

The power of our words

This summer I taught a one-week course at the Institute of Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University in New Orleans. The topic was “Understanding the Prophetic and Empowering Role of Leadership in the Black Community.” Students explored the prophetic call to leadership as evidenced in several stories from scripture. Additionally, discussions referred to the invitation to lead as presented in the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops pastoral letter, “Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord.” Two days were spent discussing strategies to motivate others to lead, the challenge of addressing racism within ministry and the value of collective leadership within the African American Catholic community.

The reference book used for the two days of study was our very own book, “What We Have Seen and Heard: Essays and Stories from Black Catholics of Baltimore.” It was well received. The students were amazed at the diverse topics of essays presented, the deep faith expressed and the historical research rendered. Their interest resurfaced within me again how awe-inspiring this collective work of education and evangelization became. I continue to salute and honor the writers and contributors of this work as we celebrate 10 years of “telling the story,” thus the reason for this article.

The book derived its name from a scriptural quote from Acts 4:20. Peter and John said, “it is impossible for us not to speak about what we have seen and heard.” We wanted to speak our special truth of conversion and our experiences within the church to those who had ears to listen. It is something very powerful when a people tell their own story from their own lips.

After years of dialogue with The Catholic Review, Daniel Medinger, then editor, and leaders of the African American Catholic Community, including both Josephite Bishop John H. Ricard and Jesuit Bishop Gordon D. Bennett, a partnership was forged. Articles written by black Catholics on various subjects of evangelization, pastoral and educational issues and historical research were to be published on a weekly basis in The Catholic Review. Our theme was “What We Have Seen and Heard.” This partnership with The Catholic Review was launched in September 2000, the Jubilee Year. Five years later, most of the articles were compiled into a

book.

Cardinal William H. Keeler wrote the foreword, stating “Our world today is in need of the testimony of African American Catholics who walk by faith and not by sight. Their testimonies bring hope into our world. Their faith story, often rising out of struggle and oppression towards victory and liberation, testifies to the good news of the gospel and the awesome love of Christ. With great self-determination, steadfast activism and daunting dedication, Black Catholics fashioned a place for themselves within the Catholic Church of Baltimore and throughout the United States. This story needs to be told, so that others may come to know Jesus for themselves through the Catholic Church.”

And the story was told. Soul-stirring articles of what it meant to be “black and Catholic” were rendered by historians, pastoral leaders, catechists, youth ministers and those involved in evangelization and leadership on boards. Issues relating to the community, schools and parish life were discussed. Catechetical and faith formation reflections were offered, inspiring discernment of liturgical seasons and inculturation within catechesis and evangelization. Challenges of racism, violence and injustice found an audience through the writers who confronted such evil in our world. Readers were introduced to black Catholic leaders within the church and the wider society.

If you want to explore the above along with saints and popes of African descent; the history of black Catholics in the archdiocese; or be engaged in some provocative reading, get “What We Have Seen and Heard: Essays of Black Catholics of Baltimore.” Let’s celebrate this 10-year anniversary by remembering “what we have seen and heard.”

(Copies can be purchased from the Office of African American Catholic Ministries at 410-625-8472.)

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