

Culture Wars

The morning newspaper had an article about a Massachusetts town wherein there is a battle brewing around the proposal to change the “mascot” of the High School to something which won’t offend. As is true of many High Schools, including my own hometown, Native American symbols and imagery are used to express school pride and/or prowess in athletics. As it turns out, the school in question used the image and name of the native “Warrior.” This was exactly the same at my own High School growing up, and we thought nothing of it. Or, if we did think something of it, it was sort of cool or noble or powerful.

Now, in perhaps a more enlightened age, we are aware that there is a whole, tragic history of the native peoples who were here well before any of our European forebears stepped onto the shores. And to the descendants of these people, the coopting of symbols, images and words along with the caricatures of these things are, apparently, deeply offensive. And this remains true even if no offense was intended. It was, likely, more a matter of cultural insensitivity borne of historical ignorance. If an earlier generation grew up on “Cowboy and Indian” movies, they may have taken in the so-called “*myth of the noble savage*.” It seems that this myth became a sort of gloss over the historical reality that the native peoples were horribly treated and their populations decimated by westward expansion.

So, clearly, there was terrible injustice in our national history which ought to be taken into account. I, for one, understand why it offends. And, if it offends, it doesn’t seem much of a sacrifice to change a name or an image of a High School mascot. But, in the article cited above, there is a very divisive battle going on between those in favor of keeping the “Warrior” image and those opposed. Those in favor see all of this as just another instance of political correctness and “wokeism.” Those opposed to keeping the native imagery and names see it as a matter of being enlightened to an injustice and doing something to address the matter.

Such conflict bears some reflection as to what a truly Christian response ought to be. I have already expressed some sympathy for the cause to change the symbols to something which won’t offend those

of Native American Heritage. But the concerns of those on the other side of the matter are not without some merit. Sometimes, (often?), grievances get weaponized into a shaming, silencing, blaming tactic: This is where “awakening” to an understanding of historical injustice morphs into, what some people refer to as “cancel culture.”

Once, at a conference, a presenter representing African American Catholics of the Chicago Archdiocese, gave a very compelling talk on the experience of “black” person in America, watching the evening news about a terrible crime that has been committed and hoping and praying that it will not be another young black man in hand-cuffs. In other words, that evening-news image, seen over and over again, becomes the caricature of a whole group of people. Later in the evening, I approached the man and expressed my own struggle: As a white man, I felt blamed for this social problem and I felt that the message to someone like me was “*You are the problem. You have no part in the solution. Just shut up.*” His response to me was thoughtful. He said, “*This is why I tell people, racism doesn’t just hurt black people, it harms everyone.*”



The problem in these struggles is the appeal to power. They become battles of the oppressed against the oppressor class. And, when everything gets put in these terms, injustice is liable to be met with injustice; the worst motivations are ascribed to those who chose the mascot for the High School sixty years ago: They have no say. They are just to be denounced.

As Christians, I think that we do want to recognize the history of injustices in our nation and in the Church. We do want to redress the wrongs and be promoters of healing and reconciliation. Hopefully we can cultivate the compassion to see through misguided political movements to see the injustices themselves. When people shout past each other, nothing gets accomplished.