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Review of Undoing the Knots: Five Generations of American Catholic Anti-Blackness

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***Undoing the Knots: Five Generations of American Catholic Anti-Blackness.* Maureen H. O'Connell. Boston: Beacon Press, 2021, paper, 266 pp., ISBN: 978-0-8070-1665-7**

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Maureen H. O'Connell in *Undoing the Knots: Five Generations of American Catholic Anti-Blackness* delves into what J.B. Metz called “dangerous memories.” In her remembering, O'Connell subverts the dominant narrative by examining what she calls “the knots of racism” in her Catholic family history intertwined with the history of Catholicism in Philadelphia. She urges that these “knots of racism” twist and inhibit Catholics and the Church from effective and faithful work to overturn racism. In her examination of this history she follows James Baldwin's advice, “Go back where you started, as far back as you can, examine all of it, travel your road again and tell the truth about it.” Her hope is that an honest and open reckoning with her family history and that of the Church will provide a template for Catholics to be formed in the practice of “racial mercy” which she defines as, “a willingness to enter into the chaos of racism” so that we “face difficult truths about ourselves, freeing us from the anxieties that come with whiteness, and emboldening us to use our privilege and power differently... to work toward imagining the beloved community” (p. 37).

O'Connell reflects a Catholic sensibility in her work. She believes that the grace implicit in confession and repentance can open people to the work of justice, to God's graceful restoration of right relationship with each other. Such confession and repentance require a relentless self-examination of conscience in both what we have done and failed to do. O'Connell is up to the task. She deftly and unflinchingly uncovers and examines her own family's participation in the construction and maintenance of white supremacy through five generations aided by the Catholic Church, especially in her home Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

She begins her historical and theological analysis with the question, “Did my people own slaves?” As she pursues an answer, she traces how interwoven slavery was with ordinary life, including the ordinary life of the Church. Religious orders owned slaves, as did individual clergy and church members. This history is no longer news. But O'Connell's examination as rooted in her family unfolds the complex relationship of race, class, and the contested “whiteness” of Irish immigrants. Her family as Irish Catholics were the object of white Protestant questioning of their place in the American project (and before that in the English domination of Ireland). But instead of finding racial solidarity, they turned and did the same in relation to Black people. Irish Catholics sought to establish their whiteness as they participated in the white Protestant framing of Blacks as inferior. Although her ancestors did not own slaves they did participate in the “anti-Blackness that linked Black people with slave status in order to perpetuate the social death of slavery” (p.59). And they did this to secure advantages for themselves.

O'Connell shows how this pattern repeats itself in the following generations as anti-Blackness takes on different economic and political forms, but consistently denies the well-being of Blacks in order to privilege whites. It is clear in the way that she tells this history, that she is not focused on judgment and guilt, which keeps us stuck in the past. Rather, she seeks the grace that comes from an “honest reckoning with the past. Acknowledging the anti-Blackness at the very beginning of my family's story can be liberating in its candor and calming in the integrity it offers” (p. 60).

Confession is good for the soul. But this is not mere individual confession. O'Connell pushes hard for a public acknowledgment of the power of racism not only in family histories, but in the history of the Church and the broader society.

She takes the reader through different phases of history and finds the Church's repeated complicity with anti-Blackness. When the Civil War ended the US Catholic Bishops did not take on the hard work of confronting the past that led to the war, nor the continuing efforts to deny freed slaves the rights they had as fellow human beings. Instead of justice, the bishops left racial work to charity which consistently reflected paternalism that enforced racial oppression. This helped the Church continue its overall project of fitting in to white Americanism, something O'Connell calls "the preferential option for the institutional Church" (p. 93).

When Jim Crow emerged supported by the racial terrorism of the Klan, instead of solidarity with Black people, Cardinal Dougherty soft-pedaled objections to Klan participation in the celebration of the nation's sesquicentennial in Philadelphia. Instead, he created an alternative Catholic event that demonstrated the strength and Americanness of Catholics. Members of Black Catholic parishes that participated were segregated in this event. They were kept at the back of the parade of parishes and relegated to the standing room only section of the stadium where the march ended.

Following World War II, the Church promoted white Catholic movement to the suburbs. This continued the Church's isolating of Black Catholics in Black parishes concentrated in certain neighborhoods. In this era, O'Connell's grandfather as a home builder was closely involved with the development of suburbs organized for Catholic families. O'Connell shows the interplay of federal loan money, Church planning, and suburban home purchases by white Catholics which together "ensured that suburban home ownership would be beyond the reach of Black people" for generations to come. O'Connell honestly takes stock of how "The anti-Blackness that drove residential segregation is the very foundation of my own financial well-being" (p. 194).

O'Connell wants this historical reckoning to raise the question: what needs to be done now within the Church and the lives of Catholics? Although she does not develop an extensive program to be followed, she does urge engagement with remembering and reparations. More, throughout her book O'Connell has effectively modeled the work that this remembering entails, particularly not getting bound up with guilt or denial. For reparations she points to the work of Bryan Massingale who urges an affirmative redress that involves systemic and structural change. Just as the Church worked with government to build a white favored economic and political system, it needs to engage with government to build the alternative. Within the Church itself she follows the suggestions of Karen Grimes who points to the work of truth and reconciliation commissions to tell the honest history and then incorporate that history into liturgies and Catholic education.

For Catholics seeking a way forward for themselves and the Church in the work for racial justice, O'Connell offers an invitation to investigate our own family histories and those of our specific Catholic dioceses. To unravel the knots of racism we have to learn how those knots were tied. To make confession and practice repentance we have to acknowledge our sins. O'Connell shows how this seeking of "racial mercy" is both hard work and filled with the gracious possibility of taking a better path. Her book stands as a call for white Catholics (and the Church) to unflinchingly face the history of complicity in racism, not to be haunted by the past, but to find a way forward that heals the wounds inflicted by the past.