

The Catholic Voice

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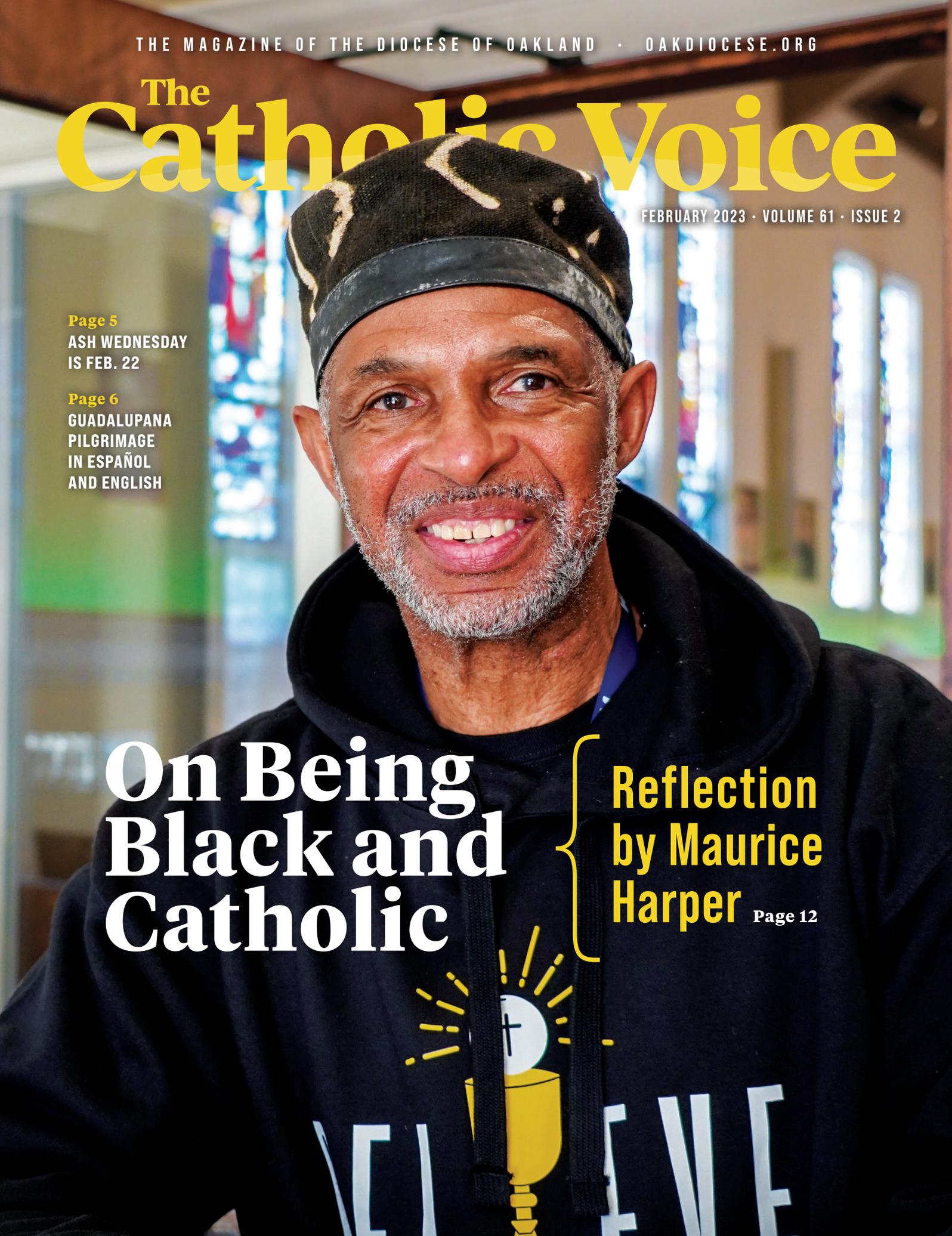
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On Being Black and Catholic

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COVER STORY

*BEING
BLACK
AND
CATHOLIC
OR BEING
BLACK
CATHOLIC*

BY MAURICE HARPER
PHOTOS BY DOMINIQUE GHEKIERE-MINTZ



The following is excerpted from a reflection Maurice Harper gave to his fellow parishioners at St. Columba Church, Oakland, on Nov. 19 and 20, the Feast of Christ the King.

KNOW WHO YOU ARE
KNOW WHOSE YOU ARE
KNOW WHERE YOU ARE
KNOW WHAT TIME IT IS

Today is the celebration of Christ the King. Everybody say, “Christ is my King.”

Today is also Crown Sunday, which fits in with the theme of Christ the King. I see a number of folks rocking crowns.

I must acknowledge that some of the young people that I work with rock crowns, too, but they do it in their own different ways. Some are rocking a hoodie, and that’s OK. You’re supposed to do it the way you do it.

St. Columba is the place to do it the way we do it.

I was asked to be the speaker. My topic is “Being Black and Catholic” or “Being Black Catholic.” They’re not the same thing.

I reflect on those every day that I breathe. I don’t have much of a choice. I was born Black and my Mom made sure I was Catholic. My Mom was a convert and made sure I was Catholic. Since I’ve been confirmed – and I know people going through confirmation – I’m Catholic by choice.

Living in the world, I’ve got some people who look at me and say, “You’re Black. Why are you Catholic?”



The easy response is, “Jesus is my King.”

The Black part is important but as Father Kwame indicated, it is not just a matter of skin tone. It’s a matter of mentality.

Often I have to struggle to remember that I’m both Black and Catholic or Black Catholic.

I come here, and it’s clear that Jesus is my hope and our hope. I’m surrounded by people who are both hopeful and prayerful. That’s part of what it means to be Catholic and universal: to go anywhere and be able to pray and be comfortable. I know there’s a difference in places. That’s why I come here. I feel the support.

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MAURICE HARPER’S ‘SEASON OF YES’

During the pandemic, Maurice Harper entered his “Season of Yes,” answering the call to assist wherever he was asked. He said yes to JustFaith. And yes to the the Diocese of Oakland’s Racial Justice Task Force. He led a multigenerational group of St. Columba parishioners on a journey to New Orleans, where they engaged in social justice work.

His “season of yes” continues as he works with the confirmation program at his parish and makes plans to bring young people to World Youth Day.

One could say that the long-time educator and ministry leader’s “season of yes” began well before 2020.

May it continue, joyfully.



I acknowledge that you and I have to feel supported. That's why we come. That's why we come today. To rock the crown, we have to feel supported.

If Jesus is our King, we can't expect any better than our King. That means there's going to be some rough times. Our Savior experienced some rough times. Although salvation is on the other end, we've got to maneuver through this life. I've got to maneuver through this life.

Sometimes it's not the royalty we get; sometimes it's the crown of thorns that we experience.

For Jesus, as we know, and for us, there is suffering before the glorious rise.

There is the truth. My Mom is the reason I'm Catholic. Her greatest gift to me was not my Blackness – she didn't have any choice in passing that on – but she passed on what it means to be Catholic. She was a lady and there are many ladies I am truly grateful for.

Reflecting on what it means to be Black and Catholic: We all had to go to school. When I got out of college, I played for a community team. I had a coach, who was Christian, not Catholic, who said, "The more you all go to school, the dumb-er you all get."

What he was talking about was that we would get further from the truth. We were born with the truth; we're born knowing. Sometimes what sets us back is those challenges where we have to wear the crown.

I'm going to take this moment to recognize I've been out of college almost 50 years. I can recognize that the truth is that I get taught by young people all the time. That's why I stay connected with confirmation, because folks teach me all the time.

Young people teach me all the time.

Thank You, Alex and all the youth who continue to teach and challenge me. Thank you Savannah, Elijah, Hayden, Kai'noa.

One person taught me something I've just got to share; any time I get a chance, I share this. Alex said, "Slow down when you make the sign of the cross. Slow down and make it meaningful all the time."

In youth situations, folks don't want to lead prayer. Alex would always say, "I want to lead prayers."

In the name of the Father
Wait for us to think.

And the Son, Savior
(pause)

and the Holy Spirit.

Couldn't do nothing but say Amen to that,

I know whose I am. I know where I am.

I'm supposed to leave one or two words you can repeat during the week, words to think about.

The word I leave you is, "Rock the crown," whatever it means to you.

Sometimes it means, "I'm going through suffering but I'm rocking the crown. I know Jesus is my savior and it's gonna be all right. It may not be all right when I want it to be all right, but it's going to be all right."

Please respond as if I was pouring a Libation

response :
Praise God, Be with us

Mother Lydia,
My mother, Juanita,
Ester Bell and
my Grandmother Olivia
My Father Maurice,
my grandfathers Norman,
Lawrence, Lee
and my Uncle Melvin,
my bookend Ms. Edna,
The energy of God,

Ms. Venus
Ms. Lucy Castro
Kenneth McLaugh,
Bill Green and
Maude Green,
Aaron Permillion.

St. Columba is not the norm. When I go to other churches, one of the first things I do is count how many Black people in the room, unless you're here, or at St. Benedict or St. Patrick, trying to figure out how welcome I feel.

Sometimes because I travel a little bit. I move into spaces that are Catholic spaces, I get, "Are you sure you're coming in here?" That's still current.

"Are you're sure you're in the right place?"

I say, "Sure, I know I'm in the right place."

It goes kind of deep for me because my Mom had me so Catholic that after church I would come home and have Mass at home. We'd pound the bread; my sister was my acolyte. I was an altar boy, so I knew Latin. I was saying it in Latin.

My mother would stick her head in and say, "I don't know about that boy."

Later on, I must express, I had the yearning, without the invitation, to say I could be a priest, maybe. There was no invitation. I could be a Christian Brother. There was no invitation.

I said to my grandson, “You could be a priest, you could be a priest in Oakland and live in poverty. But you could carry the spirit.”

I think a little different sometimes.

I do remember I went over to SF, and someone directed me. I went in there and I was

stunned. The first time I saw this big black Jesus. I taught religion at a high school for over 20 years and never saw a Black Jesus. I don’t think I ever saw a Brown Jesus. Take a look up there: That’s Black Jesus.

Sister Thea Bowman, said, “I bring my whole back self, fully Catholic and fully Black.” And that’s despite the lynching that still occurs, white supremacy and racism.

On our website there’s a video of Bishop Barber saying he apologizes for the racism in the Oakland

diocese. I thought that was historic. That came after he was here at St Columba and experienced the Father Tolton experience.

I want to say again that Jesus is my king. To be a Black Catholic means that Jesus is my King. And I acknowledge that I need the support of God and the support of communities like St. Columba to feel comfortable, to see me.

I think we’re supposed to be about evangelization. I don’t hear anybody say we need more Black Catholics.

In the meantime when as we move from downsizing to evangelization – that’s going out at and getting people – we have to make people feel welcome at home, there’s a place for them, there’s a place of leadership for them, there’s a role of leadership,

Rock the crown.

CROWN SUNDAY

The African American Celebration Committee of St. Columba Parish in Oakland invited all women to wear their “Sunday Go To Meetings Hats” (Your Crown) to Mass to weekend Masses. (Men were invited to wear their Fez or African Kufi Cap.)

The tradition of wearing hats to church is a deeply rooted tradition in the African American community. Crown Sunday honors African American History Month.

Parishioners honored that tradition on the Feast of Christ the King. ●

