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TRUTH IN LOVE

The Bridge to Racial Rapprochement and Harmonized Truth

By Parris J. Baker
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Editor's note: Following is the first of a three-part series on Catholic social teaching and Black Liberation Theology.

Since the colonization and configuration of the United States as a nation, a considerable number of Americans (defined as various groups of immigrants and formerly enslaved people) remain polarized in our acceptance of three inescapable truths:

1. The United States developed racist systems to support and maintain the institution of slavery.
2. The intersection of economics, politics, and religion was used to maintain and expand these racist systems, particularly the institution of slavery, which shaped the United States.
3. The role of religion was necessary and purposeful in the establishment, maintenance, and expansion of racism in America.

United States policymakers used democratic principles as a framework for the construction of hegemonic education, economic, religious, and political institutions. Concerned about the hermeneutical interpretation of the scriptures regarding the institution of slavery, the enslavement of Black people, and God's

commandment to “love thy neighbor as thy self,” white Catholic and Protestant institutions invented pedagogy and nomenclature justifying the protraction of slavery.

After the Civil War, with the passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments, various denominations of Christian faiths missed repeated opportunities to incorporate the new national paradigm of law and morality regarding Black people. At the end of the Reconstruction Era, Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, (May 15, 1891) outlined an educational framework for Catholic social teaching that focused on social justice, human dignity, solidarity, and subsidiarity. The early tenets of it were:

1. Protection of human life and human dignity.
2. Voice must be used to defend and protect the poor and powerless.
3. Preferential option for the poor, the rights of workers, and champion for peace.

However, most American Catholic priests, parishes, and teachers did not adopt or teach these tenets of Catholic social teaching. This was unfortunate because the rise of white supremacy groups, the instillation of Jim Crow laws, and brutalization of Black people replaced overt acts of slavery. Though laws changed, hearts were not. Imagine what might have happened if the Catholic Church had taken a position on race, to protect human life, to use their voice to defend and protect the poor and powerless, and to advocate for the just treatment of the worker in a more pronounced way.

The Catholic Church has had an impeccable and unimpeachable persona for answering the call for our nation’s most urgent health and human service needs.

Below are examples of the faithfulness of the Catholic Church:

1. The Catholic Church is the world’s largest non-governmental provider of education and healthcare. The Catholic Church is the largest provider of private education in the country.[1]
2. Having affiliations with 260 colleges and universities, the Catholic Church is our nation’s largest private provider of higher education.[2]
3. The Catholic Church is the largest private provider of healthcare in the United States. Almost 15 percent of all patients receive healthcare in a Catholic hospital.[3]

4. Twenty-five percent of Americans who struggle with poverty receive services from the Catholic Church, the country's largest private supplier of poverty services.[4]

5. The Catholic Church is our nation's lead organization for refugee resettlement.[5]

6. For over a century the Catholic Church has provided unyielding opposition to the legalization of abortion and has been an ardent defender of the right to life for the unborn amid its belief that all human life is sacred.[6]

However impressive, there is oblivious omission and obstipation of the sins of racism within the United States and the U.S. Catholic Church. That observation has been acknowledged by a growing number of Black theologians.[7] These clerics have challenged the Catholic Church and its philosophy, pedagogy and andragogy, deportment, and devotion to its belief that all life is sacred and therefore all life must be protected, particularly where its "citizens of color are concerned."

From a Black Liberation Theology perspective, the response of the Catholic Church to the issues of systemic racism and the hateful treatment of Black people was alarmingly anemic and woefully inadequate. Black people were acutely aware that approximately 100 years had passed from President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation to the onset of the Civil Rights Movement with few changed attitudes and civil behaviors of bigoted whites and segregationist politicians. Southern Blacks lived with daily portentous reminders, displayed by undeterred and resolute southern segregationists, that social, political, and religious change would not be granted graciously. The nation's unenthusiastic response to the 1954 Supreme Court ruling in the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka Kansas*, the stout resistance to school desegregation (exemplified in the violent protests by white parents to the admission of nine Black students to Little Rock High School in Little Rock, Arkansas), and the brutal killing of Emmitt Till underscored just how deeply entrenched were the racist attitudes of many Americans.

Alabama, particularly Birmingham, was the stronghold of white supremacy and segregation. During his inaugural speech, delivered on Jan. 14, 1963, the newly elected Alabama Gov. George Wallace, a devoted segregationist, proudly proclaimed, "Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever!" Two days later, an open letter titled, "An Appeal for Law and Order and Common Sense" was published in the Birmingham News during the commencement of the Alabama Christian Movement Campaign for Human Rights.

The two-fold purpose of the open letter, addressed to the residents of Birmingham, was to encourage the resident integrationists, mostly Negroes, to be patient with the judicial process, to allow societal change to occur gradually and legally, to not participate in public acts of protest, and to obey all existing laws of segregation. The clerics urged the local segregationists, white Alabamians, to avoid overt acts of aggression, violence, and hostility. Their open letter did little to change Alabamian attitudes and conduct.

Later in the same year, on April 12, 1963, recognizing the mounting racial tensions in Birmingham, eight white clergymen, two Catholic bishops, two Methodist bishops, an Episcopalian bishop, a Presbyterian bishop, a Baptist pastor, and a Rabbi issued a second, more urgent appeal in an open letter. This second appeal was unmistakably directed toward Martin Luther King, Jr., the Black citizenry, and local leadership to withdraw support and participation in public demonstrations led by “outsiders.”

According to these Alabamian clerics, Birmingham was being invaded and agitated with angered “Negroes” who wanted to challenge and change the white American way of doing things. They believed America was founded on Christian principles and that God ordained and established a religious and racial hierarchal system that placed white Christians at the top of the hierarchy. Presented with increased social and constitutional pressures to change the hierarchal arrangements, white Christian segregationists considered it their patriotic duty to protect and defend their American way of life, by any means necessary, which included violence. Here is the text of the open letter titled:

A Call for Unity.^[8] Published in the Birmingham News, April 12, 1963

We the undersigned clergymen are among those who in January issued "An Appeal for Law and Order and Common Sense" in dealing with racial problems in Alabama. We expressed understanding that honest convictions in racial matters could properly be pursued in the courts but urged that decisions of those courts should in the meantime be peacefully obeyed.

Since that time there had been some evidence of increased forbearance and a willingness to face facts. Responsible citizens have undertaken to work on various problems which caused racial friction and unrest. In Birmingham, recent public events have given an indication that we all have the opportunity for a new constructive and realistic approach to racial problems.

However, we are now confronted by a series of demonstrations by some of our Negro citizens directed and led in part by outsiders. We recognize the natural impatience of people who feel that their hopes are slow in

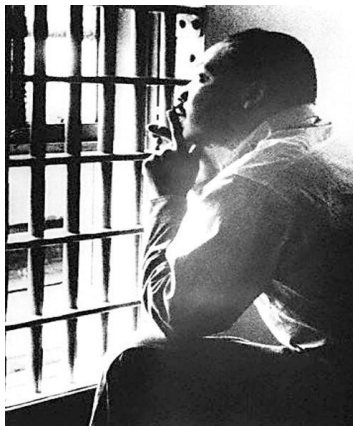
being realized. But we are convinced that these demonstrations are unwise and untimely.

We agree rather with certain local Negro leadership which has called for honest and open negotiation of racial issues in our area. And we believe this kind of facing of issues can best be accomplished by citizens of our own metropolitan area white and Negro, meeting with their knowledge and experience of the local situation. All of us need to face that responsibility and find proper channels for its accomplishment.

Just as we formerly pointed out that "hatred and violence have no sanction in our religious and political tradition," we also point out that such actions as incite hatred and violence, however technically peaceful those actions may be, have not contributed to the resolution of our local problems. We do not believe that these days of new hope are days when extreme measures are justified in Birmingham.

We commend the community as a whole and the local news media and law enforcement officials in particular, on the calm manner in which these demonstrations have been handled. We urge the public to continue to show restraint should the demonstrations continue, and the law enforcement officials to remain calm and continue to protect our city from violence.

We further strongly urge our own Negro community to withdraw support from these demonstrations, and to unite locally in working peacefully for a better Birmingham. When rights are consistently denied, a cause should be pressed in the courts and in negotiations among local leaders, and not in the streets. We appeal to both our white and Negro citizenry to observe the principles of law and order and common sense.



Dr. King responded to this open letter, "A Call for Unity," with a point-by-point rebuttal in his famous Letter from a Birmingham Jail. According to Dr. King, it was the repeated moral failure of white church leaders to address the blatant and insidious violence against Black people and their unfounded belief in and complicit support of a corrupt legal system that contributed to the ensconced structural racism. Moreover, Dr. King believed that white Christian leaders should have advocated for and championed, through direct action, a Christianity that established a standard of solidarity in support of full human rights and dignity that included black

people.

King believed fervently that the moral failure of white Christian leaders was another missed opportunity to confront and acknowledge the racist behaviors of their white supremacist peers and parishioners, to apologize personally for their passive stance and their refusal to become activist in the nonviolent, direct-action protests for civil rights. This missed opportunity was another in a long legacy of missed opportunities that necessitated the elaborate approaches used in the Civil Rights Movement.

Compelled to respond to the repetitive acts of racism, Catholic leaders (the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops^[9]) have issued four pastoral letters^[10] that addressed and condemned racism. In each pastoral letter there is a repudiation of the sin of racism, documentation of USCCB's ecclesial outrage, offers of continuous thoughts and prayers for the victims, and pleas for the Church to 'act now and to act decisively' (Statement of National Race Crisis – Issued by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, April 25, 1968). Commencing in 1958 and about every decade thereafter, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) has produced pastoral letters that address racism:

1. 1958 Pastoral Letter: Discrimination and the Christian Conscience: A Statement Issued by the Catholic Bishops of the United States
2. 1968 Pastoral Letter: Statement of National Race. A Statement Issued by the Catholic Bishops of the United States
3. 1979 Pastoral Letter: Brothers and Sisters to Us: A Pastoral Letter on Racism
4. 2018 Pastoral Letter: Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love – A Pastoral Letter Against Racism

In his book, "Racial Justice and the Catholic Church," the Rev. Bryan Massingale^[11] states that the Catholic response to systemic racism has been contemptible, lacks sufficient passion and critical reflection and reflexivity, and is negligent in listening to and incorporating the voices of Black victims, particularly those of Black Catholics in their pastoral letters. He asserts:

The pastoral on racism has had little impact upon the consciousness and behavior of the vast majority of American Catholics. It is difficult to *not* conclude that Catholic engagement with racism is a matter of low institutional commitment, priority, and importance (p. 77).

Though not inclusive of all Catholics, there remains a contemptuous silence within recalcitrant Catholic institutions and by leadership to address the foundational issues of slavery and racism. The Rev. Lawrence Lucas^[12] asserted,

“Unless a man looks at himself honestly and sees himself as he really is, no matter how painful that may be, he cannot hope to change. In fact, he won’t even suspect there is a need for change.”

Unfortunately, the deafening silence within moral, political, and legal institutions echoed throughout the hallowed halls of countless white Protestant churches. These white Christian leaders have been either unwilling, unable, or fearful of retribution to speak publicly and directly to the long history of public lynchings, acts of intimidation, and the inhumane treatment of Black people. For far too long white Christian leaders had been exercising power without morality while Black people have practiced a morality without political power and religious authority.

This essay was not written to eviscerate or cast a dark shadow upon the Catholic Church by repeatedly identifying the ecclesial deficits found in the flawed faith of humans and the institutions they govern. That serves no constructive or consequential purpose. Nor is there any value in constructing a frivolously veiled ecclesiastical and theological “gotcha” campaign to blame or shame the Catholic Church. From a Black Liberation Theology perspective, the U.S. Catholic Church must be liberated from its historic racist and oppressive institutional practices, past and present and its ideology of white superiority and white privilege.

The philosophy of Black Liberation Theology seeks full humanity, full citizenship, and answers to the question of what it means to be both Black and Christian. Moreover, Black liberation theologians wanted an animated faith tradition that spoke directly to the issues of race oppression, and suffering, and reinforced the purpose of Jesus Christ. The message encased in Black liberation pedagogy is that racial reconciliation cannot occur without Godly sorrow, which leads to repentance. Genuine repentance cannot occur unless there is an acknowledgment or confession of sin with an honest penitent heart. Therefore, truth must originate from various perspectives and precede the act of confession. Acknowledging truth that will transform individuals of the Catholic faith will require an unfamiliar genre of courage; the type of courage that only comes from God.

1. Reconciliation cannot happen without repentance.
 2. Repentance cannot happen without confession.
 3. Confession cannot happen without courage.
 4. Courage cannot happen without truth.
 5. Truth cannot happen without God.
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- [5] See Refugee Resettlement Facts, UNHCR, The UN Refugee Agency, November 2023, [Here](#).
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- [9] The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) operated under different names, with different mandates and missions. In 1917 the National Catholic War Council was formed to provide financial and spiritual resources U.S. servicemen during World War 1. The National Catholic Welfare Conference, initiated in 1922, addressed issues related to education, immigration, and social action. In 1966 two new conferences were established: National Conference of Catholic Bishops to provide direct pastoral oversight and the United States Catholic Conference to establish a greater presence of the Church in American society. On July 1, 2001, the two conferences combined to form the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. [Here](#)
- [10] The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Pastoral Letters on Racism: [Here](#)
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