

The power of faith captured on film

Photo exhibit provides revealing look inside the black church today

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At an outdoor revival service in one of New York's most dangerous neighborhoods, 10 large black men in paramilitary gear taunted members of a black Christian church.

Into the middle of this black-on-black stand-off over whether Christianity is a "white man's religion" walked a white photographer in his 40s.

Attempting to be a peacemaker, Thomas Roma was immediately surrounded by the men, who threatened to not only kill him but to harm his family.

Roma, a Catholic who was motivated to begin a photographic odyssey of black churches after the killing of a black youth in a white section of Brooklyn, could think only of the words of a Sicilian labor organizer when he was threatened with death: "One thing you have to remember is, if you kill me, you kill Jesus Christ."

The men finally walked away, and Roma survived what he now calls a defining moment of faith.

"How many times in your life do you have a chance to live your beliefs?" he asked.

The incident was one part of an extraordinary four-year journey that led to a current exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art and a new book of photographs entitled "Come Sunday."

For the approximately 80 pictures in the exhibit, he attended

some 150 services at 52 churches from 1991 to 1994. He visited Nigerian churches, Caribbean churches, Pentecostal churches, Baptist churches and even a black Catholic church.

The two- or three-hour services were the short ones. Often he would stay for five or six hours, and once attended a 12-hour service.

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Peter Galassi

"I'm just not walking in and taking pictures, and saying that's interesting to me. I'm giving myself to it," Roma said during an interview at the exhibition, which is on display through June 18.

What the photos show is the power of faith in the black church. There are images

of grandmothers lost in prayer with their arm around a sleeping child, women and men with arms raised and eyes seemingly transfixed on God, men holding onto and praying over a kneeling boy, and a woman filled with joy grasping both sides of her chair and looking upward with eyes closed.

In an introductory essay to Roma's book, Henry Louis Gates Jr., a professor of humanities at Harvard, writes "If it is true that God is in the details, then Roma has shown us God's many guises — from Jeri-curl'd or corn-row'd hair textures and the subtlest renderings of the vast array of 'black' skin tones, to the myriad ways that human eyes record the stages of the transformation in the ritual process, in which God becomes Spirit embodying."



This photograph of a woman in church is from the exhibit, "Come Sunday: Photographs by Thomas Roma" at New York's Museum of Modern Art. The pictures, which focus on black churches in America, will be on display through June 18.

In the world of contemporary art, any exhibit on religious themes is unusual.

"Roma's photographs, remarkable for their skill, are still more extraordinary for the unapologetic candor with which they embrace spiritual passion," said Peter Galassi, chief curator of the photography department at the Museum of Modern Art.

In the art world, Roma said, "People are content with the idea of long-dead white guys in robes and beards as religious things."

What he wanted to do was to create religious pictures for modern times.

"This work is not for the people who go to church. They don't need a less beautiful version of what they see with their own eyes. This is for the people who have never been to church," he said.

The idea for the exhibit goes back to the 1989 racially motivated slaying of a black youth in the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn. After Yusuf Hawkins was killed, Roma spoke at a rally for racial harmony and found himself shunned in his own neighborhood.

His small step toward creating a world where people would be free to go into one another's neighborhoods was to expand a

project photographing the outsides of churches around the city to the predominantly black neighborhoods of north Brooklyn. One pastor invited him in, telling him that "God's work is not the building itself but what goes on inside."

From there, he would visit a different church each Sunday, returning to a familiar church when he was turned down. Some 150 churches would not let him photograph their services, but he kept going back before deciding to stop at 52 churches.

"That's a real pilgrimage. That's a real thing," he said.

For Roma, an irregular church-

goer, it was a powerful spiritual experience.

As he listened to the testimonies of church members, Roma said he realized despite a frugal lifestyle, "I'm a Rockefeller compared to these people."

And yet in their faces and actions he could see people "hanging on for dear life, literally hanging on to the powerful word of God."

"I am not the person I was at all. I am not what I ought to be, but I'm better than I used to be," Roma said. "I don't have the words for how changed I am."

Only the pictures.

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