

225th Anniversary - Black Catholics

Introduction

Thank you for the joy of continuing our celebration of the 225th anniversary of the Premier See, the Archdiocese of Baltimore. I especially want to thank those who organized this wonderful event today, the Mass we are celebrating, the Black Catholic history exhibit, and the reception.

How important that we gather to remember our fellow Catholics of African descent who went before us; to remember their lives, their contributions to Church and society, their sufferings, frustrations, and tribulations, their gifts and achievements. We are standing on their shoulders.

How important that we give thanks to the Lord for the example of courageous and persistent faith they left for us, to give thanks to God for the path of freedom they cleared for us, and for the opportunities their sacrifices have made possible.

And how important that we not only remember and give thanks but also that we pray to follow in their footsteps; that we be attentive to their prayers for us from their place in eternity; and that we pray for them asking the joy of heaven. Let's allow the light of today's Scripture to guide us as we remember, give thanks, and pray!

Proverbs 31:10-13; 19-20; 30-31

And let's begin with the reading from the Book of Proverbs. That Scripture reading paints a picture of an industrious woman. The woman in that reading was a wife and mother who had the trust of her husband and the love of her children. She was a woman who never stopped working for her family but also found time to reach out to the poor and the needy. She wasn't just beautiful to look at; she had deep inner beauty, the beauty that comes from living a virtuous life, the beauty that comes when we give ourselves to others in love.

Servant of God Mother Mary Lange was not a wife but she was the spouse of Christ; and Jesus entrusted to her not only a mission but a family... the growing black Catholic family in the City of Baltimore. It was a family that had been represented in Maryland from the moment that the Ark and the Dove landed on St. Clement's Island

in 1634. It was a family of faith that managed to survive in Colonial Maryland, and by 1790, there was a congregation of Black Catholics at St. Mary's Seminary on Paca Street. When Elizabeth Lange arrived at Fells Point, she soon saw what needed to be done; she saw the need to educate the young and to form them in the faith. Like the industrious woman in Proverbs, she teamed up with Fr. James Mary Hector Nicholas Joubert, and in 1829 founded the Oblate Sisters of Providence. Today it's hard to imagine the obstacles she faced in founding the first African-American congregation of religious women in our country; and in founding the first Catholic institution of learning for African Americans in our country, (and how grateful we are today to be at St. Frances Academy!) Where would we be without the faith, courage, and industry of Mother Lange? We give thanks for her life and we pray for her speedy canonization!

But Mother Lange has successors. She has a valiant successor in Sr. John Francis Schilling, the President of this Academy and in Sister Alexis Fisher and all the Oblate Sisters of Providence! And let me share a little of my own experience. As a young priest I was privileged to serve in two predominately African American parishes, St. Vincent de Paul at M and So. Capitol St. in Washington and St. Joseph Parish in Largo, in P.G. county. In those parishes and in my work with Catholic schools, time and time again I've met in the African American community the valiant, industrious, woman in today's first reading... mothers, grandmothers, great-grandmothers who work unbelievably hard to help their children and grandchildren fulfill their God-given potential. The history of African-American Catholics in this Archdiocese and beyond is largely written by these valiant women whose names are lost to history. Let us remember! Let us give thanks! Let us pray with them and for them!

Matthew 25:14-30

In the Gospel, we're told about putting our talents to good use. Instead of burying our talents in the ground, we need to invest what God has given us so we can become the persons he meant us to be.

Today we remember Catholics of African descent who invested their talents, their gifts, their time and energy so that they would know, love, and follow Christ; and so that we, their descendants would know, love, and follow Christ & strengthen the life

of the Church, here in Baltimore and beyond.

That investment took many forms: the founding of the Josephite Fathers and Brothers in 1871 under the direction of Father Herbert Vaughan; starting in 1843 St. Francis Xavier Parish in East Baltimore, the first official African-American Parish not only in Baltimore but the United States. We remember how the Josephites founded Epiphany College here in Baltimore as a first attempt to provide higher education for the growing African-American Catholic community. What a proud legacy we have in St. Peter Claver Church, once the largest Black Catholic community in the United States or in the Black Catholic Congresses held in Baltimore through the years... congresses which continue to meet in our day and age. I think too of the efforts of Archbishop Michael Curley and Cardinal Lawrence Shehan whose 1963 Pastoral Letter on Racial Justice was something of a landmark. We remember today with great love and affection Bishop John Ricard and Bishop Gordon Bennett and the loving care and concern of Bishop Denis Madden; and how we welcome back into our midst Sr. Gwynnette Proctor. And the investment goes on today... It goes on everyday in parishes and schools in the City of Baltimore and beyond where you exercise roles of leadership and service, in programs that reach out to the community at large, and in the way you expand the vision of the whole Archdiocese, helping us to see that diversity is essential for any community that claims the title 'catholic'.

But let's be honest. During this past year, I've spoken frequently about the prejudice which the Catholic community in Baltimore and beyond faced. Those challenges were serious and real... but they do not compare to the challenges faced by Catholics of African descent. Sadly we must admit that such prejudice did not just come from the culture around us but often it came from within the Church itself... in the form of segregated schools and congregations, in a chronic slowness to recognize and respond to the needs and gifts of the African American community by many in Church leadership. And yes, there are those who would have had the African-American community bury their talents, and there are still some who may feel that way ... but I thank the good Lord you are not about to bury them! Today our exhibit will show us how the talents you invested have produced returns not only for the African-American Catholic community but for the entire Archdiocese of Baltimore and for the wider society.

1 Thess. 5:1-6

Let us conclude with the reading from St. Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians: where he tells us that the time is short, that the mission is urgent, that we must embrace afresh the light of the Gospel – and in light of that Gospel, like those who came before us, to overcome every obstacle, to climb every mountain, to join hands across every human division caused by sin – and do all that in bearing witness to Jesus Christ and his love for us and for humanity.

For us all, the challenge of this anniversary year is the same: to re-ignite the Church's mission of evangelization – it demands that we ask ourselves searching, difficult questions: What does the mission require of us now and in the years ahead? How must we pray, how spiritually alert we must be, how on fire with the Gospel we must be – if we are to bring the Gospel to the margins, as Pope Francis often says. And the second question is like it: it's not whether we'll be present in every neighborhood but how must we be present so as to win over as many as possible... by the witness of our lives and by reaching out beyond our comfort zone. And a third challenge presents itself: what will we do to strengthen our families because we know that strong families are essential to success – success in life and success in faith.

So dear friends – let us remember! let us give thanks! let us pray! We've come this far by faith! Let us go forward with a strong & active faith! May God bless us and keep us always in love!