

# Caucus to investigate rite for blacks

By Laurie Hansen  
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Members of the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus meeting in Milwaukee have said they will investigate the process of developing a new liturgical rite for African-Americans.

A proposal by Father George A. Stallings of Washington to establish an African-American rite within the Catholic Church became a major topic of discussion at the July 23-28 conference. The meeting, which was closed to the press, was attended by members of the National Black Sisters' Conference and the National Black Catholic Seminarians Association, in addition to black clergy.

A spokesman for the clergy caucus, composed of brothers, priests and deacons, announced at a July 27 press conference that it would "commit itself to a process of study, consultation and research for the development of an African-American rite."

While it investigates the process of establishing a new "canonical or liturgical rite, personal prelature or vicariate," the caucus will explore various models of African-American Catholic rituals and worship, according to a statement.

Father Stallings, former evangelist for the Archdiocese of Washington, founded the Imani Temple for black Catholics in Washington July 2. Cardinal James A. Hickey of Washington subsequently suspended Father Stallings for celebrating unauthorized liturgies.

Since founding Imani Temple, Father Stallings has said he intends to stay within the Roman Catholic Church. Just as the church has allowed distinct rites for Latin and Eastern churches, he has argued, it should be possible for African-Americans to have a specific rite that reflects their history, culture and needs.

Such a rite would be parallel to existing Byzantine, Maronite and Ukrainian rites of the Catholic Church, he has said.

Father Stallings said a new rite would

address not just liturgical issues but also religious education, economic justice and the hiring of black Catholics in decision-making positions within the church.

Participants at the Milwaukee conference also considered a proposal to form a team to mediate between Father Stallings and Cardinal Hickey. Although no final decision was reached, discussion will continue, said Holy Cross Brother Roy Smith of South Bend, Ind., president of the clergy caucus. "People are concerned that there be reconciliation," he said at a July 28 press conference.

The sisters' conference did not issue a statement regarding the establishment of a new rite, but Franciscan Sister Loretta Theresa Richards, immediate past president of the conference, said the women religious favor research and study, as well as "experimentation" with new ways of incorporating black worship and reaffirming traditional values.

Participants did not endorse a proposal reportedly circulating at the conference to petition Pope John Paul II to begin the process of developing "an 'official' African-American rite within the Catholic Church."

Auxiliary Bishop Joseph A. Francis of Newark, N.J., one of five black bishops present at the conference, told Catholic News Service July 26 that not many people realize that creation of a new rite "means much more than liturgical adaptation" and would be financially unrealistic.

He said, however, that if the 13 U.S. black bishops find establishing a separate rite for African-American Catholics "is at all possible, we will give it some study."

Bishop Francis called Father Stallings' demand that African spirituality be incorporated into African-American Catholicism "murky and ambiguous" because a number of cultures are present on the African continent.

Bishop Francis, a former president of the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus, told CNS he is not convinced the majority

of black Catholics want such a rite.

Under a separate rite, he said, black Catholics would "maintain connections with Rome (and) still be Catholic, but would not enjoy the privileges" they do now.

A separate rite would have its "own laws, hierarchy, rules for marriage and reception of the sacraments," he said.

In addition, Bishop Francis said, "resources for seminaries, school buildings and churches would have to come from the community itself," not from Rome.

In addressing black clergy at the conference July 24, Father Stallings said traditionalist Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, who provoked a schism last summer by ordaining bishops against papal orders, had received better treatment from the church than he had.

"Unlike Archbishop Lefebvre, I affirm Vatican (Council) II and all its missiology.... I am black and African-American and a priest. Lefebvre is white and an archbishop. Yet, the forbearance and respect he received for those 25 years of defiance to the teachings of a plenary council of the church is not given an African-American priest who insists that the American Catholic Church has waited too long to honor the missiology of those council fathers," said the priest.

"It is not I that my church and archdiocese must be reconciled with, but rather the teachings of Vatican II," Father Stallings charged.

Father Stallings also questioned the U.S. bishops' commitment to the pastoral plan for black ministry approved in 1987 and their 1979 pastoral letter on racism. Calling the content of the pastoral letter "magnificent," Father Stallings charged that it has been "a dead letter to American Catholics because there was never an episcopal will to give it life."

In a separate letter Father Stallings invited the black Catholic bishops to join his efforts to achieve "justice and equality."



AP Wide World Photo  
**Gene Miller, an employee of Krause Construction, works to remove a 100-pound galvanized steel cross from the steeple of St. John's Catholic Church in Marshfield, Wisc, which is undergoing renovations. Workmen finally used a crane used to remove the cross.**

"What we want is the right — which we will continue to claim as our own — to determine who we are and what we are ... How can we leave that task to a church with a long and depressing history of racism, discrimination and prejudice?" Father Stallings asked.

His July 21 letter was a response to a July 12 appeal from the nation's black bishops that Father Stallings return to unity with the church.

Contributing to this story was Lisa Floch in Milwaukee.