Opinion
Guest Voices



Worshippers pray during a Black Catholic History Month Mass in November at the Cathedral of St. Thomas More in Arlington, Virginia. (BCM/Catholic Herald/Jim Hale)



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As I returned home from Mass recently, it occurred to me that I could almost slip into obscurity given the size of my parish. By this, I mean that I could easily avoid having a connection to my fellow worshippers.

Celebrating Mass as a community is what we are called to do by God within the ecclesia, or "gathering." Over the last few years, I have, in fact, forged relationships in my parish. This was really made possible once I offered to facilitate a women's Bible study twice a month. Within this environment, we created a welcoming space to share the love of Christ and fellowship. I am grateful to have found a place of belonging.

Typically, our three Sunday Masses are celebrated with reasonable attendance. Upon becoming a weekly parishioner, I soon realized it's actually the same group of people who are the most consistent presence. However, what struck me when I first joined the parish was the presence of a Black pastor. I am a cradle Catholic and can hardly recall having a Black priest who was the prime presbyter.

Once I introduced myself, I found that he was encouraging and supportive of my participation in the life of the parish. Nonetheless, that would require a concerted effort on my part to begin the process of making connections. I recognize that not everyone is willing or comfortable speaking with new people. However, this is truly the best way to immerse oneself within the parish community.



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 liturgy was co-sponsored by the Archdiocese of New York and the Diocese of Brooklyn, New York. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)

The church should be a welcoming space for all worshippers. Healthy parishes indicate a healthy Catholic community. However, in the majority of parishes (from my personal experience) it is a sad reflection that Black Catholics will rarely see images of Jesus, Mary and Joseph as Black people. Likewise, they are not likely to see artwork of Black Catholics as part of other images or statues. This is an issue that can be rectified.

On the interpersonal level, the opportunity to connect with fellow Catholics before and after Mass can be very meaningful. In many parishes, people have spent their entire lives there and have formed very deep bonds with each other. I find this is especially true in suburban parishes where Catholic schools surround the church as well as the neighborhood itself. Therefore, the parishioners not only worship in the same space but also interact within their respective faith community outside of

church frequently. This is the ideal situation, where the local parish is a nucleus for the surrounding Catholic community.

Hospitality, after all, is a charism. Given this, I can empathize with fellow Black Catholics who experience discomfort upon entering the average parish. There are stories wherein they, as individuals or families, attend Mass and are somewhat or entirely ignored, especially during the sign of peace. This is not how the early church behaved.

The Pew Research Center has noted the diversity within the small Black Catholic community of America. It includes U.S.-born Black Americans, sub-Saharan African immigrants, and Afro-Caribbeans as well. Among these groups, there are various cultural differences. Moreover, their small numbers overall can become an excuse to ignore their presence. This, sadly, constitutes a missed opportunity for evangelization among Black Catholics, which begins with extending hospitality.



More than 80 musicians of the Black Catholic Ministries Gospel Choir perform at a concert in November 2024 at Sacred Heart Church in Detroit. (BCM/Detroit

Catholic/Izzy Cortese)

I know the reason why my presence and that of others matters. As part of the mystical body of Christ, I am there to give right praise and worship, and most importantly to receive the body and blood of Jesus in the Eucharist. The externals would not deter me from attending Mass. But how many other Black Catholics experience feelings of isolation and begin to reduce their presence at weekend Mass? I was curious to see if this was happening around me and I did find individuals who expressed similar concerns. However, they, too, chose to focus on the worship.

The church in the U.S. and Canada includes Black Catholics. They are present at weekly and, for some, daily Mass. Therefore, hospitality is a necessary ministry of robust presence and a willingness to engage both familiar and new faces on the part of all parishioners, in particular the ushers. Since the Second Vatican Council, the number of Catholics fulfilling their Mass obligation has drastically declined. The church in the U.S. and Canada no longer has the luxury to bypass anyone. If Black Catholics decrease in their presence within parishes, then the church will have to re-examine what it means to be truly "catholic."

Recently, I was speaking with a family member who has been away from the church for several years. In fact, many family members have abandoned Catholicism. Throughout our conversation, my relative revealed that they actually attend Pentecostal services. This family member expressed eagerness to be in her church on that particular Sunday, demonstrating a spiritual yearning for Christ. I began to inquire why they do not attend the Catholic church in the neighborhood. The response was simple: "I did not want to feel like an outsider."

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Given that we are both cradle Catholics, I found this disappointing. I love my Protestant brothers and sisters in Christ. Many of those closest to me belong to such churches. However, this family member, raised Catholic and absent from the church for several years, had already formed an opinion regarding the type of hospitality they would encounter in that space. Upon comparing the Catholic Church to other

Christian denominations, Black people simply do not easily find a home in the Barque of Peter. Given that this is not a new phenomenon, the role of hospitality and a welcoming environment concerns all parishioners. It hurts my heart that so many Black Catholics walk away from their church because they do not experience love.

Imagine the hospitality of Elizabeth upon seeing the Virgin Mary as she exclaimed, "Why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" She could not contain her joy. Jesus himself demonstrated hospitality in the many meals that he shared with others. He actively engaged in open table fellowship. Recall that he invited himself to Zaccheus' home for dinner. The Lord has provided a template that we can still use today.

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Black Catholics should not struggle to feel included in any parish. Hospitality goes beyond interacting with a few acquaintances once Mass has ended. If we do not correct course, more Black Catholics will walk away. No one wants to belong to any church where they cannot feel at home.

Admittedly, I would most enjoy a celebration of Mass among fellow Black Catholics, especially within a historically Black parish. The reality, though, is that inclusivity is needed in all our churches. The hospitality should be so wide that people bring other family members and friends who have been away from the church. Otherwise, the only remaining option for Black Catholics who have become frustrated with trying to "fit in" is simply to leave. Fr Bryan Massingale, a professor at Fordham University, has observed this trend and describes it as the "Black exodus."

In contrast is our profession of faith as stated in the Nicene Creed: "I believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church." During every Mass, the entire congregation makes this proclamation as a great testimony to our shared Catholic faith. The challenge today is ensuring that the church feels like a home, welcoming and hospitable no matter the location or ethnic makeup of a given parish. Black people leaving the church is a scandal, and I wonder: When will we show receptivity to all who approach the doors of our Catholic churches?