

## Soul-searching for racial justice

Alex Mikulich | May. 26, 2012



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### *Viewpoint*

It is a sign of the times that the Trayvon Martin case is waning away from public attention, and that the U.S. Catholic bishops have not addressed the fundamental issues of racial justice at stake for the nation.

A failure to address the social structures and culture that is death-dealing for African-American and Latino men and women in America -- the context for the Feb. 26 killing of Martin -- is a "supreme dishonor to the Creator" in terms of the most basic tenet of Catholic social teaching: that we are all made in the image and likeness of God.

President Barack Obama implicitly invited Americans to notice how the *Imago Dei* is at stake when he acknowledged the universal appeal of the case to every parent in America.

He spoke in personal terms, saying, "When I think about this boy, I think about my own kids." Every parent in America should be able to understand why it is absolutely imperative that we investigate every aspect of this.

The president continued, "If I had a son, he would look like Trayvon Martin." This is only one of too many cases that shake my soul and ought to shake every American to the core of our being. Every parent ought to be able to let their child go to the corner store for a soda and candy without worrying for the child's life.

Regardless of whether or not your child looks like Trayvon Martin, regardless of whether or not your child wears a hoodie, people of faith and the church ought at least to have the compassion to notice our divine and human connection with him.

The president concluded his remarks saying, "All of us have some soul-searching to figure out how does something like this happen." That may be the most significant and compounding tragedy of this case: that the U.S. Catholic bishops do not lead people of faith and justice to do real soul-searching about why something like this happens in 2012.

The U.S. Catholic bishops have undertaken a major campaign to defend religious liberty, ranking the Health and Human Services mandate regarding contraception as the greatest threat. Addressing concerns of religious liberty are certainly legitimate, but the timing, the tone and the exaggeration of the extent to which religious freedom is threatened undermine the bishops' own case.

Invoking the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail," in April the bishops' Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty called the faithful to practice civil disobedience against policies the church views as an assault on religious liberty.

In an irony that seems lost on the U.S. Catholic bishops, they invoke King with a hint of nostalgia for courage they could not muster in 1963, and they seem to have forgotten that the church's support for the civil rights movement was weak and late.

The bishops also seem to have forgotten that King wrote his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" in reply to a group of eight religious leaders, including Catholic Bishop Joseph A. Durick of what was then the Mobile-Birmingham, Ala., diocese.

Durick and his fellow clergymen defended the status quo in 1963, appealing for "law and order and common sense," as they criticized as "unwise and untimely" the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's Birmingham Campaign to end that city's segregation system.

Once again, it seems it is the bishops who are not in tune with the signs of the times. Not a word for Trayvon Martin, not a word of support for the president's invitation to soul-searching about why this happens.

The bishops are oddly silent about the institutions, unjust laws and cultural milieu that so violently deny people of color freedom of movement and human flourishing in America today. In terms of the Affordable Care Act and the need to address racial disparities in health care, an assault on affordable health care could not be more untimely.

A deeper irony, perhaps, is that Durick eventually became a champion for civil rights when he later reflected upon King's letter.

The bishops and the faithful ought to read King's letter with the same openness to conversion that led Durick to become a champion for civil rights in the 1960s. In the context of a so-called "post-racial" society that associates blackness with criminality, the enduring wisdom of "Letter from Birmingham Jail" is striking.

The bishops beautifully cite King's wisdom, drawing upon Sts. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas to say that "an unjust law is no law at all." Yet if the bishops are to speak with the same moral authority from which King wrote in 1963, they will have to preach like King did, by bodily example. As theologian M. Shawn Copeland puts it, both the bishops and people of faith must "enflesh freedom" by the way we live.

At a time when too many youth are victims of gun violence, when the cradle-to-prison pipeline disproportionately arrests, sentences and incarcerates black and brown men at rates of one in nine and one in 36 respectively, this is no time to evade the struggle for racial justice. King's witness still calls us to enact racial justice.

When the bishops and people of faith take up King's witness, that will be a real tribute to American freedom. That would honor both universal human dignity and our Creator.

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is coauthor of *The Scandal of White Complicity in U.S. Hyper-Incarceration: A Nonviolent Spirituality of White Resistance* (forthcoming from Palgrave MacMillan in 2012).]

### **Resources on faith and racism**

1963 statement by Alabama clergymen

mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/kingweb/popular\_requests/frequentdocs/clergy.pdf

?Letter from Birmingham Jail?

mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/kingweb/popular\_requests/frequentdocs/birmingham.pdf

?Church struggled for civil rights? by Theresa Laurence in the Tennessee Register, Feb. 17, 2012

www.dioceseofnashville.com/a-civirights1.htm

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