

## **We've Come This Far By Faith**

“We’ve come this far by faith, leaning on the Lord; trusting in his holy word, He’s never failed me yet.”

This gospel hymn was written in 1956 by Albert A. Goodson, during a time of personal depression. It has become a staple in Black gospel music for its message of perseverance and trust in God.

My name is Patrice Payne. My husband Mike and I have been members here at STA for almost 50 years. Faith - such a small but powerful word, but one that has carried me throughout my life. As a child I used to hear my mother say if she didn’t have her faith, she couldn’t get through life. I didn’t understand it then; I do now. I’m here today to share a little about my faith journey as a Mixed Race Catholic.

My roots in Catholicism run deep. My grandmother, one of 15 siblings, was raised at a Catholic girls elite boarding school called Cardome, in Georgetown, Kentucky, in the 1880’s and ‘90’s. This school was run by the Sisters of the Visitation. Her parents were born enslaved. Her mother was the housekeeper, and her father was the groundskeeper at Cardome for over 50 years. When growing up, I heard many stories of the fun she and her brothers and sisters had together. One story was told many times: The nuns were determined that all of “Dolly” and “Wiley’s” 15 children must learn to read and write, even though it was frowned upon because they were black.

The courage of the nuns, in the face of segregation, led to the conversion of my great-grandfather, and great-grandmother to the Catholic faith. The Catholic faith & practices were strong in my family. My grandmother and 2 aunts were housekeepers in parish rectories. My grandparents were charter members at St. Rita Catholic Church, a church started in 1919, on the east side of Indianapolis for African Americans, because blacks were not welcome at white Catholic churches. My mother was financial secretary and music director at St. Rita for over 30 years. And St. Rita was, and continues to be, rich in culture and vibrant for Black Catholics. Fr. Bernard Strange, the caucasian pastor there for 40 years, was determined that African Americans would feel worthy, despite the message to the contrary that society dictated. From the beautiful edifice that was built, to the scores of African cardinals and bishops that he arranged to visit, to the African American bishops, priests and nuns that would come to preach and serve - all of these things were meant as messages to the parishioners - that Blacks are worthy, and treasured, by God and the Catholic Church. These are my roots.

During my childhood in the 1950's and '60's, St. Rita had novenas, 24-hour devotions, a Christmas Eve Mass that was televised, (which was quite a feat for a black church at that time), school performances at the motherhouse of the Sisters of St. Francis, choir performances in Swahili around the city, parish tours to Africa and the Holy Land. At school, we had daily Mass (yes, daily!), where from Kindergarten thru 4th grade, Mass was in Latin.

Catholic practices were prevalent at home as well. My grandmother had a home "altar", as she liked to call it, filled with statues of angels and saints. She said daily rosaries, and sprinkled the house with holy water during storms. Everyone wore scapulars, and my mom had a 24-hour candle that burned before St. Vincent De Paul's statue. My family's strong faith and example was one thing that led my husband, Mike, to convert to Catholicism in 1976, before we were married; our wedding being his first communion. His father died from pancreatic cancer a month before our wedding and had a death-bed conversion to Catholicism. Our faith in God carried us through this bittersweet time.

It was divine providence that we ended up at St. Thomas Aquinas parish, a parish that was progressive and diverse, and that would welcome an African American family. My family's example of always working for the church led me to teach here at STA school for over 30 years. Here the blessings of frequent prayer, wonderful students, parents, and co-workers graced my life. I was privileged to teach at the same school where our 4 children attended. I have been called and encouraged to develop talents by serving on various committees here at STA. I have been part of a wonderful faith sharing group that has greatly enriched my journey through life. This group broadened my horizons so that I felt called to join the Race and Culture Committee in 2018. STA has given me a faith community - a faith family.

But the Catholic Church, like any institution, is not perfect. Navigating the world as a fair skinned black woman can have challenges. Mixed race individuals must often decide whether to assimilate into the majority culture or identify with a particular race. I choose to honor both my black and white heritages. As a student at Bishop Chatard High School, I was confusing to people. One white girl was determined to save me from my black friends; one black girl was confused about why I tried to befriend her, and one teacher thought my background should be investigated. I was "let go" from a summer job in college, when it was discovered that I identified as Black.

I feel we must work inside an institution to help change it. I recently heard a profound statement: "To get over something you have to go through it". That is what I believe led me to the work of the Race and Culture Committee. Being raised in a strong African

American Catholic family, set the tone for racial ally work. I want to be an ally to make our STA worship environment inviting to Black Catholics, Mixed Race Catholics, All Cultures of Catholics. I cringe when I hear people of all races say “I didn’t know there were Black saints”, “I didn’t know there were Black nuns”, or “Why aren’t there any Black images in our church?” I can’t solve all the church’s ills, so I have changed my thinking from “I have to get everything right” to “I have to keep showing up.”

The challenges of life test our faith. I’ve lost close relatives throughout the years. We’ve had the ups and downs of raising a family. Five years ago I was diagnosed with cancer. A few months ago I had an emergency hospital stay. When I struggled the most; felt the least in control; most vulnerable, that’s when my Catholic faith and prayer sustained me. When overwhelmed with life’s challenges, I visualize myself handing the problem over to God. I visualize God reaching out to take my need. Like everyone, I have peaks and valleys with my prayer life. Some days, when I get overwhelmed with challenges, I can’t pray. So that becomes my prayer: “God forgive me - I can’t pray today.” And then I feel peace. Faith - so necessary to get through life.

Our children are all grace-filled adults, with an appreciation for a multi-cultural society, always helping those in need, both in their work and personal lives. I see the face of God when my children care for our grandchildren, and their nieces and nephews. I recently felt God’s presence when a granddaughter said, “Prayer isn’t getting what you want; you get what you need to get through bad things”. What a gift - when our children and our grandchildren exhibit faith.

As I conclude, I would like to give you some homework; I’m still a teacher at heart. I ask you to do the following things:

- 1) Don’t assume my story fits every mixed race person you meet;. Don’t believe the myth that multiracial kids will lead the way to racial harmony. We all have our own unique stories & challenges.
- 2) Talk with others about your racial experiences. Listen to others’ stories with an open heart, without judgement.
- 3) Look at your family history. Discuss with your family how your Catholic faith has impacted your family’s viewpoint toward race.

I also have some pictures and handouts: pictures of the Cardome boarding school, and of my great-grandparents, both cornerstones of our family’s faith. And I have a handout for you with links to resources that you can use to learn and think more about racial issues, both at STA, and in your life.

- There is a link to a video where you can watch the desegregating work of STA in our Butler Tarkington neighborhood in the 1950's, '60's and '70's.  
Part 1 (8:12)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZIQZplCIFpg>  
  
Part 2 (8:48)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rr5tOgHKYq0>
- There is a link to the Sisters of Providence Podcasts called "JustUs", featuring some STA parishioners: Tim Nation & I are in Episode 1; Eileen Walthall & Alan Bercovitz are in Episode 8.  
<https://spsmw.org/about/justice/justus-podcast/>
- And lastly, there is a link to the "Embrace Race" website. It gives tools to parents and teachers for helping children deal with racial issues in our complex world today. [hugs@embracerace.org](mailto:hugs@embracerace.org)

Keep these words in your heart: *"We've come this far by faith, leaning on the Lord"*.  
Thank you for allowing me to share my story with you.