

## Our path to confronting racism

*Journey*  
*Forward*  
**HOLINESS**



By Sr. Mary Garascia, Ph.D.

*Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child.* Words of this African-American spiritual from the slavery era is often sung at protests and cited by those writing about racism. Racism is a huge and complex topic to treat in one column, but I would like highlight ideas and actions that seem important for reducing racism.

‘Feel’ is an important word. Empathy is a starting point for overcoming racism, I believe, because racism is a specific kind of discrimination based on skin color, and skin color cannot be changed. So, when Black, Indigenous, or other Persons of Color step out of their homes, they are “aliens” who cannot blend into the dominant white culture, no matter how educated or successful they are. People like me who are white must try to feel how that feels. It feels, I am told, like you are always unsafe. It feels like you always need to modify how you speak to and act toward members of the dominant culture. It feels like you need to protect your children from white people, giving them “the talk,” warning them, teaching them the subservient behavior that will protect them from being killed. It feels like every day, all of your life, is a struggle. This situation has been going on since European colonists linked skin color with inferior, sub-human slave status, not only in the U.S. but in Central and South America, in India, and in other colonized countries. Is it any wonder that people of color, especially younger people, sometimes feel despairing, frustrated, edgy, angry?

The linkage between light skin tone and high status is not unique to the U.S., but Isabelle Wilkerson, author of the current bestseller “Caste,” points out a unique element: the definition of whiteness in the U.S., she says, has expanded over the decades so that a larger group of “whites” could sustain its position atop the hierarchy. For example, former and more recent immigrant groups such as Irish, Italians, light skinned Middle Easterners and Asians are today considered white. But, she says, since the dawn of the U.S. caste system, Black Americans have remained at the lowest rung.

Racism is about power. Racism persists because systems and institutions, like banking, housing, and education, operate by procedures and practices and laws that perpetuate an underclass of people of color, thus upholding white dominance. Racism also persists because it is largely unconscious and imbedded in culture. Bryan Massingale, in “*Racial Justice and the Catholic Church Night Will Be No More*,” says: divestment of culture, language, religious tradition and memory experienced by the Pueblo peoples at the hands of colonists and, yes, members and leaders of the Church, must be acknowledged. And a frustrated Bishop Ferdinand Cheri of New Orleans lamented this August: [the] National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus in 1968... said, “The Catholic Church in the United States, primarily a white racist institution, has addressed itself primarily to white society and is definitely a part of that society.” Here we are in 2020 and ...the church is in the same place, the same space with new faces. Our Catholic identity is so wedded to our American ideals and systemic racism that Catholics [only] scratch the surface – do good things, but

don’t get too deep into systemic issues.”

So, what might we do to help reduce racism? First, educate ourselves. A suggestion might be to present a six-week session for teens and their parents based on the Henry Louis Gates Jr video series, *The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross*. For sustained conversation and internalizing this difficult learning, more than just one talk is needed. And recurrent homilies and General Intercessions at Masses are also needed.

Second, we need to listen to black leaders about black people, not to non-Blacks purporting to speak about or for them. Black leaders know better than we do about the dysfunctions in the Black community. Those dysfunctions do not define Black Americans, who want the same things white Americans want—neighborhoods safe from crime, children with quality education who can qualify for college admission, fathers present in family life and helping to raise children. There are wonderful black leaders who have taken up the mantle of the former great leaders like John Lewis and Martin Luther King, Jr. Fundamental to these leaders, past and present, is commitment to non-violence, forgiveness, and the inclusivity of the welcome table, the beloved community, and the rainbow coalition. Let’s let the words and perceptions of black leaders—politician, authors and artists—be what fills our images of what African Americans are like. If you hear something that does not match what these leaders are saying, it is a prejudiced, racist stereotype.

Third, it is easy to slip into social togetherness but spiritual apartness. Many of us, of all skin colors, work and study and pray together, but we lead otherwise segregated lives. Who do you eat Thanksgiving dinner with? Party with? Phone just to talk? When I was the Pastoral Coordinator at The Holy Name of Jesus, we had Masses in English, Spanish, and Arabic. But Bishop Barnes cautioned us: don’t fall into having tracks, where one language group exits and another enters, but there is no real community. We need ways, approaches, programs to help us all cross over from wary politeness to friendship.

Lastly, silence gives consent to racism. Massingale gives examples of how we excuse racist words and acts in our families and workplaces: “That’s just the way your father was raised.” “It’s just a joke.” “But deep down, she’s really a good person.” “You can’t choose your family, but you gotta love them anyway.” “I wish he wouldn’t talk that way. But you can’t change how people feel.” Hear something, say something! Even to those we love and need! The U.S. Bishops have said that racism is not merely one sin among many; it is a radical evil, the original sin of the U.S. We can’t let it go on.

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