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Spirituality
Bishop Edward K. Braxton of Belleville, Ill., leaves after concelebrating Mass with other U.S. bi

Bishop Edward K. Braxton of Belleville, Ill., leaves after concelebrating Mass with other U.S. bishops from Illinois, Indiana, and Wisconsin at the Basilica of St. John Lateran in Rome Dec. 11, 2019. The bishops were making their "ad limina" visits to the Vatican to report on the status of their dioceses to the pope and Vatican officials. (CNS photo/Robert Duncan)

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Belleville, Ill. — July 22, 2021
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Bishop Edward Braxton, one of the few African American bishops in the Roman Catholic Church, rarely talks to the press. He says he doesn't live in a "yes or no" world, and instead makes statements in pastoral letters and other writings.

"My thinking is more nuanced than something you put on the 5 o'clock news," said Braxton, 77. "I write as I speak. I have a moving viewpoint from many experiences."

His parents, Baptists from Mississippi, migrated to the south side of Chicago in 1941. Catholic schools motivated their conversion. Braxton said he went on to be the only African American in his graduating class at a high school preparatory seminary. There, he chose Aristotle over basketball.

Ordained a priest in 1970, he became a post-graduate student in Belgium, earning doctoral degrees in theology and religious studies. He taught at Harvard, the University of Notre Dame and other places but ultimately realized he wouldn't be happy as a priest "exclusively focused on the life of the mind."

His formal demeanor followed him to his role as a pastor and bishop. To some, he seems distant, most at ease surrounded by books and art. His ringtone is set to the Lord's Prayer sung in Latin. Last summer, after 15 years at the helm, he became bishop emeritus of the Belleville Diocese. He'd formerly served as a bishop in Louisiana and auxiliary bishop in St. Louis.

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He recently agreed to visit at length with the Post-Dispatch. The topic was his new book, *The Church and the Racial Divide*, which details some of the things he's been thinking about all these years. He wrote that clergy sex abuse has been the greatest crisis in the history of the Catholic Church in the United States since he was ordained, followed by the "reticence to speak up in the public square about systemic racial bias in society and in the practices of the church."

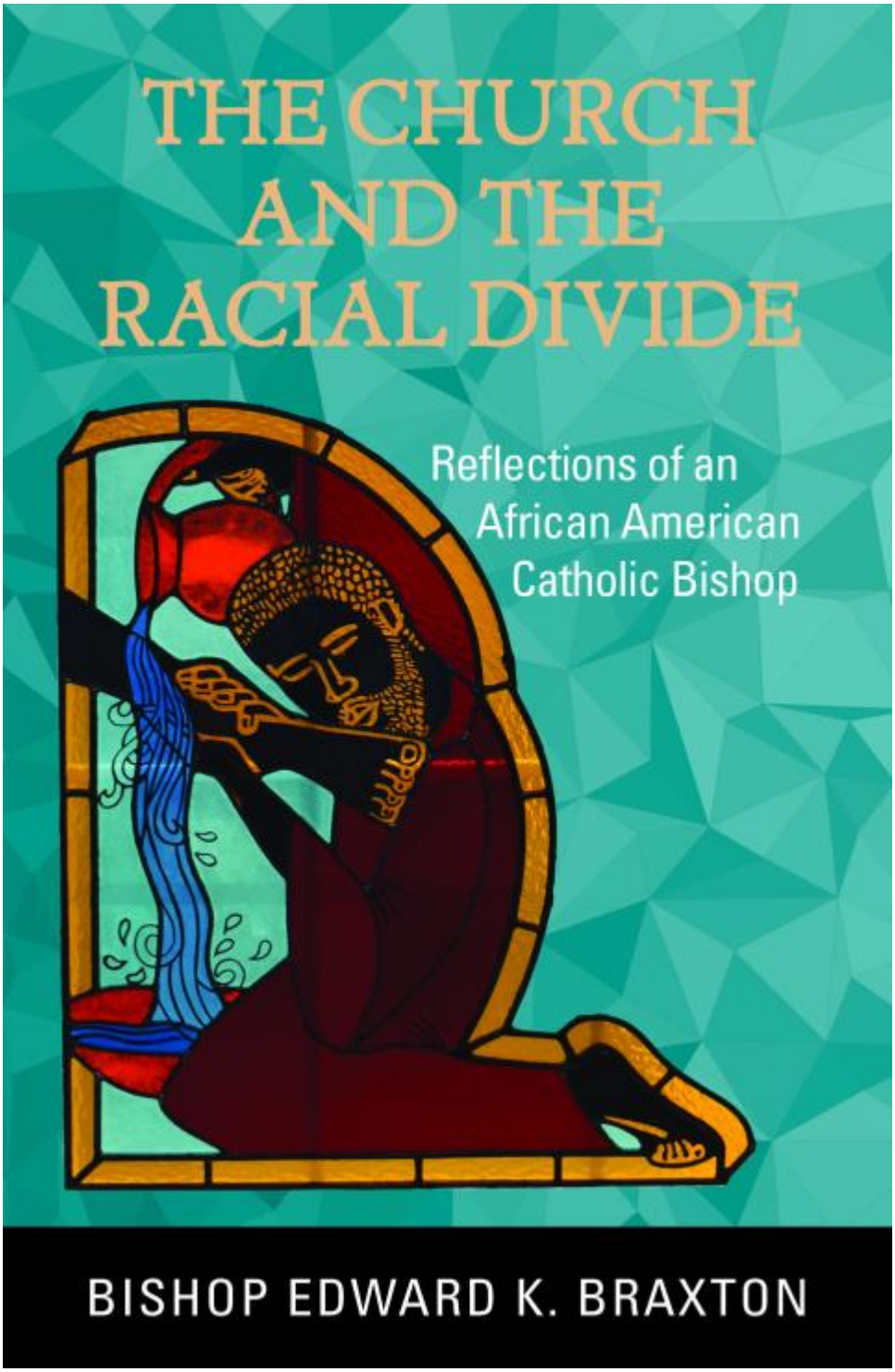
He makes the latter argument across 208 pages dedicated to African American Catholics, "who, remarkably, have remained steadfast in their commitment to the Catholic Church, even though the racial divide continues to manifest itself within the church in many ways to this day."

Why did you name your book, *The Church and the Racial Divide* instead of *The Church and Racism*?

The racial divide is much more complex and widespread. The racial divide embraces the vague biases and negative feelings that many people have toward people of other races that are not hatred, that would not lead to violence or harming people. All people, unconsciously live with bias — religious, racial, sexual, social — but it would never be acted out in attacks on individuals or groups. Racism, to me, is overt. The overt psychological and mental attitude of "I hate those people. I wish them harm." I have much more to say about this.

What was it about the Michael Brown shooting that motivated you to write this book?

It simply provided an occasion for me to organize things that I've been thinking for many years. It wasn't the first time I heard of a bad, painful story about an altercation between an African American man and a police officer that resulted in the death of a young person. I've heard many of those. My experience goes back to Emmett Till and beyond, but it became the occasion for me to take the time and organize my thoughts in a way to be of service to the church.



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Your book mentioned personal instances of being stopped and questioned for walking and driving through white neighborhoods. Why not say when and where this happened?

It's just meant to be an instance to make the reader aware that I know where I speak. I could have written the whole book on personal experiences of unkind things said and done to me and my family. I never would write such a book.

As a boy, when you went to Emmett Till's visitation in Chicago, your uncle warned you to stay away from such hatred. Though St. Clair County wasn't technically part of the South, it had more reported lynchings than any other part of Illinois. How has the racial divide affected your ability to lead the flock here?

I have heard that some people may have said unkind things about me because of the racial divide, but I've never had any direct confrontation with anyone. If anything, some people may have thought we are a rural farming area, we really are not looking for someone who is a professor of theology. I brought missionary priests called *fidei donum* priests from Nigeria and Uganda who are still here. There were some instances there where people seemed unwelcoming.

Do you think you were sent here to fix a flaw in the foundation?

No.

Regardless, have you moved the needle on race?

Yes. At the same time I would say that was not my primary goal. My primary goal was to serve the people of God as a good and faithful priest, and bishop, and to build up the church by helping people to grow in their Catholic identity and education. A phrase I use almost every time I visited a parish was the phrase: "Learn your faith, love your faith, live your faith." And within that context, part of learning your faith is learning about the dignity and value of every human person, which within that addresses racial prejudice, racism, the dignity, the value of unborn life, the value of the life of a person on death row. If you are doing that, you will see that your faith impels you not to support bias and prejudice or racism.

Yet your book is dedicated to the late Congressman John Lewis and African American Catholics, "who, remarkably, have remained steadfast in their commitment to the Catholic Church, even though the racial divide continues to manifest itself within the church in many ways to this day." What are a few examples of that?

You are trying to get me to wallow in the mud which is something I don't care to do.

A main point in your book is to not be silent.

I haven't been silent. Everything I have to say is in that book.

> My primary goal was to serve the people of God as a good and faithful priest, and bishop, and to build up the church by helping people to grow in their Catholic identity and education.
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Your father was refused entry to the Knights of Columbus, the Catholic fraternal organization. Instead, he was referred to the Knights of Peter Claver, named after the patron saint of slaves. Do rejections like that still happen in southern Illinois?

The human condition being what it is, certainly possible. Nothing that was ever reported to me. But don't forget for a person of color to be refused entry to the Knights of Columbus, there has to be a person of color that's there. The parishes of this diocese are racially very monochromatic for the most part.

Why aren't there more African American Catholics? They got you …

More my parents, you might say. I became a Catholic as a very young child. The schools attracted my mother. The world has turned now.

Has being Catholic limited the activism that you could do on the issue of race?

I discussed this with Jesse Jackson years ago. My temperament is somewhat introspective and highly refined or highly nuanced. It holds in tension many complex ideas. I read a lot, and I've traveled the world a lot. So I can't so easily say, "This is

it. You guys are all white racists, and that's the end of the story." I can't do that because I don't believe that.

What church practices still reinforce bias?

The fact that people have very little contact with people of very different racial backgrounds can reinforce existing biases. We have wonderful Catholic schools in the diocese. We have wonderful teachers, and the history texts that we use are good and better than they were in the past, but they don't cover in a clear and full way the magnitude of the racial divide. It's very hard for the Catholic Church not to appear Eurocentric.

You write about sacred art not being reflective of diverse society.

If you want to invite people of color into the world of the church, couldn't some part of it look like them? Yet I am not advocating that you go into churches built by German immigrants and take black paint and spray it all over the saints and angels. I am not proposing anything as simple as that. But there is a reason I chose the cover of my book myself. I wanted to show an Afrocentric Jesus washing the feet of an Afrocentric Peter.

Did you curate more inclusive art in the diocese?

I did in the sense that every time we had printed programs, I put more diverse art. Pastorally, I am very sensitive to people are where they are.

It seems like low hanging fruit for the Catholic Church to make a meaningful change.

People have written about it and talked about it for decades now and it hasn't happened. I think there is a sensitivity towards not wanting to seem accusatory of the people who are actually in church on Sunday. We are still building churches around the country to this day in all neighborhoods and all the angels, all the stained glass windows are people who look like Europeans.

Didn't you have something to do with the sculpture outside the Cathedral Basilica of St. Louis that has a diverse group of children playing around the base of a tall, African American "Angel of Harmony"?

Sculptor Wiktor Szostalo designed and created it. I made suggestions, including using the image of my brother Lawrence, who had recently died of cancer, as the

face of the angel. The archbishop at that time was Justin Rigali. He was supportive. We got Mrs. (Adelaide) Schlafly to fund that in honor of her husband.

Pope Francis greets Bishop Edward K. Braxton of Belleville, Ill., during a meeting with U.S. bis

Pope Francis greets Bishop Edward K. Braxton of Belleville, Ill., during a meeting with U.S. bishops from Illinois, Indiana, and Wisconsin making their "ad limina" visits to the Vatican Dec. 12, 2019. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

Safe to say that was something you've done to try to make the Catholic Church more welcoming to people of color?

Well, yes and no, because not many people go to the basilica. But I tried, by using art, to help people to see an image different than all the angels inside the basilica. There are all kinds of angels inside the basilica. Beautiful angels in the splendid mosaics that are there.

One takeaway from your book is there is a need to do more instead of make more statements.

That's true of most things. The Catholic Church is very good at issuing statements because that is something we can do. It's easier to write a book about the racial divide than it actually is to overcome it. It's by encounter that bridges are built.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops recently made news for its debate to deny President Joe Biden communion for his stance on abortion.

Which isn't going to happen. What the bishops really were discussing was a pastoral letter on the importance of the Eucharist. Some have suggested there be a chapter on receiving communion worthily — if you are sinful you shouldn't receive communion without going to confession. In that context, some would like to discuss the idea of should there be a ban on giving communion to people who support abortion, including the president. The idea of a universal ban doesn't exist. And it's not going to be created.

Do you think he should be denied communion?

No. I think that President Biden should be reminded that he is a Catholic and why is he so vigorously supporting a policy that is directly contrary to this clear teaching that developing human life in the womb should be protected and have a conversation with him. But he's not in my diocese, and I have no control over that. I understand why bishops have different opinions on this.

Would you give the USCCB an "A" for trying to protect the unborn?

Pro-life is one of the central themes of the Catholic bishops. Sure, why not?

What grade would you give them on bridging the racial divide?

They know that they are doing more in favor to deal with the complex moral issue of abortion than they are with the racial divide, though the most recent pastoral statements have been very strong and very good. It would be very difficult for the bishops to say all Catholics who are white supremacists in their thinking shouldn't go to communion because it's not a legal statement like Roe v. Wade.

You designate a chapter of your book to the new National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., and suggest that bishops spend some time there, perhaps when they are in town for a nearby USCCB meeting.

I don't want you to paint the bishops in one stroke. All the bishops are different kinds of people and they are all in different kinds of dioceses. Different ones are doing more on the racial divide than others. Just like different ones are doing more on abortion.

What are a few things that regular people can do to bridge the racial divide?

One of the things that I think is so hard for people to do is to seek accurate information. To read more. If you give a talk and you say in passing, "Of course this has been the case ever since the Jim Crow laws, or this has been the case ever since the Dred Scott decision," and you have people afterwards who say, "Bishop, who is Jim Crow? Who is Dred Scott? What was the Middle Passage across the Atlantic Ocean? How could it be that Roger Taney, the chief justice of the Supreme Court, who wrote the Dred Scott decision, was really Catholic?" I had people get up and say he wasn't Catholic. And he was. I am sorry. You can't dispute facts.