

Blacks urged to share stories

By Nancy Frazier O'Brien
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Black History Month fills a need not yet met in schools or U.S. society for African-American youth to hear about the contributions of black Americans, according to the head of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for African-American Catholics.

"One thing we're finding is that it is real important for youth and children — and for ourselves — to share family stories, to talk about family successes and the contributions that family members have made to the church, community and society," said Beverly A. Carroll, executive director of the secretariat.

"It goes a long way to increasing self-esteem when you feel connected to something like that," she added.

Carroll spoke about the importance of Black History Month, observed annually in February, in a Feb. 8 interview with Catholic News Service.

To help families share their stories, her office is promoting the "Rise Up and Rebuild" program of family-based activities, a follow-up to the National Black Catholic Congress held in 1992.

"We need to bombard our people with stories and pictures of people who have overcome great odds and not just the 3M's (Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson and Michael Jackson)," says an instructor's manual for the program. "Here are some stories that we suggest that all African-Americans should pass on to each other and especially to our children. These people moved history because of their sense of self and self-determination."

The manual suggests looking at the life stories of such people as Maulana Karenga, a promoter of



African principles in African-American life, and Daniel Rudd, owner and publisher of the nation's first African-American Catholic newspaper, as well as such better-known leaders as the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X and Harriet Tubman, organizer of the Underground Railroad that brought hundreds of slaves to freedom.

"We need Black History Month for 12 months," said Carroll, adding that "text-books have not yet caught up" with the contributions of African-Americans to U.S. society.

Black History Month should be observed until those contributions "have become part of the core curriculum so that people will have a well-rounded version of who people are and what contributions they have made," she said.

The month also helps Americans focus on the importance of Africa in world culture and in the Catholic Church, a role that Carroll calls "a pretty well-kept secret."

Few people know that there have been three black popes — Pope St. Victor I (189-199), Pope St. Militades (311-314) and Pope St. Gelasius (492-496) — and that the first lay Catholic movement in the United States was led by black Catholics with the founding of the Federation of Colored Catholics in 1924, Carroll said.

The "Rise Up and Rebuild" program provides resources on the history, geography and culture of Africa for use in classrooms or families and urges such family activities as the establishment of a heritage room or table with pictures and artifacts specific to one's family. And once the room has been set up, "turn off the TV and talk about it," Carroll advises.



File photo

Shabazz speaks out

LA CROSSE, Wis. (CNS) — When the widow of slain civil rights leader Malcolm X recently addressed a Catholic college audience, she didn't talk about her former husband as much as she urged students to work to change their community and society.

"Think of your future, because what you'll be doing is not necessarily as important for you as it will be for your children," Betty Shabazz told the audience at Viterbo College in La Crosse, run by the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration.

Despite the title of her talk, "My Life with Malcolm X," Shabazz ultimately revealed little about her enigmatic husband.

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MARCH, 1994

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Official: Racism continues to linger in church, society

Laws have 'not changed hearts'

PITTSBURGH (CNS) — Racism continues to afflict both society and the Catholic Church in the 1990s, according to the head of the nation's oldest diocesan office dealing with the African-American apostolate.

"In the '60s and '70s, laws were passed and enacted, but hearts were not changed," said Margretta "Greta" Stokes, who assumed the post of director of the Pittsburgh diocesan Office for Black Catholic Ministries on Jan. 20.

"I'm interested in the change of hearts," she added in an interview with the Pittsburgh Catholic diocesan newspaper. "I'm interested in how we bring people to an awareness of what is just, how

does that impact on our faith as Catholic Christians, and how does our faith impact upon how we make changes.

"Can we discriminate against any group of people and yet call ourselves followers of Jesus?" Stokes asked. "We know Jesus would say no."

Stokes has a bachelor's degree in religious studies and psychology from Seton Hill College in Greensburg, Pa., a master's in religious education from Duquesne University in Pittsburgh and is working on a doctorate in theology at Duquesne. She and her husband, Vincent Tucker, have a 5-year-old daughter, Alysia.

"Sometimes the church is unfortunately a reflection of society," Stokes said of racism. "I look forward to the day when we will not have to talk about this issue. Sometimes I wonder whether or not that will happen in my lifetime, or even in my daughter's lifetime. So while it is still very much a part of American society, and very much a part of the church, we have to do what we can to eradicate it."

She said events like the National Black Catholic Congresses in 1987 and 1992 have helped to "move black Catholics into the mainstream of the church." The congresses' recommendations on issues such as jobs, health care, unemployment and homelessness can help "families regardless of color," she added.

"I think and truly believe that African-Americans and African-American Catholics have such an important leadership role to play in this country and this church," Stokes said. "The issues that affect us are going to touch upon the greater society."

"What we do, what we enact, what we reflect upon in the end helps everyone," she added. "So I think it does behoove the larger part of the society to listen to the (black) community."

Contributing to this story was Phil Taylor in Pittsburgh.

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