Great Is Our Faithfulness: Why Celebrate Black History Month

by Deacon Al Turner, MTS

Why do we celebrate Black History Month? What does it mean to us as black Catholics?

Black people have experienced the faith in the context of enslavement, civil war, Jim Crow, separate and un-equal, the civil rights movement, and the post-civil rights movement era. All the while, we for the most part have stayed true to our Catholic faith and to the stated beliefs of the United States of America. Our leaders, well known or not, have held on to the belief in the notion of the American experiment in equality of persons.

St. John Paul II while addressing 1,800 African American Catholics in New Orleans on September 12, 1987, encouraged African American Catholics to contribute the gift of who they are to the wider Church. That is good citizenship in the tradition of Catholic social teaching.

From the first, we hoped that there was a place for us here as members of the Church and society. We had to invent and re-invent ourselves many times over the years and we did. We believed what we read or had read to us from Sacred Scripture, that Jesus came to save ALL God’s children. We kept that notion always as an anchor of our lives. Even in the dark days of enslavement, we had the kind of sustaining faith that allowed us to survive even the racism inside the Church and within the hearts of our white brothers and sisters in Christ, some of whom owned us as property. Even in these worst of conditions, black people “knew” that community is the foundation of the soul of all people especially for us. We have always worked to make things better for ourselves and our children. There are no areas of endeavor that have not benefited from our participation.

There are examples of brave black people who distinguished themselves in the secular society, like Benjamin O. Davis Sr., the first African American to reach the rank of general officer in the US military; Shirley Chisholm, the first black woman elected to the US Congress; and Sidney Poitier, the first African American to win the Academy Award for best actor. These are some who help us to celebrate our achievements as good and productive citizens of this country.

We, black Catholics, can also be proud of others who lived up to not only the social creed of this nation but also to the spiritual creed as well. This includes people such as Daniel Rudd, a black Catholic layman, activist, journalist, and publisher of the American Catholic Tribune, “the only Catholic journal owned and published by colored men.” He also founded the Lay

Dancers perform prior to a Feb. 14 Mass of thanksgiving for Black History Month at the Immaculate Conception Center in the New York borough of Queens.
Catholic Congress movement. We recall Fr. Augustus Tolton, the first identified African American man to be ordained a priest for service in the United States. He had to go to Rome for his formation because no US seminary would admit him. He persevered and braved discrimination inside as well as outside the Church. He believed in and lived a life that considered all people as creations of God and, therefore, good. He is an inspiration for all. We also recall Mother Mary Lange, OSP, who founded the Oblate Sisters of Providence, the first religious community for women of African descent. She also founded a school that educated immigrant and enslaved children in Baltimore, Maryland, when it was still illegal to educate black children. That school became St. Frances Academy, which is still in operation today as a co-ed high school.

These are just a few of the reasons we black Catholics should celebrate this month.

We are part of the heritage of this country. Our faithfulness in the belief that all men are created equal is a testament to our faithful citizenship. And, that is something to celebrate.

_Deacon Al Turner, MTS, is the former director of the Office of Black Catholics for the Archdiocese of Washington and is currently assigned to St. Joseph Catholic Church in Largo, MD._