

The Day it Made Sense; Remarks by Deacon Seigfried Presberry

In June of 2001, I was ordained a Deacon for the Archdiocese of Baltimore. Filled with joy and excitement I could not wait to begin my ministry at a parish that was predominately white, which to me was not a problem. If some of you can remember the word diversity was rapidly becoming “the right thing to do” in the workplace so why not our parishes. I will admit that I had my struggles and challenges since I was the parish’s first Deacon and Black at that. There were days when I questioned myself as to why I am here – because most people would not speak to me, take communion from me or acknowledge that I was a Deacon.

One of my duties as a Deacon was to perform Baptisms and this gave me an opportunity to meet some of the families and parishioners who welcomed me and embraced my role as a Deacon. So one day I asked if I could assist with visiting those in the hospital and the homebound hoping this would allow me to meet people and get know them also; again people embraced my role as not only being a Deacon but someone who cared about their well-being.

Then one day without warning my faith, my call to the Diaconate and my role as a husband, father and my perspective on life was tested and challenged to the core, all while on a visit in the hospital.

It was my Friday morning routine. I reported to the Chaplain’s office, signed in and received a list of parishioners who were in the hospital. Off I would go with my Communion Book and Hosts, visiting and offering Communion to the sick. I would do the Intensive Care and Critical Units last since it was the busier of floors to visit. Nearing completion of my visits, I entered ICU where there was a man hooked up to every machine you could imagine with his son sitting in a chair by his side. I introduced myself to the son and asked if his father would like to receive Communion. Before I knew it, the man pulled off his oxygen mask and yelled out “Oh my God we have niggers in the Church.” I’m standing there in full clerics while the son is trying to get his father under control so I leave and go stand in the hallway trying to digest what just happened.

Suddenly I wanted to go and tell him I am no nigger but a servant of God. I wanted to tell him that I do not care a damn about him or the others up at that Church and I am tired of people calling me names and disrespecting my family and my race. I started crying and said this is it – I cannot do this. I left the hospital and went home sharing this event with my wife. Her words to me were, “It is not about you Seigfried or how you feel – it’s about God and what he is asking and telling you do – so you go back next week and every week because that’s what you were called to do. Remember what Jesus said: ‘If they persecute me they will persecute you also.’ Also what oath did you take at Ordination – do you remember?”

“Receive the Gospel of Christ whose herald you have become. Believe what you read, teach what you believe and practice what you teach.”

I went back the next week and he was still there in the hospital but out of ICU. He and his son apologized to me and I asked if he wanted Communion. To my surprise he did and received Communion. The next week he was still there and received Communion but this time he engaged me in a conversation. He stated that he was going home next week and would not be in the hospital but wanted to know if I could visit him and bring Communion to his home. Now just a couple weeks ago he called me a nigger – now he wants me to visit him at his house. I told him I would and left. For the next several days though, I was discerning through prayer if this would be the right thing to do.

My Mother once told me if someone asks something of you do it, for everyone has needs but not everyone can provide for that need. So I went – I went and went every Friday morning, getting to know my dear friend and him getting to know me. We shared stories about our wives, our families and more importantly our faith. One particular day though he broke down and told me what his life was like being White and that he was truly sorry for calling me a nigger. I told him about my life as a Black man and being a Black Deacon in the Catholic Church. He thanked me for all that I brought into his life and would bring into other people’s lives for he like many others had never met or talked to anyone of color the way we did and that he regretted. My dear friend passed away several months later and he requested that I preside at his homecoming

Which I did and now I truly “Believe what I read, teach what I believe and practice what I teach” without hesitation.

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