

Next month, God willing, I will celebrate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my birth, the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my baptism and the 8<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my ordination to the permanent Diaconate. In the past 12 months I have been asked by several groups to share the story of the African America Catholic in the Diocese of Richmond and in doing so I have shared the story of my baptism. Since the anniversary is so close, I thought I might share that story with you.

Although my family was not Catholic and I was not baptized, I started kindergarten at Van de Vyver Catholic school in 1955. The school was built specifically to serve the African American Catholic community. At the time, momentum was gaining for “[Massive Resistance](#)”—the state government’s effort to block the desegregation of public schools mandated by the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* the previous year. In reaction, Prince Edward County closed its entire public-school system rather than integrate. In those early

years after that seminal court case, the African American community in Richmond feared the city would follow suit. After all, Richmond was the former capital of the Confederacy and once the largest slave market in the upper South. In the 1950s segregation was still legal. African American families in the so-called “separate but equal” public schools who could afford to take refuge in private schools began to do so in ever-growing numbers. Families with children enrolled at Van de Vyver worried that enrollment would swell beyond capacity and that non-Catholic students would be expelled and turned away. If the public-school system were to shut down, many in the African American community would be left with no other option for a good education.

In order to guarantee a spot in Van de Vyer, my mother felt it best to “make it official” and have my brother and me baptized as Catholics. She was not alone. In 1961, when I was 10 years old, my brother and I and at least 10 other African American children were baptized on the

same day at St. Joseph's Catholic Church, the first parish in the Diocese of Richmond to specifically serve the African American Catholic community.

Sisters and brothers the story of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes that we hear this evening is shared six times, in Scripture: twice in Mark's Gospel, twice in Matthew's Gospel, once in Luke's Gospel and once in John's Gospel. It is also the only miracle that is in all four Gospels. So, why do we hear this miracle repeated? What is the message that each Gospel writer wanted us to understand? [PAUSE]

Here in John, unlike the synoptic Gospels, it is Jesus himself who distributes: John wants to emphasize that Jesus is the source of all nourishment, spiritual and material. In the end, what happened? After 5,000 people had eaten and had their fill, there was still so much left over. It also reflects the experience of Elisha who had wondered how far 20 barley loaves would go. He had

been told by God, "They will eat and have some left over" as indeed was the case.

The immediate reaction of the people is to make Jesus a wonderworker their king Messiah. Jesus' response is to flee into the hills. They only saw a miraculous multiplication of loaves and fish. They saw the miracle; they missed the message. **The real teaching here is that [repeat] Jesus is the true source of nourishment for our lives.** Let me say that again!

Sisters and brothers this is the answer to that question, "Why do we hear this miracle repeated in the Gospels six times?". The hardest thing for us to learn and understand and to accept is that **all** we need in this life is Jesus Christ! It is something that we must remind ourselves of each day. We must be prepared to enter totally with him into the paschal mystery of his love-centered life, his self-giving in suffering, and death as a way to life. Jesus will only acknowledge his title of King when we follow him on that basis. We must partake of the nourishment Jesus

offers.

How can we know that we are being nourished by God? We get some pointers in today's Second Reading. Paul writes as a prisoner and, like thousands of Christian prisoners since, is denied the Eucharist. He asks us to live our lives in a way which is "worthy of the calling in which you have been called". Two signs of such a life are (1) an outreaching of love expressed through selflessness, gentleness, and tolerant patience and (2) each one doing their utmost to preserve a unity that comes through the in-dwelling of the Holy Spirit. We are not a collection of individuals separately trying to please God and thus win a heavenly reward in the future. We form one Body, the Body of Christ, one community which people should be able to see is bound by love and caring. The Eucharist is the sign of that Body. There is one Spirit animating all of us and binding us together. There is one hope, the firm expectation that God's Kingdom will be realized, and our happiness assured even now. There is one faith, by which

we are all committed in our total trust in God's love and care for us. That love and that care are normally channeled through the love and care that we show for each other. There is one Lord, who shows us the Way to follow. There is one Baptism, by which we all have , regardless our origin, become sisters and brothers in one caring fellowship, in one new family.

Sisters and brothers such unity cannot be achieved by us alone. We need the help of Jesus our Lord as the Bread of Life, who comes to nourish and feed us in all kinds of ways.