Opinion

Guest Voices



Members of the Mixed African Choir of St. Augustine-Our Lady of Victory Parish in the Bronx, N.Y., sing during the annual Black History Month Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York Feb. 5, 2017. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

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Last summer, I was invited by the director of the Texas Southern University's Catholic Newman Center to experience a concert of the Psalms with a gospel influence. They sang plenty of songs I had heard at Mass over the years, but their renditions were soul-stirring. Inspired by their uplifting melodies and lustrous voices offering praises to God, I longed for my former days experiencing Black gospel music as a Protestant.

To Catholics, that might sound like a backpedaling from my embrace of the sacrament of confirmation. For me, though, it is simply my soul's desire to truly be engrafted to a liturgical gathering that reflects my identity as a Black Christian.

Since being brought into the Catholic Church on the Easter Vigil of 2018, I've suppressed my frustration with mainstream Catholic Masses and the lack of inculturation. I accept and understand that the Mass is a re-presentation of Christ's sacrifice. In addition, we are blessed to receive the Scriptures in the Liturgy of the Word and join in the universal prayers of the church. All these, I've been told, should be my primary focus while at Mass.

Yet, even with this grand divine experience, my soul participates in unsatisfied ways. In between sacred movements, gestures, recitations and prayers, I used to come to service on Sundays disconnected from the Black Christian, Black Catholic and African patrimony that is natural for someone like me to desire and experience.

One key reason for this disconnect is a denominational matter. Black Protestant worship is known for rich gospel music, deeply rooted in African American culture and history. Musicians in this tradition spend countless hours rehearsing and perfecting the art of edifying God in song. Being a former choir member myself, I know the effort that goes into ensuring every note and arrangement is impeccable.

The dedication to the continuity of Black religious expression is truly a marvelous reflection of spiritual depth. It is simply unparalleled. The style, emotional depth, rhythmic energy and call-and-response style of these gospel songs provide a sense of community and personal intimacy with the transcendent God.

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In contrast, the Catholic Mass typically features music that, while sacred and scripturally based, often lacks the same cultural connection and musical intensity that resonates with many Black worshippers. Whether I sit or stand, the songs during Mass reflect a detachment from the cantor, the lyrics and even with God. I don't sense a closeness to the divine during most such hymns at Mass.

It's almost like talking underwater: You know someone is trying to communicate but you can't make sense of what is being said. The lifeless music all but drowns out the proclaimed word of God, making it nearly impossible to receive the energy needed to live out the fruits of the Spirit after leaving church.

The lack of a strong and dynamic musical experience can make the Mass feel senseless and unengaging for someone accustomed to the more participatory style found in Black Protestant services. To this point, I've encountered many Black Protestant brothers and sisters who have described Mass derisively as "quiet church." Because of this, many Black people raised Catholics later join Protestant communities to find a better worship experience.

Something else I've understood is that the style of worship in Mass often doesn't reflect or honor the Black spirituality that has been cultivated over the centuries. In many Black Protestant communities, there is a deep sense of charismatic expression. In these communities, members are encouraged to express themselves openly — with spontaneous prayers, clapping and even dancing. These features managed to cross the Atlantic when our ancestors were enslaved. In them, they found respite from the inhumane experience of unpaid and violent labor.

This is in stark contrast to the more structured and reserved nature of most Masses that Black Americans have to adhere to. The rituals and gestures of the liturgy, such as the fixed prayers and unison chants, may feel stifling to someone who is used to a worship environment where emotions and bodily movement are normative. Someone wanting to engage in these might feel judged by other non-Black members unfamiliar with this type of tradition. For many converts or others who have been exposed to this type of engaging worship, the difference can make it difficult to feel fully engaged and spiritually satisfied.

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One of the biggest stumbling blocks I've had is how it sometimes feels like the Mass is undermining Blackness altogether during the liturgical experience. White Catholic leaders, ordained and lay, have long been associated with a nonchalant embrace of racial justice and ensuring its most loyal members have been properly engrafted into the church. Because of this, the Catholic Mass rarely centers issues that resonate with the Black experience in America. It can feel like the liturgy doesn't provide a space where Black people's daily life and well-being are truly valued or recognized.

Furthermore, there is a strong sense that the Catholic Mass can be oppressive when its practitioners deny Black expressions of worship rooted in our Africanity. For many Black people across the diaspora, religious expression is deeply personal and tied to cultural identity. Our history, traditions and current standing are what we lay at the altar for God during worship.

In many communities worldwide, inculturation is a natural element. Local cultures, languages and customs are incorporated into the liturgy and elevated into the sacred mysteries.

Having a one-size-fits-all Mass disregards the fact that Black Americans might prefer a style of worship that reflects their ethnic and cultural needs. This can create a feeling of isolation, as if the liturgy must force an experience that doesn't reflect one's ethnoreligious identity. The failure to embrace diverse styles of worship can feel like an explicit rejection of the spirited, soulful and culturally relevant worship many Black Catholics across the diaspora have been accustomed to.

Adding to the sense of marginalization is the issue of racially divided Catholic parishes. Even in a multicultural archdiocese such as mine, Galveston-Houston, the existence of effectively segregated Black Catholic communities can perpetuate a sense of racial separation within the church.

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Equally important is that the location of these churches requires many churchgoers to travel extensively to find an affirming setting. Pew Research discovered that Black Catholics are more likely to travel greater distances to their church compared to Hispanic and white Catholics.

As an educational leader, I am reminded of Brown v. Board of Education and the busing of Black students across town to "good" schools. The 1962-65 Second Vatican Council ushered in a new era of liturgical diversity, but 60 years later Black Catholics have to "bus" themselves across town to get the worship experience they deserve.

Simply focusing on the theology and symbolic meaning of the holy Mass is something that makes my worship feel counterfeit. While it is true that the sacrifice of the Eucharist is the source and summit of the Catholic faith, to make this theological reality come alive, I would benefit from charismatic expressions, culturally relevant music, and the overall religious expression that Black Americans have developed.

Servant of God Thea Bowman, in her influential 1989 address to the U.S. bishops, spoke prophetically about the significance and struggle of being Black and Catholic.

"It means that I come to my church fully functioning. That doesn't frighten you, does it? I come to my church fully functioning.''

At the core of my frustration, I want a worship experience that doesn't force me to suppress my Black and African way of relating to the Creator. To hide my racial and cultural identity from the Almighty would be a cosmic affront. The way the Mass is handled in the U.S. church only underscored what Sister Thea sang with sorrowful moans in 1989, that she and many Black Catholics "feel like a motherless child" in our own spiritual home.

With hopes that I can find a Mass that fulfills my longings and desires, this conflict rages on internally. Yet, even in the violent waves rocking the ship, Jesus is still with me, calming my distress and bringing me to salvation.

This article was originally published at Black Catholic Messenger.