

NATIONAL BLACK CATHOLIC MEN' CONFERENCE 2020: ONLINE CONFERENCE SYNOPSIS

Fr. Charles Smith, SVD, our leader, welcomed us with on time rhyme, with content and discontent, in his address, "Still I Rise." In the spirit and legacy of his twin brother, Fr Chester P. Smith, he spoke about a culture of death that has always surrounded black folks in this country. "Where," he asked, "is the culture of health care, the culture of justice in our criminal justice system, the culture that puts food on the table and clothes on the back?" Where is the regard for the bodies of murdered black men and women? How can black men live in this culture of death as disciples of Christ? The answer(s) to these questions, he told us, is the reason why there is National Black Catholic Men's Conference every year. With sin and evil running at an all-time high, he preached, black Catholic men must step into their spiritual moment here in America and "in the spirit of Chester P. "rise up....rise up....rise up!"

Dr. Cameron Beatty, was the creator of something more than an online conference, it was a seamless visual and auditory presentation, from the graphics to the perfectly chosen songs (my favorite is Yolanda Adam's "Still I Rise"). Dr. Beatty shared his technical skills with us and just kept us flowing through this our first experience of a virtual conference. More than that, he also spoke with us about how we must be aware of our "racial battle fatigue" as we seek to keep on rising up in our lives. This fatigue we feel is from the "psychological stressors" that affect every aspect of our lives, including our spiritual lives. The things this stress causes—frustration, apathy, anger, resentment, worry, fear—are also the things that make it worse!

Evangelist Stephen Mullin, using the biblical images of the leper Namaan (2Kgs5: 8-14) dipping 7 times in [the] muddy water" and the woman who touched the hem of Jesus' garment, encouraged young black men to keep on pushing, to "press on" into the deeper, healing truths of their own life journeys, and come to discover what it means to be committed to Jesus Christ.

Mr. Anthony Mensah was asked by his "godfathers" Frs. Chester and Charlie to talk to our youth about the important subject of black male sexuality. With thoughtfulness and humility, he shared his thoughts and research about the profound, sometimes burdensome, often demonized, but beautiful gift of black male sexuality.

Mr. Andrew Lyke spoke, as he has done for so long at the NBCMC, not only of his personal experience of 45 years of marriage to Terri, but of what it meant for the black family to appreciate and work towards a "sacramental" marriage based in commitment to each other and well as to God. In this journey toward a more healthy and holy marriage tradition in our community, it is the sometimes difficult "language of God" that must be heard.

Fr. Maurice Nutt delivered a challenging talk on the subject of "The Theology and Spirituality of the Black Lives Matter" movement. Dr. Nutt explained that this theology and spirituality come from roots in black struggle and specifically affirms: the principle of the radical equality of the human race; the need to survive the real ongoing threat to black existence; a resolve to

confront the terror of racism, not negotiate with it; and, in so doing, build a true peace, as Jesus would have it, with concrete political-economic-social change.

Fr. Roy Lee Roy led our opening Nia Spiritual Café on the subject of the “double pandemic” that black Americans find themselves in. His panel included medical doctor, **General C. Johnson**, Liberation theologian **Cary Dabney**, and financial advisor **Marc Guess** who broke down for us what this double pandemic for us was in terms of health disparities, spiritual challenges, and financial burdens (Mr. Guess’ later workshop dealt with the more specific topic of estate planning). The panel brought a sober outlook as well as some very concrete steps we can take to survive and prosper in the years to come.

Fr. Lee’s own workshop, “White Psychology,” dealt with the historical legacy of those who have sought dominating power and privilege over non-white persons. Using tools that include political-economic control and the power to demonize, the doctrine of “whiteness” has taught others to self-hate. And yet, Fr Lee made the point that we black Christians are challenged by the call of the scripture to be renewed in mind and heart, to adopt the empowerment principles of the *Nguzo Saba*, to be nurtured by the defiant traditions of our ancestors who fought against the opportunistic capitalisms that took, chained, and exterminated millions from the African Motherland. This journey will, of course, take time because there is so much to unlearn. *[As part of his commitment to the renewal of mind, Fr. Roy announced an upcoming online newsletter to highlight the voices of black lay people.]*

Fr. Victor Cohea spoke of supporting our young men and families through examination and reflection of life, through caring discipline and example, through tears, faith, work, and sharing. Our “heavenly home” is yet to come, but is also present here on earth as black Catholic families make a home with Jesus.

Fr. Anthony Bozeman, SSJ, served once again as our conference pastor as he led us in our conference Eucharist. Having already inspired us at Saturday Imani Morning Praise and Worship to move our feet when we pray, Fr. Anthony delivered a clarion call in the sermon to black Catholic men to “rise above our circumstances” based on the way Jesus was able to rise above his enemies and assert his own authority in the face of challenge. We must not capitulate even though our adversaries stipulate! Remember that, just like we overcame, we shall continue to overcome.

Mr. Timothy Gholston, RN, continued from the introduction to black health disparities that Dr. Johnson made with a focused exposition on the Covid-19 pandemic. He discussed the nature of the virus as well as the why and how its spread unequally affects the black community. Focusing directly on that black community, he gave empowering solutions towards halting the spread of the virus. Most of all, hold on, knowing that faith forged in flames is strong faith.

Det. Gerald Hamilton: Detective Gerald Hamilton has had decades of experience working with “at risk” youth in Chicago. He has been a father and motivator to hundreds of black young men and women as they have found a home at the “Hamilton House.” Over the years, he has shared

his expertise in numerous media presentations about how our black youth are reached, accepted, taught, and challenged to grow. He challenged the church to make a serious effort to share with these young people the liberating kind of faith that offers them strength in the challenges of life, not judgment...a liberating religion that helps them organize to achieve political, economic, as well as spiritual power. One attendee of his workshop saw in his testimony a personal lifetime engagement with young people whose lives he believes really matter.

Fr. George Kintiba, SVD, led us in our closing reflection, “Black Men Rising Together.” His emphasis was on black men “telling it like it is,” speaking truth to power. In the face of so much stress or, as Dr. Beatty had mentioned, “racial battle fatigue,” we must fight against the fears that paralyze us. As black Catholics we must remember that Catholic theology, despite the presence of its early African formulators, has tried to push so-called “Truths” that work to erase the lives and worth of black persons. In this environment, we have to trust on, pray on, and walk on with each other!

Fr. Ken Hamilton, SVD, delivered the conference opening keynote address (*see “Rise Up, Oh Black Catholic Church!” in latest Bowman-Francis online newsletter*) and then led our closing commissioning healing service around the mantra “seven times into the water” based on the story of the cleansing of the Syrian captain, Namaan (introduced earlier by Evangelist Stephen Mullin.) He challenged us to be healed by “wading into the waters” of boy-to-manhood dreams, of found purpose, of disappointment, of romantic-sexual union and friendship, of pain and despair, of self-blame, and wisdom.

As usual, we were lifted up and sustained by the music ministry of **Ms. Phyllis Walker and the Men in Fire!** Once again, they helped us to pray, to praise, to worship, to flow! Phyllis and brothers, we love you and appreciate you as part of this national ministry for all these many years. We also would like to thank Devin Olivas and Jelani Maleeq Morris for their musical selections that moved us.

Thanks goes in a special way to the people who made this possible, **the planning committee:** Frs. Charles Smith, Anthony Bozeman, Roy Lee, and Ken Hamilton; Ms. Rosemary Brown, Ms. Karen Armitage, Ms. Marcheta Smith, Mr. Jesse Johnson, and Dr. Cameron Beatty. Taking up the mantle placed on us by Fr. Chester, and facing a unique situation here in 2020, this team met faithfully to plan and execute all the steps necessary for a successful online conference. Each shared their unique talent, valuable vision, and precious time to bring this conference for black Catholic men to fruition. It simply could not have been done without them!

Brothers, sisters, allies, Jesus worked it out, and a wonderful time was had by all! We look forward in excitement to NBCMC 2021.