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## **Beyond “Authentically Black and Truly Catholic”: Black Catholic Identity for a New Time**

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**Abstract:** This essay examines the genesis and implications of the oft-cited phrase, "authentically black and truly Catholic." Tracing its origins as descriptive of the aspirations of Black Catholics in the United States following the Second Vatican Council, the author relates both the contributions and the significant limitations of this ecclesial project. He concludes by offering a new phrasing that he argues is more adequate to the current aspirations and needs of the Black Catholic faith community, namely, "radically Black and authentically Catholic."

**Keywords:** Authentically, Radically, Truly, Black, Catholic.

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I have long been haunted by the question, “What does it mean to be both Black and Catholic?” This concern is both professional and existential; both personal and communal. Since the 1970s, the quasi-official, collective response of Black Catholics to this question has been conveyed by the phrase, “authentically Black and truly Catholic.” It is how African American Catholics, at least their official and thought leaders, have described the aims of the Black Catholic movement. However, I have grown dissatisfied with this formulation for the Black Catholic project.<sup>1</sup>

In this essay, I will make the case for why Black Catholics need to move beyond “authentically Black and truly Catholic” as a description of our identity and our faith project. I first describe the surprisingly elusive genesis of that phrase and give an account of the intentions and motivations which gave rise to it. I then will articulate the limitations and inadequacies of this phrasing, especially given the new moment in which Black Catholics find ourselves in both church and society and a deeper appreciation of the deep intransigence of a white supremacist and anti-black ethos that endures in both. I conclude with a proposal

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<sup>1</sup>I have come to this dissatisfaction, in part, because of my on-going engagement with and reflection upon Malcolm X’s life and thought. It is safe to say that Malcolm has both inspired and haunted my life spiritually and theologically. This essay is the fruit of my study of Malcolm X and the influence of Black radical thought for Black Catholicism. I look forward to revisiting and expanding on the ideas in this essay in a future book project that develops a Catholic reading of Malcolm X.

for a new phrasing for the Black Catholic project that more adequately engages the current realities, challenges and struggles of being both Black and Catholic in the United States.

### **The Genesis and Meaning of “Authentically Black and Truly Catholic”**

The phrase “authentically Black and truly Catholic” was often used to describe the aspirations of Black Catholics in the U.S. in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet its origin is rather vague. It apparently has been one of those things that has been “received,” perhaps after a collective reshaping.<sup>2</sup> Sister Jamie Phelps, one of the senior African American Catholic theologians, recalled that it grew out of Black Catholics’ earliest attempts to respond to the liturgical renewal called for after the Second Vatican Council. That council provided norms for adapting liturgical worship to the “culture and traditions of peoples.”<sup>3</sup> Phelps describes those initial efforts and their aims as follows:

Those of us who were serving as parish liturgists and/or choir directors immediately after the Council began experimenting with using folk songs, then Gospel music and spirituals as these underscored the themes of the scriptural readings. Initially we drew from those songs which arose during our long sojourn as Black people in the United States which had been documented and passed on in the traditional Black Protestant Church. I was careful to review the lyrics *to assure that the songs did not contradict Catholic interpretations of the bible and/or the official teachings of the Catholic Church (dogma)*. As time progressed, Clarence Joseph Rivers, who had been studying liturgy and liturgical music in Rome returned home and began to pen Black Catholic liturgical music and hymns.

As Thaddeus Posey and I discussed the process we wanted to use for the first Black Catholic Theological Symposium [in 1978], we decided to look at the duality of our identity and to explore both dimensions by examining our identity and experiences as Blacks and our experience and identity as Catholic *to see where there was continuity, overlap and mutual enrichment*.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>So states M. Shawn Copeland, personal email correspondence, 21 August 2015.

<sup>3</sup>Vatican II, Sacrosanctum Concilium (Dogmatic Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy), #37.

<sup>4</sup>Jamie T. Phelps, personal email correspondence, 21 August 2015. Emphases added.

Catholic historian Matthew Cressler provides additional illumination of the origins of this phrase and its aspirations. He writes:

Conciliar documents including *Sacrosanctum Concilium* and *Ad Gentes* (the Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church) contributed to the growth of black liturgies by emphasizing the ways universal faith was situated in particular cultural contexts. Those in the Black Catholic movement took this teaching as an opportunity to reinterpret practices long understood to be emblematic of “true” Catholicism as, instead, representative of various European-American Catholicisms. Black Catholics should root their religious identities and practices in their particular cultural and historical heritage, much as other Catholic communities had done for millennia. Sister Jamie Phelps, O.P., a black Catholic theologian, has spoken and written at length on this process of “inculturation”—though the term itself was not used until later. *Just as Irish, Italian, German, and Polish Catholics had incorporated their own unique devotional practices into the religious life of their churches, so too black Catholics should be free to express their Catholicism in ways that resonated with their black and African cultural traditions.*<sup>5</sup>

To advance and facilitate such liturgical adaptation (later called “inculturation”), Cressler also relates that one of the principal goals of the National Office of Black Catholics – established in the 1970s was to “convince black Catholics that *their distinctive black religious roots did not contradict Catholic universality.*”<sup>6</sup>

This sentiment – that Black Catholics could and should offer their distinctive cultural gifts to the wider Church as European ethnic groups had done, and that this did not dilute or threaten “genuine” Catholicism – at some point became codified in the phrase, “authentically Black and truly Catholic.” This phrasing received a kind of “official” approbation when it was adopted by the U.S. Black Catholic Bishops in their landmark pastoral letter on African American evangelization, *What We Have Seen and Heard*, issued in 1984. In that document, they declared

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<sup>5</sup>Matthew J. Cressler, “Black Power, Vatican II, and the Emergence of Black Catholic Liturgies,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 32:4 (Fall 2014), 115. Emphasis added. Cressler’s research projects focus on the Black Catholic movements of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially in the urban North.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 115-116. Emphasis added

that among the “essential qualities” that must mark liturgical celebrations in the Black Catholic community are that they “should be authentically Black” and they “should be truly Catholic.”<sup>7</sup>

So much for the history of the phrase’s origins. But, I want to highlight for deeper examination the goals or aspirations that motivated this phrase. These statements from the above account are significantly telling:

1. “. . . to assure that the songs did not contradict Catholic interpretations of the bible and/or the official teachings of the Catholic Church (dogma)”;<sup>8</sup>
2. “. . . to see where there was continuity, overlap and mutual enrichment” between Black identity and experiences and Catholic experience and identity;
3. “Just as Irish, Italian, German, and Polish Catholics had incorporated their own unique devotional practices into the religious life of their churches, so too black Catholics should be free to express their Catholicism in ways that resonated with their black and African cultural traditions.”
4. to “convince black Catholics that their distinctive black religious roots did not contradict Catholic universality.”

I am struck by the emphasis on overlap, continuity and non-contradiction; that is, the positing of an almost seamless connection between Black cultural identity and Catholic belief and practice. A core aspiration of the phrase was to assure *both* Black Catholic believers *and* the wider Catholic community that there was nothing to fear from a cultural engagement with what were considered “Protestant” forms of ritual, music, preaching and movement.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the phrase served

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<sup>7</sup>What We Have Seen and Heard: A Pastoral Letter on Evangelization from the Black Bishops of the United States (St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1984) 31-32. It is worth noting that the letter was signed by the ten Black bishops at that time, of whom only three (Wilton Gregory, Terry Steib, and John Ricard) are still alive as of June 2017.

<sup>8</sup>Note how a principle of “non-contradiction” with official magisterial teachings or pronouncements functions as the “norm” for determining what is or is not “Catholic” and what Black cultural products would be acceptable in a Black Catholic context governed by the canon of “authentically Black and truly Catholic.” There is no critique of the Catholic interpretations themselves. This point will be discussed at length later in this essay.

<sup>9</sup>Recall that many Black believers of previous generations were told that when they entered the Catholic Church, they had to leave behind and abandon the cultural markers of their previous religious and worship lives (i.e., characteristically “black” forms of praying, clapping, preaching, and musical expression). Indeed, many were told that these were lesser forms of religious and cultural life than those that marked Catholic religious practice. See the following footnote.

an apologetic or justifying function, explaining to the wider Black community how Black people could be Catholic (i.e., “belong to a white man’s church”) without surrendering their affiliation with Black culture or concern for liberation from racial oppression. To put it bluntly, “authentically Black and truly Catholic” was a shorthand for declaring that one did not have to become “white” – much less an “Uncle Tom” or an “Oreo” – in order to belong to the Catholic Church.

Thus by “authentically Black and truly Catholic,” Catholics of African descent – and especially their leaders – insisted that there was not, should not be, and indeed *could* not be an inherent contradiction between “Blackness” and “Catholicism.” Motivated by this conviction, Black Catholics embarked upon the project of developing worship forms, theological analyses, and historical studies that demonstrated the fundamental compatibility and seamless connection between Black cultural expressions and Catholic faith commitment.<sup>10</sup>

In a real sense, “authentically Black and truly Catholic” was the response of Catholics of African descent in the U.S. to the summons Pope Paul VI delivered to Catholics on the African continent – a charge that Black Catholics proudly and often cited in defense of their project:

You are now missionaries to yourselves. . . . You must now give your gifts of Blackness [negritude] to the whole church . . . which she needs at this historic hour” (Pope Paul VI, Uganda, 1969).

African American Catholic leaders heard these words as both a challenge and an invitation – and as papal approbation for their efforts at cultural incorporation and adaptation. This sentiment of papal invitation and support for the non-contradictory impulse of “authentically Black and

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<sup>10</sup>Matthew Cressler helpfully relates how this phrase responded to the spiritual and cultural alienation experienced by many Black members in the pre-Vatican II church, who were told, expected, and/or forced to abandon their cultural heritage or racial identity in order to belong to the Catholic church: “At the heart of the matter were claims about material and spiritual power. Leaders in the Black Catholic movement insisted that black Catholics had been denied not only positions of power in the institutional Church, but also the freedom to fully express their true spiritual selves. In other words, black Catholics had not just been marginalized in the social and political realms of the Church. They had been forced to adopt essentially white ways of being religious in order to be Catholic; they had been forced to convert to whiteness. The Black Catholic movement advocated for black control of Catholic institutions and for the inclusion of “authentic black” ways of being religious.” See Cressler, “Black Power, Vatican II and the Emergence of Black Catholic Liturgies,” 114; emphases added.

truly Catholic” was reiterated when Pope John Paul met with Black Catholic leaders in New Orleans in 1987:

Dear brothers and sisters, *your black cultural heritage enriches the Church* and makes her witness of universality more complete. In a real way, *the Church needs you, just as much as you need the Church*, for you are part of the Church and the Church is part of you. . . . [C]ontinue to place this cultural heritage at the service of the whole Church . . .<sup>11</sup>

“Authentically Black and truly Catholic,” then, was a response to the call of the Church and the signs of the times to offer Black Catholics’ unique cultural heritage as a gift to the wider Church, out of the conviction that there was no contradiction or inherent conflict between African American culture and Catholic beliefs and practice.

### **Its Limitations and Inadequacies**

I begin this part of the essay with an important disclaimer. In what follows, I do not intend in any way to minimize or denigrate the achievements of the Black Catholic movement that were inspired by the phrase, “authentically Black and truly Catholic.” It gave rise to both the current infrastructure of Black Catholic life and many historic landmarks that this faith community can point to with pride. A partial listing includes:

1. The founding of the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus (NBCCC), the National Black Sisters Conference (NBSC), the National Black Catholic Seminarians Association (NBCSA), the National Association of Black Catholic Deacons (NABCD), the National Association of Black Catholic Administrators (NABCA), and the Secretariat for Black Catholics of the USCCB;
2. The establishment of the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University (New Orleans);

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<sup>11</sup>Pope John Paul II, “Meeting with the Black Catholic Community of New Orleans,” 12 September 1987; italics in the original. Available at [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1987/september/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_19870912\\_cattolici-new-orleans.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1987/september/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19870912_cattolici-new-orleans.html). Accessed 24 July 2017.

3. The resumption of the National Black Catholic Congresses;<sup>12</sup>
4. The founding (and re-founding) of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium;
5. Numerous pastoral conferences (e.g., the Lyke Conference, Pastoring in Black Parishes and Unity Explosion); and
6. The publication of the Black Catholic hymnal, *Lead Me, Guide Me*.<sup>13</sup>

However, the most important achievement of “authentically Black and truly Catholic” – and the projects it motivated in worship, scholarship, and activism – is that it addressed and healed the profound wound of cultural alienation and estrangement that many Black Catholics suffered as the price of belonging to an overwhelmingly white faith community. Because of the aspirations and achievements inspired by “authentically Black and truly Catholic,” African American Catholics have achieved a degree of cultural recovery, integrity and pride – an integration between our cultural identities and faith commitments – which is a monumental accomplishment that the entire Church and Black faith community should endorse and celebrate.

Yet, there are significant limitations and inadequacies to the current Black Catholic project, given its expression in its signature phrasing. I argue that its emphasis on the continuity, overlap, and compatibility between the Black cultural experience and the Catholic ethos errs by omission. This project overlooks the severe tensions that exist between the Black experience and the Catholic ethos, for it downplays or minimizes those aspects of the African American cultural experience that are sharply critical of U.S. Catholicism. To put it bluntly, there is not a seamless connection between the two realities. There is a greater disjunction or tension – indeed, a fundamental incompatibility – between the aspirations of Black people and the white culture of the U.S. Catholic Church than “authentically Black and truly Catholic” can convey or admit – much less give an adequate response.

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<sup>12</sup>For a brief history of the Black Catholic Congress movement, and its resumption in 1987, see <https://www.nbccongress.org/previous-congresses.html>. Accessed 24 July 2017.

<sup>13</sup>For a brief description of each of these organizations, see the website of the National Black Catholic Congress, <https://www.nbccongress.org/nbcc-affiliated-organizations.html>. Accessed 24 July 2017.



I will develop this point by discussing three limitations of the project and its classic phrasing:

**1) *The false analogy with white Catholic ethnic groups.*** The Black Catholic movement justified its efforts at inculturation by drawing a parallel with the earlier actions of white Catholic ethnic groups. In other words, the argument was that in developing and advocating the integration of Black culture with Catholic life, African American Catholics were doing no more than what the Irish, Italians, Germans, and Poles had done in positing the compatibility of their cultural products and experience with Catholicism.

Yet the limitations of this analogy become clear when one considers the suspicion, hostility and rejection that attend attempts to utilize Black culture in either Catholic liturgy or intellectual life. For example, the respected and renowned Black Catholic ancestor, Sister Thea Bowman, addressed the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in 1989 on the need to appreciate Black cultural experiences and expressions in Catholic life. She declared that being Black and Catholic means that "we bring our whole history, our traditions, our experience, our culture, our African American song, dance, gesture, movement, teaching, and preaching and healing and responsibility as a gift to the Church. *That doesn't frighten you, does it?*"<sup>14</sup> Her question was meant for rhetorical effect, because she and many other Black Catholics knew that the answer was certainly, "Yes." That the effort to bring Black cultural expressions into the Catholic Church aroused an anxiety, fear, rejection, patronizing or hostility that did not and does not surround Irish, or German, or Polish cultural efforts.<sup>15</sup>

The analogy with the experience of white Catholic ethnic groups overlooks a critical reality, namely, that "ethnicity" and "race" are *not* equivalent realities in the American experience.

For example, the African American community encompasses considerable cultural diversity, grounded in differences such as class,

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<sup>14</sup>A video of Sister Thea's landmark address to the U.S. Bishops is available on-line at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l2S0tD6qFIA>. Accessed 24 July 2017.

<sup>15</sup>For example, there are few complaints when Irish Catholics sponsor a St. Patrick's Day parade, gathering to assert "the beauty of the green" and to declare that "everybody is Irish." Nor are there major tensions over so-called "Polka masses" that feature Polish music or instruments. That Black cultural products, then, arouse a tension and discomfort – not to mention rejection – that other "ethnic" expressions do not attests to the divergence between "race" and "ethnicity" in American Catholicism. This divergence, I contend, cannot be adequately addressed within the framework of "authentically Black and truly Catholic."

geography, generation, and education. Yet, despite such cultural diversity and class differences, there is a common core that unites the Black Experience in the US – a common experience which Black folk cannot avoid in the United States: the experience of racial prejudice, discrimination, rejection and hostility – both subtle and overt – based upon the simple fact of their physical blackness. The following statement articulates this experience well:

No matter what part of the country [black people] come from, [they] are beset with indignities traceable to the single fact that [they] are black. However well-to-do economically or however extensive [their] formal training, however correct their behavior, black [people] can never protect [themselves] from the fact that [they] are not accepted as [they] would be if [they] were white and had the same achievements.<sup>16</sup>

Thus the white Catholic ethnic analogy is a limited and even misleading one. The Black experience in America does not parallel that of the Irish, Italians, Poles, and Germans. Nor is our culture celebrated in the Church as was theirs. Rather, efforts to include it were, and still too often are, regarded as incompatible with true Catholicism and thus are viewed in many quarters with wariness, suspicion, and rejection.

Consider, for example, this opinion given by a noted Catholic commentator during Pope Benedict’s 2008 mass in Washington, DC, after a Prayer of the Faithful and Presentation of the Gifts marked by a diversity of language and spirited gospel and Spanish singing: “We have just been subjected to an overpreening display of multicultural chatter. And now, the Holy Father will begin the sacred part of the Mass.”<sup>17</sup> That such a statement could be aired on a network renowned for its orthodoxy (EWTN), and that it was not officially repudiated or challenged, and could be made without fear of official rebuke or sanction, not only suggests that standing against racism is not a major component of Catholic identity or orthodoxy. It also conveys that influential elites in American Catholicism do not believe that cultural expressions other than European (white) ones are “truly Catholic” – or even “sacred!”

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<sup>16</sup>Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Preaching* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979) 36; modified for gender inclusion.

<sup>17</sup>Bryan Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (New York: Orbis Books, 2010) 81.

The treatment of Black Catholic cultural products hardly improved during Pope Francis' pastoral visit to the U.S. in 2015. The absence and/or token presence of Black bodies during the many public liturgical events was palpable to the point of offense and pain. Black bodies and music, to the extent they were present, were often relegated to being the "warm up act" that preceded the mass (as was the case in Philadelphia); never were Black bodies and culture an integral part of the liturgical celebrations.

The fact that Black cultural products are not as accepted as are European ones, and that our attempts to do what the Irish, Germans, and Poles have done have been and still are met with a suspicion and denigration (e.g., not sacred!) that the Europeans did not experience, shows that there is not a seamless connection between or compatibility with Black cultural expression and Catholic belief and practice as there is/was with other ethnic groups. To the extent that "authentically Black and truly Catholic" masks this incompatibility by stressing "continuity, overlap, and mutual enrichment," it is limited and inadequate portrayal of Black Catholic reality.

**2) *Minimizing the white culture of American Catholicism.*** But why is there this disparate reception of Black Catholic culture? Because in the United States, "Catholic" = "white." I have developed this point at length in my book, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*,<sup>18</sup> but I will state it concisely here: the American Catholic Church is constituted by a normative whiteness. By this, I mean much more than the obvious fact that a Western European culture has shaped the ethos of the Catholic Church in the United States. I am referring to the pervasive presumption that European cultural expressions are standard, normative, universal, and thus really "Catholic." To put it more directly, what makes American Catholicism "white" – indeed racist – is the pervasive belief that European aesthetics, music, theology, and persons – and *only* these – are truly "Catholic."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Bryan N. Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 79–82.

<sup>19</sup>One could offer more examples of this complicity in racial supremacy such as: the liturgical guidelines of a major U.S. archdiocese that forbade dancing and clapping in Catholic worship unless the majority of those attending were African American – a concession justified because "they [meaning Black people] need this;" the papal masses offered by Pope Benedict in Angola and Benin where African worshippers were admonished that, for the sake of "reverence," clapping was prohibited during the service; the practice of another U.S. archdiocese that forbade gospel music during a Catholic mass at its cathedral church because "such music is OK for the central city, but not for the mother church of the archdiocese;" and the decor of cathedrals in major African dioceses that is

This is the deepest reason for the suspicion, derision, and rejection that attends the concerns and advocacy of Black Catholics. The normative whiteness of the Catholic Church is why American Catholicism has failed to undertake the actions and changes need to effectively alter the marginalization and injustice experienced by its members of color.

For example, consider the pathetic state of Catholic engagement with the current Black Lives Matter movement. I offer the following observations by the evangelical social justice activist, the Reverend Jim Wallis, commenting on the lack of white Christian engagement with this social justice movement:

A recent Public Religion Research Institute survey has revealed a devastating truth: While about 80 percent of black Christians believe police-involved killings – like the ones that killed Tamir Rice, Laquan McDonald, and so many more – are part of a larger pattern of police treatment of African Americans, around 70 percent of white Christians believe the opposite . . . that they are simply isolated incidents.

And before many begin disassociating with the term “white Christians,” we should look deeper. The numbers include 72 percent of white evangelical Protestants, *71 percent of white Catholics*, and 73 percent of white mainline Protestants. This is about all white Christians.

What's worse? Take away the moniker of “Christian” and the numbers drop to around 65 percent. White Christians are as a whole less likely to believe the experiences of black Americans than non-Christian whites. This is a shameful indictment of the church.<sup>20</sup>

In addition, in a recent (2016) keynote address at St. John's University (Queens, New York), I noted an egregious lack of any sustained treatment of environmental racism or injustice in Catholic efforts devoted to ecological ethics and responsibility in light of Pope Francis' landmark encyclical, *Laudato Si*. Despite the pontiff's call to see that social justice and environmental justice are not two separate issues,

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more Irish than that of St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City. What one sees, then, is that it is neither an isolated nor unusual situation in Catholicism for God and the sacred to be considered unambiguously mediated only in European/white cultural products.

<sup>20</sup>Jim Wallis, “Survey Reveals a Startling Truth about White Christians,” [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jim-wallis/watch-survey-reveals-truth-about-white-christians\\_b\\_8990914.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jim-wallis/watch-survey-reveals-truth-about-white-christians_b_8990914.html). Accessed 19 February 2016; italics added.

U.S. Catholic environmental reflection and activism act as if environmental racism is nonexistent.

What lies at the root of this lack of engagement with issues of vital concern to communities of color in general and African Americans in particular? I argue that it is the cultural identity of U.S. Catholicism, that is, a normative whiteness and its self-understanding of itself as a white institution. A white church will not – indeed cannot – be responsive to the existential concerns of African Americans and other groups of color, if by “white church” we mean a church identified with and complicit in racial privilege and dominance. To the extent that the Catholic Church in the United States is a “white institution,” it cannot adequately respond to the existential passions of African Americans. It must deem these passions unimportant, irrelevant, insignificant, impertinent or even dangerous to its white identity – for they are a threat to its presumption of dominance.

Needless to say, such normative whiteness challenges a facile assertion of “authentically Black and truly Catholic.” The phrase stresses the “continuity, overlap, and mutual enrichment” between Black and Catholic identity. It asserts a non-conflictual understanding of the Black Catholic project. As such, it cannot account for or contend with the profound tensions and conflicts that exist between the quest for Black recognition and self-determination on the one hand, and a Catholic Church still too often committed to practices that promote white racial supremacy on the other.<sup>21</sup>

**3) *Downplaying the influence of Black radical thought on Black Catholicism.*** The worldview conveyed by “authentically Black and truly Catholic,” with its emphasis on continuity and overlap, must necessarily downplay or even ignore the influence of Black radical thought in and upon the Black Catholic movement. Black radicalism is an integral part of *both* the African American cultural experience *and* the Black Catholic experience. To develop this topic adequately would require a separate

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<sup>21</sup>Bishop Edward Braxton gestured toward this fundamental estrangement and disconnect in his essay, “Evangelization: Crossing the Cultural Divide,” *Origins* 27 (October 2, 1997), 272-279. However, he only considered the unattractiveness of the Church to the unchurched Black Americas, but did not consider how such cultural estrangement impacts its current Black members. I myself began to articulate this impact in my 2008 keynote address to the Joint Conference of the National Black Clergy Caucus and National Black Sisters Conference (available at [www.nbccc-us.com/docs/joint\\_conference\\_2008.doc](http://www.nbccc-us.com/docs/joint_conference_2008.doc)). I have also developed this line of thinking in my book, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), especially in chapters 2 and 5.

paper, one I have already published in a prior volume of this *Journal*.<sup>22</sup> I will simply offer a resume of the salient parts of that analysis for this point at issue here.

In brief, I believe that contemporary Black Catholicism and Black Catholic identity are a tense synthesis between the integrationist and nationalist currents of African American life and thought, and in particular, a tense synthesis between Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X.

Especially relevant for this essay is the truth is that black nationalism – or more broadly, black religious radicalism<sup>23</sup> – is deeply embedded in the Black Catholic movement, though we seldom acknowledge this given our default bias toward integrationism. Modern Black Catholicism was born out of the social struggles of the Black Power Movement and its clarion calls for black pride and self-determination. Indeed, the 20<sup>th</sup> century pioneers of modern Black Catholicism were forthright in acknowledging the pivotal and pervasive influence of Black Power rhetoric and thinking in their analyses of their situation in the Church and, in particular, the catalyzing influence of Malcolm X in developing their new consciousness.

For example, the founding document of the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus in 1968, in naming the Church a "white racist institution," explicitly cites a new moment in the black community, one that demands self-determination and empowerment, as a rationale for its demands. These Black priests called upon the church to recognize that a profound change had occurred in the attitude of the black community, manifested in the demand that "black people control their own affairs and make decisions for themselves."<sup>24</sup> This manifesto, which unleashed in an unprecedented way the creative energies of Black Catholic clergy, sisters, seminarians, and laity, is incomprehensible without

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<sup>22</sup>Bryan N. Massingale, "Malcolm X and the Limits of 'Authentically Black and Truly Catholic': A Research Project on Black Radicalism and Black Catholic Faith," *Journal of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium* 5 (2011): 7–25.

<sup>23</sup>Gayraud S. Wilmore identifies three characteristics of what he calls the "radical tradition in black religion," namely, "(1) the quest for independence from white control; (2) the revalorization of the image of Africa; and (3) the acceptance of protest and agitation as theological prerequisites for black liberation and the liberation of all oppressed peoples" (*Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans*, Third Edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998] p. ix).

<sup>24</sup>The complete text of this statement can be found in: Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone (eds.), *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979* (New York: Orbis Books, 1979), 322-324.

understanding the influence of Black Power, Malcolm X, and other radical currents of African American thought and analysis.

Consider also the work of Father Lawrence Lucas, entitled *Black Priest, White Church*, where he relates the life-changing influence of Malcolm X upon his perspective and that of a generation of pioneers in the nascent Black Catholic movement – among whom are Fathers Rollins Lambert and George Clements.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Sister Mary Roger Thibodeaux of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament authored *A Black Nun Looks at Black Power*, which celebrated the Black Power Movement and its gospel of black affirmation. She spoke positively of the activity of the Black Panthers as well.<sup>26</sup>

My point is not that all Black Catholics of the founding period of modern Black Catholicism were advocates of Black Power or black nationalism. The point is that black nationalism and religious radicalism were certainly formative influences, and to a greater degree than most Black Catholics realize or admit. This subterranean stream of radical thought and analysis has decisively shaped who we are as Black Catholics. This current coexists, with some unease, alongside a more dominant or “public” integrationist ethos.

I argue that “authentically Black and truly Catholic,” with its focus upon overlap and continuity, over-emphasizes the integrationist pole of the Black Catholic experience and obscures the existence and contribution of more radical currents of Black Catholic life. I also strongly believe that a recovery of this more radical current is what is needed to form a Black Catholic project that is a more adequate response to the current situation of African Americans and Black Catholics today.

Thus in summary, the significant limitations of “authentically Black and truly Catholic” stem from its focus upon a continuity, overlap, and lack of conflict between the cultural passions of African Americans and the faith expressions of American Catholicism. By emphasizing continuity and overlap, it over-stresses the integrationist pole of the Black Catholic experience and obscures the presence and contribution of more radical currents within Black Catholicism. In short, “authentically Black and truly Catholic” cannot ground or motivate the projects and

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<sup>25</sup>Lawrence E. Lucas, *Black Priest, White Church: Catholics and Racism* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, [1970] 1990).

<sup>26</sup>Mary Roger Thibodeaux, *A Black Nun Looks at Black Power* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1972), 34.

posture that Black Catholics must adopt within a white church that does not – indeed cannot – give them a wholehearted embrace and welcome.

### **Toward a New Black Catholic Identity for a New Time**

I have argued that the phrasing of the quasi-official Black Catholic mantra, “authentically Black and truly Catholic,” masks a fundamental disjunction between Black sensibilities and the practices – even faith– of the Catholic Church. But the deeper problem is that by adopting this slogan and the worldview it conveys, Black Catholics are obscuring and even abandoning their prophetic role and presence within our church.

Black Catholics are living in new times that demand fresh responses. We have a deeper awareness of the complexity of Catholic complicity with white racial supremacy. For example, both Shawn Copeland and I have argued that there is a fundamental idolatry that compromises U.S. Catholicism.<sup>27</sup> Black Catholicism, faced new social movements such as Black Lives Matter and the anemic response of the Catholic community to such movements, must move beyond a posture of facile compatibility. It must, rather, articulate and advocate prophetic transformation. Black Catholics, if they are to remain in the Catholic Church with integrity, must become more forthrightly and consciously a prophetic presence committed to its deep transformation. The only way we can remain in the Church sanely and ethically is by being committed to its deep transformation.

To do this, I propose that Black Catholicism must adopt a new self-understanding and mentality as the seedbed for such effective engagement, a posture I call “*Radically Black and Authentically Catholic.*”

*Radically Black.* In a time where “radical,” especially in connection with religious matters, generates anxiety and fear, let me clarify what I mean by Black radicalism. It is nothing less than a passionate commitment to the subversive conviction that Black people are fully human and that Black lives matter because Black lives are sacred. Journalist and cultural activist Adam Hudson offers the following description of black radicalism:

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<sup>27</sup>I discuss this in my article, “Has the Silence Been Broken? Catholic Theological Ethics and Racial Justice,” *Theological Studies* 75 (March 2014): 133-155.



Black radicalism is more of a collective political tradition than a coherent ideology. It encompasses . . . varying beliefs, goals, methods, and approaches. *What unites the black radical tradition is the challenging of systemic racism, the liberation of African peoples, and the goal of achieving fundamental change.* If anything, black radicalism is a tradition of African peoples' resistance and self-determination.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, regardless of their disagreements over concrete strategies and rhetorical expressions, what unites Black radicals of all stripes is an unwavering commitment to the full humanity of Black people. What makes this a *radical* undertaking is the forthright recognition that asserting the full humanity of Black people remains still a *subversive* enterprise; it challenges the foundations of Western identity and culture. Black radicalism, because of its conviction that white supremacy lies at the core of Western culture, unabashedly posits that the full humanity of black people cannot be completely realized without deep and fundamental – i.e., *radical* – transformations in social, economic, political and religious institutions.

By “radically Black,” then, I mean a Black Catholicism that reflects an analysis or perspective which understands “race” as central to the construction of Western social and religious life. Such African American believers are informed by, and offer to the Church, their encounters with the radical voices in the Black tradition. As the acclaimed essayist, Ta-Nehisi Coates, observes:

Black [radicals] have always perceived something unmentionable about America that integrationists dare not acknowledge – that white supremacy is not merely the work of hotheaded demagogues, or a matter of false consciousness, but a force so fundamental to America that it is difficult to imagine the country without it.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Adam Hudson, “Any ‘Conversation about Race’ Must Include Black Radical Tradition,” *Truthout* (February 16, 2014); italics added. Available on-line at <http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/21859-any-national-conversation-about-race-must-include-black-radical-tradition>. Accessed 24 July 2017.

<sup>29</sup>Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *The Atlantic* (June 2014). Available on-line at <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>. Accessed 24 July 2017.

A Black Catholicism informed by such encounters would not only celebrate the connections and overlaps between the Black cultural experience and Catholic faith; it would also forthrightly and unhesitatingly challenge the anti-blackness that motivates Catholicism’s racist constraints, omissions, and blinders. This is a Black Catholicism that accepts and celebrates its vocation to be a force for fundamental ecclesial transformation. A “radically Black” Catholic project consciously works to create a church that has never been and that we can hardly now imagine, that is, a church uncompromised and unencumbered by collusion or complicity with white racial supremacy – a church truly universal and “catholic.”

*Authentically Catholic.* Here I acknowledge my indebtedness to the insights of the Canadian philosopher, Bernard Lonergan. For him, “authenticity” connotes a life of integrity, wholeness, and holiness. Yet he also states that only individuals, but religious traditions as well, can become inauthentic. When religious traditions become compromised, this becomes a question of what he calls “major authenticity.” What is at stake in major authenticity is the integrity of the religious tradition itself. Religious traditions, Lonergan relates, can become corrupted by being allied with social evils, such as racism, sexism, and homophobia. Such corruptions can become so “massive” and widespread so as to infiltrate, undermine and compromise the transmission and/or understanding of the tradition itself such that it eventually becomes decadent.<sup>30</sup>

Lonergan then poignantly describes the challenge that major unauthenticity poses for conscientious believers: “Not only have they to undo their own lapses from righteousness but more grievously *they have to discover what is wrong in the tradition they have inherited and they have to struggle against the massive undertow it sets up.*”<sup>31</sup> In other words, they must contend with what Lonergan calls an “agonizing question,” namely, “how can one tell whether one’s appropriation of religion is genuine or unauthentic and, *more radically, how can one tell one is not appropriating a religious tradition that has become unauthentic.*”<sup>32</sup>

So by “authentically Catholic,” I mean a Black Catholic project that strives to make the Catholic Church really be what it professes to be, that is, “universal” and truly inclusive. An “authentically Catholic”

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<sup>30</sup>Bernard Lonergan, *A Third Collection* (Paulist Press, 1985), 121.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 121. Emphasis added.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 130. Emphasis added.

project recognizes that something has gone deeply wrong in the Church when it has so seriously departed from its stated mission and beliefs, especially when it cannot respond forthrightly to the injustices being committed against the nonwhite persons in their midst. To put this theologically, the issue that faces us is not only a moral hypocrisy but a fundamental idolatry – a commitment to the idol of whiteness. By embracing the call to be “authentically Catholic,” Black Catholicism declares that its allegiance is not to the false god that holds so many Catholics hostage, the cruel and evil god that demands the sacrifice of black intelligence, talent, beauty, and bodies. Rather, Black Catholicism declares its loyalty to another God, the God of Jesus Christ. In the name of this God, it commits itself to the major effort required to purify, transform, and free the Church so that it can more fully live out of its deepest and most true aspirations, ideals, and values. And thus become in reality who and what it says it is.

This is how Black Catholics can remain within the Catholic Church: as a prophetic thorn in its flesh, for the sake of its faith. That is, by becoming *radically* Black and *authentically* Catholic.

I realize that there is far more that needs to be said. For example, I have not considered the obstacles that such a posture will encounter particularly from Black Catholics. Among these are: (1) a lack of racial pride and awareness that still exists in some Black Catholics; (2) the Black Catholic fear that if we take my analysis seriously, we have to leave the Church (e.g., many might ask why should they stay where they’re not welcome and why is this worth the fight); (3) our need for white approval and validation; and (4) the lack of concrete specificity, that is, “What does this phrasing mean in real life?”

To this last obstacle, I confess that I am not entirely sure. But neither did Black Catholics of an earlier generation fully know what “authentically Black and truly Catholic” meant, nor did they know where it would take us when they first spoke and embraced that phrase in the 1970s. We lived into it. And thus Black Catholics will have to do the same with this new phrasing that I propose. It will, in Copeland’s words, have to be “received, after a collective reshaping.” This is the best I can do for now – a first attempt to speak a deep truth that I intuitively sense is the right path for Black Catholicism.

There will be obstacles, but we also have dire reasons for adopting a new identity for and a new description of our collective project. First, Black folk are exiting the Church in a movement that is becoming a

hemorrhaging exodus. Many Black Catholics know family and friends who have left the Church, or who are on their way out, or who are in the Church but wear their membership rather loosely. We need a project that can respond to the estrangement that many Black Catholics experience from the Church.

We also need a Black Catholic project that can respond forthrightly to Black believers who, despite their love for and commitment to Catholicism, at times say, “I can’t go to a Catholic Church today.” One such conversation happened on the weekend after Michael Brown was killed in Ferguson in August 2014; and this stalwart Black Catholic said to me, “I need to go to church, but I can’t go to my parish because I know they’re not going to talk about Mike Brown’s death. And I need to be in a church that will speak to and honor my pain, my anger and my hurt. And we don’t have a church in this city that will do that yet.” This fellow believer articulated the alienation that stems from American Catholicism’s collusion with racial supremacy. We need a project that can speak to the depths of such Black spiritual alienation from Catholicism.

For if a church does not, cannot, or will not respond to our deepest questions, then why should anyone join – or stay? Part of what motivates my passion around advocating for a church that is “radically Black and authentically Catholic” is to offer an account for why being a Black Catholic is not a mistake or a delusion – despite the deep tensions and conflicts that exist between Black identity and this faith community.

I want to end on a note of hope. It has never been easy to be a Catholic of African descent in the United States. It has never been easy. But we do what we do not trusting in our power but in the God who loves and sustains us. We do not do what we do by our own power. In the words of the often sung hymn, “We’ve come this far by faith, leaning on the Lord. Trusting in God’s holy word, a God who has never failed us yet.” And so, whether this project or phrasing works, we go forward in confidence, trusting in the providence and goodness of a loving Black God.

As we begin a new articulation of Black Catholic faith in the US, we do so inspired by this confidence: that God working in us, can do *infinitely* more than we can ask or imagine. “To him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus, now and for all ages (Eph. 3:20-21).”

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