Opinion
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by NCR Staff

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Almost two weeks ago, NCR published a powerful essay written by Fr. Bryan Massingale on racism and white privilege. "The assumptions of white privilege and what we can do about it" is full of wisdom and weighty statements such as this: "The only reason for racism's persistence is that white people continue to benefit from it." Following are letters to the editor from NCR readers responding to this essay. Letters have been edited for length and clarity.

Fr. Bryan Massingale hits home with painful truths that we white people do not want to acknowledge. We do benefit from our "whiteness." I am white and have lived with the reality of my white privilege through the turbulent 1960s and beyond, and, I never gave a thought to how much my "whiteness" contributed to an ease and comfort that I enjoyed in my work life and now, my retired life.

Looking deeper into this confrontation in Central Park, what I see is not only the assumption of ideas that are pervasive in America but also a deeper cancer that betrays a truly evil origin. I am speaking about the deeper lie that has been swallowed by Americans: "it's all about me." This self-centered childish focus eats away at our spiritual life where not only do black lives not matter, but also those who would call out evil and a disregard for the law instituted for the common good.

In the final analysis, not only do we have to be aware of our "white privilege" stance and the benefits we receive from it but also, more importantly, we have to look at the deeper issue that has so painfully emerged during this COVID-19 crisis: it is not all about me; we are our brother's keeper.

JERILYN E. FELTON

Tigard, Oregon

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Please pass on our gratitude to Fr. Bryan Massingale for having written such an important contribution to the understanding and dialogue involving white privilege.

Massingale's calm clarity provides sight to America in a time when we need reflective voices speaking truth to power, and the need for us, the souls of white folk, so powerfully yet commonly privileged, to acknowledge the assumptions we see with so blindly.

May the road be less stony for all.

TIM PROSSER

Milwaukee, Wisconsin



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This is one of the most powerful and moving articles that I have read on the subject of racism. It ought to be reflected upon by everyone, but especially by white people in every country.

Here in Australia, I am humbled and ashamed to read about the treatment of people of color by white people in U.S., Australia and so many other countries of our world. The disparity between white and colored people cries out to God for deliverance. And our leaders seem to be unwilling or unable to strive to initiate a cultural change. It is so sad and depressing.

Hopefully your recent demonstrations in the U.S. will bring about a new awareness of the seriousness of the social disparity and prejudice that exists to bring about change. Indeed, we must pray for the help of the Holy Spirit.

Thank you for sharing this inspirational article.

(Fr.) DAVID STRONG, SJ

Pymble, Australia

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Thank you, Fr. Bryan Massingale, for your clear, definitive and uncomfortable editorial. Yes, I am white. Yes, I am aware that I am privileged. Yes, I need help finding a road map to clarify and transform my thinking and attitudes as well as be part of a better path forward. Your article provided all this and more as I continue to be horrified that we have allowed this systemic racism in our country to continue.

Thank you for challenging all white people to really look within and be honest about white privilege. I pray that words like yours will lead to more conversations within our various communities and that I and many others have the courage to be the change that is so sorely needed.

MADELEINE GALLAGHER

Paso Robles, California

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Forty or 50 teenagers sat on the floor crammed into my parents' very modest living and dining room in 1968 in Tallahassee, Florida, 30 miles from the Georgia border. We students had decided we could help ease racial tensions in our recently integrated high school if we just got together and talked about it. In our naiveté we believed we had done that in our interracial meeting that night.

Thinking back, I am so impressed by the courage of the African American students who attended, my parents and their parents. What an act of faith for their parents to have let them come into a white home not knowing what this was. What an act of courage for my parents whose next-door neighbors had threatened to "burn a cross" on their lawn.

I remember many spoke up that night. I do not recall the words spoken more than 50 years ago, but I remember the strong motivation that brought all of us together thinking 16-year-olds could "fix it."

In reading Fr. Bryan Massingale's terrific article and watching the terrible events of the last few years, I cannot help but recall the desire to "fix it" I had forgotten over

the years. I admit my activist spirit had waned; after all I campaign, vote and support progressive candidates. Wasn't that enough?

I loved Massingale's article because it listed things our churches could do to address systemic racism. After all, aren't churches historically powerful places for change? Everyone needs to spend time getting to know each other so that injustice, disrespect and hate, wherever found, are personal to them.

ANITA FRIEDLANDER

Miami, Florida

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I thank NCR for publishing the strong and more-than-timely article, "The assumptions of white privilege and what we can do about it" by Fr. Bryan Massingale. Every word of his message rings true in my being.

I hope and pray and urge all white readers of the NCR not to simply read articles about racism and nod our heads tacitly. Let us all make a resolution to undertake concrete actions in our local parishes and in our local dioceses so that nowhere in the U.S. are there silent, complicit believers allowing white privilege to continue undisturbed in our churches and in our society.

Let us express our solidarity with people of color and join voices, action, dollars and determination so that systems really change. This is the pro-life issue in need of all our efforts!

(Sr.) JEAN SCHAFER, SDS

Citrus Heights, California

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White privilege as defined by Fr. Bryan Massingale and masterfully explained and exampled throughout his article is the best and most thorough examination of this topic plaguing our nation and our religion today.

Kudos to Massingale and the editors for such an article coming on the heels of Pentecost for a church so badly in need for true leadership. May the spirit fill all of us to reflect.

GEORGE WETZEL

HOUSTON, TEXAS

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Thank you for Fr. Bryan Massingale's moving article on white privilege. During these tragic days, Massingale's words of wisdom should be reverberating from pulpits and off the walls of every church across our nation. That is unlikely!

Two years ago, the U.S. bishops' conference published their pastoral letter on racism, "Open Wide Our Hearts." Within a short period, that guidance was quickly ignored. As a graduate of the Archdiocese of New York's Catholic school system, raised off of Central Park, I am led to wonder if New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan had been celebrating Mass in Harlem, rather than on 5th Avenue, whether his "old friend and neighbor," our racist-in-command, would have been nearby listening.

STAN FITZGERALD

San Jose, California

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One could feel totally discouraged by the horror of racism that is still alive and well in the U.S. and in Canada, too.

I grew up in the '50s and '60s. I watched the race riots and felt hopeful that racism would be dealt with over the coming generation — my generation. I was a staunch Catholic and believed that "love your neighbor as yourself" didn't have exclusions of race or religion. It took a long time for me to see how much racism was part and parcel of the church.

I don't have the answer to the problem. I pray and I brought up my children to not be racist. I have four handicapped children so I've also seen my children exposed to some discrimination because of their limitations. It seems that fear plays a big role in some people's actions. We're a country where most people are literate but literacy doesn't seem to teach people how to do critical thinking. However, the western world is Christian. And the bigotry is so entrenched in the Christians and they don't see it!

I love your articles. Keep up the good work. Our world needs to hear your publications. Certainly our churches would benefit if your articles were part of the sermons, instead of so many clergy supporting our pyramid, dictatorship church that has virtually no input from the millions who are members. But they want the money.

ELIZABETH DeCOSTE

Antigonish, Nova Scotia

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The column by Fr. Bryan Massingale is the most powerful analysis and deep dive into white privilege, overtaking all analyses that I have read in all the United States newspapers.

As a Black South African, and slowly but surely returning to the church after not being catechized when young due to not understanding the Latin Mass (the convent primary school I attended was run by German nuns and priests who only spoke German and catechism was nowhere), I can relate to Massingale's analysis.

White privilege, and its hegemony, is too worldwide and is still prevalent in South Africa.

We need more such analyses in NCR of racist consciousness and not the tomfoolery that purports to be analysis published in other US-based newspapers.

Black lives matter — and black analysis of the black international experience and condition from a Catholic perspective is vital.

NEIL LEWIS

Johannesburg, South Africa

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I thank Fr. Bryan Massingale for offering his practical and spiritual guidance for our collective examination of conscience. Because so many white American Catholics have family histories rooted in the waves of immigration from Europe in the last two centuries, usually of humble beginnings and sometimes featuring episodes of mistreatment, we like to use this part of our lineage to claim an exemption from the call to undertake this uncomfortable form of self-examination. "You see, we had it bad, too!" many will cry.

In fact, we should use the knowledge of these family origins to enhance and deepen our reflections on the ways we have benefited and, as Massingale stresses, continue to benefit at the expense of our black brothers and sisters. Politically, too many U.S. Catholics, still grateful for their forefathers' opportunities as immigrants, are drawn to a reflexively defensive form of patriotism which pledges "I will never apologize for America!" If a nation is purportedly founded on Christian principles, would it not deeply believe in the process built into the sacrament of reconciliation?

The moment has come to humble ourselves, examine our hearts, ask forgiveness and atone for the sin embedded in many of our institutions. As believers, we know that God the father will bless our efforts!

DANNY ABRAMOWICZ

Oak Park, Illinois

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The assumption of privilege was very well written. I was captured after reading your common: "We all do, and that's the problem," and I continued to read until the end. I was pleased to hear it articulated so eloquently justifying my feelings (truth, pain, tears, injured and my ancestors).

I hope we Catholics read it and start a conversation for change.

Mary Bell

Mt. Airy, Philadelphia

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Regarding the commentary by Fr. Bryan Massingale on white privilege: In Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan he did not blame the Samaritan for not preventing the assault on the roadside victim; he praised him for taking responsibility to care for, to heal the victim.

I used to teach graduate social work students who came to my classroom expressing guilt and helplessness at the angry outpourings of a Native American instructor. I told them they are not guilty of other people's sins and injustices, past and present. However, I explained that you are morally responsible for your own attitudes, and doing what you can to remedy social injustices. Because my teaching content was on social justice, community organizing and social change, it was easier to help them feel empowered to exercise that responsibility.

While I understand the concept of white privilege, I fear it can lead to a backlash of guilt and helplessness, or even angry rejection and denial, rather than encouragement and knowledge of what to do to undo systemic racism. Let's have less blaming and shaming, and more moral encouragement and teaching people the tools and methods of social change. As Catholics, we could start by insisting that the social justice teachings of the church become universally stressed in religious education and homilies.

MARIE D. HOFF

Bismarck, North Dakota

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