

Black Catholic History Month in this Year of Faith

By Therese Wilson Favors

The inauguration of this “Year of Faith” surfaced within me some old memories of the blessings given to the people of God during the proceedings of Vatican II 50 years ago. I was young and, believe it or not, still hold some vivid memories of this great moment in church history.

It was the fall of 1963 when I first heard the word “vernacular.” It had received special prominence during Vatican II. Taught by the Oblate Sisters of Providence, I was introduced to the proceedings of Vatican II. With an eighth-grade mind and worldview, I surmised that the Vatican II event was of monumental significance to the church and to the world. Oblate Sister Mother Consolata Gibson wanted us to be well informed, thus new words were introduced and blended into our vocabulary. In the Oblate way of pursuing faith formation within their students, each one of us had to stand ready to defend the faith. In this faith formation process the term “vernacular” intrigued me. To say the least, its impact on Catholic worship and teachings has been significant.

Throughout the years the unpacking of the word “vernacular” positively haunted me and captured my attention. I constantly watched for its usage and implications around me. I heard English substituted for Latin during Mass. I slowly saw catechetical resources pictorially move toward a more inclusive presentation of the church. A broad sense of the “vernacular” found its way into the role the laity played within the church and its implications became transformational.

From the prayerful wisdom of Vatican II, church fathers presented a plan of renewal, calling for more intense, intimate and intentional engagement of the laity. The mere fact that our liturgy was celebrated in the vernacular engaged the people in a powerful way. That engagement resulted in the creation of new music appreciating

both the vernacular and the culture of the people. Vatican II ushered in the restoration of the “order of permanent diaconate.” That restoration presented a wave of new leadership with the church and held specific significance for the African-American Catholic community. Never before in our history were so many indigenous clergymen among our Catholic people.

Vatican II impacts have marked the evangelization efforts in the black community. This sacred moment of inspiration and transformation warrants our attention as we celebrate Black Catholic History Month. In November, let’s lift up our evangelization efforts, and pray and work toward new vocations within our community. The same Holy Spirit that was among the Council fathers 50 years ago still roams the earth, urging us toward renewal. Pope Benedict XVI states, “The ‘door of faith’ is always opened for us, ushering us into the life of communion with God, and offering entry into his church.” Let’s take the Year of Faith and Black Catholic History Month as an opportunity to do something eternal and intentional for God, God’s people and God’s church.

WHY NOVEMBER?

Black Catholic History Month began in November 1990 through the advocacy of the National Black Catholic Clergy with the celebration of St. Martin de Porres’ feast day. On Nov. 3 of that year, a liturgy celebrated the 350th anniversary of St. Martin’s transition into eternal life.

November was selected, including All Saints Day, as an opportunity to review the lives of the saints of African descent. Nov. 2 is a remembrance of stories of the many souls who have brought the faith to people of this present time within the African-American Catholic Community. Nov. 13 is the birth, in 354 A.D., of St. Augustine, the first doctor of the church from North Africa; Nov. 20 marks the death of Zumbi of Palmares of Brazil, the South American founder of a free state for blacks.

All are invited to celebrate Black Catholic History Month at St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church Saturday, Nov. 3, at 5 p.m. Mass. Redemptorist Father Kenneth Gaddy is celebrant and homilist.