**Black Catholic Elders Pass on Their Wisdom to This Generation**

By Joe Boland

In this moment of national soul-searching as we reckon with our painful history of racism and present-day systemic injustice, we need only to turn to the profound wisdom of Black Catholic elders who came of age in Mississippi’s Jim Crow era of segregation and discrimination.

Sacred Heart Parish in Camden, Miss., is an African American parish that in 2012 had the foresight to document the oral history of its elders, whose lives were marked by hard work and big dreams, only to be frequently thwarted by oppression.

Located in the Diocese of Jackson and proudly supported by Catholic Extension for many years, the parish is served by the Missionary Servants of the Most Holy Trinity, a religious order of men.

The compendium of fifty short stories, titled “Passin’ It On,” is described in the forward as “a treasure trove of memories of a time that we cannot afford to forget.” The stories are perhaps more relevant now than ever. The issues of the not-too-distant past sound very familiar today: inequity in access to education and traumatic encounters with law enforcement. But a belief in God’s providence and a deep appreciation of the gift of life propelled many of them forward amid unfathomable oppression during their coming of age in the South.

Andrew Mae Adams (born 1934) said, “I remember most walking home from school. You know, we had to walk while the whites were transported on buses. We would be walking and when the bus would pass, the children would throw out paper and holler and give slanderous words.” Ultimately, Adams was not able to get a high school diploma until the age of 38.

Margie Brooks (born 1942) dropped out of school due to economic pressures. She, along with her classmates, was often taken out of class to pick peas and cotton, only to be abruptly put back in school, tested, and fail. “I could never figure out why they bothered to test us when they knew we hadn’t come to class for working in the fields,” she said. She believes discrimination continues today, although perhaps more subtle.

The elders remember well their generation’s fight for justice during the tumultuous Civil Rights era.

James Washington (born 1944) graduated high school the year Martin Luther King, Jr. led a march near his hometown. “We walked up on a hill and was lookin’ down at the march when a guy came out, drew a gun on us and he marched us off to jail. We stayed in jail for three weeks. I got arrested—not for marching. I got arrested for watching the rest of the peoples march.”

Nancy Griffin Scott (born 1951) recalls that her husband, Roger, had a similar encounter with law enforcement. As a child, he joined his mother in a peaceful march in the town square. When police started shooting tear gas at them, his mother grabbed him, and they ran off while the rest were rounded up and “herded like cattle” into a fire station and locked there overnight without bathrooms. Roger’s 74-year-old aunt was among those detained. He remembers the next morning when his aunt was released, she could barely walk.

These painful memories were seared into their young minds, reminding them that they faced more than just prejudice. The entire system was against them.

For many, their faith gave them strength. As an oppressed people they understood something about God’s love and God’s law that eluded other Christians who professed faith while simultaneously embracing racist ideas.

Ignatius Branson (born 1947) explained, “Ain’t we all God’s children? If I want to go to heaven, how is hating you gonna get me there? You can’t go to heaven if you pass by someone and act like you don’t see them or you let the door slam in their face or do all that kind of stuff just to prove you think you’re better than they are. We might not be able to stay here on earth forever, but we got to live here with one another, so people ought to stop this animosity between them.”

Cleminten Dawson (born 1919) was interviewed at the age of 93. She acknowledged, “I got along because of my faith in God. I couldn’t have made it otherwise.” Her advice was this: “Be nice, treat everybody right and go to church. We got but one Father. Our blood is as red as anybody else. We’s all the same. Don’t let color mix you up. In heaven we won’t be separated, so why try to separate us down here?”

Sacred Heart Parish did something very special for Dawson to acknowledge the gift of her life. Having never obtained her birth certificate, the parish embarked on a three-year long process to get one issued. To celebrate, they threw her a birthday party. Dawson told the religious sister at the parish, **“I didn’t want to die until I could prove that I lived.”**

There is an important message in her words: racism creates a system where the personhood of some are routinely denied, ignored or overlooked. But we know from our faith tradition that everyone’s names are inscribed in God’s heart. This is exactly why our Catholic bishops recently called racism a “life issue,” and why Pope Francis said, “We cannot tolerate or turn a blind eye to racism and exclusion in any form and yet claim to defend the sacredness of every human life.” Speaking out against racism and dismantling the systemic injustice it causes is a concrete way that we as Christians can affirm the God-given value of every life, with no exceptions.

Pass it on.

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*Joe Boland is Vice President of Mission for Catholic Extension, a Chicago-based organization that works in solidarity with people in America’s poorest regions to build up vibrant and transformative Catholic faith communities. Since its founding in 1905, Catholic Extension has distributed more than $1.2 billion in today’s dollars to build up vibrant and transformative Catholic faith communities in America’s poorest regions, please visit*[*www.catholicextension.org*](http://www.catholicextension.org/)*.*