

The Cultural Virus of Racism

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Monday night, June 1st, the country fought two viruses - one microscopic, another cultural. A passage was cut through peaceful protesters in Washington, DC. President Trump used that pathway. He walked the short distance from the White House to St. John's Episcopal Church. Standing aside the church's marquee, he held a bible. The following day, the president visited a shrine honoring pope St. John Paul II, and laid a wreath at this quintessential Catholic symbol.

These pious religious gestures likely appeal to some. But in sharp contrast, Washington's Episcopal Bishop Marian Edger Budde called it a "charade." She noted, "He did not come to pray," and faulted his lack of Christian motives: expressions of remorse, consolation, shared grief and hope. Catholic Archbishop Wilton Gregory was equally critical of the shrine visit. He called it "baffling." "It is reprehensible that a church facility would allow itself to be so religiously misused."

Candidly, this religious dustup enlivened my spirit and gave me new hope. With the pandemic, houses of worship, the mainstays of most religious communities, are silent. Funerals delayed; marriages postponed; Lent, Easter, and Ramadan disrupted. Aside from the technologically advanced and media-savvy religious centers, others are slow finding ways to reach community members. Yet, many are exemplary in concern for others. People of faith in the pandemic provide a profound witness feeding the hungry, housing the homeless and caring for the elderly. Nurses, doctors, health scientists, first responders, newly recognized "essential workers," and others turned outward, expressing their faith to their hurting communities. In the pandemic, we have experienced leaders that faltered and misled, but we have experienced others who provided extraordinary vision.

During these months, we have marshaled the vast resources of American society to fight a microorganism. Can we now collectively mount a new assault, assembling new armaments, to combat the cultural virus of racism? We have social scientists to advise, economists to rebuild a fairer-for-all economy, new medical lessons, learned the hard way, for reaching the most vulnerable. Charred cities following looting and arson remind us to protest non-violently and that we have a fresh chance to reconstruct centers for those who have been marginalized and better educate youth about anti-racism. And, religious leaders will use their bully pulpits to speak, as Washington's bishop did: to express remorse when necessary, offer consolation readily, share grief when bad things happen and offer hope especially to the young.

But Catholic leaders must also shepherd the church out of the pews to participate meaningfully in these efforts. Peacebuilders frequently speak of reconciliation, and in countries with histories of injustice or violence it has been an essential element for moving forward. Catholic peacebuilders have proven to have especially distinct contributions to make in this area. And as COVID-19 and the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery highlight anew the historical and systemic injustices in American society, the US Catholic Church should take a lead in helping to initiate long-overdue reconciliation.