

RACISM – THE RADICAL EVIL
SCRIPTURAL AND THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS
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I. The Radical Evil

Some years ago, before I was a bishop, I was collaborating with Dr. James Cone, a Black liberation theologian, on workshops on cultural and racial understanding for U.S. Navy chaplains. I have never forgotten his comment at the beginning of one his presentations: “I am tired of doing these workshops and presentations on race; I dream of the day when I won’t have to do them anymore.” Well, here we are, over twenty-five years later, and we are still compelled to address the race question with people involved in the work of the Church.

Since 1957, when the U.S. bishops were organized as the National Welfare Catholic Conference, the bishops, both as individuals and collectively, have spoken vehemently, and sometimes eloquently, on the subject of racism. I suspect that fifty years from now we will still be calling for the elimination of this insidious sin. I hope that at least we will be able to point to progress we may have made by that time. That is my fervent prayer.

The most remembered and quoted document of the United States bishops is “Brothers and Sisters to Us,” issued in 1979. The title comes from the text itself: “...let the Church proclaim for all to hear that the sin of racism defiles the image of God and degrades the sacred dignity of humankind, which has been revealed by the mystery of the incarnation. Let all know that it is a terrible sin that mocks the cross of Christ and ridicules the incarnation. For the brother and sister of our brother Jesus Christ are brother and sister to us.”

“Racism,” the statement goes on to say, “is not merely one sin among many, it is a radical evil dividing the human family and denying the new creation of a redeemed world. To struggle against it demands an equally radical transformation in our own minds and hearts as well as in the structure of our society.”

The word *radical* is the correct word, not only because it connotes something drastic and major, but because it is *deeply rooted*. This means that racism in our society is so deeply entrenched, so firmly embedded in our American ethos, that it will take an extraordinary and super human effort to dislodge it, to eradicate it, for its tap root reaches deep down into the soul of our society. It is in truth the root of many evils, including that of poverty.

I was taken aback a few weeks ago as I was reading a book on Abraham Lincoln. I ran into a talk that he gave to a delegation of freed slaves at a conference at the White House, hoping to convince them and their fellow blacks on the benefits of leaving the United States and colonizing in either Africa or in Central America. This is what he said, “You and we are different races. You have endured the greatest wrong inflicted on any people. Still when you cease to be slaves, you are yet far removed from being placed on an equality with the white race. You are cut off from many of the advantages which the other race enjoys...not a single man of your race is made the equal of a single man of ours. It is far better for us both, therefore, to be separated.”

“Brothers and Sisters to Us” relates racism to poverty, to economic injustice, as we are doing here at this conference.

“Racism and economic oppression are distinct but interrelated forces which dehumanize our society,” the bishops said in 1979. They could say the same thing today.

The 1979 statement included among its victims of racism, African Americans, Latinos, Asian and Native Americans. Today we must also address new victims of racial, ethnic and cultural bias. Among these we would add the undocumented immigrants, who, as you know, come from Latin America, Asia, Africa and also Europe. The undocumented immigrant is the new pariah in our country. There is only one word to describe the present day rhetoric and local legislation directed against immigrants around the country, and that is, *meanness*. There have to be more humane ways of dealing with the immigration question without raiding places of employment and rounding up the undocumented and deporting them, with the result of the division and separation of families, including parents from their children.

People who are different from us can make us nervous and uneasy. We feel threatened and experience fear and maybe even repugnance. During my membership on the United States Commission on International Freedom, I was part of a delegation to Egypt. I had seen many men and women in their Muslim dress, among these, women in their *burkhas*, the black dress that covers women from head to toe, with a thin sliver opening for the eyes. My reaction was precisely those emotions described above, especially that of repugnance.

At the hotel one evening, as I was going down the elevator to join the other members of the delegation for dinner, I found myself face to face with a small group of people from Saudi Arabia. A young man in his white robe, smiled at me and asked me, in English, where I was from. I answered, "New Mexico." At that moment a sweet voice came from a young woman clad in her black *burkha*, "Mexico! That must be a beautiful country!" I was momentarily stunned, because I didn't expect such a courteous remark from "one of them." Unfortunately, the elevator door opened at my floor, and I left this friendly group of Saudis. I wish I had had more time to visit with them. I will never look at a *burkha* in the same way again.

When we speak of racism in the United States, we usually mean white racism. We can't deny that every group can be guilty of racism, but in this country dominant white society holds a definite position of power and privilege over other groups. I read recently that every white person in this country is willingly or unwillingly a participant systemic white racism and is its beneficiary.

It is often said, because it's true, that we are not born with racial bias. Through family, Church, school, the environment of our community we have been programmed to conform to prevailing attitudes around us regarding people who are "other." Lamentably in the U.S., racist ways of thinking and behaving are often the standard.

Racism is a global concern. Slavery as such may have been virtually eliminated, yet there are other ways of enslavement and victimization. Sadly our generation has witnessed the ethnic cleansing in Africa and elsewhere. We are witnessing the continuing caste system in places like India and child labor in China and other countries. Even in our own country refugees and asylum seekers can be treated as criminals and terrorists. On trips overseas with the Commission mentioned above, countries which we hold accountable for violations of human rights, remind us of Guantanamo and Abu Graib.

The official document of the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America held in Aparecida, Brazil, last May, continues the tradition of addressing the question of poverty by the Church in Latin America. It uses once more the oft-quoted phrase "preferential option for the poor," a phrase first used in 1968 at the Second General Conference, held in Medellín, Colombia. Let me quote some of the more outstanding points.

"The preferential option for the poor is one of the characteristics that reflects the face of the Latin American and Caribbean Church" (No. 391).

“The suffering faces of the poor are the suffering faces of Christ” (No. 393).

The service of charity of the Church among the poor “is an area that resolutely identifies Christian life, its ecclesial quality and pastoral programming” (No. 394).

“The Holy Father has reminded us that the Church is called to be ‘an advocate for justice and defender of the poor’ in the face of ‘intolerable social and economic inequalities which cry up to heaven’” (no. 395).

“We pledge to work with greater zeal so that our Latin American and Caribbean Church continues to be a walking companion of our poorer brothers and sisters, even to the point of martyrdom” (no. 396) .

Catholic Charities USA is to be commended not to allow the fight against racism to remain at the level of indifference. Not caring about people who are victims of racism, about the brothers and sisters to us, is one more sin piled on the moral evil of racism. Your policy statement on racism is a most thorough study and insightful analysis of poverty and racism. I hope it will not be just one more nice statement, to be filed away.

To be commended also are other efforts such as those of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, which was the U.S. bishops’ response to the riots in some of our cities in the 1960s. CCHD is still going strong and remains the major project of the U.S. bishops in their fight against racism and poverty. Much of the work of the Industrial Areas Foundation is community organization in order that minorities and others might be empowered to deal with their own social problems. We are justly proud that the Catholic Church produced such leaders in the promotion of social justice in the persons of Msgr. Jack Egan, Msgr. Philip Murnion, Sr. Margaret Cafferty, Sr. Thea Bowman, Harry Fagan, Fr. Gino Baroni, Bishop Joseph Francis, and in our southwest, Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, Willie Velasquez, Leonard Anguiano,

Ernie Cortez and many others. Their passion for economic justice for all continues to inspire even after they pass away.

II. Scriptural and Theological Reflections

It is at conferences such as this that we are reminded that sacred scripture, both the Old and the New Testaments, are not meant simply to help me relate with my God. The word racism does not appear in the Bible. It appears that it is a product of the modern age. The correctness of my relationship with God in Scriptures is measured in the way we relate with all our brothers and sisters. Sacred Scripture does not have a social dimension, all of it is social and all of it, in one way or another, has to do with faith in God being lived out in our lives as members of God's family.

This is particularly true in the Book of Deuteronomy, where we find the consistent and oft-repeated concern for the widow, the orphan and the stranger, (eg., Dt. 24:19). There are no less than 12 verses in Deuteronomy that specifically refer to what I refer to as the "Trilogy of Compassion." This concern is also in Jeremiah (7:6) and Zachariah (7:10). These categories of people are perennial victims of oppression throughout history, not only in the history of Israel. Millions today around the world fit these categories. The widows of our day are women everywhere who are violated in many different ways. The orphans are the street children in urban centers around the world, who are seen as disposable. There the children of Africa who suffer from AIDS or because their parents are dying or have already died, and children are left to raise their younger siblings. In our own country the innocent children of undocumented immigrants are paralyzed by the fear that their parents will be deported. The stranger among us is the "other" of another race, of another country of origin, of another culture. The concern of the prophets is our concern today and in this place.

One of the most consistent truths taught in Sacred Scripture is that the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jesus is totally inclusive. No one individual, no one group of people, of whatever race or nation, is excluded from his plan of salvation and from his realm of love.

The Old Testament tells of the development of Hebrew thought, from a kind of xenophobic regard for those of the Hebrew people, as exemplified in the so-called “hate psalms,” to the more inclusive vision of the prophets, who write of the time when people of every nation will climb the Lord’s mountain. There are several references to this inclusion of all nations in the Book of the prophet Isaiah:

“The glory of the Lord will be revealed and all mankind will see it” (Is. 40:5).

“From every corner of the earth turn to me and be saved; for I am God and there is none other” (Is. 45:22).

“The foreigner who has given his allegiance to the Lord must not say, ‘The Lord will exclude me from his people’” (Is. 56:3).

“I am coming to gather peoples of every tongue; they will come to see my glory” (Is. 66:18).

“All the nations will stream toward it (the mountain of the Lord’s house) and every people will go and say, ‘Let’s go up to the mountain of the Lord...that he may teach us his ways...’” (Is. 2:2).

The theme of social justice is found also in the Book of Job. When Job is giving his final argument about the goodness of God, even though he has been beset by trial after trial, he refers to his own uprightness precisely because he has been a practitioner of justice and compassion to the poor.

“Whoever heard of me blessed me: those who saw me commended me. For I rescued the poor who cried for help, the orphan, and the unassisted: the blessing of those in extremity came upon me, and the heart of the widow I made joyful. I wore my honesty like a garment; justice was my robe and my turban.

I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame was I; I was a father to the needy; the rights of the stranger I studied and I broke the jaws of the wicked man; from his teeth I forced the prey” (Jb. 29:17).

According to Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez, OP, recognized as the father of liberation theology, the Our Father, that is, the Lord’s Prayer, is more than the two words that begin Jesus’ prayer. The words “Our Father,” says Fr. Gutierrez, are the most subversive words in the New Testament. When we say, “Our Father,” we are acknowledging that there is but one God, the parental source of all human persons. We are all members of the one family of God, and as such, we are all brothers and sisters.

There are several implications to this. First of all, God, our sole parent, sees in each one of his created persons his own image and likeness. From God’s perspective, all enjoy the same dignity of personhood, God loves all his children the same; there is not one group whose color of skin, or any other human characteristic make it superior or the privileged group, because for God, all are special and all are privileged. Moreover, the further implication of the words, “Our Father,” is that God wants all his children to be united, to avoid hurting each other and treating one another with violence and injustice. God wants all his children to respect each other and to live in justice, love, and peace. The radical evil of racism is completely contrary to what Jesus tells us about our common origin.

In his first encyclical, Pope Benedict XVI contextualized the theme of social justice in the commandment of love. He reminded us that love is at the heart of the Gospel.

When St. Paul speaks of the mystery of God being hidden for generations and then revealed in Jesus Christ, he is probably referring to the immensity and all-inclusiveness of God's love. For this, Jesus came to the world to live among us and to explain God's love for all.

In a lecture that I attended at Notre Dame last year by Dr. Carlos Fuentes, eminent writer from Mexico, he spoke of the conversion of the Indian peoples of Mexico to the Christian God. Before the arrival of Christianity, the Indians had practiced the sacrifice of human beings to appease their Indian gods. When they were told by the missionaries that the God they preached had become a human being, that he had died for all, and that there was no need for human sacrifices, they could believe in him. No longer would they have to offer sacrifices, for Christ had died for all. This is what convinced them of the fundamental truth of Christianity of God's love.

The ecclesiology of Vatican II has as its foundational principle *communio*. Our existential unity as the Body of Christ is already a message to the world. The more we become a true Church, united as one body, the stronger our message of the possibility of the unity of the human race becomes. In the Church, we, though many, are one. We are the sign and sacrament of the world's potential. We are called to proclaim that unity among all peoples is possible. The Church's mission is the same as that of Jesus: to reconcile everyone to God and to one another. St. Paul says it succinctly: We are ministers of reconciliation. To do this we preach the Good News in order to bring about the conversion from separation to unity, from division to communion, and from racism to the ideal that in Christ there is "no Jew or Greek, slave or freeman, male or female" (Gal. 3:28).

U.S. bishops at Vatican II spoke on the issue of racial discrimination. When the discussions on *Dei Ecclesia* took place, Bishop Robert Tracy of Baton Rouge said the following, “all discrimination based on race alone is completely irreconcilable with the truth which we believe, namely, that God has created all men with equal rights and dignity....If the Council issues a solemn and concrete affirmation of the equality of all races, it will greatly help the bishops to teach their people more effectively....Such a statement by the Council would bring great consolation to all those who are deprived of equal liberty and humiliated and oppressed under the yolk of prejudice for no other reason than their race....We ask that a solemn dogmatic declaration of the equality of all men, of whatever people or race, be included in the chapter on the People of God.”

The following year when the draft of *Gaudium et Spes* was being discussed, two U.S. bishops spoke strongly regarding racism. Bishop Grutka of Gary, wanted the Church to speak more strongly against the evils of discrimination and segregation on the basis of race or color: “with a united and firm voice, which evokes the trumpets of Jericho.” Cardinal O’Boyle of Washington, speaking in the name of the bishops of the United States of America, devoted his speech exclusively to the issue of racial discrimination. He said, “It is not just a social or cultural or political problem; above all, it is a moral and religious problem of immense magnitude. The draft speaks of the issue, “in places and accidentally.” But it must do so “formally and explicitly,” stating “firmly the obligation of all the members of the Church of Christ to use all means to remove this detestable evil of racial injustice, and to promote the fraternity of all people, without discrimination, under the fatherhood of God.”

As it turned out, *Gaudium et Spes* did not speak extensively on racism. It is mentioned in *Gaudium et Spes* No. 29 in the context of the equality between all men.

Another theological theme that is counter to racism is the mystery of the Incarnation. The older I get, the more I am in awe as to the Incarnation. Why would God want to become one of us? “Though he was in the form of God, he did not deem equality of God, something to be grasped at. Rather, he emptied himself and took the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men” (Phil. 2:6-7).

Reflecting on the idea that God would become one of us, it does not take much to acknowledge that God did not become only like some human beings but like all human beings. He took on the human nature of all of us, irregardless of the color of our skin and where we were born. He took on the flesh equally of white, black, and any other skin color; he took on the flesh of the weak and the handicapped as well as the healthy; he took on the flesh of the poorest of the poor as well as of the richest of the rich. He became like unto all of us. “He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified have one and the same Father. Therefore, He is not ashamed to call them brothers” (Heb. 2:11).

I would like to share with you a wonderful insight of Fr. Robert Barron, who teaches theology at Mundelein in Chicago. “...all finite reality – from archangels to quarks – comes forth here and now from the same divine generosity, the ontological ground of any one thing is identical to the ontological ground of any other. Like islands in an archipelago, we are all, despite our surface differences, connected at the depth. All creatures are ontological siblings. When he stood at the corner of Fourth and Walnut Streets in downtown Louisville in 1958, Thomas Merton realized this truth, and in his *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, gave famous expression to the realization. Seeing all of the ordinary people bustling past him, it suddenly dawned on him that he loved them all, not on a sentimental or emotional sense, but mystically, even metaphysically. Waking from what he called a ‘dream of separateness,’ he knew that they

all belong to God and hence to each other. Connected through a *point vierge*, a virginal point where each was being created by God. Understanding this coherence for the first time, Merton exclaimed, “There is no way of telling people that they are walking around shining like the sun.”

Dom Helder Camara of Recife is another who belongs in our list of those who championed justice. In an interview before he died, he shared that a prayer of Cardinal Newman was one that he prayed constantly, often more than once a day. It goes like this, “Lord Jesus, I have the joy and responsibility of believing that ever since my baptism we are one. Do not extinguish the light of your presence within me. Oh, Lord, look through my eyes, listen through my ears, speak through my lips, walk with my feet. Lord, may my poor human presence be a reminder, however weak, of your Divine Presence. For, to the degree that others notice me, it is a sign that I am, unfortunately, still opaque and not transparent.”

We are called to be in the way Newman and Dom Helder, transparent enough so that Christ can be seen through our actions and words, especially in the way we regard others and treat them, so that others may see through our lowly human presence the divine presence of God. We can pray like Dom Helder did, that God take away whatever is opaque in us and help us to become transparent so that we will allow our works to shine before the world, that they may glorify our God who is in heaven. May God bless you.