

The Bible and the blues: A connection, says LMU professor

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In his “experimental” workshop at the 2011 Los Angeles Religious Education Congress — using live music by veteran blues musicians Bernie Pearl and Michael Barry along with scholarly research — Daniel Smith-Christopher drew striking parallels between the personal pains, sufferings and eventual hope inscribed in blues music and the biblical themes of lament, sadness and hope in the Old Testament’s often overlooked Book of Lamentations.

The professor of Old Testament and director of Peace Studies at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles stressed that the blues, born in the poverty-stricken Mississippi Delta during the 1880s and ’90s, not only wrongly earned the reputation as the “devil’s” music, but had much to offer Christians calling out to their God in times of despair, recognizing that this same God cares more than can be imagined by his creation.

“The blues reminds us that we have suffered, others suffer and we have the right to call to God and to each other,” he said during “The Bible and the Blues: A Musical Journey in the Old Testament — and the Delta” March 18 morning session. “As Christians we can enjoy the blues not because that is how life always is, but because we have the right to call out to God our pain and the pain of others.

“We admit that sometimes we have the

blues. We admit that sometimes we can lament because we know there is someone who cares and who listens. It’s isn’t that we enjoy the suffering, it is that we have a God who lusts to hear the truth and to hear us.”

Historically, Smith-Christopher traced the origins of the Book of Lamentations to the late sixth century B.C., when Babylonia attacked the Kingdom of Judah and thousands of ancient “Hebrew POWs” were forcibly exiled to Babylon, which is today modern Iraq and Syria. He called the exile one of the “greatest watershed” events in all of biblical history.

“Arguably one of the most emotionally wrenching books of the Bible is the five chapters we call the Book of Lamentations,” he said. “They are cries of anguish from the ruins of defeated Jerusalem after the devastation of Nebuchadnezzar’s army who ravished Jerusalem and the surrounding villages of Judah.

“But these books were more than just the first horrifying scream after the dreadful attack. They are very unusual calls that were very carefully and artfully composed. If blues come from the suffering and pain of a people, then Lamentations in a powerful sense is ‘Hebrew Blues.’”

Smith-Christopher pointed out that African Americans likewise suffered horrendously under centuries of slavery in America, which gave rise, ironically, to their own powerful interpretation of Christianity, the very religion under which they were enslaved. But, he added, it was the post-Civil



ILLUSTRATION — Bluesmen Bernie Pearl, right, and Michael Barry provided poignant musical interludes during “The Bible and the Blues: A Musical Journey in the Old Testament — And the Delta,” a 2011 Congress workshop.

PARALLELS — Daniel Smith-Christopher drew many parallels between blues music and the Old Testament’s Book of Lamentations.



War period, and the migration of former slaves to the fertile cotton-producing Mississippi Delta with its economic system of sharecropping that gave birth to the blues.

He quoted one historian as saying “the loan replaced the wipe.” Poverty was omnipresent. Lynchings were a fact of life. Disease was rampant. Marriages were usually common-law and understood to be temporary, with loneliness from broken families a bitter byproduct.

“It doesn’t take much imagination to consider what kind of impact this level of poverty would have on the family structure of African American sharecroppers,” he observed.

Going back to the Book of Lamentations, the college professor explained that a lament goes beyond simply an expression of pain and emotion. He said a lament is a call to others, and especially a call to God, to respond to tragedy, but also with the assurance of being heard. So in a sense it was actually thanking God “ahead of time” for acting to lessen pain.

In addition, he noted that Lamentations is not read very much by Christians today who, for the most part, want to look away from human suffering, while others dismiss blues music because of the sometimes bawdy lyrics and sexual overtones.

“I believe that Christians should reject that kind of commercial and social stereotyping,” maintained Smith-Christopher. “We can enjoy and appreciate the artistry of the blues, but we also listen to pain. After all, we listen to pain in our lives; surely we can listen to others’ pain as well.”

He said the blues is really about missing a loving family. Most male blues singers dream of the one good woman to come into their life, while females sing about a man who will truly care for them. Both want intimacy, love and permanence.

“The blues have a reputation for speaking the unvarnished, angry truth about a difficult life,” the scholar remarked. “The Book of Lamentations also demands that we see the same afflictions.... If telling the truth is really a prayer to God, can’t much of the blues be heard as prayer?” ❖

Catholic Sisters explore future at LCWR meeting in Orange

“Charting the Path to Our Future” was the theme for the Leadership Conference of Women Religious Region 14 semi-annual meeting, held March 15-16 in Orange.

Sister of Charity Patricia Wittberg of Cincinnati, professor of Sociology at Indiana University-Purdue University in Indianapolis, was the featured presenter for the event, attended by Catholic Sisters on leadership teams in California. In her talk, she noted that explorers attempting to cross a mountain range do not know what lies on the other side, while air travelers can see where

the passes are, but cannot detect barriers on the ground.

“In like manner,” said Sister Wittberg, “those among us who see the overall contours shaping the future of religious life may be less familiar with the daily details religious leaders face in negotiating these contours — and vice versa. Charting the path to our future requires sharing both perspectives.”

On the second day of their gathering, the sisters addressed the resolution affirmed at the LCWR National Meeting last August: to “actively seek to strengthen bonds with women religious throughout the world.”

To facilitate the prayer and reflection process, members of the executive committee from Southern California — Sisters Kathryn Stein, CSJ; Kathleen Bryant RSC; and Angela Milioto, RSHM — invited sisters from other countries who minister in Southern California to share their ministry,

cultural and integration stories.

The region will participate in the August 2011 National Assembly in Garden Grove, where members of the Southern California Partners for Global Justice will provide a justice action focused on immigration.

Also presented was an update on the exhibit, “Women and Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America,” set to be in California at Mount St. Mary’s College, Los Angeles, (June 19-Aug. 14) and at the California Museum of History, Women & the Arts in Sacramento (Jan. 24-June 3, 2012). “Women & Spirit” offers history museums across the country an opportunity to display artifacts and images that have rarely been seen by the general public. (Information: <http://www.womenandspirit.org/index.html>.)

The day concluded with national business and election of Sister of St. Francis Patricia Rayburn, of Redwood City, as the new Region 14 chair who will represent the region on the National Board. The next meeting of the region will take place in October 2011.

LCWR Region 14 has approximately 100 members who are elected leaders of their religious orders, representing approximately 2500 Catholic sisters. The conference develops leadership, promotes collaboration within church and society, and serves as a voice for systemic change. The region covers the states of California, Nevada, Utah, Hawaii and Guam. ❖



Sisters reflect on talks heard at the LCWR Region 14 meeting in Orange.