

Features

Deacon continues quest for recognition of black Catholics

By Lee Strong

Deacon John Holmes has been trying to shake the Catholic Church from the outside for nearly two decades. Now he's going to try from the inside.

On June 5, he became the second black permanent deacon to be ordained in the Diocese of Rochester.

"I have plans to do some of the things we were doing in the '70s — this time from the inside as opposed to the outside," Deacon Holmes said. "(I want) somehow to change the hierarchical structure, somehow to change the Church."

Deacon Holmes noted that it had been six years since the first black permanent deacon, Daryl Mercadel, was ordained. And he predicted that the diocese will have to wait at least five more years before another black is ordained — perhaps longer if the diocese doesn't begin to better recognize the needs of black Catholics.

Deacon Holmes intends to do something to meet these needs.

A veteran of campaigns to promote the Church's sensitivity to the needs of black Catholics, and a member of the boards of directors of the National Office for Black Catholics and the National Black Lay Catholic Caucus, Deacon Holmes' goal is to make both the black and white communities more aware of the black experience and the presence of blacks in the Church.

His own ordination is one step in that process. As his wife, Norma, pointed out, the ordination gives the Holmeses' efforts more authenticity in the eyes of the broader Catholic community, encourages other black Catholics and tells the black community "that it is possible to be a black Catholic."

The ordination is also another step in what Deacon Holmes described as his own "up-and-down affair with the Church," which began 48 years ago in Elmira.

Originally a member of the AME Zion Church, Deacon Holmes was drawn into a discussion of the Eucharist when he was about 10 years old. "That got me interested in the whole Catholic mystique," he said, referring to the Church's rites and rituals, which eventually helped convince him to convert.

At age 14, he was baptized a Catholic, and became a member of St. Peter and Paul Parish in Elmira. Eleven years later, his then-fiance Norma converted, too, largely because of him. They were married in 1956.

After several moves, they settled in Rochester in 1959. In 1963, Deacon Holmes was hired as a data analyst by Xerox Corporation. Increasingly outspoken about the hiring of blacks in the company, he was later made manager of affirmative-action programs in the company's personnel office, where he still works as a personnel manager.

As he focused on furthering employment opportunities for blacks at Xerox, he also began to question their place in the Church.

"There was no doubt that I was a Catholic and that I wanted to be one," he commented. At the same time, however, "I had grown to the point that I began to recognize that I wasn't sure how welcome blacks were in the Church."

In addition, he had found that the rites and rituals that first drew him toward the Church were no longer relevant. For a time, he stopped attending Mass.

Norma continued to attend, however, drifting from church to church until she discovered Immaculate Conception Parish in Rochester, which was then implementing the liturgical changes introduced by the Second Vatican Council. She talked her husband into attending a Mass, and he found a home.

"You felt that not only did the people not mind you there, they wanted you there," he recalled.

Under Pastor Robert G. Kreckel and his as-



Newly ordained Deacon John Holmes distributes Holy Communion during Sunday Mass at St. Bridget's Church in Rochester, where he has been assigned as parish deacon.

sistant pastor, Father Paul Brennan — who later became pastor — Immaculate Conception had become a socially active parish. It took such controversial positions as refusing to pay telephone taxes to protest the Vietnam War, declaring itself a sanctuary for draft resisters, and condemning the war as racist. It also launched a community-ministry program, and continued a policy begun in the 1950s of openness to blacks.

The Holmeses plunged into parish life, joining the parish council and, at the suggestion of Father Kreckel, attending the first Black National Congress in Washington in 1970.

"When we went to the first black caucus meeting in Washington, we had never seen a black priest before," the deacon recalled.

The Holmeses returned to Rochester to begin organizing black Catholics on the local level and created a chapter of the Black Lay Catholic Caucus. They also began to travel to national conferences and to advance the cause of blacks in the Church.

In 1976, local efforts by black Catholics resulted in the creation of the diocesan Office of Black Ministries with Dominican Father Jerome Robinson as its first director.

Father Robinson was one of the members of the commission that created the permanent diaconate program in the diocese. Through the priest and his own travels, Deacon Holmes was aware of the diaconate programs being created in the diocese and across the country, but at that time did not seriously consider becoming a deacon himself.

He changed his mind in the summer of 1984 following conversations with longtime Elmira friend Guilda Campanelli, whose husband, Michael, had entered the permanent diaconate program. The Campanellis, and later Father Brennan, encouraged him to consider the ministry.

The Holmeses discussed entering the program the following year, when two weeks later, they received a letter from Monsignor George Cocuzzi, then in charge of the diaconate program, inviting them to come and talk.

and church, and has dramatized stories from Luke's Gospel for adult audiences.

Registration for the institute is due by July 7. The cost of registration and tuition, including lunches and a picnic supper social, is \$125.

For information, contact the Spirituality Institute, care of St. Bernard's Institute, at (716)271-1320.

Black ministries office seeks candidates for directorships

The Office of Black Ministries of the Diocese of Rochester is seeking new members for its board of directors.

For information, contact Diane Hill, c/o Office of Black Ministries, 1150 Buffalo Rd. 14624, or call (716) 588-4410.



St. Bridget's pastor, Father Robert Werth, offers a blessing to Deacon Holmes as he prepares to proclaim the Gospel.

Two months later, they began the program.

Now that he has been ordained, Deacon Holmes expects to continue his role as a leader of the black Catholic community. "(Deacons') primary purpose for existing is service," he noted. "I see it as social service. What I was doing before I even thought about being a deacon was what a deacon should be doing."

The Holmeses also see a part of their ministry as raising the awareness of other Catholics about the existence of black Catholics. During his deaconal formation, Deacon Holmes took advantage of every opportunity to relate the black experience to what he was learning and to increase his classmates' awareness of the presence and needs of black Catholics.

He plans to continue his efforts to make fellow Catholics aware of the needs of blacks in the Church. "The (diocese) doesn't understand you have a diverse black community," he noted. "They treat black people all the same, not recognizing that there are differences. You can't do that."

The Holmeses also believe that the diocese has not made enough of an effort to reach out to the black community, and assert that the Office of Black Ministries doesn't have the necessary staff or clout to be more active at this time.

Deacon Holmes further pointed to his own ordination as a missed opportunity for the diocese to communicate its acceptance of black Catholics by incorporating elements of black culture and spirituality into the ceremony. "It would have been an excellent time to educate the broader Catholic community about the black experience," he said.

The diaconate program itself, Norma Holmes suggested, offers an opportunity to reach out to blacks, but the diocese has not actively tried to recruit minorities in general. So the Holmeses have taken the recruiting responsibility for themselves, and plan to encourage two other black couples to consider the program, she said.

But in spite of their emphasis on equal rights, neither John nor Norma Holmes considers the ordination of women to the diaconate as an important issue at this time. For them, the racial question is of far greater importance.

"Women can't be ordained, but when you look at the Pastoral Center, you see women in jobs, in positions of authority, but no blacks," Norma Holmes observed. "That's a much greater issue — black men and black women are being denied. They need a share in those jobs."

Despite the couple's criticisms, Deacon Holmes acknowledges that blacks have seen great progress in the diocesan and universal Church.

"Times are changing," he noted. "We don't have something where people are cut off from the community. People are not as overt about situations as they used to be."

Nevertheless, Norma Holmes interjected, "my strong feeling is the Church is very flat in terms of flavor — too much salt; not enough pepper."

Even as they bring their own flavor to the Church, Deacon Holmes realizes that his understanding of the diaconate and his role as a deacon is still evolving. "I feel better and better about it every day," he said. "I'm glad I made the decision."

Spirituality Institute scheduled

Father Roland E. Murphy, O.Carm., Old Testament scholar and Professor Emeritus of Duke University, and actress Roberta Nobleman will be the featured speakers at the Third Annual Spirituality Institute, July 18 to 22. The theme of this year's conference, co-sponsored by the Diocese of Rochester, St. Bernard's Institute, and the Divinity School, is biblical spirituality today.

Father Murphy is a member of the committee working on the revision of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible and has participated in the translation known as the New American Bible. Nobleman, who teaches creative drama and mime at Kean College in New Jersey, is the author of several articles on the theater