

New Horizons

Volume 5 | Issue 1

Article 10

2021

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Recommended Citation

Tunzi, Porsia (2021) "Building the Beloved Community: Christian Ethical Reflections on Race, Gender, and Family During COVID-19," *New Horizons*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/newhorizons/vol5/iss1/10>

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Building the Beloved Community: Christian Ethical Reflections on Race, Gender, and Family During COVID-19

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Abstract

Catholic circles are no stranger to using the beloved community as a way to communicate a particular vision of what the world could and should be. Rooted in a Christian social ethics framework, this transformative vision captures how the Gospel story and paschal mystery might be lived out today. This paper examines how Catholic ethicists can adopt the beloved community lens as a way to broach issues of race, gender, and family during the current COVID-19 pandemic. This vision of the beloved community specifically looks at how spiritual resistance, Eucharistic solidarity, and community organizing can approach matters of race, gender, and family together, ideally empowering families to work toward racial and gender justice in the midst of the current crisis and beyond.

“...the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the *Beloved Community*. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opponents into friends. It is this type of understanding goodwill that will transform the deep gloom of the old age into the exuberant gladness of the new age. It is this love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of men.”

-Martin Luther King, Jr., “*Facing the Challenge of a New Age*,” 1956

Martin Luther King, Jr. believes that it is our collective call to build the *beloved community* where “racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood.”¹ King’s *beloved community* is a lens in which equity, solidarity, inclusivity, radical hospitality, and racial and social justice are the pillars for a healthy society where all people are committed to compassion, truth-telling, and reconciliation. It is also a lens with deep roots in a Christian vision of building God’s kingdom

¹ The King Center, “The King Philosophy,” *The King Center*, accessed May 16, 2020.

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here on earth where all people may flourish. Is this an idyllic vision for the world or a grounded, tangible one? Catholic circles are no stranger to using the *beloved community* as a way to communicate a particular vision of what the world could and should be. Rooted in a Christian social ethics framework, this transformative vision captures how the Gospel story and paschal mystery might be lived out today. The *beloved community* is also a vision and lens that offers a way for the field of Christian social ethics to authentically deal with or think about race, gender, and family *together* in a United States context. By offering a new, revitalized lens or way of seeing, the *beloved community* vision allows scholars to engage in a pedagogy that infuses reflection and action — praxis — where matters of race, gender, and family become personal, real, and transformative. This vision becomes an essential one to adopt, as the U.S faces simultaneously a global pandemic and continued racial injustices and uprisings.

Why is talking about matters of the family important when discussing race and gender? What perspectives might we gain? Why are these categories not often examined together, especially when it is impossible to separate family and gender from the larger social structure of racism? How might attention to family in discussions on race create opportunities for social transformation? How does race and racism impact the American Catholic identity and, in particular, American Catholic families? These questions unveil gaps in current scholarship when addressing complex issues. By reflecting and expanding upon current research in Catholic social thought, social ethicists can move toward an intersectional framework that examines race, gender, and family together for the purpose of building the *beloved community*.

This paper is divided into two sections. In the first, I briefly review past and current developments and methodologies concerning race, gender, and family in the field of Christian social ethics. Understanding where the discipline has been as well as the progress it has made

aids in understanding how the *beloved community* lens can serve as an intersectional tool to examine issues of race, gender, and family. The second section will provide a case study – that of the current COVID-19 crisis – that analyzes where ethicists can work toward building the *beloved community*. This vision of the *beloved community* specifically looks at how spiritual resistance, Eucharistic solidarity, and community organizing can approach matters of race, gender, and family together, ideally empowering families to work toward racial and gender justice in the midst of the current crisis and beyond.

Race, Gender, and Family: Limitations and Progress

Race, gender, and family have been topics of concern for Catholic theologians and ethicists, yet these topics have not adequately converged, missing a critical opportunity for intersectional dialogue and justice work to be achieved. Despite such limitations, some ethicists are making deliberate movements, cultivating new practices, and implementing new methodologies. This section examines the limitations and progress in the field so far, illuminating a path toward cultivating a *beloved community* in the present day.

Although neither explicitly examines family, scholars Shawn Copeland and Bryan Massingale’s analyses on race and racial justice unearth the need for inclusion and reimagination of family issues. For Copeland, it is through seriously considering embodied experiences of Black women’s historical oppression that scholars can learn about what it means to be human and what it means to do justice. The trauma-filled experience of being seen merely as breeders, where slavery devoured and reduced women and childbearing to a commercial objectification, reveals a need to talk about the intersection of race, gender, and family. Sharing the stories of women who, against “repeated whippings, brandings, and severed [appendages],” “refused to

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surrender to slavery” and continued to fight for freedom, even with young babies in their arms, unveils the inherent dignity and incessant will to be free that is fundamental to the human person.² In his examination of racism in the Catholic Church, Massingale notes the slave spiritual: “sometimes I feel like a motherless child” is a soulful lament that conveys “the pain, grief, hurt, and disappointment of belonging to a church wherein [Black Catholics] too often feel orphaned or abandoned.”³ This metaphor of motherhood and being an orphan evokes the collective yearning to create and belong to a *beloved community*—a community of belonging, familial hospitality, and justice.

Some contemporary scholars have examined the role of race in their analysis of family and justice. Julie Rubio argues for families to develop practices of resistance in order for social transformation at both the home and society level to occur; in this way, families are a necessary aspect for resisting injustice.⁴ James and Kathleen McGinnis look at family as domestic church and social forces such as racism and sexism that impact families. A domestic church vision allows families to become “agents of their own development and in the process involve themselves in the transformation of the world” and helps families “move more fully into the world rather than retreat from it.”⁵ Nichole M. Flores demonstrates how the Latina/o practice of “extended communal family promotes solidarity by strengthening the larger community”⁶ and by enhancing the common good.

Catholic Social Teaching also emphasizes that families specifically can play a vital role in building the *beloved community*. As John Paul II adamantly states in *Familiaris Consortio*:

² M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*. (Minneapolis, Fortress Press: 2009), 115.

³ Bryan N. Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*. (Mayknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2010), 79.

⁴ Julie Hanlon Rubio, *Family Ethics: Practices for Christians* (Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 2010), 160.

⁵ Kathleen McGinnis and James McGinnis, “Family as Domestic Church,” in *One Hundred Years of Catholic Social Thought: Celebration and Challenge*, ed. John A. Coleman (Orbis Books, 1993), 125.

⁶ Nichole M. Flores, “Latina/o Families: Solidarity and the Common Good,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 33, no. 2 (November 30, 2013): 57–72, 69.

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“The Christian family is thus called upon to offer everyone a witness of generous and disinterested dedication to social matters, through a ‘preferential option’ for the poor and disadvantaged. Therefore, advancing in its following of the Lord by special love for all the poor, it must have special concern for the hungry, the poor, the old, the sick, drug victims and those who have no family.”⁷

Families—as a unit and as individual members—are intimately called to community and social engagement, education (e.g. antiracist book clubs), and service (e.g. virtual phone banks). Being in relationship with all members, particularly those who are poor and disadvantaged, is critical to living out what it means to be a family in church and society. John Paul II specifically calls upon the family to be in communion with social and political commitments and empowers lay people to go out into the world and live the social teaching of the church. Although John Paul II does not explicitly discuss race issues, it becomes clear with these words that families are responsible for fostering equity and racial justice in their homes and communities. John Paul II and Christian ethicists provide a window into seeing how family can act as a site of convergence where a *beloved community* vision is made manifest.

Ethicists are also progressing the field by engaging in important truth-telling work. Eric Yamamoto describes truth-telling as the process of “recalling history and its present-day consequences in order to release its grip.”⁸ Although difficult to acknowledge, the Catholic Church has fallen short, made mistakes, and has actively perpetuated and functioned within the complex inner workings of white supremacy. This is not an easy reality to unpack, yet it is necessary to tell the truth about the past and present when the church has helped facilitate racial inequity, domination, colonization, and slavery throughout its history. Truth-telling work that examines gender, family, and the roles of women is also necessary if one hopes to find solutions

⁷ Pope John Paul II, “Familiaris Consortio,” November 22, 1981, par. 47.

⁸ Eric K. Yamamoto, *Interracial Justice: Conflict and Reconciliation in Post-Civil Rights America* (United States: NYU Press, 2000).

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to social justice issues like racialized sexism and sexist racism.⁹ To find a way forward toward gender and racial justice, the Catholic Church, and Christian ethicists particularly, must do the truth-telling work necessary in acknowledging how racism has actively infiltrated all aspects of Catholic life, especially family life, where white privilege has dominated and oppressed those who fall outside the perceived white norm.

Truth-telling work can also be a call for critical examination and reimagination of Christian social ethics as a discipline and field. Michael Jaycox urges his fellow scholars to “invert the academic gaze toward ourselves by asking about our own complicity in white supremacy.”¹⁰ In order to be effective in working toward social justice, the field must undergo scrutiny as well as reimagination by asking whose voices are heard, who is allowed to produce knowledge, and how ethical frameworks have been infiltrated with racist and patriarchal ideas.

Further, Catholic ethicists are utilizing ethnography and intersectionality as methodological tools to adequately broach complex issues. Ethnographic work, particularly in-depth interviews, allows ethicists to respond intentionally to “the signs of the times”¹¹ and enables scholars to take seriously the varied and often messy experiences of women and families in the Catholic Church. Likewise, adopting an intersectional lens allows scholars to unpack and understand complex problems and structures as well as to recognize intersecting dimensions of identity.¹² In utilizing these methodologies, Christian ethicists have the potential to cultivate a

⁹ Christine Gudorf, for example, discusses the real clash between papal teaching on private/family matters and the lived realities of women and families in “Encountering the Other: The Modern Papacy on Women,” in *Change in Official Catholic Moral Teachings*, ed. Charles E. Curran (New York: Paulist Press, 2002).

¹⁰ Michael P. Jaycox, “Black Lives Matter and Catholic Whiteness: A Tale of Two Performances,” *Horizons* 44, no. 2 (December 2017): 306–341, 331.

¹¹ Pope Paul VI, “Gaudium et Spes,” December 7, 1965, par. 4

¹² Kimberle Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–1299.

new vision of inclusion and social transformation in the here and now. This vision is the *beloved community* made tangible where matters of race, gender, and family can be approached together.

COVID-19: A Case Study in Building the Beloved Community

The remaining part of this paper provides a case study demonstrating how Catholic ethicists might address family, gender, and race in the midst of the COVID-19 global pandemic. What healing, what practices can we create and foster in the continued confinement of COVID-19? How do both adults and children learn to operate in the dialectic of sorrow and joy, despair and hope, suffering and peace? A framework of the *beloved community*—one of spiritual resistance, Eucharistic solidarity, and community organizing—can empower families and inspire movement toward racial and gender justice during the current crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic unveils not only the collective American folly that we value some lives more than others, but also a “deep understanding that our lives are inextricable from social, political, and economic forces.”¹³ It is by no accident that our racial and economic makeup as well as our family histories overwhelmingly determine our chances of being directly impacted by the crisis. It is Black and indigenous people who suffer most, who are bearing the brunt of the health and economic burdens that face us today.¹⁴ At every stage, from risk of exposure due to being essential workers, to testing access, to gravity of illness and death, people of color bear the heaviest burden of COVID-19.¹⁵ Black people have died from COVID-19 at

¹³ Yohana Agra Junker, “On Covid-19, U.S. Uprisings, and Black Lives: A Mandate to Regenerate All Our Relations,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 36, no. 2 (2020), 117.

¹⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “COVID-19 in Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups,” *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, last modified April 22, 2020.

¹⁵ Daniel Wood, “As Pandemic Deaths Add Up, Racial Disparities Persist — And In Some Cases Worsen,” *NPR*, last modified September 23, 2020.

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one and a half times the rate of white people nationwide.¹⁶ The vast, often interlocking issues such as health care disparities, racism, domestic abuse, and unemployment that arise in light of the pandemic, reveal what the most vulnerable among us face in everyday life. The pandemic exposes social inequities and reveals what it means to continue to live in the tight grip of American white supremacy.

This revelation of immense and complex suffering invites Catholic ethicists to reimagine the role of the church as well as the way in which we engage in relationships and connect with others. It also invites scholars to think about the new ways in which Christian communities are being called to advocate, organize, and resist in a time of unified distress. It is here that the vision of the *beloved community* offers not merely a response to the current crisis, but a new way of being and living in the world, one that deals authentically with family, gender, and race issues together. To make the *beloved community* a tangible reality, three concepts and practices—that of spiritual resistance, Eucharistic solidarity, and community organizing—provide ordinary opportunities for healing and justice.

Spiritual resistance, or an act of resistance rooted in a deep sense of spirituality that grounds oneself and one's community in values like human dignity and social justice, can contribute to the building of a *beloved community*, particularly during the current pandemic. Cultivating a nonviolent spirituality of white resistance rooted in the Beatitudes, for example, has the power to decenter the white subject culturally and institutionally, allowing for the *beloved community* to become a tangible reality in the United States.¹⁷ A spirituality of non-violence

¹⁶ In partnership with Boston University's Center for Antiracist Research, *The Atlantic* created "The COVID Racial Data Tracker" as a way to analyze and publish racial data and the COVID-19 pandemic across the U.S.

¹⁷ Margaret R. Pfeil, "'Pacem in Terris' and a Nonviolent Spirituality of White Resistance to Hyper-Incarceration," *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 11 (2014): 127–149.

offers “a way of being in the world.”¹⁸ This is seen concretely in the example of Dorothy Day who “exhorted the Catholic Worker houses of hospitality to wield the works of mercy as spiritual weapons” in American cities.¹⁹ The spiritual resistance of activists such as Day, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Thomas Merton provides a tangible vision of how a spirituality of resistance can counteract the injustices that plague society.

Catholic ethicists can also consider how families in a variety of parish communities might develop a spirituality of resistance and allyship. Without intentionally fostering this spirituality within families on the ground, American society remains fractured by racism. One way families might cultivate a spirituality of resistance is engaging in Black Liturgies, “a project seeking to integrate concepts of dignity, lament, rage, justice, rest and liberation with the practice of written prayer.”²⁰ Writer, liturgist, and speaker Cole Arthur Riley debuted this resource via Instagram on June 26, 2020, inviting people from all walks of life to pray, resist, and hope in a time of continued confinement and racial injustice. Taking time to engage in this liturgical resource as a family provides a space to grapple with racial injustice and white privilege as well as to embody values of racial equity, human dignity, and justice for all. Jean Pierre Ndagijimana, Rwandan psychologist and research scholar, emphasizes the importance of remaining connected during a time of pandemic and confinement through adopting an “everyday spirit-in-action.” For example, Ndagijimana shares that there is a sacred connection, perhaps even an act of communal resistance, when meeting the eyes of a fellow Black male runner while on his daily evening route; it is as if their mutual, intentional glance says, “keep going, you got this.” Ndagijimana also calls attention to the importance of creating informal virtual safe spaces that foster a

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid, 134.

²⁰ Cole Arthur Riley, “Black Liturgist,” Squarespace, *Black Liturgist*, last modified January 2021.

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community of care where fears and vulnerabilities may be seen and shared.²¹ In these ways, a vision of the *beloved community* becomes real.

Further, the *beloved community* calls for Eucharistic solidarity—an active embrace of social action and mutual liberation inspired by the crucifixion narrative—among all people. Eucharistic solidarity is a deliberate infusion of and linkage between Jesus’s suffering on the cross and the remembering of the “Black victims of history, martyrs for freedom.”²² It is a “virtue, a practice of cognitive and bodily commitments oriented to meet the social consequences of Eucharist.”²³ Similar to adopting a spirituality of resistance, families are called to racial justice through Eucharistic solidarity, an embodied, intentional practice of community.

This time of quarantine and pandemic brings forth a hyper-awareness of our embodied, visceral, and human experiences. It is our physical being-ness as gendered, familial bodies and the depth of our bodily woundedness that remind us of our desire to be seen and of our human capacity for freedom, resistance, and redemption. For Copeland, it is the wounds of Black women, men, and children who were tortured and enslaved that “constitute another stigmata. These 'hieroglyphics of the flesh' not only expose human cruelty but disclose the enslaved people's moral grasp of the inalienable sacredness, dignity, and worth of their humanity.”²⁴ It is our wounds, especially the wounds of the most marginalized among us, that unveil our human goodness and intrinsic worth—the crux of what it means to be an embodied being made in the image of God. This understanding is where Eucharistic solidarity is made manifest. A simple and deliberate act of Eucharistic solidarity and indeed racial justice is wearing a mask. In doing so, people not only protect themselves, but they actively protect their fellow community members,

²¹ Phone interview, “Solidarity and Spiritual Resistance During COVID-19,” with Jean Pierre Ndagijimana.

²² Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*.

²³ *Ibid*, 127.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 116.

especially those most vulnerable and at risk. Wearing a mask is one of the most tangible acts of solidarity during this time of pandemic because it is intentional, active, and community-centered.²⁵

Massingale's reflection on racial reconciliation creates a praxis for families to participate in Copeland's Eucharistic solidarity. Although Massingale does not engage with families specifically, his questions provide a guide for family involvement in this important work. His questions include, "How do we overcome the poisonous legacies of suspicion, mistrust, fear, animosity, and even hatred that constantly threaten our attempts at intergroup living?" and, "How do estranged groups learn to live together in justice, and not merely coexist in the same place?"²⁶ Also important is fostering this moral imagination in young children. What would a racially just society look like? Can you envision an America free from the stain of racism? Reflecting upon these questions invites families to actively participate and take responsibility in the building of the *beloved community*.²⁷ There is opportunity for the decentering and dismantling of white supremacy to start at home and in one's local church community. Providing families with opportunities to ask these questions in virtual sharing groups and to apply their reflections to concrete action in a local community context is an important step forward.

These reflections echo John Paul II's call for families, as an intentional social institution, to work toward justice.²⁸ Participating in virtual antiracist education programs²⁹ is one way to make Massingale's reflection on racial reconciliation come alive during continued confinement. As COVID-19 continues to unveil multifaceted and interlocking racial and health injustices,

²⁵ Ignatian Solidarity Network, "Wearing a #facemask Is an Act of #solidarity.," Twitter, April 11, 2020.

²⁶ Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*.

²⁷ Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*.

²⁸ Pope John Paul II, "Familiaris Consortio."

²⁹ JustFaith Ministries, a nonprofit Christian organization, offers the program series, "Faith and Racial Equity: Exploring Power and Privilege," to church communities across the U.S.

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parish communities and families, now more than ever, are invited to reflect, learn, and unlearn so that they may be more effective change agents in their work toward Eucharistic solidarity.

Finally, community organizing as a Christian theological praxis is another way to make real the *beloved community* in American society. Annie Fox emphasizes how the process of community organizing in which community members coming together with a common purpose to enact social change creates opportunities for social and spiritual transformation on a small scale in parish communities. In many ways, community organizing intuitively addresses race, family, and gender issues together through storytelling, intentional relationship building, and active listening.³⁰ This relationship building through conversations of encounter acts as a precedent to action, where families can form deep connections to fellow church members and the community at large.³¹ These encounters of storytelling allow community members to begin to understand systems of power and to engage in public research actions on a local level. Prophetic action, the final phase of community organizing, allows families and other community members to imagine new ways of acting and discerning a way forward in building the *beloved community*.

Although it is difficult to engage in the kind of community organizing Fox describes during the current pandemic crisis, this model serves to uplift the importance of storytelling and encountering people and families where they are, either virtually or through social distancing. It is in times of crisis that community members, especially families, need opportunities to share their experiences and stories. Allowing them to respond to a question like, “How is COVID-19 impacting you and your family right now?” will give insight into the needs of and sufferings in the community. From here, leaders of the community organizing initiative can help families imagine solutions and invite them into action. This process can serve as a concrete way to make

³⁰ Annie Fox, “Prophetic Pastoring: Faith Based Community Organizing and the Power for Change,” April 6, 2020.

³¹ *Ibid.*

real the *beloved community* that Martin Luther King, Jr. calls for in his vision for a more just and equitable society.

Virtual phone banks are another tangible example of what community organizing might look like during the pandemic. Calling a list of families in one's parish directory and singular pairing, for example, pairing a child with an elder in the community, allow for individual and collective needs to be heard so that churches might offer the right support and resources. In a very tangible way, this process invites people to help their neighbors who are elderly or self-isolating during the COVID-19 outbreak by arranging grocery drop offs, volunteering to tutor children virtually, sharing extra resources, or simply fostering a sense of community; it allows an opportunity for people to listen, create, and work towards a common goal. Through this type of relational work, vulnerable sharing, connection, and belonging can be achieved during a time of isolation, uncertainty, and fear.

During COVID-19, it is in celebrating Black Liturgies, creating informal virtual safe spaces, wearing masks, participating in antiracist education, and engaging in virtual phone banks and other prophetic actions that the *beloved community* is able to come to fruition in the ordinary here and now. A *beloved community* lens offers a way for Christian social ethicists to examine how people, especially families, can actively participate in practices that uplift, challenge, serve, and empathize with those most vulnerable in our society, particularly those suffering from and greatly impacted by COVID-19.

Conclusion

This paper examines the ways in which the field of Christian social ethics can authentically engage in intersectional issues. Through the case study of the COVID-19 crisis, it

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becomes clear how race, gender, and family can converge in building the *beloved community*. Future research might include an analysis of papal and U.S. bishops' documents as a way to better grasp precisely what the Catholic Church's official stance is on matters of race, gender, and family. The inclusion of additional scholars such as Emily Reimer-Barry, Barbara Andolsen, Shawnee Daniels-Sykes, and Katie Grimes, and a deeper analysis of their current scholarship on race, gender, and family will be critical in future analysis.

How do we build the *beloved community*? When we acknowledge how our bodies yearn collectively for connection and belonging and to be truly seen, when we tell the truth about our shared histories of complicity in oppression, when we listen to the stories and experiences of friends, neighbors, and strangers, we may catch a glimpse of the *beloved community* in the ordinary, in the here and now, in the complex and intersectional family.

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