

American Catholics heading for schism?

by Kathleen Klenetsky

The American exceptionalist faction within the U.S. Catholic Church has seized upon the case of Fr. George Stallings to further its goal of undermining the central authority and discipline of the Church.

What has now become a national *cause célèbre* began early in July, when Father Stallings, a black priest in Washington, D.C., launched a renegade “Afro-American” congregation, called the Imani Temple, which, he claimed, was designed to provide a more “relevant” religious experience to black Catholics. While his Sunday ceremonies, which feature jazz music, dancing in the aisles, and pleas for hundred-dollar contributions, have attracted several hundred to a thousand attendees at most, they have nevertheless garnered Stallings feature coverage in nearly every major U.S. newspaper and news magazine.

In establishing his Imani Temple, Stallings openly defied his superior, Washington Cardinal James Hickey, who had warned him in no uncertain terms that if he proceeded with his plan, he would be separating himself from the Church. Although some Catholic authorities believe that Stallings has put himself into schism, Hickey has so far limited his response to suspending Stallings from functioning as a priest.

This has not deterred Stallings, who, in addition to carrying on his Imani Temple activities, has been making one public appearance after another boosting his cause. On Aug. 2, for example, he was the guest speaker at the National Press Club in Washington, where he announced that he had made his first priest-recruit, the Rev. Bruce Greening.

Stallings insists that his Imani Temple is necessary, because the Church has so far failed to provide the “ecstatic religious experience” which he claims blacks need. He says the Church is too “Euro-centered,” and ignores blacks’ ethnic heritage and special needs.

This is the exactly the same kind of racist cultural relativism cynically employed by the neo-malthusian crowd at the International Monetary Fund and fellow institutions to deny black Africa and the rest of the Third World access to economic development. People of color are “too backward,” they say, to absorb such 20th-century advances as nuclear power and large-scale irrigation projects; they should be content with “appropriate technology,” like windmills and horse-drawn plows.

Aiding the schismatics

Whatever he may think he is doing, Stallings—who has made himself a comfortable living by charging \$500 a day to give revivals to churches outside the diocese—is in fact aiding the enemies of the Church, who have vowed to destroy it because of its staunch opposition to malthusian genocide, and the destruction of natural law. These forces have been trying to foment a schism in the Church, to destroy its moral power.

Interviewed on a local Washington television show July 2, Stallings claimed that he still adheres to Church doctrine, but in the next breath, asserted that the Church would have to reexamine its position on female priests, priestly celibacy, abortion, and birth control. One wonders just whose interests Stallings is really serving when he implicitly condemns the Church’s opposition to abortion and related measures.

The prospect that Stallings’s breakaway movement might spread beyond Washington and cause a major schism in the Church has been played to the hilt by the major media, especially the *Washington Post*. Reportedly, Stallings is getting covert backing from the same ultraliberal milieu at the Jesuit Georgetown University in Washington, which helped spawn “dissident” Fr. Charles Curran.

The Association for the Rights of Catholics in the Church, one of the principal organizations pushing for more “pluralism” in the Church, in opposition to what they characterize as the authoritarian, patriarchal bent of Pope John Paul II and Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, is looking to Stallings’s movement to serve as a rallying point for other special interest groups who want to overturn Church doctrine on such issues as homosexuality and abortion. The group plans to meet with Stallings this fall.

It does not seem likely that the Imani Temple itself will grow much beyond its present numbers. But that doesn’t mean that Stallings’s operation doesn’t pose real danger to the integrity of the Church. Stallings has argued that the Church needs to formally establish an Afro-American rite, modeled on the Byzantine and other Eastern rites, which have their own liturgy, but recognize the supremacy of the Pope. Never in nearly two millennia of Church history has a group that is already part of the Latin rite formed a new rite within the Church.

Yet, the nation’s black Roman Catholic bishops announced July 25 that they are beginning “very preliminary” studies of establishing a possible Afro-American rite. The announcement came after Stallings met with black Church leaders at a national gathering of black Catholics in Milwaukee.

If these studies prove to be serious, chaos could ensue, as various ethnic or other groups within the Church demand that a separate rite be established to serve their special interests. This fragmentation can only result in the destruction of the fundamental concept of the Church as a universal entity, representing the common definition of all men as made in the living image of God.