

Jesuit scholastic has full plate as head of black seminarians' group

Mark Pattison Catholic News Service | Jan. 31, 2013
Washington

January saw the swearing-in of two African-American presidents in Washington.

The same day Barack Obama was inaugurated in public ceremonies to a second term as U.S. president, Lorenzo Herman, a Jesuit scholastic, became president of the National Black Catholic Seminarians Association.

However, because of all of the hoopla surrounding Obama's inaugural Jan. 21, Herman took the oath of his office in Jan. 23 ceremonies as the association's headquarters in the nation's capital.

Herman, 39, will have a full agenda in his role as president of the seminarians' group, an auxiliary unit of the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus.

One item is to get more seminarians to attend the annual joint summer meeting of the seminarian and priest organizations, which also meets with the National Black Sisters Conference.

Another is to get the association's revised bylaws officially approved, adopted and implemented.

The third is developing a strategic plan to take the seminarian group through the next three years. "We've never had one before. We need to have one for continuity," Herman said. "We need to know what that is and how to go about doing it."

One necessary element in formulating a strategic plan is to assess "the state of black seminarians" with "a comprehensive survey, how they see the organization fulfilling some of the needs that they have," Herman said.

His path to the Catholic church and a religious vocation began in his hometown of Cleveland -- where he was raised in a Baptist family.

He went to a Jesuit high school, St. Ignatius in his hometown of Cleveland, and joined the church at age 19. He told Catholic News Service in a Jan. 16 telephone interview from Seattle that his family, which is Baptist, supported his move.

"When I decided to become Catholic, my family was like, 'Congratulations. Tell us about it,'" Herman said. "It was (about) going to where I fit and where I felt the most comfortable. And when I became a Jesuit, they were very happy with that. My daddy's a deacon. I never had an experience with my family that my path was a contradiction to their Christianity."

He is a seminarian of the Jesuits' Oregon province -- which includes Washington state, Alaska, Idaho, Montana and Oregon. And he is one of few black Jesuits.

"In the United States there aren't that many African-Americans" in the order, Herman noted. "I'm like one out of 20 in a group of about 2,000. I rarely get to meet black Jesuits, but I have met most of them in the past five

years. They've created opportunities for me to meet other black Jesuits.

"One of the things that is important for me is to claim a connection and other relationships with black Jesuits from the United States. I'm one of seven black scholastics in formation to the Jesuits."

He pointed out that although, three of the four new officers in the National Black Catholic Seminarians Association belong to religious orders, a distinct majority are seminarians training for diocesan priesthood.

And more members come from Africa, the Caribbean and South America than the United States.

"Even with this national organization, it's an international organization," he told CNS. "We speak with many different languages and come from many different cultures. It's really something to learn about all these different cultures inside the organization."

Herman said people ask him about the organization, "Why do they call it 'black' and not 'African-American'?" His answer: "This organization represents black men of African descent who were born and raised here or came from Africa, Latin America, or the Caribbean. So that's been a very rich and exciting experience for me, especially since I went to Africa for the first time last summer. ... So when I go to meetings ... it expands what it means to have a black identity."

The group has 65 members, but its leaders believe there are 150 black seminarians in the United States.

The task is to find them. "Part of my goal is to identify those others," Herman said.

It's like looking for a needle in a haystack when there are what seems like "thousands of other religious organizations" in the country, he added. "Figure out where they are, get hold of the vocation director. The biggest challenge is finding out the other religious orders," he said. The association also will use social media like Facebook and Twitter.

"If we can't find them directly on our own, they can find us through social networking or word of mouth," according to Herman.

Herman said he started thinking about the priesthood at age 17, while still a Baptist, when a Jesuit priest at his high school urged him to consider it -- which he said he did until he finally entered the Jesuits at age 33. In between, he went to college and graduate school, served in the Air Force, did some acting in community theater, and spent a lot of time in HIV/AIDS ministry.

What got him started in that endeavor occurred while Herman was serving in the Air Force -- his best friend told him in 1995 he was HIV-positive. "I was completely shocked. I didn't understand the HIV virus. To me at that time, he was going to die; it was like a death sentence. I was afraid of what it would do to him and how it would affect me," he recalled.

Herman soon discovered other friends and family members with HIV. "It helped me to cope with my own emotional anxieties and to be available to him (his friend). And be educated about it. ... When I discussed that with my family, I was told that relatives of my mother had died (of AIDS). I had known (they had died) but I did not know they had died of AIDS."

He had his eyes opened to the "stigma" of AIDS in "how horrible people had treated him," he said of his friend. "It got me angry and I wanted to do more."

It started by volunteering as a case worker and advocate at the Spokane AIDS Network, later working as a case manager there after he left the Air Force.

Herman spent the next six years before joining the Jesuits in San Diego working at the Comprehensive Health Center, a community clinic for African-American and Latino HIV/AIDS patients, eventually becoming a department director. He then coordinated HIV/AIDS programs for newly diagnosed patients at the University of California-San Diego Medical Center's Owen Clinic. While there he worked with then-California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to pass HIV/AIDS legislation through the California Legislature.

One of his first assignments after joining the Jesuits was to minister at a pediatric HIV/AIDS clinic in Jamaica.

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