

Further reflections on the challenges of racism:

Some time has passed since the initial uproar over the video from Rob McCann at Catholic Charities, and several responses have been issued from several different quarters. These issues are very complex, of course, but I think some points that have been published merit some further reflection. As I mentioned before, I think Rob's video was very challenging, and I too, think he spoke very passionately and was perhaps not as careful in his presentation as he might have been. There are a couple of things we do need to keep in mind however. First of all, it was not a message that was intended to go to the whole community, but only to employees and volunteers at Catholic Charities. It was designed to help people understand that there would be some changes in the way that ministry is being done at Catholic Charities—particularly in the basic attitude that ministry can no longer be done “to” people, but must include the people in the process of the ministry. It was very self-reflective on Rob's part—the examination of his own attitudes and perhaps how he understands his ministry to the most vulnerable members of our society, particularly in light of the fact that we can always do better than we do. We are never done growing and being transformed in the journey of conversion. The fact that his message wound up going out to anybody on YouTube has shown that it was probably not the most prudent platform for him to use.

Secondly, I think the use of the word ‘racism’ is always fraught with difficulty. The application of the word ‘racist’ to individuals is always inflammatory—no one can hear that directed to oneself and not feel a level of outrage—either against the person saying it or against the community of those who have experienced the injustice of racism. Several people have pointed out that racial bias exists in all communities, in all nations, in all cultures. Yes, racial biases exist based on the *shades* of skin tone, the shape of the eyelid, language dialect, religious affiliation, hair and eye color. Racism and racial bias exist in all cultures and among all nations, and even in all religions—our own notwithstanding.

I write as a pastor, conscious of my responsibility to encourage the use of the gifts that the Spirit has given to us all. These are very challenging times, but challenging times also bring with them, new wine to be poured into new wineskins. It is particularly important to reflect a bit on that last point—that racism and racial bias exists even within our own Church. This is a difficult point—much of our institutional identity continues to bear the wounds of racism. Institutionally, structurally, many of the ways in which we have operated bear the marks of white

privilege and bias. There is no blame to be cast, or any one particular individual or groups of individuals to rail against or to demonize. It has come about through generations of attitudes and historical and cultural experiences, the consolidations of power and authority and the exploitation that exists just by virtue of being human seeking our own self-interest in a world marked by Original Sin. BUT, it does not have to remain that way! This is the crux of the situation—how will we move forward in a way that will be more in keeping with the vision that Christ has for the world? One of the first steps is the requirement to at least recognize what this structural and institutional racism looks like. I can only give some historical data and some of my personal experiences regarding racial bias.

It is important to recognize that it has only been in most of our lifetimes that the first black bishops were named in the U.S.—1977 was the first time that a black bishop was named Ordinary for the diocese of Biloxi, Mississippi (there had been one other black bishop named in 1874 in Portland, Maine to work primarily with the French-Canadian population there).

Prior to the mid 1970's, many black candidates for priesthood were not ordained by bishops simply because they were black: they had to join religious orders that would 'allow' them to be ordained, and their ministry was limited to only those parishes that had large black congregations.

Black parishioners in the South were not allowed, *even in the 1980's* to attend Mass with a predominately white congregation—and if they were allowed to attend Mass, they were frequently not allowed to receive communion with the rest of the people—they had to wait until all of the white people had received first. Neither were they allowed, in many parishes and dioceses, to receive from the cup—even into the late-1980's in Laurel, Maryland where I was a parishioner during my final days in the Air Force.

There were even groups of volunteers in some parishes who would pick up the black Catholic members of their community and drive them to a parish that had a Mass for black Catholics, rather than have them attend their local parish.

These attitudes and injustices have been incredibly divisive in the life of the Church—they have split us and kept us from being the Body of Christ that we're called to be. I remember St. Paul's words: "...neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free..." and can only imagine that it should include "black nor white..."

These attitudes and divisions were part of the life of black Catholics in the U.S. which perhaps helped prompt the then-Fr. George Stallings to leave the Catholic Church and attempt to start an African American Catholic Church in the 1990's in northern Virginia. Stallings was motivated by anger and by a sense of

outraged injustice—he was also accused of a variety of crimes and had many problems, but he was also a very charismatic man who had a large number of followers who wound up being excommunicated along with him. This is not to say that he would have been different or better as a priest or leader if there had been no racism, but it is just an example of a large number of people (more than 5,000) who were excommunicated from the Church at the time because of the biases that existed, and to a significant extent, still are a part of the overall Church. Some may critique my comments and say that this is just anecdotal evidence or isolated experiences. I wish I could agree. The disparity in resources that are offered to non-white Catholics in the life of the Church is staggering. It led to the USCCB to issue the challenge to all bishops of this country to have conversations about racial bias in each and every diocese in the country. Those conversations, for the most part never occurred, even in our diocese. We must not pretend that we have listened or responded to the issue.

I have been privileged to live and work in a variety of different cultures and with a variety of different races. It is a very real challenge to our time—and especially in the U.S. because we have welcomed people from every culture to our ‘melting pot.’ The issue of ‘white privilege’ is a very real thing—many of us have lived our lives knowing only the graces, benefits and blessings of our lives that have naturally occurred because we have lived in a predominately white culture—it does no good to wish for it to have been different, to pretend that an apology will be sufficient to make it be different—there must be real recognition, real grieving for our shortcomings and real work to begin substantive changes that will change how we understand ourselves and share in the mystery of the Body of Christ.

We must recognize that our demographics and racial/ethnic mix are shifting and changing. Virgil Elizondo, in the 1980’s spoke of the U.S. Catholic population becoming ‘mestizo,’—mixed. Our identity is shifting through sheer generational shifts and a recognition that it will likely be within a very short period of time that we will be unable to discern racial differences simply from outward appearance. We can no longer just live with the assumption that our viewpoints and the experiences we’ve had in the past are going to be sufficient for the world in which we live now or for the future. So, how do we begin to think about these things, or how do we begin to make the changes that are going to be necessary?

Some of the glib responses to this issue are ignorant—in the sense that they are not well-informed, knowledgeable or well-thought out. Identifying Black Lives Matter as a socialist organization, as a Christian or anti-Christian, atheistic or whatever-adjective-that-gets-used organization, is simply an obfuscation or

distraction. Dismissing the organization by saying “all lives matter,” is to ignore the situation and diminish the call to justice. Black Lives Matter leaders are not saying (in spite of some of the rhetoric one might hear) that *only* black lives matter—they are simply saying that they will not be overlooked, dismissed or ignored when the issues of life and death, justice and exploitation occur. Nor should they be.

Another response has been to insert the issue of abortion into the equation and conversation. If one were truly concerned about that issue, one would understand that the economic and social pressures that are placed upon young women are far different based upon the limitations that racial bias has placed upon non-white communities. Generations of denied opportunities, limited resources, lack of adequate health care and fewer educational opportunities have contributed to the attitudes and anxieties that young women of color experience and seemingly leave abortion as a reasonable response to an unplanned pregnancy. Again, that response is not well thought out. The systemic and pervasive attitudes must be changed in order to create different and better choices for young women of color.

Addressing the organization and critiquing it because it does not conform to the teachings of the Church is also another inadequate response. Oddly enough, Black Lives Matter is not an organization that advertises itself as affiliated with *any* religion—nor should it have to. Trying to diminish the work that it is striving to do in terms of justice and civil rights by proclaiming it is in conflict with Catholic teachings is to say that one cannot support any organization or work that does not “fit.” Ludicrous! The Church’s social teachings, beginning with ‘Rerum Novarum’ in 1891, addressed the dignity of workers and work itself because it was based on the dignity of the human person—conformity to the Church’s teachings is not a prerequisite for doing justice, to love kindness or to walk humbly with God.

It is too easy to just say “we’re going to be more just and equitable from this point forward,” without knowing we’re going to make a lot of mistakes along the way. It does no good to just get rid of Confederate monuments and pretend that that’s going to make everything all better. Creating quotas and classifying people in particular ways to receive benefits as a means of trying to re-balance society isn’t going to work either. Excluding anyone or treating anyone in a special way that benefits them over others in order to “re-balance” the scales is not going to work either. Throwing money at the situation isn’t going to work, and certainly violence is never going to work.

We’ve tried many of these things in the past both within the Church and within our democracy—we know that they don’t work. But it does not mean that

the work is not important or worth doing. These are days of beginnings—we start by acknowledging that there are huge institutional and structural weaknesses at play both in society and in the Church. We're not going to have any answers right away, there's no perfect plan or perfect way to do this that will not be challenging. There is no prayer that we can make that will make God remove the obligation that we have to do the work that must be done.

As I mentioned in the homily last weekend, the most important thing we can do is listen. I don't know what every person's experience has been like, I cannot know what kind of suffering someone else has endured, I cannot know what injustices someone else has suffered without listening to them. It is only in listening to what those experiences have been that I can discern how I might pray: for those most deeply affected by racial injustice and inequities to be able to use the gifts and talents of the Holy Spirit to raise up leaders that will help to respond to these issues well; for those of us who have been privileged to be able to have the humility to recognize our place within the fabric of the *whole* Body of Christ; and to be able to use the gifts that we have been given to be the instruments of peace and reconciliation we are called to be.