

## **No to Racism, Yes to Inclusion and Diversity.**

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On the 21 March 1960, in Sharpeville, South Africa, 69 black South African people were killed when police opened fire on a peaceful demonstration against apartheid laws. Six years after this horrific event, the United Nations called for an International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. Now held on 21<sup>st</sup> March each year, this was an attempt to increase efforts to eliminate all forms of racial discrimination in our world and to generate solidarity with all those affected by racism.

Sixty years later, despite the growing awareness of racial discrimination and the work of the Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), racism remains a pandemic due to fear, ignorance, suspicion and even hatred towards individuals or groups for their ethnic or religious identity. It comes in many forms, including language, behaviour and viewpoints. It is built on a false classification of people and is a political construct. It is based on a system of power, legitimising the power of white people over black people, over Indigenous people and over people of colour. Racism can be the sin of omission, when individuals, communities, and religious people remain silent and fail to speak out against racial injustice when it is encountered, or try to justify or minimise the impact it has on the person, their community and indeed on all of us.

Today we are seeing new forms of racism developing out of older manifestations, leading to extreme nationalist ideologies which are filtering into the public discourse. This xenophobic rhetoric causes fear of black people, foreigners, immigrants, and refugees and eventually leads certain ethnic and cultural groups to be regarded as 'out of place' in the dominant culture.

Fear can deprive us of the desire and the ability to encounter the other, the person different from myself. Therefore, we need to educate ourselves. Each country and context is different. As a first step perhaps we can ask ourselves, how many theology books have I read recently that were written by black, Indigenous or people of colour? How many novels have I read in the past year that have been written by authors who were black, Indigenous or people of colour? Whose music do I listen to? I could go on. This can be an initial introduction to the world of the other.

The recent deliberate, sinful act of murder of George Floyd has led many thousands of people in grassroots movements across the USA, Europe and elsewhere to insist "Black lives Matter." We see the pulling down or defacing of statues that symbolise colonialism and white supremacy in Great Britain, Belgium and the USA. The issue of racism is centre stage, calling on us all to listen and to act in a way that will bring about systemic change.

We have to begin to seriously listen to black peoples, people of colour and Indigenous peoples' experiences and to engage in the conversation. To stand in solidarity with them but not co-opt their issues. Let them teach us. Most of all, we must be careful not to view anti-racism as just a self-improvement project. We are all equal but we are not all the same. We must embrace and understand the different levels of diversity among us. We are being

called to engage in the deep analysis that is necessary in order to work to change the ‘power over’ systems that keep us locked in. We must strive for a world where all can live with dignity and respect. Tolerance of difference will not bring about change. Accepting each other as we are, and sharing in the struggle to bring about change is what we are called to do now. As the poet Audre Lorde says “I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own.” We are all not free so long as black people, indigenous or people of colour remain unfree, even when their shackles are different from our own.

Our Church has a long history of racism. A separate paper or thesis would be needed to adequately deal with that history. To cite one example: the collusion of the Catholic Church in the colonisation of Latin America. The Church was complicit and remained silent in front of many injustices. It was indifferent to the plight of black people, Indigenous communities and people of colour. It was known for its lack of respect for cultural traditions. In the recent Amazonian Synod, some of these issues were raised and Pope Francis reiterated his apology for the role of the Church in the colonisation of Latin America. This was a first step but there is so much work still to be done.

As Christians we believe that all humanity is made in the very image of God. In the book of Genesis we read:

“God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness. So God created humankind in God’s image, in the image of God, God created them; male and female, God created them. God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good.” (Gen:1:26-27,31)

There is only one human race. So what went wrong? God gave us freedom to choose. This freedom has led to dominating patriarchal systems which set up systems of ‘power’ of one group over another, leading to norms of entitlement for a few and oppression of others. Racism occurs when we ignore the fundamental truth that we are all equal. Even Jesus had to be reminded of this when he was confronted by the Canaanite Woman (Matt. 15:21-28). He claimed “he was sent only to save the lost sheep of Israel “ (15:24). She replied “yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that that fall from their masters’ table” (15:27). She reminded him that God’s love is freely given and it is not about race or borders. She invited him to move beyond his own cultural experience, to move out of his comfort zone, just as many of us today are being asked to listen to black people, Indigenous people, people of colour and to move out of our own comfort zone of white privilege. No one should suffer the indignity of being considered less than human.

There is no room for racism in the Christian heart. We need to be honest with ourselves and recognise that the majority of us are racist and in need of personal, ongoing conversion, a conversion that will compel us to change. We need to acknowledge that we have been the beneficiaries of white privilege and begin to lament our complicity. As Bryan Massingale, suggests, “for the beneficiaries of white privilege, lament involves the difficult task of acknowledging their communal complicity in past and present racial injustices.”<sup>i</sup> If racism is to be confronted, we need to address the racism that is in ourselves, and Massingale tell us, we need to engage “viscerally at a ‘gut level’<sup>ii</sup> that cannot be addressed

solely through rational discussion.” We have to have the courage to join with others to confront the systemic racism in our Church and society along with the injustices it produces. Only then healing can begin. Racism will end only when we who have benefitted from it oppose the policies and institutional barriers that perpetuate and preserve the inequality that we still see all around us.

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<sup>i</sup> See Bryan Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Orbis, 2010).

<sup>ii</sup> Bryan Massingale, *The Systemic Erasure of the Black/Dark-Skinned Body in Catholic Ethics* here [work](#)