

Church must address evangelization roadblocks

In February, a religious portrait of African-Americans was released. Its major reference was the “Pew Forum U.S. Religious Landscape Survey.” The report’s overview discusses research that indicates that “while the United States is generally considered a highly religious nation, African-Americans are markedly more religious on a variety of measures than the U.S. populations as a whole, including level of affiliation with a religion, attendance at religious services, frequency of prayer and religion’s importance in life. Compared with other racial and ethnic groups, African-Americans are among the most likely to report a formal religious affiliation, with fully 87 percent of African-Americans describing themselves as belonging to one religious group or another, according to the survey, conducted in 2007 by the Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion and Public Life.

The Landscape Survey also says that “nearly eight-in-10 African-Americans (79 percent) say religion is very important in their lives, compared with 56 percent among all U.S. adults. A majority (72 percent) of African-Americans who are unaffiliated with any particular faith say religion plays at least a somewhat important role in their lives; nearly half (45 percent) of unaffiliated African-Americans say that religion is very important in their lives.

While the above is good news, one also can read in the same survey that only 5 percent of those African-Americans who are affiliated to a church, who pray often, who say religion is important to them are Catholic. Questions arise ...Why can’t we attract and maintain more African-Americans to the Catholic Church? Is there an overall appreciation of people of color and the gifts they bring to the church? Is there an environment of welcome and hospitality? What barriers exist and what enhancers can be employed? Historically, racism has played a significant role and still remains a constant challenge in the church and within society. Aspects of the U.S. Bishops’ Pastoral Letter on Racism in our Day: “Brothers and Sisters To Us” have not been followed or implemented. Some Catholics do not see themselves as promoters of racism, but support bigotry through a particular stance on

immigration, inclusiveness, or integration vs. assimilation. Personal views on promoting confederate culture in spite of the pain it inflicts upon people of color remains. Inappropriate and ugly behavior at sporting events when racial diversity exists as well as exclusionary practices in schools and at the pool have been experienced recently.

As African-American Catholics, our evangelization efforts must address racism and call for moral integrity within our church and among the people of God within our church. Every person seeking spiritual growth and connectedness with Christ should have as a quest of life the collective responsibility of achieving dignity and respect for all of God's people. Internal catechesis and conversion as well as healing is required if we want to attract and maintain more African Americans to the Catholic Church.

Externals need to happen, too. Acceptance of our expression of spiritual gifts within the liturgy as well as within catechetical environments is a must. This is a sign that people are welcomed and appreciated. African-American Catholics also have a task in adopting the mission of evangelization with fierce dedication and enthusiasm. After all, we are disciples of Christ, the one who can make all things possible. We must never underestimate the power of invitation into the fold. We must invite those who do not have a church home. We must invite those who left our church home, and we must invite those in our own families who worship nowhere, unaware of the blessings they can step into by knowing Jesus.

As a church, let's take to heart the above survey and let's address those issues that block evangelization and make the church unappealing to African Americans. We all have work to do!

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