

BLACK CATHOLIC THEOLOGY

- Convener: LaReine-Marie Mosely, Loyola University, Chicago
Moderator: Shawnee Daniels-Sykes, Mount Mary College
Presenter: Bryan N. Massingale, Marquette University
Respondent: Laurie Cassidy, Marywood University

Bryan N. Massingale's paper, "The Dark Night(s) of Malcolm X: Catholic Spirituality and African American Sanctity" highlights key stages of Malcolm X's personal and spiritual transformation. Massingale's goal is to make Malcolm X (and by extension, the more radical currents of Black thought) accessible for Catholic theologians by discussing him in terms of their own theology. His hope is to encourage Catholic scholars to re-examine their familiar constructs through an encounter with the Black Experience. That is, the experience of carving out meaning, purpose and identity amid the crushing ordinariness of coping with white racial supremacy. Another hope for undertaking this study is that by examining the notion of "dark night" it could pry open the contours of African American sanctity, facilitating their exponential growth in holiness.

A member of the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X is powerfully remembered in the minds and hearts of millions for holding strong Black Nationalist, Black Power, anti-White, and Black segregationist convictions. Malcolm X, a seminal figurehead in the 1960s Civil Rights struggle in the United States, is consistently depicted as an angry volatile Black man who fought for human rights and equality "through any means necessary." Even if that means is accomplished through physical force, killing, or gun violence, for Malcolm human rights and equality must be garnered for Black people.

Drawing on the Carmelite understanding of the "Dark Night of the Soul," Massingale seeks to illuminate a spiritual perspective of Malcolm X's rather than dwelling on the more popular depiction of him as a non-Christian hate-filled racial demagogue. For Massingale, certain constructs of Christian spirituality can be employed to shed light on Malcolm's spiritual journey.

In general, Massingale observes that the "dark night" is a process of interior purification, inner transformation, and intense spiritual growth that both marks—and stems from—a more or less prolonged crisis, breakdown, and failure. Concurring with Carmelite scholar Constance Fitzgerald's work, *Impasse and Dark Night*, Massingale correlates the universality of this radically transformative experience with what Malcolm X encountered in his life's journey.

Malcolm experienced two pivotal religious conversions. The first occurred during his lengthy imprisonment as a young man when he became a member of the Nation of Islam. He ceased to be known as Malcolm Little/Detroit Red, and received the name Malcolm X. The second one happened after a crisis of leaving the Nation of Islam and subsequently, participating in a life-altering pilgrimage to the city of Mecca. He received the name El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. From the insights of the Carmelite "dark night" scholars, these conversion experiences radically shook him out of his political-spiritual complacency. Now he embraces a

new experience of God, a quieter, deeper, freer, more committed self-love, self-knowledge, and respect for others.

Arguably, for Massingale, Malcolm X's conversion also conveys something significant to believers of African descent as they attempt to respond to the Divine, and especially as they struggle to affirm the Divine who is too often clothed in the guise of those who would deny them full and unambiguous recognition of humanity. Malcolm X's spiritual journey provides a model for how Black sanctity can be grasped and internalized.

Responding to Massingale, Laurie Cassidy notes that his work on Malcolm X's spiritual conversion process through the lens of Carmelite Spirituality is provocative in many ways. For her, this work challenges one to take seriously the spiritual journey of a Muslim in America. Further, it not only calls into question the function of Malcolm X as a cultural representation in America's collective consciousness, but it calls white people to take up the Black Power sources for Catholic spirituality.

However, by focusing merely on Malcolm's vision of Black Power and his pivotal spiritual conversions neglect the contributions of Black women in the Civil Rights Movement, such as Ella Baker, Mary McCloud Bethune, Rosa Parks, Bernice Johnson Reagan, Fannie Lou Hammer, and so many others. They, too, embody the resurrection in concrete ways in conjunction with a praxis of hope in history. Hence, one needs to seek all spiritual resources that intend to "dismantle the master's house." For example, Ella Baker's role as an activist in the Movement spanned fifty years. Famous for founding and advising the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Baker's work with youth emphasized life and human flourishing. Noted by many to be a "political mother" of the Civil Rights Movement, Baker focused on mothering future generations of Black activists amidst White supremacy.

SHAWNEE DANIELS-SYKES

*Mount Mary College
Milwaukee, Wisconsin*