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Black Lives Matter demonstrators are seen near Lafayette Square in Washington Aug. 12 during the start of the white nationalists' rally "Unite the Right 2." (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)



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When white supremacists gathered in Washington last month to mark the bloody anniversary of a "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, a year ago, demonstrators preaching hate found themselves vastly outnumbered by nonviolent Americans showing up to offer a defiant rejection of racism. The United Methodist Church organized the main faith event in response. Protestant, Jewish and Muslim leaders took the stage to speak with urgency and eloquence. The strong interfaith display of solidarity summoned the spirit of the civil rights era, and reminded us that progressive advances toward racial equity will again require a moral movement where religious leaders play a leading role.

As two Catholics — a black woman and a white man — we found it unacceptable that Catholic bishops were missing in action when white supremacists came to our town. In particular, given their geographical proximity to the rally, the fact that neither Cardinal Donald Wuerl of Washington or Bishop Michael Burbidge of Arlington, Virginia, failed to take a few minutes to come stand with other faith leaders left a gaping void from the nation's largest religious denomination.

Both Wuerl and Burbidge did write brief responses. "In the face of groups whose messages we deplore and even as they exercise their First Amendment right, we must stand firm in our convictions," Wuerl wrote in rather tepid language that lacked a sense of urgency or specificity. In a statement, Burbidge asked Catholics "and people of good will to pray for peace in our nation," and to be "advocates for those who are victims of discrimination." Prayers and calls for reconciliation are needed, but real leadership requires action, organizing and putting resources behind your rhetoric.

The church has set precedents for what social action informed by prayer and faith look like. Catholic bishops are front and center in Washington for the annual March

for Life, a gathering that draws thousands of Catholics and other people of faith to protest the *Roe* v. *Wade* Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion.

The U.S. bishops' conference even sponsored a "Novena for the Legal Protection of Human Life" timed for the Senate confirmation hearings of Brett Kavanaugh, President Trump's Supreme Court nominee. Bishops and clergy in dioceses across the country have mobilized parishioners to take political action by distributing parish bulletins with specific instructions for contacting lawmakers on religious liberty and right-to-life issues.

In July, the president of the bishops' conference, along with other bishops, visited children separated from their parents who are now imprisoned in a detention center at the southern border. Bishops have publicly denounced the administration's immigration policies. Yet, they were nowhere to be seen at the interfaith rally in Washington challenging white supremacists, whose very ideology contradicts the Gospel and the church's proclamation of the dignity of all people.

Systemic racism is a "pro-life" issue. If Catholic leaders are willing to hit the streets, carry banners and lobby lawmakers for the unborn, they should also be pouring out of churches to resist the assault on black and brown bodies.

We need bishops confronting police brutality, and challenging politicians who make public policies that target communities of color. Protecting the sanctity of life and defending human dignity must include challenging police killings of unarmed black men and women; resisting efforts from Republican lawmakers to impose barriers to voting with the goal of suppressing black turnout; and dismantling the "school-to-prison" pipeline that criminalizes young people of color by disproportionately targeting them as threats to public safety. Not only do these practices violate Catholic social teaching, but they are also directly connected to issues, such as immigration, that the church is already vocal about in the media and in front of lawmakers. The church is complicit in our silence and lack of urgency when we fail to challenge these manifestations of institutional evil, and ineffective in our advocacy when we deny the role that racism plays in our society.

There are plenty of written materials addressing the church's teachings in response to racism that a Catholic could find if she spends enough time digging around the bishops' conference website. We are eager to read the U.S. bishops' forthcoming national pastoral letter on racism to be released later this year. Given the central role of race in our society, it's staggering that the last time the conference weighed

in with a major reflection on racism, "Brothers and Sisters to Us," Jimmy Carter was in the White House. But as the latest horrifying revelations of clergy sexual abuse again underscore, statements from Catholic bishops — no matter how powerful — are woefully insufficient.

> "White, brown and black Catholics who live very different lives outside of church can't continue to be strangers to each other."

Racism is our nation's original sin, which we have all inherited. History teaches us that the idea of white supremacy was a tool created to advance the wealth and power of the United States. The blood of black slaves greased the engines of American capitalism. Jesuit priests at Georgetown University sold human beings to finance what is now a world class university.

Lay Catholics grapple with this legacy in our daily lives, and are not waiting around for bishops to lead on racial justice. Parishes such as St. Augustine and St. Teresa of Avila in Washington have been organizing, agitating and fighting structural racism for decades.

At times, the church hierarchy has to be led by those of us in the pews. But for many parishes, especially majority white churches, bishops and pastors who prioritize racial justice play a critical role in creating the space for conversations that are often uncomfortable, but that can lead to inspired action. It is easier to avoid interrogating our own beliefs, prejudices and internalized racism. When a church leader sends the message that racism is a structural sin that we must collectively confront, we are invited to struggle together. The spiritual art of Christian discernment can help us navigate this rocky terrain. What experiences in my life have shaped unconscious racism? How do we perpetuate privilege or exclusion? Do I put myself in situations where I am the outsider to understand marginalized experiences?

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Pope Francis has emphasized the need for a "culture of encounter." We don't experience a conversion of heart simply by reading articles or having theoretical conversations. Encountering someone means listening to their hopes, joys, anxieties and sufferings. It also means making ourselves vulnerable and having the courage

to question assumptions that have shaped our worldview. This needs to happen individually, but also together as a church.

Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. observed that the most segregated hour of Christian America is 11 o'clock on Sunday morning. Sadly, not much has changed to debunk that truth.

Catholics who share the same faith are often strangers when it comes to experiences with race, class and power. This will not change unless intentional steps are taken by bishops, pastors and lay Catholics.

White, brown and black Catholics who live very different lives outside of church can't continue to be strangers to each other.

Parishes build a culture of encounter when opportunities are created to pray beside, listen to and act together with people who look and think about the world differently. It's in these moments, far from our comfort zones, where we realize the fullness of a Catholic's role in living our values.

Let's get to work.

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