

Sacraments have universal meaning, says Nigerian archbishop

BUFFALO, N.Y. – Such common themes as the nourishing nature of the Eucharist and the cleansing of baptismal waters convey universal meaning to believers of many cultures, a Nigerian archbishop told participants in the 10th National Black Catholic Congress.

Archbishop John Olorunfemi Onaiyekan of Abuja, Nigeria, delved into the symbolic nature of the seven sacraments during his July 13 keynote address.

The symbols of the church not only convey universal meaning but also the presence of Christ in our lives, said the archbishop, who has served as co-president of the African Council of Religious Leaders.

“To be Catholic is to really believe that Jesus is at work in his church,” he said.

He said the sacraments are the outward signs of the inward grace Christ has given to believers. Referring the audience to the Catechism of the Catholic Church for its discussion of the sacraments, Archbishop Onaiyekan spoke about each one.

He said baptism is the foundation of all the other sacraments and cleanses people of original sin. The Catholic Church recognizes many baptisms performed in Protestant faiths, he said, noting that rather than focus on what separates Christian faiths Christians should focus on the baptismal sacrament that unifies them.

“We may have doctrinal differences, but we agree on this,” Archbishop Onaiyekan said.

The sacrament of confirmation confirms the baptismal promises. It is needed, he said, because many Catholics have been baptized as infants rather than choosing to become Catholic as adults.

“Chrismation (confirmation) helps us renew our enthusiasm and receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit,” he said.

Archbishop Onaiyekan said the sacrament of the Eucharist is important in today’s world because it is a symbol of accord between faith communities – something he often looks for as he travels. He said Catholics should see the Eucharist as an active force in their lives that calls them to address the growing gap between the rich and poor.

“The Eucharist challenges us to work for a better world where it is not possible to

continue what we are doing,” said Archbishop Onaiyekan.

The sacrament of reconciliation, he said, helps prepare people to receive the Eucharist.

“It’s best to look at it not as a distasteful duty but as the wonderful grace of God that you can go to the Eucharist and come out with your heart relieved,” he said.

He noted that the anointing of the sick can heal both physical and spiritual ailments.

“The spiritual houses are flooded with people looking for spiritual healing,” Archbishop Onaiyekan said. “God never abandons his hope.”

On the sacrament of marriage, he said it’s important to remember that a married couple receives grace from their union.

“You are going to heaven because of your marriage, not in spite of it,” Archbishop Onaiyekan said, drawing laughter from the group.

He also quoted the late U.S. Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen’s comment that it takes three people to get married: a husband, a wife and God. Archbishop Onaiyekan said if a person looks at marriage only as a contract that does not involve God then that person may see marriage as something that can be dissolved.

In addition to marriage, he spoke about vocations contained in the sacrament of holy orders, which confers the three degrees of deacon, priest and bishop. Archbishop Onaiyekan said he is always impressed by the number of married deacons in the United States, and said young men everywhere should be encouraged to consider the priesthood.

He called on all those gathered to consider what their own vocations might be.

“All the baptized have a share in the charism of the Lord Jesus,” he said. “You are all priests, in a sense.”