

TRADITION AND THE TRADITIONS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CATHOLICISM

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[The author takes as her point of departure Black Catholic appropriation of the Tradition in the anticipatory theological reflection of the Black Catholic Congress held in 1893. She then interprets the retrieval of African cultural retentions through the lens of popular religion. In her final section she identifies the Black Catholic subject of Tradition.]

TO SPEAK ABOUT TRADITION and the traditions of African American Catholicism is not without contention.¹ Almost from the beginning, indeed, even now, the faith praxis of African American Catholics has been met with arrogance and suspicion. These reactions stem chiefly from the notion that African American Christianity is restricted to, if not identical with, a certain form of Protestantism. This misconception has been absorbed not only into our religious, cultural, and social commonsense, but has been formalized in scholarship, that is, in the prevailing American religious and social historiography. On the one hand, authoritative voices among Catholic historians, sociologists, and theologians treat the notion of the immigrant church as the primary interpretative paradigm for Catholic

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¹ See Yves Congar, *Tradition and Traditions: An Historical and a Theological Essay*, trans. Michael Naseby and Thomas Rainborough (London: Burns & Oates, 1966); Josef Rupert Geiselmann, *The Meaning of Tradition*, trans. W.J. O'Hara (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966; orig. ed. 1962); James Hennesey, "Grasping the Tradition: Reflections of a Church Historian," *Theological Studies* 45 (1984) 153-63; Orlando O. Espín, *The Faith of the People: Theological Reflections on Popular Catholicism* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997); and *Zur Logik Religiöser Traditionen*, ed. Barbara Schoppelreich and Siegfried Wiedenhofer (Frankfurt: IKO, 1998).

life and thought in the United States. But since African Americans are not immigrants, this paradigm is not only insufficient to mediate the experience of African American Catholics and, thus, cannot account for their appropriation and transmission of the faith, but reduces African American Catholicism to a 20th-century phenomenon.² Moreover, these scholars isolate African American Catholicism to certain geographic areas, specifically, New Orleans and Baltimore, thereby, correlating authenticity with geography. On the other hand, social historians, sociologists, and theologians of African and African diasporic experience, assuming African American Catholicism to be a 20th-century phenomenon, have rendered African American Catholics either invisible or a curiosity before the 1960s.³ But most importantly, these scholars take little, if any, notice of the spiritual and religious agency of Black Catholics, and too often impute opportunistic motives to their embrace of the faith.⁴

It would seem, then, that given the intimate relation between history and Tradition, the theologian who wishes to reflect on the Black Catholic community's reception and transmission of Tradition confronts either an excessively limited or apologetic, and nearly impossible task.⁵ However, with the publication of *The History of Black Catholics in the United States*,⁶ Black Benedictine monk and historian Cyprian Davis laid down a serious challenge to the contentions that the Catholic Church in North America is an immigrant church and that African American Christianity is identical to

² See Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to the Present* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1992; orig. ed. 1985); Michael Zöllner, *Washington and Rome: Catholicism in American Culture*, trans. Steven Rendall and Albert Wimmer (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1999).

³ See Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed., *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); and especially, John Burdick, "Catholic Church in Latin American and the Caribbean" 391–94.

⁴ See E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964); C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University, 1990).

⁵ It is possible that the development of Black Catholic theology will contribute to a recovery of the importance of history, since as James Hennesey has observed, is "where presumably one finds the tradition unfolding" ("Grasping the Tradition" 154).

⁶ Cyprian Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (New York: Crossroad, 1990). There are historical accounts of the U.S. Catholic experience that attend to some degree to the Black Catholic experience prior to the publication of Davis's work. In particular, see James Hennesey, *American Catholics: A History of the Roman Catholic Community in the United States* (New York: Oxford University, 1981); and Patrick W. Carey, *People, Priests, and Prelates: Ecclesiastical Democracy and the Tensions of Trusteeship* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1987).

a certain form of Protestantism. Although, there had been challenges to this conceptualization of American religious history prior to Davis's work, his research has mounted the most sustained and detailed overview of African American Catholicism.⁷

In *The History of Black Catholics in the United States*, Davis presents a complex portrait of African American ecclesial loyalty and sanctity in the teeth of segregation and rejection, indifferent pastoral care, and few episcopal champions. He has found and reconstructed the lost and overlooked history of slaves and free people of color in Florida, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, and New York; of the men and women of the Lay Society of the Holy Family who, after nearly two years of weekly meetings for prayer, singing, catechesis, and devotional reading, found themselves and their library pushed by a deliberate load of lumber from the Baltimore basement of Calvert Hall.

The History of Black Catholics in the United States fills in our picture of women living vowed religious life behind the veil of segregation—Elizabeth Lange, Henriette Delille, and Juliette Gaudin; of Mathilda Beasley;⁸ of the struggles of the first recognizable Black Catholic priests Augustus

⁷ See John T. Gillard, *The Catholic Church and the American Negro* (Baltimore: St. Joseph's Society, 1929); and his *Colored Catholics in the United States* (Baltimore: Josephite, 1941); Albert Foley, *God's Men of Color* (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1955); Maria Caravaglios, *The American Catholic Church and the Negro Problem in the XVIII-XIX Centuries* (Charleston, S.C.: Caravaglios, 1974); Edward J. Mische, "The American Bishops and the Negro from the Civil War to the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore, 1865–1884" (Ph.D. diss., Pontifical Gregorian University, 1968); Marilyn W. Nickels, *Black Catholic Protest and the Federated Colored Catholics: 1917–1933. Three Perspectives on Racial Justice* (New York: Garland, 1988); Jamie T. Phelps, O.P., "The Mission Ecclesiology of John R. Slattery: A Study of African-American Mission to the Catholic Church in the Nineteenth Century" (Ph.D. diss., The Catholic University of America, 1989); and Stephen Ochs, *Desegregating the Altar: The Josephites and the Struggle for Black Priests, 1871–1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1990).

⁸ While it is true that the question of slavery did not divide the Roman Catholic Church, that is, result in schism or the formation of a separate Black church, segregation was a feature of Catholic life. The women mentioned here participated in founding congregations of vowed religious or sisters for Black women, since no White congregations would admit them. These Black religious congregations, however, remained open to White membership. Elizabeth Lange is a founder of the Oblate Sisters of Providence (1829); Henriette Delille and Juliette Gaudin of the Sisters of the Holy Family (1842). Mathilda Beasley a free woman of color and widow who attempted to begin a religious congregation for colored women who would work with orphans; this tiny beleaguered foundation eventually was suppressed by the bishop of the Savannah, Georgia, diocese, Thomas Becker. There is a third Black religious congregation, the Franciscan Handmaids of the Most Pure Heart of Mary, founded in 1916 by Mother Theodore (formerly Elizabeth Barbara) Williams; this community was begun in Savannah, but eventually Mother Theodore

Tolton and Charles Uncles;⁹ of the heroic charity and goodness of Pierre Toussaint; of the determination and courage of Harriet Thompson who, in 1853, wrote directly to Pope Pius IX protesting the shabby treatment of Black Catholics in the Archdiocese of New York;¹⁰ of evangelists Lincoln and Julia Valle who began Milwaukee's St. Benedict the Moor Mission;¹¹ of Professor Thomas Wyatt Turner founder of the 1916 Committee for the Advancement of Colored Catholics which had among its purposes "the propagation of the Faith among colored people."¹²

All these African American Catholic men and women—laypeople, vowed religious, and priests—in their fidelity to the gospel, in their deep love of and loyalty to the Church, in their commitment to social action and justice in the concrete, not only received and appropriated the faith, but preserved and handed on that faith to successive generations. Their faithful living and lived faith is the very mediation of Tradition. These men and

moved the group to New York and to Harlem at the invitation of Cardinal Hayes in 1922.

⁹ August Tolton is recognized as the first Black Catholic priest, but, there were three others, the Healy brothers—James Augustine, Patrick Francis, and Alexander Sherwood, and Patrick Francis. Their father, Michael Morris Healy was an Irish Catholic planter and their mother was a "light-skinned slave woman named Mary Eliza" (Davis, *History of Black Catholics* 146). While law forbade the marriage of slaves and slaveholders, Healy seems to have entered into monogamous relationship with Mary Eliza; although the children born of their union were by law slaves, Michael Healy did not bring up his children as objects of property.

¹⁰ In 1853, Harriet Thompson, a Black Catholic laywoman, wrote directly to Pope Pius IX about the indifferent treatment of Black Catholics in the Archdiocese of New York. This letter, co-signed by 26 other persons, protested the racist refusal of the Archdiocese to provide religious instruction and secular education for Black Catholic children; this meant that Black Catholic children were prey to Protestant caricatures of their faith. The letter singles out the attitude and behavior of Archbishop Hughes stating that he "did not recognize the black race to be a part of his flock" (*History of Black Catholics* 96). Davis writes that Thompson "pointed out that when a proposal for a school for Black children at St. Vincent de Paul's Church was drawn up, the archbishop refused to approve it. [Thompson] added that "it is well known by both white and black that the Most Reverend Archbishop Hughes . . . [hates] the black race so much that he cannot bear them to come near him." [But Thompson] mentioned the names of four priests who did care for the blacks. . . . She closed her letter with the hope that "if it is the will of God for the black race to be saved something will soon take place for the better" (Ibid). Carey reports a petition presented to trustees in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia in 1819 by "poor Catholics of colour" which requested assistance with the education of their children because the "different sectarians [were] seeking and encouraging us to send" their children to schools where Catholic religious instruction was disallowed (*People, Priests, and Prelates: Ecclesiastical Democracy and the Tensions of Trusteeship* 78–79).

¹¹ Davis, *History of Black Catholics* 210–12.

¹² Ibid. 218.

women not only contributed to Tradition, but created the condition by which their descendents in the faith could enter into the process of traditioning, that is, of discovering, testing, and nurturing their own authentic ways of doing and expressing matters related to faith—of being Black Catholic. The struggle of Black Catholics to respond to the invitation of the Holy Spirit to participate in the mission of the whole Church, their understanding and appreciation of the obligations of baptism, and their creative efforts to live faith-fully is the topic of this article.

I will elaborate this in three parts. Tradition is to be distinguished from history, even as it is linked ineluctably to it. “The content of Tradition,” Yves Congar states, “is ‘the revelation of God and the gift which he has made of himself in Christ, his presence in the life of the church’ by the power of the Holy Spirit.”¹³ In order to understand the active reception and transmission of this gift by Black Catholics, the history of that reception and transmission must be uncovered. One of the best examples of this is the 19th-century Afro-American Catholic congress movement. In my first section, then, after a brief review of this national lay inspired and directed movement, I will analyze the formal address presented at the conclusion of the Fourth Black Catholic Congress (1893). Written at a time when animosity toward Blacks in churches and society was widespread and written by laymen with no formal theological preparation, but trained and educated in various professions, this document has few, if any, parallels in American Catholic history.

In my second section, I propose to read the contemporary Black Catholic retrieval of African cultural retentions through the lens of popular religion. As a theological category for apprehending traditioning and traditions (*traditiones*), popular religion has been associated with the work of Latino/a theologians such as Orlando Espín, Roberto Goizueta, Alejandro García-Rivera, and Jeanette Rodríguez Holguín¹⁴ as well as Euro-American scholars such as Robert Orsi and George Scheper.¹⁵ Reading cultural retrieval in this way clarifies African American Catholicism as the dynamic response to the invitation of the Holy Spirit that it is. At the same time, traditioning

¹³ Congar, *Diversity and Communion* (Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-Third Publications, 1985; orig. ed., 1982) 135.

¹⁴ Orlando O. Espín, *The Faith of the People: Theological Reflections on Popular Catholicism* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997); Roberto S. Goizueta, *Caminemos, Con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995); Alejandro García-Rivera, *St. Martin de Porres: The “Little Stories” and the Semiotics of Culture* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995); and Jeanette Rodríguez Holguín, *Our Lady of Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment among Mexican American Women* (Austin: University of Texas, 1994).

¹⁵ Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1889–1950* (New Haven: Yale University, 1985); and his *Thank You St. Jude: Women’s Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes* (New Haven: Yale

contributes to the constitution of cultural, social, and existential identity. Thus, even if only in brief, my third section, makes an anthropological statement. There is a Black Catholic subject of Tradition. This subject incarnates protest against the dominant American religious historiography that to be authentically Black and truly Catholic is, at best, impossible, at worst, anomalous.

TRADITION AND AFRICAN AMERICAN CATHOLICISM

From 1889 until 1894, African American Catholic laypeople organized and conducted an increasingly vigorous national movement to importune their Church to “take an active interest in what concerns, not only the spiritual but also the temporal welfare of all the people entrusted to [its] care.”¹⁶ The call for a meeting of “Colored Catholics. . . for the purpose of taking the status of the race in their relation to the church”¹⁷ was the inspiration of Daniel Rudd, the publisher and editor of the *American Catholic Tribune*, the only national newspaper published by and aimed at Catholics of African descent in the U.S. in the 19th century.¹⁸ On Tuesday, January 1, 1889, nearly 100 Black delegates from thirteen states, the District of Columbia, and South America, along with invited members of the clergy and the hierarchy, assembled in Washington, D.C.

Four congresses followed this first, convening in 1890, 1892, 1893, 1894—each gathering of delegates growing in self-confidence. Women were not among delegates to the first congress and, in his address to the assembly, Robert L. Ruffin of Boston commented on their absence. Ruffin said, “I should liked to have seen delegates from the females, for I recognize the work which women are doing in bringing men to a higher civilization.”¹⁹ It is not clear if women were delegates to other meetings, but close inspection of a photograph of at least some of the participants attending the 1892 Congress reveals the faces of at least four laywomen and one religious sister.²⁰

At the conclusion of each congress, participants prepared and issued an address to the whole Catholic community. These statements tell us much

University, 1996); and George L. Scheper, “Guadalupe: Image of Submission or Solidarity?” *Religion and the Arts* 3 (1999) 336–84.

¹⁶ *Three Catholic Afro-American Congresses* (Cincinnati: The American Catholic Tribune, 1893; reprint ed., New York: Arno, 1978) 14.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 13.

¹⁸ In 1884, Daniel Rudd began to edit and publish *The Ohio State Tribune*. In 1888 he changed the paper’s name to *The American Catholic Tribune* and shaped it as a Catholic journal which operated from 1888 until about 1899.

¹⁹ *Three Catholic Afro-American Congresses* 17.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 1.

about how Black Catholics saw themselves and their Church. The congresses discussed political and economic, social and religious issues of national and international scope: civil rights at home, the abolition of slavery in Brazil, the back to Africa movement, just and equal treatment in church and society. There were repeated calls for an end to discrimination in the building trades, the rental and sale of housing, employment, and trade union and labor practices. They advocated for increased opportunities for cultural development, manual training, and education in all disciplines of learning and at all levels. Delegates appealed to their White bishops and pastors for the admission of Black youngsters to Catholic high schools and, barring that, proposed the establishment of a national Catholic high school to meet their need. They called for ongoing religious instruction so that Black Catholics might be well grounded in the faith and for the support of vocations to the priesthood and religious life. Moreover, these laypeople exhorted themselves to greater respect for family life, and to the cultivation of thrift, frugality, honesty, industry, and virtue.²¹

Although many of these issues are implicit concerns for the delegates of the Fourth Congress, the 1893 address stands out as a theological meditation which synthesizes years of Black Catholic longing for the intimate embrace of their Church. As Cyprian Davis suggests, this address offers “an eloquent exposition of. . . [a kind of] foundation document of. . . a Black Catholic theology of Church.”²² Its historical and theological significance justifies its reproduction in full:

The colored Catholics of the U.S., through their representatives to the fourth congress in convention assembled in the city of Chicago, with the approbation of His Grace, Archbishop Feehan, invoke the blessing of God, the prayers of the Holy Church, and the good-will of mankind in issuing their fourth address for the kind consideration of those interested in spreading the faith among our people. We first renew our profession of love and loyalty to the Holy Church and our submission to the See at Rome. We congratulate our fellow Catholics and ourselves on the manifestation of the solicitude of love of Pope Leo XIII in behalf of the members of the Church in the U.S. in the appointment of His Excellency Monsignor Satolli as Apostolic Delegate.

The Catholic Church, guided by the spirit of truth, must always preserve inviolate the deposit of faith, and thus she cannot err in proclaiming the rights of man. From the beginning it has been her mission. From the days of Christ it has been her mission to inculcate the doctrine of love and not of hate; to raise up the downtrod-

²¹ Ibid. 92, 98–99, 107–8, 124, 133, 146–47.

²² Cyprian Davis, “Two Sides of a Coin: The Black Presence in the History of the Catholic Church in America,” in *Many Rains Ago: A Historical and Theological Reflection on the Role of the Episcopate in the Evangelization of African American Catholics* (Washington, D.C.: Secretariat for Black Catholics/National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1990) 56, 58, 59.

den, and to rebuke the proud. It has been her mission to proclaim to the ends of the earth that we all have stamped on our immortal souls the image of God, that by baptism we have become the brethren of Jesus Christ, and made the heirs of one blessed home of everlasting happiness. For ages the Church has labored to break down the walls of race prejudice, to teach the world the doctrine of the meek and humble Christ, that man should be gauged by his moral worth; that virtue alone, springing from grace, truly elevates a man, and that vice alone, springing from the malice of the heart, degrades him. Though the practice of the Church is consistent with her divine doctrine, we must deplore the fact that some of her members in various parts of the country have, in the words of our very distinguished friend, the Most. Rev. John Ireland, "departed from the teaching of the Church in the treatment of the colored Catholics and yielded right to popular prejudice." As children of the true Church, we are anxious to witness the extension of our beloved religion among those of our brethren who as yet are not blessed with the true Faith, and therefore we consider it a duty, not only to ourselves but to the Church and to God, that we draw the attention of every member of the learned Roman hierarchy to such violations from Catholic law and Catholic practice.

The third congress, held in the city of Philadelphia, received, in official assembly, the first intimation of these discriminations against colored Catholics. A committee consisting of two members from the South and one from the North was appointed as a committee on grievances to report to the fourth congress. In order to have the investigations and analysis of the report more complete, the fourth congress resolved itself into executive session. The voluminous report was carefully sifted. The evidence, oral and written, fairly showed that though no children of the world are more docile to their superiors than the children of Christ's true Church yet, owing to the frailty of human nature if we would have our rights, we must demand them.

A distinguished lady of color, who is not a Catholic, asserts that the Catholic Church, of all Christian Churches, comes nearest to practicing the doctrines of the rights of man. We know that the Roman Church, as she is One and Apostolic, is also Catholic and Holy. With thorough confidence in the rectitude of our course in the enduring love of Mother Church, and the consciousness of our priesthood, we show our devotion to the Church, our jealousy of her glory and our love for her history in that we respectfully call the attention of the Catholic world, and in particular of the clergy, to those wrong practices that mark the conduct of those of the clergy who have yielded to the popular prejudice. Instances of such weakness, though not numerous, are still not so rare but that a remedy should be applied. Those who have departed from the teachings of the Church we would see reclaimed, and those of our own people who have not yet had their eyes opened to the light of God we would see converted.

In the name of our brethren throughout America, we desire to thank the Church for the many charities conducted, North and South, by Catholic philanthropy, distinctly for our people. We heartily endorse the magnificent effort our Church is making in educating our youth on industrial lines. We are proud of our parochial schools, our orphanages and higher educational institutions; but above all things, we rejoice that our Church, the Church of our love, the Church of our faith, has not failed to stand by its historic record.

For did not the Holy Church canonize Augustine and Monica, Benedict the Moor, Cyprian, and Cyril, Perpetua and Felicity? And, at this time, notwithstanding race antagonism is at its height, notwithstanding, after only thirty years of freedom, the

Negro is a man and brother, public opinion has molded the sentiment that a Negro could not be a priest of the Roman Catholic Church. The Catholic Church has rebuked this settlement by ordaining the Rev. Father A. Tolton, the first Negro priest in America, and the Rev. C. R. Uncles to the exalted estate of the Catholic priesthood. We desire to say every encouragement, every fraternal greeting extended the priests of our race, are in our opinion so many more proofs of the Divine truth of Catholic religion. The Catholic spirit we ask for in the future is that exemplified by the Columbian Catholic Congress in making the Colored Catholic Congress a part of itself.

In conclusion we say in all sincerity, that should the clergy, where rests their responsibility, see to it that in all instances and in all places the truth of Catholic doctrine, which knows no distinction of races or previous condition, be maintained, the day will yet come when the whole colored race of the U.S. will be knocking at her doors for admittance, anxious to be of that faith which teaches and practice the sublime essence of human rights in the sight of God and our fellow man.²³

The delegates to the Fourth Black Catholic Congress begin this formal statement with a profession of “love and loyalty” to their Church. They express gratitude for ministry to Black Catholics through the ordination of Black men to the priesthood, catechesis and sacramental care, education and social welfare. Moreover, these laypeople are eager for “the extension of [their] beloved” faith among their African American brothers and sisters.²⁴ But, complaints of discrimination against Black Catholics on the part of members of the White clergy have prompted a formal investigation; the results of the committee’s findings formed a substantive part of the agenda of the Fourth Congress. Calling attention to these “violations [of] Catholic law and Catholic practice,” is, for the delegates, “a duty, not only to [themselves] but to the Church and to God. . . [to] draw the attention of every member of the learned Roman hierarchy to such violations.”²⁵ The primary purpose of this address, then, is to awaken the Catholic community, particularly the hierarchy, to anti-Black discrimination in the Church and to advocate for remedy. Although this address is neither combative nor bitter, the delegates conclude that despite their love of the Church and willing obedience to their priests and bishops, “[o]wing to the frailty of human nature if we would have our rights we must demand them.”²⁶

Before beginning an analysis of the 1893 address, it is important to place

²³ Cited in Davis, “Two Sides of a Coin” 57–58. The address of the Fourth Black Catholic Congress was published in the Boston *Pilot* (September 23, 1893) under the caption “The Colored Catholic Memorial: The Eloquent Expression of Their Fourth Congress.” The document was signed by L. C. Vallé, Illinois; Fred L. McGhee, Minnesota; R. N. Woods, New York; S. K. Govern, Pennsylvania; C. H. Butler, District of Columbia; Daniel R. Rudd, Ohio; W. J. Smith, District of Columbia; and William K. Easton, Chairman, Texas.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 58.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.* 57.

this fourth meeting of the Congress in its historical context. This will shed light on the strategic *theological equivalence* the writers of the document propose: that is, that the Church has the same relation to human rights that it has to the truths of divine revelation (“the deposit of faith”). Or to put it another way: the Church must preserve and defend with equal vigor the truths of the faith and the rights and lives of African Americans. Given the historical and social context of the period, this is a remarkable and audacious claim.

The First Black Catholic Congress movement can be dated from 1889 through 1894. During this same time period in the U.S., the most basic respect for Black human life was compromised by unrestrained mob assault and lynching. Historian James McGovern has observed that after 1865, “the American practice of lynching Blacks became a systemic feature of race relations.”²⁷ James Cutler points out that between 1882 and 1903, 2,060 Blacks were lynched, roughly one person every other day for twenty years.²⁸ In 1892, the year in which the Third Black Catholic Congress convened and called for a formal investigation of anti-Black discrimination in the Church, lynching reached an all-time “peak” at 235.²⁹ The motivations for lynching included either attempted, alleged, or actually committed arson, robbery, theft, assault, murder, the poisoning of well water, insulting Whites or failing to show proper deference, disobeying an order, and sexual assault against White women.

Lynching was a capricious instrument of terror which Southern (but also Northern) Whites used to deconstruct the new order of political and economic relations which the Union victory achieved and the amended Constitution affirmed. Lynching aimed to restore and maintain White dominance, to monitor and control the boundaries of caste and class.³⁰ Not only did the spectacle of a castrated, mutilated, lynched, and burned Black man (and sometimes a Black woman) intimidate and pacify purportedly restive Blacks. As McGovern argues, it put Whites on notice that anyone “who balked at the caste system and attempted to initiate personal as against

²⁷ James R. McGovern, *Anatomy of a Lynching: The Killing of Claude Neale* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1982) 2.

²⁸ James E. Cutler, *Lynch Law: An Investigation into the History of Lynching in the United States* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1905) 175–76.

²⁹ Trudier Harris, “Introduction,” in *Selected Works of Ida B. Wells-Barnett*, compl. Trudier Harris, The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth Century Black Women Writers (1895; New York: Oxford University, 1991) 7.

³⁰ George M. Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1987; orig. ed. 1971) 272. For some recent treatments of lynching see Orlando Patterson, *Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1998); James Allen et al., *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe, N.M.: Twin Palms, 2000).

caste relationships with blacks ran the risk of severe social ostracism, especially in the small towns and rural areas.”³¹ Northerners may have found lynching revolting, but as George Frederickson points out, their “opposition to [it] was. . . a limited and ineffectual phenomenon.”³²

In the immediate post-Reconstruction era, the paramount reason for lynching was the accusation of sexual assault or the rape of a White woman. The irony of this charge, of course, is that the men of the Confederacy went to war without worry leaving their mothers and sisters, wives and daughters alone with enslaved Black men. Ida B. Wells-Barnett, the courageous anti-lynching crusader, called this accusation against Black men “a thread-bare lie.”³³ But, this “thread-bare lie” helped to account for the widespread acceptance, even popularity, in the 1890s of the stereotype of the “Negro as a brute and a savage.”³⁴ This fetid social ecology was ripe for the 1896 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* which led to the introduction of the notion of “separate but equal” which furnished the legal basis for racial segregation in the U.S. for more than half a century.”³⁵

Against this social and cultural backdrop of untrammelled racial violence, particularly against Black men, and generalized hostility toward Black humanity, the delegates read and appropriated the first encyclical of Catholic social teaching. *Rerum novarum* was written and promulgated by Pope Leo XIII in 1891, right in the thick of the congress movement.³⁶ The encyclical responded to abuses against workers—men, women, and children—under

³¹ McGovern, *Anatomy of a Lynching: The Killing of Claude Neale* 5.

³² Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind* 272.

³³ Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *A Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynching in the United States, 1892–1893–1894* in *Selected Works of Ida B. Wells-Barnett*, compl. Trudier Harris, 146.

³⁴ Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind* 274–75. Frederickson points out that “In 1900 a religious publishing house brought out [the book] *The Negro as Beast* by Charles Carroll, a bizarre work that revived the pre-Adamite arguments of Dr. Samuel Cartwright and “Ariel” by describing the Negro as literally an ape rather than a human being. . . . Most racists did not accept Carroll’s Biblical arguments, but there was some support for his theory that a mixture of blood was responsible for the rise of crimes against white womanhood” (ibid. 277).

³⁵ In this landmark case, Homer Adolph Plessy, a very fair-skinned man of African descent, refused to ride in the “colored” section of a train during an intrastate trip from New Orleans to Covington, Louisiana. His refusal was considered a violation of the 1890 Louisiana law that provided “equal but separate accommodations for White and colored races [Louisiana Railway Accommodations Act, Section 1, No. 111, *Louisiana Laws* (1890): 152–154]. Arrested and tried on criminal charges in Louisiana by Judge Ferguson, Plessy contended that this provision of Louisiana law was an infringement of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments, and initiated legal proceedings. Enforced segregation of the races, Plessy declared, was for Blacks a *badge of inferiority*.

³⁶ Anne Fremantle, ed., *The Social Teaching of the Church* (New York: New

the industrial revolution at the close of the 19th century. Participants in the Black Catholic Congress were conversant with this encyclical, certainly. Indeed, the following passage from *Rerum novarum* supports my assertion:

It is the soul which is made after the image and likeness of God; it is in the soul that sovereignty resides. . . . In this respect all men are equal; there is no difference between rich and poor, master and servant, ruler and ruled “for the same Lord is over all” [Rom. 10.12]. No man may outrage with impunity that human dignity which God himself treats with reverence, nor stand in the way of that higher life which is the preparation for the eternal life of heaven. Nay, more; a man has here no power over himself. To consent to any treatment which is calculated to defeat the end and purpose of his being is beyond his right; he cannot give up his soul to servitude; for it is not man’s own rights which are here in question, but the rights of God, most sacred and inviolable.³⁷

This passage suggests a hermeneutical lens through which the delegates not only might read and critique the thorny issues pressing upon the Black Catholic community, but develop a theological response to them. If the institutional Church would have little, if anything, to say about the social agonies of African Americans in the 19th century, Black Catholics certainly did. The address issued at the close of the Fourth Black Congress offers several rich and suggestive themes. I will sketch briefly four of these—a theological understanding of the person, justice and evangelization, the notion of the priesthood of the faithful, and identification with a historic community of faith.

A Theological Understanding of the Person

In this address, the congress delegates reiterate common Catholic teaching on the human person: that all human beings participate by their very creation in the *imago Dei* and that the human person “should be gauged by. . . moral worth; that virtue alone springing from grace, truly elevates. . . and that vice, springing from the malice of the heart degrades.”³⁸ But by articulating this common teaching explicitly on behalf of people of African descent—men and women despised and considered savage—the delegates offer a pointed and theological protest against the hostility and violence of the prevailing social commonsense, against God-given Black human dignity. Moreover, they exhort the Church to live out the liberating work of Christ “to inculcate the doctrine of love and not of hate; to raise up the

American Library, 1963): Leo XIII, *Rerum novarum* (The Condition of Labor) 15 March 1891.

³⁷ *Rerum novarum*, no. 32, also, no. 13, no. 22.

³⁸ Davis, “Two Sides of a Coin” 58.

downtrodden, and to rebuke the proud. . . . to proclaim to the ends of the earth that we all have stamped on our immortal souls the image of God.”³⁹

Justice and Evangelization

Although the notion of human rights as presented in this 19th-century document ought not to be conflated precisely with the contemporary understanding, the delegates surely were concerned about the conditions for the possibility of African Americans to live out those political, cultural, and religious freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution. They explicitly conceive of the social mission of the Church as integral to its nature and life, thus making a direct connection between justice and evangelization. If evangelization of African Americans and others is to be effective, the Church must condemn all forms of anti-Black discrimination and racial prejudice in society and eradicate these attitudes and practices from among the clergy and people.

Thus the joining of human rights—the “rights of man” in the French formulation—to “the revelation of Christ,”⁴⁰ means not only that the Church cannot be morally wrong in defending the rights of people of African descent. It means more: the Church must preserve and defend those rights with the same vigor that the Church preserves and defends the truths of the faith. The protection and nurture of the lives of despised and marginalized people is an integral part of the fabric of the mission of the Church. Moreover, by explicitly linking action for justice in society with the mission of the Church, the Fourth Black Catholic Congress anticipates by 80 years the 1971 pastoral letter, “Justice in the World,” which states unequivocally: “Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world [are] a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel.”⁴¹

The Priesthood of the Faithful

With the phrase—“our priesthood”—the congress participants indicate an awareness of the notion of the “priesthood of the faithful.” Of course, the congress members were in no way attempting to displace the ordained priesthood and its unique, sacramental role in the life of the Church. Rather, these Black Catholic laymen understood themselves *as the baptized* to have a share in the ministry of Christ. They recognized both their intimate connection to the apostolic witness, which was given once and given for all, and their obligation to participate in and contribute to the building up of the Church.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 59.

⁴¹ *Justice in the World*, Statement of the Synod of Bishops, 1971, no. 6.

The congress was prescient in its understanding of the ministerial implications of the baptismal vocation. These 19th-century laypeople grasped what the Second Vatican Council would assert: laymen and laywomen have a “special and indispensable role in the mission of the Church” and neither the hierarchy, nor the clergy must deprive them of “their rightful freedom to act on their own initiative.”⁴² These laypeople understood that their baptismal duty and obligation called them to infuse a Christian spirit into the mentality, customs, laws, and structures of the community in which they lived.⁴³

Identification with a Historic Community of Faith

The delegates of the Fourth Black Catholic Congress “fashioned for themselves African roots in the early Church. [Indeed,] their self-identity went to the [very] roots of [antique] Christianity.”⁴⁴ Rejected and despised in society, wounded by their Church, these Black Catholics identified for themselves African ancestors in the faith, men and women from every walk of life—laypeople, martyrs, priests, bishops, theologians. They linked themselves by African heritage and Catholic faith to the Tradition transmitted by Augustine and Monica, Cyprian and Cyril, Perpetua and Felicity. To those who considered African Americans alien to Roman Catholicism, the delegates produced the most ancient Catholic lineage. They reached back across the centuries and affirmed their own identity as Black and Catholic through the identities of Catholics of African heritage who were integral to the faith they professed. These Black Catholic laypeople understood themselves as the fruit of an ancient tree. Perhaps, as Cyprian Davis has observed, no other 19th-century Catholic community articulated such an intimate and direct kinship with the earliest Church or claimed that Church with such conviction and affection.

In sum, this document introduces us to laypeople who were self-consciousness about themselves, their faith, and their role within their Church. Like the Fathers of the early Church, they are aware of the great dignity to which baptism elevates us.⁴⁵ They seem to have had a grasp of spiritual foundations for ecclesial service or ministry that exceeded mere

⁴² *Apostolicam actuositatem*, Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People, “Lay people’s right and duty to be apostles derives from their union with Christ their head. Inserted as they are in the mystical body of Christ by baptism and strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit in confirmation, it is by the Lord himself that they are assigned to the apostolate” (no. 3; see also nos. 1 and 24).

⁴³ *Lumen gentium*, The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, nos. 9–24.

⁴⁴ Davis, “Two Sides of a Coin” 59.

⁴⁵ Congar, *Lay People in the Church: A Study of the Theology of the Laity*, trans., Donald Attwater (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1965) 430.

lay activism.⁴⁶ This document, indeed, the congress movement itself, constitutes an instance of the *sensus fidelium* as a living conversation between the faithful and the magisterium. Emboldened by the Holy Spirit, these Black Catholic laypeople reflected critically on their social suffering, sifted what was and was not of the gospel, what was and was not of authentic Catholic faith. The address of the Fourth Congress makes a substantive contribution to the transmission of Tradition through deepening the insight of what it meant for stigmatized and despised people *to be church*, to take their bearings by the gospel and to empower themselves as its witnesses. In their serious preparation and analysis; in their loving indignation at the failures of the Church and its ministers to live boldly the message of justice and equality; in their self-determination and self-definition; in their critical racial and cultural consciousness—these Black Catholic laypeople demonstrated a critical understanding and appropriation of the faith that created the conditions for the possibility not only of transmission of Tradition, but of traditioning.

LIVING TRADITIONS: AFRICAN AMERICAN CATHOLIC POPULAR RELIGION

The transmission and reception of *Traditio* or Tradition, as Orlando Espin has argued so persuasively, is implicated in the process of traditioning, of creating traditions, of popular religion.⁴⁷ Popular religion represents a people's dynamic, living engagement with a faith tradition. The "popular" in popular religion does not denote "common" or "widespread" in majoritarian terms—although popular religious devotions can be found to be widespread and common. Moreover, popular religion is not an opposition to "official" or "institutional" religion, but may complement these dimensions in the creating and reconfiguring of devotional practices by socially and/or religiously marginalized groups. The "popular" in popular religion adverts "to the socio-historical fact that [its] religious symbols, practices, and narratives are *of the people*."⁴⁸

African American popular Catholicism is constituted by that select set of religious or devotional or esthetic practices whose function is to affirm the personal and communal identity of the practitioners as *Black Catholic*. Concretely, then, African American popular Catholicism may be expressed in several ways including pouring libation, ancestor veneration, rites of

⁴⁶ Debra Campbell, "The Struggle to Serve: From the Lay Apostolate to the Ministry Explosion," in Jay P. Dolan, R. Scott Appleby, Patricia Byrne, and Debra Campbell, *Transforming Parish Ministry: The Changing Roles of Catholic Clergy, Laity, and Women Religious* (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 221.

⁴⁷ Espin, *The Faith of the People* 63–90.

⁴⁸ Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesús* 21.

passage, celebrations of Kwanza, the installation of elders, the iconography of the cross, and Marian devotion and iconography. Since identity is a privileged theme in this article, in order to bring forward the impact of popular religion on the Black Catholic subject of Tradition, I will comment both on the veneration of ancestors and on Marian iconography, particularly that of Our Mother of Africa.

The Ceremony of Commemoration and Veneration of the Ancestors

The Institute for Black Catholic Studies (IBCS) with its critical interrogation and retrieval of the fragments of West African BaKongo culture has made a contribution to the controversy over African retentions in American culture.⁴⁹ The primary popular religious ritual of the Institute is the annual ceremony of the commemoration and veneration of ancestors. This practice draws heavily upon features of BaKongo religio-cultural ritual. Why BaKongo culture? Historians tell us that the BaKongo peoples were the most numerous among the captured and enslaved.⁵⁰ Tracings of their way of life, their religious, esthetic, moral, and social vision of the world, are scattered throughout African American culture and appear in cognitive, esthetic and moral orientations, in linguistic construction and use, and in phrasing the body.⁵¹

While the ancestors are venerated at other times, that this annual commemoration takes place each year on the national day of independence, the Fourth of July, places it in direct protest to any simplistic celebration of freedom in the U.S. The ceremony invokes and performs the question Frederick Douglass once posed, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?”⁵² This commemoration, then, is informed by the historic struggle of

⁴⁹ See Copeland, “Foundations for Catholic Theology in an African American Context,” in *Black and Catholic: The Challenge and Gift of Black Folk: Contributions of African American Experience and Thought to Catholic Theology*, ed. Jamie T. Phelps (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 1998) 107–47; and my “Method in Emergent Black Catholic Theology,” in *Taking Down Our Harps: Black Catholics in the United States*, ed. Diana L. Hayes and Cyprian Davis (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1998) 120–44.

⁵⁰ Philip Curtin estimates that “fully one-third of United States Blacks are of Kongo and Angolo ancestry,” quoted in Robert Farris Thompson and Joseph Cornet, *The Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1981) 32, 27.

⁵¹ Joseph E. Holloway, ed. *Africanisms in American Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1990) especially Robert Farris Thompson, “Kongo Influences on African-American Artistic Culture.”

⁵² Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?: An Address Delivered in Rochester, New York, 5 July 1852,” in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997) 379–91.

peoples of African descent for spiritual, cultural, and social freedom and informs that struggle into the present. This public popular religious ritual of the commemoration brings together BaKongo and Roman Catholic regard for the dead: This is intercession for and to the Church Suffering and the Many Thousand Gone of the Middle Passage, for and to African and African American ancestors and those Black Catholic dead who are the seed of our church.

Throughout this commemoration the “circle” motif is central. This explicitly recalls the BaKongo cosmogram that was a way of stating in ideograph or picture-writing the vitality of the connection of the community of the living to the visions and hopes of the dead.⁵³ Participants enter the site of commemoration moving in a counterclockwise direction and sit in a circle. This movement accords with BaKongo custom: it follows the movement of the sun from east to west; it marks the cardinal points of travel as well as those of human passages; it crosses the kalunga line acknowledging the unity of the living and the dead. By recreating the cosmogram, participants inscribe it not only on the site of commemoration, but in their own bodies, hearts, and minds.

This ceremony is marked by improvisation and adaptation to circumstances, but more or less common features have emerged. For instance, participants are encouraged to wear White West African attire, the ceremony is often led by the Director of the Institute or by an nonordained female or male, male and female dancers and drummers—some professionals, others novices all take part. The significance of the drum—especially in New Orleans—cannot be over estimated. This city was the singular place in the “new world” where drumming was permitted during the time of enslavement. Through sound and rhythms drumming helps participants to recover time (and timing), presence (and absence), sense and sensibility to self and to the community both living and dead. A general structure of the ceremony can be outlined as follows—gathering, processional, libation and prayer, readings, singing, telling the story, “walking” the circle, and feasting with the ancestors.

In the earliest stages of the gathering, prior to the inauguration of the ceremony, the drum sounds festivity and anticipation, but then turns to summons, to solemnity. Elders of the community lead the procession to the site of commemoration, administrators and faculty, students and guests follow; participants from the Continent of Africa are accorded special recognition—they are living links to the bittersweet joy of continuity and discontinuity with Mother Africa.

Libation, the pouring out of liquid onto the ground, as “an offering of

⁵³ See Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1984).

respect, especially to departed relatives or intercessory spirits like Eshu Elegbara before any request” or ritual⁵⁴ opens the ceremony. In this case, water is poured, the One Holy Triune God is invoked, the ancestors addressed and formally invited, order and harmony are petitioned. Prayer and singing follow, the selections taken, almost always, from among African American spirituals. Next, the woman (or man) who serves as the griot, the keeper of the story, recites the origin of the Institute, placing it in the context of the larger and historic Black and Black Catholic struggles for liberation. Through this story the “local” or family ancestors of the Institute are identified; the gifts and achievements of these beloved dead are publicly recited, received, affirmed, and reincorporated in the Black Catholic story. Participants may be invited to “walk” the circle for or on behalf of the dead. Each person moves counter-clockwise around the room; this allows for a *personification* of the ancestors, that is, the memory of this man or woman is made present in the person of another. This is more than an annual and solemn necrology, although it is this; once again, Bakongo and Roman Catholic regard for the dead compenetrates one another. The honored dead, both those who died long ago and the deceased of more recent memory, remain, even in death, most intimately connected to the living. Because, they are believed capable of intervening in daily affairs, bestowing blessing or meting out punishment, the ancestors must be venerated properly and faithfully according to ritual and custom.⁵⁵ Next, Institute elders, administrators or faculty, national or diocesan or local parish leaders are invited to “walk” the circle as their contributions to church and society are publicly recited, received, affirmed, and incorporated into the Black Catholic story.

The ritual walk honors the Many Thousand Gone, the enslaved ancestors of the Middle Passage and its brutal fulfillment, and the Black Catholic dead. The walk performs and inscribes. It recalls the cosmogram of the free BaKongo people and its retention in the slave’s ring shout that “combines the force of singing, words and tracing . . . the ritually designated ‘point’ or ‘mark’ of contact between the worlds” of the living and the dead.⁵⁶ Then, as Estella Conwill Majozo writes, this ritual walk, “charts the pilgrimage path upon ground made holy by the tears, sweat, and blood of our people.”⁵⁷ At the same time, this walk can be inserted into the subversive

⁵⁴ Will Coleman, *Tribal Talk: Black Theology, Hermeneutics, and African/American Ways of “Telling the Story”* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 2000) 72.

⁵⁵ E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religions: A Definition* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1975; orig. ed. 1973) 184.

⁵⁶ Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* 110.

⁵⁷ Estella Conwill Majozo, *Libation: A Literary Pilgrimage through the African-American Soul* (New York: Harlem River, 1995) 11.

dance traditions of Mardi Gras, especially the “second line.” It is of special significance that this ritual takes place in the City of New Orleans. In African American consciousness, New Orleans is the most liminal place: here, the borders and boundaries of slavery were transgressed with permission, with frequency, perhaps, even, with impunity; here, the dead and the living vye for space; here the blues is a transcendent esthetic in which sorrow and mourning give way to the “grace and moral strength to survive;”⁵⁸ here, and only here do those who walk in tears to the cemetery, return rejoicing. Thus it is natural that when the prayers the dead and the living are completed, when meditation, drumming and singing cease, the memorial spills out into a joyous feast that is shared with the ancestors.

The Ceremony of Commemoration and Veneration of Ancestors functions in, at least three ways: First, the ancestors “are not mental concepts but historical people.”⁵⁹ This ceremony promotes the remembrance of the dead who have lived among us. It holds up their lives for example and allows their lives to influence and shape the lives and ministries of members of the Black Catholic community. Second, the ritual allows the living co-creators of Black Catholic thought and praxis to be seen by the community. Through their public presentation to the ancestors and to the community, these leaders and teachers are challenged and strengthened to live a life worthy of their calling. Moreover, this leadership is recognized as *Black Catholic* and acknowledged as rooted in baptismal charism and in educational and cultural competence, as self-initiating and attentive to the signs of the times, as committed to social justice in the concrete, as collaborative, and as prayerful.⁶⁰ Even as the ancestors exert religious, moral, and intellectual sway, the community and its leaders are invited to personal and communal self-examination. Third, the ceremony teaches the Black Catholic story as one of faith and love, perseverance and service, of courage and integrity. Telling and performing the story nurtures an intimate bond between the Institute and its new members, both students and faculty, and reaffirms that bond between returning members.

Marian Iconography: Our Mother of Africa

On August 30, 1997, more than 400 years after their arrival to these shores, Black Catholics dedicated a chapel to Our Mother of Africa in the

⁵⁸ Ibid. np.

⁵⁹ Nwaka Chris Egbulem, *The Power of Afrocentric Celebrations: Inspirations from the Zairean Liturgy* (New York: Crossroad, 1996) 91.

⁶⁰ Copeland, “Toward Collaborative Leadership Between Ordained and Non-Ordained Black Catholics,” A Plenary Address to the National Consultation of the National Black Catholic Congress: *A Vision for African American Catholic Leadership*, Baltimore, Maryland, 20 January 2000.

Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C. Marian devotions are common to Catholics of all cultures, and this chapel represents “the deepest expressions of the heart and soul of African American Catholics . . . to honor Mary, the Mother of God.”⁶¹

The chapel itself is a complex artistic work of religio-cultural appropriation and interpretation. On the floor of the nave of the chapel is an abstraction in bronze relief of the 17th-century merchant slave ship, the *Henrietta Marie*, the only extant slave ship in the Western Hemisphere. The *Henrietta Marie* was found in 1972 about 35 miles off the coast of Key West, Florida, and recovered in 1980. Three sculptural components in the chapel are impressive: the statue of Our Mother of Africa holding the Child Jesus both rendered in idealized African features; a bas-relief, which chronicles the passage of Africans from capture to enslavement to freedom; and a crucified Christ also in African design.⁶²

These pieces from what art historian Donald Reynolds calls a “sacred conversation in which the spectator participates with Our Mother of Africa, her Crucified Son, and [her] African-American children.”⁶³ An introductory panel bearing these words from the book of Isaiah prompts this conversation: “Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb?” (Isaiah 49.15). The Marian iconography, then, resonates both person and place, that is, embodiment and geography: Mary who is the mother of Africa is our mother; Mary is Our Mother of Africa, Africa is our mother. The dispersed children long for their mother’s embrace, and the mother longs, seeks, and calls for her lost children. The representation of the sculpture, Our Mother of Africa, signifies a rich theological and psychological commensurability. There is a triple inscription: the Marian sculpture represents the mother of Jesus Christ in idealized African female form, she is the mother of African children, she is our mother; the mother of Jesus Christ is presented as the mother of Africa, the mother of an abused and violated continent; the mother of Jesus Christ is figured as *Mother Africa*, the continent whose children’s children’s children have been torn from her breast.

The significance of this Marian iconography, Our Mother of Africa, for a people whose bodies and hearts still recall the loss of a mother’s love through the deprivations of slavery cannot be overstated. The love and comfort that the despised and abused enslaved mother was prevented from lavishing on her children was offered instead by the mother of Jesus, Our

⁶¹ *Our Mother of Africa Chapel: Commemorative Edition* (Baltimore, Md.: National Black Catholic Congress, 1997) 3.

⁶² David Martin Reynolds, “A Celebration of Love and Freedom Expressed in Art and Architecture: The Meaning of the Sculpture Program in Our Mother of Africa Chapel” *ibid.* 4.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

Mother of Africa. The mother of Jesus who is our mother embraced the children of the enslaved mother with an unconditional love which the commercial exchange of the slave market could not destroy. As Africa (Egypt) once sheltered the child Jesus when his family fled from danger,⁶⁴ so to Mary shelters the children of the enslaved mother.

These examples of African American popular Catholicism, the Ceremony of Commemoration and Veneration of Ancestors and Marian iconography are communications of the “‘faith-full’ intuitions, the *sensus fidelium*”⁶⁵ of Black Catholics expressed through their retrieval of African esthetic and cultural mores and expressive of their need for community, healing, and religious identity.

The Black Catholic Subject of Tradition

For a people whose black bodies are despised, whose faith praxis comes under suspicion, whose culture is dismissed as non-existent or pathological or disadvantaged or deprived,⁶⁶ popular religion provides a crucial mediation for human subjectivity. To be a human subject implies that a man or woman consciously and intentionally in word and in deed assumes and affirms his or her own personhood and humanity. This affirmation means that a human subject cannot consent to any treatment or condition that is intended to usurp the transcendental end or purpose for which human beings are divinely created.⁶⁷ To do otherwise is to enter into a decreasing negativity that spoils the spirit, brutalizes the heart, and surrenders to *ressentiment*.

In the unfolding of Tradition in African American Catholicism, in its process of traditioning, we meet a subject who consciously and intentionally in word and in deed assumes and affirms personhood and humanity. This subject so values personhood as God’s sacred gift that she or he will not yield that gift even to the Church, and is ready in love to rebuke the Church when it fails to reverence and protect creation. In the praxis of valuing personhood, this subject is humble and accepts her or him self, just as she or he is, without any right of refusal. This Black Catholic subject accepts herself or himself as God’s image in Black. In fact, is this not another way of speaking about the universal call to holiness?

⁶⁴ Prayer from the Anaphora of St. Mary (Ge’ez/Ethiopic Rite Divine Liturgy) *ibid.* 41.

⁶⁵ Orlando O. Espín, *The Faith of the People: Theological Reflections on Popular Catholicism* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997) especially 68.

⁶⁶ See Jamie T. Phelps, “African American Culture: Source and Context of Black Catholic Theology and Church Mission,” *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 3, no. 3 (February 1996) 43–58.

⁶⁷ *Rerum novarum* no. 32.

Even if the following statements have the character of assertions, they are not mere assertions given of the reception and transmission of Tradition and traditioning in the history of Black Catholics. Thus, the Black Catholic subject of Tradition is

- that one who responds to the invitation of the Holy Spirit to accept the love of the Father of Jesus made available to us through his life and ministry, his sacrificial death on the cross;
- that one who is animated by reception of Tradition, that which has been handed down—“that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day” (1 Corinthians 15: 3–4);
- that one who yearns to incarnate Tradition in daily living and to witness to and struggle for its transforming power for in the world;
- that one who is willing to risk all to preserve inviolate the image of the Triune God in Black as an aspect of the distinct, essential dignity of God and God in-flesh;
- that one who steps inside the circle of traditions and is strengthened, confirmed, and claimed by these and other expressions of popular religion;
- that one who embraces the Black Catholic dead, who accepts their guidance, who knows and loves them as ancestors, who pours out libation to them;
- that one who knows Our Mother of Africa, who knows her search for her lost children and seeks her, who talks with her and her son.

CONCLUSION

To speak about Tradition and the traditions of African American Catholicism is not only to contest, even with integrity, those deficient interpretative paradigms that have challenged the faith praxis of African American Catholics—that the Roman Catholic Church in the U.S. is a White European immigrant church *and* that African American Christianity is identical with a certain form of Protestantism. To speak about Tradition and the traditions of African American Catholicism is also to find for Black Catholic theology a way forward through critical attention to the unfolding of Tradition in the history of Black Catholics, that is, *ressourcement*. Thus, the first part of this article uncovered the reception and transmission of Tradition by 19th-century Black Catholics and undertook to bring out some of the theological themes in the Address of the Fourth Colored Catholic Congress (1893). My aim was no seamless heroic narrative and, indeed, none such can be written. From the outset, the congress delegates sought for some permanent form of organization and at the Third Congress established the St. Peter Claver Union. However, neither the Union, nor the congress movement lasted. It is not precisely clear why. There is some

evidence of increasing clashes and differences with White hierarchy and clergy over the identity, direction, purposes, and leadership of the movement. There is also some evidence of power struggles and failures of accountability among the delegates.⁶⁸ But, the movement was not a failure. “In fact, [the Black lay Catholic congresses] achieved what Rudd set out to do in calling for the first. . . . They demonstrated beyond a doubt not only that a black Catholic community existed but that it was active, devoted, articulate, and proud.”⁶⁹

African American Catholicism is no 20th-century phenomenon. To make this point even more forcefully: consider that careful and critical historical research demonstrates that 42 years before the British settlement in (1607), 54 years before the arrival of Africans on the Dutch man-of-war in Jamestown in Virginia (1619), and 55 years before the arrival of the Pilgrims in Massachusetts (1620), Black Catholics had a vibrant ecclesial, devotional, and sacramental life in St. Augustine in Florida.⁷⁰ Moreover, elderly Sisters of the Holy Family of New Orleans tell stories of their enslaved great-grandmothers and grandmothers praying the rosary, of Black Catholic slaves going into the woods to pray and to sing.⁷¹ Finally, John Thornton has shown that South Carolina slaves, BaKongo in culture, Catholic in faith praxis, led the Stono rebellion, one of the fiercest uprising against Black enslavement in the U.S.⁷² African American Catholicism is no 20th-century phenomenon.

The second part of the article focused on African American cultural retrieval as popular religion and briefly sketched the veneration of the ancestors and Marian iconography, and the third part drew out the Black Catholic subject of Tradition. Still, we would do well to remember that reception and transmission of Tradition as well as traditioning are dynamic processes. As Siegfried Wiedenhofer cautions, “the agents, contents, institutions and norms of historical religious communities change over time. Obviously, their identity must therefore be understood as a process that includes ruptures and historical discontinuities.”⁷³

Still, grace may feed a stream—sometimes a trickle, sometimes a mighty river of living faith. One of the most poignant of the stories of such faith is

⁶⁸ David Spalding, “The Negro Catholic Congresses, 1889–1894,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 55 (October 1969) 337–57.

⁶⁹ Davis, *The History of Black Catholics* 193.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 31; See also Dwight Hopkins, *Down, Up, and Over: Slave Religion and Black Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999) 13.

⁷¹ Private communication with Dom Cyprian Davis, O.S.B., 28 March 2000.

⁷² John K. Thornton, “African Dimensions of the Stono Rebellion,” *American Historical Review* 96 (1991) 1101–13.

⁷³ Siegfried Wiedenhofer, “The Logic of Tradition,” in *Zur Logik religiöser Traditionen* 11–84, at 34.

that of a settlement at what is now known as “Catholic Hill” in Colleton County in the diocese of Charleston, South Carolina. In the 19th century, this area was known as “Catholic Crossroads.” This was the site of St. James the Greater Church which had been established in 1833 by Bishop John England for the several Catholic families who owned plantations and slaves. We know that a fire destroyed the church in 1856 and, not long after, Civil War was declared. The slaveholding families fled the area and the church buildings were left in disrepair. “[O]nly a small nucleus of Catholics [were left] among the blacks.”⁷⁴ These Black people had suffered many trials during slavery; now, abandoned and forgotten, the genuineness of their faith would be tested by fire (1 Peter 1: 6–8). Yet Cyprian Davis writes, “[w]ithout priest, church, or sacraments the Catholic faith was kept alive [among them] over a period of forty years through the efforts of Vincent de Paul Davis, a former slave who instructed the children.”⁷⁵ Not until 1897 did a priest from the diocese discover this community, attend to their sacramental needs, and have the church building restored.

But during that forty-year period, always, there had been a “core of laymen and laywomen who taught and led the community in worship,”⁷⁶ who nourished and sustained one another in faith, who handed on what (the Tradition) they had received: “that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day” (1 Corinthians 15: 3–4). Without a physical structure, a building for divine worship, through the power and grace of the Holy Spirit, these humble Black people, former slaves, became “living stones” and they themselves were built into a house at the crossroads where surely the risen Christ came and made his abode.

⁷⁴ Davis, *The History of Black Catholics* 209–10.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 210.