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## Blessed, Broken, and Shared

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## ABSTRACT:

This article seeks to boldly confront the evils of racism while simultaneously pointing to a renewed baptismal ecclesiology and a praxis of radical communion as a way forward. Venturing into the unknown, we will persevere onward to the road less traveled by briefly charting the Catholic Church's historical cooperation with White Supremacy. We will also celebrate the wisdom gleaned from Black and Latin American communities and their seemingly mundane yet deeply sacred rituals.

# Blessed, Broken, and Shared

*by Joseph Penny*

The Second Vatican Council solemnly opened on October 11, 1962, yet its message still reverberates throughout the church fifty years later. In commemorating this memorable milestone in the Church's history, the Boston College School of Theology and Ministry's Continuing Education team selected Fr. John Baldovin, S.J. as the featured lecturer for their celebration. Professor of Historical and Liturgical Theology, Fr. Baldovin delivered a lecture entitled, "A Reform in Motion: Vatican II and the



Liturgy,” in which he illustrated Vatican II’s lasting implications on the life of the whole church, “head and members.”<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, he emphasized the council’s attempts at holistic and comprehensive *aggiornamento* by its treatment of liturgical movements and ecumenism as mutually informative realities. To this point, Fr. Baldovin states the following: “The council does not use the phrase baptismal ecclesiology, but that is precisely what is being affirmed in this paragraph<sup>2</sup> Embracing the tension of unity amidst religious diversity, the conciliar documents address a variety of distinct doctrinal claims that influence the Church’s interior life<sup>3</sup> and engagement with the world,<sup>4</sup> and these claims are woven together by the animating and sustaining presence of the Holy Spirit. The documents, guided by a dynamic pneumatology,<sup>5</sup> operate in concert with one another,<sup>6</sup> thus offering a theological method that is consistent with the content it promulgates. Relying on modern technological advances, a more prominent global presence, and the invitation of Protestant observers, Vatican II’s unique methodology<sup>7</sup> enriched its proceedings, developing a theological style that continues to influence the Church to this day. Therefore, the documents do not simply contain juridical decrees concerning observable behavior; rather, they promote a sacramental vision of the Church that seeks unity amidst diversity.

Given, the gradual rise of globalization in the Catholic Church,<sup>8</sup> one might ponder whether contemporary ecclesial structures are equipped to navigate cultural diversity in all its complexities. Historically, racism has functioned as a sin that separates God’s people from the peace and love that flows from their union with God. M. Shawn Copeland, professor emerita of systematic theology at Boston College, captures this dynamic

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1 1 Cor. 12:12-31

2 See Vatican Council, “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: *Lumen Gentium*,” Solemnly promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI on November 21, 1964, paragraphs 10-12.

3 *Ad intra*

4 *Ad extra*

5 See International Theological Commission, “*Sensus Fidei* in the Life of the Church,” 2014.

6 See Edward P. Hahnenberg, *A Concise Guide to the Documents of Vatican II* (Cincinnati, Ohio: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2007).

7 See John O’Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Bellknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press, 2010).

8 See Pew Research Center, “The Global Catholic Population: Report 2013.”

perfectly. She writes: “Sacramentality signifies the real-symbolic unity between what we are as humans, even as the de-creation of black bodies clarifies the cost of daring to em-body Christ in a morally degraded context of white racist supremacy... Eucharistic solidarity sustains our praxis of discipleship as we stand the ground of justice in the face of white racist supremacy, injustice, and domination; take up simplicity in the lure of affluence and comfort; hold on to integrity in the teeth of collusion; contest the gravitational pull of the glamour of power and evil.”<sup>9</sup> Living as a non-White Catholic in a world governed by a sophisticated system of White Supremacist attitudes, beliefs, and structures is a disintegrating experience. One’s voice will always be perceived as radical in a world that thrives on its silence.

This paper seeks to boldly confront the evils of racism while simultaneously pointing to a renewed baptismal ecclesiology and a praxis of radical communion as a way forward. Venturing into the unknown, we will persevere onward to “the road less traveled”<sup>10</sup> by briefly charting the Catholic Church’s historical cooperation with White Supremacy. We will celebrate the wisdom gleaned from the folks who persist in the face of racism, foregrounding experiences that have shaped many Black and Latin American communities. Thereafter, we will explore the systematic underpinnings of baptism and grace and their influence on contemporary ecclesial life. Finally, our time together will conclude with an exploration of human subjectivity and self-actualization.

As historians set out to craft historical meta-narratives, tracking the Catholic Church’s engagement with the world around it, many were never given the opportunity to author their own story. For example, Black history in America is often taught in terms of bondage, slavery, and oppression if it is taught at all.<sup>11</sup> The enduring blindness to the lives of Black folk in America is precisely what the late great James Cone wrote about nearly a half century ago: “They should know by now that, in view of white brutality against blacks and church

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9 See M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 125, 128.

10 See Robert Frost, “The Road not Taken” (Chicago, IL: Poetry Foundation, 2022).

11 See Ibram X Kendi, “Should you teach your children about racism? Of course – here’s how” (The Guardian, 2022).

participation in it, no white person who is halfway sensitive to black self-determination should have the audacity to speak for blacks.<sup>12</sup> By existing in a White Supremacist society governed by racism in its many forms,<sup>13</sup> we have been conditioned to normalize the omission of Black expression, historical authorship, and self-determination.

Thus, a radical love for Blackness can naturally be perceived as a threat to Whiteness. Prominent Black American figures are certainly not immune to this culture of distortion and omission. To this day, many worship a more palatable, sanitized, and colorblind Martin Luther King Jr., divorced from his interrogation of the military-industrial complex and widespread socio-economic injustice.<sup>14</sup> In defiance of this longstanding cultural erasure, Servant of God Sister Thea Bowman addressed the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in the summer of 1989 declaring, “I come to my Church fully functioning. I bring myself; my black self, all that I am, all that I have, all that I hope to become.”<sup>15</sup> Rooted in her baptismal call to stand united with God as priestess, prophetess, and queen, she offers a living witness to the truth and freedom that come when we courageously show up as our most authentic selves. She brings herstory rooted in the Black experience in America. Though we must confront the Church’s ethical justification for the transatlantic slave trade,<sup>16</sup> its active participation in slavery<sup>17</sup> and the encomienda system,<sup>18</sup> and its entanglement with Jim Crow policies and practices,<sup>19</sup> this history must not detract from the wisdom that flows from those scattered throughout the diaspora.

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12 See James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1970), 66.

13 See Ijeoma Oluo, *So You Want to Talk About Race* (New York, NY: Seal Press, 2019).

14 See Tyler Perry, “Critical Race Theory and the Misappropriating of Martin Luther King, Jr.” (African American Intellectual History Society, 2021).

15 See Servant of God Sr. Thea Bowman, “Sr. Thea Bowman’s Address to the U.S. Bishop’s Conference” (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops: Subcommittee on African American Affairs, June 1989).

16 See Pope Nicholas V, “*Dum Diversas*” (June 18, 1452).

17 See Mark Massa, S.J. and Catherine Osborne, *American Catholic History: A Documentary Reader* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2017).

18 See Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

19 See Cyprian Davis, OSB. and Jamie Phelps, OP., “*Stamped with the Image of God: African Americans as God’s Image in Black*” (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003).

In conversation with Kayla August, a doctoral student at Boston College's School of Theology and Ministry who focuses her work on preaching, and Reverend Kendrick Kemp, a graduate student at Boston College's School of Theology and Ministry whose work has brought him to develop a Black Liberation Theology of Disability, I have come to the profound realization that I had my first experiences of church before I ever physically entered a formal church building. Eating ribs at a backyard family BBQ was among my first experiences of holy communion. Pops<sup>20</sup> would spend over twenty-four hours loving on his famous barbecue ribs before they even caught a glimpse of the dinner table. They were some of the juiciest ribs you could ever imagine. After the meal was *blessed* by the whole family, my Pops would *break* the ribs so that they could be *shared* with all who came.<sup>21</sup> Though I did not have the sophisticated theological vocabulary to articulate the thought, I could feel and taste the deeply liturgical rhythm of our celebration. We was having church without even knowing it.

Now, my pops ain't the only one in the family who knew how to throw down. Once mi mamá<sup>22</sup> and mis tías<sup>23</sup> introduced me to Costa Rican tamales, it was over. The gift of a tamale is one of my community's most profound expressions of love. For those of you who may not be familiar with tamales, it is a multi-day production that includes collecting banana leaves, cleaning banana leaves, cooking the meat, preparing the rice and vegetables, and most importantly cooking the masa. United in prayer and love, mi familia<sup>24</sup> became an informal-ecclesial and tamale-making community much like the disciples who, "Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people."<sup>25</sup>

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20 My father

21 The threefold blessing, breaking, and sharing of a meal reflects the scriptural roots of the Eucharistic prayer. For example, in Luke 24:30-31 we see Jesus Christ revealing himself in the breaking of the bread, "When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight." We also see this threefold action unfold at the Lord's Supper in Luke 22.

22 My mother

23 My aunts

24 My family

25 Acts 2:46-47a

After reflecting on my first experiences of communion, I considered the liturgical undertones of my parents care for me. My mother and father's arms were my first pews. My mother's praise and worship playlist that permeated the house on every cleaning Saturday was my first church choir. My mother's love washing over me as the water poured over my infant head in the bathtub was a baptismal outpouring of God's love.<sup>26</sup> These embodied, routine, and seemingly mundane rituals that often characterize Black and Latin American experiences serve as living reminders of the divine. By reflecting on our rituals, we can continually unveil the sacramentality that animates and sustains our lives, thus, re-kindling our baptismal call to actively participate in the church's life within and beyond its physical walls.

We will now take a moment to examine the systematic underpinnings of the Sacrament of Baptism and their connection to the work of racial justice. The Sacrament of Baptism welcomes people into the Christian family as members of the body of Christ. Baptism illustrates God's transformative inclusion through symbolic gestures that have been passed down throughout history: "The symbolism – immersion in flowing water with the implication of danger in this case the destruction of an old, false orientation of one's life – and the inner content, a firm purpose of repentance, a new orientation to the will of God and to the approaching reign of God, are elements of John's baptism that are retained in the Christian rite."<sup>27</sup> The Sacrament of Baptism marks the conferring of transformative grace that reorients us towards God, our source of life. Thus, it is fitting that Baptism relies on water's dually cleansing and life-giving symbology.

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26 For further clarification, I am not claiming that my mother's love in any way replaces the one Baptism I profess in faith. Rather, this ritual act points to a deep sacramentality that is not to be confused with the formal Sacrament of Baptism. Considering my parent's love for me and their deep faith in God's active presence in my life, we can turn to Herbert Vorgrimler's commentary on Baptism for a layer of nuance, "If it is true that all of us, in one Spirit, were baptized into one body (1 Cor. 12:13), then it is not baptism that first communicates the divine Spirit. According to Gal. 3:26-27, faith causes human beings to become 'children of God'; baptism announces (publicly) the condition of being buried with Jesus and the will to remain united with him in new life." See Herbert Vorgrimler, *Sacramental Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 105.

27 Ibid., 103.

Additionally, Thomas Aquinas offers theological vocabulary that can aid our exploration of Baptism. He writes: “I answer that: as we said in Q. 110, Art. 2, grace may be understood in two ways, as the divine help by which God moves us to do and to will what is good, and as a habitual gift divinely bestowed on us. In either sense grace is appropriately divided into operative and co-operative grace.”<sup>28</sup> Grace, more simply understood as God’s unmerited self-gift, must also be received by faith, and therefore, the sacrament of Baptism is a public affirmation of faith. The neophyte<sup>29</sup> receives God’s operative grace, which transforms their nature, through faith and will subsequently participate in union with God through co-operative grace, often manifesting in meritorious works. Therefore, Baptism and Sir Winston Churchill’s famous remarks share a similar sentiment: “Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is perhaps, the end of the beginning.”<sup>30</sup> Baptism marks the beginning of Christians’ active participation in the sacramental life of the Church, but we must also address the history that shaped these theological convictions.

Having explored the Catholic Church’s complex history with race, the sacramentality of daily life, and the importance of grace in the sacrament of Baptism, we have established a solid foundation for our discussion of racial justice in the Catholic Church, but what is the relationship between the Church’s foundation and its structures? Famed neurologist and founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, once said, “The mind is like an iceberg; it floats with one-seventh of its bulk above water.” Freud’s iceberg model refers to the relationship between the conscious and unconscious mind. Understood in the context of our discussion on the sacramental life of the Church, Freud’s iceberg model highlights the need to trace doctrinal claims back to the crucibles of scrutiny from which they were born. Furthermore, multidisciplinary artist, Morgan Harper Nichols, offers an expansion of Freud’s iceberg theory, using tree symbology. Human behaviors are not supported by a clear and defined

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28 See A. M. Fairweather, *Aquinas on Nature and Grace: Selections from the Summa Theologica of Thomas Aquinas* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1954), 167.

29 The newly baptized

30 See <https://tommccallum.com/2020/04/20/the-end-of-the-beginning/>



block of ice beneath the water line. Rather, we carry with us a complex root system of lived experiences. The Sacramental life of the Church invites us to dig into these dirt-covered, tangled roots so that we may truly be transformed. Allow me to model what this might look like as we dig into the Pelagian Controversy, Original Sin, and Racism.

Pelagius promoted a notion of sin and grace that championed human choice as a means of justification from sin. Not to be confused with the Lutheran soteriological claim, *justificatio sola fide*,<sup>31</sup> his sophistry offered an anthropocentric vision rooted in the knowledge of and meritorious adherence to the law:

“Thus, Pelagius declares, ‘We stated that a man can be without sin and keep the commandments of God, if he wishes, for God has given him this possibility. On the other hand, we did not say that anyone could be found, who from infancy to old age had never sinned, but that whoever has turned away from sin, by his own labor and the grace of God could be without sin, yet nevertheless would not thereby be incapable of regression afterwards.’”<sup>32</sup>

It is important to note that Pelagius and Augustine, and later Aquinas, do not share the same definition of grace in relation to Original Sin. According to Pelagius, Original Sin inflicts extrinsic damage which only requires co-operative grace and meritorious human action for justification, whereas Augustine asserts that Original Sin intrinsically damages humanity, thus requiring a “divine physician.” Through operative grace and sustained by co-operative grace which perfects human rationality and free will, humanity can be restored and equipped to actively participate in ecclesial life.

Well-known author, activist, preacher, teacher, and pastor, Jim Wallis, offers much-needed nuance to this centuries-old question of Original Sin. In his book *America’s Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America*, he argues the following: “Put simply, racism

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31 Salvation by faith alone

32 See John A. Mourant and William J. Collinge, *Saint Augustine: Four Anti-Pelagian Writings* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1992), 131.

negates the reason for which Christ died – the reconciling work of the cross to God and then to one another. It denies the purpose of the church: to bring together, in Christ, those who have been divided from one another – particularly, in the early church’s case, Jew and Gentile – a division based on racial ethnicity, culture, and religion.”<sup>33</sup> Wallis invites us to critically reflect on racism as a sin that “negates” and “denies” God’s reconciling work in and among us. Liberation theological discourse, feminist biblical interpretation, womanist thought, mujerista theology and LGBTQ+ theologians and thinkers call us to recognize a God who compassionately suffers with the oppressed.

With the inclusion of racism, racial healing, and reconciliation in our conversation of Original Sin and Baptism, we can map the esoteric theological remarks that at times “float above the world like an eternal ‘form,’”<sup>34</sup> onto embodied experiences of God’s abundant grace. *Mi familia*<sup>35</sup> and *mis comunidades*<sup>36</sup> are essential wells of wisdom for my theological expression, though often quickly dismissed and undervalued by the academy. Grounded in the hermeneutic of love for my people, I can read the “classics,” “standards,” and theological “giants” with new eyes.<sup>37</sup> For instance, let us revisit a homily offered by Pope Benedict XVI on January 9, 2011, the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord. He states: “The Baptism of Jesus, which we are commemorating today, fits into this logic of humility and solidarity: It is the action of the One who wanted to make himself one of us in everything and who truly joined the line of sinners; he, who knew no sin, let himself be treated as a sinner (2 Cor. 5:21), to take upon his

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33 See Jim Wallis, *America’s Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016), 54.

34 See Richard Lennan, *Tilling the Church: Theology for an Unfinished Project* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2022), 4.

35 My family

36 My communities

37 “Western education is designed within a forced affection, shaped to take all of us on a journey of cultural addition – add to the great European masters other thinkers who are not white or male but who approximate them, add to the great European artist other artists who are also great like they are, add to the eternal wisdom and universal insights of Europe the wisdom of other peoples that resemble them. Add these nonwhite others as embroidery to frame a picture, or spices to season a dish.” Thus, non-white achievement is subject to white criteria, judged for its proximity to and celebration of whiteness. See Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2020).

shoulders the burden of the sin of all humanity, including our own sin.”<sup>38</sup> He illustrates a vivid image of God’s compassionate solidarity. A God who hears the cries of God’s people.<sup>39</sup> Taking upon his shoulders the burden of the sin of all humanity, God enters our suffering and situates Godself with the oppressed, a sentiment that inspired James Cone, M. Shawn Copeland, and many others. Therefore, Christian’s participation in the sacramental life has the potential to lead them to confront the realities of sin, manifesting in the form of White Supremacy, that persist. Given the presence of racism in our world, one cannot live as their most authentic self without first confronting America’s Original Sin, racism.

As our journey with one another approaches its conclusion, let us draw insights from Latin American theologians’ commentary on human subjectivity and contemporary developments in ecclesiology. Pope Francis’ encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*<sup>40</sup> comments on the rampant individualism that plagues human relationships on the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and systemic levels. Though consumerism and the global pandemic have been two of the many factors that have spread this hyper-individualism throughout the world, there still exists a few who have tirelessly committed themselves to pondering potential paths forward through discourse on human self-understanding. Roberto Goizueta, the Margaret O’Brien Flattley Chair in Catholic Theology at Boston College, is among the few who invite us to reflect on the following:

For Latinos/as, a community is not a collection of fundamentally autonomous individuals who have freely chosen to enter into an association with other individuals (‘a voluntary association of like-minded individuals’). Rather, community is the very source of personal identity. Individuals are not the building blocks of community; community is, instead, the

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38 See Pope Benedict XVI, “Feast of the Baptism of the Lord Homily of His Holiness Benedict XVI” (Sistine Chapel, Sunday, January 9, 2011).

39 Gen. 4:10

40 See Pope Francis, “*Fratelli Tutti*: Encyclical Letter of the Holy Father Francis on Fraternity and Social Friendship” (October 3, 2020).

foundation of individual personhood. Communion precedes personal existence, not the reverse.<sup>41</sup>

Before self-actualizing as an individual within society, my Black Costa Rican family and community formed me. Harkening back to my conversations with Kayla and Rev. Kemp, God finds a home in us through sacred and embodied experiences of communion, and in turn, we can find a home in one another. Thus, communion is the womb from which we are born.

Guided by the gift of the Holy Spirit, I invite you to heed Fr. Richard Lennan's words as he writes:

The portfolio of the Spirit in the life of the church includes deepening the ecclesial community's faith in Christ, enlivening its worship and prayer, supporting its common life, and empowering the church for the mission of Christian discipleship in the wider world. In these ways, the Spirit is the primary agent of the church's tilling (ongoing conversion), working through all baptized members of the church who share in the grace of the Spirit.<sup>42</sup>

One need not look hard to see that this vision is far from being normalized in the life of the Church. I am certainly not the first to highlight its importance and surely not the last.

Sacramentality and experiences of communion amidst the contemporary backdrop of racism are unfortunately found more easily outside of most Catholic and Christian churches. Our world is in grave need of healing and reconciliation. A baptismal ecclesiology enriched by a diversity of expressions can form the whole Body of Christ through radical experiences of communion. Racism operates as a sin that seeks to separate, but by returning to the reconciling power of God's grace, we can continue the hard work of actively confronting the sin of racism

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41 See Peter C. Phan and Diana Hayes, *Many Faces, One Church: Cultural Diversity and the American Catholic Experience*, "Reflecting on America as a Single Entity: Catholicism and U.S. Latinos," Roberto S. Goizueta (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2005), 76.

42 See Richard Lennan, *Tilling the Church: Theology for an Unfinished Project* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2022), 127.

and live into God's radical love. Bigotry, hatred, and even colorblindness often prevail as we are prevented from truly seeing one another.<sup>43</sup> Rather than conceding to cultural erasure and the subsequent assimilation to Eurocentricity, I urge you to turn against the sin of racism and seek out communion so that through it we may be born again, free to live as liberated children of God.



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43 See Austin Channing Brown, *I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness* (New York, NY: Convergent Books, 2018).

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