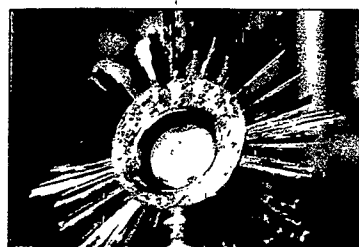


Catholic Courier

DIOCESE OF ROCHESTER, NEW YORK ■ NOVEMBER 2004 ■ www.catholiccourier.com ■ \$3.00 NEWSSTAND ■ 40 PAGES/2 SECTIONS

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'I'm so glad Jesus lifted me!'

Black Catholics celebrate heritage at convocation

ROCHESTER — Twenty-five years ago on Oct. 15, Kim Harris entered the Catholic Church. On the evening of Oct. 15, 2004, she entered Immaculate Conception Church to share her faith through song, accompanied by her husband Reggie's guitar-playing and voice. The couple are storytellers and songwriters who use music to teach about such subjects as the Underground Railroad and black history.

"I'm so glad Jesus lifted me!" she sang, encouraging about 130 people in the church to join her and her husband in the lively spiritual. "Singing Glory, Hallelujah! Jesus lifted me."

The congregation included Catholics from the dioceses of Rochester, Buffalo and Syracuse, who were all in Rochester to attend the 2004 Black Catholic Convocation. The convocation was cosponsored by all three dioceses, according to Father Michael Upson. Father Upson is pastor at Immaculate and director of the Office of Black Ministry in the Rochester Diocese's Parish Support Ministries.

An Albany-area Catholic, Kim Harris gave a presentation on the life of abolitionist Harriet Tubman, who helped African-Americans escape slavery. Both Tubman and fellow abolitionist Sojourner Truth had religious visions that inspired them to fight slavery, she said, noting that the religious connection is not always taught in schools.

"We have to ask ourselves, we — who are people of faith



Seventeen-year-old Ashley Brass joins the rest of the Immaculate Conception Liturgical Dancers in preparing the congregation for worship Oct. 15 during the opening prayer service for the Black Catholic Convocation.

— what is our vision?" Harris told her listeners.

If you asked some of the young liturgical dancers who performed at Immaculate that night, their vision included sharing their talents with the church. Nikko Fenderson, 11; his brother, Kenneth, 13; Julian Bell, 18; Marianna Scott, 15; and Ashley Brass, 17, all noted that they dance at Masses and other events as a form of ministry.

"I love dancing, and this is just another way of praying," Julian said.

Kenneth Fenderson added that liturgical dancing was his way of "making God happy." And God is a forgiving audience, added Ashley.

"You're doing this for God," she said. "It doesn't matter if you mess up or not."

Fellowship and celebration were among the factors that drew Ron Thomas, an Immaculate parish council member, to the convocation.

"I think it's important that we celebrate the African-American heritage within this church," he said.

Joanne Gordon, an active Immaculate volunteer who works with the young dancers, also said the convocation was a way to bring the black Catholic community together, as well as the larger Catholic community. Indeed, a number of white, Hispanic and Asian Catholics were present at Immaculate that night, and also attended the convocation's second day of events at St. Bernard's School of Theology and Ministry in Pittsford Oct. 16.

Jackie Campbell, youth

minister and choir coordinator at St. Bridget's Church in Rochester, said she thought it was important to attend the convocation to reinforce her sense of identity as a Catholic. Although African-Americans may think of the Catholic Church as a "white church," she said, 120 million people in Africa alone are Catholic. And, according to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the United States is home to 2 million black Catholics.

"When I talk about who I am, I'm part of a larger universal church where black Catholics are a significant part of it," Campbell said.

During a presentation at St. Bernard's Oct. 16, Father Bryan Massingale, associate professor of moral theology at

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Story by Rob Cullivan • Photo by Mike Crupi