

Black Catholics have 'uncommon faithfulness'

John Thavis Catholic News Service | Mar. 2, 2011

ROME -- African-American Catholics have a dynamic history of "uncommon faithfulness" in the church, but it's one that has been generally invisible -- even to other Catholics, a U.S. nun from New Orleans told a Rome audience.

Dominican Sr. Jamie Phelps, director of the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University of New Orleans, explored the U.S. observance of Black History Month in February from a Catholic perspective.

She spoke Feb. 25 at the Pontifical University of St. Thomas of Aquinas, also known as the Angelicum, at a program organized by the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See.

The U.S. ambassador to the Vatican, Miguel Diaz, said black Catholics were a little-known but important segment of American society, and he wanted Rome to hear about it.

Phelps recalled that when she was growing up, people would look puzzled when she and her family showed up at Catholic events and tell her, "You're supposed to be Protestant."

There are about 3 million African-American Catholics in the United States today, she said. They generally identify closely with the teachings of the church, on matters from abortion to concern for the poor.

"What resonates with the worldview of African-American Catholics is respect for the dignity of the human person," she said.

Black Catholics are proud of their religious history. There were early popes and saints from northern Africa, "and we claim them as our own," Sister Phelps said.

"We recognize that missionaries who came to Africa gifted us with Catholicism, even as they defined us as less than themselves," she said.

Sister Phelps said that by establishing schools for black Catholics as far back as the 1800s and by maintaining Catholic schools in inner cities over the past 100 years, U.S. bishops played a key role in promoting social justice. She worries, however, that economic pressures are eroding that commitment to education.

"We are losing black Catholics ... there really is a battle on for that. The closing of schools is one of our big concerns," she said. For more than a hundred years, she said, Catholic schools have been the major instrument of evangelization in black communities.

"So it's sort of crazy for us to be engaged in evangelization in one breath, and to be closing Catholic schools in the other breath. You need to meet people where they are," she said.

The reasons given always have to do with money, but Sister Phelps said she finds those arguments unconvincing.

"It seems to me we're one church, and there are some rich Catholics in the United States and there are some rich parishes. What's the obligation of those rich Catholic parishes to nurture and sustain the Catholic Church in the inner city, where we're supposed to be doing our ministry to the poor?" she said.

She added: "Don't get me wrong, all black Catholics are not poor. So we should make it come out of their pockets also."

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