From the Editor’s Desk

A major North American theologian, James Hal Cone, died in April of this year. In 1968, when Gustavo Gutierrez was penning his proposal for a theology of liberation, Cone published a groundbreaking essay, “Christianity and Black Power.”1 In that essay, Cone limned a theology of structural sin that implicated the churches in the white supremacist ideology that had led to slavery and the destruction of a whole people.

In the face of this history, Cone argued that the church is called to live the Gospel by facing its own internal racism and its entanglements with the racism of US society. “If the Church is to remain faithful to its Lord,” he wrote, “it must make a decisive break with the structure of this society by launching a vehement attack on the evils of racism in all forms. It must become prophetic, demanding a radical change to the interlocking structures of this society” (3). Yet, Cone saw a deeply rooted resistance to this Gospel demand within the church itself. He concluded “that Christ is operating outside the denominational Church. The real Church of Christ is that grouping that identifies with the suffering of the poor by becoming one with them” (12).

Thus began the impactful life of an unforgettable theologian, whose voice came to speak to both Protestant and Catholic theologians, and by implication, to their churches in the United States. His work has also generated an examination of “whiteness” that now involves not only African American theologians, but a growing number of Caucasian, Latino/a, and Asian theologians, and theologians beyond North America.

One of his last books, The Cross and the Lynching Tree, is a bracing venture into the “dangerous memories” that all theologians must keep foremost in mind as they dare to undertake their theological vocation in the name of the Gospel. In her address to the Black Catholic Theological Symposium at their gathering in June 2018, M. Shawn Copeland captured the importance of Black theology for each and all of us: “Black theology is the prophetic theology of a crucified community in a crucifying world, black theology consciously and intentionally affirms black personhood. Indeed, black theology affirms and values all human persons as the expression of God’s own self.” She added, in reference to the liberation from racism which is one of the goals of Black theology:

In the United States, this liberation will be expressed in authentic collaboration between blacks and whites. In other words, in order to realize concretely the authentic way in which this God intends for us to live, blacks and whites, in response to the demands of the Gospel will work together in effective solidarity for the eradication of white racist supremacy and its effects in themselves, in political and economic arrangements, in culture, and in the church.2

The particular history of black people in the USA that grounds Cone’s theology has its cognates in the dangerous memories that haunt the histories of many peoples here and globally, including, not least, the other victims of white supremacist genocide, the indigenous peoples of the Americas and elsewhere. Not to be forgotten is the history of racism against Latino and Asian people, and also histories of hatred toward and exclusion of refugees that we are witnessing in the United States, Europe, and Myanmar, to name only a few places. As is evident, these histories continue to unfold tragically in our own time.

Cone’s legacy serves itself as a “dangerous memory” to our cluster of articles in this issue that take us back to 1968 for a consideration of how theology and the church have moved (or not) in relation to some ever-bracing issues: the continuing ecclesial pain over *Humanae Vitae*, the ongoing internal anguish over the church’s struggle to embrace women as equal to men in the sight of God, and the unfinished work of liberation stemming from the CELAM conference in Medellín. Looking back fifty years later to that momentous year is a sobering reminder of how inscrutably history moves, how short are our lives in the course of it, and how history, including church history, is not so much a chronicle of progress as it is the ongoing unfolding of a muddled human drama. Many hopes have been dashed, but others emerge. Yet we live in faith (Heb 11:39–40), preceded by a cloud of witnesses who themselves did not live to see the Promised Land, yet who were driven by a heartfelt hope to live and work for their descendents’ arrival there one day.

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After several years of distinguished service as our Book Review Editor, Dan Kendall, SJ, will be stepping down. We are now looking for his successor. The desired candidate will be familiar with the journal and conversant with current theology; will have good editorial and organizational skills; will be able to devote about twenty hours per month to the job; and can commit fully to our mission as a work of the Society of Jesus. The term is five years with possible renewal and includes a stipend. If you are interested, please send an email to the Editor at tseditor@scu.edu, no later than October 15, 2018. We hope to have a new appointment made by the end of this calendar year.

Paul G. Crowley, SJ
Editor-in-Chief