

DOWN DEEP IN MY SOUL

An African American Catholic Theology
of Preaching

Maurice J. Nutt, CSsR

ORBIS  BOOKS
Maryknoll, New York 10545

Introduction

During the past decade (2010–2019) of the twenty-first century many throughout the world experienced a rare phenomenon of having two world leaders capture, captivate, and most importantly keep our attention not only through their inspiring humanitarian deeds but also by their sincere and riveting rhetoric—their words. The persuasive eloquence of both the former United States president (2009–2016), Barack Obama, and the leader of the Roman Catholic Church (2013–), Pope Francis. President Obama and Pope Francis both possess the ability to engage their listeners in a familiar way without being ostentatious given their position and authority. Their words, whether in an address, oration, disquisition, or homily, are seamlessly intelligent, relevant, clear, and compassionate. By and large people want to listen to these two contrasting figures, men varying in age, ethnicity, religion, and profession not only because of *what* they say but *how* they say it. Both politician and pontiff are passionate about their beliefs and convictions, and it is apparent in their rhetoric. I believe their speaking and preaching styles (although not ordained, Barack Obama has a preaching style) are honed by their cultural identities. The spirited rhetoric of Latin Americans and African Americans, persuasively evoking passion, emotion, and certitude, are evidenced by both of these prominent leaders.

Although there are undeniable differences and challenges between American laws, political positions, and Roman Catholic teachings, without compromising their personal and institutional values they respected each other and coalesced around their commonalities. This was never more in evidence than when Pope Francis made a papal visit to the United States and was invited by Mr. and Mrs. Obama to visit the White House on September 23, 2015. As a way of welcome President Obama spoke first, and after his initial customary pleasantries, he took on the semblance and rhetoric of a preacher. He didn't have a scriptural text but with rhythmic diction, moving cadence, and reverberating repetition of the phrase, "you remind us," President Obama in part shared these sentiments regarding Pope Francis's papacy:

You remind us that the Lord's most powerful message is mercy. That means welcoming the stranger with empathy and a truly open heart—from the refugee who flees war-torn lands, to the immigrant who leaves home in search of a better life. It means showing compassion and love for the marginalized and the outcast, those who have suffered, and those who seek redemption.¹

Having just promulgated his encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis spoke next, offering a salient admonition about caring for the environment by caring for our common home. He said:

Such change demands on our part a serious and responsible recognition not only of the kind of world we may be leaving to our children, but also to the millions of people living under a system which has overlooked them. Our common home has been part of this group of the excluded which cries out to heaven and which today powerfully strikes our homes, our cities and our societies. To use a telling phrase of the Reverend Martin Luther King, we can say that we have defaulted on a promissory note and now is the time to honor it.²

Knowing to whom he was addressing his comments, this first pope from Latin America was saying to the first African American president that we share common ground with our concern for marginalized and excluded people because we have worked with and ministered to them in our respective countries. Pope Francis contextualized this global environmental crisis for the American people by invoking the name and words of Dr. King, an American champion for the oppressed and downtrodden.

Many who were present on the White House's South Lawn that day commented that they felt like they were at a church service rather than a meeting of two world leaders. How could you not feel that way when immediately after Pope Francis finished his remarks / "sermon" a robe-clad African American gospel choir rose from their seats and with full voice sang a "sermonic song" typical of a Black church service. They sang the stirring song "Total Praise" by composer Richard Smallwood. However, the choir was not from a Protestant church. No, they were a gospel choir from St. Augustine Catholic Church, the "mother church" of African American Catholics in Washington, DC. This Black Catholic

¹President Barack Obama's Remarks: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/23/remarks-president-obama-and-his-holiness-pope-francis-arrival-ceremony>.

²Ibid., Pope Francis's Remarks.

gospel choir delighted both pope and president as they rejoiced together in praise to God at the conclusion of the song. In an unassuming meeting beginning a papal visit to the United States, something happened on the White House's South Lawn that both secular and Catholic news commentators and political pundits apparently missed—the occurrence was manifested in both symbol and substance—that race, religion, rhetoric, and ritual all matter.

This is a book about race, religion, rhetoric, and ritual. The racial group considered consists of African Americans who are members of the Roman Catholic Church who generally appreciate sound theological, biblically grounded, and culturally astute rhetoric known as the Black preaching style utilized during their time of worship at eucharistic liturgies and prayer services. More succinctly, this is a book authenticating, validating, and encouraging the use of the Black preaching style by those who are blessed to preach in African American Catholic settings as well as other cultural settings.

Preaching and Evangelism

When the Black³ preacher is moving the hearts and souls of his or her Black congregation through his or her powerful teaching, a loud shout of “tell the story, preacher” may be heard from some satisfied soul sitting in the pew. One of the most interesting and faith-filled stories within the Catholic Church in America is that told by African American Catholics. It is a story that tells of a people who were both faith-filled and faithful to a God who never fails. It is a story of persistence and perseverance under discouraging circumstances. It is a story fraught with racial hatred and racial injustice, opposition and oppression, and blatant disregard and disrespect. And yet it is also a story of a people who held tight to God's unchanging hands when the dark clouds of racism clouded their way. With great self-determination and steadfast activism, African Americans carved a place for themselves within the Roman Catholic Church in America. Once known as a mission church and a mission people, the African American Catholics of today are a people committed to the work of spreading the good news of the Gospel among themselves and

³Although it is most common to use the term “African American” in referring to the children of the African Diaspora, for the purpose of this work “Black” and “African American” will be used interchangeably. Note also the term “Negro” will be used in citing references prior to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

others—while acknowledging that this is no easy task as membership at Black Catholic parishes continues to decline.

African American Catholics experience a double invisibility. In the Black world, they are marginalized because of their religious identity as Catholics; in the Catholic world, they are marginalized because of their racial and cultural identity. Yet African American Catholics have not allowed their perceived double invisibility to deter their mission of evangelization.

In their pastoral letter *What We Have Seen and Heard*, addressed to the Catholics of the United States, ten African American bishops made the bold statement that African American Catholics have “come of age.” African American Catholics had matured to adulthood and were no longer the helpless missionary children of the predominantly white Catholic Church of America. Although the tone of the pastoral letter was respectful and appreciative of the many gifts that had been shared with African American Catholics, the African American Catholic bishops nonetheless affirmed that they, too, as African Americans, had gifts to share with the universal Catholic Church. The African American Catholic bishops wrote: “Evangelization means not only preaching but witnessing; not only conversion but renewal; not only community but the building up of the community; not only hearing the Word but sharing it.”⁴

There remains today a great vitality among African American Catholics to spread the Word of God among themselves and others. African Americans are a biblical people. The Word of God has been a tremendous source of support and consolation through the anguish and afflictions that they have had to endure. Many times, it has been “a word from the Lord” that has sustained them throughout their struggle with the evils of racism. However, in most cases the Word of God is not effectively preached to many African American Catholics. Every Sunday, many African American Catholics endure homilies that are not Holy Spirit filled, not relevant to their situations or life circumstances. The homilies are not based on the scripture readings and do not inspire the people to be a witness to the goodness of Jesus. It is truly a mystery how African American Catholics continue to return to the liturgies that give them neither life nor the hope of eternal life. Some African Americans contend that Mass has always been fairly boring. Others maintain that their love for the Eucharist calls them back to the Catholic Church every Sunday. Some also acknowledge that their faith is so strong that even if the priest or deacon doesn’t have the Word, the Word of God is still deep within them.

⁴*What We Have Seen and Heard: A Pastoral Letter on Evangelization from the Black Bishops of the United States* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1984), 2.

For the most part, preaching in our Catholic churches is notoriously uninspired. African Americans throughout this country almost unanimously will attest to this fact. Those who feel called to minister to African American congregations must see it as their duty to develop the art of effective, spirit-filled preaching. Black preaching is a Black folk art, but this does not mean that preachers from other ethnicities cannot be trained in certain techniques of this Black liturgical art. Some white pastors have acquired the ability to preach in the Black genre without doing a disservice to the integrity of their white identities. Conversely, many preachers who are not African American use their cultural identity as an unacceptable excuse for mediocrity. Preaching in the Black genre implies preaching with an eloquence that exegetes both the scriptural text and the congregation. The “Good News” must be addressed to this particular people, and the hermeneutical application of it must be made to their own situation.

Challenges

The Catholic Church in urban neighborhoods throughout the United States is faced with a serious challenge. Many urban neighborhoods are plagued by deterioration and decay. Where once stood thriving communities with stable neighborhood residences, corner grocery stores, and other economic endeavors, now remain abandoned buildings, vacant lots, and the ruins of former successful businesses. In some neighborhoods the large beautiful Catholic church buildings remain, signs of a once-flourishing immigrant Catholic community. The once strong immigrant neighborhoods (German, Irish, Polish, and Italian) are now inhabited, in many cases, by a struggling and depressed African American community. In some instances, the ornate edifices dedicated to God and once populated by the Roman Catholic faithful have been sold to growing Protestant and non-denominational congregations in desperate need of extra space. Familiar Catholic names, such as “St. Mark’s,” “Most Holy Name of Jesus,” and “St. Ann Shrine,” have been replaced by new names reflective of new congregations, names such as “Emmaus Way Missionary Baptist Church,” “New Jerusalem Cathedral Church of God in Christ,” and “Transformation Christian Church.” These once densely populated former Roman Catholic churches are now standing-room-only-churches. The Word of God is powerfully preached, the music ministry moves the congregation to make a joyful noise unto the Lord, the doors of the church are opened, and a call to discipleship is extended; the congregants have the Good News about Jesus Christ to take with them to share all week long, and

the Word of God leads them to service within and outside their church.

In most cases the Catholic churches in African American neighborhoods throughout this nation have remained. However, there are significantly fewer parishioners. Dioceses and archdioceses have closed or merged many of their parishes in urban communities. Lack of parishioners and lack of funds have topped the list of reasons for the increased mergers. Pastors have somberly noted that all of the Catholics have moved to the suburbs. Yet there remains in our urban communities a vast number of African Americans who are unchurched or lapsed Catholics or inactive baptized believers. For too long there has been the perception that any semblance of Blackness must be left on the front steps of Catholic churches and that admittance means assimilating to the dominant Eurocentric expressions of Roman Catholic liturgy and worship. There have been few methods and/or models of inculturated evangelization of African Americans to the Catholic Church. In short, there is a great harvest of souls among African Americans for which the Catholic Church *must* find ways of effectively evangelizing.

According to the late Glenn Jeanmarie, preaching plays an important role in the evangelization of African Americans:

We Blacks are people of the Word. We are by culture, by history, preaching orientated. We come from a preaching tradition. Preaching sustained and nurtured us during the days of slavery. Preaching gave us hope “in days when hope unborn had died.” Preaching enables us to keep on keeping on. Preaching enables us to be truly opened to receive Eucharist, the bread of life. So, one of the greatest gifts, we, as Black people, can give to the Church today is preaching. For in authentic Black preaching the spirit is renewed.⁵

The Holy Spirit calls us all to the work of evangelization. It is important that those who have received the Gospel of Jesus Christ spread the Good News. Like Paul, Christians must be compelled to confess, “Preaching the gospel is not the subject of a boast; I am under compulsion and have no choice. I am ruined if I do not preach it!” (1 Cor. 9:16).

Evangelization is both a call and a response. It is the call of Jesus reverberating down the centuries: “Go into the whole world and proclaim the good news to all creation” (Mark 16:15). The response is, “Conduct

⁵Glenn Jeanmarie, “Black Catholic Worship: Celebrating Roots and Wings,” in *Portrait in Black: Black Catholic Theological Symposium*, ed. Thaddeus J. Posey (Washington, DC: National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus, 1978), 85.

yourselves, then, in a way worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Phil. 1:27). Evangelization means not only preaching but witnessing, not only conversion but renewal, not only entry into the community but the building up of the community, not only hearing the Word but sharing it.

The Good News of the gospel not only transforms those who hear it, but it must also transform those who preach it. “The person who has been evangelized,” Pope Paul VI wrote, “goes on to evangelize others.”⁶ However, evangelization is not done in a vacuum; it is performed within a particular context. Pope Paul VI in writing on the subject of evangelization in the modern world states:

The obvious importance of the content of evangelization must not overshadow the importance of the ways and means. This question of “how to evangelize” is permanently relevant, because the methods of evangelizing vary according to the different circumstances of time, place and culture, and because they thereby present a certain challenge to our capacity for discovery and adaptation. On us particularly, the pastors of the Church, rests the responsibility for reshaping with boldness and wisdom, but in complete fidelity to the content of evangelization, the means that are most suitable and effective for communicating the Gospel message to the men and women of our times.⁷

The *National Black Catholic Pastoral Plan* promulgated by the National Black Catholic Congress in 1987, while stating that its primary purpose was to discuss issues relating to the evangelization of African Americans on the local level (within dioceses and parishes), never adequately addressed the need of a model of inculturated evangelization of African Americans to Catholicism. The National Black Catholic Pastoral Plan merely encourages the development of evangelization programs that are rooted in the Black spiritual experience. I submit that the preaching of the Word of God in a style that speaks to the heart and soul of the African American community is vital and must precede any programs of evangelization. In the great commission, Jesus did not instruct us to “go ye therefore” and set up programs, policies, and procedures. He instructed us to go preach!

⁶Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* [*On Evangelization in the Modern World*], apostolic exhortation (December 8, 1975), no. 24.

⁷*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 40.

Outline of *Down Deep in My Soul*

In this book I maintain that for effective evangelization to occur in African American Catholic parishes, aspects and techniques of the Black preaching style must be utilized by those called upon to preach. When Catholic preachers, African American, and non-African American, preach the Word of God in a manner that speaks to both the heart and the experience of the African American community, then there will be fewer empty pews in African American Catholic parishes. My fundamental goal in writing this book is to prepare *all* preachers—African Americans and those of other cultures called to preach in African American Catholic parishes—and thus enable a growth of African Americans embracing the Catholic faith. However, this stated endeavor presupposes both a willingness of the preacher to minister to African Americans and an openness to immerse himself or herself into the African American culture.

Down Deep in My Soul consists of seven chapters that offer a deeper understanding of the African American culture and preaching style. Chapter 1, titled “The Uniqueness of African American Culture, Spirituality, and Religious Experience,” is an exposé of the uniqueness of African American culture and the richness of African American spirituality. I also give an extensive review of slavery and the slave religion. One cannot speak of Black preaching apart from Black spirituality. I demonstrate that spirituality is one’s attempt to encounter God or the Divine Other. From a Christian perspective, when we speak of spirituality, we acknowledge a way of personally encountering or experiencing God in our lives. Spirituality is “faith lived.” This means simply that as Christians we strive to live out that which we believe. In this first chapter the specific characteristics of Black spirituality are named. Black spirituality is characterized and explained as contemplative, holistic, biblical, joyful, and communal. Finally, I illustrate how each characteristic of Black spirituality relates to Black preaching.

Chapter 2 examines the very origins of Black preaching. The chapter is titled “The Black Preaching Style: Its Origins, Language, Method, and Techniques.” The origins of the Black preaching style are discussed, with an analysis of the African oral tradition, the effects of slavery on the modes of communications among enslaved Africans, and the creation of the Black English dialect. The purpose of this chapter is to present a brief historic overview of the origins of the Black preaching style, an operative definition of Black preaching, and an observation of the literary and artistic

forms of the Black preaching style. A methodology for Black preaching is offered, including an expansive description of the various techniques of the Black preaching style (e.g., call and response, rhythm, alliteration, repetition, and musicality).

The third chapter raises the question and is aptly titled “Will It Preach?” This chapter considers the purpose of the homily in Catholic worship. Essential to the foundation of preaching is to examine the stages of homily preparation, homily development, and delivering the homily. I offer four objectives of homily preparation germane to an African American Catholic liturgical context. These rudiments of homily preparation are information, inspiration, motivation, and celebration. The structure and movements of a homily are addressed as they pertain to homily development. I highlight the value of lectionary preaching in Catholic worship and the advantage of having several biblical texts to consider. Although there are various homiletical methods that are useful, I delve into the expository and narrative preaching methods that are commonly used in the Black preaching tradition. It is vital to gain the skills necessary to effectively deliver a homily. I review the significance of finding and owning one’s voice as well as one’s preaching presence.

Evangelization is the focus of Chapter 4. This chapter, titled “The Black Preaching Style as an Effective Means of Inculturated Evangelization,” defines evangelization and its meaning and impact on the Roman Catholic Church and the African American community. Since the advent of his papacy, Pope Francis has emphasized the importance of preaching in the ministry of the Catholic Church. I assess the writings of Pope Francis on preaching by briefly considering his two apostolic encyclicals that uplift preaching as paramount to the work of evangelization, *The Joy of the Gospel* and *Rejoice and Be Glad*. I also appraise the import of “Word of God Sunday” promulgated by Pope Francis. The concept of “inculturated evangelization” is explored in depth. In what follows, I elucidate the importance of the role and image portrayed by the Catholic Church within the African American community. The image of the Catholic Church and its impact on any local community often reflect the dedication of the persons representing the Catholic Church who minister in that community. For the most part, people do not relate to abstract institutions. Rather, they identify with ministers working among them on matters important to them and their families. The same could be said for the place and purpose of preaching. African Americans generally seek a preached Word that will have a significant impact and relevance in their lives. They look to hear a powerfully preached message that leads them

to the Lord and assists them in their daily Christian journey. If this is not accomplished in the context of worship, they leave the worship service feeling unfed and frustrated. I put forth practical suggestions for effective inculturated evangelization in African American Catholic parishes, demonstrating proven ways in which the Black preaching style can lead to amazing growth in African American Catholic parishes. Conversely, I conclude this chapter without negating what not only hinders evangelization but has attempted and at times succeeded in destroying the faith of African American Catholics, namely racism, indifference, and injustice within the Church.

Chapter 5 queries a probing and provocative question, “Whom Shall I Send?” This chapter strives to achieve clarity regarding who can and who should preach. Although the Church is clear canonically that ordained male presbyters and deacons are the persons who are granted faculties to preach at Eucharistic liturgies by the local Ordinary, I briefly examine other occasions that the non-ordained are permitted to “break open the Word.” This chapter also explores the many and varied contributions that women offer as gift to the Church specifically in the African American Catholic community. This chapter culminates by highlighting lay preaching as an intrinsic value and an indubitable necessity within the African American Catholic community.

The sixth chapter addresses the transformative power of words and how they successfully effect societal change. The agency of the Black prophetic tradition is commonly embodied in preached sermons, pronouncements, declarations, and resolutions. The prophetic practices and actions of Black people seeking justice derive from the Black prophetic tradition. This study of rhetorical agency in the Black prophetic tradition, while not ground-breaking, is one that has not been considered by the Roman Catholic rhetorical or religious tradition. On several occasions, Pope Francis has acknowledged the transformative rhetoric of Martin Luther King Jr. I hope that this exposition of the Black prophetic tradition will cause it to be valued and utilized more widely within mainstream Catholicism.

Down Deep in My Soul, draws to a close with Chapter 7, “Toward an African American Catholic Theology of Preaching.” It establishes the common ground between a developing Catholic theology of preaching and the tenets of the Black preaching style. The essential tenets of the Black preaching style are complementary to the principles of effective Catholic preaching promoted by the United States Catholic Bishops. Topics addressed in this formulation of an African American Catholic theology of preaching include: The Holy Spirit and Preaching, Preaching and

Ecumenism, Preaching as Celebration, and Preaching for Liberation. An appropriate understanding regarding *true* liberation for African Americans cannot remain abstract or nebulous; no, it demands praxis. A familiar adage of Black folks is the admonition “to practice what you preach.” This is precisely what is expected in any tenable African American theology of preaching: preaching must make liberation and justice real for all God’s children. From the pulpits of African American Catholic parishes, issues of social injustice must be preached; avoidance or disregard of topics pertaining to the social maladies plaguing the African American community is antithetical to the Gospel. This chapter serves not only as a concise personal operative theology of preaching but is intended also to facilitate further discussion between Catholic theology and Black theology as they relate to preaching.

The aims of *Down Deep in My Soul: An African American Catholic Theology of Preaching* are met only when preachers ministering in African American Catholic settings effectively understand that they must preach in a way that is relevant and brings their listeners to a greater commitment to following Jesus and witnessing to others about it. Then, and only then, will the resounding cry come from some satisfied soul sitting in a pew, “You’ve told the story, preacher; you’ve told the story!”