

Pastoral Letter: “What We Have Seen and Heard” Celebrates 25th Anniversary



(Seated, left to right: Most Reverends-Joseph A. Francis, SVD; Harold R. Perry, SVD; Joseph L. Howze; Eugene A. Marino, SSJ; James P. Lyke, OFM; Standing, left to right- Most Reverends Wilton D. Gregory; Emerson J. Moore; Moses B. Anderson, SSE; J. Terry Steib, SVD; John H. Ricard, SSJ)

In each generation, the Spirit gives a specific assignment to its spiritual leaders. The assignment given usually is a unique, yet prophetic call to move God's people to a higher level of mission. This is what happened twenty five years ago (1984) when the African American Catholic Bishops acted in unison to speak about evangelization within the African American Catholic community through the Pastoral Letter, “What We Have Seen and Heard” . This was a Letter to **us** about **evangelization**.

In its Introduction, the Black Bishops speak... “Within the history of every Christian community there comes a time when it reaches adulthood. This maturity brings with it the duty, the privilege and the joy to share with others the rich experience of the ‘Word

of Life.' Always conscious of the need to hear the Word and ever ready to listen to its proclamation, the mature Christian community feels the irresistible urge to speak that Word ... We write to you, Black brothers and sisters, because each one of us is called to a special task. The Holy Spirit now calls all to the work of evangelization."

At that hour, the Black Bishops called to memory a quote of Pope Paul VI to the peoples of Africa when he said to them in Kampala in Uganda: "You are now missionaries to yourselves" ... And Pope Paul VI laid out for all sons and daughters of Africa the nature of the response: "You must now give your gifts of Blackness to the whole Church (The Pope Speaks, 1969 Symposium in Kampala, Uganda)

Twenty five years ago, through this landmark document, the Black Bishops speak of the role that culture plays in the ministry of evangelization. "There is a richness in our Black experience that we must share with the entire People of God." A discussion on the universality of the Catholic Church follows the previously mentioned statement. The Bishops then remind us that to be "universal does not mean to be uniformed", instead a sharing of the gift of Blackness is our part of building up the whole Church. They continue..."We have heard with Black ears and we have seen with Black eyes and we have understood with an African heart". It is through this understanding of culture and the universality of the Church that the Black Bishops call forth the specific task of African American Catholics to evangelize among our own... "it is our way to witness to our brothers and sisters within the Black community that the Catholic Church is both one and also home to us all."

The Pastoral Letter "What We Have Seen and Heard" also discusses and provides other strategies for evangelizing. They include...

- Understanding that African American spirituality is based on Sacred Scripture and the hope it promises .
- Proclaiming that the "good news" is a message of liberation and that evangelization calls for forgiveness and reconciliation... "Without justice, meaningful reconciliation is impossible."
- Placing special interest and outreach on the family and the extended family. Church is extended family, that is why we call each other Brother and Sister. Our Parishes can evangelize just through family outreach and being family to one another, especially when family-hood is threaten.
- Confronting racism as it particularly impacts Black men and at the same time calling forth Black men in their role of fostering a "vocation of fatherhood" and to assert their spiritual strength.
- Supporting the role of women as sources of strength and examples of courage.
- Promoting Black values, "especially new life within the mother, has always been a value to Africans and to African Americans... as a people of faith, it is our task to fight for the right of all of our children and in all the circumstances of their existence".

- Nurturing Vocations. Sr. Thea Bowman said, “if you want vocations then each family and individual must raise them within our families.” We’ve got to place into the imagination and heart of our young ones the awesome blessing and joy of serving God and God’s people as Priest, Brother, Deacon or as a Religious Women.
- Honoring Ecumenism within our evangelization efforts.

“What We Have Seen and Heard” was issued on the feast day (September 9,) of St. Peter Claver, who compassionately worked among Africans who were enslaved. In the coming months, let us examine this wonderful and inspiring Pastoral Letter with prayerful review and assess our evangelization efforts within our parishes and organizations.

The Spirit that moved among the ten Black Bishops of yesterday to compose this Pastoral Letter still has a potent force today, seeking to stir the souls of those who strive to please God. Let’s “report for duty!” For a copy of the Letter call 410-625-8472.