

A Deacon Art Millers response to a Black Catholic who sees being called Black Catholic as being separated from just being Catholic.

I received the following (unedited) email after a Black History Mass, my response to said email follows.

Dear Deacon,

As a young African American Roman Catholic Convert as many other young Catholics I would have to say that I am offended by your ministry due to the fact that we have to label Catholics who are black and separate us from everybody else. As the Catholic Church we are the body of Christ and nobody should be separated, and by these actions, especially during the African American masses, I see much chaos. The liturgical music and dances both break canon law and the instructions of the Roman Missal, so I advise you to please be careful with this and to bring back our Roman Catholic identify with Gregorian and sacred chant and reverence instead of dancing, regardless of race since our religion comes first. These African American Ministries and practices should be done through the church but outside of the Mass instead, since Jesus deserves reverence and peace in the blessed sacrament. A great Idea I suggest to attract African American Catholics is to begin using the African rites of the Church such as the Ethiopian and the Coptic which have large African roots and also reverence and rhythm. Please contact me soon with feedback and may God Bless You.

Christian

Letter to a New Catholic

While reading your recent email, I was particularly pleased to learn of your recent conversion to our sacred faith. The Catholic Church's deposit of faith is the very foundation of Christianity; it is our faith where every other Christian tradition finds their roots. Your Christian journey has brought you to us and the entire church is enriched because of that, in fact whenever anyone is brought into the fold the church is enriched and so I joyfully welcome you. As much as I am pleased to welcome you into the faith, I am equally concerned with your understanding of what our truly Catholic/universal faith teaches us and the unquenchable depths of Christ-like inclusion to which our faith calls us. Since I feel you are of genuine good will and your criticisms are heartfelt and your concerns are troubling for you, I will attempt to answer them in what I pray will be patient and reasonable terms.

You indicated that you were offended by the ministry because "*we have to label Catholics who are black and separate us from everybody else.*" Indeed, we are black and white Catholics, just as we are black and white Americans, but as Catholics we are not separated by our faith, we are separated by our cultural differences. It is important to realize our Church knows that our faith is not one that exists only within the spiritual context of the world but exists within the real world as well, with all its flaws. And within this real world there exists a real chasm that separates us all, race by race, ethnicity by ethnicity, class by class and culture by culture. A fact of our human condition is that we do separate ourselves by what we see and how we look. Understanding this reality, the church from its very beginning used that human reality to glorify a spiritual reality.

The only place that unity of peoples can be found is in the Church and yet unity does not mean unwavering conformity. I take as an example the very beginning of the Catholic Church, on Pentecost. In Acts 2 vs 1-12: At this vital time in the beginning of the church, God did not eradicate differences, God did what only God can do. At Pentecost God spoke through the apostles all languages. God's grace is

the power to understand, to hear in one's own language, one's own accent, one's own dialect, one's own lens, the powerful works of God and it came in unifying languages not a single culture or single language but a single loving message. The gift of separate cultures and languages did not diminish the diversity of the great crowd; the people did not cease to be Medes, Persians, and Elamites. They were not reduced to some vague amalgam, some generality without past or place. No, they did not become less than they were. What happened was the sum became greater than its parts, they became more than they had been, for they became one with all of those who heard and understood that God was alive and active in this world and eager that they, all of them, should participate in his purposes. It is the reality of the individual that made and makes the universal so powerful and appealing.

The unity of Christ's Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, a unity that is celebrated worldwide today, is a unity that is based upon the understanding of who God is what God has done, what God is doing and God will do. The understanding that united the faithful is the grace to realize that every single human person is an example of the mighty works of God. But there is another form of understanding at work as well and that is our understanding that others hear of the mighty works of God, because the gospel is not our gospel, the gospel is the good news of Jesus Christ that all of us, every single human person is privileged to hear.

And the unity of what we hear overcomes the differences of who we are. But it does not require we stop being who we are and it does not require we stop being who we were created to be. Pope John Paul II expressed his joy of cultural diversity when addressing the black Catholic community when he spoke to us in New Orleans in 1987

“I express my deep love and esteem for the black Catholic community in the United States. Its vitality is a sign of hope for society. Composed as you are of many lifelong Catholics, and many who have more recently embraced the faith... you reflect the Church’s ability to bring together a diversity of people united in faith, hope and love, sharing a communion with Christ in the Holy Spirit. I urge you to keep alive and active your rich cultural gifts....”

At the same gathering he reiterated the joy of cultural diversity and its importance by stating.

“While remaining faithful to her doctrine and discipline, the Church esteems and honors all cultures; she respects them in all her evangelizing efforts among the various peoples.”

Thus motivated, we take on our Pentecostal role, we too begin to evangelize as did St. Paul as expressed in 1 Corinthians 9: vs 19-22.

Although I am free in regard to all, I have made myself a slave to all so as to win over as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew to win over Jews; to those under the law I became like one under the law—though I myself am not under the law—to win over those under the law. To those outside the law I became like one outside the law—though I am not outside God’s law but within the law of Christ—to win over those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, to win over the weak. I have become all things to all, to save at least some. All this I do for the sake of the gospel, so that I too may have a share in it.

St. Paul, who some say was the greatest apostle, spread the message of salvation through graces that allowed him to understand that it is the message of inclusive gospel love that brings people to the fold, not their station in life, or culture.

However, their station in life and culture can act as the doorway to faith.

We should remember, you and I, that we are members of a fellowship that far surpasses our cultural differences. And though we must never separate ourselves from those outside our own circle or culture, we must also never separate ourselves from who we are, from our present, from our past or our future in the false belief that another culture is greater than our own. Instead we must

embrace a Pentecost understanding of our mission in Christ and speak to the diversity of the people with a unifying message of salvation, recognizing the churches doors are to be like the arms of Christ, open wide. It is the message of love that unifies us under Christ and this is the Christian message that is to reach the ears and hearts of all people precisely where they are.

The danger that has plagued the church is that if we determine on our own which culture is valid and which culture is not, we may fall into the same error the Apostles did in Mark 9 vs 38-41 and Luke 9 earning the chastisement of Christ.

“John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in your name, and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow us.” 39Jesus replied, “Do not prevent him. There is no one who performs a mighty deed in my name who can at the same time speak ill of me. 40For whoever is not against us is for us. 41Anyone who gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ, amen, I say to you, will surely not lose his reward.” **Mark 9 vs 38-41**

This same incident is written about by St. Luke in his gospel:

“Then John said in reply, “Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow in our company.” Jesus said to him “Do not prevent him, for whoever is not against you is for you.” **Luke 9 vs 49-50**

Jesus worked in ways and places the first apostles could not possibly have understood. Today, two thousand years later we continue to struggle with how God works. We continue to want God to work in ways and through people the way we want Him to work and act, we have yet to accept that God will be God the way He wants to be God, not always the way we want Him to be God.

So as to address fully your concerns I now turn to your statement “... *I see much chaos. The liturgical music and dances both break canon law and the instructions of the Roman Missal.*”

Firstly, the music; the songs that were used during the Black History Mass you attended conformed appropriately to all liturgical norms. The director of the Archdiocesan Gospel Choir, Ms. Donna Shears has been fully trained in liturgical music, was approved by Archbishop Mansell as the director and has acted in this role for over a decade. In this role she directs an Archdiocesan sponsored choir which has sung in Catholic churches throughout the archdiocese and at St. Joseph’s Cathedral. The joyous gospel music they offer enhances worship and praises the splendor of God just as it should the way it should.

Secondly you scold us for allowing liturgical dance into the Mass. I turn to our newly elected Pope as our guide, for to whom else are we to turn as our spiritual leader?

In a homily dated Jan 28, 2014 the Pope stated in part:

*Reflecting on the episode from the Second Book of Samuel, which was read at Mass, in which “David **danced** with all his might before the Lord,” Pope Francis recalled that the whole people of Israel were celebrating because the Ark of the Covenant was returning home. He went on to say that David’s prayer of praise, “led him to move beyond all composure,” adding, “this was precisely a prayer of praise.”*

*“Explaining that the passage caused his thoughts to turn to Sarah, Abraham’s wife, who, after giving birth to her son, Isaac, said, “The Lord made me dance with joy.” He said that it is easy to understand a prayer of petition – asking something of the Lord – and prayer of thanksgiving, as well. Even prayer of adoration, he said, “is not so difficult,” to understand. Prayer of praise, however, “We leave aside – it does not come to us so easily [It. *Non ci viene così spontanea*].”:*

“But, Father! This is for the Renewal in the Spirit folks, not for all Christians!”

No: prayer of praise is a Christian prayer, for all of us. In the Mass, every day, when we sing the Holy, Holy, Holy ... 'But, Father! I am not able...I have to...' Well, you're able to shout when your team scores a goal, and you are not able to sing praises to the Lord? To come out of your shell ever so slightly to sing [His praise]? Praising God is completely gratis. [In it] we do not ask [Him to give us anything]: we do not express gratitude for anything [He has given]; we praise [Him]!"

We need to pray "whole-heartedly," he said. "It is also an act of justice, because He is great! He is our God." David, Pope Francis went on to observe, "was so happy, because the ark was returning, the Lord was returning: his body, too, prayed with that dance.":

*"[Here is] a good question for us to pose to ourselves today: 'But how am I doing vis à vis prayer of praise? Do I know how to praise the Lord? Do I know how to praise the Lord when I pray the Gloria or the Sanctus? Is my whole heart really in it, or do I merely mouth [the words]. What does David dancing here say to me, and Sarah, **dancing for joy**? When David enters the city there begins another thing: a party!"*

The joy of praise," said Pope Francis, "leads us to the joy of the feast - the feast of the family." The Pope went on to recall how, when (King) David returned to the palace, Michal, the daughter of King Saul, scolded him in front of everyone, he, who is the king. Michal "despised David": And she died childless.

"I wonder sometimes", said the pope," how many times we despise good people in our hearts, good people who praise the Lord as it comes to them, so spontaneously, because they are not cultured, because they do not follow the formalities? [I mean really] despise [them]? The Bible says that, because of this, Michal remained sterile for the rest of her life. What does the Word of God mean, here? [It means] that joy, that the prayer of praise makes us fruitful! Sarah danced in the great moment of her fecundity – at the age of ninety! The fruitfulness that praise of the Lord gives us, the gratuity of praising the Lord: that man or that woman who

praises the Lord, who prays praising the Lord, who, when praying the Gloria is filled with joy at doing so, and who, when singing the Sanctus in the Mass rejoices in singing it, is a fruitful person.”

On the other hand, warned Pope Francis, “Those, who are closed in the formality of a prayer that is cold, stingy [It. misurata], might end up as Michal, in the sterility of her formality.”

Evidently the Pope, the shepherd of shepherds embraces an understanding of praise that has room for many expressions of joy. If we determine that there exists only one way to glorify God, If we decide that there exists only one way to adore, praise and sing of God’s almighty power and majesty, if we delude ourselves into believing our cultural traditions are subordinate to another, if we accept without question that the Eurocentric model of worshipping God is superior to the Afrocentric model, or the Hispanic-centric model, or Asian-centric model or any other centric model, then we have deluded ourselves and diluted God’s inclusive message.

Another concern you voiced was the liturgical validity of the Mass. You wrote:

“The liturgical music and dances both break canon law and the instructions of the Roman Missal, so I advise you to please be careful with this and to bring back our Roman Catholic identify with Gregorian and sacred chant and reverence instead of dancing, regardless of race since our religion comes first. “

I have attempted in each part of my response to you to address the social, cultural, and biblical validity in the Black History Mass you attended. I will now attempt to address your Mass construct concerns. Although you did not indicate which Canon Law or Roman Missal dictate that was broken, I scoured my copy of Canon Law and The GIRM (General Instruction of the Roman Missal) to uncover every aspect that might lead someone to believe the Mass was against Roman Catholic norms.

In section 39 and 40 the GIRM speaks to *“singing together, psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.”* Every song that was song came from an approved Hymnal “Lead

Me, Guide Me”. This hymnal was created and developed by an array of talented and grace-filled people, who include Bishops, priests, religious sisters and brothers, they include organizations that supported the understanding that African-American cultural norms must be included in order for the Church to be truly Catholic. I suggest you read the opening credits. You will find that those who developed this hymnal have 100’s of years of combined liturgical study and practice. The list of contributors includes but is not limited to Bishop James Lyke, Reverend William Norvel, Sister Thea Bowman and Bishop Wilton Gregory who later was elected as the first African American President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. (USCCB). The effort to develop culturally inclusive songs was deemed necessary to accomplish the very concern you addressed and that is to evangelize to African-Americans. These Black Catholic luminaries have far greater understanding of Canon Law and The Roman Missal than you may have imagined.

There are several publications you might find informative, publications that might give you a greater understanding of the depth of the faith you have embraced. A faith I fear you have only begun to understand. To start, I suggest reading the Black Bishops publication: “What I Have Seen and Heard”, which states:

“There is a splendid opportunity for the vast richness of African American culture to be expressed in our liturgy. It is this opportunity, thanks to the norms established in the revised Roman liturgy, which enables our work of evangelization to be filled with such promise for the future.” What We Have Seen and Heard, p.31

I will include at the end of this letter, several other publications that detail the long history of Black Catholics here in America, I will introduce you to authors and theologians, who have instigated change and enhanced evangelization and growth for mother church in the African American community.

You also wrote: *...to bring back our Roman Catholic identify with Gregorian and sacred chant....* Which I will now address.

The Roman Missal does state in section 41. *“The Gregorian chant holds pride of place because it is proper to the Roman Liturgy. Other types of sacred music, in particular polyphony, are in no way excluded, provided that they correspond to the spirit of the liturgical action and they foster the participation of the faithful.”*

It seems you thought only and centered exclusively on the “Gregorian chant holding pride of place”, and excluded or stopped reading the rest of the statement which allows inclusion of the other types of sacred music. I have already indicated above the absolute validity of the sacred music you witnessed at St. Michael’s Church.

Unable to find the errors you alluded to in your email to me I searched through the Catholic Catechism. I found in section **835**:

“Let us be very careful to not conceive of the universal Church as the simple sum, or . . . the more or less anomalous federation of essentially different particular churches. In the mind of the Lord the Church is universal by vocation and mission, but when she put down her roots in a variety of cultural, social, and human terrains, she takes on different external expressions and appearances in each part of the world.” The rich variety of ecclesiastical disciplines, liturgical rites, and theological and spiritual heritages proper to the local churches “unified in a common effort, shows all the more resplendently the catholicity of the undivided Church.”

And further in sections 1204 through 1206 we read:

1204” *The celebration of the liturgy, therefore, should correspond to the genius and culture of the different peoples. In order that the mystery of Christ be “made known to all the nations. . . to bring about the obedience of faith,”⁷¹ it must be proclaimed, celebrated, and lived in all cultures in such a way that they themselves are not abolished by it, but redeemed and fulfilled:⁷² It is with and through their own human culture, assumed and transfigured by Christ, that the multitude of God’s children has access to the Father, in order to glorify him in the one Spirit.*

1205 "In the liturgy, above all that of the sacraments, there is an immutable part, a part that is divinely instituted and of which the Church is the guardian, and parts that can be changed, which the Church has the power and on occasion also the duty to adapt to the cultures of recently evangelized peoples."

1206 "Liturgical diversity can be a source of enrichment, but it can also provoke tensions, mutual misunderstandings, and even schisms. In this matter it is clear that diversity must not damage unity. It must express only fidelity to the common faith, to the sacramental signs that the Church has received from Christ, and to hierarchical communion. Cultural adaptation also requires a conversion of heart and even, where necessary, a breaking with ancestral customs incompatible with the Catholic faith."

I think it important that you be aware the head liturgist for any diocese or archdiocese is the Shepherd or Bishop for that particular diocese. As you must be aware the celebrant of the Mass was our Archbishop, Archbishop Leonard Blair. At the Mass, Archbishop Blair spoke of how wonderfully invigorating and spirit-filled the Mass was. As the director of the Office for Black Catholic Ministries and the sponsor of the Mass, I would have immediately heard from him of any liturgical discrepancies, erroneous actions or of anything that was incompatible with the Catholic faith at the Mass. I did not. Quite the contrary the Mass celebrating Black history, was lauded by the Archbishop for the very reason you are chagrined, that being the celebration of diversity in an authentic, united, universal Catholic Mass.

Interestingly a recent survey was completed by the University of Notre Dame. This survey evaluated and compared several religious tendencies of people, separating them into different categories; those categories being, Black Catholics, White Catholics, Black Protestants and White Protestants. The survey is titled; "2011 National Black Catholic Survey". It is sponsored by The National Black Catholic Congress, The Institute of Church Life at the University Of Notre Dame and the Office of the President, University of Notre Dame.

I was privileged to be a board member of the National Black Catholic Congress at the time of the survey and was able to interview and question the two professors who conducted the survey. With empirical evidence their findings were remarkable.

The Executive Summary read in part:

“As the first national survey of African-American Catholics the National Black Catholic Survey (NBCS) reveals important insights into individual religious engagement and parish life. While the primary focus is on African-American Catholics, the survey includes a sizable comparative component making it possible to isolate specific influences of culture and religion. Methodological limitations notwithstanding, previous attempts to understand the attitudes and beliefs of African-American Catholics highlight the central theoretical constructs upon which the NBCS builds.

“The major finding of the NBCS indicates that contrary to anecdotal accounts, African-American Catholics are highly involved with their religion and parish life, and the academic literature shows that a high level of religious engagement has always been a trait of African-American Catholics. White Catholics on the other hand, stand out for their egregiously low-level of religious commitment.”

The scientifically empirical evidence is clear, how we as African American Catholics celebrate the grandeur and majesty of God speaks to us through our humanness into our spirits. The Afro-centric modality through empirical evidence draws Black people to a closer religiosity than Euro-centric modality draws whites. As was said by a Catholic Bishop at the National meeting of Bishops in 2012, after reviewing the survey, “Looks as if we all need to become Black Catholics”.

Finally, you used the unfortunate term chaos: “I see much *chaos*.” By that I assume you mean there was no order and there was much confusion. Your

observation is counter to truth. For many, unfamiliarity equals chaos and yet an unfamiliar truth does not lose its truth simply because it is unfamiliar. It is up to the ignorant to find knowledge and truth, and to that I do claim, I embrace my ignorance for it causes me to pursue knowledge and truth which begets understanding, I am afraid of neither, ignorance or truth. As my dear mother often cautioned her children, “If you’re afraid to face the truth you’ll never find the truth.”

For this truth remains, at the Black History Mass the bread and wine were consecrated by Christ through the Archbishop and became the undeniable reality of the real presence of Christ, the Holy one of God in the Eucharist. The Eucharist was given to the people and they were graced by it. God was present at that Mass, unity of spirit and faith spoke out in ways that may have been unfamiliar to you, but not to the nearly three million African-American Catholics in America. And yet I celebrate what you have found, I celebrate how God speaks to you through Gregorian Chants, I celebrate those who fully embrace the Mass said in Latin, I fully celebrate and defend your pathway to God. I praise God that at your Pentecost moment you heard God calling you precisely in the way you could hear Him. I pray you come to understand God has far too many languages to call His people to Himself than we will ever understand. I pray you come to embrace; God can never be restricted to what you or I can understand or accept. We are called to live His Gospel of love the best way we know how and allow God to be God.

On a side note I enjoy Gumbo and Jambalaya over Borscht, James Brown over Mick Jagger, The Temptations and Miracles over the Beatles, The Jackson five over the Osmonds, Jazz over classical, John Coltrane over Benny Goodman and Duke Ellington over Bach, I pulled for Magic Johnson over Larry Bird, All of this makes me human and subject to the influences of the world in which I live. To quote Sister Thea Bowman “I am proudly Catholic and authentically African American.”

I hope my response has assisted you in learning more about our Church and the many divergent peoples and cultures throughout the centuries that have helped form her. If you have been offended, I apologize, for that was certainly not my intent, my intent was to educate and inform you. If I have offended God or the Church that I love so dearly I ask forgiveness.

In Christ

Deacon Arthur L. Miller

Archdiocese of Hartford.

Suggested reading:

“Stamped with the Image of God” 2003, By Cyprian Davis OSB and Jamie Phelps
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“[The History of Black Catholics in the United States](#)”, Mar 1 1995 by [Cyprian Davis](#) OSB

“Taking Down Our Harps: Black Catholics in the United States” by Diana L. Hayes and Cyprian Davis OSB

“Racial Justice and the Catholic Church,” 2010 Fr. Bryan Massingale