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Toward an Anti-Racist Theology: American Racism and Catholic Social Thought

by

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Abstract

In the writings of the Vatican, the United States and Latin American bishops, and various theologians since the 1950s, Catholic social thought has generally failed to understand the pernicious depth of the system of racial classification, discrimination, and violence in the Americas. Catholic social thought still sees racism as based on the pre-existing, valid category of “race,” requiring individual conversion and social effort. What is required instead is seeing the very concept of “race” as what must be rejected as the product of a racist ideology of politico-economic oppression and developing an anti-racist theological response that overcomes and eliminates this deadly ideology. It involves a re-imagining of the *Imago Dei* as the image of Jesus on the cross, of Mary and the women at the foot of the cross, as a direct confrontation with the principalities and powers that are invested in racist ideology, where the human and divine are connected through the cross and affirmed in the resurrection. It invokes a re-imagining of *Laudato Si'* as an anti-racist teaching, using many of the same ideas Pope Francis uses for his integral ecology to overcome the racist ideology that is inextricably tied up with modern capitalism and environmental despoliation.

Contents

Introduction.....	4
The Question of Racism and “Race:” Science and Ideology.....	6
What Has Happened: The Current State of the Question	15
What Is to Be Done: The Challenge of Addressing the Question	29
How It Can Be Accomplished: The Choice of Action	38
Conclusion	51
Bibliography	55

Introduction

Catholic social teaching and thought, which together make up the Catholic social tradition, as developed since the late-nineteenth century through church documents, papal and episcopal writings, and theological reflection, has failed to address adequately the deep and persistent problem of racism in the Americas.¹ The social teaching of the Catholic Church only began to discuss the problem of racism openly in the late 1950s, and after a few episcopal publications in the United States and Latin America and a pair of mentions in Vatican documents over the next sixty years, has remained relatively mute on what the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops called the sin of racism, the recent 2017 pastoral letter notwithstanding. General theological silence and inattention has followed the Vatican and episcopal leads.² Catholic social teaching has not sufficiently dealt with the injustice created by racism, partly because it continues to see the concept of “race” as an inherent and real—what one could call in philosophical language ontological—quality of individuals and social structures and racism as a sin of discrimination and violence perpetrated against a certain class of people as determined by

¹ Meghan J. Clark, *The Vision of Catholic Social Thought: The Virtue of Solidarity and the Praxis of Human Rights* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), makes an important distinction between Catholic social teaching as the official pronouncements of the Catholic Church on contemporary social problems and Catholic social thought as theological and ethical reflections on human dignity, economic justice, social progress, international peace, and now ecological crisis. The Catholic social tradition is the combination of the two.

² A brief survey of recent theological works discussing Catholic social thought in general demonstrates the neglected state of reflection and analysis on racism; in each of these works, racism and “race” are barely referenced, if at all, and if mentioned, are usually part of a general list of social ills. In addition to Clark referenced above, see John Coleman and William R. Ryan, *Globalization and Catholic Social Thought: Present Crisis, Future Hope* (New York: Orbis, 2005); Edward P. DeBerri and James E. Hug, *Catholic Social Teaching: Our Best Kept Secret*, 4th ed. (New York: Orbis, 2003); Fred Kammer, *Doing FaithJustice: An Introduction to Catholic Social Thought* (New York: Paulist, 2004); and Thomas D. Williams, *The World as It Could Be: Catholic Social Thought for a New Generation* (New York: Crossroad, 2011).

their “race.”³ In addition, previous Catholic social thought on racism has used cultural and social constructions of “race” as its starting point, focusing on the assignment of people to certain racial classifications and consequent attitudes of prejudice and acts of discrimination that are applied to them. It has not dealt sufficiently with the legal, economic, historical, and political sources of racism. Simply put, Catholic critiques of racism do not go far enough criticizing the entire system of oppressive classification and labeling that racism entails. They fail to engender a thoroughly radical critique that the church can theologially explicate and use to develop a passionate and committed response directed to the elimination of racism as an abomination in the eyes of a loving God who sees all God’s children with equal compassion and love.

What is required is an approach to “race” and racism that reverses the usual understanding of these concepts. Many critiques of racism take the concept and reality of “race” as simply a given, accepting that there are meaningfully distinguishable groupings of human beings based on skin and eye color, facial structures and appearances, and hair color and textures, typically expressed as one of four colors: “white” or Caucasian, “black” or African, “yellow” or Asian and “red” or Native American. Although the latter two have fallen away from common usage, the distinction between “black” and “white,” what will be argued below as the primordial racist distinction, still persists. The problem of racism is thus attributed to mistaken conceptions and fears concerning these pre-existing racial differences that results in prejudice, discrimination and eventual violence. Yet as almost all researchers now admit, “race” is not an objectively biological or genetic reality, let alone a meaningful way to distinguish between human groupings, nor is it simply a social and cultural construct actively and yet mistakenly

³ Following Dawn M. Nothwehr, *That They May Be One: Catholic Social Teaching on Racism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), “race” is noted in scare quotes as a sign of its conceptual and scientific illegitimacy, as discussed below.

layered over apparent and superficial biological or genetic differences.⁴ Rather, “race” is itself the creation of racism, the product of an intentional, historically, and politically constructed ideology designed to defend and propagate the legal and economic systems first of slavery, and then Jim Crow legislation and its racist offshoots, and finally the regime of mass incarceration in the Americas. The ideology of racial difference and separation of human beings into distinct racial groupings was created to defend the rights of those who wished to exploit the persons and labor of those enslaved in the emerging practice of chattel slavery, where human beings were considered the property of other human beings. The creation of this fundamental racist hierarchy between “black” and “white” has subsequently influenced and affected all the other ways people infer difference and thus inequality based on other so-called “races.”

The Question of Racism and “Race:” Science and Ideology

Scientifically speaking, there are no “races.” At most, and only provisionally, one can speak of geographically- and historically-derived populations, groups of people that have common ancestries from the larger land-masses of the planet: Africa, Asia, Europe, and even sub-continental areas – West Africa, North Africa, East Asia, Northwest Europe, etc. Before about 10,000 years ago, these populations were relatively isolated and had thus established

⁴ This approach is directly addressed by the American Anthropological Association in its 1996 document “AAA Statement on Race” which begins with “In the United States both scholars and the general public have been conditioned to viewing human races as natural and separate divisions within the human species based on visible physical differences. With the vast expansion of scientific knowledge in this century, however, it has become clear that human populations are not unambiguous, clearly demarcated, biologically distinct groups.” See <https://www.americananthro.org/ConnectWithAAA/Content.aspx?ItemNumber=2583>; see also Michael James, “Race,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.): <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/race/>

genetic differences that can be generalized and identified in contemporary human populations. This has to be done, however, with significant caution and careful distinctions. These ancestral genetic differences are not linked to the populations that occupy those regions today, due to significant population migrations. In addition, no contemporary individual presents a genetic profile that is unmixed with regard to these ancestral origins due to centuries of intermixing of these same populations. The resulting picture of human genetic difference is incredibly complex. As David Reich points out, “the findings that the nature of human population structure is not what we assumed should serve as a warning to those who think they know that the true nature of human population differences will correspond to racial stereotypes.” Moreover, he adds, “we truly have no idea right now what the nature or direction of genetically coded differences among populations will be.”⁵

Other fields of study are recognizing this historical reality and addressing the negative impacts of racism and racist ideology. For example, medical professionals have increasingly recognized that “race” fails as a marker for biological health risks and serves more as a sign of risk for medical bias and neglect, the very consequences of conceiving of humanity as divided by “race.” Genetics as a science can be used to assist in diagnosis and treatment because it is based on studies of DNA, not superficial characteristics such as skin color and hair texture, which are imprecise measures at best of genetic difference. “Race should not be used as a proxy for genetics, ancestry, culture or behavior” because it has no scientific basis, “but it is meaningful within the context of inequality” in understanding how the ideology of racism affects medical

⁵ David Reich, *Who We Are and How We Got Here: Ancient DNA and the New Science of the Human Past* (New York: Pantheon, 2018), 261, 264.

treatment or the lack thereof.⁶ Still others, among them the German Zoological Society, warn that even broad geographic differences are “completely arbitrary,” making “the concept of races/subspecies in biology purely a construct of the human mind.”⁷ The Society’s statement goes on to clarify that “this does not mean that there is no genetic differentiation along a geographical gradient” but that “the taxonomic evaluation of this differentiation (as race or subspecies, or not) is arbitrary,” especially among “humans, where the greatest genetic differences are found within a population and not between populations.”⁸ As a consequence, the German Zoological Society argues that “today and in the future, not using the term race should be a part of scientific decency.”⁹

The idea of “race” itself then is a belief, a construct, and an ideology. “Race” is not grounded in scientific reality, either biologically or descriptively. The more one tries to define it through such physical characteristics as skin color, hair texture, facial features, and/or physical stature, the more the exceptions mount and the taxonomies generated fail to hold any consistency. Racial categories are always already loaded and contentious terms employed to create the illusion that they correspond to actual biological realities that carry significant historical and social meaning. Racism can thus be defined as “the belief that races exist, and that some are better than others.”¹⁰ The act of categorizing peoples and individuals by “race” sustains and perpetuates this racist ideology in such a way that the action appears benign and transparent,

⁶ Jennifer Tsai, “What Role Should Race Play in Medicine,” *Scientific American*, September 12, 2018: <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/voices/what-role-should-race-play-in-medicine/>

⁷ See the German Zoological Society, “Jena Declaration: The Concept of Race is the Result of Racism, not its Prerequisite” (August, 2019): https://www.uni-jena.de/unijenamedia/universität/abteilung+hochschulkommunikation/presse/jenaer+erklärung/jenaer_erklärung_en.pdf.

⁸ German Zoological Society, “Jena Declaration.”

⁹ German Zoological Society, “Jena Declaration.”

¹⁰ Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: Norton, 2010), xi.

almost commonsensical, and yet is grounded in fabrication and deadly discriminatory power. Racism in the Americas (originally the colonial holdings of France, Great Britain, Portugal and Spain in the western hemispheres) is arguably best seen as a politico-economic ideology, originally developed in Portugal and Spain the late 15th century and expanded to England and beyond in the 16th and 17th centuries, to justify the oppression, enslavement, and murder of people forcibly removed from Africa to serve as forced labor in Europe and thereafter in American colonial and later national plantations. As an ideology, this initial distinction was then applied in various degrees to all other “non-white” peoples to in turn justify their expulsion, oppression, and exploitation and with the expanded influence of American culture and power in the 1900s, exported to the rest of the world.¹¹ Racism continues in the present day through the use of categories of “race,” particularly the oppositional categories of “black” and “white” that embody this discriminatory and violent ideology whenever they are invoked, even inadvertently.

Because the concept of “race” was born out of the desire by enslavers and their societies to justify their chattel slavery of stolen African peoples, it cannot shake its origins as an ideology of oppression and supremacy. One cannot believe in “races” and at the same time not believe that some of these same “races” are better than others. One cannot act in the world based on this taxonomy of “race” and act in a way that is not racist. To believe, to use, to refer to “race” in any way that does not belie these twin beliefs is to indulge in a fantasy, a post-racial dream of racial

¹¹ See Painter, *History*, Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (New York: Verso, 2012) and Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Bold Type, 2016). While the idea of “races” as peoples distinguished by superficial characteristics pre-dates the 16th century, the deployment of this idea was originally more complex than a reference to four distinct colors of people, and thus primarily descriptive rather than systematically prejudicial; applying this idea of “race” to the ends of racist ideology was an innovation, replacing all previous notions of “race” with this framework.

equality, where racial difference exists as a neutral designation. “Race” is always already loaded with discrimination, oppression, and devaluation and cannot be used in any meaningful way otherwise. The problem is that we use this language of “race” so frequently when discussing the issues of racism and racist prejudice, discrimination and oppression. Efforts by some to reimagine or recode this language, to create positive images and references to “black” while desiring to make “white” a less appealing category, all have the same problem in that they use referents ineluctably tainted by their racist origins. Writers of all backgrounds have tried to put these terms into verbal constellations and rearrangements, and yet they cannot escape the original designations of “black” as inferior and “white” as superior. The key is only to refer to these color-designations as the racist terms they are, and never as people themselves in any way. We have plenty of historically grounded, scientifically meaningful, and socially sound references available to us. People do come from multiple geographic areas, have traceable (more or less) ancestry, and belong to identifiable cultural and linguistic groups, all of which fail to correspond in any meaningful way with racist concepts of skin color, hair texture, facial features, and/or physical stature.

Despite this evidence, one of the most significant flaws of previous efforts to address racism has been the sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit, acceptance of “race” itself as a rational category of attribution and categorization, even if violently and tragically applied. The very idea of “race,” again, is a creation of a racist ideology, a category invented to justify oppression and slavery. To even continue to use it any way but critically and pejoratively complicates any effort to get to the heart of the matter because racism precedes “race,” both historically and logically. As Karen and Barbara Fields have argued, “*racism* refers to the theory and the practice of applying a social, civic or legal double standard based on ancestry, and to the

ideology surrounding such a double standard... *Racism* is not an emotion or state of mind, such as intolerance, bigotry, hatred or malevolence.” Racism is “a social practice... an action and a rationale for action... [that] takes for granted the objective reality of race... something an aggressor *does*” [italics in the original].¹² This is a critical distinction, for the formation of racial categories, of the concept of “race,” is derivative of the social and ideological practice of racism; the act creates the designation. Following K. Anthony Appiah, Fields and Fields define racism as “the conception or the doctrine that nature produced humankind in distinct groups, each defined by inborn traits that its members share and that differentiate them from the members of other distinct groups of the same kind but of unequal rank.”¹³

Moreover, they argue, this habitual invocation of “race” is more than cultural difference; it is a “mental terrain... [a] pervasive belief... [that] originates not in nature but in human action and imagination.”¹⁴ This mental terrain they designate as “*racecraft*,” their neologism based on their previous studies of West African witchcraft and American slavery. Ritual actions, specialized language, repetition in varied contexts, create evidence of the reality of the thing allegedly observed. Racecraft is deeply rooted in sumptuary codes based on skin color, in the unconscious desire to designate the “race” of characters in stories, whether in fiction or non-fiction, and on “the will to classification.”¹⁵ The magical thinking behind racecraft becomes particularly visible when one thinks of how Americans use references to blood as a carrier of

¹² Fields and Fields, *Racecraft*, 17.

¹³ Fields and Fields, *Racecraft*, 16. See K. Anthony Appiah, “Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections” in K. Anthony Appiah and Amy Gutmann, *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 30-105.

¹⁴ Fields and Fields, *Racecraft*, 18. Willie James Jennings writes of a similar alteration of space and terrain through racist ideologies in his *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven; Yale University Press, 2010), 63-64.

¹⁵ Fields and Fields, *Racecraft*, 29; see also 31-47.

racial difference, even though biochemically and genetically, human blood is simply human blood. How else to explain why people who identify as “white” often believe that kids they identify as “black,” when in a swimming pool, pollute the water, that transfusions between people of different “races” may be dangerous, or that specific blood disorders regularly track to specific “races?” None of these beliefs are scientifically true, and in fact are easily disproven, yet they tenaciously persist in the popular American imagination despite all the contrary evidence.¹⁶

The source of this persistence is the centuries-old racist ideology developed by European colonial slaveholders and slave traders to justify life-long and generational chattel slavery of Africans and their descendants. Seeing this history clearly requires accepting that “facts of nature spawned by the needs of ideology sometimes acquire greater power over people’s minds than facts of nature spawned by nature itself.”¹⁷ The ideology of “race” was developed to justify chattel slavery in the minds of those who were coming to believe a competing ideology, that all men were created equal. The inferiority of Africans and their assignment to the role of slaves had to appear natural, as God-given, as woven into the fabric of creation, in order to salve the possible cognitive dissonance that the reality of slavery would cause for those holding to new views of liberty and self-determination.¹⁸ This was not just the creation of “white” Protestant slaveholders and their allies. Even in the 19th-century Catholic Church, this ideology was reinforced by deep religious pietism, suspicion of liberalism, and reformist gradualism that accepted the necessary and legitimacy of slavery and reduced the equality of all the children of God to a spiritual truth guarded by the myth of the benevolent religious master.¹⁹

¹⁶ Fields and Fields, *Racecraft*, 31-33, 50-70.

¹⁷ Fields and Fields, *Racecraft*, 129.

¹⁸ Fields and Fields, *Racecraft*, 142-45.

¹⁹ Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 125-55.

The erasure of “race” as an ontological and sociological category is thus necessary in order to clarify the theological and moral distinctions of the ideology of racism, and recognize that using “race” as if it describes an existing reality always already creates an immoral hierarchy. Attacking and ending racism as this powerful ideology, this violence predicated upon the taken-for-grantedness of racial difference, has to begin with uncovering and removing the power of this ideology to shape reality as many see it. The challenge is then to develop an anti-racist language that recognizes the power of racial designations, their instantiation in law and power, without on the one hand giving them a reality outside the racial regime of inequality and oppression, and on the other hand refusing to pretend that such racial designations do not have significant on-going power and influence that has to be dealt with. An anti-racist thought would develop the preliminary understanding, as Ibram Kendi argues, that it must develop a language that is both “expressing the idea that racial groups are equals and none needs developing, and is supporting policy that reduces racial inequality.”²⁰ This moves in the right direction but ultimately is an inadequate definition because it still accepts that racial groups are somehow real entities rather than the construction of a racist ideology. Truly creating an anti-racist language would understand that use of the terms “black” or “white” to always be within scare-quotes, never taken as merely descriptive of people, culture, or expression. These terms must be problematized from the beginning as language others use to oppress or to elevate. There are no “black people” nor are there any “white people,” let alone the nominative forms of “blacks” or “whites.”²¹ Rather, there are people who are designated as “black” or as “white,” and people who will self-designate as “black” or as “white.” There are even characteristics traditionally

²⁰ Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Anti-Racist* (New York: One World, 2019), 24.

²¹ See Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016 [1995]).

ascribed to “blackness” and to “whiteness.” As much as those who try to invest some of these words with liberative power, especially the ones that refer to “black” and “blackness,” they are all “fruit of the poisonous tree,” a legal concept developed by Justice Felix Frankfurter in “*Nardone v. United States*” (308 U.S. 338, 1939).

One way of addressing the problem is to adopt and modify the terminological practice developed by the Fields in using the word “black” in lower-case only and the word “Afro-American” to refer to the people forcibly removed from Africa and enslaved in the Americas, as well as their descendants, unless directly quoting from another source.²² The term “black” here signifies the racist construction of a negative identity for people of sub-Saharan African origin and descent and is used only in the context of its historical and present application. “Afro-American” as described above is distinguished from “African-American” by the Fields, who use the latter to signify more recent African immigrants to America who still identify as coming from their nation of origin.²³ The latter distinction is an important one in terms of the relations between these two historically distinct groups, but the most important distinction is in the limited use they make of the color-designations of “black” and “white.” We can thus refer to people who have been referred to by these terms, or how they even refer to themselves with these terms, but as scholars and writers who are consciously trying to develop an anti-racist vocabulary and analysis, we can never use these terms as simple adjectives or even nominative designations of anyone. We can speak of people sharing geographic ancestries, cultural heritages, and common

²² Fields, *Racecraft*.

²³ There is a long history of debate and controversy about the use of these terms, going back to Jesse Jackson’s call for the widespread use of African American, that is more than this essay can explore. For context, see Ben L. Martin, “From Negro to Black to African American: The Power of Names and Naming,” *Political Science Quarterly* 106, no. 1 (1991), 83-107.

languages (all with the understanding that these generalizations hide a multitude of differences as well); we cannot speak of people belonging to particular “races.”

What Has Happened: The Current State of the Question

So unless Catholic social teaching and thought securely grasp this fact, that racism precedes and creates “race,” and that the very concept of “race” is illegitimate except as an indicator of the racist structures it embodies, any effort to theologically grapple with and begin to eliminate racism in the Americas will regrettably continue to fall short. This, however, is not the understanding that the Catholic social tradition has used in analyzing and addressing racism.²⁴ The church’s official position often begins with accepting the reality of racial difference as both a biological and a social reality and sees racism as a perniciously erroneous socio-cultural perspective that can be corrected through educational and relational work that develops better understanding between the “races” as they are understood and accepted. In this framework, racism remains a social construction, a set of values and beliefs used to order society in a hierarchical fashion based on pre-existing racial differences that only have to be re-ordered and re-conceived on the basis of equality and understanding in order to remove the ills of racism. This approach has characterized much legal and social reform since the nineteenth century and has led to some significant successes: abolition of slavery, passage of civil rights legislation,

²⁴ See note 1 above on Clark’s distinctions between Catholic social teaching, thought and tradition.

legalization of interracial marriage, reductions in overall poverty, etc. Yet because both society in general and the Catholic Church in particular have continued to utilize the false concept of “race” in their efforts to mitigate racism’s effects, the fact that their efforts have been ultimately ineffective in reducing overt racism (increased mass incarceration and rate of violent death among Afro-Americans, persistent numbers of Afro-Americans in poverty, etc.) over the past sixty years should be evidence enough that a radical rethinking of the Catholic understanding of racism and “race,” and the way it is linked to overall Western thought about the same issues, is necessary if any further progress is to be made.

The inadequacies of Catholic social teaching regarding racism and “race” can be seen in a relatively quick survey of official church writings and publications, quick because the amount of writing on racism is relatively thin. The ten Vatican documents that form the core of the first century of Catholic social teaching, as developed between *Rerum novarum* in 1891 and *Centisimus annus* in 1991, and added to by *Caritas in veritate* in 2009 and *Laudato si’* in 2015, speak of human dignity, social and economic justice, human progress, and social harmony and peace. They are powerful statements of faith and principle. The church as a whole has repeatedly taught that all people are created in God’s image: free, intelligent, and social with inviolable rights and duties.²⁵ All, especially Christians, are called to respect this human dignity, to work for the good of all humanity, and to build human solidarity.²⁶ Human beings are “the source, the

²⁵ Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes* (December 7, 1965), 12, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html (hereafter cited as *GS*); John XXIII, *Pacem in terris* (April 11, 1963), 9, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem.html (hereafter cited as *PT*).

²⁶ John XXIII, *Mater et magistra* (May 15, 1961), 179, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_15051961_mater.html; Paul VI, *Octogesima adveniens* (May 14, 1971), 46-47, http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_letters/documents/hf_p-vi_apl_19710514_octogesima-adveniens.html.

center, and the purpose of all socio-economic life,”²⁷ and peace and prosperity are goods that belong to all of humanity.²⁸ These are powerful statements and principles, and when placed together, as in most church pronouncements, provide for the protection of indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities from economic and cultural imperialism.²⁹

Only twice, however, do these documents speak explicitly of racism and its elimination. *Pacem in terris* speaks of “the elimination of every trace of racial discrimination” and places this in the context of “the consequent recognition of the inviolable principle that all States are by nature equal in dignity.”³⁰ *Populorum progressio* is more explicit, but still rather limited: “Racism is ... still an obstacle to collaboration among disadvantaged nations and a cause of division and hatred within countries whenever individuals and families see the inviolable rights of the human person held in scorn, as they themselves are unjustly subjected to a regime of discrimination because of their race or their color.”³¹ In both cases, these writings assume the existence of “race” as an obvious and apparent reality and primarily critique the misuse of these differences and the prejudicial and discriminatory results of racist decisions on individuals and groups across the world. Moreover, they demonstrate a pattern of placing all forms of racial discrimination and prejudice against multiple and different groups on the same level, never acknowledging the complex history and politics of racism in the modern world, and the explicit origin of racist ideology in the justification of the enslavement of African captives in the

²⁷ *GS*, 63.

²⁸ John Paul II, *Centesimus annus* (May 1, 1991), 27, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html.

²⁹ Paul VI, *Populorum progressio* (March 26, 1967), 40-41, http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum.html (hereafter cited as *PP*); *PT*, 96.

³⁰ *PT*, 86.

³¹ *PP*, 63.

Americas. Subsequently, neither *Caritas in veritate* nor *Laudato si'* mention racism, except to affirm the unity of “the human race.”³²

These same flaws and limitations are apparent in the effort by the United States Catholic bishops to address racism and “race.” In 1958, they wrote that, “the heart of the race question is moral and religious.”³³ Using references to the universality of Christianity, the two greatest commandments, the declaration of independence, and critiques of “discrimination based on the accidental fact of race or color,”³⁴ the bishops accepted racial identities as normal facts and compared discrimination against Afro-Americans to that suffered by Spanish-speaking Americans and many others of European and Latin American heritage. “The problems... are rooted in decades, even centuries, of custom and cultural patterns”³⁵ and therefore prudence, study, and reflection are called for since such long held ideas cannot be changed overnight. Racism here is characterized solely by custom and culture, practices and habits that are passively received. The bishops do not consider that racism is also, and more dangerously, actively agitated for and purposefully pursued for ideological, political, and economic ends. The passivity of the problem results in a passivity of action, a willingness to accommodate, and a resistance to calls for significant change that mark this initial timorous effort.

³² Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate* (June 29, 2009), http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html (hereafter cited as *CV*); Francis, *Laudato si'* (May 24, 2015), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html (hereafter cited as *LS*).

³³ National Catholic Welfare Conference, “Discrimination and the Christian Conscience” (November 14, 1958), 6, <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/cultural-diversity/african-american/resources/upload/Discrimination-Christian-Conscience-Nov-14-1958.pdf> (hereafter cited as *DCC*).

³⁴ *DCC*, 11.

³⁵ *DCC*, 21,

By 1968, the bishops had become more concrete in their ideas. Not enough, they argued, had been done to address the persistent problems of racism in education, housing, employment, health care and public assistance because of “a white segregationist mentality... [for which] in varying degree, we all share in the guilt.”³⁶ There is a running and self-evident discourse here where the bishops talk as a “white” church to those who are not “white” suffering from discrimination and prejudice and to the “white” people responsible for that suffering. There is a tinge of condescension as if those who are “not white” are also not part of the church while there is no explicit mention of racist violence and exploitation; all the problems, as severe as they can be, are discriminatory and prejudicial. More positively, there is the beginning of a self-critique here, a call to end discrimination in all Catholic institutions. Bridge building and cooperation in directly attacking the political and economic effects of racism, as listed above, are also called for, representing some progress in the ten years since 1958.

Another decade later, the United States’ bishops published “Brothers and Sisters to Us” in 1979. Noting the lack of progress in matters regarding racism since 1968, the bishops “once again address our pastoral reflections on racism to our brothers and sisters of all races. We do this, conscious of the fact that racism is only one form of discrimination that infects our society. Such discrimination belies both our civil and religious traditions.”³⁷ While acknowledging and minimizing racism in one stroke, the bishops clearly declare for the first time that “racism is a sin: a sin that divides the human family, blots out the image of God among specific members of

³⁶ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Statement on National Race Crisis,” (April 25, 1968), 6-7, <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/cultural-diversity/african-american/resources/upload/Statement-on-National-Race-Crisis-April-25-1968.pdf>.

³⁷ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Brothers and Sisters to Us: Pastoral Letter on Race,” (November 14, 1979), <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/cultural-diversity/african-american/brothers-and-sisters-to-us.cfm> (hereafter cited as BSU).

that family, and violates the fundamental human dignity of those called to be children of the same Father.”³⁸ Moreover, they clearly define racism as “the sin that says some human beings are inherently superior and others essentially inferior because of race. It is the sin that makes racial characteristics the determining factor for the exercise of human rights.”³⁹ Racism, they argue, is persistent, subtle, and affects many different peoples in the United States: “black, Hispanic, Native American or Asian.”⁴⁰ It is deeply rooted in the history of “slavery, peonage, economic exploration, brutal repression, and cultural neglect... Our history is littered with the debris of broken promises and treaties, as well as lynchings and massacres that almost destroyed the Indians, humiliated the Hispanics, and crushed the blacks.”⁴¹ The proclamation of 1968 marked significant progress in acknowledging the historical roots of racism in slavery, yet still sees this founding racist act, the justification of African slavery by European settlers in the Americas, as one crime among many.

The self-critique of 1968 finds a strong echo in 1979: “the Church in our country has been for many a ‘white Church,’ a racist institution. Each of us as Catholics must acknowledge a share in the mistakes and sins of the past. Many of us have been prisoners of fear and prejudice. We have preached the Gospel while closing our eyes to the racism it condemns.”⁴² The language is also stronger here and clearly moves beyond the position of 1968: “Therefore, let the Church proclaim to all that the sin of racism defiles the image of God and degrades the sacred dignity of humankind which has been revealed by the mystery of the Incarnation. Let all know that it is a terrible sin that mocks the cross of Christ and ridicules the Incarnation. For the brother and sister

³⁸ BSU.

³⁹ BSU.

⁴⁰ BSU.

⁴¹ BSU.

⁴² BSU.

of our Brother Jesus Christ are brother and sister to us.” This movement is especially clear here, where the priority of the struggle against racism is first asserted: “Racism is not merely one sin among many; it is a radical evil that divides the human family and denies the new creation of a redeemed world. To struggle against it demands an equally radical transformation, in our own minds and hearts as well as in the structure of our society.”⁴³ The self-critique becomes more explicit, going beyond economic and social change and calling for structural change in the church itself: need for greater representation in leadership, in liturgy, in all the ways the church functions.

However, as Bryan Massingale noted, the “us” is still the “white” hierarchy addressing the “our” of other “white” people in the church, not addressing those who are rarely recognized as “brothers and sisters;” Afro-American participation and agency are absent from the document.⁴⁴ “Race” and racial characteristics are accepted as given; no distinction is made between the genocide of the Native Americans, the centuries-long abomination of chattel slavery for Afro-Americans, the assaults and discrimination suffered by European, Asian and Latin American immigrant groups, and Mexican-Americans who had been subjected by American expansionism. The problem identified here is how these racial categories are used to discriminate, not how these categories are themselves inherently racist and therefore problematic. While the bishops recognized the personal and structural realities that promoted and sustained racism, racism remained an undifferentiated sin perpetrated against all who are not “white,” who are not “us.” They remained blind to the unconscious use of racial division and distinction that limited their own efforts to address the sin of racism.

⁴³ BSU.

⁴⁴ Bryan N. Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (New York: Orbis, 2010), 75.

In 1984, the ten Afro-American bishops of the United States (all of them auxiliary bishops, five of whom had been raised to the episcopacy only since 1982) addressed these deficiencies and published “What We Have Seen and Heard.” Reiterating *Brothers and Sisters to Us* and the United States’ bishops desire to “urge consideration of the evil of racism as it exists in the local Church and reflection upon the means of combating it,” the Afro-American bishops here make the clearest statement about racism, both in America and in the church to date (and subsequently): “this racism, at once subtle and masked, still festers within our Church as within our society. It is this racism that in our minds remains the major impediment to evangelization within our community. Some little progress has been made, but success is not yet attained.”⁴⁵ They clearly noted that “this stain of racism on the American Church continues to be a source of pain and disappointment to all, both Black and White... [and] is a scandal to many, but for us it must be the opportunity to work for the Church's renewal as part of our task of evangelization.”⁴⁶ They advocated reconciliation, but one based on a true repentance: “We, like St. John the Baptist, proclaim a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and we call on the American Church to produce the fruit of repentance.”⁴⁷ As they do elsewhere in the letter, they call out both the history of racial oppression in slavery and Jim Crow laws and the ongoing struggles with “racial hate and economic oppression” where people were “barred from access to decent employment... [and] stripped of [their] dignity.”⁴⁸ It was the first detailed, open and honest appraisal of the effects of

⁴⁵ Joseph L. Howze, et al., “What We Have Seen and Heard: A Pastoral Letter on Evangelization from the Black Bishops of the United States” (September 9, 1984), <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/cultural-diversity/african-american/resources/upload/what-we-have-seen-and-heard.pdf> , 20 (hereafter cited as WWHSH).

⁴⁶ WWHSH, 20.

⁴⁷ WWHSH, 20

⁴⁸ WWHSH, 12.

racism on society and on the church, and was filled with hope that a renewed evangelization informed by the Afro-American Catholic experience, culture, and ministry could transform the country. It addressed and called on Afro-American Catholics to continue their historic efforts towards change and reconciliation.

Despite this clear call to recognition and repentance, between 1984 and 2019 there are few mentions of racism in documents issued by either the Vatican or the United States Catholic bishops. Less than one in five issued their own statements on the sin of racism; less than one in thirty members of church leadership, from bishops to lay ministers, were Afro-American. While the few pronouncements issued in these three decades demonstrate a clearer awareness of structural racism within and without the church, little systemic action has been taken to change the persistent discrimination and racism in the United States. Massingale's recent critique of these positions is trenchant and remains relevant. The lack of social analysis, ethical reflection, specific plans, and most of all the "*lack of passion*" [italics in the original] for anti-racist justice plagues the church's response.⁴⁹ Despite the progress in perspectives and the increasing explicitness of the condemnation of racism, the inattention and inaction of the church in the United States since the 1970s betrays a deeper problem and the need for a more radical solution.

Lest the impression is given that these issues and failures are unique to the United States, one can see these same limitations appearing in the singular effort of the Latin American bishops to address racism, especially racism directed at Afro-Americans, in the final document produced by the conference in Aparecida, Brazil, in 2007. Racism is mentioned only twice in the Aparecida document, both times as part of a long list of social ills and evils to be overcome. There is no clear singling out of racism as a significant topic in and of itself. The document

⁴⁹ Massingale, *Racial Justice*, 77; see also 67-72.

always places Afro-Americans in Latin America in the context of indigenous peoples, the poor, and other oppressed groups. The bishops note the discrimination, the denial of rights, the “exclusion and poverty,”⁵⁰ and the threat of “economic and cultural globalization”⁵¹ that face all of these groups. Only as part of highlighting the value of Latin America’s “vibrant Afro-American communities which contribute and participate actively and creatively in building this continent”⁵² do the bishops note the need to support existing “movements for the recovery of identities, for citizen rights and against racism, [and] alternative solidarity income-generating groups [that] are enabling black women and men to be architects of their own history.”⁵³ Uncontroversially, “the Church denounces the practice of discrimination and racism in its different expressions, because it is an offense against what is deepest in human dignity created in the ‘image and likeness of God.’”⁵⁴

Much like their North American counterparts, the Latin American bishops were concerned about Afro-Americans’ “access to higher education... defense of their territories, in the affirmation of their rights, citizenship, their own development projects, and black consciousness.”⁵⁵ They offer a cultural solution, one based on mutual communication and understanding, on “being familiar with the cultural values, history, and traditions of Afro-Americans, and entering in fraternal respectful dialogue with them.”⁵⁶ In doing so, however, they reduce racism and slavery to “the cultural wounds unjustly suffered in the history of Afro-

⁵⁰ Fifth Conference of Catholic Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, “Concluding Document: V General Conference” (June 29, 2007), 89, <http://www.celam.org/aparecida/Ingles.pdf> (hereafter cited as *Aparecida*).

⁵¹ *Aparecida*, 90.

⁵² *Aparecida*, 97.

⁵³ *Aparecida*, 97.

⁵⁴ *Aparecida*, 533.

⁵⁵ *Aparecida*, 533.

⁵⁶ *Aparecida*, 532.

Americans.”⁵⁷ Unlike the calls for self-critique in the United States church, the church is not called on to change save for becoming more welcoming and open, since “Afro-Americans are now taking their place in society and the Church... demanding the full recognition of their individual and collective rights, being taken into account in Catholicism, with their cosmos vision, their values and their particular identities, so as to live a new ecclesial Pentecost.”⁵⁸ What this place is that they are taking is not well-defined except as a place of dignity and equality, and the results of this “new ecclesial Pentecost” are equally unclear. Lastly, while recognizing the unique culture of Afro-Americans, the document uses only stereotypical language: “characteristic features of Afro-American cultures include bodily expressiveness, family-rootedness, and sense of God.”⁵⁹ The solutions are equally banal: education, dialogue, and openness. What they refuse to do is deal with the oppressive political and economic roots of racism and to struggle to overthrow them. The plan is cultural, communal, incremental, and reformist. Like the North American response, Afro-Americans are still “them” in relation to “us,” agency is still in the hands of the leaders of the church, and Afro-Americans are still the “other” whose voice has to be heard and needs met by the church, as opposed to members already within the Body of Christ itself.

The most recent effort from the church to address racism is the United States bishops’ establishment of the new ad hoc committee on racism in 2017 in the wake of the violent “white” supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia that resulted in the death of Heather Heyer. Led by Bishop George V. Murry, SJ, of Youngstown, Ohio, the ad hoc committee has published a

⁵⁷ Aparecida, 533.

⁵⁸ Aparecida, 91.

⁵⁹ Aparecida, 56. Dawn Nothwehr has gathered an even broader collection of related church documents that sadly do not change this basic analysis. See Part II of *That They May Be One*.

website with resources aimed at combatting racism,⁶⁰ as well as a new pastoral letter, “Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call of Love.”⁶¹ The documents replicate much of the work discussed above, with little in new perspectives. Appeals to unity as the children of God, love of neighbor, new prayers and conversations on racism, and a new educational campaign remain the central response. However, the designation of racism as a “radical evil” as in 1979 is missing, as racism is again tied into wider social concerns, including abortion, child abuse, and immigration reform, all of which are still primarily thought of as individual sins, an “inner demon” addressed best through prayer, conversion and reconciliation. The committee itself is designated as an ad hoc one, necessarily temporary and clearly tangential to what the bishops consider the more important issues of the day. Lastly, a prayer published at the same time reduces the struggle against racism to individual decisions by flawed people from which forgiveness is needed and reconciliation required. Although the prayer calls for recognition of “systems that do not support the dignity of every person” and acknowledges the need for structural reform, repeatedly praying for “graced structures so children of color” may have equity in education, health care, and housing,” it does not use descriptive language for these “graced structures” nor does it pray for specific changes in society in order to make this happen.⁶²

This generalization of problem of racism, while clearly called out as “white” supremacy by the bishop of El Paso, Texas, as recently as 2019 in his pastoral letter, “Night Will Be no

⁶⁰ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Bishops Address the Sin of Racism” (August 23, 2017), <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/racism/index.cfm>.

⁶¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call of Love” (November 2018), <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/racism/upload/open-wide-our-hearts.pdf>.

⁶² United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Prayer to Address the Sin of Racism” (August 23, 2017), <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/racism/prayer-to-address-the-sin-of-racism.cfm>.

More,” in the wake of the mass shooting there that left twenty-to people dead, persists in the letter’s labeling of racism as something that affects ethnic minorities, in this case Latinos, equally across the United States.⁶³ While Seitz retraces the history of racism at the border more clearly and thoroughly than any other official church teaching, explicitly linking together the exploitation of indigenous Americans with the enslavement of Africans and Afro-Americans, he refers to the suffering of these peoples in the usual terms of prejudice, discrimination, and exploitation rather than calling out the genocidal violence and brutal enslavement that connected their fates. He calls for an explicit anti-racist approach without fleshing out explicitly what that would mean aside from recruiting new leadership and working for an end to injustice. His answer remains a generalized call for restoring human dignity, improving pastoral practices, and ending “the cycle of hate, blood, and vengeance on the border.”⁶⁴

From 1958 to 2019, there has been remarkable consistency in the limited ways the leadership of the global church as well as the church in the Americas has addressed the sin of racism. While there has been some progress in including social sin with personal sin, as well as in acknowledging the role of the church itself in the implementation and persistence of racist policies and practices, overall the position of the church on racism from the Vatican to the bishops in the Americas has been sporadic, inattentive, and without energy or passion. While it has at times been grounded in serious theological study and reflection, it has not tried to address the evil rooted in the very concept of “race” that derives its power from racist ideology. Catholic social teaching on racism still reads much like the kind of temporizing and rationalizing that Martin Luther King, Jr. criticized in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” when he called out the

⁶³ Mark J. Seitz, “Night Will Be No More: Pastoral Letter to the People of God in El Paso” (October 13, 2019), <https://www.hopeborder.org/nightwillbenomore-eng>.

⁶⁴ Seitz, 22.

“white moderate... who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.”⁶⁵ It is temporized by the concern for what “my people” (read “white people”) will think, how they will react, how they might leave a church that dares declare its own complicity and that of its members in the atrocities of racism and the everyday assaults of racist ideology.

The hierarchy’s approach to racism has been and continues to be ameliorative, reformist, and gradualist, grounded in general appeals to human dignity, keeping the focus on moral, religious and cultural issues related to discrimination and prejudice. The resulting recommendations for action amount to calls for bridge building, cooperation, and conversion, not the thorough eradication of racist ideology and all of its spiritual, socio-economic, and political effects. Despite the relatively bold move of the United States bishops in finally declaring racism a sin in 1979, and the bolder move of the Afro-American bishops in 1984 to call for repentance as the price of reconciliation, the proposed solutions to the enduring and debilitating problem of racism remain both remarkably consistent and continually ineffective because they fail directly to take on the language of “race” we have all inherited from racist ideology. What is needed then is a radical re-grounding of the church’s analysis of these questions on a more critical and penetrating approach, one that goes beyond moral and religious ideas, even beyond social and cultural analysis, to one based on political and economic critique and the deconstruction of the racist ideology and the concepts of “race” that underpin them all.

⁶⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” April 16, 1963, http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html.

What Is to Be Done: The Challenge of Addressing the Question

The task is for Catholic social thought to address the shortcomings of Catholic social teaching, a task that has been undertaken by several theologians but one that remains incomplete. One of the more significant efforts to address the challenge of racism and by theologians in the Catholic church has come from Bryan Massingale. As noted above, Massingale has offered an insightful critique of Catholic social thought on racism, as well as a way forward. It begins with recognizing the cultural roots of racism, the soul of African American culture, and the soul of “white” culture and “white” supremacy. Using clear terms identified as racial in his analysis and proposals, Massingale moves beyond the simple acknowledgment and condemnation of “white” racism and “white” supremacy towards a deeper understanding of the cultural engagement and change necessary for what he desires as “racial reconciliation.”⁶⁶ He roots this in “the realization that racism is a cultural phenomenon, that is, a way of interpreting human color differences... an ethos... that not only facilitates such [racist] acts, but makes them understandable and intelligible.”⁶⁷ Following Bernard Lonergan, Massingale argues that “culture provides the ideological foundation for social, political and economic policies” because it is “shared... learned... formative... [and] symbolic,” the core conceptual foundation for Massingale in solving the problem of racism in the United States.⁶⁸

Two fundamental approaches emerge from this cultural analysis: the need for truth-telling and the use of lament. Massingale convincingly argues that an honest, critical, and complete historical recognition of the reality and consequences of American chattel slavery, of

⁶⁶ Massingale, *Racial Justice*, 86.

⁶⁷ Massingale, *Racial Justice*, 15.

⁶⁸ Massingale, *Racial Justice*, 16-17.

the cultural assertion that “blackness” is always less than “whiteness,” is absolutely essential to any possible racial reconciliation.⁶⁹ Moreover, there is a need for the use of lament, a tradition rooted in the Psalms and deeply resonant with the Afro-American experience. The complaint against brutal injustice, the calling of God to account, and the petition for help in redressing wounds are essential elements in an honest and open dialogue about racism, since lament challenges “entrenched cultural beliefs” and elicits compassion, empathy, and identification in return.⁷⁰ Fundamentally, these are necessary and arguably effective approaches, and they certainly go well beyond what papal and episcopal efforts have imagined (save for, not surprisingly, the Afro-American bishops letter of 1984, which finds its echo here). There is a need, however, to go even further, to take the cultural critique advanced by Massingale, including stronger truth-telling and more vocal lament, and instead of thinking of culture as foundational, place the political and economic ideology of racism at the heart of the analysis, critique, and response to American racism.

Massingale begins this approach in his 2014 essay, “Has the Silence Been Broken? Catholic Theological Ethics and Racial Justice.”⁷¹ There, after assessing his own work as well as that of James Cone and M. Shawn Copeland (both of whom are also discussed below), he makes the argument that “methodological discussion and refinement” alone are insufficient and must be moved towards “engaged social praxis.”⁷² This requires accepting that Catholic social thought with regards to racism is a liberationist theology, even if unrecognized as such. As Maria Theresa Davila put it, Catholic theologians need to “take on the hard questions of privilege,

⁶⁹ Massingale, *Racial Justice*, 97-99.

⁷⁰ Massingale, *Racial Justice*, 110; see also 104-116.

⁷¹ Bryan Massingale, “Has the Silence Been Broken? Catholic Theological Ethics and Racial Justice” *Theological Studies* 75, No. 1 (March 2014): 133-155.

⁷² Massingale, “Silence,” 143.

institutional violence, racialization of the other, dehumanization of entire groups, and the essentialization of the white or European as paradigmatically human.”⁷³ Massingale sees in the work of Alex Mikulich, Laurie Cassidy, and Margaret Pfeil the beginnings of a social-political analysis that focuses on the “complicity” of American society in the practice of mass incarceration, the structures, institutions, and social benefits that constitute it, the unseen and destructive “habitus” of “white” Christian identity, and the necessary spirituality to deal with it.⁷⁴ For Massingale, the interesting point of Mikulich, Cassidy, and Pfeil’s work is their insistence on “white” critique of “white” ideology from within, a reform of “white” consciousnesses and a liberation from idolatry.⁷⁵ However, the uncritical use of the term “white” by these authors is part of what needs to be reexamined and deconstructed. As long as their analysis remains at the level that accepts that being “white” is a real, ontological thing and until they critique the concept of “whiteness” itself on this basis, much of what they do will replicate the problems of other analyses.

What is needed to begin this process, which Massingale, Mikulich, Cassidy, and Pfeil do not attempt, is a full-throated analysis and condemnation of the origin of racism and thus the idea of “race” in slavery, specifically in the form of the enslavement of Africans and Afro-Americans in the Americas. Massingale notes the need for an historical, as well as global turn in Catholic

⁷³ Maria Theresa Davila, “Racialization and Racism in Theological Ethics: ‘Facing History’ as a Pillar for a Catholic Ethic Grounded on the Preferential Option for the Poor and an Incarnational Anthropology.” *Catholic Theological Ethics Past, Present, and Future: The Trento Conference*, ed. James Keenan (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011): 307-321, quoted in Massingale, “Silence,” 135.

⁷⁴ Massingale, “Silence,” 144-45, citing Alex Mikulich, Laurie Cassidy, and Margaret Pfeil, *The Scandal of White Complicity in US Hyper-Incarceration: A Spirituality of White Resistance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

⁷⁵ See also Laurie M. Cassidy and Alex Mikulich, eds., *Interrupting White Privilege: Catholic Theologians Break the Silence* (New York: Orbis, 2007).

social thought, referencing the work of Diane Nothwehr and her studies of racism and colonialism.⁷⁶ Developing a Catholic social theology that responds to the origins of American racism must begin with slavery, with the ideology of racism that was developed to defend American slavery, the denial of the fundamental humanity of enslaved Africans in the Americas, and its “sacrilegious extension in white racist supremacy”⁷⁷ as M. Shawn Copeland has written. Alongside this, Catholic social teaching must also explicitly examine and condemn Christianity’s entanglement with and support for the enslavement of Africans, the denial of baptism and religious education (or the use of baptism and religious education as facilitating the acceptance of enslavement), and the profit-making of Catholic institutions, as Katie Grimes and Copeland have begun to do.⁷⁸ Slavery required the denial of the humanity of Africans and racist ideology insisted that Africans, in Copeland’s words, were “incapable of the human functions of intellectual reflection and critique, culture making, and cultural refinement.”⁷⁹ When Enlightenment ideals called for asserting the claim that “all men are created equal,” the preservation of chattel slavery required an equally compelling argument from natural law that some men were in fact not equal. The natural law tradition in Christianity was called into service to justify the enslavement of Africans and thus must also be thoroughly examined and critiqued.⁸⁰ Lastly, a strong analysis and critique has to be undertaken of the construction of “whiteness” in all its manifestations, from “white” racism to “white” supremacy to “white”

⁷⁶ Massingale, “Silence,” 153, citing Nothwehr, *That They May Be One*.

⁷⁷ M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 68.

⁷⁸ See Katie Walker Grimes, *Fugitive Saints: Catholicism and the Politics of Slavery* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017).

⁷⁹ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 79.

⁸⁰ This is precisely done by Episcopal priest and theologian Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (New York: Orbis, 2015).

privilege, as moral evil, as the creation of an identity and narrative that elevates men and women of particular national and geographical heritage above others on the basis of certain physical traits, in this case, “pale skin and smooth hair.”⁸¹

One solution that reveals the ideological construction of “whiteness” and follows this analysis and critique is the parallel construction and embrace of the value of “blackness,” the antithesis of this “whiteness,” despite its origins in racism and oppression, as James Cone has argued.⁸² Cone employs these terms, not in the reified and ontological terms of “black” and “white,” but rather in an effort to express the creation of a politico-economic and socio-cultural ideological system that encodes color as hierarchical values that legitimate violence and enslavement. The identification of Afro-American people with those who are illiterate, poor, oppressed, with the suffering victims of the world who experience rape, beatings, forcible family separations, and are often murdered with impunity, makes the experience of those identified as “black” the closest to those that the Bible calls for all to identify with, to care for, to reach out to, and to become. There is historical precedent for this in the liberation movement in Santo Domingo, what is now Haiti, in 1791. The enslaved who liberated themselves required all those who were to be citizens to accept being “black,” which meant rejecting the ideology of “white” rule and accepting the legitimacy of “black” rule. One’s skin color was irrelevant; no matter one’s color, agreeing to these principles made one “black.” This, one could argue, is what Cone is referring to with the idea of “blackness.”⁸³ The advantage of Cone’s turn to “blackness” is that

⁸¹ Mary Niall Mitchell, “The Young White Faces of Slavery,” *New York Times*, January 30, 2014, <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/01/30/the-young-white-faces-of-slavery>. For a full discussion of the creation of “whiteness,” see Painter, *History*.

⁸² James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 40th anniversary ed. (New York: Orbis, 2010 [1970]).

⁸³ See Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), 47.

it makes clear that the biblical tradition of the exodus, of liberation from slavery, of the desire of God for human freedom so that all can be in a relationship of love with the divine, has to be grasped as the central biblical root of Catholic social thought. It is this that those who were enslaved and their descendants teach us in their constant desire for freedom, their turning of Christianity towards stories of exodus and liberation and away from narratives of control and submission.

Yet the turn to the elevation of “blackness” as a counterweight to the prejudice of “whiteness” keeps the argument in the domain of racist ideology. It is a “counter-racist” as opposed to “anti-racist” strategy. Cultural critiques, legal reform, and educational days of dialogue to raise awareness and compassion are clearly necessary yet insufficient measures to address such a deep-seated and virtually invisible practice such as racism. Afro-American and African-American people always suffer under layers of suspicion that tarnish their accomplishments, question their veracity, and denigrate their very being, long before they even speak or do anything. Simply by appearing as “black” to the observing world, the magic of racecraft, the social practice of racism, and the will to classify by “race” have already done their work in the minds of others and set in motion a series of actions that will confirm all the suspicions, questions, and denigrations to come, even before they happen. Changing this will require an equally deep-rooted, enduring, and liberating ideology critique, beginning with the ways Christianity has assisted and become entangled in racist ideology, passing through a reevaluation of our existing values that identifies the soul of the Gospel with the biblical tradition of the exodus, of liberation from slavery, of the desire of God for human freedom and lifts the magical ideology of racecraft from our eyes.

The complicity of Christian theology in the development of racism and racial ideology has deep roots. Traced back to the adoption of Platonic ideals and Greek philosophical categories, including the embrace of political power by the early Church and its reinforcement throughout history, searching out and bringing to light the Christian origins of racist ideology in service first of slavery and later of segregation, discrimination, mass incarceration and other forms of racist violence, including lynching, directed at Afro-Americans, is a necessary step. For Kelly Brown Douglas, it begins with the denigration of the body, all bodies, in Neoplatonic Christianity, where the possibility of a union of oppression and terror between Christian theology and white supremacy began.⁸⁴ The Christian theological imagination, as Willie James Jennings argues, influenced by docetism and adoptionism, removed the direct and incarnated intervention of God in history, denying the messy reality of the incarnation, reducing God's presence into a spiritual essence, and limiting the universality of God in all people to "imagining the divine among one's own people" alone.⁸⁵ The foundation is thus laid for later identifying the divine with "whiteness" as the imperial and later colonial power of western Europeans increases.

When this power is then tied to the idea of redemptive suffering as elaborated in the atonement theology of the cross, it is easy to imagine how the suffering and death of Christ on the cross as redemptive can be read onto the suffering and death of Afro-American men and women, especially in the act of lynching. Christianity in the American south, and elsewhere in the United States, had before the civil war come to identify African "blackness" with the destiny of the children of Ham, with lifelong and generational enslavement, and with the Christian duty

⁸⁴ Kelly Brown Douglas, *What's Faith Got to Do with It? Black Bodies/Christian Souls* (New York: Orbis, 2005), 9-10. On the contemporary forms of this violence in mass incarceration, see Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. rev. ed. (New York: The New Press, 2012).

⁸⁵ Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 167.

of white slaveholders of protect enslaved Afro-Americans from the dangers of freedom.⁸⁶ After the war, in the era that followed “reconstruction,” what those in the south called “redemption,” many white Christian Americans increasingly demonized and characterized “black people as subhuman beasts” and equated “blackness with a sinful, satanic nature... [where] the lynching of black people became for white southerners equivalent to casting out Satan.”⁸⁷ “White” supremacist Christian racism linked the cross and the lynching tree in a terrifying manner, claiming that the power of the cross to redeem can be transferred to the tree as well. The conquering cross of Constantine, the cross that that is drawn in red on the cloaks of the Ku Klux Klan, the cross that burns in front of the homes and churches of Afro-American people, has been closely linked to the lynching tree in one form of the Christian imagination.⁸⁸ This terrifying and destructive connection must be firmly and finally broken if Christian theology and Catholic social thought is to have any chance to redirect itself in a constructive manner.

In its place, therefore, is the need for a new linkage, one strongly rooted in the experience and writings of Afro-Americans. In effect, Christian theology, and especially Catholic social thought, has to listen carefully to Afro-American theologians in order to remove the remnants of “whiteness” that continue to define it.⁸⁹ It begins with reversing the way Catholic social theologians, and other Christian social theorists, have routinely placed the persecution of Afro-Americans alongside that of Mexican-Americans, Native Americans and others as if they were

⁸⁶ Noll, *Civil War*, 33-35, 56-63.

⁸⁷ Douglas, *Faith*, 65-66. See also James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (New York: Orbis, 2011), 6-10.

⁸⁸ Douglas, *Faith*, 68-70.

⁸⁹ This is a task for all Christian theologians, as all have been shaped by the dominance of a theological scholarship and thought that has often been blind to its connections to white supremacy and racial oppression. See Johnny Bernard Hill, *Prophetic Rage: A Postcolonial Theology of Liberation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013) and Katie Walker Grimes, *Christ Divided: Antiblackness as Corporate Vice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017).

all part of the same generic racism, and substituting for it an argument first made by Cone in 1970. In *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Cone argued that in order for “persons of color... to challenge the oppressive character of white society, they must begin by affirming their identity in terms of the reality that is anti-white.”⁹⁰ Citing Tillich’s idea of faith, especially a faith necessary for survival and liberation, as “existential risk,” Cone provides the basis for the kind of passion Massingale rightly notes as missing from so much Catholic thought on our pressing social issues. Dispassion and distance, objectified as “white” values, need to be replaced by passionate and personal commitment, so that an anti-racist theology can “do everything it can to reveal the satanic nature of racism.”⁹¹

It continues with reversing the demonic connection between the cross and the lynching tree in “white” supremacist theology with the identification of God “with the crucified and the lynched.”⁹² The theology of atonement that has facilitated the union of Christianity and racism has to be replaced with an understanding of “the cross and the lynching tree” as “symbols of terror, instruments of torture and execution, reserved primarily for slaves, criminals, and insurrectionists—the lowest of the low in society.”⁹³ The risk of faith, a faith that can lead to death, is incarnated in the cross and the lynching tree, a risk that Cone noted many “white” social theologians shied away from. Those who embraced this risk, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King, Jr., understood that declaring themselves for the cross, identifying those

⁹⁰ Cone, *Black Theology*, 8. Cone’s use of persons of color, although uncommon in the time of his writing, has come more and more into standard usage, and has also become controversial in precisely the way that it elides differences in the experience of racism by different groups. The solution lies in his connecting people of color to those who are not “white,” the epitome of whom are people who are thus rendered “black” in the origin of racist ideology.

⁹¹ Cone, *Black Theology*, 21.

⁹² Douglas, *Faith*, 73.

⁹³ Cone, *Cross*, 31.

who were the victims of the concentration camp and the lynching tree, was to risk their own lives.⁹⁴ A theology steeped in existential opposition to oppression and violence, is not a bloodless theology for safely ensconced academics and preachers, fitting only for those who are “whited sepulchers” (Matt 23:27, KJV). It is a thriving, passionate commitment to justice, to being with and walking with those who are made less than by all forms of “white” supremacy, and calls for fundamental reform in not only social theology, but Christology, ecclesiology, and Christian anthropology.⁹⁵ All these forms of Christian theology need to be re-imagined as anti-racist, as centrally opposed to all forms of oppression and subjugation rooted in racist ideology, in order for Catholic social thought to finally confront and begin to help put an end to American racism.

How It Can Be Accomplished: The Choice of Action

An anti-racist theological response via a renewed Catholic social tradition (both authoritative teaching and theological thought) that is capable of moving the church forward on the problem of racism, especially in its American form, requires a Christian anthropology that strongly argues against the ideology of racism and simultaneously abjures all notions of “race.” This possible re-foundation can begin with Copeland’s three premises of a Christian anthropology: 1) “human beings, created in the image and likeness of God, have a distinct capacity for communion with God;” 2) they “have a unique place in the cosmos God created;” and 3) they are created “for communion with other living things.”⁹⁶ These premises are integral to a theological

⁹⁴ Cone, *Cross*, 70-71.

⁹⁵ Massingale, *Racial Justice*, 80-81.

⁹⁶ Copeland, *Enfleshing*, 24.

anthropology rooted in an integral humanism, one that already exists in the tradition and recognizes the “higher values of love and friendship, of prayer and contemplation” and “a growing awareness of other people's dignity, a taste for the spirit of poverty, an active interest in the common good, and a desire for peace.”⁹⁷ This integral humanism has been expressed in the social movements of the Church, where “acting either as individuals or joined together in various groups, associations and organizations, these people represent *a great movement for the defense of the human person* and the safeguarding of human dignity.”⁹⁸

These premises alone, however, are inadequate to the challenge. The language of human dignity needs to be deployed seriously to the problem of racism as one of the highest priority, as once again the “radical evil... [that is] not one sin among many,” rather than seeing the problem of racism as solved, along with a host of other pressing problems, though the regular application of a theology of human dignity.⁹⁹ One cannot fundamentally address and develop strategies to overcome racism through a general appeal to individual repentance and reform in which the sin of racism is simply one among many such human failings. One must use the principles of this theology, of a Christian anthropology firmly rooted in this theology, to directly assault the scourge of racism as the fundamental threat to human dignity it represents for all people, not just for the oppressed, but for the oppressor as well. Racist ideology deforms the image of God in all people that it touches, and this ideology touches all people. This can be accomplished in a number of ways, beginning with the ways the work of Cone, Copeland, and Elizabeth Johnson, can lead us, by emphasizing our identification as the people of God with the people of the exodus, those liberated from slavery, with the people of the crucifixion, of those bound to Jesus

⁹⁷ *PP*, 20-21.

⁹⁸ *CA*, 3.

⁹⁹ *BSU*.

through a common experience of suffering and death, and with the people of the resurrection, those freed from sin by the cross. We can do this by understanding ourselves, identifying ourselves, with those who are still in bondage and with those who have been set free. Cone's linking of "the cross and the lynching tree" seeks to overcome how "this symbol of salvation has been detached from the ongoing suffering and oppression of human beings."¹⁰⁰ By reattaching the cross to that suffering, by reminding the world that the God whom Christians proclaim died on that cross as one of us, and that in that death the cross became "a redeeming and comforting image for many black Christians... the God of Jesus' cross is found among the least, the crucified people of the world, [and] God is also found among those lynched in American history."¹⁰¹ Cone thus adds a voice of liberation from the systems of power and knowledge that have particularly inscribed themselves on the bodies of Afro-American men and women, strengthening the identification between the broken body of the Crucified One and the suffering and murdered bodies of these men and women. Our understanding of human dignity, of a Christian anthropology, must begin by recognizing that those who thus suffer epitomize all of us, that they are who we are as the people of God. There is no "us and them" in the people of God; what exists as "us and them" is our own misbegotten creation. To avoid simply erasing the distinctions we have created and thinking them the ones God has made, we all need to identify with those whom our politics and economics have made "black." In their suffering and in their liberation, they show us the image of God into which we are all made.

This reinterpretation of the cross and the lynching tree thus also includes those who mourn at the foot of the cross, at the root of the tree. Cone, relying on Copeland among others,

¹⁰⁰ Cone, *Cross*, xiii-xiv.

¹⁰¹ Cone, *Cross*, 23.

sees in the images and stories of Mary a powerful reminder of resistance and perseverance. Afro-American women refused to accept the hypocrisy of “white” supremacy as defining of Christianity, and as Mary did with the disciples of her son in holding them together and leading them in the days after his death and resurrection, Afro-American women led the fight for civil rights, using the power of the cross to fight against the lynching tree, pitting nonviolence against the violence of “white” supremacy. They “not only preached the cross but bore it, and sometimes died on it.”¹⁰² What a Christian anthropology that embraces the Crucified God on the cross brings is a deep awareness that “humanity’s salvation is revealed in the cross of the condemned criminal Jesus, and humanity’s salvation is available *only* through our solidarity with the crucified people in our midst.”¹⁰³ A Christian anthropology has to deal with the experience of life at its most vulnerable, oppressed, and exposed, or it will simply replicate these systems in its application, much as the “white” churches could not see link between the body of their God hanging on the cross and the bodies of Afro-American men and women hanging from the lynching tree.

Mary can be a powerful figure in this reconsideration. Elizabeth Johnson’s work on the theology of Mary echoes Cone’s point, but with much more focus and intentionality. The ideologies under which we live “have been shaped by men in a patriarchal context and have functioned powerfully to define and control female lives.”¹⁰⁴ The same can be said for those men who have shaped our consciousness in racist contexts and defined our lives accordingly. A Christian anthropology must be a radical challenge to the prevailing norms and approaches of a

¹⁰² Cone, *Cross*, 148.

¹⁰³ Cone, *Cross*, 160.

¹⁰⁴ Elizabeth Johnson, *Truly our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 7.

society that continues to be both racist and paternalist, for as the history of American racism shows, the two often go hand in hand. For Johnson, this means theological work against all “systems and thought patters that disparage and abuse the humanity of women in all their differences along with their communities.”¹⁰⁵ What is required in addition to this focus is the establishment of racism as the signature radical evil that empowers all who wish to maintain this system of racial supremacy, one that instills modernity’s version of patriarchy and paternalism with a particularly sharp razor’s edge.

Near the end of her work, Johnson examines the Marian hymn in Luke 1:51-53: “The Lord has shown might with his arm, dispersed the arrogant of mind and heart. He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones but lifted up the lowly. The hungry he has filled with good things; the rich he has sent away empty.” For Johnson, this hymn is “the presence of a memory that is truly dangerous... a revolutionary song of salvation” that embodies God’s preferential option for the poor and the overcoming and subverting of all systems of inequality.¹⁰⁶ This inclusiveness of community equally alongside the individual is an important dimension of her theology that aligns with a Christian anthropology that focuses on the communion of people with God and with each other as the essence of our human dignity, and continually keeps at the forefront the inseparability of the individual from her diversity and her community. In focusing on the persistent challenge of patriarchy, this theology carries, however, the potential to elide the foundational power of racist ideology in this matrix, continuing to reduce the power of racism to one threat among many. Placing Cone and Johnson in dialogue helps to move the image on which we base a Christian anthropology in that of Mary at the foot of Jesus’ cross, reflected in

¹⁰⁵ Johnson, *Truly our Sister*, 19.

¹⁰⁶ Johnson, *Truly our Sister*, 268-69.

the image of Afro-American women standing in front of the “strange fruit” hanging from the lynching tree. Seeing them both together as representative of what humanity faces in the threat of racism gives us a more specific anti-racist image of the relationship between God and humanity.

With these insights, we can begin developing the thought of Copeland’s Christian anthropology, rooted in life lived in solidarity and communion with one another, and integrating the experience of slavery, especially among Afro-American women, as constitutional for revealing, through its terror and torture, what is essential about our human dignity. As Copeland notes, for Afro-American women and men, slavery debased their divine image, distorted their place in creation, and deformed their ability to be in relationship with others. Slavery “blasphemed,” it was “sacrilegious,” and it “had fatal consequences for *all* people— black people, especially, and black women, in particular.”¹⁰⁷ Chattel slavery exposed the extreme, but the same can be said for all those suffering from poverty, illness, and isolation, for all those rendered powerless and made into the objects of the gaze and examination of the powerful. Such an alienating gaze allows for the construction of the other as an object of power and thus separated from the norms that govern the powerful and privileged. It is not overcome by creating the illusion of personal autonomy; it is only overcome through embracing human createdness, seeing human beings as “the enfleshing of created spirit” and the body, in particular “the black body,” the body that has suffered the most completely in our society, as “the site of divine revelation.”¹⁰⁸

As Cone sees in the cross the symbol of salvation, Copeland examines the Christian practice of Eucharist. Johnson’s reminder that Mary’s audacity in proclaiming that her God has

¹⁰⁷ Copeland, *Enfleshing*, 24.

¹⁰⁸ Copeland, *Enfleshing*, 24.

“filled the hungry with good things and the rich are sent away empty” is matched, as Copeland notes, by her son’s claim that unless “you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life within you” (John 6:53). Christian Eucharist is the presence of Christ, the making visible of the body of Christ “through a praxis of solidarity, which counters the disorder of this world.”¹⁰⁹ Racism, as the binding of “viscous or negative feelings or attitudes to the exercise of putatively legitimate power,... infiltrates, permeates, and deforms the institutions of politics, economy, culture, even religion.”¹¹⁰ The solution is in the solidarity of Eucharist, in the “counter-imagination” of the sacraments, in “daring to embody Christ in a morally degraded context of white racist supremacy.”¹¹¹ Eucharist, like the cross, like Mary, is a challenge and “countersign to the devaluation and violence directed toward the exploited, despised black body.”¹¹² Such a Christian anthropology has to take into account such solidarity, such embodiment, as well as the racism, discrimination, and violence of the world within which it operates. It needs to understand itself as a source of resistance.

These insights help us establish the foundation for the tasks ahead. They begin shifting our language towards the language of power and what has been done to people: their enslavement, their crucifixion, their oppression, rather than on what they do or who they are. Racism is not just, or even primarily, what is in one’s heart; racism is what one does with one’s hands, with the laws written, the customs enacted, the decisions made. Giving real content to the preferential option for the poor means recognizing the ways people have been and continue to be enslaved, have been and continue to be impoverished. In other words, one is not born poor or a

¹⁰⁹ Copeland, *Enfleshing*, 109.

¹¹⁰ Copeland, *Enfleshing*, 109.

¹¹¹ Copeland, *Enfleshing*, 125.

¹¹² Copeland, *Enfleshing*, 127.

slave; one is made so by the hands of others. Their social status as the “poor” does not define their identity, their humanity, and we make the same mistake of using this term to define those suffering from poverty as we do in using racist terms of “black” and “white” to define and identify people. Our language has to change so that we do not reify the way a person or a people are made, assigned, or identified as being the actual identity of that person or people.

We also have an existing tradition of defining human dignity, as the *Imago Dei*, through the images of God’s creation, the beginning of the light, the freedom of life in the garden, the love and care that God gives to the creation of the world and human beings place in it. It is lyrical, mystical, and rather abstract. What is required is a grounding of human dignity as well in concrete historical experience, an experience in darkness as well as in light. As human beings, our dignity is also reflected through the concrete images of Holy Week: eucharist, crucifixion, and resurrection. The *Imago Dei* that traditional Catholic social teaching proclaims, one that is free, intelligent, and social with inviolable rights and duties, one that reflects the unity and diversity of the Holy Trinity, needs to be thought beyond the individual and her connections to others, beyond the light and into darkness. It is not only that we have a capacity for communion with God, it is that this communion defines us, unites us through the incarnation and the Eucharist with divinity. How many of the significant moments we believe mark the life of Jesus are moments in the darkness? The birth of Jesus is traditionally presented as happening at night, in a stable, to parents who could not find human shelter. Eucharist, the first of which was an evening dinner celebration, is the moment we celebrate when, as in the words of the prayer, “we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity.”¹¹³

¹¹³ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Roman Missal*, 3rd typical ed. (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2011), 529.

Human dignity is a dignity shared with God, signified when we pray to the Father, through the Son and in the Holy Spirit, remembering that the Son is fully human and fully divine, the Son who suffered and died, attended by his mother and the other women at the foot of the cross, in darkness, and rose again, appearing to Mary Magdalene, just as the dawn was breaking. Our understanding of the *Imago Dei* is incomplete when it does not include our divinization through the incarnation and the Eucharist. Similarly, it is inadequate when it reduces the *Imago Dei* to that of an interconnected individual, where the individual is always prior to the community within which we live. Just as the Divine is Trinity, three-in-one, we exist as individuals-in-community, and in particular individuals-in-community as represented in the tableau at the foot of the cross. Moreover, the *Imago Dei*, as the image of Jesus on the cross, of Mary, the women, and the centurions at the foot of the cross, is a direct confrontation with the principalities and powers that are invested in racist ideology, in the power of the lynching tree, where the human and divine are connected through the cross and affirmed in the resurrection.

This image of our human dignity, not only as free, intelligent, and social, but also as connected, suffering, and redeemed, transcends any division by racist ideology and yet affirms the existence of this oppression in our midst. It does not erase the oppression and death caused by this racist power, rather it holds it up as indicative or constitutive of who we are as human beings. It evokes our deepest fears and our deepest hopes, our common humanity at the foot of the cross and our destiny in the human and divine Son of God who hangs there. We know that they were not the light-skinned people of European imagination; they were dark-complexioned, from olive- to brown-skinned, people of that part of the world at that particular time. Holding this image of human dignity, of dark-skinned people shrouded in darkness, of the suffering

humanity of the *Imago Dei*, in the forefront of our minds and hearts, would make difficult the holding of a racist ideology that divides us into those who are better and those who are less.

This conversion not only of our individual, but also our social conscience, however, is only the beginning, the first step required. It must be leveraged by the church's vast teaching about economic justice directly into the question of racial justice. The connections between the modern history of slavery and the history of capitalism, the revelation of the inherent and original linkages between racism and economics, the structure of slavery and the racist ideology that justified it, and the structures of capitalism and the neo-liberal ideology that in turn justifies it, need to be clearly connected to the ways human dignity has been denied and oppressed by both systems. Modern enslavement, impoverishment, and oppression are all intimately linked to racist ideology, inseparable from their origins in regimes of power that created and used racial difference to accumulate vast amounts of wealth. The lack of a persistent passion for the elimination of racism can only be overcome by acknowledging the fundamental ways racist ideology distorts not only our human dignity, but all the economic, political, and social systems humanity has constructed in the modern era.

Finally, what is required within the Catholic social tradition is an analysis and dedication to anti-racist principles that must be made at the highest levels. What is needed in moving toward an anti-racist theology is a *Nostra aetate* or *Laudato si'* on racism in the world, a racism that has been fundamentally shaped by the American experience and in which the church has lamentably participated since the 15th century. The issue of racism has to be treated at the same level of seriousness and crisis as that of antisemitism and environmental destruction, and the same moves institutionally and spiritually that were and are being made in response to these two calls for rejecting our past ways and moving in a new direction must be made with regard to overcoming

racism. One can only begin here to shape what such a response would look like. A clear and ringing statement that those who have been oppressed by enslavement and all its legacies “should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures. All should see to it, then, that in catechetical work or in the preaching of the word of God they do not teach anything that does not conform to the truth of the Gospel and the spirit of Christ.”¹¹⁴ Moreover, declarations and actions that go beyond the claim that “no foundation therefore remains for any theory or practice that leads to discrimination between [individuals] or people... so far as their human dignity and the rights flowing from it are concerned” needs to be made.¹¹⁵

The path towards this could begin with the prophetic call of *Laudato Si'* clearly in mind. The language of integral ecology so effectively deployed by Pope Francis with regard to “our common home” can also be used to confront directly the ideology of racism and the oppression it continues to create in the world.¹¹⁶ Just as the planet suffers under “the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her,” so to have we through our racist oppression of our sisters and brothers “come to see ourselves as [their] lords and masters, entitled to plunder [them] at will.”¹¹⁷ All of the issues Pope Francis calls our attention to: environmental pollution, climate change, water maldistribution, biodiversity losses, social breakdown, and global inequality, can be attributed not just to the way our capitalist systems of economics perpetuate our misbegotten mastery of the natural world, but

¹¹⁴ Vatican II, *Nostra aetate* (October 28, 1965), 4, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html (hereafter cited as *NA*).

¹¹⁵ *NA*, 5.

¹¹⁶ *LS*, 1.

¹¹⁷ *LS*, 2.

also to the fundamental racist ideology that governs the maldistribution and exploitation of resources. There are reasons why our “international political responses have been” weak, that our “politics are subject to technology and finance,” that “the most one can expect is superficial rhetoric, sporadic acts of philanthropy and perfunctory expressions of concern.”¹¹⁸ The language and theology we employ to overcome the issues of environmental crisis must also become those that we employ to overcome the racism that is at the heart of the modern world economy.

When we look at the environmental crisis through the lens of a human dignity informed by the foot of the cross, and how that image echoes the Afro-American experience of chattel slavery and all of its afterlives, we can see this as the key to addressing these global issues. Imagine the gospel of creation applied to an analysis of racism in the way this encyclical applies it towards the exploitation of our common home. Imagine how an affirmation of how “human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbor, and with the earth itself,” when applied to racist ideology, would lead us to reimagine what human dignity means.¹¹⁹ Imagine a similar assertion that “nowadays we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God’s image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures” also explicitly includes other human beings.¹²⁰ A call to bring an end to prejudice and discrimination is not the same as a call to reject dominion and absolute domination, claims racist ideology routinely makes. Imagine genuinely accepting that “everything is interconnected, and that genuine care for our own lives and our relationships with nature is inseparable from fraternity, justice and faithfulness to others” and

¹¹⁸ *LS*, 54.

¹¹⁹ *LS*, 66.

¹²⁰ *LS*, 67.

applying that insight to reforming political and economic structures that still integrate racist ideology into the way they function.¹²¹

The entire section on an integral ecology could be recomposed as an integral humanism that seeks the liberation of all from the oppression of racism. The questions of our technological and financial exploitation of nature (and of each other) can only be rightly understood when we become aware of the deep racist ideology that informs the development and distribution of technology and finance. So many of the issues Pope Francis raises, including institutional ineffectiveness, consumerist values and practices, and the dysfunctional life in our cities, including extreme poverty, inadequate housing, and disrespect for human life, all have their modern roots in racist ideologies of exploitation and oppression.¹²² They cannot be solved without an equally forceful address to these roots. The common good and intergenerational justice, all dimensions of human life that are deeply affected by structural racism, cannot be effectively addressed if we leave the question of racism at the level of individual (and even social) sinfulness and conversion.¹²³ It will take the kind of political and economic reform Pope Francis calls for with regard to the environment: moving beyond a political economy driven by profit above all else, beyond reducing all decisions to an economic cost benefit analysis, and enlarging our imaginations concerning what “protecting the environment and creating more sources of employment” can mean.¹²⁴ What would “a politics which is far-sighted and capable of a new, integral and interdisciplinary approach to handling the different aspects of the crisis” be if not one grounded in an anti-racist language that addresses the roots of all these issues?¹²⁵

¹²¹ *LS*, 70.

¹²² *LS*, 137-55.

¹²³ *LS*, 156-62.

¹²⁴ *LS*, 192.

¹²⁵ *LS*, 197.

Pope Francis ends the encyclical with a reflection of the Eucharist, on Mary, and on the Trinity, one that is beautifully spiritual and mystical.¹²⁶ What if that reflection was grounded in the images of Holy Week: the last supper, the crucifixion, and the resurrection, of heaven and earth being joined not only in the Eucharist but in the cross. He calls forth the memory of Mary: “her pierced heart mourned the death of Jesus, so now she grieves for the sufferings of the crucified poor and for the creatures of this world laid waste by human power.”¹²⁷ Imagine this powerful image turned towards all who have suffered from racist ideology and its oppression, a racism that has been central to the exploitation of the world, natural as well as human. Imagine it calling for concrete political and economic reforms that include reparations for injustice, restoration of stolen wealth, and reconstruction of inequitable political structures. The ecological language of environmental justice can become the anti-racist language of human justice. We have the words, we have the tools, we have the tradition; all we are lacking is the will.

Conclusion

When we take seriously the emerging scientific and intellectual understanding that racism precedes “race,” that racial categories are ungrounded in biological and genetic reality, and that any use of the terms of racial categorization, primarily the original categories of “black” and “white,” are always already tainted by the destructive uses they have justified, we are presented with a great challenge, linguistically, philosophically, politically, and theologically. This challenge thus forces us to reconsider the way we have spoken and written about racism, to find

¹²⁶ *LS*, 236-41.

¹²⁷ *LS*, 241.

ways to name the radical evil and sin of racism without falling back into the same racist constructions in order to describe what has happened and continues to happen. This challenge forces us to recognize how so many of our past writings in the Catholic social tradition, both in terms of magisterial teaching and in terms of theological thought, have inadvertently replicated and reinforced these racial categories and divisions, leaving us to time and again repeat the same arguments, make the same reforms, and witness the same reversals of progress we have witnessed before. We have to find a way forward that does not repeat the mistakes of the past, that develops a renewed language that expresses a deeply anti-racist theological position, and that elevates the church's position against the radical evil and sin of racism to the highest of its social concerns.

We can do so by recapturing several moments in our past discourse and combining them in new ways to create new paths. We can begin by rooting our language in the concrete historical experience of peoples instead of abstractions: the experience of enslavement, the creation of the ideology of racism, the continued oppression of those categorized as inferior by this experience and this ideology, people of African ancestry, darker skin, and centuries of stigmatization. We can find the moments of clarity in our recent tradition that spoke most directly to the radical evil and sin of racism, such as “Brothers and Sister to Us” and “What We Have Seen and Heard,” where for the first and only time the teaching authority of church called out racism for its deep sinfulness and attempted, despite the documents' limitations, to make the struggle against racism a top priority for the church in the United States. We can find powerful voices among Christian theologians who call us to recognize our universal humanity while also showing us the ways we continue to deny human dignity and full humanity to so many others. James Cone and Kelly Brown Douglas from the Protestant tradition, and Bryan Massingale and

M. Shawn Copeland from the Catholic tradition, among so many others who have tried to light the way, all speak to a reimagined theology of human dignity that draws from the experience of the enslaved and their descendants to reveal how God shows us what it means to be truly human, recognizing that those who suffer from the sin of racism are truly the people of God, representative in the modern world of those who are outcast, betrayed, and despised, and to whom God's salvation is offered first and foremost.

We can do this by bringing all of this to the foot of the cross, to the place where the revelation of the divine in darkness and suffering, in the shadowed faces of Mary and the other women gathered there, in the agony of Jesus in his death for all us, is shown most clearly. When we view our theology of human dignity, our *Imago Dei*, through the scene of the crucifixion, in the dark-hued tones of these people and this moment, we can turn this vision towards our tradition and reinterpret this tradition in this likeness. We can reimagine an anti-racist theological language and argument that will bring clarity to the problems we continue to face, that will keep us from making the repeated mistakes of the past in our on-again, off-again attention to the radical evil and sin of racism, and that can bring to bear the weight of our Christian tradition against this most constant and serious of evils. So many of the contemporary world's crises are rooted in the fundamental nature of racist ideology in the creation of modernity, that to fail to address this evil at the root of our suffering is to condemn ourselves to repeating it time and again. The radical inbreaking of divinity into history that the incarnation, the crucifixion, and the resurrection continue to be, the promise of liberation from enslavement and the restoration of our full human dignity that Jesus Christ is, calls us to fully grasp the theological, political, and ideological work that the final elimination of racism from our world will require, with an

attention and focus driven by that moment when Jesus offered his entire self for the salvation of the world.

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