

Walking in the light of God

By Deacon Wardell Paul Barksdale

I had the privilege of attending the African Eucharistic Congress last month in Bethesda, representing St. Bernardine Parish and the archdiocesan Office of African American Catholic Ministries. The first day marked the 18th Conference of African Clergy and Religious who live and minister in the United States, a day of unity and support.

In 2006, the first Congress was planned; the second followed this year. The Congress reflected the readings of John's Gospel pertaining to "The Bread of Life Discourse." The theme for this Congress was: "The Eucharistic Nourishment - Catalyst for Unity, Justice and Peace for African Catholics as New Migrants in the U.S.

The hotel used for the Congress became a different place, one that would welcome the Holy Spirit and all of God's people. There were Africans from all parts of Africa, laughing, singing and praying together all in the name of our Lord and Savior. One major factor was the love they all had for the body of Christ. Dinner was a delight, the food was adequate but the company was overwhelmingly hospitable. I sat at a table with brothers and sisters from North, West, South and East Africa. The conversations were centered on the love of the "Body of Christ" and their ministries.

After dinner, there was an hour of prayer and praise. The hotel was transformed into a place of worship. The energy and power of the prayer and praise could not be contained within the walls of the room. This power engulfed the entire hotel, including the lobby, the elevators, the bedrooms and most of all in the people gathered who lifted the praise for such a wonderful God. The groups from the different nations of Africa led this prayerful journey. The scene was one of unity, where all gathered were at peace, fellowship and love; united under one God and the body of Christ.

No matter what African nation one was from, everyone could communicate and respond. The closest description I have is that we were reliving a mini-enactment of the descent of the Holy Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles. Every voice was heard and it seemed that we were all speaking the same; praising God and no one was left out. All of us were shouting, laughing, crying and becoming infused with the Holy Spirit. We danced and sang for the Lord. We embraced as if we were longtime friends, happy to see each other. It was and still is a great feeling of unity and power as we knew then and now that God is with us. The hour went fast, but we waited for the Lord to arrive before Mass started.

The energy of prayer and praise did not dissipate as Mass began. The procession included two bishops, 40 priests and four deacons. We were literally “walking in the light of God and marching to the body of Christ” as the center of our joy as Catholic Christians. All of Africa gathered around the table of the Lord with the meal that unifies us in love.

Mass was followed by eucharistic adoration whereby a cluster of nations hosted each hour until morning arrived.

On the second day, Sister Joanna Okereke, of the Congregation of Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus gave a brief history of the National Eucharistic Congress: “The Eucharist shapes and transforms the heart and strengthens the African’s love of the Body of Christ. This is our gift to the American Church. The Eucharist is a gift which promotes awareness of the central part of the Mass and is an evangelizing component of worship. The Eucharist is the source and summit of Christian life and during the weekend, every Mass will draw us together in the ‘spring of life,’ the Eucharist.”

The keynote speaker, Bishop William A. Avenya, auxiliary bishop of Makurdi, Nigeria, gave a very rousing presentation. His key points included:

- We will have justice if we work out just relationships and are willing to forgive unconditionally; not to judge, then unity can be restored;
- Truth needs to be set free;
- Peace is a gift from God and true peace is transforming; and
- The center of our joy as Christians in the Eucharist unites us and sets us

free to do the work of God on earth.

Much more can be said, but I hope this reflection provides a glimpse of the power of the Eucharist and the action of the Holy Spirit among us.

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