

Reflections on Racism within the Church

Written Remarks by Dr. Skipp Sanders

At age 14 in 1956 I stepped on the hard line of separation between the races. At age 15 I crossed it. At 14, I was selected to leave the fully segregated, supportive community which had nurtured me in Baltimore to continue to desegregate City College, one of Baltimore's top two male public high schools. A year later I crossed the racial line somewhat by joining the Catholic Church in a parish predominantly white and at the very beginning of racial change due to white flight from my new neighborhood. Stepping on the line at City was what I expected it to be. White students acted indifferent at best most of the time. My two buddies from Booker T. Jr. High and I isolated ourselves in response to their indifference. The majority of our advanced college prep homeroom of 42 guys, however, was Jewish. From 1956 to 1959 they became the humane glue that somewhat bonded our homeroom and others to become the graduating class of 539 young men.

When I was 15, I attended Mass a few times with a relative visiting from New York. I was totally drawn to her church here and its striking differences from my parents' Baptist and Methodist background and my general leanings towards the Presbyterian Church in our former neighborhood. There was no outreach whatever from St. Edward's. It was just the Holy Spirit finding adolescent me there. I hero worshipped the very tall, very intelligent and friendly young priest who instructed and baptized me. He would become the head of the Archdiocese's schools and a monsignor. The pastor of my parish was curt, unsociable, and, I concluded, discontented with the trickle of brown faces visible in the pews. I gave him my best high school-learned detachment in return. When I told my hero of my desire to be a priest, he told me to finish high school and he would handle everything after that.

I graduated at 16 the next year still resolved to be a priest, and my mentor did handle everything. I would learn he had done much more than my naïveté then could even suspect. Throughout my senior year of high school, he kept an eye on me by

giving me a part time job as receptionist at the rectory three evenings a week, while I did my homework. The pastor looked disturbed whenever he saw I was on duty. But the neighborhood was changing, and my diction and manners were impeccable, thanks to my parents and early teachers. There was nothing he could fault about me except me.

Stepping completely over the racial line and into the seminary in September, 1959 was baptism by complete immersion. I had never lived with white peers day and night before. Moreover, it was not until my first day in St. Charles Seminary that I realized I was the first and the only black seminarian there. I hitched up my City training for it but found it totally unnecessary. Throughout my eight and a half years at St. Charles and St. Mary's the Sulpician priests and lay faculty members were professional, fair, and absolutely impartial in their behavior towards everyone. My fellow seminarians and I had a few adjustments to make with one another. From a background that was totally a European-derived perspective of history and sociology, and living in a paradigm that privileged them often just because they were white, it was inevitable that they would occasionally do or say something that reinforced my sense of being an outsider.

It was also inevitable, given my learned tendency to be a non-confronter in mixed-race situations and my initial loneliness there, that eight years down the road I would realize I had become an iconic example of Carter G. Woodson's argument in his 1932 classic, The Mis-Education of the Negro. I had a fantastic education in all things European, including languages, culture, music – you name it – but little higher education beyond that culture. I was in many respects a black white man. No wonder that once in my first year when a classmate innocently shared with me the supposedly comic line that yellow people created civilization, white people advanced it and black people enjoyed it, the best I could do was stand there dumbfounded at the insult. Despite all I had learned, I knew next to nothing about specific periods of history in ancient Egypt, or about Ethiopia or Kush or any of the African civilizations interacting with Europeans throughout European history.

Nevertheless, my classmates learned the boundaries of my daily world as I learned the expansiveness of theirs beginning with their end of the year bus trip to the beaches along the Chesapeake Bay, then clear of pollution, and people of color,

when they realized that I had to stay behind on campus and wait for my father to take me home. We learned on our summertime outings to recreational venues where they had to re-collect all their fees after the cashier at the entrance refused to take mine; and on every trip to Ocean City, where I always was the only naturally brown body on the beach and dared not go to the bath house unless a few of them accompanied me. Not until Paca Street and philosophy did a sociology professor begin to tackle the issues of race literally surrounding us there. The subject was never truly a part of theology studies.

Minority peoples interpret and understand Euro-Americans' attitudes towards them through multiple acts of body language, physical acts, words, assumptions, and presumptions as well as through acts of commission and omission. The day an underclassman named Buzz drank some of his Coke, and then immediately put the bottle between my lips for me to drink, then took it back and finished it off, literally blew my mind. I loved him instantly.

I remember most vividly the visit I had one afternoon from a stranger in May, 1962, just before I graduated from St. Charles. He was a newly ordained black priest, the first I had ever seen. He had heard of me, and he came to St. Charles to ask me to be the M.C. for his first Mass. He was a Baltimorean, and he had just been ordained by our new Archbishop, Lawrence Shehan. He explained that a few years before I came along, he had inquired about the seminary and was told it was not the Archdiocese's policy to accept Negro candidates for the priesthood. He vowed internally to go to whichever diocese would take him, and he got negative responses from Baltimore/Washington all the way south until he inquired of Mobile -Birmingham. That bishop said yes, because like the many Josephite priests there, my visitor would never serve anywhere but in a totally black community. He told me how Archbishop Shehan had requested to speak with him in the sacristy immediately after the ordination ceremony. "Father," he said, "I regret with all my heart that I was not ordaining you for Baltimore. If you will permit me, I will petition my brother bishop to excardinate you, so that I can bring you home to Baltimore where you belong." My new friend replied that the only place to accept him should be the place to have him, at least initially.

Imagine my astonishment when he explained to me that the actions of my hero

priest and Archdiocesan official were critical for my acceptance. When my priest asked for approval for a young man from his parish to enter the seminary for Baltimore, he intentionally omitted any reference to race. The assumption was that he was asking about a white young man, since the parish was still predominantly white. After that, careful planning by my priest, the new pastor of St. Edward's, and the rector of the seminary kept my identity downplayed for months until, as my friend said, the previous archbishop, who had been ill for some time, had far more immediate thoughts to weigh than the color of my skin. This is the story I was told.

With each passing year of study, when I was home from St. Mary's I would hear of the slights and outrages that Baltimore's black Catholic population had received and that the whole black Catholic community knew: the pastor of a parish near mine who vowed that blacks would never get across the Edmondson Ave. bridge that joined our neighborhood and his; the segregated wards of Catholic hospitals. The black community as a whole knew the latter situation, and people were quick to point out that anomaly in any discussion about Catholic social action. It was Archbishop Shehan's decisive, adamant directives with consequences and especially his actions that drew the attention and gradual trust and respect of black Catholics and the African American community in general. That formula still works.

My personal conclusions from all my experiences are these. First, when it comes to dealing with racism at a personal level, when people are in a crucible together where they have to work it out, they generally do. Working class African Americans, Latinos, and whites are living and rubbing elbows in sections of Baltimore I would not have dared to walk through years ago. White flight years ago, and accommodating white flight with all the necessary business, religious, and educational institutions, and now current gentrification actions strictly along socioeconomic lines do not facilitate elbow rubbing. How do we learn to live together?

Second, my story certainly punctuates the importance of a radical overhaul of our curriculum, K through ordination, to correct the great gaps and errors in history that, uncorrected, promote racial attitudes and white privilege. A few years ago, the Walters Art Museum's original exhibition, "The African Presence in Renaissance Europe," showed through classical art the comfortable socializing of Africans of

equal stature with white aristocracy and nobility. Martin Bernal in Black Athena states that western racism has a history, such as Blumenbach at Gottingen being the first to use the term “Caucasian” in the first half of the 18th century.

Equally important, the church’s accommodation to America’s structural and systemic racism must end. The unexamined thoughts and practices governing our judgements and actions at an official and policy level cripple minority progress far more than interpersonal hostility. The church militant is globally, gloriously diverse; yet, in countries settled by Europeans imported, immigrant and indigenous peoples are treated as appendages more than the living examples of that glorious reality. Original Europeans brought their racial paradigm with them as easily as their belongings and germs. Our great church was not immune, but living up to the Gospel we preach can make us well, so that we can heal this country.

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