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# Presidential Address: Confessions of a White Catholic Racist Theologian

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**Presidential Address**  
**CONFESSIONS OF A WHITE RACIST**  
**CATHOLIC THEOLOGIAN**

INTRODUCTION

In the following remarks, I am trying to respond to three challenges. The first one comes from our soon-to-be president, Shawn Copeland. She asks:

How are we theologians to speak God's word in these times? How are we to understand our theological vocation? How are we to offer what we have to the struggle for authentic human liberation from within our culture? How shall the next generation of theologians remember us and the age in which we have come of age? Shall we be shamed into confessing that our shoulders sagged in recognition of the cost of truth? Shall we surrender our most cherished principles and values to expediency? Shall we be forced to admit that the cost of our own religious, moral, and intellectual conversion was too steep? What do our times call on theologians to become?<sup>1</sup>

The second challenge is a question from James H. Cone. Its barb is even sharper. Cone says:

Racism is one of the great contradictions of the gospel in modern times. White theologians who do not oppose racism publicly and rigorously engage it in their writings are part of the problem and must be exposed as the enemies of justice. No one, therefore, can be neutral or silent in the face of this great evil.<sup>2</sup>

We Catholics are among these silent White theologians and Cone summons us in particular to account for ourselves. "What is it," he asks, "that renders White Catholic . . . theologians silent in regard to racism, even though they have been very outspoken about anti-Semitism and class and gender contradictions in response to radical protest?"<sup>3</sup> For Cone, a real theologian cannot choose whether or not to confront racism. "Racism is a profound contradiction of the gospel . . . [therefore] [a]ny theology that does not fight White supremacy with all its

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<sup>1</sup>M. Shawn Copeland, "Racism and the Vocation of the Theologian," *Spiritus* 2/1 (Spring 2002): 16.

<sup>2</sup>James H. Cone, "Looking Back, Going Forward: Black Theology as Public Theology," in *Black Faith and Public Talk*, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1999) 257.

<sup>3</sup>James H. Cone, "Black Liberation Theology and Black Catholics: A Critical Conversation," *Theological Studies* 61/4 (2000): 732.

intellectual strength cancels its Christian identity."<sup>4</sup> How, then, do so many of us manage to see so clearly that classism and sexism destroy the credibility of any Christian theology, yet fail to see that racism does the same?

The third challenge comes from Jamie Phelps and appears in the December 2000 issue of *Theological Studies*. This issue was devoted to the theme, "The Catholic Reception of Black Theology." The authors of its articles are well known to us; in fact, most of them are members of this Society: M. Shawn Copeland, Diana Hayes, Bryan Massingale, and Jamie Phelps herself. Reading their studies shows that the issue could have been more accurately titled, "The Catholic Marginalization of Black Theology." This point is made most sharply by Phelps when she describes White Catholic theological silence, thus: "[T]he silence of U.S. Catholic theologians about racism is parallel to the silence of leading German theologians and intellectuals during the Nazi atrocities and prosecution of the so-called 'final solution' against the Jewish people."<sup>5</sup>

If ever there were a sentence that seems to jump off the page and seize the White reader by the throat, it is this one. It demands a response.

An initial reaction might well be to dismiss Phelps's claim as rhetorical overkill, a tactic to get Whites to pay more attention to issues that she thinks are important. But that is a reaction born of ignorance. Her comparison of White Catholic theologians to the German theologians is more than justified by Basil Davidson's conclusion that the slave trade "cost Africa at least fifty million souls";<sup>6</sup> it is more than justified by the extremes of suffering endured by the kidnapped Africans and their descendants for 244 years of legalized slavery;<sup>7</sup> it is more than justified by the seventy-one years of oppression and discrimination known as Jim Crow; more than justified by the fifty-one of those same years during which one black person was lynched about every two and one-half days, somewhere in the United States "at the hands of persons unknown";<sup>8</sup> and more than justified because racism continues to infect our country today.

The German theologians under National Socialism are an easy target for criticism and condemnation. They can provide illusory reassurances of our moral superiority. But Phelps's analogy says, if you want to see someone who has

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<sup>4</sup>Cone, "Conversation," 737.

<sup>5</sup>Jamie T. Phelps, "Communion Ecclesiology and Black Liberation Theology," *Theological Studies* 61/4 (2000): 692.

<sup>6</sup>Cited in Cone, "Looking Back," 253.

<sup>7</sup>See, *inter alia*, Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution. Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Vintage, 1956) and *Voices From Slavery*, ed. Norman R. Yetman (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1970).

<sup>8</sup>Cornel West, "Black Theology and Human Identity," in *Black Faith and Public Talk*, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1999) 16. See also Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown. The Lynching of Black America* (New York: Random House, 2002).

failed to meet the responsibility of being a Catholic theologian when it comes to one of the greatest, if not the greatest, moral issue of our nation, look in your mirror. For decades, Johann Baptist Metz has borne the burden being a German Catholic theologian in the "Christian" nation that gave birth to Nazism,<sup>9</sup> but we have no one like Metz among us. No U.S. White Catholic theologian has likewise taken on the burden of racism. Very few White Catholic theologians (except for Rosemary Radford Ruether, William O'Neill, Lisa Sowle Cahill, Daniel McGuire, and David Tracy) seem to have noticed, much less published responses to, Black Theology.

So Cone's question returns more forcefully. Why don't we have any theologians like Metz? Is it possible that, by and large, we White Catholic theologians are racists? Surely not, if racism means night riders, lynching, cross burning, and race riots. Atrocities like these are light years away from the sedate world of theological libraries and seminar rooms. Surely not, if racism means simply the attitudes, words, and actions of individuals who discriminate openly and consciously against others on the basis of their skin color.

But what if racism is more pervasive and subtle? What if racism is more a system than a symptom? James Boggs's understanding of racism is more perceptive:

The first thing we have to understand is that racism is not a "mental quirk" or a "psychological flaw" on an individual's part. Racism is the systematized oppression of one race by another. In other words, the various forms of oppression within every sphere of social relations—economic exploitation, military subjugation, political subordination, cultural devaluation, psychological violation, sexual degradation, verbal abuse, etc.—together make up a whole of interacting and developing processes which operate so normally and naturally and are so much a part of the existing institutions of the society that the individuals involved are barely conscious of their operation. As Fanon says, "The racist in a culture with racism is therefore normal."<sup>10</sup>

Thus, racism makes oppression seem normal, preferred, legitimate, and, therefore, hard to detect and uproot precisely because it is part of "the way things are" and "the way things ought to be."

Now there is a type of racism peculiar to us White Catholic theologians. It consists of ignoring, marginalizing, and dismissing that body of theological insight and challenge born of the Black struggle for justice, Black Theology.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Johann Baptist Metz, "Unterwegs zu einer Christologie nach Auschwitz," *Stimmen der Zeit* 218/11 (November 2000): 755-60. On Metz's conversion, see Gregory Baum, *Compassion and Solidarity. The Church for Others*, CBC Massey Lecture Series (Concord, Ontario: Anansi, 1992; orig. 1987) 78-80.

<sup>10</sup>James Boggs, *Racism and the Class Struggle* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970) 147-48.

<sup>11</sup>For brevity's sake here, I follow Dwight N. Hopkins and include Womanist theology

So I have to confess I am a racist. I am a racist insofar as I rarely read and never cited any Black theologians in my own publications. I never suspected that the Black churches might teach me something that would make me a better Roman Catholic ecclesialologist. Occasionally, I have assigned a short article by a Black theologian to my students, but never a complete book. I have learned much from Latin American and feminist liberation theology, but paid little attention to Black theology. So Cone is talking about me when he says:

They engage Feminist, Latin American, and other White reflections on God. Why are they silent on Black theological reflections? If one read only White Catholic theologians, one would hardly know that Blacks exist in America or had the capacity for thought about God.<sup>12</sup>

There are good grounds for my thinking that I am not the only White Catholic racist theologian.<sup>13</sup>

It did not have to be this way. White Catholic theologians could have been dialogue partners with Black theology from the very beginning. Thirty years ago, just four years after James Cone published his groundbreaking *Black Theology and Black Power*, Preston Williams addressed this Society and urged the membership to find, mentor, and support the Black Catholic scholars who were so urgently needed.<sup>14</sup> Then, one year later, 1974, the late Joseph Nearon delivered the preliminary report of the Research Committee for Black Theology to the CTSA. At this point, Nearon was a committee of one.

When President [Richard P.] McBrien asked me to take on this task, [he said,] we decided that for the CTSA to address the question of black theology we needed someone who was (1) black, (2) Catholic, (3) a theologian. I noted that "the field is fairly limited" and McBrien immediately responded "To my knowledge you *are* the field."<sup>15</sup>

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within Black theology. Of course, Womanist theology, which emerged in the mid-1980s, is not simply a subcategory of Black theology. While it owes much of its inspiration to Black theology (and to feminist theology), Womanist theologians critique any theology, white or black, that is blind to the distinctive sufferings and strengths of women of color. See Dwight N. Hopkins, *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1999) 125-56, and also Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *Introducing Womanist Theology* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 2002).

<sup>12</sup>Cone, "Conversation," 741.

<sup>13</sup>Bryan Massingale, "The African American Experience and U.S. Roman Catholic Ethics: 'Strangers and Aliens No Longer?'" in *Black and Catholic. The Challenge and Gift of Black Folk*, ed. Jamie T. Phelps (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1997) 81-86.

<sup>14</sup>Preston N. Williams, "Religious and Social Aspects of Roman Catholic and Black American Relationships," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 28 (1973): 15-30.

<sup>15</sup>Joseph R. Nearon, "Preliminary Report. Research Committee for Black Theology,"



McBrien's invitation was the occasion for Nearon's own awakening because Black Theology was uncharted territory for him, too. Although he was black, his blackness had played no role in his religious life or theological career up to that point. So, before he could chair this Research Committee, he felt the need to educate himself. Yet, even at this early stage of his work, Nearon could say to the CTSA:

Catholic theology is racist. If this fact can be blamed on the cultural situation, if it is more the result of omission and inattention than conscious commission, it is still a fact. There is an insensitivity here which can only remain blameless until it has been pointed out and I serve notice to you, my colleagues, that I am now pointing it out. . . . I do this not to condemn, but to awaken.<sup>16</sup>

If Catholic theology in this country was racist in the early 1970s, you might suppose that we would have acknowledged Nearon's critique and did what needed to be done to overcome it. I am not convinced that we have. Our theological journals, publishers' catalogs (excepting *Orbis*, of course), graduate course curricula, and undergraduate course syllabi that make up our stock in trade as theologians show little evidence that Black Theology even exists. How can we deny Cone's caustic observation: "If one read only White Catholic theologians, one would hardly know that Blacks exist in America or had the capacity for thought about God."<sup>17</sup>

Now this White Catholic marginalization of Black theology makes a statement to Black Christians: "Your experience of struggle, suffering, and triumph and your Christian reflections on your experience *do not count*." This is cultural devaluation. This is psychological violation. This is racism. And Whites are its victims, too. To declare, in effect, that the slave trade's cost of fifty million ancestors, that the torture endured by the slaves and their descendants, that the martyrdom of Christian slaves at the hands of slaveholders outraged by their slaves' conviction that God loved them and wanted their freedom,<sup>18</sup> that the degradation of Jim Crow and the reign of terror known as lynching, that the faith-born and faith-nurtured resistance to these atrocities, which was sung in the Black spirituals, proclaimed in Black preaching, interrogated in Black theology—to declare implicitly that all this has nothing significant to contribute to our understanding of the Gospel for our time and nation is a drastic truncation and impoverishment of our theology.

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*Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 29 (1974): 413.

<sup>16</sup>Nearon, 415.

<sup>17</sup>Cone, "Conversation," 741.

<sup>18</sup>Karl Rahner, "Dimensions of Martyrdom: A Plea for the Broadening of a Classical Concept," in *Martyrdom Today*, ed. Johannes Baptist Metz and Edward Schillebeeckx (New York: Seabury, 1983) 9-11.

Once a Church of feared and despised immigrants, American Catholicism is now the largest denomination in the United States. Its traditions, convictions, and values are preserved and pondered in over two hundred colleges and universities across the country. Seen through Black eyes, however, the theological faculties of these institutions labor under a massive disability, that is, the illusion that Black people who have lived the Gospel throughout centuries of intense suffering have nothing significant to teach us about a tortured and crucified Lord. The question is, how could this marginalization of racism as a theological issue and of Black theology as worthy of our engagement come to be normal, legitimate, accepted, and utterly unremarkable? How can we Roman Catholic theologians have done this with untroubled consciences?

#### WHITE CATHOLIC THEOLOGICAL RACISM: WHY?

Four factors have been chiefly responsible for the racism of White Catholic theologians: the realities of segregation, the ideal of integration, the impact of Vatican II in the United States, and the style of early Black theology itself.

##### *The Realities of Segregation*

Between 1820 and 1920, well in excess of thirty-three million European Catholics immigrated to the U.S.<sup>19</sup> Most of these settled in the cities on the Eastern seaboard and the Midwest.<sup>20</sup> At mid-century, 1950, seventy-five percent of the nation's Catholics still lived in the Northeast and the Midwest.<sup>21</sup> The bishops were understandably driven by the priorities of maintenance, not mission, since they had to make provision for these millions. Their problem was how to serve these Catholics, or how to tend the flocks they had, not to seek new sheep. They also had to maintain the unity of the Church amid the tensions and conflicts between—and within—the various Catholic ethnic groups. The solution to the problem entailed a particular configuration of parish, neighborhood, and ethnicity.

By the end of the 1950s, most urban whites in the North were Catholic. Thus, black-white relations became Black-Catholic relations,<sup>22</sup> since these same cities were also the destinations of black Americans seeking a better life for themselves and their families. "Between 1910 and 1940, 1,750,000 black people

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<sup>19</sup>Chester Gillis, *Roman Catholicism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999) 59.

<sup>20</sup>Gillis, 61.

<sup>21</sup>Bryan T. Froehle and Mary L. Gautier, *Catholicism USA. A Portrait of the Catholic Church in the United States* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 2000) 8.

<sup>22</sup>John A. McDermott, as quoted in John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries. The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) 132.

left the South. As a result, the black population outside the South doubled by 1940." The decade between 1910 and 1920 was the high point of the "Great Migration" from the rural South. In just these ten years, the black populations of fifteen Northern cities grew by fifty percent or more; in some cases, the increase was dramatic, such as Chicago's 148 percent, Cleveland's 307 percent, Detroit's 611 percent, Akron's 749 percent, and Gary's nearly 1,300 percent.<sup>23</sup>

As McGreevy's history, *Parish Boundaries*, shows, the influx of Blacks was perceived as a mortal threat to nearly everything that Catholics held dear. "For generations, . . ." he points out, "Catholics . . . throughout the country . . . had absorbed a gospel linking neighborhood, family, and parish."<sup>24</sup> The prospect of integration meant "the possible loss of a home [the family's chief financial asset], the transformation of a familiar neighborhood into a ghetto—a threat to family, community and, not least of all, to the Church itself."<sup>25</sup> The prospect of integration, followed, as it nearly always was, by white Catholic flight from the area, meant the loss of all the Church facilities—the church building, the school, and, yes, the gymnasium—that their parents and grandparents had sacrificed so much to erect and maintain. Bishops and priests realized that they would not only lose these infrastructures but also lose the loyalty of the people in the pews if they pushed integration too hard from their pulpits.<sup>26</sup> "Integration" did not mean "equality of all God's children and Christ's redeemed" to these people, but, instead, cultural, financial, and religious disaster.

It is bad enough that residential segregation was—and is—the main obstacle to Black social advancement because it severely restricts "access to quality education, health care, employment and informal networking."<sup>27</sup> This urban residential segregation also guaranteed that few Catholics—and few Catholic theologians—would have a friendly relationship with a black person. Without such relationships, there was nothing to impel them to explore how racial differences could transform an "Other" into a Beloved Other and what gifts these differences might bring to the Church.

In short, throughout the formative years of most Catholic theologians, we saw no faces that made Black suffering just as intolerable to us as to the victims. We heard no voices that made Black claims inescapable. John Howard Griffin's small classic, *Black Like Me*, was a valiant effort to awaken Whites to the reality of Black suffering, but Griffin the white man traveled as a black man through the

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<sup>23</sup>See Darlene Clark Hine, William C.Hine, and Stanley Harrold, *The African-American Odyssey* (Upper Saddle River NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000) 383.

<sup>24</sup>McGreevy, 139. See Edward Farley, *Divine Empathy. A Theology of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996) 260-61, for a sympathetic outsider's view of Roman Catholicism's assimilationist bent.

<sup>25</sup>Dennis Geaney, quoted in McGreevy, 190.

<sup>26</sup>McGreevy, 110.

<sup>27</sup>Bryan N. Massingale, "The Ethics of Racism," *Origins* 28/4 (26 November 1998): 425.



South, not the North. Therefore, most Catholics, even if they read *Black Like Me*, could say, "It's not our problem here," even though Martin Luther King maintained that "I have never seen—even in Mississippi and Alabama—mobs as hostile and hate-filled as I've seen in Chicago."<sup>28</sup>

There was, of course, the Civil Rights movement and the 1964 Civil Rights Act. But without a Black perspective to correct it, these developments could foster the illusion among Whites that the struggle for racial justice had ended in victory, even though there may be a few mop up battles here and there. Instead, even today,

Whether out of hostility, indifference or simple lack of knowledge, large numbers of white Americans incorrectly believe that blacks are as well off as whites in terms of their jobs, incomes, school, and health care. . . . In fact, government statistics show that blacks have narrowed the gap, but continue to lag significantly behind whites in employment, income, education, and access to health care.<sup>29</sup>

#### *Integration as an Ideal*

During the half-century from the end of the Civil War through the end of World War I, episcopal leadership on racial issues was, to say the least, lackluster. The Popes and Vatican officials repeatedly tried to prod the U.S. bishops to become more proactive about the plight of Blacks, but the main results were half-measures and foot dragging.<sup>30</sup> The "reign of terror" known as "lynching" thrived during this period and Cardinal Gibbons published an essay decrying lynching,<sup>31</sup> but the bishops said and did little more than this.

While this record is regrettable, it is understandable, since most Blacks still lived in the rural South where Catholics were a small minority. Also, most Black Christians were Protestant. No longer slaves, they naturally wanted to control their own churches, and the more congregational Protestant church politics permitted them to do just that.<sup>32</sup> The bishops were also struggling to cope with waves of European immigration. Their problem was not to seek new sheep but how to tend the flocks they had.

Where Catholics began to adopt integration as the ideal and goal to be achieved, it was understood as the social implication of the Christian conviction

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<sup>28</sup>Stephen B. Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound. A Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994) 413.

<sup>29</sup>Richard Morin, "It's Not As It Seems," *Washington Post National Weekly Edition* (16-22 July 2001): 34.

<sup>30</sup>Cyprian Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (New York: Crossroad, 1990) 216-17.

<sup>31</sup>Cardinal Gibbons, "Lynch Law: Its Causes and Remedy," *North American Review* 181 (October 1905): 502-509.

<sup>32</sup>Eric Foner, *Reconstruction. America's Unfinished Revolution. 1863-1877* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988) 81, 91-92.

that all people were children of God, equal in dignity and rights, no matter what their skin color. Catholics could also prove their patriotism by promoting integration. After the 1954 Supreme Court decision, "Brown v. Board of Education," which struck down the doctrine of "separate but equal" and the later Court decisions outlawing segregation on interstate transportation (thus leading to the "Freedom Rides" on interstate buses), a "good American" favored integration. The fight against segregation also strengthened the U.S. in its struggle against "godless Communism." Progress toward integration could refute the Communist claim that freedom was a sham in a nation dominated by capitalists who kept the workers, white and black, down.<sup>33</sup>

But the particular ways in which the Church understood integration served to obstruct it and even to foster the racism that it was supposed to conquer. According to the prevailing wisdom of the time, race was not an independent factor and force in social relationships and conflicts. It was, instead, reducible to some other factor, like economics or psychology. According to this analysis, Whites were prejudiced against Blacks because they were poor and, therefore, saw Blacks as economic competitors. Whites might also be racists on account of the narrowness of their education, the biases of their subculture, or some form of immaturity. In short, racism was framed as an affliction of individuals, not a systemic social dysfunction.

Most important, in my view, was another element of the prevailing sociological consensus, the notion that the assimilation of Blacks into the mainstream of American life would follow the same pattern as the assimilation of White immigrant groups, like the Irish, the Polish, and the Italians. This prognosis acknowledged no distinctive features of Black history that might retard this assimilation or even prevent it altogether. What's more, assimilation (that is, integration) would take place automatically as a kind of natural process. No special remediation or attention was needed for the brutalities of slavery, Jim Crow, lynching, and the Great Migration. Merely the passage of time would produce the solution to racial conflict,<sup>34</sup> a notion that Martin Luther King later dismantled so effectively and eloquently in his classic "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" addressed to white *clergymen*, including the auxiliary bishop of Mobile-Birmingham.

Whites who embraced integration as an ideal while they ignored the distinctive history of Black suffering were wary of any strategy that seemed to tolerate or promote continuing separation of the races. Progressive White Catholics often did not want to hear about Black history, to heed Black voices, to take account of Black experiences because this emphasis on the distinctiveness

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<sup>33</sup>C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*. 3rd rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974) 130-32.

<sup>34</sup>Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States From the 1960s to the 1980s* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986) 10-23.

of the Black experience in America seemed to reestablish the kind of difference that could justify separation—and from there it could be a short step backwards into segregation.

The painful consequences of this approach to integration can be seen in the story of the Federated Colored Catholics, told in sum by Cyprian Davis and in full by Marilyn Nickels.<sup>35</sup> The organization's founder, Thomas Wyatt Turner, came to prominence after World War I. At this time, Rome had begun pressing the American hierarchy about the plight of U.S. Blacks and not least about the twenty-five race riots that had bloodied our streets in one year, 1919, alone. With his doctorate from Cornell and his professorship at Howard University, Turner was determined to improve the position of Blacks in the U.S. Catholic Church.

He wrote to the Apostolic Delegate in November 1919 with a twenty-page statement of the Committee for the Advancement of Colored Catholics, which he had also sent to all the bishops prior to their first annual meeting. In this document, Turner complained about the practice of making pastoral plans for Blacks, while not encouraging and supporting them in becoming agents of their own advancement: "It can be readily seen that effective work can be done among no people when it leaves that people out of the conferences and off the advisory boards which make plans for them."<sup>36</sup>

The bishops were unresponsive. The pastoral letter that emerged from their meeting was utterly inadequate in light of the race-based violence afflicting the country. It showed the truth of Turner's complaint that black Catholics had no voice in their Church. To give them a voice, Turner's organization became the Federated Colored Catholics in 1924. They made it their business to write to the bishops each year in advance of their annual meetings, and gave promise of enabling black Catholics to take their rightful place in the Church.

Eight years later, in 1932, a disastrous split developed in Turner's organization. This was the result of a dispute between Turner and two Jesuits, William Markoe and John LaFarge, over the organization's goals and strategies. Turner, its founder, saw the development of self-consciousness, pride, identity, and leadership among Blacks as essential. Markoe, however, could not recognize Blacks as leaders. Also, to him, an organization of Black Catholics for Black Catholics led by Black Catholics smacked too much of the segregation that he had pledged to oppose. He set out to remake the Federation into an interracial organization. For his part, LaFarge thought that interracial collaboration in interracial education was the way forward, not the Black advocacy that Turner promoted.<sup>37</sup> Nor could LaFarge be content to let Turner lead the way.

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<sup>35</sup>Davis, 214-29, and Marilyn Nickels, *Black Catholic Protest and the Federated Colored Catholics, 1917-1933: Three Perspectives on Racial Justice* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1988).

<sup>36</sup>Quoted in Davis, 219.

<sup>37</sup>John LaFarge, *The Catholic Viewpoint on Race Relations* (Garden City NY:

By 1932, LaFarge and Markoe had recruited enough allies to revise the Federation's constitution in accord with their vision and to remove Turner as its president. The result was two groups, one led by Turner and the other by LaFarge, both weakened and less effective. Davis generously concedes that both Jesuits were great men, committed to the cause of Black equality, but unable to understand why Blacks had to appropriate their own history, secure their own identity, and find their own voice before integration could mean genuine harmony and not the repression of Black distinctiveness and the loss of Black gifts to the Church.

Thus, the irony: the man who "saved the honor of Roman Catholicism in America by being the persistent voice of reason and justice in a time of apathy and racism,"<sup>38</sup> as well as other opponents of segregation, such as Markoe and Slattery,<sup>39</sup> actually held them back, for they had little sense that their Black fellow Catholics had distinctive gifts to bring. Thus, marginalizing Turner and his allies actually fostered racism, the very evil to which they were opposed. As LaFarge became the Church's main voice on racism and Turner was effectively silenced, the implicit lesson was that a distinctive Black identity either did not exist or was negligible. Thus, the ideal of integration absolved White progressive Catholics—and theologians—from listening to and learning from the experience and perspectives of Blacks. When he came to write his autobiography, *The Manner is Ordinary*, LaFarge did not even mention Turner. For him and Markoe, the Catholic song could only be sung by everyone at the same pitch. And, of course, a priest had to lead the choir. Turner and his allies learned, long before Stokely Carmichael and Malcolm X, that integration in the wrong hands and heads meant Black powerlessness.<sup>40</sup>

## THE IMPACT OF VATICAN II

During the period known as the Second Reconstruction, many Catholics stood and marched with Blacks demanding their rights. My own university holds a dubious place in U.S. Catholic history as the scene of the first demonstration by sign-carrying, habit-wearing nuns. They were protesting the Catholic Women's Club's "Whites Only" policy for their swimming pool on the

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Hanover House—Doubleday, 1956) 45, 61.

<sup>38</sup>Davis, 228.

<sup>39</sup>Joseph A. Brown, *To Stand on the Rock. Meditations on Black Catholic Identity* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1998) 150-51.

<sup>40</sup>On LaFarge and Markoe, see also McGreevy, 38-47. This inadequate approach to racial justice continues today in the church. "Catholic teaching on racism tends to speak about and for aggrieved African Americans, but seldom reflects, acknowledges, or encourages Black thought, initiative, or leadership." Bryan N. Massingale, "James Cone and Recent Catholic Episcopal Teaching on Racism," *Theological Studies* 61 (2000): 723.



university's downtown campus. But where were the theologians during the Civil Rights struggle? Put more directly, where were our teachers, the ones who made it possible for us to be here today? And where were we?

They—and we—were in our studies, trying to absorb and adjust to the new perspectives and changed emphases in theology and church life emerging from the Council, so that, as Catholic theologians, we could promote the new initiatives that fidelity to the Council demanded. As Joseph Komonchak reminds us,

There are very few features of everyday Catholic life . . . that were not affected by the Council or at least by the changes said to have been introduced as a consequence or implementation of it. This is true both of the church's internal life and of its relationship to the "others": other Christians, other religions, unbelievers, "the world" in general . . . the church had changed more in a decade than it had in the previous century: "The Church of Pius XII was closer to that of Pius IX than to that of Paul VI."<sup>41</sup>

Catching up meant, first of all, assimilating the Council's sixteen documents and, in particular, its four constitutions. Our red-covered Abbott and Gallagher paperbacks, with the gold medallion profiles of John XXIII and Paul VI on the cover, got pretty dog-eared during these years. So too did works by the European architects and interpreters of the Council—bishops like Suenens, König, and Montini; theologians like Rahner, Congar, Schillebeeckx, and Ratzinger—who had generated the conciliar perspectives. At the same time, it meant engaging the work of non-Catholic Christian theologians, seeking to understand these separated fellow Christians on their own terms. It also meant efforts to become familiar with Judaism and the other religious traditions of the world.

As if all this were not enough, we also had to develop a new breed of Catholic theologian, the lay theologian. We had to carve out and defend a place for theology in a new social location, our Catholic colleges and universities, and, in that setting, to transform theology into an academic discipline. No longer could theology be just high octane catechesis or a handy kit bag of one-liners that a busy priest could use to pacify intellectually curious Catholics.

And as if all this were still not enough, the Church looked to its theologians to develop a theology that reflected the particular experiences and gifts of the U.S. Roman Catholic Church. "Inculturation," a new word for a new enterprise, appeared on theologians' agenda. What was demanded was no less than forging a new identity for the Church in the United States. This was to be an identity crafted not *over against* but *in relation to* the "Others"—other Christians, other religions, other cultures, and even the otherness of nonbelievers. Engagement

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<sup>41</sup>Joseph A. Komonchak, "Interpreting the Council. Catholic Attitudes Toward Vatican II," in *Being Right. Conservative Catholics in America*, ed. Mary Jo Weaver and R. Scott Appleby (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995) 17. See Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America 1776–1990* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992) for a sociological account of this impact.



with the "Other" was to be a permanent, coconstituent element of the future development of the Roman Catholic tradition in the U.S.<sup>42</sup>

The task of inculturation helps to answer the pained questions posed by James Cone and Bishop Joseph Francis:<sup>43</sup> why were Catholic theologians so interested in Latin American Liberation theology, even as they ignored our own homegrown liberation theology, that is, Black Theology? After all, Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* appeared just before Gutierrez' *A Theology of Liberation*, in April 1969.

The answer is, we gravitated toward Latin American Liberation theology because it was both indigenous and Catholic. As such, perhaps it offered clues and methods for grappling with the identity question that the Council had created for the U.S. Church. As Deck has it,

Liberation theology undoubtedly inspired real hope in many Catholics who belong to the generation that lived through the drama of the 1970s and 1980s, the heady period of Vatican II reforms, the cold war and the worldwide, often violent human rights struggles of those tumultuous times. We found light in the methods and message of liberation theology, a compelling vision for an engaged and caring Christian praxis grounded in deep biblical and doctrinal currents.<sup>44</sup>

In short, the century's defining moment for the Roman Catholic Church came precisely at a defining moment in the Black struggle for justice in this country and during the birth and early years of Black theology. Catholic theologians had good reasons to be preoccupied. Nor can we say that these issues of identity and mission have yet been resolved in such a way as to command a consensus.

#### *Factors within Black Theology*

We cannot overlook factors within Black theology itself that complicated White theological efforts to engage it. Recall that the original matrix and stimulus for the development of Black theology was the Black Power movement in 1966. Also, Black separatism was a major theme stressed in Black theology's

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<sup>42</sup>"In three respects at least, the Council posed major threats to the self-articulation of modern Catholicism: by its far more positive assessment of modernity in its political and cultural features, by its call for an updating and reform of Church practice in the light of modernity, and by its appeal to particular and local churches to assume responsibility for culturally distinct realizations of Catholic Christianity." Joseph A. Komonchak, "The Ecclesial and Cultural Roles of Theology," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* (1985): 23.

<sup>43</sup>James H. Cone, "A Theological Challenge of the American Catholic Church," in *Speaking the Truth. Ecumenism, Liberation, and Black Theology* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1986) 51. Bishop Francis is quoted in Massingale, "Episcopal Teaching," 701-702.

<sup>44</sup>Allan Figueroa Deck, "Beyond La Pausa. Liberation Theologies Live," *America* 188/3 (3 February 2003): 20-21.

earliest period.<sup>45</sup> Even if Black theology was meant to be separate only temporarily—and it was, according to Cone<sup>46</sup>—it was still a separatism that seemed to absolve White theologians here and now from engaging it. Though Black theologians insisted that the liberation they envisioned encompassed everyone, oppressed and oppressor alike, Black theology was often presented as a theology for and by Blacks only. As a “special interest theology, Whites could safely ignore it.”<sup>47</sup> Cone’s groundbreaking text *Black Theology and Black Power* could be mistaken simply as an effort to legitimate emerging Black consciousness.

Moreover, a Black theology written for and by Blacks out of Black experience looked like a theology with a short shelf life. As segregation died, Black Theology would naturally disappear. As Blacks become integrated (that is, “more like us”), the need for a Black Theology and the impulse to write it would fade away. Very few White readers perceived that the calls for Black separation were actually efforts to establish a Black-White theological dialogue but on radically new grounds of equality.<sup>48</sup> Few White theologians heard the voices that said, Blackness is not simply—or even primarily—a matter of skin color, but of identifying with the struggle and sharing the suffering of the oppressed.<sup>49</sup>

Certainly, Black anger and even hostility played a major role here, as Cone himself admits: “I must admit I was pretty hard on them and that partly accounts for their silence. But I was not going to pamper privileged Whites.”<sup>50</sup> Cone is alluding to statements like this from *A Black Theology of Liberation*: “To whites who want to know what they can do (a favorite question of oppressors), Black Theology says, ‘Keep your damn mouth closed, and let us black people get our thing together.’”<sup>51</sup>

Another problem for White academic theologians was how to interpret a theology drawn largely from nontraditional theological sources: sermons, hymns, devotions, and narratives. In *The Spirituals and the Blues* (1972), Cone had

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<sup>45</sup>James H. Cone, *For My People. Black Theology and the Black Church* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1984) 19.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>47</sup>Peter J. Paris, “Comparing the Public Theologies of James H. Cone and Martin Luther King, Jr.” in *Black Faith and Public Talk*, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1999) 218.

<sup>48</sup>Theo Witvliet, *The Way of the Black Messiah*, trans. John Bowden (Oak Park IL: Meyer-Stone Books, 1987) 131-32.

<sup>49</sup>Diana L. Hayes, “Through the Eyes of Faith. The Seventh Principle of the *Nguzo Saba* and the Beatitudes of Matthew,” in *Taking Down Our Harps. Black Catholics in the United States*, ed. Diana L. Hayes and Cyprian Davis (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1998) 62.

<sup>50</sup>James H. Cone, “Theology’s Great Sin: Silence in the Face of White Supremacy,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 55/3-4 (2001): 9-10.

<sup>51</sup>James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970) 194. See also *For My People*, 31-52.

maintained that " 'academic tools' are not enough. The interpreter must feel the Spirit; that is, he must feel his way into the power of black music, responding to both its rhythm and the faith in experience it affirms."<sup>52</sup> In 1992, the CTSA devoted a convention to this hermeneutical issue—"Experience and Theology: A Critical Appropriation," but a survey of our meetings since the Council reveals our ongoing engagement with it.

A third difficulty is White Catholic theologians' unfamiliarity and even discomfort with the nonsacramental, Bible-based, free church traditions of most Black churches, the root and home of Black theology. The charismatic, spontaneous styles of their Christian worship and leadership contrasted mightily with the sedate, structured style of Catholic liturgy and ordained ministry.

Also, these churches were not Catholic and the Roman Catholic Church had deemed itself to be the one and only true Church of Christ for four and a half centuries. As George Tavard has observed, when it came to ecumenism, Vatican II initiated a tradition; it did not articulate and advance a trajectory already underway, as was the case with the liturgical renewal. Not until November, 1964, did the Church declare that "We must come to know the mind [*animus*] of our separated brothers [*fratrum*]" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 9) and call for a corresponding theological renewal.

Finally, there is the "fragmentary" character of Black Theology that seems to fall far short of "real" theology as an ordered, systematic exposition of the whole of Revelation. The term "systematic theology" is falling into disuse, but the aspiration that it expresses still lives and controls Catholic theology's norms and expectations. From Vatican I's notion of theology as an imperfect understanding of truths in relation to each other in 1869 to John Paul II's *Fides et Ratio* in 1998, there is real continuity. But, as David Tracy says:

No major African American thinker, long before the rest of us, ever attempted or wanted a system. They have left us, all of them (especially James Cone in his theology, Cornel West in his philosophy, and Toni Morrison in her literature) with something far more valuable than a system. They have left to us fragments that break and undo such pretense to totality, and that describe hints and guesses of hope . . . fragmentary glimpses of light and redemption. These are the crucial resources which African-American thought, if heeded, can provide for our dessicated public realm.<sup>53</sup>

So there are many good reasons for White Catholic theologians to have marginalized Black Theology. But these reasons are "good" in the sense of explanatory. They are not "good" in the sense of exculpatory. They are not good enough to refute the charge of racism, however benevolent our racism has been.

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<sup>52</sup>Quoted in Brown, 52.

<sup>53</sup>David Tracy, "African American Thought. The Discovery of Fragments," in *Black Faith and Public Talk*, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1999) 37-38.

They are not good enough because they have led to our failure in solidarity, as Shawn Copeland describes it: "the empathetic incarnation of Christian love [that] . . . entails the recognition of the humanity of the 'other' as humanity, along with regard for the 'other' in her (and his) own otherness."<sup>54</sup> And they are not good enough because this systemic White Catholic theological racism threatens our credentials. It means that we have failed in significant ways to live up to our vocation as Catholic theologians.

### CONCLUSION

In this final section, I want to argue that a substantial and critical engagement with Black theology is indispensable to our vocation and identity as Catholic theologians. It is good that the Society has an established Program Group on Black Theology, but this is not nearly enough. Just as we are familiar and engaged with Latin American liberation theology, feminist theology, as well as the various challenges that can be grouped under the rubric of postmodernity, just as much and so much more must we embrace Black theology as an indispensable dialogue partner.

Catholic theology, in order to be truly *Catholic* theology in the United States, must be worked out in conversation with Black Theology. If Black Theology remains as marginal to our work and even to our attention, as it now is, then our claim to be Catholic theologians can be rightly challenged. In reflecting on "The Social Context of American Catholic Theology" at our 1986 convention, Gregory Baum found much to praise, but wondered, "Is American theology . . . generated out of an identification with the middle class?"<sup>55</sup> When you realize that the best book on African-American theology, Theo Witvliet's *The Way of the Black Messiah*, was written by a Dutch scholar, translated by an Englishman, published by an obscure publisher, and is already out of print, it is hard not to think that Baum is on to something.

As long as Black theology is off our radar screens, we can be accused of subverting Vatican II. We can be charged with exploiting the Council as a way to buttress our own prejudices and privileges, not embracing it as the new Pentecost for which Blessed John XXIII prayed. We may even be dismissed as an effete elite, little more than chaplains to "sick middle-class egos," in James

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<sup>54</sup>M. Shawn Copeland, "The New Anthropological Subject at the Heart of the Mystical Body of Christ," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 53 (1998): 36-37.

<sup>55</sup>Gregory Baum, "The Social Context of American Catholic Theology," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 41 (1986): 94.

Cone's typically forceful phrasing.<sup>56</sup> I know these are strong claims. Let me try to back them up.

When Bryan Hehir addressed the CTSA in 1986, he explained how the Council had moved the social justice agenda of the Church from its periphery to its center. Prior to Vatican II, he said, "Social ministry was understood (or tolerated) as an *extension* of the Church's life, but not always seen as decisively something *of the Church's nature*."<sup>57</sup> Now, on Hehir's reading of *Dignitatis Humanae* and *Gaudium et Spes*, "The decisive conciliar contribution to the social and public ministry of the Church was to locate the defense of the human person at the center of Catholic ecclesiology, thereby moving the social ministry from the periphery to the core of the Church's life and work."<sup>58</sup>

Not only was the Church's public ministry reconceived. So also were the ministers, the principal agents in the service of the person, and these belonged to the local Church. As we know, "the local Church" is prominent among the Council's retrievals from the Church's past to renew her in the present. The theme of our convention in 1981—which met here in Cincinnati, by the way—was "The Local Church." Addressing our convention then, Komonchak emphasized that

this Church is not only made manifest and visible in dioceses and local congregations; it is represented there, in the strong sense of this word. The Council's statements are strong and direct: The one and universal Church is gathered together in such churches; it is present and active in them; it is built up and grows in them; it is in them and out of them that it exists; and, for all these reasons, the local gatherings of believers are rightly called "churches." As a number of commentators have pointed out, this vision represents something like a Copernican revolution in ecclesiology.<sup>59</sup>

Thus, Vatican II maintains that of its very nature the Church must be substantially engaged in the world to protect and advance the transcendent dignity of the person. It also restores to its proper place the meaning and mission of the Church, as it is realized and actualized in eucharistic communities, parishes, dioceses, and larger groupings, like regional and national conferences.

Hehir is quite right to identify the striking conjunction of these two themes in Paul VI's *Octogesima adveniens* (1971), where the Holy Father says:

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<sup>56</sup>James H. Cone, "The White Church and Black Power," in *Black Theology. A Documentary History*, vol. 1, 2nd rev. ed., ed. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1993) 78. This is an excerpt from *Black Theology and Black Power*, 1969.

<sup>57</sup>J. Bryan Hehir, "Church-State and Church-World: The Ecclesiological Implications," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 41 (1986): 56.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>59</sup>Joseph A. Komonchak, "Ministry and the Local Church," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 36 (1981): 58.



There is of course a wide diversity among the situations in which Christians—willingly or unwillingly—find themselves according to regions, sociopolitical systems and cultures. . . . In the face of such widely varying situations it is difficult for us to utter a unified message and to put forward a solution which has universal validity. Such is not our ambition, nor is it our mission. *It is up to the Christian communities to analyze with objectivity the situation which is proper to their own country, to shed on it the light of the Gospel's unalterable words and to draw principles of reflection, norms of judgment and directives for action from the social teaching of the Church.*<sup>60</sup>

Now what is being described here, if not the work of theology? And who is to do it, if not people like you and me who call ourselves Catholic theologians? And hadn't the Council already given us this mandate back in 1965 when it said that "it is the task of the entire People of God, especially pastors and theologians, to hear, distinguish, and interpret the many voices of our age, and to judge them in light of the divine Word." (*Gaudium et Spes*, 44).

But if we overlook slavery, Jim Crow, the ritualistic and systematic terrorizing of Blacks known as lynching, and the devastating residue of these horrors that still poison our national life today, how can we possibly "analyze with objectivity the situation which is proper to [our] own country?" And how reliable can our theological reflection be if we try "to shed on it the light of the Gospel's unalterable words" without the help of the Black Theology that has arisen precisely out of Black suffering and sorrow and endurance and triumph?

If James Cone were with us this morning, I know exactly what he would say to us. "Begin the antiracist struggle where you are. . . . One of the most important thing whites can do in fighting white supremacy is to support black empowerment in the society, church and theology. . . . The black church and black theology are black empowerment in religion."<sup>61</sup> To begin where we are means to resolve here and now to make an end of White Catholic theological racism and to take our Black Christian sisters and brothers just as seriously as we have taken our other dialogue partners. To the extent that we do, we will vindicate our claim to be Catholic theologians. We will be more faithful to our vocation as Catholic theologians. It is true, as Shawn Copeland reminds us, that "the cost of our own religious, moral, and intellectual conversion [is] steep." But who ever said that the vocation of the Catholic theologian was supposed to be easy?

This year is the 100th anniversary of W. E. B. DuBois's classic work, *The Souls of Black Folk*. It is painful to read him because you realize how little he would have to change to make his analyses just as accurate today as they were a century ago. The most famous words from this book are "The problem of the

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<sup>60</sup>As quoted in Hehir, 59-60; emphasis added.

<sup>61</sup>Cone, "Sin," 13.

twentieth century is the problem of the color line. . . ." Less well known is the prayer with which DuBois ends the book. Let me make his last words mine, too.

*Hear my cry, O God the Reader; vouchsafe that this my book fall not still-born into the world-wilderness. Let there spring, Gentle One, from out its leaves vigor of thought and thoughtful deed to reap the harvest wonderful. Let the ears of a guilty people tingle with truth, and seventy millions sigh for the righteousness which exalteth nations, in this drear day when human brotherhood is mockery and a snare. Thus in Thy good time may infinite reason turn the tangle straight, and these crooked marks on a fragile leaf be not indeed.*

THE END<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup>W. E. B. DuBois, "The After-Thought," *The Souls of Black Folk*, in *Three Negro Classics*, ed. John Hope Franklin (New York: Avon Books, 1965) 389; italics in original.