

CELEBRATING BLACK HISTORY MONTH:
AFRICAN AMERICAN CATHOLICS AND EVANGELIZATION
AS CULTURAL DISCERNMENT

ST LUKE'S PARISH

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Your Eminence, Cardinal Wuerl; Your Excellency, Joseph Bienvenu Charles Atangana, Ambassador of Cameroon to the United States; faithful of St. Luke's Parish, brothers and sisters all:

A Special Moment

We gather together this morning during Black History Month to celebrate the heritage of African American and Cameroonian Catholics in the United States and specifically in this Archdiocese and parish. We gather to call attention to the opportunities and challenges facing parishes like yours and so many others in the context of dramatic demographic and generational changes taking place throughout our country. The bishops of the United States have stressed the importance of "recognition of cultural diversity" and insistently recommend a positive attitude toward these developments. The bishops see in them a *kairos* moment, a blessing from God, much more than an unwelcome disruption in the ways things have been. A brother Jesuit of mine, the late Cardinal Avery Dulles pointed out to me personally as well as in several talks and writings, that the coming of new Catholic immigrants offers the Church a golden opportunity to evangelize American culture perhaps as never before.

Recalling the May 2010 Diversity Convocation

Last May at the University of Notre Dame hundreds of ecclesial leaders from each of the major cultural and racial families that make up the Church gathered to celebrate their Catholic identity and diversity. It was noted that when each family –for example, the Hispanic, the Asian

and Pacific Island, and the African American—was asked to share stories around Catholic identity in relation to their cultures they were not only able to do so, but were enthusiastic about doing it. Ironically, the group that reported the most difficulty in reflecting on Catholic identity and culture was the one made up of participants of European descent, precisely that part of our American Catholic leadership that is often called the mainstream.

What Happened to an American Catholic Culture?

Reflecting on this topic, Archbishop Dolan, president of the Bishops Conference, recently told some of the staff at the USCCB that the problem is that too many of our mainstream Catholics have lost a sense of what it means to be Catholic in an increasingly secular world. We have forgotten that it is culture that gives traction to belief. When we downplay culture we eliminate the “hooks” whereby faith and Catholic teaching really become life. By “hooks” I mean the sacred stories, rites, customs and powerful symbols that motivate a people. Sadly, many European American Catholics no longer subscribe to a cultural baseline for what it means to follow Christ in this country. Indeed, many have simply fallen away from the faith. So it is urgent that we all get serious about the task of renewal-- finding the way in which faith engages culture precisely in the new and challenging circumstances of our time. Pope John Paul II called this the New Evangelization—proclaiming the faith and witnessing to it with new methods, new expressions and new ardor.

An Urgent Call for a New Evangelization

Pope Benedict XVI has highlighted the urgency of this challenge in his renewed call to a New Evangelization, and our Archbishop has produced a comprehensive approach for carrying out the process of “re-proposing” our faith in today’s circumstances in his Pastoral Letter on the New Evangelization titled *Disciples of the Lord: Sharing the Vision.*

The Church tells us that to evangelize is to engage cultures and to do this not in a superficial way, but getting down to the nitty-gritty, the core values of a people. What this means then is that we all must become aware of our particular cultures not only in their external expressions like language, dress, food, or music, but in their very roots, in ways of thinking and acting that may or may not conform to the teachings of Christ. This process of cultural discernment is fundamental for the process of evangelization and it pertains to every culture. In a special way, however, it refers to the European American culture, which as we all know, tends to exercise the greatest influence over everyone in our society, among youth and young adults, and especially among the sons and daughters of our communities of non-European origin who constitute the overwhelming majority of young Catholics in this country today.

Bishops’ Priority Activity: Catholic Identity and Communion in Diversity

I can report in passing that one of the main activities of the bishops’ priority on cultural diversity at the USCCB is the development of guidelines on cultural and intercultural

competence which the bishops intend to offer all those engaged in ministry. The guidelines require at least a basic level of knowledge, attitudes and skills in intercultural relations and familiarity with theological underpinnings of faith in relation to culture. The Secretariat of Cultural Diversity will be piloting the competencies in the form of a workshop this year and, after review and approval from the Committee on Cultural Diversity, plans to disseminate them regionally for training trainers throughout the country in 2012 and beyond.

In going about our mission to evangelize, we seek never to lose sight of the unity that is a fundamental mark of the Church everywhere. All the baptized are called to be evangelizers. They therefore must know, respect and love every culture they seek to evangelize, but must love the faith received from the Lord even more. To evangelize means to know what the Church teaches, but also to know one's own culture as well as the all-pervasive secular culture. It means finding the path through the maze of options offered us by the vast array of cultures around us in pursuit of our real ultimate goal, God's Kingdom, which is beyond all cultures. How can we guide our youth, if we ourselves fail to realize what is at stake and what we need to do?

Tapping into the Spiritual Gifts of African Americans and African Immigrants

Here at St. Luke's and in many places throughout our country people of African heritage are coming together. Some trace their heritage going back centuries to Africa and the terrible institution of slavery; others to the recent immigration of Africans from virtually every nation of that great continent, nations like Cameroon. It is not lost on us that African Catholic immigrants are among the most educated newcomers to our country. They bring many gifts, among them a style of prayer and worship that offers to enliven our sometimes flat, middle-class ways of prayer and worship. I do not mean to offend anyone in putting it this way, but by many accounts there's a kind of beigeness or grayness about U.S. Catholicism, a lack of affectivity and passion that virtually all the immigrant groups are helping dispel. There is in the way these communities live the faith an enthusiasm, color and movement that energize and revivify. It can be catching, engaging the whole person body and soul in the finest spirit of our Catholic sacramental and liturgical traditions. Of course, this gift of vitality in many ways was pioneered by African American Catholics who together with African American Protestants have left a profound mark on religion in this country. Indeed, blacks year after year are found to be the people most mindful of God in our country as measured by belief, daily prayer, and reading of the Bible. To me this suggests that the presence and fellowship of American blacks as well as the new African Americans from Cameroon and many other parts of Africa are very much a blessing for all of us of whatever ancestry.

The Scriptures Propose the Need to Culturally Discern

The readings for this Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time seem tailor-made for our Eucharist this morning. All three of them highlight the urgent need to become a people capable of making right choices in light of the identification of each and every one of us with Christ and in light of

the vocation, the baptismal call, we have received to follow the Lord. The first reading from Sirach stresses the need to choose rightly, to discern between good and evil, life and death (Sirach 15:15-20), while Paul in First Corinthians, the second reading, exhorts us to a “wisdom” which is a form of knowledge that goes beyond the head and is informed by a deep personal experience of God and His universal love for all his creatures beginning, we can infer, with those culturally/racially different from oneself (ICor.2:6-10). In the Gospel Jesus says three times, “You have heard that it was said,...but I say to you....” (Mt 5:20-37) In this the Lord reminds us today more than ever that to be a Christian means not to remain simply with what we have heard or even what has been taught, to simply remain satisfied with the content of faith we have received and the customary ways we have tried to live those teachings in our particular cultures. To do that is to unwittingly fall into the mistake of the Pharisees. Jesus was not against the Law and the Prophets, he taught the people to observe the Torah, to be righteous and faithful. Yet more is needed if that tradition is to become life, to become action, in the light of our relationship with Christ Himself, in response to who Christ is for each and every one of us. Christ’s personal presence makes a difference. God made man, the mystery of the Incarnation, makes a difference because it means that God draws near to us not in some generic, one-shoe-fits-all way, but in our particularity of culture, race, gender, social class and so forth. The truth revealed in Christ the Word of God becomes life when we experience it as an event, a happening, flowing from the love that God has specifically for each of us and our choice to love God in return.

The reading from Matthew’s Gospel today is taken from the fifth chapter in which Jesus proclaims the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes. Here Jesus proposes a radical way of life based on a logic of love that challenges each and every one of us to ongoing conversion. He urges a change in our way of thinking, feeling and behaving-- that means cultural change -- in light of our relationship with God and one another. This is about faith engaging the world with all its pluralism and choices in order to create a rich, diverse civilization of love that more faithfully expresses our catholicity, and witnesses to the truth of what we believe and to the communion in diversity that is the one Body of Christ.

A discerning heart requires knowledge of the faith and of what the Church really teaches together with reflection, dialogue and, most importantly, a personal encounter with Christ in prayer. Ultimately it has to do with the ability to discern and to choose with “discrete love,” to use the phrase of Saint Ignatius Loyola. Our response, the choices we make about our life, our work and friends, how we raise our children, live out our commitments in marriage, what we do with our money, what political causes we support, all of this and so much more must be the fruit of a culturally discerning heart.

That is why Sunday after Sunday we gather to celebrate Christ’s presence with us as a community, to reflect on what the Word means concretely in our lives, and to encounter him once again as our loving and saving Lord in the midst of such diversity in the assembly. We nourish our faith and support one another. We hear him say once again, “You have heard that it was said, but **I** say to you now.....” Yes, the Lord draws near; he does not tarry or leave us alone.

He is in our midst, in the Church. Yes, Jesus speaks to our minds and hearts, especially with, in and through the Word we proclaim and the Sacrament we receive, the source and summit of our life which is the Eucharist, the Holy Communion, we celebrate around the altar this morning.