Opinion
Editorial



A makeshift memorial of flowers and a photo of victim Heather Heyer sits in Charlottesville, Va., on Aug. 13. Heyer died when a car rammed into a group of people who were protesting the presence of white supremacists who had gathered in the city for a rally. (RNS/AP/Steve Helber)

by NCR Editorial Staff

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"Unite the Right," a rally called by white nationalist, white supremacist and alt-right groups in Emancipation Park, Charlottesville, Virginia, Aug. 12 to protest the city's decision to remove a statue of Gen. Robert E. Lee, turned bloody and violent. Heather Heyer, 32, a paralegal from Charlottesville died, and at least 19 people were injured after a driver with ties to white supremacists rammed his car into counterprotesters.

An article on Breitbart.com, the website of far-right American news, opinion and commentary, quotes conservative talk show host Laura Ingraham denouncing the removal of Confederate Civil War memorials as "the eradication of history" and disrespect for "all of our war dead."

"What else will be subjected to their eradication and denunciation?" she said. "This is not about racial healing. This is about the control of the narrative and a destruction of historical recognition. That is terrifying. And what about books? Are they going to start burning books, too? I mean why not?"

This short article was followed by more than 6,500 comments left by readers of Breitbart, which White House Chief Strategist Steven Bannon helped start in 2007 and ran from 2012 to 2016. Here is a small sampling:

- "There is only one reason and one reason only to re-write history. Control the narrative, you control the populace. Leftists once again emulating their totalitarian heroes like Hitler, Stalin, and Mao."
- "Erasing History … like ISIS! Pave the way for a New World Order. 'My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.' —Hosea 4:6."
- "I wonder when the Pyramids of Egypt will be demolished? After all, they were built using slave labor?"
- "Here is the real issue; people on the Left have dissed God and His Word; 'Great peace have they which love thy law: and nothing shall offend them.' Psalm 119:165 Try falling in love with God's Word and watch the offensives depart."
- "The leftists will try their best to destroy white America. They continue to push and try to shame us for being white and American. It is starting to cause trouble. And will cause much more trouble in the future. Backing someone in to a corner is never a good idea."
- "I smell war."

- "It's coming. They think we're just gonna roll over and let them slaughter us. That's what their end game is."

Ingraham went on to ask what would come next. "How long before they show up at Monticello," the home of Founding Father Thomas Jefferson?

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This same line of thinking was expressed by President Donald Trump on the afternoon of Aug. 15 when he seemingly repudiated an earlier statement condemning white nationalists and white supremacists. He criticized "alt-left" groups that he claimed were "very, very violent" when they sought to confront the nationalist and Nazi groups, again saying there is "blame on both sides."

"They were there to protest the taking down of the statue of Robert E. Lee," the president said. "This week it's Robert E. Lee. I noticed that Stonewall Jackson is coming down. I wonder, is it George Washington next week and is it Thomas Jefferson the week after? You know, you really do have to ask yourself, where does it stop?"

It is unsettling to see this twisted joining of revisionist history and misguided Scripture quotes. Yet this is what we are up against.

"Racism is a poison of the soul. It's the ugly, original sin of our country, an illness that has never fully healed," Philadelphia Archbishop Charles Chaput wrote in one of the most powerful statements from a Catholic leader. "Blending it with the Nazi salute, the relic of a regime that murdered millions, compounds the obscenity."

Trump's response was worse than inadequate. He demonstrated a lack of moral leadership and — again — his lack of qualifications to hold this office. But that is not the subject of this editorial. The question we have before us is: What do we, the American Catholic faith community, do next?

> Charlottesville is a visceral reminder that we can't turn away from this.
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As Americans, we must be honest about U.S. history. "The Confederacy was on the wrong side of history and humanity," said New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu, explaining why he began removing Confederate statues from his city this spring. The Confederacy betrayed our union and fought for a system that enslaved people. Lee and Jackson cannot be equated with Washington and Jefferson. That honesty does not exculpate our Founding Fathers from their sins of racism and sexism, but it allows us to talk about our historical failings and move forward.

Yet, what happened in Charlottesville is much more than a dispute about statues and history. Charlottesville reveals the weeping wound of racism that white Americans try mightily to ignore, hide or rationalize. Charlottesville is a visceral reminder that we can't turn away from this.

As people of faith, it would be good to talk here about bringing healing to this wound, but the sad fact is that we, as a community, are not yet ready to become an instrument of healing because we have not yet expelled the poison of racism from our own body.

Leaders in the National Black Catholic Congress, which met this summer, informed members that the U.S. bishops are working on a pastoral letter to follow up on their 1979 pastoral letter on racism, "Brothers and Sisters to Us," which condemned racial prejudice as a heresy. At the congress, Bishop Edward Braxton of Belleville, Illinois, explained that the bishops had hoped that their letter would contribute to a process of healing and reconciliation.

However, the bishops, Braxton said, were "somewhat chastened" by the awareness that many Catholics haven't heard of the 1979 letter or of a pastoral letter issued by African-American bishops in 1984. "Sadly, they were never read, never discussed, never prayed upon, never acted on … why not?"

In November, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Task Force to Promote Peace in Our Communities, led by Atlanta Archbishop Wilton Gregory, urged the conference to complete the new letter. "A statement from the full body of Bishops on racism is more important than ever," the task force said in its list of recommendations.

That list also included some basic and yet vital first steps toward addressing racism in the U.S., such as bishop-led conversations with local communities, parish and

diocesan training, and seeking out opportunities for encounter "to see firsthand the challenges within their own and others' communities."

Has the bishops' conference or have local bishops acted on any of these recommendations? Charlottesville shows that the time for excuses, delays and inaction are past. At the very least, the bishops should write and distribute widely — and loudly — a pastoral letter that repudiates racism and supremacism and reminds Catholics of their own social teaching that "human life is sacred and that the dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society."

A version of this story appeared in the **Aug.25-Sept. 7, 2017** print issue under the headline: "Steps toward expelling poison of racism".