

*Following the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis*, reactions and overreactions have been rampant. These are especially challenging times and our words must be carefully spoken. I am sure that I have spoken in haste on more than one occasion, and perhaps maybe some of you will take exception to what I write at this time, yet you have always known that I will speak to the issues to the best of my ability. As I mentioned in one of our announcements in the recorded Masses, my generation and the generations on either side have tacitly operated under the premise that the civil rights movement had accomplished its primary goal, while still acknowledging there were still areas of racism, bias and prejudice, “growing edges.” The events of the last several years have underscored tragically the fact that we are still at the very beginning of the work that must be done in creating a more just society and world.

There have been some people who have reacted negatively to a video message from Rob McCann from Catholic Charities, a video message that appeared on YouTube and was recently summarized and reported in the Spokesman-Review on Thursday. Rob makes a very impassioned plea for us to more fully engage in the work to overcome the status quo and the systemic racial bias that exists in our nation, a culture that is slanted, at the very least, in favor of those who have grown up in the privilege that being white allows.

It is my own culture, my own experience and I will acknowledge along with Rob, that that has been my background—not because of any overt effort, but simply because the Spokane of the 1960’s and 70’s was a community with a very small percentage of people of color. It was even more striking in my youth in western Montana where the only people of color in my town numbered in single digits. This is not to say that the white privilege I experienced and that was inculcated into my life was deliberate—and Rob recognizes the impossibility of it being anything other than inevitable—but it does not take away from its reality. We must also acknowledge that the Spokane of 1968 no longer exists; there can be no reminiscing or nostalgic return to the racial mix that existed at the time, nor can we ignore the necessity for change in the ways we live.

So much has changed in our community in the last 50 years—we have become much more mobile—people seldom spend their whole lives in the same community, and the changing dynamics of our communities necessitate changes in the way that we live. Our world has become much more diverse in terms of race and culture and viewpoints—but as I have often noted, people don’t always deal well with change. Elements of the white privilege in which I grew up—in which many of us grew up—created a comfortable (for us) complacency that surrounded

us. The demands for change in that regard has provoked an ugly reaction and many of the attitudes of white privilege manifested themselves in hardened opinions, narrowness of vision and a kind of xenophobia (fear of that which is outside our experience). To speak of this as racism is true—when the bias of race denies others the freedom to live, to receive education, to work, to succeed in the workforce, to have the same access to housing, to receive the same health care, to be subject to the application of the law with the same presumption of innocence and to receive the same degree of justice when transgressed, to pray, to socialize and to believe they have the same rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness as any other American. When this vision and hope is violated based upon differentness or upon race, is, racism. To live in a culture that has tacitly allowed those structures to remain, even when it knows better, and not only has neglected to act but refused to work for active change, is racist.

The word ‘racist’ is pejorative—there is no way that one can hear that word applied to oneself and not have a reaction. I understand how someone could be angered by the word, but there are two types of reaction that one can have—a cry of outrage at how unfair the assessment is and to vilify the one who has uttered the word, or to reflect and ask if there is some truth to the epithet. Both of these reactions are alive and well in response to Rob’s statements, but the baptismal call to be ‘priest, prophet and king,’ particularly in the prophetic voice that acknowledges what is a part of our culture and thus a part of our Church seems clear and evident, while it does invite and demand change.

To hear the word racist applied to the Church is difficult, yet if we know our history and acknowledge the bad as well as the good, we must be responsible for the sake of the gospel and accept the label. While many changes have been made in changing some patterns, the existence of the preceding years of oppressive and dehumanizing structures left their mark. Yet it is not only a historical reality that we are challenged to examine.

Even our recent history—I think back to the national meeting of the conference of Bishops in the 1970’s when Sister Thea Bowman FSPA addressed the conference (that, too, is on YouTube). The reluctance of the bishops to engage, even with one another, reveals the division that existed then and exists now in the structures of the institutional Church and the polarization that has kept us from working for substantive change. The distinctly different visions that face us have also been revealed even in the last two and a half years in relationship to the issue of immigration (see Bishop Seitz’s response and letter to his presbyterate) in contrast to those who have chosen to adopt a barrier mentality.

Racism does not only exist for black people—in our diocese our predominant racial shift has been among those who have immigrated to the U.S. from Mexico and Central America. Even within our own diocese, there are disparate opinions as to the best way to provide for our newest members: for some there is a call for assimilation—to “encourage” those who have recently arrived to learn English and to adopt an “Americanized” version of their own culture—what we will allow and accommodate. In contrast to this is the notion that since we have encouraged and welcomed seminarians from Mexico and Central America to minister to “their own people,” we have done enough to address the situation. Yet, neither of these approaches address the problem of being Catholic—of being united in faith; they do not address the differences and the challenges that lie before us of institutionalized attitudes of “us” vs. “them.” No diocese, no presbyterate, no community, no nation does it perfectly—some do better than others, but it does mean that we all have work that lies before us.

This varies from diocese to diocese—in Yakima, there is a requirement that every seminarian must spend at least one summer working among the farm workers and have at least a basic working level of Spanish language. Certainly a basic working level of Spanish language was a requirement in our diocese during my formation, but that requirement was dropped in the early 2000s, with the idea that we would have enough native Spanish speaking priests to minister in the parishes that would require it. It essentially created a subconscious attitude of “separate but equal.” As the numbers of Spanish-speaking Catholics grows in our diocese, it becomes even more important to us as Church, to address the issue—not in terms of ministry “to them,” but as ministry “to us.”

We must acknowledge that structures and institutions, even in the Church, have a component that addresses situations and circumstances based on race, and to that extent, is decidedly racist. That does not mean that one can move from the individual experience and attitude of racism and universalize it and say that all of us are racist, even when we have grown up in the midst of white privilege. However, Rob’s challenge to us demands that we must adopt a renewed responsibility to move forward and address the needs to change the status quo. I cannot hear his words in any other way.

Attempts to vilify Rob’s statement are, in my opinion, outrage at the challenging statements that are laid before us and a way of distracting and distancing oneself from the work that must be done. It is a quintessentially NIMBY response (Not In My Backyard). I would also hazard a guess that the notion that many of our images of Jesus, certainly the ones that we first see and are conscious

of are scenes of the Nativity at Christmas. Of all the creches that I have blessed and the countless infant Jesuses, the vast majority show a very Caucasian baby with Italianate shepherds, kings, angels along with very Caucasian Josephs and Marys—this is another indication that the West is still strongly influenced by the predominant racial makeup of Western Europe of the preceding centuries—it is a part of that inevitable culture into which we have been born. However, artistic renderings are simply that—interpretations of a world view from which the artist arises. Those images influence culture, but they do not determine it—that means that things do not have to remain the way that they’ve been, that new interpretations and understandings must emerge. These are the challenges that belong to our generation.

I cannot apologize for being born into white privilege—it would do no good anyway, but it does mean that I can hear the challenge that is laid before us and acknowledge that there must be systemic and cultural change. Reacting in anger at the message and “shooting the messenger,” do not help. The statement that the Bishops have made in regard to racism is appropriate and in and of itself, acknowledges to some degree the direction in which we must move. Identifying active steps toward changing the polity and participation in Church structures and institutions is one way in which Rob challenges Catholic Charities, and us. It reminds us that many of our ingrained attitudes and ministries directed toward the poor, the vulnerable and the marginalized, regardless of race, are ministries “to them” and not “to us.”

There are no easy answers, and perhaps the best thing we can do at this moment is to acknowledge the truth of the assessment of the culture and institutions in which we live and vow to work toward constructive and substantial change. Passionate dialogue aside, it must also always be respectful. We have not done well in recent years in the category of respect, nationally or locally. As difficult as Rob’s points are to hear, perhaps they are the beginning of the dialogue that needs to occur, and something that should not be simply disregarded because we don’t like the way that it makes us feel. May the Holy Spirit grant us wisdom, understanding and good counsel to find ways to bring healing and reconciliation.