



BLACK CATHOLICS "DON'T LET THE FLAME GO OUT"

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Over three thousand Black Catholics and allies gathered to write a prophetic call to be visionaries at the National Black Catholic Congress XIII, held July 20-23 at the Gaylord National Resort and Convention Center in Oxon Hill, Maryland. The Congress' theme, "Write the Vision: A Propheptic Call to Thrive," was taken from the book of the Prophet Habakkuk. In Cardinal Wilton Gregory's opening Mass on Friday, July 21, 2023, His Eminence said, "Visionaries are important people for every culture. They are the ones who are able to see and to discover unimagined possibilities. They are those who offer people hope. They are the lead agents for change. We all need visionaries and fortunately, we Black Catholics have many such visionaries in our heritage to follow and to honor."

Indeed, my wife, Charlene Howard, National Council Chair of Pax Christi, USA, and Robert Hurteau, Director of the LMU Center for Religion and Spirituality, had the privilege to meet many enthusiastic Black Catholics and allies across the globe who are visionaries. Individuals like John Stowe O.F.M. Conv., Bishop of Lexington, Kentucky; Dr. Ansel Augustine; and Sr. Marcia Hall, an Oblate Sister of Providence, who recently spoke with students in one of my courses, *Black Catholics Spiritual Call: Theological Reflections*. These individuals demonstrated a proactive spirit to not only write a vision, but give witness to the vision. The list of individuals we encountered is extensive, too numerous to mention; they all voiced a commitment to revitalize the Black Catholic community with Habakkuk's vision for justice. We must write a vision that teaches the lion how to lay with the lamb for all of God's people to thrive in the Kingdom of God.

Retired Bishop John Ricard urged everyone at the closing Mass, "Don't let the fire go out!" Recalling his childhood days of camping in the woods, Bishop Ricard told a short story about poking the fire. After gathering firewood during the day, the campers built a massive fire to stay warm through the night. Two or three camp leaders would remain awake to poke the fire to keep the flame going throughout the night. Unfortunately, the little campers would get cold when the leaders failed to poke the fire at night. Here, Bishop Ricard admonishes everyone to poke the fire. Do not let the fire go out.

For this reason, when listening to the voices of the many prophetic leaders and Bishop Ricard's encouragement at this conference, the words of St. Paul resonated in my spirit. "I remind you to stir into flame the gift of God that you have through the imposition of my hands. For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather of power

and love and self-control." (2 Tim. 1:7-8) Cardinal Gregory's exhortation to imagine the possibilities and have the audacity to hope in fearful times calls for Black Catholics to live out their baptismal promise to be priests, prophets, and kings.

We must stir up the flame. Bishop Ricard's words are prophetic. Keep the flame burning in your parishes. Poke the flame at the diocesan level to hold leaders accountable. Ignite a fire in your community by proclaiming God's word, telling your story, and singing your song. More importantly, live the vision in your heart. "Be firm, steadfast, always fully devoted to the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (1 Cor. 15:58).