News

A Black man wearing a tweed cap, a black cassock, and a purple stole speaks to a large grou

Washington Cardinal Wilton D. Gregory leads a prayer service Feb. 25, 2023, for enslaved people believed to be buried in the cemetery at Sacred Heart Parish in Bowie, Md. The property is on a former plantation once owned by members of the Society of Jesus in Maryland in the 1700s and 1800s, and enslaved people who worked at that plantation may be buried in unmarked graves in the cemetery. (OSV News photo/Mihoko Owada, Catholic Standard)

Catherine Buckler

View Author Profile



OSV News

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Bowie, Md. — March 1, 2023

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

On Feb. 25, just following a snow flurry that morning, a tent with seats for about 100 people was put up among gravesites on the property behind Sacred Heart Parish's chapel in the Washington suburb of Bowie for an afternoon prayer service honoring the departed.

Those in attendance, including more than 100 people standing outside the tent, gathered near a field and a hillside that were dotted with little pink and orange flags that represent an anomaly, stones or possibly grave markers discovered by archaeological research since the new year began.

Previously, the property was on one of the plantations owned by members of the Society of Jesus in Maryland in the 1700s and 1800s, and enslaved people who worked at that plantation may be buried in unmarked graves on the grounds of the parish cemetery.

Washington Cardinal Wilton D. Gregory led the service, which was attended by members of the parish and community, as well as descendants of the area's enslaved. Descendants wore small black ribbons pinned to their coats that read, "Forever in our hearts."

Members of the Washington archdiocesan Gospel Mass Choir began the event by singing "Amazing Grace." In his homily, Gregory explained the significance of the prayer service, and how there is still work ahead to acknowledge the history of the Catholic Church's involvement in slavery.

He noted that day's reading from the Gospel of St. John included the word "loss," which is often associated with death. But he pointed out that "Jesus told us that he was sent so that no one would be lost."

"What we are doing today is helping give life to those Gospel words. We are trying to, to the best of our ability, allow the people whose lives were bound up in slavery and whose death mattered little to those who survive them, we are trying to make sure that their lives are not lost, but more importantly, that their memories are not lost," Gregory said.

Baltimore Archbishop William E. Lori participated in the prayer service, along with members of the clergy including Fr. Ronald Potts, the pastor of Sacred Heart Parish, and Fr. Michael Russo, the parochial vicar there.

Maryland Delegate Adrian Boafo, a Prince George's County state representative, read the first reading from the Book of Wisdom (3:1-6, 9), which includes the phrase, "The souls of the just are in the hand of God."

Before the prayer service, Gregory and church and parish representatives had a private meeting with descendants and community members.

In his homily, the cardinal noted, "Today, a lot of us who came to hear the conversations that took place in the chapel were reminded in vivid language that there is a lot of work that needs to be done so that the lives and the identity and the

dignity of the people who were once in shackles will be held in honor by those of us who remain."

Concluding his homily, Gregory said, "Jesus said He came so that none of those who were given to Him would be lost. We believe that, and we will continue to work to make sure that those people in this ground and in other grounds, once owned by the church, once held slaves by the Church, will not be forgotten, overlooked, or neglected, and none of them will be lost."

Following the homily, the cardinal went to bless the gravesites with holy water. Then began the pouring of libations. Deacon Darryl Kelley, who serves at St. Philip the Apostle Parish in Camp Springs, Maryland, gave attendees a brief background on the ritual of libations.

Advertisement

"The pouring of the water libation is an essential African ceremonial tradition. It is a way to pay homage to the ancestors," Kelley said.

Mélisande Colomb, a descendant, took the podium following Kelley's remarks. She asked everyone to respond with "asé," a word from the West African language Yoruba that encompasses the concept of a force that leads to change. Colomb then explained how they were going to pour a cool, clear water libation onto the ground.

Descendants at the event were encouraged to say the names of their ancestors out loud. Names that could be heard include Taylor, Queen, and Hawkins.

After the prayer service, Colomb said her ancestors include both the enslaved Queen and Mahoney families, as well as members of enslaver families.

Colomb currently works at Georgetown University with the Laboratory for Global Performance and Politics. Her family was part of the 1838 sale by the Jesuits' Maryland province of 272 enslaved men, women and children to Louisiana plantation owners that helped ensure the financial survival of Georgetown College. Although Colomb grew up in Louisiana, she has since found cousins in the Maryland area. She said she is not Catholic.

"No, I didn't leave the faith. The faith did not accommodate Black Catholic families during human trafficking schemes. So those who were Catholic here in Maryland were left without resources to practice their faith in Louisiana. Many of them, many Black Catholics do not understand or connect with the reality that they are Black Catholics because they were enslaved by enslaver Catholics," Colomb told the Catholic Standard, newspaper of the Archdiocese of Washington.

She went on to describe what a water libation meant as part of the prayer service.

"It's a very ancient practice. Lots of people do it all over the world. It's a way to honor ancestral spirits, to offer them things that they need. So in pouring libation, we can pour water, we can pour alcohol, you can pour grains, you can pour sugar, you can pour rice, it depends on where you are. But here we are not far from the water, and water is clear and pure. So we used the water libation," Colomb said.

Colomb said she hopes attendees will take away from the service “a sense of ownership and responsibility and obligation. … To stand in the truth, to learn the truth, to separate from past beliefs and embrace the future. And know that we are responsible in the present for what the future becomes."

Also attending the prayer service was Jesuit Fr. Timothy Kesicki, who works with the Jesuit Conference of Canada and the United States and directs the campaign for the Descendants Truth & Reconciliation Foundation. He said he first met descendants of those enslaved by Jesuits in 2017 when he was president of the conference.

He said that events like the prayer service are an important component in understanding the emotional history of the enslaved.

"The more proximate you are to history, and in the presence of living descendants, it grounds us in what happened. But it’s not like we’re just looking at something from the past in memorializing, that history is still living today. Racism is one of the huge remnants of that history," Kesicki said. "Many of the injustices that still plague us as a nation are connected to this history. So how is this history informing our understanding of mercy, equality, justice – all these very rich Catholic virtues?"

Following the service, attendees walked around the property and visited both the visible and unconfirmed gravesites.