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## My Interview with Akan

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# The Newsletter at Sacred Heart University

## Issue 43

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### —The Lead Story—

#### *He is Risen!*

#### *My Interview with Akan*

**By Rory Budden**

*Patience is an absolute virtue. After a long winter break and all the drama surrounding it, last week, just days before returning to campus for this new semester. I finally got a chance to catch up with Akan Ogwumike and discuss the controversy around him, our campus, and the impact of his Halloween costume almost three months ago. Enjoy...*

**Rory: First off, I feel it's only right I ask, how was your Christmas, man? How was, I guess I should say, your "extended" winter break?**

Akan: *(Chuckles)* You know what? It was actually aight. Obviously my family and I had to get past all the extra craziness of this whole thing, and we still are dealing with all this attention and what not. But, truth be told, we're so spiritually grounded, and Christmas is always one of the most sacred days of the year for us. So despite all the extra baggage this year's brought, we still ended up having a great Christmas. You know, filled with the love of the immediate family, gifts, watching basketball *(chuckles)*, all that.

**Nice, and so the second part of my question...**

*(Chuckles)* Oh yeah, the second part, what was that again?

*(Chuckles)* Your extended winter break, how was that?

Ahh, man, you're coming out blazing already?! *(Laughs)* But, it had its ebbs and flows. Originally, back in early December, when I first got suspended, I was really going through it. I was just so overwhelmed and confused on how this got so big that I could get suspended. Yeah I was angry, but to be honest the anger did not pop up until after that initial sobering blow of the suspension hit. It's like a literal slap to the face, think about it: when you first get slapped (especially slapped unexpectedly and from the blindside) at first you're just confused and you do not know what to feel. Then the shock comes in and of course the embarrassment. But it isn't until you start to feel the pain creeping in, that you become angry. The pain, mixed with the embarrassment makes you mad—real mad.

And just as the anger set in, it seemed like the entire world was at my front door. Every news station you can name begging me sit down and take an interview to discuss this whole thing. My phone constantly blowing up with calls and texts filled with love and support, as well as hate and people wishing me the absolute worst. It just seemed like life was moving over 100 miles an hour with no stop, and it was not until a couple days before Christmas that I felt like I had to move in the opposite direction of all of this momentum. Right around then I was able to gather my thoughts and reflect on my part in this situation and how I would move from that point. And since then I have not

done an interview until today, and I have kept the circle of people I communicate with relatively small.



Figure 1. Akan Ogwumike being interviewed by the Newsletter.

### **Small circle? Why is that?**

Situations like this one I have been in remind you that you never truly know someone's intentions when they reach out. I was already aware of that before, but to experience it is an entirely different thing. I find nowadays its best to remain quiet at times and always stay vigilant.

### **So you felt like the suspension from SHU was a slap in the face?**

Well, I was speaking both literally and metaphorically, but yes. I felt the suspension from SHU was a slap in the face.

### **Could you tell me specifically what you mean?**

I mean, just in the way they went about it. It seemed like they were punishing me not just for the costume itself, but for bringing what they perceive as "negative" attention to their institution. You even mentioned in your newsletter the week of the suspension. Just why did they wait until right before I took my final exams to suspend me? If you say you're punishing me for something I wore on Halloween, then shouldn't the suspension come the week after Halloween? Two weeks at the most. But for over a full month to pass,

and then hand out a punishment in December when I am getting ready for the hardest part of the semester, and then bar me from being able to even take my final exams is not only a slap in the face, but it seems rather strategic.

### **What do you mean by *strategic*?**

*(Chuckle)* What do I mean by *strategic*? Well it's like this: the best way to disarm a people is if you make an example out of their leader. Now I'm not saying I'm the leader of the African American student population at SHU, and just because I dressed as Christ, I do not want to be seen as a Messianic figure by any means, but one thing is for certain and that is that I have a presence on that campus. Amongst blacks, whites, or anyone for that matter.

So they see me wear this controversial costume, obviously they didn't like it, and want to silence me instead of letting my voice be heard. So not only do they hand out this suspension, but they do it at the most critical juncture of the semester, to put instill fear in the minds of anyone who may have been inspired by my costume. Sort of like they're saying, "here's what happens when you try and change the dynamic of the way of the OUR institution is run. You get suspended and run the risk of failing all of your courses because you cannot take your finals."

It's a trip, man, and to be honest, it's some plantation shit. Some "make an example out of and lynch the one slave who tried to liberate the minds and bodies of his people." I know that might sound crazy to hear, but nothing imprisons the mind like fear and those in charge at SHU knew just what they were doing when they suspended me at the time they did. They knew just the cord they were striking. They knew they would put fear into other students, that was their intention in my opinion. Like I said, it's a trip, but it's the truth. Some real Colin Kaepernick shit, if you ask me.



*Figure 2. Photo of Akan's Halloween costume last fall.*

**Those are some strong words, Akan. Raw and unapologetic.**

Truth always is.

**One might say. But I want to touch on something specifically you just briefly mentioned; you think we're slaves as students at SHU.**

Well, context is everything and it is important to note that, once again, I was speaking in metaphorical terms. That being said, to a certain extent the point of any institution—be it a prison, a religious body, or a university—is to control the way you think. Take that how you want. That's all I'll say about that.

**To honor your request, I won't go further about that, but it's funny you bring up the idea of knowing how we think. I am a huge advocate for clear and objective thinking, but I find those like me are few and far between. Though I can tell you are a person who appreciates clear thinking. One way to be objective in thought is to see a situation from another person's perspective. Have you thought about the other side at all? Have you tried to see things from President Peccas's POV? And with that in mind, does this situation and your suspension have to tie back to race? Or is there something morally wrong with what you did in their eyes?**

Wow, that's a lot of questions, but all of them are necessary and I'm glad you ask.

To answer your first question, yes I am willing to see things from President Peccas's POV. I think at first my assessment of the situation was a clouded just because it was so fresh and I was at the center of it. So if you were to ask me this question a month ago I wouldn't have been willing let alone able to see things from his perspective. But now I am able to step back and see that the situation for him has been crazy as well. I mean, let's say we take it back to the Halloween season; he already has a lot to worry about just because that is normally the craziest time on any college campus and he is the head guy in charge at SHU. So right away he's probably a little anxious. So the day comes and goes, whatever, and then—BOOM—he gets informed about me. Just him initially becoming aware of the situation was probably insane, because it could have happened that night from Brenda Peccas. Obviously, she is his niece and I was at her townhouse party when I donned the costume, and she was not happy about it at all.

**She kicked you out of the party, right?**

Yeah, man, she was not having it. She seemed genuinely offended by the costume, and even though her party was an absolute banger, I guess my presence bothered her so much she had to get me outta there. At the end of the day, there are no hard feelings about that. My point is that that very night she could have been the one to tell President Peccas, and as distressed as she was that night, I cannot imagine how she would have broken the news to him if she was the one who told him.

**Sorry, I don't mean to keep cutting you off, but you think that's how he first found out. Rumors say it is.**

I've never been one to get caught up in the gossip, but it could have been. My point is his initial finding out about my costume could have very well been a slap in the face to him. Then, when you add the fact that I wore the costume at his niece's party (and technically on his campus), he could have very well have taken that as disrespectful. And, if I am being totally honest, I was absolutely in my bag that night, so there definitely was a little arrogance not only in the costume, but in rocking it to Brenda Peccas's party, of all places. And I have to take accountability in that because all that foolish pride potentially played a great role in this whole thing.

That's all beside the point. He found out and he must have felt the need to have a meeting with me. In retrospect, I can really see things through his eyes here, because right away in our meeting I could tell he wanted to get out in front of this situation and not let it spiral out of control. Like it eventually did.



Figure 3. University President Wendel Peccas.

**Once again, I apologize, but could you just clarify what day this meeting was on?**

We met at 4 pm on the day of Halloween.

**Wait, wait, wait, you're telling me the two of you had the first meeting about your Halloween Costume on Halloween?**

Yes. If you recall, Halloween last year was on a Tuesday. Brenda's party was on the Saturday before Halloween.

**Wow, not only did I not know that, but that changes a lot, Akan.**

Yeah, bro, that is one of the reasons I felt the need to discuss this matter in its entirety with someone who writes in the school paper. So I can just tell the raw truth from my side of things. And if I am being totally honest, still looking at the situation from Peccas's POV, I know his making the meeting on Halloween day was strategic.

**Okay, so once again I am going to have to ask you what you mean by *strategic*.**

Strategic in the sense that he thought this meeting would keep me from stepping out that night and possibly wearing the costume once more. Funny thing is, I was not planning to go out that Tuesday anyways.

**Unbelievable. Anyway, go on with your meeting with Peccas on Halloween.**

So I'll speak on only what I am at liberty to discuss, not because I think that I should remain silent as the University wants me to. Rather, because certain things said behind closed doors must remain there just out of mere respect for our conversation. And to be real, man, on that day, that's all it was, man. We just had a conversation. Man to man. He welcomed me in pretty warmly and told me he was aware of my costume and just wanted to know if anything else happened Saturday night that should be brought to his attention. I didn't give him the details of the party, of course, that wouldn't be smart. But just filled him in on going to the party, wearing the costume, getting mixed reactions at the party, and then being kicked out by his niece.

The two of us are both very Stoic in how we handle ourselves, so I could tell we both had hidden agendas, so to speak.

### **What do you mean by that?**

I simply mean, it was almost like we were playing a little chess match. I knew he didn't want me to wear this costume again, given that that night was Halloween. He made that clear without explicitly saying that.

On the other side, little did he know I wasn't planning on going out anyways, but I did not want him to feel like he could silence my presence. So the next card I played was using the power of social media.

As I left his office that day I gave it a couple hours before I posted the now infamous pic of me at the party on Instagram.

### **Wow, and that proved to be the ultimate power move.**

Yeah, exactly, but once again, in retrospect, I just look back on posting that picture and knew it did not come from the purest of intentions. It was more of an ego move than anything, and I let my original intention of pushing an interesting conversation forward get lost in this moment of not letting my voice be suppressed.

**But just what is the problem with that? I mean, that makes me think of about a month ago when you were simply the biggest star Sacred Heart has ever seen (and you still are), but you sat down and did an incredible interview with Don Lemon on CNN. I remember in that interview you spoke of how vital it is that you are able to know the price of remaining silent. So I'm confused why you seem to have second thoughts about not letting your voice be suppressed.**

By no means am I saying that being silent on racial and/or social issues is a good thing. Those who know me know I never take that position. I am just speaking of my intentions in that moment of uploading the pic. It did not come from the purest of places. And it is important, because putting myself back into President Peccas's shoes he probably felt like, "okay, although I may not have agreed with this kid's costume in the least bit, at least we were able to come to somewhat of an understanding in our meeting." Once again, I want to make clear that that is from his POV.

So, imagine his reaction when he sees that the pic I posted went viral. Now his phone is probably blowing up from his peers. Now he might be feeling the pressure from whatever forces to discipline me, since he is in a position to do so. And on top of all that, he is probably just plain angry with me, because he thought our first meeting would be the end of this situation, rather than make it a bigger problem. So from his POV, I can 100% see how he thinks I brought "negative" attention to his university.

Now, am I completely able to put myself in his shoes? No, because as one of my favorite authors, Bryan Massingale, says, "Culture creates consciousness." Because of the immediate environment and the generation gap between us, we see things differently. The two of us were raised in very different cultures. We also currently just lead very different lives. We surround ourselves with groups of very different people. We have very different political agendas and very different views on spirituality and religion. All of this shapes how we view the world.

So when a situation like this happens because we have such different ideas and opinions about reality, that is where the tension and resistance comes in. Yet it's still true that where different ecosystems merge is where

the most growth occurs, and just sitting down and having a talk with President Peccas, I saw the potential for growth to emerge from both of us.

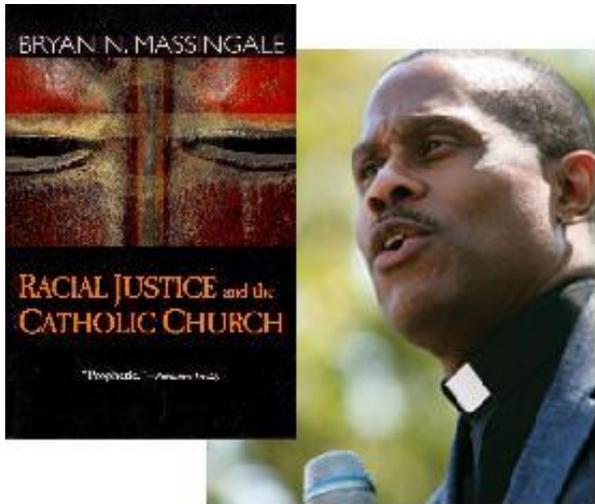


Figure 4. Father Bryan Massingale, S.J., author of "Racial Justice and the Catholic Church" (2010).

#### Could you speak more of this growth?

As far as growth, none occurred in our first meeting; that meeting was filled with a lot more of the tension and resistance I spoke of.

#### So you avoided the last part of my question again, and it's ironically the part that everyone tries to avoid. In your opinion, is race was of the reasons you were suspended?

Well, let me first be clear by saying that I did not mean to avoid that part of the question. The conversation took on a life of its own and went into so many different directions, that the last question slipped from my mind. *But let me be more clear by saying, race permeates the entire fabric of our society, and it 100% had to do with my suspension.* And there are so many different levels to look at this debacle and how it ties back into race, but you asked it best in your Newsletter: *Would our Catholic institution still be suspending Akan if he were white?* And I have been at this school long enough to see that if it was a white male

dressing up as Jesus for Halloween, not only would he not be suspended but Peccas would not even have been made aware of the costume. It would have never been taken to that level. To be honest, it would have just been another Halloween costume, maybe edgy to some people, but in the thrill of a Halloween party, a white Jesus will not turn any heads. I have seen some of the most offensive costumes worn on Halloween at SHU, but the moment I dress up as Jesus I deserve to be disciplined.

**See now I think that is the point where a lot of people argue with you. Because obviously like you said or hinted at: Cultural appropriation is always a huge problem every Halloween. For example, just down the road at Fairfield we have seen students suspended for their derisive depictions of African Americans and African American culture. So it must be asked, was your costume, and especially donning your costume at a Catholic university, another form of cultural appropriation? If so, then, isn't the school justified in its suspension of you?**

Another great question, and my answer is that me wearing this costume is not a form of cultural appropriation and I'll tell you why. Only those who truly have their eyes opened to the lies of history are able to encounter the truth. and the truth of the matter is that *the man Jesus Christ was not white.* He was a Palestinian Jewish person who lived in the middle east 2000 years ago. Any decent student of history knows that Jesus could not be white. The problem is that the history of this world is often false. For a variety of reasons that we can go into, if you want.

**We could go on a rant about this topic for days. But my point is this: you quoted earlier that "Culture creates consciousness," so for a white individual raised Catholic, their belief is that Jesus Christ is a white male. And you know more so than anyone, being a religious**

**studies major, just how offensive it can be to depict a sacred figure in a manner that does not coincide with someone's beliefs. I have heard you say yourself in interviews that "people hold their religion at the core of their existence." So can you see why a white individual would feel like you are morally wrong for wearing this costume?**

Absolutely, and I have reflected deeply on my wearing this costume for months now, both before and after Halloween. Like you said, I know how dear people hold religions and I do not mean to mock that by any means. But at the end of the day, the belief at the core of my existence could be that Christ was a black male. If that is the case then not only am I constantly just as offended, if not more offended (because of the racial history of this country), every time I see Jesus depicted as white. Which, as we know, is basically ubiquitous in our country.

My point—and one of the bigger points I hoped to reveal by wearing the costume—is that we all must take a Socratic and even a Buddhist approach to wisdom. Which is to admit that we are only wise in acknowledging what we do not know. Now because, as I mentioned earlier, history is so riddled with straight-up lies, we have to come to an understanding that there is part of reality that we do not see. Christianity itself has a history that is not known by the majority of believers. And in my opinion, those who seek religion should seek its truth. But that is only my opinion and one could call me a hypocrite for asserting it at this juncture.

What is necessary for humanity is that we be willing to not walk around with all these beliefs that we hold so dear, but are so perilous, in such a way that when we look at the world we do it from a perspective of only wanting to confirm our own bias.



*Figure 5. The sculpture outside the Sacred Heart University library, celebrating "truth" and "wisdom" in various languages.*

*In dressing up as Christ, I sought to shift the paradigm in our community and society—just as Christ did. That was my intention in wearing this costume and that is what I am now using my platform for. Maybe it is very far-fetched, but it is necessary.*

**I feel a little wiser already after that answer.**

Exactly! That is the reason why discourse is so important.

**You have said in an interview before that you sometimes enjoy making white people feel uncomfortable. Why is that?**

Well, once again, context is key. In short, stepping outside of one's comfort zone is the key to growth for both individuals and societies. I think uncomfortable conversations about race, history, politics, religion, you name it, are extremely necessary. But for race in particular, in this country, the onus is mainly on white people.

**Indeed. So speak more on race impacting the entire fabric of our society.**

Sure. I think the best way to illustrate this point is to think of it in a psychoanalytic way.

What I mean by that is that anyone who knows anything about therapy knows that the psychologist often asks the patient to refer back to things that happened earlier in their childhood. This is done because the experiences we have early in life affect our development, how we think now, our behavior. Essentially, experiences in our childhood affect our entire being. And the only way to heal certain parts of ourselves is to not only reveal what we have dealt with all throughout our lives, but to encounter these experiences again and truly reconcile them no matter how much pain they may bring. One does not heal its pain by burying it deeper and deeper into their subconscious, because that only adds to the cyclical nature of the illness.

*Now what holds true for an individual also holds true for a society.* Yet for some reason in this country the hardest thing for people to do is to be honest about our past and all the evil that comes with it. The infancy of this country involves slavery and genocide. These patterns continued through this country's childhood and has shaped us into the nation we are today. So if a country was built on racism, it goes without saying that racism not only still exists but it is far more imminent than we could ever imagine. I think white people in the Northeast have a tendency to buy into the façade that racism does not exist anymore, but that's completely wrong. Not only is it very much alive, but the vast majority of racism in this part of the country is done unconsciously. Bryan Massingale speaks about this phenomenon, too, knowing that the majority of white people do not consciously think of themselves as race, but being raised in such a racist and white supremacist culture, they cannot help but be susceptible to it.

**I understand what you're saying, and if I am being completely honest with myself, I know there are some subconscious stereotypes I keep about certain people depending on their**

**skin color. I am not proud to say it, but it's true.**

Exactly. But you know what? Not only can I respect the fact that you admit that (as most whites will not), but I also deeply respect and honor the fact that you are working to remedy that. None of us are immune to the 'isms' built into our societies.

I remember this professor I had once asked a question to our class that will forever stick with me: "Is it that bad to find out that something about the way you think is racist?" On the surface it sounds blasphemous, but digging deeper shows his inquiry has proved to forever be liberating. If I am being honest I know that being raised in a sexist culture there are probably qualities that I have that are misogynistic, but until I am able to become aware, reveal, and then face that reality, I will not be able to heal it.

**So now that we know race plays a role in all of our interactions as individuals in society, it seems kind of pointless to ask if institutional racism is a big deal at SHU.**

Well, it's prevalent everywhere, and SHU is not immune.

**So for the big question that has been sitting on everyone's mind since I first wrote the Newsletter back in December: Did the President Peccas violate your human rights by suspending you in the manner he did?**

You know, first off, I should thank you for originally asking that question to our community, and I have to admit I have wrestled with the question since... I definitely think that my suspension was a violation of my rights in this country, i.e., freedom of expression, but I do not think he violated my rights as a human being.

**It is interesting that you, of all people, say that. Why do you feel like that?**

Well, first off, for him to violate my rights as a human being he would have to had in some way done some really drastic action against me, which he didn't. I mentioned slavery earlier to speak metaphorically, but it was not like he saw my costume and then physically enslaved me. He could not have done that. It seems wild and even funny that we bring that up but I do so to show just how severe actions must be to be considered as a violation of human rights. And me being a first generation Nigerian, I have enough perspective to know President Peccas certainly did not violate my human rights by any means.

As for my civil rights, that is another debate, because although I believe he did, it is important to keep in mind that Sacred Heart University is a private institution. At the end of the day, if he saw my freedom of expression as wrong, he is in the position to use his discretion and hand out a punishment. I am in no way saying he is right in doing so—if he was then I wouldn't be sitting here talking to you—I am just saying given the hierarchy of the infrastructure he is in, HE had the right to suspend me if he felt I was in the wrong.

**When was the last time you spoke to President Peccas?**

On Halloween.

**You haven't spoken to him since?**

Nope.

**So how were you informed about your suspension?**

It was handed down by President Peccas, but I found out through Dean Breacher.

**Wow, how did you feel about that?**

I felt like it was sort of a coward move by the President. If anything, he could have been the one to look me in my eye and suspend me, since the order allegedly came in from him. I think that is part of the reason I was so mad. If you recall, a week after the suspension I did an interview with Trevor Noah in which I called President Peccas a coward. In retrospect, that was not the wisest thing to do. And I do want to make clear that I do not think he is a coward, yet I do still feel so many things about this suspension are cowardly. But I do regret calling President Peccas a coward. I want to make that clear.

**Do you regret anything from the first meeting you had with Peccas?**

I regret just not having an open and honest conversation about my Halloween costume. That was my original intention walking into his office that day, but I let, we let, this stupid cat-and-mouse game get in the way of some vital discourse that would have been major for our school. Looking back on it, that was a golden opportunity. Now it seems like this situation has spun so far out of control who knows if there is any coming back from it.

**Do you keep faith that you'll be back at SHU to graduate this spring?**

I keep faith in my highest self and God, and those two forces to lead me where I need to be. I keep no faith in Sacred Heart University. Ultimately it is their call if I return.

**Well, I know I speak for many when I say we would love to have you back. Akan Ogwumike, it has been a pleasure interviewing you.**

Thank you, Rory. The pleasure was all mine.



*Figure 6. Akan keeps the faith.*

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*Editor's Note: This Newsletter interview is a fictional story written by Uwem Akpanikat, a senior majoring in Theology and Religious Studies. Inspired by the film "Dear White People," which was shown to the students in his Human Rights course, the piece aims to explore the intersection of race, free speech, higher education, media, and religion, in light of the critical and ethical thinking that is central to the Catholic intellectual tradition.*