Opinion
Guest Voices



Graduate students in theology and ministry at Catholic Theological Union walk across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, during a pilgrimage of sacred sites from the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. (Courtesy of Pathways@CTU)

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> Ain't gonna let nobody turn me 'round, turn me 'round, turn me 'round,
> Ain't gonna let nobody turn me 'round, I’m gonna keep on a-walkin', keep on a-talkin', marching up to freedom land.

The trip started out like many others. Participants made the journey by car, by train and by plane down to Birmingham, Selma and Montgomery, Alabama, to visit sacred sites from the U.S. Civil Rights Movement and learn about key figures in the fight for racial justice. However, this trip was more than just a class trip — this was a pilgrimage, often described as a spiritual quest, a search for deeper meaning, and a journey of transformation through encounters with sacred spaces and holy people.

Since this pilgrimage was also a graduate course in theology and ministry, each step was marked by theological reflection, prayer, critical thinking and research on the history of racial injustice and white supremacy in the United States.

We walked in the footsteps of the religious leaders, activists and committed citizens who marched across the Edmund Pettus bridge in Selma, Alabama, to fight for voting rights, only to be brutally attacked by law enforcement on what became known as Bloody Sunday (March 7, 1965). We poured libations on the soil of Kelly Ingram Park in Birmingham, the site of student demonstrations for civil rights which resulted in dog attacks, arrests, beatings and severe injuries caused by fire hoses aimed at children. We prayed in Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, where Martin Luther King Jr. and other holy people organized the Montgomery bus boycott, and where racial justice work is still being done today. We wept in the Equal Justice Initiative's Legacy Museum and the National Lynching Memorial, both in Montgomery, as we witnessed the atrocious history of human trafficking, slavery, lynching and mass incarceration of Black people.



Graduate students in theology and ministry at Catholic Theological Union visit the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, where four Black girls were killed in a bombing by Ku Klux Klan members in 1963.* (Courtesy of Pathways@CTU)

Each day was mentally, emotionally and physically challenging, but each experience was slowly and powerfully transforming our spirits and filling them with conviction to build the beloved community that God intended for all people.

> I'm gonna keep on a-walkin', keep on a-talkin', marching up to freedom land.

This pilgrimage course was conceived and designed by Dr. C. Vanessa White, associate professor of spirituality and ministry at Catholic Theological Union, and recent recipient of the Catholic Theological Society of America CUERG Distinguished Scholar-Leader Award. After years of teaching courses in spirituality and ministry on the topics of anti-blackness and white supremacy in the context of the Catholic Church, and an encounter with Bryan Stevenson (founder of the Equal Justice Initiative) when he received CTU's Blessed Are the Peacemakers Award in 2023, she sought to create this pilgrimage experience for graduate students in theology and ministry. White reflects, "I believe in the value of immersion experiences in the journey as a graduate student in theology and ministry, and have found that such experiences can be life changing for the one studying to become a missionary disciple."

Our pilgrims for this experience were intentionally chosen from diverse communities at CTU, including the Augustus Tolton Program for Black Catholic scholars, and Pathways@CTU, a living-learning community for young adults, especially those from marginalized groups. This diverse community of pilgrims (most of our group were either Black or Latinx) contributed to very rich, raw and honest discussions about how the structural impact of racism in the U.S. affects individual experiences of faith, community and perceptions of human dignity. We also discussed how the structural sin of white supremacy works to plant seeds of discord within marginalized groups, pitting Black and brown communities against each other in the struggle for liberation.

Prior to departure, we engaged with Ignatian spirituality by reading and praying with *The Spiritual Work of Racial Justice: A Month of Meditations with Ignatius of Loyola*. This work prompted journal reflections about white privilege, the ongoing crucifixion of people of color, distortions of human dignity and Christianity's sinful history of racism, to name only a few.

While in Alabama, we found the following practices and perspectives to be essential to our work of processing and reflecting on the history of racial injustice in the U.S. as Christian pilgrims.

Graduate students in theology and ministry at Catholic Theological Union pour libations on th

Graduate students in theology and ministry at Catholic Theological Union pour libations on the soil at Kelly Ingram Park in Birmingham, Alabama, during an opening prayer for a pilgrimage of sacred sites from the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. (Courtesy of Pathways@CTU)

Libations. The ritual of libation has its origins in many religious traditions, including those of ancient Greece, Egypt and Israel, and is a popular practice within Black spirituality. This ritual involves pouring liquid onto the Earth in remembrance of ancestors and as a prayer of thanksgiving to God. On our journey, we poured libations onto the sacred soil of Alabama and honored those ancestors who shed their blood, sweat, and tears in the fight for liberation.

Liberative view of God's work. The work of Black liberation theologians like James Cone, Bryan Massingale and Kelly Brown Douglas are vital in understanding Christian theological and ethical concepts through the lens of justice for the oppressed, against a horizon of liberation. During one group theological reflection, we reflected on the cross on which Jesus was killed as a symbol of suffering, death and liberation for Black people, and the modern-day crosses that we persecute people on today.

Lament. When a person confronts the terror of trafficking, slavery and lynching in this country, it is easy to want to freeze in shock, or move on to righteous anger and swift action. However, the spiritual work of a pilgrim that witnesses evil is to sit with that reality for a while and cry out to God in lament. Each member of our group experienced moments of lament in different ways as we somberly walked through the National Lynching Memorial and listened to children's voices crying out in agony for their mothers in the slave barracks powerfully recreated at the Equal Justice Initiative Legacy Museum.

Long view of justice. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once preached that the "moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice." Although the legacy of racial injustice persists today in many different forms, the work of religious leaders and activists like Rosa Parks, King, Fannie Lou Hamer and John Lewis give us hope that the work of justice may not be complete in our lifetimes, but the march is not in vain. Each step that each of us takes in planting seeds of restorative justice, peace, solidarity and radical love is a step closer to the kin-dom of God bearing fruit on Earth, where all human beings live in harmony and freedom.

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Lifting our voices as one. At each sacred site of remembrance, our group opened with the Black spiritual "Ain't gonna let nobody turn me 'round." As Black, Latinx and white Catholics, we joined together as one to sing these songs of freedom and lift our voices in solidarity with all those who struggle to keep on walking each day.

In a country and church marked by the stain of anti-black racism and the subsequent violence inflicted upon black bodies, our pilgrimage course leadership team believe that it is an ethical imperative for Catholics — especially Catholics preparing to be leaders in theology and ministry — to confront the history of slavery, segregation and mass incarceration, and to interpret it through the lens of God's liberative work in the world and the Christian call to create the kin-dom of God on earth. Without the opportunity for reflection, encounter and transformation that immersive experiences like this pilgrimage provide, we run the risk of recreating the harmful structures of the past and allowing the sins of the present to persist. As Maya Angelou wrote, "History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again." This is the spiritual work of the racial justice pilgrim.

**This caption has been edited to correct the location of the photo.*