Opinion
Guest Voices



Tyrrah Young Mwanga is seen in Atlanta during the Freedom Ride For Voting Rights at Ebenezer Baptist Church in June 2021. (BCM/Reuters/Dustin Chambers)



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August 11, 2025
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There is, within the Black church, a prophetic tradition that centers spirituality, social justice and activism. This tradition exists among Black Catholics, Episcopalians, mainline Protestants, Baptists and nondenominational Christians. This is the tradition of Rev. Henry Highland Garnet's 1843 "Let Your Motto Be Resistance" sermon, Rev. Kelly Brown Douglas' *The Black Christ* book, and Servant of God Thea Bowman's ode to "fully functioning" Blackness. In many respects, the Black freedom struggle, the Civil Rights Movement and other efforts have been nurtured by the African American Christian understanding of the Gospel as good news in this life.

There is, perhaps, no greater need for a revitalized Black prophetic voice than today. Our current federal administration in America has come to power through the votes of White Christians. Some 60% of white Catholics, 80% of white evangelicals and 57% of white mainline Protestants voted for the Trump-Vance ticket. In "normal" times, such a partisan political vote is simply a matter of personal choice. In these days, however, the vote was a profoundly immoral and unethical one.

Time does not permit a catalog of the cruel and inhumane policies and actions of this administration. Among them are preventable illnesses, child malnourishment, virus outbreaks and other ills that will expand across the globe — leading to thousands, perhaps millions, of unnecessary deaths, particularly among children. Catholic relief agencies and other organizations around the world have spoken of the horrendous impacts of federal cuts to their critical programs.

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At home, those who voted for the Big Beautiful Bill also delayed the worst impacts until after the midterms, knowing their draconian cuts to social programs will harm millions of Americans. The elderly, those in nursing homes, poor children, families on the margins, people with medical needs and others will suffer so that the rich can enjoy even lower taxes. Perhaps most dramatically, masked and heavily armed men ride around in unmarked vans, carting off immigrant landscapers, those trying to

find day work at hardware stores, people walking down the street and, apparently, anyone they think looks Hispanic. Incredibly, the administration now brags about an Alligator Alcatraz detention facility, and there are websites where people can buy unofficial merchandise. I have personally overheard people laughing about detainees potentially being eaten by alligators.

It is into this social and political context that Black Catholics and Protestants alike are called by God to stand up for justice. Some would argue that Christianity in America has been discredited by its heretical capitulation to white nationalism. Sadly, and in stark contrast to Catholic social teaching and comments from both Pope Francis and Pope Leo XVI, the response from Catholic bishops has been mild. In some cases, notably Bishop Robert Barron of Winona-Rochester and Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York, their cozy relationship with the president seems to hinder their prophetic voice.

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Dolan prayed at Trump's second inauguration and has often spoken of his frequent conversations with him. Dolan even publicly stated during Trump's first administration that his mother complained he talks to Trump more often than he talks to her. This year, Barron spoke glowingly of being invited to the State of the Union address, even going so far as to compare it to sacred liturgy. In addition, both he and Barron serve on Trump's Religious Liberty Commission alongside far-right white Christian nationalists like Franklin Graham. From what I have read, it seems the Commission projects the gospel of white American privilege rather than the justice and mercy of the reign of God.

Where does that leave us? The Black church, and all Black Christians, must live out the call to work for justice. As Catholics, we have many figures to pray for us and whom we can emulate. Sister Thea, who is herself on the road to sainthood, told the U.S. bishops not long ago to recognize her unapologetic Blackness and spirit. Through song, prayer and action, she set the standard by which we can, with hearts full of love, still speak out for human dignity.

Sr. Thea Bowman speaks at St. Augustine Church in Washington in 1986.

Sr. Thea Bowman, a Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration, speaks at St. Augustine Church in Washington in 1986. Bowman died in 1990 and her sainthood cause was opened in 2018. She has the title "Servant of God." (OSV News/CNS file/Catholic Standard/Michael Hoyt)

The womanist theologian Diana Hayes urges us to work for "all those historically marginalized in our church ... To work in solidarity to overcome the divide between personal piety and social justice." Lena Horne and other Black leaders met with Robert Kennedy Sr. in 1963 and spoke harsh truths to him about the pervasiveness and brutality of American racism. The late Auxiliary Bishop Fernand Cheri III of New Orleans preached often about our call to be faithful, not successful, and to pursue without reservation the cause of love and justice. These witnesses, alongside many others, are our companions toward God's beloved community and dignity for all.

In a perfect world, I would hope that the hierarchy shows us the way forward, but we cannot wait. It should be noted that there are some priests and bishops speaking and acting boldly. Yet, we need more, and the laity also has a critical vocation. The Second Vatican Council reminded us that laypeople must "take on as their distinctive tasks the renewal of the temporal order." Further, we are to utilize our "special competence" to seek the justice of God's kingdom.

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For hundreds of years, Black Christians, Catholic and otherwise, have lived with and struggled to overcome injustice and wrong. This legacy has shaped our faith such that Black spirituality understands, in unique ways, how God desires human fulfilment, dignity and union with God's very self. These times call for Black Catholics specifically to seek Christ in community, in the Eucharist, and in the distressed, outcast and hurting.

Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes* makes clear the mission of the laity, priests, bishops, religious and indeed, the entire pilgrim people of God. "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ," it says. We are further reminded that we are united in Christ, guided by the Holy Spirit, and are bearers of the message of salvation for all

humanity.

Let's draw on the rich Black Christian prophetic tradition, Catholic teachings on justice and human dignity, the eucharistic call to be an "eternal offering" to God, and most of all, the love of Jesus Christ to stand against "principalities, powers, and the world rulers of this present darkness" (Ephesians 6:12).

*This article was originally published at Black Catholic Messenger.*