News
Spirituality



Fr. Kareem Smith of the Archdiocese of New York delivers the homily in Baltimore's historic St. Francis Xavier Church July 22, 2019, for a Mass honoring jubilarians during a joint conference of black priests, women religious, deacons and seminarians. (CNS/Catholic Review/Kevin J. Parks)

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The joint conference of the national organizations for black Catholic clergy, women religious, seminarians and deacons finally made its first stop in Baltimore, a city noted for several firsts on the road to equality in the faith.

The annual conference brings together members of the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus, the National Black Sisters' Conference, the National Black Catholic Seminarians Association and the National Association of Black Catholic Deacons. The Black Catholic Clergy Caucus was founded in 1968, followed in turn by the other groups. They began meeting jointly because of their commonalities.

One of this year's attendees, Sr. Beulah Martin, a Sister of the Blessed Sacrament, didn't wait for the formal opening of the July 20-24 gathering to soak up some of that Baltimore history.

Beulah was among the more than 100 priests, deacons, seminarians and religious women from around the nation at a July 22 Mass at Historic St. Francis Xavier, the first black Catholic church in the United States.

It was her 10th day in town, as Beulah had spent her annual retreat at the motherhouse of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, who in 1829 were founded by Mother Mary Lange, a candidate for sainthood, as the first community for sisters of African descent in the U.S.

Beulah's retreat included learning about Mother Lange from Oblate Sister Magdala Marie Gilbert, who is advocating for her cause, and stifling heat reminiscent of her youth in Crowley, Louisiana, during her daily hourlong walk on property that adjoins Patapsco Valley State Park.

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"It's only hot if you think about it," said Beulah, who at the 2017 joint conference received the Harriett Tubman Award from the National Black Sisters' Conference. It is given to the sister who has demonstrated service and dedication "as a liberator of African-Americans and/or peoples of the African Diaspora."

As her teaching ministry took her to Birmingham, Alabama, Chicago and now Powhatan, Virginia, where she is launching a pre-school, Beulah has been a regular attendee of the joint conference since making her final vows in 1984.

"I come for the support," she said, "and to gather information about how I can go back to my community and share the good news."

Her kindred spirits at the Mass, which acknowledged jubilarians, included Washington Archbishop Wilton Gregory, who presided and made women religious the focus of his closing remarks.

"Our jubilarians had the courage to enter religious life when there were few (minorities in those ranks)," Gregory said. "Sisters, you have carried the church on your shoulders."

Concelebrants included Bishop John Ricard, the retired bishop of Pensacola-Tallahassee, Florida, and the newly elected superior general of his religious order, the Josephite Fathers, whose roots include serving freed slaves in Baltimore in the 1870s; and Washington Auxiliary Bishop Roy Campbell, the president of the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus, who was raised in southern Maryland.

Among others, the National Association of Black Catholic Deacons was represented by its president, Deacon Melvin Tardy, of the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Indiana.

Jubilarians were recognized by Sr. Roberta Fulton, a Sister of St. Mary of Namur, who is president of the National Black Sisters' Conference. Those honored for 60 years of service were Sr. Callista Robinson, of the Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls, Minnesota, and Baltimore's Sr. Gloria Rubio, of the Sisters of Christian Community.

Those recognized for 50 years of service included Sr. Rita Michelle Proctor, superior general of the Oblate Sisters of Providence. Her cousin, Sr. Gwynette Proctor, organized the conference along with Sr. Josita Colbert, a fellow Sister of Notre Dame de Namur.



Fr. Donald Sterling, pastor of New All Saints in Baltimore, center, is among the priests processing into Baltimore's historic St. Francis Xavier Church July 22, 2019, for a Mass honoring jubilarians during a joint conference of black priests, women religious, deacons and seminarians. (CNS/Catholic Review/Kevin J. Parks)

Josita estimates that 80 percent of the women religious at the conference included teaching among their ministries. Gwynette, director of the Office of Black Catholic Ministries for the Archdiocese of Baltimore, noted the impact the jubilarian liturgy had on her discernment.

"When I entered (her order) 39 years ago and attended my first (jubilarian liturgy)," Gwynette said, "I saw our elders, jubilarians, all the members of the organizations, and I experienced God's touch, a shiver went through me. It was at that moment that all uncertainty and doubt left me."

"When I saw faithful women and men, who looked like me, that had been living the call of Jesus for 25 years, 50, 60, 70, some 80 years, I knew I could do it," she told the Catholic Review, the news outlet of the Baltimore Archdiocese.

The homily, in contrast, was delivered by Fr. Kareem Smith, who was ordained for the Archdiocese of New York in 2018.

"My story is your story," he said. "How many times have you been told, 'You hang in there, you keep pushing.' ... Brothers and sisters, this thing is not about what we

have done, but what God is doing."

He addressed the "carnal" nature of the modern world, and the call to live "radically different lives."

"I'm standing on the shoulders of those who have come before us," Smith said. "In this troubled world, we have to show up … ready for the fight.

"They may not like you. They may say you're not smart enough. They may have threatened you. They may try to intimidate you, but show up for the fight. God can't bless you, if you're not there."

While Smith took the train back to Yonkers, New York, to celebrate 6:45 a.m. Mass July 23 for the Annunciation-Our Lady of Fatima community he serves, most joint congress attendees spent the day furthering their knowledge of Baltimore's black history with a bus tour.

That day included a gospel festival, with song from the St. Ambrose Gospel Choir, New All Saints Men's Chorus and the Cardinal Shehan School Choir, which went viral in 2017 with its rendition of "Rise Up." The Shehan choir is led by Kenyatta Hardison, who doubles as choir director at Historic St. Francis Xavier.

The joint congress – organized under the theme "This Work Is Ours to Do: Send Us" – concluded with business meetings and an awards dinner July 24.