

African American Catholic Youth Congress

St. Thomas More Catholic High School
Lafayette, LA

Saturday, November 19, 2022
8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.



Teenagers, parishioners and lay ministers combine a passion for Jesus, Church and community

– *Picture and article are excerpts from the 2015 Catholic Extension Society Magazine*– One of the most courageous stories within the U.S. Catholic Church is that of African-American Catholics—a story of perseverance, joy and hope. For years, black people felt invisible and not fully appreciated in the Church. But instead of leaving, they cultivated a faith that has fueled strength, freedom and exuberance. How did African Americans persevere? “People believed in the real presence of God in the Catholic Church,” said Stephanie Bernard, Director of both Black Catholic Ministry and the Office of Justice and Peace in the Diocese of Lafayette, Louisiana. “They stayed for the Eucharist.”

Fostering faith among peers the African American Catholic Youth Congress is a faith gathering. This one day event attracts over 600 teens—ages 13-18 and from 33 parishes—for an opportunity to stop and reflect on the direction of their lives and to build relationships with their peers. Many teens come from rural areas where there is no formal youth ministry, and this event may be the only time during the year they will be with other Catholic, African-American youth, talking about matters of faith.

The Congress features speakers, workshops, skits and a Mass celebrated by the Bishop, vested in a Kente cloth chasuble and stole. The Congress uses a peer-on peer ministry model. Most of the facilitators are young. To prepare, they meet weekly, on Sundays until the event in November, planning workshops and building leadership skills. For last November’s Congress, the facilitators elected Dominique Williams as Chairperson and Derek Henry as co-chair. Dominique participates in football, wrestling and track and field. He’s a member of the National Honor Society and student council. Yet, he has time for his faith. He’s the state president for Louisiana’s junior division of Knights of Peter Claver and a lector at his parish, St. Anthony’s. Faith is at the heart of everything he does.

What’s the purpose of the Congress? “Youth are going through so much,” Dominique explained. “We need faith.” “People struggle with bad decisions, I find myself doing that less and less as my faith grows,” he said. “This is a chance to talk about being black Catholics and express ourselves. There are stigmas that come with being black and being Catholic, so when kids can overcome those stigmas and give everything they have to God and community, these kids can do things they thought impossible. They become the next leaders of America.” “Teens need to know what’s going on in the Catholic Church,” Derek added. How do they share these ideas with others? “You give up yourself, so they trust you and the walls come down,” Dominique said. “For example, the bullying workshop is a large, popular one. You get down to bare bones and say—Have you been bullied? I have. Have you bullied? I have. You expose yourself to them so they expose themselves back.” There’s a workshop called “Black Educated Teens.” “Sometimes kids, particularly boys, don’t want to excel in school,” he said. “We show them it’s cool to go to school, and you should not be ashamed or let people put you in a box.”

