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The Decline of Black Catholicism: What's Racial Slavery To Do With It?

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This essay links the current decline of black Catholicism to the racial slavery practiced in Roman Catholicism at its settlement in the USA. Employing missiological anthropological analysis, Assenyoh, S.V.D., argues that the racism that characterized the beginning of New World slavery remains in the Church and accounts for the decline of black Catholicism. Assenyoh calls for persistent critiques of racial slavery in the Church's history if there must be transformation rather than reformation.

“We’re losing members steadily... and if we don’t do something we’re going to lose a lot more. ... The old injury has not been healed ... the church’s long reluctance to condemn slavery.”¹

It is not the digger of a trench who sees its crookedness but the one who stands at the beginning of the trench and watches the digging.²

The two texts above capture the problem and the solution this article deals with. Sam Dennis’ presents the fact that black Catholicism in the USA is in decline³ and points to the unfinished

¹ Statement of Sam Dennis, a sociologist, quoted in Robert McClory, “Black and Catholic: Many Say They Are Faithful Despite Church’s Inattention,” *National Catholic Reporter* (March 13, 1998), http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1141/is_n19_v34/ai_20404493/pg_2/?tag=content:col1 (accessed June 30, 2009).

² Oral Tradition of the Ewe ethnic group in Ghana, West Africa.

³ By decline I mean a dwindling in the number of members, especially the youth, their less participation even as they maintain their Catholic status, the closing down of black Catholic churches, ministries and programs, the acute drop in the number of black religious, clergy and lay leaders, and the more and more disregard for

problem of slavery as the locus of the solution. The second text – a saying among the Ewe ethnic group of South-eastern Ghana – suggests that we treat current problems from their origin or source location. Reactions to the decline vary. At least one black Catholic leader has left the Church in protest, and formed a church.⁴ Others, who have rightly identified the problem of the decline and its causes as racism and slavery, have often fallen short of calling for structural transformation beyond mere reformation.⁵ In the spirit of this Ewe saying, however, members of the black Catholic faith community, gathered in 1992 at the National Black Catholic Congress VII in New Orleans, Louisiana, made the following call:

We suggest studies be conducted on the history of evangelization of [b]lack slaves. ... What models were used to evangelize? What were the personalities of those who

cultural sensibility in the liturgical celebrations as well as leadership and membership formations of black Catholics. These have been widely reported by the following witnesses: Most Reverend Edward K. Braxton, “The View from the Barbershop; The Church and African-American Culture,” *America* 178 (February 14, 1998): 1; William C. Leonard, “A Parish for the Black Catholics of Boston,” *Catholic Historical Review* 83 (January 1997): 10; Arthur Jones, “Black Catholics: Life in a Chilly Church,” *National Catholic Reporter* 34 (August 14, 1998); George Shuster and Robert M. Kearns, *Statistical Profile of Black Catholics*, with forward by Bernard Quinn, (Washington, D.C.: Josephite Pastoral Center, 1976), 39; See also, Robert McClory, “Black and Catholic.”

⁴ Teresa Malcolm, “Black Leader Leaves Church,” *National Catholic Reporter* 33 (February 28, 1997), 8. Another article describes how rapidly younger African American Catholics are shedding the faith in which they were baptized while the hope of their parents (and adults) of a reversal of the declining trend fades (see Vivian R. Rouson, “Waiting for my Church to live its Creed – African American Catholic – Column,” *National Catholic Reporter* (April 25, 1997), 13. See also Bryan Massingale, “Forty Years Later in a ‘White Racist Institution’: Looking Back, Looking Around, Looking Forward,” Plenary Address of the 2008 Joint Conference of Black Clergy, Sisters, Deacons, and Seminarians, Montgomery, AL, July 29, 2008; Robert McClory, . “Black and Catholic: Many Say They Are Faithful Despite Church’s Inattention.” *National Catholic Reporter* 34, 13 March 1998, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1141/is_n19_v34/ai_20404493/ (accessed August 1, 2010).

⁵ See the “erasing the color line” model by Albert J. Raboteau, “Relating Race and Religion: Four Historical Models,” in *Uncommon Faithfulness: The Black Catholic Experience*, edited by M. Shawn Copeland, editor with LaReine-Marie Mosely and Albert J. Raboteau (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2008), 14, 23f.

evangelized like? What part did geography, politics, and the social climate play?⁶

The call was made because black Catholics were dissatisfied with the steady regression of black Catholicism in the USA.

I argue that racial slavery and ideology seriously and initially damaged the encounter between European Roman Catholicism and Africans, and that this damage remains responsible for the decline of US black Catholicism. Hence the paper suggests that black Catholics be persistent in calling for transformation of Church structures rather than reformation of the content of structures. The underlying assumption here is that slavery and racism were inextricably linked to Roman Catholic teaching for 1400 years.⁷ Therefore, there is the need to place slavery and racism always at the center of the discussion on black Catholicism, particularly in the USA, and in the world in general.

I begin by examining the beginnings of the encounter between black people and Roman Catholicism in the New World,⁸ and identify slavery as an expression of racism. In the second part I use Louis Luzbetak's missiological theory to draw the mission model inherent in the encounter, particularly in slavery, and how this model functioned in the Church's approach to black people from the ante-bellum through the reconstruction period. Part three considers how racism impacts specific events of the decline of black Catholicism in our times. The conclusion suggests some action on the part of the Church in the path of repairing its mission model – a transformation of the Church's evangelization prospects, particularly in the African American.

⁶ Committee on African American Catholics, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Keep Your Hand on the Plow: The African American Presence in the Catholic Church* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1996), 103.

⁷ See John F. Maxwell, *Slavery and the Catholic Church: The History of Catholic Teaching Concerning the Moral Legitimacy of the Institution of Slavery* (London/Chester: Barry Rose Publishers, 1975), 13.

⁸ The New World here refers to the creation of the African Diaspora through the Atlantic Slave Trade (AST).

Part One: The Beginnings – Slavery and Roman Catholics in the Americas

What was the cause of the Atlantic Slave Trade and slavery in the Americas? Was it economics or racial ideology? These are questions that preoccupied many historians of the AST and Black Studies scholars because the answer determines the kind of solution to the problem of slavery. Historical reports on European Roman Catholics' participation in slavery and the AST are uncontested. Instead what follows here is a demonstration that, economic benefits notwithstanding, racial ideology was the driving force of the slavery practiced by Roman Catholics in the Americas. This becomes clearer when we consider how significant the role of the Church was in the AST and slavery.

Roman Catholics and missionaries played a significant role more than the holding and using of slave labor. The Church's leadership and members were instrumental in the design and execution of the AST that led to the enslavement of African blacks in the New World.⁹ In his famous work, *Capitalism and Slavery*, black scholar and first prime minister of Trinidad and Tobago Eric Williams noted that the “[o]rigin of Negro Slavery” in the New World was coterminous with “bitter” struggles over lands for economic prosperity among Catholic European colonial countries:

⁹ I distinguish between slavery and the AST since, according to testimonies of many scripture and history scholars, slavery existed in ancient times, in the Old Testament, in the New Testament, and through the Middle Ages to our times. Slavery also existed in almost all societies; see Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa*, 2nd ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1; Joseph E. Inikori, “Slaves or Serfs? A Comparative Serfdom in Europe and Africa,” in *The African Diaspora: African Origins and New World Identities*, edited by Isidore Okpewho et al., (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2001), 51; Maxwell, *Slavery and the Catholic Church*, 22ff. I will limit the scope of the Church's role in slavery, however, to pre-modern, modern and our contemporary times, that is, from the 15th to the 21st Centuries. This is because it is within this period that the Atlantic slave trade – “the slavery that ... evolved during the Renaissance, Reformation, and Enlightenment” – occurred; see David Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 8.

Portugal and Spain.¹⁰ The Papal bulls of 1455 and 1497 triggered these “rival claims” for economic opportunities because, in these bulls, the pope assigned non-European lands in Africa and the Americas to Portugal and Spain respectively with a *mission* – “to reduce to servitude all infidel peoples.”¹¹ Countries like England, France, and Holland challenged the pope’s authority to assign such lands and joined the dispute to fight for their share and place in the economic advantages of the New World. In this context and place of battle for power and economic wealth by Europeans, “The Negro, too,” Williams maintains, “was to have his place, though he did not ask for it: it was the broiling sun of the sugar, tobacco and cotton plantations of the New World.”¹² Williams concluded that slavery was the result of capitalism, a position that has enjoyed some support among contemporary scholars.¹³

It is clear that Williams drew his conclusion from his focus on the European countries’ imperial, conquering, and mercantile activities in his analysis. However scholars today who challenge Williams’ conclusion focus on the significant role of papal bull discourses and their execution by missionaries in the launching of the New World slavery. V. Y. Mudimbe reports his analysis on one of the bulls of pope Nicholas V, *Dum Diversas* (1452) as follows:

Dum Diversas clearly stipulates [the] right to invade, conquer, expel, and fight (*invadendi, conquirendi, expugnandi, debellandi*) Muslims, pagans and other enemies of Christ. ... Christian kings, following the Pope’s decisions, could enter pagan kingdoms ... and dispossess them of their personal property, land, and whatever they might have (*et mobilia et immobilia bona quaecumque per eos detenta ac possessa*). The king and his successors have the power and right to put these peoples into perpetual

¹⁰ See Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1944), 3-4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹² *Ibid.*, 4.

¹³ See for example, Oliver C. Cox, “Race Relations: Its Meaning, Beginning, and Process,” in *Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader, 2nd edition*, edited by Les Back and John Solomos (New York: Routledge, 2009), 78.

slavery (*subjugandi illorumque personas in perpetuam servitute*).¹⁴

From his analyses of such papal bulls and missionary discourses as the above, Mudimbe discovers a three-stage scheme he refers to as “the concepts of derision, refutation-demonstration, and orthodoxy-conformity.”¹⁵ The language of the bulls first derided – ethnocentrically misrepresented – the religion and culture of Africans; second, it refuted by European rational arguments – the task of theology to convince Africans themselves to reject their own culture; and finally, the discourse of the bulls imposed European norms as orthodox in non-European lands.¹⁶ Mudimbe demonstrates that this scheme, which opened the way for Europeans to invent, invade and enslave “Africa,” was both ideological and racial.

Despite their different conclusions, the analyses of both Williams and Mudimbe show that the Roman Catholic Church, through its racial and ideological scheme, played an original role in landing Europeans in Africa for the purpose of enslavement. Indeed, the Atlantic Slave Trade that saw the forced migration of Africans in the Americas was an offshoot of an initial racial and ideological scheme embedded in papal and missionary discourses of the 15th and 16th centuries.

Racial slavery therefore continued to characterize the contact between African blacks and the initial faces of the Roman Catholic Church in the Americas. Black Catholic scholars have also made their contributions to the question of the Church’s role in the enslavement of black people in the US. An historical research with depth on this issue by Cyprian Davis is found in *The History Black Catholics in the United States*. Davis’ account reveals that although there were black people who made significant

¹⁴ V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 45.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 52-53.

contributions to the early Catholic settlements¹⁷ in the Americas, racial biases and perceptions on the part of the Europeans led to two forms of treatment of black people. First, racial perception of Europeans Catholics on blacks was manifested in an intentional devaluation, distortion, and neglect of the black presence and contributions in the discovery and founding of the church in the Americas. This was evident in Davis' account of Esteban, who was "the first black man to traverse what is now the territory of the United States" in 1536.¹⁸ He was a slave of Moroccan origin who had escaped capture and was the only black man among the first four Spaniards who came to the New World "in an expedition that had evangelization of the Indians as one of its goals."¹⁹ However, as Davis points out, very little is known about his accomplishments. So also before the establishment of the Spanish colony in the territory of today's Florida, Davis also underlines the active contribution of Spanish-speaking blacks that have gone without acknowledgement.²⁰

The second effect of the racial perception of Europeans on blacks, to be drawn from Davis' account, is a systematic domination and oppression of blacks, of which slavery was a central characteristic. The centrality and importance of black peoples' enslavement are reflected in the banality of the practice in all rank and file of the Roman Catholic Church in the years of the country's foundation. The very first American bishop, John Carroll, Davis reports, "was a slave owner" and so were others. In Maryland, "by the end of the seventeenth century, the Jesuits had introduced on their lands African slaves,"²¹ and:

¹⁷ Cyprian Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), 28.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 29-30. Also, in the second Spanish period (cir. 1784-1821) the eleven families who founded the city of Los Angeles – Nuestra Senora de Los Angeles as it was called at its foundation – were said to be all Catholic of whom "over half were black, two were Spanish and the rest were Indians" (*Ibid.*, 33), but as in many other cities the "black element" were neglected and were made to eventually "evolved into mestizos and Indians."

²¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

[I]n 1836 the general of the Jesuits, John Roothaan, approved the sale of slaves; provided the practice of the Catholic faith by the slaves was assured and the families were not separated. In 1837 Thomas Mulledy became provincial, and ... [a]ltogether 272 slaves from the Jesuit estates in southern Maryland were sold to purchasers in Louisiana. They were not necessarily sold to Catholic slave-owners, and in the end families were separated.²²

Many other religious and missionary communities in the American Catholic church are cited in Davis' report as participating in enslaving black people.²³ So entrenched was the practice of slavery in Roman Catholicism that the bishops of the US Catholic Church resisted the calls and efforts of the world to abolish slavery. The basic notions that fueled this attitude of Catholics against their fellow Catholics of African descent were articulated by Bishop William Henry Elder. He held that "the African American slave was part child, part animal, part saint,"²⁴ and those who were sympathetic to slaves still described them as "inferior both intellectually and physically."²⁵

The conclusion Davis draws is that, as it did on the civil society of the United States, so did slavery cast a shadow over the history of American Catholicism, so that slavery is connected to Roman Catholic history. This clearly reflects the conclusion we drew from the analyses of Williams and Mudimbe earlier that racial slavery was coterminous with Roman Catholicism in the 15th and 16th centuries. Davis' account goes further to reveal that there was continuity of the initial relation between Roman Catholicism and black slavery into the settling of the USA.

²² Ibid., 37; See also, James T. Fisher, *Communion of Immigrants: A History of Catholics in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 53.

²³ Davis, *The History of Black Catholics*, 35-39.

²⁴ Ibid., 44.

²⁵ Ibid., 61.

Part Two: Missiological Implications of Racial Slavery

What then was the mission approach of Roman Catholicism toward black people in the United States after the abolition of slavery? I seek to demonstrate here that, owing to the profound embedding of racial ideology in Roman Catholicism, the abolishing of slavery did not eliminate racism. In other words the missionary approach of the Church toward black people in the reconstruction era retained the spirit of 15th and 16th century papal and missionary discourses. The mission models of the Church in the time of slavery continued well into the reconstruction era.

Catholic Mission Models in the Antebellum Era

According to Louis Luzbetak, theoretically, there are three categories into which mission models may be grouped based on the revelation of their “dominant traits.”²⁶ First, there are models whose dominant traits are ethnocentric oriented. A second group of models has “accommodational orientation” and a third group is contextual or “incarnational” or “inculturational” in their orientations. Luzbetak’s explanation of these categories of models helps us to assign or relate the ethnocentrically oriented category of mission models to the context of the encounter between black people in the United States and the Roman Catholic Church. This may help to explain the contents of the context, that is, the enslavement of blacks by whites.

Luzbetak attempts a definition of ethnocentrism thus:

Ethnocentrism is a tendency (to some degree present in every human being) to regard the ways and values of one’s own society as *the* normal, right, proper, and certainly the best way of thinking, feeling, speaking, and doing things, whether it be in regard to eating, sleeping, dressing,

²⁶ Louis J. Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures: A New Perspective in Missiological Anthropology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 64.

disposing of garbage, marrying, burying the dead, or speaking with God.²⁷

The concept of ethnocentrism, therefore, simply refers to normalizing, generalizing, or universalizing what pertains to one's own context, particularity or situation. As a process of socialization by which the young of a society or people are equipped to participate and to survive, enculturation makes ethnocentrism almost impossible to undo or change. Enculturation solidifies and instills in a person the ethos and worldview with their constituent values, beliefs, and perceptions of reality. Ethnocentrism, according to Luzbetak, manifests itself in three major forms – paternalism, triumphalism, and racism.²⁸

These three forms of ethnocentrism characterized the attitude of European Roman Catholics who first came to the New World as explorers, missionaries, lay, religious or clergy as we have seen above. European ethnocentrism in its paternalistic form enabled some of these early Euro-American Catholics to rationalize the moral contradiction of being Christians and holding and trading in slaves. As Davis writes, Bishop Auguste Marie Martin of Natchitoches in northern Louisiana held that “slavery is really a disguised blessing for the Africans, ‘children of the race of Canaan,’ for through slavery they have received the faith and other advantages.”²⁹ Bevans and Schroeder also agree that the “Jesuit Reductions Model” of mission failed because of its paternalism.³⁰ This is exactly how Luzbetak explains paternalism: “a misguided compassion that tends to humiliate the would-be beneficiary, making them even more dependent on the would-be benefactor than they were before.”³¹ Triumphalistic ethnocentrism is a conviction that one's culture or the Church's success gives it the right to spread their success and force others to receive them.

²⁷ Ibid., 65.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Davis, *The History of Black Catholic*, 51.

³⁰ Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), 183.

³¹ Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures*, 65-66.

Finally, Luzbetak presents racist ethnocentrism as an orientation for some mission models.³² In his view, this category of models also generates classicism in society. It is the model that maintains that “[t]he color of the skin somehow condemns certain ‘less fortunate’ individuals to second-class citizenship, not only in society at large but sometimes in the Church as well.”³³ Black Catholic theologian Jamie Phelps writes that the Catholic Church’s ministry in antebellum times was held from black slaves and free people as it was a matter of official church policy.³⁴ It was, she goes on to say, rather reserved for “the immigrant Catholics of European decent with whom most of the clergy and bishops could claim a cultural and racial identity.”³⁵ I single racism out for elucidation separately in order to critique Luzbetak. His presentation treats all three as though they were mutually exclusive forms of ethnocentrism. It may not however be Luzbetak’s position or intention to make paternalism, triumphalism and racism as exclusive forms of the same reality. There is no mention of their interrelatedness, hence my critique.

It is important then to point out the position of Michael Omi and Howard Winant on racism. From what they call the “racial formation perspective” Omi and Winant advance that the concept of racism has to do with the creation and reproduction “of structures of domination based on essentialist categories of race.”³⁶ In this sense race is conceived of as a neutral fluid term that is socio-historically constructed; but racism is the use of this socio-historical term for domination and oppression. This is the hermeneutic of race and racism that I adopt in this paper. Slavery then was a kind of domination that had its origin in racism. In fact Omi and Winant

³² See Luzbetak, 66.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Jamie T. Phelps, “The Mission Ecclesiology of John R. Slattery: A Study of an African-American Mission of the Catholic Church in the Nineteenth Century,” unpublished doctoral dissertation, Catholic University of American, 1989, 85.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 71.

and other African American and Black Diaspora Studies theorists, though not unanimously, now hold that racism morphed through different periods in human history manifesting itself in different institutions and practices.³⁷ Hence, we can see racism not just as one of the ethnocentric forms, but as an embedding dynamic in both paternalism and triumphalism inasmuch as these forms conceal the domination of others based on something they consider as essentially different in the humanity of these others. This has cultural implications for both the slave-owners and the oppressed slaves. The former on one hand, not only assert their culture but also, as a superior culture, normalize, universalize and generalize it. The latter, on the other hand, do not just have their culture impoverished, but also this impoverished culture is assimilated gradually until it falls out of existence in the face of the dominant culture.

The significance of re-conceptualizing racism and race in this way is to make way for our understanding of the black Catholic experience in relation to the ethnocentric model of mission in the antebellum and the reconstruction periods of the United States. We have seen extensively the context of black Catholics in the antebellum period as a context where racism, embedded in triumphalism and paternalism, manifested itself in the form of slavery.

Catholic Mission Models and Black Catholics in the Reconstruction Era

This post-war period in black history was a period of reconstruction for both the nation (as a recovery from the war) and black people in general as a reconstruction of their lives as free citizens of the nation. More so for black Catholics it was to be a period of reconstructing their Catholic faith in all its dimensions. Black Catholics, both formerly enslaved or never enslaved alike, took the opportunity of the relative physical freedom to make strides in the Roman Catholic Church. Some examples of the achievements made by the lay black Catholics, reported by Davis,

³⁷ See Ibid.

include the establishment of black Catholic lay organizations, the formation of black religious communities, the promotion of education for black children and the emergence of black Catholic clergy. These achievements of black Catholics however were not made without struggle. This is because the post-Civil War context was one in which the pastors of the Church neglected the blacks by denying them pastoral care, religious education and evangelization, leadership, and so on. A meeting organized to work out “a policy on the national level for ministry and evangelization of the former slaves,” one year after the war, produced “no coherent policy.”³⁸

According to Davis, before this period, there had been complaint letters sent to Rome on behalf of black people to petition the pope for missionaries for apostolic work among black Catholics since the white Euro-American Catholic clergy had rejected pastoral work among blacks. The letter of one Harriet Thompson in 1853 lays out the pastoral situation and struggle of black Catholics in those days.³⁹ The fundamental problem that the black community faced in the Reconstruction period, as it stands out in Thompson’s letter, was the neglect of the black community by the local clergy and religious. Davis does not mention a reply from Rome to Thompson’s letter but he believes that this pre-civil war letter played a role in a later intervention for the sake of the evangelization of black people. Rather than working with and among the blacks themselves, the bishops of the United States preferred soliciting from people they disagreed with on the question of the abolition of slavery and the Slave Trade, especially Irish “missionaries from Europe to work among the black population.”⁴⁰

³⁸ Davis, *The History of Black Catholics*, 116.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 120; From my 8-year pastoral experience I learn that, even today, especially in the Archdiocese of New Orleans, more and more white diocesan priests stay away from serving as pastor in African American Catholic Churches – churches that are predominantly black. Most white pastors of African American Churches are members of religious orders. The common reason for this is that the income of predominantly black parishes is not enough to maintain a diocesan priest. Diocesan priests need their salaries as they are registered with Internal Revenue Service (IRS) as “self-employed” and eligible to file taxes on their income. Religious order members do not personally receive income but their

Delores Labbé reports that in southern Louisiana, a system of “segregated parishes” for blacks was experimented with to see if it would be effective in curbing or dealing with the racial tension of the period after the Civil War. However, she points out, that “the experiment of the 1890’s has become the dilemma of the 1970’s”⁴¹ because what was put on experimental basis became the norm filling southern Louisiana with many segregated “white churches” and “black churches” that still exist today. It was because the bishops, most of whom benefited from slavery and the Slave Trade, felt “resentment ... toward the freed slaves after the Civil War”⁴² that brought the emancipation. From the above, we can conclude that the white Catholic leadership’s decision and negative attitude towards black evangelization in the reconstruction period was ethnocentrically driven. To employ Omi and Winant’s racial formation perspective, the bishops’ approach to the mission among black people in those days was fundamentally “racist”, a “racist project”, or simply, “racism.”

Part Three: Racial Slavery and the Decline of Black Catholicism

To say that black Catholicism in the United States is on the decline in our contemporary times is not hard to verify. The widely reported events include the closing of black Catholic inner-city schools and churches for lack of funds and diocesan personnel, the dwindling number of black vocations to the priesthood and religious life, and the estrangement of black philosophical and theological scholarship from the day-to-day black Catholic communitarian experience.

communities do. In my view, however, the fact that bishops could support their priests, as religious orders do, in poorer parishes if they regard it important, makes the old reason – racism that has trickled down from the post-war white leadership sentiments regarding evangelization of blacks – a probable explanation.

⁴¹ Delores E. Labbé, *Jim Crow Comes to Church: The Establishment of Segregated Catholic Parishes in South Louisiana* (New York: Arno Press, 1978), 92.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 121.

The most recent report that strongly makes the connection between the decline of black Catholicism of our time, the practice of racial slavery of old, and racial discrimination was delivered by the black Catholic ethicist Bryan Massingale. In his 2008 Plenary Address of the Joint Conference of Black Clergy, Sisters, Deacons and Seminarians at Montgomery, Alabama, Massingale spoke of the frustration and disappointment brewing in the black Catholic community as it witnesses a free-fall after many years of promises by the hierarchy of the Church. He presented a recent study that shows, “only 18% of the country’s bishops have issued statements condemning the sin of racism.” Since the bishops’ conference collectively published their pastoral letter on racism, *Brothers and Sisters to Us*, “over half of ...[diocesan] offices of black Catholics report that they lack the financial resources needed for effective ministry in the [b]lack community;” “[b]lack enrollment in Catholic elementary and high schools has declined in the past 20 years, while Asian and Hispanic enrollment has increased;” and the “... [w]hite Catholics over the last twenty-five years exhibit diminished – rather than increased – support for government policies aimed at reducing racial equality.”⁴³ The common lesson in the report is what this paper suggests – that the racism of slavery is alive and well in the Church. As Massingale puts it:

[W]e have not yet fully appreciated the profound implications of our founding insight: the U.S. Catholic church is a ‘white racist institution.’ ... What makes it ‘white’ and ‘racist’ is the pervasive belief that European aesthetics, music, theology, and persons – and only these – are standard, normative, universal, and truly ‘Catholic.’⁴⁴

The profound nature of the problem requires blacks to adopt an equal and profound approach to deal with it.

⁴³ Bryan N. Massingale, “Forty Years Later in a ‘White Racist Institution’: Looking Back, Looking Around, Looking Forward,” Plenary Address of the 2008 Joint Conference of Black Clergy, Sisters, Deacons and Seminarians, Montgomery, AL, July 29, 2008. See also Conference Committee on African American Catholics, online at www.usccb.org/saac.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 15, 16.

Thus Rodney Petersen writes:

Orlando Patterson summarizes the toll that racism took upon a people. He cites broken bloodlines with their impact upon gender relations, crises in marriage and family life among African-Americans. The impact upon images of masculinity and patterns of social accountability are further described. All of this bears itself out in current crime statistics. The effect of racist social reality on upon the youth of America is detailed in its chilling reality by Fred Smith.⁴⁵

These effects of racism may be applicable also to black Catholics. First, in the antebellum period, slavery allowed white Catholic slave-owners to sell their slaves. The selling of slaves was widely known to be an immediate cause of destruction to the black-slave-family because of the separation of relatives. There is also the destructive effect of racism through slavery on black men, women, and their interrelationship that disorganized the socio-cultural life of the black community. Finally, Petersen's quote also mentions black youth as one of the casualties of racism. Through slavery the youth – children of slaves – were slaves. They suffered from the lack of education and lack of self-worth with the consciousness that they belonged to an inferior, powerless, and hopeless race. All these, together, disturb the self image of young blacks and affect the way they interact with the world and their immediate environment – family, friends, neighborhood, society, etc.. Petersen seeks to stress that the extent of the destructive effects of racism (seen through slavery) is genocidal – it destroys a people because it destroys everyone in the black family without exception. Blacks who lived in the post-Civil War era did not encounter racism in the form of slavery; instead, they suffered under white paternalistic and triumphalistic models of mission in the Catholic Church.

⁴⁵ Rodney L. Petersen, "Mission in the Context of Racism, Restorative Justice and Reconciliation" in *Antioch Agenda: Essays on the Restorative Church in Honor of Orlando E. Costas*, ed. Daniel Jeyaraj et al, (New Delhi: Indian Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, 2007), 263.

The decline of Catholicism among blacks in the USA should not be a surprising phenomenon. It should be expected because of the ever-lingering racial ideology in Roman Catholicism in the USA. Racism reminds black people about slavery and threatens to conquer, dispossess, and dominate as the papal bulls declared. Racism then creates insecurity of membership in black Catholics as their culture and gifts are, in Mudimbe's terms, derided, refuted and replaced by European cultural forms as orthodox. Racism's importance made it a central issue for most black Catholic conferences. The first three National Black Catholic Congresses during Reconstruction called the bishops' attention to racial discrimination and the need for inclusion or redress.⁴⁶ In 1984, ten black bishops issued a pastoral letter on evangelization entitled "What We Have Seen and Heard" in which they underlined racism as an obstacle to evangelization.⁴⁷ And in 2002, the National Black Catholic Congress IX took place in Chicago, where a national pastoral plan was designed which again featured an urgent call to the US Catholic leadership to focus on the elimination of "racism" especially in all parish levels.⁴⁸ Shawn Copeland vividly puts it that "pastoral neglect and disregard by white clergy and hierarchy have forced black Catholics to seek out separate sites for the development of our own spiritual life."⁴⁹ She goes on to point out what she sees as the decline of black Catholicism namely: "[t]he thwarted work of the black Catholic congresses of the nineteenth century, the collapse of the Federated Colored Catholics in the early twentieth century, the demise of Catholic schools in so many cities, along with the

⁴⁶ The American Catholic Tradition, *Three Catholic Afro-American Congresses* (Cincinnati, OH: The American Catholic Tribune, 1978), 14.

⁴⁷ See "What We Have Seen and Heard: A Pastoral Letter on Evangelization From the Black Bishops of the United States" online at www.aodonline.org/NR/rdonlyres/.../seenandheard.pdf (accessed December 11, 2008).

⁴⁸ The National Black Catholic Congress, "National Black Catholic Congress IX" online at <http://www.nbccongress.org/aboutus/nbcc-congresses/congress-09-PRINCIPAL-SPIRITUALITY.asp> (accessed December 11, 2008).

⁴⁹ M. Shawn Copeland, "Catholic Theology: African American Context," 1998, in "Stamped with the Image of God": *African Americans as God's Image in Black*, edited by Cyprian Davis, O.S.B. and Jamie Phelps, O.P. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003), 148.

mergers and closures of so many parishes that nurtured black Catholics”⁵⁰ Copeland explicitly makes the case that the decline of black Catholicism is a direct result of racism. One may ask whether the Church did nothing good toward blacks? The church made some strides in individual cases; however the critique of this paper concerns the Church’s stance on racism in its structures and the issue of slavery, which seriously damaged and marred its ministry to black people. At best, most scholars describe the Church’s approach to issues of black people as one carried out in reluctance and ambiguity.⁵¹

Conclusion

According to Bevans and Schroeder, “The history of mission, the movements of culture, and the history of theology intersect, and depending on the *way* they intersect, various ‘models’ of mission can be discerned.”⁵² Analogously, it expected that if any of these three changes, the rest must change as well. However this did not happen. While the history of the antebellum period and the slave cultural practices were changed, the theology has not been changed because, to use J. Deotis Roberts’ words, “we have not dealt racism [the ideology that fuels the theology] a mortal blow here at home in the United States.”⁵³ In his book *Race: A Theological Account*, J. Kameron Carter expresses surprise:

[T]hat modern racial discourse and practice have their genesis inside Christian theological discourse and missiological practice, which themselves were tied to the practice of empire in the advance of Western civilization.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Wright, “Black Liberation and the Catholic Church,” 75; see also Bentley R. Anderson, “Black, White, and Catholic: Southern Jesuits Confront the Race Question, 1952,” *Catholic Historical Review* 91, no. 3 (July 2005): 484. See also John F. Quinn, “Three Cheers for the Abolitionist Pope!: American Reaction to Gregory XVI’s Condemnation of the Slave Trade, 1840-1860,” *Catholic Historical Review* 90, no. 1 (January 2004): 85.

⁵² Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 73.

⁵³ J. Deotis Roberts, *Black Theology in Dialogue* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1987), 13.

But it is precisely an account of this problem that is sorely lacking.⁵⁴

This implies that, in order to change or transform its missionary approach to black people in the USA, the Roman Catholic Church must seriously confront its historical, theological, and cultural interpretations, perceptions or beliefs about black people. In this paper I have focused on the historical and cultural interpretation expressed in the ethnocentric orientation of white Catholic leaders toward blacks since the inception of the Church in the United States. The call of the black Catholic Church is a call for transformation, not reformation. I find missiologist Keith Bridston's view of mission in the ecumenical movement era appropriate for the present discourse. He writes:

The idea that a reformation of mission would be an adequate change fails to take into account the possibility that the traditional forms of mission are themselves irreformable because they embody a response to a world that no longer exists and express a theological understanding of the relation of the world to God that is now felt to be fallacious.⁵⁵

It means black Catholics must not shy away from insisting on structural changes; nor should we settle for reforms of the contents of structures. As Emilie Townes warns, concerning civil society, "failure to engage structurally in the age of empire has been and will continue to be disastrous ..." if we acquiesce in reforms.⁵⁶ Slavery and the slave trade must be seriously studied, analyzed and incorporated into our theologizing. The sin of slavery will not be appeased until the US Church openly apologizes to blacks as a starting point of a healing process that would include a systematic and open condemnation of the theological and ethical teachings in the past – teachings that have discretely informed structures in the

⁵⁴ J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3.

⁵⁵ Keith Bridston, *Mission Myth and Reality* (New York: Friendship Press, 1965), 17.

⁵⁶ Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 126.

Church, theological academies, and seminaries.⁵⁷ When he was recently interviewed, an old black priest who has experienced racial discrimination all his life was asked, “Right now, today, what would you like to see the church doing that you don’t perceive it to be doing?” His answer: “For one thing, I haven’t heard the church say ‘I’m sorry’ publicly for all the things that have happened and are still happening to black people.”⁵⁸ Without transformation in the variables, the mission model(s) of today’s Church will continue to be ethnocentric, and will yield the same failed and declining results in black Catholicism of today.

⁵⁷ See Kwame Nantambu, “Question of Apology for Slavery: A Global View,” Trinicenter.com (June 15, 2001), <http://www.trinicenter.com/kwame/20010615d.htm> (accessed September 16, 2009); Philip S. Kaufman, *Why You Can Disagree and Remain a Faithful Catholic*, foreword by Richard A. McCormick, (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1995), 48.

⁵⁸ John L. Allen Jr., “Black Priest Lives with Hope, Resignation,” *National Catholic Reporter* 34 (November 21, 1997).

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