

Catholics and racism: from examination of conscience to examination of culture

Maureen H. O'Connell | Mar. 30, 2012



Trayvon Martin (Religion News Service)

OPINION

While public outcry about the death of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin gathers momentum on social networks and in various public demonstrations around the country, it does not seem to be weighing too heavily on Catholic consciences. A cursory Web search does not yield much by way of statements by Catholic leaders or empathetic rituals by Catholic parishes.

But for people of color in this country and the growing number of Catholics among them, the situation in Sanford, Fla., is *the* justice issue of the day. So why the apathetic silence? Sadly, we need only look to our own religious teachings to find the answer.

Catholic social teaching, *the* primary resource for Catholics when it comes to addressing a variety of social questions and often referred to as the church's "best-kept secret," began in 1891 with a papal encyclical about the plight of workers in Europe's industrial revolution. Pope Leo XIII called Western Europe's attention to the need for fair labor practices, a living wage and the right of workers to unionize. Since then, the institutional church has not hesitated to address a host of justice issues -- human rights, nuclear disarmament, economic development and ecological sustainability, to name a few -- speaking not simply to Catholics but to "all people of goodwill." In fact, Pope Benedict XVI offered the most recent addition to the tradition with his 2011

Christmas address about the global economic crisis.

Yet when it comes to racism, Catholic social teaching is conspicuously silent. While some documents briefly mention racism as an impediment to life in community -- as is the case of racism and nationalism as impediments to human development in Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio* in 1967 or racism and population control in John Paul II's *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* 20 years later -- none examine it as a root cause of various injustices that these same documents address, whether labor issues, human rights, human development or crime and punishment. In their often-celebrated pastoral letter on the economy in 1986, *Economic Justice for All*, the U.S. bishops dedicate all of three sentences to the role of racial discrimination and prejudice, as well as "the effects of past discrimination" in marginalizing people of color from "mainstream" economic life.

When church authorities do take up racism explicitly, as is the case in the bishops' 1979 pastoral letter, *Brothers and Sisters to Us*, they tend to think of it in terms of voluntary, deliberate and conscious acts on the part of individuals, the response to which is one of examination of conscience and personal conversion. While the bishops acknowledge that "the structures of our society are subtly racist" and call for an evaluation of racism in the economy and institutions including the church itself, Catholic ethicist Bryan Massingale notes that they fail to examine critically the underlying *cultural* beliefs or myths that give rise to and justify racist behaviors. Instead, they make strong appeals to individual consciences to avoid them.

But racism is not about isolated and blatantly evil acts. Rather, it is a far more subtle and pervasive way of perceiving ourselves and others that is shaped by our collective way of being together. Failing to name racism as a cultural phenomenon -- a set of dispositions and perspectives on the world that are collectively learned and symbolically shared -- only perpetuates white complicity in racism. Since few of us have probably ever committed conscious, intentional and deliberate acts of racial hatred, most whites can be assured of our lack of culpability with the events related to the Martin case in Florida and shirk any kind of responsibility for it that others try to foist on us. Catholic social teaching tells us that our consciences are clean.

It's this clean white conscience that is the biggest impediment to racial justice. As philosopher Barbara Applebaum noted in her book, *Being White, Being Good*: "White people can reproduce and maintain racist practices, even when, *and especially when*, they believe themselves to be morally good."

Invocations of white moral goodness are a form of denial -- of full knowledge of the self and others, of our vulnerability and others' sufferings. Most importantly, our confidence in our moral goodness when it comes to racism denies a culture that awards us benefits based on our skin color. Catholic moral theology and ethics have yet to take up white privilege, which historians, sociologists, critical race theorists and activists see as the root cause of internalized, personally mediated and structural racism. This is no doubt a reflection of the Euro-American or white orientation of the tradition itself. And this orientation is not easy to detect in a culture where white is considered "normal" and everyone else is "different." It took feminist sociologist Peggy McIntosh months of interrogating her subconscious to come up with her now-infamous inventory of the "invisible knapsack" -- a series of privileges whites enjoy by virtue of our white skin.

If you want evidence that whites are indeed complicit in a culture of racism, consider the fact that we are usually unable and at times unwilling to accept responsibility for the privileges afforded to us by our white skin. Like the privilege of wearing a hooded sweatshirt without fear of being seen as threatening, or knowing that the neighborhood watch is watching out *for* you and not watching out *for you*. If you want evidence of white Catholics' complicity, ask yourself whether you've heard anything about Trayvon Martin's death from the pulpit. So long as whites aren't willing to accept responsibility for the privileges afforded to us by our white skin, we are indeed complicit in a culture of racism.

To be sure, there are other resources within the Catholic tradition to which whites or Euro-Americans can turn to begin to wrestle with our complicity in this culture of racism. Several spiritual traditions -- most notably that of St. Ignatius of Loyola, with which I am most familiar -- invite us to use our imaginations in prayer, not only to better enter into contemplative encounters with the Divine, but also to stand in others' shoes and perceive ourselves as they do. This perspective might be the first step in being able to name the privileges our skin color awards us and denies to others. We can also begin to apply the principle of solidarity -- a gem of Catholic social teaching that reminds us we are all responsible for all -- to the cultural reality of racism. Or we can strive to follow the example of prophetic figures in the Catholic tradition who did not shy away from taking responsibility for their white privileges: activist Dorothy Day, writer Flannery O'Connor or St. Katharine Drexel, for example.

Don't get me wrong. As a professor of theological ethics, I am a proponent of Catholic social teaching, given its rightful insistence that our faith tradition has something meaningful to contribute to public discourse about a variety of social justice problems. I'm just not sure that is the case quite yet when it comes to racism. There is work to be done here, and we might begin by naming the limitations of our tradition when it comes to racism, so that it might not limit Catholic responses to what's going on out there. It is time we examine our culture, as well as our individual consciences.

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