

Catholicism and African Heritage

Mrs. Rita Nzinga – St. Agnes Parishioner

As a person of African descent who practices as closely as possible the traditions of my African ancestors passed down through my line, Catholicism is my religion of choice. Being Catholic in many ways is very similar to being African.

In traditional African culture, prior to our being stolen there was structure, ritual, and order. Any Catholic, of any ethnic origin can testify to the structure of our faith. I personally find the structure and guidelines spiritually comforting. And for those that may connect the usage of the word *ritual* to pagan, be at ease. If you've ever attended a wedding, baptism or naming ceremony...you've participated in a ritual.

The sacraments alone provide a life-long connectivity to God. You begin your life with baptism, practicing, and participating in the prepared course of the sacraments until life ends with the anointing of the sick, the last of the seven sacraments. As a parent of a child with chronic, sometimes life-threatening health issues, I have found both immeasurable and divine consolation in the anointing of the sick.

Catholicism, as a religion brings great pageantry and theater to Christianity. And there should indeed be great joy and celebration at all times for the knowledge that we serve a risen Lord. Catholicism is also a global faith. You will find practicing Catholics in every nation in the world, praying in every language. On the continent alone petitions are placed daily in dozens of tribal dialects.

There have been times as an individual of African descent that I felt *the Beatitudes* were written with the foreknowledge that we as a race would be both stolen and enslaved.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven (*the theft*).

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted (*the middle passages*).

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth (*slavery*).

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied (*Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Fredrick Douglas*).

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy (*Rev. George W. Lee, Septima Clark and Mack Parker*).

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God (*Denise McNair, Addie Mae Collins, Carole Robertson and Cynthia Wesley*).

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the Children of God (*Dr. Martin Luther king, Jr., Myrlie Evers and E. D. Nixon*).

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven (*Emmett Till, Medgar Evers and James Chaney*).

My faith and love of God is inclusive of being a person of African descent, for our struggles have been numerous and great. We, as a people have endured much to practice Catholicism and be called Christians. And lest we never forget that Christianity was practiced on the continent prior to the introduction of Islam.

Office of African American Catholic Ministries