

10th National Black Catholic Congress

Panel discussion on families stresses importance of faith

By Mark Ciemcioch
Staff Reporter

With so many African-Americans raised in single family households, one of the major themes of the 2007 National Black Catholic Congress was "The Future of the Black Family," discussed during a panel session at the convention held in Buffalo in early July.

Panel moderator Deacon Harold Burke Sivvers derided the perception that the media has on the modern black family.

"What does it mean to be a black Catholic family in today's society?" Deacon Sivvers said. "(Culture) floods us with pointless mistruths. There's no question that this secular culture is having an influence on our children. We have a society that places itself, not Jesus Christ, as the Absolute Truth."

The panel used the sacrament of marriage to focus its message on raising families from a Catholic perspective, for, as Deacon Silver noted, "The family is where Jesus learned the love and respect for his parents."

The married parent perspective came from Damon and Melanie Owens, Natural Family Planning coordinators from the Archdiocese of Newark. They discussed their own challenges in raising children, as well as the bettering the communications between parents.

"So goes the family, so goes marriage," Damon said. "Marriage was not developed by the Church or government. Recognize marriage as a personal choice."

Melanie announced that they are expecting their seventh child, as Damon outlined the steps that men need to take to become a better father and provider.

"In order to develop the next generation, in order to build a civilization of love, we need the stuff God has," Damon said. "This is not about being perfect, but realizing that perfection lies in God."

School counselor Cathy Green-Miner talked about the influence the world outside the home has on children, positive and negative. A native of New Orleans, Green-Miner said the entire community must take part in a child's development.

"Our own youth need our prayers, and they need them now," Green-Miner said. "They are being challenged by so many things in this day and time. It's all over the TV and radio, and parents are not there to teach them (otherwise)."

The speaker noted the combined effect of absent parents and negative imagery in the media causes hardships not only in the home, but the overall community. Green-Miner argued that the entire social environment – parents, relatives, neighbors and community essentials like religious life – all take part in raising children to be good people.

"Are we reaching out to the community? We have got to get off our butts. Jesus is the perfect example ... he hit the road running to do God's will, exactly what we're called to do."

Green-Miner was raised in a nine-child family by a single father – the mother died when Green-Miner was only 18 months old. Now with a husband and 10-year-old child of her own, Green-Miner believes that families can gain strength by including Catholicism in their lives.

"We have to raise (children) in the faith," she said.

As the director of Inner City Ministries for Hard as Nails Ministry, Brian



Photo by Patrick McPartland/Staff Photographer

Melanie Owens of the Archdiocese of Newark, N.J., listens as her husband, Damon, speaks during the general panel session titled, "The Future of the Black Family: A Catholic Perspective."

Greenfield offered the perspective from children and teens that they need adults to provide them with positive direction in the world. The Washington, D.C., resident spoke about the societal pressures

inflicted on the younger generation.

"As a young adult, I look to you to show me a better way," he said. "We all need each other, and we need the adults now more than ever."

Bishop Kmiec welcomes participants of Black Catholic Congress *(continued from page 1)*

of our African-American brothers and sisters today."

He then promoted the wonders of the Buffalo region like Niagara Falls and the Anchor Bar.

The bishop closed his welcome with a prayer from St. Theresa of Avila, which went, "Christ has no body, but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which He looks with compassion on this world."

Brenda Easley Webb, director of the Office of Black Ministry for the Diocese of Buffalo, also welcomed the crowd, recalling her trip to Washington, D.C. in 1987 for Congress VI, the first Black Catholic Congress in 93 years.

"We came back on fire. We came back to show our community, as well as ourselves, that it is OK to be black and Catholic," she said, drawing a huge af-

firming response from the crowd.

"For too long we have denied ourselves to be the exception to the world and the Church and it is not going to be acceptable. We said, 'There is something wrong with that picture.' We know Scripture does not say, 'We held are in this reality different.' We must prove them wrong. So thank you for coming to my community, to help me prove to those who ask me, 'Why are you Catholic? Why are you part of that racist Church and institution?' Because it is our presence through Jesus Christ that will lead to change."

She encouraged the participants, not to try and remember all that they see and learn over the four-day event, but to take back one thing that feeds you, so that they can act upon it.

Among the many bishops and clergy in attendance was Archbishop Henry J.



Auxiliary Bishop Joseph Perry of Chicago addresses the convention during the opening ceremonies.

Mansell of Hartford and formerly bishop of Buffalo.

In between workshops, Archbishop

Mansell spoke in a private interview recalling the invitation he put forth 10 years ago for the congress to come to Buffalo.

"We decided then that we would invite the Congress to come to Buffalo. We renewed that invitation in Chicago in 2002, and they accepted our invitation," he said. "The wonder of it is to see the Black Catholic experience across the United States. In Baltimore, there were Black Catholics from every one of the 50 states, and the continuing theme was 'Authentically Black, Authentically Catholic.'"

With a black population in Hartford similar to that in Buffalo, Archbishop Mansell hopes to inspire the 75 people who attended from his archdiocese.

"The great mission coming out of the black Catholic people is an inspiration for everybody."