Opinion



by NCR Staff

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An article on the Catholic Church and race was pulled from Sojourners website recently, sparking a controversy that eventually saw two resignations, the appointment of a new editor-in-chief and the republication of the article. Letters to the editor responding to the events are below. They have been edited for length and clarity.

I want to thank NCR for trying to treat a very regrettable and painful situation fairly. It was indeed, as reported, a conflict that became a crisis — externally and internally — between our commitments to both journalism and advocacy in our continuing desire to help create "advocacy journalism" that is finally committed to faith and justice.

Legitimate concerns about a published article by a very legitimate author, from also legitimate friends and partners — that all share our core commitments to faith and justice — should have led to an legitimate internal and external dialogue, and even debate, not about the core message of the article with which everyone agreed; but about the best ways to precisely and effectively make these important arguments. All of that would have honored the important principle that it is good and important to agree to disagree and keep integrity all around.

The mistake that was made to take down the article, instead of having that public debate, as our editors would have preferred, literally made everything worse — on both the journalistic and advocacy sides.

Once again, I take ultimate authority and responsibility for that, even with the initial support of our top organizational and board leadership — who all now agree this was a mistake. That's why we have put the article back up; and I have promised that an article will never be taken down again even if it might jeopardize our advocacy commitments.

This has also spurred our long-standing efforts to better structure ourselves for better organizational integration and accountability of journalist independence and advocacy leadership going forward. We are learning through failures here, and ask you to please pray for us, as it certainly is deeply grievous for all when our own organizational failures become a case study.

And let's all be clear that racial justice issues are involved in everything we all do to change our lives, our organizations, our churches, our society — and all of our systems.

But again, I deeply apologize to any and all — internally and externally — who have been confused or hurt by all of this. Leadership means to take responsibility and I am and will continue to try to do so in this "teachable moment" for what Dorothy Day always called us to — the "clarification of thought."

JIM WALLIS, Founder and president of Sojourners

Washington, D.C.



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Where to begin with all the troubling concerns that this issue raises? But an especially pertinent fact for my own assessment of the veracity of Eric Martin's article on the church and the painful subject of racism is this: Did or did not the U.S. bishops, in deliberating their 2018 pastoral letter against racism, reject language that would condemn the imagery of swastikas and nooses? If they in fact rejected such language, then I would find it both cowardly and indefensible.

Not only would it lend credibility to the article, but any outrage expressed by the U.S. bishops' conference about Martin's article I would see as not only self-serving but inconsistent with the basic tenets of Catholic spirituality, which they are supposed to be modelling.

On the other hand, if they in fact did not discuss or reject such language condemning such reprehensible imagery, then Jim Wallis undoubtedly did the right thing in removing a factually inaccurate article.

J. OFFNER

Middletown, Connecticut

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I have the deepest respect for Sojourners and Jim Wallis. The article about the Catholic Church's bishops not forthrightly condemning the white supremacist's symbols we all know is truthful and honest.

It is also true that there are white people in the Catholic Church who support white supremacy and white privilege. Those readers of this article who found it to be offensive shows how much racism exists in the Catholic Church.

No matter how apologetic Wallis is, the truth is the truth and it should not be stifled. Silencing this article's pointing to the failure of our pastoral leaders has shown how much we have to learn and to actively expose hidden racism and white supremacy.

AL MERCATANTE

Newark, Delaware

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The erasure of a published Sojourners article that alleged white supremacy factions within the U.S. Catholic Church is part of a much larger problem. For decades, the whiteness and positions of power within our U.S. Catholic Church seems completely comfortable with white supremacy.

I called "The Patrick Madrid Show" on Relevant Radio in June and August. In June, I asked Patrick to address the racism within the church. I read the first line of the letter published by the Black Catholic Clergy Caucus in 1968 which stated, "The Catholic Church in the United States, primarily a white racist institution, has addressed itself primarily to white society and is definitely a part of that society." As soon as I finished that line, Patrick shut off my mic, retorted with one individual Catholic act of anti-racism, and ignored all institutional policy that promoted slavery and racism.

When I called back in August, I referenced the 2018 U.S. bishops' conference letter against racism "Open Wide Our Hearts." Once I said that the letter was calling Catholics to research and support policies of reparations for American Descendants of Slavery, again my mic was shut off and I was told there was no more time. Not only that, but on the archives of that particular show (which was Aug. 10), my name is in the notes for hour one but all audio of my call was removed.

Our voices of power often promote Catholic white supremacy. We must follow Christ and overturn those tables that are plaguing our heavenly temple.

MATT CITIZEN

San Francisco, California

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I'm wondering "what would Jesus do?" Would he let fear keep him from speaking out against hatred? Remember he was not afraid to disrupt the temple money changers. Theologians seem to taunt their own position, forgetting Jesus.

MARGARET A. BURDGE

St. Louis, Missouri

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I am a Catholic priest and a member of Sojourners, and am sad about them taking down a comment about racism in leadership within the Catholic Church from the printed version of the Sojourners Magazine. I certainly and sincerely hope there is not racism present, but I also want to say that I have been concerned at a number of bishops, notably New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan supporting President Donald Trump. We are going through a difficult time in the U.S., and have watched a number of protests, in particular with the Black Lives Matter movement.

I was impressed with the quality of that protest, as also I have been thrilled with the appointment of Kamala Harris as the vice presidential candidate by Joe Biden, the Democratic candidate for president. I am also a strong supporter for him as president, and proud of him as a notable member of the Catholic Church.

I have also noted how few bishops have protested the statements of Trump who seems to be repeating his previous comments regarding support for rightwing activists in Charlottesville recently.

I have also noted the seeming support for Trump by the Knights of Columbus, and wish that they had disavowed that.

We are facing a difficult election. It is a difficult time and I hope that the U.S. bishops repeat a statement they previously made at election time. Biden deserves their support but I have not noticed any that has been made.

(Fr.) NICHOLAS PUNCH, OP

Webster, Wisconsin

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I deeply appreciated the article about white supremacy in the Catholic Church. Finally, some truth-telling.

The upset over the article from Catholic "allies" points to how deeply ingrained and unconscious the white supremacy goes among Catholics. For Christians, the Black Lives Matter movement includes reckoning with the lies, the biases, the racism that is entwined with the institutional structures that support the edifice of our faith.

The article touched a nerve, rightly so, and Sojourners should have stood by its author rather than caving to white fragility. For Jim Wallis, it's a little too late; he thew away his shot.

LESLEY PELLA-WOO

Princeton, New Jersey

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Jim Wallis and Sojourners hold a remarkably prophetic place in religion and politics in the United States. While the publication, and subsequent removal, of the Eric Martin article in Sojourners Magazine may have been a setback for them, the manner in which they subsequently strove to maintain and repair relationships, both with partner organizations and within their own organization, reflects well their generous commitment to justice and the common good.

Some of the reactions from our own Catholic Church seem overly defensive. Someone somewhere would appear to have been unafraid to wield our comparative size and influence to "right" the perceived offence. And they got their way. But what does that say about us as a church? What kind of internal dialogue do we Catholics need in order to adjust our focus towards the greater good, especially towards the needs of the poor and marginalized, and away from our own identity issues?

Regarding the "offending" article, it is good to see it back up on the Sojourners website with accompanying statements and clarifications. The article raises the important issue of racism for U.S. Catholics and our conscious or unconscious participation in it.

However, the article is also something of a hit job. It tries to establish guilt by association. By listing some people who are Catholic and also active in white nationalist type circles or involved in public life in a way that supports explicit racism, the article inductively attempts to generalize guilt to a broader population. A subtler approach might be more successful in inviting much needed reflection.

JOHN O'DONOGHUE

Eugene, Oregon

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White supremacy too has often felt at home within the Catholic Church. For example, during the era of Africanized slavery, Catholic bishops classed abolitionism rather than slavery as the church's enemy; during Reconstruction, a Southern bishop granted Confederate veterans their own ecclesial community but refused black Catholics their own parish; in response to the Great Migration, Northern white Catholics, both lay and ordained, worked together to make sure that their parishes and their neighborhoods remained for whites-only. They perceived Black people rather than white supremacy as a threat to the integrity of the body of Christ.

But, as the pushback against Sojourners' decision to un-publish Eric Martin's article "The Catholic Church has a Visible White-Power Faction" perhaps suggests, this may be changing. Now, it is white supremacy that Catholics are unwilling to make space for. This is a good thing.

KATIE WALKER GRIMES

Wayne, Pennsylvania

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