

Joy, holiness called keys to attracting African-American vocations

NEW ORLEANS - Manifesting joy and living a life of holiness are fundamental ways to attract young African-American men to consider a vocation to the priesthood, Redemptorist Father Maurice Nutt of Memphis, Tenn., told the joint convention of the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus and the National Black Sisters' Conference July 25.

The conference, attended by more than 200 black priests, deacons, sisters and seminarians, focused on vocations and enriching the spiritual, theological, educational and ministerial lives of the participants.

The attendees also participated in two service projects - cleaning out the house of the 90-year-old mother of a deacon and working at the Sisters of the Holy Family motherhouse.

"There are a number of young people who are interested in answering God's call to serve the church, and we as clergy have to be more deliberate in our invitation to have men consider the priesthood," said Father Nutt, pastor of Holy Names of Jesus and Mary in Memphis. "The best promotion is by our example and our encouragement of young men and women."

In 2005, Father Nutt said, the Redemptorists were looking to staff two parishes in the South. They selected Holy Names of Jesus and Mary in Memphis and Our Mother of Sorrows in Biloxi, Miss.

"In both of these parishes there was a need for evangelization and preaching," Father Nutt said. "Both were predominantly African-American parishes. Holy Names had not had a resident pastor for over 10 years and the parish had dwindled to 30 families.

"Two years later, we have slightly over 100 families, and that's due to evangelization

and explicit proclamation of the Gospel and building a sense of community within the church,” he said.

Father Nutt, 44, said he visits frequently with students in the parish school and youth group “to encourage them and to let them know that the priesthood and religious life are joyful.”

“There’s a joy for African-American youths to see someone who looks like them fulfilling a life’s dream as a priest,” he said.

It was the encouragement and support he received from older African-American priests and sisters that fueled him spiritually, Father Nutt said.

“We might have moments of discouragement and low morale about vocations, but we need to remember those who have gone before us and persevered and helped sustain us in our vocations,” he said.

Of the 42,000 priests in the U.S., about 250 are African-American. There are 26 African-American seminarians in the U.S., Father Nutt said.

There are 300 African-American religious sisters out of more than 67,000 U.S. sisters. African-American deacons number 380 out of more than 16,000 deacons. Of the nation’s 68 million Catholics, 2.3 million are African-American.

In a question-and-answer period, one priest mentioned that vocations exist in the African-American community, but some seminarians never make it to ordination because they have to overcome racial obstacles within the seminary community.

“Sometimes I would walk into a room and the room got quiet,” the priest said. “Or when the TV news reports a murder by a black man, you have to endure the comments that might be made.”

“My story would not be as horrific or devastating as other men who have shared those horror stories of racism in the seminary,” Father Nutt said. “I think there was an understanding that the Redemptorists wanted to do all they could to maintain African-American vocations, and I was grateful for the support I received.”

Father Tony Ricard, parochial administrator of Our of Lady Star of the Sea in New Orleans, told the group he and other black priests are planning a nationwide youth conference, perhaps in 2010.

“We specifically want 12 black priests to put this on,” he said. “The spiritual concept is based on the apostolic structure. It would be 12 black priests searching, like the apostles, for the 72. Our job is to find some more people to help us do the work.”