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## Review – Bryan Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*

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RACIAL JUSTICE AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH by *Bryan N. Massingale*. Pp. xvi + 224. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York. 2010. \$26.00. ISBN: 978-1570757761 (paper).

Massingale's book should be required reading for every seminarian, priest, and Bishop in the United States. It is a cry of outraged love worthy of an Old Testament prophet. It is also a brilliant, lyrical piece of scholarship. Massingale, himself an African-American Catholic priest, offers in five chapters an insightful analysis of contemporary racism in the U.S. and the U.S. Catholic church, a history of the Church's few and inadequate responses to the problem, and takes the reader to a vision of hope and reconciliation. Thanks be to God for the latter, for at times reading this book I was so enraged at the inadequacies of the Church's response to the peculiarly American form of racism that I did not want to continue reading the book. Only the promise of a better, Godly response in the table of contents got me to keep turning the pages. If I had not, I would have missed the passion and holiness of Massingale's prescription for racial healing and Catholic engagement in fighting the terrible sin of racism that continues to metastasize in the Body of Christ.

The book opens with a clear and compelling analysis of contemporary American racism post-Obama. Too often pundits, people on the street, and our fellow Academics hold a shallow, naïve vision of racism as mere individual ill feelings to be treated as an individual character flaw. Those whites not personally prone to racial epithets protest that they are not racist, nor are any of their (white) friends, thus racism does not exist. If any racial disparities exist, they argue, they exist because blacks prefer to play the race card rather than to work. Yet, despite this blithe dismissal, reams of data document racial disparities in housing, health care, banking, education, you name it. For, as Massingale argues, racism thrives on an institutional structure put in place from the founding of this nation as a slave nation and codified legally through the Jim Crow era. This inertia of inequality did not disappear into the night after the struggles of the Civil Rights era removed racist laws from the

books. African American lives remain marked by struggle, even as white lives are marked by privilege and entitlement (whether the latter are aware of it or not). Americans are raised in a culture of racism, which distributes benefits and burdens along lines of racial hierarchy: “racism is a communal and learned frame of reference that shapes identity, consciousness, and behavior—the way a social group understands its place and worth” (p. 25). Racialized identities form our identities and the symbols through which we navigate our cultural world. Thus much of the most damaging racism operates at a unconscious or subconscious level, shaping who we see as normal, good Americans, whom we want to live near, to teach our children, be our co-workers, our fellow parishioners, and our priests.

Sadly, this preconscious racial conditioning has shaped the leadership of the U.S. Catholic church as well. As Massingale amply documents in his second chapter, the U.S. Bishops’ responses to the sin of racism have been lacking and issued only under pressure from Rome or from social upheaval in the U.S. The Bishops have followed, with reluctance, rather than leading the Christian fight against the evils of bigotry. Indeed, unlike Protestant churches which quickly responded to the 1954 Brown decision, the first U.S. Bishops’ statement in 1958 came a full four years after the Supreme Court’s decision and issues very little in the way of a call to action, recommending instead a “method of quiet conciliation” (cited p. 53). The statement did not even call for a desegregation of Catholic facilities or fraternal organizations, or condemn the violence directed at integration efforts. The Bishops’ third and final effort, Brothers and Sisters to Us in 1979, pushed deeper in calling racism a sin, addressing institutional racism, and calling for personal, ecclesial, and societal action. However, as Massingale notes, the Church did very little to publicize the document. “Thus, many—if not most—Catholics were (and still are) unaware of the document’s existence.” (p. 67). One might steal a phrase from David Hume (describing his first book) and say the Bishop’s statement fell stillborn from the press; and a study to mark the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the statement found that very little has changed in the church’s relationship with African Americans since its publication.

If St. Paul called us to be in the world and not of it, Massingale documents quite clearly that the American Catholic Church clearly reflects society's racism. Only a handful of Bishops have issued any statements condemning racism, few priests preach about racial justice or against racism, there is a paucity of black representation in church leadership at every level, few seminaries even discuss the history, culture and traditions of black Americans, only a third of dioceses even have an office for Black Ministry, and most of those are underfunded and marginalized. The majority of white Catholics do not appear to know or care about ongoing racism in society at large or in their own churches. The cultural meanings and values that maintain and defend a system of white social, material and economic privilege and disadvantage of persons of colors appears to have distorted even the house of God.

The picture here is both painful and ironic, because as Massingale explains, surely in the church if anywhere we possess a different set of symbols and meanings with which to defy the world's sinful ones. Human beings made in the image of God are free to resist and reject the world's seductive logic of power and domination. Christ Jesus came to free us from the sin and death, including the sin of racial hatred. The church is ideally suited to offer its counter-witness of love, "articulating a spirituality of racial resistance" (p. 85). The Catholic Christian narrative, with its alternative meanings and values of love, social justice, and commitment to God and neighbor can help free priest and parishioners alike from the myopia of white privilege. Catholic theological contributions to racial reconciliation are deafening in their silence: Massingale's voice is calling out to break that silence. He makes a powerful point with his insight that as racism is visceral and pre-cognitive, intellectual debate alone will not touch the sinful indifference of the white majority. Instead of rational analysis, he argues, racial reconciliation and justice require lament, "which both stems from and leads to deep compassion" (p. 105).

Lament bewails an evil reality, voices our outrage, pain and suffering and protests the horrors of injustice. And laments make up approximately one third of the Psalter and the majority of African

American spirituals. Laments cry out to God in the face of brutality and suffering, yet proclaim that God will deliver. Laments are not mere catharsis, but speak a new creation of hope in God's ultimate justice. As Massingale describes this:

Lament has the power to challenge the entrenched cultural beliefs that legitimate racial privilege. Lament makes visible the masked injustice hidden beneath the deep rationalizations of social life. It engages a level of human consciousness deeper than logical reason; its harrowing cries of distress indisputably announce: "All is not well!! Something is terribly wrong! Such things should not and must not be!" Laments thus propel us to new levels of truth-seeking as they raise profound and uncomfortable questions that cannot be easily answered with the existing cultural template. The standard accounts of social reality wither before a lament's strident account of agony (pp. 110-111).

This chapter, including sample laments and the call for laments of the privileged, moved me to tears. White Catholics (this writer included) must acknowledge and bemoan their complicity in the past and present exploitation of our brothers and sisters in Christ. How can we hope for absolution from God and our neighbor if we will not honestly confess? And how can the church offer an authentic witness if she, too, will not actively show contrition and sorrow in her own theology of lamentation? Lament can lead to compassion and solidarity with the victims of racism and energize building a godly human community. The Catholic Church could offer strength, courage and a faith-based narrative to those seeking to truly live into the baptismal promise of radical equality and to fight for bringing the kingdom of God's justice to earth. Only such a powerful counter narrative can overcome the radical evil of racism and white privilege. Massingale is offering the church a sketch of how to begin the battle.

Massingale's final two chapters flesh out the explicitly African American religious ethos of universal inclusion and equality of all before God. For those wondering how to begin picturing a church fellowship of racial reconciliation, the traditional Black (Negro)

spirituals' image of the welcome table can spark their imaginations. The welcome table exists in the world where all, the most despised and outcast, are honored guests at Christ's table. The radical love and inclusion of Christ is the polar opposite of Jim Crow and racist discrimination. Likewise, the African American metaphor of the Beloved Community with freedom and justice for all, across color or nation or even religion, can help guide our struggles against racial supremacy's vision of white power. Real racial reconciliation is eating together, living together, and sharing power together. Massingale calls forth the meaning in African American communities' of visions---"visions spring form and fuel the nonrational centers of the human person form which come the courage, fortitude and determination needed to engage and persevere in protracted struggles against injustice. Only 'vision'—understood here as a passion or pathos—can lead to and ground effective justice praxis" (p. 143). Visions of the welcome table and the Beloved Community can fuel our hope in God's ultimate justice and give us the passion to try and bring the Kingdom here to earth.

Massingale closes with a final chapter on the role of the black catholic theologian. Like the black scholar, the black theologian must speak out for a community struggling against injustice. The black scholar must bring to bear his or her work on behalf of justice. The black theologian must do more: he must offer a vision of social change in the face of spiritual, political and cultural struggle. S/he must speak to a church trapped in the sins of the world and help guide her out of the wilderness---s/he must be a prophet of God's kingdom who helps the faith community reason critically on behalf of God's suffering people. "Our ultimate goal is to help transform the Catholic Christian community into a less imperfect witness to the broad, expansive, and inclusive 'welcome table' that is the reign of God. Our distinctive vocational challenge is to think through and struggle with the contradictions, paradoxes, and potentials of the Catholic faith, and then prophetically challenge this faith community's propensity to sinful attitudes and practices of exclusion" (p. 162).

Massingale's book is a model of that prophetic witness and a map for those of us who want to follow him on his journey.

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