

THIS CURIOUS THING: AFRICAN-AMERICAN CATHOLIC LITURGICAL DEVELOPMENT

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Quite unexpectedly during the past generation, we have discovered a treasure in witnessing the curious wedding of the Catholic liturgical renaissance and a renewed interest in the cultural heritage of African-Americans. The off- spring of this unusual union is most commonly referred to as Black Catholic Liturgy.

We can certainly chart the genesis of the present liturgical renewal from the mandates of the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council. But whence this new interest in the Afro-American cultural heritage and what prompted their union and what of the future of their progeny? The answers to these questions are as much speculative as they are historically observable. It would be prudent on my part as well as intellectually honest to acknowledge that I begin this presentation with an hypothesis: that the contribution of the Black Catholic Liturgical development is and will continue to be a boon to the life of the wider Church in the United States if not beyond.

The Second Vatican Council called for a general reform of Catholic liturgy (Sacrosanctum concilium, Art. 21). And this reform was to admit the inclusion of certain cultural elements within the liturgy itself (Sacrosanctum concilium, Art. 37). In drafting and approving this particular dimension of the impending liturgical reform, I can only speculate whether the Council Fathers realized the full impact of their wisdom. Most observers at the time of the promulgation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy: Sacrosanctum concilium, on the 4th of December, 1963, I am certain, understood that such cultural intrusions into the Roman Rite would generally come from those lands and peoples that then constituted the "Mission Communities of the Church". (Sacrosanctum concilium, Art. 38) There was already an expressed concern that significant ritual variations between neighboring regions ought to be avoided. (Sacrosanctum concilium, Art. 23)

The great Western cultures of the Church had already offered their contributions to the Roman Liturgy. Indeed, the Roman Liturgy as it was celebrated at the time of the promulgation of the Constitution on the Liturgy was already the hybrid creation of Judeo, Grecian, Roman, Gallican, Celtic, Iberian, Anglo, Saxon, and a number of other early European cultural ancestral communities. Perhaps the Council authors envisioned only the gentle and perhaps limited inclusion of certain tribal or regional cultural variations which would allow the Roman Rite to reflect a modest accommodation to specific contemporary peoples. I sincerely doubt that they had foreknowledge of a significant contribution coming from one cultural community living, albeit on the edge of one of the major Western nations in the world.

African-Americans have lived on the edge of American society for nearly four centuries. Always present, but rarely given the full status of true contributors to the American community, Black Americans at the time of the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council were just beginning to rediscover a rich heritage that had been born in this and but fruitful space afforded us on the American horizon. In August, 1963, several months prior to the issuance of the Liturgical Constitution, Black Americans had staged a massive protest demonstration in Washington, D. C. We were in the thick of the Civil Rights Revolution. One of the effects of that struggle would be the rapid rediscovery of a heritage that had gone largely unnoticed for generations. At various periods in our history, African Americans had achieved certain Renaissance moments during which we began to focus more attention on our cultural achievements. Occasionally people like Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Hiram Revels, Marcus Garvey, or W. E. B. Du Bois had struck a bold blow for Black cultural and civil significance, but generally they were only bright stars quickly being eclipsed by the dark night of slavery and/or publicly sanctioned segregation and discrimination. Along the way, a great many Black people had succumbed to the terrible legacy of slavery and racism and had begun to actually accept the premise that we offered little in the way of cultural gifts and that we possessed few artistic treasures with which to enrich the American community. The Civil Rights Movement began to change such poor self-images. The aftermath of the federal and local legislation was an era of Black Power, Black Self-Determination, Black Awareness.

We had entered the age of Roots!

It is difficult to reconstruct an entire heritage within one generation, especially a heritage that had been systematically destroyed, forbidden, and belittled. The Middle-Passage, as the journey from Mother Africa to this new homeland has been termed, was the beginning of the obliteration of the African Past. Africa is a continent of cultures and tribal differences which are as rich and varied as are the customs of any vastly distributed peoples. But on the slave ship, such cultural differences were of little consequence. language, tribal origin, religious practices, were counted as nothing. Sterling Stuckey, in a fascinating book: *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America*, (1987 Oxford University Press) has attempted to reconstruct the foundation of the Black cultural heritage from the many diverse tribal and regional differences that distinguished the slaves and their posterity. What he surmises is that through a whole host of oppressive factors, tribal differences soon took second place to the primary need for nationhood and survival which produced the Black American Culture(s) of today. There are vestigial remnants of the earlier tribal cultures that are identifiable even today in language, familial structure, musical compositions, and other observable sources. While anthropologists, social scientists and historians, and students of the African-American experience attempt to unravel the secrets from generations of distortions and neglect, more than a few Black American are now basking in the rediscovery of our heritage -from wherever that heritage may be rescued.

We are also simultaneously beginning to appreciate the continual accretion of the African-American community with new peoples from the Caribbean island nations, Africa, and other homelands which can and do boast of African peoples who also have developed distinctive cultures and heritages and now bringing those gifts to our American community. We must carefully and enthusiastically welcome these new peoples with their gifts. More than ever before, to speak of the contemporary African-American community, one must also include a breadth of peoples and customs - all of which truly share in the African traditions, but do so with individual and specific backgrounds.

It was the Church's call for liturgical reform and the excitement of African- Americans rediscovering our lost or denied heritage that set the stage for what we now know as Black Catholic Liturgy. It was, of course, never the case that Black Americans had no cultural gifts or treasures with which to enrich the American society. In truth, musicians, artists, dramatists, poets, and craftspersons have long found in the Black Community both worthy subjects to study as well as colleagues in the artistic fields. Black American music, with the exception of perhaps Native American music which is still much to be explored, has been considered by some to be the only truly indigenous music of American society. We are a people who have produced poets at a time when it was against the law to teach us to read and write. At almost every juncture in the development of the American nation there is the unexplained presence of a African-American making some bold contribution to this nation's cultural resources.

No one institution in Black America has been such a prodigious seedbed for Black cultural expression as has the Black Church. There are those people who refer to the Black Church as the only true Black controlled institution in America. The Black Church is the term which refers to the conglomerate of religious traditions in which the Black American professed adherence. The Black Church is more than a denomination or gathering of denominations. It is the singular institution which was simultaneously social advocate, legal authority, political party, professional guide, educational and moral benchmark, and spiritual and emotional therapeutic moment, in addition to being a religious assembly. All of these functions were not seen to be in conflict. The Black Church is the storehouse of Black culture. While the Black Church viewed as a cooperate institution, is clearly circumscribed within a Protestant religious tradition it is far richer than any single denomination. And the religious traditions which have been given expression within the Black Church are, in many cases, trans-denominational and reflective of a people rather than a particular credal position. This is blatantly the case with the music which was fashioned in and for the Black Church but which is scripturally established upon the experience of a class of people who were withstanding social, political, and economic pressures of an extraordinary nature.

In 1964, Catholics in the United States were anxious to be about the business of implementing the liturgical changes. While there had been American Catholic devotional books and hymnals in use as far back as John Carroll, the first Archbishop of Baltimore, the mid and late Nineteenth Century increase in new non-English speaking Catholics during the successive generations had made a single language approach to liturgical development all but impossible (John A. Gurrieri, 'Catholic Sunday in America: Its Shape and Early History', pp. 75 Sunday Morning: A Time for Worship, ed. Mark Searle, The Liturgical Press, 1982). It was in August, 1964 when the first widely publicized Mass in English was celebrated during the Annual Convention of the Liturgical Conference in Saint Louis' Kiel Auditorium that a certain Father Clarence Joseph Rivers, Priest of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati led the assembly in a Communion hymn God is Love that a new era was born. Clarence Rivers is uniquely the Father of the Black Catholic Liturgical Movement. He more than anyone else took the first steps which brought Black American melody, rhythm, tempo, and style to music which was composed for Catholic Worship. More than any one element, music has made a sizable contribution to the development of a Black Catholic Liturgical tradition. But there were other elements also to be considered. The Constitution on the Liturgy called for the renewal and the expansion of the proclamation of Sacred Scripture (Sacrosanctum concilium, Art. 51)

African-Americans are steeped in a tradition of Scriptural reading, prayer, and citation. The Nineteenth Century African-American had a particular affinity for the Hebrew Scriptures with their clear themes of liberation and deliverance (Gayraud S. Wilfmore, Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Examination of the Black Experience in Religion, 1972, Doubleday, pp. 51-53).

Black Americans are familiar with the words of Sacred Scripture in song, paraphrase, and in a most effective way in sacred oratory. The Black Preacher was and is an institution of long standing within our community. Poet, musician, folk narrator, prophet, dramatist, humorist, moralist - no one title is capable of capturing the full breath of just what the Black Preacher does and has done in relation to the Black worship assembly. (Henry H. Mitchell, Black Preaching, 1970 Lippincott.) In 1964, and I dare say perhaps even occasionally in 1987, many a fervent and loyal Black Catholic spent Sunday evening tuning in the radio - now perhaps cable television adds image to sound - to hear a rousing Black Preacher bring a Black assembly to spiritual ecstasy.

The Sunday Assembly in the Black Church is a full social occasion. It might include, in addition to a worship service, fellowship, societal meetings, dining, and community problem discussion and solution. The Black Church community is and has been an association which included many concerns which could be and eventually were all brought together in worship. Consequently the time factor has never been an insurmountable obstacle. Preachers preached for as long as the "spirit prompted." Generally following worship patterns that were reflective of a free and charismatic tradition, the tempo was determined by the spirit rather than being subject to a fixed ritual. Even in this matter there is considerable variation since the Black Church is broad enough to embrace more structured and formal worship traditions as well as more Pentecostal and charismatic patterns. The ministries within the assembly were certainly much more diversified than those to be found in the typical Catholic parochial community in 1964. Black Church traditions might include male and female ushers, nurses, deacons, musical soloists, people who offered testimonies to the power and presence of God acting in their lives, attendants, and guest pastors. These ministerial offices allowed a great many people to have a more active role in the Sunday worship. The assembly was animated with a spirit of direct involvement in the act of praise and worship.

When the constitution on the Liturgy called for active participation as the primary concern in the reform of the Liturgy (Sacrosanctum concilium, Art. 14), many Black American Catholics were already familiar with a type of active participation - a tradition which at times overlooked another concern of the Constitution which insists that active participation is always understood according to the variety of orders, offices, and ministries which distinguish the members of the assembly. (Sacrosanctum concilium, Art. 26)

We are presently at a juncture in the reform of the liturgy in some of our Black Catholic assemblies where we are attempting to reconcile Article 14 of Sacrosanctum concilium which calls for active participation in the Liturgy and Article 26 of the Constitution which circumscribes that participation according to the office and ministry of the participant. There is such a treasure to be shared from the African-American Religious Tradition in spirit, life, hope, joy, music, preaching, and spiritual depth, yet these treasures must be brought into dialogue with the equally venerable Catholic worship traditions of word and sacrament, proclamation and sign, sacred sound, touch, smell and sight. We Black Catholic Bishops wrote in our Pastoral Letter on Evangelization

What We Have Seen and Heard:

"From the standpoint of evangelization in the Black Community, the liturgy of the Catholic Church has always demonstrated a way of drawing many to the Faith and also of nourishing and deepening the faith of those who already believe. We believe that the liturgy of the Catholic Church can be an even more intense expression of the spiritual vitality of those who are of African origin, just as it has been for other ethnic and cultural groups... "Through the liturgy, Black people will come to realize that the Catholic Church is a homeland for Black believers just as she is for people of other cultural and ethnic traditions. In recent years, remarkable progress has been made in our country by many talented Black experts to adapt the liturgy to the needs and genius of the African-American community. In order that this work can be carried out more fully within the Catholic tradition and at the same time be enriched by our own cultural heritage, we wish to recall the essential qualities that should be found in a liturgical celebration within the Black Catholic community. It should be authentically Black. It should be truly Catholic. And it should be well prepared and well executed..." pp. 30-31

Father Rivers' bold beginning was wise beyond perhaps even his initial intention. He fashioned music that was clearly African-American in sound, tempo, rhythm and spirit, while at the same time it subscribed to Catholic worship traditions in meaning, use, and message. Following his lead, a number of Black Catholic parishes gradually at first began using Black Spirituals, Gospel Songs and Anthems, generally without much knowledge about the music, its origin, its original use and its relationship to other forms of African-American music. In truth, a great deal of research has been accomplished by ethnomusicologists since the 1960's. As part of the growing interest in things black, we have discovered that the religious music of Black Americans is a complex and sophisticated topic (Thea Bowman, "The Gift of African American Sacred Song" in Lead Me - Guide Me: The African American Catholic Hymnal, 1987 G.I.A. Publications)

Rapidly thereafter, splendidly robed Gospel choirs were introduced, the Permanent Diaconate was restored in the Catholic Church in 1972 adding another Ordained ministry for many parishes, other ministries which may have originally been found in some Black Churches were gradually introduced into some Catholic parishes. Today we are now witnessing a group of Catholic Priests, Deacons, and lay Ministers who are becoming quite skilled in the rich style of classic Black evangelical preaching. Clothes from Africa, the African-American colors of Black, Red, and Green found their way into Catholic vestments and church decorations. More than a few Amen Corners have been introduced into Catholic celebrations. Sculpture and graphics which depict Christ, the Blessed Mother, and the Saints in unmistakably African-American visage and garb adorn many of our Catholic parishes. While the use of these African-American items was gradual at first, some African-American artifacts or environmental recognition are now found in most Black Catholic parishes.

The humble beginnings which Father Rivers' genius offered have resulted in a small but growing number of musicians and artists who are fashioning wonderful new music and works of art which are designed for the Catholic Liturgy but clearly reflective of the African-American heritage. Musicians like Rawn Habor, Grayson Brown, Roger Holliman, Eddie Bonnemere, Leon Roberts, and others have begun to compose music for Catholic worship using the liturgical texts and exhibiting a clear and beautiful African-American spirit and style. Artists like Sister Angela Williams, Mr. Larry Venzant, and Mr. Jerzy Kenar are offering splendid examples of the development of a Black Catholic Liturgical artistic tradition (Regina Kuehn, "A Black Parish Affirms Identity", *Liturgy* 80, Vol. 17, No. 5, July 1986, pp. 2-4) While these artists work to assist the worship life of Black Catholic communities, it is not uncommon to hear or see their works used with great joy in White parishes. This is a clear indication that the renewal which has the Black Catholic community as its source is simultaneously offering the wider Church an expression of the Catholicity which marks our Faith and the transcultural beauty of truly gifted artists of any particular culture or generation.

The Liturgical renewal in the Black community was part of a deeper spirit of renewal in our community. The National Office for Black Catholics which was established as an independent Church structure by joint agreement on the part of laity, religious, and clergy in 1970 provided a forum for bringing together ministers and professional to examine the phenomenon and to encourage the growth of the Black Catholic community. One of the first projects of the National Office for Black Catholics was to establish a department of culture and worship. This agency sponsored a number of annual summer workshops offered throughout the United States beginning in Detroit Michigan in 1971. These workshops were fertile occasions for pastoral staffs to experience and share creative approaches to liturgical inculturation. (Gertrude Morris, "The History of the NOBC Liturgy Workshops". *Freeing the Spirit*, Vol. 7 No. 1, Spring, 1981, pp. 5-7). The National Office for Black Catholics also began publishing *Freeing the Spirit* in August, 1971 as a pastoral journal for the development of and to review the Black Catholic Liturgical renewal.

The National Office for Black Catholics sponsored a joint conference with the Liturgical Conference at Catholic University of America in February 1977 on the topic: *Worship and Spirituality in the Black Community*. The presentations from that conference were later published as *This Far by Faith: American Black Worship and Its African Roots*. Father Rivers was a frequent contributor to the NOBC workshops and to the journal *Freeing the Spirit* as well as conducting a number of workshops on his own. He composed many additional musical pieces and authored a number of works on African-American culture and music including: *Soulful Worship* (1974) and *The Spirit in Worship* (1978). The 1970's and early 1980's saw a great excitement as Black Catholics came together to share our triumphs and our discoveries. We were clearly taking the task of liturgical renewal seriously.

Renovation of a physical space, composition of new music, professional workshops are always easier projects than the renewal of the human spirit or the conversion of personal attitudes. Just as the liturgical reform was not universally applauded, so too the inculturation of the liturgy according to our African-American religious heritage has alienated, confused, and angered a number of Catholics -both White and Black!

Perhaps one of the last myths that we must all confront and overcome as an American society is the myth that wishes to view all African-Americans as a monolithic group of peoples. We are a complexus of peoples representing diversity in region, education, socio-political, economic, and cultural influences. In a word, we exhibit the same types of social and attitudinal stratification that marks other people. Black Catholics, like all other Catholics fall into several difficult to categorize religious ideological and experiential groupings. Therefore, when we speak of Black Catholic Liturgy, we are necessarily speaking of a complex and broad ritual development that must embrace a wealth of musical traditions, ministerial involvement, styles of assembly participation, and, of course, artistic expressions. If we have learned anything during this past generation it is that the Black Catholic Community must respect and value its own diversity if we are to live according to the catholicity which we claim: our religious heritage as much as the cultural treasures we are anxious to share with our fellow Catholics for the building up of the One Church of Christ.

Some of our Black Catholics do not understand nor appreciate the introduction of these elements from our cultural heritage into their parish worship life, taught as they were to identify them solely with the Protestant denominations wherein they were first used. We must be careful in accepting any element in an uncritical manner from another religious tradition because of the real possibility of also accepting credal or ecclesial positions that run contrary to the truth of our Faith. Nonetheless, the caution should not simply be imposed on African American religious items and the development of Black Catholic Liturgy as though this development poses a unique and singularly dangerous threat to the unity or truth of our Catholic Faith. At the same time that Black Catholic parishes were beginning to rediscover some of the music of our ancestors, Catholic parishes in general were borrowing liberally from the music of other religious denominations as well as from secular musical sources with sometimes little concern for words or the positioning of such music within the Liturgy, which, on occasion, were at least heterodox. Nonetheless, we must remember that the culture of a people is always found wherever the people have been welcomed to express themselves -and for African-Americans the Black Church was the place of greatest welcome for many generations. While the great treasury of Black Religious music is a special gift to our society and to our Church, we must never forget Father River's original insight to create new works out of the splendor of our heritage for use in the contemporary liturgical moment in which we live. In short, we need to both use old songs and create new music for Black Catholic worship in 1987.

There are concerns beyond the music that is employed from the Black Church. After all, African-American religious music is singularly scriptural in origin and thus belongs to the wider font of Christian traditions in which our own Catholic Church has an originating place of honor. The style of participation is another point of concern. Catholic worship is hierarchical in structure as it reflects the Church's nature. Catholic worship is also Sacramental in its ritual pattern. The proclamation of the Word of God and its inspirational and enlightened exposition in the homily are only the first part of a two part worship fabric. Some people note that Black Catholic Liturgy occasionally exhibits a heightened celebration of the Liturgy of the Word but a less richly developed Sacramental response. We have much to do to achieve a balance which respects both the gifts of the African-American community and the worship tradition of the Roman Rite.

In 1984, the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy established a standing sub-committee for Black Liturgy, of which I have the privilege of serving as the first chairman. This sub-committee of bishops, clergy, religious, and laity serve as a sounding board and a catalyst for the Bishops' Liturgy Committee to assist the Bishops in being aware of specific and general concerns which confront the Black Catholic assembly. Recently we have completed a document which will be issued shortly of a reflective analysis of the current options for liturgical accommodation for the Eucharistic Celebration. We have also begun work on a document which will attempt to explain the overall wisdom and phenomenon of Black Catholic worship traditions.

Obviously, one very difficult factor to be considered is the attitude which may still prevail for certain Black Catholics that not only are our religious cultural gifts non-Catholic in origin, they are inferior in quality and nature. This is always an unfortunate attitude. One can certainly understand a person who does not particularly care for a style of music or a type of behavior in worship or a method of preaching or a form of art, but to find difficulty with a people's cultural heritage as inherently inferior or without redeeming value would be a sad commentary indeed. Patience and magnanimity are the most important qualities which must guide our progress in this enterprise. The importance of individuals must never be overlooked, while the good to be accomplished for the Church in service to the Black Community must never be held hostage because of individual disagreement over the wisdom or worth of our liturgical growth. If the Church is to grow within the Black American Community, it must invest itself in the wonderful task of recognizing the gifts of Black people. The Church cannot remain a stranger to the African-American traditions, but she must adorn herself with the works of beauty which have been fashioned by our people as an expression of the dignity which we received from the One Creator of us all.

Recently there has been much progress in the development of the Black Catholic Liturgical traditions. In the fall of 1987, the GIA Publishers issued the long-awaited Black Catholic Hymnal: *Lead Me -Guide Me*. The hymnal was a joint project of the Black Clergy Caucus, The Knights and Ladies Auxiliaries of Saint Peter Claver, the National Association of Black Catholic Administrators, the Black Sisters' Caucus and a group of artists under the able direction of Bishop James P. Lyke, OFM, Auxiliary Bishop of Cleveland. The work was widely reviewed and the product of extensive consultation. It represents the first attempt to gather a selection of the treasury of Black Religious music (traditional and contemporary) and to arrange it for effective and proper use for the Catholic Liturgy. It is a triumph of the first order.

There is a growing phenomenon of Revivals which are everywhere growing in popularity. These liturgical celebrations of Scripture, Music, Preaching, Prayer, and Fellowship trace their origin to the period of the Great Awakening of the Nineteenth Century, but certainly follow an equally venerable tradition of Catholic Mission Preaching which was wide-spread only a generation ago. At the time of the composition of the paper, the work of Diana Hayes, S.T.D. Candidate at the Catholic University of Louvain, "Black Catholic Revivalism-The Emergence of a New Form of Worship". Journal of the Inter-denominational Theological Center, Vol. 14 (Fall 1986-Spring 1987) Nos. 51 and 52, pp. 87-107 has not been received in this country.

In May of 1987 over 1600 delegates from throughout the United States of America gathered at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D. C. for the Sixth National Black Catholic Congress. This assembly, building upon the earlier five Congresses of the last century, brought the Black Church together to discuss and plan for our future and to address the needs that we experience in common. The liturgies of the Congress were spectacular expresses of the sophistication of the Black Catholic Liturgical development and its widely accepted approbation by Black Catholics from throughout the United States.

In January, 1988, the United States Catholic Conference will establish a Secretariat for Black Catholics. This office will be another indication of the presence of Black Catholics in the heart and mind of the Church in the United States and the affirmation of the development of our singular gifts for the life of our Church.

However, all of this is not enough; there are issues which still need to be addressed. Racism and its terrible effects on all of us is still too present and too common. Some urge even greater freedom to express our cultural gifts within the Liturgy. Some insist only a Black Rite will finally solve all of our issues. Some argue that greater freedom to experiment is necessary. The Church has certainly embarked upon a wonderful adventure -one whose full course has yet to be completed -but one which is already bearing much fruit.

The simple fact that people are excited, and some perhaps are even a bit impatient, about the possibilities and the future development of the Roman Catholic Liturgy in dialogum with the African-American cultural heritage is a hopeful sign. Who would have thought that so much could be accomplished within one generation. Like Countee Cullen:

I doubt not God is good, well meaning, kind,
 And did He stoop to quibble could tell why
 The little buried mole continues blind,
 Why flesh that mirrors Him must some day die,
 Make plain the reason tortured Tantalus
 Is baited by the fickle fruit, declare
 If merely brute caprice dooms Sisyphus
 To struggle up a never-ending stair.
 Inscrutable His ways are, and immune
 To catechism by a mind too strewn
 With petty cares to slightly understand
 What awful brain compels his awful hand.
 Yet do I marvel at this curious thing:
 To make a poet black, and bid him sing!

YET DO I MARVEL, Countee Cullen

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