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Guest Voices



A Black Lives Matter protester carries a sign against police brutality as protests around the country continue over the death of George Floyd at the hands of the Minneapolis police in the days of the coronavirus pandemic May 30 in New York City. (Newscom/UPI/Corey Sipkin)



by Bryan N. Massingale

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> "*Every white person in this country — I do not care what he says or what she says — knows one thing. … They know that they would not like to be black here. If they know that, they know everything they need to know. And whatever else they may say is a lie.*" — James Baldwin, "Speech at the University of California Berkeley," 1979

It has never been easy to be black in America. Still, the past few months have pushed me to depths of outrage, pain and despondency that are unmatched in my 63 years of life. Look at what has transpired:

- *The COVID-19 pandemic* showed that while all might be vulnerable, we are not equally vulnerable. Blacks, Latinos and Native peoples are the vast majority of those infected and killed by this virus. In some places, the levels of "disparity" (such a sanitizing word!) are catastrophic. But as tragic as this is, it was entirely predictable and even expected. The contributing factors for this vulnerability have been documented for decades: lack of insurance, less access to healthcare, negligent treatment from and by healthcare professionals, overcrowded housing, unsafe and unsanitary working conditions. All of this compounded by how the least paid and protected workers are now considered "essential" and must be exposed to the virus' hazards. As a young black grocery clerk told me, "Essential is just a nice word for sacrificial." Sacrificed for the comfort of those who can isolate and work from home, who are disproportionately white.
- *Ahmaud Arbery,* an unarmed 25-year-old black man, who was executed on Feb. 23 as three white men stalked him while he was jogging in Brunswick, Georgia. One of the killers had ties to local law enforcement. Only after public protests and the passing of 74 days were any arrests made and charges filed over this death.
- *Breonna Taylor,* a 26-year-old African American woman, who was killed by Louisville police officers on March 13 after they kicked in the door of her

apartment unannounced and without identifying themselves. Fearful for their lives, her boyfriend fired his lawfully possessed gun. Breonna was killed with eight bullets fired by three officers, under circumstances that have yet to be satisfactorily explained.

- *Christian Cooper,* a young black man — a birdwatcher — who was reported to the police May 25 by Amy Cooper (no relation), a young white woman, who called 911 to say that "an African American man" was threatening her in New York's Central Park merely because he had the gall to ask her to comply with the park's posted regulations to leash her dog.
- *George Floyd,* an unarmed 46-year-old African American man, who was brutally killed on May 25 in Minneapolis by a white police officer who knelt on his neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds, despite being restrained, despite the urgent requests of onlookers, despite his repeated desperate pleas: "I can't breathe."
- *Omar Jimenez,* a black Latino CNN reporter, who was arrested on May 29 in the middle of doing live reports on events in Minneapolis, while a white CNN reporter doing the same thing, at the same time in the same neighborhood, was not only *not* arrested but was treated with "consummate politeness" by the authorities. The stark contrast was so jarring that Jimenez's white colleagues noted that the only possible difference was the race of the reporters.

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All of this weighs on my spirit. I try to pray, but inner quiet eludes me. I simply sit in silence on Pentecost weekend before a lit candle praying, "Come, Holy Spirit" as tears fall. Words fail me. I ponder the futility of speaking out, yet again, trying to think of how to say what has been said, what I have said, so often before.

Then it occurred to me. Amy Cooper holds the key.

The event in Central Park is not the most heinous listed above. The black man didn't die — thankfully. Compared to the others, it has received little attention. But if you understand Amy Cooper, then all the rest, and much more, makes sense. And points the way forward.

White privilege

Let's recall what Amy Cooper did. After a black man tells her to obey the posted signs that require her to leash her dog in a public park, she tells him she's going to call the police "and I'm going to tell them that there's an African American man threatening my life." Then she does just that, calling 911 and saying, "There's a man, an African American, he has a bicycle helmet. He is recording me and threatening me and my dog." She continues, in a breathless voice, "I'm being threatened by a man in the Ramble [a wooded area of Central Park]. Please send the cops immediately!" This despite the fact that Christian Cooper's camera records the events and shows that he made no threatening moves toward her, spoke to her calmly and without insult, and kept his distance from her the whole time.

In short, she decided to call the police on a black man for nothing more than politely asking her to obey the park's rules. And made up a lie to put him in danger.

She knew what she was doing. And so do we. The situation is completely "legible" as my academic colleagues would say. What did she and rest of us know? Why did she act as she did?

- She assumed that her lies would be more credible than his truth.
- She assumed that she would have the presumption of innocence.
- She assumed that he, the black man, would have a presumption of guilt.
- She assumed that the police would back her up.
- She assumed that her race would be an advantage, that she would be believed because she is white. (By the way, this is what we mean by white privilege).
- She assumed that his race would be a burden, even an insurmountable one.
- She assumed that the world should work for her and against him.
- She assumed that she had the upper hand in this situation.
- She assumed that she could exploit deeply ingrained white fears of black men.
- She assumed that she could use these deeply ingrained white fears to keep a black man in his place.
- She assumed that if he protested his innocence against her, he would be seen as "playing the race card."
- She assumed that no one would accuse her of "playing the race card," because no one accuses white people of playing the race card when using race to their advantage.
- She assumed that he knew that any confrontation with the police would not go well for him.

- She assumed that the frame of "black rapist" versus "white damsel in distress" would be clearly understood by everyone: the police, the press and the public.
- She assumed that the racial formation of white people would work in her favor.
- She assumed that her knowledge of how white people view the world, and especially black men, would help her.
- She assumed that a black man had no right to tell her what to do.
- She assumed that the police officers would agree.
- She assumed that even if the police made no arrest, that a lot of white people would take her side and believe her anyway.
- She assumed that Christian Cooper could and would understand all of the above.

(And she was right. He clearly knew what was at stake, which is why he had the presence of mind to record what happened).

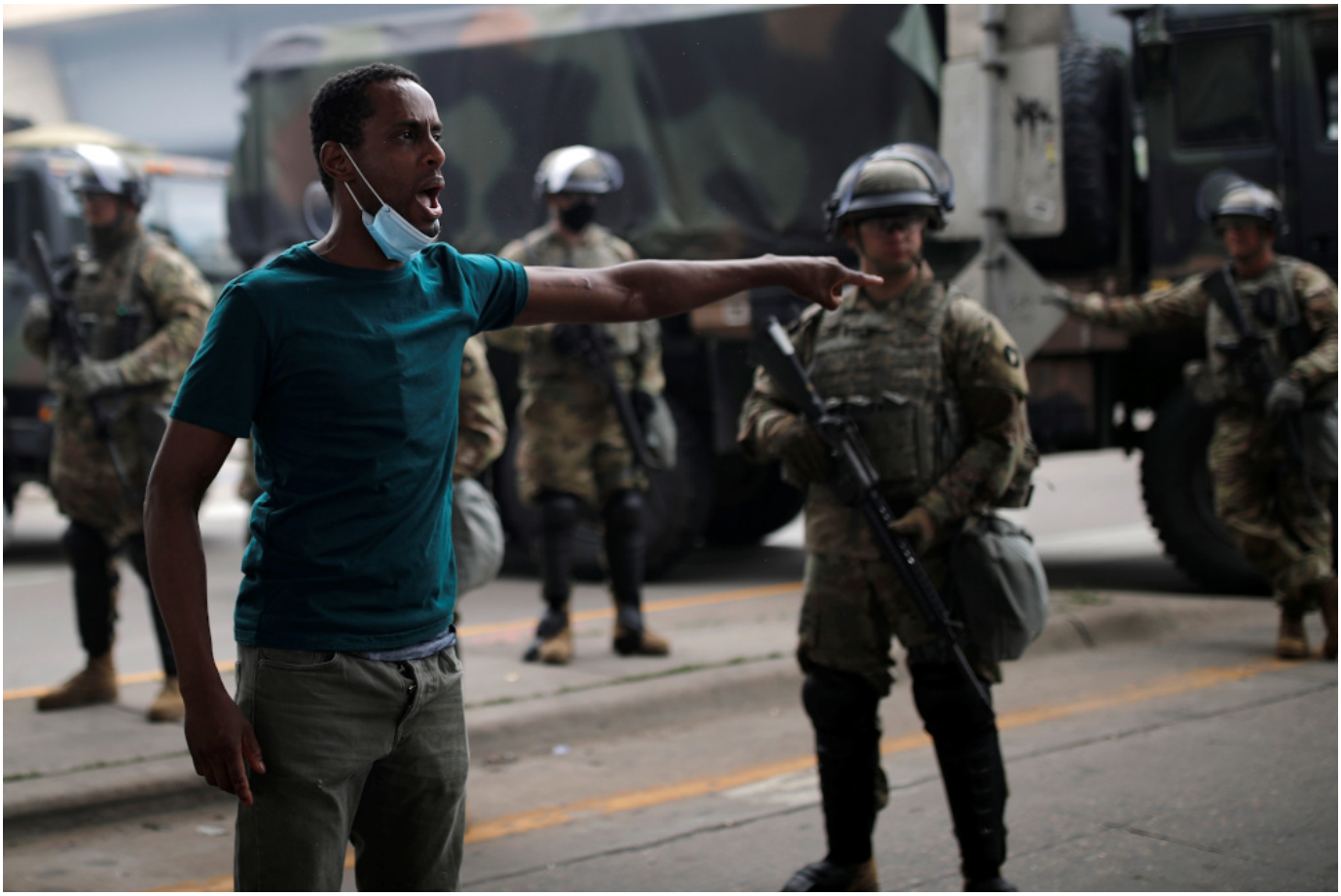
I am not a mind reader. I have no access to Amy Cooper's inner thoughts. But I know, and we all know, that without these assumptions, her words and actions — her lies — make no sense. We also have to admit that her assumptions are not unreasonable. In fact, we have to admit that they are well-founded. They match what we know to be true about how the country works and about how too many white people think.

All of this was the almost instantaneous reasoning behind her actions. By her own admission, she acted out of reflex. No one taught Amy Cooper all of this. Likely, no one gave her an explicit class on how whiteness works in America. But she knew what she was doing.

And so do we. We understand her behavior. We know how our culture frames whiteness and folks of color. We know how race works in America.

The fundamental assumption behind all the others is that white people matter, or should matter, more than people of color. Certainly more than black people. That black lives don't matter, or at least not as much as white lives. That's the basic assumption behind Amy Cooper's decisions, actions and words. That's the basic assumption that links Christian Cooper with COVID-19, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd and Omar Jimenez.

Amy Cooper knew that. We all know that. So who taught her? Who taught us?



A man in Minneapolis is seen near National Guard members May 29 guarding the area in the aftermath of a protest over the death of George Floyd, an African American, while in the custody of a white police officer. (CNS/Reuters/Carlos Barria)

The ways of whiteness

This is where things may get uncomfortable for most of you, who I assume (and hope) will be white. Because just as no one gave her an explicit class on the ways of whiteness and how it works in society — and for her — most likely you never received a formal class or explanation either. It's just something that you know, or better, that you realize on some distant yet real part of your brain. At some early age, you realized that no matter how bad things got for you, at least you would never be black. And it dawned on you, though you rarely consciously say it, that you would never want to be black. Because you realized, even without being explicitly told, that being white makes life easier. Even if you have to do some hard work along the way, at least you don't have to carry the burden of blackness as a hindrance.

And if you're really honest, something else dawned somewhere in your mind. You realized that, if you wanted, by being white you could make things hard — much harder — for others. Especially black folks.

How did you, how did I, how did we all learn this? No one taught you. No one had to. It's something that you absorbed just by living. Just by taking in subtle clues such as what the people in charge look like. Whose history you learned in school. What the bad guys look like on TV. The kind of jokes you heard. How your parents, grandparents and friends talked about people that didn't look like you.

I can hear some of you protesting. You don't want to admit this, especially your ability to make life rough for people of color. You don't want to face it. But Amy Cooper made the truth plain and obvious. She knew deep in her soul that she lived in a country where things should work in the favor of white people. She knew the real deal. We all do.

That's the reason for the grief, outrage, lament, anger, pain and fury that have been pouring into our nation's streets. Because folks are tired. Not only of the individual outrages. But of the fundamental assumption that ties them all together: that black lives don't matter and should not matter — at least not as much as white ones.

We struggle to admit that Amy Cooper reveals what W.E.B. Du Bois calls "the souls of white folks." Because, to quote James Baldwin again, facing the truth "would reveal more about America to Americans than Americans want to know." Or admit that they know.

What don't we want to admit? That Amy Cooper is not simply a rogue white person or a mean-spirited white woman who did an odious thing. Yes, we should and must condemn her words and actions. But we don't want to admit that there is a lot more to this story. That she knew, we all know, that she had the support of an unseen yet very real apparatus of collective thoughts, fears, beliefs, practices and history.

This is what we mean by systemic racism. I could call it white supremacy, although I know that white people find that term even more of a stumbling block than white privilege. Essayist Ta-Nehisi Coates gives the best short description of this complex reality called white supremacy. He describes it as "an age-old system in America which holds that whites should always be ensured that they will not sink to a certain level. And that level is the level occupied by black people." Amy Cooper knew that. And so do we.

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We don't want to admit that Amy Cooper is not simply a bad white woman. We don't want to face the truth about America that her words and actions betray. We don't want to admit that present in Central Park that morning was the scaffolding of centuries-long accumulations of the benefits of whiteness. Benefits that burden people of color. Benefits that kill black and brown people.

Without facing this truth, Amy Cooper's actions make no sense. She knew what she was doing. And so do we. Even if we do not want to admit it.

Where do we begin?

"But I don't know what to do with this information." That's what a white male student declared in class after I gave a lecture detailing the long tragic history of medical experimentation and maltreatment inflicted upon African Americans by the medical establishment, that is, by white doctors and nurses, by white hospitals, including Catholic institutions sponsored by white religious communities.

I understand the feelings of helplessness, confusion and even despondency that can afflict us. It's easy to be overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problem, by the immense weight of centuries of accumulated fear, resentment, privilege and righteous anger. It can be shocking to confront the vastness of this nation's commitment to white benefit and advantage. Where do we begin?

Let me be more specific: what are white people to do now that they know that they know what Amy Cooper knows — assuming they want to do anything? (The reason for the specificity will become clear).

First, *understand the difference between being uncomfortable and being threatened.* There is no way to tell the truth about race in this country without white people becoming uncomfortable. Because the plain truth is that if it were up to people of color, racism would have been resolved, over and done, a long time ago. *The only reason for racism's persistence is that white people continue to benefit from it.*

Repeat that last sentence. Make it your mantra. Because until the country accepts that truth, we will never move beyond superficial words and ineffective half-measures.

> The only reason for racism's persistence is that white people continue to benefit from it.
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Systemic racism benefits white people. That's the truth that Amy Cooper knew and that we all know. That truth supports all the assumptions that sustain the racial craziness and insanity in which we live. I know that bluntly stating that systemic racism benefits white people makes people — especially white people — uncomfortable. I also feel a pang of discomfort in being so direct. (I know the kinds of online comments and emails that are sure to follow.)

But avoiding and sugarcoating this truth is killing people of color. Silence for the sake of making white people comfortable is a luxury we can no longer afford.

If white people are unwilling to face very uncomfortable truths, then the country is doomed to remain what Abraham Lincoln called "a house divided." And he warned that such a house cannot stand.

What to do next? Nothing. *Sit in the discomfort this hard truth brings.* Let it become agonizing. Let it move you to tears, to anger, to guilt, to shame, to embarrassment. Over what? Over your ignorance. Over the times you went along with something you knew was wrong. Or when you told a racist joke because you could. Because you knew that your white friends and family would let you get away with it, or even join in. Because you thought it was "just a joke." Or the times you wouldn't hire the person of color because you knew your white employees would have a problem with it and you didn't want the hassle. Or when you knew the person of color was in the right, but it was easier not to upset your white friends. Or wealthy donors, who are almost always white. (By the way, the wealth disparity didn't just happen nor is it due to black and brown folks' laziness. Look at the complexions of our "essential workers" for proof.) Most of all, feel the guilt, the pain, the embarrassment over doing nothing and saying nothing when you witnessed obvious racism.

Stay in the discomfort, the anxiety, the guilt, the shame, the anger. Because only when a critical mass of white folks are outraged, grieved and pained over the status quo — only when white people become upset enough to declare, "This cannot and will not be!" — only then will real change begin to become a possibility.

Third, *admit your ignorance and do something about it.* Understand that there is a lot about our history and about life that we're going to have to unlearn. And learn over. Malcolm X said that the two factors responsible for American racism are greed and skillful miseducation. We have all been taught a sanitized version of America that masks our terrible racial history.

For example, most of my white students — and students of color, too — know nothing of the terror of lynching. They don't know that for a 30-year period from 1885-1915, on average every third day a black person was brutally and savagely and publicly murdered by white mobs. This wasn't taught, or it was taught to mean only that, in the words of a white student, "some people got beat up real bad." (Note the passive voice, which obscures who did these beatings and why).

Yet without knowing this history, the Civil Rights Movement only becomes a feel-good story about desegregation and bringing races together — sharing schools, drinking fountains and (maybe) neighborhoods. The brutal, savage and sadistic violence that whites inflicted with impunity upon black — and brown and Asian — people in order to defend "white supremacy" (their words, not mine) is never faced. Nor do we have to face the truth that most racial violence in our history has been and continues to be inflicted by whites against people of color.



(Unsplash/Logan Weaver)

To create a different world, we must learn how this one came to be. And unlearn what we previously took for granted. This means that we have to read. And learn from the perspectives of people of color. (Not to toot my own horn, but my book *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* is a good place to start).

Demand that your parish and diocese sponsor not just an evening on race, but a whole series. How about during Lent? Tell your priests and religious education directors to make anti-racism a staple feature of their homilies and your children's religious formation. Insist that your children learn a truer picture of the world than you did, and not only during Black History Month. Take a stand and say you'll take your presence and dollars elsewhere if they don't. And when they do the right thing, write them a note of support — because, trust me, they will hear plenty from the other side.

While you're at it, write your bishop and ask how anti-racism is part of your church leaders' formation for ministry. Ask how he is actively educating himself to become anti-racist. Let him know that if seminarians and candidates for ministry and religious life are unwilling or unable to be actively anti-racist, then they do not have a vocation for church leadership since they haven't embraced a fundamental requirement of Christian discipleship.

Fourth, *have the courage to confront your family and friends.* I tell my white students that they will see and hear more naked racial bigotry than I do. Because when I am in the room, everyone knows how to act. Sociologist Joe Feagin documents how white people behave one way when on the "front stage," that is, in public. But "backstage," in the company of fellow whites, a different code of behavior prevails. Here racist acts and words are excused: "That's just the way your father was raised." "Your grandmother is of a different generation." "It's just a joke." "But deep down, he's really a good person." "But if you ignore all that, he's a really fun person to be with." "You can't choose your family, but you gotta love them anyway." "It's only once a year." "I wish he wouldn't talk that way. But you can't change how people feel."

I understand the desire to have peaceful or at least conflict-free relationships with family and friends. But as the Rev. Martin Luther King said so well, "There comes a time when silence is betrayal." Silence means consent. Or at least, complicity.

Until white people call out white people, there will always be safe places for racial ugliness to brew and fester. And people like Amy Cooper will continue to assume that white people will always have their backs, no matter what. And they won't be wrong. And black people will continue to die.

> Until white people call out white people, there will always be safe places for racial ugliness to brew and fester.

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Fifth, *be* "*unconditionally pro-life.*" These are the words of St. Pope John Paul II from his final pastoral visit to the United States. He summoned Catholics to "eradicate every form of racism" as part of their wholehearted and essential commitment to life.

This has a very serious consequence: You cannot vote for or support a president who is blatantly racist, mocks people of color, separates Latino families and consigns brown children into concentration camps, and still call yourself "pro-life." We need to face, finally and at long last, the uncomfortable yet real overlap between the so-called "pro-life" movement and the advocates of racial intolerance.

In the name of our commitment to life, we must challenge not only these social policies, but also the attitude that cloaks support for racism under the guise of being "pro-life." John Paul declared that racism is a life issue. Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and the many black and brown victims of COVID-19 prove it. It is way past time for Catholics to become "unconditionally pro-life."

Finally, *pray.* Yes, racism is a political issue and a social divide. But at its deepest level, racism is a soul sickness. It is a profound warping of the human spirit that enables human beings to create communities of callous indifference toward their darker sisters and brothers. Stripped to its core, white supremacy is a disturbing interior disease, a malformed consciousness that enables white people to not care for those who don't look like them. As historian Paul Wachtel succinctly declares in his book *Race in the Mind of America*, "The real meaning of race comes down largely to this: *Is this someone I should care about?*"



Protesters in Minneapolis gather at the scene May 27 where George Floyd, an unarmed black man, was pinned down by a police officer kneeling on his neck May 25. (CNS/Reuters/Eric Miller)

This soul sickness can only be healed by deep prayer. Yes, we need social reforms. We need equal educational opportunities, changed police practices, equitable access to health care, an end to employment and housing discrimination. But only an invasion of divine love will shatter the small images of God that enable us to live undisturbed by the racism that benefits some and terrorizes so many.

In her essay, "The Desire for God and the Transformative Power of Contemplation," Baltimore Carmelite Sr. Constance FitzGerald writes, "The time will come when God's light will invade our lives and show us everything we have avoided seeing. Then will be manifest the confinement of our carefully constructed meanings, the limitations of our life projects, the fragility of the support systems or infrastructures on which we depend ... [and] the darkness in our own heart."

God's love is subversive and destructive. It exposes self-serving political ideologies as shortsighted and corrosive.

And yet FitzGerald and the Carmelite tradition insist that God subverts our plans and projects for the sake of new life. FitzGerald relates how, through unmasking the shallowness of our "achievements," God leads us to "new minds, as well as new intuitions, new wills, and passionate new desires."

Perhaps, then, the grace of this dark time in our nation is that it reveals how racially toxic our politics, society and culture have truly become, in order to spur us to build a new culture based not on the exploitation of fear but on solidarity with and for the least among us.

We need to pray for a new infusion of the Spirit and for the courage to let this Spirit transform our hearts. Come, Holy Spirit!

(Do we dare to really make that our prayer?)

Is this enough?

I can hear some of you saying, "But is this enough?" I am under no illusion that these actions, by themselves, can erase the accumulated debris of centuries of commitment to white preference and black detriment. None of us can do all that is required at this moment.

But just because we cannot do everything doesn't mean we should not do something. We are not as helpless as we fear. Moreover, helplessness is an emotion that we cannot afford to indulge. As James Baldwin believed, despair is an option that only the comfortable can afford to entertain.

We can create a new society, one where more and more people will challenge the assumptions of white racial privilege that sustain Amy Cooper's universe. *Our* universe. One built on a different set of assumptions, one where all lives truly do matter because black lives finally will matter.

I end with the final words of *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church:*

> Social life is made by human beings. The society we live in is the outcome of human choices and decisions. This means that human beings can

change things. What humans break, divide, and separate, we can — with God's help — also heal, unite, and restore.

What is now does not have to be. Therein lies the hope. And the challenge.

Come, Holy Spirit!

Fill the hearts of your faithful.

Enkindle within us the fire of your love.

Come, Holy Spirit!

Breathe into us a fiery passion for justice.

Especially for those who have the breath of life crushed from them.

Amen.

[Fr. Bryan N. Massingale is a theology professor at Fordham University in New York. He is the author of *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*.]

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