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## Review – Matthew J. Cressler, *Authentically Black and Truly Catholic: The Rise of Black Catholicism in the Great Migration*

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***Authentically Black and Truly Catholic: The Rise of Black Catholicism in the Great Migration.* Matthew J. Cressler. New York: New York University Press, 2017. xiii, 262 pp. \$30.00. Paper. ISBN: 9781479880966.**

*Authentically Black and Truly Catholic* joins a recent group of writings that try to shed light on the gifts and contributions of African American Catholics in the United States. As Shawn Copeland writes of this book, it "(t)urns a spotlight on the efforts of Black Catholics to articulate and dramatize their faith in an idiom reflective of the spirituality and aesthetics nourished by their culture" Matthew Cressler shines a light on the period in American history known as the "Great Migration" that saw the movement of six million African Americans out of the rural Southern United States to the urban Northeast, Midwest, and West that occurred between 1916 and 1970.

One such city that was the focus for African American's hopes and dreams for a better life was Chicago IL. Chicago attracted slightly more than 500,000 of the approximately 7 million African Americans who left the South during these decades. Before this migration, African Americans constituted 2 percent of Chicago's population; by 1970, they were 33 percent. Cressler's book specifically focuses on those African Americans who were a part of the great migration and who settled in Chicago, not only for work but for a better life, beyond the context of Jim Crow. At the turn of the century, Cressler states Black Catholics numbered several hundred people but by 1975, they numbered close to 80,000. What constituted the rise in numbers of Catholics within the African American community and what was the impact of African American emergence on the Catholic Church in Chicago and beyond? That is the focus of this book.

Particular emphasis in the first section of the book is paid to what Cressler refers to as the "Chicago Plan, a strategy for evangelizing African Americans who had come to the city of Chicago. African American communities were seen as mission territory by white Catholic leaders and those religious orders who initially ministered to these communities. This section focuses on the work of the Society of Divine Word missionaries at St. Elizabeth and St. Anselm Catholic Churches and the work of Franciscan missionaries at Corpus Christi Catholic Church. For them, Black neighborhoods were "a foreign mission field, populated

by heathens in need of true religion" (22). This initial view of African Americans as heathens was problematic and has shaped the relationship of the Catholic Church with African Americans to this day.

The plan concentrated on reaching the parents through the children. This constituted opening the parish schools to African Americans, actively recruiting black students and their parents to attend the church and finally welcoming non-Catholic enrollment on the condition that both children and parents agree to attend religious instruction as well as Mass as a condition for staying in the school. While the book does an excellent job of illustrating what this meant in regards to recruitment and numbers of African Americans who joined the Catholic Church, little attention is given to how African Americans themselves during this time in history focused on obtaining a Catholic school education as a means of improving their own status and the financial and social status of their families.

This section of the book is rich with stories on the work of missionaries in these communities as well as African American's stories of faith and practice. Of special mention are descriptions and photographs of popular Catholic practices such as the Living Stations of the Cross which became an important devotion for many African American Catholics.

The second section concentrates on the rise of Black Catholicism in Chicago and in the United States, specifically looking at the work of Fr. George Clements, an African American diocesan priest, whose legacy in helping to form a vibrant black Catholic presence in the 60s has been documented in film, essays and earlier books. Cressler's contribution looks at Fr. Clements within the context of the Black Power movement that was evident in the 60s. A little-known fact is that Holy Angels Church (which Fr. Clements pastored) was a sanctuary for many in the Black Panther movement. This section further looks at the legacy of several churches in the African American community, such as St. Sabina and St. Dorothy, which continue to have vibrant attendance and leadership to this day.

Both sections attempt to highlight Black Catholic agency rather than focus on Black people as the grateful recipients of white Catholic leader's good will and benevolence. While many Black Catholic churches are cited in this work, one glaring omission is that there is no mention of Holy Name of Mary Church and School (located on the South Side of Chicago and staffed by the Oblate Sisters of Providence) which was

founded in 1940s by black Catholic lay men and women as a distinctly African American church which from its beginnings reflected the spirituality and culture of Black people.

While I commend this work for continuing the legacy on Black Catholic history begun by historians Cyprian Davis, Diane Batts Morrow, Cecilia Moore, Katrina Sanders and Shannen Dee Williams, I would also encourage the reader to research those authors in conjunction with this work. As a white Catholic scholar uncovering Black Catholic history, the author joins the ranks of Stephan Ochs, Mary A. Ward, R. Bentley Anderson, and other white scholars who have acknowledged the resources and work of their black Catholic colleagues and have made their own unique contribution to this history.

Considering Bishop Wilton Gregory's ascension as the newly installed Archbishop of Washington DC, an African American who benefitted significantly from being formed as a Catholic within the African American community in Chicago, I recommend this work for any course or research on Black Catholic history.

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