

# Father Robinson: *'I Leave in Relatively Good Form But Also With Some Sources of Pain'*

What do you think is the reason for so few black Catholics in the United States? Is it because the Church has been racist? Is it because blacks just do not find cultural comfort in the U.S. Catholic Church? In other words and at the risk of oversimplification, is it because the white Church doesn't want the blacks or the blacks don't want the white Church?

There are so few because it's historical that black people are not welcome to be part of the Church. Those western European and other whites who went to Africa, their condescension and royal ripoff of Africa, has much to do with the lack of blacks in significant numbers. The whites overlooked the cultural beauties and nuances of black Africans and judged their gods as not good enough. Also the way they (the blacks) were dealt with by missionaries and the way they were dealt on these shores, when they were excluded from Catholic churches, presumed not good enough to be Roman Catholic. Historically speaking, there has been racism and discrimination.

It's a fact that blacks couldn't go to the main parish but were given mission churches. And when it came time for churches to amalgamate, the white churches were always kept open and the black churches closed -- if something had to close it was their (the black) institutions, schools, churches.

And the behavior of the Church was no different or better than the larger society. All three congregations of black women in the U.S. were formed because they couldn't join white congregations. The orders were found by what were called Free Women of Color, which meant they were not restricted by slavery. The first black American priests were ordained in Europe.

The lack of enthusiasm of blacks for the Church stems historically. Through oral history, American blacks have conveyed to their offspring their experiences with the Roman Catholic Church.

Pope Paul VI talked of the "gift of negritude." Do you find the Catholic Church willing to accept this gift at the international level? At the national level? At the diocesan level?

That statement bothers me in the light of the absence of exhortation in the life of the Church which affirms and revels in its relationship with black people. The U.S. bishops didn't condemn racism until a statement in 1958. There was no previous condemnation from Rome. There was no definitive grappling with discrimination.

And so, even up to the present, the fact there have been so few references that can be pointed to in relation to the black strife in this country is terribly significant, terribly indicative of the lack of attentiveness or care on the part of the Church.

As for the Pope's statement, while it was intended to be a compliment, it was taken out of context which also chided black people to not be overly engaged in promotion of their distinctive Africanity. Incidentally he said it during his visit to Uganda.

When you read Scriptures concerning the scandal of particularity, the peoples were spoken to out of their particular culture. Each people needed to hear the same message, what Paul said to the Corinthians, to the Ephesians, and so on, each in their own way.

Thus today the black people need to hear God speak to them from their culture. We are the only people who came to this nation in chains. So when God speaks to us He has to speak to us as enslaved people.

Now, the Church is not opposed to black people but it is cautious, even in this diocese. It is open to the heritage of black people but cautious as to how it is to be expressed... we have made distinctiveness synonymous with divisiveness.

Along the same lines, one of the greatest problems in the U.S. is the increasing lack of priests and Religious. In face of this, there is huge potential among the black Christian population, a very small percentage of which is Catholic. Is there any way of bringing this need and supply together to reach a happy ending?

I hope to write an article about the Conference on the Church and the Black Apostolate which I attended recently in North Carolina. It was a landmark event with some 200 participants, bishops, black people in ministry and other roles and it concerned itself with where the Church should be going in the 1980s.



Father Robinson at his desk in the Office of Black Ministry.

Father Jerome Robinson, OP, has announced his resignation as head of the diocesan Office of Black Ministry to return to his Dominican community for further assignment in Nigeria. At the request of the Courier-Journal, Father Robinson assessed his three years as OBM director, and gave his views on the interface between the Church and black Catholics.

Carmen J. Viglucci, Courier-Journal editor, interviewed Father Robinson and we publish his candid views in the hope that they will lead to a better understanding between the Church and the black community and to progress in the cause of all the sisters and brothers of Christ.

It addressed such areas as education, pastoral ministry, youth, vocations, liturgy and worship, incarceration... Father Cyprian Davis, the foremost black Church historian in the U.S., said that the conference represented the empowering of the Office of Black Catholics to move into the next era. He told the participants that they must not only commit themselves financially; that there would be no point in it if they were not going to share, if they were simply going to turn the matter over to the NOBC. He told the delegates their time and resources will be needed.

How would you characterize your years here as head of the Office of Black Ministry?

I do not regret these years. They were important in my life. I learned so much about the priesthood, ministry and the Church. Working at this level of Church administration has taught me a lot about the hassles people face in doing good programming, etc.

I leave in relatively good form but also with some sources of pain. In good form because I have no less commitment to the work of the black apostolate, to the struggle of my people to be fully part of the Church and totally themselves. My people have a beauty to offer... the awesomeness of negritude, of spirituality. There is such and it does exist in Rochester, in spite of the lack of appreciation or lack of calling forth of black people. Black people still do shine something unmistakably God-given.

I am far more sensitive to the fact there is no one way of describing black people, we are as distinct among ourselves as is the rest of the nation. Still there is some common basis due to our common past.

In retrospect, if I had my three and a half years in Rochester to do over, I would still advocate affirmative action on the diocesan level. There should be black personnel working at the center of the administration because so much remains undone relative to diocesan personnel.

The diocesan administrators don't have a hold on the black experience in America or in the diocese. While the Office of Black Ministry should be considered the expert that does not exclude the rest of the personnel from understanding black people's lives, heritage, etc.

This has not been accomplished in Rochester.

Black concerns are not represented in goals or priorities that diocesan departments work from. Black concerns are seen as secondary, not necessary.

What I would do differently? I as a black priest would not be in central administration but I would endorse black people there. I would rather see diocesan resources go to a parish where black culture could be made manifest. I have done a plethora of services but would like to be able to point to such a parish and say, "There it is." And make it strong enough to go on without me, nothing to do with Robinson, a parish where sound liturgy is happening, where the black experience is really the undergirding idea of parish, where black lineage and heritage is being acted out within the Catholic Church, where blacks are being true leaders, where their Christian community spreads over into the larger community.

Some of the black Catholic families who are viable leaders remain uncalled for by the diocese and are not utilized... those who have been asked are too few and overworked.

"Where is your parish?" I have been asked many times. I deliberately did not have one for fear of alienating others. But in retrospect I should have one, to give people a taste of something.

I was calling them forth and not giving them a place, a climate, an atmosphere.

I regret my gypsy experience -- 44,000 miles later. For all my gallivanting around, I regret I can't show people... point to something that is there for the rest of the diocese, with pastoral staffing, with black people on deck.

Did you find the diocese generally supportive? Tolerant?

That's a hard question, Carmen. But I don't want to evade it. The diocese, the composite, was not indifferent. I saw people making an earnest effort to be open; I did not see people turn me away.

But I did see people finding it difficult to embrace some of the possibilities I represented, because they were new, because the possibilities could negate where they were entrenched.

I don't see any parish doing the intrinsical black ministry to the extent it needs to be done. The effort in parishes is for survival... not to be closed down for physical, personal, urban renewal reasons. Parishes are still striving for individual earth, for longevity. The inevitability of amalgamation is something parishes are having difficulty with. The Church in the central city... we didn't build those buildings but we are shackled by them. When are we going to work for a catechesis that transcends the keeping of property?

Tolerant... within limits. The conception of what this office is supposed to be is controlled. There has been no significant increase in our budget in over three years. In the first year we had four people, myself, a secretary and

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