

## AYITI

# Reflections on the role of Haitian Women in the Church

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A turnout of over 530 females in a retreat down the Cape last January was a proud success for the organizers. The retreatants applauded when the female clergy of the Grace Chapel based in Lexington welcomed an all women audience from 11 states and one country that weekend.

I did not find the numbers compelling because I respectively attended religious conferences organized for women and by women at Boston College and Harvard Divinity that numbered in the 1,000's or close to that. I was rather struck by the presence of approximately 100 Haitians and other Black evangelical women. I was bewildered because most Catholic educational gatherings, even institutions I attend except for those geared to a Black or an ethnic audience, one can literally count on their fingers the number of Blacks including women. Whether it's Catholic, mainline Protestants, or evangelicals, it's always instructional to meet for fellowship and share the Word of God. As a woman, it was reassuring to realize Haitian women are not alone" juggling" house chores, runny noses, intergenerational gaps, and myriad women's dilemma.

However, there were some striking activities that I did not expect in an evangelical setting. A hat contest was understood. I found the dancing party exceptionally intriguing. As a typical Haitian, I did not expect to see dancing to popular music like "Macarena" a component of a woman prayer retreat.

Many youth and young Adult Catholic conferences tend to include dances. I have seen a band play in Congress IX, a Black Catholic conference that is held every five years. Many Anglo Catholic churches hold dances on a regular basis for their teens and youth. But Haitian churches, be it Catholic or Protestant don't organize dances for their youth under the pretext that that they should abstain from those "worldly" customs. I disagree with half naked young women videos that BET and MTV project, but I believe anybody would enjoy neat steps like those at the Winterlude organized by Grace Chapel.

Given the number of Haitian and African American women, however, I found the prayers in this retreat too personal. They don't reflect this contemporary world reality. There was no praying for women victims of domestic violence. For the hundred or so Black women present, issues such as low educational achievement, high incarceration rates of Black males, AIDS, health care, Blacks on Blacks crimes, lack of recreational facilities and social programs for Black youth, summer jobs, and teen pregnancy could have been prayerfully addressed. As a follow up to this retreat, the participants could report to their respective churches and discuss some of the issues pertaining to

the Black reality in their small groups - a practice more common in the evangelical milieu than Catholic settings.

Though of mainline affiliation, I could relate with evangelical keynote speaker Cheri Fuller. She is an educator that had self-taught herself the Word of God by reading. Ms. Fuller wrote many spiritual books but doesn't hold a theological degree. Every single woman has skills, knowledge, and talents that they are not transmitting to the next generation. I hope the clergy could facilitate women sharing their talents to the larger community. Moreover, female Haitian lay ministers who attended that all women retreat were able to observe that in this country women are as much versed in Scriptures and can proclaim the word of God, hold doctorates and master's degrees in theology. In the Athens of America, Haitian Christians should be able to organize "One day" reflection and prayer gatherings and gradually weekend retreats and conferences.

However, to gradually get to a point that Haitian women could organize national or international conferences, a lot of learning and formation need to occur. In contrast to New York area Apostolate, Boston does not have a Pastoral training center for the laity. Thus reading is the key activity to learn.

Reading the Bible, the daily papers and religion section of major press, Haitian weeklies or monthlies, one's town and community papers are ways to keep learning. Joining a professional discussion line is also informative. Inviting guest speakers in the churches and going to conferences are other methods to stay abreast, given the changes that have occurred in the world including in the religious arena in the past four decades.

The Catholic church of Europe, United States, and Canada have experienced a reversed trend in theological preparation. A study field that was exclusively reserved to men going to the priesthood is now primarily comprised of Caucasian women. For instance in the United States, based on Georgetown University Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), in 2005, 75% of the laity in ministerial training were white women. The Black ratio was 4%, Hispanics, 17%, Asians, 2%, and others 2%. In 2002-2003, the number of laity in Catholic ministerial formation were 36,048 and 18,847 in 2,005. In terms of males, 3,308 were in the seminaries in 2005. Last year the Pilot reported about 595 priests were ordained for 64.8 million Catholics in the United States. CARA mentioned that 24 institutions did not report their number of enrollments for the 2,005 research. Also the close to 50% drop of females in ministerial training last year could be attributed to graduation from 3 to 4 year programs. Notwithstanding statistics, white Catholic females outnumber six to ten times the amount of males in priestly formation.

In many instances, the women are theologically better prepared and/or have more education than the priests. A vast majority of these women are entering theological and ministerial fields as second career professionals holding previous M.D's, JD's, PHD's, MBA's, or Master degrees. Close to 1/3 of theologians preparing the priests, writing books, and articles even about homilies are now women. As a Third World woman, I find this theological shift an interesting, yet concerning period. What is the western Catholic church going to be or do with more women in theological training than men? How will Haitian women who worship in the same Euro American churches "compete" spiritually and intellectually with those highly educated women? Though one can estimate up to a million the number of local urban Catholics from Brazil, Cape Verde, the Azores

Portugal, Haiti, Asia, the Pacific islands, the Caribbean and Latin American countries, these ethnic groups as those aforementioned CARA references demonstrate are under represented in theological/ministerial formation programs.

My recent experience with the evangelicals reaffirms that Haitians need to emphasize education in pastoral contexts as well. The Gospel is proclaimed according to the financial, cultural, educational, and spiritual milieu. Thus in the United States, the immigrant churches need to attract more professionals and utilize their skills. The Caucasian Catholic women though they will not be ordained will do the teaching, produce the scholarly works and continue to hold many diocesan administrative positions. Therefore within a few generations, Euro females will shape the Catholic church. In a section of the world with the finest theological institutions, Haitians and other ethnic women will remain in the margins even in the church due to lack of ministerial education and training that the clergy they depend upon are not providing.

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<http://www.potomitan.info/ayiti/lamour/women.php>

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