



# 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.<sup>1</sup>

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*<sup>2</sup> 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."<sup>3</sup>

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## Catholic Social Thought and Racial Solidarity

In 1991, Rodney King asked, “Why can’t we all just get along?” Since then we have seen multiple police shootings of black adults and children, the brutal racist murders of nine churchgoers in Charleston, Neo-nazi marchers in Charlottesville, and much, much more to remind us how deeply racism stains our society. “It is a wound in humanity’s side that mysteriously remains open.”<sup>1</sup>

Our Church has been clear that racism, white supremacy, and neo-nazism are serious sins<sup>2</sup> and that eradicating them in ourselves and in society and its structures requires conversion on the part of all of us. A great deal of attention is paid—rightfully—to changes in personal and collective attitudes and behaviors, recognizing privilege (in its various forms), truth-telling about our collective past, racial healing, and reconciliation. Too little attention, however, is paid to the equally important economic, social, and political tasks demanded by racial solidarity and needed to end institutionalized racism.<sup>3</sup>

Pope Saint John Paul II underscored the urgency of connecting action for justice to faith in a term reflecting his experience with a famous Polish union, the **duty of solidarity**. For him, solidarity meant, not just attitudinal changes and love of neighbor, but the structural responses demanded by Gospel love and involving fundamental societal changes. He wrote bluntly, “Solidarity is undoubtedly a Christian virtue.”<sup>4</sup> He explained in a much quoted passage:

This then is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good, that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual because *we are all really responsible for all*.<sup>5</sup>

This solidarity takes concrete form, John Paul wrote, in how we live as individuals and families, use resources, conduct our civic activity, make economic and political decisions, and commit ourselves nationally and internationally.<sup>6</sup>

If societal systems promote or condone racism and inequality, then our faith response in solidarity has to be structural as well as personal. We must do justice as well as charity. Specific actions directed toward imbedded racial injustices include: (1) reforming existing institutions like the criminal justice system (including policing), underfunded public school systems, unjust employment practices, income and wealth inequality, inadequate family support and welfare programs, *de facto* residential segregation, and regressive tax systems; (2) strengthening graced institutions and initiatives such as legal services and public defenders, civil rights organizations, community organizing, affirmative action, fair and affordable housing, collective bargaining, interracial coalitions, community reinvestment, political reform, targeted philanthropy, and alternatives to incarceration; and (3) developing new institutions and structures to right the past wrongs of slavery, Jim Crow, and *de facto* segregation and privilege and to create and insure a just, diverse, and equitable future in which no one will “be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.”<sup>7</sup>

One practical way to promote racial reconciliation and solidarity simultaneously is to bring together people of diverse races to work together, focused not explicitly on racism, but on changing the structures that perpetuate injustice and inequality, such as our broken schools, overcrowded prisons, unjust tax systems, and inadequate health systems and services.

### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Pontifical Justice and Peace Commission, *The Church and Racism: Toward a More Fraternal Society*, November 3, 1988, no. 33.
- <sup>2</sup> Cardinal Daniel N. DiNardo, President of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and Bishop Frank Dewane, Chairman of the USCCB Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, “We stand against the evil of racism, white supremacy and neo-nazism.” August 13, 2017 statement in the wake of events in Charlottesville at <http://www.usccb.org/news/2017/17-144.cfm>
- <sup>3</sup> Pontifical Justice and Peace Commission, *op. cit.*, no. 9.
- <sup>4</sup> *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 40.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 38 (emphasis added).
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 47.
- <sup>7</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., from his “I have a dream” speech on the Washington mall, August 28, 1963.



# ON BEING BORN INTO THE INTEGRATED SOUTH

## A Personal Story

BY NIK MITCHELL, PH.D.

In *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, Rev. Bryan N. Massingale poses a series of questions on the subject of racial reconciliation.<sup>1</sup> These provocative questions challenge both lay people and scholars of race to consider the moral implications of race relations and the need for reconciliation. Two of his questions have a special urgency because they challenge us to do a difficult thing<sup>2</sup> — “How do estranged groups learn to live together in justice, and not merely coexist in the same place?” and “How do we overcome the poisonous legacies of suspicion, fear, animosity, and even hatred that constantly threaten our attempts at intergroup living?” We must decide to commit to the simple act of living together in community under the long shadow of history and living memory.

Living in community and coexisting are not interchangeable concepts because they do not seek change in the same way in a society that is only 50 years removed from the horrors of Jim Crow. Community focuses on reconciliation which seeks to change the heart through its emphasis

on the acceptance of difference. Coexistence, with its emphasis on tolerance, seeks only to change the most superficial interactions. The best that coexistence can provide is a lull in animosity until the next racial flashpoint, such as a presidential election or the removal of a statue, reveals the virulence of unreconciled racial tensions that lie beneath pleasant superficial interactions. As a city, a state, and a country we have tried tolerance and coexistence; it has failed. Now, the culture is full of racial conflicts from local neighborhoods to the White House.

History cannot be escaped, but it can be reckoned with. There can be no racial reconciliation without coming to terms with the traumas of the past. The United States is still caught in the reckoning between what actually happened historically and the fictions many prefer. Jim Crow is the shorthand name for segregation society in the United States. It extended far beyond the mere physical separation of race, but rather segregation was the default state of American culture which the white

majority supported with pseudo-science and frequent acts of violence.<sup>3</sup> The residue of that time period permeates every aspect of society today. The pogroms have stopped and black bodies no longer swing in the southern breeze, but grand juries refuse to indict police whose crimes are caught on camera phones for all the world to see and black bodies are harvested by a prison industrial complex. Many of us still live in segregated cities and live segregated lives. So, it is easy to forget that there are some that live in integrated communities among the urban and rural balkanized American landscape. These people live on the frontier of Massingale's question—as a country and a culture, shall we merely coexist or shall we live in community?

I have lived my entire life suspended, so to speak, between coexistence and community. My own black identity was forged in the integrated South, which was full of all the tension that came with the loud echoes of the collapse of Jim Crow. This was especially true of Baton Rouge, Louisiana in the 80's and the 90's. In my youth, "tolerance" was taught as a virtue whereas "acceptance" was considered unattainable. I realize now that this particular ethic was written by adults who had spent more time in a segregated society than outside of it. When I explored my neighborhood, went to the pool for a swim, went to the corner store for candy, went to the movie, or went to school, black faces were sparse. This does not mean that I was a token; I wasn't. We were just fewer in number. We were minorities in our everyday life which is a different experience, in some ways, from my black counterparts who grew up surrounded by black faces in the practice of everyday life.

I am the child of immigrants in a way. My parents are Americans but themselves were reared in the segregation society. They witnessed horrors that I have read about and seen dramatized but never witnessed with my own eyes. So, in that way, they are from "the old country." Like many blacks who grew up in the ghetto when it was still a ghetto in the legal sense, they left when presented with the opportunity. Of course, there was community in those ghettos. We were never cut off from the "old country" as my extensive network of cousins and my grandparents still lived in those all-black communities such as Old South Baton Rouge. I was a familiar and frequent visitor, but still a visitor.

Segregation was corrosive to the soul and fostered self-loathing in African Americans from a young age. Doctors Kenneth and Mamie Clark proved this, and their findings were cited in the *Brown vs Board* opinion written by then Chief Justice Earl Warren.<sup>4</sup> Once Jim Crow ended, many African Americans, my parents among them, moved to the suburbs or to the country looking for a place where their children could grow free from spiritual damage inflicted by being forced to live in ghettos. But no one can outrun culture. Racism, Massingale asserts, is a culture that has no borders; and it waits patiently to prey on our fears of change.<sup>5</sup> There were racial slurs; there were fights; there were long hateful stares; but there were also bonds deliberately forged and maintained with the children and grandchildren of those who had terrorized my people without reservation.

Living in community requires a dedication towards justice, the acceptance of difference, and racial reconciliation. It requires cultural exchange as well as the mutual recognition and confrontation of systems that would prevent necessary exchange. Living in community requires an unwavering fidelity to the truth, no matter how damning, regarding who were the aggressors and the victims in America's racial story. On the other hand, coexistence is easy. All one needs to coexist is tolerance, which invariably devolves into clash when times get rough and resources get stretched. Racially speaking, the United States has been trapped in a cycle of coexistence and clash since the end of the Civil Rights Movement with no resolution of the racism problem. If those of us alive today wish to give our descendants a country not trapped in a cycle where racism moves through the society like a summer fever, we must pursue racial reconciliation and hold up acceptance as the standard for race relations in America.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Massingale, Bryan, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2010), p. 86.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>3</sup> Cell, John. *The Highest Stage of White Supremacy: The Origins of Segregation in South Africa and the American South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 3
- <sup>4</sup> Clark, K., & Clark, M. (1947), "Racial identification and preference in Negro children," in T. M. Newcomb & E. L. Harley (Eds.), *Readings in Social Psychology* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1958), pp. 169-78; *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).
- <sup>5</sup> Massingale, pp. 13-19

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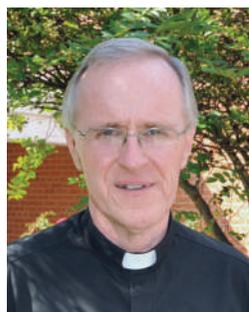
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Saint Ignatius in the *Contemplation on the Incarnation*<sup>4</sup> imagines the Blessed Trinity looking down upon the earth and seeing all the people of the world engaged in both good and evil. Despite all the evil, the Persons of the Trinity desire to save this world. This desire is the merciful gaze of God that brings transforming power. The 36<sup>th</sup> 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

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

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