Baptismal Window at St. Rose De Lima Bay St.
Louis, Mississippi: Palm Sunday, March 29, 2015
(A Story by Thomas C. Shellnut)

Well, here I am, upfront with everyone looking at me. Rather than understanding what is happening, I am just looking at them – a crowd of smiles and joyous faces. This is a different crowd from what I remember before, yet they have the same appearance of serenity as the other crowd. What is going on?

I hear a loud rap at the door in the back of the room – guess you could call it a room. It is full of benches, and it has statues scattered about. I smell something sweet in the air. From outside the door comes a voice, a voice of authority. The people stand and turn. When the door opens, a man, a black man, enters with a staff, or shepherd’s crook in his hand and a funny hat covering his closely cropped hair. He leads a group of men dressed in what I would call dresses, but each outfit looks pretty close to the same so they must not be dresses, but some kind of costume.

Music starts, with a chorus of voices like I haven’t heard before -- such joy, such enthusiasm, such cadence, such undulation. The sounds bring the man down the passageway between the benches until he gets to the front of the crowd. He moves out of my view, and the crowd listens and joins in with the music until it stops. Then the man speaks. Unfortunately I can’t understand what he is saying as the sound is going right past me.

After several minutes, he comes and stands in front of me, looking at me, then at the crowd. As he speaks the crowd listens then says something back to him. He then throws some water on me that he gets out of a silver container with a wand-looking silver stick held in his hand. He appears very solemn and sincere while he’s doing this.
Later the man moves to a speaker’s stand where he commences to speak to the people. What he’s saying has an effect on the people as they listen intently to his words. (Others seem to nod off a little – they must have had a hard day.)

While the man with the funny hat continues, I muster up my thoughts trying to remember why I’m here. I remember a journey in the dark in the back of a truck. I bounced around as we went down bumpy roads from somewhere that had colder weather than here.

At last, my memory begins to return as my thoughts get into order. I recall being in a similar situation in another place. I was in front of what today might be called a “hot tub” or “home spa,” which was filled with water on occasion. Into the water a person came invited by a man who dunked the person. The man said some words resulting in the person having a serene look on his face. Another person took the place of the first one, and he was treated the same way.

When the tub was full of water, people were there watching much in the same manner as those I look at now. In my recollection, I notice a difference. The people today mostly have black or brown faces while those in my memory had white faces. What could be the reason for this? As I thought harder, I pushed my brain back further in time until I remembered where I was in the first space, in front of the tub.

I saw a young boy, about ten or twelve years old in front of me addressing the people in front of him. I recall it was a Sunday morning, bright and sunny. Some of the women gathered wore fancy hats as must have been the custom as the time. The boy, not accustomed to addressing a large crowd, appeared somewhat anxious as he intones that
he dedicates a stained glass baptismal window to the glory of God and to the memory of his grandmother and great grandmother.

It is coming back to me now. I understand the young boy’s parents gave the window to the First Baptist Church in a small town in north Mississippi. The boy was at the pulpit making the dedication.

Now, I am on the wall behind the baptismal font at St. Rose de Lima Church in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, and I realize I am the stained glass window dedicated by the young boy. The scene on me is a rendition of the River Jordan where John the Baptist baptized Jesus. The river is shown in vivid shades of blue, sort of cobalt, with greens and reds on the banks of the river and in the background.

When the First Baptist Church was later razed and a new church building built in another location, a deacon of the church asked the young boy’s parents if they wanted the window - me - back. The parents said yes, and I ended up in their garage. When the parent’s house was closed after their death, I was moved to the back porch of the young boy’s house. By this time the boy was a grown man with a family.

A St. Rose parishioner, a friend of the grown man and his wife, knew about me, the stained glass, stored on the back porch. She asked the couple if they would contribute me to St. Rose de Lima where a major renovation effort was in progress. The couple said yes, and I was moved to the church where I now reside to the right of the chancel.

When you attend a baptism at St. Rose de Lima in Bay St. Louis or just visit the church and see the shimmering cobalt blue of the baptismal window, remember this story of how I came to be there, coming from the cold north of Mississippi to the warm, tropical south of Mississippi. In both venues, I served the same purpose: to heighten and reflect the joy of baptism regardless of the composition of
those watching or participating in the baptism. We are all the same in the eyes of God.