

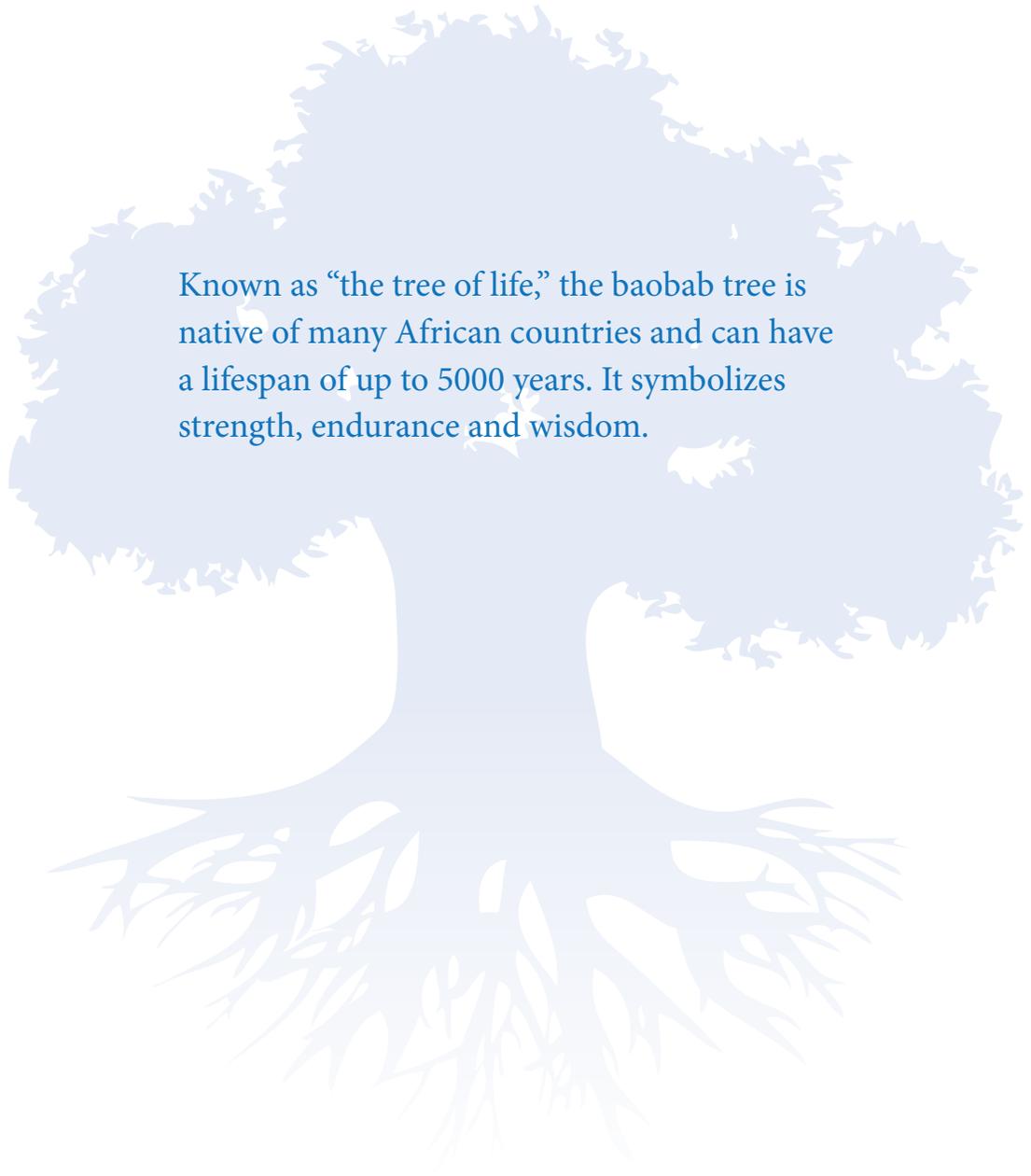


BLACK CATHOLIC *Prayerful Reflections*

By Most Reverend Joseph N. Perry

These Prayerful Reflections are being shared with you as part of the Archdiocesan Synod implementation and in preparation for the Black Catholic Pastoral Plan.





Known as “the tree of life,” the baobab tree is native of many African countries and can have a lifespan of up to 5000 years. It symbolizes strength, endurance and wisdom.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Pope Francis wrote: “The history of the Church shows that Christianity does not have simply one cultural expression, but rather, remaining completely true to itself, with unswerving fidelity to the proclamation of the Gospel and the tradition of the Church, it will also reflect the different faces of the cultures and peoples in which it is received and takes root” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 116). In the history of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, we can certainly see and celebrate the gifts and presence of “different faces of the cultures and peoples.” I am particularly proud of the rich history and extraordinary service of our Black Catholics in the archdiocese.



As we experience the implementation of our recent Archdiocesan Synod pastoral priorities of Catholic Identity, Evangelization and Stewardship, we also continue our focused efforts on our pastoral initiative of Black Catholic Ministry. To this end, I offer the opportunity to deepen our understanding of Black Catholic presence in the archdiocese as one aspect of our Catholic Identity.



Bishop Joseph N. Perry and Archbishop Jerome E. ListECKI.

The Church we all celebrate and love finds a great source of grace and rich history in the journey of our Black (African, African American and Caribbean) Catholic brothers and sisters. We are blessed to share this monograph by Most Reverend Joseph N. Perry, Auxiliary Bishop of Chicago and a native son of our archdiocese, reflecting on the history and journey of the Black Catholics in southeastern Wisconsin. This document allows us to contextualize the upcoming Archdiocesan Pastoral Plan for Black Catholics, which is being prepared by a dedicated Steering Committee.

I invite all Catholics of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee to take the time to read and reflect on Bishop Perry’s reflections and message.

At the conclusion of this document, there are three questions that will help individuals, parish groups and committees to deepen and share their reflections. This is not the history of a particular group, but the history of our Church. “In the diversity of peoples who experience the gift of God, each in accordance with its own culture, the Church expresses her genuine catholicity and shows forth the beauty of her varied face” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 116).

I am very grateful for Bishop Perry’s generosity and guidance in this process. I am also very proud of our talented Steering Committee members, who are not only helping us to understand history, but also writing its next chapter.

With assurance of prayers,

Sincerely Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads '+ Jerome E. ListECKI'.

Most Reverend Jerome E. ListECKI
Archbishop of Milwaukee

Peoples of African descent derive inspiration from the biblical narrative of God's people of old tried in the crucible of brutal slavery in Egypt. Through that suffering saga, the people of the original Covenant were formed and shaped to be a people ready for God's promise of a Redeemer, the Savior Jesus Christ (*Exodus 6*). Their escape from Egypt offers a metaphor through



Virgil Cameron, Joyce Simms, Henry David Johnson and Albert Thompson share welcoming smiles.

which we have interpreted the suffering of black peoples through slavery, emancipation, colonization, yet still segregation and discrimination that have marked us paradoxically as one model for the Christian sojourn of life; a narration through which we can interpret the love of God for his dark children and thereby be companions for any people who suffer, of whatever ethnic or racial stripe.

As members of the local Church of Milwaukee, we stand ready to be welcoming Christians to all who wish to experience and learn from the journey of Africans and African Americans, not as exclusive harbingers of talent and experience but fellow participants in the Christian story and its move towards the kingdom.

The Church can benefit from the wisdom of the black experience. Among the first churches of the apostolic and patristic eras were found communities of African Christians. But the participative presence of black Christians was somehow lost amidst the written record of peoples and their migrations, the European conquest of the West and notions of racial superiority that laced human progress.

African Americans migrated to Milwaukee and other urban and rural places north and east of the country shortly before the first World War – what has been described as *The Great Migration* – some six million people it is estimated, escaping the cruelties of the post-slavery south, looking for gainful employment and the supposed freedom that the north offered them in glaring contrast to areas of the south which still reeled of anger following the Civil War and Emancipation, and the tumultuous period of Reconstruction, where African Americans were often victims of haphazard treatment, disenfranchisement and murder.

During The Great Depression and especially following World War II, blacks came in even greater numbers to northern cities looking for a better life. The urban Church proved an entirely different experience for blacks and their small framed churches left behind in the south. Nevertheless, becoming Catholic offered a step up on the social ladder for families and their children especially through the schools. Education was seen key to advancement and a life different and improved from that of the rural south.

Lacking a corporate strategy for the evangelization of newly arrived blacks, the Catholic Church, nonetheless, has always had gifted individual bishops, priests and sisters interested in the black community, who broke through racial demarcation entrenched in laws and lawless custom to win African Americans to the Church.

However, the negatives involved with urban existence would drag on African American spirits. There are forces in the urban situation that are simply beyond our control absent a higher social consciousness and a political strategy bent toward those who subsist on the margins of our democracy. The pace of progress and opportunity, consumerism and technological advance, together with the forces of age and change, the inimical forces of racism and prejudice separate people frequently defining the profile of our neighborhoods and parishes, determining whether a neighborhood lives or dies. The lack of neighborliness, broken marriages and families, and the social upset proffered by industrial and corporate society, to say nothing of the instability resulting in chronic unemployment and lack of personal station with housing and homestead; all these negatively impact life and the pursuit of happiness on part of African Americans, raising prospects of crises of health and early death.

The Church offers a prophetic voice about the human penchant for privacy and individualism amidst periodic downturns in a democratic society that would divide us, separate us, partition us into communities of rich and poor, white, black and brown. Many of us, white, black and brown, become angry in face of these social forces we cannot single-handedly change.

Despite the Civil Rights era of the 1960s, residual effects of these crises still linger for many African Americans disproportionately affected by the turns and tides of economics, education, health care and quality of life. Black Christians turn to their church to find consolation in difficult times, and rationale in times of suffering and loss. African Americans look to their pastors and shepherds to rehearse the message of hope that the kingdom spoken of in the gospels remains a possibility for God's dark children.



Sr. Lucy Marinday, Sr. Julietha Mduma and Sr. Margret Sergon, Little Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi.

We are grateful to the many individual priests, religious women and men and laity who received our children in their parish schools, instructed our forebears in the rich traditions of Catholicism or came to the aid of poor neighbors, relatives and friends in moments of need, even while certain churches barred us from entering their doors. These courageous

Catholic leaders echoed the first kerygma when the apostle Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch and thereby introduced Africa to Jesus Christ (*Acts 8, 26-40*). Ever since, black people have easily found refreshment in the yoke of the Lord (*Matthew 11, 25-30*). Christian hope is found in the paschal mystery where a suffering and brutalized Jesus offers salvation for every man, woman and child who can profess faith in him. In our baptism, we are absorbed into his resurrection that will finally close off the suffering experienced in this life.



Jackie Martin Stone, Agatha Coleman, Carl Carby, Archbishop Listecky, Br. Roy Smith, CSC, Shandra Johnson, Dana Keckley, Fr. George Kuforiji, Sr. Adele Thibaudeau, OSF and Sr. Callista Robinson, OSF.

And here we are today, descendants of those first believers, citizens of this local Church through baptism and confirmation ready and willing for all that entails to discipleship in the Lord (*Catechism of the Catholic Church, CCC nos. 1269-1270*). As the US black bishops stated in their pastoral letter, “*What We Have Seen and Heard*” 1984, the black Catholic community has arrived at a certain maturity where we no longer are merely recipients of services and pastoral care. But now should take our rightful place among all Catholics of whatever background and be of service to others, proclaim the message of Christ and live the Christian lifestyle in all its requirements, lead others to Christ with special attention to the unchurched and the lapsed. We stand with the bishop of the diocese, ready to share our story with anyone who would listen, ready to be fervent Catholic Christians and ready to be invited to assist in the life and works of the Church to build up the kingdom of God. We, therefore, find pleasing to the ear the Church’s own vision of needed social repair of the conditions of those who stand on the margins of existence in our city and our Church when, in Vatican II’s Pastoral Constitution On The Church In the Modern World (GS) 1965, no. 29, she states:

“Excessive economic and social disparity between individuals and peoples of the one human race is a source of scandal and militates against social justice, equity, human dignity, as well as social and international peace. It is up to public and private organizations to be at the service of the dignity and destiny of man; let them spare no effort to banish every vestige of social and political slavery and to safeguard basic human rights under every political system.”

Albeit among the smaller groupings of our local Church, African American Catholics desire to contribute to the building up of this Church like all other groupings. For we acknowledge that faith gets us through the problems and mysteries of life and helps us to interpret the joys of life. We know something else exists beyond this world

promised us by God in Jesus Christ. Our coming together each Sunday to worship routinely nourishes our faith where we rehearse the message of Jesus and commune with his Eucharist while waiting for Him to return to take us with Him (*John 14*).

It was faith that pulled our ancestors through many a setback along the path to freedom. Faith is what those ancestors bequeathed to us as one among their richest legacies for we a people continuing to define ourselves and win a welcome among others pursuing life and fulfillment.

But we recognize that our faith is not separate from our black heritage, not extraneous to our history but coterminous with that history. Our singular contribution to our Church will be, therefore, black and Catholic. With this in view we not only take note of what the church can do for us but also the need for our participation and stewardship toward what is needed to strengthen Catholicism among us, raise up appreciation of our gifts among others of our Catholic family and stir pride in being black and authentically Catholic.

We are proud to know that we were there from the beginning when Simon from Cyrene (*Luke 23, 26ff*) helped Jesus carry the cross to the mount of execution. We were there at Pentecost (*Acts 2*) when peoples of every hue of skin and language were anointed by the Holy Spirit to carry forward the community of faith founded by Jesus Christ. That community was catholic while simultaneously it was diverse. We were there as members of the earliest Christian communities in the Middle East and along the Mediterranean basin. And apparently from authentic historical research, black people secretly tagged along with the Hebrew Exodus from bondage in Egypt (*Exodus 12, 37ff*).

The Church was One before human foible broke it up sixteen centuries later into all manner of fragmentations of Church. Unfortunately, legalized segregation under the nickname of Jim Crow saw blacks abandoned to setting up their own church experiences and were brought along, unknowing and without the information we deserved, joining in the popular protest against the Catholic Church. Resultantly, African American heritage here in the United States carries largely a Protestant face.

Black Catholics were there from the beginning with several of the earliest councils of the Church taking place in North Africa. We were numbered among the martyrs of the first centuries and the earliest monks and hermits of black complexion communing with God in the desert.



Charlesetta Jackson joins in prayer at a recent Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. celebration.

Therefore, we see it as our obligation to bring others to the richness of the faith of our marking. Each and every one of us must boast to having sponsored someone to Catholic faith in these days, be they our spouses, our children, relatives and friends.

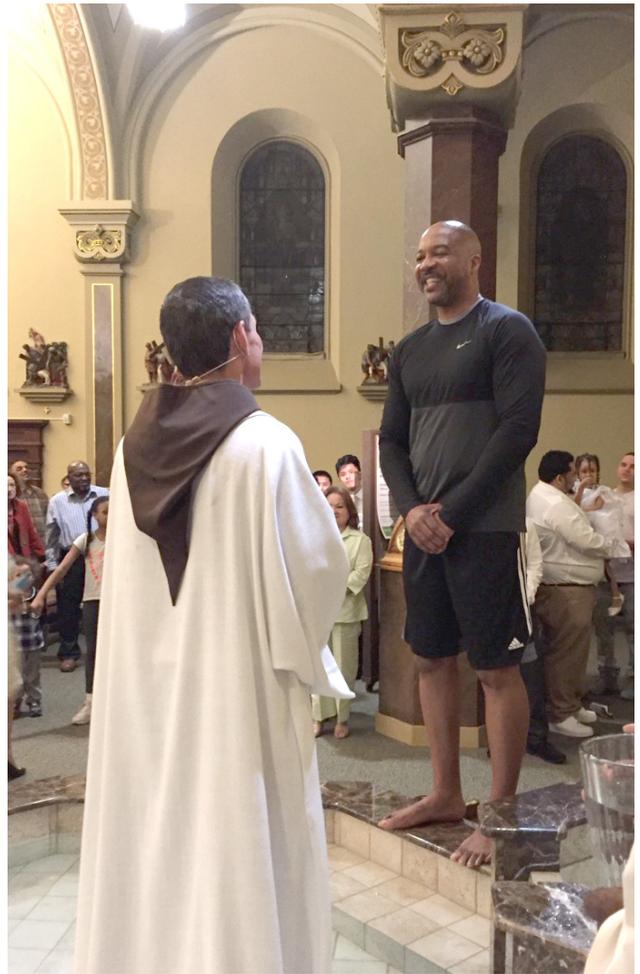
The gift of Catholic faith is among our superior treasures. Over the expanse of history, black Catholics have put their faith to work, often at great odds. The benchmarks of our labor and faith are obvious in our numbers, our parishes, our children and grandchildren and the numbers of priests and religious who have made personal sacrifices to live and work among us. For these, we give thanks! For the only faith worth the name is a working faith, a faith tried by challenge and set back, if not by persecution and critique. Precisely, from the ground of our experience has been discovered our glory as a people. We have reason to boast about our sufferings, our Catholic heritage, education and good works.

Among our achievements is found a pathos measured in the cross of Christ by those who have carried that burden for us – men and women, black, brown and white. We carry all this forward, uniting it with Christ's sacrifice in the Holy Eucharist of the Mass, where that first Cross gives meaning to all crosses we each carry in life. Our achievements obtain value by that cross and we Catholics strive better to understand what that means, for the only Jesus we know is the one who demonstrated his love for the human race by the ignominy of his cross.

Therefore, in the holy Mass, we thank God for all good things, as well as the wisdom that comes with the rough experiences of life. This way we become more like Christ before the Father in Heaven and his Holy Spirit, who lives and breathes in us. In this way we are empowered to carry within our lives the flame of faith, justice and freedom for ourselves and our brothers and sisters who will come after us.

We will offer a plan for the development of the black Catholic Community throughout our archdiocese. Our sojourn in history as a people says we can do this, for we have had to move and readjust any number of times over the course of our lives. And we have done it well every time.

We are Catholic Christians, so we can do this. We are pilgrim Christians moving toward the kingdom, so we can do this. We respect one another, so we can do this. We love our Catholic faith, so we can do this. We are asked to do something new. Others will look back in history to our moment, at our faith and good works and hopefully applaud us for some courageous steps, so we can do this. For this is what it means to be black and Catholic in these times. This is what vibrant faith and practice asks of us at this moment.



Gary Brown smiles with joy as he is received into the Catholic Church at Easter Vigil.



Matthew Lewis, Rocksand Byrd-Rhymes and Raytricia Byrd give powerful expression to Black Catholic spirituality through sacred movement.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What did you discover from your reading?
2. How does the experience of Black Catholics described in Bishop Perry's reflection help you to deepen your understanding of the Church?
3. Bishop Perry wrote, "... we recognize that our faith is not separate from our black heritage, not extraneous to our history but coterminous with that history." How would you describe the growth of your faith in your own history?

For more information, feedback or comments, please write to Eva J. Díaz at diaze@archmil.org.



*“Others will look back in
history to our moment ...”*

— Bishop Joseph N. Perry