In central Mississippi, where 681 immigrant workers were arrested in massive ICE raids at chicken processing plants in August, less than seven months later at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, immigrants still employed at the plants received special letters from their employers to show the police in case they are stopped. The letter indicates that the person is an “essential” employee and should be allowed to travel to work.¹

The impossibilities and contradictions that are the reality of undocumented immigrant lives in the United States grow only stronger with the COVID-19 pandemic. For nativist Americans, undocumented immigrants are the “dangerous other,” despite easily checked facts that show native-born Americans commit crimes at higher rates than undocumented immigrants.² Although undocumented immigrants are ineligible for essential government safety net programs like Food Stamps, TANF cash assistance (i.e. “welfare”), Social Security, and Medicaid,³ somehow they are labeled “takers.” Undocumented immigrants perform difficult, sometimes dangerous work that many Americans shun, like clearing out homes smothered in the muck of epic floods after natural disasters. Nevertheless, they are accused of “stealing our jobs.”

Now in the midst of a historic pandemic, undocumented workers, otherwise invisible and disposable, are needed to fill jobs considered essential to U.S. citizens’ health and well-being, not only at meat processing plants, where at least 20 percent of workers are undocumented,⁴ but also as farm laborers (an estimated 50-70 percent are undocumented),⁵ and home health care workers (one out of fourteen are undocumented).⁶ In New York City, an early epicenter of the pandemic, a study by the Center for Migration Studies found that 15 percent of grocery store workers and 33 percent of food delivery workers are undocumented.⁷

—Continued on page 2
At the same time, among the hundreds of thousands of people who have lost their livelihoods to the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S., perhaps none have been harder hit financially than undocumented immigrants. Social distancing requirements have heavily impacted the service industry, where 32 percent of undocumented workers were employed before the pandemic. The three COVID-19 aid programs passed by Congress in late March to assist unemployed workers provide little or no relief to undocumented workers.

The Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program provides unemployment insurance for people who are self-employed, independent contractors, freelancers, and part-time workers, but only to those who are work-authorized, regardless of whether they pay taxes or not. (Over one-half of undocumented immigrant workers pay federal income taxes using an Individual Taxpayer Identification Numbers, ITIN, assigned by the IRS.) The CARES Act provides direct payment of $1,200 for a single filer, $2,400 for joint filers, and an additional $500 per child claimed on their tax returns; but recipients must have valid Social Security Numbers. In fact, if just one member of a family is undocumented, even if she filed her income taxes using an ITIN, the entire household is disqualified.

MariLo Martinez Rivera is the leader of a New Orleans area nonprofit, Mujeres Luchadoras, that provides support services to immigrant families who have lost their husbands/fathers to deportation. She recently shared with me the tremendous fear and anxiety undocumented immigrants are experiencing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many local undocumented immigrant women were employed in the hard-hit hospitality industry as housekeepers, waitresses, cooks, and dishwashers. She knows of no undocumented immigrant woman who still has work. She described their plight:

Everybody, besides being scared for their kids, for yourself, of getting sick, are especially worried about how to pay the rent. People are being threatened by their landlords. One landlord said you don’t have to pay rent this month but you have to pay me double next month. They are never going to catch up with that—they have no safety net… One woman was so worried about paying the rent she was having headaches so bad she felt like her eye was going to pop out… People from here, at least they know where to turn to… Here [for undocumented immigrants] there is no loan, there is no nothing…It is like people don’t exist… However, if there is another hurricane, who do you think will be doing the [recovery] work?

Historical geographer Richard Campanella notes that during the many yellow fever epidemics that ravaged New Orleans during its first two centuries of existence, newcomers to the city, such as mariners, transients, and particularly immigrants, dominated the list of fatalities. It is estimated that at least six thousand Irish immigrants died from yellow fever and cholera building the New Basin Canal between 1832 and 1838. When yellow fever struck New Orleans for the last time in 1905, Italian-born immigrants, only two percent of the city’s population, comprised 39 percent of the fatalities.

One reason why immigrants were particularly vulnerable to such epidemics is because they lacked immunity to tropical contagions—in other words, the antibodies to fight the diseases they were encountering.

In his Easter message, Pope Francis, in his vivid and creative way of drawing us more deeply into the core truths of our Christian faith, insists that “an emergency like COVID-19 is overcome in the first place by the antibodies of solidarity… If we can act as one people, also in the face of other epidemics that are hitting us, then we can have real impact.” He goes on to identify the other epidemics as hunger, war, poverty, environmental devastation, and the globalization of indifference. The Pope has often noted that it is the “globalization of indifference” that leaves migrant people so vulnerable to marginalization and exploitation.

In another compelling Easter reflection, Rev. Augusto Zampini, Adjunct Secretary of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, writes “The Coronavirus-19 pandemic is a tremendous challenge for all people worldwide. It is an urgent and complex calamity that requires new solutions: ‘new wine, new wineskins’ (MK 2:22), new ways of living, new ways of working, new ways of development.”

The pandemic has exposed the extreme vulnerabilities of immigrants and other poor and marginalized people. In the weeks, months, and years to come can we discard the old “wineskins” of fear and indifference that have placed undocumented immigrants in the untenable situation they are forced to live today? Can we rise to Pope Francis’ Easter challenge to embrace the necessary antibodies of justice, charity, and solidarity and finally “not be afraid to live the alternative civilization of love”?

ENDNOTES

1. Interview with Rev. Roberto Mena, ST, Pastor, St. Michael the Archangel Catholic Church in Forest, MS., May 1, 2020.
Catholic Social Thought and the Coronavirus

Every human person is sacred and social. This brief statement captures the two most fundamental principles of Catholic social ethics and offers us a framework to consider the current coronavirus and the responses imposed by public authorities.

First, there is the foundational belief in the sanctity and dignity of every human person. This underlies the high priority in public decision-making that orders drastic shutdowns in economic, educational, and political life to slow down the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and save lives. Whether those lives are old or young, healthy or “compromised,” incarcerated or free, they are sacred and deserve all reasonable measures to limit the pandemic’s spread. The lives of our neighbors and all others across our communities are equally as precious as those of our families and ourselves.

The second principle unpacks the word “social.” The principle is the common good, rooted in Greek and Roman philosophy as the goal of political life and enunciated in the Catechism of the Catholic Church as fundamental to our entire social ethics. Opposing rampant individualism, the Catechism defines the common good as: “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily.”

The Catechism notes three essential elements of the common good: respect for the individual, the social well-being and development of the group, and peace which results from the stability of a just society.

Regarding the first essential element of individual respect, the Catechism notes that all “public authorities are bound to respect the fundamental and inalienable rights of the human person.” This means far more than the utilitarian “greatest good for the greatest number,” and insists that majorities respect individual rights.

The common good’s second element—the group’s social well-being and development—maintains that authority’s proper function is to mediate between various particular interests in society, which becomes ever more sensitive during a pandemic. Essential to this is ensuring the accessibility of each person to “what is needed to lead a truly human life: food, clothing, health, work, education and culture, suitable information, the right to establish a family, and so on.” In applying the principle in pandemic times, common good decisions of policy-makers will often trump the claims to individual freedom to mix socially or to open “my business” regardless of social cost.

The third element of peace and stability of a just social order presupposes that “authority should ensure by morally acceptable means the security of society and its members.” This may become much more applicable as we see increasing threats of violence in the public square in response to the pandemic or measures enacted to control it.

Two other important principles apply now as well. One is the Gospel’s preferential love for “the least” among us—already the most severely impacted because of unemployment or job vulnerability (low pay, low or no benefits) and limited resources. The other is solidarity with people far and wide, including first responders and “essential workers” here and also the people of poorer countries with far fewer resources to control the pandemic and limit its impacts.

As we consider the constraints of this pandemic regime, we should remember how Jesus raises the bar from loving-our-neighbor-as-ourselves to “love one another as I have loved you.”

ENDNOTES

2  Catechism, no. 1910.
3  Ibid., 1907.
4  Ibid., 1908.
5  Ibid., 1909.
6  John 13:34
JustSouth Quarterly, Summer 2020

Louisiana, one of the early epicenters of the pandemic, which has the second highest black population per capita in the country at 32 percent. As of the writing of this essay (Tuesday, June 23, 2020), in Louisiana deaths from complications of COVID-19 sit at 3004, and this number is certain to rise. Of those 3004 souls, 53.11 percent were black. Governor John Bel Edwards has been very proactive in his response and forthcoming with data by race. I applaud him for this because he did the right thing knowing that it would trigger the usual chorus of detractors claiming that “he is making this about race.” This is what people say in Louisiana and across the nation, I assume, when they don’t want to face hard truths about the society in which they live. In America, the COVID-19 pandemic was always going to be about race; and the numbers prove that it is very much about race.

One of the more important concepts that is often ignored in conversations about racial power is that of “necropolitics” and “necropower.” Achille Mbembe describes “necropolitics” and “necropower” as the ability to decide who lives and who dies in a society. Of all the powers that people delegate to government, the power to shape the factors that influence life and death are the most consequential. This power manifests itself in many forms and ranges from the military to public policy. Bearing the concept in mind, perhaps the greatest privilege that white society currently has over communities of color in the United States from the founding of the republic to the modern day is that of “necropower.” The structural racial inequality inherent in the United States is an expression of “necropolitics” and “necropower.” The COVID-19 pandemic has laid this truth bare for all to see.

When the news began to leak highlighting racial disparities concerning COVID-19 related deaths, I felt many emotions; but shock was not among them. I live in Louisiana, one of the early epicenters of the pandemic, which has the second highest black population per capita in the country at 32 percent. As of the writing of this essay (Tuesday, June 23, 2020), in Louisiana deaths from complications of COVID-19 sit at 3004, and this number is certain to rise. Of those 3004 souls, 53.11 percent were black. Governor John Bel Edwards has been very proactive in his response and forthcoming with data by race. I applaud him for this because he did the right thing knowing that it would trigger the usual chorus of detractors claiming that “he is making this about race.” This is what people say in Louisiana and across the nation, I assume, when they don’t want to face hard truths about the society in which they live. In America, the COVID-19 pandemic was always going to be about race; and the numbers prove that it is very much about race.

Of course, the virus does what it does. It infects hosts who in turn infect other hosts. People of other races are contracting the virus, and many of them will suffer...
physically and emotionally. Some of them will die. To acknowledge how race shapes the pandemic is not an attempt to minimize the suffering of anyone; but, rather, it is necessary to confront the spread of the virus and to mitigate the chances that other contagions will reach pandemic level. The reason that COVID-19 is killing more black people across the country at higher rates than other racial groups is because America has been slow to demolish the social structures that facilitate black suffering which are the legacy of official government policies at every level in the United States from the 18th century well into the 20th century.

The United States was founded as a slave state. It remained one until the Slaveholders’ Rebellion, which we commonly call the Civil War. Following the sabotage and collapse of Reconstruction by both Republicans and Democrats, the United States became a segregation society under the rule of Jim Crow laws in which the impoverishment of black people was official federal policy through their tolerance of Jim Crow and practices such as redlining. America existed as a racial caste-based state through two World Wars and only became a liberal democracy after the Civil Rights movement created a cultural and legal revolution that began to topple the Jim Crow regimes in the 1960s. Today’s black baby boomers were born into a segregation society that did everything in its power to keep them poor. At most, America is three generations removed from the end of its Jim Crow period, and it is still in living memory.

Why do I bring this history up? Because the social structures and social hierarchy founded in the Jim Crow period provides context to the answer of “why are black people dying of COVID-19 in higher numbers than white people across the country?” Black people have higher comorbidity and higher exposure to COVID-19 because they have higher rates of poverty, lower rates of education, lower paying jobs, and higher rates of incarceration. All of this was the goal of US domestic policy regarding black people until the last 50 years. This was always going to happen because our society was designed to maximize black suffering.

Even the ubiquitous mantra “stay safe, stay at home” cannot escape the structural inequality that gives American race relations its shape. Make no mistake, the stay-at-home orders are good public policy, have slowed down the spread of this virus, and saved lives; but even this is evidence of the racialized nature of America’s “necropolitics.” Many people do not have the option of working from home, and therefore cannot shelter in place and have no reasonable ability to social distance. According to a March 2020 report released by the Economic Policy Institute, only 19.7 percent of black workers and 16.2 percent of Hispanic workers have jobs where they can work from home. The same report also shows that the ability to telework increases the higher the wage level. The hard truth is that many black people and Hispanic people do not have the privilege to work from home because they often do jobs that interact with people—especially in essential work like grocery stores. In the coming months, “necropolitics” and “necropower” will take center stage as lawmakers and constituents debate how to “reopen” the American economy and schools.

When this pandemic is over, we must have necessary conversations about how to prevent another pandemic. Among the debates about health care, urban planning, education, and research, we must face the truth about our society. Yes, we have moved far from the mentality that created the social structures that have allowed COVID-19 to claim a disproportionate number of black lives; but we never removed the structures themselves or confronted the racialized nature of America’s “necropolitics” and “necropower.” Until we as a society resolve to do this and demand this of our elected officials, pandemics will always remind us how we have truly inherited the sins of our fathers as evidenced by the color of the dead.

ENDNOTES

2 Data retrieved from http://ldh.la.gov/coronavirus/
3 Ibid.
4 Retrieved from https://www.epi.org/blog/black-and-hispanic-workers-are-much-less-likely-to-be-able-to-work-from-home/
5 Ibid.
Before the COVID-19 crisis, the research was clear: the lower your socioeconomic status, the greater the likelihood of poor health and premature death. Difficult and sometimes dangerous jobs, low income, poor quality and cramped housing, lack of access to good nutrition, and high stress can inflict great damage—directly or indirectly—on the body and mind. Such living conditions are breeding grounds for all sorts of health problems, including heart ailments, high blood pressure, diabetes, and mental health challenges.

The poor and working class—and much of what passes for the middle class—are, in a word, vulnerable. Why this has been so in the richest country on earth with a GDP of $20 trillion and thousands of millionaires and billionaires is a topic that deserves great attention. It can be simply stated, though, as a problem of inequality—the unequal distribution of the resources in this country. In terms of wealth distribution, the bottom half of the country’s households collectively own just 1% of the nation’s wealth.

Having so little in a land of plenty has been taking its toll on working people and their families for decades, long before the appearance of COVID-19. This current crisis, which is both medical and economic, has slammed those already vulnerable, while it has further revealed their vulnerability to the rest of the nation and world.

What does it mean to be vulnerable? It could mean you are without a job, without savings to cushion the loss, and perhaps without any—or enough—assistance from the government to help you pay the bills. It may also mean losing health insurance...during the greatest national health crisis in a century!

Being vulnerable in a pandemic can also mean that you must go to work, because either your work is essential and/or your income is required in order to live. Those who went to work throughout the peak of the crisis typically risked their health and sense of well-being, and put themselves at greater risk of death.
These workers include nurses, doctors, nursing assistants, EMTs, nursing home personnel, and others in the medical field—some decently paid, others not.

The list of vulnerable workers also includes grocery store clerks, public transit employees, postal workers, food delivery people, meatpacking workers, and law enforcement personnel. Many of these workers who have risked their lives and health are lower paid and often without benefits such as paid sick days. And decent pay or not, many of these jobs are high stress and/or often unpleasant in the best of circumstances. During pandemic times, these workers also have to deal with even more stress driven by fear.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, only 9.2 percent of workers in the lowest income quartile are able to work from home, while 61.5 percent of workers in the highest quartile have that ability.3

Further, about one in four workers are without paid sick leave benefits, a problem greatest among those in lower income occupations and among those working part-time.4

Risk exposure clearly has a class dimension to it.

One of the special features of these past months is the appearance of protests demanding an end to the restrictions that were put into place to reduce COVID-19 infection spread and death. These protests, like the old Tea Party gatherings, have been encouraged and funded by conservative organizations and amplified by the right-wing propaganda machine known as “Fox News,” as well as by ultra conservative talk radio and conspiracy-heavy websites.5

For those of us influenced by Catholic Social Teaching (CST) and the importance of promoting the common good, these protests have been infuriating. Putting money and property rights ahead of public health and human rights might be within the tradition of conservative thought, but it is quite contrary to CST and any notion of the common good. What these folks are really asking for is that some of the most vulnerable people in the nation get to work to provide them with the services they demand—haircuts, massages, nice sit-down meals, and the like.

That being said, not all of those who have advocated for a quick opening of our country are conspiracy theorists or sociopaths. There are millions of people who fear for their futures and very lives—not in a medical, but in an economic sense. As I pointed out above, we live in a country filled with the vulnerable. Wealth, security, and comfort are enjoyed by a few, while the many live on the edge during the best of times and are certainly desperate now.

Protesting is a great American tradition, particularly given the fact that there have been ample reasons in our history to take to the streets in the defense of human rights and social justice. I have a sense of solidarity with all of those who are facing the horrific choice of our times: to go to work in order to survive economically, or to stay at home in order to reduce the risk of death. Many workers have faced such a Sophie’s choice throughout our history (coal miners come to mind). The ugly choices within the context of this pandemic bring into greater focus the sad reality of life that too many people face.

However, rather than demand an opening of business too early out of desperate economic concerns, what the protestors—and all of us—should have been doing is demanding that the country remain closed in order to protect our collective health AND for the government to provide ways to ameliorate the severe economic burden on the poor and working class. Some steps have been taken, such as the $1200 checks and additional unemployment benefits, but many people need more help in order to survive economically. Such actions could include some or all of the following: temporary rent and mortgage relief, additional and expanded unemployment and SNAP benefits, forgiveness of student loan debt, paid sick days and paid medical leave for all workers, and, of course, universal healthcare (clearly nobody should be avoiding going to the doctor or stressed about paying for care during a pandemic).

The blatant mass vulnerability within our rich country should cause us to rethink all the ways we have organized our economy and society. Rather than having people serving the economy, we need an economy that truly serves the people—all the people—as the U.S. Catholic Bishops have said.6 Fortunately, we have it within our power to do the heavy lifting necessary to move our people from a state of frightening vulnerability to comforting security. I sincerely hope we will rise to the challenge.

ENDNOTES

THE MISSION OF THE JESUIT SOCIAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE

The Jesuit Social Research Institute works to transform the Gulf South through action research, analysis, education, and advocacy on the core issues of poverty, race, and migration. The Institute is a collaboration of Loyola University New Orleans and the Society of Jesus rooted in the faith that does justice.