

FAITH, COURAGE NEEDED ON PATH TO CIVILITY



**GANNON PROFESSOR ANSWERS THE QUESTION OF OUR TIMES:
'WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO LOVE OUR NEIGHBORS?'**

BY MARY SOLBERG

Parris Baker was 20 years old in 1978 when he was denied food because of the color of his skin.

A sophomore at Erie's Gannon University, he was driving home to Erie from New Jersey when he pulled over for a quick bite to eat at a truck stop on Interstate 80 in rural Pennsylvania.

After about 20 minutes, Baker noticed that waitresses were taking care of several other customers who had come in after him. Something was odd, he thought, so he approached one waitress and asked for a menu.

"I saw you, but you're not going to get a menu," the waitress said, matter-of-factly. "We reserve the right to refuse to serve anyone."

That's when the light first started to flicker on for Baker. He was wearing a shirt and shoes, so they couldn't deny him service for that reason. Could it be that he was being mistreated for being a Black man passing through a mostly white community?

Baker politely asked to speak to the person in charge. The manager pulled up a chair, smiled and told the young man: "You're upset that we're not going to serve you. I've been through this before, so I know what you'll do. You'll call the State Police, they'll come and then we'll serve you

food that isn't any good. This is how it works, so just go to the McDonald's at the next exit and have a nice day."

Somewhat startled and never having experienced blatant racism before, Baker got up and drove away in his VW. Hungry, he found the McDonald's and ordered a hamburger.

At that moment, he realized he had done exactly what the manager had told him to do.

"He was in control and he had designed a whole environment to keep me out," Baker says. "The waitress showed no animosity toward me, but she was taught to smile and say, 'I'm not going to serve you.' It was powerful for me to understand that this was individual and institutional racism. Initially, I was angry with the manager's actions, but then I became angry with myself for going along with him. I was so upset that I threw the hamburger away."

From that moment on, Baker immersed himself in studying racism and diversity. He also started to think seriously about civil dialogue. Was a smile civil? Or could it be used as a cover for hate? How can people respond to racism without filling up with anger themselves? How can people love their neighbors with whom they disagree?

All of these questions were part of Baker's reawakening. He went on to eventually earn undergraduate, graduate and

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Photo by Rick Klein

Parris Baker, Ph.D., an assistant professor and director of social work, mortuary science and gerontology programs at Gannon University, speaks and writes about incivility and racism in our culture.



Parris Baker, right, is pictured with Martin Luther King III, son of famed civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.

Contributed Photo

doctoral degrees in social work from Gannon, a diocesan university; Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland; and the University of Pittsburgh, respectively. He also earned an undergraduate degree in theology and a master's in ministry from California-based Advantage College. Currently, he is working on a graduate degree in pastoral studies at Gannon.

Now 62, he is an assistant professor and director of social work, mortuary science and gerontology programs at Gannon. A member of the newly formed United Clergy of Erie, he is the pastor of the Believers International Worship Center in Erie. Additionally, he has conducted diversity and cultural sensitivity training for the Erie Bureau of Police.

Baker believes — and teaches his students — that faith can guide us on the path to a more loving world, and civil dialogue can overcome any differences between people.

To explain, he turns to the Gospel of St. John. Jesus tells the apostles that he is “in need” of going to Samaria. The apostles try to dissuade Jesus, saying Samaritans and Jews don't get along and they're liable to get killed.

“Normally, they would walk around Samaria, but Jesus said, ‘No, we're going through it.’ He got past all the barriers,” Baker says, adding that Jesus' subsequent conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well transformed the town in which they were visiting.

“The Samaritan woman had been married five times and was in an adulterous relationship. Still, Jesus told the

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★
**WHAT CAN WE DO
TO LIVE IN A MORE
CIVIL WORLD?**
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The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) is asking Catholics in the Diocese of Erie and throughout the country to model civility, love for neighbor and respectful dialogue.

The initiative is called “Civilize It: Dignity Beyond the Debate,” and its goal is to get Catholics to pledge civility, clarity and compassion in their families, communities and parishes.

Launched last November, the effort was intended to promote activities and discussion in parishes and schools throughout 2020 leading up to the presidential election this November.

But the COVID-19 pandemic effectively halted many activities throughout the country.

“Once the pandemic hit, we had to pay attention to the immediate needs in our diocese, which is practicing and engaging with charity,” says Patrice Swick, director of the Social Justice & Life Office of the Diocese of Erie. “Now that we're able to breathe a little, we want to address the important issue of civility in our world.”

On Sept. 3, Swick joined Bishop Lawrence Persico and a representative of the USCCB's Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development in a Zoom presentation on civility.

Titled “Love My Neighbor: Civility in Dialogue,” the Zoom event offered suggestions and insights on how to love our neighbors with whom we might disagree.

“On some level, we know each other. We're all created in God's image,” Swick says. “I may not know someone's whole story, but I know they have dignity. So much of civility is engaging with that and honoring that in any way we can and must.”

Swick is hoping that more conversations about civility will continue in parishes and schools in the coming year, well beyond the presidential election. So does Emily Schumacher-Novak, assistant director of education and outreach in the USCCB's Civilize It program.

“Civilize It goes far beyond politics. It's a tool for everyday life, especially now as we look at all the difficult problems this country faces today,” Schumacher-Novak says. “It's an opportunity to expect the best and assume the best and model that for each other.”

Rooted in Gospel values, Civilize It promotes the common good of all people. It encourages respectful dialogue and works to transform unjust systems and structures.



I PLEDGE ...

**“TO RECOGNIZE THE
HUMAN DIGNITY OF THOSE
WITH WHOM I DISAGREE,
TREAT OTHERS WITH RESPECT,
AND RISE ABOVE ATTACKS
WHEN DIRECTED AT ME.**

#CivilizeIt2020



CIVILIZE IT

Source: Civilize It, USCCB



An interdenominational prayer service this past summer outside the Episcopal Cathedral of St. Paul in downtown Erie.

Photo by Anne-Marie Welsh



As a member of the newly formed United Clergy of Erie, Parris Baker speaks at an ecumenical prayer service in downtown Erie on Aug. 7.

Photo by Anne-Maïe Weish



CIVILITY GROWS IN THE HEARTS OF PEOPLE.”

apostles, who warned him not to talk to her, ‘I don’t care who she is. She has need for me,’” Baker says.

The woman accepted Christ and shared her experience of the living God with others in the community.

“I love this story because the woman was transformed because of her dialogue with Jesus and she ended up bringing the whole city to him,” Baker says. “How they spoke to each other changed the environment for everyone else. An encounter with

Jesus helps me to change.”

One person can make a difference on the path to civility, Baker says. Each of us must follow Jesus’ example to overcome the natural human tendency to protect ourselves and become defensive when confronted with people we don’t like or with whom we disagree.

The antidote to that defensive posture is more frequent interactions that build up trust and increase our desire to serve, rather than admonish, others.

“Civility grows in the hearts of people,” Baker says.

He quotes Joshua in the Book of Deuteronomy, who advised believers to be “strong and of good courage” as we confront the expected and unexpected challenges of discrimination, animosity and anger. †



TIPS FOR ENGAGING IN CIVIL DIALOGUE

- Listen first and seek to understand the whole picture.
- Ask questions for clarification.
- Use “I” statements; pay attention to body language.
- Listen to what feelings are present and pay attention to how you respond.
- Summarize what you’ve heard and ask for feedback.

Source: *Civilize It*, USCCB

To access classroom and parish resources, a civility prayer and pledge, as well as other information on civility, go to www.wearesaltandlight.org/civilize-it.

To contact Patrice Swick, director of the Social Justice & Life Office, email pswick@ErieRCD.org.

