Marching for Racial Justice in Cont

AUGUST 28, 1963: Civil rights activists Andrew J. Young (middle) and Julian Bond, holding hands during a civil rights rally in front of the Washington Monument. (Photo by Francis Miller//Time Life Pictures/Getty Images)

BY ALEX MIKULICH, PH.D.

Congressman John L. Lewis, who is the sole surviving speaker of the 1963 March on Washington, maintains that while we have come a long way since that famous day 50 years ago, we still have a long way to go to achieve racial justice in this land. "There is a lot of pain, a lot of hurt in America," he recently said. Too many current events, he added, "remind us of our dark past."[1]

If we are going to contend with our dark past and achieve racial justice in this land, we will enforce universal voting rights; end racial profiling; dismantle the "cradle to prison" pipeline; and eliminate racial disparities in housing, health care, and employment, among many other policy changes.

While we must continue to work for these changes in public policy, the depth and breadth of changes require much deeper soul-searching and transformation. Congressman Lewis, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and all those who gave their lives for the civil rights struggle call us to a deeper conversion that goes well beyond law and public policy.

Congressman Lewis and Dr. King call white Americans—indeed, all of us—to a deeper transformation rooted in our baptismal promise to be continually transformed into God's love.

If we seek authentic human liberation from white privilege and oppression, white people of faith need to enact collectively both a deeply contemplative orientation to God and radical protest against white racism.

By contemplative orientation, I suggest Constance Fitzgerald's faithful, humble cry of the mystic who, in the midst of societal-spiritual decline and emptiness, is

> *everywhere crying out for God...a great cry of desire for life, freedom, resurrection, a cry to the God of life who brings liberation out of every type of death, a cry for a new vision, a cry for a contemplative vision.*[2]

Fitzgerald's practice of contemplation invites people of faith to open to our vulnerability, to our loss of meaning and empty imagination in the midst of societal moral and spiritual decline.

emplation and Protest

Silence and lack of passionate concern for the loss of life in our country tells much about us. The child who is murdered on the streets of New Orleans, the parent who dies of exposure attempting to cross the Mexican border for a better life, and people who die everywhere because of poverty reveal to economically privileged whites our own violence and how our desires daily deface the Image of Christ.

When Dr. King spoke of the triple evils of poverty, racism, and militarism, he was addressing our deepest desires as Americans and connecting our racism to larger, global realities. Our—North American whites'—seemingly unlimited desire for more comfort and pleasure, our insatiable desire to possess the world's wealth and natural resources as our own, reveal our deadly combination of privileged ignorance and arrogance. Those who die before their time due to war, poverty, and U.S. urban violence reveal our loss of humanity.

Fitzgerald's contemplative practice invites whites to acknowledge how our way of living is idolatrous, as we set our self-reliant humanity as an alternative to God. Leave no doubt that whites tend to live as if we are self-reliant.

Francis Cardinal George, Archbishop of Chicago, calls residential hyper-segregation "spatial racism" in his pastoral letter *Dwell in My Love.*[3] He states that spatial racism creates a "visible chasm between rich and poor, and between whites and people of color." This chasm includes how whites lack cross-racial empathy for brothers and sisters of color. Living this way excludes the possibility of racial solidarity.

Fitzgerald invites us to reflect also how technological prowess and multiple capitalist practices wreak devastation from the Mississippi River to the Gulf Coast and to the entire planet. Left to our own idolatry, the result is more of the same—insatiable consumer desire, increasing cynicism, and the "presumptive" resort to violence—whether it is shooting the young black male walking down our street or the drone bombing of defenseless Afghan communities.

Precisely at this point of "dead-endedness," abandonment, and emptiness, Constance Fitzgerald wonders if God might be preparing us to experience transformed desire, personally and collectively, for new vision, love, courage, and hope that renews life across the face of the earth. The miracle in the midst of this emptiness, writes Fitzgerald, is that contemplative cries from people and the earth itself are "no longer silent and invisible, but rather prophetic and revolutionary."[4]

If we attend and listen, we will hear the groans of people sick and tired of racial profiling, sick and tired of gun violence, sick and tired of unequal public education, sick and tired of whole families and communities being torn asunder by the "cradle to prison" pipeline.

We should recall the wisdom of Proverbs: "S/he who shuts her ear to the cry of the poor will [him or her]self call out and not be heard" (Prov 21:13). However, if we attend and listen to the groans within ourselves, from peoples everywhere, and from the earth, we may yet hear the cry of new life and a new creation.

When we hear these cries for freedom and life, then we must respond to Congressman Lewis's prophetic call to re-affirm Dr. King's dream and become "good troublemakers" for the Beloved Community.

John Lewis learned how nonviolence invites—and demands—ascetic practices of prayer, fasting, contemplation, and active nonviolence. Or, as Pope Paul VI wrote on the first World Day of Peace on January 1, 1968, racial justice and peace demands a "new training" that "must educate the new generations to reciprocal respect between nations, to brotherhood [and sisterhood] between peoples, to collaboration between races, with a view to their progress and development."

Now is the time to attend to cries in our land for freedom and life. Now is the time to respond to those cries by nurturing practices of contemplation and protest for racial justice and peace that we may yet be transformed in heart, mind, and soul and yearn with all people for the Beloved Community.

What does this symbol used by JSRI and the Jesuits mean?

From the third century on, the names of Jesus are sometimes shortened, particularly in Christian inscriptions. Used as a symbol, one such contraction or *Christogram* was **IHS**—denoting the first three letters of the Greek name of Jesus, *iota-eta-sigma,* capitalized as **IHΣ**, then as **IHS** or **IHC**. Over time the three nails were added below and the cross above the **IHS** and the rays of the sun around this emblem of Christ. In the late Middle Ages, it was popularized by St. Vincent Ferrer and St. Bernardine of Siena in the 15th century, and then adopted by St. Ignatius of Loyola as the seal of the Society of Jesus in 1541. It can be found in widespread use in Christian art and architecture, especially in Jesuit sites and settings.

Popular interpretations of **IHS** have evolved, such as two Latin phrases: "Iesus Hominum Salvator" *("Jesus, Savior of humanity"),* as used by Pope Francis in his homily to Jesuits at the Gesu Church in Rome on the feast of St. Ignatius, July 31, 2013; and "In Hoc Signo" *("In this sign…[you shall conquer]"),* a reference, some say, to the legend surrounding the vision of Constantine before the victory over Maxentius at Milvian Bridge in 312 before which the emperor saw a sign of Christ in the sky and heard these words.

One commentator reported two interpretations of "IHS" in English: "I Have Suffered" and "In His Service.'

ENDNOTES

1 Sheryl Gay Stolberg, "Still Marching on Washington 50 Years Later," *The New York Times,* (August 13, 2013) available online at http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/14/us/politics/50-years-later-fighting-the-same-civil-rights-battle.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

2 Constance Fitzgerald, OCD, "The Desire for God and the Transformative Power of Contemplation," in Mary Heather MacKinnon, Moni McIntyre, and Mary Ellen Sheehan, ed., *Light Burdens Heavy Blessings: Challenges of Church and Culture in a Post Vatican II Era.* Quincy, Illinois: Franciscan Press, (2000): 203-222, here 208.

3 Francis Cardinal George, O.M.I., *Dwell in My Love: A Pastoral Letter on Racism* (2001) is available online at http://www.archdiocese-chgo.org/cardinal/dwellinmylove/dwellinmylove.shtm

4 Fitzgerald, op. cit., p.208.