

# **Report: Black Catholic Young Adult Plan of Action**

The compiled recommendations borne from the national Black Catholic young adult gathering held this fall in New Orleans.

December 9, 2023

In January 2019, the Black bishops of the United States convened a meeting of Black Catholic leaders from around the country in New Orleans, Louisiana. The purpose of the gathering was to see how various Black Catholic organizations from around the country could collaborate better to advance the needs of the Black Catholic community. This gathering was cosponsored by the Black and Indian Mission Office as well as the National Black Catholic Congress.

Following this gathering, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) coordinated the “Journeying Together” initiative, in which young adults from various cultural families gathered to share their perspectives and concerns as a way to educate the USCCB, and other cultural groups, on the needs of their generation in the Church.

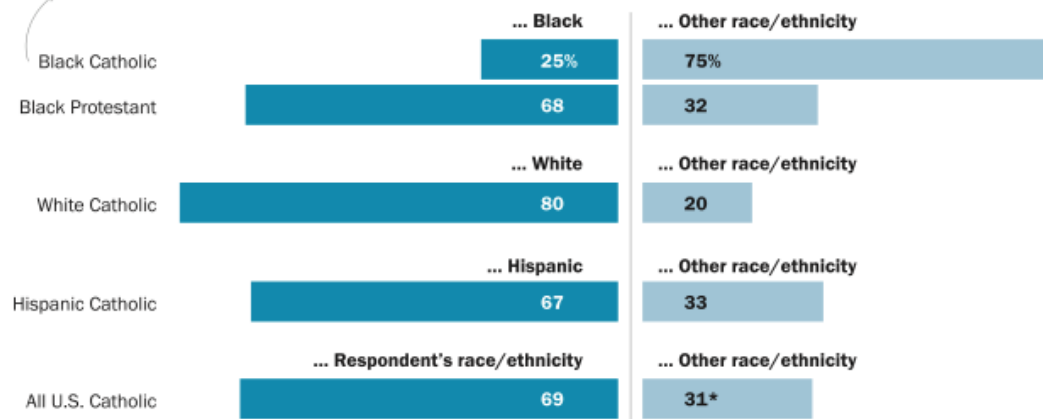
Very noticeable at both of these gatherings was the lack of participation from Black (specifically African-American) Catholic young adults aged 18-40. This demographic has been in a mass exodus from the Church for many years for a variety of reasons. During the Black Catholic leaders’ meeting, the struggle to retain Black youth and young adults was a topic brought up by the various organizations as a cautionary tale concerning the relevance and existence of these organizations, including Black parishes, in the future. During the “Journeying Together” process, there was a struggle to not only locate but also to encourage Black Catholic young adults to participate.

The unfortunate reality is that the Church never really hears the “truth” about what is going on with this demographic because they have been ignored, hurt, or do not see the Church as relevant in the reality they live in as Black, and specifically African American, young adults. Also, when these young adults do take the risk of becoming involved, they eventually leave again because, when they challenge the Church, they are seen as hypocritical, and thus ignored, silenced, or reprimanded by others around them. We, the Church, only tend to hear from the ones who are already committed to the faith, which does not represent the majority of the young African-American demographic. Thus, outcomes are skewed, inaccurate, or even irrelevant to the ministry the Church could be doing with this demographic.

## **Statistics from Pew Research:**

## Relatively few Black Catholic churchgoers worship where most attendees are Black

% of \_\_\_ church attenders who typically attend a parish/church where most other attendees are ...



Note: Based on those who attend religious services at least a few times a year. All respondents who identify as Black – including those who also identify as another race, or as Hispanic – are categorized as Black. Respondents in all other categories only include those who do not also identify as Black. The “other race/ethnicity” column includes those who say no one racial group makes up a majority of their congregation and those who say most people in their congregation have a race/ethnicity other than White, Black, Hispanic or Asian American, as well as those who decline to answer the question about the racial composition of their parish.

\*Includes 2% of U.S. Catholic Mass attenders who describe their own race as “mixed” or as something other than White, Black, Asian American or Hispanic.

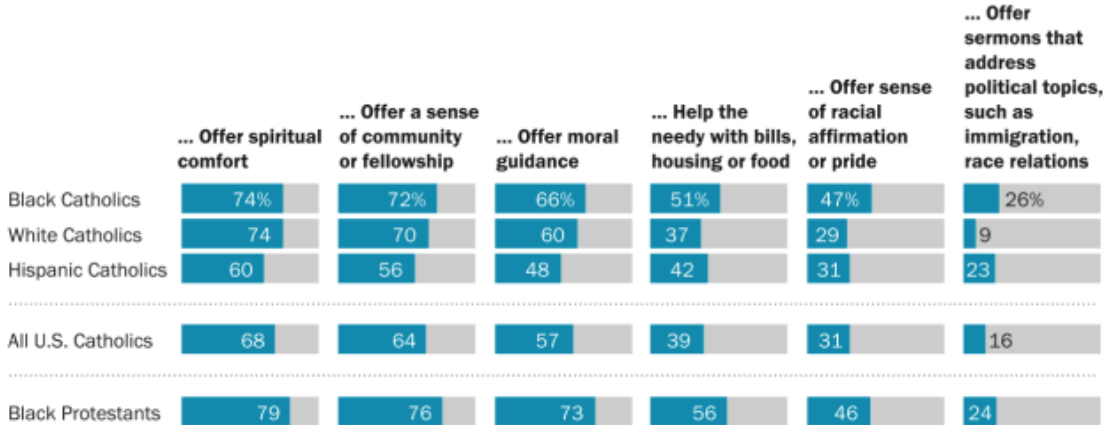
Source: Survey conducted Nov. 19, 2019-June 3, 2020, among U.S. adults.

“Black Catholics in America”

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## Black Catholics more inclined than White and Hispanic Catholics to say churches should offer a sense of racial affirmation

% of \_\_\_ who say it is essential for churches to ...



Note: All respondents who identify as Black – including those who also identify as another race, or as Hispanic – are categorized as Black. Respondents in all other categories only include those who do not also identify as Black.

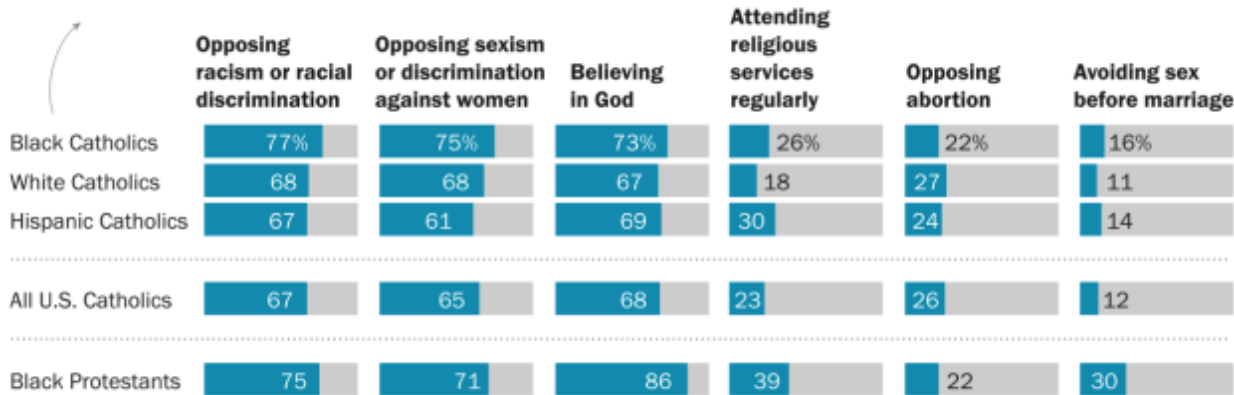
Source: Survey conducted Nov. 19, 2019-June 3, 2020, among U.S. adults.

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## Three-quarters of Black Catholics say opposing racism is essential to their faith

% of \_\_\_ who say each of the following is essential to what being Christian means to them



Note: All respondents who identify as Black – including those who also identify as another race, or as Hispanic – are categorized as Black.

Respondents in all other categories only include those who do not also identify as Black.

Source: Survey conducted Nov. 19, 2019-June 3, 2020, among U.S. adults.

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### Overall, Black Catholics are younger than White Catholics but older than Hispanic Catholics

	Black Catholics	White Catholics	Hispanic Catholics	All U.S. Catholics	Black Protestants
% who are ages...	%	%	%	%	%
<b>NET Under 50</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>48</b>
18-29	17	7	30	17	15
30-49	35	23	41	31	33
<b>NET 50 or older</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>52</b>
50-64	26	33	19	27	31
65+	21	36	9	24	21
% who live in the...					
Northeast	29	34	11	25	14
Midwest	11	28	8	20	17
South	45	24	44	32	60
West	15	13	37	23	9

Note: All respondents who identify as Black – including those who also identify as another race, or as Hispanic – are categorized as Black. Respondents in all other categories only include those who do not also identify as Black. Those who did not answer the question about their age are not shown.

Source: Data for Black Catholics and Black Protestants are from a survey conducted Nov. 19, 2019-June 3, 2020, among U.S. adults. All other figures based on U.S. adults are from a survey conducted Aug. 3-16, 2020.

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### Upwards of nine-in-ten Black Catholics say they would prioritize welcoming atmosphere, inspiring sermons if looking for a new congregation

Among \_\_\_\_, % who say that each of the following would be at least somewhat important if they were looking for a new congregation

	Black Catholics	White Catholics	Hispanic Catholics	All U.S. Catholics	Black Protestants
	%	%	%	%	%
The sermons are inspiring	94	91	85	89	95
The congregation is welcoming	93	94	87	91	96
Most other attendees share your race or ethnicity	32	17	24	20	36
Most senior religious leaders share your race or ethnicity	28	13	23	18	37

Note: All respondents who identify as Black – including those who also identify as another race, or as Hispanic – are categorized as Black. Respondents in all other categories only include those who do not also identify as Black.

Source: Survey conducted Nov. 19, 2019-June 3, 2020, among U.S. adults.

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## Black Catholics in America

Most Black Catholic churchgoers are racial minorities in their congregations, unlike White and Hispanic Catholics – and Black Protestants

Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project Jeff Diamant, Besheer Mohamed and Joshua Alvarado

After months of planning that began in the spring of this year, Black Catholic young adults from around the country gathered in New Orleans from November 16-19, 2023, representing various demographics of the 18-40 age range so that we could get diverse

perspectives (single, married, divorced, parents, employed, underemployed, unemployed, students, lapsed, involved in ministry).

During this gathering at Xavier University of Louisiana, there were many hours of reflection on what it means to be Black and Catholic in 2023, along with the realities that Black Catholic young adults face in today's world. There were many robust discussions and debates on what the Church is doing correctly and incorrectly to connect with this demographic. The fruit of this time together is the following document.

## **Top 10 issues within the U.S. Catholic Church**

### **1. No representation**

**Audience:** USCCB, dioceses, Catholic organizations

**What is the problem?** Lack of Black people in leadership, communication, and in media/art.

**Why is it important to have?** Black people need to see themselves represented so that they feel more welcome, in the Church.

**What is the plan?** Include black people in leadership and design teams, dioceses, and media organizations. Hire qualified Black candidates who understand diversity issues.

**Timeline:** 1 year to ongoing

### **2. Too much focus on charity and not enough on social justice**

**Audience:** USCCB, dioceses, parishes, Catholic organizations

**What is the problem?** Not doing enough social justice work in the community.

**Why is this important to have?** Social justice issues take a backseat but they are important to our community's growth.

**What is the plan?** Defining the difference between social justice and charity. Defining social justice. Creating task forces through the [Catholic Campaign for Human Development](#), and implementing in the diocese what they are already doing. Teach comprehensive Catholic social teaching.

**Timeline:** 1-5 years

### **3. Not talking about racism and White supremacy**

**Audience:** USCCB, dioceses, Catholic organizations

**What is the problem?** Marginalized people do not feel seen or heard in the Church. Sweeping issues under the rug to avoid uncomfortable conversations because of White fragility.

**Why is this important?** In order to heal the church, you have to treat the root of the injury to prevent further injuries.

**What is the plan?** Every diocese should have true faith-based diversity training about White supremacy's impact. Have a progressive, robust campaign, and a year of prayer for racial harmony.

**Timeline: 3-5 years**

#### **4. Fear of progress**

**Audience:** USCCB, dioceses, parishes, Catholic organizations.

**What is the problem?** Clinging to Eurocentric tradition is precluding the possibility of better systems and ideas.

**Why is this important?** In order for the Church to grow and do its mission, it must adapt.

**What is the plan?** Focus on the teaching of Jesus Christ and go by the spirit of the law rather than the letter of the law. Putting more diverse/marginalized people in leadership who are actually aligned with Pope Francis' vision for the church.

**Timeline: Immediate**

#### **5. Political polarization and Culture Wars**

**Audience:** USCCB, dioceses, parishes, Catholic organizations

**What is the problem:** The Church has been turned into a battleground for our vote/civic duty.

**Why is it important?** Politics is influencing church life rather than Church influencing political life.

**What is the plan?** Further edit the USCCB's "Faithful Citizenship" document to include relevant issues outside of abortion. Provide better catechesis.

**Timeline: Ongoing**

#### **6. Lack of cultural expressions**

**Audience:** USCCB, dioceses, parishes, Catholic organizations.

**What is the problem?** European Americans believe their cultural expression is the standard.

**Why is this important:** Because non-European Americans' cultural expressions are viewed as inferior or heretical. We want to feel that our culture is respected, authentic, and accepted.

**What is the plan?** Diversify liturgical expressions at national conferences, cathedrals, and diocesan cathedrals. Instructions and teaching on why cultures express themselves as they do.

**Timeline: 1-2 years**

## **7. Acknowledging the Church's role in segregation, racism, etc.**

**Audience:** USCCB, dioceses, parishes, religious institutions

**What is the problem?** There is a lack of acknowledgment concerning the Church's complicity in America's original sin. Additionally, the efforts to rectify it continue to cause harm and destruction.

**Why is it important?** In order to heal and grow we need to know what we're growing from. The U.S. Catholic Church must always promote justice and human dignity through teaching that will help increase morality.

**What is the plan?** Teaching Black history in schools and church events. Encourage Church leadership to teach on history, to apologize and heal, and to provide better religious education. Remove slaveholders' names off of buildings and other institutions.

**Timeline: 1-2 years**

## **8. Too focused on tradition instead of missions**

**Audience:** USCCB, dioceses, religious orders/communities

**What is the problem?** When overly focused on tradition, we take energy, time, and resources away from the actual mission of the Church.

**Why is this important?** We lose people, particularly young Black people, and we continue to create golden calves and divisions.

**What is the plan?** To be mission-focused, to know the mission, and to be welcoming and administer the sacraments. Get young, Black, open-minded people into leadership positions to make changes.

**Timeline: Immediately**

## **9. Lack of accountability/Clericalism**

**Audience:** USCCB, dioceses, religious orders/communities

**What is the problem?** People have lost their faith and trust in the Church due to the lack of accountability in the actions of the clergy.

**Why is it important?** It erodes unity. Accountability maintains a mission focus. It allows for people to have a safe space.

**What is the plan?** Laypeople should be empowered to report consecrated religious and ordained individuals who promote harmful ideologies contrary to Catholic teachings, such as White

nationalism, racism, discrimination, and opposition to the teachings of Pope Francis. Transparency and accountability are key to rebuilding and renewing trust between the Church and the laity.

**Timeline: Immediate and ongoing**

## **10. Lack of investment in education**

**Audience:** USCCB, dioceses, religious orders/communities

**What is the problem?** There are educational deserts where Catholic schools were shut down. This causes a major problem for some students. Catholic schools are also not affordable to those who need them the most.

**Why is this important?** The lack of investment in education in Black communities ultimately leads to the closing of Black Catholic schools, which leads to the closing of Black Catholic parishes and decreased evangelization.

**What is the plan?** Financial investments in Black neighborhoods with Catholic schools, increasing scholarships to attend Catholic schools, and investments in trade skills.

**Timeline: Immediate and ongoing**

## **Top 10 issues within the Black Catholic community**

### **1. Gerontocracy**

**Audience:** Black Catholic parishes and national organizations

**Why is it important?** Representation is important. Everyone wants to feel like their needs are met. There is a need to encourage real synodality. The next generation needs to be entrusted with leadership.

**What is the plan?** Term limits on ministry leadership and have co-leads to promote mentorship. Advise national organizations to hire younger individuals with a focus on collaboration and partnerships.

**Timeline: 1-5 years**

### **2. LGBTQ+ issues**

**Audience:** Black Catholic parishes and national organizations

**Why is it important?** Lack of representation and acceptance puts lives and souls at risk. People feel unwelcomed.

**What is the plan?** Listening to Pope Francis; incorporating LGBTQ+ ministries at Black parishes; educating parishioners about the community; ongoing dialogue with Black, queer Catholics.

**Timeline: 1-5 years**

### **3. Cliques/Bullying/Ostracizing**

**Audience:** Black Catholic parishes and national organizations

**What is the problem?** Bullying, gossiping, and division in the Church. The people that challenge the status quo get shunned, blackballed, or attacked.

**Why is it important?** Church bullying casts more people out than Church teachings.

**What is the plan?** Anti-harassment and bullying training along with community relations training at the parish level. Encourage accountability amongst leadership.

**Timeline: Ongoing**

### **4. Not enough Black American priests**

**Audience:** Black Catholic parishes/institutions and vocation departments

**Why is it important?** Black American priests understand the history, expressions, and culture of the Black community. Seeing representation on the altar helps with representation in leadership and community.

**What is the plan?** Invite religious orders to different parishes to give advice regarding vocations. Pressure vocation directors, priests, and laity to encourage vocations from the Black Catholic community. Give those who enter vocations the opportunity to work in that community. Give funding to those entering vocations. Provide education on religious life and priesthood, and safe spaces in seminaries and religious institutions. Outreach from National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus. Bias training in seminaries.

**Timeline: Ongoing**

### **5. Need for mentoring and leadership priorities**

**Audience:** Parishes and Black Catholic organizations.

**Why is it important:** To encourage the passing of the torch, to fix gerontocracy issues, and to allow a fresh breath of the Holy Spirit to enter.

**What is the plan?** Retreats, lock-ins, and mentorship programs that are not about controlling but rather fixing the problems. Advise national organizations to hire younger individuals with a focus on collaborations and partnerships. Have national organizations create young adult advisory boards.

**Timeline: Ongoing**

### **6. Mental Health Stigma**

*\*There is already a national initiative approved by the U.S. bishops. We need to call on national orgs to get this information out to Black Catholics.*

**Audience:** Parishes and national organizations

**Why is this important:** To save lives and to avoid burnout, especially among clergy, religious, and laity. To provide a space for pastoral care. To promote wholeness in the Church.

**What is the plan?** Trained crisis teams at each church. Make people aware of community behavioral health resources. Mental health resource awareness for parishioners. Show vulnerability. Have social workers come in for health fairs, create mental health ministries at parishes, and maintain robust campaigns.

**Timeline: Ongoing**

## **7. Worldly priorities**

**Audience:** The Black Catholic community overall (BCC)

**What is the problem?** Low Mass attendance, community involvement, and families not prioritizing church.

**Why is this important?** Loss of moral compass and community/church involvement.

**What is the plan?** Better religious education and education on why the Church is important and how worldly priorities provide only temporary satisfaction (Proverbs 3:5-8). Parental formation. Workshops on how to raise the future Church and on Christianity. Retreats. Give God one hour a week.

**Timeline: Ongoing**

## **8. Rejection of Culture**

**Audience:** BCC

**What is the problem:** Whitewashing and not being inclusive of various forms of worship. Self-hate.

**Why is this important:** Whiteness/European culture does not equal holiness.

**What is the plan:** Education about cultural expressions. Promote liturgical training. Attend the Lyke Conference and Institute for Black Catholic Studies to learn about liturgy and theology from a Black Catholic perspective.

**Timeline: Ongoing**

## **9. Lack of religious education and formation**

**Audience:** BCC and national organizations

**What is the problem?** Young adults are leaving because they have not been properly catechized.

**Why is this important?** A lot of misinformation exists and people are leaving because they don't understand what we believe.

**What is the plan?** Training, making use of the Catechetical Institute, and promoting formation in the Catechism.

**Timeline:** Ongoing

## **10. Lack of Community Engagement**

**Audience:** Black parishes and national organizations

**What is the problem?** Parishes aren't involved in the communities they're in.

**Why is this important?** We need to draw circles of inclusion and not of exclusion. Pope Francis says we need to go to the marginalized. We need to be living out Catholic social teaching.

**What is the plan?** Promoting Catholic Social teaching and supporting the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD). Our national organizations need to share this information and the Black Catholic community needs to *teach* this information.

**Timeline:** Immediate and ongoing

## **Ideal qualities of allies for this work**

(Representatives at parishes and from national organizations)

- **Non-racist Catholic in good standing**
- **Accepting/open-minded, good listener**
- **Active in ministry**
- **History of working with Black Catholic young adults (BCYAs) within the last 10 years, with proven results**
- **Keeping the needs of the BCYAs as a priority**
- **Track record of leadership abilities/qualities, including effective communication of priorities**
- **Dedicated to social justice issues**
- **Alignment with Pope Francis's priorities for the Church**

- **Suggested young adult or someone with the above qualifications**
  - **Non-black orgs that have a strong minority outreach and representation in leadership**
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The group that gathered in New Orleans is hoping this document will serve as a call to action for the Church as a whole, and for the Black Catholic Community, to address the ever-increasing reality of Black Catholic youth and young adults' disaffiliation from the Catholic Church. This is not an attack, but a reality check. The hope is that institutions and organizations will take a hard look at themselves after reading this document, and use the suggestions/plans under each section to create effective change to address this reality.

Although the young people involved in formulating this document represented different walks of life, and were in various positions on their faith journey, everyone shared a passion for a Church wherein Black Catholic young adults are genuinely welcomed and accepted as their authentic selves.

### ***Main Planning Committee***

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### ***Sponsored by***

*The Black and Indian Mission Office*

*Knights of Peter Claver and Ladies Auxiliary*

*National Conversation On Shared Parish Life*

*gathering grant*

*The Catholic Campaign for Human Development*

*Xavier University of Louisiana's Campus Ministry*

*The Office of Black Catholic Ministries,*

*Archdiocese of New Orleans*

*he Office of Black Catholic Ministries, Archdiocese of  
New Orleans*

<https://www.blackcatholicmessenger.org/black-catholic-young-adult-plan-of-action/?ref=black-catholic-messenger-newsletter>