

As a young (32) African American religious in formation for priesthood I wish to add another voice, with slightly different timbre and pitch to the growing number of young adult Christians “singing” out on this issue of liturgical reform. My initial attraction to Catholicism and later discernment about a ministerial vocation was greatly affected by wonderful “glimpses” of what it might mean to be black and Catholic. Nowhere is this nuanced and unique perspective more acutely felt than around the celebration of the Eucharist and the other sacraments. Black American religious culture is an extremely complex and rich tradition that has a set of principles all its own. The union of black and Catholic liturgical principles in the United States has had amazing fits and starts in the work of singular individuals now gone to glory like the work of liturgist Clarence Rivers and musician Leon Roberts. Yet today those capable of continuing that work seem unable to find ways to harness their collective capabilities so that the work might continue.

The so-called reform of the reform that liturgical conservatives call for is understandable given what so many on this great new blog have pointed out: mistakes have been made. The loss of beauty as a central principle could only naturally encourage a nostalgic gaze into the past with rose-colored glasses. The constant concern for an impoverished notion of making liturgy relevant seems to show its limits in a postmodern culture where nothing lasts forever and everything experiences a constant deconstructing critique. All the while, black Catholicism shrivels up and dies because nobody cares to offer this robust liturgical tradition to African Americans, while we – of our own doing – seem ever-intoxicated by the newest, coolest, loudest snake oil salesman.

Who will sing the songs of the Ancestors, the songs of Zion in a foreign land? There are a few. Those responsible for diocesan implementation of liturgical norms appear as inept at black inculturation as ever. Again and again you see white presiders (and now some black ones) continuously mistaking a black emphasis on relationality with informality. Black church culture has never been informal; it has always stressed the formality of ritual even when ritual was mistakenly condemned. Mimicking Pentacostals will get black Catholics nowhere. Conversely, the Catholic Church in America continues to have one of the greatest opportunities in the universal church; if it could just learn how to embrace its own blackness. And I mean that liturgically and theologically.

I am hopeful still. Perhaps this blog will take up the mantle and reopen the dialogue between black and Catholic traditions and find few a blue notes and jazz rifts to play, come Sunday.