

NATIONAL BLACK CATHOLIC CONGRESS

REPORT FROM THE DAY OF REFLECTION

Arch/Diocese: Diocese of Rochester

Date of Day of Reflection: March 3, 2012

Leader of Day of Reflection: Lynette Saenz, Parish Support Ministries

Number of Participants: 14

SUMMARY

The key findings from the National Black Catholic Survey (NBCS) affirmed the lived experience of those who participated in the Day of Reflection. Reflections on the findings from the survey focused on three areas: Mass participation, the Black Church and Black saints. The following summarizes what participants learned from the NBCS and why it was considered important.

Mass Participation. The differences between the level of participation between African American Catholics and White Catholics in the NBCS were significant. African Americans were found to be much more engaged in parish life than white Catholics. One of the reasons provided for this occurrence was families. Families with children tend to be more engaged because of religious education programs and sacramental preparation. The church community is also seen as an extended family that takes care of one another. Another reason was the attitude that church is more than an obligation. It is who we are. We are called to serve and participate in a community of faith. A third reason was the centrality of the Eucharist. We experience the Real Presence of Jesus every time we celebrate mass.

The Black Church. In the survey, racial identity was found to be more of a defining factor than religious affiliation. This finding reinforces the differences between the Black Church and the Catholic Church. Historically, the Black Church provided the only opportunity for expression and positive self-esteem.

Black Saints. The dissatisfaction that was described in the survey in relation to the promotion of Black Saints reflects the need for representation of Black Catholics in the Church. Saints are examples of Christian living and it is important to see ourselves reflected in the communion of saints.

Three key pastoral issues in the Diocese of Rochester that need attention among the African American Catholic Community as we move forward are: adult formation, ministry with children and youth, and leadership development.

Adult Faith Formation. Any pastoral efforts to promote the faith formation of adults should:

1. Create opportunities for prayer in community, i.e. prayer groups.

2. Take advantage of opportunities when adults are already gathered by connecting social and spiritual activities to Sunday mass, providing adult formation while children are in religious education, and/or increasing awareness of church rituals & traditions while they are taking place, i.e. teaching mass.
3. Explore and participate in educational opportunities outside of the parish.
4. Increase knowledge of church history & traditions from an African American perspective through private study and small discussion groups.

Children & Youth. In order to foster the personal and spiritual growth of the young people in the Church we must:

1. Promote family values and identify positive role models such as prominent black figures and saints. Another way is to encourage the men in the parish to serve as the role models that so many young people are lacking.
2. Encourage the active participation of young people in the parish and build community among the youth.
3. Develop a curriculum that is informative, engaging and culturally-relevant.

Leadership Development. The development of leaders in our community should include these efforts:

1. Create a variety of training opportunities for lay ministers such as mentoring into established leadership positions.
2. Empower the laity as catechists in the preparation of the sacraments, i.e. baptism classes, as opposed to it being solely the responsibility of the priest or deacon.
3. Establish a hospitality committee that will welcome the stranger to the parish and provide a more personal experience.
4. Become more visible in the community by utilizing available media and participating in community outreach.
5. Conduct a parish-based needs assessment and revisit our mission statement.
6. Establish a forum where new ideas can be presented and new leaders recruited.

As the theme for this year's Congress states, being equipped and empowered leads to evangelization and engagement. A "faithfully engaged" Catholic will actively participate in events and programs offered at the parish and diocesan levels, as well as the national level when possible, i.e. Congress XI. He/she will participate in the evaluation of current ministries and help in identifying areas of growth. A "faithfully engaged" Catholic will also extend an invitation to others and bring them along this journey of faith.

In order to encourage other African American Catholics to become more engaged it is important to offer a variety of opportunities that meet their needs and interests. To let others know that they are missed when they are not in church and not be judgmental. Communication is also important. It is important to find ways to communicate what is going on and how others can get involved. This information needs to be clear and accessible. It is also important to be a more welcoming community.

Strengthening relationships with the Diocese of Rochester and developing new relationships with sister parishes are other ways to keep African American Catholics "faithfully engaged." These relationships will ensure that the voice of African Americans is heard and their needs are met. Together, we must be proactive and work within collaborative structures. It will facilitate the conversation when conflict occurs and continue to move us towards the common goal of unity in diversity.