The 2011 National Black Catholic Survey

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY of KEY FINDINGS of PASTORAL ISSUES

The 2011 National Black Catholic Survey (NBCS) is the first national survey of its kind to assess the level of religious engagement of African American Catholics.

Questions that motivated the study include:

- To what extent are African American Catholics religiously engaged in the church?
- Can their level of religious engagement be interpreted as an indicator of a willingness to remain involved and committed to their Catholic faith and identity?
- Is there a cultural effect and a Catholic effect influencing the level of religious engagement among African American Catholics?
- What are the particular characteristics of African American Catholics that might strengthen their Catholic faith?

The study of race often implies a comparison with other groups. Understanding the social and religious dynamics of African American Catholics will depend on the dynamics of other groups. The NBCS examined the religious engagement of African American Catholics and compared it to white Catholics, African American Protestants and white Protestants.

Conducted by Knowledge Networks, the NBCS was fielded from July 7 to August 1, 2011. The National Black Catholic Congress, the Institute Church Life at the University of Notre Dame and the Office of the President at University of Notre Dame sponsored the survey.

Understanding the factors that shape the faithfulness of African American Catholics can be instrumental in creating pastoral strategies to enhance religious engagement.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

A clear theme in the study is that African American Catholics' faith and religious identity are quite strong.

In terms of their level of religious engagement, African American Catholics appear similar to African American Protestants and are much more engaged in their church than white Catholics.

African American Catholics are highly involved in parish life. By comparison, white Catholics stand out for their low level of religious commitment.

Religious engagement among African Americans is enhanced through the extent to which they are socially networked. African American Catholics value social interaction in their parishes and churches. The challenge on the parish level is to find ways to connect individuals in parish life outside of Mass. Strengthening social connectedness enhances religious engagement.

Formal registration in a parish is a significant way to intensify religious engagement and parish life because it is one of the first steps in building an attachment and identity with a parish community. Becoming a formal member creates

an identity from which individuals gain esteem and connect with others.

African American Catholic young adults are more religiously engaged and consider religion to be more important than whites of the same age. Older African Americans are more engaged than younger adults. White Catholic young adults, by contrast, have an extremely low level of religious commitment.

African American Catholics perceive challenges with racial inclusiveness in the Church. African American Catholics express some dissatisfaction with the emphasis on black saints, promoting black leadership, targeting black vocations and support for issues like affirmative action, calling attention to problems in Africa and promoting racial inclusiveness.

On direct questions of racism in the Church, African Americans overwhelmingly do not consider the Church racist.

About one in four African American Catholics report some form of personal intolerance in their parish, such as being avoided because of their race, the reluctance of others to shake hands and insensitivity and indifference of priests on issues of race.

One of the most influential factors enhancing African American Catholics' religious engagement is membership in a black parish. Membership in a black parish reflects shared social and cultural experiences that connect people through a common identity. The importance of social connections of African American Catholics and the influence on religious engagement cannot be overstated.

On almost every conceivable measure of religious engagement, ranging from religious beliefs to practice, African Americans are more religious than most other Americans. African American Catholics, as part of a larger historical and cultural community, consider faith and its institutions vital to their survival.

ATTITUDINAL RESEARCH

Why are African Americans drawn or attracted to Catholicism?

African American converts were observed as being highly educated and enjoying high socio-economic positions. Research subjects pointed to the theological richness of Catholicism as a positive attraction and the emotional appeal of their previous church as a negative factor. Ritual in the church was essential to African American converts. The Catholic Mass was seen as a sacred experience and reception of Holy Communion was central.

Studies have shown that African American Catholics are more likely than white Catholics to participate in Bible studies and traditional Catholic devotions, such as benediction, confession and novenas.

A social network matters more to African Americans than to whites for feelings of attachment to the parish. This finding includes the importance of a number of close friends who are also members of the parish and the frequency of conversations with the pastor and other members of the parish.

DENOMINATIONAL DIFFERENCES

There is an obvious and significant gap in socio-economic factors that highlight important differences between African American Catholics and African American Protestants. African American Catholics are more highly educated. For income, African American Catholics earn on average the equivalent to white Protestants and are twice as likely to make at least $60,000 as African American Protestants.

RELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT

African American Catholics are engaged in their parish and church. The racial and cultural norms of the African American community that result in the greater importance of religious, spirituality and church affect African American Catholics in the same way as they do African American Protestants.

African American Catholics (70%) say they are very satisfied with their parish, which is a larger percentage than white Catholics.

The NBCS shows that African American Catholics are more spiritually engaged in their parish or church than they are emotionally or socially engaged. While African American Protestants are more spiritually engaged (65.6%), emotionally engaged (54%) and socially engaged (45.1%), than African American Catholics, 58.4% who are spiritually engaged, 44.1% are emotionally engaged and 33% are socially engaged.

African American Catholics register more satisfaction with having their spiritual, emotional and social needs met by their parish than white Catholics. For example, 62% of African American Catholics say their social needs are being met and only 40.5% of whites say theirs are being met.

About 48.2% of African American Catholics attend church once a week compared with white Catholics (30.4%) who attend weekly. African American Catholics have comparable attendance at weekly services with African American Protestants (50.5%) and better than white Protestants (37.3%).

African American Catholics appear more attached to their parish than whites. When asked if they would be most upset about being forced to leave their parish 40.5% of African American Catholics, 48.3% of African American Protestants, 32.2% of white Protestants and 21.4 % of white Catholics said they would.

REASONS FOR ATTENDING MASS

The need to hear God's Word and to feel spiritually uplifted are the two most accepted motivations for attending Mass. Of African American Catholics, 82% said they attend Mass to feel spiritually uplifted compared to 61.7% of white Catholics who felt that way. Reactions to "I need to hear God's Word" shows that African American Catholics go to church (79.1%) and white Catholics say they go for this reason (56.6%). African American Catholics (31.7%) perceive more of an obligation and believe they are required to attend Mass, compared to only 20.5% of white Catholics.

48% of African American Catholics, and 25.9% of white Catholics, say they enjoy "being with others" in church.

QUALITY OF RELIGIOUS SERVICE

While African American and white Protestants have higher satisfaction levels with the preaching and music, Catholics have recognizably lower levels: 73.2% of African American Catholics and 67.5% of white Catholics are satisfied with the preaching and 68.3% of African American Catholics and 63.7% of white Catholics are satisfied with the music.

SOCIAL NETWORKING

African American Catholics (26.9%) find it important to have more of their friends attend their parish. A social network through the parish does not appear important for white Catholics because only 6.9% consider their friends' presence at Mass important.

When asked if a parish would not be worth attending without seeing their friends, 9.7% of African American Catholics

agreed compared with only 3% of white Catholics. Only about 10% of Protestants answered this question affirmatively.

AGE DIFFERENCES

African Americans at all age categories indicate stronger religious engagement than whites and African American Catholics are very similar to African American Protestants. Remarkably, young African American adults, regardless of religion, show stronger level of engagement than young white adults in the same age categories. The oldest age category (60+) among African America Catholics shows that 74.9% are strongly engaged in their parish, where as 52.8% of 18- to 29 year-olds. White Catholics, on the other hand, have significantly lower engagement in all age categories, 55.8% of 60-year-olds and 26.8% of 18- to 29-year-olds.

AFRICAN AMERICAN CATHOLICS

The perspective of African American Catholics is positive regarding their perception of the nature of the church and race. But, for African American Catholics, the church has significant room for improvement when it comes to their perceptions on racial issues.

African American Catholics are the least satisfied with the church's position on targeting black vocations (only 36.6% are satisfied) and black saints (only 38.1% are satisfied).

On policy issues external to the church, the satisfaction with the church's position is lukewarm: 40.2% are satisfied with the church's position on support for affirmative action; 44.2% are satisfied with the church's perceived position on calling attention to problems in Africa; and 45.1% are satisfied with the church's position on promoting racial inclusiveness.

An overwhelming 85.7% find it important to include African American religious expression into Catholic worship.

Roughly one in four African American Catholics report racially insensitive experiences in their parishes. A higher percentage (31.4%) report feeling uncomfortable because they were the only African Americans in their parish and being avoided because of their race.

About a quarter of African American Catholics said that priests have been insensitive or indifferent on issues important to their racial group. These types of experiences seem to be higher for African American Catholics than African American Protestants where only 1 in 10 reported experiencing similar forms of racial intolerance.

However, while not intending to minimize the perceptions of a sizeable proportion of parishioners, a much larger percentage of African American Catholics has not experienced these forms of racial intolerance. Rather, they find their parishes comforting and respectful. This helps explain why African American Catholics' religious engagement is high despite perceptions of racial challenges in the church.

THE BLACK CATHOLIC PARISH

Most African American Catholics (76%) do not attend a predominately black Catholic parish.

For African American Catholics who attend a black parish, Mass attendance and satisfaction with the church improves. On every measure of racial inclusiveness or sensitivity, African American Catholics who attend a black parish are more satisfied than African Americans who do not attend a black parish.

For more information call us at 410-740-5009 or 410-547-8496.