

BLACK CATHOLIC THEOLOGY

- Topic: A Public Theology, Black and Catholic
Convener: M. Shawn Copeland, Marquette University
Moderator: M. Shawn Copeland, Marquette University
Presenters: Diana L. Hayes, Georgetown University
Bryan N. Massingale, St. Francis Seminary

In "A Black Catholic Public Theology: A Womanist Perspective," Diana Hayes presented an outline of such a theology within the context of an increasingly secular world where persons of faith are believed to have little, if any, positive contribution to make to public discourse. Hayes said that theology is rooted in the Black community and emerges from the historical experience of African Americans which affirms the affinity between a life of faith and engagement in public discourse and action.

Hayes argued that a holistic context is under threat today as the success of some serves to undermine the future of others. Thus, greater engagement of African Americans is needed across denominational and cultural lines, recognizing that our faith in a God of liberation enabled us to survive and thrive in the past. That liberating faith must be explored and resurrected as we reengage in the public debate not as individuals but as a community of faith. Women play an especially critical role as they are and have been historically responsible for maintaining and passing on the faith as part of Black culture.

Hayes concluded by stating that a Black Catholic public theology requires that we, as theologians, be involved in both the academy and the community, affirming that which is positive while exposing those ideologies that are life and soul threatening at every level of church and society.

Bryan Massingale, in "HIV/AIDS in U.S. Communities of Color," explored the demographic impact of the epidemic of HIV/AIDS on communities of color and the glaring paucity of Catholic ethical and theological reflection on the increasingly disproportionate burden of HIV/AIDS in those communities. He noted that "In 1982, African Americans represented 23 per cent of the known case total" of those suffering with HIV/AIDS. Sixteen years later, in 1998, while African Americans made up only 12 per cent of the total U.S. population, they accounted for 45 percent of newly diagnosed reported cases. Drawing on research from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Massingale observed that "Together, Blacks and Hispanics account for 55 percent of the total number [of persons] living with HIV/AIDS in the United States, and over two-thirds of those newly diagnosed with this condition." The first section of the paper established two major points: that AIDS threatens the very existence of the entire African continent and the survival of a significant portion of the U.S. Black population; and that the gross disproportionate burden of HIV/AIDS among Blacks and Hispanics is due to the social and economic deficits that accompany the systemic situation of racial injustice in the United States.

The second section of the paper turned to the task of theological and ethical reflection. Massingale first uncovered the failure of Catholic theologians and ethicists to address the HIV/AIDS epidemic from the experience and perspective of communities of color. A conspicuous exception to this assessment is the recent volume edited by James Keenan et al., *Catholic Ethicists on HIV/AIDS Prevention* (New York: Continuum, 2000). There are resources, Massingale argued, in the theological tradition for making a significant contribution toward coping with this tragedy: for example, a conviction about the fundamental dignity of all persons; a preferential option for the poor and vulnerable; a consciousness of the structured evil of human societies; an understanding of the common good which promotes personal responsibility; and growing reflection upon more adequate ways of conceiving gender roles and relationships. Massingale attributed this failure to a lack of interest in the moral aspects of race relations on the part of American Catholic ethicists and moral theologians. Massingale concluded by stating that an American Catholic public theology must come to grips with the ominous threat that HIV/AIDS poses to the survival of communities of color and must incorporate race consciousness and critique as integral parts of its craft.

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