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Growing Up White in White Spaces: Incomplete Glimpses of Trinitarian Communion

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Where did I—and you—learn Communion through human relationships? I learned it in Oakville, Missouri at Queen of All Saints Catholic Church: on Catholic Youth Council (CYC) sports teams, at De Smet Jesuit High School, and through my family. I was grateful for these loving communities. I still am. They inspired many moments of joy and laughter, offered me friendship, taught me teamwork and sharing—and patience and prayer and self-giving love—and in so doing gave me a glimpse of the ever-loving Communion of the three divine Persons whom we celebrated last month on the Feast of the Holy Trinity.

On that Sunday, amid the civil unrest prompted by the latest incident in our history of systemic racism, I once again noticed the incompleteness of the image of the Trinitarian Communion that my upbringing offered me. To be sure, no image of Communion offered in our finite temporal reality could ever completely convey the grandeur of the Trinitarian Mystery. Every child's upbringing will provide glimpses of the Trinity in the communion they experience through ordinary human relationships, but they will each have blind spots in their vision of the Trinity that is the infinitely knowable Communion of divine Persons. Prompted by this intersection between our nation's civic life and our liturgical year, I would like to offer a reflection on the blind spots that my suburban St. Louis upbringing left on my understanding of the God who is Communion. I believe such individual reflections can be a key step in unraveling systemic racism and living in full unity with God as members of His Mystical Body.

So I ask again, where did I—and you—learn Communion through human relationships?

Oakville, a community of about 10,000 people during my years there, sits at the southernmost tip of St. Louis County. The result of suburbanization, it offered a safe and calm environment as a child. I would run out to the ice cream truck in the summer, umpire at QAS, explore the natural beauty of Bee Tree Park, enjoy frozen custard with my CYC teammates after games, and excitedly pester police officers for the free Cardinals baseball cards they passed out to kids in this tranquil St. Louis community.

When I was 18 and geolocating myself in stories more expansive than Oakville's, I researched the demographics of the suburban community, and what I discovered was striking but not surprising: Oakville's population was 98% white. The most recent US Census data has "White Alone" at 96.2%. Neither percentage is surprising given the de facto segregation brought on by mid-century "white flight" to the suburbs, an American phenomenon particularized in suburban communities like Oakville.

Queen of All Saints, my local parish, reflected the racial makeup of Oakville itself. Through my nine years of Parish School of Religion (PSR) classes, my approximately 17 seasons of CYC sports, and my 15 years of weekly Mass attendance there, I can only recall knowing of a single black member of our parish community. (The fact that he stood out to me in itself reveals the distinctiveness of racial minorities in such an overwhelmingly white parish). When I listened to my priests' and deacons' homilies, I heard the wisdom and holiness of God's ordained faithful, but only from the whites among God's ordained faithful. When I lined up before the CYC soccer, baseball, and volleyball games to open our competition in prayer, I did so alongside loving teammates and coaches, but only white teammates and coaches. When I attended adoration, I kneeled in silent prayer with other broken yet devout searchers, but only the white subgroup of broken yet devout searchers. After I worshipped at Mass and waited as my dedicated mom and stepdad chatted with other parishioners, I was absorbing community life, but only community life between white parishioners. When I checked in with my supervisors and laid out pregame instructions to coaches as a CYC umpire and referee, I encountered men and women modeling the virtues cultivated by youth sports, but only white men and women with white cultural fluencies. My formation in Christ at QAS was rich and textured, but nonetheless incomplete in presenting me with the racial and cultural diversity that lives through, with, and in Christ's Mystical Body.

At DeSmet Jesuit High School, a community still close to my heart, I gained a more representative, though still incomplete picture of the Church in St. Louis. Across 8 semesters totaling 54 courses, I had zero black teachers. On my six or seven high school retreat experiences, I don't recall ever hearing a black speaker. During my one season playing soccer and four playing volleyball, I never had a black teammate or coach. In my all-honors core schedule, I do not recall having a single black classmate in my honors classes—meaning that I learned about the international slave trade and Western imperialism in AP World History class without any black classmates, I learned about the United States' fraught racial history in an AP US History class without any black classmates, I had peer-to-peer discussions about Miranda rights and affirmative action in an AP US Government class without any black classmates, I considered the racial dynamics of Shakespeare's *Othello* in an Honors World Literature class without any black classmates, I read *Huckleberry Finn* in an AP US Literature class without any black classmates, and I read through invaluable works of the Western literary canon in an AP World Literature class without any black classmates. Consequently, some of the most valuable insights afforded by my academic education were cultivated in my mind without being filtered through the perspectives, objections, insights, and experiences of any black members of the Mystical Body. Some of my most unconscious assumptions about authority, intelligence, academic knowledge, course content, and social norms were established in the wonderful, loving, academic environment of De Smet, but one nonetheless lacking the presence of any black voices.

Systemic racism, to be sure, was addressed in my Morality and Faith & Justice courses. The former was taught by Mr. Donahue, a man I privately criticized at the time as a "bleeding heart liberal"—a "snowflake" before the word itself gained such a disparaging and politicized definition—but whom I now recognize as a Christian more fully attuned to Christ's summons than my argumentative, intransigent teenage self would allow. I grew more deeply in love with Christ at De Smet, and that

Jesuit Catholic community certainly set the moral foundation that makes this very reflection possible. Still, my experiences there left me with blind spots in my conception of the Holy Trinity's Communion which we find reflected in our human relationships.

I share all of this for several reasons. Let me first address some objections that I have come to expect given the ideological blinders worn by too many Americans when discussing race-related experiences. I do not share these reflections as a performance of self-flagellation for white guilt. I do not share these reflections out of deference to the illiberal demands of leftist, identitarian zealots. I do not share these reflections to heap shame on white St. Louis Catholics or on faithful communities as beautiful and good as Queen of All Saints or De Smet Jesuit High School. (De Smet in particular appears to have begun intentionally addressing the racial disparities in society and in their school community by increasing the racial diversity of their faculty, establishing race-conscious scholarships, and providing student programming to heighten racial consciousness.)

Rather, I share all of this so that my fellow white Catholics can reflect on their own blind spots and work to see and hear the nonwhite members of the Body of Christ. My hope is that white Catholics throughout the US might commit to, as St. Louis's Archbishop Carlson recently urged, "listening to our brothers and sisters of color and learning about their experiences, their triumphs, their struggles and sorrows" so that we Catholics can walk together through these tense and perhaps transformative moments in our nation's history.

How can we do this? Plan parish movie nights around racial justice topics. Start a small group to read the US Bishops' pastoral letter on racism, "Open Wide Our Hearts." Email your Catholic school's administration and request new programs. Ask your diocese to host a Theology on Tap series about being bridge builders across our nation's and your city's racial divide. Speak to your children about systemic racism—not just overt prejudice—and share with them the names and stories of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery. Such actionable and reasonable steps, even if potentially uncomfortable, would strengthen Christ's Body and provide a new angle from which to see the Trinitarian Communion alive in our world.

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