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Obama election draws new racial bonds

by Arthur Jones

I missed Mass on Sunday, Miss Kelly. It was Barack Obama's fault. Sort of. Miss Kelly was my teacher a year during spent at a convent school; all the other classes had nuns. Each Monday she'd pull out her ledger and you had to answer, "Mass, Communion, Sunday School," when she called your name checking Sunday observances,

I remember one Sunday, just leaving for church, I stuck a finger in the bacon fat which would be heated for the artery-clogging Sunday breakfast later.

I licked my finger. I'd broken my fast. No communion.

Nonetheless, on the Monday I called out, "Mass, Communion, Sunday School."

I'd like to pretend I did it to keep her ledger perfect. In fact I didn't want to stand guilty of sinning. My twins cousins ratted on me, not to her, to their mother, my Aunt Gertie.

She taunted me, "Little Ananias!"

My mother and her four sisters were great at verbal torture. (I was just grateful I knew who Ananias was.)

So, Miss Kelly, at the age of 72, I missed Mass last Sunday. Here's where Mr. Obama fits in. We live, you see, in a very conservative rural area. McCain signs like billboards. One night all the large signs were defaced. Someone spray-painted them over with the preferred candidate's name: Ron Paul.

So, jubilant on Wednesday at Mr. Obama's victory, I went out to celebrate with my pal Smitty, whom I sometimes take to the local supermarket and back because he can't drive.

He wasn't in. It wasn't until late in the afternoon I saw the first black person; three lines over from me in

the store. I left my line, went to him, tapped him on the shoulder and stuck out my hand.

He turned. "It's a great day for America," I said. He said, "Pardon?" (Sometimes it's the English accent that throws people.) As he gripped my hand I repeated, "It's a great day for America." We were looking into each other's eyes, intently. Finally he realized. "Yes, it is," he said.

I went back to my line and checked out.

In the parking lot he waved me over. Smiling broadly, he said, "You're the first Caucasian all day who's mentioned the election to me." On the way home I wondered how many other local African Americans had been ignored.

From our kitchen window we can see the roof, three hundred yards away, of the little black Baptist chapel. I decided to call a few neighbors and see if they'd join my wife, Margie, and I at the Baptist's Sunday service.

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This meant, Miss Kelly, we wouldn't be at Mass at St. Vincent de Paul Church in downtown Baltimore.

And so it was that two Jews, four Methodist/Episcopalians, and two Catholics, went to the Baptist church. We were warmly received, smiling eyes, open arms (and oil heat). There were three young boys in white shirts, no girls, and a smartly suited older teenager usher. He was just at the age that as this crowd of odd visitors arrived he couldn't decide between smiling welcome or ministerial reserve. He opted for caution.

Pews with red cushions (oh Catholics, we have so much to learn about evangelizing from the bottom up); a draped *trompe l'oeil* cross painted on the wall behind the pulpit; electric flickering candles, and a minister by the delightful name of the Rev. Hawthorne Rice.

The congregation numbered about 28 for this main service, but there were other services -- men's bible, children's gatherings -- throughout the day. The average person at in our service was over 55, all joyfully engaged in the two hours of singing, prayers and preaching.

We had explained who we were -- neighbors from the nearby street, who had come to join them in thanking the God who is above all faiths and creeds for our new president-elect.

At about the halfway mark, in a pause between musical selections, the church secretary read the notices, and again described to everyone the meaning behind our presence.

She asked if one of us would like to say a few words, and the other eyes focused on me, the organizer.

After the greeting I said that from the perspective of white voters like ourselves, who had joined with them to help elect Senator Obama, he was two things: he was the black Abraham Lincoln who could help bind the nation's racial wounds; and he was the political apotheosis of Dr. Martin Luther King's "I have a dream," the political part to come true. I thanked them for their welcome, said Amen, and sat down.

Amens reverberated for quite a while until the minister took the pulpit.

He said that Sunday was the most segregated day of the week, whites in the white churches, blacks in the black churches, when, in fact, we were all children of one God. In 30 years had never expected a group of

white people to 'boldly and openly' come to church to signify that oneness. 'So boldly' and he had to pause. He used his huge handkerchief to wipe away tears; I could detect some sniffles around me as I took out my own handkerchief. Rev. Rice preached for a further 40 minutes from Exodus 33-13: 'one nation'.

At the two hour mark, we all gathered around the altar, held hands and offered the names of those who needed our prayers. My wife, Margie, named our sister-in-law Joan, fighting breast cancer after a second mastectomy and nine years of no cancer, and I mentioned my brother Roy, at that moment on life support in a hospital in Yorkshire England.

You'll want to know about 'communion,' Miss Kelly. Well, I'm not sure what I mean by 'communion of the spirit' as we held hands and communed to pray over the dozens of names offered, but it was almost of Eucharistic power.

You'll want to know about 'Sunday School,' too. That bit's easy. Until 1902 when it became the Baptist chapel, it was the village school.

Segregated, it was the white school. This Sunday in that school we all learned a lot about one another.

You know, Miss Kelly, when you walked into the classroom each morning, we'd say in unison, 'Good morning, Miss Kelly. God Bless you Miss Kelly.' And I'm sure God did. So I'm certain you'll understand why I missed mass Sunday.

Arthur Jones is a former NCR editor.

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