News



Worshippers recite the Lord's Prayer during a Black Catholic History Month Mass at the Basilica of St. Patrick's Old Cathedral in New York City Nov. 18, 2023. The Lyke Conference, named for Archbishop James P. Lyke, takes place June 18-22 in Grapevine, Texas, to promote Black Catholic liturgical worship and participation. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)

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A national gathering will explore how Black Catholics can "embrace the gifts" they bring to the church, particularly to the Mass, according to organizers.

Some 300 are expected to attend the 2024 Lyke Conference, which takes place June 18-22 in Grapevine, Texas. The event, launched in 2004 and held annually for most of the years since, is named in honor of the late Archbishop James P. Lyke, the second Black archbishop appointed to the Catholic Church in the U.S., who died at age 53 in 1992 while serving as archbishop of Atlanta.

The Lyke Foundation sponsors the conference as part of its mission to continue the late archbishop's legacy of fostering Black Catholic liturgical expression. Among his pioneering accomplishments, Lyke was instrumental in coordinating the production of the Black Catholic hymnal "Lead Me, Guide Me," released in 1987 under the direction of the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus.

This year's conference theme, "Standing in the Need of Prayer – Reclaiming Our Black Catholic Liturgy," will explore the riches of how the Mass is celebrated in the "cultural expression of prayer" that characterizes the experience of Black Catholics, Lyke Conference director Richard Cheri told OSV News.

"(It's) evident in a preaching style, a genre of music, a sacred dance and a real conscious effort to hear the voice of our young people," said Cheri, brother of the late Bishop Fernand J. Cheri, who served as auxiliary bishop of New Orleans until his death in March 2023, and who had served on the Lyke Foundation board.

"I reflect on the ministry of my brother," Cheri told OSV News. "He never apologized for being Black and Catholic. ... He brought (to the church) something different."

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Delivering the conference's welcome message will be Cynthia Bailey Manns, a lay delegate to the Synod on Synodality, adult learning director at St. Joan of Arc Catholic Community in Minneapolis and adjunct professor at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Manns will speak on "Gifts of Conversation in the Spirit," a theme that has been key to the synod process and that involves active listening, speaking from the heart and — as the Lyke Conference materials describe — creating "sacred space to listen to the protagonist, the Holy Spirit, and allow ourselves to move from 'I' to 'We," and "continually encounter God."

Overviews of Black Catholic liturgy will be provided by Jesuit Father Joseph A. Brown, professor of Africana studies at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, Illinois; liturgical composer Rawn Harbor; and Father R. Tony Ricard, an Archdiocese of New Orleans priest, campus minister and author. Pianist and liturgical music director Aaron Mathews will lead several workshops as part of the conference's Rivers Institute for Music Ministers, which advances the vision of the late composer Father Clarence Rivers, dubbed the "father of Black Catholic liturgy." Alexis Cross-Tunley and Yvette Tunley will present a segment on "The Power and Purpose of Liturgical Dance."

Addressing the topic of Black Catholic preaching will be Redemptorist Father Maurice Nutt, who will deliver a talk on rhetorical agency in the Black prophetic preaching tradition; Father Manuel Williams, director of the Alabama-based Resurrection Catholic Missions of the South, who will explore the foundations of African American preaching as well as the ways in which laity and clergy can partner for better preaching; and Kayla August, a Boston College theology and ministry doctoral student, who will discuss "Preaching Outside the Church Doors" through the witness of faith in daily life.

Rounding out the program will be two sessions on parish growth and financial development, led by entrepreneur Timothy Jacquet, a parish capital campaign consultant for OSV (the parent company of OSV News).

Church teaching holds there is a "living exchange between the church and the diverse cultures of people," as taught by the Second Vatican Council in "Gaudium et Spes," — and Black Catholics are a vibrant example, said Cheri.

"What we do is different, and people appreciate it because of what it is," he told OSV News. "The cultural aspect of it is important, and it's prominent."

It's also welcoming, he added, noting that "we have Protestants that come (to a Black Catholic liturgy) and say, 'Oh, I didn't expect this in the Catholic Church,' or white folks that say, 'Oh, this is really different.'"

Cheri hopes that conference attendees will head home with a greater sense of their own personal gifts and what they bring to the church.

"This is who we are. This is why we come together as a community," he said. "We are truly Black and truly Catholic. It's that combination that we have to embrace for the revitalization of the church."