

# Take a look at history while walking forward

On Jan. 20, 2009, Barack Obama was sworn in as the 44th president of the United States. He is the first African-American to earn the highest honor in the United States of America. On Jan. 4, 1899, 120 years ago, black Catholic men from all over the nation convened on Washington, D.C., for a four-day Black Catholic Lay Congress. This was the first Catholic Congress ever held by black Catholic men. It took place at St. Augustine Catholic Church in Washington, D.C.

Father Augustus Tolton was one of the celebrants of Holy Mass along with Cardinal James Gibbons. Father Tolton was ordained in Rome, becoming the first African-American priest in the United States. Daniel Rudd was the leader, planner and organizer of the congress.

The delegates of the newly formed congress voted Daniel Rudd as their first president. He was born in Bardstown, Ky., in 1854. He was one of 12 children born to Catholic parents. As a teenager he went to live with his older brother in Cincinnati. There he received his advanced education and continued to worship and study the Catholic religion.

When the Catholic Congress adjourned, President Grover Cleveland invited the group to the White House. The men met with the president in the East Room of the White House. There the president greeted each man individually, and a reception followed. We do not know why the president invited the delegation to the White House. That question still remains: why? It was during President Cleveland's administration that France gave the United States the Statue of Liberty as a gift.

However, we do know the agenda of the congress. They came armed with questions, grievances, opinions and resolutions. They came seeking assistance and relief from racism within the church and the community. The congress' main interest was in the quality of life for blacks in America. Rudd felt that the Catholic Church was in a position to speak out against racism. This vocalization would be of value to resolutions that Rudd listed in the agenda of the congress. He hoped that by the next

Congress some progress would be accomplished. He remained optimistic.

Rudd went about the Catholic community lecturing against racism in the church. He wrote and published newspaper articles. He used his newspaper "The American Catholic Tribune," which he started in 1886, as a vehicle for change. He wrote articles explaining the feeling and position of black Catholics. His newspaper also carried other articles of interest, such as Frederick Douglass' explanation for his resignation of being the minister to Haiti. Rudd called Catholics to unite, to gather as one under the auspices of Holy Mother the Church and get to know one another. Most of all, Rudd and the congress wanted to see some improvement in racial harmony.

In the meantime, Rudd was preparing for the second Black Catholic Congress, which was held in Cincinnati in 1890. The second congress was much like the first. The delegates' objective was to establish schools, open unions to the working poor, eradicate the grandfather clause and eliminate restrictions keeping Catholic colleges off-limits to black students.

The third congress was held in Philadelphia in 1892. It did not have any enhancement of previous resolutions. Catholic education was high on the list, but it had not improved. Catholic education and vocational training was the objective. By 1899 Rudd had stopped publishing his newspaper. The fourth congress took place in Chicago in 1893, and addressing racism was still the primary aim. The fifth congress was held in Baltimore at St. Peter Claver Church. The next congress was held 93 years later in 1987 at The Catholic University of America.

Now history will record that in January 120 years ago, black men visited President Cleveland and in January 2009 a black man, Barack Obama, was sworn in as president of the United States?

Agnes Kane Callum is a noted historian and a parishioner of historic St. Francis Xavier Church in Baltimore.