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Wear It Like A Banner for the Proud: The Challenge of Achieving Genuine Diversity in America

Gregory Chisholm S.J.

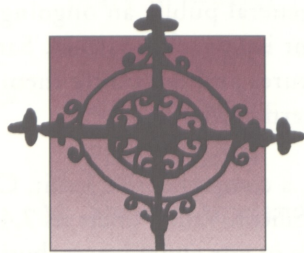
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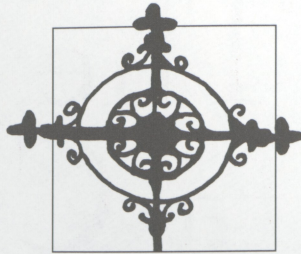
“Wear It Like A Banner for the
Proud: The Challenge of Achieving
Genuine Diversity in America”

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Los Angeles, CA

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Gregory Chisholm, S.J.
Administrator, Holy Name of Jesus Church
Los Angeles, CA

“He made me a sharp edged sword
And concealed me in the shadow of his arm.
He made me a polished arrow
In his quiver he hid me.
You are my servant, he said to me,
Israel, through whom I show my glory.”
Isaiah 49:2-3, NAB

If I had a dollar for every time that someone white has told me that she, usually she, doesn't notice the color of a person's skin, then I would have a handsome nest egg indeed. How many times has someone tried to convince me that race doesn't matter? I've lost count of the times that someone has suggested that focusing my ministry primarily on African-Americans was too particular and too confining, if not racist. Within the last month it was intimated to me that black issues and concerns do not encourage the intellectual engagement with ideas of which I am capable.

This country wishes that we, that I, might hide our “negritude” if we could. Hiding is, of course, time honored in these United States. There is an art, that Americans have a unique taste for, to denying your feelings, your history, your color, your sex, your economic status, your ethnicity, your sexual orientation or your religion. There are distinct advantages to you personally, as you take comfort in your participation in the whole. There are distinct advantages to the wider society which takes it's own comfort in its homogeneity.

When I and others assert African-American heritage and tradition, when we choose to worship on Sunday in an African-American key, when we search out African-American music or literature or art, when we opt to live with one

another, when we congregate together at lunch time, the false sense of equilibrium is disturbed. We see ourselves as distinct from the British professor or the Irish pastor or the brunette movie star or the wealthy and powerful mayor. By not hiding or running away from who we are, a believing community is formed. The wider American culture recognizes something distinctive in the believing community that may or may not have to be engaged. The phenomenon has to be engaged when the community riots in the city or when the young people of the community suffer the indignity of slurs and threats at a Catholic school or when it comes to light that the blight in the community reflects badly on the municipal image. Otherwise, when no one is embarrassing the municipal leadership or threatening the peace, the community may be punished and disconnected from the source of life for having the boldness not to hide.

I don't know what a country that truly celebrates its diversity would look like. What would the character of the United States be like if our people did not find it more advantageous to hide who we are rather than celebrate the ways of being and believing in the world that make us distinctive? I know at least this, there will be no true respect for the distinct believing communities in our country until there is reconciliation among them. Until there is forgiveness for the fear and hatred of difference fostered in American culture, until there is forgiveness for the secrets and lies which perpetuate the image of homogeneity, until there is forgiveness for the presumptions of superiority, until there is forgiveness for self hatred and self deception, we will not reach that place that some of us would like to see.

That forgiveness of which I speak may even entail reparations to repair the damage that has been done. Indeed, if there has been damage done to communities, if the damage is pervasive, if the damage proceeds from some identifiable fault, reparations may be necessary.

Hiding and the Deception of Homogeneity

“He said to them, ‘Is a lamp brought in to be placed under a bushel basket or under a bed, and not to be placed on a lamp stand? For there is nothing hidden except to be made visible; nothing is secret except to come to light.’”

Mark 4:21-22, NAB

In 1982 it became apparent to the citizens of our country that a unique and powerful virus was causing homosexual men, Haitians, and those who exchange intravenous fluids to succumb to deadly infections. The Human Immuno-deficiency virus was a bombshell of significant proportions. The dis-

ease had the capability of exposing the sexual behavior of a segment of American society which had largely enjoyed its relative anonymity, the gay revolution of the 1960s notwithstanding. Before HIV and AIDS homosexual men could be what they are and still live lives acceptable to the dominant culture. They could be gay and still marry women. They could be gay and still play professional basketball. They could be gay and still preach the Word of God. Prior to HIV and AIDS one could hide from the scrutiny of the wider society and endure only the pain of keeping secrets.

There was a small bit of humor that surfaced in colleges in 1982 among those young persons preparing to enter the mainstream of our society. "Did you hear the AIDS joke," one person would ask. "What is so difficult about finding out that you are HIV-positive?" The answer is....the difficulty is in trying to convince your parents that you are Haitian? Typically, our humor reveals the areas of our greatest sensitivity. The central conflict was not the possibility of death or the degree of illness one would have to bear. The central conflict at the root of the humor is the dilemma occasioned by the world's growing awareness of your homosexuality. Whether we are gay or not, whether we are HIV-positive or not, we understand the humor because we understand that most Americans would do anything to conceal the knowledge that their sexual orientation is anything but conventionally heterosexual. Our society supports us in encouraging the belief that all decent Americans are heterosexual. We are punished for being too distinctive. The gay man or lesbian justifiably fears the loss of job, fears the isolation from friends, and fears the disappointment of family.

Hiding matters of significance, which might separate us from the group, is very American. I speak of those points of distinction that have the potential for creating the beautifully quilted character of American life that we speak of so lyrically. We don't sweat the small stuff, like the preference of beer to wine or the taste for movies over books. The small matters don't have the potential for putting us beyond the pale. I consciously remove from consideration those hidden characteristics which of their nature act in opposition to communal life. I remove tendencies to harm oneself through addictive behavior or impulses to harm others or taking advantage of the innocence or immaturity of youth. On the other hand if we hide our ethnicity by masking our accents then we have the sense of integration with the larger community. If we resist smarting at jokes regarding religion or economic status then we can keep up the illusion that everyone holds the same beliefs. We want to be whole. Each of us here tonight at one time in our lives has hidden origin or history or language or culture or sex or religion or something of significance affecting our beliefs. We do it because we have incontrovertible evidence of the punishment

in store for us if we don't. We have only to look at the evidence of black men and women in America to know what can come of wearing your differences for all to see.

Comedian Chris Rock has a segment of his repertoire where he speaks about the people who those in his audiences would most like to change places with. So he considers motion picture stars with glamorous lifestyles, he considers sports figures and people of power. He receives quite a laugh when he proposes that the men change places with some public figure who is successful in attracting women. But the segment is most successful when he suggests that no white man would under any circumstances change places with Chris Rock himself. He suggests that even the young white cleaning man who, on the surface of things, has few resources, would not want to change places with Chris Rock. Not even Chris Rock's reputed wealth would be enough for someone not black to change places with someone who is black. The audience laughed and laughed and laughed because the truth can be hilarious.

Black people generally can't hide. They can't run. They can't avoid. And they cannot be a part of the whole. On the American continuum from being totally integrated into the dominant society to being totally segregated from that society, blacks define the most extreme form of a distinct community of belief. That very fact has been a punishment as far back as American culture can remember. Whether one is self consciously black or simply unavoidably so, being black creates a distinctive view of America which few people envy.

In the worst case, then, by being honest in our distinctiveness or by "coming out" we run the real risk of being excluded from clubs, of being refused service, of being treated with suspicion, of being erroneously targeted by law enforcement. So we stay in our closets or smear away the language, looks, dress, tastes, attractions, or traditions that make us who we are. By hiding we do damage to ourselves but risk little damage being done to us by others. Our sense of ourselves as being part of the whole is left intact. There is no need to create community as blacks and women and some communities of Asians have had to do or opted to do. You may suffer silently but not publicly, and that is what matters for most of us.

The more dominant culture, for its part, has considered black people, and what black people represent, a threat. For centuries what was most important in the relationship between blacks and whites was that the black man would know his place in the society. Chief Justice Roger B. Taney in the infamous Dred Scott Decision of 1857 argued that "They [blacks] had no rights which

the white man was bound to respect.” The political compromise of 1877 removed the federal troops from the South and ushered in an era of oppression against “negritude” that was even more insidious than slavery. In the years of Jim Crow, a black man could have no social commerce with whites. They could not marry, they could not study together, and they could not eat together or even sit in the same public conveyance together. The place of the black man was where the white man was not. Any breach of that code would very likely leave the offender in danger of his life. One will not be surprised, then, to learn that there were few black Catholic clergy in the Jim Crow years. The color black was too incompatible with the respect, which every ordained priest was due from the Catholic faithful.

Miscegenation was, nonetheless, not unheard of throughout the country. The result is that what we call black or African-American covers a range from very dark skinned people to those who are visually indistinguishable from the white majority. In some parts of the country those people of African descent with lighter skin occupied a slightly, and I emphasize slightly, more privileged status in the society. In the off chance that a black had no distinguishing black features the black just might pass for white. They might hide in plain sight of the white majority. Once begun, the fiction had to be maintained. If the offending party was found out, the punishment could be death, or, worse than death, segregation again. But for the fiction to be maintained the one passing for white would have to resist any contact with a black family member or acquaintance who might reveal the deception.

No one should doubt the intent or resolve of American culture to maintain its sense of self. The fiction of our homogeneity is pervasive throughout the country. One’s place is determined by how consistent an image one projects. Blacks define the extreme of what it has meant to be left out. The effect of this isolation on generations of black Americans has been tragic and glorious, tragic and glorious for black families, black economic development, and black self-image. The effect has also been that blacks have shown America how a believing community can survive and thrive against the odds.

The African American Phenomenon

“To the one who is despised, whom the nations abhor, the slave of rulers:
When kings see you, they shall stand up, and princes shall prostrate themselves
Because of the Lord who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel who has chosen you.”

Isaiah 49: 7, NAB

My grandfather had a unique way of responding to my insistence that he do this thing or that when I was a boy. I would run up to him and insist that he come here or do that. When I was most insistent his answer was always the same, “All I have to do is stay black and die.” I would laugh at his answer. My brother and I would repeat it with the same Southern intonations that he used. I laughed and laughed until I had reached adulthood and was no longer insulated by parental protection from the unabashed truth. “All I have to do is stay black and die.” All that anyone has to do is remain who they are and ultimately end this life. Nevertheless, only among black people and only in America would the inevitable be rendered so distinctively, so tragically, and so well.

The 100th birthday of African-American poet Langston Hughes would have been celebrated on Feb. 1, 2002. Hughes was one of the most celebrated poets to come out of the Harlem Renaissance, a prolific period of African-American arts extending from 1920 to 1940. Hughes’ poems and short stories distinguished themselves in their ability to evoke the unadorned, even gritty, aspects of black American life. His work was musical, erotic, tough, joyful, comical, and even sad. In describing his own work and that of his contemporaries of the Harlem Renaissance, he wrote, “We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame.!”

Within three years before and after Hughes published these remarks the Klu Klux Klan had marched on Washington, lynching of blacks had reached a fever pitch, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters—a black labor union—had been formed, Marcus Garvey—leader of the back to Africa movement—was sent to federal prison, Negro history week was established, the Harlem Globetrotters was founded, Paul Robeson appeared on Broadway, Oscar DePriest became the first black Congressman in 30 years and the Scottsboro Boys were arrested for raping two white women on a train from Tennessee to Alabama. Color was not incidental to any of these events of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Some of these, like the imprisonment of Marcus Garvey and the Klan’s march on Washington and the arrest of the Scottsboro boys, would occasion fear and anger among black people. Others, like the election of DePriest, the performance of Paul Robeson, and the formation of a black labor union would inspire hope. Everything underscored for blacks our distinction from larger society. Few events were simply incidental. They were ignited by someone’s malice toward blacks or propelled along by someone’s struggle toward self-determination. Depending on where a black lived or what he had recently heard on the radio or whom he had talked to, his sense of himself in America was fearful or hopeful. That would be fear or hope regarding the single fact of life that he could not hide, his race. He could not expect

to be absorbed by simply the desire to excel in his work or purely the concern for raising a family or only the need to find someone to love. He was obliged to remember that he was black. By nature and by the will of the dominant culture he is a member of the black community.

Langston Hughes wrote the poem "Color." It evokes the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance. It remembers the tragedy of segregation. It celebrates the joy of community.

Wear it
Like a banner
For the proud—
Not like a shroud
Wear it
Like a song
Soaring high—
Not moan or cry

What black people have done with exclusion and tragedy and community is to create a new voice, a distinct voice that is uniquely American and uniquely black in music, poetry, dance, athletics, comedy, language, prose, religion. Slavery, Jim Crow, segregation, lynching, suspicion, fear, and bare tolerance have forced a new grammar that is uniquely American and uniquely black. Low down jazz, athletic grace, gritty comedy, rich cooking, musical speech, ecstatic worship, dangerous sensuality, confrontative oratory. From Storyville to Death Row Records, Nat Turner to Mike Tyson, Frederick Douglass to Cornel West, Harriet Tubman to Sister Thea Bowman, Jack Johnson to Michael Jordan, Henry Flipper to Colin Powell, Phyllis Wheatley to Toni Morrison, Daniel Rudd to Juan Williams, Ma Rainey to Ja Rule.

Some have run away from the difference expressed by the way black people are. Whites have run away dismissing this cultural expression as marginal. Even blacks have tried to run away when the exclusion and tragedy and community seemed too confining. Letting go of some aspect of black life enables one to believe they were breathing freely. Some have tried moving away from black neighborhoods. Some have left black churches. Some have integrated universities. Some have relocated overseas. A few have married men or women who are not black. Yet leaving is difficult, if not impossible, in America. How does one leave? The dominant culture will not let one leave and black life continues to pull one back.

You have to come back to eat the foods that make you whole. You have to come back to hear the music that gives life. You have to come back to let your guard down. You have to come back sometime to worship God in the way that feels right. That's the core of what it means to be black in America: A black man cannot run away from the way black people believe. The community is fundamentally defined by how blacks believe. The black community is a community of belief.

Come Sunday, O Come Sunday, That's the Day.
Lord, Dear Lord Above
Almighty God of Love.
Please Look Down and See My People Through.

In 1943 Duke Ellington composed his landmark jazz suite, "Black Brown and Beige." Within the framework of that piece he set a song that reflected a return to the faith of his roots. "Come Sunday," he called the song. The author of "Take the A-Train" and "Sentimental Mood" was still moved by the death of his own mother several years before. By the Duke's own admission his mother's death had left him in a deep darkness. So he wrote about Sunday because that was always the day.

Lord, Dear Lord Above
Almighty God of Love.
Please Look Down and See My People Through.

I first heard that song just a few years ago, in spite of the fact that the Duke had arranged a very popular version of the song for the Gospel singer Mahalia Jackson in 1958. I had not heard the song before it was sung by a family at my church following my homily at Sunday worship. Sheree Johnson, her husband Doug, their daughter Maya, and their young son, Revels, wanted to provide a reflection on my homily...or was it a prayer? Or was it praise to God? Or was it witness? Or was it thanksgiving? When black folks sing in church on Sunday, sometimes it's hard to define what happens. Sometimes it's hard to know whether they are praying or praising or witnessing or thanking. We simply know that it feels so good and sounds so good. Maybe you could say, when our folks sing in church on Sunday, it's so healing.

Well, on this particular Sunday when the Johnson family stood before Holy Name of Jesus Church in Los Angeles and sang about "Sunday," there was not a sound. There were no questioning glances in the congregation. Nobody had to go to the toilet. The ushers weren't standing in the vestibule of the church, as is their wont. All creation, it seemed, was listening to that song.

Lord, Dear Lord Above
Almighty God of Love.
Please Look Down and See My People Through.

Consider the words of that song. Reflect on the ideas or the concepts. Think on the theology presumed by that simple introductory statement invoking Sunday. Ponder the choral refrain where the Duke asks his God to look down and see his people through.

He doesn't invoke Monday or Wednesday or even Saturday. "Come Sunday." The singer isn't tense when that line is sung. There is no nervousness, no desperation, no frustration about Sunday. Not "Hurry Up, Sunday." Not "Get Here, Sunday." Not "When, Sunday?" The singer gently anticipates the desired event, Her heart reaches out for what is desired: "Come Sunday, O Come Sunday, That's the Day."

That's the day when the Lord, who sits high, might look low. That's the day when the author of Life may write a new chapter for his people. That's the day when the God of freedom may set us free. "Please," the singer says, "please look down." There is no demand in the singer's voice, no challenge, no anger...only hope, "please," only desire, "please," only need, "please." "Please see my people through." Not me, Lord but mine. Not for me, Lord, but for mine. Not someone over there, Lord...mine. Not someone in another country, Lord...mine, Not some other people, Lord, my people.

See them through. As we have discussed already, black people in America have a way of communicating which economizes the wordiness of the English language. In a very few well-chosen words or sounds blacks have learned to convey paragraphs of meaning. When a black woman sucks slowly and audibly through her teeth while at the same time turning her head away and all the while rolling her eyes, in one smooth and well orchestrated move, you know she thinks you are full of "stuff" and you better get the "heck" out of her face. When a person says "He took her through," blacks understand that to mean that a man has given a woman, his employee or his girlfriend or his wife, a very hard way to go indeed. We can only imagine the pain, or the suffering, or the hurt, which he visited upon her.

But, now back to the Duke's theology, when someone "sees you through," it means that there is no trouble, no darkness, no difficulty, no pain, no sickness, no loneliness, no abuse, no racism, no poverty, no prison, no blindness, no emptiness, no frustration, no death that you can't overcome. If someone has

the power to "see you through," then you have been blessed.

Duke Ellington was no theologian. He was a product of a black community of belief. As childhood for blacks in America goes, the Duke had a comfortable one. But the Duke knew where the back of the bus was. The Duke knew what to say to whom about what. The Duke knew how to enter a white movie theater or nightclub. The Duke knew what side of the tracks to live on. And he knew what Sunday is for black people. And he knew what God is for his people. And he knew that Sunday and God are what, in the end, get us through.

A Challenge for the Contemporary Catholic College

"Everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if salt becomes insipid, with what will you restore its flavor? Keep salt in yourselves and you will have peace with one another."

Mark 9:49

The history of black people in America, born of hope and malice and nature, points the way to a more authentic notion of diversity than the ones we pander to in popular culture. Among blacks in America we see what is possible for truly distinct American communities. A language and system of belief can develop, perhaps out of great suffering, which is both unique and American. Issues of race, gender, ethnicity, economics, and sexuality in the larger American society should be reasons for concern here at a Catholic college. Each of these issues has occasioned the arrival of new groups, potentially new communities of belief, on campus. Yet they are communities whose difference from the wider cultural community already entrenched at Catholic colleges is greater than the differences which exist among those who have nothing to hide within the wider cultural community. Thus blacks and Asians are more distinct as groups from Irish Catholics than Irish Catholics are distinct from Italian Catholics or distinct from descendants of diversely European Catholics. This is due largely to the American view of race rooted in our national origins. Similarly women who subscribe to a feminist critique of patriarchy in Western culture stand outside the perhaps predominant ideas of womanhood. Jews and Muslims at Catholic colleges are not Christians. Latinos are not exotic Anglos. The poor do not fit within the social and economic stratum of most contemporary Catholic college students. Gays and lesbians who adhere to notions of freedom from discrimination, freedom from silence, freedom from the closet, advocate a way of being which is uncommon and even considered sinful.

Where there is reason to consider oneself as belonging to a distinct group,

then justification exists for calling such a group a community of persons if there is a shared history, shared traditions, shared values, and a common sense of the future. These shared elements affect the religious, political, economic, and social life of the community. Even if every Chicano man or woman on campus is not a believer, the identification with the particular history and traditions of their community, the sharing of values and the common struggle would orient such a group toward a particular sense of what divine "salvation" or "redemption" could possibly mean for them. Thus one can say that such a community can have a religious life. By extension, these elements affect a political, economic, and social life, as well.

Catholic colleges have the potential to create a genuinely multicultural environment. However, the college must see these communities of belief not as bundles of political interests, not as threatening moral attitudes, not as curious patterns of behavior, not as a competing for the soul of education, but as intentional communities of belief. Each community exists in relation to God and salvation is at work amongst them. What each community needs is to be encouraged to find what hope in God means from its unique perspective. The challenge was the same for a young Christian community in Jerusalem described in the sixth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. The Greek-speaking Jews were being ignored in the distribution of goods by the Hebrews, causing friction within the community. The disciples appointed persons from among the Greek-speaking Jews who would have responsibility to ensure that their community had what was needed. In the academic setting intentional sustainable communities will need the support of the institution to insure its integrity and encourage its understanding of God's salvation.

What may yet be missing or left unsaid in the sixth chapter of Acts, however, is reconciliation or forgiveness. The experience of blacks in America may indicate a fact of life for truly distinct American communities. Truly distinct communities often have origins in the malice of one group toward another. The forces that sustain a false sense of American homogeneity, the forces that encourage many to hide their distinctiveness are not benign. Black resentment of exclusion remains strong and deep. The resentment or fear or anger of the predominant culture toward blacks is no less strong and deep. That history begs both forgiveness and reparation.

Pope John Paul II's recent remarks at the celebration of the World Day of Peace following the tragic events of Sept. 11 speak to these matters most clearly. He says,

"Forgiveness is above all a personal choice, a decision of the heart to go against the natural instinct to pay back evil with evil. The measure of such a decision is the love of God who draws us to himself in spite of our sin. But individuals are essentially social beings, situated with a pattern of relationships through which they express themselves in ways both good and bad. Consequently, society too is absolutely in need of forgiveness. Families, groups, societies, states, and the international community itself need forgiveness in order to renew ties that have been sundered, go beyond sterile situations of mutual condemnation, and overcome the temptation to discriminate against others without appeal."²

At a contemporary Catholic college, I am sure, forgiveness and reparation are called for among emergent groups. Yet I know how difficult such prospects are. There is an emerging voice within the black community calling for reparation, which is justified, but not coupled with forgiveness. This would be like calling for justice without a means to sustain that justice in the long term. The government of the United States refuses to admit regret for a history of black slavery and government-sanctioned segregation. In the absence of such an overture, of course, reparation makes no sense. Indeed, our vision of a multicultural future will not be bright unless and until forgiveness and reparation are realized mutually between a black community of belief and the predominant American culture. And I don't know the way out.

When Abraham came face to face with his own insufficiency before the Lord, after he had received so much in the promise and covenant of the Lord, after he had received so much in the birth of his son Isaac, after he had been tested so severely when he came face to face with his insufficiency to find a way and he admitted it, the Lord provided. So he named that mountain on which he had almost lost his son...he named it Jehovah Jireh. Jehovah Jireh, Jehovah Jireh, the Lord will provide. The Lord will provide.

¹ Hughes, Langston, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," *Nation*, 1926.

² John Paul II, "No Peace Without Justice, No Justice Without Forgiveness," Par 9, Dec. 8, 2001.