News



Auxiliary Bishop Roy E. Campbell Jr. of Washington, president of the National Black Catholic Congress, celebrates Mass Feb. 6, 2022, at St. Matthew's Cathedral to mark Black History Month. The 13th National Black Catholic Congress is July 20-23. The portraits on display are of Fr. Augustus Tolton and Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange, candidates for sainthood. (CNS photo/Javier Diaz, Catholic Standard)



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Washington — July 18, 2023
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Black Catholics from across the U.S. are preparing to gather just outside Washington for the 13th National Black Catholic Congress July 20-23.

The four-day event, held at National Harbor in Maryland, will feature keynote addresses by Washington, D.C., Cardinal Wilton Gregory and motivational speaker Omékongo Dibinga, workshops, a documentary film viewing and several liturgies, including a celebration of the feast of St. Mary Magdalene.

Washington Auxiliary Bishop Roy E. Campbell Jr., president of the National Black Catholic Congress, told NCR that this year's event arrives as "the faith in our religion is alive and well and growing."

At the same time, Campbell said, a major challenge is: "How do Black Catholics strive to take their rightful place in various areas and ministries of the church and leadership of the church?"

"The National Black Catholic Congress is working to be a resource to help [Black Catholics] with a pastoral plan" and to give them resources "to make their parishes, their communities and their Black Catholics live in a vibrant faith," said Campbell.

> 'We are just and righteous in seeking to better the lives of Black Catholics spiritually and physically, as well as contributing to the church overall.'
> —Washington, D.C., Auxiliary Bishop Roy E. Campbell Jr.
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Stefanie Miles, a youth and young adult minister and lifelong parishioner at the Church of the Incarnation in Washington, D.C., who will be attending her third Congress, said that the event has a "family reunion type feeling." She and other Black Catholics planning to attend said the opportunity to connect with others is the most valuable element of the gathering.



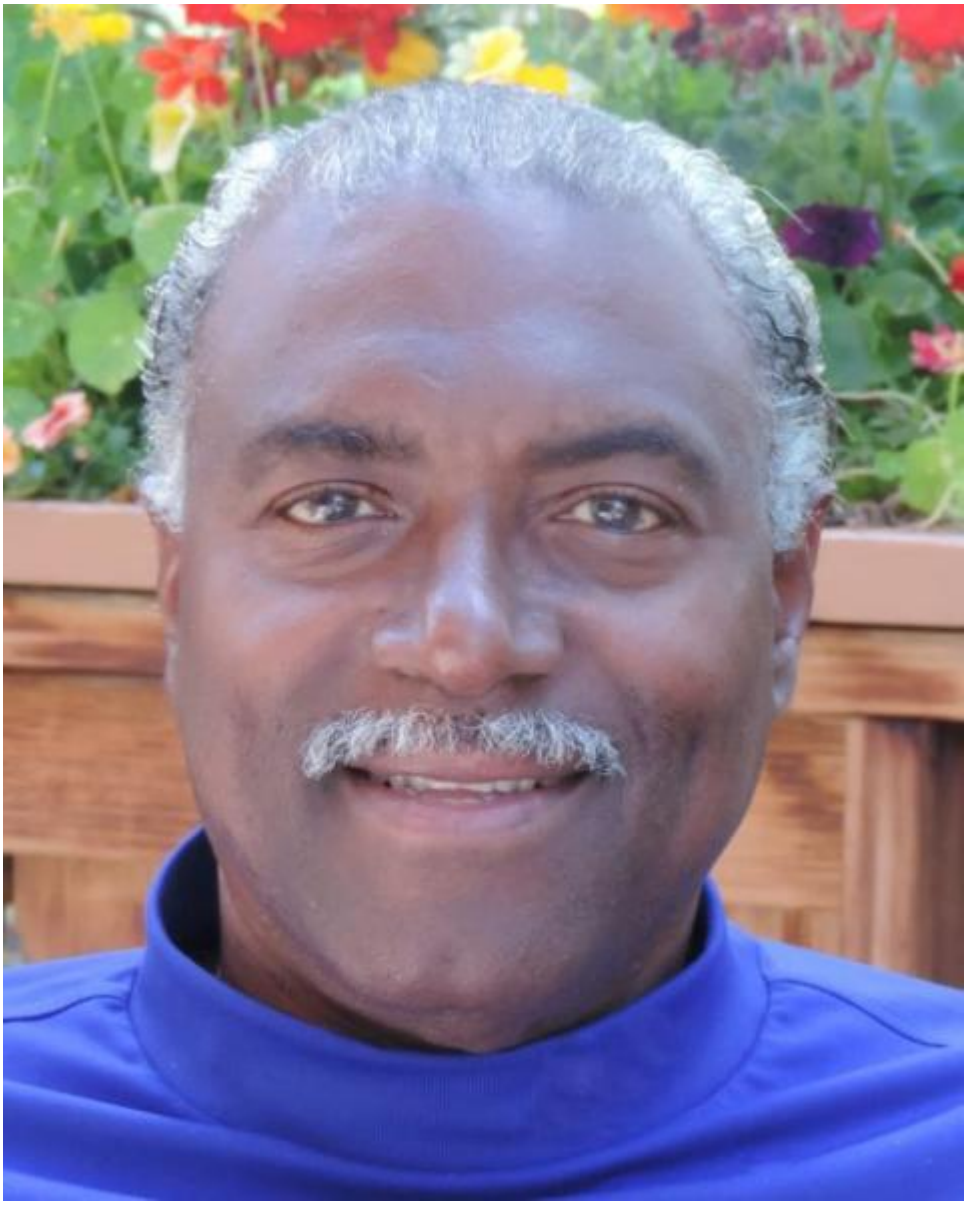
Stefanie Miles, a youth and young adult minister and lifelong parishioner at the Church of the Incarnation in Washington, D.C., will be attending her third National Black Catholic Congress. (Courtesy of Stefanie Miles)

Shannon Schmidt, who co-hosts the podcast, "Plaid Skirts and Basic Black," said she is excited "to have a space that belongs to us as Black Catholics, in which we get to celebrate our culture, to worship within our own cultural idioms, and to really recognize and celebrate the long journey that we've had as Black Catholics throughout the church's history."

"It's a time to really reflect on how far we've come and how far God has brought us and how good it is to be together as brothers and sisters in Christ," said Schmidt, who is also the parish vitality coordinator for the Archdiocese of Chicago.

The 2023 Congress will be the first time the event is held with a Black cardinal. (Gregory, who has served as Washington's archbishop since 2019, was made a cardinal by Pope Francis in 2020.) "We're very proud of him," said Caleb Legg, the capital campaign chairman at St. Rita Catholic Church in Indianapolis, who will attend the Congress with others from his parish.

Legg will co-present a workshop about St. Rita's and another Black Catholic church's success receiving funding from the Preserving Black Churches grant program at the National Trust for Historic Preservation.



Caleb Legg will co-present a workshop about two churches that received funding from the Preserving Black Churches grant program at the National Trust for Historic Preservation. (Courtesy of Caleb Legg)

He hopes his session will raise awareness about the grant and encourage others that success is possible.

"The interstate highway system cut through many of our traditional Black neighborhoods, and we lost Black parishes as a result of that," Legg explained. "And so the ones that we have left tend to be isolated and tend to be in areas that are experiencing gentrification and experiencing a lot of social pressures" that sometimes prevent parishes from having a sufficiently large parishioner base to keep up with capital improvements.

Legg's session is among a few to focus on preserving Black parishes. Other themes include mental health, vocations and the sainthood causes of U.S. Black Catholics.

Some Black businesses will also be present at the Congress. Gina Paige, president of AfricanAncestry.com, said, "My session will enlighten on the significant role that identity plays in the holistic wellness of Black people today and how genetics can be used as a vital tool of self-empowerment."

Marianist Sr. Nicole Trahan, chair of the board of the National Religious Vocations Conference, said the idea for the workshop that she will co-present, "Living your best life," was developed at the 2022 Joint Conference of Black clergy, sisters, deacons and seminarians as her small group talked about how to inspire vocations among Black youth.



Attendees are seen at the National Black Catholic Congress XI in Indianapolis in this 2012 file photo. (CNS/Bayou Catholic/Lawrence Chatagnier)

Trahan said the Congress is "an opportunity" to respond to two challenges: that religious congregations and seminaries are not racially representative of the U.S. Catholic church, and that "young people of all races are walking away from the Catholic faith or, for most, they're just walking away from faith in general."

"It's really important that younger Catholics see themselves represented in the leadership in the church because if they don't, there's no way for them to imagine themselves as part of it," said Trahan, emphasizing she wanted younger Black Catholics to feel "there is room for them."

Miles, the youth minister, will lead a workshop about U.S. Black Catholics who have open causes for sainthood and encouraging attendees to identify with one of them. Miles is also a Tolton ambassador, a lay person accredited to help support the sainthood cause for Fr. Augustus Tolton.

Tolton, who was the first U.S. Catholic priest publicly known to be Black, celebrated a Mass at the first Black Catholic Congress in 1889. "I try to promote awareness of his cause and of him as a person any chance that I could get," said Miles. "Father Tolton, all day, all night, 24/7," she said.

> 'The church's tradition around culture and racial diversity and racial justice is beautiful, but it's also very hidden.'
> —Shannon Schmidt
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In addition to providing adult programming, the Congress has a separate agenda for teenagers.

"The church's tradition around culture and racial diversity and racial justice is beautiful, but it's also very hidden," said Schmidt, who will co-present a workshop on racial justice for the teens.

With her podcast co-host, Schmidt will also present workshops for adults on the gifts of Black Catholics for the 21st century church and the role of Black Catholic laity in parish renewal.

Alessandra Harris, a popular Black Catholic author and mother of four, tweeted that she will be unable to attend the Congress.

"As a mom with two kids in college and two in high school, there was no way my husband and I could afford for me to go without help from the diocese," she told NCR in an email.

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"The Catholic faith should not be a prize for the wealthy," Harris said. She noted that many people are excluded from conferences and programs because of their pricing.

Early-bird registration for adults for the Congress was $395, which is fairly typical for an event of this kind. Rooms in the coordinating hotel were about $250 per night. The Congress did not immediately respond to a question about whether it was able to offer any scholarships to help defray the cost for attendees.

The 2023 Congress' theme "Write the Vision: A Prophetic Call to Thrive," is drawn from a section in the Old Testament's Book of Habakkuk.

The theme speaks to Black Catholics, said Campbell, because "we have a vision of the gifts God has given us and what he calls us to use them for."

God "is with us, and he will not leave us alone," said Campbell. "We are just and righteous in seeking to better the lives of Black Catholics spiritually and physically, as well as contributing to the church overall."



Participants are seen July 9, 2017, during the 12th National Black Catholic Congress in Orlando, Florida. The event, usually held every five years, was delayed a year because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The 13th Congress is set for July 20-23 at National Harbor in Maryland. (CNS/Courtesy of National Black Catholic Congress/Nancy Jo Davis)

The first Black Catholic Congress was held in Washington, D.C., in 1889. After the fifth Congress in Baltimore in 1894, no Congresses were held until 1987, when

Congresses began to be held every five years. The 13th Congress was delayed one year due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Because of the delay, the National Black Catholic Congress will fall on the same weekend as the African National Eucharistic Congress, which will bring together African Catholics in the U.S. at the Catholic University of America.

The African National Eucharistic Congress schedule includes a joint Mass with the National Black Catholic Congress at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception on July 22, as well as a reception with attendees of both Congresses at the National Museum of African American History and Culture.