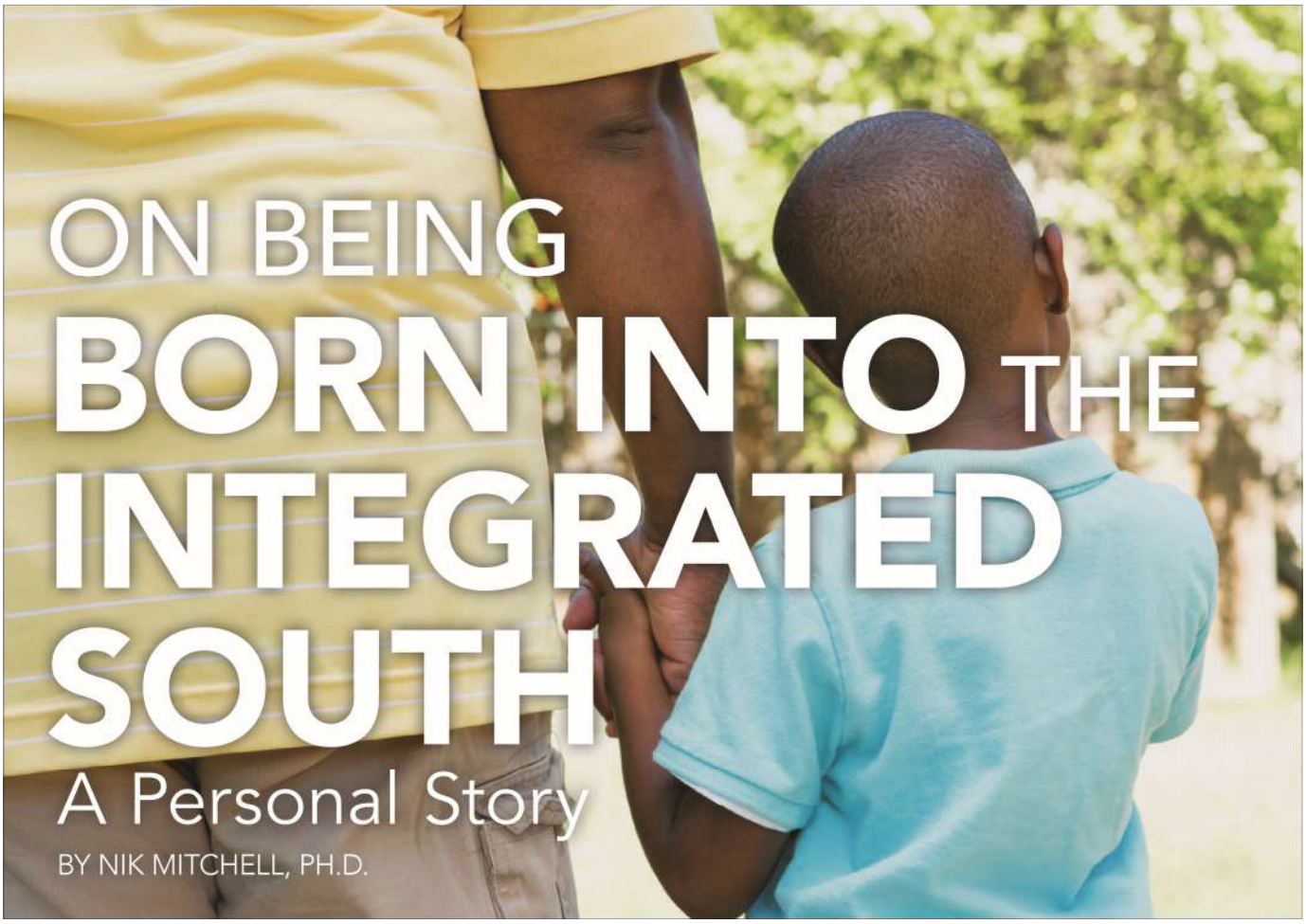

ON BEING BORN INTO THE INTEGRATED SOUTH

A Personal Story

BY NIK MITCHELL, PH.D.

In *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, Rev. Bryan N. Massingale poses a series of questions on the subject of racial reconciliation.[1] These provocative questions challenge both lay people and scholars of race to consider the moral implications of race relations and the need for reconciliation. Two of his questions have a special urgency because they challenge us to do a difficult thing[2] — "How do estranged groups learn to live together in justice, and not merely coexist in the same place?" and "How do we overcome the poisonous legacies of suspicion, fear, animosity, and even hatred that constantly threaten our attempts at intergroup living?" We must decide to commit to the simple act of living together in community under the long shadow of history and living memory.

Living in community and coexisting are not interchangeable concepts because they do not seek change in the same way in a society that is only 50 years removed from the horrors of Jim Crow. Community focuses on reconciliation which seeks to change the heart through its emphasis on the acceptance of difference. Coexistence, with its emphasis on tolerance, seeks only to change the most superficial interactions. The best that coexistence can provide is a lull in animosity until the next racial flashpoint, such as a presidential election or the removal of a statue, reveals the virulence of unreconciled racial tensions that lie beneath pleasant superficial interactions. As a city, a state, and a country we have tried tolerance and coexistence; it has failed. Now, the culture is full of racial conflicts from local neighborhoods to the White House.

History cannot be escaped, but it can be reckoned with. There can be no racial reconciliation without coming to terms with the traumas of the past. The United States is still caught in the reckoning between what actually happened historically and the fictions many prefer. Jim Crow is the shorthand name for segregation society in the United States. It extended far beyond the mere physical separation of race, but rather segregation was the default state of American culture which the white

majority supported with pseudo-science and frequent acts of violence.[3] The residue of that time period permeates every aspect of society today. The pogroms have stopped and black bodies no longer swing in the southern breeze, but grand juries refuse to indict police whose crimes are caught on camera phones for all the world to see and black bodies are harvested by a prison industrial complex. Many of us still live in segregated cities and live segregated lives. So, it is easy to forget that there are some that live in integrated communities among the urban and rural balkanized American landscape. These people live on the frontier of Massingale's question—as a country and a culture, shall we merely coexist or shall we live in community?

I have lived my entire life suspended, so to speak, between coexistence and community. My own black identity was forged in the integrated South, which was full of all the tension that came with the loud echoes of the collapse of Jim Crow. This was especially true of Baton Rouge, Louisiana in the 80's and the 90's. In my youth, "tolerance" was taught as a virtue whereas "acceptance" was considered unattainable. I realize now that this particular ethic was written by adults who had spent more time in a segregated society than outside of it. When I explored my neighborhood, went to the pool for a swim, went to the corner store for candy, went to the movie, or went to school, black faces were sparse. This does not mean that I was a token; I wasn't. We were just fewer in number. We were minorities in our everyday life which is a different experience, in some ways, from my black counterparts who grew up surrounded by black faces in the practice of everyday life.

I am the child of immigrants in a way. My parents are Americans but themselves were reared in the segregation society. They witnessed horrors that I have read about and seen dramatized but never witnessed with my own eyes. So, in that way, they are from "the old country." Like many blacks who grew up in the ghetto when it was still a ghetto in the legal sense, they left when presented with the opportunity. Of course, there was community in those ghettoes. We were never cut off from the "old country" as my extensive network of cousins and my grandparents still lived in those all-black communities such as Old South Baton Rouge. I was a familiar and frequent visitor, but still a visitor.

Segregation was corrosive to the soul and fostered self-loathing in African Americans from a young age. Doctors Kenneth and Mamie Clark proved this, and their findings were cited in the *Brown vs Board* opinion written by then Chief Justice Earl Warren.[4] Once Jim Crow ended, many African Americans, my parents among them, moved to the suburbs or to the country looking for a place where their children could grow free from spiritual damage inflicted by being forced to live in ghettoes. But no one can outrun culture. Racism, Massingale asserts, is a culture that has no borders; and it waits patiently to prey on our fears of change.[5] There were racial slurs; there were fights; there were long hateful stares; but there were also bonds deliberately forged and maintained with the children and grandchildren of those who had terrorized my people without reservation.

Living in community requires a dedication towards justice, the acceptance of difference, and racial reconciliation. It requires cultural exchange as well as the mutual recognition and confrontation of systems that would prevent necessary exchange. Living in community requires an unwavering fidelity to the truth, no matter how damning, regarding who were the aggressors and the victims in America's racial story. On the other hand, coexistence is easy. All one needs to coexist is tolerance, which invariably devolves into clash when times get rough and resources get stretched. Racially speaking, the United States has been trapped in a cycle of coexistence and clash since the end of the Civil Rights Movement with no resolution of the racism problem. If those of us alive today wish to give our descendants a country not trapped in a cycle where racism moves through the society like a summer fever, we must pursue racial reconciliation and hold up acceptance as the standard for race relations in America.

ENDNOTES

1 Massingale, Bryan, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2010), p. 86.

2 Ibid.

3 Cell, John. *The Highest Stage of White Supremacy: The Origins of Segregation in South Africa and the American South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 3

4 Clark, K., & Clark, M. (1947), "Racial identification and preference in Negro children," in T. M. Newcomb & E. L. Harley (Eds.), *Readings in Social Psychology* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1958), pp. 169-78; *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

5 Massingale, pp. 13-19