

Power of decisiveness, faith, inspire women

As we end this month of celebrating women's history, I remember a story once shared here in Baltimore at St. Mary's Seminary and University by Benedictine Father Cyprian Davis, a noted historian and teacher.

Father Davis spoke of a woman of faith, dedicated to God and the church, who acted decisively to transform the world in her time as racism raised its ugly head. Her name was Harriet Thompson, a New Yorker, a black Catholic in the mid-19th century.

Confronted with the lack of respect of the hierarchy and many clergy toward blacks, Thompson wrote a letter to Pope Pius IX on Oct. 29, 1853. The letter uncovered specific actions of neglect and disregard of black Catholics in New York. "Archbishop Hughes," she wrote, "did not recognize the black race to be part of his flock and it is well known by both white and the black race that he cannot bear them (blacks) to come near him." The letter was signed by 26 black Catholics as they anticipated a visit of the papal nuncio to New York.

Thompson's attempt to address the racism unveiled in the New York church was precipitated by the barriers placed to enhance segregation in Catholic schools by refusing the participation of black Catholic students. In addition, in "The History of Black Catholics in the United States," Father Davis writes that "New York City in the mid-19th century was a cauldron of unrest, with crowds of immigrants pouring into the city, many of them whom were Irish and were subject to racial discrimination and economic exploitation. ... Free Blacks were in competition with the Irish for the bottom rung of the socioeconomic ladder."

During Father Davis's presentation at St. Mary's, he shared that "Harriet Thompson and those 26 signers put into motion a demonstration of their loyalty (within the Church) at the same time as they addressed their denunciation at a lack of Christian justice." Father Davis surmises that this level of black Catholic activism became the bedrock for future movements, such as the National Black Catholic Congress, the

Federated Colored Catholics and the formation of the Black Catholic Clergy Caucus.

Lessons were taught, and lessons can be learned by this woman, who saw moral inconsistencies, addressed them and advocated for change. In the end, Harriet Thompson longed for the church to be true and authentically Catholic, with “justice for all” wrapped as a mantle around its body. She understood the power of decisiveness imbued with faith and she inspired others to work for the transformation of society. Her end goal was “the growth of the Catholic faith among African Americans.”

Women such as Mother Mary Lange and Sister Mary Paul Lee, Oblate Sisters of Providence, also took up this mantle, pushing always for the doors of the church to open wider and wider. These faithful women served under the impulse of the Holy Spirit. And you know that once you become a decisive agent of the Spirit of Christ, you are compelled to further the kingdom of God and to participate in God’s project of transformation – sharing the Gospel, advocating for justice and promoting charity in the name of Jesus.

Under the impulse of the Holy Spirit and galvanized by the prophetic witness of those such as these who act decisively and imbued by faith, African-American Catholics and those who minister in the Apostolate will gather on the evening of April 7 at Our Lady of Mount Providence, 701 Gun Road. This serves as a follow-up to the “Conversation on Leadership and Vocations” held in December. Its goal is to collectively discern and collaborate in implementing goals, to further the kingdom of God and to participate in God’s project of transformation by sharing the Gospel, advocating for justice and promoting charity in the name of Jesus.

For more information, call the Office of African American Catholic Ministries at 410-625-8472.

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