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MASSINGALE'S PRESCRIPTIVE FOR RACISM
IN THE U.S. CATHOLIC CHURCH

Jessie Bazan

Abstract - Nearly every social issue plaguing the United States is impacted by racial bias, most often, against black Americans. Rev. Bryan Massingale, an internationally-recognized black Catholic theologian, has committed much of his ministerial work to advocating for racial justice and educating others about the urgent need for racial reconciliation within the Church. This paper uses Massingale's holistic approach to explain how the USCCB could strengthen its understanding of racism, its support of black leadership, and its passion for opposing racism both inside and outside the Church.

Racism mars the United States of America like a scab that will not heal. From the carnage of slavery to the sting of unequal housing, the country is entrenched in cycles of racial injustice. Whether explicit or implicit, “virtually every social challenge facing the United States – education, care for the environment, access to health care, poverty, immigration reform, criminal justice, etc. – is entangled with or aggravated by racial bias against people of color.”¹ Most often, black Americans are the ones slapped with rejection while white Americans stand at the threshold of

privilege² – simply because of the colors of their skin. As a faithful body operating within a deeply-wounded cultural context, the United States Catholic Church is not exempt from racial scarring. Racism is the Church’s business. Rev. Bryan Massingale knows these scars all too well.³ An internationally-recognized black Catholic theologian, Massingale has committed much of his ministerial work to advocating for racial justice and educating others about the urgent need for racial reconciliation within the church. Massingale is adamant that it is the responsibility of all Catholics to work for a more just church, but he also recognizes the special responsibility that ecclesial leaders like U.S. Catholic bishops have to instigate change at the institutional level.⁴ Their efforts to oppose racism and cultivate racial justice, Massingale insists, must be strengthened.

Because of his holistic approach⁵ to the topic of racial justice, this paper focuses on Massingale’s scholarship and uses it as a framework to suggest reasons why the U.S Catholic bishops should strengthen their understanding of racism, support of black leadership, and passion for opposing racism. If more proactive steps are not taken by ecclesial leaders, this author argues that racism will continue to have dire implications at the parish level. To that end, this paper analyzes each of these three major areas (e.g. understanding of racism) individually. Each section begins with a summary of primary words and actions of the bishops that demonstrate the strengthening that is needed. Then, it calls upon Massingale’s scholarship to further explain why efforts in this area need to be improved. Finally, each section uses communication theories to explore the implications of racism at the parish level.

The paper's conclusion offers an initial suggestion for promoting racial reconciliation.

UNDERSTANDING OF RACISM

It is evident by their texts and subsequent actions (or lack thereof) that the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops as a whole understands racism to be more of an individual issue rather than a systemic problem with deeply rooted, cultural repercussions. According to Massingale, racism is a complex “cultural phenomenon”⁶ that deeply sways the way people act in and understand the world. Racism is much more than a surface-level issue of one racial group disrespecting another. The individual and societal repercussions of racism are inescapable, as racism “is expressed in the cultural symbols, social order, and public policies of the country.”⁷ It is a prejudiced framework for reality that both explicitly and implicitly impacts the quality of life for people of various skin tones. In short, racism is both an individual and collective sin. It is evident from their official documents⁸ that the country's body of bishops believe racism⁹ is primarily an individual issue. While their latest document *Brothers and Sisters to Us* at least recognizes the societal impact of racism, it still attributes the root causes of racism to the individual. The authors write, “Today's racism flourishes in the triumph of private concern over public responsibility, individual success over social commitment, and personal fulfillment over authentic compassion.”¹⁰ They seem to be conveying that racism flourishes when the focus is on the individual.

The solutions to combatting racism named in the document naturally follow this emphasis on individuality. Catholics are told that each “must acknowledge a share in the mistakes and sins of the past” as many “have been prisoners of fear and prejudice” who have preached the Gospel with eyes closed to the racism it condemns.¹¹ Again, the U.S. Catholic bishops are suggesting that the individual must acknowledge his or her mistakes and roles in furthering racism. Individual responsibility is important, but it is only part of the solution. What about the responsibilities of the Catholic Church as an institution? Racism is also a collective issue that needs the system itself to take collective responsibility in order to be rectified. It can not only be combatted through individual acts of good manners, education, reason, and interracial dialogue, as is the dominant approach of the U.S. Catholic Church right now.¹² An analysis of underlying societal beliefs is needed for systematic change to occur.

The limited understanding of the systemic roots of racism by the USCCB is problematic because the Church can only affect a limited amount of positive social change by only addressing the individual effects of racism. Condensing the reality of racism to individual acts leaves the Church “insufficiently attentive – if not blind – to the nexus of race and cultural power and social privilege, and the need to sever this linkage” according to Massingale.¹³ The bishops can and should keep denouncing individual acts of racism, but more people could be impacted if they address the root causes of racism. Massingale writes that the bishops need to begin by understanding and acknowledging the uncomfortable truths about the ways white Church-goers “enjoy a privileged social status with access to advantages and

benefits to the detriment, disadvantage and burden of persons of color.”¹⁴ They have to acknowledge the deep wounds of racism within its harmful individual *and* societal effects.

If church leadership does not address the deeper realities of racism, communication theory suggests that the limited understanding is bound to trickle down to the parish level. Systems theory¹⁵ in the communication discipline explains that an organization (i.e. the Catholic Church) is an interconnected system. What occurs within the leadership of the organization (i.e. the bishops) necessarily influences any constituents (i.e. local parishes) because all are facets of the same entity. Members of the same organization naturally desire to act cohesively in order to maintain group identity.¹⁶ This often leads to groupthink, the theory that consensus-seeking outweighs good sense in group decision-making.¹⁷ If U.S. Catholic bishops address racism as a mainly individual issue, then the odds are higher that U.S. Catholic parishes will hold the same understanding in order to remain uniform. The leadership needs a more thorough understanding of racism in order for substantial, systematic change to occur at the parish level.

SUPPORT OF BLACK LEADERSHIP

The Catholic Church in the United States also suffers from a lack of black voice and leadership – a reality that perpetuates racial disparity. There are 2.5 million African American Catholics in the United States.¹⁸ This racial group is part of the more than 35.2 million Catholics in the United States (or 46 percent of the total U.S. Catholic

population) who identify as people of color.¹⁹ Although people of color account for nearly half of the U.S. Catholic population, the racial composition of U.S. clergy is far less diverse. Of the 38,275 Catholic priests in the United States,²⁰ only approximately 225 are black.²¹ There are just eight active black Catholic bishops²² in the country.

It is evident that black Catholics are not adequately represented in leadership positions – or in voice. In *Brothers and Sisters to Us*, the bishops “urged scrupulous attention at every level to insure that minority representation goes beyond mere tokenism and involves authentic sharing in responsibility and decision making.”²³ This call has gone essentially unheard, according to Massingale. Instead of shared responsibility, Massingale writes that “the Catholic racial justice tradition tends to speak about and for aggrieved African Americans; but it does not support or acknowledge black agency, meaning independent thought, action, and leadership.”²⁴ Rather, “black people are usually acted upon, seldom the actors, in Catholic moral discourse. Such a view cannot but render Catholic ethical reflection in matters of race inadequate and impoverished, if not absolutely erroneous.”²⁵

The Catholic bishops could improve their efforts to listen to the black voice. The little discourse they have about racism in the Church comes from a predominately white perspective. Consider, for instance, the very title of the 1979 pastoral letter on racism, *Brothers and Sisters to Us*. Contextual evidence indicates the phrase “brothers and sisters” is referring to black Catholics. The object of the sentence is held in contrast to the first-person pronoun “us” – the authors of the letter who logically must not be black.

As Massingale writes, “The very title indicates that this is a document written for white Catholics and addressed to white Catholics.”²⁶ Perspective matters. It often dictates who holds the power and whose agency is being acknowledged. Listening to and engaging with the voices of people of other races is necessary for any real progress. How can racial reconciliation happen in the U.S. Catholic Church if the voices of a wide range of people are not being heard and represented in leadership?²⁷

The lack of black voice and leadership in the U.S. Catholic Church has detrimental effects at the parish level. When black parishioners do not see any ecclesial leaders who look like them, communication theory suggests it is much more difficult for the black parishioners to develop their identity as contributing Catholics. The looking-glass self theory centers on the idea that human beings “learn about ourselves from the ways others treat us, view us, and label us.”²⁸ A significant part of one’s sense of self comes from interactions with other people. If black parishioners do not see any black leadership at the pulpit, this theory suggests that they are likely to think that they are not worthy or capable leaders, either. People believe what they see.

Similarly, white parishioners can easily begin to think that white people are the only ones capable of ecclesial leadership if all they see are white priests. The notion of the looking-glass self implies that self-expectations affect behaviors.²⁹ If black parishioners think they cannot lead, odds are they will not take many actions of leadership. If white parishioners think they are the only ones who can lead, odds are their actions will also follow suit. The results of such thinking profusely limit the parishes’ opportunities for communal learning and growth. Parishes will lose out on

the many gifts that African American leadership, viewpoints and spirituality³⁰ have to offer if their black parishioners are kept silent. Therefore, a greater representation of black voice and leadership is necessary for the U.S. Catholic Church.

PASSION FOR OPPOSING RACISM

Perhaps most troubling for Massingale in the U.S. Catholic Church's fight against racism is the lack of passion for the fight itself. Opposition to racism does not seem to be a major priority for the USCCB as a whole, if the number of statements on racial justice is any indication. Unlike the passionate crusade against abortion that stands as "a major public marker of Catholic identity,"³¹ Massingale notes how the fight against racism lacks strong rhetoric and action. For instance, *Brothers and Sisters to Us* calls racial tension "unfortunate" and "unnecessary"³² – words more apt to describe missing the bus than the discrimination against one's livelihood. At best, Catholics feel it is their duty to respect the desegregation laws of 1954, but Massingale insists there is "no recognition that believers are called to be proactive agents in the achievement of racial justice."³³ This lack of proactivity is evidenced in the lack of USCCB rhetoric on racism, as its most recent document on racism was promulgated some 35 years ago.

At the time of its publication, *Brothers and Sisters to Us* was viewed with great optimism and hope. It seemed that U.S. Catholic bishops were finally taking a passionate stance against racism. The authors wrote that "every institution that bears the name Catholic" must speak out against the "scan-

dal” of racism.”³⁴ The calls for change fell flat, however, as there was a lack of strong plans of action, resources, or follow-up dialogues offered after the initial publication. On the tenth anniversary of *Brothers and Sisters to Us* in 1989, the U.S. Bishops’ Committee on Black Catholics issued a message on the state of race relations in the Church. The committee called the archdiocesan and diocesan response to the 1979 document “pathetic” and “anemic.”³⁵ It asked why the Catholic Church has “receded into a blatantly racist society” in the late twentieth century.³⁶ The underlying question to Catholic leadership seemed to be, does the pain that racism inflicts on members of the Body of Christ matter to you at all?

The impact of the bishops’ lack of passion for opposing racism spans deeply to the parish and personal levels. As a black Catholic theologian, Massingale writes honestly about the hurt caused to fellow black Catholics. He wonders, “If standing against racism is not a priority for the Catholic Church and its approach to and engagement with this social evil is inadequate and ineffective, where does that leave a black Catholic believer?”³⁷ In their own church, Massingale writes that many black Catholics feel an “aching loneliness and estrangement too deep for words.”³⁸ Racism is hurting the people of God. It is also dividing a people who pledge to be united as “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.”³⁹ Racism causes a polarization between the different racial groups at the parish level. The black parishioners are commonly ostracized while the white parishioners are left holding the power.

This segregation has detrimental effects on the unity of the parish. The spiral of silence theory from the communication discipline suggests that comfort and fear of

isolation entice people to maintain or conform to the perceived majority view.⁴⁰ It is thought that “people who believe that they hold a minority viewpoint will remain in the background where their communication will be constrained; those who believe they hold a majority viewpoint will be more encouraged to speak.”⁴¹ According to this theory, it would be likely that black parishioners would remain estranged and white parishioners would remain empowered because these are the commonly held perceptions. The two racial groups will stay polarized until people on *both* sides feel impassioned enough to make the extra effort to counter the status quo and demand racial reconciliation. Both white and black Catholics have agency over their individual responses to racism. Without passion and motivation to reconcile, the deeper union to which Catholics are called is unlikely to materialize. Passion fuels action. Action makes change possible.

That action is needed from parishioners, and it is especially needed from ecclesial leaders who hold great power of influence. For systemic change to occur, Massingale says U.S. bishops need to make “proactive efforts to rectify social relationships.”⁴² If they are not proactive and passionate, “what often results is only a covering over of social tensions, not fundamental change.”⁴³ Commitment to combatting the sins of racism needs to be made in words and actions by the United States bishops – and it needs to be done passionately in order to be effective.

The U.S. Catholic community as a whole must continue to grapple with the realities of racism that plague parishes nationwide. Racial reconciliation will remain a distant hope until ecclesial leaders strengthen their understanding of racism, support of black leadership, and passion for

opposing racism. Initially, one suggestion to increase unity among Catholics is to invite parishes to more intentionally incorporate aspects of black spirituality into their liturgies. While liturgists must be careful to not promote tokenism, there are plenty of genuine ways to embrace aspects of black spirituality like lively music and the strong emotive basis.⁴⁴ Theologian C. Vanessa White writes that black people are “a Spirit-filled people” whose spirituality is God-centered, biblically-rooted, community-focused, justice-oriented, and joyful.⁴⁵ A lot can be gleaned from this style of worship and the efforts at enculturation. Racially-focused educational and faith formation opportunities should also be offered to encourage a growing dialogue and understanding between parishioners of various races. The scars of racial injustice will remain forever embedded in the Church’s flesh. Too much pain has been inflicted on both black and white Catholics to ever be completely mended. But the wounds of racism do not have to continue to disfigure the Church’s body in the years to come. Healing is possible, if people of all skin colors are willing to nurse each other back to health.

Notes:

¹ Bryan Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2010), x.

² The phrase “threshold of privilege” refers to the conscious and subconscious advantages many people who are white experience because of their race. For more on the theory of white privilege and its practical implications, see Laurie M. Cassidy and Alex Mikulich, eds., *Interrupting White Privilege: Catholic Theologians Break the Silence* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2007).

³ Bryan Massingale is a priest for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee and professor of theological ethics at Marquette University. A current Past Convener of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium and a former president of the Catholic Theological Society of America, Massingale is internationally recognized for his work in the fields of Catholic Social Thought, African American religious ethics, liberation theology, and racial justice. For more of Massingale's biography, see his faculty profile on the Marquette University website: <http://www.marquette.edu/theology/massingale.shtml>. Accessed November 20, 2014. For more information on Massingale's authority as a moral theologian, see James F. Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century* (New York, New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), particularly 211-212.

⁴ In this paper, I use general mentions of "U.S. Catholic bishops," "the bishops," or the like for reading purposes to refer to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). The USCCB is the official episcopal conference of the Catholic Church in the United States. This paper focuses on the response of the bishops to racism because U.S. bishops are the leaders of the U.S. Catholic Church. As the official governing body of the institutional church, the bishops have the power to significantly impact the Church's response to racism.

⁵ One of the many strengths of Massingale's racial justice work is its inclusivity. He uses the experience of black Catholics as a starting point for his larger reflections on human dignity and justice. Massingale is adamant that while racism may impact people of different races differently, it nevertheless impacts *everyone*. For more on Massingale's holistic approach to racism, see the *Racial Justice* introduction.

⁶ Massingale, *Racial Justice*, 15. The word "phenomenon" refers to the complex realities or experiences of racism..

⁷ *Ibid.*, 33. A much more expansive definition of racism can be found in the first chapter of *Racial Justice* entitled "What is racism?"

⁸ Since the beginning of the modern civil rights movement in 1954, the episcopal conference of U.S. Bishops has issued just three collective statements focused exclusively on racial justice. The most recent document called *Brothers and Sisters to Us* was published in 1979. This thirty-six-year-old document provides the latest official teachings from bishops in the United States, and thus, its content will be heavily drawn upon in the forthcoming sections. When

Brothers and Sisters to Us was published, the episcopal conference known today as the USCCB was called the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

⁹ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Brothers and Sisters to Us* (Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing, 1979), accessed on November 22, 2014 at <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/cultural-diversity/african-american/brothers-and-sisters-to-us.cfm>. The authors of *Brothers and Sisters To Us* note that “the structures of society are subtly racist.” Further in the “Racism is a Fact” section, the bishops recognize that racism leads to poverty, unemployment, violence, etc.

¹⁰ Ibid., “Racism Today.”

¹¹ Ibid., “The Voice of the Church.”

¹² Massingale, Racial Justice, 70.

¹³ Ibid., 76.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Communication theory is a theoretical framework that addresses the verbal and nonverbal ways in which information is transferred. It is valuable because it gives people a framework from which to explain their internal decisions and external relationships. Human beings are constantly communicating – verbally and nonverbally, in intrapersonal and interpersonal situations. Communication theory can help explore *why* people communicate the way they do in race-related situations. This deeper understanding can lead people to develop more effective solutions to combat discrimination and promote justice.

¹⁶ Richard West and Lynn Turner, *Introducing Communication Theory: Third Edition* (New York, New York: McGraw Hill, 2007), 262-263.

¹⁷ Ibid., 260.

¹⁸ 2012 *Catholic Almanac* (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, 2012), 427.

¹⁹ Mark Gray, Mary Gautier, and Thomas Gaunt, *Cultural Diversity in the Catholic Church in the United States* (Washington, DC: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, 2014), 9, accessed on November 22, 2014 at <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/>

cultural-diversity/upload/cultural-diversity-cara-report-phase-1.pdf.

²⁰ “Frequently Requested Church Statistics,” Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, last modified 2014, accessed November 22, 2014, <http://cara.georgetown.edu/caraservices/requested-churchstats.html>.

²¹ 2012 *Catholic Almanac*, 427.

²² “Laity and Parishes,” United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Media Relations, last modified 2012, accessed November 22, 2014, <http://www.usccb.org/about/media-relations/statistics/laity-parishes.cfm>.

²³ NCCB, *Brothers and Sisters to Us*, “Our Community Church.”

²⁴ Massingale, *Racial Justice*, 75. For further reflection on the U.S. Catholic African American experience, see Bryan Massingale, “The African American Experience and U.S. Roman Catholic Ethics: ‘Strangers and Aliens No Longer?’” in *Black and Catholic: The Challenge and Gift of Black Folk*, ed. Jamie T. Phelps (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 1997), 79-101.

²⁵ Massingale, “The African American Experience,” 84.

²⁶ Massingale, *Racial Justice*, 75.

²⁷ For a description and analysis of racial reconciliation, see Massingale, *Racial Justice*, 85-102.

²⁸ The name “looking-glass self theory” derives from the idea that an individual’s community acts as a figurative mirror, reflecting characteristics about the society back at the individual. That person often begins to embody those characteristics. For more information, see West and Turner, *Introducing Communication Theory*, 103.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 104.

³⁰ For more insight into characteristics of African American Catholic spirituality, see Secretariat for the Liturgy and Secretariat for Black Catholics of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Plenty Good Room: The Spirit and Truth of African American Catholic Worship* (Washington DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1990).

³¹ Massingale, *Racial Justice*, 77.

³² NCCB, *Brothers and Sisters to Us*, “Introduction.”

³³ Massingale, “The African American Experience,” 82.

³⁴ NCCB, *Brothers and Sisters to Us*, “Introduction.” The full sentence reads, “Let the Church speak out, not only in the assemblies of the bishops, but in every diocese and parish in the land, in every chapel and religious house, in every school, in every social service agency, and in every institution that bears the name Catholic.”

³⁵ Bishops’ Committee on Black Catholics, NCCB, *For the Love of One Another: A Special Message on the Occasion of the Tenth Anniversary of Brothers and Sisters to Us* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, Inc., 1989), 5.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁷ Massingale, *Racial Justice*, 78.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

³⁹ Apostles’ Creed.

⁴⁰ West and Turner, *Introducing Communication Theory*, 444.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 443.

⁴² Massingale, *Racial Justice*, 102.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ For more, see Secretariat for the Liturgy, *Plenty Good Room*, particularly section seven entitled “Toward an Authentic African American Catholic Worship” and section eight on “An African American Catholic Worship Model.”

⁴⁵ C. Vanessa White, “Liturgy as a Liberating Force,” in *Liturgy and Justice: To Worship God in Spirit and Truth*, ed. Anne Y. Koester (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 109-115.