Opinion

News



The Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial in Washington, D.C. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)



by Michael Sean Winters

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @michaelswinters

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

February 19, 2018

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

John Carroll, the first bishop and archbishop of Baltimore, is rightly revered as a holy and wise man who led the ancient church in the newborn republic with care and skill. He was, as are we all, a man of his times and so it would not have surprised his peers, even though we find it somewhat shocking, that Carroll was a slaveowner and, indeed, made a gift of a slave to a newly arrived group of nuns.

In 1861, Abraham Lincoln's security detail had to contrive an intricate plot, filled with decoys and deceit, to get him to Washington for his inauguration. A plot to kill the president-elect in Baltimore had been unearthed.

Later that same year, Lincoln had to suspend the writ of habeas corpus because Confederate sympathizers in Baltimore and the rest of Maryland threatened to cut off Washington from the rest of the Union. Maryland was a slave state and, sad to say, even today in some of its rural parts, there are plenty of homes where they fly the Confederate battle flag.

It is against this history that Archbishop William Lori issued a beautiful and thoughtful pastoral letter last week, "The Enduring Power of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Principles of Nonviolence."

Lori notes that he is writing this pastoral in part because our nation is preparing to mark the 50th anniversary of King's assassination in April but, even more, because "Dr. King's wisdom is more necessary than ever in our violent and fragmented society." Can I get an amen?

Although Lori's pastoral letter is not about racism specifically, he does not dodge the issue in the least. In the first section, he writes:

> Weighing heavily on our minds and hearts is the sin of racism that continues, sometimes overtly but often subtly, to insinuate itself in our relationships, institutions and communities of faith, including our own. Indeed, the sin of racism has tarnished the soul of our society for so long that racist attitudes can be deeply embedded in our subconscious, such that we may hardly know they are there. We must bring to light such attitudes and overcome them.

Later, he links to a video of an interview Bishop George Murry, chair of the bishops' Ad Hoc Committee Against Racism.

I was especially glad to see that Lori chose not to whitewash even more recent racial history. He mentions the violence that rocked the city after the death of Freddie Gray Jr. in 2015. He recalls the night in 1966 when his predecessor Cardinal Lawrence Shehan was booed when he spoke on behalf of equal housing opportunities before the city council. The pastoral even links to news coverage of the event. I recall reading about the incident in Thomas Spalding's *The Premier See: A History of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, 1789-1994*. I thought at the time: Who would be rude to Shehan? He was, as his successor (both in Bridgeport, Connecticut, and in Baltimore) writes, "a gentle, peaceful man if ever there was one."

Advertisement

The pastoral letter sets out key principles drawn from King's teachings. "Nonviolence is a way of life for courageous people" is the first, "Nonviolence seeks to win friendship and understanding" the second, and so on. In each section, Lori develops the theme, introduces a bit of Catholic doctrine or draws out a practical lesson.

Nothing sounds too pie-in-the-sky nor too pious. "It is friendship that often paves the way for a meeting of minds and hearts in dialogue and mutual understanding and leads to authentic human development," he writes. "We need to cultivate civic and political relationships aimed at human dignity and the common good. We need to foster friendship in our families and local communities. And, as Pope Francis exemplifies, we need to be friends with those living on the peripheries of our society — people who are homeless, unemployed, variously handicapped, newly arrived — to name a few. They are not statistics, but people."

After his brief discussion of each principle of nonviolence, the archbishop poses questions for reflection and discussion. And so, after looking at the principle that "nonviolence holds that suffering can educate and transform," Lori offers these three questions:

- "In what ways am I called to bear witness to the truth?"
- "How do I respond when my witness to truth is rejected or ridiculed?"
- "How do I overcome the urge to retaliate?"

This is not the way bishops taught 50 years ago. This text engages the reader, and is designed to engage the reader. Its use in religious education is obvious but also in family discussions.



Archbishop William Lori of Baltimore (CNS/Bob Roller)

Lori's pastoral letter epitomizes something else that has been a source of some contention in recent years. Some people who are opposed to Francis and the reforms of the church he is proposing cling to the idea that nothing important really changes in the life of the church.

Yet, the archbishop knows that his predecessor Cardinal James Gibbons participated in the Parliament of Religions at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition and was subsequently chastised for his involvement by Pope Leo XIII. The pontiff thought Catholics should not participate in such events with non-Catholics, lest people think all religions were on the same plane and indifferentism gain a foothold. Catholics should hold their own events.

At Vatican II, the documents *Unitatis Redintegratio* on ecumenism and *Nostra Aetate* on relations with non-Christian religions eliminated that hostility to interreligious dialogue irrevocably.

More than half of the previous archbishops of Baltimore would have scoffed at the idea of a pastoral letter built around the teachings of a Baptist minister. For all the problems we face in our time, the fact that such a letter is possible, and not just possible but undertaken, is a thing to celebrate.

Regular readers will know that I have had my disagreements with Lori in the past. And, consequently, it gives me the greatest of pleasures to commend him for this pastoral letter. He has done a fine thing. May it prosper and bear good fruit.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

Editor's note: Don't miss out on Michael Sean Winters' latest: Sign up to receive free newsletters, and we'll notify you when he publishes new Distinctly Catholic columns.