

# JustSouth Monthly

JSRI Perspectives on FAITH DOING JUSTICE

LOYOLA UNIVERSITY NEW ORLEANS



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## Context Matters: Race and the importance of historical framing

By Nik Mitchell, Ph. D.

### JSRI Future Activities

#### July 9

Fr. Fred Kammer, S.J. will give a presentation on social realities of New Orleans to a group of students and faculty from Loyola School in NYC.

### JSRI Recent Activities

#### May 31

Dr. Sue Weishar presented data on immigrant arrests in East Baton Rouge Parish at a meeting of the Baton Rouge Immigrant Rights Coalition.

#### May 31

Dr. Weishar gave an update on a report on solitary confinement in Louisiana prisons to at the inaugural meeting of the Louisiana Stop Solitary Coalition in New Orleans.

#### June 3

Fr. Kammer gave a talk on the role of charities in the Church to the Board of Catholic Charities Baton Rouge.

#### June 4

Fr. Kammer gave a presentation on social realities of New Orleans to the four men participating in the "three weeks a Jesuit" summer program.

#### June 8

Dr. Dennis Kalob was one of the presenters at a gathering in New Orleans to discuss *Pushed to the Bottom: The Experience of Poverty in the U.S.*, a report recently released by ATD Fourth World.

#### June 8

Dr. Kalob presented on food insecurity to the Hugh O'Brian Youth Leadership gathering at Southeastern Louisiana University.

#### June 8

An [op-ed](#) by Dr. Weishar on the need for Congress to support the Dream and Promise Act was published by *The Advocate*.

#### June 14

Dr. Weishar was a guest speaker at a World Refugee Day event sponsored by the Louisiana Organization for Refugees and Immigrants held at the Diocese of Baton Rouge Tracey Center.

#### June 18

JSRI hosted a visit with Edith Tapia from the Hope Border Institute in El Paso.

#### June 20-21

Dr. Weishar attended the Second Annual Ethical Policing is Courageous (EPIC) Conference at Loyola Law School. JSRI was one of the sponsors of the event.

#### June 25

Dr. Weishar and Fr. Kammer participated in the press conference on the release of the new report from JSRI, *Solitary Watch*, and the ACLU of Louisiana on the use of solitary confinement in Louisiana.

#### June 27-30

Dr. Kalob was one of the education track leaders at *Laudato Si' and the U.S. Catholic Church*, a national conference of Catholics hosted by Creighton University in Omaha and organized by the Catholic Climate Covenant.

Have you ever noticed that during any conversation about racism, someone will inevitably say that "no one alive today was a slave" or that "segregation ended a long time ago—get over it!" It's a pretty common response to assertions about the impact of racism. When someone says that, all that is being asserted is that history does not matter...and we all know that isn't true. This is a form of erasure called "decontextualizing" which, in the case of racism, seeks to remove a topic from its proper historical framing.

Now, in the interest of full disclosure, I have to say that, yes, no one alive today was a slave and that segregation ended before I was born in 1982. The implication here, however, is that both slavery and segregation are ancient history. No, I personally did not know any slaves. My grandfather, however, born in 1916, did. So if we are being honest, the living memory of knowing older people who had been the property of other people is just starting to fade from living memory with the passing of the World War II generation.



As far as segregation goes, Jim Crow ended 50 years ago. That's less than a human lifetime—this means there are millions of people alive today that know firsthand what it was like to be legally unfree in a country that claimed to be the defender of democracy. My parents didn't get their civil rights until they were adults. So where does that leave me and every other African American in the United States whose parents were born during Jim Crow? This means that we are the first generation of African Americans born outside of slavery and state sanctioned oppression in the United States. Ever.

Put another way, in 2019, African Americans will have spent only 51 out of 400 years in the United States not in a state of enslavement or second-class citizenship near to enslavement. That is the context of racism in this country—it only recently stopped forcing people of color into ghettos. I'm only speaking from the African American male perspective. Different communities have different timelines of freedom but none of them are older than 1968. It's not like Jim Crow died quietly. Down south, we exist in the aftermath of a decades-long failed white terror campaign and lynchings that my parents and grandparents saw with their own eyes.

Now, has there been progress since the end of Jim Crow? Of course, and it is intellectually dishonest to assert otherwise. It is just as dishonest to assert that this progress hasn't met resistance. Programs like Affirmative Action were a response to the fact that, even after the collapse of Jim Crow, people and institutions were discriminating against people of color. In fact, many still try to find new ways to keep people of color locked out. The messy truth is that millions of Americans still suffer because of pervasive racism; but there has been transformative progress in race relations over the last 50 years despite very active resistance. So, the next time you find yourself in an argument about the role of racism in society, don't hesitate to remind them that the first generation of African Americans born outside of slavery or government sanctioned oppression just turned 50.

Monthly articles reflect the opinions of the authors and not necessarily those of Loyola University New Orleans.

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