

Black History Month Mass
Sunday, February 14, 2021
St. Agnes Cathedral, Rockville Centre
Homily

Bishop Barres, thank you for the invitation to preach this morning here at St. Agnes Cathedral. It's not on many occasions that this Brooklyn boy, born and raised has the opportunity to come to the sister diocese for Sunday Mass. I was privileged to serve as the deacon for the Ordination Mass of my three classmates here at St. Agnes, who were ordained priests just two weeks before my own ordination in Brooklyn almost 11 years ago. I also wish to thank Mrs. Darcel Whitten-Wilamowski for extending the invitation to me today on this occasion in which we celebrate as a nation, Black History Month. I also thank Father Lachlan Cameron and Father Edward Sheridan for being here with us today. I lived with both Father Cameron and Father Sheridan at the Seminary of the Immaculate Conception in Huntington where we studied for the priesthood. Father Sheridan was actually born and raised in the Diocese of Brooklyn, but somehow found his way to the sister diocese. I joke all the time, although the Brooklyn Bridge connects the boroughs of Brooklyn and Manhattan there seems to be a road leading to Nassau and Suffolk counties.

As a kid growing up, I always wanted to fit in with the popular crowd. I remember all throughout my early years of grammar school, looking up to the most popular kid in class. I remember going home and telling my parents that I needed to change the way I looked, or change the way I acted, so that I could be recognized as being associated with the popular kid in class. Of course, my parents would say to me, be yourself and that's enough. But being myself was not going to get me to popularity, or the attention that I wanted. So, I decided to get advice from someone that I thought was the wisest person in the world. My grandmother. At the time, she was in her early 80's and living in Brooklyn. Grandma would be considered one of those southern Black Catholics. She grew up in a town called Williamston in North Carolina. She was one of the very few Black Catholics in that town. She loved the Lord and she loved the

Church, but unfortunately there were moments that those in the Church didn't love her, all because she was Black.

She would tell us, her grandchildren stories of growing up in the south as a Black Catholic. Ushers would tell her that when she arrived for Mass at the Church that she would have to stand at the doors. She was not allowed to sit in the pews with everyone else. She wasn't allowed to pray the rosary with the rest of the congregation or during lent pray the stations of the cross with the congregation. She had to live her life of faith from the doors of a Catholic Church. None of this though diminished her faith, it actually made it stronger, giving her children and grandchildren the opportunity to grow in faith, hope and charity.

As so I would go to her, as my prayer warrior and guide. So, I told her about my dilemma and that I needed to change my image to be the popular kid in class. My grandmother turned to me and said something that I will never forget. In her southern drawl, she said, "All you need to do is be like Jesus and you'll be ok".

All you need to do is be like Jesus and you'll be ok. Sounds like St. Paul today in his letter to the Corinthians. Be imitators of Christ. Doing everything for the honor and glory of God. We are reminded that we don't need to take on any other persona than that of Jesus Christ. But yet, there are times in our lives where we allow popularity, fame, prestige and honor get in the way of being true imitators of Christ.

During this month of February, we as a nation celebrate Black History Month. We thank God for the gift of those who have gone before us, who paved the way for justice and equality. We remember those who shed their blood fighting that all people, Black, and White would be able to live in peace and harmony. So here we are, in the year 2021 and we come to yet again another Black History Month, one though that is very different from years past.

Every February we pray for justice. Every February we sing songs of freedom. Every February we remember the ancestors whose shoulders we stand on today lifting us up to be stronger and valiant. But yet are our cries for justice, freedom and equality being heard? Are our cries being heard when we hear of yet again another person of color being killed by the hands of a racist. Are our cries being heard when we see white supremacists taking heed of our community. We stand as a church today to say that will not allow racism, bigotry or discrimination to make its way into the depths our spiritual home.

We stand on the shoulders of those who paved the way for us to get to this moment. We stand on the shoulders of Sr. Thea Bowman who in 1989 sang to the Catholic Bishops of the United States that we shall overcome. We stand on the shoulders of Venerable Augustus Tolton, the first African American priest ordained in the United States, born a commodity to be bought and sold, died a priest of Jesus Christ. We stand on the shoulders of Monsignor Bernard Quinn, a priest of the Diocese of Brooklyn who wanted to minister to the growing Black community in Bedford Stuyvesant Brooklyn. Monsignor Quinn, a white Irish priest was told by his bishop, if you want to minister to those people, build them a church yourself. Monsignor Quinn built St. Peter Claver Church and it was formally dedicated in 1921. I am privileged today to serve as Pastor of St. Peter Claver Church along with Our Lady of Victory and Holy Rosary Churches making up the canonically merged, St. Martin de Porres Parish. Monsignor Quinn built Little Flower House of Providence in Wading River, Long Island as a home for orphaned black boys and girls. Msgr. Quinn stood up to the Ku Klux Klan who came and burned down the orphanage 3 times. Msgr. Quinn rebuilt the orphanage each time. When they came back the fourth time, Msgr. Quinn said to them, if you are going to burn this place down, you are going to do it with me in it!

As disciples of the Risen Lord, we must imitate him in all that we say and do. We must bring the love and mercy of Christ to all of God's holy people, because ultimately Jesus changes and transforms hearts. We see in today's gospel of how the leper's life was radically transformed by the healing hand of Christ. He goes and tells everyone of how Jesus made him clean! His heart

along with his physical body was transformed by Christ. It's all about changing hearts. How do we defeat racism within our communities and yes how do we defeat racism within our church, we need to start changing hearts!

Just a few years ago, the Bishops of the United States put together a beautiful pastoral letter addressing the sin of racism entitled, "Open Wide Our Hearts." The Bishops of the United States tells us that racism can often be found in our hearts. They state, "it can lead to thoughts and actions that we do not even see as racist, but nonetheless flow from the same prejudicial root. Consciously or subconsciously, this attitude of superiority can be seen in how certain groups of people are vilified, called criminals, or are perceived as being unable to contribute to society, even unworthy of its benefits."

During this Black History Month, let us pray for an increase in conversion of hearts. That is the only way that we will continue the journey of walking hand in hand, side by side as brothers and sisters created in the image and likeness of God. We look to our ancestors of the past, as we build a future rooted in equality, peace and justice.

Let us pray that we will be imitators of the man who set all of us free by the shedding of his blood on the cross. Because ultimately, all we need to do is be like Jesus.