

A Personal Encounter with Racism; Remarks by Fr. William Guri, C.Ss.R.

I am a Redemptorist Priest from Zimbabwe, studying at Loyola University MD, living with the Redemptorist community, and assisting with ministry at St Mary's Church in Annapolis, MD.

Last year, on the 13th of May, I was taking a walk in the Carroll gardens behind the rectory where I live. I noticed a couple in wedding dress having their pictures taken by the waterfront in the Carroll gardens. I deliberately stayed in the opposite end of the gardens, by the Redemptorist Cemetery, to avoid interrupting the photography session. As I paced up and down between the open gate to the Carroll House and the cemetery, a gentleman, a white man in his forties, who I do not know approached me. I did not recognize this man as a parishioner at St Mary's and I have never seen him again.

He spoke to me quite rudely asking me what I was doing in these gardens. I responded with calmness. He continued to ask me harshly what I thought I was doing in the gardens. He asked me how I had found my way in here and demanded that I should leave immediately. He insisted that I should leave at once because he needed to close and lock the gate. He also told me that I should not be in the gardens since this was private property and especially that there was a private wedding photography session going on and my presence was not welcome or wanted.

Then I asked him if he knew who I was. He did not know who I was, he did not care who I was, all he wanted was for me to leave the premises immediately. So, I, very calmly again, told him that I was a priest and a resident in the rectory on these grounds. He was obviously shocked by this revelation and his demeanor immediately changed from the initial hostility to an effected friendliness. I asked him: "What were you going to do, to call the police on me or simply to draw and shoot at me? Is

this how you treat people like me?” He quickly left before I could establish his name and whether or not he was a local parishioner.

I was left wondering what he thought I might have done wrong. Did he see me posing any threat to the young couple having their wedding pictures taken? Did he perhaps think that I could have hurt and violated the young couple, raping the bride, beating up the groom, taking away their property, and even ending their lives? I wondered that if my black presence was such a threat in a private garden area, how much of a threat is my blackness perceived by one like this man on the sanctuary while I am celebrating the Eucharist? What could have happened if I had not said that I was a priest living and working here? From that day on I have become aware that there could be someone in the crowd who is feeling threatened by my black presence and could act upon this fear without giving me a warning or a chance to save myself.

I am an international student at Loyola University Maryland, and my student visa is in good order, and I have not violated my legal status. I am in the US with the full blessing of the Redemptorist Provincial Superior of the Baltimore Province and I am incorporated in the community and mission of the Redemptorists in Annapolis. I am a Roman Catholic Priest in good standing with the Archdiocese of Harare, Zimbabwe, and I have received the requisite faculties to exercise my priestly ministry in the Archdiocese of Baltimore. The fact that this incident happened in the backyard of the rectory where I am rightfully domiciled ecclesiastically and civilly, awakened me to the reality that there are some people to whom I can never be good enough for the simple reason of being black.

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