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The Ignatian Witness to Truth in a Climate of Injustice

By Bryan N. Massingale

In an address in 1980 to the Roman Rota, a chief legal court in the Catholic Church, Pope John Paul II cited a 17th-century maxim, “Truth is the basis, foundation, and mother of justice.” He thus highlighted the often-noted connection between the pursuit of justice and the quest for truth. For example, the many “Truth and Reconciliation” processes undertaken in the aftermath of severe social traumas, such as in South Africa and Rwanda, are vivid reminders that healing estrangements between peoples and establishing right relationships between social groups can only be premised upon an honest acknowledgment of the harms committed or tolerated against others. Communal and national honesty are the prerequisites for effective reconciliation and a just society.

By any measure or reckoning, the pursuit of racial justice is still, in the words of the African American poet Langston Hughes, “a dream deferred.” In a report published in the summer of 2016, a United Nations commission investigating the situation of African Americans in the United States forthrightly concluded:

Despite substantial changes since the end of the enforcement of Jim Crow and the fight for civil rights, a systemic ideology of racism ensuring the domination of one group over another continues to impact negatively on the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights of African Americans today.

What accounts for this disturbing persistence of racial injustice, manifested in almost every area of our national life, including gross disparities in crim-

inal justice, education, poverty rates, and healthcare services? Why, despite years of protest and agitation, do we as a nation find ourselves locked in a seemingly endless cycle of racial recrimination, resignation, and even despair? I offer two reasons: first, a persistent belief in an ideology of “personal responsibility”; and second, the profound, pervasive, and perhaps even willful ignorance of the majority of white Americans about the history that has led to and fuels our current impasses and divisions.

The Mantra of “Personal Responsibility”

One manifestation of the current ideology of “personal responsibility” was given at Marquette University by Ben Shapiro, a noted young conservative activist and provocateur. His presence on campus was the subject of a great deal of controversy, as a student group timed Shapiro’s lecture to coincide with Marquette’s annual “Mission Week” celebration of its Ignatian charism and Jesuit ideals. It was especially problematic given the university’s chosen theme for 2017 – “Racial Justice and the Call of the Church” – and the title of Shapiro’s address, “Can You Handle the Truth?” I decided to attend his speech, which he delivered in a packed lecture hall to an audience of overwhelmingly white male students.

Once one gets past the caustic *ad hominem* polemics that peppered Shapiro’s address, his position can be summarized in the following moves:

- There was a time when institutionalized racism existed in the US, but that was 40-50 years ago. (Note that he isn’t sure exactly when it ended, nor did he give a historical marker for its demise).

- Therefore, systemic racial injustice is no longer a reality.
- Shapiro acknowledges that there are individual racists, that is, people who do bad things and discriminate because of racial bias.
- But society as a whole isn't intentional in putting people of color down or holding people of color back.
- Thus, for people of color, it is now all up to them. At the core of his argument is a plea for personal responsibility. "Life is what you make of it" was a mantra repeated several times. In fact, he declared that if you follow three rules, you are virtually guaranteed to achieve middle class status: (1) Finish high school. (2) Don't have children out of wedlock. (3) Get a job.
- Left unsaid explicitly, but assumed throughout his presentation: If you don't get ahead, if you don't make it, it's your own fault. To think otherwise is to succumb to a "psychology of victimhood" and to allow oneself to be defeated, because there are no longer any systemic obstacles to one's progress.
- More pointed conclusions follow from this line of thinking: we, as a society – and especially

white people – have no obligation to help anyone, because all of the systemic obstacles and barriers to individual advancement have been eliminated and eradicated.

- Therefore, most of all, but left unsaid: if white straight men have a disproportionate share of society's goods and benefits, it's because they've *earned* them by being more intelligent, virtuous, and responsible than other groups.

I dwell on Shapiro's argument and views because he is not an aberration. His presentation of this worldview is but an exaggeration of a typical point of view present among many Americans, especially white Americans. His line of thinking explains why so many white people, and especially white Christians and Catholics, are so anemic and tepid in their engagement with issues of racial justice. They believe society is now a level playing field. Therefore, notwithstanding a few bad apples – of *both* and *all* races – black failure and racial disparities are due to personal irresponsibility, laziness, and lack of effort.

Let us consider a concrete example of how this insistence upon the demise of systemic racism and assumption of personal responsibility plays out.



Ben Shapiro speaks to students in a packed lecture hall at Marquette University.



In May 2015, approximately 50 students, faculty, and administrators gathered outside of Grewen Hall, Le Moyne College, to express their solidarity in support of the people of Ferguson. Following a moment of silence, the group walked throughout the main academic complex before reconvening outside for prayer and reflection.

Such thinking explains in great measure the apathy or indifference of white Christians toward police violence and misconduct in our society, especially as these are experienced by communities of color and protested by the Movements for Black Lives. A recent Public Religion Research Institute report related how over 80 percent of black Christians believe that police-involved killings of black people are part of a much larger picture of racial injustice. However, an almost equal number of white Christians believe the opposite, holding that such deaths are mainly isolated incidents with no connection to one another. (Seventy-one percent of Catholics hold this view.) Indeed, white non-Christians are more likely to see a systemic problem than white Christians.

In other words, white Christians are among the least likely to believe that there is a systemic race-based problem with policing in our country. They admit that bad things happen. But these are “isolated incidents” – that is, the fault of a few renegade indi-

viduals – not events that point to deeper systemic faults in the institutions of our society. The majority of white Americans, it would seem, hold that racial injustice is no longer a pressing issue in society; it is, rather, at most, an episodic aberration committed by some bad people.

A Pervasive (Willful) Ignorance of Truth

Yet, note how the widespread acceptance of an ideology of personal responsibility – put more colloquially, the mentality of “it’s their/your own damn fault” – is abetted by a pervasive ignorance of the real history of racial injustice in our country. (Recall how the first and necessary move made by Shapiro is a declaration that systemic institutional racism has been eradicated). African American religious scholar Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., states that “willful blindness” to our history allows so many to “absurdly

believe...that black social misery is the result of hundreds of thousands of unrelated bad individual decisions by black people across this country.”

One of the best independent assessments of the lack of accurate knowledge of our nation’s racial history comes from the United Nations’ investigation of our racial practices referred to earlier. It notes that most Americans have not been and are not being taught the true history of the country’s complicity with what it called the “crimes against humanity” that were perpetrated upon communities of color, especially African Americans. Two of its findings are especially pertinent:

- In particular, the legacy of colonial history, enslavement, racial subordination and segregation, racial terrorism and racial inequality in the United States remains a serious challenge, as *there has been no real commitment to reparations and to truth and reconciliation for people of African descent*. Contemporary police killings and the trauma that they create are reminiscent of the past racial terror of lynching. Impunity for State violence has resulted in the current human rights crisis and must be addressed as a matter of urgency. (emphasis added)
- There is a profound need to acknowledge that the transatlantic trade in Africans, enslavement, colonization and colonialism were a crime against humanity and are among the major sources and manifestations of racism, racial discrimination, Afrophobia, xenophobia and related intolerance. Past injustices and crimes against African Americans need to be addressed with reparatory justice.

Note how this report relates that ignorance of our past compromises our ability to cope with present-day racial injustices, which are the enduring manifestations of an unacknowledged and actively avoided past. Glaude concurs, opining that being “willfully ignorant” of our history of racism “has consigned so many black people to poverty with little to no chance of escaping it.”

Thus, it comes as no surprise that the U.N. task force, in its recommendations for a more racially just society, concluded: “Consistently, the school curriculum in each state should reflect appropriately the history of the transatlantic trade in Africans, enslavement and segregation.” In short, telling and facing the truth of our tragic past is an essential part of achieving justice in the present. What Canadian Jesuit philosopher Bernard Lonergan called the “flight from understanding” is a major contributing factor to the racial apathy and indifference that result from a race-based ideology of personal responsibility.

The Ignatian Witness to Truth

What, then, are the challenges and opportunities of this state of affairs for Jesuit higher education in the United States? What does it mean for Jesuit campuses to be “sanctuaries of truth” in the midst of so much injustice, denial, and willful ignorance? What does the summons to fidelity to our mission entail in such circumstances?

First, a reclaiming of and recommitment to the fundamental inspirations and values of the Society of Jesus. One of the lasting memories of my

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– U.N. task force



undergraduate theology courses at Marquette was studying the book *The Faith that Does Justice*. It was a compilation of articles written by Jesuits in the mid 1970s, reflecting on how the promotion of justice was an essential part of Christian faith. I no longer remember the specifics of the articles. But the title arrested me then and inspires me still. It was the first time that an explicit connection was made between my belief in God and my hunger for justice.

I then discovered that this deep connection is a fundamental Jesuit conviction, first articulated in 1975 during its 32nd General Congregation and then reaffirmed repeatedly since, most notably in 2000 at Santa Clara University by then Father General Peter-Hans Kolvenbach. His words are powerful and prophetic:

“Since Saint Ignatius wanted love to be expressed not only in words but also in deeds, the Congregation committed the Society to the promotion of justice as a concrete, radical but proportionate response to an unjustly suffering world. Fostering the virtue of justice in people was not enough. Only a substantive justice can bring about the kinds of structural and attitudinal changes that are needed to uproot those sinful oppressive injustices that are a scandal against humanity and God.

Therefore, a first step for Jesuit campuses is a forthright and public commitment to this legacy of seeking justice as a vital component of our identity and mission – a commitment that is not just rhetorical but effective. How do we come to see ourselves as custodians of sacred trust, “the service of faith through the promotion of justice,” that has been committed to our care? How do our campuses continue to inspire new generations of young people, captivating them with book titles, courses, experiences, and witnesses that

show them the deep connection between love of God and justice for their neighbors?

To put this first step negatively: If, in the midst of a society scarred by racial injustice, Jesuit colleges and universities are not forthright witnesses of “concrete, radical but proportionate responses” to unjust suffering, then we fail to embody what makes us unique among institutions of higher education. And if we are no different from any other college or university, especially lower-cost competitors who can offer just as valuable an educational product, then we have no reason to survive – and in all likelihood, we will not.

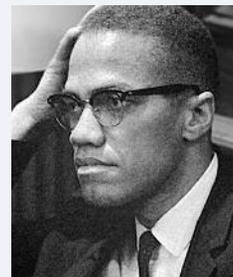
Second, acknowledging that we have much to learn and to “un-learn” about our racial (and racist) history. Malcolm X once said, “Untruths have to be untold. We have to be untaught before we can be taught, and once untaught, we ourselves can unteach others.” He thus stated the implication of his belief that injustice in America is sustained by a not accidental strategy of miseducation and omission. The bottom line is that most of us have been taught many half-truths and untruths about our nation’s dealings with communities of color.

If “truth is the basis, foundation, and mother of justice,” then an important contribution of Jesuit higher education toward a racially just society is fostering a deeper and truer knowledge of this nation’s legacy of racial animus and privilege. Our curricula should insure that no one graduates from our institutions without a sustained engagement with the reality of racial injustice. This is wholly and entirely consistent with our institutions’ mission to discover and disseminate knowledge. This leads to a pressing question: How do our curricula both reflect and respect the intellectual contributions of the majority of the human race? For we cannot fulfill the mission of discovering and disseminating knowledge of the human condition if, by omission or silence, we ignore, downplay, or disparage insights and knowledge arising from the majority of humankind.

Third, accepting that solidarity with the racially “other” means living in the midst of human conflict. I teach courses that focus on race, white su-

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– Malcolm X



premac, and religious complicity. Students are often bewildered, confused, and dismayed as they encounter new knowledge, question previously held beliefs, and face the uncomfortable truth that religious leaders have not always been agents of social justice. Sometimes they express their discomfort in less than mature ways. And, as this winter’s controversy at Marquette demonstrated, fostering honest engagement with racial privilege generates intense and often passionate resistance. Radical responses to unjust suffering, what Father Kolvenbach detailed as a core component of Jesuit higher education, will generate not only sincere misunderstandings but also polemical counterattacks. The road to a just society must go through the path of social conflict.

Institutions, because of their instincts for self-preservation, are inherently averse to conflict and risk. Yet, the unique nature of institutions founded upon an Ignatian charism demands a different and even counter-intuitive approach. There is no other way we can be faithful to our mission of truth in the midst of social injustice. To paraphrase the insight of Martin Luther King, Jr., the ultimate measure of our institutional integrity is not where we stand in times of convenience and comfort but where and how we stand in times of challenge and controversy.

At the very least, we must make it absolutely clear – effectively and not only rhetorically – that intolerant words, actions, or postings will not be tolerated on our campuses. Students, staff, and faculty of color must not only know this but also feel it as an existential commitment from the highest levels of the university. How we engage the controversies of witnessing truth in a climate of injustice will often be a matter of deep discernment. Yet the commitment to doing so, and accepting the inevitable risks that such a stance entails, are the acid tests of fidelity to our Ignatian values.

Finally, being beacons of hope. The promotion of truth inherently undermines ideological appeals to “personal integrity” that evade the demands of justice. It necessarily generates obstacles and resistance. Yet, this is consistent with the spirit of the Spiritual Exercises as those who engage them move from a contemplation of the suffering Jesus to an encounter with the risen Christ. The resurrection is not an escape from conflict. Rather, it summons us to engage conflictual reality in light of a new experience: an experience of being loved beyond death. This fills one with the courage to struggle for a justice founded on truth, in the words of St. Ignatius, “not counting the cost.” Because no cost is too great in the light of such great love.

In teaching about racial justice and white supremacy, I have learned that it is important to leave students with a sense of hope. This is not the facile optimism that maintains that good always prevails over evil, and sooner rather than later. But it is the hope that believes that good ultimately (though not always) prevails, and often at a great price. This is the hope to which the Ignatian Exercises lead us. It is the only hope that is adequate in the face of the long and bitter struggle that racial justice requires. It is an important contribution that our institutions, each in their own way, can offer to our fellow citizens.

The “service of faith.” The “promotion of justice.” The “quest for truth.” Witnessing to the inherent links between these realities in concrete and radical ways is the summons of Jesuit higher education in the midst of unjust racial suffering.

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