

Biography: George Augustus Stallings, Jr.

1948 - present

Nationality: American

Occupation: Founder, Archbishop, Imani Temple

PERSONAL

Born: George Augustus Stallings, Jr., March 17, 1948, in New Bern, NC; son of George Augustus, Sr. and Dorothy (a convent housekeeper; maiden name, Smith) Stallings.

Education:

B.A. in philosophy, St. Pius X Seminary 1970

Attended North American College, Rome, Italy

S.T.B., Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas 1973

M.A., in pastoral theology, Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas 1974

S.T.L., Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas 1975

Addresses: Office--Imani Temple, 1015 I St., Washington, DC 20002.

CAREER

Ordained Roman Catholic priest, 1974;

Our Lady of Peace, Washington, DC, associate pastor, 1974-76;

St. Teresa of Avila, Washington, DC, pastor, 1976-88;

Archdiocese of Washington, DC, director of evangelism program, 1988-89;

Imani Temple African American Catholic Congregation, Washington, DC, founder and pastor, 1989, became Bishop, 1990, and

Archbishop, 1991.

AWARDS

First black "Golden Boy," Boy's Club of Richmond, 1972;

Outstanding teaching award, J.L. Francis Elementary School, 1983-86;

Doctor of Sacred Theology, Eastern Theological Seminary, Lynchburg, VA, 1993.

NARRATIVE ESSAY:

"As a successful black [Roman Catholic] priest, I recognized I could write my own ticket, but I never felt at peace. No matter what I wanted to do, I always had to get the stamp of the white establishment," George A. Stallings, Jr., the founder of the African American Catholic Congregation in Washington, D.C., explained in an *Ebony* interview. ***"I realized the church is a white racist institution controlled by a preponderantly Euro-American white male hierarchy that for a century had decided the fate of black people in the Catholic church,"*** Stallings continued. ***"My blackness could no longer tolerate it!"*** And every Sunday since July 2, 1989, the Most Reverend George Augustus Stallings, Jr., has celebrated the so-called "Gospel Mass"--a blend of Catholic and traditional black Protestant worship styles--at his independently established Imani (Swahili for "faith") Temple African American Catholic Congregation.

A maverick in the religious community for nearly two decades, Stallings considers institutionalized Catholicism to be largely racist and insensitive to the needs of its black community. His breakaway church grew out of his belief that the Catholic church should do much more liturgically and evangelistically to serve its more than two million black members.

The man behind the movement was born March 17, 1948, in New Bern, North Carolina, and baptized into the Roman Catholic faith. But despite this cradle Catholicism, Stallings was exposed by his grandmother, Bessie Taylor, to the passion and enthusiasm of black Baptist church worship and, while still a small child, became inspired by it. By the age of three, he had become so enthralled by the spirit of celebration at his grandmother's church that he told her he wanted to be a preacher. Thrilled by young George's

declaration, Bessie told his mother, who in turn told a Catholic priest. "And he was not excited at all," Stallings related in a *News and Observer* interview. The priest stipulated that George should pursue his interest in the clergy by attending the Catholic church, not a Protestant denomination. Stallings recalled fond childhood memories of Catholic priests, whom he saw as "fairy godfathers" who played with the neighborhood kids. "I saw how they made our lives better as a result of mingling with us, and I wanted to do the same thing."

Stallings began testing the limits of Catholic authority during his early training for the priesthood at Asheville Catholic High School, a boarding school several hundred miles away from his hometown. (While there, he reportedly challenged a bishop's order to shave off his mustache, insisting that it was part of his black identity.) After graduating from Asheville, Stallings attended St. Pius X Seminary in Erlanger, Kentucky, where he earned a bachelor's degree in philosophy in 1970. Later that year, he was sent to the North American College, a major house of formation in Rome and a "Harvard" for priests. During his time there, Stallings earned a reputation as a rabble-rouser for advocating that fellow seminarians have a greater say in their educational programs.

Stallings earned three degrees in just five years from the prestigious Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas, also in Rome. On July 20, 1974, he was ordained a Roman Catholic priest and appointed associate pastor at a Washington, D.C. church. Just two years later, Stallings became the youngest pastor in the history of the Washington, D.C. archdiocese, assuming leadership of St. Teresa of Avila parish in 1976. (At that time, a Catholic priest usually served a dozen years or more in a variety of churches before being appointed pastor of his own parish.)

Stallings attracted considerable attention by appealing directly to the cultural and spiritual needs of his growing black membership. Blending age-old Catholic liturgy with African rites, a traditional black preaching style, and elements of African American history and music, Stallings captured headlines throughout the nation for his rebel brand of Catholicism. He hung a painting in St. Teresa's depicting Christ as a black man, introduced gospel music at mass, and delivered fiery, spirited sermons resembling those of black Protestant church orators. It was said that in front of his congregation at Sunday mass, he would preach, swing, and sing with such holy verve that even the ushers would join in. Stallings remained the church's pastor until 1988, when he was named director of the evangelism program for the district's archdiocese. But he left an indelible mark on St. Teresa's history by increasing its membership tenfold--from 200 to 2,000 parishioners.

Despite the media attention and congregational praise, Stallings still felt that the Catholic church was neglecting its African American members. A blatant nonconformist and harsh critic of Roman Catholic church authority, he publicly denounced the white-dominated church hierarchy, saying it lacked the cultural and ethnic background necessary to meet the spiritual needs of people of color. He further stated that he planned to organize a separate, black Catholic congregation--without the approval of the diocesan bishop. Roman Catholic officials, particularly James Cardinal Hickey, began to view Stallings with increasing disfavor. According to the *Washington Post*, the Cardinal expressly forbid the priest from establishing an independent black congregation and voiced disappointment with Stallings's performance in the post of archdiocesan evangelist, claiming he had failed to introduce "even a single proposal as to how the church might reach out more effectively to our black Catholic community."

The renegade priest countered by launching the Washington, D.C.-based Imani Temple African American Catholic Congregation--a Catholic offshoot for black worshippers. On July 2, 1989, Stallings defied Cardinal Hickey and celebrated the first mass of his newly formed congregation at the Howard University Law School chapel, drawing an estimated 2,300 people. His decision to establish the Imani Temple sprang from his disillusionment with a church that he felt had failed to make key changes in its racially oppressive structure. **"I know I am breaking canon law,"** he proclaimed in *Time*. **"But to stir up the conscience of a nation, I'll do it. When laws control, then laws enslave."** As he later told the *Birmingham News*: **"A people who do not direct their destiny by the genius of their culture can never achieve full spiritual maturity."**

As Stallings expected, church authorities reacted rigidly to his new church. He even received an unequivocal suspension, forbidding him from celebrating mass and administering sacraments. The man who was once the pride of the Catholic church had become a thorn in its side. It has been suggested that many of the Catholic church's black bishops understood and sympathized with Stallings's actions but refused to condone them. As Jacqueline Wilson, director of the Washington, D.C. archdiocesan office for African American Catholics put it in *Time*, "No one can go off and start up his own church and call it Roman Catholic." Although Stallings risked excommunication from the church for his actions, he remained unrepentant.

Nearly one year after the formation of his Imani Temple, Stallings was indeed excommunicated from the Roman Catholic church. He had appeared on the *Phil Donahue Show*, a nationally televised program, just

a few days earlier on January 30, 1990. He boldly announced on the show: "As of today, the African American Catholic Congregation is going independent and is no longer under Rome ... no longer under the Pope." (The Pope is regarded by believers as the infallible head of the Roman Catholic church.) Stallings also announced that his unsanctioned African American organization would permit abortion, birth control, divorce, homosexual activity, women in the priesthood, and marriage among priests--all of which are forbidden under Roman Catholic church law.

Father William Kane, who was then the archdiocese's vicar general, later declared in a statement reprinted by the *Catholic Standard*: "By his public declaration that he has separated himself from the church and by his renunciation of church teaching, Father Stallings has excommunicated himself." Father Kane added that the excommunication also extended to Catholics who willingly renounce the Roman Catholic church to join the congregation. In an open statement to the media, Stallings referred to his suspension and later excommunication as "political tactics used by the powerful, the oppressors, to further enslave and oppress the oppressed."

In May of 1990 Stallings was consecrated as a bishop of his church by Richard Bridges, an archbishop of another breakaway denomination, the Independent Old Catholic Church. The next year, he was elevated to the rank of archbishop. Stallings has established six additional Imani temples, five in cities throughout the United States--Baltimore, Richmond, New Orleans, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles--and one in Lagos, Nigeria. An *Ebony* report indicates that Stallings's goal is to empower African Americans both within and beyond the church. He has expanded the meaning of Catholicism to include the Afrocentric worldview and style of worship, and his congregations continue to grow, but his actions nevertheless remain unsanctioned by the Roman Catholic church. Stallings was quoted as saying in the *Final Call* that his stated aim is to **"make blacks whole, self-respecting, self-loving people, who are better equipped to solve the problems they face."** Still, debate over his inauguration of an "outlaw" brand of Catholicism rages on.

SOURCES:

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- *Birmingham News*, October 21, 1989.
- *Boston Globe*, July 3, 1989, p. 3; August 3, 1989, p. 1.
- *Catholic Standard*, February 8, 1990, pp. 1-6, 16.
- *Durham Morning Herald* (NC), November 3, 1989, p. 1A.
- *Ebony*, November 1989, p. 160.
- *Final Call*, July 31, 1989, p. 4.
- *Last Trump*, August/September 1991, p. 7.
- *Los Angeles Times*, July 3, 1989, p. 11; July 16, 1989, sec. 5, p. 1.
- *New Republic*, May 11, 1992, p. 18.
- *News and Observer* (NC), July 31, 1989, p. 1A.
- *New York Times*, July 5, 1989, p. A1; July 9, 1989, sec. 1, p. 22; August 6, 1989, sec. 1, p. 20; September 5, 1989; February 6, 1990, p. A24; September 9, 1991, p. A10.
- *People*, July 31, 1989, p. 28.
- *Stay in the Black* magazine, May/June 1993, p. 30.
- *Time*, July 10, 1989, p. 57; May 14, 1990, p. 67.
- *Washington Post*, June 22, 1989, p. D1; June 25, 1989, p. D1; July 5, 1989, p. A1; July 7, 1989, p. A1; July 10, 1989, p. D1; July 11, 1989, p. B3; July 13, 1989, p. A1, A23; April 29, 1990, p. A1; April 30, 1990, p. A1; May 1, 1990, p. A1; April 10, 1993, p. B1.

Washington Times, January 12, 1990.