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Local News

July 12, 2007

Sr. Shawnee makes history in earning doctorate

Becomes first black U.S. Catholic theological bioethicist

By [Jim McLaughlin](#)

Special to your Catholic Herald

MILWAUKEE — When School Sister of Notre Dame Shawnee Daniels-Sykes received her doctorate in religious studies with a specialization in theological ethics and bioethics from Marquette University in May, she became the first and only African American Catholic female theological bioethicist in the United States.



She has been a vital part of the black Catholic community and holds a place in the history of the Milwaukee Archdiocese, said Shauneille Allen, director of African American Ministry for the archdiocese. “We all take pride in her accomplishment as many of us walked with her on this journey,” she added.

Sr. Shawnee, 46, grew up in Milwaukee’s inner city with her devoutly Catholic parents and five siblings. Her religious vocation “was always on the back of my mind since grade school,” she said. She attended the former St. Elizabeth Elementary School until it was converted to Harambee Community School.

Sr. Shawnee Sykes is pictured at Mount Mary College in Milwaukee. (Catholic Herald photo by Sam Lucero)

Some of the religious sisters who had taught at St. Elizabeth remained as teachers and principal of Harambee and continued preparing students for sacraments through religious education classes. This left a lasting impression on Sr. Shawnee, who teaches theology and theological bioethics at Mount Mary College, Milwaukee, which is sponsored by the School Sisters of Notre Dame. She also works with inner-city college students at the college’s Midtown Campus.

“I really appreciated the sisters staying to help us grow academically and in our Catholic faith,” she said. People forget, she added, that when schools and parishes close in cities, gaps are created in which faithful people living in these areas can be left behind and unheard by the archdiocese. The sisters’ commitment to the community influenced Sr. Shawnee to make her vows years later.

After completing her bachelor’s degree in biology and biochemistry in 1983 from Spelman College, a historically black college in Atlanta, she received an undergraduate degree in nursing in 1986 from the University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee.

She worked as a registered nurse for the State of Wisconsin for three and a half years, practicing labor and delivery as well as public health care nursing in Milwaukee. During that time, she witnessed health care practices she viewed as unethical that adversely affected racially and economically marginalized people.

“A high percentage of Milwaukee residents are persons of color, poor whites and economically poor. Their race, educational background and socioeconomic status have a direct relationship to adequate access to health care. Inadequate access to health care leads to inequalities in the health care system,” she said.

While working as a delivery room nurse, Sr. Shawnee said she watched as a physician who was delivering the baby dropped the infant into a bucket beneath the hospital bed seconds after it was born. The physician instructed her to bring him narcotics to use, she suspected, to drug the mother so she would forget about the incident. After she questioned the doctor’s ethics, she was reprimanded. She found no support from her nursing supervisor after she reported the event, and soon after quit hospital nursing to pursue public health nursing in the home.

“I turned in my resignation letter and moved onto public health nursing, where I did get somewhere with health care providers as I advocated for my clients in the inner city,” said Sr. Shawnee.

She said she hoped that by working in people’s homes she would be able to educate Milwaukee’s inner-city families on matters of health care, but she met a brick wall. In August 1988, she made a visit to an inner-city home to assess the family’s newborn baby. Her attention, however, was caught by an 8-year-old



girl in a full body cast in the home. The girl had been hit by a school bus in May and had not been removed from the cast since three months before Sr. Shawnee arrived at the home.

“She was absolutely filthy,” Sr. Shawnee said, describing the girl’s overpowering smell. “I took it upon myself to follow up on the situation.”

Sr. Shawnee said she contacted the hospital that had cared for the girl in May only to find that the girl had “fallen through the cracks.” There was no record on her. Her family didn’t have a phone, nor did they know how to follow-up.

Sr. Shawnee called for an ambulance to take the girl to the hospital for her follow-up care. Her prognosis was bad because her muscles had atrophied from lack of any physical therapy for months. Sr. Shawnee said this kind of negligent health care could have left the girl crippled.

She left nursing shortly after and took an advisory position with the Archdiocese of Milwaukee for parishes on the north side of the inner-city. The archdiocese at the time was reconstructing itself, drawing new district lines and making changes in the infrastructure of the diocese. While working in this position, she was invited by the School Sisters of Notre Dame to join their order, and she accepted. She became a postulant in 1990 and began her path toward becoming a sister.

In 1993, she became the Archdiocese of Milwaukee’s director of the Office of African-American Ministry. During her tenure, which lasted until 1998, she directed several ministry programs that focus on the African-American community but welcomed everyone, including Umoja (Swahili for unity), a marriage retreat ministry program, a youth ministry program called Kujenga (also Swahili and roughly translating to “youth leadership”), a prison ministry program in Fox Lake, and the Lincoln and Julia Valle Lay Leadership Program. Sr. Shawnee founded the African World Festival Mass, held annually on the Summerfest grounds.

In addition to being director of the archdiocese’s program and taking her first steps toward becoming a School Sister of Notre Dame, Sr. Shawnee earned her master of arts degree in pastoral studies from Saint Francis Seminary in 1996.

She left her position as director in 1998 and continued her studies at Saint Louis University in health care ethics until 2000. She enrolled in the doctoral program in religious studies at Marquette University in 2001 to complete her doctorate six years later.

Her dissertation, which she defended at Marquette on March 30, is entitled, “Roman Catholic Social Bioethics Critiques Secular Bioethics: Fetal Tissue Research and Vulnerable Populations.”

“My dissertation is on the beginning of life,” Sr. Shawnee said. “It’s taking a social justice lens and looking in Catholic bioethics,” she said. In it, she argues that the modern societal view of bioethics concerning the health care and research of fetal tissue can be challenged by the Roman Catholic view in the public realm.

“A secular analysis of this situation does not care about the poor, vulnerable and marginalized. It does not view the fetal as a person with moral agency and thus, champions elective abortions and fetal tissue research. A Catholic social bioethical analysis counters this secular position and is wise to be consistently against abortion in the first place as it intuitively sees the social effects of fetal tissue research on poor, vulnerable and marginalized populations,” she said.

The Roman Catholic view honors the dignity of life from conception until death. As a Catholic theologian she does not promote fetal tissue research, but her dissertation examines these dilemmas from a pastoral, social and ethical perspective.

She argues by implementing fetal tissue research into common medical

practice, the inconsistencies in health care, especially as it relates to marginalized people, such as the medically uninsured or underinsured or racial minorities, and the poor are illuminated.

“Fetal tissue research is premised on electively induced abortions,” she said. She said although treatments for terminal and debilitating conditions like Parkinson’s disease or spinal cord injuries may be aided by the research of fetal tissue, the gains will not be distributed evenly. “It’s a good idea for some people who have the money, but not for the Catholic notion of the common good,” she said, because those who can’t afford this kind of health care are not helped.

“Although it is illegal to sell human fetal tissue as a part of the market enterprise, or to provide financial incentives to the parent ‘donor,’ the research literature notes that money is still exchanged with a middle person for the transport and storage of the tissue in research companies. Fetal tissue research is a multi-million dollar industry.”

She noted that a disproportionate amount of abortions are being performed in the African-American community.

“African Americans make up about 12 percent of the U.S. population and have an abortion rate of 34.7 percent,” she said.

If fetal tissue were sold on the market for research, African-American women who are poor may be incentivized to abort their unborn children for money, furthering the gap between the African-American community and other demographics on abortion, she added.

Sr. Shawnee said that Catholic ethics moves society to be attentive, intelligent, rational and responsible about social justice issues that impact the poor, vulnerable and marginalized in society, including in ethical research.

“The arguments that I put forward push us to move beyond whether it’s killing an embryo or fetus. We know that Catholic teaching is against the intentional destruction of unborn human life. There are further reasons why we must be mindful of fetal tissue research in society,” she said, noting that humans are created in God’s image and likeness making them social in nature. “We often forget that,” she said, adding Catholics must be mindful of the church’s teachings on such matters and aware of the social ramifications of society’s actions.

Until Sr. Shawnee completed her doctorate, Fr. Bryan Massingale, an associate professor of theology at Marquette University, was the only African American Catholic with training as a Catholic ethicist.

“Sr. Shawnee’s accomplishment is indeed an historic moment for black Catholicism in the U.S.,” he said. “It is a witness to the fidelity of African American Catholics, and is another sign of our desire to contribute to the wider church’s understanding of faith in the light of our unique cultural experience.”

Fr. Massingale added, “I was honored to have played a role in Sr. Shawnee’s education, and was more than proud as I witnessed her competence and professionalism during our questioning at her doctoral defense.”

Sr. Shawnee hopes to publish her arguments and findings. She said her education and science and nursing background allow her think through life, beginning of life, and end of life issues. She believes members of the African-American community find her more credible for having grown up in the inner-city and achieving such lofty goals.

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