

White Catholics have 'to talk about race and to admit their racism'



Police officers attend a July 17 vigil at St. John the Baptist Church in Zachary, La., for the fatal attack on policemen in Baton Rouge, La. (CNS photo/Jeffrey Dubinsky, Reuters)

Two years ago, at the age of 7, my daughter developed an interest in the biographies of famous people. We started with a children's book about Amelia Earhart, followed by Walt Disney and Anne Frank. Next up was Rosa Parks. The book opened with Parks as a girl growing up in rural Alabama, watching white kids ride buses to white schools while she and her black friends walked to black schools. The moral of the story was clear: Racism is bad. When we finished the book, my daughter said to me, "I go to a segregated school." It wasn't a question. It was a statement of fact.

My children attend a Catholic elementary school in Baton Rouge, La. My spouse and I send our children there for obvious reasons. It's connected to our parish. It's seven blocks away from our house. We both attended Catholic schools as children. My mother taught at Catholic schools. My wife works in the parish office.

What can I say? We're Catholic.

We're also white.

In describing her school as segregated, my daughter was simply calling it as she saw it. The children she encountered every day—in the classroom and on the playground and at birthday parties—were white. I couldn't disagree with her, but I tried to explain why. I said things like, "Most Catholics in the school

district are white, and only people who live in the district can go to the school,” and “Most of the people who go to our church are white, and only the people who go to our church can go to the school.” Remember, she was 7. So she replied, “Well, that’s too bad.”

Not much has changed since my childhood in the 1980s. I attended a Catholic elementary school in a rural town on the outskirts of Lafayette, La. Two black children started kindergarten with me, Quiana and Joshua. They were gone by the third grade. I never spoke to them again. My kindergarten teacher was black, Mrs. Norman. She was fired the following year. My mom seems to remember that she filed a racial discrimination lawsuit against the school. I don’t know the outcome. And I didn’t read a biography of Rosa Parks when I was 7.

Today, there are more African-American Catholics in Louisiana than almost anywhere else in the United States. They are here because of slavery. During the 18th century, French and Spanish colonists introduced Catholicism and race-based slavery to the Mississippi Valley. Sacramental records of the period show people of color—most of them enslaved but some of them free—being baptized, married and buried in the church. In the years following the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, the church became one of the largest slaveholding entities in the state. When Pope Gregory XVI condemned slavery in his 1839 apostolic letter “In Supremo Apostolatus,” the white clergy continued to defend slavery as it was practiced in the United States. Most white laypeople never heard of the pope’s letter, much less read it. They also agreed with the assessment of Bishop Auguste Marie Martin of Natchitoches, La., that slavery was “the manifest will of God” and the result of the so-called curse of Ham. The Vatican rejected Bishop Martin’s opinion in 1864, but who was listening?

A Separate Faith

After President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, the Catholic Church continued to marginalize African-Americans. During the Second Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1866, U.S. bishops decided against a motion to address the hardships of free, black Catholics. They agreed with Archbishop Jean Marie Odin of New Orleans that African-Americans “already received sufficient care and had no need for new programs.” This was coming from a bishop who suppressed the black Catholic community of New Orleans for organizing a pro-Unionist church during the Civil War. By the end of the 19th century, and with the endorsement of the white clergy and laity, most black Catholics had acquiesced to a segregated model of parish organization. One of the leading architects of church segregation was the Dutch-born Archbishop Francis Janssens of New Orleans.

The Catholic Church in Louisiana became a Jim Crow institution after Homer Plessy, a Catholic of color from New Orleans, lost his case before the U.S. Supreme Court in 1896. “Separate but equal” was not just the law of the land. It was the practice of the church. The church’s position on race compelled W. E. B. Du Bois to state that “the Catholic Church in America stands for color separation and discrimination to a degree equaled by no other church in America.”

In response to this racial discrimination, African-American Catholics founded the Federated Colored Catholics in 1925. Thomas Wyatt Turner, the group’s leader, did not mince words with the white clergy. “We have undoubtedly come to a sad parting of the ways,” he wrote to the president of St. Mary’s Seminary in Baltimore, adding, “the passing of Christ out of His Church if our bishops and priests are willing to acknowledge that their labors are no longer efficacious in changing men from their sinful ways.” Turner was talking about “the sin of race prejudice.” “Should not the bishops and priests speak out against this sin as the paramount evil of the age?” he asked the seminary president. “Should the Church become a party to our oppression, and an abettor of our contemnors?” A handful of white Catholics advocated for interracialism during the early 20th century, chief among them the Jesuit priest John LaFarge. Their gradual approach to change, however, aggravated the intentions of black Catholics like Turner.

Why the slow movement toward racial justice in the church? The answer is straightforward: the power of white, Catholic racists. Diocesan-wide desegregation before *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) occurred in Indianapolis in 1946; St. Louis in 1947; Washington, D.C., in 1948; New Orleans and Raleigh, N.C., in 1953; and San Antonio in 1954. In these and later cases, large numbers of white Catholics put up resistance to episcopal authority. For example, when a Louisiana bishop excommunicated a group of white mothers for acts of violence against those integrated into a children's catechism class, a Catholic man from Ohio reminded the prelate that "it is morally wrong to mix the races."

White Catholic support for desegregation grew during the 1960s, a decade that witnessed the peak of the civil rights movement and the *aggiornamento* of the Second Vatican Council. But a comprehensive plan to address racism never materialized in the church. The National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus observed in the late 1960s that "the Catholic Church in the United States, primarily a white racist institution, has addressed itself primarily to white society and is definitely a part of that society." Since then, U.S. bishops have issued pastoral letters and conducted studies on the realities and sinfulness of racism. Yet as much as some white, Catholic activists have worked for racial equality both inside and outside the church, many rank-and-file Catholics of European descent have continued to harbor attitudes toward interracialism ranging somewhere between ambivalence and violent opposition.

A Racial Sin

This brings us to the present day. On July 5, a white police officer shot and killed Alton Sterling, an African-American man in Baton Rouge. In the days following the incident, I listened to my white Catholic friends and family members talk about the Black Lives Matter movement. I read a statement released by Bishop Robert W. Muench of the Diocese of Baton Rouge that made no reference to the racial implications of violence against African-Americans. I spoke to a representative of the diocese's Office of Black Catholic Ministries who said that all we can do is "pray and let God bring us insight." I went to Mass on the Sunday after the killing of Mr. Sterling and listened to a homily on the parable of the good Samaritan that made no reference to the tragic events of the week.

All of this silence and inaction made me wonder what my white Catholic neighbors in Baton Rouge were thinking about their involvement in the racism of our church and our community. I was encouraged when my parish announced a special event, billed as a Prayer Service for Peace. On the night of July 12, our white senior pastor led about 200 people through an opening prayer and Scripture readings. When he got to the sermon, instead of offering his personal thoughts on racism and violence, he read a message written by our associate pastor, who was away on a teen service trip.

The associate pastor is the only African-American priest in the Diocese of Baton Rouge. He is in his late 20s. His father is black and a retired Baton Rouge police officer. His mother is white and a retired nurse. The senior pastor wept throughout most of the sermon. "It's interesting," the white priest read from the black priest's notes, "since I have become a priest, not much has changed.... When I wear clerics, people respect me. But when I wear [civilian] clothes...my experience growing up being judged for the color of my skin continues to this very day." The associate pastor explained to his white flock, "Some of you may have never experienced discrimination in this way, but this is normal for us [African-Americans], and this is not okay." He implored the congregation to pray the rosary and to "listen to God who we cannot see," for only then "can we certainly begin to listen to our brothers and sisters who are different than us and whom we can see."

Then on July 17, a black man shot and killed one black and two white police officers in Baton Rouge. Their names were Montrell Jackson, Matthew Gerald and Brad Garafola. John Bel Edwards, the Catholic governor of Louisiana, asked Louisianans to pray for the officers and families involved in the shooting. Bishop Muench issued a call to prayer, fasting and action, "so that we may gain wisdom and courage to

become personally and communally involved in building bridges across everything that divides us to become better brothers and sisters to each other.” He encouraged Catholics to recite the Peace Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi. “Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace,” et cetera and so forth.

Call me a bad Catholic, but I don’t expect much change to come from prayer and fasting, especially when there is such an aversion among many white Catholics to talk about race and to admit their racism. Growing up white and Catholic in Louisiana, I do not remember a time when I didn’t hear people say the N-word. Children used it when parents and teachers weren’t around. Teachers and parents used it when children weren’t around. Grandparents used the word whenever they wanted. The only adults I addressed by their first names were my grandparents’ maids. No Miss or Missus. Just Leona and Willie Mae. Kids played a game called “black baby,” which involved throwing a ball or doll in the air and trying to catch it. I didn’t interact with African-American Catholics because there were two Catholic churches in town. St. Joseph was the white church. Our Mother of Mercy was the black church. To this day, the Diocese of Lafayette has more racially segregated churches than any other diocese in the United States. I am told that my grandfather went to confession toward the end of his life and said, “I can’t help it, Father. I hate N—s.” He knew racism was a sin. He knew he was racist. I think we all knew we were.

Some white Catholics out there might be shocked by this kind of upbringing. But I suspect many can relate. In parts of Louisiana, this was and in some cases still is normal. I didn’t learn about race in religion classes or during homilies. I wasn’t provided a theological vocabulary that addressed racism from a Catholic perspective. The vagaries of caring for the poor, turning the other cheek, loving thy neighbor and being a channel of peace just didn’t cut it. Race was not a culturally constructed category to be understood and appreciated. It was a dividing line that made white people superior and black people inferior. Racism was not a problem to be eradicated. It was a way of life, so pervasive as to be invisible.

History, like prayer, matters when addressing the deep roots of racism in the Catholic Church and in Catholic families. But let’s be honest. Thinking about the past and kneeling in prayer can be a lot easier than living in the present and turning faith into action. I’ll also admit that the last people I want to read this essay are my white Catholic friends and family members—people I love—because then we will have to admit to some terrible sins, sins that we were born and raised into, sins that we have kept alive in what we have done and what we have failed to do.

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