



ELEPHANTS IN THE LIVING ROOM

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DR. CHRISTOPHER PRAMUK
GRACED ENCOUNTERS ACROSS THE COLOR LINE
CHRIST THE KING
DETROIT, MI
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Introduction

Bishop Thomas Gumbleton

Good afternoon, and welcome to the Elephants. Today, I would like to introduce to you Dr. Christopher Pramuk, author, songwriter and professor at Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio. Dr. Pramuk will address us today on the subject, *Graced Encounters Across the Color Line*. He was trained at the University of Notre Dame and received his doctorate in theology and his main discipline is systemic theology. I could tell you a few things about his life. He is happily married and his wife Gloria is a pediatrician and together they have the challenging responsibility of raising four children. Dr. Pramuk has been a prolific writer. He has had articles in many journals and magazines, like *America Magazine*, *Theological Studies*, *Cross Currents*, and also published four books, one of them we will be discussing this afternoon you are aware of. But he's also written a book called *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton*, which is also very challenging and prayerfully written, an enlightening book of Thomas Merton. He is the author of two other books one of which I think would be an especially good one for all of us to read, *Surviving the Search: Sexuality, Spirituality and Love*; and that's a very, very good book, I'm sure. Dr. Pramuk is a lifelong musician. He also is a student of African American history and spirituality. In view of all of this marvelous background, I ask you now to welcome enthusiastically Dr. Christopher Pramuk. (Applause)

Graced Encounters Across the Color Line

Dr. Christopher Pramuk

Thank you, Bishop Gumbleton. I have to say that opening prayer, to hear, "The word according to Christopher Pramuk," I like the sound of that. (Laughter) I just wish my sixteen year old son would hear that so that when he asks me, "Why can't I take the car?" I can say, "The word has spoken." (Laughter)

I'm so glad to be here; and it was a bit of an adventure this morning getting here, but I got here. And it's just an honor to be asked to speak about my book a little bit, and share with you some themes on a topic that has really kind of haunted me for a lot of years. And it was a great gift to have a sabbatical a few years ago, to sit down, and finally pray over, and write through this material, and weave in a bit of my own life story; and also the work of artists and poets, theologians, musicians. And we will hear a little bit about that this afternoon; and also a warning: you will all have a chance to sing with me; and I hope you will; otherwise, I will feel awfully lonely up here. I brought my guitar, and will use it in just a few minutes. I was really happy to hear the name of Sister Thea Bowman mentioned earlier. And I have kind of a funny story about her. I never met her, but she's long been a kind of inspiration to me; and part of a chapter of my book is about her.

I was teaching a class last semester called *The Black Catholic Experience*. And I didn't know if anybody would show up, but the course was packed. There were two sessions of 30 students each; and there was a waiting list; and so I was very excited to teach this course for the first time, and I kind of put it together from the ground up. It had never been taught at Xavier University, where I teach. But I was nervous. I was nervous to get into this subject with young people today; and I wasn't sure what to expect, but about two thirds of my students were African-American and about a third were white and Catholic. Of the African Americans there wasn't a single black Catholic and I think partly just reflects the demographics of Xavier University in Cincinnati but there were again two thirds African-American. And when I walked into the room on the first day in the lecture hall, and looked around the room, you know, I think you could have heard a pin drop. And I looked at the faces of those around the room; and it took me a moment to recognize that I think many of the students were puzzled. What is this red headed white boy from Ireland teaching a class called Black Catholic Experience? I think they were expecting an African-American Catholic to be teaching this course. And to tell you the truth, I was thinking the same thing. (Laughter) What the hell am I doing here? But I prayed a lot about it on the opening day of class. I introduced them

on the first day to Sister Thea Bowman, and showed a short video; and I opened with prayer to her, invoking her name and her story, and asking her to guide me to be witness to all of us as we walk through this together. I told them this was really an experiment; and I'm along for the ride with you. And it was a wonderful semester. And I'll say more about that experience in the latter part of my comments. So, in the spirit of Sr. Thea, again, I thank you for inviting me here.

Songs in the Key of Hope

I want to reflect for just a little while with you, as I do in the book, on our relationship between our life of faith and the Church and our commitments, or at least our desire to be more fully committed, to racial justice and reconciliation in the places that we live, work and pray. There are so many doorways through which we could approach this topic of race. We could begin with dramatic demographic changes taking place right now in the United States, in the global Catholic Church today, and the need to embrace multicultural expressions of faith, dance, and song in liturgy. We could talk about issues of poverty, or health, and income disparity along racial lines in the United States, and I'm sure here in Detroit, or in my own city of Cincinnati, which is a highly segregated city. We could talk about the dismantling under the current Supreme Court of hard won gains made during the civil rights movement: gains such as public school integration, voting rights, and affirmative action, admission policies with schools like as the University of Michigan. We could look at the devastating impact of hyper incarceration rates in communities of color, largely the result of what some call war on drugs, dating back to the Reagan era. And so on and so on. All of these are valid, and even urgent entry points, in the conversation about race in the United States and in the Catholic Church; but I'd like to begin on a more personal note, if I may, and share with you a couple stories relating to my own education or formation, if you will.

Graced Encounters Across the Color Line in my own life, gifts that I've been given, time and time again, through the world of art, and especially through music. As a kid, I played the piano; and our piano was in the basement; and it was kind of a scary place down there; and my parents would send me down to practice every night. And I would sit at the piano in the dark and see the light over the keys a little uncomfortable, a little bit annoyed that my friends were out in the back yard playing; but as soon as I played the first note, and struck the piano and the keys; and the notes and sounds just filled the room and filled my breathing; and, you know, I was at peace. And only years later did I realize that the piano and music was really my primary vehicle of prayer. It's where I felt The Presence, a presence just surrounding me. I would sit for an hour, sometimes two hours, not even aware that the time was passing; and at the end just look up from the piano and utter the words, "Thank you," just this profound sense of God's presence in music.

And so music followed me, haunted me, my whole life long; and in 1988, after graduating from college at the University of Kentucky at Lexington, which is where I'm from, at the age of 23, I packed up all my belongings, and loaded them into an old blue Ford Econoline van that my dad and I bought from a blind salesman for \$450. I kid you not, a blind Avis salesman; and I loaded, including my piano, in the back of this van and I went west to Boulder, Colorado to study at a little college called Naropa Institute. Today, it's called Naropa University in Boulder, a wonderful liberal arts school; and I went there to study music, because at the time I was writing a lot of music and composing.

One of the first courses that I signed up for was a summer workshop called *Building a Vocal Community*; and the professor was someone I had never heard of, but maybe you have, her name was Ysaye Barnwell. And she was a member of the a cappella, all African-American female group called *Sweet Honey in the Rock*. Boy! I just signed up for this course, and I had no idea what I was getting myself into. She was a powerhouse! And for the next two weeks, the first summer I arrived in Boulder, Dr. Barnwell took us 50 or so students on this intense and wondrous ride into the terrible and wondrous beauty of the African-American spiritualists' tradition. Now it's one thing to think and talk about race and race relations in society and the Church; it's quite another to accompany a great story teller, artist and musician, as they plunge you head long into the deep river of black suffering, resistance, courage and grace. Now at some level of course, I already knew intellectually the historical significance of the slave songs and freedom songs, but what I learned during this workshop about the world, about myself, about American history, and so on, and about faith, was something much deeper than an intellectual conversion.

Don Saliers of Emory University has a wonderful quote that I have included on your handout about spirituals; and he writes, "This music comes out of struggle, pain and courage in the face of enormous ecological and social hardship. We might call music that sustained hope in difficult times a survival art,

songs that move the soul enhance the social body. This is the sound of political theology, not the words only, but the power of the melodies, and the way the whole body of the community sang the words, sounded the deep religious passion of such a theology." And what Don Sailors his insight there, I think, puts into words that I didn't understand then, or know, but what I experienced during this workshop. And so if you will bear with me, and eventually, if you will join with me, I want to share just one song that I've learned during this workshop; and it was really my introduction to the African-American spiritualists tradition. So I'll begin. And it's a song; and it's called, *Soon I Will Be Done with the Troubles of the World*. I'll begin; and I'll pick up the tempo a little; and at some point, if and when you're ready, I hope you'll join me. And if you could really keep it going for me, then I might add a couple of parts on top. Okay? Want to try it?

Soon I will be done with the troubles of the world....

*Refrain: Soon I will be done with the troubles of the world,
the troubles of the world,
the troubles of the soon I will be
Soon I will be done with the troubles of the world
Goin' home to live with God (3 times)*

*No more weepin' and wailing
No more weepin' and wailing
No more weepin' and wailing
Goin' home to live with God*

Refrain

*I want to see my mother
I want to see my mother
I want to see my mother
Goin' home to live with God*

Refrain

*I want to see my mother
I want to see my mother
I want to see my mother
Goin' home to live with God*

Refrain

*No more weepin' and wailing
No more weepin' and wailing
No more weepin' and wailing
Goin' home to live with God*

(Applause)

You guys did pretty good, don't you think? Thank you. That was fun. You know, the way I would say it, my experience, the song, when you sing it, surrounded by 5, 10, 50 or 100 people, you begin to believe in it. You feel in your whole self a resurrection, life in the Kingdom of God perhaps, even a foretaste of what heaven would be like: the eye that sees into the weak, right? You know what I mean? It's not that the eye disappears - I'm still here - but I experience myself seeing into something larger than myself, a community around you, like Dr. King called *The Beloved Community*. Think about the song *I Shall Not Be Moved*. Maybe you remember that song during the Civil Rights Movement. One word has changed - remember what word? The subject "I" was changed to "we." "We Shall Not Be Moved. Like a tree planted by the

water we shall not be moved.” That changing one word is really significant. And whether the words are changed or not, you feel yourself as part of something bigger.

There’s one other body of music that was really important to me that came much earlier, in fact, when I was a boy. And this music, in fact, was my introduction to your city, the city of Detroit. Can you guess who it was? It came through the musical genius of little Stevie Wonder, the child prodigy and boy wonder of Motown. When I was 12, the year was 1976, *Songs In the Key of Life* was released, Stevie Wonder’s double album masterpiece that gave brilliant and beautiful voice to the joys and struggles of life in the inner city. Steve’s original title for the album, *Let’s See Life the Way It Is*, that was his working title. The album’s 17 songs reveal the world largely hidden from suburban, middle-class, white America. I remember vividly listening to the record for the first time with my older brother. Though I was too young, and far too insulated to grasp the social and racial complexity of the songs, I was mesmerized by the music. And almost 40 years later, I am still mesmerized at the full genius, and wonder, and artistry still eludes me. Today, I introduce his music to my students, and never cease to wonder how an encounter with such an artist opens their social horizons, much as mine were broken open as a child. Track three for example, *Village Ghetto Land*, layers images of life the way it is in the inner city over the serene encultured instrumentation of chamber quartet. So you have the juxtaposition of an almost classical score, the way he scores the song against these lyrics. And it went something like this.

*Would you like to go with me
Down my dead end street
Would you like to come with me
To Village Ghetto Land*

*Children play with rusted cars
Sores cover their hands
Beggars watch and eat their meal
from garbage cans*

Now, two tracks later, as if to say, “Don’t even think you understand me or my people anyway,” Stevie delivers a song called *Sir Duke*, a funky and joyful tribute to the genius of Duke Ellington and other black artists, followed by *I Wish*, playful memories of growing up on the streets of Detroit; and then comes

*Isn’t she lovely?
Isn’t she wonderful?
Isn’t she precious?
Less than one minute old
I can’t believe what God has done.
Through us he’s given life to one
But isn’t she lovely made from love?*

Isn’t She Lovely celebrates the birth of his daughter Aisha. The song tells us that the name Aisha means simply life. Life made for love, followed by *Joy Inside My Tears*, *Pass-time Paradise*, and *Black Man*, all hymns to what it feels like to be black in America. As though like turning a many faceted diamond now this way, now that, Stevie refracts the mosaic colors of life as it is for many in inner city America, life held down to street level.

What interests me most today is not the insight into so-called ghetto life Stevie Wonder’s news gives me as a middle class white person, but rather what interests me is the implicit and sometimes explicit critique of the racially unconscious white listener embedded everywhere in his music. There is another album called, *Talking Boy* - and if you don’t know, this I urge you to look it up - it’s called *Big Brother*. Some of you know that song.

*Your name is big brother
You say that you’re watching me on the tele,
Seeing me go nowhere,*

What he does, he takes at white outsider gaze and he turns it around; and he says, "You think you know about me; but you don't know nothing about me or about my people. You just come and visit me around election time," he says in his song. It's a brilliant protest song; and the thing about Stevie is that somehow he does it with love and not contempt. I don't know if it is sass, or if its gentle mockery; but whatever it is, it is brilliant. He manages to apply the racial routine but not through the lens of contempt: it's love and invitation to wake up. And so for listeners like myself, Stevie Wonders artistry facilitates a powerful and potentially painful realization mainly by allowing complete isolation from black experience, my own confinement in the prison built by racism and the degree to which my own white habitus, if you will, my own white way of seeing, my own white privilege, or what Thomas Merton calls "groups' faith," conditions my very manner of seeing and judging reality. In other words, the opening of *Village Ghetto Land*,

*Would you like to go with me
Down my dead end street*

still resonates today as both an accusation and an invitation; an accusation of social blindness, but also an invitation to wake up; to come and see life as it is, as it really is, not through a television screen, or the lens of our Hollywood film makers; to come and see life more clearly than I have seen it before from my perspective of social privilege; to say yes to the invitation is to discover that once it stays, it's not my grasp of so-called black experience, as if all such experience were monolithic, or the same certainly as mine, but what is at stake is the music of life itself, life in the heat of humanity, black, white brown, red, yellow. It is about the music of human relationships, sorrowful and joyful, broken and redeemed.

Was Blind, But Now I See

I often wondered how strange, sad and beautiful that Stevie Wonder, a blind man, would be teaching me and so many others how to see. Blindness, of course - I'm into part two, if you are following the outline - blindness is one of the most pervasive themes and metaphors in the gospels. Repeatedly in the gospels, Jesus is seen healing the blind. Yet, for me, the most compelling of all these miracles is the one that didn't work the first time. You know which one I am talking about? What is it? Mark's Gospel, chapter 8: the blind man of Bethsaida. It's a wonderful story, putting spittle on his eyes Jesus laid his hands on him and asked, "Do you see anything?" Looking up, he replied, "I see people looking like trees and walking." Well, Jesus finishes the job, of course; he's not going to leave the man; and he sends him on his way.

It's the man's shadowy, in between, state of partial sight and partial blindness that most intrigues me. It seems an almost perfect metaphor for our human condition. Slow the story down, and stretch it out over the course of a lifetime, generations and then centuries, and the blind man of Bethsaida, before Jesus finishes the job, becomes a fitting parable for race relations in America. We are all still on the way; each of us stumbling forward in partial blindness, seeing people looking like trees and walking. But the face of Christ is there, hidden in light and shadow, calling us slowly into our freedom, our freedom to love better, to see more clearly.

I grew up in Lexington, Kentucky, as I mentioned, in a white, suburban neighborhood where I had almost no contact with any peoples of color until my mid twenties, when I moved west and was quickly plunged into a more diverse environment. Less than three months from the cathedral parish of my youth, the church, which by the way is called Christ the King, it's now the seat of the Diocese of Lexington. There was, and still is, a thriving black Catholic church just three miles from Christ the King. For almost 30 years, I'm sad to say, I had no sense, no idea, that there was such a thing as black Catholics. There are some four million Catholics of African descent in the United States. Four million! I did not know that. Nor was I ever taught the extraordinary history of black Catholic sisters, priests and lay parishioners across the country, who kept the faith, so often in the face of breath taking racism and discrimination, in their own churches and their own dioceses. The veil of my ignorance began to be lifted some 20 years ago when my family joined a black Catholic community in Denver; and the relationships we formed there transformed our whole way of being Christians, my whole sense of what it meant to be Catholic. How often since then, in black churches in three different cities, I have felt the spirit rise like a dove and stirring something deep in my heart, as if to say, "Here are my beloved children on whom my favor rests. Can you see them? Do you know them? Will you share your joys and sorrows?"

The point I want to emphasize here, as I try to do throughout the book, is that none of us enters the conversation about race a fully developed completely integrated whole and holy person. Each of us enters the conversation, or refuses it, from a unique social location and developmental stage in the drama that is every human life. Every one of us needs to be challenged; but we also need to give each other room to grow, room to imagine a future different from the way things are, and where we have been over the course of our lives. In an interview following the verdict in the George Zimmerman trial case of Trayvon Martin, Deacon Royce Leonard Winters, who works for the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, who is a black Catholic, Director of African American Ministries for the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, in the wake of that verdict, Deacon Winters was interviewed for the Cincinnati Inquirer. He noted that he thinks the country has made great progress in combating racism since the late 1960's, but that the subject is fading from a position of importance in the country and in the Church, and I quote, "We in America seem to be pursuing our individual goals in life, but we've lost our sense of community, our sense of being connected to something greater than ourselves," he said. "We failed to consider our obligation to bring others along with us."

Bishop Curtis Guilory of Texas, who is one of about a dozen black Catholic bishops in the United States influenced Deacon Williams in suggesting the topic is too easily avoided. "I don't think race and ethnicity have been subjected to serious dialogue." And then he offers this metaphor, "It's like you have a two story house, where the floor upstairs is weak in some spots and unstable; so you walk around the spots, or you go very lightly across them." Then he continues, "This is where the Church can make a tremendous contribution; but you have to work at it. It isn't just going to happen."

Of course, conversations around race are not easy, calling for a great deal more intimacy and risk than many of us are accustomed to sharing with strangers - family even, friends, students, where we find the kind of spaces needed to navigate such conversations. For those of us privileged to be more in more formal academic settings, the university is, I think, uniquely positioned to provide the kinds of open spaces where truthful conversations can happen, where roots can be fertilized in the next generation; new opportunities for interracial encounters and friendship are given room to grow. Kids come together in dorm rooms, and lunch halls, and all the rest.

But perhaps even more than the academy, I think the churches, the synagogues, the mosques are where hope for healing and social transformation will take route or it will not. After all, this is where people live, work and pray. One of my hopes in writing *Hope Sings, So Beautiful: Graced Encounters Across the Color Line* was to provide a resource, a starting point, for these conversations. The book builds its mosaic of images and sketches partly from the intuition that racism, among many other things, is the symptom of a profound poverty of imagination, including our theological imagination, how we imagined, and put into practice, our most elemental images of God; and, moreover, a disease of the imagination calls not only for moral, ethical and political responses, but also responses that nourish, enlarge and free the imagination. To say in biblical terms, we have eyes but do not see; we have ears, but do not hear. And where others would like to close the book on racial justice and reconciliation, the artists and poets, the mystics and prophets, open the book again showing us that there are still more pages to be written; a few of the many spirits who haunted my writing in this book: Stevie Wonder, Billy Holiday, Georgia O'Keefe, and the great Howard Thurman, Jonathan Kozol, Sister Thea Bowman, James Baldwin, Eddy Hillson, Malcolm X, the novelist Sue Monk Kidd, and her wonderful book, *The Secret Life of Bees*, the Indians of Taos pueblo, and the black Catholic theologian, M. Shawn Copeland, who teaches at Boston College and Brian Massingale, who teaches at Marquette, Latino theologian Bertha Lesando, the spirits of the ancestors who come to us in the spirituals, the slave songs and laments. The point I want to make here is simply that all of these speak to something more than our heads, more than our ideas about race. They speak to our whole person, if we are open to hearing, and to being touched; and they open our heart.

Just very briefly, I want to address two contemporary authors - and I include them also in the outline - who have been very important to me in opening my eyes to the reality of systemic racial injustice in the United States today.

The first is Jewish educator and activist, Jonathan Kozol. Many of you, I think, will be familiar with Jonathan Kozol's books, an educator, a Jewish activist, whose books have long cast an ominous spotlight on the plight of minority children and the state of public education in our cities. Listen to the title of a few of his books *Death at an Early Age*, *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* - that was the book that really made him famous - *The Shame of the Nation*, subtitled, *The Restoration of Apartheid*

Schooling in America. His books tell the story of whole populations of young people, disproportionately black and Latino, whose presence in America is so tenuous and provisional, one could say, they might as well be absent.

The second is legal scholar Michelle Alexander, whose critically acclaimed study called, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, details the devastating effects of mass incarceration and systematic disenfranchisement, i.e., the removal of the vote on communities of color in the United States, much of it due to the so called War on Drugs. Like Jonathan Kozol, Alexander's painstaking scholarship unmasks patterns of injustice directed against whole populations that most of us would rather not see, and many simply choose to deny it.

What have I learned from these two authors? Fifty years ago the face of racism was epitomized in openly racist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan, in men like (Eugene) Bull Connor, the bigoted Commissioner of Public Safety in Birmingham, Alabama, and in horrific tragedies, like the killing of four school girls in the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. Then, it seems to me, it was quite clear what racial hatred and violence meant. It meant to will the non-existence of black people, to seek their erasure. Today, racial animosity manifests much more subtly than this, though its effects are arguably no less oppressive or potentially liable, as both Kozol and Michelle Alexander demonstrate in unflinching detail.

In the decades since the Civil Rights Movement, racism's implicit strategy, you could say, has gone underground. It has not been the erasure of the feared and marginal other, i.e., especially young black men, so much as their eclipse from meaningful participation in society. To eclipse is to ignore, to refuse to deal with the person as a person, as a somebody, a child of God as we say in the Church, as a somebody who matters. To eclipse is to block out the light. As the great Howard Thurman, often noted mystic and black preacher, advisor to Dr. King and many others, Howard Thurman, "To destroy a people, I don't have to kill them; I only have to convince them that they are not worth anything. To borrow an image from Jesus, I only have to hold a bushel basket over their light." It is this form of violence, violence by systematic neglect and creeping despair, which is the new face of racism.

For far too many children in our urban core, the street is the place where I finally submit, where I give in, where I quit. Now, the stirring of white conscience - I make this point in the book repeatedly - the stirring of the white conscience in America by no means depends on the premise that Blacks, Hispanics or other non-whites in the United States hold a monopoly on social neglect or suffering; yet, what scholars, like Alexander and Kozol, open our eyes to is the suffering that is senselessly, systematically and disproportionately fits in Black and Latino communities. And what they are asking us, it seems to me when I read their books, is not only that we pay attention, but that we might recover our capacity to mourn, to pay attention and to mourn, to care enough to mourn, to let our hearts be touched. Both of these, it seems to me, are non-negotiable in any Christian spirituality worthy of the name and vision of Church.

We are talking about the lives of children, men and women, brothers and sisters, made in the image and likeness of God. Indeed, it seems to me that perhaps the great sin of our times with respect to race is not blindness, as such; rather, it is the willful and conscious choice to be blind. What I mean is: the unwillingness and failure of the Church, and the whole People of God, from top to bottom, to adequately confront racial ignorance and injustice, and work together for spiritual and societal transformation. If we wish to be healed, Christ will heal us. Amen? (Audience answers amen also). If we have no desire to be healed, if we don't know we're blind, to the extent we deny others. Christ stands powerless, Amen? And cannot, or will not, do the work for us.

Let me try to be a little more concrete and just share a few experiences in my own diocese; and I promise in this second half that I will be a little more hopeful. Not once in eight years in my Cincinnati parish has our pastor preached a word about race from the pulpit; not after the election of our first African American president, not after the Supreme Court cut key provisions in the voting act, not even Sunday morning after the not guilty verdict in the Trayvon Martin trial. If these "pastoral oversights" are painful for me, I can only imagine the black Catholics sitting next to me in the pew, some of whom are elders in our parish. When I spoke with another inner city pastor in Cincinnati, who is a Marianist priest, and happens to be a good friend of mine, when I broached with him the possibility of initiating a conversation around race in his church's adult education program, he asked me in so many words, "Why would I want to stir up that hornets' nest?"

Initially, I was quite taken aback that he would say this to me; but his frank hesitation helped me to at least grasp the complexity and sensitivity of the situation in his parish. He knows the racial wounds are there. It's a mixed race parish in the heart of urban Cincinnati; and there are wounds, big wounds in Cincinnati - in the Cincinnati Church - along racial lines. He knows the wounds are there; but, when it came to a kind of cost benefit analysis, he wondered what the risks would be worth the potential gain. He worried, among other things, about being perceived as the well intentioned white guy, tearing the scabs off old wounds that pre-date his tenure in his parish. And I reflected a lot on that conversation. What he seemed to be saying is that he can't simply be the pastor's tail trying to wag the dog of the parish. It takes a special combination of trust, courage and above all vibrant, healthy, lay leadership to initiate the conversation on race.

On the other hand, I know of at least three parishes in Cincinnati, two predominately white, one more racially diverse, that are using the book, *Hope Sings, So Beautiful*, have used it over the course of several months to initiate the sustained conversation in their community; and a number of other small faith sharing groups have used the book as a source of shared meditation gathering. Recently, during the season of Lent, there were a number of reading groups that used the book, reading a couple of chapters together a week. As you might expect, all of these folks belong to socially progressive parishes, communities already inclined to offer spiritual formation and opportunities for social outreach around issues of faith and justice. In every case, as far as I know, these parishes have strong lay leadership teams, empowering - this is important - who are empowered by the pastor, to undertake these kinds of issues. My own parish, I am sad to say, is not such a parish; and so I share that with some degree of sadness, I've hung in this church for eight years, and over and over, have nearly walked out, just because it gets tiresome, as you well know. I've also heard from readers in different parts of the country who've used the book, and the west side as well; so I have a website that has a lot of resources that I hope are helpful for small groups who want to enter into this conversation.

To be very honest, when I look at my own city - and I expect the same is probably true here in Detroit and everywhere - it's hard for me to imagine similar initiatives taking place in the predominately white and more affluent suburbs surrounding Cincinnati., arguably where the conversation mostly needs to happen. I suspect that most of these churches wouldn't touch the topic of race with a ten foot pole. For example, Westchester is a northern suburb of Cincinnati, and the home to our most famous Catholic, who is Speaker of the House, John Boehner. (Laughter) I'm not waiting at my phone for a call from his parish. And I don't mean to suggest that these churches are populated by bad people. Rather, like many American Christians, and too many Catholics, I think, I dare say, they prefer to live and worship in circles of politically and culturally like-minded people, which is to say with other people of privilege; and they prefer, I dare say, to get their news about life in the city, down there, from a comfortable distance, and from talk radio, and cable TV. And, by and large, as far as I can tell, our priests and our archbishop seem to be no different. Thus, with respect to social and racial conscientiousness, at least a significant part of the Church is the case of the blind leading the blind, or not leading the blind. Again, if we wish to be healed, Christ will heal us. If we don't wish to be healed, or we simply don't want to see, Christ is powerless and cannot initiate the work for us.

So, where do I find hope? This is where my hope, my tenor, shifts, because I do see and feel a lot of hope. Above all, I find hope in my students, in young people, in the next generation. If my experience in college classrooms has taught me anything, it is the happy realization that a great many young people today long for something more than what the consumer culture, and the glitter of technology, and the disembodied virtue of global marketing economy offers them. They long for genuine community, and for participation in the common good. They want to give their lives and gifts to something meaningful; but like the rich young man in the gospel story, who approaches Jesus with the question of what more must I do to find eternal life, young people today, I think, don't yet know how to give words to their deepest desire, much less identify a course of action. In a word they long for a taste of the divine community, and their eyes have not yet closed. Their imaginations have not yet fallen asleep. They have not yet become cynical. So, it seems to me, that the Church, as teachers and pastors, and yes, even its theologians, in the pattern of Jesus' response to the rich young man, ought to be able to light their imaginations up and turn their focus from self-concern, and the utilitarian ethic of marketplace, to other centered, to the poor, to the stranger, and do it in the spirit of love - (His voice sounds scratchy) - I never talk this much. (Laughter) You're looking at an introvert. Teaching stretches me!

So, I think we do this pretty well at Xavier. I know of no better way to facilitate this kind of transformation in young peoples' lives than by offering them emergence experiences that put them outside their comfort zone, in the cities, and streets, and neighborhoods, beyond their school, to get them away from campus; the kind of education that meets young people today, where they are, wherever they are coming from, and mobilizes thinking. So, to meet people where they are; and mobilize their gifts; and give them room to grow.

The Gifts of Presence: Sr. Thea

I want to talk a little bit about Sister Thea Bowman. I'm also conscious of the time. So I want to move into the latter two parts of my presentation. But let me just say this about reconciliation. Reconciliation, I think, has to do with just crossing the boundaries, with placing oneself in the gaps that divide everyday persons and groups. The life of a follower of Jesus is a life of reconciliation. So, it seems to me, that prior to any political or social agendas, prior to any speeches about integration, or reparations, or shared worship - all of these things are extremely important - simple physical presence is the greatest gift we can offer to one another in a divided society. The heart does not feel what the eyes cannot see. Amen. The heart does not feel what the eyes cannot see, with one exception: Stevie Wonder. (Laughter) Somehow, he sees everything; because, I think, he has a heart and soul. But Christians on all sides must cross geographic, economic and racial boundaries in order to simply be present to one another to experience this, to celebrate them, and indeed, sometimes to mourn them. More than orthodoxy, it is courage that is demanded of the Church today; courage to build relationships across racial, ethnic and economic backgrounds; and, for me, this means simply leaving my various comfort zones: the university, home and hearth, solitude, nature. These are all beautiful important things. I desperately need solitude; I desperately love nature; and to get out into the woods - and there are a lot of woods around Cincinnati - but I also see the extent to which these can be a temptation, and escape, an invasion, from life right around me in the city. And so, to engage life as it is, for people of color in my own segregated city, and as a teacher, it means doing what I can to open my students imaginations to the world of the poor, to the mystery of the stranger; and to do it in a spirit of love and invitation, not of judgment, and not should, and ought, and ethical mandates, but to invite them to a life of greater joy.

As Pope Francis puts it, "To cultivate," what he calls, "a culture of encounter in the Church," right? Culture encounter! And, he says, "What is needed is nearness, proximity." "I see the Church as a field hospital after battle." How about that! And what would be the implications of that image of the Church? Pope Francis' image of the Church: a field hospital after battle. What are the implications of this statement for our churches, our Catholic schools, and universities in places where we live, work and pray? To listen and see what the eyes of the heart, to draw near. The heart feels what the eyes see and galvanizes a response.

Last semester I mentioned this course I taught called, *The Black Catholic Experience*; and Sister Thea Bowman was a prominent presence in the class; and I just want to read you a couple of statements from my students. I have a lot of stuff by her, but I want to skip over that, just for the sake of time.

One of my students wrote this, who is a young black Baptist from Chicago, who was in my class, and wrote this in a paper about Thea, "One of the main things that struck me about Sister Bowman was her discussion of the physical aspect of faith and culture. When she urged her audience to sing, move, clap with her, she was trying to involve them in the physical understanding of her culture. One cannot understand the moving power of Black spirituals unless one fully engages in them; and this is what she so persistently conveyed and insisted upon to her audiences. You cannot understand the culture," my student is still writing, "by simply reading about it in a textbook. You need to fully immerse yourself in the culture, both cognitively and physically to be part of it."

Another young woman, one of several young Muslim women that I had in class, wrote, "I find Sister Thea Bowman to be such an inspiration to women everywhere, no matter what color, what race or religion. She was able to help change Catholic worship and continue traditions of her ancestors, not just by educating people, including Whites, but by giving them a whole new experience with God that went beyond prayer.

That's some pretty wise students!

It's important to say that Sr. Thea insisted the tendency of other fellow Catholics that elevated her to a status of a saint, insofar as doing so would relieve us of our own baptismal freedom and responsibility for love. She said, I know people are looking for sources of hope and courage and strength. I know it's

important to have special people to look up to. But see, I think all of us in the Church are supposed to be that kind of person to each other. This seems to me to be the great pearl of price and the story of Theo Bowman. All of us in the Church are supposed to be that kind of person to each other.

Just briefly, I want to mention that I brought my students to mass at two different Black Catholic churches in Cincinnati, including the church known as St. Joseph's on West End. The name, Clarence Joseph Rivers, might be familiar to some of you. But St. Joseph's was his home; it's where he was ordained, the first Black Catholic priest in Cincinnati, and where he wrote so much of the beautiful liturgical music that makes him still the beloved figure in the Black Catholic community.

And so, I took my students to St. Joseph's; and they were just blown away by those experiences, and the sense of welcoming that they felt. You know, picture the *sign of peace* as it is in most black Catholic churches, which carries on for about 10 minutes. And of those 10 minutes, one could observe that all hell breaks loose; and all heaven breaks loose; and both statements would be true - 100% true, at the same time.

And as I read in my students' journals a few days later, I was moved by what they wrote. One young man, a White Catholic, who attended schools in Indiana, shared these views in his journal - and he gave me permission to share it. "I've seen a different side of my faith that I didn't know anything about. I've learned about the embarrassment Blacks felt when the *Jim Crow* laws were in effect. I heard the music that made me feel some of the same impressions African-Americans felt at different times, and in my own church, would feel."

You know, one feels a total stranger, as my students, going to these churches, when one feels oneself a vulnerable outsider. It is a remarkable thing, a beautiful thing to be welcomed unconditionally, without judgment or expectation, in return. And thinking back on my own life, and my own experience in Black Catholic churches, the gift that my students perceived on these occasions makes perfect sense to me. The heart feels what the eye sees and galvanizes a response, a transformation in the whole person.

Foretastes of Heaven

And I want to conclude with a quote from the great Jewish poet and philosopher, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Herschel. And this quote I also have in the outline. In a wonderful little book called *The Sabbath*, Rabbi Herschel highlights the inseparable connection between how we pray and live in this life, and our state of preparedness for the next life, the life of eternity. He writes

*The Sabbath contains more than a morsel of eternity
Unless one learns how to relish the taste of the
Sabbath while still in this world...
Unless one is initiated in appreciation of eternal life
one will be unable to enjoy the taste of eternity
in the world to come.
Sad is the lot of him who arrives inexperienced
and when led to heaven has no power
to perceive the beauty of the Sabbath.*

How prepared shall we be when we are seated at the head of the banquet table? Will we recognize those seated next to us? Will we know their names, their stories, their dreams? Will we have prayed with them? And imagination stumbles reluctantly upon one other question. Will I need to ask their forgiveness before the feast is served? Sad will be our lot, indeed, if we arrive and have no prior experience in what Dr. King called the beloved community: the multi-racial community, and indeed the ecumenical and interfaith community.

In an interview with Larry King just a few years ago, Larry King asked Stevie Wonder, so I am going to conclude with a note from Stevie. Larry King asked Stevie Wonder whether he had ever thought of retiring, you know, just hanging up a career, calling it quits. Stevie responded gesturing to his family "Obviously there will be at some point where I will decide, OK! I've got a darn to sing, a song to sing, and a family; you know, There are little children that are very talented; and so, I think, you know, at some point, you know, life will give itself to them; and, by then, whenever that might be, I'll just not do it. Maybe I will just write songs or whatever." And then, here he pauses for a long time, and then he says, "But I

love performing." Larry King pressed him further, "But Stevie, I want to ask you, do you ever feel there will come a point when you have nothing more to say?" To which Stevie responded without missing a beat, "For as long as there is life, for as long as we have things happening, for as long as people haven't been able to work it out, for as long as people are not trying to work it out, for as long as there is crime, and destruction, and hate, and bigotry, for as long as there is a spirit that does not have love in it, I will always have something to say." To which I can only say, "Amen." And I hear the people saying (audience says, "Amen"). Thank you. (Applause)

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