

Black Catholic congress opens in Buffalo with 2,000 participants

More than 2,000 black Catholics from nearly 100 U.S. dioceses traveled to Buffalo, N.Y., July 12 for the start of the 10th National Black Catholic Congress.

The theme of the July 12-15 congress was “Christ Is With Us: Celebrating the Gifts of the Sacraments.”

On the agenda were sessions looking at the ways the sacraments are related to the congress’s eight core principles: Africa, Catholic education, HIV/AIDS, parish life, social justice, racism, spirituality, and youths and young adults.

“Congress X wishes to reflect on these principles through the prism of the seven sacraments. The principles arise from our baptism and anointing, our birthright in the Roman Catholic Church,” said Auxiliary Bishop Joseph N. Perry of Chicago, chairman of the U.S. bishops’ Committee on African-American Catholics, after he officially called the congress to order.

Feeling energized and ready to share her congress experience with her fellow parishioners at New All Saints, Liberty Heights, Gloria A. Herndon of Randallstown wants to help bring more people to her church through evangelization ideas she gained from her Buffalo trip.

“We’ll bring people back by knocking on doors,” Ms. Herndon said. “We’ll find the people who have strayed and find out why and what you can do to bring them back.” The many other evangelization techniques can come in very handy to keep predominately black Baltimore City Catholic churches open and prevent more from being closed or merged, she said.

The first National Black Catholic Congress was held in 1889, and subsequent congress events were held every two years until 1894. After a hiatus lasting nearly a century, the congresses resumed in 1987, and since then have been held every five

years.

“For blacks in this country, the congress is an excellent way to gather from the north, south, east and west to renew cultural identity,” said Father Ronald Sajdak, pastor of St. Martin de Porres Parish, the largest black congregation in the Diocese of Buffalo.

“For African-American Catholics in Buffalo, the African-American Catholic community is in the minority in a variety of ways, being African-American and Catholic and being African-American in the city of Buffalo,” he added. “Because the congress chose to come here, this is a tremendous affirmation to the Catholics in our church.”

The jubilant atmosphere inside the Buffalo Convention Center resembled that of a family reunion as participants made their way into the opening ceremony.

Bishops, priests and laypeople - many in traditional African attire - mingled, reuniting with old friends and making new ones as African drummers marshaled them into the opening ceremony, where a choir opened the event with an enthusiastic hymn of praise.

Although they had only been at the convention center a few hours, first-time congress participants Bess Alston and her husband, Sam, already felt right at home when the ceremony began. The couple from the Diocese of Charleston, S.C., had been longing to attend the congress for years but didn't have time to make the trip until Sam retired this year, she said.

“I couldn't do it without him,” said Bess Alston, who converted to Catholicism 50 years ago, shortly after meeting her future husband, who was raised a Catholic. Her Catholic faith has been a blessing, she added.

Bishop Edward U. Kmiec of Buffalo said Catholics in his diocese felt blessed to be chosen as the site of the congress.

“I hope you really realize your presence is a gift to our city because of your wonderful witness to your Catholic faith,” Bishop Kmiec told participants during the opening ceremony.

African-American Catholics bring a unique vitality and faith to the Catholic Church, but the racial tension that has permeated the nation for years also has permeated the Catholic Church, making African-Americans sometimes feel unwelcome, Father Sajdak said.

“For too long we have denied our own selves to be accepted into a world and a church that does not readily accept us. It is our presence through Jesus Christ that will make it change,” said Brenda Easley Webb, director of Buffalo’s diocesan Office of Black Ministries.

Participants Sandra Moore, from the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City, and Marian Johnson, of the Diocese of Rockville Centre, N.Y., said they are strengthened and encouraged by sharing a weekend of faith and fellowship with so many other black Catholics. Both women have attended each congress since 1987.

“I was happy the first time I came. We had an opportunity to show our side of being Catholic,” Moore said.

“It was thrilling to say the least. I’d never seen that many black Catholics or black priests in my life,” added Johnson, who this year brought her 13-year-old granddaughter, Ceciley Scarbrough from the Diocese of Orlando, Fla.

Johnson said she hoped to learn what other parishes were doing in relation to the eight principles - especially Catholic education - so she could bring fresh ideas home to her parish.

Gracie Middleton, who had traveled to Buffalo from the Diocese of Beaumont, Texas, with 52 other adults and teens, said she wanted to learn more about the sacraments during her first trip to the congress and share that knowledge with others who hadn’t made the trip.

“Sacraments are not just pageants or performances or concerts. Something takes place in each sacrament that only God can do, resulting in our sharing life with God, friendship and redemption ... while we receive strength for the journey,” Bishop Perry said during the opening ceremony.

As Catholics make connections between the sacraments and the realities of their

lived experiences, they begin to enter more fully into the mission Jesus gives Catholics through baptism, said Auxiliary Bishop Martin D. Holley of Washington.

“Our mission is to go out into all the world to share the good news,” Bishop Holley said in his homily during the opening liturgy. “We do not belong to ourselves. We belong to Christ ... and he is in the sacraments of the church and he comes to us in a powerful way through all the sacraments.”

Catholic Review Staff Writer Chaz Muth contributed to this article.