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—Sr. Jamie Phelps

Black Catholics: life in a 'chilly church'

By ARTHUR JONES
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CHARLOTTE, N.C. — During her frequent appearances as keynote speaker at Catholic workshops, Sr. Anita Baird always asks a series of questions.

First, the member of the Daughters of the Heart of Mary asks "How many have heard of the U.S. bishops' [1983] peace pastoral?"

"Everybody, everybody," she says, "puts up their hands."

Then she asks how many have heard of the document "Brothers and Sisters to Us," the bishops' 1979 pastoral on racism. "It's one hand here, one hand

there," she said.

Concludes Baird, "The bishops did a phenomenal job in marketing the peace pastoral. They did not do it on the racism pastoral."

Baird was one of more than 220 attendees here at the annual Joint Conference of the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus, the National Black Sisters' Conference, the National Black Seminarians' Association and the National Association of African-American Catholic Deacons.

Implicitly, racism and the extent to which black Catholics are still absent from the table were joint conference themes under the more optimistic title, "The Storm is Passing Over."

Dominican Fr. Tom Jackson, homilist

at the opening liturgy, alluded to the conference title: "Some storms come and seem to pitch tent and hover over our lives, not moving at all." One such storm is racism. Yet Jackson added, "The storms are not the issue for God's people, but how we respond to them."

Dominican Sr. Jamie Phelps spoke of that response when she told a conference session, "God gave us power, and it takes power to suffer and be disciplined, power to suffer through the wilderness of injustice, which is still here." She did not need to spell out the injustice.

The audience responded with "Amen" and "Right on" when Phelps, theology professor at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, continued, "The God we must

proclaim to the young and disaffected, the unchurched and the underchurched, is the God of Jesus Christ but — as the God revealed to us that helped us survive slavery, lynchings, segregation, desegregation, false integration."

And when, after a prolonged pause, she added, "We still here," everyone hooted with laughter. Rollicking laughter, high seriousness and endorsements from audience or congregation were hallmarks of all the joint conference sessions and services.

Jackson, preaching in an air-conditioned tent the hotel had erected in its parking lot, brought laughter to the liturgy when he quipped, "Too often those who are supposed to be pointing the way

African-born seminarians on the increase in United States

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — At first glance, the numbers for black Catholic vocations look fairly constant — about 200 seminarians today, roughly the same as in 1972.

The distinction is that more than half of today's seminarians are Africans, not African-Americans, explained Sidney O. Speaks III, president of the National Black Catholic Seminarians' Association. While the majority of the African seminarians are ordained for their home dioceses in Africa, said Speaks, the number of Africans ordained for the United States is increasing.

The Black Catholic Clergy Caucus now has its first African-born board member, Tanzanian Fr. Callist Nyambo. He is a priest of the St. Petersburg, Fla., diocese.

At the Joint Conference there was serious discussion regarding the vocations dropout rate for minority semi-

nary students in a nonreceptive system. Speaks, who will be ordained next year as a Josephite priest, is in a supportive environment at the Society of St. Joseph Seminary in Washington. The order has many black priests and serves the African-American community. He comes from a solidly black parish, St. Veronica's in Baltimore, went through Catholic grade and high schools, describes himself as "people-oriented" and hopes to work in a parish and develop as a preacher.

Norman Fischer Jr., third year theology student at Mundelein Seminary in Chicago, never saw a black priest while growing up in a tiny rural community with a 25-family church. He kept his vocation hopes to himself, involved himself in mentoring programs, in college set his mind to becoming a pediatrician and was surprised when, in 1992, a delegation from the only black parish in Lexington, Ky., arrived on his

Danville, Ky., college doorstep.

They had come to invite him to that year's Black Catholic Congress in New Orleans and, once they'd met him, asked him to attend as a youth delegate.

Fischer, who will be ordained for the Lexington diocese, finds himself visiting black parishes nationally at annual youth days giving personal witness to black vocations. He would like, after ordination, to work with youth — perhaps as a high school chaplain — and in vocations.

That type of outreach is what Divine Word Fr. Chester Smith has been doing for three years through "Kujenga" conferences. These are weekend leadership development programs that invite black high school youth and young adults to become active and remain in the church.

It is a revival and retreat ministry that lately has taken him to Chicago, Atlanta, New York and Nashville, Tenn.

What do young black Catholics ask?

Smith said they want to know, "What would Jesus do if he was 14 or 15 or 16?" Or, they say: "Tell me about my history, tell me about my God, instill in me some values so I can survive in this confused world."

Is there any hope in the confusion?

Spiritan Fr. Albert McKnight sees the confusion as hope. He has his own chaos theory.

"Black folks have become so disenchanted with what has happened in the past 30 years that their seeking becomes, for me, a sign of hope. They're asking 'Who am I? Why am I here?'"

McKnight's answer is that the country needs an African-American cultural revival movement. "The civil rights movement was an external movement, trying to change white folks. The African-American cultural revival will be internal, changing ourselves, a realignment of our values, attitudes and behavior, re-educating ourselves to who we are."

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are too docile. And when I was young I was told, 'If you want to be a bishop, don't you be hanging around that [black priests'] organization.'"

Jackson is an associate pastor in Chicago.

Fr. Bryan Massingale, professor at St. Francis Seminary in Milwaukee and the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University, using the topic, "How to Survive in a Chilly Church," described how "Holy Mother Church, if truth be told, was less than a mother to many of us."

"We don't like to speak of these things," said Massingale, "the pain and grief, the hurt and the disappointment of belonging to a church in which we sometimes feel orphaned and abandoned."

He said, "The relief that is on our faces and the joy in our spirits when we come to bodies like this is itself a silent testimony of the ordeal we have endured."

He outlined the ordeal: "To be black and Catholic is often to be discounted and devalued, usually deemed irrelevant and insignificant, repeatedly trivialized and patronized, habitually overlooked and ignored, infrequently endorsed and celebrated, sometimes supported and embraced, but seldom fully appreciated, valued and welcomed at the table."

Speaking of that table, Chicagoan Baird, who is Cardinal Francis George's

executive assistant, described how, when she took the job last year, everyone black in the chancery building "came to look at me because there had never been a black person in the level of position I had. And we're almost in the year 2000."

"And in our own archdiocese," Baird said, "you look at the decision-makers, you look at the people gathered around the table, there's no Hispanic, no African-American, no one of color. It's all white, all middle and upper middle-class, predominantly Irish, so how do you have a world view?"

On the black Catholic absence from the table, Massingale said, "The church is comfortable with, if not comforted by, our exclusion."

To be black and Catholic "is to be absent," Massingale said, and the fact that the church does not even know whether there are 2.5 million or 4 million black Catholics "is itself significant."

Fr. Timothy Reker of the bishops' Secretariat for Vocations and Priestly Formation was at the conference to describe the bishops' forthcoming study on multicultural vocations. Fr. Victor Cohea told Reker, the U.S. bishops "still have not addressed the fundamental problems" of attracting minorities to priestly and religious vocations, "and this is not a new issue for us."

"Most vocations directors themselves

know nothing about the cultures of the minorities they are supposed to welcome," said New Orleans-based Cohea. When he added, "In 15 years of vocations work, I've seen half the students leave because of the inflexibility and insensitivity that greets the [minority] candidates," the audience responded with thunderous applause.

Continued Cohea, those in charge should at least take part "in programs like the Mexican-American Cultural Center and the Institute of Black Catholic Studies."

Added Cohea, "I said the same things in meetings with the bishops 10 years ago." The bishops, he said, "have still not addressed the fundamental question. That is, you are looking for a passive person."

The bishops will not accept strong leaders — either male or female — into roles of religious leadership, nor deal with "how we can support the [minority vocations] process where our communities insist on being involved in formation of the persons for ministry," he said.

Franciscan friar Fr. Martin Carter said, "Our gifts, these seminarians, must be able to see themselves in the educational process and come back to their people intact rather than being transculturalized."

Said Carter, "You're talking multi-

culturalism. What kind of curriculum do we have in our seminaries? What do our faculties look like? We should not bring in a multicultural student body and give them a Eurocentric faculty."

Massingale, in his address, also tackled the multiculturalism issue. "Multiculturalism," he said, "means, more and more Hispanic or even Asian and less and less us. Multiculturalism is a subtle refuge for dodging racism."

Again to tumultuous support, Cohea told Reker another question not addressed "is why we are bringing in our brothers and sisters from Africa to staff our formation programs and parishes without [their] being grounded in our African-American culture."

A contributing factor to all these issues, said Sr. Mary Ann Henogan, is that "African-Americans need to be present in numbers on the decision-making boards. Part of the problem," said the member of the Missionary Servants of the Most Blessed Trinity, "is we're not being heard."

It goes back, in Carter's words, to something else not heard often enough or widely enough: "We have to recognize the institutional racism of our church historically. We have never truly addressed that adequately."

That past, said Massingale, "explains the neglect and indifference of the present." ■

He's a bridge-builder with a booming voice and a large laugh

ALEXANDRIA, Va. — Dominican Fr. Brian Walker is halfway down the aisle, beaming, booming, talking about life as it is, particularly in families. "Why can't we tell each other I love you?" he wants to know.

The African-American priest was gently chiding members of the Queen of Peace congregation here — about 65 percent white, 35 percent people of color — for holding back on expressions of love, especially for those in the family and workplace who are hardest to love.

He's got a large laugh, one heard several weeks later cutting through the conversation at the Joint Conference in Charlotte.

And there was much good-natured ribbing in Charlotte about the Dominican's white habit from members of the Society of the Divine Word. That's because Walker, once a Divine Word missionary in Oaxaca, Mexico, and inner-city Los Angeles, subsequently joined the Order of Preachers, the formal name for the Dominicans.

"I decided there was more in the spirituality department that I needed for myself, something more monastic in my life," he said.

Despite being pastor of St. Basil-Visitation parish in downtown Chicago, a mainly African-American church with a large population of Latinos and a few whites, Walker manages to do parish missions. At his Chicago parish — he rates himself as "comfortable, not excellent" preaching in Spanish — "I am trying to be a bridge-builder between the two communities."

"The communities have so many things in common," he said. "One, they're all feeling the same, isolated. Two, they're left out of a lot of things — not part of the decision-making. Three, our particular culture — of color — is left out of the church."

"Not because it hasn't been endorsed," he said. "The Holy Father has endorsed

African-American and Latino worship in many ways. But because we find ourselves in situations with people who don't understand."

The Dominican, whose Catholicism stretches back several generations to New Orleans, said, "I constantly try to get people to see that when somebody is speaking in another language, they're not always talking about you. That the things you think you don't have in common, you do — they're just as oppressed as you are. That we need to break down those barriers and look at people not as being enemies but as brothers and sisters in solidarity."

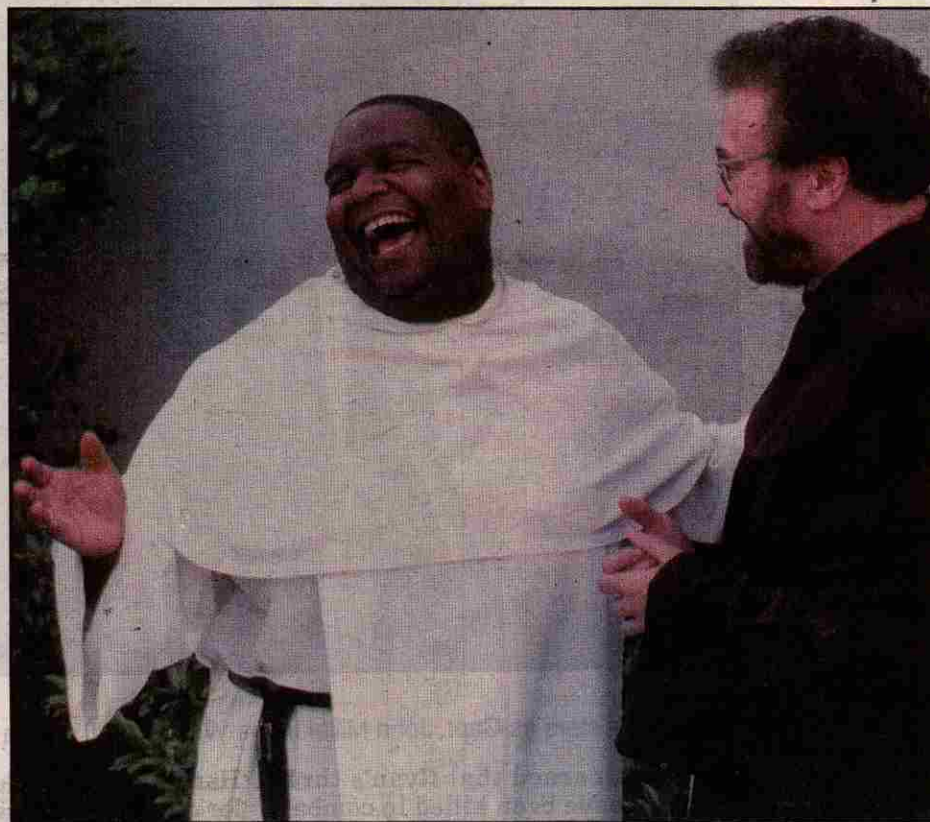
Walker, long active in the Black Catholic Clergy Caucus, sees people's isolation from each other as not so much a church situation but a "people situation, the assumption of the negative."

Racism in the church? He finds it in the Dominicans,

"though I can honestly say I did not in the [Society of the Divine Word]. As SVDs, for the most part, you'd work with African-Americans and minorities in this country. You took it for granted that anyone who joined knew that."

"In the Dominicans, there's a different type, and yes there is racism," he said. "We are an educated group,

and with that education in many ways comes sophistication. And through sophistication comes a way of finding ourselves better than somebody else — as opposed to being in solidarity with



Dominican Fr. Brian Walker, left, with Franciscan Fr. Jim Goode, president of the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus

someone else."

He and other black Dominican priests and sisters belong to the Black Dominican Conference to deal with "what we need to do collectively and what we need to do individually in our provinces. 'Is there a difference between preaching to a generally white congregation and one of color?'"

"It's not that I don't like preaching in an all-white setting. I do," he said. "But there is a lot more response from people of color. There's a common feeling. I want to say it's the soul aspect of preaching. I speak directly to people without beating around the bush. I try not to sound elaborate — in a lot of instances, I'm speaking from my own experience."

"Strange as it may seem," he said, "the only way to be an effective preacher is in the context of pastoral care. You cannot preach effectively without contact with the world around you."

Regarding worship Walker said, "We are a church of different people, but we try to make it the same for everybody. Not all African-American worship has to be the same. Not everybody likes drums and electronic organs and clapping."

What he likes is the noise of family. "When you don't hear some baby screaming or a child wandering around or people saying 'shhhshh!' then you realize that in a very few years you'll have a very dead congregation."

The congregation this day was far from dead.

And at the conclusion of the liturgy, the white celebrant, on behalf of the people, turned to Walker and said — in tribute to Walker and his homily — "I love you, man." The congregation burst into cheers and applause.

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