

# Taking a look at poignant moments of history

Sometimes I feel unable to recount history in the proper way or with the amount of supplication or pride I feel is required. But as a layperson in a church where vocations are declining, I believe this particular history is critical and useful for African-Americans and Catholic laity. It's the story of Lincoln and Julia Vallé.

The lessons come from history 100 years old. When motivated by the Black Catholic Lay Congresses of the 1890s, Capt. Lincoln Charles Vallé and his wife, Julia, left Chicago and went to Milwaukee to evangelize the black community. Lincoln began holding meetings where he explained the Catholic faith. He rented a storefront which later became the chapel named St. Benedict the Moor Mission. This effort increased the conversion of blacks in Milwaukee. Valle's efforts won the full endorsement of Archbishop Sebastian Messmer, who helped the Vallés. Door-to-door visits by the Vallés and some priests resulted in continued increases in the number of black Catholics. (Their visits bring to mind Operation Faith Lift, a door-to-door evangelization effort supported by the Office of African American Catholic Ministries.) Evangelization continued with St. Benedict the Moor "Colored" Mission and the development of a boarding school to educate black children. The Vallés became the very first black Catholic pastoral life directors in the Midwest. Lincoln Vallé was also the editor of *The Conservator*, a black newspaper that spoke on issues as seen from the black middle-class perspective.

The Vallés provide us with a couple lessons. First, "we have done it before." That lesson will also be applied to the psyche of all African-Americans now that a black man has become president of the United States. For our descendants, "we've done it before" takes away the excuse that someone, somewhere is keeping us from fulfilling our dreams for accomplishing things that "haven't been done before." For us laity, the grassroots determination can be rekindled to achieve some of our own agenda because "we have done it before." I don't understand the psyche that well, but I know we "have done it before" is a motivator.

Another lesson as shown with the Vallés and Archbishop Messmer is "assistance is

not always a bad thing.” Also shown in the story of Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange, assistance at the proper time after you have properly organized and completed the groundwork can be an advantage. Sometimes, for us laity, requesting assistance from the hierarchy is perceived to take away autonomy, change direction or put restraints on our project/mission. In the case of the Vallés and Mother Lange, this did not prove to be the case. The Vallés provide another occasion for us to seek and be open to assistance from “the establishment.” Also, we can, as the Vallés did, make the parish community the vineyard we use for our evangelization. This would accomplish a couple of things. Most importantly, it would accomplish our mission as disciples of Christ to spread the Gospel. Also, we seem to have become parishes with many parishioners outside of our parish boundaries. Evangelizing in the community would bring our parishioner base closer to the parish, allowing us to do more in the neighborhood. It would also allow the church to be a focal point in the rebuilding of America one neighborhood at a time, as our president and first lady suggest.

There was a Lincoln and Julia Vallé Lay Leadership Program inspired by the Vallés founded in Milwaukee. This is a program of study and formation, with the emphasis on Afrocentric spirituality, to form and develop lay ministers and leaders in the Catholic church community. The program was developed by School Sister of Notre Dame Shawnee Daniels-Sykes. Dr. Daniels-Sykes recently received her doctorate in religious studies with a specialization in theological ethics and bioethics from Marquette University. When she did, she became the first and only African-American Catholic female theological bioethicist in the United States – another first I couldn’t resist reporting.

We’ve done it before, with assistance. There’s nothing to keep us from doing it again.

Sharon H. Winchester is a parishioner of St. Bernardine in Baltimore and coordinator of religious education at St. Joseph’s Passionist Monastery Church in Irvington.