



THE MYSTERY OF EVIL IN THE RACIAL DIVIDE

God's Call to Reconcile Humanity

BY THOMAS F. CLARK, SJ

The 36th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuit governance body) in 2016 issued a decree entitled, *Companions in a Mission of Reconciliation and Justice*. In this decree, the Congregation identified reconciliation as a primary ministry for Jesuits and a particular way in which they experience the call of the Eternal King:

All our ministries should seek to build bridges, to foster peace. To do this, we must enter into a deeper understanding of the mystery of evil in the world and the transforming power of the merciful gaze of God who labors to create of humanity one reconciled, peaceful family.¹

As an American Jesuit, I experience this call to reconciliation as an urgent appeal to focus on this country's racial divide. As a white pastor of an historically black Catholic parish in Baton Rouge, I am led to enter into an "examen," that distinctly Ignatian review of one's life and world under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to seek clarity about the consolations and desolations we encounter as we serve the Lord and his people. In 2016, Baton Rouge was the scene of the police-involved killing of Alton Sterling, the ambush shooting of law enforcement officers, and a flood that damaged approximately 90,000 homes and businesses. In my examen, I seek to do what the

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Congregation invited—enter into a deeper understanding of the mystery of evil and seek hope in the transforming power of the merciful gaze of God.

I must admit that up until July 5, 2016 I was standing on the sidelines in Baton Rouge. I had come from Boston where, as pastor of another black Catholic parish for fourteen years, I was deeply involved in the struggles of an urban neighborhood and a participant in neighborhood and faith-based coalitions. I decided to take a break. Concerned that I had neglected some of the needs of the church community and weary of the amount of time and energy that coalitions and advocacy required, I regarded Baton Rouge community issues as perennial battles that produced little success: still no supermarket in our food desert; limited public transportation; and lack of access to health care. I was succumbing to the temptation of cynicism and complacency. The death of Alton Sterling was a rallying call. There was no more standing on the sidelines. This was too important. Baton Rouge was now part of the national narrative of black people shot by police.

We joined the list that included Ferguson, New York City, Cleveland, and Baltimore. The name, Alton Sterling, joined the litany of names—Michael Brown, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray, Eric Garner, and Tamir Rice. To me and many parishioners there was no choice but to get involved. In the days following Sterling's death, there was a meeting of Together Baton Rouge, a faith-based coalition that brought together about 300 people of all races and faiths from all over the city. We felt consolation and empowerment in the gathering of people of good will. There was a cautious hope that this was a *kairos* moment, an opportunity for much needed change. However, on July 17, the brutal and senseless sniper attack that killed three law enforcement officers sucked the air out of that hope. Baton Rouge was a city wounded and hurting, divided and grieving. What was always known but rarely spoken about became glaringly obvious: there were two Baton Rouges, north and south, black and white. All the issues—access to food stores, education, public transportation, health care, police/community relationships—were interrelated.



Volunteers from Jesuit College Prep in Dallas joined Baton Rouge residents in 2016 post-flood recovery work.

Then, in mid-August came the flood which compounded the misery of the summer of 2016. Suddenly the wounded city sprung into action. Volunteers reached out to those in need without concern for race, ethnicity, wealth, or geography. Instantly, it seemed we were one city, struggling to recover and taking care of each other. Was this an answer? Was the flood the remedy to the divide? If only it were that simple! The lesson of that summer in Baton Rouge was that we do disaster really well. It is regular everyday life at which we are not so good. We do interpersonal relationships really well. It is the systemic that we do not do well. If we only could convert the energy, urgency, and selfless spirit that emerges in a disaster to work for the change of systemic, imbedded inequality and injustice.

One of the most important things I did during this time was to participate in the *Dialogue on Race Louisiana*, pioneered and guided by Maxine Crump, one of the city's first black TV reporters and a descendent of Neely Hawkins, one of the enslaved Africans sold by Georgetown University to a plantation in Maringouin, Louisiana. Ms. Crump has a gift for talking about race and racism with a clarity that I had not experienced. *Dialogue on Race Louisiana* is a six-week facilitated conversation. Her understanding of dialogue is critically important. It is not an argument, a battle of opinions, nor skillful debating. *Dialogue on Race* is an historical-and-fact-based discussion that teaches how racism functions in systems and institutions and how change happens. The goal is to listen to each other and to move forward together in a new understanding toward action and change.

Ms. Crump points out that we have muddied the waters of racial dialogue by focusing on interpersonal relationships. If I just sit down and get to know someone of another race and understand how they feel and where they are coming from, that will solve our country's racial divide, one person at a time. The truth is that even if we all learn to live together in perfect harmony, we still will have racism. In this country, when we talk about racism, there is an emphasis on individual incidences of hatred and prejudice. These inter-personal manifestations of racism—irrational judgments, intended or unintended slights, hateful behaviors, micro-aggressions—are more accurately termed "race prejudice." When race prejudice is backed up with power to enforce it in societal structures and institutions, then it is racism. Race prejudice and systemic racism are interrelated, but by far the more serious issue is systemic racism because it makes discriminatory policies

and has the power to enforce them. Not surprisingly, we focus on the interpersonal because it is a decoy that shifts attention from the root cause. To focus our gaze clearly and unflinchingly on the systemic nature of racism, we do what the General Congregation calls Jesuits to do, "to enter into a deeper understanding of the mystery of evil."

I gained a deeper understanding of systemic racism through these dialogues as well as through a reading of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander and *The Third Reconstruction: How a Moral Movement Is Overcoming the Politics of Division and Fear* by Rev. William J. Barber, II. Both authors argue persuasively that the systemic racism that undergirded slavery continuously reinvented itself in each succeeding age to perpetuate the underclass status of blacks.

Advances in freedom achieved during Reconstruction were curtailed by Jim Crow segregation. When Jim Crow was defeated by the civil rights movement and the passage of the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965), that freedom was curtailed by the so-called War on Drugs of the 1990s which enforced harsh policing tactics principally in black and brown neighborhoods. This over-policing led to disproportionate incarceration rates and severe sentencing for relatively minor and first offense drug charges. Even after release from prison, these persons continued to be punished by denial of voting rights, access to public housing, and the ability to find a job as convicted felons.

Systemic racism camouflages, disguises, and reinvents itself to maintain its power. If the War on Drugs had explicitly targeted black and brown people, it would have been illegal. So, it targeted criminals in the drug trade, but disproportionately enforced it in black and brown neighborhoods. Coupled with law-and-order rhetoric, the images of inner cities out of control with crack houses and the birth of crack babies planted racial fear and stoked racial hatred. The racism of the War on Drugs was hardly noticed until recently, so clever was its disguise. This underscores the insidiousness and the cruelty of systemic racism. To acknowledge this shameful story as part of American history is "to enter into a deeper understanding of the mystery of evil."

How does such evil happen? Why is it not seen by everyone? Why is there not an outcry from people of good will? There is silence because it is practically invisible to

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Volunteers working at the parish donation center, with Fathers Tom Clarke, S. J. and Jay Hooks, S.J. (back row)

white people. Systemic racism is as pervasive as the air we breathe. It is the *status quo*, the norm, the way things are. This phenomenon is called white privilege. There is lots of push-back against this term. As whites, we protest that we are not privileged. We will argue that we have worked hard for all we have. This may be true, but this fails to appreciate the reality. I am privileged because I can walk into a room and not be immediately judged because of my skin color. I can go to an interview with someone in charge (most often white) and immediately there is a commonality and a mutual understanding. I was raised to think that a police officer was my friend and, if I am in danger, I can go to him or her for help. My culture and my history was taught in school, celebrated, and made normative. Those are privileges, advantages, and assets that are invisible to me and to other whites.

But to blacks and other people of color it is a daily reality and barrier. White culture and its values, no matter how flawed, are deemed superior, while black culture and its values are presumed inferior. What makes systemic racism so difficult to eradicate is not only that blacks are disadvantaged, but that whites are advantaged. People never give up power or advantage easily. The loss of privilege can be seen mistakenly as being discriminated against. Thus, we have charges of "reverse racism" and challenges to affirmative action.

Saint Ignatius was right when he said in the *Meditation on the Two Standards*² that money and possessions lead to privilege and prestige that lead to pride and sin. All

whites bear responsibility for inequality because we have benefited from it. Ownership of the reality of white privilege is not meant to make whites feel only guilt and shame. Guilt and shame are just the beginnings of contrition and reconciliation. The final stage of contrition and reconciliation is *metanoia*, a total change of heart and a conversion of ways. Realizing the true nature of systemic racism and white privilege—our deeper understanding of evil—can and should lead us to work harder for systemic change.

Understanding evil leads us to "the transforming power of the merciful gaze of God who labors to create of humanity one reconciled, peaceful family." My examen of the past year leads me to acknowledge that surprisingly I have become more hopeful, a direct effect of the *Dialogue on Race Louisiana*. By learning how systems perpetuate and camouflage racism, I learned how they can be changed. Institutional change happens on the level of policies and practices. These must be examined to see whether intentionally or unintentionally they discriminate because of skin color. If found, discrimination can be changed when enough people demand it. The greatest weapon against systemic change is cynicism and pessimism, which I admit having been infected with. I gave lip service to the possibility of change but concurred in my heart when others said, "It's always been this way; things will never change." If enough people demand it, change will happen.

We have powerful examples of behaviors thought unchangeable. Seismic changes have occurred with regard to smoking, drunk driving, recycling, diet, and health because enough people demanded change. I am inspired by the preaching and activism of the Rev. William J. Barber, II. He previously led the Moral Mondays campaign of non-violent sit-ins in the State Capitol in Raleigh, North Carolina, to protest repressive voting restrictions enacted by the legislature. These efforts led to a U.S. Supreme Court decision against the state's voting restrictions and redistricting. In our national political environment, this effort might have seemed futile; but it succeeded because enough people demanded change. Rev. Barber's simple and clear message of biblical justice and the faithfulness of his witness bring hope, a product of faith and trust in God's faithfulness and promises. In the words of the biblical scholar, Demetrius Dumm, OSB, "Faith is an awakening to the radical goodness in life, in spite of the very real evil that is also found there."³

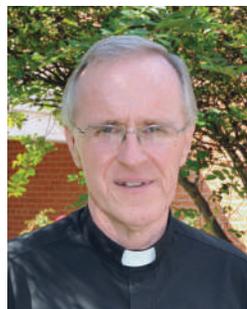
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Saint Ignatius in the *Contemplation on the Incarnation*⁴ imagines the Blessed Trinity looking down upon the earth and seeing all the people of the world engaged in both good and evil. Despite all the evil, the Persons of the Trinity desire to save this world. This desire is the merciful gaze of God that brings transforming power. The 36th General Congregation called us to experience and to become part of this merciful gaze that will bring about the creation of humanity as one reconciled and peaceful family. This reconciliation requires that we first enter into a deeper understanding of the mystery of the evil of systemic racism and white privilege and how they function in our nation. Then we must embrace faith and hope in the transforming power of the merciful gaze of God by joining with other people of faith and good will in working for systemic change.



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ENDNOTES

- ¹ General Congregation 36, *Companions in a Mission of Reconciliation and Justice*, 2016, no. 31.
- ² St. Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, no. 142.
- ³ Demetrius Dumm, OSB, *Flowers in the Desert: A Spirituality of the Bible* (Petersham, MA: St. Bede's Publications, 1987), pp. 33-34.
- ⁴ St. Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, no. 102.

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