

## CHAPTER ONE

# WE'VE COME THIS FAR BY FAITH

## Black Catholics and Their Church

THE BLACK CATHOLIC BISHOPS<sup>1</sup> of the United States issued their first and, to date, only pastoral letter, *What We Have Seen and Heard*,<sup>2</sup> in 1984. They did so in recognition of their belief that “the Black Catholic community in the American Church has now come of age.” This coming of age, they noted, brings with it the duty, the privilege, and the joy to share with others the rich experience of the “Word of Life.”<sup>3</sup> Today, we are witnesses to further signs of that coming of age. African American Catholics<sup>4</sup> are today asserting their rightful place in the Roman Catholic Church, nationally and globally. Basing our claim for recognition and inclusion on our history in the American church, which predates the Mayflower, our persistent faith gives living expression to the “Word of Life,” which we have received and which we fully embrace:

you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. (Eph 2:19-22)

Strangers and sojourners no longer, African American Catholics can no longer be required, in the words of the Psalmist, to “. . . sing the Lord’s song in a strange land” (Ps 137). Instead, we are taking down our harps and

converting that “strange land” into a homeland, one rich with the woven tapestries of our voices lifted in praise and song; of our spirituality expressed in deep and heartfelt prayer and preaching; and of our cultural heritage—a colorful mixture of peoples of Africa, the Caribbean, the West Indies, South America, and North America.

## A New Birth

In many ways, the voices of these new and yet so old Catholics can be seen as calling forth a new witness. We see ourselves as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people” who work to “declare the wonderful deeds of him who called (us) out of darkness into his marvelous light.” Throughout our existence in the United States we were seen as “no people” but today, African American Catholics affirm that we “are God’s people”; once little mercy was given us “but now (we) have received mercy” from God on high (1 Peter 2:9-10). As part of that witness, we recognize the necessity of exposing the miseducation received by all, of whatever race, who dwell in this land regarding the contributions of our black and Catholic foremothers and forefathers to the present status of the United States. The truth of our history, both in this and other adopted lands, and in our motherland as well, must be recovered, for that history reveals the proud and distinctive heritage that is ours, one which predates the Greek and Roman empires as well as Christopher Columbus. Black Catholics must also tell our story within our church, a story that has as part of its richness a cherished role in the life of the church dating back to Africa. For it was our African foremothers and forefathers who received the teachings of Christ from the church’s earliest beginnings; they who nurtured and sheltered those teachings, preserving them from the depredations of those who were not believers; they who received, revitalized, and re-Christianized those teachings, too often distorted at the hands of their would-be masters, in the new lands of the Americas. Cyprian Davis has written of those early years of African history:

Long before Christianity arrived in the Scandinavian countries, at least a century before St. Patrick evangelized Ireland, and over two centuries before St. Augustine would arrive in Canterbury, and almost seven centuries before the conversion of the Poles and the establishment of the kingdom of Poland, this mountainous Black kingdom (Ethiopia) was a Catholic nation with its own liturgy, its own spectacular religious art, its own monastic tradition, its saints, and its own spirituality.<sup>5</sup>

This cherished heritage must once again be brought forth, exposed to the light of a new day, and shared with all of the church catholic.

One can arguably say that the continued presence of black Catholics in the Roman Catholic Church in the United States serves as a subversive memory, one that turns all of reality upside down, for it is a memory of hope brought forth from pain, of perseverance maintained in the face of bloody opposition, of faith born of tortured struggle.<sup>6</sup> It is the memory of a people forced to bring forth life from conditions conducive only to death, much as Christ himself was restored to life after a scandalous death. Ours is a memory of survival against all odds. It is the memory of a people, born in a strange and often hostile land, paradoxically celebrating Christ's victory over death as a sign of God's promise of their eventual liberation from a harsh servitude imposed by their fellow Christians. Today, black Catholics are affirming that we are no longer sojourners, we are no longer just passing through; we are here to stay and intend to celebrate our presence as only we can.

### The Sinful Persistence of Racism

This memory becomes even more challenging when we recognize the demographic shifts taking place both in the United States and in the Roman Catholic Church as we enter upon the third millennium. U.S. Census statistics present a picture of a very different American society and American Catholic church, one in which persons of color, as a whole, are the majority rather than the minority. African American Catholics will be a part of this majority, which can be seen, depending on one's perspective, as threatening to the very stability and identity of both church and state, or simply as a sign of the changing times that must be dealt with.<sup>7</sup>

These changes do provide a critical challenge for us as church today as we seek to affirm the new understandings of theology, ministry, and liturgy that are emerging from persons heretofore marginalized on the church's periphery. The development of a black Catholic theology is only one example of these shifts in understanding that must be acknowledged and affirmed. This theology was born out of the struggle to maintain both our Catholic faith and our black culture, in the face of the racism that still besets our church, institutionally and individually. The Pontifical Peace and Justice Commission noted in 1989:

Today racism has not disappeared. There are even troubling new manifestations of it here and there in various forms, be they spontaneous, officially tolerated or institutionalized. The victims are certain groups of persons

whose physical appearance or ethnic, cultural or religious characteristics are different from those of the dominant group and are interpreted by the latter as being signs of innate and definite inferiority, thereby justifying all discriminatory practices in their regard.<sup>8</sup>

Racism is a fact of life that continues to torment black Americans regardless of their particular faith. It has its roots in the very foundations of our society where, in drafting the Constitution, the enslavement of blacks was recognized and accepted. The revolutionary phrases of the founding fathers, proclaiming liberty and justice for all and declaring the equality of all “men,” ignored the condition of black humanity. As the late Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall noted, “the famous first three words of that document, ‘We the People,’ did not include women, who were denied the vote, or blacks, who were enslaved.”<sup>9</sup> The intent was clearly expressed in the notification that blacks counted as only three-fifths of a white person and then only for the purpose of white male representation in the new Congress. The Constitution of the United States of America was developed not as a color-blind document, but as one assuring the hegemony of white, propertied males over all others living in the newly formed union.

Racism, today, has changed its face. Rather than the blatant, overt racism of prior years, today we are confronted with a more sinister—because it is less visible—form of covert racism. Institutional racism “originates in the operation of established and respected forces in the society and thus receives far less public consideration.”<sup>10</sup>

As such, institutional racism is more than a form “sanctioned by the Constitution and laws of a country”<sup>11</sup> as the Vatican commission suggests. For even after that Constitution has been expunged of its color bias and the laws mandating segregation and second-class citizenship have been removed, the aura of institutionalized racism still persists. It persists in the very warp and woof of that society, which has, for so long, been imbued with an ideology supported all too often by an erroneous interpretation of the teachings of sacred scripture.

The 1960s and 1970s saw significant changes in the laws governing American society with regard to African Americans. Yet, today, many of those changes have been nullified and labeled as preferential treatment, thereby ignoring the centuries of slavery and second-class citizenship that hindered the descendants of African slaves from attaining equal opportunity before the law. All too often, persons of faith have been silent in the face of these assaults against the human dignity of persons of color.

Racism still persists. It is a mind-set that flies in the face of sacred scripture and the teachings of the Christian church. It is a distortion of the teaching that “all are endowed with a rational soul and are created in God’s image.”<sup>12</sup> Racism is incompatible with God’s design. It is a sin that goes beyond the individual acts of individual human beings. Racism, to be blunt, is sin that is incorporated into and becomes a constituent part of the framework of society, sin that is the concentration to the infinite of the personal sins of those who condone evil.

The U.S. Catholic bishops have affirmed this understanding:

The structures of our society are subtly racist, for these structures reflect the values which society upholds. They are geared to the success of the majority and the failure of the minority. Members of both groups give unwitting approval by accepting things as they are. Perhaps no single individual is to blame. The sinfulness is often anonymous but nonetheless real. The sin is social in nature in that each of us in some measure are accomplices. . . . The absence of personal fault for an evil does not absolve one of all responsibility. We must seek to resist and undo injustices we have not caused, lest we become bystanders who tacitly endorse evil and so share in guilt for it.<sup>13</sup>

## Reflecting on the Journey

Theology, in its simplest understanding, can be seen as “God-talk.” We, as African American Catholics, often become intimidated when asked to reflect theologically on a matter of importance to us, such as our relationship with God or how we see our role in the church, because we see ourselves as academically unqualified. There are too few of us with academic degrees in systematic theology.<sup>14</sup> Yet, when asked to simply talk about God’s action in our lives, or the working of the Holy Spirit in our midst, our reaction is quite different.

Although the world of academe may not recognize our reflections as such, we are, indeed, speaking theologically when we do this. And as African Americans, we have been doing so for all of our existence. What we have done, as a holistic people in whom the sacred and secular are intertwined rather than alienated, is simply to talk about God, about Jesus Christ, about the Holy Spirit, and about their importance in our lives—a God that you can lean on, a brother you can depend on in your darkest hours, a Spirit that walks with you and brings peace to a troubled soul. We have not put our theology down in dry, dusty tomes that no one can or really wants to read; we have lived it in the midst

of our daily lives. That theology has been expressed most clearly in our songs, in our stories, in our prayers. We talk of a God who saves, a God who preserves, a God who frees and continues to free us from the troubles of this world.

Theology can also be seen as “interested conversation.” In other words, theology is talk, dialogue, discussion, conversation about God and God’s salvific action in the world not from an objective, unbiased stance because no such stance truly exists, but from the perspective of one who is “involved,” one who is caught up in that discussion, one whose involvement is “colored,” as it were, by his or her own history, heritage and culture. We cannot speak about the church, Jesus Christ, or anything else except from within the context of who we are: a people caught in a daily struggle to survive despite the constant assaults of racism, prejudice, and discrimination from the institutional structures of both our society and our church.

This is to say, in one sense, that there are as many different theologies within the church as there are persons talking about God but, on the other hand, that all of these theologies have as their foundation the context of Roman Catholicism with its particular teachings, traditions, and faith beliefs. Our theology as African American Catholics is “interested conversation” about that “ultimate reality” that is central to the core of our being, our faith in Jesus Christ. As such, it cannot be understood or conceived of apart from our being and the place in which we find ourselves. All theologies are particular, rooted in and arising from a particular context, the context of the people engaged in their development. Theology arises out of their loves and their angers, their joys and their sorrows, their sufferings and their hopes for a better tomorrow as they express these in the light of their faith. Today, we, as an African American Catholic people, are engaged in the development of a black Catholic theology that speaks truly to us and expresses who we are and whose we are, as children of a justice-loving God, for the enlightenment of the entire church.

We are African Americans: a people with roots deeply sunk in the history and culture of our African homeland, yet also a people with a long and proud history in these United States. Both strands of our heritage are important in defining who we are. Neither can be denied without denying an important part of our very selves. That understanding of who we are and whose we are impacts our theologizing. It “colors,” quite simply, our concept of God, our faith in Jesus Christ, our existence in the Holy Spirit, our total understanding of what it means to be “truly black and authentically Catholic.” Our reflections are not abstract or objective; they are particular, because they are grounded in the context of African American history, which is a history of slavery, of second-class citizenship, and of discrimination, both in U.S.

society and in our mother church as well. It is also, more importantly, a history of struggle, of perseverance, of hope, of faith, and of survival against all odds and all obstacles placed in our path.

As a holistic people, however, the pain does not outweigh the hope; the struggle does not diminish the faith. We rejoice in the intertwining, rather than the separation, of the many strands of our life, for we are a people for whom religious faith has been and remains an integral part of who and what we are. Thus, the context of our theologizing is a deep rootedness in our faith, examined in the light of Christ's teachings and a religious tradition dating back to the early church. Accordingly, our lives must be a witness to the ongoing and pervasive presence of the gospel within us and must reflect that presence back into the world in which we live.

We, therefore, cherish our memories, painful though they may often be, for they serve as subversive memories memories that turn all of reality upside down, as Jesus Christ did in his life, death, and resurrection. They are memories that transform that which is seen as worthless to that which is of the highest value. We remember, not with an eye toward revenge, but to prevent faintheartedness in the struggle. We remember that we, as a people, survived and continue to survive despite it all. The apostle Paul's words have a particular significance for us: "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are" (1 Cor 1:27-28).

We have been and, too often, continue to be seen as the "low and despised" in the world in which we find ourselves, but paradoxically we see ourselves also as that chosen race and priestly people commissioned to overturn the miseducation of ourselves and all Americans regarding African Americans. Knowledge and understanding of our chosenness comes to us from our God who nurtured and sustained us like a bridge over the troubled waters of our sojourn here. It is from God that we received our faith and it is to God that we turn in the bosom of our church, the Roman Catholic Church. For, as earlier noted, it is the church that our foremothers and forefathers nurtured and sustained long before many who now claim total ownership of it even knew of its existence.

Black Catholics have remained in the church, feeling love and hate, forgiveness and frustration, concern and impatience. We, too, the darker brothers and sisters of this country, are a vital and vibrant part of the Roman Catholic Church. We, too, have gifts of song, story, and praise to offer the church universal. And we know that those gifts are not only needed but welcomed by

the number of our Catholic brothers and sisters who attend our services of worship and even join our gospel choirs, recognizing, perhaps, the absence of a joy-filled praise of God in their lives that brings a comforting peace.

Yet, still, we wonder at the coldness with which we are so often received and at the anger that is directed toward us. How do we prove that we are who we say we are? Why must we even do so? As W. E. B. DuBois recognized almost a century ago, African Americans, and especially African American Catholics, are so often caught in a quandary. He states,

it is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his [or her] twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.<sup>15</sup>

This has been our quandary in the four hundred years of our sojourn in this land. But the confusion is now at end. The turmoil is over. The strivings are reconciled. There is evidence throughout this nation that our Catholic African American sisters and brothers are taking down their harps from the walls, they are taking them out of the dark trunks and closets where they have been gathering the dust of the ages, and are proclaiming, as our poetic brother did years ago, that we, too, sing America.

We are proclaiming to the church and the world at large that to be black and Catholic is not a paradox; it is not a conflict; it is not a contradiction. To be black and Catholic is correct; it is authentic; it is who we are and have always been. For ironically, it must also be recognized that questions about our faithfulness have come not just from our Catholic family but from the greater black community, who mistakenly assume that all African Americans are or should be Protestant. This is further evidence of the critical need for the full history of the African presence in early Christianity as well as in the United States to be told—a history that predates the English-speaking Protestant colonies. For in so telling, naysayers will have to acknowledge that there have been African peoples in the Catholic church as long as that church has existed. Black faith is not and cannot be limited to one church or one expression. But it does share in a richness of heritage that predates Christianity and that continues to shape and form it into a new creation.

The time has finally come for African American Catholics to fully articulate our self-understanding and to present that articulation not only to our brothers and sisters in the Roman Catholic Church, but to all with whom we



come into contact. If theology is “God-talk,” if it is “interested conversation,” then we must become full and active participants in that conversation, which has been going on for too long a time without our input.

In our gatherings, discussions, dialogues, days of reflection, revivals, and congresses, we are developing a theology—a way of speaking about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the church, and all that pertains to them in a way that is indigenous to us—that is Africentric, that is truly black and authentically Catholic. Our way of doing theology stems from our understanding of and faith in a God who is an active, interested, and loving participant in our history.

We say this not to be divisive, not to deny the truths and teachings of our Catholic faith, but simply to acknowledge for ourselves and to demand from others the recognition of our distinctive Catholicity, a Catholicity with African roots and myriad branches.

## Speaking the Truth

It is time to “speak the truth to the people.”<sup>16</sup> It is time for the history of the darker peoples of the Catholic church to be set forth so that all can learn, not only of the dark days of colonization and enslavement, but also of the days of civilizations ancient and renowned throughout the world. Instead of others’ stories, we must learn of and share our stories so that we see ourselves as a new people empowered by our knowledge to take our rightful place in the ranks of peoples of the world. Pope Paul VI noted when in Africa that we, as Africans and people of African descent, “are now missionaries to” ourselves, stating further that “You must now give your gifts of Blackness to the whole Church,”<sup>17</sup> a sentiment reaffirmed by John Paul II in his meeting with black Catholics in 1987.

We must learn of ourselves and then share that knowledge with others. “We have come this far by faith,” in the words of our gospel heritage, and we will and must continue to explore and uncover the truth of our past so that we may move forward into the future.

African American Catholics have retained, despite the strains of slavery, segregation, discrimination, and second-class citizenship, a steadfast faith in God. Remaining unswayed by the distortions of Christianity force-fed them during slavery, they have always believed in a God who saved, one who was on the side of the poor and oppressed, like them. This steadfast faith in a God who promised eventual deliverance grounds all that is said and done, providing, thereby, a freedom, both spiritual and physical, for there is no dichotomy

between the life lived on earth and the life to be lived with the coming of the kingdom.

To learn of ourselves, to understand and accept who and whose we are, we must reflect on both faith and its praxis, seeking to understand for ourselves, in language of our own choosing, the constant presence of God within our lives, while recognizing with St. Anselm that theology in its truest sense is “faith seeking understanding.” We must then share that understanding with all of the church. For it is in learning the truth of ourselves that we are empowered to continue the struggle, “leaning on the everlasting arms” of our God.

### Plenty Good Room

We are all called to defend the faith that is ours (1 Pet 3:15). This is especially true on the local level, for it is in the parish setting that we are called upon to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ, both in and outside of the church itself. We are all called as Christian faithful who have been anointed in baptism to share in the mission and ministry of Christ (Canon 204). Thus, it is our responsibility and our joy to evangelize, to spread the good news of the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ to all around us. This must be done for those outside the church but even more so for those within. We must rekindle the spirit of love within the hearts of our brothers and sisters in Christ. But we must do so in a way that is uniquely ours. As a people of God, we are called to witness to the working of the Holy Spirit within us, while recognizing the different gifts that the Spirit has bestowed.

It is the spirit of God that has empowered us as African American Catholics to speak of our faith and to present that faith without shame, recognizing that as African American Catholics, we are “no longer simply recipients of the ministry of others, [but] are called to be full participants in the life and mission of the church, on both the local and national levels.”<sup>18</sup>

It is now time for African American Catholics to take ownership of this church in which they have, for so long, lived marginalized and often alienated lives. We are called to express that ownership in all that we say and do, in our workshops, programs, liturgies, parishes, and every part of our lives.

Today we recognize and affirm that to be both black and Catholic is not a contradiction but a proclamation of historical pride, for to be truly black and authentically Catholic means that we, as an African and American and Catholic people, have, indeed, come of age and are beginning to act in accordance with our adulthood. It means that we are challenging the

all too prevalent understanding of Roman Catholicism as a Western, Eurocentric religion. We are proclaiming by our presence in the church that there is, indeed, “plenty good room” in our Father’s kingdom for a diversity of expressions of the Catholic faith. We are challenging the church catholic to acknowledge that recognition and acceptance of the cultures and heritages of the many peoples who make up the church as they are lived out in the faith and worship of these people is no longer a luxury, but a necessary reality. Otherwise, there is the risk of preaching not the transcendent Christ but a cultural Christ, one who is embodied in a particular time, a particular context, and a particular culture.

As the church finally opens itself to the contributions of peoples of every race and ethnicity, it must also expand its understanding and expression of God and Jesus Christ. This correlates with our understanding of the incarnation of Jesus Christ. If God became incarnate in a human being—a male, a Jew—taking on all the characteristics and appearances of that humanity, so must the church, expressive of Christ’s body, incarnate itself today in the peoples and cultures with whom it has come in contact. This is not optional; it is mandated.

There is “plenty good room” in God’s kingdom. We must only choose our seats and sit down. As African American Catholics, however, we must ensure not only that we are doing the choosing, but that the seats actually fit us because we have participated fully in their construction and placement at the center, not the periphery, of our church.

As black Catholics, we are full members of the Catholic communion. We have struggled for a long time, but the journey is nearing its end. As we continue toward that end, we take as our mandate the words of the prophet Isaiah: “They who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint” (Isa 40:31). Our faith has not faltered and our spirit has been renewed. We are truly black and authentically Catholic. As we continue to deepen our own understanding of ourselves, we offer the gift of ourselves to the Roman Catholic Church, acknowledging that there is still much work to be done. Yet we have come this far by faith and that faith will, in time, lead us home.