

## BLACK CATHOLIC THEOLOGY

Topic: Black Catholic Movements and Institutions as Prophetic Witness  
 Convener: LaReine-Marie Mosely, Loyola University Chicago  
 Presenters: C. Vanessa White, Catholic Theological Union  
 Jamie T. Phelps, Xavier University of Louisiana

The theme of the conference prompted our two presenters to look back and consider the manner in which Black Catholic movements and institutions are a testament to the prophetic witness of African American Catholic theologians and the entire African American Catholic community. C. Vanessa White focused her presentation on the Augustus Tolton Program, a collaboration between Catholic Theological Union (CTU) and the Archdiocese of Chicago. Jamie T. Phelps wove together the prophetic dimensions of the Civil Rights Movement and the Second Vatican Council.

White turned our attention to 1990, the year of the publication of Dom Cyprian Davis' seminal book, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States*, the death of Sr. Thea Bowman, and the establishment of the Augustus Tolton Program. This program, named after the first self-identified Black priest in the U.S., was intent on preparing lay ecclesial ministers for service in the Archdiocese of Chicago and beyond.

The first Tolton scholars numbered four, three women and one man. They were given full tuition scholarships and were expected to actively participate in fundraising for the program and to commit themselves to three years of service in the Archdiocese of Chicago. Led by the program founder and first director, Jamie T. Phelps, students were immersed in formative experiences rooted in the Black experience while also pursuing graduate degrees at CTU with the possibility of pursuing coursework at other institutions in the Hyde Park cluster of theological schools. Through attention to Black theology and spirituality, the Tolton scholars engaged in formation for prophetic witness.

In White's concluding section, she shared the stories of six former and present Tolton scholars and their particular ministerial commitments. These included service in the New Orleans Diocese's and the Chicago Archdiocese's Offices of Black Catholics and in Chicago parishes. Others focused their service on domestic violence, mentoring homeless LGBTQ youth, mentoring young adults through Black storytelling, and working against violence on the streets of Chicago. This is the fruit of the Augustus Tolton Lay Ministry Program and the ways these ecclesial ministers are indeed prophetic.

Phelps then turned to the Second Vatican Council and its call that the Church, the People of God, "incarnate itself" in the culture of the people as Christ did. *Ad Gentes* exhorts its hearers to be "challenged to enter into dialogue with other Christian communities, be active participants in ecumenical and civic activities while avoiding "racial prejudice and hypernationalism while fostering a universal love." This provided a fitting segue into Phelps treatment of the Civil Rights Movement.

Many Black Catholics were compelled to participate in the Civil Rights Movement. This provided them the opportunity to constructively engage in dialogue with their Euro-American friends, colleagues, and fellow parishioners who feared the changing times and the effect they could have on society.

This was also the time when Black Catholic women and men religious and directors of Offices of Black Catholic Ministries developed different caucuses in an effort to help the Church become more Catholic, that is, universal. Phelps maintained that the very need for such organizations attests to the failure of the U.S. Catholic Church to address the reality of cultural diversity while at the same time maintaining the essential unity of the Catholic community.

This failure on the part of the Catholic Church was replicated in the wider society. Phelps noted, retrospectively it is clear that the prophetic preaching and activity of Martin Luther King and his bi-racial followers who were committed to overcome racial segregation and injustice was paralleled by the prophetic preaching and activity of Black Catholic laity, sisters, and priests in an effort to end racial marginalization and devaluation within the church. Today the challenge is to discern how the central challenges and insights of both the Civil Rights Movement and the Second Vatican Council can provide direction for contemporary challenges that confront us today. More specifically, now is the time to identify the contemporary manifestations of racial, gender, class, sexual orientation, and imperialist injustice that inhibit our realization of fulfilling our call to be a universal sacrament of salvation.

During the question and answer session participants expressed their gratitude for the presentations because the information shared is part of our collective U.S. Catholic history. Another topic that was raised related to the influence of culture on pedagogies used to educate and train future African and African American ecclesial ministers.

LaREINE-MARIE MOSELY  
*Loyola University  
Chicago, Illinois*