

## **Rise Up, Oh Black Catholic Church!**

--Fr. Kenneth Hamilton, SVD, Ph.D.

In this moment of transition, we black Catholics in the United States stand here at the homegoing of yet another black Catholic leader, and an outstanding one at that: Fr. Chester P. Smith, SVD. Fr. Chester is one of the many black priests we've lost in this past year alone, including Fathers James Matthews, George Clements, Lawrence Lucas, Russell Best, and Kenneth Westray. The biblical story of the funeral of Moses in Deuteronomy 34(1-8) tells us that the great father was laid in an unknown grave in a land that lies near the center of the Middle East. It reminds me that the symbolic place where the prophetic leader lies is right at the center of history: in the middle of the people, in the middle of their struggles, in the middle of their dreams. Fr. Chester's legacy lies in the middle of the middle of our struggle to be free as black Catholics.

He rests in the soil of a defiant people, a defiance seen in the defections and insurrections of revolutionary ancestors, continuing on into the freed so-called slaves who joined in worldwide liberation movements from the moment they broke their chains. He rests with those abducted ancestors who fought European masters in fierce battles, who made their own religion, and understood Jesus in their own way.

This defiant tradition lived also in the black Catholic community Chester, Charlie, and so many other black Catholic leaders, were raised. When Fr. Chester began his ministerial journey, the black Catholic movement was in full swing. Those were the stirring times of an emerging black Catholic awakening. This awakening was partly spurred by a worldwide postcolonial uprising, particularly in Africa and its diaspora, that rejected European domination. In 1968, black Sisters, Brothers, and clergy gathered together and stood together to name the US Catholic Church "a white racist institution" and resolved then and there to help change it.

There was hope in the air when in 1969 Pope Paul VI came to the shrine of the African martyrs of Uganda and asked black Catholics to share our gift of [blackness] with the whole world.<sup>1</sup> It was a time of struggle but also a time of great hope...hope that the Church was finally changing...hope that black voices could be heard from pulpits and black music and rhythm heard from the choir section.

There was hope, church, that religious orders and dioceses would begin to accept and respect black women and men who wanted to join them. Chester had that hope when he and his twin brother, Charles, joined a religious society of men and women of all races who were pledging to live and minister together. The twins were later sent to black and brown Catholics across the world and saw the need for liberation on a larger scale. They worked with the poor and the indigenous. Years later Fr. Chester would be one of us who wanted to help in 1992 make a change by co-founding a brand new, cutting edge, ministry to black Catholics throughout the African diaspora, now called the Bowman Francis Project. Out of that grew black Catholic

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<sup>1</sup> "To the Heart of Africa." (Address to the Bishops of the African Continent at the Closing Session of a Symposium held in Kampala, Uganda), *The Pope Speaks*, vol.14 (1969), p. 219.

revivals, rites of passage for “at risk” black youth, youth Sankofa retreats, *Bakijana* conferences for young adult Catholics, *Kapona Dada* women spirituality groups, liberation centered bible studies, etc.

### **Who and Whose are We?**

As we face tomorrow, we black American Catholics need to go back and reclaim that we are the descendants of defiant folk who sang, “Before I’d be a slave, I’d be buried in my grave and go home to my Lord and be free!” and say to each other that our lives and our stories matter. For, black Catholics can trace our lineage in this country at least to 1523, to the black explorer Esteban who wandered across the plains of Texas, the hills and valleys of Arkansas, and the swamplands of Florida.

We are the descendants of those black and proud Catholic leaders who called out the church in 1968 because they were concerned with freedom, not false reverence. We the benefactors of great black Catholic thinkers and theologians who asked the question, “Why can’t we be both black and Catholic?” Why can’t we come with all our parts, be accepted as fully functioning persons? These questions led these pioneers to gather in 1978 to draft “Theology: A Portrait in Black!”<sup>2</sup>

### **Where Do We Go from Here?**

I believe we have to press on with an even more urgent and conscious agenda of empowerment in the Catholic Church and throughout the world. Both. If you look at the building hopes of the past and compare them to the dashed hopes of the present, you may want to give up being a black Catholic. Because we have had losses. I’ll give you three examples.

First, we black Catholics in the United States have been fighting since the sixties to get our cultures in their various expressions celebrated on Sunday morning. But, now those efforts are under attack as the bishops turn the liturgy back towards the times of our enslavement and colonization. Our liturgical movement is now under attack from right-wing translations that force Latinized words back into our Sunday celebrations so that the language of imperialism and conquest ends up on our very tongues. Instead of our Sunday Eucharist becoming more Africentric, it is more Roman-centric. Instead of reflecting solidarity with black bodies, we are told to greet each other with “and with your spirit.”

Black ways of worshipping matter. Black rhythms and blues matter. Our ways of looking at God, understanding who Jesus was, and responding to the Holy Ghost matter! When they cease to matter, we will be bound to worship a “God” who put us in chains, not the One who set us free. Today, white racism in the Catholic Church wants to put down our spirituals and gospel

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<sup>2</sup> “Theology: A Portrait in Black: Proceedings of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium.” *Black Catholic Theological Symposium*, no. 1, Oct. 12-15, 1978. Pittsburgh: The Capuchin Press, National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus, 1980.

music, demonize or patronize our black theological and spiritual insights, and mentally police us with racist preaching.<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, in this church and country we black Catholics cannot fully “breathe.” We must, therefore, be in public solidarity with all political movements that are working for real racial justice. Our future demands a greater political consciousness within and outside the Catholic Church. The reason is that it is not merely our voices that are being erased; our very lives are. We must be about getting the most vulnerable among us out of harm’s way and then grow in solidarity with those activists of all ages out there fighting for justice. This was recently made clear when the leaders of our black Catholic national organization came together and issued a public statement supporting Black Lives Matter and other anti-racism movements. If black Catholics will not stand up for black lives in the Catholic world, who will? And, on the inside of our own church, we black Catholics cannot politically settle for the diluted forms of multiculturalism and vapid tokenism the U.S. bishops serve us.

Thirdly, with our parishes now decimated, our Catholic schools closed and our pastors often being racists themselves, we must find power in a unity with black Catholics all over the world. I believe we must go beyond the borders of this nation and find strength in numbers with the over two hundred million black Catholics on the planet. Fr. Chester was always one of those black American leaders who had a vision of a Pan-African, transnational movement. Our future means looking deeper into developing Pan-African Catholic solidarity and sharing with the whole church, as Paul VI invited us to, a Pan-African political Catholicism.

### **Conclusion: Rise up, oh Black Catholic Church!**

The twins and I were once inspired by a black preacher who preached a sermon in which he shouted out, “Rise up, oh black church!” Today, we still shout, “rise up, oh black church” because this moment is our rite of passage. Rise up to create and support economic wealth in our black Catholic institutions, our black Catholic caucuses, our schools and parishes.

Rise up, oh black Catholics. Let us support black Catholic leaders who are often isolated from their own people, targeted and neglected. Surrounded by racism on all sides, they are often afraid to speak up from the pulpit, the seminaries, novitiates and convents. We need our people to stand behind us!

Rise up, oh black Catholic people and demand input into how those who come into our parishes and communities will be trained to serve us. Demand that these men and women who will serve in the black community be introduced and sensitized to our culture, our needs, our spirituality. Here, I have ministered over the last thirty years with a pair of black twin priests

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<sup>3</sup> The latter has always been the case, but, as Eugene Genovese pointed out in his classic *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, we’ve always known the difference between domination and liberation: “The white preachers preached to the [negroes] and then the [negroes preached to themselves]...our theology has never been that of our dominating Christian preachers. ( Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. New York: Vintage, 1976, p. 207)

who have thrilled thousands of young Catholics doing creative and riveting revivals and “twin tag team” preaching! Yet, black teens who jumped up and shouted—inside a Catholic church, no less—one night had to go back to their home parishes to irrelevant and dry sermons. And from these parishes they have left the church.

If we would rise up and save our community, let us learn about what it really means to be authentically black and Catholic, as the Mother of Black Catholicism, Sister Thea Bowman, taught. Be it the Xavier Institute of Black Catholic Studies or the upcoming Bowman Francis Ubuntu education ministry, the way forward is towards a new black Catholic theology, a renewed black Catholic history education, a unique black Catholic evangelistic outreach, and exciting black Catholic liturgies.

Here we are, standing, as it were, on the soil in which our ancestors lay. Here we are, brothers and sisters, in the middle of the middle of our story, ready to move past “yes, Sister and yes, Father” and come to a place where we can stand and shout out what Fr. Chester always had us say: “It’s nation time! Rise up, oh black Catholic church!”