

The Sin of Racism

It doesn't seem possible that the campaign season for the Presidential nomination has started!

In 1968 – in his campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination – Robert Kennedy spent an unusually hot spring day in New York City. For five hours, he crisscrossed the streets in some of the poorest neighborhoods in Spanish Harlem. By the end of the day, Kennedy was caked with dirt and soaked in perspiration.

Kennedy's guide that day was José Torres, the former World Light Heavy-Weight Boxing Champ. Ever since Robert Kennedy announced his candidacy for president, Torres had wondered why this rich man's son would come to the ghetto on quick trips back East; why was he working so hard and so long – often 16 hours a day – for a goal that seemed so distant?

At their car, Torres finally asked: "Senator, why are you doing this? Why are you running?"

Kennedy replied, in a voice so low that Torres had to lean in to catch words: "Because I found out something I never knew," Kennedy said. "I found out that my world was not the real world."

(From "Bobby Kennedy: The Making of a Folk Hero")

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This past week I had the opportunity to attend a conference at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia, sponsored by the National Jesuit Conference and PICO – a national faith-based community organizing group. The purpose of the conference was to brainstorm on how parish communities might prepare for the visit of Pope Francis in September, by reflecting on the various themes of Pope Francis's vision for the Church as found in his exhortation "The Joy of the Gospel."

The honored guest at the Conference, who spent a day with us, was Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez of Honduras – a close friend of Pope Francis and the Chairperson of the new Council of Cardinals who advise the Pope. It goes without saying – but I'm going to say it – Cardinal Rodriguez is presently the second most powerful person in the Catholic Church!

He began his reflection by challenging us to return home and address the issue of racism with our parish communities.

Pope Francis has addressed racism often. On his first visit outside Rome, in words powerful and clear, he said in part: "Racism today is the ultimate evil in the world. The Church must fight all forms of racism."

So today I would invite us to spend a few moments reflecting on racism – especially in light of the events in Baltimore these past two weeks.

What is racism?

Sisters and brothers, way back in 1979 in their 'Pastoral on Racism,' the US Catholic bishops defined racism very clearly:

"Racism is a sin because it divides the human family, blots out the image of God among specific members of that family, and violates the fundamental human dignity of those called to be children of the same God.

"Racism is a sin that says that some human beings are inherently superior and others essentially inferior because of race.

"It makes race the determining characteristic for the exercise of human rights. It mocks the words of Jesus: "Treat others the way you would have them treat you."

"Racism is more than a disregard for the words of Jesus; it is a denial of the truth of the dignity of the human person, being revealed by the mystery of the Incarnation...."

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What can we do about it?

The American bishops stated that to struggle against racism, *first* a radical transformation must take place in our own minds and hearts; and, *secondly* a radical transformation must take place in the structures of our Americans society.

Brothers and sisters, for the first "radical transformation" to take place in our minds and hearts... in *my* mind and *my* heart... as a white American – *I must admit that I am racist*. It is part of my DNA. It's what I learned from the time I was a little boy... growing up in Fairmont, where there lived two black families in the whole community and they were very poor.

For those of us who were brought up in the Civil Rights Movement... who even walked in marches and were part of demonstrations; who respected Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. ...., our racism may be *unconscious* – but it's still there.

Sr. Nancy Schrenk, of the Leadership Conference of Religious Women, describes "unconscious racism" very well; she writes:

"Dismantling or unlearning racism must be a deliberate, life-long journey which begins with personal work and always leads to confronting institutional racism. It requires long-term plans, sustained vigilance, and daily practice. Even after many years of deliberate effort I find that subtle thoughts and feelings indicate that the illness is still there eating my soul."

Last week, while listening to National Public Radio, I connected with the author of a book on racism, ('though I didn't catch his – or the book's – name). He described racism in white America as an 'addiction,' and made the point that to get this disease into recovery and remission, we must follow a 12-Step Program: admitting the addiction, recognizing our powerlessness over it, and asking for the grace of God to be freed from the addiction, a day at a time.... Denial that one has an addiction to racism – like the denial of an alcoholic... is the greatest sin that we have to acknowledge.

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The second challenge named by our Bishops necessary to dismantle racism *is to radically transform the structures and institutions and ways of life in America that are in many ways inherently racist.* That's quite a statement!

Although significant strides were made during the Civil Rights Movement, it would be a huge mistake to think that the task has been completed. An Editorial in the Philadelphia Inquirer this week pointed this out very clearly. Under the title "Riots Have Reasons," the Editorial states:

"There's no need to study the Baltimore rioting this week to figure out the cause. The spark was the death of a black man in police custody. But the fuse lit by that spark was the same fuse cited in the 1968 Kerner Commission report, which examined riots in America nearly 50 years ago.

"The frustrations of powerlessness have led some Negroes to the conviction that there is no effective alternative to violence as a means of achieving redress of grievances and of moving the system' the Commission, created by President Lyndon Johnson, reported after there were 167 riots in 1967 alone.

"Poverty, joblessness, bad schools, poor health – the same percolating problems that brewed the 1960s riots are just as pervasive in too many minority neighborhoods across the United States today.

The Kerner commission in 1968 concluded – prophetically – that "our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white – separate and unequal." The editorial concluded: "One need only walk through America's richest and poorest neighborhoods to see that even with a black president and black mayors in cities like Baltimore and Philadelphia, that prediction for some people has come true."

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Sisters and brothers, one of the wonderful gifts of our Parish Community is its diversity – and one of our diversities is that we are a community of diverse colors and ethnic backgrounds.

As Pastor, I invite us to reflect together on the sin of racism and discuss how we may assist one another in

- 1) transforming our minds and hearts; and
- 2) in joining with other people of goodwill in confronting structures and systems and institutions and ways of life in America that continue to metastasize this evil disease.

A disease that is contrary to everything the Gospel of Jesus stands for. I am asking our Pastoral Council to begin reflecting on what steps we might take as a Parish community to face this issue. All parishioners are invited to our next meeting of the Council on May 20<sup>th</sup> at 7:00pm – details will follow in our Bulletin and website.

An overwhelming task?

Our Gospel today reminds us:

“If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Abba God is glorified by this: that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.”

Amen.