I had the honor to host the National Association of Black Catholic Administrators annual meeting held September 19-21, 2018 at the Tutwiler Hotel. NABCA is dedicated to providing a forum for black American Catholic Administrators to: 1. Gather and share our collective resources to effectively address the needs, issues, and concerns facing the Black Communities; 2. Develop and mentor Black Catholic leadership; and 3. Be the change agent for an inclusive church.

When planning for this meeting I thought about how to incorporate the civil rights history of Birmingham and share the story of a well-loved priest, Father James Coyle killed on the porch of St. Paul’s Rectory by an enraged minister for performing a secret wedding of the minister’s daughter to a dark-skinned Puerto Rican. However, I did not want this meeting to be about who did what to who, but Reconfiliation, how we all are sons and daughters of Abraham.

Each day of our meeting mass or a pray services is held. The administrators attended noon mass at the Cathedral of St. Paul. Leon Dixon, OBM director for the Archdiocese of Detroit, commented: “I must admit, it was quite a pride-filled moment to see a black bishop and black priest participating in the mass.” Bishop Robert Baker was the celebrate of the mass. During his homily he welcomed Bishop Joseph Perry (auxiliary bishop Chicago), Father Henry Sands (Office of Black and Indian Mission, executive director) and all the Office of black Catholic Administrators from around the country.

“From the Gospel today see how the Lord Jesus ventured into the peripheries of his society to meet his Jewish community as they were and where they were. Pope Francis tells us that we need to take the Gospel out where the people are, often on the fringes of society.

So where does Jesus go, in today’s Gospel? He goes into the lion’s den. He has dinner with some of his greatest critics. He dines at a Pharisees home. And he takes the occasion to teach the Pharisees a lesson or two. He teaches them about true hospitality.

It wasn’t the Pharisees or his servants who welcomed Jesus so graciously. It was a woman of ill repute who shows Jesus the greatest respect and honor. And he singles her out, aware that the Pharisees knew her background, to say that she was the most hospitable person at that gathering...A rater stinging critique, I would say. But a good message about who is a true host... The one truly welcomes Jesus, wherever he appears in our midst, perhaps in the guise of a stranger.

Since we have people at this liturgy who are on work schedules, I will keep my remarks short. But I do commend all of you who are working in the peripheries of our society to help build bridges among all classes and all races of people, a very challenging task today.

Our diocese was privileged to help host a conference at Beeson Divinity School March 3-4, 2016 addressing the topic “Black and White in America: How Deep the Divide? And who among us is doing anything positive and creative about building bridges?” The conference was organized in the light of
riots that erupted in Ferguson, Missouri; Baltimore, Maryland; Los Angeles; Oakland; and Brooklyn, New York.

Since Birmingham is ground zero historically for the civil rights movement, it seemed an ideal location to engage that important conversation. We weren’t at the peripheries of the issue, but we were still in a difficult environment to engage that discussion, much as Jesus was at the Pharisee’s home. But engage the issue we did, with some distinguished political, religious, and academic people. And the discussion proved fruitful. And the discussion goes on, with listening sessions in parishes on the peripheries and in the more prosperous areas of our diocese. James Watts may provide you with copies of our printed talks from our conference back in 2016. We are grateful to the Daniel Rudd Grant of the National Black Catholic Conference for support of this project.

What we discovered from our conference is there the divide remains, but there are many good people building bridges across the divide. We also discovered that there need to be more opportunities for good people to listen to one another, and listening is an art that needs to be developed and refined. You administrators are people quite adept at helping that process. You are also quite able to find occasions for joint prayer and joint social events that bring people of different heritages and races together.

Your role is so important in that regard. I join Bishop Perry, Father Sands, and my own staff of the Diocese of Birmingham in thanking you for helping us bishops do a better job of leading the way for unity, harmony, and peace in ways that reflect that mind and heart of Jesus, who reminded the Pharisees: You did not anoint my head with oil, but she anointed my feet with ointment. So I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven: hence, she has shown great love.

Can the Lord inspire us to be as hospitable to one another as that great woman of the Gospel was to her Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. Can we find more opportunities to foster inter-racial dialogue and conversation, and to be good listeners in the process, so that we may reflect the hospitality of that gracious woman of today’s Gospel. For she serves as a model for us of Hospitality and holiness.

May the Lord bless all of us in our efforts for hospitality in our dioceses and in the Catholic Church in the United States of America.”

The mass ended with the closing song, Lift Every Voice and Sing. The Holy Spirit could truly be felt in “the Church.” I am sure Father Coyle was smiling.

Later that evening the administrators toured the Civil Rights District. They looked silently at the marker on the side of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church where the dynamite was placed that killed the four little girls. They walked through Kelly Ingram Park site where protest marches were witnessed on television all around the world. Mr. Dixon commented on the Civil Rights Institute, “The exhibits were emotionally taxing because the provided a harsh reality check for all Americans, especially when it comes to our country’s racist past. However, the tour served as a reminder as to why organizations like NABCA are important to the Catholic Church. NABCA is essential to the continuing presence and expression of the Black Catholic Community.”
Many topics were discussed during the meeting. Plans were made. And action items were assigned to the membership. The one thing that we agreed to do as administrators was to decrease ourselves so that the organization can increase itself.

It is my hope and prayer that the National Association of Black Catholic Administrators’ meeting that was held in our diocese will not only foster bridgebuilding humanitarian dialog, but will spread head action in accordance with our Savor Jesus Christ.