

Three takeaways from symposium for black catechists

By Jessica Marsala

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In the year that Erin Phillips, 28, has taught religious education to fourth-graders, she has discovered that a catechist's own education is never complete.

"I'm learning with them," said Phillips, a parishioner of New All Saints in Liberty Heights. "The great part is while I'm getting it, they're getting it."

Phillips joined catechists and youth ministers from 17 other parishes and Catholic schools in Baltimore, New York and Washington, D.C, at St. Veronica in Cherry Hill Sept. 13 for the 24th "Keep on Teaching" symposium.

The annual workshop is sponsored by the Archdiocese of Baltimore's Office of African American Catholic Ministries. Sister of Notre Dame de Namur Gwynette Proctor, the director of the office, said the event provides black catechists with Africentric resources, so that they don't "have to reinvent the wheel," as well as opportunities to network and be "nourished by the Word of God."

Three takeaways from the symposium follow.

1. Black catechists need to find the "sweet spot" between the past and the present.

✘ In light of the workshop's theme, "Lord, Order My Steps in Your Word," guest speaker Monsignor Raymond East, pastor of St. Theresa of Avila in Washington, D.C., referenced another meaning of GPS, "Gospel Positioning System." He said that educators and preachers need to have that kind of GPS in the "toolboxes" in order to relate to young people.

"All of us, especially catechists, have to be on that front part of the wave," Monsignor East said of staying relevant and up-to-date with culture and technology, which he said catechists ignore "at their own peril."

At the same time, he urged catechists to teach African-American youths about their

roots, referencing Baltimore's "strong and important black Catholic history.

2. An intellectual education is not effective by itself.

✘ "You can't catechize or evangelize from a distance; you have to get up close to Jesus and get up close in the lives of the people that you are involved in," said Therese Wilson Favors, former director of the Office of African American Catholic Ministries. "The most revolutionary thing that you can do is to teach, because it changes hearts, changes minds, helps people to know Jesus for themselves." Favors, who has been a catechist for 44 years, assisted with the production of the volunteer-written resource manual given to all symposium participants.

3. Catechists have to be "positive" role models and show young people how to live out their faith, even outside of the classroom.

✘ "Most of our kids," said Ernestine Watkins, the director of youth ministry at the combined St. Peter Claver and St. Pius V parish in Baltimore, "do not go to Catholic school. (We need to tell) them it's OK to be Catholic, it's OK to be Christian. It's OK to show that you're Christian." "I have to keep reminding myself," Watkins added, "we are planting the seed. We're planting it and we're watering it."

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