



What is Happening in Catholic Schools?

By Shawnta S. Barnes – January 20, 2019

Catholic schools have been in the media and the frequency is increasing, unfortunately, for all the wrong reasons. Unless you avoided media yesterday, you probably know about the incident involving Catholic students at the Lincoln Memorial. Students from Covington Catholic High School in Park Hills, Kentucky were in Washington D.C. for the March for life, the anti-abortion rally. But instead of staying focused on the rally they were attending, the students (who were wearing Make America Great Again hats) taunted Nathan Phillips who was in Washington D.C.

for the Indigenous People March. They mocked and hurled inappropriate comments at Phillips, an Omaha elder, Vietnam-era Veteran, and former director of the Native Youth Alliance.

One of the reasons families typically give for sending their children to a Catholic school is because of the religious education. Based on this incident, it is clear something is amiss at this school, but unfortunately, this isn't the only Catholic school that has been in the media lately for poor student behavior. When I look closer to home, I am reminded of the incident at Theodore Guerin Catholic High School in Noblesville, Indiana where a few cheerleaders made a video taunting and bullying another student at the school. The video also involved inappropriate gestures. I did see this video and based on the name of the student that was mentioned, it appears that the targeted student was probably not white. The girls that made the video are no longer enrolled at the school, but I'm concerned about the student targeted in the video, just like I'm concerned about the incident in Washington D.C.

That is not all. Catholic schools have also come under fire for policies that target black students. At the beginning of this school year, an 11-year-old black girl in New Orleans was sent home because she had braid extensions in her hair. The heartbreaking video of her crying as she exited the school went viral. Christ the King Catholic School eventually rescinded its policy and said, "When this issue arose, the school immediately reviewed its policy and recognized that there may have been sensitivities that needed to be addressed." Did the issue get addressed because they realized it was wrong or because they were exposed on video?

I can't reference all of these incidents without sharing one close to home. When my boys attended PreK-3, they were in separate classes and one was referred to as an evil twin because he cried sometimes. The adult calling him evil was caught and eventually fired, but the damage had been done.

The following school year, we enrolled our boys in a Catholic school for PreK-4, and they were in the same class, but my son, who was called evil at his last school, continued to struggle. His classroom teacher worked hard to help him and we are grateful for that, but one special area teacher did not. Right before winter break, my husband and I reached out to the special area teachers to see how our sons were doing in special area classes. All the teachers responded, but we were appalled by the response of one teacher we had never spoken to before; we had spoken to the other special area teachers on a few occasions. This teacher we had never spoken to, who touted three decades of experience, wrote us a six-paragraph letter about how he felt about my sons.

In the letter, which I still have, the teacher said my children were “powerfully negative entities.” One of my sons didn’t have many problems outside of typical preschool behavior, so my husband and I were shocked by this letter. One of the six-paragraphs was just the teacher listing all the degrees and specialist certifications the teacher possessed and the teacher wrote, “I am considered a specialist in early childhood education.” Any professional or specialist would know that it is not appropriate to write those words about any child especially when you have never called or made any attempts to contact the parents about your concerns. We picked this school because of word of mouth feedback about how great it was. I toured the school and observed the teacher who ended up being my children’s classroom teacher and I was impressed. Despite the glowing reviews, we, a black family, still had this disturbing incident.

As I read comments from Indigenous people in response to the incident at the Lincoln Memorial, many made parallels to the colonial settler viewpoints where colonizers came, took land, and had no regard for Indigenous people. How can we sing a song that says, “Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world – red and yellow, black and white. They are precious in His sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world” and then we have white children hurling hate at people of color or white administrators and teachers excluding, dismissing, and making inappropriate comments about children of color? This is not what Jesus would do. The Catholic church needs to do better and should not only be reactive once they are caught on tape but instead be proactive to prevent more incidents from occurring.