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### Leaving Home, Keeping the Faith

Damian J. Geminder

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Damian Geminder  
Capstone

## Leaving Home, Keeping the Faith

A stained glass image of Christ, dressed in royal regalia, holding a scepter in one hand and an orb of the Earth in another, keeps watch over the congregation. African and American Indian figures stand on either side of him in awe as Chinese and European figures kneel at his feet in adoration.

The choir practices hymns and chants off to the side as a statue of the Virgin Mary, her head donning a queen's crown as she holds the Christ Child, looks on. The pews of St. Mark the Evangelist Roman Catholic Church, located on 138<sup>th</sup> Street in Central Harlem, are filled with the faithful as they wait for Mass to begin.

One of those faithful is James Roman. James is over 1,500 miles from his native Haiti, the country where he spent the first 28 of his 30 years of life. And yet, despite the long distance from his home, he *is* home.

All rise as the procession makes its way up the center aisle. The choir sings a rousing French opening hymn, joined by those in the pews. Finally, after everyone has taken his place around the altar, the pastor stands before those gathered and addresses them:

*“Au nom du Père et du Fils et du Saint-Esprit.”*  
*“Amen.”*

The Rev. Freddy Washington, known as “Father Freddy” to his flock, became the pastor of St. Mark's in 2013. It's small for a New York City Catholic church, with approximately 350 families registered at the parish, although in its early years, the church had 10,000 communicants on the rolls, more than a sixth the population of Harlem at that time. In addition to daily Mass, the parish offers three Masses on Sundays, two in the morning in English and one in the evening in French, an innovation Father Freddy implemented in November that year.

Father Freddy, a squat, jovial man with an infectious laugh, belongs to the Congregation of the Holy Ghost, a group of Catholic priests and laymen who frequently minister to both black and French-speaking populations. The 52-year-old priest was born in Charleston, South Carolina, to a U.S. Virgin Islander father and a Haitian mother, and grew up speaking French and Creole, in addition to English. Father Freddy came to learn through his own parents' experience as newcomers that establishing a sense of community was essential to keeping Catholic immigrants in the fold.

St. Mark's was established in 1907 as the first black Catholic parish in Harlem, and it has always catered to immigrants, but for decades, they had mostly been from English-speaking countries. In recent years, however, an increase in immigration from West Africa brought over a population that speaks chiefly French, a cultural leftover of decades of European Colonialism, as is the Catholicism that so many of them practice. Today, French is the third-most spoken language in Central Harlem, after English and Spanish. The cultural center of the Catholic Church has gradually shifted away from Europe and toward the developing world, as Western society has grown more secular

over the last century. Immigration from Africa and elsewhere may not only enrich the Church in an increasingly less devout United States; it may be what saves it.

The overall state of the American Catholic Church presents a mixed picture: Unlike most mainline Protestant denominations, which have seen a sharp decline in membership over the past several decades, the Church has been able to recoup its losses through a combination of births and immigration and has increased its membership every year, to a record 68 million souls in 2015, according to according to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), a research center affiliated with Georgetown University that studies the Catholic Church. Weekly Mass attendance, however, has declined from 55 percent in 1965 to 24 percent in 2015.

Immigration fuels the Church's numbers because the longer a community has been in the U.S. (or, put more bluntly, the more "American" that group becomes), the more likely that group is to drift away from the faith. Case in point: Both Italy and Mexico boast populations that are over 80 percent Catholic. Yet only 48 percent of Americans with Italian ancestry are Catholic, compared with 67 percent of those with Mexican ancestry. Italian Americans are far more likely to be native-born, however; just 7 percent were born abroad, versus half of Mexican Americans.

According to the General Social Survey, just 29 percent of Catholics reported that all four of their grandparents were born in the U.S., a downward trend from a high of 41 percent in 2002 and a return to levels seen in 1967, when a Harris survey found 32 percent of Catholics saying so.

Indeed, the secularism that has resulted in the decline of the European Catholic Church, in addition to defections to other faiths, has also impacted its American flock. The percentage of Americans who self identify as Catholic has remained relatively stable for the last few decades, staying in the low 20-percent range, but an additional 10 percent of Americans self-identify as *former* Catholics. Further digging into the numbers shows that U.S. Catholics born abroad are markedly less likely to leave the faith than are those Catholics born in the States: A third of native-born Catholics leave the Church, compared to less than a fourth of foreign-born Catholics, according to the 2014 General Social Survey. There are almost as many foreign-born Catholics in the U.S. as there are former Catholics, according to CARA.

Word-of-mouth evangelization highlights a major cultural difference between many immigrant Catholics and American Catholics. According to the Pew Research Center, just 38 percent of U.S. Catholics polled had shared something about their faith in a real-life setting the week the poll was taken. Only 15 percent of those surveyed had shared their faith online. This openness to evangelization would prove vital to the success of St. Mark's ministry.

James grew up in Lascahobas, Haiti, about an hour west of the Haitian-Dominican border. Faith was simply a fact of life growing up in Haiti. James only lived a five-minute walk from church, and he could see the building and hear the bell from his house. James attended a school run by the Episcopal Church, although the faith taught there was so similar to his own that James calls it "Episcopal Catholic."

He went on to receive an associate's degree in chemistry and found work in a laboratory for Brasserie de La Couronne, or "Crown Brewery." Brasserie de La Couronne is Haiti's licensed bottler of Coca-Cola.

In July 2013, James visited the United States for the first time: first Boston, then Washington, D.C., before returning home. James couldn't wait to go back, but there was one problem: money. Traveling to and from the U.S. multiple times simply wasn't affordable for him or his family, so James' parents finally told him he should stay in America to "live his work" and continue his education. James agreed, and his mother made arrangements with family in New York.

James arrived in New York in February 2014. Within a few weeks, he was ready to start making connections and planting some roots. He had heard of Father Freddy from his friend Campane back in Haiti. Campane was a former seminarian and knew that Father Freddy would be a good resource for James. Father Freddy was the new pastor of St. Mark's in Harlem, and he was already becoming known to Francophone Catholics in the area as a friend. James sent Father Freddy a text message introducing himself as a friend of Campane and asked to meet up. Father responded that he would be happy to do so – in Haitian Creole.

James agreed to meet Father Freddy at St. Mark's rectory that Tuesday, March 4. James had never used New York City public transportation before, so his family drove him to Harlem. Father Freddy took James to a restaurant on Fifth Avenue to talk as his family waited in the car.

There, James told Father Freddy that he wanted to continue his education in the CUNY system and asked the priest for help connecting him with others who could help him.

"Well, there are things that can be done," Father Freddy said. "I promise to help you. Why don't you stay at my place this weekend?"

The two set up an arrangement that James would go to Manhattan every other weekend and stay in one of the guest rooms at the rectory. Staying the night was the most practical solution if he was going to travel so far for Mass.

"Message me when you get home," Father said as they said their good-byes.

After he got back to Staten Island that night, James sent Father Freddy a Facebook message, in Creole:

*"Mwen rive lakay mwen byen P. Washington, merci beaucoup,"* or, "I made it home safe, Fr. Washington, Thanks a lot."

*"(-) m kontan anpil. map tann ou,"* Father Freddy replied. "(-) I am very happy, see you next time."

That Saturday, James took the Staten Island Ferry by himself for the first time. Father Freddy had instructed him to take a taxi from Battery Park to Harlem and would cover James' fare. James wasn't ready to negotiate the subway just yet.

The cab arrived at St. Mark's, and a congregant named Theresa took James up the rectory's creaky, dark wooden steps to the second floor and into the parlor, where he could make himself comfortable. The first thing James saw when he entered the room was a homemade Haitian flag hanging on the wall above the couch.

"Take whatever you want from the fridge," Theresa said.

James opened the mini-fridge and saw yet another familiar sight: Prestige, a Haitian beer, to which he helped himself.

Father Freddy finally got back to the church, and he immediately began introducing James to everyone there:

“This is my son, James, from Haiti.”

My son. James.

It really was quite overwhelming: Here James was, 1,500 miles from home, yet here was this priest who spoke his language, who knew his culture, and here was this rectory filled with what he calls “Haitianity,” *in New York*.

James attended the English Saturday evening Mass and then went out to dinner with Father Freddy, as well as another Haitian man who was visiting from Chicago. They went a few blocks south and an avenue west to Harlem Karibe, a popular Haitian restaurant. It would be the first of many such meals there.

James ordered the red snapper and *fritaille*, or fried plantains with goat. He was still shy, even though his fellow countrymen surrounded him, but as the night went on, he slowly opened up.

“I just got back from visiting Lascahobas,” one Haitian woman said. “It was so beautiful.”

“Oh, *he’s* from Lascahobas!” Father Freddy said, gesturing to James.

“You are?” the woman said. “Hi, I’m Joanne.”

“Yeah, I am! I’m James.”

James had made another new friend, who spoke his language, who knew his culture, here, in this restaurant filled with Haitianity, in New York.

James was home.

Both Father Freddy and James say that they have seen Catholic immigrants stray from the faith when they were unable to find a church community that welcomed them. James’ relatives in Staten Island all attend an evangelical church there, but his immediate family back in Haiti is Catholic. Father Freddy says that Francophone Catholics who have recently arrived in Harlem can sometimes feel that “the Catholic Church is not the church that is open to them,” so they attend local French-speaking Protestant churches, and some have even joined Masjid Malcolm Shabazz, a mosque on 116<sup>th</sup> Street that has its own immigrant outreach.

Father Freddy responded to this need by celebrating a weekly French Mass. In addition to holding Catholic services in the immigrants’ native tongue, the congregation holds a forum after Mass to discuss the community’s needs, and there is even a separate pastoral council for the Francophone congregants.

The French Mass was initially sparsely attended – maybe 20 people at a time – and sometimes, there were more people in the choir stall than in the pews. But through word of mouth, the Francophone community at St. Mark’s grew. Attendance more than doubled less than a year after Father Freddy established the French-language outreach. As the ministry enters its third year, the number of attendees at the French Mass is more than triple what it once was.

Other Catholic churches in the city have had French-language ministries for far longer than St. Mark’s, and their attendance figures are comparable to or even lower than that of Father Freddy’s parish. In less than a year’s time, St. Mark’s went from merely

welcoming this relatively new community to embracing them and integrating them into the vitality of parish life.

The Archdiocese of New York, which includes the Bronx, Manhattan, Staten Island and the northern city suburbs, has seen many of the same effects as the Church throughout the country. Over the past year, the Making All Things New initiative has resulted in the most church and school closures in archdiocesan history. In total, 141 parishes will be merged into 68 new parishes, leaving 39 churches effectively closed.

In addition to parish-level initiatives, such as Father Freddy's French-language ministry, the national Church has made outreach to different communities a top priority. Sister Joanna Okereke, HHCJ, is the assistant director of cultural diversity for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), who originally hails from Nigeria. She says many non-English-speaking communities are wary of the American Church.

"Many of the groups feel the parishes, or the whole Church here, want them assimilated, instead of integrated, so there is reluctance to go out and to show up. You have to encourage them because they feel marginalized," Okereke says. "In many other places, like Africa, they don't register in their parishes back home. Every activity is non-stop in the parishes. Here, it's not like that: You're expected to register, and many are undocumented, so they don't register, and they don't feel a big part of the Church."

Okereke says the USCCB considers 36 percent of U.S. parishes "multiethnic," broadly defined as parishes that worship in more than one language, in addition to implementing other outreach programs. That's up from 33 percent of parishes in 2010.

"Language is a big barrier, and so many would rather not worship if they can't in their own language," Okereke says. "They are active when they have opportunity to worship."

Okereke says that work needs to be done at the parish, diocesan and national levels to make sure that new communities are welcomed into the American Church. "Different cultural groups enrich the church in different ways," she says. "They bring their gifts that many of them have: a rich faith that should be emulated, a love of family that should be emulated, the joy of serving the Lord, and all of these gifts help the Church to grow."

At 5 p.m. on Sunday, Father Freddy celebrates the same Mass the other priests at St. Mark's did that morning, except in French, with elements of Creole blended in. Those assembled in the pews and the choir stall hail from such far-off lands as Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Haiti, Ivory Coast, Mali and Senegal. The congregants' age profile skews young, and there are many children and teenagers.

Father Freddy's baritone voice can be heard distinctly throughout the chants and hymns, which are far more celebratory than the typical solemn fare at an English Mass, and, without context, one might mistake the post-Communion hymn for a birthday celebration.

After everyone has received Communion, choir members and other parishioners leave their pews to dance in a circle in front of the altar, and Father Freddy joins them. A little girl stands in the center of the circle, jumping up and down. One of the assisting priests joins her, hopping and laughing — in full vestments.

Father Freddy, meanwhile, snatches a somewhat reluctant man, who is wearing his best Sunday suit, from his pew, but soon, both he and Father Freddy are dancing and clapping with gusto. The whole celebration lasts about 10 minutes before concluding, and it is time for the closing announcements.

At the end of Mass, Father holds a meeting in which the Francophone community can voice their questions and concerns about the church and their community, something not done after the two English Masses.

One woman stands up in her pew. “I would like us to have adoration after Mass,” she says, referring to the practice of praying before the Eucharist, which Catholics believe to be the body of Christ.

“*Mademoiselle,*” Father Freddy replies, “let’s hold that before Mass, so no one is compelled to stay late.”

As St. Mark’s pastor, Father Freddy’s job is to shepherd his flock, but in this forum, he’s just another of the faithful, sitting in the front pew as he lets congregants take turns speaking into the microphone at the pulpit. After everyone has said his or her piece, Father Freddy issues the dismissal blessing, and the congregation moves into the gymnasium of St. Mark’s attached parochial school for a fellowship hour.

The choir master congratulates the choir on another successful Sunday evening and gathers his music papers before heading toward the gymnasium.

Wilfried Tapsoba, 28, has been in the U.S. since 2012, when he left his native Burkina Faso, and now directs St. Mark’s French choir. Back home, he sang opera as a tenor and conducted a 127-member choir.

For Wilfried, having a community like St. Mark’s allows him to bring a bit of his homeland to America, if only for a Sunday evening. “The French community, it is not that different from the other ones,” he says, “but what makes it a bit different is we are trying to live here like we live at home.”

Wilfried credits this successful sense of community to Father Freddy’s ministry. “Father Freddy himself — he’s amazing,” he says. “When I first got here, I felt home. I didn’t feel like I was in a church where I didn’t know anybody. It felt like home.”

Instead of pursuing a career in music, Wilfried is pursuing studies in engineering and physics at the Spanish-American Institute. “I received a gift for free,” he says of his musical talents. “Why should I be paid for this?”

He says that he had originally planned to go back home after completing his studies in America, where he has few relatives, but now, he’s not so sure where he wants to go. St. Mark’s is his family now, too.

St. Mark’s was not the first American Catholic church he joined. He directed the choir at Holy Name of Jesus, a large Gothic church on West 96<sup>th</sup> Street. The choir only sang the last Sunday of every month, however, rather than weekly, and Wilfried felt the sense of community lacking.

“Are we a *part* of the church, or are we just here to *use* the church?” Wilfried asked.

In January 2014, Wilfried was referred to St. Mark’s by an African friend. The church had just begun its French ministry barely months earlier.

When Wilfried first entered the church, he was struck by how small it was, both physically and in attendance. The building has a capacity of about 300, in stark contrast

to the thousands who could fit into Holy Name. Even more shocking was the poor quality sound system in place. If Wilfried were to continue his music ministry here, he would have fewer people with worse equipment, but at least he could still perform every Sunday, rather than once a month.

He and Father Freddy met for the first time that day. The priest welcomed Wilfried with open arms: “Oh, it’s you! How are you, my son?”

“I knew when I met him that he was a wonderful person,” Wilfried says of Father Freddy. “He’s always happy.”

Despite his reservations, Wilfried accepted the position and began the work of training — and expanding — the choir.

“I just have to be faithful that it will get bigger than this,” Wilfried said to himself.

In addition to his lay music ministry, Wilfried discerned joining the priesthood. He ultimately decided against it, but it is an increasingly common sight to see African-born priests in American congregations, even among those with mostly non-black congregants. The Church frequently has foreign-born clergy serve in its congregations to fill the gaps left due to the relative dearth of American priests.

Despite the overall increase in the American Catholic population, vocations are down from their peak in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. There were only about 37,000 priests in the U.S. in 2015, a decrease from nearly 60,000 in 1965. Nuns and religious sisters have taken an even bigger hit: There were only 48,000 in 2015, down from nearly 180,000 in 1965.

Although all Americans were technically immigrants at one point or another, the immigrant experience has been particularly pronounced for Catholics. The United States was founded as a secular republic, but from its inception, the country’s religious traditions were almost entirely Protestant.

Most of the Thirteen Colonies either outlawed the Church entirely or imposed severe penalties on Catholics, such as revoking their right to vote or hold political office. According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, as late as 1785, only four states — Delaware, Maryland, Pennsylvania and Virginia — did not place Catholics under civil penalties. Only one signatory of the Declaration of Independence was Catholic.

At the time of the first Census, in 1790, John Carroll, the first Catholic bishop in the United States, estimated that just 30,000 Americans were Catholic, although formal estimates place the number closer to 45,000. The total U.S. population was just under 3.9 million at the time.

The next century would see rapid population growth in the United States, however, both due to westward territorial expansion as well as immigration. Pope Pius IX reigned from 1846 to 1878, longer than any pope except for St. Peter himself. During his pontificate, Pius paid special attention to the U.S. at a time when Catholic immigrants from Germany and Italy began arriving on American shores. Many of the dioceses and archdioceses that exist today are his creations, and Pius moved swiftly to install bishoprics in the formerly Mexican territory then recently ceded to the United States. His tenure also saw the first formal – albeit temporary – diplomatic relations between the U.S. and the Holy See. In 1875, New York Archbishop John McCloskey became the first American elevated to the College of Cardinals, the body tasked with electing the pope. In

the century and a half since then, the United States would elect its first Catholic president and later vice president, and four popes would visit the nation's shores, including Pope Francis.

It was a weekday in early August 2015. Wilfried was sitting at his computer in his Bronx apartment making up the program for that Sunday's Mass. The music ministry was going very well. Father Freddy had bought new musical equipment for both the English and French choirs to use, and Wilfried now had almost two dozen choir members.

The phone rang. It was Father Freddy.

"Wilfried, as you know, Pope Francis is going to be visiting next month, and I've been asked to bring a special guest to an event with him who could speak French, and I'm inviting you."

"Excuse me, Father?!" Wilfried blurted out.

"Yes, yes, my son!" Father Freddy said.

"What an honor! No, I don't deserve it!"

"Yes, you do!"

Wilfried held the phone in stunned silence for 10 seconds.

"Wilfried, do you want to come down and talk about it?"

"Yeah, OK."

After saying good-bye and hanging up, Wilfried finished making up the program and headed to St. Mark's. He still couldn't believe his ears.

That September, Pope Francis made his first-ever visit to the United States. During the New York leg of his trip, the pontiff attended a ceremony at Our Lady Queen of the Angels School, in East Harlem. The event featured immigrants and refugees from around the world who had been helped by Catholic Charities. The room was filled with schoolchildren, all in identical uniforms, but also representing the anything-but-uniform demographics of the city. Wilfried was to read in French from the Gospel of Matthew, and he was slightly nervous.

Then, he arrived. The room swelled with cheers as Francis entered the room. One by one, he approached the event's speakers, touching them on the left shoulder and offering a blessing. Finally, he came to Wilfried. Wilfried couldn't make out what Francis was saying over the happy screaming, but he knew it was something in Latin.

Francis sat down, and suddenly, Wilfried wasn't thinking about reading anymore.

"It's something you cannot explain," Wilfried says. "Even if I hadn't been touched physically, just him being there, the most holy person on Earth that we can meet, I want to be better."

Then, it was his turn to speak. One after the other, an English speaker would read from the Gospel, and another person would repeat the verse in another language: Spanish, Creole, Chinese, Arabic, Wolof and then:

"I was in prison and you came to visit me."

*"J'étais en prison, et vous êtes venus à moi."*

And not long after, it was over. Everyone was stuck in the room for a half hour or so after Francis left, but Wilfried didn't care. He was still playing the day's events in his head.

"I just lived that moment again. Every step."

The Easter 2015 concert was drawing to a close, and it was time to begin the final piece, the Hallelujah Chorus from Handel's "Messiah." The French choir had been practicing for three hours every Sunday since Christmas for this day, and now, they were singing before a packed church. Thanks in part to Father Freddy's classes, most of the choir was now bilingual, and all of the songs were in English.

With this in mind, the English choir was invited to join the French choir, and they sang the Hallelujah Chorus together, simultaneously in English and French. As the final "Hallelujah" hung in the air, the congregation of both English and French speakers burst into sustained applause.

Father Freddy then calmed the crowd and addressed them:

"What these choirs did, coming together, we must always do in our lives, even outside of church," he said. "The person that is sitting next to you, it doesn't matter who he is, it doesn't matter where he's from, or what language he speaks. He's your brother in Christ."

Wilfried was especially proud of what his choir had accomplished.

"St. Mark's is home for everybody," he says. "Everyone. No distinction. That is what St. Mark's is about."