering us to spread the Good News.

Our perspective, as African Americans:

Social scientists have repeatedly found that African Americans are more religiously engaged than other Americans. The recent National Black Catholic Survey confirms that Black Catholics have a “strong and resilient” faith. Weekly Mass attendance, reliance on the counsel of a priest, and engagement in parish life are common practices among Black Catholics.

Overwhelmingly, and in every age group, Black Catholics declare religion an essential part of daily life. As the 11th National Black Catholic Congress, we celebrate the faithfulness in our community and seek to sustain and nourish holiness in ourselves and future generations.

Our faith engaged:

Empowered by the grace of God, we commit ourselves to conversion and holiness of life. Created in the image and likeness of God and called to live in perfect communion with Him, we commit ourselves to



a life-long journey of faith, hope, and love, seeking to serve God by prayer, repentance, praise, and worship, and the active service of our brothers and sisters, especially those most in need.

We renew our commitment to the sacramental life of the Church, especially the Mass, Eucharistic Adoration, and the sacrament of Penance.

in a word or two

With his Apostolic Letter *Porta fidei* of 11 October 2011, Benedict XVI declared a Year of Faith. It will begin on 11 October 2012, 50th anniversary of the opening of Vatican Council II, and will conclude on 24 November 2013, Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ Universal King.



The Holy Father's aim in promulgating this Year is to focus the attention of the Church on the theme which, since the beginning of his Pontificate, has been closest to his heart: the encounter with Jesus Christ and the beauty of having faith in Him. The Church is well aware of the problems facing the faith and feels impelled by the question Jesus Himself raised: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Lk 18: 8). Therefore, "if faith does not take on new life, deep conviction and real strength from the encounter with Jesus Christ, then all other reforms will remain ineffective" (*Christmas address to the Roman Curia, 22 December 2011*).

By order of Benedict XVI, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has prepared a Note with pastoral recommendations for the Year of Faith. The Note contains an introduction followed by a number of pastoral recommendations.

The Introduction explains that "the Year of Faith is intended to contribute to a renewed conversion to the Lord Jesus and to the rediscovery of faith, so that the members of the Church will be credible and joy-filled witnesses to the Risen Lord, capable of leading those many people who are seeking it to the door of faith".

"The beginning of the Year of Faith coincides with the anniversaries of two great events which have marked the life of the Church in our days: the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council, called by Blessed Pope John XXIII (11 October 1962), and the twentieth of the promulgation of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, given to the Church by Blessed Pope John Paul II (11 October 1992).

Vatican Council II, "beginning with the light of Christ, ... wanted to elaborate on the intimate nature of the Church and its relationship with the contemporary world". "After the Council the Church – under the sure guidance of the

Magisterium and in continuity with the whole Tradition – set about ensuring the reception and application of the teaching of the Council in all its richness".

"To assist in the correct reception of the Council, the Popes have frequently convoked the Synod of Bishops. The next General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, to be held in October 2012, will have as its theme: *The New Evangelisation for the Transmission of the Christian Faith*.

The Year of Faith will be a propitious occasion to make Vatican Council II and the Catechism of the Catholic Church more widely and deeply known.

The pastoral recommendations contained in the Note aim "to aid both the encounter with Christ through authentic witnesses to faith, and the ever-greater understanding of its contents". Through these pastoral recommendations - which do not intend to preclude "other initiatives which the Holy Spirit will inspire among Pastors and faithful in various parts of the world" - the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is seeking to offer its help, because its specific functions include not only safeguarding sound doctrine and correcting errors but also, and foremost, promoting the truth of the faith (*cf. Apostolic Constitution *Pastor Bonus*, nos. 48-51*).

At the parish level the focus remains on the celebration of the faith in the liturgy, especially in the Eucharist, because "in the Eucharist, mystery of faith and source of the new evangelisation, the faith of the Church is proclaimed, celebrated and strengthened". It is on this foundation that other initiatives will come into being, develop and spread, particularly those undertaken by Institutes, new Communities and Ecclesial Movements.

All members of the Church are to work to ensure that, during the Year of Faith, we may rediscover and "share that which is most dear to us: Christ Jesus, the Redeemer of mankind, Universal King, "leader and perfecter of faith" (Hb 12: 2)".

The above information on the Year of Faith came from the Vatican website .

Front cover photo of Rhonda Cross of Cleveland, Ohio at Congress XI in Indianapolis, Indiana.

Divine Word Missionaries is an international missionary community of over 7,000 brothers and priests. In 1905 the SVDs began working among African Americans in the Southern United States. Today, Divine Word Missionaries work in over 35 parishes in Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas and Arkansas.

IN A WORD is a publication of The Society of the Divine Word's Media Production Center. Rev. James Pawlicki, S.V.D., Director and Editor; Cathy Green-Miner, office manager; Father Brendan Murphy, SVD consultant.

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IN A WORD is not published during July and August.

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