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Review: 'Racial Justice and the Catholic Church'

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resources within the tradition which can lead to a more effective witness against racism.

In Chapter Four, Massingale examines two symbols of inclusion drawn from the African American religious tradition, the welcome table and the beloved community. The author sets these symbols in context and mines them for their creative and revelatory potential. The first symbol is drawn from the cultural and religious expressions of enslaved Africans and even in the midst of social, political, religious, and existential exclusion speaks of a new realm where all of God's children would be received with joy. The second symbol was made popular during the Civil Rights Movement and as articulated by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., described a gathering of humanity bound together by the strong bonds of love. Both of these symbols are powerful because they are grounded in hope. In the final chapter, Massingale treats the vocation of the black Catholic theologian. Here he describes his own personal journey as he simultaneously draws from the African American religious and intellectual tradition (which is overwhelmingly Protestant) and the Catholic religious and intellectual tradition. In some ways the author's self-described journey is reminiscent of W.E.B. DuBois' struggle with twoness. As DuBois noted, this twoness can be both a source of anguish and a source of great creativity.

Massingale's text is a valuable one and provides a much needed presentation of the ongoing task of analysis and creativity that is necessary if we are to live into our calling as people of faith. What I believe to be the strength of his work may also be, in the eyes of some contemporary writers, its weakness; that is, its analysis is funded by a dichotomy of black and white as oppositional terms that define our reality in a myriad of ways. He is not convinced by discussions of racial hybridity and the obsolescence of analyses based on stark racial categories. Massingale, however, continually reminds us that as Christians inescapably involved in a legacy of racism and oppression, we cannot overcome this evil until we have faced it.

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IV

Bryan Massingale writes a hopeful and appropriately critical book in *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*. The audience is meant to be any Catholics affected by racism in the United States (that is to say, every U.S. Catholic), and he knows his audience well. He knows that many readers are likely to become emotional as they read the book, for he has learned that almost "no other issue engages us so emotionally

and viscerally as that of racism" (xii). He also knows that readers might think that racism does not really affect them because the commonplace view of racism suggests: "Person A, usually but not always white, does something to Person B (usually but not always black or Latino) because of the color of his skin" (1). So, Massingale tries to show that racism is much deeper, more systemic, more entrenched than the usual definition: what makes the U.S. Catholic Church a racist institution is "the pervasive belief that European aesthetics, music, theology, and persons—and only these—are standard, normative, universal, and truly 'Catholic'" (80). Then, he seeks a better theological vision, one that resists racism better than Catholics have been able to do thus far, that perhaps enables racial reconciliation and that uses theological traditions that are black *and* Catholic. He writes a particularly beautiful discussion of lament and compassion, and a section on justice that he believes is a more truthful account of the kind of justice that Civil Rights leaders espoused (as opposed to a drier, abstract justice discussed in ethics courses), all the while drawing on elements like baptism and Eucharist that will be familiar to Catholic readers, but also sources from African American contexts (such as the sacred music of spirituals) that will be unfamiliar to many readers of this book.

As I read the book, I was struck by this theme of unfamiliar and hidden things being revealed, for the black U.S. Catholic experience is not one that is well known, as Massingale discusses toward the end of the book. It is this theme of hidden things being revealed that I wish to discuss further here.

In the interest of revealing what *may* be hidden, and in light of the fact that the book did, indeed, affect me emotionally as Massingale suspected it might, I should perhaps say that I did not grow up Catholic, but United Methodist, where the conversations about race were noticeably different. United Methodist congregations were typically either all-white, or all-black, or (very, very rarely) some kind of vibrant interracial, international congregation that was extolled by the United Methodist bishop and others as the way all congregations should be because that more faithfully represented the diversity of the Body of Christ. Moreover, the United Methodist Church is part of a pan-Methodist group that included other Methodist/Wesleyan denominations, all of whom had split from each other because of race rather than over doctrinal issues. While the average lay person might not necessarily have a conversation about racial justice, people like me, who were involved at higher levels of the church, and the bishops themselves were likely to have regular conversations about racism.

By contrast, I have never been a part of a conversation (until now) on racism in the Roman Catholic Church, but my experience in all of

the local parishes I have attended or visited contrasted strikingly with the churches where I attended as a youth and a young adult: the communion line in all the parishes I have visited or attended (including the small, rural, Southern parish) have had at least visible diversity, a few African Americans, people in saris or traditional African dress, Latinos. The apparent diversity at the surface (which the local congregations of my youth might well have envied and which Catholics do name as something they notice about their parishes) hides the fact that racism exists for and among Catholics.

I point to this to wonder whether and how racism and conversation about race as experienced in Catholicism is different from that in Protestantism, and to some extent different from the way American culture as a whole experiences racism. That kind of conversation could be fruitful especially given that, toward the end of the book, Massingale alludes to the difficulty and invisibility of “being a ‘minority within a minority’” (166), and Catholic among Christian, non-Catholic African Americans. Yet, the book begins with a general chapter on racism and attention to *all* groups that experience racism. The chapter pays particular attention to the racially-charged political conversation happening among Americans because President Obama is in office (alongside questions about nationality and religious identity). Massingale writes that the first chapter is perhaps the most important in the book, and he may be right. Yet, the nuances and complexities of race that he wishes to discuss in chapter one are overshadowed in the rest of the book, as he returns again and again to concerns arising specifically from African American experience (slavery, Jim Crow laws, the theme of lament in African American spirituals, justice in the Civil Rights Movement). The *general* discussion of racism and culture theory in chapter one merits some more specific discussion to help bring to light the themes Massingale wants his readers to see (and that his readers need to see).

Massingale does begin to tell a more specific story about Catholics and racism in chapter two as he discusses the U.S. Catholic Bishops’ statements on racism in the last half of the twentieth century. His comparison of the documents is excellent and the book is well worth reading for that chapter alone. Yet still, the generality of the first chapter follows into this chapter, for this is still a conversation about Catholicism and racism in general, which makes the meaning of later chapters somewhat hard to follow. It is only into the third chapter that Massingale really starts to tell details of his story and names specific ways “Catholic Christians have shared in and even abetted the racial fears and prejudices of American society” (112–3). The story takes on greater depth and specificity as he adeptly combines discussing traditional African American elements like lament, with more traditionally understood

Catholic elements like solidarity, leading to more unfolding of the story in his chapter on justice. It was not till the final chapter, where Massingale discusses what it means to be a black Catholic theologian, that I began to see more clearly what had been hidden and how racism affects the Church.

I am concerned here about specificity, details, and making plain what is hidden for two reasons, both of which have to do with Catholic social teaching. Massingale's focus on justice and solidarity treats two important themes in Catholic social teaching, but it comes at a time when Catholics are strangely divided against themselves as evidenced in the last election (and which may, itself, be an important part of the story of racial justice and Catholicism). Life Issues seem to be the purview of the "liberal" Catholics while Justice Issues seem to be the purview of the "conservative" or "traditionalist" Catholics. In an era when George Weigel can accuse the Pope of reneging on the truth to the "peace and justice" crowd and lay people on the web can accuse others of not being "Catholic enough" simply because they are focusing on "social justice" issues rather than abortion, racism most certainly runs the risk of getting shunted to one side as a "justice" issue that pales in comparison to abortion.³ A specifically Catholic discussion of racism would rightly reveal that racial justice cannot be so neatly separated from life issues. (For example, few Catholics know of Dorothy Black's landmark work *Killing the Black Body*, a book that is chilling for its discussion of forced contraception and less-than-subtle Planned Parenthood clinics in impoverished, largely black neighborhoods.⁴

Second, part of the point at issue here is the nature of sin. Massingale wants to focus on racism as a *systemic evil*. He makes a good attempt to get Catholics to see that racism is not merely some easily identifiable evil action but rather something that has a tendency to be hidden in plain sight in our everyday actions. Thus, the "common sense" understanding of racism as "Person A" committing some wrong against "Person B" is left behind and with it the number of theological descriptions of sin that relate to individuals (i.e., Augustine's *incurvatus in se*). I think I see some of the difficulty: Massingale does not want us to limit racism to the blatant acts that we often associate with it, for it is too

³George Weigel, "Caritas in Veritate in Gold and Red: The Revenge of Justice and Peace (Or so they think)," *National Review Online*, <http://article.nationalreview.com/399362/icaritas-in-veritatei-in-gold-and-red/george-weigel> (accessed March 1, 2010).

⁴Black would not at all characterize herself as against abortion; still the book offers insight into a problem in ways that Catholics may appreciate in relation to Catholic social teaching. See Dorothy Black, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage, 1998).

easy to wiggle out of that and say “That isn’t my sin, so not my problem. I didn’t own slaves.” And yet, does naming something as systemic sin also make it easy to wiggle out and say, “Oh, this is a systemic sin, so only the bishops and others in the hierarchy need to worry about that”?

Toward the end of the book, Massingale explains his hesitancy about writing his own experiences as a black Catholic theologian in an era where self-confession happens on blogs and daytime TV (152) because the story runs the risk of being devalued among the general cultural chatter. I think that it is precisely because of these blogs and reality TV programming, however, that it is important for Catholics to name individual sins, to learn to name them rightly and well. I do not think that means returning to a view of racism as individualistic (the Person A/Person B view of racism). Rather, I think that means developing a different account of how individuals commit sins against each other, even and especially when those sins are not the blatantly easy ones to name. It means that Catholics will need to learn how to make their own hidden lives more visible.

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AUTHOR’S RESPONSE

I thank my colleagues for their insightful and generous readings of my work. The opportunity to see one’s project through the eyes of thoughtful interlocutors is a precious gift. This is all the more so since readings of the Catholic faith from the vantage of the black experience sadly have been too often suppressed, overlooked, or rendered marginal. Through their questions and soundings, my respondents have helped me to refine and further develop my thinking; this reflection is the fruit of that engagement.

Charles Curran raises pivotal questions that demand our attention: “Why did we [i.e., white theologians and ethicists] fail to recognize the reality of racism in our society and our own white privilege? What caused this blind spot (but in reality much more than a mere spot) in our approach?” There are multiple and complex answers to these queries. Yet such questions are why I declared that the first chapter of my book, devoted to advancing an understanding of racism as a culture, is the most important. My response to Curran requires a deeper appreciation of the formative aspect of culture.

Cultures—the sets of meanings and values that inform a people’s way of life—are also systems of identity formation. Cultures shape a human group’s behavior and consciousness; they condition thoughts,