

in the South. The “Citizens Council of New Orleans” implored Catholics to keep money out of collection plates on Sunday and labeled Archbishop Rummel’s action a “Communist Conspiracy by the Church.” The State Legislature threatened to remove the tax exempt status of Catholic schools. Although Archbishop Rummel had to slow down the implementation of his plan when public officials indicated they could not provide public protection at the schools, he remained firm in his decision.

Fifty years later we hail this courageous pioneer of racial integration, even as we try to make a realistic assessment of the progress and the challenges that are ours today.

The Catholic Church continues to welcome children of all races and backgrounds to her schools. During this school year, we have an archdiocesan enrollment of almost 41,000 children. Over 7,000 are African American. Almost 1,500 are Hispanic. Just over 1,000 are Asian. Two hundred are multi-racial. We are offering education to almost 1,500 students from our public schools. Many of our Catholic school graduates have become the first members of their families to attend institutes of higher learning, move into professional and business courses and break the cycle of poverty that had previously gripped their families.

Now we are in a new situation in post-Katrina New Orleans. The painful suffering that gripped us along with the devastating flood water has brought home the still unaddressed issues which weigh heavily upon us: the unacceptably high rate of poverty among African Americans; the limited choices in education because of the failing public schools; the disproportionate percentages without health insurance; the difficulty in finding adequate affordable housing.

As Katrina stormed in on us, I was completing a pastoral letter on racial harmony. It was due for release in September 2005. Hurricane Katrina sidetracked the issuance of the letter

but has not changed the significance of the issue. It seems even more important now to move forward with the release of this message in the hope that grappling with the truth about race from a faith perspective may help to contribute to the way we live together in the new New Orleans.

We did not need the chaotic days following Katrina to become aware that heroic goodness and human degradation can live side by side in our city. I had already heard such stories in the focus groups of parishioners of different races and cultures as they gathered to share with me their experiences. Their accounts helped me to understand how far we have come and how far we have to go.

In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, water is an ambiguous reality. At the creation, Genesis depicts God as taming the chaotic water in service to future life. In the time of Noah, flood water was highly destructive, but it provided new life for eight human beings, the animals of the earth and their descendants. At the Red Sea, the water drowned the Egyptian army but provided liberation to the children of Abraham. Christ chose water to symbolize and effect both death to sin and new life in the sacrament of baptism. What a great grace it would be if the waters of Katrina (which means cleansing) were not only to wreak devastation but also to wash away the stain of racial prejudice and division, and enable us to rise to a new life of racial justice and harmony!

My Own Story

Each of us in the Church has a unique history to tell. As most of you know, I come from Boston, Massachusetts. The community in which I lived was totally white, so I did not interact with those of other races in my neighborhood or church or school. It was not until seminary that I experienced the friendship of African and Asian American fellow students.

I was already a priest when the 1973