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Praying While White: Preparing the Soil for the Work of Antiracism

by

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ABSTRACT

Racism, White supremacy, and Whiteness are deeply ingrained in U.S. society and in our U.S. Catholic Church. White U.S. Catholics are infected with these sins, even our prayer can be tainted. We, who continue to benefit from White privilege and who are descendants of those who created White supremacy, are responsible for bringing an end to its reign with God's help. In order to heal, we must recognize our sin and repent. Repentance is deeply rooted in our tradition and is a necessary spiritual practice for White U.S. Catholics to prepare the soil for individual, communal, and systemic changes to create the Beloved Community and advance the reign of God.

To Justin, Oscar, and Mariela

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PROLOGUE

Writing this paper has been the greatest challenge of my academic career. At every turn I question myself. What can my voice, the voice of a White straight cisgendered non-disabled neurotypical 5th generation U.S. citizen Roman Catholic woman with ancestors from a variety of countries in Western Europe, a voice that historically and currently has had the potential to inflict so much violence against people of color,¹ contribute to this conversation? My voice shakes, my palms sweat as I type this. But I feel the Holy Spirit nudging me, “if not you, who?”

INTRODUCTION

As Instagram and Twitter explode with expressions of intended solidarity following the murder of another Black body, many White U.S. Christians expressed their “thoughts and prayers” for the victims and the families of the deceased and for Black people more broadly. Many White Christian individuals and Christian institutions professed support for antiracism in the summer of 2020. Some took to the streets to protest or posted black squares on their social media pages or read books and joined discussion groups. But much of the awakening to racial injustice was short-lived; much of the fervor has subsided. The conversion to antiracism is not instantaneous but rather is a practice for most White Catholics. As in the Parable of the Sower, the seed of antiracism doesn’t always fall on fertile soil where it can take root and bear fruit. Some White Christians deny the idea of racism all together; some believe that racism isn’t the problem that it once was; others acknowledge racism but claim to be too overwhelmed to do anything about it or do not know where to begin; still others dive into “doing something” to fix

¹ Bryan Massingale, “The assumptions of white privilege and what we can do about it: Amy Cooper knew exactly what she was doing. We all do. And that’s the problem,” *National Catholic Reporter*, June 1, 2020, <https://www.ncronline.org/opinion/guest-voices/assumptions-white-privilege-and-what-we-can-do-about-it>. See also James H. Cone’s discussion of the brutal murder of Emmet Till after accusations that he “whistled at a white woman,” *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 65-69.

racism. In the spectrum between “thoughts and prayers” and fantasies of overthrowing the government, where should White Christians begin, and what can sustain their journey of antiracism? How can we create soil where the seed can take root, survive, and bear fruit?

Eliminating racism and White supremacy requires massive social and systemic change, and as an initial but ongoing step, White people, communities, and institutions must recognize their own role and responsibility in creating and sustaining injustice. We cannot rest on our self-perceived kindness or our beliefs that we have good intentions, are not racist, are progressive, or are enlightened already. We cannot limit our involvement to “thoughts and prayers” for those who are affected by racism. White U.S. Catholics are infected with the sin of White supremacy, even our prayer can be tainted. In order to heal, we must acknowledge our sin and repent. Repentance is a necessary spiritual practice for White Catholics to prepare the soil for individual, communal, and systemic changes to co-create the Beloved Community and advance the reign of God.

The first step is recognition of racism, Whiteness, and White supremacy. I will briefly discuss several reasons why recognition can be difficult. Next, I will discuss problems with prayer and how prayer can perpetuate White supremacy. Finally, I will discuss repentance and how repentance can both help one to recognize racism and White supremacy and how repentance is an initial and ongoing practice in healing ourselves and our institutions. Our prayer for antiracism must begin with repentance. Because of the perspective I bring to this topic, my intended audience is White U.S. Catholics both lay and clergy. However, as will be discussed below, because Whiteness is beyond skin color,² all are welcome to consider this material.

² Willie James Jennings, “Can White People Be Saved?” in *Can “White” People Be Saved?: Triangulating Race, Theology, and Mission*, ed. Love L. Sechrest, Johnny Ramirez-Johnson, and Amos Yong (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 28-29.

A note about language: I use the term “people of color” or “siblings of color” rather than non-White in an attempt to decenter Whiteness, but I would like to acknowledge that language is imperfect, and “people of color” does not adequately account for the multitude of identities to whom I am referring. While this paper focuses primarily on anti-Black racism because of the devastating history and lasting effects of chattel slavery in the U.S., White supremacy damages all races of people and White people must repent for all forms of racism. Finally, I have chosen to capitalize both “Black” and “White” throughout this paper. Although the capitalization of “Black” has become more common, most media outlets and publishers continue to keep “White” lower case. Because one of my arguments is that we fail to see Whiteness, I wanted Whiteness to be noticeable.

Definitions

To begin, we must first consider some frequently used terms that require definition. **Race**, “as it is now generally accepted by scientists, is not a biological reality but rather reflects the cultural and social underpinnings originally used to justify slavery and that live on in myriad of ways.”³ Race is a “political and social construct that is fluid [and] can change over time, place and context.”⁴ It is often used to “identify a group of people who share a collective identity on

³ Beth Baker, “Race and Biology,” *Bioscience* 71, no. 2 (February 2021), 121.

⁴ Ruben Rosario Rodríguez, *Racism and God-Talk: A Latino/a Perspective* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 45-46.

the basis of physical markers...and/or analogous social locations.”⁵ Ta-Nehisi Coates elucidates that “race is the child of racism, not the father.”⁶

Racism is a “system of oppression for social purpose.” Many have referred to racism as America’s original sin.⁷ It is more than individual prejudices or biases, although that is part of it. “The heart of racism was and is economic, though its roots and results are also deeply cultural psychological, sexual,...religious, and, of course, political.”⁸ The U.S. Bishops and Pope Francis have called out racism as a sin.⁹ Bryan Massingale identifies racism as “a soul sickness...a profound warping of the human spirit that enables human beings to create communities of callous indifference toward their darker sisters and brothers.”¹⁰ Massingale says it is more than “a few bad apples;” racism is “in the soil.”¹¹ It can be unconscious and absorbed “almost by osmosis...through the everyday process of socialization and learning what it means to be an ‘American.’”¹² Indeed, “most whites are unaware of how their identity is shaped” by racial

⁵ Rodríguez, *Racism and God Talk*, 25.

⁶ Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 8.

⁷ Jim Wallis, “America’s Original Sin: The Legacy of White Racism, *Crosscurrents* 57, no. 2 (2007): 197-202.

⁸ Wallis, “America’s Original Sin,” 198.

⁹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Brothers and Sisters to Us* (1979), <https://www.usccb.org/committees/african-american-affairs/brothers-and-sisters-us>. Elisabetta Povoledo and Christine Hauser, “Pope Francis Calls Unrest in U.S. ‘Disturbing,’” *NYTimes*, June 3, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/03/us/protests-pope-francis-obama-justin-trudeau-george-bush.html>.

¹⁰ Massingale, “The Assumptions of White Privilege.”

¹¹ Elizabeth Sweeny Block, “White Privilege and the Erroneous Conscience: Rethinking Moral Culpability and Ignorance,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 39, no. 2 (2019), 367.

¹² Bryan Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 27.

consciousness.¹³ Ruben Rosario Rodríguez provides the most comprehensive definition that I will rely upon throughout this paper:

Racism is distinguished by the systemic imposition of ethnocentrism or racial prejudice by one social group upon social structures and cultural practices that not only foster racial discrimination but also produce long-term racial disadvantage for another social group. By this definition, whenever one social group exercises political power over against another group with the intention of advancing its own political advantage and cultural domination while limiting the political, economic, and cultural opportunities of the other, we have an instance of racism.¹⁴

White supremacy “creates and sustains institutions and practices that promote the social, political, and economic dominance of Whites and the oppression of people of Color.” White supremacy “is a specific and historically particular form of racism, which in turn refers to a general set of practices and beliefs embedded in institutions that promote a hierarchical ordering of racial groups from best to worst...[it] is the ideology that centers whiteness.” Racism and White supremacy are ideologies that operate in conjunction with one another.¹⁵ “White supremacy is a disturbing interior disease, a malformed consciousness that enables White people not to care for those who don’t look like them.”¹⁶

Whiteness “orders global systems of dominance in favor of Whites” these systems “have in turn nurtured racism, White supremacy, and patriarchy.” Whiteness is an “idolatrous way of being in the world at its core” and requires many to confront “[t]he degree to which one’s own praxis and worldview yearns for or participates in whiteness.”¹⁷ “To speak of Whiteness is not to

¹³ Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, 26.

¹⁴ Rodríguez, *Racism and God-Talk*, 26.

¹⁵ Johnny Ramírez-Johnson and Love L. Sechrest, “Introduction, Race and Missiology in Global Perspective,” in *Can “White” People be Saved?: Triangulating Race, Theology, and Mission*, ed. Love L. Sechrest, Johnny Ramírez-Johnson, and Amos Yong (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 13.

¹⁶ Massingale, “The Assumptions of White Privilege.”

¹⁷ Ramírez-Johnson and Sechrest, “Introduction, Race and Missiology,” 12.

speak of particular people but of people caught up... in a deformed formation toward maturity [of the world].”¹⁸ In a sermon on Exodus 33:12-23, Senator Reverend Rafael Warnock’s description of Pharoah alluded to Whiteness. He said, “Pharoah is not so much a person” as a “mindset” and an “orientation” that can be internalized by a person of any race. “Pharoah is the comfort you have with the bad you know.”¹⁹

Privilege is “unearned advantage derived from one’s group membership, and privilege based on race is embedded in the foundation of the United States.”²⁰ In *White Christian Privilege*, Khyati Joshi recommends that rather than “some people giving up privilege, or others seizing it...we should be pursuing and enjoying the absence of privilege, replacing it with opportunity, dignity and safety that are equally available to all...where all may feel included and live freely with all of our histories, ancestries, and beliefs respected.”²¹ White people are often “taught about racism as something which puts others at a disadvantage, but [are] taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, White privilege, which puts me at an advantage.” Peggy McIntosh describes White privilege as “an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious.”²²

Antiracism is the practice of actively identifying and opposing racism; it is a “powerful collection of policies that lead to racial equity and justice and that are substantiated by ideas of

¹⁸ Jennings, “Can White People Be Saved?” 28-29.

¹⁹ Raphael Warnock, “Faith from a Rearview Mirror” (sermon, Second Baptist Church, Santa Ana, CA April 16, 2023), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hnpPdndbJEY>.

²⁰ L. Taylor Phillips and Brian S. Lowery, “Herd Invisibility: The Psychology of Racial Privilege,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 27, no. 3 (June 2018), 156 – 157.

²¹ Khyati Y. Joshi, *White Christian Privilege: The Illusion of Religious Equality in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 225.

²² Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work In Women’s Studies,” *Working Paper* 189, Wellesley Centers for Women (1988).

racial equity.”²³ The goal of antiracism is to “actively change policies, behaviors, and beliefs that perpetuate racist ideas and actions”²⁴ and effects. “Antiracism recognizes that there are no traits inherent within a racial group solely because of the color of their skin. Antiracism forces us to analyze the role that institutions and systems play in the racial inequalities we see, rather than assign the blame to entire racial groups and their ‘behavioral differences’ for those inequities.”²⁵ In his book, *The Spiritual Work of Racial Justice*, Patrick Saint-Jean posits that “antiracism is not an optional aspect of the spiritual life, but rather that it is essential to becoming all that God calls us to be...engaging in antiracist work is not about perfection but rather a constant quest for grace to see each other as Christ sees us.”²⁶

Repentance is “about amends, but also about transformation.”²⁷ The Jewish tradition of repentance as described by the 12th century philosopher Maimonides is the following: a process of naming and owning the harm we have caused or are otherwise responsible for, starting to change, accepting consequences and providing restitution, apologizing, and making different choices.²⁸ For Christians, repentance is a response to sin and includes a conversion, a *metanoia*. Christian Scripture calls us to “repent and turn to God.”²⁹

²³ Ibram Kendi, *How to be an Antiracist* (New York: One World, 2019), 26.

²⁴ Kendi, *How to be an Antiracist*, 29.

²⁵ National League of Cities, “What does it mean to be antiracist,” <https://www.nlc.org/article/2020/07/21/what-does-it-mean-to-be-an-anti-racist/>.

²⁶ Patrick Saint-Jean, *The Spiritual work of Racial Justice: A Month of Meditations with Ignatius of Loyola* (Vestal, NY: Anamchara Books, 2021), 12.

²⁷ Dayna Ruttenberg, *On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2022), 27.

²⁸ Ruttenberg, *On Repentance and Repair*, 27.

²⁹ Acts 3:19 (New Revised Standard Version).

White supremacy and racism are sins. “Sin is not simply wrongdoing that calls for punishment; sin is rooted in an embraced falsehood that cannot be sustained. It is the attempt to live without God.”³⁰ We are living the falsehood and idolatry of White supremacy. As God created in the beginning but also with the end in mind,³¹ so too we who continue to benefit from and are descendants of those who created White supremacy are responsible for bringing an end to its reign with God’s help. In response to the question: What will we do in the face of such sin and evil? We look to the words of Emilie Townes: “We begin with ourselves.”³² Because Whiteness and White supremacy are so deeply ingrained in our culture and our beings and our religion, even those who are committed to eradicating it risk perpetuating it if they do not heal from White supremacy and repent from the sin of racism. This evil even infects our prayer. Spiritual practices and prayer are essential aspects of the lives of Christians. So, too, they are essential in combatting racism, but prayer alone is not enough and could in fact create more damage. Our prayer and our practice must take the posture of repentance in order to begin the process of actively dismantling this institution that is the original sin of our nation. White Christians in the United States must include practices to unpack and heal our own complicity in White supremacy by repenting, lamenting, and sitting in the ashes of our sin³³ in order to authentically live out the Gospel and work for racial justice. If we don’t do the intrapersonal and

³⁰ Stephen Westerholm, “Repentance and Forgiveness: Biblical Foundations,” in *Repentance and Forgiveness*, ed. Matthew E. Burdette and Austin Victor Lee (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2020), 2.

³¹ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 15th anniv. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 87.

³² Emilie Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 159.

³³ Job 2:8 “Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes” performing rituals of mourning; Jonah 3:6 “When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes” performing customs of mourning and repentance.

communal work of deep authentic repentance and lament, we continue to live and grow in the soil of racism.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

I have chosen three theologians to provide a roadmap of recent scholarship regarding the interrelation of White supremacy and racism in Christianity. Their work lays out the parallel path of colonialism and the creation of race as well as White supremacy's relation to Christian supremacy; the complicity of the Catholic Church in the advancement of racism; and establishes the foundation that our Christian imaginations are deformed by this history.

As early as Frederick Douglass' autobiography published in 1845,³⁴ and especially since James H. Cone introduced Black Liberation Theology³⁵ in the late 1960s much has been written about racism in Christianity. More recently, Jeannine Hill Fletcher, Bryan Massingale, and Willie James Jennings have published books that lay foundations for understanding the existence of racism and White supremacy in the U.S. and also how the institutions of Christianity and racism and White supremacy are intimately intertwined in the U.S. Massingale lays out an ethical argument and actions the Catholic Church and theologians can take in the present moment to rectify racism. Hill Fletcher unpacks the theological challenges presented by such supremacy. Jennings powerfully traces how Christian supersessionism (the idea that the Christian Church superseded or took the place of Israel, the Jewish people, "in the mind and heart of God"³⁶) of the earliest church fed "colonialism [that] established ways of life that drove

³⁴ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845; repr., Mineola, NY: Dover, 1995).

³⁵ James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 50th anniv. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2020).

³⁶ Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 32.

an abiding wedge between the land and peoples....unrelenting assimilation,...racial identities”³⁷
and ultimately a “Christian social imagination that is diseased and disfigured.”³⁸

The Sin of White Supremacy

In *The Sin of White Supremacy*, Jeannine Hill Fletcher traces the history of White supremacy from the Catholic Church’s imperialist advances based on the belief that there was “no salvation outside the church”³⁹ to the later institutionalization of slavery based on the belief that slavery was biblically warranted in the U.S. because it would bring salvation to “heathens.”⁴⁰ Hill Fletcher states that “White Christians built America as a White Christian nation, mobilizing the witness of the Creator to cram and crowd non-Christian, non-White peoples onto lands ‘reserved’ for them.”⁴¹ Christian theologians, professors and ministers created and advanced the basis of the ideology for White Christian supremacy. She provides examples of White Catholic efforts to maintain and advance the racial hierarchy in housing and education that began with redlining.⁴² Although Christians proclaim a global vision that provides well-being for all, White Christians are taught to view their well-being as blessings from God which of course ignores the disparate access to resources needed for a full human life that results from the structural reality of White supremacy that arose out of the sins of the past and is maintained by the sins of the present. Hill Fletcher challenges White Christians and especially White Christian theologians to

³⁷ Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 292.

³⁸ Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 293.

³⁹ Jeannine Hill Fletcher, *The Sin of White Supremacy: Christianity, Racism, & Religious Diversity in America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), 5-6.

⁴⁰ Hill Fletcher, *The Sin of White Supremacy*, 10-11.

⁴¹ Hill Fletcher, *The Sin of White Supremacy*, 53.

⁴² Hill Fletcher, *The Sin of White Supremacy*, 68.

embrace God’s call to love and be in right relationship with others and with God. She acknowledges the importance of self-reflection and prayer but also cautions against the potential reproduction of privilege due to blind spots that individual practice risks.⁴³ She repeats multiple times that “Christian love is not easy,”⁴⁴ but it is exactly what we are called to do and be.

Racial Justice and the Catholic Church

Racial Justice and the Catholic Church by Bryan M. Massingale was published 7 years before Hill Fletcher’s book and provides a detailed primer of racism in the U.S. and explains the systemic and cultural nature of racism at a time before the term “systemic racism” had become more commonly used, especially for White people in the U.S. Massingale’s work analyzes the scant and shallow Catholic Social Teaching on racism in U.S. history since the mid-20th century. Quoting Brother Joseph Davis, then executive director of the National Office of Black Catholics in 1975, he notes that “[i]n analyzing the church’s own documents, it is obvious that the church has always perceived...its primary constituency as the white, European immigrant community.”⁴⁵ Massingale calls out the essential role that the Catholic Church can play in seeking racial justice and the necessity of conversion within the church, while recognizing the difficulty of this task. Massingale states that “*people are by and large not inclined towards...racial reconciliation unless they can see their own life-stories as part of a larger theological narrative.*”⁴⁶ Massingale draws on the work of legal and social justice scholar, Eric Yamamoto, who identifies a type of repentance through recognition, responsibility,

⁴³ Hill Fletcher, *The Sin of White Supremacy*, 164.

⁴⁴ Hill Fletcher, *The Sin of White Supremacy*, 172.

⁴⁵ Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, 63.

⁴⁶ Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, 85.

reconstruction, and reparation as the four dimensions required for interracial justice.⁴⁷

Massingale shows how our faith should also draw from these concepts, but he recognizes the limitations of believing we can solve social problems exclusively through rational and intellectual means and “hard work.” Rather we need a response that transcends logic and reason and Massingale proposes “*lament*, which both stems from and leads to deep compassion.”⁴⁸

Truth-telling, affirmative redress, lament and compassion, conversion, baptism, eucharist and confession of faith are all resources and practices familiar to the Catholic faith and applicable to the quest for racial justice.⁴⁹

The Christian Imagination

In his book, *The Christian Imagination*, Willie James Jennings takes the necessary first step to prepare the soil for reconciliation (and I would argue, first repentance) when he “articulate[s] the profound deformities of Christian intimacy and identity in modernity.” Indeed, he recognizes that “it is not at all clear that most Christians are ready to imagine reconciliation.”⁵⁰ Jennings asks the fundamental question of why the Christian faith has failed to imagine and enact a way of belonging that is stronger than racial belonging? He states that “structural racism is bound to the structure of the Christian reality.”⁵¹ Jennings describes a “central theological distortion” that was created through supersessionism,⁵² when the early

⁴⁷ Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, 97.

⁴⁸ Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, 104-105.

⁴⁹ Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, 97 – 129.

⁵⁰ Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 10.

⁵¹ Willie James Jennings, “Lecture on *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*,” Richard L. Evans Chair of Religious Understanding, Brigham Young University (Provo, UT, December 4, 2020), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6vohrCo5ntQ>.

⁵² Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 32.

Christian Church retold the story and replaced Israel as God's chosen people. "European Christians reconfigured...a vision of Israel's election."⁵³ In this new vision Europeans filled the "conceptual vacuum" created when Israel was jettisoned from the "calculus of the formation of Christian life."⁵⁴ The European body, the White body became the "compass marking divine election...a discerning body, able to detect holy effects and saving grace."⁵⁵ The European Christian body was centered and became normative.

Because Christianity has not "reckoned with the ramifications of colonialism" and the resulting racism in any substantial way, there is a "massive gap in [the] conceptual imagination."⁵⁶ Jennings envisions a "Christianity born out of the colonialist wound, speaking to itself in its global reality, pressing deeply inside the miracle of its existence, battered, bruised, marginalized, yet believing, loving Christian."⁵⁷ Jennings imagines a Christian identity that embodies "the cunning of reason [and] the power of love that constantly gestures toward joining, toward the desire to hear, to know, to embrace"⁵⁸ - a Christian identity where everyone deeply and intimately belongs. He describes the "anatomy of a diseased [Christian] imagination"⁵⁹ through three themes: (1) displacement, (2) translation, and (3) intimacy.

⁵³ Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 33.

⁵⁴ Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 33.

⁵⁵ Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 33-34.

⁵⁶ Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 291.

⁵⁷ Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 291.

⁵⁸ Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 291.

⁵⁹ Jennings, "Lecture on *The Christian Imagination*."

Displacement

Displacement includes the displacement of people through the African diaspora created by enslavement; displacement of stories; and “naturalizing and normalizing” such displacement. The Christian doctrines of providence and creation were both used to justify the slave trade. Colonizers saw themselves as doing God’s work through slavery and the taking of land because they were (1) bringing sinners to salvation through the Gospel, thus forcing the theological identity of White European Christians on African and Indigenous peoples; and (2) bringing the land to maturation. These same patterns of thinking continued on into the expansion of the West and White Christian settlers made no space for an understanding of God or creation that differed from their own beliefs.

Land was viewed as a commodified resource for the enjoyment of the colonizers. Based on White Christian understandings of truth, goodness, and beauty, colonizers attributed value to bodies depending on where those bodies fell on a spectrum from European to African. White Christian experience and belief were normative. Jennings traces this tendency of replacement and supersessionism back to the earliest Christians who crafted the story and then belief that God had replaced the people of Israel with Christians. Christians centered themselves in theology. They replaced Israel’s story with their own. Jennings highlights that there is “something essential to being a Christian that is lost with this displacement.” Jennings raises questions of salvation that remain relevant today. If the White Christian settlers believed that they were bringing salvation to heathens, when we pray today are we maintaining that space of the White savior? White colonists used their understanding of truth, goodness and beauty to create systems of

government and culture. So, too, have the church and theologians created systems of doctrine and belief. The colonists had one singular view toward and definition of salvation.⁶⁰

Indeed, while not addressed by Jennings, it should be noted that for Catholics, the expansion West was not simply the opposition between Christianity and non-Christians. Rather, Catholic history must reckon with the tension between the White Catholicism of the European settlers and the Catholicism of Indigenous and Latinx peoples. This tension remains visible today, “[b]rownness has been met by the institutional church in ways that range from outright hostility to embarrassment to multiple gradations of inclusion.”⁶¹ For example, in the late 19th century White Catholic clergy pushed to standardize Catholic ritual and devotion to align with Roman tradition and forbade Mexican Catholics from practicing traditions that were seen as “too boisterous and indecorous.”⁶² Willa Cather’s novel *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, which was lauded by White Catholics, presents the French-American bishop as “a saintly and civilizing force whose heroic efforts rescued deluded New Mexican Catholics from his antagonist” - native New Mexican priest Antonio José Martínez. “Her plot line leaves no doubt that the imposition of U.S. rule and new religious leadership in New Mexico and in the greater Southwest was both a sacred duty and a moral imperative.”⁶³ White rule and White religion were seen everywhere as divinely warranted.

Jennings shows that modern ideas of Whiteness and race emerged as the White settler identity was forced on Indigenous people, an identity that was held completely on the body. Any

⁶⁰ Jennings, “Lecture on *The Christian Imagination*.”

⁶¹ Kristy Nabhan-Warren, “Brown Catholicism and Brown America,” *American Catholic Studies* 127, no. 3 (2016), 23.

⁶² Timothy Matovina, “Remapping American Catholicism,” in *Remapping the History of Catholicism in the United States*, edited by David J. Entres (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2017), 20.

⁶³ Matovina, “Remapping American Catholicism,” 22.

aspect of identity that was bound up in relationship with the land was denied. Jennings sees modern ideas of race as resulting from this “contorted Christian vision” that places race and private property as “two sides of the same coin.” Whiteness became the organizing principle – the way of “seeing the world and...being in the world.” Jennings proposes a possible way forward if Christians decenter themselves and learn and understand their story as one of “gentile inclusion and...what it means to enter from outside to inside.”⁶⁴ He highlights the importance of place, the way communities are built, and God’s role as Creator. The powerful write the story, the powerful are centered in the story and use the Earth for their advantage rather than the creation of God’s reign. The settlers saw land as something to be controlled and owned – so too they saw bodies with those connections the same way - it is a short jump from one aspect of God’s creation to another. God is reduced from mystery to an ally of the powerful. Creation is limited as a commodity. Do many still have an idea of theological anthropology along this spectrum? The centering of White bodies remains normative in Christianity and the work of Jennings, M. Shawn Copeland and others challenges this normativity.

Translation

With “translation” Jennings asks what it means for “Christians to enter the lives of others,” to be decentered and step away from the imperial role of teacher and constant evaluator and rather become learner. Indigenous people were treated as though they were guests in the home of White settlers. Christian European translation of the Bible and the world defined the good, the true, and the beautiful. Jennings states that translation needs to be mutual, we “need to translate our lives to one another.” Jennings proposes three ways to move forward: (1) humility that learning is fundamental to Christian witness, as demonstrated in the incarnation of Jesus

⁶⁴ Jennings, “Lecture on *The Christian Imagination*.”

who learned before he taught; (2) God calls us to expand our lives and learn to “adapt to and adopt other ways of life” - “reverse” assimilate; and (3) relearning translation through the lens of the “slivers and fragments” that are not Whiteness.⁶⁵

Intimacy

Jennings writes of the “distorted cultural intimacy in the modern West” originating out of slaveholding society where “the interior life of white flesh...had to be the slaves’ most central concern. For any slave living in close proximity to white flesh, life itself depended on understanding and immediately discerning every mood, manner, and motive of white people.”⁶⁶ Intimacy became one-sided and nonreciprocal, and in many ways this dynamic continues in modern day where White rage remains a danger to bodies of color.⁶⁷ A wholesome intimacy calls us to work against a mentality of segregation and control of geographic space. Rather we are called to “yield to the spirit that is always guiding us toward others.” This “spiritual discipline allows God to reshape what is comfortable and normal.”⁶⁸ Recognizing, lamenting, and repenting for racism require us to question the normative and also sit in discomfort. Repentance can open the door to wholesome intimacy.

Through his discussion of displacement Jennings shows how the Christian imagination began its deformation and how White Christians began to lose sight of the systems of oppression they were creating. Displacement limits and skews the horizon of vision. Rather than allowing the beauty, truth, and goodness of God’s creation - the new land and new people - to expand the

⁶⁵ Jennings, “Lecture on *The Christian Imagination*.”

⁶⁶ Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 242.

⁶⁷ Resmaa Menakem, *The Quaking of America: An Embodied Guide to Navigating Our Nation’s Upheaval and Racial Reckoning* (Las Vegas: Central Recovery Press, 2022), 316 – 318.

⁶⁸ Jennings, “Lecture on *The Christian Imagination*.”

colonizers' horizon of understanding, land and people were seen through a singular purpose of utility: maturation for land and salvation for humans. Whiteness became the lens through which creation was seen. The colonizers could see nothing else. Rather than a bilateral translation, colonizers began to unilaterally translate the world through their lens of Whiteness. Likewise, intimacy in slaveholding society ran in one direction.

WHY CAN'T WE ALL SEE IT?

Although much has been written on the topic of racism, White supremacy, and the intersection with Christianity, especially in recent years, many still fail to recognize or accept its existence. Bodies, stories, and the truth have been displaced. Jennings speaks of the “disruption, even mutilation of the paths to wisdom necessary to live in the world.”⁶⁹ A translation must occur.

Invisibility of Sin – Invisibility of Whiteness

White supremacy is a sin, and it infects and fractures our entire society as well as our personal lives.⁷⁰ Elizabeth Johnson recognizes that “[b]rokenness and sin are everywhere...renewal is an ever-present need.”⁷¹ Sin itself is often unconscious and unrecognizable. The Gospels reflect that we “often do not realize we have sinned.”⁷² In fact, “we have a predisposition to *not* believe we are sinners.”⁷³ In order to understand our own sinfulness

⁶⁹ Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 58.

⁷⁰ Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Graham Hill, *Healing our Broken Humanity: Practices for Revitalizing our Church and Renewing the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 56.

⁷¹ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 135.

⁷² James F. Keenan, *A History of Catholic Theological Ethics* (New York: Paulist Press, 2022), 22.

⁷³ Keenan, *A History of Catholic Theological Ethics*, 25.

we need grace to “see ourselves as we actually are.”⁷⁴ Ignatian spirituality recognizes the need to ask for “graced illumination to do any serious self-examination” and understand where we have sinned.⁷⁵ Because sin is often hard to recognize, the sin of White supremacy can be especially hard to recognize because it is deeply embedded in the systems and beliefs we hold to be true.

In the face of sin, including the sin of racism, individuals, communities, churches and society “are called to repent, to turn around, to sin no more, to be converted.”⁷⁶ As an initial step sin must be identified. The sins of racism and White supremacy must be understood in our heads, our hearts, and our bodies both individually and collectively. Why, then, is it so hard for most people to recognize it as such? Because we may not be able to see it; we may not want to see it; and we have been taught and socialized not to see it. White identity is often invisible.⁷⁷ Jennings shows that “whiteness is a way of seeing the world, a way of being in the world and a way of organizing the world.”⁷⁸ Without going beneath the surface, we often unknowingly carry it with us. Because White supremacy ideology continues to empower and confer benefits, both subtle and obvious, on White Christians changing the way one shows up in the world could mean giving up that power and those benefits.

White European Christian settlers centered themselves as divinely preferred and charged with carrying out the Gospel and salvation through conquest and enslavement of land and people. Throughout history, laws and systems were put into place that continued to perpetuate this believed preference. Our country and our religion have been built on ideals of White and

⁷⁴ Keenan, *A History of Catholic Theological Ethics*, 24.

⁷⁵ Keenan, *A History of Catholic Theological Ethics*, 24, 25.

⁷⁶ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 9.

⁷⁷ Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 25.

⁷⁸ Jennings, “Lecture on *The Christian Imagination*.”

Christian supremacy. While generally not directly professed, this White-centered reality continues. Because it is so deeply ingrained in daily life and because of the privilege it affords White people, many refuse to look beyond the surface of their own believed reality. As Paolo Freire identifies, “discovering [one]self to be an oppressor may cause considerable anguish, but it does not necessarily lead to solidarity with the oppressed.”⁷⁹ Seeing oneself as an oppressor is generally not desirable. Further, because we are socialized in a culture of racism our ability to feel the pain of the oppressed is dulled. Sociologist Joe Feagin refers to this “sustained inability to relate to and understand the suffering of those who are oppressed” as “social alexithymia.” This emotional callousness is vital for the continuation of an unjust racialized society.⁸⁰

Social psychologists have written about “herd invisibility” in relation to racial privilege. Arguing that White people are motivated by “positive self-regard (*innocence motive*) or privileges associated with their group’s dominant status (*maintenance motive*)” and as a result engage in behaviors to hide their privilege thus making it invisible and protecting “both the privileges and the innocence of individual privileged actors.”⁸¹ In general, White people grow up without needing to acknowledge their Whiteness. We can distance ourselves from this identity. Further, “the segregation that characterizes Whites’ daily interactions also likely helps Whites disconnect...When enough individuals distance themselves from and deny the existence of racial advantages, invisibility emerges at the societal level.”⁸² Our living spaces have been configured to isolate us from one another.⁸³ Living communities and faith communities are often segregated

⁷⁹ Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968; repr., New York: Bloomsbury, 2000), 49.

⁸⁰ Massingale, *Racism and the Catholic Church*, 117.

⁸¹ Phillips and Lowery, “Herd Invisibility,” 156.

⁸² Phillips and Lowery, “Herd Invisibility,” 159.

⁸³ Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 294.

by race. White people can live much of their lives without ever interacting with people of color in a meaningful way. The displacement continues and there is little space for translation or intimacy.

“White supremacy is invisible to the majority of the dominant culture until allies name it and stand against it.”⁸⁴ This invisibility becomes so normalized that Whiteness and White supremacy become unconscious. Whiteness simply becomes what is and what is normal. Which makes it not only invisible, normal, and pervasive but also deeply entrenched. It is a constant and countercultural practice to see something that is invisible and to question something that has become normative. “To claim innocence, individual Whites would then have to actively dismantle privilege at individual, interpersonal, and societal levels.”⁸⁵ In other words, Whites would need to recognize Whiteness and White supremacy in themselves and in society and repent from their privilege.

Horizon and Scotosis

Bernard Lonergan describes the limits to our field of vision, our knowledge, and our interests as the “horizon” by which we see the world. Horizons can change based on one’s education, personal development, social background and environment, the era in which one lives,⁸⁶ or one’s race and gender. But, beyond the horizon there are blind spots or scotosis, things

⁸⁴ Barbara A. Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 151.

⁸⁵ Phillips and Lowery, “Herd Invisibility,” 160.

⁸⁶ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (1972; repr., Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 235, 236.

that cannot be seen.⁸⁷ With respect to White supremacy, White Christians individually and as a community are operating from a place of scotosis. Elizabeth Johnson draws from Lonergan in defining scotosis as a “hardening of the mind against unwanted wisdom.”⁸⁸ Lonergan recognized scotosis as an “unconscious process.”⁸⁹ We don’t want to believe that we are benefitting from privilege.⁹⁰ And thus we limit our horizon – perhaps both consciously and unconsciously.

Any particular group is prone to have a blind spot for insight that would reveal its well-being to be excessive or founded on distorted assumptions. The powerful tendency of such group bias is to exclude some fruitful ideas and to mutilate others by compromise. Scotosis is present when group interest limits intelligence...It is the refusal of insight as a function of group bias. The only remedy is conversion.⁹¹

Because White Americans’ horizon is limited by our race, it can be hard to see beyond our own privileged experience. While it would be nice to say that people “should” see it, we need an inbreaking – a wakeup call or experience that shifts our horizon. We need conversion. Conversion moves us into a new horizon and conversion generally must be continually renewed.⁹² Practices of repentance can lead to conversion.

87. Robert M. Doran, “What Does Bernard Lonergan Mean by ‘Conversion’?” Lecture at University of St. Michael’s College, Toronto, July 15, 2011, 3, <https://lonerganresource.com/pdf/lectures/What%20Does%20Bernard%20Lonergan%20Mean%20by%20Conversion.pdf>.

⁸⁸ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 13.

⁸⁹ Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (Longmans, 1957), 191.

⁹⁰ Peggy McIntosh wrote “White Privilege and Male Privilege,” where she lists 46 conditions that benefit most White people on account of their race. This study is often popularly reproduced in shorter form as “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” (1989).

⁹¹ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 13.

⁹² Laura Boysen-Aragon, “Lonergan’s Concept of Conversion: A Path to Antiracism,” *Say Something Theological* 6, no. 1 (2023), Article 5.

For many White people in the U.S., the murder of George Floyd by a White Minneapolis police officer offered a glaring example of the “distorted cultural intimacy in the modern West”⁹³ and functioned as a corrective lens to seeing racism in the U.S. It functioned as an inbreaking. As Floyd struggled for his life and breath and called for his mother for eight minutes much of the country watched the recording in horror. The first time I met with men incarcerated in a maximum security prison as a law student, my horizon shifted. These men were human beings created in the image and likeness of God. Not the “bad guys” of playing cops and robbers in my youth. They all had painful stories, they all needed healing. Once you know, you know, but it still takes peeling back many layers because White supremacy is so entrenched in our surroundings. The inbreaking is only the first step – there remains much more work to do after you begin to see the issue. Further “to recognize the human condition of vulnerability takes inner strength.”⁹⁴ This requires work. We must ask the questions, learn the answers, and “commit ourselves to the tangible practice of working alongside the most vulnerable in the re-articulation of justice and in the creation of a more just world.”⁹⁵ Repentance must lead us to commit ourselves and our communities to change and continue to do the work to change the world.

White Guilt

Guilt is one factor that impedes awareness. Cherie Brown, Executive Director of the National Coalition Building Institute calls guilt the “glue that holds prejudice in place.”⁹⁶ Feeling

⁹³ Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 242.

⁹⁴ Nancy Pineda-Madrid, “Standing at the Foot of the Cross,” in *Enfleshing Theology: Embodiment, Discipleship, and Politics in the Work of M. Shawn Copeland*, ed. Robert J. Rivera and Michele Saracino (Langham, MD: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2018), 123.

⁹⁵ Pineda-Madrid, “Standing at the Foot of the Cross,” 124.

⁹⁶ Lauren N. Nile and Jack C. Straton, “Beyond Guilt: How to Deal with Societal Racism,” *Multicultural Education* 10, no. 4 (2003), 6.

guilty about our own wrongdoing or our complicity in or advantage gained by our ancestors' wrongs can become an "emotional trap" that can keep many White folks "stuck in a lack of both understanding of and compassion for people of color."⁹⁷ An emphasis on White guilt can also focus the conversation on Whiteness again and distract from the experience or reality of the person of color.⁹⁸ White guilt has been characterized by three properties: "a focus of attention on the ingroup (i.e., White people), a sense of group responsibility for a transgression or disparity (e.g., contemporary or historical racial injustice), and an unpleasant feeling that people prefer to ally through restitution or avoidance."⁹⁹ While White guilt can be an impediment, studies suggest that "higher levels of White guilt are associated with a variety of prosocial outcomes" including as a "socially productive force in challenging White privilege and disrupting the racial status quo in the United States."¹⁰⁰ Those who balk at the work of antiracism because it makes them feel bad about themselves are called to do something with those feelings. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel reflects on the Hebrew prophets when he says that "in a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible."¹⁰¹ While surface levels of White guilt can become, as Audre Lorde describes, a "device to protect ignorance and the continuation of things the way they are, the ultimate protection for changelessness," digging into guilt can actually be productive and can lead to the "beginning of knowledge."¹⁰² Repentance can facilitate this deeper exploration of

⁹⁷ Nile and Straton, "Beyond Guilt," 3.

⁹⁸ Lisa B. Spanierman, "White Guilt in the Summer of Black Lives Matter," in *Guilt: A Force of Cultural Transformation*, ed. Katharina Von Kellenbach and Matthias Buschmeier (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 44.

⁹⁹ Spanierman, "White Guilt," 48.

¹⁰⁰ Spanierman, "White Guilt," 49.

¹⁰¹ Abraham Heschel, "Required: A Moral Ombudsman," in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 220.

¹⁰² Spanierman, "White Guilt," 49.

guilt. Repentance can make “guilt productive of change and provide performative pathways for atonement and expiation.”¹⁰³

The Stories We Tell

Enlightenment-inspired individualism is woven into many of the stories of success and the American dream. It teaches that with hard work anything can be achieved. “In American society, meritocracy is the favored principle of distributive justice and hierarchy-justifying ideology.”¹⁰⁴ When we believe in meritocracy and individualism, we often fail to recognize the forces of power and privilege. De Tocqueville warned in *Democracy in America* (1835), that this extreme focus on individualism would result in feeling that we “owe no man anything and hardly expect anything from anybody. They form the habit of thinking of themselves in isolation and imagine their whole destiny in their own hands.”¹⁰⁵ Additionally, these views fail to account for bias and also fail to recognize that many institutions from education to healthcare to corporations to the church were built as intentionally segregated systems.

The way history is taught and told in this country often whitewashes the story. The story is told from the vantage of the victor and those who wield worldly power – colonialists and White people. Stories of the middle-passage, slavery, Jim Crow, and the civil rights movement are often misleadingly diluted – focusing on the “heroes” but failing to acknowledge the villains. The powerful narrate history, stories of our country and our faith. Those stories are centered in Whiteness. And those who are marginalized or oppressed are not seen as fully created in God’s

¹⁰³ Katharina von Kellenbach, “Rituals of Repentance: Joshua Oppenheimer’s *The Act of Killing*,” in *Guilt: A Force of Cultural Transformation*, ed. Katharina Von Kellenbach and Matthias Buschmeier (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 185.

¹⁰⁴ Phillips and Lowery, “Herd Invisibility,” 157.

¹⁰⁵ Ruttenberg, *On Repentance and Repair*, 11.

image. The deformation of our imagination continues. Seeing Whiteness and White supremacy requires remembering all of our history, not just select parts or select perspectives. Emilie Townes recognizes that we cannot escape the influence of “the fantastic hegemonic imagination...by simply wishing to do so or thinking that our ontological perch exempts us.”¹⁰⁶ Rather than view evil as something that sits outside of us “we must answer remembering that we are in a world that we have helped to make.” Only through unknowing, unlearning, and relearning and knowing anew can we begin to break the stronghold of Whiteness. “Truth-telling is what the evil bred from the fantastic hegemonic imagination does *not* count on.”¹⁰⁷ Following Jennings’ proposal, can we decenter ourselves and our stories and have the humility to learn and relearn through the “slivers and fragments” that are not Whiteness?¹⁰⁸

Memory

Shaped by his experiences of World War II and its aftermath, J. B. Metz coined the term “dangerous memory.” Reflecting on this experience and the silence of the church with respect to the atrocities of war following the war he said, “there is no truth of history which one can defend, and no God in history who one can worship with one’s back turned to Auschwitz.”¹⁰⁹ So, too, with backs turned to colonialism, slavery, Jim Crow, the civil rights movement, there is no God in history we can worship. These memories have the potential to fuel the creation of a more just world, but we lose that fuel if we do not remember. Whiteness continues to perpetuate oppression, inequality, and violence in our society. As Christians, we are called to love God and

¹⁰⁶ Townes, *Womanist Ethics*, 159.

¹⁰⁷ Townes, *Womanist Ethics*, 162.

¹⁰⁸ Jennings, “Lecture on *The Christian Imagination*.”

¹⁰⁹ J.B. Metz, “Communicating a Dangerous Memory,” in *Communicating a Dangerous Memory: Soundings in Political Theology*, ed. Fred Lawrence (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 41.

love our neighbors as ourselves, but White supremacy impedes our ability to live out these values. The effects of past atrocities continue as a strong current in our society. Failing to remember them will not make them go away.

M. Shawn Copeland speaks of the “ethical responsibility of memory.”¹¹⁰ Copeland speaks of the “‘dangerous memory’ of slavery” and “*anamnesis* – the intentional remembering of the dead, exploited, despised victims of history” as the beginning of solidarity. Our prayer must be aware of and in solidarity and intimacy with the lives and experiences of others. As individuals and faith communities in our quest to imitate Christ we must practice kenosis or emptying to “release our hold on false narratives, privileges, and self-centric structures built to serve empire, White supremacy, and the established order.”¹¹¹ As we trace the sign of the cross on our bodies we remind ourselves of the “crucified Jew” whose memory must be juxtaposed to memory of the bodies of the enslaved to remind us of “a past that is not over, that must be encountered and confronted in the here and now even as they open onto hope and future life.”¹¹² At mass we are called to “do this in memory of me.” This memory conjures up Jesus’ place in history as one who challenged the stories of empire and was crucified by empire. Each time we experience the liturgy of the Eucharist we are called to remember the dangerous memory of the crucifixion of Jesus. The dangerous memory tells the stories of history from the vantage of those on the underside of history. Memory is a powerful anecdote to the invisibility and blindness of sin and of Whiteness. As we pray we must also remember, so that prayer too can open us to seeing sin

¹¹⁰ M. Shawn Copeland, *Knowing Christ Crucified: The Witness of African American Religious Experience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2018), 97.

¹¹¹ Stephanie Spellers, *The Church Cracked Open: Disruption, Decline, and New Hope for Beloved Community* (New York: Church Publishing, 2021), 88.

¹¹² Copeland, *Knowing Christ Crucified*, 97.

and White supremacy. Stories and memory can spark an inbreaking that can serve as a powerful anecdote to invisibility and blindness.

The work of antiracism is multifaceted. It is individual, communal and systemic. It is personal, political, economic, psychological, sociological, religious and more. Antiracism involves every aspect of life in the U.S. because racism implicates every aspect of life in the U.S. But first we must see it. Understanding the causes and effects of White supremacy from an intellectual perspective is but one piece of antiracism and has tended to be the most prolific piece. Emphasis on the intellect and written word are additional Enlightenment-inspired beliefs that shape which stories are valued and told. Racism hurts more than our minds. It is a soul sickness. It harms and kills bodies.¹¹³ As such if we stay in our heads, we continue to miss the mark. The sin continues. Prayer is the focus of this work both because of its importance and because of its inadequacy in addressing White supremacy. Prayer can change us and open us to new possibilities and horizons, but it too can be infected.

PRAYING WHILE WHITE

Prayer is foundational in the Christian faith as a way to express, live out, and grow in our relationship with God. Prayer “determines, impacts, criticizes, and corrects faith and life...What we believe impacts...our worship and ethics.”¹¹⁴ Our beliefs are shaped by the way we see the world. Our celebrations reflect our way of being in the world. Prayer can transform us and our communities. Christians use prayer and spiritual practice to communicate with and grow closer to God and each other. Prayer and spiritual practice call on our imagination. However, as

¹¹³ Several people are doing meaningful and important work in embodied antiracism including Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending our Hearts and Bodies* (Las Vegas: Central Recovery Press, 2017).

¹¹⁴ Nico Koopman, “Prayer and the Transformation of Public Life in South Africa,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 68, no. 1 (2014), 56.

Jennings demonstrates “Christianity in the Western world lives and moves within a diseased social imagination.”¹¹⁵ Given the ubiquity of White supremacy in the U.S. and in our church, we are living out our faith in a White-organized world. Our prayer is infected with the diseased imagination of White supremacy, and we likely don’t even recognize it. If our communication with God is confined by White supremacy, so too is our relationship with God, our being in the world and ultimately our salvation, involvement in bringing about the Reign of God, and ability to feel joy. Our socialization in a culture of racism and White supremacy numbs us to the pain of others and in doing so also dulls our own ability to feel emotions on the other end of the spectrum- true liberated joy.

If our imaginations are diseased by the scourge of racism how can our prayer be authentic and reach fullness? How can we reach full authenticity, salvation and the Reign of God if we are marred by this sin? Liberating our prayer and worship is the only way we can reach the fulfillment that God intended for all of us. We are compromising our own relationship with God and because of the systematic societal presence of White supremacy, every imagination is tarnished. Our prayer is infected in how we pray and who and what we pray for and when we pray. My discussion of prayer is primarily focused on liturgical, petitionary, and intercessory styles of prayer as they are commonly practiced by White Catholics in the U.S. In this section I will provide an overview of prayer and show how our prayer is tainted with White supremacy.

¹¹⁵ Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 6.

What is Prayer?

The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines prayer as the “vital and personal relationship with the living and true God” through belief, celebration, and living out the mystery of faith.¹¹⁶ Henri Nouwen reflects that

[w]hile prayer is the expression of a most intimate relationship, it also is the most difficult subject to speak about and becomes easily the subject for trivialities and platitudes. While it is the most human of all human acts, it is also easily perceived as the most superfluous and superstitious activity.¹¹⁷

But prayer is essential. Prayer can be embodied through movement or speaking or singing or dancing. It can be silent; it can be contemplative. Prayer can be a practice that takes effort or a spontaneous mystical experience. It can be cataphatic (prayer that uses thoughts or images) or apophatic (prayer that transcends thoughts and images). “The paradox of prayer is that we have to learn how to pray while we can only receive it as a gift...prayer is our first obligation as well as our highest calling.”¹¹⁸

As prayerful people we are necessarily spiritual. Christian spirituality is a path to integrate all aspects of human life and experience by considering the mystery of creation and human existence in conscious relationship with God who is mystery through prayer and praxis both individually and in community.¹¹⁹ Healing, whole, and holy all derive from the Greek *holos*,

¹¹⁶ John Paul II, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2d ed. (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 2019), 2558, <https://www.usccb.org/sites/default/files/flipbooks/catechism/>.

¹¹⁷ Henry M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 115.

¹¹⁸ Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 123.

¹¹⁹ Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History: Questions of Interpretation and Method* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 60.

suggesting that wholeness and healing are intimately connected with what is holy and spiritual.¹²⁰ Sandra Schneiders defines spirituality as “the project of life-integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives.”¹²¹ In prayer we are seeking authenticity, to integrate all aspects of our life as we transcend toward our God who is the beginning and the end. As Nouwen recognizes, “it is only in the lasting effort to unmask the illusions of our existence that a real spiritual life is possible.”¹²² White supremacy and racism function to create such illusions of our existence. Nouwen further recognizes that the “most basic movement of the spiritual life...is the movement from illusion to prayer.”¹²³ To move toward authenticity, healing and wholeness, attention must be paid not only to spiritual truths, but also to the truth of our interpersonal relationships, our perceptions, and our emotions.¹²⁴ As such, prayer, the most basic movement of the spiritual life, is essential in dismantling the sin that separates us from God - White supremacy that is within us as individuals and in our institutions and systems. Racism and White supremacy have resulted in the death of countless people of color, the pain and generational trauma of generations, and damage to our imaginations. We must heal as individuals and as communities of faith. We all must heal, all of us.

¹²⁰ Craig S. Cashwell, Paige B. Bentley, and J. Preston Yarborough, “The Only Way Out is Through, The Peril of Spiritual Bypass,” *Counseling and Values* 51 (2007): 139-148.

¹²¹ Sandra Schneiders, “Religion vs. Spirituality: A Contemporary Conundrum,” *Spiritus* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2003), 166.

¹²² Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 113.

¹²³ Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 114.

¹²⁴ Cashwell, Bentley, and Yarborough, “The Only Way Out is Through,” 139-148.

Liturgical Prayer

Prayer and worship can serve to both oppress and liberate.¹²⁵ The Catechism draws on the ancient axiom of *lex orandi, lex credendi* – “[t]he law of prayer is the law of faith: the Church believes as she prays.”¹²⁶ In liturgy we pray both individually and communally, we pray from our beliefs and the church’s beliefs. We “pray as we live, because we live as we pray.”¹²⁷ We express our beliefs and our values in who and what we pray for as well as who and what we fail to pray for. Prosper of Aquitaine is attributed with originating the doctrine of *lex orandi, lex credendi* – as we pray, so we believe. The inverse is also true, as we believe, so we pray.¹²⁸ Our prayer and worship influence our beliefs and our beliefs influence our prayer and worship. If our prayer is afflicted by White supremacy, so too will our beliefs, the way we live, and our relationship with God.

Neulinger and Findl-Ludescher interpret the axiom through a justice-focused lens and propose that *lex vivendi* be a necessary addition because liturgy (and I would argue prayer more broadly) expresses both belief and life; liturgy expresses both the ecclesiological and socio-ethical vision of the church.¹²⁹ Neulinger and Findl-Ludescher recognize that justice is at the heart of Catholic social ethics. Their focus is on gender justice in liturgy and their feminist analysis can also be applied to race. They ponder if, although women celebrate church – does the

¹²⁵ Koopman, “Prayer and the Transformation,” 56.

¹²⁶ John Paul II, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1124.

¹²⁷ John Paul II, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2725.

¹²⁸ Mary-Anne Plaatjies-van Huffel, “Rethinking the reciprocity between *lex credendi, lex orandi* and *lex vivendi*: As we believe, so we worship. As we believe, so we live,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76, no. 1 (August 2020), 1.

¹²⁹ Michaela Neulinger and Anni Findl-Ludescher. “Lex Orandi – Lex Vivendi? Reflections on the Interaction between Gender Justice and Liturgy after Vatican II” *Review of Ecumenical Studies Sibiu* 9, no.2 (2017), 231-232.

church celebrate women?¹³⁰ In the U.S., the same can be asked of Black Catholics or Latinx Catholics or Asian Catholics or Indigenous Catholics. Although people of color celebrate church – does the church celebrate people of color? *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (SC) calls for the “fully conscious and active participation by all peoples”¹³¹ in the liturgy and states that

to promote active participation, the people should be encouraged to take part by means of acclamations, responses, psalmody, antiphons, and songs, as well as by actions, gestures, and bodily attitudes. And at the proper times all should observe a reverent silence.¹³²

Bryan Massingale’s reflects that “what makes [the US Catholic Church] ‘white’ and ‘racist’ is the pervasive belief that European aesthetics, music, theology, and person – and only these – are standard, normative, universal and truly ‘Catholic.’”¹³³ Neulinger and Findl-Ludescher argue that the exclusion and invisibility of women within liturgy represent fundamental theological ideas and ethos¹³⁴ and they recognize the power of language to empower and disempower.¹³⁵ So too, the invisibility of African-American, Latinx, Asian, and Indigenous aesthetics, music, theology and persons represent the theological ethos buried in Whiteness. We don’t talk about “how to address White supremacy *symbolically* in our worship.”¹³⁶ The questions are not only who, where, when and how the liturgy is celebrated but also who, when, where and how the liturgy is

¹³⁰ Neulinger and Findl-Ludescher, “Lex Orandi-Lex Vivendi,” 239. (translated from German – “Gerechtigkeit und Liturgie: Frauen feiern Kirche – feiert Kirche Frauen?”).

¹³¹ Paul VI, *Sacrosanctum Concillium* (1963), 14.

¹³² Paul VI, *Sacrosanctum Concillium*, 30.

¹³³ Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, 81.

¹³⁴ Neulinger and Findl-Ludescher, “Lex Orandi-Lex Vivendi,” 240.

¹³⁵ Neulinger and Findl-Ludescher, “Lex Orandi-Lex Vivendi,” 243.

¹³⁶ Lenny Duncan, *Dear Church: A Love Letter from a Black Preacher to the Whitest Denomination in the US* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2019), 66.

remembered and reflective of the church's self-understanding.¹³⁷ "Symbols matter."¹³⁸ When the liturgy is soaked in Whiteness, and images of God are predominately White, the self-understanding of the church as a White institution is clear. If the way we live, our beliefs, and our imagination are afflicted with White supremacy, so too will our prayer and vice versa and by extension our relationship with God is damaged.

Image of God

Our image of God is also impacted by Whiteness. As how we pray affects how we believe, so too, how we identify God influences our faith and our lives. As Elizabeth Johnson teaches, "the symbol of God functions as the primary symbol of the whole religious system, the ultimate point of reference for understanding experience, life and the world."¹³⁹ The symbol of God functions, "to practical and critical effect."¹⁴⁰ Applying Johnson's feminist analysis to a racial context, if we define the mystery of God always as a White, older, able-bodied man, that image has an impact. God's image, this *imago Dei*, is buried in Whiteness. Speaking rightly of God means "weaving the stories" of people of color into the stories of God.

The mystery of God...is the dark radiance of love in solidarity with the struggle of the denigrated persons, ... to shuck off their mean estate and lay hold of their genuine human dignity and value....She accompanies the lost and defeated, ... on the journey to new, unimaginable life.¹⁴¹

Sitting with multicultural, multiethnic, multiracial images of God, Jesus, Mary and the Saints (like the work of artists including Harmonia Rosales, Kelly Latimore and Mickey McGrath)

¹³⁷ Neulinger and Findl-Ludescher, "Lex Orandi-Lex Vivendi," 251.

¹³⁸ Duncan, *Dear Church*, 66.

¹³⁹ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 4.

¹⁴⁰ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 244.

¹⁴¹ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 244.

challenges the dominance of White images, can expand our imagination, calls out prevailing structures of White supremacy, and

gives rise to a different vision of community, one in which the last shall be first, the excluded shall be included, the mighty put down from their thrones and the humble exalted...[a community] characterized by relationships of mutuality and reciprocity, of love and justice.¹⁴²

If we don't imagine God as Black, how can we believe that people who are Black are made in God's image? Sitting with images of God as a Black woman, like those of Harmonia Rosales helps me to understand myself and others as being made in God's image. As Mary Daly infamously suggests, "if God is male, then male is God." So, too, if God is White, then White is God. Daly recognizes as Jennings does, "The problem is one of transforming the collective imagination."¹⁴³ As long as the White divine lives on in the human imagination, Whiteness is the definition of transcendence. The images of God, Jesus, Mary, and the communion of saints who fill our churches, our art, and our literature, can also fill our imagination. As we pray to and with White icons and images we start to believe that is what God looks like, that is what holy looks like. Research out of Stanford shows that the way we identify God impacts the way we view people and impacts the credibility and importance we grant to others.¹⁴⁴ If God is always depicted as a White male, how can we believe that anyone else is created in God's image? There are no U.S. churches named after African Americans, no feast days celebration and no confirmation names that reflect Black U.S. Catholics. No person of any race can pray for the

¹⁴² Johnson, *She Who Is*, 6.

¹⁴³ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 54.

¹⁴⁴ Steven O. Roberts, et al., "God as a White Man: A Psychological Barrier to Conceptualizing Black People and Women as Leadership Worthy," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology: Interpersonal Relations and Group Processes* 119, no. 6 (2020): 1290 – 1315.

intercession of a Black U.S. Catholic saint; our U.S. Catholic Church has zero Black Catholic Saints even while seven holy women and men await the title of saint.¹⁴⁵ Because these White images dominate our worship spaces, healing our damaged imaginations and expanding our image of God will require conscious and continual practice.

Martin Luther King, Jr. called Sunday morning the most segregated hour of Christian America. This truth continues, in the church and beyond. White social networks have been shown to be 91 percent White, and 75 percent of White people have entirely White social networks without the presence of *any* people of color.¹⁴⁶ If we are only praying with other White people, our prayer is drenched in Whiteness. As White supremacy impacts who we pray to and what we pray for, what we fail to pray for is also soaked in Whiteness. Following the death of George Floyd and following the deaths of countless Black bodies, the prayers of the faithful and the homilies at many U.S. Catholic Churches never mentioned Mr. Floyd or how the church should prophetically respond, accompany the suffering, or repent. “The indifferent responses about ‘black lives mattering’ were deafening.”¹⁴⁷ Sins of omission can be equally damaging. If prayer does not meaningfully participate in “action for justice, prayer could deviate into pietistic self-sufficiency and vapid otherworldliness.”¹⁴⁸ Prayer could become irrelevant.

¹⁴⁵ Michael R. Heinlen, ed. *Black Catholics on the Road to Sainthood* (Huntington, IL: Our Sunday Visitor, 2021).

¹⁴⁶ Wioleta Polinska, “Mindfulness Meditation as a Remedy to ‘White Ignorance’ and Its Consequences,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 38 (2018), 334.

¹⁴⁷ Lori A. Stanley, “Diving into the Deep: A Mystical-Contemplative Leap of Hope from the Pew,” *Say Something Theological* 6, no. 1 (2023), Article 1.

¹⁴⁸ Koopman, “Prayer and the Transformation,” 64.

Biased Prayer and Damaging Prayer

Just as our horizon affects our ability to see sin, so too our prayer is situated within this horizon. Drawing on the work of Bernard Lonergan, M. Shawn Copeland defines horizon as “a maximum field of vision from a determinate standpoint.”¹⁴⁹ Copeland describes race as functioning like a horizon and “what and who is outside the range of that field is eliminated from my knowledge and interest, care and concern.”¹⁵⁰ Race and “skin morph[] into a horizon funded by bias.”¹⁵¹ Lonergan defines bias as “the more or less conscious and deliberated choice, in light of what we perceive as a potential threat to our well-being, to exclude further information or data from consideration in our understanding, judgment, discernment, decision and action.”¹⁵² We pray from that which we know or have experienced, which in turn can be further limited by bias.

Kate Ward discusses Lonergan’s four types of bias that can disrupt common sense – individual, dramatic, group, and general. Individual bias leads one to only consider “solutions that benefit herself, failing to pursue solutions that benefit the whole of society.”¹⁵³ Individual bias gets in the way of loving our neighbor, we are primarily focused on ourselves. As beneficiaries of White privilege, perceived threats to that privilege will be excluded from our consideration and concern. In a society where many are striving for a bigger piece of the pie, bias encourages us to take as much as we can even if that means less for others. With group bias, a group is “prone to have blind spot[s] for the insights that reveal its well-being to be excessive or

¹⁴⁹ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 13.

¹⁵⁰ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 13.

¹⁵¹ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 13.

¹⁵² Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 13.

¹⁵³ Kate Ward, “Scotosis and Structural Inequality: The Dangers of Bias in a Globalized Age,” in *Everything is Interconnected: Towards a Globalization with a Human Face and an Integral Ecology*, ed. Joseph Ogbonnaya and Lucas Briola (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2019), 44.

its usefulness at an end.’... insights that would encourage the group to voluntarily accept a lower status or a lowered opinion of itself are conveniently ignored.”¹⁵⁴ Group bias distracts groups from recognizing White privilege or recognizing one’s own complicity or responsibility in racism. “Dramatic bias describes the way the self manipulates new information to conform it to pre-existing, personally important understandings.” According to Lonergan, this is where scotosis occurs, “individuals exclude knowledge that challenges their own common-sense, limited understanding of self and the world.”¹⁵⁵ Dramatic bias is not believing history occurred the way a person of color tells the story or doubting or minimizing the damaging impact of one’s well-intended words or actions on a person of color. Copeland describes the general bias of common sense as having a “penchant for ‘the quick-fix’ and the short-term solution.”¹⁵⁶ It has taken hundreds of years to build and embed these systems of racism and White supremacy; there will be no quick-fix solutions. Further general bias and group bias work together to “disregard innovative and good ideas that might come from non-privileged groups. General bias regulates social arrangements to the immediate well-being of the dominant racial group and thereby despoils the common good.”¹⁵⁷ Lonergan is clear that bias does not only refer to individual prejudice. “Since developing insight is a communal process by which bias disrupts, bias insinuates itself into the structures of society.”¹⁵⁸

In her work *The Dangers of Christian Practice*, Lauren Winner exemplifies this bias and discusses how, when operating out of a place of damage, prayer and spiritual practice can

¹⁵⁴ Ward, “Scotosis and Structural Inequality,” 44.

¹⁵⁵ Ward, “Scotosis and Structural Inequality,” 44.

¹⁵⁶ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 14.

¹⁵⁷ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 14.

¹⁵⁸ Ward, “Scotosis and Structural Inequality,” 45.

sometimes “perpetuate damage” rather than “foster intimacy with God and growth in Christlikeness.”¹⁵⁹ Such is the space of White supremacy. She states that “[a] doctrine of sin requires us to acknowledge that our perceptions are faulty.”¹⁶⁰ Using examples of the centrality of prayer to women managing households run by enslaved labor,¹⁶¹ Winner demonstrates that prayer, specifically petitionary prayer, is not always “rightly formed...[or] in a way that fosters peace, concord, and the flourishing of all Creation.”¹⁶² She suggests that when we engage in petitionary prayer, “we should do so knowing its potential for distortion, and do it in such a way that our knowledge informs our practice.”¹⁶³ On southern plantations

obedience intertwined with prayer...many devout slave mistresses understood themselves to be moved by concern for the state of their slaves’ souls...[this] arose not from a kindly sense of shared baptismal kinship but rather because of mistresses’ deep interest in promoting docility in slave society. When [one mistress] prayed that her slaves would know and love God, she did not mean the God who liberated the Israelites from Egypt or the God who, quoting Isaiah, preached release for the captives. She meant a God who ordered a hierarchical world and who would inspire and demand of any slaves who knew and loved him obedience to both him and to their earthly pastor, [this mistress] herself.¹⁶⁴

Praying as a means of controlling other people is damaging, whether or not the control is well-intended or not. The mistress Winner refers to is praying for God to sustain White supremacy.

As Hill Fletcher recognized, when White Christians pray in thanksgiving for blessings as God-given gifts we ignore the disparate access to resources needed for a full human life that results from the structural reality of White supremacy that arose out of the sins of the past and is

¹⁵⁹ Lauren F. Winner, *The Danger of Christian Practice: On Wayward Gifts, Characteristic Damage, and Sin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 4.

¹⁶⁰ Winner, *The Dangers*, 9.

¹⁶¹ Winner, *The Dangers*, 59.

¹⁶² Winner, *The Dangers*, 61-62

¹⁶³ Winner, *The Dangers*, 61-62.

¹⁶⁴ Winner, *The Dangers*, 66.

maintained by the sins of the present. We fail to take into account the privilege that may have facilitated so many of these “blessings” – from public school funding to the GI bill, redlining, food deserts, bias, and policing, to name a few. Even programs designed to help balance the privilege result in White privilege - White women realized greater benefit from affirmative action policies than any other demographic.¹⁶⁵ During the racial uprisings of 2020 and 2021, I heard and continue to hear people pray for peaceful protests. While praying for violence never seems warranted, it reflects privilege to pray for “a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.”¹⁶⁶ Are we praying against those who are protesting for justice? Are we praying to avoid the discomfort that White people feel when they talk about race? While prayer is certainly an essential part of an end to racism and White supremacy, when we say our “thoughts and prayers” are with those who are suffering as a result of racism, without looking within ourselves and engaging in repentance and change, our words are a mere platitude. “Well-intentioned people going about their daily practices and often habitually following the ‘accepted and expected rules and conventions’ hold structural injustice in place.”¹⁶⁷ “Thoughts and prayers” alone are not enough.¹⁶⁸ We often turn to prayer in search of comfort. However, in the work of antiracism, it is important for White Christians to sit in their discomfort. The discomfort of racism may be new to White folks because our bias has allowed

¹⁶⁵ Sally Kohn, “Affirmative Action Has Helped White Women More Than Anyone,” *Time*, June 17, 2013, <https://time.com/4884132/affirmative-action-civil-rights-white-women/>.

¹⁶⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” *Christian Century* (June 1963), 770.

¹⁶⁷ Sweeny Block, “White Privilege and the Erroneous Conscience,” 371.

¹⁶⁸ James 2:15-17: “If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs what good is that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”

us to avoid such discomfort; most people of color have not had such a privilege. Bryan Massingale tells us

White people should feel discomfort when confronted with the reality of white privilege in the United States, ...and sit with that discomfort. Let it be agonizing, let it be overwhelming because frankly it's agonizing for me, too. It's overwhelming for me, too... It's only when we become agonized enough, angry enough...that we begin to be invested in change.¹⁶⁹

Prayer is not a shortcut; it is not a quick fix. Rather it should open the door to long lasting, deep, meaningful and uncomfortable change.

Spiritual Bypass

Spiritual bypass is a risk and can be “a common process for people who pursue a spiritual path.”¹⁷⁰ A term first coined by John Welwood in 1984, Welwood observed that many people try “to use their spiritual practices to suppress their personal [and psychological] needs and identity.”¹⁷¹ In spiritual bypass, people take refuge in spirituality to heal wounds at the spiritual level only “and avoid the important (albeit often difficult and painful) work at other levels, including the cognitive, physical, emotional and interpersonal.”¹⁷² Spirituality is an integration, embrace, and transformation of our authentic selves, not a way to shield ourselves from pain. If we pray for those who are victims of racism or pray for an end to racism, without inviting the discomfort that comes with working to dismantle the Whiteness in ourselves we are succumbing to spiritual bypass. Spiritual bypass is inauthentic spirituality because it uses spirituality as a way

¹⁶⁹ Michael J. O'Loughlin, “Fordham’s Bryan Massingale: White Catholics need to sit with the discomfort of systemic racism,” *America Magazine*, June 8, 2020, <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2020/06/08/fordhams-bryan-massingale-white-catholics-need-sit-discomfort-systemic>.

¹⁷⁰ Gabriela Piciotto, Jesse Fox, Félix Neto, “A phenomenology of spiritual bypass: Causes, consequences, and implications,” *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health* 20, no. 4 (2018), 335.

¹⁷¹ Piciotto, Fox, and Neto, “A phenomenology of spiritual bypass,” 334.

¹⁷² Cashwell, Bentley, and Yarborough, “The Only Way Out is Through,” 139-148.

to avoid challenge or possible discomfort. The current empire of White-wellness and “self-care” that focuses on “good vibes only” and “positive energy” or even the idea that “everything happens for a reason” often smacks of spiritual bypass. “Some negative outcomes for spiritual bypass include “the need to excessively control others and oneself, shame... compulsive kindness, ... and disregard for personal responsibility.”¹⁷³ Spiritual bypass shows up in the White savior, White guilt, and focusing on good intentions without recognizing negative impacts, to name just a few.

Colonialism Rooted in Prayer Tradition

Patrick Saint-Jean’s important book *The Spiritual Work of Racial Justice* walks readers through a month of meditations with Ignatius of Loyola (founder of the Jesuit religious order). Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* aim to “assist people in being freed from disordered attachments, growing in spiritual freedom, and responding to the call of Christ to join him in mission.”¹⁷⁴ The structure of the Exercises leads participants through human sinfulness, being with Christ in Mission, the cost of discipleship and an experience of the “joy and hope of Christ’s resurrection.”¹⁷⁵ Discernment is an intended gift of Ignatian Spirituality, “the wisdom to recognize the difference between courses of action that are life-directing and ones that are out of harmony with our relationship with God.”¹⁷⁶ Such discernment can be essential in the work of antiracism and healing from White supremacy as Saint-Jean demonstrates with his book. And

¹⁷³ Piciotto, Fox, and Neto, “A phenomenology of spiritual bypass,” 335.

¹⁷⁴ Philip Sheldrake, *The Spiritual Way: Classic Traditions and Contemporary Practice* (Collegeville, MN, Liturgical Press Academic, 2019), 91.

¹⁷⁵ Sheldrake, *The Spiritual Way*, 91-92.

¹⁷⁶ Sheldrake, *The Spiritual Way*, 92.

yet, the Jesuits were responsible for the enslavement of at least 20,877 people in 1760 in their missions,¹⁷⁷ more people than are in the Society of Jesus today.¹⁷⁸

Jennings devotes an entire chapter to the 16th century missionary work of an “eager young [Spanish] Jesuit named José de Acosta Porres.”¹⁷⁹ Jennings identifies Acosta as “one of the most important, if not the most important, bearer of the theological tradition of Christianity to set foot in the New World” for a period of over 100 years.¹⁸⁰ Marked by his own scotosis, Acosta failed to discern the “crisis of theological tradition...that locked theology in discourses of displacement from which it has never escaped”¹⁸¹ Specifically, Acosta “marks the theological beginning of imperialist modernity.” When Acosta arrived in Peru he, like the colonizers who came before and after him, “entered [and contributed to] a Spanish world in the making and a native world in collapse.”¹⁸² The “authority of sacred land” was denied.¹⁸³ Whereas unlike the Spaniards, the natives “interpreted their lives through the land; their ancestors walked the land, signified their existence through trees, mountains, rivers, rocks, animals, earth, and sky.”¹⁸⁴ Instead, the conquerors established themselves as “a new system of relating to the land and a new point of evaluation for indigenous agriculturalist practices”¹⁸⁵ and their prayer reflected this

¹⁷⁷ Andrew Dial, “Antoine Lavalette, Slave Murderer: A Forgotten Scandal of the French West Indies,” *Journal of Jesuit Studies* 8 (2021), 40.

¹⁷⁸ “With 16,000-plus priests, brothers, scholastics and novices worldwide, we are the largest male religious order in the Catholic Church.” The Jesuits, About Us, <https://www.jesuits.org/about-us/the-jesuits/>.

¹⁷⁹ Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 65.

¹⁸⁰ Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 70.

¹⁸¹ Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 71.

¹⁸² Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 75.

¹⁸³ Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 75.

¹⁸⁴ Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 76.

¹⁸⁵ Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 77.

relationship with God’s creation. “Detached from the land, oblivious to the ongoing decimation of native ecologies, deeply suspicious of native religious practices, and most important, enclosed within Iberian whiteness, the performance of Christian theology would produce a new, deformed, and deforming intellectual circuit.”¹⁸⁶

As has been discussed above White supremacy is embedded in the foundations of U.S. society and Roman Catholicism and, as such, it influences our praxis, our being, and our imaginations. We should always pray but we cannot simply wish and pray White supremacy away - active steps must be taken to unlearn and unknow this ideology that infects our faith and our lives. Miroslav Volf said, “There is something deeply hypocritical about praying for a problem you are unwilling to resolve.”¹⁸⁷ While prayer is a cornerstone of Christian life and should be a part of any justice practice, bias, White symbols, failure to pray, damaged prayer, spiritual bypass, and colonial origins all complicate prayer. But prayerful repentance offers a path forward in the work of antiracism.

REPENTANCE: PREPARING THE SOIL

Healing from the sin of White supremacy is a call to which all U.S. Christians and the church must respond. We must undergo conversion to heal ourselves, our communities, and our prayer. Our faith has a deep history of repentance that should be tapped into for this important work. Just as we have to learn how to pray, we must specifically learn how to repent, the fruits of which are a gift only bestowed by God. Sheldrake notes that “[i]n both theology and spirituality, a kind of transformation is implied by the search for knowledge.” So too, “the human quest for

¹⁸⁶ Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 81-82.

¹⁸⁷ Kirsten Powers, “Why ‘thoughts and prayers’ is starting to sound so profane,” *Washington Post*, November 6, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/10/03/why-thoughts-and-prayers-is-starting-to-sound-so-profane/>.

God demands a paradox of both knowing and not knowing.” Repentance too requires such a transformation and such a paradox. In our antiracist repentance we continue our quest for God, one of the most fundamental aspects of Christianity.¹⁸⁸ “To assume that sinners can turn to the Righteous One without turning from their own unrighteousness is the height of theological nonsense.”¹⁸⁹ In this section I will describe the Scriptural foundation for repentance, provide examples of repentance from several faith traditions, discuss the importance of lament, and also propose how we might practice repentance.

Scripture calls us to repent and turn away from sin and turn towards God. Repentance is foundational to our Christian faith. It is an “essential part of the Christian gospel message.”¹⁹⁰ Practices of repentance and lament provide an opportunity for well-meaning White Christians to sit in the ashes of their sin, to come to terms with their complicity in White supremacy and racism and to begin to seek reconciliation. Repentance must be foundational individual and communal spiritual practices for White Christians in order to heal the Christian imagination and prepare the soil for the work of antiracism and ultimately the reign of God.

As Catholics we often jump to reconciliation as the necessary path to healing. We know reconciliation, it is an obvious part of our tradition. However, theologians debate whether forgiveness is possible without repentance.¹⁹¹ Jennings admits that “it is not at all clear that most Christians are ready to imagine reconciliation.” In fact, Western Christianity often misuses the

¹⁸⁸ Sheldrake, *The Spiritual Way*, 21.

¹⁸⁹ Mark J. Boda, ‘Return to Me’: *A Biblical Theology of Repentance*. New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 192.

¹⁹⁰ Boda, ‘Return to Me,’ 193.

¹⁹¹ Michael Battle, “Penitence as Practiced in African/African American Christian Spirituality,” in *Repentance in Christian Theology*, ed. Mark J. Boda and Gordon T. Smith (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006), 329.

term as either (a) an ideological tool “for facilitating the negotiations of power; or (b) socially exhausted idealist claims masquerading as serious theological accounts.”¹⁹² Calls for reconciliation can be manipulative. Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg writes that Americans privilege forgiveness over repentance. In the wake of the Civil War “northern white-clergy began preaching forgiveness, reconciliation and unity with white southerners, at the expense of justice or even safety for Black Americans.”¹⁹³ Much like the spiritual bypass and general bias discussed above, it’s easier to jump to a quick fix and feeling better about ourselves, the negative peace and absence of tension that Dr. King speaks of, rather than do the lasting, uncomfortable, and difficult work to change ourselves and our institutions and advance justice. Forgiveness without repentance, is the cheap grace that Dietrich Bonhoeffer warns of. Cheap grace offers us “license and latitude” as opposed to the costly grace for which Jesus gave his life. Costly grace calls Christians to the paradox of our faith and the need for repentance with forgiveness, confession of sin with absolution, and the “suffering, death, and cross together with the joy and blessedness of new life.”¹⁹⁴ Cheap grace, like White privilege, gives us comfort and security and justifies sin. Like Jesus, Bonhoeffer’s costly grace cost him his life. “But repentant discipleship *is* grace – the very presence of God.”¹⁹⁵ Cheap grace won’t get us where we need to go. We need lasting grace to take root.

¹⁹² Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 10.

¹⁹³ Ruttenberg, *On Repentance and Repair*, 13.

¹⁹⁴ Jason A. Mahn, “The Cheap Grace of White Privilege and the Costly Grace of Repentant Antiracism,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 47, no. 3 (July 2020), 10.

¹⁹⁵ Mahn, “The Cheap Grace of White Privilege,” 14.

Parable of the Sower

Repentance serves to prepare the soil for the work of antiracism. As in the Parable of the Sower,¹⁹⁶ without good soil the seeds of racial justice will perish with the well-meaning White Christian. The story of racism often functions like this parable.¹⁹⁷ Like the seed on the path, some hear of racism but do not understand it or believe it, “the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart.”¹⁹⁸ Bias may prevent this deeper understanding. Some hear the story and “immediately receive it” with enthusiasm, but because that person has “no root” the message “endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away.”¹⁹⁹ As discussed above, this person may jump to spiritual bypass. What is sown among the thorns, “this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of [privilege] choke the word, and it yields nothing.”²⁰⁰ Giving up privilege, recognizing our own complicity, and changing ourselves and our communities takes hard work, but this is the call for Christians. But like the rich young man in Matthew 19,²⁰¹ many choose to maintain the privilege. Finally, “as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another

¹⁹⁶ Matt. 13:1-9.

¹⁹⁷ In the Synoptic Gospels Jesus implores the disciples to “Listen” as he tells the Parable of the Sower (Matt. 13:3-23). “A sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. 5 Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. 6 But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. 7 Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. 8 Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!”

¹⁹⁸ Matt 13:19.

¹⁹⁹ Matt 13:21.

²⁰⁰ Matt 13:22.

²⁰¹ Matt 19:20-22. This will be discussed in greater detail below.

sixty, and in another thirty.”²⁰² Reciting from Isaiah 6:9-10, Jesus tells the disciples that he speaks in parables so that we might understand God’s word with our hearts and be healed.²⁰³ Jesus is telling us that we need a shift in our perspective so that we see something we could not before; so that our horizon shifts; so that we *can* use our imaginations to understand God’s word, and this imagination allows us to heal. In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus teaches of the need for good soil in order for the reign of God to bloom, in order for the hearers of the word of God to understand and for that understanding to bear fruit. The soil of U.S. culture and Christianity is contaminated with White supremacy; it infects all of us who live here. The poison is so entrenched it even contaminates our prayer. The internal and collective work of repentance can help to create better soil.

The Parable of the Sower, like Jesus’ ministry of repentance shows the fruit that can come from repentance – the reign of God.²⁰⁴ The work of repentance in a culture of Whiteness opens the door for such redemption. For each area where the seed lands, repentance is a step that can bring the faithful closer to good soil and help the good soil maintain its health. Jennings challenges us to “look more deliberately at the soil in which the modern theological imagination grew and where it continues to find its deeper social nutrients.”²⁰⁵ Jennings seeks “deeper richer soil” that is difficult to unearth, but upon which “to seed a new way of belonging and living together, then we will find together not simply new ground, not simply a new seed, but a life

²⁰² Matt. 13:23.

²⁰³ Matt. 13:15.

²⁰⁴ ChoongJae Lee, *Metánoia (Repentance): A Major Theme of the Gospel of Matthew* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2020), 165.

²⁰⁵ Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 7.

already prepared and offered to us.”²⁰⁶ The good soil has been nourished and healed, has been watered, can retain water, can take in something new and allow it to grow – repentance is the work of healing and preparing the soil to allow fruit to grow, to allow the reign of God to come to fruition. “There is within Christianity a breathtakingly powerful way to imagine and enact the social, to imagine and enact connection and belonging.”²⁰⁷ The first step is repentance.

Repentance in Scripture

In the New Testament “repentance is *the necessary* change in thinking and behavior required in order to help fulfill God’s plan of universal salvation and establish a community that embraces all people,”²⁰⁸ a Beloved Community. Repentance is “both a communal and an individual experience.”²⁰⁹ At its core in both Hebrew and Christian Scripture, repentance is relational – it is “focused on repairing a broken relationship with God caused by sin” and a path forward to continue that relationship.²¹⁰ In breaking our relationship with God we also break relationship with each other. Repentance entails both an external change in behavior and an internal shift. It is often accompanied by verbal or ritual expressions – including prayers to God, confessions of sin, seeking mercy, “assembling for communal expression,” and mourning.²¹¹ In the Hebrew Scriptures, repentance has an intergenerational nature. People confess their own sins

²⁰⁶ Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 11.

²⁰⁷ Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 4.

²⁰⁸ Guy Dale Nave, Jr., “Repent, for the Kingdom of God Is at hand’: Repentance in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts,” in *Repentance in Christian Theology*, ed. Mark J. Boda and Gordon T. Smith (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006), 95.

²⁰⁹ Boda, ‘Return to Me,’ 186.

²¹⁰ Boda, ‘Return to Me,’ 191, 194.

²¹¹ Boda, ‘Return to Me,’ 145-149.

and those of their ancestors, and ultimately can benefit “their children after them.”²¹² They recall the dangerous memory and tell the stories of sin. They sit in the discomfort. Repentance often includes “deep reflection.”²¹³ Repentance is not guaranteed and is only possible through God’s grace.²¹⁴ There is also an eschatological element to repentance of already and not yet. Repentance is a response to the in breaking of the reign of God in the present and also the practice of those who will participate in the reign of God when it comes.²¹⁵

Guy Dale Nave’s analysis of repentance within the Christian Gospels and Acts is relevant and also applicable in describing the role of repentance in a world soaked in Whiteness. First, repentance is a “requirement for all those who intend to live as disciples of Jesus.” Repentance is integral to our lives as Christians; it is not optional. Further, repentance is a public and communal “change in response to the inbreaking of the [reign] of God.” We are not called to privately change as a step in a wellness routine or self-improvement program; the reign of God necessitates our public change both individually and communally. As a response to the reign of God, repentance

addresses issues of power...[and] causes us to examine to whom and to what manifestations of power we have given our allegiance. The status quo, which serves the interest of the powerful at the expense of the powerless, is no longer acceptable.²¹⁶

²¹² Boda, ‘*Return to Me*,’ 155, citing Deut. 32:39.

²¹³ Boda, ‘*Return to Me*,’ 156.

²¹⁴ Boda, ‘*Return to Me*,’ 160.

²¹⁵ Boda, ‘*Return to Me*,’ 181.

²¹⁶ Nave, “‘Repent, for the Kingdom of God Is at hand,’” 100.

Finally, because those in power are unlikely to “surrender power without a fight, the demand for repentance is a demand to lose one’s life for the sake of Jesus and the good news.”²¹⁷ We are called to leave our worldly belongings, our White privilege, and follow Christ.²¹⁸

Some have defined repentance as an individual returning back to God,²¹⁹ but this is inadequate as Nave indicates repentance must be in community. If repentance is only a returning to God, but one’s image of God is limited to the image of an old White man, we are asking for forgiveness and returning to an image that represents one complicit in White supremacy. “The symbol of God functions...to practical and critical effect.”²²⁰ If we have become too comfortable with God because we have created God only in our own image and likeness – we are perpetuating White supremacy.

Repentance Practices

As White Christians learn of the harm they continue to cause our siblings of color, it makes sense to hear and learn from stories and practices that have been and continue to be ignored or frequently not included in White Christian communities in the United States. Michael Battle provides the penitential practices of African/African American Christian Spirituality as “best practices” for encouraging “communities to respond appropriately to sin”²²¹ and “learning how to stop abusive historical cycles all together.”²²² Traditionally for Africans or African Americans, community is more than gathering together for worship. Community is inherent in

²¹⁷ Nave, “Repent, for the Kingdom of God Is at hand,” 100.

²¹⁸ Matt 4:20, 4:22.

²¹⁹ Westerholm, “Repentance and Forgiveness,” 5.

²²⁰ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 6, 244.

²²¹ Battle, “Penitence as Practiced,” 329.

²²² Battle, “Penitence as Practiced,” 330.

personal identity. “Person is conceived not as an individualized self, but as a unique person webbed in unique relationship.”²²³ Thus, healing fractured relationships is necessary for authentic personhood. Communities are understood to be restored and healed through practicing “healthy memory of the past”²²⁴ in African Christian spirituality. As evidenced with the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, “public truth about past evil is essential to repentance and can only lead to healthier communities.”²²⁵ The dangerous memory helps to heal. A healthy memory of the past is a practice done in community as well as individually. “[B]lack Christians teach a crucial lesson – that God has created us to participate in creating a healthy past, present, and future.”²²⁶ Health and healing of community are the focus, not just individual salvation. As Battle recognizes, “the genius of African and African American penitential practice is in the ability to continue moving from ambivalence to joy.”²²⁷ White Christians must move from their failure to recognize and their ambivalence about race, through the discomfort of repentance to arrive at joy.

The Jewish tradition is rich with practices of repentance. The time of repentance or *teshuvah* is the forty-day period from the first day of the Hebrew month of Elul through Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.²²⁸ Repentance is rooted in hope, “because hope says that we can change.”²²⁹ Prayer provides the opportunity for “observing and then the means for narrowing, the

²²³ Battle, “Penitence as Practiced,” 331.

²²⁴ Battle, “Penitence as Practiced,” 333.

²²⁵ Battle, “Penitence as Practiced,” 340.

²²⁶ Battle, “Penitence as Practiced,” 340.

²²⁷ Battle, “Penitence as Practiced,” 343

²²⁸ David Arnow, *Choosing Hope: The Heritage of Judaism*, Essential Judaism Series (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 2022), 8.

²²⁹ Arnow, *Choosing Hope*, 3.

gap between the way we are and the way we should be.”²³⁰ During Elul, the shofar (horn) is customarily blown in the synagogue every morning as a reminder to awaken, “examine your deeds, return in repentance, and remember your Creator.”²³¹ Repentance is continual and is practiced collectively, socially and publicly in community and is built into the tradition.

Catholics have elements of repentance in liturgy including a penitential rite that begins with the Eucharist and we remember the death of Jesus the Christ in the season of Lent,²³² but these only encompass part of a practice of repentance. A familiar model for repentance at the individual and internal level is the sacrament of penance (also called the sacrament of conversion, confession, forgiveness or reconciliation²³³) where both “divine and human agency are involved.”²³⁴ The elements of contrition, confession of sins, the act of penance or satisfaction, and absolution are similar to the elements of repentance. But individual penance in the Catholic context breaks down on a number of levels. As discussed above, because of the systemic and endemic nature of racism, individual contrition is not enough. There must also be a communal and public repentance. Further, the sacrament is not open to all Catholics - many women or survivors of sexual abuse feel unsafe being alone with or confessing to men. Also, priests are ill-equipped to counsel or absolve the sin of racism. The curricula for seminaries do not include education and spiritual work around racism and White supremacy. For example, the USCCB’s Program of Priestly Formation states that “if the seminary has a multicultural community”

²³⁰ Arnow, *Choosing Hope*, 6.

²³¹ Arnow, *Choosing Hope*, 10, quoting Maimonides.

²³² Ralph Del Colle, “Life as a Holy Penitent: The Catholic Call to Conversion,” in *Repentance in Christian Theology*, ed. Mark J. Boda and Gordon T. Smith (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006), 234.

²³³ John Paul II, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1423-1424.

²³⁴ Del Colle, “Life as a Holy Penitent,” 238.

professors are encouraged to learn more about the needs of these multicultural communities through programs and workshops - suggesting that cultural competence is only necessary if presented with a multicultural community.²³⁵ Priests are humans drenched in Whiteness too. It is necessary that this learning and unlearning occur with clergy in order to engage in reconciliation with parishioners who are repenting the sins of racism and White supremacy. Much discussion has begun about unpacking Whiteness and White supremacy in the academy, but this discussion has not meaningfully reached seminaries.

In fact, the church's response to racism is steeped in Whiteness and tepid at best. The U.S. Catholic Bishops have written collectively to "express their pastoral concern"²³⁶ about racism four times in the past 60 years. The most recent letter, "Open Wide Our Hearts" was issued in 2018 and prior to that "Brothers and Sisters to Us" was issued in 1979. Even the titles of the letters are problematic. Who is the "Us" if not White people; these titles immediately center Whiteness as what is normal. Both letters are weak and reflect myriad blind spots. Racism is presented as a problem mostly outside of the church and mostly perpetuated by individuals. Both letters fail to truthfully account for the church's historical and continuing complicity in racism. Rather the letters urge, recommend, and suggest several tepid band aids to racism such as visiting museums and providing resources to parishes without committing the bishops themselves or the church as a whole to any change. In "Open Wide Our Hearts," the bishops selfishly jump to ask for forgiveness,²³⁷ when there is no evidence that they have done the work

²³⁵ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Cultural Preparation for Formation," Principles of the New PPF: The New Program of Priestly Formation, Sixth Edition, July 19, 2022, <https://www.usccb.org/resources/PPFBulletin.Issue20.19JULY2022.pdf>.

²³⁶ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Open Wide Our Hearts: An Enduring Call to Love. A Pastoral Letter on Racism," (2018), 6, https://www.usccb.org/resources/open-wide-our-hearts_0.pdf.

²³⁷ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Open Wide our Hearts," 22.

of repentance. As we have learned from the church's continued sex abuse crisis, in the absence of repentance by naming and owning the harm caused, changing individuals and structures, accepting consequences and providing restitution, apologizing, and making different choices (including no longer silently moving clergy around as a punishment for bad behavior) more listening sessions or pastoral letters will not magically create conversion.

How We Can Repent

Without practices for repentance and lament in our theological practice, we cannot move forward. "Any process of repentance and atonement must integrate the internal and the external, the personal and the public, the unconscious and the relational."²³⁸ We are called to "assume a lifelong posture of repentance, i.e., humility."²³⁹ Following the steps laid out by Maimonides and echoed throughout history, repentance must include (1) naming and owning the harm caused, (2) beginning to change, (3) accepting consequences and providing restitution, (4) apologizing and (5) making different choices. Only through these steps can repentance begin in our church. Naming and owning the harm caused will require galvanizing our guilt and no longer being paralyzed by it. To do so we must prayerfully recognize sin, Whiteness and White supremacy through a deep excavation of the dangerous memories of our personal, national, and church history. Authors, activists, and theologians of color have written more about race than one person could read in a lifetime. We are called to educate ourselves and hear the stories that we have not yet been told or have failed to hear; to learn the history of White supremacy, the history of Christian supremacy; to hear personal and communal stories of those affected by racism.

²³⁸ Kellenbach, "Rituals of Repentance," 187.

²³⁹ Al Tizon, "Postures Toward Postcolonial Peace: Repentance, Forgiveness, Lament," *Transformation* 39, no. 4 (2022), 230.

Meditative and contemplative prayer within and outside the Christian tradition have been shown as practices that can help one to face and address both explicit and implicit individual prejudice and bias, can affirm a close connection between self-compassion and compassion for others, and can lead to a sense of interconnectedness with others.²⁴⁰ Rhonda Magee’s research has shown that “mindfulness and other contemplative practices do support ways of being in the world that reflect less of the biases that each of us hold.”²⁴¹ Further because “race and related issues are charged with potential for emotional reactivity, ...the benefits of self-regulation offered by mindfulness are evident.”²⁴² Howard Thurman believed that the work of public repentance and lament could not be done “apart from the slow work of the contemplative life.” Only in that way can we “embody the way of Jesus, chastened in prayers and quieted in our anger, steeled with a moral courage that no violence can efface.”²⁴³ We must continually and prayerfully discern how our White supremacy shows up in ourselves, our communities, our institutions, our liturgies, our images of God, and our prayer.

As a community we must publicly name and own the harm we have caused, not just once. This truth-telling must become part of our narrative our history. We continue to peel back the layers and discern how the sin of White supremacy is functioning every day in our church. Whose voice is being silenced? Whose “tradition” is considered “tradition?” Who is making decisions? Who is sitting in the pews? Who does not feel welcome? Who are we praying for and for whom are we failing to pray? We continue to name and own the harm, we continue to begin

²⁴⁰ Polinska, “Mindfulness Meditation as a Remedy,” 332, 335.

²⁴¹ Polinska, “Mindfulness Meditation as a Remedy,” 334.

²⁴² Polinska, “Mindfulness Meditation as a Remedy,” 335.

²⁴³ Myles Werntz, “Prayerful Resistance: Howard Thurman’s contemplative nonviolence,” *Christian Century*, August 28, 2019, 29.

to change, and we accept the consequences and provide restitution. Who decides what the restitution should be? Only when the voices of those who have been silenced, the voices of those who deserve the restitution are heard can the restitution be determined. After beginning and continuing to name and own the harm and beginning to change, the church as a whole and each diocese and parish in the U.S. must publicly and sincerely apologize for the sins of racism and White supremacy.²⁴⁴ And as these steps continue, the church and Christians must continue to make different choices, different choices in thinking and living to respond to the needs of all of God's creation.

Massingale recognizes that “tactical practices or techniques...run[] the risk of feeding into our American tendency to believe we can solve our social problems solely through rational analysis, hard work, and tenacious determination.”²⁴⁵ That is not how repentance would work and rather we must prayerfully walk through this process. Together with repentance, Massingale calls for the recovery of the practice and genre already deeply rooted in our faith heritage: lament.²⁴⁶ “Laments pierce the crusty calluses of numbness, cynicism, indifference, and denial.”²⁴⁷ Specifically lament is needed “which both stems from and leads to compassion.”²⁴⁸ Lament is a powerful language of truth telling to express the “paradox of protest and praise that leads to new life.”²⁴⁹ For beneficiaries of White privilege, lament is a practice of acknowledging “individual

²⁴⁴ Monica Clark, “Black Catholics ask Pope for Apology,” *National Catholic Reporter*, September 2, 2015, <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/black-catholics-ask-pope-apology>.

²⁴⁵ Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, 104.

²⁴⁶ Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, 111.

²⁴⁷ Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, 107.

²⁴⁸ Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, 105.

²⁴⁹ Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, 108.

and communal complicity” in White supremacy; the harms that have been caused by our complicity; and the benefits that have been gained from another’s suffering. It is a “forthright confession of human wrongdoing in the light of God’s mercy.”²⁵⁰ Such truth telling should be deep, specific, and uncomfortable. In this way, lament is a practice in eschatological hope, “that human wrongdoing is not God’s final act in the drama of personal and social salvation.”²⁵¹

Massingale states that

honest lament then gives rise to a deep sense of *compassion*... Compassion arises not through avoidance of suffering, but from a deeper entering into it. Compassion is a gut-wrenching response to human suffering and anguish that propels one to act beyond the limits of what is considered reasonable or acceptable,²⁵²

especially what is reasonable or acceptable in a society steeped in Whiteness. “Compassion moves the will to justice.”²⁵³

Repentance requires conversations in community. These conversations may be difficult and we are going to get things wrong. God isn’t calling us to be perfect. Ideas of White supremacy often establish a binary and suggest that there is one correct way to do things. As mentioned above, colonists had one singular view toward, and definition of, salvation and White guilt can be paralyzing. As Christians we are called to be “perfect as [our] father in Heaven is perfect.”²⁵⁴ The Greek word *teleios* has been translated as “perfect” in this instance. To translate this as “without flaws” is incorrect. Rather, a better translation is to love “without boundaries’

²⁵⁰ Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, 111.

²⁵¹ Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, 111.

²⁵² Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, 114-115.

²⁵³ Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, 116.

²⁵⁴ Matt. 5:48.

or ‘without selectivity.’”²⁵⁵ Laynesmith suggests that the authors of “Matthew’s intention in using the word [*teleios*] would appear to be to remind [the] audience to keep an eye on whether their morality has narrowed to what is convenient.”²⁵⁶ As disciples, we are sometimes called to do uncomfortable things. In Matthew, Jesus responds to a rich young man, a man of great privilege, and tells him “If you wish to be perfect, go sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”²⁵⁷ For the rich young man, like so many privileged people, the difficulty of giving up the privilege and the possessions and money that may come along with privilege is too much to bear, even for the promise of treasure in heaven. His possessions and positions define him.²⁵⁸ He is “unable to relinquish familiar security for the uncertainties of discipleship.”²⁵⁹ Jesus offers to teach him the way that is kenotic and self-emptying and self-giving, but like many human beings the rich young man refused that “freedom or ultimately that joy.”²⁶⁰ He chose to remain numb.

As more and more people in the US leave the Catholic Church, it is time for the church to reclaim its authenticity and create spaces for people to repent the sins of racism and White supremacy and find hope and ultimately joy in the church. Repentance is not optional. As disciples of Jesus, we must repent. Further, we are not changing for the sake of change, but rather in response to an inbreaking of the reign of God. God helps us to see something we had

²⁵⁵ Mark Laynesmith, “Difficult texts: Matthew 5.48 – are Christians to ‘be perfect?’”, *Theology* 124, no. 2 (2021), 118.

²⁵⁶ Laynesmith, “Difficult texts: Matthew 5.48,” 119.

²⁵⁷ Gerald O’Collins, “Difficult texts: being made perfect according to Matthew 5 and 19,” *Theology* 124, no. 6 (2021), 407, citing Matt. 19:21.

²⁵⁸ Spellers, *The Church Cracked Open*, 32.

²⁵⁹ O’Collins, “Difficult texts: being made perfect,” 407.

²⁶⁰ Spellers, *The Church Cracked Open*, 32.

not seen before, to recognize the evil of racism and White supremacy. Massingale speaks of the Beloved Community that Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke of as his organizing principle. The idea of “an inclusive and interracial society characterized by freedom and justice for all’...where each member is a full participant in social, economic, and political life;” where power and responsibility are truly shared;²⁶¹ where we live and recognize that we are all interwoven in one community. What a beautiful aspiration for the church!

CONCLUSION

White Christians and the U.S. Catholic Church have much work to do dismantle White supremacy and begin the path toward an antiracist future. We must do the deep work to uncover it in ourselves and our church. We can no longer remain “silent and secure behind stain-glass windows.”²⁶² We must look beyond our horizon. Once we see it, we have an obligation to do better, to repent individually and as a community in order to advance the reign of God. Prayer is an essential component of the Christian’s work for antiracism, but prayer is not enough, and prayer drenched in Whiteness is damaging. Repentance is a practice our tradition has known for millennia, and it is time for our community to repent the sins of racism and White supremacy by truthfully recalling “dangerous memories” and owning our responsibility, changing our ways, accepting the discomfort and providing restitution, publicly and communally apologizing, and making different choices to change the structures embedded with White supremacy.

However, it is not enough to pick this piece while ignoring the rest of the harm that the church continues to perpetuate. There is an incompleteness and a hypocrisy in doing antiracism work without allowing women and our LGBTQIA+ siblings to bring their whole authentic selves

²⁶¹ Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, 140-141.

²⁶² King “Letter From Birmingham Jail,” 772.

to the table, including all of their vocational calls. The church's soil remains inhospitable to many people. In the words of civil rights leader Fanny Lou Hamer, "Nobody's free, until everybody's free."²⁶³ As long as the Catholic Church remains a misogynistic, patriarchal and homophobic institution, Whiteness and evil continue to perpetuate. We have been made aware of the problem, the injustice, and the evil. Repentance is a first and continual step.

²⁶³ Fannie Lou Hamer, "'Nobody's Free Until Everybody's Free,' Speech at Founding of the National Women's Political Caucus, Washington, D.C., July 10, 1971," in *The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer: To Tell It Like It Is*, ed. Maegan Parker Brooks and Davis W. Houck (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 134-139.

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