



Diocese of Belleville
Office of the Bishop

“Even Their Virtues Were Being Burned Away”

Homily for the Closing Mass of the National Catholic Media Association

June 3, 2016

The Solemnity of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus

(Ez 34:11-16, Ps 23:1-3a, 3b-4, 5, 6, Rom 5:5b-11, Lk 15:3-7)

The Cathedral Basilica of St. Louis

(The Old Cathedral)

His Excellency, The Most Reverend Edward K. Braxton, Ph.D., S.T.D.

Bishop of Belleville, Illinois

Celebrant and Homilist

Dear People of God:

It is a joy for me to be with you in this historic Cathedral of St. Louis, where, many years ago, I celebrated my First Mass as a Bishop, the day after my Consecration as a Bishop for service as Auxiliary Bishop of St. Louis. We gather to give thanks for God’s love for us symbolized in the burning heart of Jesus. Above the altar is the magnificent reproduction of Diego Velasquez’s masterpiece, “Christ Crucified,” which hangs in the Museo del Prado in Madrid. Our eyes are drawn to the milky white flesh of the dead Jesus suspended in the midst of the vast, empty darkness of the universe. The work is a towering achievement of Velasquez’s religious imagination.

This morning, I invite you to enter into your religious imaginations!

Imagine that you are a White American teenager living in a poor urban area with few opportunities for you to get a good education and find a decent job. Some of your friends are trouble makers and when the African-American police come around they often intimidate them. This frightens you because another White friend of yours was shot and killed by African-American police when he reached into his pocket for his wallet, which the police thought was a

gun. Since you were very young, your parents have cautioned you to avoid contact with the Black police, because they may suspect you of wrongdoing.

You and your friends live near the neighborhood Catholic Church, though you have never been inside the church, since you are not a Catholic. Some of your relatives think of the Catholic Church as a “Black racist institution,” with no interest in attracting White members.

Now, imagine that an African-American acquaintance persuades you to go with him to visit this very church, St. Charles Lwanga and the Uganda Martyrs. You enter the church and you immediately notice that Jesus, Mary, Joseph and all the saints and angels are depicted as People of Color. God the Father Himself is painted on the ceiling of the church as a distinguished older Black gentleman. You think to yourself, “I thought God was pure spirit, with no race or nationality, or anatomical gender. Does the Bible really say God is an elderly, African-looking, brown skinned man?” You wonder if the Catholic Church believes that only people of African ancestry are in heaven.

As you walk about the church, you begin to ponder the writing on the wall.

The prophet Ezekiel proclaims:

Thus says the Lord GOD:

“I myself will look after and tend my sheep. I will lead them out from among the peoples and gather them from the foreign lands. The lost I will seek out, the strayed I will bring back, the injured I will bind up, and the sick I will heal. But, the sleek and the strong I will destroy.”

You wander into the Blessed Sacrament Chapel and you see a painting of Jesus and the Apostles, all with Afro-centric features. You read familiar words your mother often prays:

“The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He bids me to lie down in green pastures;

beside restful waters he leads me;

to revive my drooping spirit.

Surely goodness and kindness shall follow me all the days of my life!”

Suddenly, you notice the huge mosaic covering the wall behind the altar. It depicts a handsome, athletic looking African-American young man, with closely cropped hair and a trim very short beard. His brilliant dark brown eyes seem to be looking right at you, no, right through you! His eyes are on fire with a mixture of compassionate love and righteous anger! Around his head is a nimbus of white hot light. The commanding figure is dressed like a common laborer.

But the most amazing part of the mosaic is the fact that the man’s denim shirt, stained with the dirt and grime of the day’s work is completely unbuttoned revealing his heart, throbbing and aflame with the fire of divine love. The powerful flames from this beating heart flare out and envelope the hearts of men and women of different race and religions standing at the edges of the mosaic. You are captivated, even mesmerized. The figure seems alive and watching you. At the bottom of the massive mural you see these words from Mary Flannery O’Connor’s short story,

“Revelation,” “She could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.”

Suddenly, your African American friend startles you out of your hypnotic experience. Pointing at the mosaic, you ask him, “What is that?” He answers, “Oh, that’s the Sacred Heart of Jesus of Nazareth, the work of a local artist. You see it in most Catholic Churches. It is a very popular devotion. In fact, today is the Feast of the Sacred Heart. Ideally, it is a day on which all Roman Catholics are called to meditate deeply on the living gift of divine love. We are to look for specific ways in which they can mirror God’s love in our daily lives in our homes, in our parishes, in our places of work, and everywhere we go. Unfortunately, most of us don’t really do that.

You ask your African-American acquaintance, why do all of the saints and angels in this church have African features? “Wouldn’t the Catholic Church be more truly *catholic* and welcoming of all, if the holy men and women of the Church were pictured as people of different ethnic and racial backgrounds? He responds, “We get that question all the time. White people should realize that the Afro-centric art in Catholic Churches all over the world represents everyone, because Afro-centric art is actually universal!

“But,” you ask, “what about here in the racially diverse United States? What a powerful impact it would have on People of European heritage, like me, if we could walk into a Catholic Church and see an image of a long haired, blond, blue eyed Sacred Heart of Jesus wearing flowing red robes and pointing to his heart with his fingers? Wouldn’t that convey a more authentically universal image of the Kingdom of heaven and a truly Catholic Church?” Your African American companion pauses for a moment and then answers, “I really don’t think that is ever going to happen.” “Why not?” You ask. “Why not?”

Suddenly, you awake from this dream, a kind of day-mare of the future, in which White people are a struggling so called “minority group” in a United States in which the majority of Americans are People of Color. You exit the Old Cathedral of St. Louis checking your watch. You don’t have much time before the next session of the Catholic Press Association of the United States & Canada.

As you pick up your pace, the rich sound of energetic African-American gospel music lures you into a small Baptist church. Standing in the back of the small Black congregation, you are suddenly a minority of one, as I often am. The group has gathered to discuss the negative impact of terms like “Minorities” and “minority groups” on American society. After some remarks about the racial divide in the United States, the litany of the names of unarmed young African-American men, who have died in encounters with White law enforcement officials, and the controversies surrounding the Black Lives Matter Movement, the speaker begins with a poem by Countee Cullen, a giant of the Harlem renaissance.

“Once riding in old Baltimore,
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,
I saw a Baltimorean
Keep looking straight at me.
Now I was eight and very small,

And he was no whit bigger,
And so I smiled, but he poked out
His tongue, and called me, 'Nigger.'
I saw the whole of Baltimore
From May until December;
Of all the things that happened there
That's all that I remember."

Stunned that the poet actually used that word, you listen as the speaker continues,

In many of the uneasy conversations about what the country has been experiencing since attention has been focused on the deadly encounters between unarmed African-American men and the White law enforcement personnel, the expressions "minority groups," "minorities," and "minority communities" have been widely used, especially by almost all members of the media. I charge you to examine and question the validity of these common expressions. Are there really "minority" Americans and "minority" Christians? Though these expressions are regularly used in government and school documents, newspapers and by television journalists, they are radically incorrect and they exacerbate the already difficult relationships between people of different ethnic and racial backgrounds because they reinforce white privilege.

What does it really mean to be an American? The common use of the word "minorities" as the collective designation for People of Color perpetuates negative stereotypes and is contradicted by what it actually means to be a citizen of this country. Words like "minorities" and "minority groups" are used quite selectively in America. They are not applied consistently in reference to all groups of Americans who are a statistically smaller percentage of the population. Americans whose ancestors came from Luxembourg, for example, do not constitute a major portion of the population. But they are never referred to as minorities. Why not?

These expressions press the question: Precisely which American citizens are the "majority" group? There is no single ethnic, racial or cultural group that constitutes "true" Americans. Every citizen of the United States is fully and equally an American in the exact same sense of the word. Citizens who are descendants of passengers on the Mayflower and immigrants from Western Europe are not, somehow, more truly Americans than descendants of "passengers" on slave ships, or the most recent immigrants from Iran, or the Native Americans granted citizenship (in their own land!) by Congress in 1924. If people are citizens, they are Americans. Period! *E Pluribus Unum* ("one from many"), excludes the possibility of designating "minorities" in this country, unless we call all citizens minorities.

The speaker continues.

The practice of gathering together those Americans whose ancestors were from various European countries with very little in common and making them the "majority" group and relegating everyone else as "minorities" is, historically, a rather recent and arbitrary development. In its present usage, the term "minority groups" often connotes the haves vs. the have-nots, the powerful vs. the powerless, the assimilated vs. the non-assimilated, because they have not assimilated middle-class mores and the cultural heritage of Western Europe. As a result, even

when the majority of the residents in a city are African-Americans or Hispanic-Americans, they are still “minorities.”

Why don't Americans take a step across the racial divide by acknowledging that *all* Americans are from different racial and ethnic backgrounds and that *no* group constitutes the *majority*. Frequent references to groups of Americans and groups of Christians as “minorities” seem to designate them as who they supposedly are not. Not who they ARE!” We Baptists are Baptists. We don't like being called “non-Catholics!”

Looking around you realize this building is a former Catholic church. You read the writing on the wall. St. Paul writing to the Christians living in Rome declares:

“Brothers and sisters:

The love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit
God proved his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us all.”

Looking up you see a stained glassed window with a traditional image of a long haired, blond, blue-eyed Sacred Heart of Jesus wearing flowing red robes and pointing to his heart with his fingers.

Suddenly, the speaker notices you and invites you forward. You introduce yourself as a Catholic in town for a Catholic Communications conference. A Catholic? He asks. Why, our sanctuary was once the Catholic Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus!

The speaker asks, why does the Catholic Church call Americans of African descent, minorities? Are we not all Americans? Are we not ALL redeemed sinners transformed by Christ with equal dignity before God? It would be a great thing if the powerful Catholic Church, especially Catholic media and communications leaders, would lead the way in eliminating expressions like “minorities” and “minority groups.” Is it asking too much for a nation that proclaims itself to be “one from many” and a church that claims to be universal to affirm that, in truth, there are no majority/minority groups in this country because we really are one? We are simply Americans, proud of our amazingly diverse backgrounds, with every right to expect, even demand, to be treated with equal dignity by law enforcement, by the courts, in the public square and in our churches, including the Catholic Church.

Is there any chance you can put this topic on the agenda for your Catholic communication meeting? You pause for a moment and then, somewhat hesitantly, you respond, “I really don't think that is ever going to happen.” “Why not,” he asks, “Why not?”

You excuse yourself hastily and make your way to the conference taking a seat in the back since the speaker has begun. You cannot remain focused. Your mind's eye is still flooded with the rugged Afro-centric image of the throbbing heart of Jesus of Nazareth, aflame with the fire of divine love. You cannot get that image of the Sacred Heart out of your mind. You cannot escape the writing on the wall from the Gospel according to St. Luke:

'Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.'
I tell you, in just the same way
there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents
than over ninety-nine righteous people
who have no need of repentance.

Nor can you escape Mary Flannery O'Connor's words:

“She could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.”

Praise be Jesus Christ.
Both now and forever. AMEN!

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