



First Black Catholic Bishop in Memphis

Rev. J. Terry Steib on race, home and how ‘God is good’

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At the offices for the Catholic Diocese of Memphis, there are two offices for bishops.

One office is the workspace of the current bishop, the Most Rev. David Talley. The other is for a past bishop, the Most Rev. J. Terry Steib, bishop emeritus of the diocese.

It’s unusual for a past and present bishop to work side by side, much like Pope Francis and Pope Benedict XVI did before Benedict’s death, but it’s a system that has worked well in Memphis, with Talley relying on the expertise of Steib,

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The Most Reverend J. Terry Steib, S.V.D., the bishop of The Catholic Diocese of Memphis, blesses a room filled with church members during a dedication in 2016.

YALONDA M. JAMES/THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

Bishop

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who was bishop for 23 years until his retirement in 2016.

Not only did Steib serve as long as his three predecessors combined, but he also was the first Black bishop to lead the diocese.

Today, at 82-years-old, he's enjoying retirement, but still staying busy with spiritual direction and retreat work.

Read about Steib's life, path to the priesthood and his well-known mantra.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: What led you to the priesthood?

A: There were a group of religious sisters in my hometown of Vacherie, Louisiana, who were teaching catechism in the public schools after classes. I got to know them, would help them even as a little kid. Then I decided to think about what do I want to do when I grow up? Do I want to be like my dad and work in the sugarcane fields, because sugar's good and everyone needs it, but is that what I wanted to do?

So, I started looking around this little town of Vacherie to see what the leaders were doing. I saw the doctors, I saw the policemen, I saw the priests and preachers and decided maybe I wanted to do something good. I looked at the doctors and said, well, doctors do great work, but in class where we had to do biology and dissecting — I wasn't too sure. I fainted at the sight of blood. I looked at policemen and saw they do great work, they take care of citizens, but it seems to me that life is always on the line, so I said no, I don't want to do that.

Then I saw the priests and pastors and said what I'd like to do is somehow help people to make decisions for their future lives, help them along this way. I decided to look at the priesthood.

But then in my time, we couldn't go to the seminary because there was no place where an African American guy could go to study in the diocese. It just wasn't done. But there was this religious community, Divine Word Missionaries, which specializes in the Black apostolate in the southern province, and they had a future priests' club. So, I got in touch with them, became a future priest ... and when I graduated eighth grade I decided to go to seminary.

Q: Over your time as bishop of Memphis, what are some things that you learned?

A: I learned about the people of Memphis and I learned how good they are. And I learned it was Southern, just like I was coming from Louisiana. There were a lot of good connections I had in Memphis with the people. They were southerners and so was I.

I also learned they were willing to accept me, because when I first came to Memphis one of the reporters asked, "Did the Holy Father send you to Memphis because you're an African American bishop?" And I said, "No, the Holy Father sent me because I'm qualified."

Q: During your time as bishop, reopening Jubilee Schools and establishing the Ministry for Gay and Lesbian Persons were two of your more prominent initiatives. Why were those things you focused on as bishop?

A: We were closing all of the schools in the inner city where we as a Catholic entity needed to be, even though it might not have been affordable there. I said that was one thing, I wasn't gonna rest until we got that started. ... My principle is we're there not because they are or are not Catholic. We're there because we're Catholic and that's what we're called to do, to help evangelize and move folks forward.

(The former Jubilee Schools are now Compass Community Schools, where Steib serves on the board)

(On the Ministry for Gay and Lesbian Persons), that was something we started with folks coming to me, parents saying we feel that we have not been ministering to them at all. We looked about starting a ministry for the gay and lesbian, because they're part of the church and I wanted them to feel welcome into the church. We got that started and they meet regularly. We have people who are really interested in doing that. We were telling the folks we're there because they're Catholics and we were not looking to be an advocacy group for them, we were there to minister to them.

Q: You were also bishop during some difficult times for the diocese, including two lawsuits about sexual abuse. Looking back on those times, what was done right and what was done wrong?

A: I think at the time that we were beginning this process, we were in some ways following the recommendations of the lawyers and the people (doing) therapy. There was the thought that this was not constant, that if folks got help they could go back into ministry ...



Bishop J. Terry Steib led the Catholic Diocese of Memphis from 1993 until his resignation in 2016. He was the first African-American bishop to lead the diocese. STU BOYD II/THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

which we found out was not the case. That was wrong. For us, what we try to do is whoever had a case, we wanted to make sure they would come forward. We always had the open house for those who wanted to come in and we established a committee for that.

Q: How does it feel to know God is calling you?

A: I've always said the Lord has taken me down some strange avenues that weren't exactly what I had planned, but the grace of the Lord was sufficient for me.

The great time when I knew what this was about is when I got the call saying I was going to be an auxiliary bishop in St. Louis, Missouri. ... I was saying, "What do you mean, me?" (The archbishop) said think about it overnight and I'll call you early in the morning. He did, early in the morning, "How did you sleep?" I said, "Oh, I'm hoping I had a nightmare." He said, "No, this is what we're planning for you." I said, "If that's God's will, OK."

Before I went back to Bay St. Louis, I decided to stop home and have some home cooking with my mom. I did that, and after the meal my mom starts. (She says), "I've been having this strange dream lately. I've been dreaming that I'm in a big church and people are coming around to congratulate me. I don't know what it means. If it means I'm gonna die, I guess that's alright, but it doesn't seem that way."

And I'm saying to myself, "Lord, it's not fair for you to use my mom to tell me what to do. It's not fair, Lord."

I said, "Mom, within a week I think you'll have your issue solved." Sure enough, when she goes to St. Louis and saw the big church (where I was installed as bishop), that was the church.

Q: You're still here, working alongside the current bishop. What does that role look like?

A: It looks like fun. It's good, because it keeps me going, and the fact that he's interested in how I'm thinking about different things and where he's going with it. We work well together. I'm just free to let him serve the diocese as he will. I engage myself mostly into spiritual direction or retreat work or helping out liturgically.

Q: How does that pairing work well between you

and Bishop David Talley?

A: It works well because I let him be, and if he has any questions he says, "Here's where I'm going, I know what you did in the past years and the organizations you had how does that look?" I say that looks great. I let him go and let him be. ... I'm loving it. I love retirement. There's no administrative work that goes with it.

Q: You were the first African American bishop of Memphis. What did that mean at the time?

A: It didn't have any significant meaning for me, but I think it meant a lot for the people, because it was OK — why Memphis? (People thought) it wouldn't be a place you'd send an African American bishop to, but when I got the appointment, I said, "OK." I think it was within a year I had allowed myself time to meet with the folks and it was through these meetings that the relationship grew. They go, "Oh, he's alright. He's alright." I would go to the parishes for confirmation, I would go for liturgies. We also started the all-school Masses.

The mantra I always use is, "God is good, all the time. And all the time, God is good." I go around today and people say it and I go, "Oh, you remember."

Q: With staying in Memphis after your retirement, has the city become home? Can you tell me a little about why?

A: Oh yes. I had always thought that I would be retiring back to community in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. But being 23 years, all my doctors and everyone were all here. The folks were saying, "Stay, stay, stay." I stayed and now it's like whenever I go shopping, folks say, "Oh, you're still here. We're so glad you're here. We're glad you didn't leave." ... Then when I went back to Bay St. Louis, I had been gone from there almost 30 years and all the people I knew were gone and there's a whole new crew. I'm welcome back there and I still go back, spend time there, but it's not like being at home. It's not like being in Memphis at home.

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