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Black Catholics' survey finds strong ties, strong engagement in church

by Patricia Zapor by Catholic News Service



Joanne Pereira sings the closing hymn during Sunday Mass at St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Alexandria, Va., Nov. 27. According to the first study of its kind, African-American Catholics in the United States are highly engaged with their religion and parish life, more so than white Catholics. (CNS photo/Nancy Phelan Wiechec)

WASHINGTON -- African-American Catholics are much more engaged in their church on a variety of levels than are white Catholics, concludes the first National Black Catholic Survey.

Whether in a majority black church, a mixed or mostly white parish, the survey found African-American Catholics feel satisfied and fulfilled in their parishes, explained retired Bishop John H. Ricard of Pensacola-Tallahassee, Fla., who is president of the National Black Catholic Congress.

By "engaged," Bishop Ricard explained, the authors of the report mean African-Americans are involved in their parishes well beyond simply attending Mass somewhat regularly. That includes having strong networks of friends and family in their churches, participating in multiple parish activities and saying their spiritual, emotional and social needs are met there.

Bishop Ricard, who is rector of the Washington seminary of his religious order, the Josephites, said the results of the survey surprised and pleased him and the leaders of the National Black Catholic Congress who commissioned it, along with the University of Notre Dame's Institute for Church Life and the office of the school's president. The survey will be used as the basis of a pastoral plan for evangelization that will be presented during next July's National Black Catholic Congress in Indianapolis.

"This is a bright spot for the church," said Bishop Ricard in an interview Nov. 28 at St. Joseph's Seminary. Whatever their parish situation, a majority of African-American participants in the attitudinal survey conducted by Knowledge Networks, "feel affirmed and have decided they are going to stay Catholic," he said. "It's a very optimistic message."

Among the conclusions of the survey were that black Catholics feel more committed to their parishes emotionally, spiritually and socially than do white Catholics. In those respects, as in many other aspects of the survey, black Catholics were shown to be much more like black Protestants in their approach to church than they are like white Catholics.

"Compared with other religious and racial groups, African-American Catholics behave and look like African-American Protestants," said the executive summary written by study authors Darren W. Davis, a professor of political science and associate vice president for research at Notre Dame, and Donald B. Pope-Davis, professor of psychology and vice president and associate provost Notre Dame.

Still, "African-American Protestants are clearly more highly involved by every measure of engagement," they continued. Therefore, they said, the pattern "is taken as suggestive of a cultural effect, as opposed to a Catholic effect, whereby the historical and cultural norms of the African-American community weigh just as heavily on African-American Catholics as on African-American Protestants."

The survey was conducted this summer in phone calls to 3,215 people, including 2,104 African-Americans, proportionally representing Catholics and Protestants according to their ratio in the U.S. population. Seventy-six percent of those surveyed said their parish is not predominantly African-American. No margin of error was given.

In one set of comparisons, asking "how well does your parish meet your needs," black Catholics, and both black and white Protestants were more likely than their white Catholic counterparts to agree. For instance, when the question asked about spiritual needs, 78 percent of black Catholics and 86 percent of black Protestants said "well" or "very well," while 67 percent of white Catholics and 81 percent of white Protestants said the same.

The difference was sharper when the question asked about parishes meeting social needs, with 62 percent of black Catholics, 76 percent of black Protestants and 63 percent of white Protestants saying "well" or "very well," while just 41 percent of white Catholics said so.

Bishop Ricard said the finding that black Catholics are almost as at-ease in mixed or mostly white parishes as they are in majority black parishes shows that efforts have been successful in helping African-Americans to feel a part of the Catholic Church and make it their own.

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That model could hold lessons for dioceses and churches that are struggling to help immigrants from

Latin America and Asia feel like they belong, he said.

Like African-Americans, Latino and Asian immigrants have a strong cultural sense of community, Bishop Ricard said. "There is less emphasis on the individual and more on the communitarian aspects of a church."

For instance, black Catholics in the survey were much more likely to say it's important that their friends attend their church. Just about 7 percent of white Catholics agreed with that statement. But 27 percent of black Catholics said so. Phrased another way, 48 percent of black Catholics said being with others in church is an important reason to go, compared with 26 percent of white Catholics, 58 percent of black Protestants and 52 percent of white Protestants.

And there also are lessons for all types of parishes that are interested in having their members become more deeply engaged.

Bishop Ricard related the experience of a large Florida parish that made the effort to have the pastor or a member of the parish staff personally visit every one of the 2,000 registered families. Completed over the course of a year, these visits featured conversations about what people wanted from their church, what was working and not working and what their everyday concerns were, he said.

"It had a significant effect on increasing people's involvement," he said. It wasn't so much that the parish would be able to adapt to all those concerns, but a matter of "making people feel personally involved," he said.

The survey did find various aspects of church life where African-Americans consider improvement is needed. Among them that although most African-Americans do not consider the church racist -- 77 percent said they don't consider it racist -- nearly a third have felt uncomfortable being the only black in a church and a quarter have encountered people avoiding them or refusing to shake hands.

Majorities of African-Americans said the church should put more effort into emphasizing black saints; promoting black vocations and black bishops; supporting issues such as affirmative action and problems in Africa and promoting racial integration.

But there was also hopeful news when it comes to young adults being involved, the survey found.

"African-American young adults, both Catholic and Protestant, are more religiously engaged and consider religion to be more important than whites of the same age," the authors wrote. "Older individuals are more religiously engaged than younger adults, and there is an age gap, but African-American young adults are also religiously engaged. Whatever disengagement exists among African-Americans, it cannot be attributed to a generation gap. White Catholic young adults, by contrast, have an extremely low level of religious commitment."

It also found that black Catholics were much more likely than their white counterparts to say religion is important in their lives. They also are more likely to say they would turn to their pastor or another church leader for help in times of crisis such as a death in the family, marriage or alcohol problems.

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