

## HOLY CROSS HERO: FR. RAYFORD EMMONS

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**“E” IS FOR ENTHUSIASM: FIRST BLACK ORDAINED CATHOLIC PRIEST IN ARCHDIOCESE OF PHILADELPHIA TURNS 75:** After 49 years of service as a priest, Emmons still looks forward to serving for more years to come. He’s not done yet!

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How old are you and where were you born?

75 years old, born in West Philadelphia on 6/25/48. Fun Fact: Will Smith and I went to the same HS, Overbrook High School; he went to a Catholic school in W. Philly just as I did. Never met him but thought it might be cool to mention.

Were you raised Catholic? When did you become Catholic?

No, I was raised AME (African Methodist Episcopal). But when I was 15, I was Baptized Catholic; it was Christmas Eve of 1963. That was a great year for me. Got my first job through Boys Scouts of America, I worked at a Boy Scouts camp. I finished my first year of high school, I would switch to a Catholic school the next year. It was a great year for self-development and self-improvement. Many new opportunities came too.

At what age did you know you wanted to become a priest? Was there a specific event that helped you realize it?

When I was 12 years old I knew I wanted to be in public service. I thought I wanted to become a missionary. But there were no Black priests in Archdiocese of Philadelphia at the time, so it made sense for my mission to take place here and not on foreign land.

Junior high was a transformative experience for me. The principal [of my junior high] was fantastic at giving the students the most opportunities possible. She helped the students see the beauty in the diversity of their classmates: Jew, Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, Hindu, Blacks, Whites, Latino and Asians, all felt confident and seen. There was a



**Photo:** Fr Rayford Emmons turns 75 years old, a priest for 49 years and the 1<sup>st</sup> Black ordained priest in Archdiocese of Philadelphia, PA, extends his service another year.

higher comfort level among the students having experienced [this diversity] in such a positive environment.

“I thought I heard the voice of God and climbed the highest steeple. But said the voice, ‘Go down again, I dwell among the people.’” In the main entrance of the school, that saying was large and visible for all to see, which made it a safe space to speak about religion.

What was your favorite part of being a priest?

I don’t like church politics, they stink. It has destroyed so much of what we [as priests] are trying to do. I like the diversity of the people and the diversity of the situations I worked in was great. I like being able to work with all kinds of people: old, young, poor, wealthy, urban, suburban, and a university parish. It’s never boring.

Recalling his time at seminary, Emmons states: “I really love my classmates and I’m so proud of them

as priests. They are all dedicated and hardworking and good at their priest work.”

I remember being at a class retreat [as a seminarian] and we were asked what do you expect as priests. The responses included: we will not be easily accepted; we have to practice what we preach. After a year or two, the group was brought together on retreat again. We all were shocked at how accepted we were, and that people wanted us to be successful. It’s remarkable how open people are to work with you.

As a Black priest, I didn’t know what to expect. The support was so good. When odds were against me, the people were so supportive. Being a priest has made me have to grow spiritually, to appreciate the truth of the gospel and to see the truth of the gospel.

*What advice would you give a young person who might be considering Holy Orders?*

There isn’t much difference in the type of guys entering seminary today, as compared to when I became a priest. I am 49 years a priest this year.

My advice: first, do all you can to be sure that your call is from God, that the discernment is intended for you genuinely because it fits who you are. Second, develop as many personal friends with other students as you can, and work to keep them as a priest. And lastly, don’t be afraid to do what’s right. There are many people out there to support you.

*What keeps you up at night? Any worries or dreams?*

The politics of the church. The Catholic Church in many ways sells itself short on the powerful positive impact it’s had in people’s lives both Catholic and non-Catholic. Also, the useless closing of parishes and schools; and inability to come up with better solutions to keep them open. We need more openness about things that work and trying them before giving up.

Lack of forgiveness, and how the Archdiocese [of Philadelphia] treated people wrongfully accused. I

am most concerned that when I die, when I face God, that I will have as little to be ashamed of as possible. I really, sincerely tried. I always think about the meaning of life and the meaning of death.

*Now that you are approaching official retirement age for a priest, what is next for you? Is there something you’ve been meaning to do?*

I appealed to stay on, and they accepted. [We are excited about that!] I’d like to spend time authenticating my experience as a Black priest. Would love to accumulate information over the last 50 years from all over the world and write a book or an almanac on Black Catholics worldwide. And perhaps, form a resource library on the topic.

*If there was one word or phrase that you would want people to remember you by, what would it be? Why?*

“I try to do what’s right. I want people to see a genuinely sincere guy that’s trying to do what’s right.”

*Final thoughts, reflections, advice you might share?*

Never in a school I didn’t like. I truly love learning! So, never stop learning.



