



BLACK CATHOLIC THEOLOGICAL SYMPOSIUM (BCTS)

**International Network of Societies of Catholic Theology
Triennial Network Council Meeting
DePaul University
Chicago, IL U.S.A.
13 June 2011**

1) Profile of the BCTS

The Black Catholic Theological Symposium (BCTS) is the principal learned society for the study of Black Catholicism, especially as it exists in the Western diaspora (specifically in North America). The BCTS was founded in 1978 as an occasional conference. The proceedings of that conference were published in a volume entitled, *Theology: A Portrait in Black*. The Symposium met again in 1979, but the papers of that conference were never published. The Symposium re-convened again in 1991, and the participants of that gathering determined that the organization should become a national Roman Catholic interdisciplinary theological society that meets annually. The Symposium, with one exception, has met annually since 1991.

The Symposium was established to:

a) foster among Black Catholics an ethical community of scholarly dialogue characterized by

- (1)** commitment to the fundamental humanity of all persons; and
- (2)** regard for the plurality of cultural, ethnic backgrounds and religious experience among Black peoples;
- (3)** the development of a theology which is authentically Black and truly Catholic;

b) to publish reports, the Symposium's discussions, and research of Symposium membership;

c) to encourage the teaching and discussion of Black Catholic religious and cultural experiences and thought within the theology and/or religious studies curriculum of colleges, universities, and seminaries;

d) to encourage the identification and development of Black Catholic Scholars in the fields of Theology, Liturgy, Ethics, Canon Law, Church History, Biblical studies etc;

e) to enable the identification and development of theoretically grounded practitioners in the fields of pastoral ministry and religious education; and

f) to encourage theologically and theoretically grounded ministry and program development responsive to the needs of Black Catholics within the Church and society. (citing the BCTS *Constitution*)

Full Membership is open to Roman Catholics of Black African descent holding doctoral degrees or their equivalent within the field of theology or related disciplines (philosophy, religious education, psychology, literature, history, sociology, etc.)

Associate Membership is restricted to Black Catholic doctoral students and those who possess demonstrated scholarly expertise in areas of theology or related disciplines. A limited number of Affiliate memberships is extended to selected scholars and persons, both Black and non-Black, whose research, writing, and/or ecclesiastical appointments focus on Black Catholics and who are nominated and approved by vote of the full members of the society.

The rationale for the interdisciplinary character of the BCTS is that from the beginning, we recognized that in order to adequately reflect *theologically* upon the Black Catholic experience, it is necessary also to engage those disciplines that enable us to have an adequate account of both the Black and Black Catholic experience. Thus, the Symposium has always included in its membership Roman Catholic historians, literary scholars, psychologists, and pastoral ministers possessing doctorates in religious studies/catechesis.

Currently, there are about 55 members in the BCTS, of whom about 40 are regular attendees at our gatherings. There is a fairly even gender representation (about 28 men; 25 women). Of the group, 18 are ordained priests, 4 are women religious, and 29 are lay persons.

Among the activities of the BCTS are (a) its annual meeting; (b) the publication of *The Journal of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium* (2010 marks the fourth volume); and (c) maintaining its website (www.bcts.org). Moreover, many of our members also belong to the Catholic Theological Society of America (CTSA), and sponsor a regular session there entitled, "Black Catholic Theology Consultation." A particular point to note is that two members of the BCTS have served as the presidents of the CTSA.

A unique feature of our annual meeting is our commitment to a listening session with the local Black Catholic community of the place in which we gather. This session is not marked by the members presenting papers. Our purpose is to listen to the concerns of the local community, as part of our commitment to make our theology accountable to the people and cultural experience upon which we reflect.

2) The Institutions in Which We Work

Most of our members (about two-thirds) work in academic university settings, both Catholic and secular. Only three are professors in Catholic seminaries/institutes of formation. The rest are employed in ministerial settings in parishes, diocesan offices, or work on the staff of the national bishops' conference. Given the interdisciplinary character of the Symposium and its membership, those in academic settings are pretty evenly divided between those who work in departments of theology/religious studies and those who hold appointments in other university departments (e.g., history, classics, anthropology, Africana studies, and gender studies).

3) The Profile of Theological Schools and Student Enrollment

I will leave this section of the report to my CTSA counterpart, for our situation is fairly identical to theirs in this regard (with the unique distinctiveness of our experience to be noted below).

4) The Challenges Faced by our Members (Concerns about Work/Competing Academic vs. Pastoral Expectations)

A) The Paucity of our Numbers. Currently, there are about twenty Catholics of African descent in the United States who possess a doctoral degree in the traditional sacred sciences (Scripture, Systematics, and Moral Theology). This group is augmented by seven who possess a doctorate in History with a focus on religious studies; and four who possess a doctorate in Canon (Church) Law. There are also a little more than a dozen who possess a Doctorate of Ministry in various pastoral disciplines. We also include in the membership of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium a number of Catholic scholars who possess doctoral degrees in ancillary disciplines essential for a comprehensive understanding of the Black Experience. A closer examination of the number of those who possess terminal degrees in the traditional theological disciplines, however, reveals that some are no longer active scholars; in addition, many are not African Americans but are from the continent of Africa or the Caribbean Islands, with related but distinctive formative histories and concerns. **Thus there are only about a dozen African American Catholic theologians who are current active members of the theological guild.**

Among the most pressing challenges posed by the scarcity of our numbers is that there are so few to shoulder the work of developing a nascent Black Catholic Theology. Such tasks include: contributing to professional journals; conducting seminal research and scholarship; convening special consultations and sessions for the theological guild; leadership of and teaching in the Institute for Black Catholic Studies;⁶ sponsoring and coordinating the Black Catholic Theological Symposium; mentoring future Black Catholic theologians, scholars, and ministers; and networking with other colleagues, especially our Latino and Asian colleagues and other African American religious scholars. All of this is vitally important and necessary, yet there are only a few who can do the job. (God help us if any of us get sick or have pressing family or personal crises).

Another challenge posed by our numbers is the strain of being what one of us has called the “lonely only” at the institutions at which we serve or at most gatherings that we attend. Because we are usually the lone “raisin in the oatmeal,” we often are called upon to be the expert on all other “raisins” and “raisin” matters. At times, this leads to others seeing us as competent to speak *only* on issues of race, racism, and Black Theology – neglecting our expertise in so-called “mainstream” theological concerns. Because we are often the sole faculty member of color, or one of a handful, in our departments or institutions, we also face the challenge of balancing traditional academic scholarship with the hats we must wear as mentor, role model, advocate, political advisor, personal counselor, and “cultural invigorator” at our institutions. This leads not only to loneliness and exhaustion, but also a sense of being misunderstood and unappreciated (especially during evaluation and/or tenure processes, as these adjunct roles count for little in promotion and salary considerations). One could also mention the lack of a community of discourse and dialogue, and the stresses which accompany creating a new field of intellectual inquiry; these challenges are also exacerbated by the fewness of our numbers.

Before leaving this issue, I want to briefly avert to the crucial question of WHY? Why are there so few? There are two I would highlight. First, the Catholic Church has not been proactive in developing leadership of any kind from among the Black Catholic community. Indeed, some have declared that this community has the worst record among mainstream Christian bodies in supporting and utilizing Black leadership talent. Second, related to the first, is the lack of Black ordained ministers and vowed men and women religious in Catholic life. Many professionally trained White theologians active today received their education under the auspices of diocesan or religious sponsorship. For example, the first wave of Catholic women theologians active today received their theological formation under the sponsorship of their religious communities. This pathway, for the most part, was not available to African Americans (until very recently). There are little more than 100 African American priests active in the U.S. (less than one third of one percent of the total) and less than 500 African American women religious (less than one half of one percent of the total). The reasons for this are directly related to the historic exclusion and discrimination directed against Blacks by diocesan seminaries and religious communities. That there are so few Black Catholic religious and theologians, then, is in no small degree a legacy of the racial exclusion suffered by this “community-in-struggle” at the hands of their coreligionists.

B) The Pressing Needs of the Black Catholic Community and the Challenge of Community Leadership. I noted above the organic relationship between Black intellectual activity and that intellectual’s membership in a specific stigmatized community of belonging. This close solidarity raises unique challenges when one considers Black Catholic scholars and the struggles of the Black Catholic community. Because of our close connection with the Black Catholic community, the smallness of its numbers, and the reality that there are so few who can provide the theological expertise this community needs and desires, Black Catholic theologians find ourselves involved in the so-called “pastoral” life of the faith community to a far greater extent than most of our white colleagues. We are speakers at days of reflection for Black Catholics across the nation; presenters at and resource for the National Black Catholic Congress by drafting its documents and providing expert guidance and commentary; theological consultants for various committees of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, especially on issues which pertain to African American life; keynote presenters at national Black Catholic pastoral convocations; speakers at Martin Luther King Day and Black History Month commemorations . . . and this merely scratches the surface of the various involvements we have. I say these things not in complaint, but for understanding. One of the challenges of being an organic part of a community is that it requires participation in activities which many in the academy deem outside the professional purview of intellectual endeavors. Some, indeed, deride such involvements as inimical to serious scholarship. Yet Black Catholic theologians contend that this involvement is essential to our vocation, born of both desire and necessity.

By desire, for we have been nurtured by this community and sustained by it. Our fellow Black Catholics are there for us when, sadly, few others are. We value our organic connection to this community of faith. By necessity, not only because there are few others who have both the training and willingness to be of theological service to this community. But more importantly, because such presence is an essential contribution to our more intellectual endeavors. Indeed, we consider such activism on behalf of the Black Catholic Community a constitutive part of our “scholarly” work – so much so that many of us would rather describe ourselves as “scholar-activists” (as opposed to the “teacher-scholar” designation typical in today’s colleges and

universities). Such an organic relationship with the community is essential if the Black Catholic experience is to be a real font and locus for theology, and not merely a nominal appeal or abstract notion.

C) Being a “Minority within a Minority”: A Double Invisibility or Marginalization.

Black Catholics number only about 8% of the U.S. Black Christian population and less than 4% of the U.S. Catholic population. It is not unusual for Black Catholic scholars to find ourselves either the only Black in many Catholic settings, and the only Catholic among gatherings of Black scholars. Because of this “minority within a minority” status, our perspective and contributions are often overlooked or slighted by both groups.

We are absent and invisible in the discourse of Black Theology and discussions of Black faith in America. Symptomatic of this is that in major works on Black Liberation Theology and African American religious thought, one finds scant reference to Black Catholic scholarship. Indeed, in a work (hailed as “seminal”) detailing the African American religious experience, there is no mention of Black Catholicism.

We often are rendered invisible in Catholic theological discourse as well. At times, my BCTS colleagues have the distinct impression that our White Catholic peers more often dialogue with Black Protestant theologians than with their Black Catholic colleagues.¹¹ There have been recent noteworthy efforts to redress this matter, specifically the annual Black Catholic Theology consultation at the conventions of Catholic Theological Society of America (CTSA); the special issue of *Theological Studies* (December 2000) exploring the reception of Black Theology in Catholic theology; two seminal works on white privilege and Catholic theology;¹² and the elections of Shawn Copeland (2003-2004) and myself (2009-2010) to the presidency of the CTSA. These are laudable and significant accomplishments. There remains a long ways to go.

5) Key Themes and Priorities for Theological Study

A) *The “White Culture” of the U.S. Church.* Many racial/ethnic minorities members of the Catholic Church in the U.S. contend that that this faith community tacitly believes that “Catholic” = “white.” That is, in U.S. Catholicism, only European aesthetics, music, theology and persons are standard, normative, universal, and unambiguously Catholic. All other cultural expressions and experiences are but tolerated (at best). Given the dramatic demographic changes in U.S. Catholicism, such that white/Anglo Catholics are a minority of U.S. Catholics, this presents major pastoral challenges. It also poses significant theological challenges as well, to wit: Can a faith community that (tacitly) believes that the Divine can only be unambiguously revealed in white cultural products truly be “Catholic” . . . or even Christian?

B) *The Erosion of the Black Catholic community.* Surveys and documents from the Black Catholic experience have consistently maintained that the greatest obstacle to successful African American evangelization is the “white culture” of the U.S. Catholic church. Now, not only is this culture an obstacle to evangelization, but also for the retention of Black Catholics in the church. We are witnessing an erosion/defection of members from the Catholic Church. While it is true that many

white Catholics are leaving as well, Black Catholics leave for different reasons. Yet these reasons have not received the same level of notice, attention, or study from researchers. It is the fear of many Black Catholics that within ten years, there will not be a significant number of African American Catholic believers (other than newly-arrived African or Afro-Caribbean immigrants).

- C) *The Growing Demographic Complexity of the Black Catholic community.* The last observation leads to this one, namely, that the Black Catholic faith community in the U.S. is not solely comprised of African Americans (that is, persons of African descent born in the U.S.). We are now composed of an increasing number of African and Afro-Caribbean immigrants who, while sharing some common cultural affinities and experiences, have distinctive histories and cultural formations. This has led, in some cases, to conflicts and tensions. Negotiating and reflecting upon this new richness of this new African diasporic experience is a pressing priority both pastorally and theologically.
- D) *The Continuing Existence of Racism “Post-Obama.”* By any account, the election of the first person of African descent to the nation’s highest office is a monumental milestone in the tortured history of U.S. racial relationships. Yet, it has also unleashed a wave of race-based resentment, hostility, and xenophobia on the part of many whites who are uneasy about the nation’s changing racial demography and the shifting in the country’s racial hierarchy. Paradoxically, it is more common and acceptable for public figures to utter barely coded race-based messages of intolerance now than before President Obama’s election. The hostility of the U.S. hierarchy toward the President is palpable and often remarked, especially among communities of color. Many in these communities fear that the bishops are, *de facto*, aligning themselves with the most regressive forces in political debates. Also, the catastrophic unemployment rate among African American men (almost 50% in some urban areas), the severe racial disparities in the administration of justice, and the acrimonious controversies over immigration policies challenge Catholic theologians to engage and employ race-based critiques for the adequacy and credibility of their theological projects.
- E) *Nurturing Future Scholars and Scholarship.* Related to the above demographic challenges, one of our pressing tasks is that of cultivating the next generation of Black Catholic religious scholars. Two themes are particularly relevant here. The first is that of inviting promising African American students during their undergraduate years to consider a vocation to theological scholarship. By the time they are in graduate school, career options are usually set. The second is to make attractive the vocation of the religious intellectual in a climate that is decidedly anti-intellectual, more materialistic, and where the credibility of religious institutions is markedly diminished.

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6. The Institute for Black Catholic Studies of Xavier University of New Orleans is summer program which trains ministers and leaders for service to the Black Catholic community, primarily though not exclusively in the United States. It is a holistic learning experience, incorporating teaching, research, community service, and communal worship. It is the only institution in the Western hemisphere which offers, among other programs, a master's degree in Black Catholic Studies. More information about the Institute is available at its website, www.xula.edu/ibcs/index.

11. One of the reasons often given for such omission is the supposed lack of resources for such engagement. Given the existence of four anthologies on Black Catholic thought edited by Black Catholics, this reason is more than a little bewildering (to say the least). Such works include: Jamie T. Phelps (ed.), *Black and Catholic: The Challenge and Gift of Black Folk* (Marquette University Press, 1997); Diana L. Hayes and Cyprian Davis (eds.), *Taking Down Our Harps: Black Catholics in the United States* (Orbis Books, 1998); Cyprian Davis and Jamie Phelps (eds.), *Stamped with the Image of God: African Americans as God's Image in Black* (Orbis Books, 2003); and M. Shawn Copeland (ed.), *Uncommon Faithfulness: The Black Catholic Experience* (Orbis Books, 2009). One should also note the anthology edited by William J. Kelly, S. J., *Black Catholic Theology: A Sourcebook* (McGraw-Hill, 2000). Moreover, since 2007, there is the annual *Journal of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium* which publishes the significant papers delivered at its annual gatherings. In view of these resources, not to mention the monographs and other publications of Black Catholic scholars, the pattern of omission and nonengagement is all the more "curious."

12. Jon Nilson, *Hearing Past the Pain: Why Catholic Theologians Need Black Theology* (Paulist Press, 2007); and Laurie M. Cassidy and Alexander Mikulich (eds.), *Interrupting White Privilege: Catholic Theologians Break the Silence* (Orbis Books, 2007).