Black Catholics have had an arduous history in the Diocese of Pittsburgh. In many ways, the history of Black Catholics in the greater Pittsburgh region mirrors the history and struggles of the larger African American community and Black Catholics nationally. For in fact, both Black Catholics and Black Protestants, share the same history, have faced the same prejudices and discrimination, and have the same struggles. We are brothers and sisters in every way, overwhelmingly Christian, though we have chosen different religious paths. Therefore, as we reflect on the topic of Black Catholic endurance and survival in Pittsburgh, we must be cognizant that Black Catholics have a multifaceted history and experience, unique and particular within the larger experience of Black America and in the Catholic Church.

I have divided the presentation into three sections:
1. An overview of the history of Black Catholics in the Diocese of Pittsburgh and the placement of this history within a national context;
2. The National Black Catholic Lay Congresses;

Black Catholics in the Diocese of Pittsburgh

Through the initiative of Bishop Michael O’Connor, who later founded St. Francis Xavier church in Baltimore, the Chapel of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin for Negroes was founded in 1844 in the Diocese of Pittsburgh. The chapel was a rented building located in downtown Pittsburgh. The diocesan Archives and Record Center has limited information about this first attempt at the establishment of a pre-Civil War parish for Black Catholics. While initially successful, the congregation dwindled within a year due to the jealousy and rivalry of other ministers. There were those who claimed that the pastor, Fr. Robert Wilson, intended to sell the parishioners into slavery. The chapel, founded by Bishop O’Connor two decades before the Civil War and the end of slavery, was forced to close its doors and evangelization among Black Catholics ended.

Within a year of his ordination as bishop of Pittsburgh and the day after the blessing of the chapel, Bishop O’Connor left Pittsburgh to fulfill his dream of becoming a Jesuit. What was it about this pioneer, the bishop of a newly created diocese, that caused him to reach out to Blacks by establishing the first Black Church for them, and by assigning a pastor at a time when few bishops in the United States dared risk such a move? Did he have a special empathy towards Blacks? Did he abhor slavery and its consequences? What did he see as the central role of the church or in the salvation of Blacks? Would the outcome of this first attempt at pastoral care to Blacks have been different if he had remained in Pittsburgh? I will leave these questions to you and future historians.

The second attempt to evangelize among African Americans in Pittsburgh was in 1867 with the establishment of St. Joseph Church in the Hill District under Bishop Michael Domenec. Land was purchased and a building was erected that also served as a school staffed by the Sisters of Mercy. For nine years, the church struggled as a mission of St. Brigid Parish. However, debt, the poverty of its members and a national crisis—the 5-year economic depression caused by the failure of the Jay Cooke investment banks—plagued the church. Unable to financially sustain itself, the church closed in 1873.

Interestingly, St. Joseph Church was founded after the Second Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1866. Fr. Cyprian Davis in Black Catholics in the United States chronicles this important gathering of bishops in the United States. According to Davis, the bishops at the end of the Civil War were encouraged by Archbishop Martin Spalding of Baltimore to care for the spiritual
needs of the emancipated slaves. In a letter to Archbishop McCloskey of New York, Spalding said about the Second Plenary Council, "I think it precisely the most urgent duty of all to discuss the future status of the Negro. Four million of these unfortunate are thrown on our charity. . . . It is golden opportunity for reaping a harvest of souls, which neglected may not return." What an ominous and prophetic warning that went unheeded.

The last topic on the Council's agenda was the evangelization of Blacks. The fact that it was addressed at the close of the Council in an extraordinary session indicates that it was not a popular or easy topic. The final decision by the bishops gathered was that each bishop with Blacks in his diocese should decide if and how to evangelize them. There was to be no national directive or ecclesial person to coordinate these efforts. This lack of zeal and commitment, as compared to the evangelization efforts by Protestant churches, was to have a lasting legacy upon the Catholic Church in America, resulting in low numbers of Blacks coming into the Church. At the end of the Civil War, the Catholic Church in America had an opportunity to evangelize among the freed slaves, but chose to remain silent. In Pittsburgh, for whatever his reasons, Bishop Domenec reached out to Black Catholics, although those efforts failed.

Twenty-four years after the end of the Civil War, Black Catholics gathered for the first of several Black Catholic Lay Congresses. The first, held in Baltimore, January 1-4, 1889, was conceived by Daniel Rudd, a leading Black Catholic during that era. In his newspaper, American Catholic Tribune, Rudd expressed his belief that the Catholic Church was the greatest hope for American Blacks. Davis quotes Rudd who wrote, "There is an awakening among some people to the fact that the Catholic Church is not only a warm and true friend to the Colored people, but is absolutely impartial in recognizing them as the equals of all and any of the other nations and races of men before her altars. Whether priest or laymen they are equals, all within the fold." Without having a theology degree, perhaps Rudd understood the theology and sacramentality of the Eucharist better than the ordained within the Church whose responsibility it was to preach and model this equality before the altar.

A delegation from Pittsburgh attended the 1889 Black Catholic Lay Congress, including Fr. Patrick McDermott, C.S.Sp., a member of the Holy Ghost Fathers (Spiritans) at Duquesne University. Fr. McDermott is listed as having addressed the congress. What is significant is that a year before the congress, Fr. McDermott met with Black Catholics in Pittsburgh to organize a mission and school for them in the diocese. This was the third attempt to form a community of Black Catholics. The new church, St. Benedict the Moor, still exists today. It was established in the Hill District of Pittsburgh on Helmman Street, and was blessed on July 28, 1889, seven months after the first Congress. Along with the Sisters of Mercy, Katharine Drexel, who lived at the Sisters' convent in the Hill, assisted at the school and parish mission. Shortly after the dedication of St. Benedict the Moor Parish, Fr. McDermott left Pittsburgh to become the pastor at a newly formed mission for Black Catholics that had been given to the Holy Ghost Fathers in Philadelphia. While in Philadelphia, Fr. McDermott attended the third Black Catholic Congress convened in that city from January 5-7, 1892.

Finally, there was a place in the Diocese of Pittsburgh where Black Catholics could worship and evangelize. St. Benedict the Moor included a school. Then, like today, the school educated and shared the Catholic faith with children who were mostly not Catholic. For about a decade, between 1895 and 1906, the growth of the parish declined. One of the contributing factors was the high turnover of pastors assigned to the parish. There were six Holy Ghost pastors during this time, most of whom were temporarily assigned while recuperating from various illnesses and diseases contracted while on assignments in Africa with the Spiritan Order.

A second factor was financial instability. Fr. Francis Xavier Lichtenberger, pastor from 1904 to 1906, was able to raise funds that helped to revitalize the parish. This, however, was short lived when the newly appointed Bishop Regis Canevin closed the parish to White parishioners. He admonished the 200 parishioners to become financially self-sufficient. Given the poverty of the parishioners and most African Americans in Pittsburgh, this was an insurmountable task. The subtle and overt racism practiced in the Pittsburgh region at that time added to the financial difficulty of African Americans. Another factor was that most of the parishioners were scattered throughout the city of Pittsburgh.
From 1906 to 1918, the parish was placed under the supervision of the diocese and the parish began to grow. Only one pastor, Fr. Haggerty, was assigned during these twelve years that saw tremendous vitality and growth with a membership of 500. The parish was returned to the Holy Ghost Fathers. They assigned Fr. William Stadelman, who was the pastor for ten years until his death. During his tenure as pastor, Fr. Stadelman continued to focus on the spiritual growth of the parish, although the membership was still approximately 500 persons. A reason cited for the lack of membership growth was that many Black Catholics were forced to leave Pittsburgh in search of better employment.

Between 1902 and our contemporary period, several events have affected Black Catholics in Pittsburgh. These included the back and forth supervision of St. Benedict the Moor by the Holy Ghost Fathers and the Diocese of Pittsburgh; a rapid succession of pastors; the Great Depression; the Civil Rights Movement; parish financial instability; racism in the Church and society; the young leaving for better economic and social opportunities; and demographic changes in the Hill District brought about by the demolishing of the lower Hill for urban renewal. Yet the parish remains today, having been located in several buildings in the Hill District since 1889.

National Black Catholic Lay Congresses
A review of the five lay congresses for Black Catholics in the late 19th century and their resurgence in the later 20th century may offer some insights into the issues and concerns of Black Catholics in Pittsburgh. Between 1889 and 1894, five congresses were convened. There were several initiatives that these congresses focused on for Black Catholics, and that they called to the attention of the Church in the United States. One issue was the education of Black youth, both Catholics and non-Catholics. Education was seen as a vital resource of evangelization. Many in the Black community came into the Catholic Church through the Catholic school system. Black Catholics believed that religious education and a moral foundation would foster strong Catholic families and help to reshape the moral character of African Americans. They called for vocations and trade schools to provide skilled training, believing that both academic and vocational education were intrinsically tied to the economic security necessary for Blacks in order to have a better standard of living.

Racism was another issue that these five congresses addressed. They discussed the prejudice and discrimination to which Blacks were subjected. This, they believed, hindered evangelization efforts among Blacks who did not see a difference between the racism in the Catholic Church and that of the general society. In addition, they felt that the Church was slow and often silent in vigorously denouncing racism. They raised concerns about the discrimination towards Black men and women seeking religious vocations, and the lack of financial resources for evangelization, education, and the spiritual care of Blacks.

Another area of racist discrimination cited was the housing industry whereby real estate agents selectively rented substandard properties to Blacks, or offered only poorly constructed homes in less desirable neighborhoods. As now, they spoke out against the unjust legal systems that gave young Black men longer prison sentences for minor offenses. Once released from prison, these men faced numerous problems in finding employment, housing, and stability in the community. Tied to the concerns and issues of the five early congresses was the understanding that the dismal economic picture for

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Blacks was steeped in racism. They wanted the Church to encourage labor and trade unions, many of which had strong Catholic connections, to employ Blacks and to end the discrimination in membership to the unions.

In 1988, the Sixth Black Catholic Congress was the first convened in contemporary time. The purpose of the national gathering held in Washington, D.C. was to develop and ratify a national pastoral plan for Black Catholics and the Church. The result of this historical event that gained national and international attention was the publication of “Here I Am, Send Me: A Conference Response to the Evangelization of African Americans and The National Black Catholic Pastoral Plan.” The Pastoral Plan, approved by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and published in 1989, focused on three broad areas important to Black Catholics in the United States: “the Catholic identity of African American Catholics; ministry and leadership with the African American Catholic community; and the responsibility of this community to reach out to the broader society.”

According to the document, “Within these areas are such issues as culture, family, youth, spirituality, liturgy, ministry, lay leadership, parishes, education, social action, and community development.”

In reviewing the areas of focus raised at the Sixth National Black Catholic Congress, it is ironic that many of the Church and social issues expressed by Black Catholics in 1988 were the same as those expressed in the first five lay Black Catholic Congresses in the 1800’s: racial discrimination in the Church and society, financial stability, economic and social injustices, and the importance of Catholic education. Thirteen delegates from the Diocese of Pittsburgh attended Congress VI, ten Blacks and three Whites, including the diocesan bishop, Anthony Bevilacqua. They, along with other representatives from dioceses throughout the United States, chose and prioritized the agenda for Black Catholics and the late 20th century United States Catholic Church.

Several major topics and objectives were ratified by the delegates at the Sixth National Black Catholic Congress. One of the themes was Black Catholic history and culture under the theme of Catholic identity. Black Catholics were proactive in reclaiming their often overlooked and ignored history and roots, and in telling their own stories and history too often deliberately ignored. The use of cultural symbols to connect with their African past was significant. Other themes included the important role of Catholic education in breaking the cycle of poverty within Black communities and as a tool of evangelization; economic issues like housing, unemployment and homelessness that impact Blacks; and social justice issues, particularly institutional and personal racism.

Since that historical event, three additional National Black Catholic Congresses have been convened in five-year intervals with both Black and White clergy and laity from the Diocese of Pittsburgh attending. Following the 6th National Black Catholic Congress, a national office was created to coordinate the implementation of the National Black Catholic Pastoral Plan and its agendas throughout subsequent years. Congress IX, the most recent gathering, was held in Chicago in 2002. Approximately fifty Black and White Catholics from the Diocese of Pittsburgh attended, including about twenty youth. Black Catholics are preparing for Congress X in Buffalo, New York in 2007. Black and white Catholic laity and clergy in the Diocese of Pittsburgh have been active in the Congresses in our time by sponsoring Days of Reflection in preparation for the Congresses, sending delegations, participating in regional and national gatherings, and implementing Congress objectives within the diocese.

Black Catholics in Pittsburgh Today: Endurance and Survival

The post-Civil War pastoral and social needs and concerns of Black Catholics that echoed throughout the latter 1800’s continue to be expressed today, both nationally and in the Pittsburgh region. When we look at the history of Black Catholics in the United States and in Pittsburgh, we find a people that have not only endured, but also survived with their faith intact. Just as it became clear that emancipation from slavery did not bring about full acceptance and equality, not only in the South but also in other parts of the country, so too did Black Catholics come to realize that membership in the Catholic Church did not necessarily mean their full acceptance and equality.

Daniel Rudd, and many other Black Catholics in the decades following the slave emancipation, believed that the sacramental theology of the Catholic Church was the greatest hope for Blacks, for this theology said that all people were created by God and were one around the Eucharistic table. The Catholic Church, the Church
of immigrants, the poor, and marginalized would surely open its arms in welcome. The Catholic Church, whose Black saints from Northern Africa had already left an indelible mark upon the church, would certainly welcome these people of African descent. And, with each missed opportunity, a remnant of Black Catholics throughout the country remained faithful and stalwart in their faith, hope, and conviction that the Catholic Church would be what God had ordained it to be.

Black Catholics have always been a part of the Church in the United States. For over 160 years, Black Catholics have been in the Diocese of Pittsburgh. While I believe that Catholics of African descent will continue to be a part of the racial and cultural diversity in the diocese, the question nationally and locally is not merely, will Black Catholics remain in the Church? But rather, what kind of existence will they have? Will they continue to be a marginalized part of the Church? What will be their quality of life in the Church of Pittsburgh? Black Catholics have survived against many obstacles, but today they must do more than survive or exist on the benevolence of others. I suggest that there are five things Black Catholics in the Diocese of Pittsburgh and nationally must do:

Be responsible for shaping their own future:

This was one of the reasons for the convening of the Black Catholic Lay Congresses in the late 1800s and for their recent revival. Black Catholics must continue to speak and engage Catholic leadership about their place in the American Church. They must continue to foster the bonds of fellowship and community with one another and with the entire Catholic Church locally and nationally. They must have pride in themselves, know their history and strengths, and be willing to evangelize to their Black brothers and sisters hungry for the gospel. They must find new ways to financially maintain and support their parishes, schools, and programs. In addition, they must empower and develop Black Catholic leadership, particularly among Black Catholic youth.

Identify their own unique cultural gifts and spirituality, and share them with the larger church:

Black Catholics must continue to explore and articulate the unique gifts they bring to the Church. Within the liturgical guidelines of the Church, they must find ways to incorporate the cultural symbols and elements that help to express the deepest convictions of their faith and to evangelize within the larger Black community. According to Here I Am, Send Me: The National Black Catholic Pastoral Plan, “The cultural dimension of African Americans can enrich and enhance.”

“It is in their communal experience of worship that the cultural richness of the African American community has made and continues to make a remarkable contribution. . . . the liturgical celebration in the parishes of the African American community should be always authentically black—truly Catholic.”

Be responsible to the larger Black community:

Black Catholics are not only brothers and sisters to other African Americans, but also to Africans and those of African descent throughout the world. They share the same history, spirituality, culture, and oftentimes, oppression and dreams. What affects the greater Black community also affects Black Catholics. When Blacks in Pittsburgh and Allegheny County were denied entry to swimming pools at Kennywood and other recreational places, denied employment opportunities, entry to trade unions, or decent affordable housing in certain neighborhoods, were they asked, “Are you Catholic?” No. In the system of racism and discrimination, Blacks were viewed and judged on the basis of race, the color of skin, not their religion.

Black Catholics have taken a religious path that differs from their Protestant brothers and sisters; yet, they are bound together racially, historically, culturally, biologically, socially, and in any other way that matters. In writing about the Fifth Black Lay Catholic Congress in the 19th century, Davis quotes Fredrick McGhee and Dr. William S. Lofton who “deplored the fact that ‘the Catholic Church is looked upon by most non-Catholic[s] of our race as distinctly White.’” Unfortunately, this belief is still held today by many African Americans. With the small number of Black Catholics in the greater Pittsburgh region, this view is only magnified. Only by intentional efforts by the Church, supported by and in collaboration with Black Catholics, will African Americans come to see the Church as a Church for and of all God’s people who are welcomed with their gifts of racial, cultural, and ethnic diversity.

Be involved in social justice issues:

Black Catholics must exercise their moral voice in words and actions, not only on social justice issues that affect them di-
rectly, but also on those that affect the world in which they live. Often, Black Catholics, and Blacks in general, have been so engaged in basic survival that they have not been active in speaking and working on global or international issues. In addition, Blacks in America have often been told that they have no place at the table when it comes to global, political, and environmental issues. Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. was censured for expressing opposition to the Vietnam War. As long as he did not stray from national issues involving race, his voice was acceptable. In the 1980's, Jesse Jackson was told to stick to community issues when he raised questions about our government's position on international issues.

It is significant that the Principles of Action from the Ninth National Black Catholic Congress (2002) include Social Justice, Africa, and AIDS. Black Catholics in Pittsburgh must be involved in all aspects of social justice issues at the parish, diocesan and local community or neighborhood levels in order to be a credible voice within the larger Black community.

Black Catholics must exercise their moral voice in words and actions on social justice issues that not only affect them directly, but also those that affect the world in which they live.

Be the keepers of their history:
The 1989 National Black Catholic Pastoral Plan said, “At the same time that African American Catholics are encouraged to discover their past, let them be encouraged to retell their story for the sake of the present. The role of history in evangelization is that it relates the story of faith in the midst of struggle, and the story of hope and perseverance in the midst of opposition... African American Catholics must be encouraged to conserve their records and documents; without conservation and preservation of records today, there is no history to be written tomorrow... The possession of one’s history is the first step in an appreciation of one’s culture.”

Black Catholics worship in parishes throughout the Diocese of Pittsburgh. While the majority belong to St. Benedict the Moor Parish in the Hill District neighborhood of Pittsburgh and St. Charles Lwanga in the Homewood-Lincoln-Larimer sections of Pittsburgh, others worship at various churches throughout the diocese. Black Catholics, together with those who worship with them and minister to them, should continue to address the challenges of the past. Today they compete for shrinking funds and ways to find their voice among new immigrants and cultural groups from Africa, Asia, and Central and South America who have similar and sometimes different challenges and agendas.

In conclusion, Black Catholics in Pittsburgh, and in the United States, must do more than survive if by survival we mean merely exist. Black Catholics must be active and vibrant in their faith in words and actions, and be welcoming communities of faith. They must continue to be the voice of inclusion, justice, and reconciliation for themselves and anyone who is marginalized in the Church or society.

Black Catholics have endured in this country and in the American Catholic Church. They have had to bear up under the yoke of racism and indifference; put up with obstacles that threatened their faith and livelihood; tolerate discrimination; and suffer without yielding their faith and hope in this country and the Church. Black Catholics have endured and survived. However, they must no longer settle for endurance. Black Catholics are an integral part of the Mother Church, locally, nationally, and internationally. As Pope John Paul II said to an assembly of Black Catholics in New Orleans in 1987, “The Church needs you and you need the Church.”

1Davis, Cyprian, Black Catholics in the United States (New York: Crossroads Publishing Company, 1995), 118.
2Ibid., 165.
5Ibid, 5.
6Ibid.
7Davis, 193.
8Here I Am, Send Me, 3.
9Address by Pope John Paul II to Black Catholics.

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