

BALTIMORE AND THE BLACK CATHOLIC
EXPERIENCE – INVITED SESSION

Topic: “Black Catholic Baltimore”
 Convener: Kathleen Dorsey Bellow, Xavier University of Louisiana
 Moderator: Kathleen Dorsey Bellow, Xavier University of Louisiana
 Presenters: Therese Wilson Favors, editor, *What We Have Seen and Heard: Essays and Stories of Black Catholics in Baltimore*
 Ralph E. Moore, St. Ann Church, Baltimore
 Michael G. Middleton, SB7 Coalition, Inc., Baltimore

President-Elect Nancy Pineda-Madrid hopes to establish a CTSA practice of intentionally engaging with the people of God who live in the various cities where the society’s conventions are held. The 78th Annual Convention was held in Baltimore, Maryland, an old Catholic city, established as a diocese in 1789, and made an archdiocese in 1808. The transatlantic slave trade and the US system of enslavement gave the local Catholic church extraordinary and dehumanizing power over the Black residents—free and enslaved. Aftereffects of America’s original social sin have persisted in the lives of Black Americans through Jim Crow regulation, the civil rights movements, until today.

The CTSA 2024 convention theme, “Social Salvation,” was the lens through which a panel of Baltimoreans, Black Catholic leaders, discussed the contemporary situation of the Black Catholic community in Baltimore, providing CTSA members theological insight into the ongoing struggle of the Black faithful in their local neighborhoods, the US Catholic Church and society at-large as well as collective resources of Black culture and faith that affirm the gifts of salvation in the Blackness of God.

The Renaissance Hotel, situated in touristy Baltimore Harborplace, provided a windowed backdrop against which the panelists spoke. Looking over their shoulders, session attendees could see the waters of the Maryland port where, during the transatlantic and domestic slave trade, captured Africans were unloaded like cargo and sold into US slavery. Therese Wilson Favors, former director of the Office of African American Catholic Ministries, former coordinator of elementary catechesis for the Archdiocese of Baltimore, and past director of the National Black Catholic Congress, introduced an unnamed Catholic negro servant who arrived on a ship associated with the 1634 founding of the state of Maryland. In her historical overview, Favors recalled the presence of Black Catholics—enslaved and free—who staffed the early settlements of local priests, religious, and lay people, were counted among the faithful at worship services in Catholic parishes, and whose sacramental initiations are in the registers of the Baltimore cathedrals. She lifted up Mother Mary Lange and the Oblate Sisters of Providence whose ministries contributed mightily to the growth of the faith in Baltimore and its surroundings. Favors described the spirit of self-determination among the Black faithful that, in the late 1800s, brought about the establishment of Black Catholic parishes in Baltimore and its first Black priestly vocations, concluding that the Black Catholic Church of Baltimore, through each era, has held on in the midst

of cultural, political, and religious shifts to evangelize and form disciples who combatted the sin of racism in church and society.

Ralph E. Moore, Jr., a community organizer and social justice advocate, picked up on Therese Favors' discussion of Black Catholic Baltimore by focusing on Venerable Mother Mary Lange (1784-1882) and the international campaign for her canonization. He extolled the foundress of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, the first congregation of Black women in the United States who, in the twenty-first century, remain faithful in consecrated life to the education and welfare of all God's children. Moore emphasized Mother Lange's courage to defy the law of her time to do God's will. He reported on the efforts of the Baltimore St. Ann faith community to catechize and pray in support of the causes of Mother Mary Lange, Pierre Toussaint, Henriette Delille, Augustus Tolton, Julia Greeley, and Thea Bowman, the first African American candidates for Catholic sainthood. Attendees were urged to participate in a 2024 All Saints Day activity organized by St. Ann parish to bring global attention to these Black Catholic campaigns.

The final panelist, Michael G. Middleton, has extensive legal expertise that he currently employs as Executive Director of a non-profit corporation serving the needs of low-income communities of South Baltimore. In that capacity, he gives the Archdiocese of Baltimore credit for its charity partnerships with local community development programs that address poverty—housing, healthcare, and job creation needs. As a long-time parishioner and youth minister in a northwest Baltimore parish, however, Middleton expressed dismay and disappointment in the archdiocese's virtual divestment of urban Catholic communities through its "Seek the City to Come" proposal, announced in April 2024, which will drastically decrease the number of struggling Black Catholic parishes in the Baltimore area. Follow-up questions and comments from attendees expressed similar frustrations with similar states of affairs in Black Catholic centers across the country. With Favors and Moore, Middleton drew direct connections between the twenty-first century situation of the Baltimore Black Catholic community with the church's enduring inability to evangelize with credibility, its historical abuse and neglect of Black Catholics, and the ramifications of the church's sexual abuse allegations. At the same time, the panelists attest to the persistent faith and hope of African American Catholics in the Church, their love for the Body of Christ, the source of salvation for all.

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