Opinion
News
Voices of Sisters



An advocate for racial equality is livestreamed in Phoenix during the "Peaceful, Prayerful Protest" June 13. The Spanish banner in the cellphone reads "Black Lives Matter." (CNS/Tony Gutierrez)



by Sr. Joan Chittister

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Back in the quiet of their homes, the world is awash in questions.

The first question: What is going on? And what supports it?

The answer: What's going on?! Racism is going on! Everywhere.

But what do you mean, *racism*? The woman was clearly troubled. "Things were so good. I thought this was all over. And now look at this: Looting and brick throwing and fire. I don't mind if they protest. They have a perfect right to protest. But like this? Are we going backwards?"

And she meant it. For her, things have been good. Where did all this come from — all of a sudden? How can we allow "these people" — as if they were not "our people" — to destroy the good?

The second question: I thought we solved this. What happened to start it again?

Then there's this question: Why does it just keep coming up?

Let's look at those questions a little. *How long has this been going on?*

First, never mind the racists around the edges. After all, there will always be someone who's insulting someone somewhere.

Right. Forget them. Let's start with the important things: like the church, for instance.

In that case, in the 16th century, theologians supported the theology of limitation — that God created some people inferior to others who were to be enslaved for their own good. They argued the morality of white racism and its righteous control over those — the natives — who had no capacity to receive the faith, they said, or live human lives. *Despite the quality and artistry of the civilizations they had built before*

us.

This conquest and enslavement of whole peoples is a seedbed of white shame that has lasted for decades, for centuries, and must finally be weeded out now.

One man, Dominican Fr. Bartolomé de Las Casas, debated those ideas at the highest levels of church and state until 1537 when Pope Paul III issued *Sublimis Deus*, declaring that Indians were rational and in 1542, King Charles V promulgated the New Laws that outlawed the enslavement of Indians.

How long have these ideas been in our DNA? For centuries, all documents to the contrary. And do you notice? No one wrote a document saying that white superiority is a myth, a sin, a crime against humanity. Only that slavery was forbidden.

The white scandal of natural superiority marked the Western World and has never been foresworn. Worse, it lives in pockets up and down all the Main Streets of the White World yet — all proof to the contrary.

What happened to bring this up again? We thought it was solved.

Systemic racism has marked every institution, every major social system since the first slave boat arrived in U.S. ports and the first slave trading began in the public markets. More, it has only gotten worse over the years.

From the moment of emancipation on, law was used to control even the occupation of freed slaves who were confined to agriculture, domestic work, and service jobs — just what they had been doing before emancipation. But none of those occupations were protected by the labor legislation that dealt with jobs in other categories. No laws defined the wages, benefits, working conditions or protection from discrimination in agriculture, or domestic help, or service jobs. Which means that a whole population of people were enslaved without being enslaved. There simply was no real "getting ahead."

Jim Crow laws managed to erase most of what were meant to be the gains that came from emancipation. As in no drinking at white water fountains in the heat of the day. So slaves were enslaved without being enslaved. Go figure.

Later, even after the move for new civil rights legislation in our own time, the system managed to get around them. Medical care was refused to the neediest people in the United States by doctors who wouldn't accept the little health care blacks had access to for their children.

Inner city schools were under-resourced and teachers denied the materials they needed to develop their classroom preparations. In the end, then, it also affected higher educational opportunities for children who would then lack that background.

Real estate was ghettoized. Once agents popularized the notion that one black family in a neighborhood lowered the value of every other house on the block, blacks couldn't buy a house there, however much they tried or however hard they worked.

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Ask Cesar Chavez what that lack of equal protection did to farmworkers in California, for instance. Or waiters and waitresses whose income has been reduced to getting tips rather than be able to depend on living wages. Let alone a job.

But most shameful of all were the run amok police departments that trapped blacks in their blackness. They stopped African American drivers and arrested them on bogus charges; they stopped blacks and seized their property, their time, and their freedom until they were finally released on no charges at all; they stopped blacks and arrested them on "suspicion" of nothing or gave double the attention to half the drugs that whites carried and with double or more the prison time; and they stopped and, we know with our own eyes now, they killed blacks — with impunity.

When did it begin? Centuries ago. When will it end? Maybe now. Maybe now that whites, too, are finally seeing the sin of it all and are embarrassed by it, pained by it, ashamed of it.

But, from where I stand, don't be sure that change can be taken for granted, that it will move another inch unless we keep up the pressure to save our own souls if nothing else.

The fact is that sin is very hard for sinners to see. For instance, let me use another example. A little example. A tiny example that you may at first consider

meaningless. To see what we have done as a church to counter systemic slavery, I went to the Catholic catechism to see what it said about certain kinds of social sin.

"Consideration of racism is grounded in fundamental scriptural beliefs: equal dignity of all people, created in God's image; and Christ's redemption of all," writes Jesuit Fr. Fred Kammer in the Jesuit Social Research Institute article "Catholic Social Teaching and Racism." He continues, "The Catechism of the Catholic Church spells this out: 'The equality of men rests essentially on their dignity as persons and the rights that flow from it.' "

And the U.S. bishops' conference document, "Brothers and Sisters to Us," states:

"Racism is not merely one sin among many; it is a radical evil that divides the human family."

Get it? Read it carefully. We're all about equality — and we can't even get them to slip in the notion that, as the catechism says, "the equality of men *and women* rests essentially on their dignity as persons."

Keep going. Don't think it's over. Don't give up. Don't give in — and maybe someday blacks and whites, men and women will get those questions answered and the equality we promise, as well.

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