



Pilgrims participate in a Sept. 17, 2022, Mass at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception National Shrine marking the 25th anniversary of the Our Mother of Africa Chapel. The pilgrimage and Mass were sponsored by the National Black Catholic Congress. (OSV News photo/Patrick Ryan, courtesy National Black Catholic Congress)

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During Black History Month in February, Catholics are being invited to register to attend this summer's National Black Catholic Congress, which over the years has made history of its own.

The National Black Catholic Congress XIII will be held July 20-23 at the Gaylord National Resort in National Harbor, Maryland, just outside the District of Columbia. It marks the third time the Washington area has hosted the gathering, and each of those times, key participants included noted figures in U.S. Catholic history.

St. Augustine Church in Washington -- the mother church for Black Catholics in the nation's capital, founded by free men and women of color in 1858 -- hosted the inaugural congress gathering, which opened on New Year's Day 1889 and included a Mass celebrated by Fr. Augustus Tolton, the first U.S. Catholic priest publicly known to be Black and whose cause for sainthood is now being considered. He was declared "Venerable" by Pope Francis in 2019.

Five of those congresses were held before the turn of that century, and then that movement was revived with National Black Catholic Congress VI held in 1987 on the campus of The Catholic University of America in Washington, where the speakers included Sr. Thea Bowman, a Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration and dynamic evangelist who died of cancer in 1990. Her sainthood cause also is underway. She has the title "Servant of God."

At the National Black Catholic Congress this summer, Cardinal Wilton D. Gregory -- the archbishop of Washington who was elevated to the College of Cardinals by Francis in 2020, becoming the first African American cardinal in history -- will give the opening keynote speech and celebrate the opening Mass.

On Feb. 16 from 6:30 to 7:30 p.m. (EST), the Office of Cultural Diversity and Outreach of the Archdiocese of Washington is hosting an online information session

on the 2023 congress, which has as its theme, "Write the Vision: A Prophetic Call to Thrive."

The virtual meeting will provide background, details and registration information about the congress, the largest national gathering in support of Black Catholic ministry that brings together lay people, clergy and religious for prayer, dialogue and discernment.

Wendi Williams, the executive director of that office, noted that the National Black Catholic Congress "coming to the Archdiocese of Washington is a coming home at an important time for Black Catholics, coming out of COVID, really sensing the needs and interests as they exist today, and how we plan to move the priorities forward."

She explained that "the congress movement is a mechanism to involve the lay faithful with the Black Catholic ministry. By attending, the lay faithful are involved with decisions and priorities that will become the pastoral plan (of the National Black Catholic Congress) for the next five years."

That national pastoral plan is integral to diocesan plans and parish outreach for Black Catholics, Williams said, noting that it exemplifies the synodality that Francis has encouraged in preparation for the world Synod of Bishops at the Vatican in October.

"The congress is an important lay movement that helps ensure that the voices of the lay faithful are heard and acted upon," Williams told the Catholic Standard, newspaper of the Washington Archdiocese. "It's about listening, dialogue, discernment and journeying together."

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Williams said that at the information session Feb. 16, the history of the congress movement will be shared, and people will learn "how each of us has an opportunity to be a part of it."

In preparation for the National Black Catholic Congress XIII, parish representatives from throughout the Archdiocese of Washington in November 2022 participated in a day of reflection at St. Joseph Parish in Largo, Maryland, to shape local recommendations for the national gathering.

Washington Auxiliary Bishop Roy E. Campbell Jr., who also is St. Joseph's pastor and president of the National Black Catholic Congress, welcomed those participants, saying, "We look at what we can do as a prophetic people for our communities, families and church."

The National Black Catholic Congress, which meets every five years, was held in Orlando, Florida, in 2017; in Indianapolis in 2012; in Buffalo, New York, in 2007; in Chicago in 2002; in Baltimore in 1997; in New Orleans in 1992; and in Washington,, in 1987. At each gathering, the congress renews its mission with a new pastoral plan.

Several key recommendations in the Pastoral Plan of Action from the most recent National Black Congress gathering in Orlando included: enabling Black Catholics to enhance their Africentric spirituality; increasing awareness of Black saints; creating opportunities for lay leadership in the church; identifying and eradicating racism; increasing prison ministry and outreach; providing support for those experiencing domestic violence; and increasing awareness of and working to eliminate human trafficking.

Other recommendations were: developing Africentric religious education programs; providing outreach to unchurched members of the community; creating more sustainable Catholic schools; promoting and supporting Black Catholic vocation; and having parishes and dioceses "address the urgent issue of disengaged Black Catholic youth."

Campbell said the pastoral plan devised in the upcoming congress will help Black Catholic parishes and parishes with Black Catholic members "address the vision of what we're called to do."

The early congresses and now the modern gatherings have had a goal of showing that "Black Catholics have an equal place in the church with any other Catholics," he said. The gathering, he said, can help Black Catholics persevere in their faith and show the gifts from God that they have to share.

Discussing the impact that the National Black Catholic Congress can have on individuals, parishes and dioceses, Campbell said, "We start with a change of our hearts and move to change the hearts of others, so we're all walking together. That's what we do in our parishes. Just like a family is the building block of society, the parishes are the building blocks of the church."

A promotional flier for the upcoming National Black Catholic Congress XIII invited people to "join with other Black Catholics and those who minister to Black Catholics in the United States for a celebration of our faith and culture."