



CATHOLIC COURIER

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Priest's action strikes chord with area blacks

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

Billy Jeffries held hands with two other worshipers as the congregation at Immaculate Conception Church recited the Lord's Prayer during the 11 a.m. Sunday Mass.

"For Thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory, forever and ever. Amen," Jeffries recited along with his fellow Catholics, most of whom were black.

Later, as Jeffries turned to exit his pew while a gospel choir of black and white parishioners sang the closing hymn, the two words emblazoned on the back of his T-shirt became visible to the other worshipers — "Black Catholic."

"There are so many stereotyped minds of blacks," Jeffries later said. "A lot of people think Catholics are white or Spanish," he added, noting that his T-shirt is one way of letting the world know such thinking is limited.

In Washington, D.C., meanwhile, the actions of Father George A. Stallings Jr. have forced Catholics nationwide to address the question of racism in the church.

Last July 2, Father Stallings established the Imani Temple, an African-American parish, without the authorization of his superior, Cardinal James A. Hickey.

Since then, Cardinal Hickey has suspended the black priest from his duties, but Father Stallings has refused to close the temple, which is reportedly drawing a few thousand worshipers to its services each week.

According to Father Stallings, Imani Temple is committed to several goals, including development of liturgies that are "both authentically Catholic and African-American," and formation of a "sensitive indigenous African-American clergy."

Cardinal Hickey has criticized Imani Temple's founding as the personal crusade of an ambitious priest, but Father Stallings insists that he is loyal to Pope John Paul II and that he only wants the Catholic Church to begin to work toward the establishment of an African-American rite, with status similar to the Roman Rite and the 17 ethnic rites within the church. Each of these rites covers the areas of governance, liturgy and spiritual heritage for its followers.

At least two million African-Americans belong to the Catholic Church, but for centuries, they were segregated or ignored by their white brethren. The 3,000 black Catholics in the Diocese of Rochester have shared in the pain of that segregation, and only in the last 20 years do they believe the diocese has addressed their liturgical and ministerial needs in a formal manner.

While many Catholics — including the nation's black bishops — have questioned Father Stallings' tactics, support of his desire to fortify the Black Catholic identity appears strong among local black Catholics.

"There's racism. Something has to be done about it. It just happens that (Father) Stallings went about it in a way that most people don't agree with," said Deacon John Holmes, who works on a volunteer basis at St. Bridget's Parish, which like Immaculate Conception, claims a black population of more than 60 percent.

Although Father Stallings' approach to combatting racism would probably not apply in Rochester, the deacon noted, the priest could find listening ears among black Catholics here. "(Imani Temple) has raised a consciousness level among blacks," he said.

Parishioners at Immaculate Conception weren't as diplomatic as Deacon Holmes in their assessment of the Imani Temple situation. Charlotte Downing, a past president of Immaculate's parish council, said that Father Stallings merely brought to light the dissatisfaction of many black Catholics.

"If I were not a black Catholic, I don't know what would attract me to the Catholic Church," Downing said, noting the lack of black priests and black-oriented liturgical services. Frieda McCray echoed Downing's sentiments. "I can certainly see why there was a necessity for Father Stallings to start the Imani Temple," she commented.

"It will open eyes," Juanita Washington said. McCray then added, "It will send a strong message."

Father Stallings' sympathizers at Immaculate Conception would not find a comrade in Auxiliary Bishop James



For Kestner with great friend knowledge to correct

'If in all of our churches, the image of Jesus is blue eyes and long hair, doesn't that make me Jesus' step-child?'

Gaynelle Wethers

Lyke of Cleveland. One of the nation's 13 black bishops, Bishop Lyke criticized Father Stallings in an Aug. 14 address to the Diocesan Black Catholic Advisory Board and the pastoral staffs serving the black community in Cleveland.

"(I)n regard to the call for an African-American rite and the establishment of Imani Temple, it is worth observing that Father Stallings made his move without prior formal and open consultation. He did not use the channels of consultation within the archdiocese of Washington, nor did he communicate with the black priests of the archdiocese," the bishop said.

"In this age, when a pastor would not even rearrange the sacred furnishing in a church without consulting with a parish council, Father Stallings was strikingly non-collegial in establishing a parish without going through the normal processes of consultation and in acting independently of the authority of his diocesan bishop — a bishop who has known and supported him for some 19 years," Bishop Lyke added.

Father Stallings defended himself by asserting that he is

assaulting the institutional racism of the church in a practical manner. Addressing the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus in Milwaukee on July 24, Father Stallings said: "I am convinced that African-American freedom is more important in God's eyes than white convenience. I am also convinced that this is not the belief of the majority of our white brothers and sisters, be they clerical or lay. This is why we are told to wait."

Local black Catholics say they have experienced the literal meaning of these words, and some can easily recall racist incidents in the church. Washington said that during the early 1980s, she belonged to a Delaware parish that was almost all white. "They didn't know me, and they didn't want to know me," she said.

Closer to home, fellow parishioner Roxanne Weber and her family belonged to an almost exclusively white parish in suburban Rochester in the late 1970s before joining Immaculate Conception. None of the white parishioners would sit near her and her family until instructed to do so by the pastor, Weber said. "I don't think I had body odor," she joked.

Weber's mother, Mary Hall, remembered that her son, the late Father Charles Hall, often experienced racism both in the South, where he was a pastor, and when he returned home to Rochester to visit his family. When he went on home visits, for example, Father Hall was sometimes called a "nigger" by white parishioners at Immaculate Conception, she said.

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