

FEATURE

Cyprian Rowe seeks return to church, Marists

By Lou Panarale
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — "I went crazy. There's no other way of putting it," said a smiling, soft-spoken Cyprian Rowe, now in his mid-60s and still wearing the kind of African attire he wore as a Marist brother.

Crazy? A strange choice of words, one might think, for this African-American scholar, who has several degrees and has been a research associate in the psychiatry department at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore.

He was talking about his decision to leave the Catholic Church and his Marist community three years ago to join a breakaway African-American Catholic community and his current fervent desire to return to his roots.

"By 'crazy,' I don't mean I was some kind of drooling and incoherent doddler," he explained, laughing. "I'm talking about someone who was so focused in one area of his life that the rest of his life fell away."

Rowe is a former executive director of both the Washington-based National Office for Black Catholics (1978-80) and of the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus (1981-83).

He has a doctorate in African studies from Howard University in Washington, and in the early '70s received permission from his Marist community to live in a small village in Ghana and study African culture firsthand.

After returning to the United States, he started black studies programs — at the University of Rhode Island in 1972 and at Temple University in 1978.

He also regularly urged the U.S. Catholic hierarchy to recognize more fully the unique spiritual character and ded-



Nancy Wiechec/CNS

Cyprian Rowe, once director of the National Office of Black Catholics, is seeking to return to the Catholic Church and the Marist order three years after joining the breakaway African-American Catholic Congregation.

ication that African-American Catholics brought to the church, a goal he still pursues tenaciously.

Rowe told Catholic News Service he believes his "crazy" period began in May 1996 with his shock over the death of his beloved 81-year-old mother, Helen Brewington. It reached its low point a year later, he said, when he was ordained in the breakaway African-American Catholic Congregation, founded by Archbishop George Augustus Stallings Jr., a former Roman Catholic priest.

At the time, he was a professor in the

University of Maryland's Graduate School of Social Work in College Park, Md., and a Johns Hopkins research associate.

"I made a lot of decisions I should not have made during that period, and joining the AACC was one of them," Rowe said. "I had the false notion that by reconstructing everything in my life, in some magical way I would feel less pain over the loss of my mother."

When Rowe left the Marist Brothers, which he first joined in 1951 at age 15, he sadly announced. "In a sense, I will always be a Marist brother. That's who I am. ... That will never change."

He added, "I cannot pretend anymore that an Irish bishop understands what God is saying to me through my culture better than I do."

Rowe, who remained in Washington while part of the Stallings congregation, says he felt then — as he does now — that the predominantly white U.S. Catholic hierarchy does not fully appreciate or recognize African-American Catholics' unique cultural and spiritual contributions to the church.

"Even if you're a bishop, you must let me tell you what that (black culture) means to me," Rowe said. "I see every person and every culture as a revelation of God, and I'm not prepared to have that put aside by somebody else."

"If God did not send each of us into this world with a message, there is no reason for our being here," Rowe continued. "This is not only true of individuals, it is also true of cultures."

But, Rowe said, he was "sadly mistaken" in thinking that by joining Archbishop Stallings, he would be able to articulate that message of the black Catholic culture.

"I think that Patriarch Stallings — or Archbishop Stallings as I knew him — sees

the AACC as his possession, and I see no indication of pastoral caring on his part," Rowe said.

"I don't mean to say he is a selfish person," he continued. "I just think there are some people at a developmental impasse who cannot grasp the notion of the 'other.' By the 'other,' I mean the world out there, other people. It just does not exist for them."

As a result, according to Rowe, Archbishop Stallings has formed a congregation without social programs of caring for the sick, the destitute or the poor, and as a result, he believes, many of Archbishop Stallings' most ardent followers have returned to their Catholic parishes.

"A church has to have a meaning that goes beyond a certain way of talking, a certain way of walking. The African spirit is a spirit of community, a spirit of sharing. It is a spirit of 'we,' not 'I,'" Rowe said.

He says he harbors no resentments toward Archbishop Stallings, and sees "the whole experience as a gift" that has left him "far more able to understand and help people who are despondent because of something traumatic that may have happened in their lives."

Rowe said one of the most poignant moments for him since his decision to return to the Catholic Church was meeting privately with Washington Cardinal James A. Hickey. He said he didn't know what kind of reception he would get because "I never spoke to him when I left. I didn't speak to anybody when I left."

"He embraced me so hard he nearly took the wind out of me, and then he said, 'Welcome home.' I was almost in tears," Rowe said.

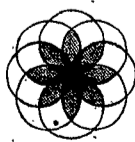
Now, he says, he is writing a letter to the superior of the Marist Brothers, asking to re-enter the community.

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