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Interview: Brother Joseph Davis

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JW: I'm sitting with Bro. Joe Davis and I'm going to ask him some questions about the effort to desegregate the Catholic elementary schools, which I believed started in 1967, didn't they?

JD: Yes, perhaps it started before that. I would say that my own involvement began in 1967.

JW: You were a member of the task force, which I think Bishop McCarthy called, to evaluate a proposal made by, what they called the De Facto Desegregation Committee. Regulinski, I believe...

JD: Right, made up of a number of lay and religious people here in the city of Dayton. I think representative of kind of a broad span of the Catholic community...

JW: Well, every priest from every parish in the Dayton area was involved. And then a member of a parish council, also.

JD: Right.

JW: Which I think led you to, or some members of the committee, to criticize the committee, saying it was being composed of people who already came out questioning the call for desegregation of the Catholic elementary schools.

JD: Right.

JW: ...involving the priests already in that was something which...
JD: Right. I think first of all the whole situation has to be contextualized in the sense that that was the height of the Civil Rights Movement of the late '60s and early '70s. There was much going on in the general public society in terms of the whole integration/segregation issue to begin with. And, of course, the Supreme Court decision on the desegregation of public schools had been handed down so there was a question of how the public schools was going to approach the whole issue of desegregation itself. From a Catholic point of view, and certainly my own motivation, put it on, I would say, perhaps the theological and moral level of saying that as Catholic institutions we have an obligation to set a pace of standard for the rest of society; that is, Catholic institutions should be doing what is right. Given the configuration of the Catholic community in the city of Dayton, when we talk about the desegregation of schools, of course you have St. James, Resurrection, St. Agnes - those three parishes particularly that had in the elementary schools a sizeable black populations which meant that all the rest of the Catholic elementary schools did not have large black populations or had no black populations at all. There was a group of people in Dayton who felt very strongly on the issue that the Catholic church should do something to desegregate its schools. But when you talk about that kind of proportions and you talk about desegregation, what exactly do you mean or how will that work? Bishop McCarthy, who was auxiliary bishop at that time, did set up a task force and, as you indicated, was comprised of pastors and parish representatives. Obviously,
right away, you've got a very unbalanced kind of committee in terms of schools that would have a real vested interest and concern in the question of desegregation or integration. For the pastors, from the predominantly white parishes, the perspective was one of seeing perhaps numbers of black children coming into the parish schools, the involvement of black parents in the school and the parish, and of course most often people approached those questions with fear; that if we suddenly bring black people into our community and our schools, how is that going to affect the quality of the school? What is it going to do to the level of education? How is it going to affect the parish attitudes? And so on. And so there was a real fearing of the nature of the composition of the committee itself one would not, in fact, get a fair kind of...

JD: You resigned from the committee before the final report was written, I believe.

JW: I resigned from the committee on the basis of a statement made by the Archbishop Karl Alter. It was clear that there was going to be some movement toward desegregation. The question was whether it was going to represent a real effort of the archdiocese and of the Catholic school system of Dayton or whether it was going to be simply a pushing of a small number of people and in response to the recommendations of the committee about desegregation and in response to certainly the interest of people strongly committed to desegregation, the Archbishop, on one occasion, made a statement that ultimately the decision would be made by the people in the pews and that
the people would vote with their pocketbooks. In other words, he was saying, as I understood it, that the decision really would be an economic decision. That if people indicated by their decreasing the amount of their contributions to the parishes, then desegregation would not happen. I simply did not think that that was an appropriate kind of leadership for the Archbishop...

JW: Was that out of character with Archbishop Alter? Because he had written earlier, some years earlier, a letter condemning anti-Semitism and racism. He was part of a Bishops' coalition...

JD: I think it's very often very easy for people in leadership positions, when they are dealing with the question on kind of a universal level, to assume very correct ethical and moral and theological positions. When it comes down to effecting particular institutions which may have some reaction to the proposed initiative, then perhaps people become more reluctant, they kind of back off and say that the deal with the dollars and cents aspect of this issue...

JW: One thing that has fascinated me is when I read the committee reports, for example, Regulinski's committee, or what became known as the Nealon committee (Tim Nealon, I guess, had a very small ad hoc group.) to push for immediate implementation of the consolidation plan that Regulinski suggested. But these groups, when they write their reports, tend to refer to civil rights documents or those documents in the secular world which call for the need of desegregation. And they almost never quote pastoral
letters, they almost never quote Vatican II, which should have been available at that time. Bishops have at least written two pastoral letters. There was that letter that Alter had penned about... It seems that no one does refer to that.

JD: Well, I think the reason for not referring to those letters was, in a way, very simple. The letters tend to address a very universal, ethical kind of issue, a moral kind of issue. And they, therefore, don't have a lot of teeth in it in terms of practical guidelines or methods of approaching the question as it effects a particular diocese or a particular school system. In terms of the civil rights legislation that was often referred to, I ________ the law of the land and dealing with not only law as it has been written, but law as it has been interpreted by the Supreme Court. Consequently, on the Supreme Court decision of the desegregation of schools, there were guidelines formulated by the U.S. Government. So you had some very specific, very concrete things. And I think that that's actually the crux of the real interesting aspect of that whole question in 1967-68 was the law coming into conflict, in a sense, with church practice. Maybe not church policy or church teaching, but coming head-on against the actual practice of the church in terms of its school systems.

JW: One of the re________ that the priests seem to express, regarding the question of desegregation, was that if we consolidated the schools the parish priest would lose the position that he is supposed to occupy, which is to be the spiritual Father of the family.
JD: Put in those terms today, when we see what in fact has happened and is happening with Catholic school systems, that sounds rather humorous. I think no doubt all of this occurred at a time right after the second Vatican council, right after a sort of new mood, a new spirit began to move into the church. And so we're in a period where we still have a strong concept of the pastor as sort of the master of his kingdom and that he had great responsibility for an oversight of every aspect of that parish, a sort of a direct, hands-on approach. And so it's understandable that they would feel perhaps they might lose something in the process. But I think that's, again, not the real issue. The real fundamental issue was what would be the white response. What would be the response of white Catholics to the presence of black children in their Catholic schools? And so you had not only the argument about the pastor, but you had the whole question, Who are Catholic schools for? Are they for Catholics, are they meant to serve non-Catholics because it was felt, again, you would open up doors to a lot of black non-Catholic people coming to the schools and they would be using the money that Catholics pay and occupying the space that Catholics pay for to educate Catholic children. So there were many, many different ways of kind of hedging around that whole issue. Looking at it from today's vantage point, how many schools are we talking about? We're really only talking about a handful of schools. A small number of black people that would have been involved. It was not really a major kind of issue. It was something that would have been very, very simply done.
And, again, one has to keep in mind that here you have the Catholic church in kind of an intense, internal struggle over what to do about what has been interpreted as the legal requirement of the country.

JW: And about the only thing that was done, I guess, was the voluntary exchange of open enrollment program.

JD: Right. The open enrollment, voluntary exchange program which involved...

JW: It lasted about 4 years?

JD: Right.

JW: But only two of those really involved a fair number of students.

JD: That's right.

JW: Enrollment declined immediately after those first two years.

JD: Right.

JW: You went on to become the principal of St. James, I think.

JD: I was principal of St. James for one year...

JW: And worked with Sr. Mary Ann Drerup?

JD: Yes, I worked with Sr. Mary Ann Drerup. And during that year... St. James was one of those that was most heavily involved in the open enrollment program. We had kids who came in every day by bus and it worked out very beautifully. It was a wonderful kind of experience.

JW: Phil Donahue speaks highly of it; he has a chapter on it in his book.

JD: Yes.

JW: ...which is modestly titled, Donahue.
JD: But I think that the reason that it did work so well is that there were obviously committed people who wanted to see it work, who were willing to put the energy into it and personal resources and other resources into it to see that it did work.

JW: When I spoke with Sr. Mary Ann Drerup, she mentioned that she was never, or at least now looking back, that her commitment to integration was far less than her commitment to quality of education for the students at St. James. And if voluntary enrollment and voluntary exchange would provide for better opportunities for the children at St. James, she would be for it. But she was not simply for mixing for the sake of mixing. Does that seem to reflect the attitude that permeated St. James at the time you were there?

JD: I would think so because, again, you had several things going on in the secular society at the same time. There was the famous Coleman report, which talked about the fact that black children in segregated schools did not do as well educationally as children in integrated schools which seemed to have the implication that for the benefit of black children themselves schools needed to be integrated. At the same time, the whole black power movement was developing which was calling, in fact, for separate institutions, not integrated institutions and saying that we need to run our own institutions; we need to have our own institutions; we need to establish our own role models and be able to work within our cultural framework. So there were a lot of conflicting kinds of things going on in the whole secular
society. So, from that point of view, what was the purpose of pursuing the desegregation of Catholic schools and as far as I'm concerned it was 1) very definitely a question of what was the correct position of the Catholic church as a church to assume in a secular society that was being torn apart over the question of race and of the dignity and value of the human person. Secondly, I think that Sr. Mary Ann would be very right regarding the question of quality education. If the desegregation of the schools would have negatively affected the quality of education, then I'm not certain if I, for example, would have pursued it or had thought it to be a very good idea. Thirdly, I think there was the value of what did the white students have to gain from their relationship with black students in the same educational institutional environment. So it's not simply a one-way street. It was not a matter of bringing white students in so that black children could benefit, but there was some mutual benefit to be gained from that kind of experience. In fact, at St. James, which participated in that program, the environment of the school was very definitely a black cultural environment.

JW: It was never a desegregated school, it was a black school with white students.

JD: It was, in a sense, a black school with white students; that's one way to say it. But I think perhaps a more correct way to say it would be to say that it was a school in which all of the students were exposed in many ways, including the environment of the facility itself, were exposed to the rich heritage of black history and culture.
Again, I think that could have perhaps been seen as a one-sided approach. But, on the other hand, I think one can walk into any educational institution today and still find that you're going to have in that institution a predominant cultural environment.

**JW:** One thing that surprises me about the story of the desegregation of the Catholic schools is that when the open enrollment voluntary exchange program seemed decline and lost its power people no longer talked as much about desegregating or integrating or moving pupils around or consolidating the schools as they talked about sensitivity sessions and multi-cultural curriculum. Here's a question I often pose to people that I talk to, is what did we learn from this and what should we do in the future. When I posed that to the superintendent of ________, he said that it was sensitivity sessions that he would use today. He said that that was the thing that was important and influential in changing his mind. And Sr. Mary Ann Drerup became involved in those with Dr. King.

**JD:** The sensitivity sessions became very popular and widespread all over the country. There was a very strong movement based on the belief that one of the ways that of changing the situation in the U.S. and in specific institutions was to educate and sensitize people and to conscientize them and give them an awareness of the experience of what it meant to be black in this country. And an awful lot of energy was put into those sessions. They were emotionally and psychologically very demanding and very draining kinds of experiences. I would suspect that many
African-American people today would take a different point of view. I'm sure that there are people who still do that. Dr. King is still very heavily involved in that, as far as I know. But I think there are an awful lot of African-American people today who would say that that is not our responsibility; our responsibility is not to all communities; our responsibility is to develop our community and an awareness of its own culture and its own traditions and to try to bring the community together around culture and tradition as a basis for development and for strengthening our presence in the U.S. And that if there is going to be such a thing as sensitivity sessions, those sessions ought to be conducted by white people for white people. By white people with an awareness of multi-cultural living and for people who do not have the kind of awareness.

JW: Dr. Art Thomas would express such a position that black people should be involved in black peoples' communities; but by the same token, he seems to have provided a kind of sensitivity session in the sense that he was a very sensitive person. He used a thing called Project Commitment, he spoke to lawyers...

JD: He definitely was a very strong person, a very articulate person, a very outspoken person. And I would say that he certainly had a very strong impact on me, influence on me. I admired him very much. I enjoyed very much working with him. I think he would express that position, yes. At the same time, anyone who expresses that position as I am certainly would not mean by that an absolute rejection of doing what one can to give people a broader
vision of life. I suppose that I have arrived at the point of feeling that it is as important for you to understand the specific cultural background out of which you come as it is for me to understand that. As I define myself as an African-American, I'm sure there is some hyphenated American by which you would define yourself. What does that mean to you? And how does that influence your daily way of living as well as how does it influence the way you relate to this society in general? An interesting thing to me is that one finds Americans who find themselves as Irish-Americans or Italian-Americans or German-Americans or French-Americans, Polish-Americans, that often are not in touch at all with what specifically that means.

JW: Thinking especially of Art Thomas, there are instances that come to mind where his effort to try to build a stronger black community seems to have frustrated efforts to desegregate. Now I'm thinking specifically of publich schools. But there was an example of one time, Edison School at Broadway and 5th, burned. And Wayne Carle, who was then superintendent of schools, wanted to rebuild the building in an area which would be more amenable to integrating; that is, closer to the white section of town, closer to the middle of town. And then there would be a desegregated school. Where it is and where it was, it was in the middle of a black community and it was difficult to desegregate there.

JD: Why is that?

JW: You mean why...
JD: Why, if it's in the black community, it's difficult to desegregate. If we move it closer to the white community, it is easier. Right away in saying that, you are stating exactly the problem. And the problem is the tremendous imbalance in terms of how we tend to regard each other as people and as cultural groups. It is saying that if it's closer to the white community, white people will feel safe. If it's in the black community, white people will feel more threatened if they have to go there. How do we change that very fundamental perception? When Art Thomas says no school has to be built here, what he is saying is that you have to recognize our dignity as people just as you recognize the concerns of the white community. Why does all the change have to come from the black community. It is saying that the black community has to work in such a way to try to meet whatever expectations or demands or the requirements of the white community are. And I think in opposing that Art Thomas is simply saying, life is a two-way street.

SIDE TWO

JD: One other aspect to that - I would go back again to what I had indicated - that there was a very strong movement in the black community at that time, and in general, throughout the states, to have their own institutions. And many black people are saying that they are not interested in desegregation at all. In saying that, one of the implications of that is that Art Thomas, and many other people, had to be be walking a very fine line of
being in touch with the black community. And I think Art
Thomas was certainly one of the strong leaders of the black
community at that time, among several others. And somehow
responding to the white community without absolutely turning
them off, trying to respond to some of their concerns and
needs, and at that same time, get them to understand that
the black community has its own concerns and its own needs.
So there was a very fine line.

JW: It must have been difficult for him and I know he
had difficulty with Wayne Carle as the superintendent.

JD: Yes, and with many of the city leaders. Not every
one in the black community found Art Thomas easy to take.

JW: He seems not to have been a segregationalist in
the sense that at least he wasn't...SOS, Serving Our
Schools, was unable to enlist him even though they made some
overtures.

JD: Right.

JW: Rev. Huey is someone that I've wanted to get in
touch with but I believe he has passed away.

JD: I believe so, yes.

JW: He was actively involved in trying to desegregate
the public schools. I think he was a Methodist.

JD: Yes.

JW: But he seems to have taken a somewhat different
position; that is, to have been more of an integrationalist.

JD: Yes, and I think that that's not surprising that
you would find that diversity in the community as you
certainly would find diversity within the white community of
people who were very strong advocates of integration and
people who were just tremendously opposed to the whole idea of desegregation and integration and didn't want to hear about it.

JW: Tim Nealon said that in order to understand the controversy of desegregating the Catholic schools and the public schools, you would really have to see the crisis of 1966 when the National Guard was called in. Does that seem accurate to you?

JD: Well, not only the crisis of 1966 but the whole crisis of civil rights at that time was nationwide. I think a certain climate had been established in the country. Martin Luther King had moved the spirits of black people toward a more forceful articulation of their demand for greater participation in American life. Malcom X had come along taking a different position than Martin King in terms of the whole integration question. The black power movement had developed. At that time the National Committee of Black Churchmen, as well as the National Black Development Committee, which placed specific demands on the white churches to pay compensation to the black community for the years and years of segregation. There was just this whole climate ______ in the country. It has to be understood in that context; not just the local situation in Dayton, not just the local Catholic or public school situation, but what was going on in the country as a whole among blacks and whites.
JW: If I was from another city and we were going to go through similar difficulties that Dayton went through and I was to ask you what suggestions you would give me avoiding problems or helping with success, what would you tell me?

JD: Number one, I think if you're going to, and I'm assuming your talking about the integration of schools, if you're going to undertake that, I don't think you're going to avoid problems. I think the question becomes how does one best deal with the problems that will be encountered. Because, again, fundamentally you're dealing with peoples' attitudes about one another. How do white people think about black people; how do black people think about white people? And can enlarge that question today to Hispanics, to Asians who are coming in large numbers to the country. And it seems to me that you start out realizing that in dealing with some very, very deeply ingrained racial and cultural attitudes. And, basically, I think we tend to take closed views of other groups in relationship to our own culture. So, how you open up those views. There you get into the whole area of cultural and multi-cultural kind of questions. That's why I think the more we understand about the nature of culture itself and the more you are able to understand about the nature of your own culture and how, in fact, whatever - I'll use the term "ethnic" - I don't like it, I don't think it's the best term, but - ethnic background you come from impacts even on your understanding of yourself as an American. And we all have that. I think the unfortunate thing in this country is that it seems to me that Afro-Americans, perhaps Irish-Americans, perhaps Italian-
Americans, recognize that more readily than other groups. Many white people are prepared to say, "I am an American." But at other times they do recognize and realize that they come from an additional cultural background. You have to begin with that whole appreciation of the role that culture plays in every one of our lives. I think that if you, for example, can understand and appreciate how you are shaped by the culture from which you come, it ought to give you an ability to appreciate the cultural background from which I come. I think we do with the whole question of educational content. It is quite interesting to talk with and observe foreigners in this country in their response how limited Americans are in their awareness of the world. What we have is in the evenings as national or international news is not really international news. Americans are very, very miopic as far as other countries and other cultures are concerned. So we come to the question of what kind of history do we teach; what kind of geography do we teach in our schools from the most basic level. And, particularly when you look at the curriculum content for courses relative to Africa or Latin America or Asia, what content is there to begin with and what is the quality of that content? Americans are so unknowledgeable about Africa that we tend to have very, very negative perceptions of Africa and Africans. And so we don't even have a basis there for appreciating what it means to be an African-American.
JW: Would you say that the controversy that Dayton went through has, in any way, encouraged those kinds of teachings or those kinds of insights on the part of Daytonians?

JD: Well, I think at the time perhaps it did.

JW: But there was nothing permanent?

JD: I would say no. And I think that as many, many people recognize today that perhaps we're in a worse situation today than when we were fighting this battle in 1968; that things have really gotten worse.

JW: By worse, do you mean that residential patterns seem to have been hardened economically?

JD: Residential patterns, economic patterns, I just think that we find ourselves in many, many ways a much more deeply divided city now than we were in 1968. I know I do not live here on a regular basis at the present time, but I do not seem to detect a strong leadership that is trying to deal with the issue that, in fact, this city is very racially divided. And that racial attitudes have hardened more than anything else.

JW: I neglected to ask you about your own efforts in Dayton when you became principal of St. James. In what direction did you move?

JD: Well, my primary effort there was to establish a very good environment in the schools. I recall we put a lot of effort in seeing that the physical environment of the school was as uplifting and motivating and pleasant as possible.

JW: It is architecturally pleasing.
JD: It is. Part of our school was ungraded in the ungraded system at that time so that students were in classes according to their ability rather than being grouped simply by age. We put an awful lot of energy in working with the teachers and the parents to understand what was going on within the school to bring their contribution to the whole effort to desegregate the school. At the same time I think there was a general recognition of the need to develop within the black students a very strong sense of self-esteem and self-worth. Therefore, that accounted for the kind of African-American cultural thing that one would find running throughout the school. So we opened the school day with different kinds of affirmation of a sense of worth and a sense of self-esteem. We had special programs in black history and black culture and we did as much as possible to give all the students a positive sense of a contribution of black Americans to the country. From my point of view, and I'm sure from the point of view of many of the other people who were on the faculty there, as well as the parents, it was an effort to provide a sound and positive education for everybody; not just for the black students, but to give the white students, as well, a sense of appreciation of the fact that this country has been built by many people, not just by one particular group.

JW: You stayed there one year.

JD: I stayed there one year. At that time I was asked by the black priests and brothers and sisters in the country to develop the National Office of Black Catholics in Washington, D.C. And so for awhile I was dividing my time
between Washington and St. James in Dayton and then I moved to Washington for seven years where I opened up the National Office for Black Catholics.

JW: Well, thank you very much for spending this time with me and answering these questions.

JD: You're very, very welcome. I appreciate the opportunity to do so.