

Priest: African-Americans must assert role in church

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — African-Americans have been sustained by their churches in the past and can still serve their communities through them, noted Father Donald A. Sterling, who, in 1974, became the first African-American priest ordained in the Baltimore archdiocese.

The priest delivered his keynote speech before more than 50 people attending the Diocesan Black Catholic Convocation on Saturday, Dec. 11, at the Masonic Temple, 875 E. Main St.

Father Sterling seasoned his own speech with occasional audience give-and-take as audience members answered various questions he posed.

"Over the years, it was the black church that kept the flame of freedom burning in the hearts of our mothers and fathers," he said. "It was the black church that taught us to sing 'We are the Holy Father's children.'"

"The pains and scars of racism are real," he said. "There are many among us who are still enslaved.... As black Catholics, we must develop a powerful set of new values to counteract the power of racism."

The wounds left by slavery, segregation, racism and poverty on African-Americans can be healed if they take to heart the church's message that all are God's children and act accordingly, he asserted.

"I am certain that the most latent source of church power sits in pews and around this room right now," Father Sterling said, later adding, "you sit at the controls of the only institution owned and operated by the community."

Father Sterling laid down a number of challenges to both the U.S. church's mainly white hierarchy and his mainly black audience. Just as he called on the church's leaders to broaden their recognition of such non-whites as blacks, Native-Americans and Hispanics, he dared his listeners to broaden God's influence in their own lives and the lives of African-Americans.

He noted, for example, that his parish in Baltimore tended to cram most of its church programming into Sundays — a situation he eventually rebelled against.

"Yours truly went on strike," he said, maintaining that his flock had lost sight of the Sabbath's purpose by turning it into a catch-all day filled with activity as opposed to reflection.

"One of the things we have given away is rest," commented the pastor. "We had

reduced community involvement as a church to a one-day process."

Black Catholics, along with other blacks, have allowed such false gods as materialism and individualism to dominate their lives and rob them of time needed to nurture their families and community, he argued.

Many of the themes in Father Sterling's speech were echoed in the subsequent panel discussion, moderated by Robert Laird, deputy director of Action for a Better Community, Inc.

Panel members featured four workshop presenters at the convocation who summarized the points discussed in their workshops.

Franciscan Friar John Douglas McMillan, director of the Office of Black Ministry in the Syracuse diocese, explained that his discussion group defined racism and family as diametric opposites.

"What racism tends to do is distort and destroy unity," he said, pointing out that the African-American slaves in the United States regularly suffered family break-up when relatives, spouses and children were bought and sold in the South.

In addition to the effect of such forces on their families, African-Americans encountered the concept of "rugged individualism" in the United States which contradicted the African value that an individual exists — and is meaningful — only within the greater community.

Nonetheless, blacks have surmounted such attacks on their family life in the past and can do so again, he said, pointing out that ex-slaves went out of their way after the Civil War to find separated family members.

"We are more than sociological studies," Friar McMillan said. "We are a people with a definite history that we need to get in contact with and reclaim."

One way to rebuild community and family is to make conscious changes in black lives, asserted Dorothy Dobson, a retired Monroe County social services caseworker and, along with Laird, a charter member of the board of directors of the Office of Black Ministries.

After outlining several threats to black life, Dobson noted that her group brainstormed numerous ideas to improve blacks' quality of life.

Her group suggested making lifestyle changes to improve health; developing hobbies; listening to uplifting music; surrounding oneself with positive people; and developing the ability to delay gratification.

Above all, Dobson stressed putting God first in life.

"We should begin each day with a spiritual ritual and end each day with a spiritual ritual," she said.

Holiday concert



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Violin choir performs

Stephanie Powell performed with the Suzuki Violin Choir during a lunch-hour holiday concert Dec. 9 at the Monroe County Office Building in downtown Rochester. Powell, who recently moved to Syracuse, came back to Rochester to perform at the annual holiday performance. The fledgling violinists from St. Plus the Tenth Church in Rochester are under the direction of Sister Helen Barry, SSJ.

Ithaca native returns home to celebrate his ordination

ITHACA — Father Tim Murphy, a newly ordained priest with the Glenmary Home Missioners, celebrated a Mass of Thanksgiving on Dec. 4, 1993, at his home parish of Immaculate Conception Church, 113 N. Geneva St.

Father Murphy graduated from Immaculate Conception School and Ithaca High School. He went on to receive a degree in education from the University of Massachusetts.

After performing literacy work in southern Georgia as a volunteer with VISTA, a domestic peace corps, Father Murphy began serving among the poor in that area as a community organizer.

He also earned a master of divinity degree from the Washington D.C.-based Theological Union, and a master of pastoral counseling degree from Loyola College in Maryland.

Father Murphy entered the Glenmary Home Missioners novitiate program in 1991. He was ordained on Nov. 27, 1993, at St. Matthias Church in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Cincinnati serves as headquarters for the Glenmary society, which was founded in 1939. This group of priests, brothers and lay associates serves at 80 rural missions in 12 states.

Father Murphy's first assignment as a priest will be as sacramental minister for St. Helen Church in Glenmary's mission in Amory, Miss., as well as the Christ the King mission in Fulton, Miss. He will also perform pastoral counseling for the Diocese of Jackson's family ministry office, and will serve as a resource person for the Neon, Ky.-based Commission on Justice.

— Mike Latona

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Hornell church renovation benefits from volunteerism

HORNELL — Unlike many church refurbishing plans, the one involving St. Ann's Church, 31 Erie Ave., was not several years in the making.

For that matter, there wasn't really even a clear-cut agenda.

According to Father Elmer J. Schmidt, pastor, it was more a case of one thing leading to another.

Now, thanks to the ongoing volunteer work demonstrated by St. Ann's parishioners, several improvements have been made to the church building, which is over 100 years old.

"The people were excellent — very cooperative," Father Schmidt said of the volunteers.

The project's completion was marked by a special dedication Mass on Tuesday, Dec. 7 — the vigil marking the feast of

the Immaculate Conception.

Bishop Matthew H. Clark served as the Mass's celebrant and also blessed the church. He later attended a celebration supper at the St. Ann's School hall with approximately 120 parishioners.

The refurbishing project began shortly after Easter, when a parishioner volunteered to clean and varnish the church pews.

From there, work was done on the floors, new carpeting was laid down, and a significant amount of painting took place. The final step was installing a marble platform to complement the marble altar it is positioned beneath.

New furniture adorns the church as well. Memorial donations have provided for a new lectern with matching kneelers. Chairs have been added to the Our

Lady of Fatima Chapel as well.

In all, roughly 60 volunteers took part in the refurbishing.

Father Schmidt likened this project to the husband who bought his wife a new bread box, and then had to paint the kitchen so it would look as nice as the bread box.

Despite the many upgrades made to St. Ann's over the past few months, Father Schmidt emphasized that his chief concern was to preserve the church's original appearance.

"The people are so proud; it's a beautiful church," acknowledged Father Schmidt. "It would be disturbing (to make drastic changes), and rightfully so, too. I didn't even consider it. It was out of the question as far as I was concerned."

— Mike Latona