

## JAMES CONE AND RECENT CATHOLIC EPISCOPAL TEACHING ON RACISM

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*[The author analyses 21 published statements by U.S. Catholic bishops from 1990 to 2000 on different aspects of racism. He explores the texts' understanding of racism, and highlights the deficits in many of these statements. Apart from several documents of Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles and Bishop Thomas Daily of Brooklyn, the texts typically fail to stress social sinful structures. The author examines Cone's understanding of racism and White supremacy, as well as Cone's conviction that simple moral suasion is ineffective. The author concludes with an enumeration of six shifts needed in Catholic reflection on racism.]*

AT A CATHOLIC SPONSORED justice conference held in 1983, Professor James Cone gave what he called “a theological challenge to the American Catholic Church.” His contention, in short, is that there are critical faults and deficits in Catholic reflection on racism. He adduces this, in part, from a disparity between Catholic concern regarding issues, on the one hand, such as poverty and the sanctity of life, and, on the other hand, the peripheral attention given to the endemic racism of U.S. society. Here are his stirring words: “What is it about the Catholic definition of justice that makes many persons of that faith progressive in their attitude toward the poor in Central America but reactionary in their views toward the poor in black America? . . . It is the failure of the Catholic Church to deal effectively with the problem of racism that causes me to question the quality of its commitment to justice in other areas. I do not wish to minimize the importance of Catholic contributions to poor people’s struggles for justice, but I must point out the *ambiguity* of the Catholic stand on justice when racism is not addressed forthrightly.”<sup>1</sup> Given that virtually

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<sup>1</sup> James H. Cone, “A Theological Challenge to the American Catholic Church,”

every pressing social concern—education, care for the environment, access to health care, capital punishment, immigration, workers' rights, HIV/AIDS, criminal justice, right to life, concern for women—is arguably entangled with or aggravated by racial bias against people of color, Cone's challenge is a fundamental one. Catholic failure to engage adequately the pivotal issue of racial injustice would decisively compromise its theology of justice and renders its praxis of justice ineffective.

Cone's reservations concerning the adequacy and effectiveness of U.S. Catholic reflection on racism also have been expressed by official voices within the Catholic Church. In 1989, the U.S. Bishops' Committee on Black Catholics issued a statement commemorating the tenth anniversary of the national conference's pastoral letter, *Brothers and Sisters to Us: U.S. Bishops' Pastoral Letter on Racism in Our Day*.<sup>2</sup> However, this committee found little worth celebrating. Instead, it concluded that:

The promulgation of the pastoral on racism was soon forgotten by all but a few. A survey . . . revealed a *pathetic, anemic response* from archdioceses and dioceses around the country. . . . The pastoral on racism had made little or no impact on the majority of Catholics in the United States. . . . In spite of all that has been said and written about racism in the last twenty years, very little—if anything at all—has been done in Catholic education; such as it was yesterday, it is today.<sup>3</sup>

Two years later, at a symposium celebrating the centennial anniversary of modern Catholic social teaching, Joseph Francis, an African American and at that time auxiliary bishop of Newark, declared that the lack of attention given *Brothers and Sisters to Us* made it “the best kept secret in the church in this country.” He concluded by voicing sentiments very similar to those expressed by Cone:

Social justice vis-a-vis the eradication of racism in our church is simply not a priority of social concern commissions, social concern directors and agencies. While I applaud the concern of such individuals and groups for the people of Eastern Europe, China, and Latin America, that same concern is not expressed, is not incarnated for the victims of racism in this country nor do I hear voices raised against the violence and carnage taking place in some African nations and, closer to us, especially in

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in *Speaking the Truth: Ecumenism, Liberation, and Black Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 54–55; emphasis in the original.

<sup>2</sup> National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Brothers and Sisters to Us: U.S. Bishops' Pastoral Letter on Racism in Our Day* (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1979).

<sup>3</sup> Bishops' Committee on Black Catholics, *For the Love of One Another: A Special Message on the Occasion of the Tenth Anniversary of Brothers and Sisters to Us* (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1989) 39, 41; emphasis added.

Haiti. The question is, Is the quality of our mercy strained when black people are concerned?<sup>4</sup>

Written in 1979, *Brothers and Sisters to Us* was the last pastoral letter devoted specifically to the subject of racism issued in the name of the entire national body of Catholic bishops. In this article, I propose to survey statements on racism written by individual bishops and state conferences of bishops within the period from 1990 to 2000—the time that has elapsed since the observations I have just cited. In giving these statements the scholarly attention from the Catholic theological community not given to previous episcopal teaching on racial justice,<sup>5</sup> I seek to discern the contours of contemporary official teaching on racial injustice, to determine to what extent the criticisms voiced by James Cone and others concerning Catholic reflection on racism are still valid, and to give an account of the reasons or causes for the inadequacies that may exist. To this end, first I provide a survey and analysis of these episcopal statements. I then offer critical observations upon them in light of the theological perspectives found in the corpus of Cone's works. In conclusion, I provide constructive proposals or suggestions to guide future Catholic theological reflection on racism in America. Through this study, both the benefits and necessity of a constructive engagement of Catholic theology with the African American experience—the core of the Black Catholic theological project—will become apparent.

### Recent Statements of American Catholic Bishops on Racism

The statements discussed in this article are those published in the semi-official weekly *Origins*, a documentary branch of the U.S. Catholic News Service. This publication is trusted for its timely and accurate delivery of some of the more significant statements impacting the Catholic community—especially documents and commentary issued by those exercising official teaching authority in the Church. While one cannot claim that this publication has printed every statement on race given by the individual bishops, the statements that are found here are considered of noteworthy importance. These documents thus provide us with a reliable profile of the thinking of Catholic leaders on this topic.

<sup>4</sup> Bishop Joseph Francis, "Revisiting Five Bishops' Pastorals: Justice for All," *Origins* 20 (March 14, 1991) 659.

<sup>5</sup> I detail the dearth of American Catholic theological reflection on racism in my essay, "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: Contributions of African American Experience and Thought to Catholic Theology*, ed. Jamie T. Phelps, O.P. (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 1997) 79–101.

Searching this resource for episcopal letters and statements on racism, issued from 1990 to 2000, one finds 21 documents—five of which were issued by one prelate, Cardinal Roger Mahony, the archbishop of Los Angeles.<sup>6</sup> These texts vary considerably in length, purpose, and theological acumen. Many were written in response to a specific situation of racial injustice occurring in a local community, for example, cross burnings, gubernatorial elections, Ku Klux Klan rallies or marches, educational initiatives, outbreaks of racial violence, the O.J. Simpson verdict, and referendum initiatives concerning affirmative action. Some statements were given by bishops on the occasion of a Martin Luther King, Jr., holiday observance. Still others have no particular social catalyst. The majority are very brief declarations; a few are more comprehensive and extended reflections.

To arrive at an understanding of the ethical teaching found in these texts,

<sup>6</sup> The documents studied here, in chronological order are: Bishop William Friend, “That All May Be One,” *Origins* 20 (August 16, 1990) 175–78; Bishop Thomas Daily, “Created in the Image of God,” *Origins* 20 (January 3, 1991) 488–90; Louisiana Bishops, “Issues Faced in Gubernatorial Election,” *Origins* 21 (November 14, 1991) 361, 363; Archbishop Daniel Kucera, “Growing Racism Contributes to Society’s Unraveling,” *Origins* 21 (December 5, 1991) 423–24; Bishop William Bullock, “Cross Burnings Produce Burning Questions,” *Origins* 21 (January 23, 1992) 530; Cardinal Roger Mahony, “The Rodney King Verdict and Its Aftermath,” *Origins* 22 (May 21, 1992) 17–23 [this same issue also has briefer statements from Bishops Walter Sullivan and John Sullivan]; Cardinal Roger Mahony, “An Addiction to the Abuse of Those Called Inferior,” *Origins* 22 (June 11, 1992) 63–76; California Bishops, “Racism: A Pervasive Virus,” *Origins* 22 (June 18, 1992) 96; Bishops of Galveston Houston, “A Local Church’s Cultural and Ethnic Diversity,” *Origins* 24 (June 16, 1994) 65–70; Cardinal Adam Maida, “Human Unity: Beyond a Religion of Abstractions,” *Origins* 24 (January 5, 1995) 493–95; Cardinal Roger Mahony, “Affirmative Action and Catholic Social Teaching,” *Origins* 25 (June 22, 1995) 89–94; Cardinal Roger Mahony, “The Way to Racial and Ethnic Understanding,” *Origins* 25 (October 26, 1995) 321–23; Bishop Thomas Daily, “The Image of God Revisited,” *Origins* 25 (January 25, 1996) 522–26; Bishop William Houck and Pastoral Council of Jackson, Miss., “Steps Toward Eradicating Racism,” *Origins* 25 (March 7, 1996) 630–32; Cardinal Roger Mahony, “A Pastoral Response to Proposition 209,” *Origins* 26 (September 26, 1996) 229, 231–32; Florida Bishops, “The Education of Black Youth,” *Origins* 26 (December 12, 1996) 435–36; Louisiana Bishops, “Racism’s Assumption That Some Are Superior,” *Origins* 26 (January 30, 1997) 526–27; Bishop James Griffin, “Racism: A Tarnished Reflection of Ourselves,” *Origins* 27 (May 29, 1997) 17–20; Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua, “Healing Racism through Faith and Truth,” *Origins* 27 (January 22, 1998) 518–21; Bishop Sean O’Malley, “Solidarity: The Antidote to Resurgent Racism,” *Origins* 29 (February 3, 2000) 529–33; and Illinois Bishops, “Moving Beyond Racism,” *Origins* 29 (April 27, 2000) 731–32. One should note that many other bishops have issued statements that make passing references to racism as part of a larger concern (e.g., multicultural worship or urban parish life). The sole focus of this article is with those statements devoted specifically to the matter of racial justice.

I wish to examine how they perceive the phenomenon of racism, the theological reflection or interpretation they give of this injustice, and the means they advocate for its eradication or decrease.

### What is “Racism”?

The Louisiana Catholic bishops in 1997 wrote: “The teaching of the Roman Catholic Church on racism is clear. Racism is morally wrong. To persist obstinately in this stance is unChristian.”<sup>7</sup> To know that Christians are to shun and struggle against racism is one thing; this conviction seems intuitively obvious. But to know what is meant by “racism” is quite another. What exactly are Catholic believers called to reject and combat? The question of how the bishops understand the reality of racism is critically important; their perception of this social malady will influence decisively their theological interpretation and ethical guidance.

Given the importance of this question, it is somewhat surprising to note how few of the bishops clearly articulate how they understand the phenomenon of racism; most apparently presume that its meaning is familiar and commonly shared by their readers. (Later I will describe what seems to be this implicit understanding). The bishops who do offer formal definitions evidence considerable variance. For example, the bishops of Louisiana state: “Racism is the theory or practice which assumes that one race or ethnic stock is superior to another.”<sup>8</sup> Bishop Sean O’Malley gives a similar understanding: “Racism perpetuates a basic untruth that purports an innate superiority of one group over another because of skin color, culture, or ethnicity.”<sup>9</sup> These statements, then, understand racism as the more or less deliberate thoughts and actions that proceed from a relatively conscious conviction about the superiority of one’s racial group. This is evidenced by the Louisiana bishops declaration: “To hold that one race is inherently superior to another is a serious sin.”<sup>10</sup>

Other bishops offer more nuanced definitions of racism that seek to differentiate between its personal, interpersonal, and institutional manifestations. For example, the Illinois prelates asked: “What is *racism*? Racism is a personal sin and social disorder rooted in the belief that one race is superior to another. It involves not only prejudice but also the use of religious, social, political, economic or historical power to keep one race privileged. . . . Racism is personal, institutional, cultural, and internal.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Louisiana Bishops, “Racism’s Assumption That Some Are Superior” 526.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Sean O’Malley, “Solidarity: the Antidote to Resurgent Racism” 531.

<sup>10</sup> Louisiana Bishops, “Racism’s Assumption That Some Are Superior” 526.

<sup>11</sup> Illinois Bishops, “Moving Beyond Racism” 731; italics in the original.

These church leaders go on to develop more precise definitions and distinctions among the forms of racism they have identified. A similar concern for clear distinctions is found in the statement given by the Pastoral Council of Jackson, Mississippi.<sup>12</sup> This text states: “*Racism* is both individual and institutional. Individual racism is expressed through a person’s prejudicial actions and words. Institutionally, racism is the assumption of power to enforce personal prejudice through discriminatory practices and actions in various institutions of society, including the church. . . . Prejudice, coupled with the abuse of power, creates a racist system.”<sup>13</sup> These church leaders then proceed to distinguish among individual, cultural and institutional manifestations of racism. What this second group articulates, then, is an awareness that racism encompasses not only conscious, deliberate actions of personal racial animus or hatred, but also the widely accepted social habits and conventions that result in advantage or privilege conferred upon those of a given skin color.<sup>14</sup>

Yet while there appears to be some disparity between the understandings of racism articulated by individual bishops, perhaps this difference is more rhetorical than real. For regardless of the formal definitions offered, the substantive concerns of these bishops lie with the more obvious and visible actions of racial hatred and exclusion. Even when they articulate an awareness of covert and systemic forms of racism, their attention is focused primarily upon the voluntary, conscious, and deliberate actions of individuals. For example, in these documents one can find extensive listing of concrete personal behaviors that are proscribed as unethical: “discrimination in housing, lending, employment, job promotion, contracting, retailing [and] health care,”<sup>15</sup> “narrow habits of mind,”<sup>16</sup> cross burnings,<sup>17</sup> physical attacks upon persons and violence against property,<sup>18</sup> attitudes of “greed and selfishness,”<sup>19</sup> “racially restricted communities, clubs, [and] schools,”<sup>20</sup> racist Internet hate speech and “law enforcement officers who routinely

<sup>12</sup> Although this is a statement of the diocesan pastoral council, it is included among the episcopal statements inasmuch as the local bishop is a member of this council and moreover has formally endorsed its sentiments in an accompanying cover letter.

<sup>13</sup> Pastoral Council/Jackson Miss., “Steps Toward Eradicating Racism” 630–31.

<sup>14</sup> One should note, however, that never is it explicitly stated that this advantage or privilege is enjoyed by White Americans. The phrase “White privilege” is not found in any of these recent statements.

<sup>15</sup> Friend, “That All May Be One” 176.

<sup>16</sup> Kucera, “Growing Racism Contributes to Society’s Unraveling” 423.

<sup>17</sup> Bullock, “Cross Burnings Produce Burning Questions” 530.

<sup>18</sup> Daily, “Created in the Image of God” 489; and Mahony, “The Rodney King Verdict” 17, 19.

<sup>19</sup> California Bishops, “Racism A Pervasive Virus” 96.

<sup>20</sup> Pastoral Council/Jackson, Miss., “Steps Toward Eradicating Racism” 630.

profile black drivers.”<sup>21</sup> However, what one does not find is an examination or critique of the underlying cultural beliefs or myths that facilitate, engender, and legitimate racial bias.<sup>22</sup> Racist beliefs are viewed as widely shared *personal* stereotypes, not as reflections of endemic *cultural* patterns.<sup>23</sup> Thus these episcopal statements—whatever their expressed intent—implicitly convey an understanding that reduces racism to demonstrable manifestations of personal racial prejudice. Substantively, these prelates understand racism as the racially pejorative beliefs of individuals that are expressed in interpersonal actions and omissions.

This point is so central that it requires further explication. It is because they locate racism principally in personal beliefs and practices—which may or may not assume an institutional presence—that one prelate can define racism as “a sin against fraternal charity” rather than as a violation of justice.<sup>24</sup> This line of reasoning causes another to see “racism” as equally manifest “when a black man is attacked in a white neighborhood or when a white man is attacked in a black neighborhood.”<sup>25</sup> Not seeing racism in terms of social groups with unequal power at least partially explains why a group of bishops speaks of a “mainstream” or “prevailing” culture—but not a “dominant” culture.<sup>26</sup>

Hence, notwithstanding the formal definitions given by a few,<sup>27</sup> one must conclude that these bishops possess an understanding of racism that privileges personal and interpersonal manifestations of racial bias over

<sup>21</sup> Illinois Bishops, “Moving Beyond Racism” 732.

<sup>22</sup> For example, there is no extended critique of media representations or depictions of African Americans that reflect deeply embedded cultural myths about Black sexuality. An example of extended critique of cultural representations of blackness and their role in the maintenance of White social dominance, see bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End 1992). For a description of the cultural myths surrounding Black sexuality and their contemporary impact upon public policy, see Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1999).

<sup>23</sup> The exception to this prevailing viewpoint is Cardinal Mahony’s statement, “An Addiction to the Abuse of Those Called Inferior.”

<sup>24</sup> Bevilacqua, “Healing Racism Through Faith and Truth” 518.

<sup>25</sup> Daily, “Created in the Image of God” 489; I hasten to add that either situation is an instance of unjust violence. What is problematic, however, is the proposition that Blacks and Whites are *equally* implicated in the systemic injustice of racism. This is the danger of viewing racism principally in terms of personal actions and beliefs, evidenced in statements such as “racism is part of all of us whatever our own race” because “each of us is prone to stereotyping people” (ibid).

<sup>26</sup> Bishops of Galveston-Houston, “Local Church’s Cultural and Ethnic Diversity” 67.

<sup>27</sup> Notable exceptions to this line of thinking are the views of Cardinal Mahony, and those espoused in Bishop Dailey’s second pastoral letter. Their positions will be presented later.

those which are systemic and structural.<sup>28</sup> Racism is perceived principally as racial prejudice and its behavioral expressions, that is, the relatively conscious and deliberate acts of individuals who engage in racially pejorative attitudes, speech, and actions of omission and commission. As will be seen, viewing racism principally in terms of individual racial bias decisively influences the theological reflection these prelates develop, the actions they counsel for combating racism, and the critical challenges posed by Cone's theological perspective.

### Theological and Ethical Reflection upon Racism

"All baptized Catholics have a moral obligation to work toward the elimination of racism" declare the bishops of Illinois.<sup>29</sup> On this point, there is unanimity across the statements surveyed. With one voice, the bishops teach the absolute incompatibility of racist behavior with Christian convictions. What I now seek to discover are the theological warrants given for this stance. What theological interpretation do the bishops give to the reality of racism? Why, in the light of faith, is racism morally wrong? Upon what grounds do the bishops state that racism is contrary to Christian belief and practice?

Bishop Joseph Francis, speaking about the pastoral letter *Brothers and Sisters to Us*, noted that it was not issued as "a theological or sociological treatise, but a simple, compelling message appealing to the conscience of Catholic America and a call for conversion in its way of thinking, speaking, and acting relative to minorities."<sup>30</sup> A very similar statement could be made about most of these most recent pastoral messages. They are primarily moral exhortations and appeals to conscience. They employ a parenetic style of argumentation; in other words, the basis for the moral appeal or duty proposed is often presupposed and left implicit.<sup>31</sup> These episcopal interventions are admonitions rooted in faith convictions that are assumed to be intuitively obvious and shared by those being addressed. Thus the warrants for the bishops' stance on racism are seldom argued or explained in detail. What one finds, rather, are statements of fundamental faith beliefs that show the incongruity of racial prejudice and discrimination with Christian identity.

<sup>28</sup> Bishop Griffin provides a typical expression of the priority of the personal over the structural: "Racism flows from personal attitudes and actions into the human world around us; it becomes a social evil. Our social institutions and structures are [then] affected" ("Racism: A Tarnished View of Ourselves" 19).

<sup>29</sup> "Moving Beyond Racism" 731.

<sup>30</sup> Francis, "Revisiting Five Bishops' Pastorals" 659.

<sup>31</sup> S.v. "Parenesis" in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, ed. James F. Childress and John Macquarrie (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986) 448.



Most commonly, the immorality of racism is grounded in the doctrines of creation and Incarnation. The doctrine of creation holds that all humans are creatures of the one Creator God who made all human persons—without exception—in the divine image and likeness. Being creatures of the same God gives a unity to the human family; being made in the divine image confers upon all human creatures an intrinsic dignity and sacred value that must be respected, promoted, and defended. The Incarnation declares that in Christ, all men and women are made brothers and sisters to Christ and to all through a common act of divine redemption. The treatment of our human neighbor, then, is the measure of our commitment to God.

These fundamental confessions of faith are universally held by the bishops and virtually every statement on racism makes explicit or implicit appeal to them. For example, Brooklyn Bishop Thomas Daily teaches: “If God is our Father, we must be related to one another as brother and sister. Race, creed, color, sex, national origin, language, culture or condition of life is irrelevant.”<sup>32</sup> Likewise, Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles states: “The ‘character of the human person’ begins to be defined in the creation stories of Genesis, where we understand that we are created in God’s image, and then in the Gospels, where we learn that God becomes human. Together, the creation accounts and the incarnation form the most compelling affirmation of the worth and dignity of the human person.”<sup>33</sup> The Louisiana prelates profess: “Sacred Scripture testifies that God created us with an equal dignity and destiny. . . . We share a common dignity in Jesus Christ. Through the Holy Spirit, we enjoy communion with the triune God and are bonded with one another as brothers and sisters.”<sup>34</sup> As a final example, Philadelphia Cardinal Bevilacqua instructs: “Our dignity as human beings is a sacred one, for we are children of God created by him in his own image and likeness.”<sup>35</sup>

A few bishops also appeal to the narrative of Pentecost to promote the respect for cultural pluralism and diversity they believe should mark the Christian’s attitude and behavior. The Pentecost event is interpreted as demonstrating that the diversity of language, color, and ethnic heritage in the human community exists by divine will; this proscribes attitudes of cultural superiority and practices of cultural assimilation.<sup>36</sup> Some pastoral statements also make use of the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37); through an appeal to Jesus’ heroic depiction of the cultural

<sup>32</sup> Daily, “Created in the Image of God” 488.

<sup>33</sup> Mahony, “Affirmative Action and Catholic Social Teaching” 91.

<sup>34</sup> Louisiana Bishops, “Racism’s Assumption That Some Are Superior” 526.

<sup>35</sup> Bevilacqua, “Healing Racism Through Faith and Truth” 518.

<sup>36</sup> These documents are extended meditations upon the Pentecost event and its implications for racial justice: Mahony, “An Addiction to the Abuse of Those

outcast, contemporary believers are enjoined to respect those ostracized because of their cultural differences.<sup>37</sup>

Because of these convictions, the bishops enunciate a fundamental ethical judgment. They unanimously hold that racism is a “sin” because it is absolutely incompatible with the Christian worldview outlined above. Two examples are typical of the type of condemnations found. The California bishops assert: “Racism is an affront against human dignity, is an affront to God who creates every unrepeatable human being in his own image and who has created the diversity of peoples to manifest his own wisdom . . . Racism is a sin against God.”<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Bishop Griffin of Columbus, Ohio, declares: “Racism is a serious sin. It is a refusal to accept God’s creative plan—that all human beings are made in his image and likeness, that all persons have the same heavenly Father, regardless of their race or nationality.”<sup>39</sup>

However, while the injustice of racism is unanimously given the theological interpretation of “sin,” the precise nature of racism’s sinfulness is neither totally clear nor the object of universal consensus. While some of the bishops articulate an awareness of racism’s presence in and impact upon social institutions, not even all of these label these social manifestations as “sinful.” Only two prelates, Roger Mahony and Thomas Daily, develop an extended treatment of structural sinfulness and the evil of racism.<sup>40</sup> Most bishops view racism principally as an instance of personal sinfulness; sinful individuals then create and maintain unjust institutions. In the words of one prelate: “Racism flows from personal attitudes and actions into the human world around us; it becomes a social evil. Our social institutions and structures are affected.”<sup>41</sup> Racism, then, is above all else a “sin against fraternal charity” committed by individuals which comes to have socially harmful effects.<sup>42</sup> This is in line with their implicit social analysis that privileges the personal and interpersonal manifestations of racism over those which are systemic and structural. In practice, the bishops understand the sin of racism as consisting of attitudes of racial animosity and personal acts of culpable omission and/or commission.

But there is a fundamental ambiguity or confusion in this line of thinking. Let me cite one example to illustrate this point. The same prelate who

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Called Inferior”; California Bishops, “Racism A Pervasive Virus”; and Bishops of Galveston-Houston, “Local Church’s Cultural and Ethnic Diversity.”

<sup>37</sup> See O’Malley, “Solidarity: the Antidote to Resurgent Racism” 531–32.

<sup>38</sup> California Bishops, “Racism A Pervasive Virus” 96.

<sup>39</sup> Griffin, “Racism: A Tarnished Reflection of Ourselves” 17.

<sup>40</sup> Daily, “The Image of God Revisited”; and Mahony, “Affirmative Action and Catholic Social Teaching” and “A Pastoral Response to Proposition 209.”

<sup>41</sup> Griffin, “Racism: A Tarnished Reflection of Ourselves” 19.

<sup>42</sup> Bevilacqua, “Healing Racism Through Faith and Truth” 518.

defines racism as “a sin against fraternal charity” also maintains that “it would be naive not to recognize the enormity of the historical, social, and cultural entrenchment of this moral plague.”<sup>43</sup> Note however, that this “social and cultural entrenchment” is not critically examined or extensively critiqued; it is not the focus of ethical analysis and scrutiny; it is never labeled “sinful.” As a result, the proposed solution to this “social and cultural entrenchment” lies in the personal acts of individuals: “The sin of racism will be eliminated only when every human being acknowledges and respects every other human being as a person made by God to his own image and likeness.”<sup>44</sup> But the unavoidable limitations and inherent constraints imposed by this “enormity” of cultural entrenchment upon an individual’s freedom and knowledge—and thus upon his or her personal responsibility, culpability, and sinfulness—are neither acknowledged nor addressed. Hence, the exact meaning of the declaration “racism is a sin,” is unclear especially if “sin” refers primarily to personal sinfulness that presupposes conscious knowledge and deliberate choice.

Finally, it should be noted that the bishops employ a strategy of moral suasion in their ethical argumentation. That is, they assume their audience’s goodwill and moral acceptance of the basic faith tenets that they delineate. Therefore, the bishops presume that if the incompatibility of racist behaviors is pointed out to them, this will lead to personal conversion that will result in social transformation. In the words of the Illinois bishops: “Conversion changes individuals, and individuals change society.”<sup>45</sup> This assumption undergirds the appeals to conscience which characterize these texts, for example: “It is our hope that the pondering of God’s word will then lead to an inner conversion of heart and some constructive initiatives.”<sup>46</sup>

### Means and Strategies Advocated for Eradicating Racism

A final step in arriving at an understanding of the ethical thinking contained in these recent episcopal statements is a consideration of the specific strategies that are commended toward the elimination of racism. In keeping with their understanding of racism and policy of moral suasion, almost all recommend some form of self-examination akin to an examination of conscience, that is, an honest inventory and acknowledgment of the racial prejudices and fears that all too often motivate the behavior of Catholics.<sup>47</sup> The faithful are to avoid using racial slurs and telling racial jokes. They are

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* 520.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Illinois Bishops, “Moving Beyond Racism” 732.

<sup>46</sup> Louisiana Bishops, “Racism’s Assumption That Some Are Superior” 527.

<sup>47</sup> Bullock, “Cross Burnings Produce Burning Questions” 530; Bishops of Galveston-Houston, “A Local Church’s Cultural and Ethnic Diversity” 68; Griffin,

also to challenge such behaviors among their family members, friends and co-workers.<sup>48</sup> Parents are asked to instill in their children the values of racial tolerance and an appreciation for ethnic diversity.<sup>49</sup> Individuals are asked to cultivate interracial and cross-cultural friendships.<sup>50</sup> Catholic schools and teachers are invited to develop curricula that foster cultural respect and toleration.<sup>51</sup> Priests are asked to preach regularly, “pointedly,” and “boldly” about racism.<sup>52</sup> Churches should offer liturgies of racial reconciliation; prayers for racial justice should be a regular part of Sunday worship.<sup>53</sup> Catholic parishes are to be “safe places” for interracial dialogue and open sharing, they also are to offer hospitality to those who are racially and ethnically different.<sup>54</sup> Catholic business managers and other professionals are to work against racial discrimination in employment and promotion.<sup>55</sup> Voters are asked to take a “calm, rational, and prayerful ap-

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“Racism: A Tarnished Reflection of Ourselves” 19; O’Malley, “Solidarity: the Antidote to Resurgent Racism” 532; Illinois Bishops, “Moving Beyond Racism” 732.

<sup>48</sup> Friend, “That All May Be One” 177; Bishops of Galveston-Houston, “A Local Church’s Cultural and Ethnic Diversity” 69; Pastoral Council/Jackson, Miss., “Steps Toward Eradicating Racism” 631; Griffin, “Racism: A Tarnished Reflection of Ourselves” 20; Illinois Bishops, “Moving Beyond Racism” 732.

<sup>49</sup> Kucera, “Growing Racism Contributes to Society’s Unraveling” 424; Bishops of Galveston-Houston, “A Local Church’s Cultural and Ethnic Diversity” 69; Pastoral Council/Jackson, Miss., “Steps Toward Eradicating Racism” 631; Griffin, “Racism: A Tarnished Reflection of Ourselves” 20; Bevilacqua, “Healing Racism Through Truth and Faith” 520; Illinois Bishops, “Moving Beyond Racism” 732.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Maida, “Human Unity” 495; here he avows that through interracial friendships “distinctions of race or ethnicity will vanish.” See also O’Malley, “Solidarity: the Antidote to Resurgent Racism” 533; Illinois Bishops, “Moving Beyond Racism” 732.

<sup>51</sup> Kucera, “Growing Racism Contributes to Society’s Unraveling” 424; Daily, “The Image of God Revisited” 526; Pastoral Council/Jackson Miss., “Steps Toward Eradicating Racism” 631.

<sup>52</sup> California Bishops, “Racism: A Pervasive Virus” 96; Daily, “The Image of God Revisited” 526; Pastoral Council/Jackson Miss., “Steps Toward Eradicating Racism” 631; Griffin, “Racism: A Tarnished Reflection of Ourselves” 19–20; Bevilacqua, “Healing Racism Through Truth and Faith” 520.

<sup>53</sup> Mahony, “The Rodney King Verdict” 19; Daily, “The Image of God Revisited” 526.

<sup>54</sup> Bishops of Galveston-Houston, “A Local Church’s Cultural and Ethnic Diversity” 69; Mahony, “The Way to Racial and Ethnic Understanding” 323; Florida Bishops, “The Education of Black Youth” 435; Griffin, “Racism: A Tarnished Reflection of Ourselves” 19; Illinois Bishops, “Moving Beyond Racism” 732.

<sup>55</sup> Bishop Daily declares: “The business community is the stage of most of our interpersonal exchanges. Here *civility* must dominate. To refuse to serve someone because of race, color religion etc., attacks personal dignity and is unacceptable conduct” (“Created in the Image of God” 489; emphasis added). See also Griffin, “Racism: A Tarnished Reflection of Ourselves” 20.

proach” in civic elections.<sup>56</sup> There are somewhat vague exhortations to become better informed about the role of social institutions in the perpetuation of racism.<sup>57</sup> One or two prelates call for sharing power with racial minority groups.<sup>58</sup> These, then, are the most commonly advocated means for combating racism. One has the impression that the basic summons is for Catholics to treat those who are racially different with respect, decency, and civility. This is consistent with the view that racism, being primarily a manifestation of personal prejudice, can be eradicated by practices that foster individual conversion and interpersonal goodwill.

### Two Alternative Approaches

Before concluding this exposition of recent Catholic episcopal teaching on racism, I would like to highlight the teaching of two prelates who evidence an approach to this issue that differs significantly from what I have noted earlier. In this second of two pastoral letters on racism, Bishop Thomas Daily of Brooklyn, N.Y., provides an in-depth presentation of the concept “structural sin” as a backdrop to examining racism as a fundamentally systemic reality. He notes that “traditional notions of sin,” by which he means “a personal, reprehensible act in contravention of God’s will” are “incomplete.”<sup>59</sup> Why? Because they cannot adequately explain or account for our experience of social evil: “It happens often that institutions created by people (even, originally with the best of intentions) contain mechanisms that eventually humiliate, devalue, damage, even destroy people. And they remain operative through processes that are both voluntary and involuntary. We live in structures; and we are often blind to the injury they cause.” Racism, in his view, is an instance of social, structured evil: “prejudicial attitudes often creep into our thinking, ingested from the social structures around us, ingrained by years [of] unexamined and unconscious acceptance, latent but ready to explode into action, word, or attitude when some ‘trigger’ moment arises.”<sup>60</sup> Note the interplay he posits between personal sins and unjust social situations. The injustice of our society influences us in preconscious ways that dispose us to commit acts of injustice. Following

<sup>56</sup> Louisiana Bishops, “Issues Faced in Gubernatorial Elections” 363. See a statement of Mahony’s which asks Catholics to demand “a more intelligent level of political discourse” on issues of racial justice (“Pastoral Response to Proposition 209” 232).

<sup>57</sup> Friend, “That All May Be One” 177; Pastoral Council/Jackson, Miss., “Steps Toward Eradicating Racism” 631.

<sup>58</sup> Friend, “That All May Be One” 177; Griffin, “Racism: A Tarnished Reflection of Ourselves” 19–20.

<sup>59</sup> Daily, “The Image of God Revisited” 524.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* 523.

the lead of Pope John Paul II, Daily terms those unjust social situations and institutions that damage human persons and facilitate personal wrongdoing “social or structural sin.”<sup>61</sup>

Because these forms of sinfulness affect us in preconscious ways to which we are blind, Daily maintains that “love and goodwill alone will not reveal them.” We become aware of their existence through moments of “interruption,” that is, through events powerful enough to disrupt our complacency and to cause us to see the human damage fostered by social institutions. He hopes that such occasions will be catalysts not of personal guilt but of “sorrow” and “mourning” which when widely shared can create social environments conducive to eradicating sinful structures of racism.<sup>62</sup>

Cardinal Roger Mahony in his two pastoral letters defending the legitimacy of affirmative action also adopts a more structural and systemic understanding of racism. Three features are especially noteworthy. First, he employs a more analytical style of ethical argumentation. Rather than presume that his addressees share his faith convictions (i.e., the parenetic approach), he provides a comprehensive argument for affirmative action that draws quite explicitly from themes in the heritage of Catholic social thought. He employs the concepts of structural sin, solidarity, and the option for the poor as principles to scrutinize social policy.<sup>63</sup> He thus broadens the foundation of the Catholic Church’s concern for and condemnation of racial injustice.

Second, he evidences a more sophisticated understanding of racism in that he perceives racism as manifested in both “personal attitudes and actions,” and “social norms and institutional structures.”<sup>64</sup> He writes: “The social ills manifest in today’s society are cumulatively the result of the choices of many individuals. Persistent and pervasive, these problems have integrated themselves into the very fabric of our society so that their presence and effects are now disguised in the social landscape.”<sup>65</sup>

Third, because of this understanding of racism, he argues that personal goodwill and the acts of committed individuals are not sufficient to redress its social harms and injustices. Consonant with the heritage of Catholic social thought, he argues for the essential role of government—as the preeminent agent of the common good—in bringing about a more racially just society: “Our history demonstrates that without legislation and other

<sup>61</sup> Daily states his indebtedness to, and extensively quotes from documents issued by Pope John Paul II, in particular *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, *Evangelium vitae*, and *Veritatis splendor*. See *ibid.* 526, n. 9.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* 524. Here Daily is making his own the thinking of Canadian social theologian Gregory Baum. He is citing from Baum’s work, *Essays in Critical Theology* (Kansas City, Mo.: Sheed and Ward, 1994). See *ibid.* 526, n. 13.

<sup>63</sup> Mahony, “Affirmative Action and Catholic Social Teaching” 91.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* 92.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

legal remedies, discrimination will persist. . . . Therefore, where individual and private sector initiatives fail to provide adequate relief and when the deleterious effects of these problems persist, government has an obligation to intervene. Market forces and good will alone will not remedy the conditions caused by the legacy of racial intolerance.”<sup>66</sup> Thus, while Mahony agrees that personal conversion is essential, it alone is insufficient “in the face of widespread and deeply rooted systemic injustice.”<sup>67</sup> Hence, unlike those who formally develop structural definitions of racism but fail to employ them in their ethical reflection, Mahony articulates and defends the practical implications of a systemic understanding of racism.

What both Daily and Mahony demonstrate is that there are alternative analyses of and approaches to the problem of racism that are consistent with Catholic faith convictions. Notwithstanding these alternatives, the dominant approach found in recent Catholic episcopal reflection upon racism is marked by: (1) a stress upon its interpersonal manifestations; (2) a strategy of moral suasion and appeals to enlightened conscience; and (3) calls for civility, decency, respect, and fair treatment which will translate into improved social relationships among America’s racial groups.

### Cone’s Theological Perspective and Catholic Critique

By most accounts, James Cone is the pioneer and foremost proponent of Black theology, a theology of liberation that seeks to give a systematic articulation of the Christian faith in light of the African American struggle for freedom, justice, and equality. In Cone’s own words: “The task of black theology . . . is to analyze the nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ in light of oppressed blacks so they will see the gospel as inseparable from their humiliated condition, and as bestowing on them the necessary power to break the chains of oppression. This means that it is a theology of and for the black community, seeking to interpret the religious dimension of the forces of liberation in that community.”<sup>68</sup>

Thus from its inception, his theological enterprise has been stamped by his explicit identification of the social location from which he does theology and to which he holds himself accountable—the Black experience.<sup>69</sup> The

<sup>66</sup> Mahony, “A Pastoral Response to Proposition 209” 232.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 20th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis 1990, orig. ed., 1970) 5.

<sup>69</sup> A fundamental axiom of Cone’s thought is that *all* theology is socially and historically situated. He declares: “Theology is *contextual* language—that is, defined by the human situation that gives birth to it” (Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* xiii). Cone holds that he is making explicit the particular socio-cultural matrix out of which he does theology. He does this in the name of intellectual

“Black experience” is the answer to the question: “What does it mean to be a Black person in America?” Thus the “Black experience” refers to a particular and complex historical-social-cultural worldview. “The black experience is the atmosphere in which blacks live. It is the totality of black existence in a white world . . . in a system of white racism. . . . The black experience, however, is more than simply encountering white insanity. It also means blacks making decisions about themselves. . . . It is the experience of carving out an existence in a society that says you do not belong.”<sup>70</sup> In short, the Black experience is the collective story of African American survival, struggle, and achievement in a hostile social environment, that is, “the experience of surviving with dignity in a society that [does] not recognize black humanity.”<sup>71</sup>

At the beginning of this article, it was noted that Cone had challenged the adequacy and integrity of earlier U.S. Catholic reflection on racial justice. I now wish to examine, from Cone’s theological perspective, the more recent corpus of racial teaching elaborated by the U.S. bishops. I seek to determine how Cone would judge these contemporary articulations. In other words I study and critique the body of statements from the perspective of the Black experience. Viewed from the social location of those who suffer most directly from this social injustice, and from the vantage point of one who has devoted his theological career to reflecting upon and combating this social evil, how is the predominant strain of current Catholic teaching on racism assessed? To this end, I now consider how Cone understands the reality of racism, his theological interpretation of this injustice, his critique of the methodology of moral suasion, and his understanding of solidarity and its practical implications.

### Cone’s Understanding of Racism

Cone offers a straightforward definition of racism that captures its essence. Racism describes a situation or “a context where color means rejection and humiliation.”<sup>72</sup> For Cone, the paramount importance of skin color as the key to understanding American racism cannot be overstated: “I cannot de-emphasize the *literal* significance of blackness. My people were enslaved, lynched, and ghettoized in the name of God and country because of their color. . . . And because blacks were dehumanized by white-

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honesty, and as a way of critiquing theological efforts that claim a false and hegemonic universal validity.

<sup>70</sup> Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* 24–25.

<sup>71</sup> James H. Cone, *Risks of Faith: The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation, 1968-1998* (Boston: Beacon, 1999) xii.

<sup>72</sup> James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation*. (New York: Seabury, 1972) 123.



skinned people who created a cultural style based on black oppression, the *literal* importance of whiteness has historical referents.”<sup>73</sup> Indeed, Cone maintains that color—not ethnic heritage or economic class—is the overriding reason why Black people suffer rejection and mistreatment in the U.S.:

It is clear to blacks why they are unwanted in society, and for years they tried to make themselves acceptable by playing the game of human existence according to white rules, hoping that whites would not regard the color of their skins as the ultimate or only criterion for human relationships. But to this day, *there is little evidence that whites can deal with the reality of physical blackness as an appropriate form of human existence.* For this reason, blacks are oppressed socially even if they have economic and intellectual power.<sup>74</sup>

Thus from his short definition, one sees that the essence of racism lies not simply in attitudes, behaviors, or policies that discriminate or distinguish on the basis of color. What is essential is the use of color differences for the purpose of subordinating, ostracizing, or degrading a person or group. In a racist society, skin color is a chief—if not decisive—basis for maintaining social hierarchy. Hence, social relationships of subordination and dominance on the basis of color are of the essence of racism.

This is why Cone views American racism as synonymous with “White supremacy.” He argues: “Two hundred forty-four years of slavery and one hundred years of legal segregation, augmented by a reign of white terror that lynched more than five thousand blacks, defined America as ‘white over black.’ White supremacy shaped the social, political, economic cultural and religious ethos in the churches, the academy, and the broader society.”<sup>75</sup> He declares: “We live in a nation committed to the perpetuation of white supremacy,”<sup>76</sup> that is, a nation committed to maintaining relationships of White cultural, political, and social dominance.

Thus racism involves not only—or even principally—deliberate acts of exclusion, avoidance, and hatred; racism also encompasses the underlying and largely covert system of racial advantage and privilege enjoyed by White Americans irrespective of their conscious awareness or choice.<sup>77</sup> Even if individual White Americans wished it otherwise, they cannot es-

<sup>73</sup> James H. Cone and William Hordern, “Dialogue on Black Theology,” *The Christian Century* 88 (Sept. 15, 1971) 1079–83, at 1080; also cited in *Risks of Faith* 1.

<sup>74</sup> Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* 14–15; emphasis added.

<sup>75</sup> Cone, *Risks of Faith* 132. Throughout this, his most recent work, one detects a definite preference for the term “White supremacy” as opposed to “racism.”

<sup>76</sup> Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* 55.

<sup>77</sup> James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 20th anniversary ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1989; orig. ed., 1969) 15–16.

cape the advantages conferred upon them solely for being born with white skin.<sup>78</sup>

Thus, whereas the American bishops typically emphasize the personal and interpersonal manifestations of racial bias, Cone accents the systemic character of racism. He articulates this view by speaking of an “ethos” of racism: “[White racism in America] is a part of the spirit of the age, the ethos of the culture, so embedded in the social, economic, and political structure that white society is incapable of knowing its destructive nature.”<sup>79</sup> If by “ethos” one means the entire range of meanings and values that define a human group, then racism is a truly pervasive force. Racism is a cultural phenomenon, a way of interpreting human color differences that pervades the collective convictions, conventions, and practices of American life. Racism, according to Cone, is “the American way.”<sup>80</sup>

Because it is such an endemic and pervasive force, part of the givenness of everyday life, Cone maintains that Americans are ensnared, entangled, and enmeshed in a web of racial subordination and dominance that is largely invisible and outside of the awareness of all except those who suffer the effects of systemic disadvantage—the inseparable corollary of White privilege. Speaking of academic institutions, Cone notes: “The problem [of racism] continues to be intensified because most white administrators, professors and students do not know what blacks are talking about when we speak of an ethos of racism. It is as if whites have been socially conditioned to be racist and thus dehumanizing to blacks for so long that they now do not even recognize it any longer.”<sup>81</sup> Making this point more succinctly, he

<sup>78</sup> Cone’s germinal views on the reality of White privilege are now supported by a growing literature in the field of “White studies,” a discipline that critically interrogates the racial identity of White Americans as a location of unearned advantage, conferred dominance, and invisible privilege. The seminal essay on the reality of White privilege is Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women’s Studies.” This article can be found in a valuable anthology edited by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1997) 291–99. Other key texts include: Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1993); Joe R. Feagin and Hernan Vera, *White Racism: The Basics* (New York: Routledge, 1995); David R. Roediger, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness* (New York: Verso, 1994); and *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to Be White*, ed. David R. Roediger (New York: Schocken, 1998).

<sup>79</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* 41.

<sup>80</sup> Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* 56.

<sup>81</sup> James H. Cone, *My Soul Looks Back* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1986) 31.

writes: “Racism is so embedded in the heart of American society that few, if any, whites can free themselves from it.”<sup>82</sup>

The limitations of space prevent me from offering a more thorough development of these positions. However, it is obvious that Cone not only has a very different understanding of racism than the majority of the American Catholic bishops, he also holds that their perspective is so inadequate as to be fundamentally flawed. For an analysis that accentuates the interpersonal forms of racism serves only to further blind one to the deeper and more important cultural convictions that facilitate acts of injustice. Such an analysis fails to give sufficient focus to the reality of subordination and dominance that is at the heart of racial injustice. Moreover, the fact that even those prelates who adopt a more structural understanding of racism—even to the point of speaking of “privilege” as an aspect of racism<sup>83</sup>—they fail to explicitly label this as “White” privilege shows how blind they are to the radical character of racism’s challenge.<sup>84</sup> For at the core of racism is the nexus of racial difference with power, privilege, and prestige. In short Cone would judge that the American bishops’ understanding of racism lacks the depth needed to ground accurate theological reflection and effective pastoral practice.

### **Cone’s Theological Interpretation of Racism**

The Catholic body of teaching is unanimous in its view that racism is sinful. It will become clear that Cone concurs with this judgment. But he develops an account of human sinfulness that gives the evil of racism a more radically sinful character than most of the bishops ascribe to it. Cone develops his theology of sin from a reflection upon the biblical narrative of creation. In the Genesis account, human beings are fashioned in the image of God in order to care for and continue the divine work of creation through the exercise of dominion and stewardship. But human beings rejected their God-given vocation, choosing to separate themselves from God and to remake creation according to their own designs and intentions. They succumbed to the temptation “to become like gods” (Genesis 3:5). For Cone, “the essence of sin [is] every man’s desire to become ‘like God.’”<sup>85</sup>

Sin, then, is a denial of one’s status as a creature in an attempt to become

<sup>82</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* 23; see also 15–16.

<sup>83</sup> The bishops of Illinois acknowledge that racism includes the use of various forms of power “to keep one race privileged,” but never explicitly state that this race is the White race, that White Americans enjoy this racial privilege, or give an analysis of what they mean by racial privilege (“Moving Beyond Racism” 731).

<sup>84</sup> Cone, *Risks of Faith* 133.

<sup>85</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* 63.

the Creator. It is a state of alienation from God rooted in a false sense of pride, in an inflated sense of one's own importance. "Sin is a theological concept that describes separation from the source of being. Instead of affirming their identity in the source of being, sinners reject it and attempt to be what they are not."<sup>86</sup> Sin describes a state of separation from God that stems from the rebellious effort to adopt a false identity, that is, one other than that given by God. "Sin is living a lie—that is trying to be what we are not."<sup>87</sup> Sin is rooted in a false sense of importance, a kind of "megalomania"<sup>88</sup> which leads to attempts to impose upon creation and the rest of humanity one's own designs and purposes—designs and intentions contrary to those of God. Thus Cone's paradigmatic understanding of sin is idolatry: the desire to be "like God" through making one's self or social group the ultimate locus of one's loyalty and commitment and reshaping others according to one's own designs.<sup>89</sup>

Given this understanding of sin, one can see the reasons for Cone's theological condemnation of racism as sinful. Because subordination and dominance on the basis of color is the essence of racism, racism entails the defining a racial group in ways as to serve the dominant race's self-and group-interests. Thus Cone declares that "sin is whiteness—the desire to play God in the realm of human affairs" when White people define Black existence in ways which serve their interests.<sup>90</sup> The systemic relationships of domination and privilege that White Americans enjoy and defend are manifestations of the desire to be "like God," the living a lie, the claiming of more for oneself than one ought, which are of the essence of sin.

Cone believes that the paradigmatic instance of White America defining Black existence according to its own interests is slavery, where persons of African descent were defined as "nonpersons," chattel property, economic goods, and commodities.<sup>91</sup> Thus, the Black slave's existence and identity were defined by the dominant members of society, that is by White masters and their allies: "To be property means, after all, to have one's existence determined solely by one's master."<sup>92</sup> Yet it is important to underscore that American slavery was a structural and systemic reality reflective of a cul-

<sup>86</sup> Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* 103–4.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.* 105.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.* 103.

<sup>89</sup> "The white god is an idol created by racists and we blacks must perform the iconoclastic task of smashing false images" (*ibid.* 59).

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.* 108.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.* 25–26. Here Cone makes reference to the infamous Dred Scott decision by the U.S. Supreme Court (March 6, 1857) which concluded that "Negroes had no rights which the white man was bound to respect"—the ultimate legal sanction for racial subordination and dominance.

<sup>92</sup> Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues* 22.

ture of White supremacy. Slavery was not the result of the deeds of a few pernicious individuals nor was it maintained by slaveholders alone.<sup>93</sup>

Although slavery is the paradigm of Black oppression in the U.S., by no means is it the exclusive form. The mandating of “separate but equal” facilities, the widespread lynching of Black persons with impunity, the absence or token presence of African Americans in influential positions of government, finance, justice, or education, all of these in Cone’s view are manifestations of the desire and power of White society to define Black humanity in ways beneficial to its political, social, and economic self interest.<sup>94</sup>

While Cone ascribes the sin of racism to White Americans in a foremost way—as they alone are the American racial group with the social power to employ color differences for the purpose of subordination—it should be noted that he also sees racism as a sin in which African Americans share, though in a different way. Black Americans participate in the sin of racism when they live a lie and “refuse to be what they are” by acquiescing to White definitions of Black humanity.<sup>95</sup> Hence it would seem more exact to say that, in Cone’s view, African Americans can be complicitous in the sin of White racism.<sup>96</sup> Black people are guilty of racism insofar as they cooperate with or acquiesce to a system of White structural advantage and privilege.

Thus one must conclude that Cone takes serious exception to the account of racism’s sinfulness held by the majority of the bishops studied here. He agrees that racism is sinful but it is principally a structural and systemic sinfulness. It is manifested in both voluntary and nonvolun-

<sup>93</sup> Commenting on the fact that slavery was a social situation participated in even by nonslaveholders, one authoritative source notes: “*Any white person, even those who owned no slaves*—and they outnumbered slaveholders six to one—could challenge a truant slave and turn him over to a public official. . . . Without legal means of defense, slaves were susceptible to the premise that *any white person* could threaten their lives or take them with impunity” (U.S. Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* [New York: Bantam, 1968] 209; emphases added).

<sup>94</sup> James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury, 1975) 2.

<sup>95</sup> Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* 108.

<sup>96</sup> Cone insists that attitudes of racially-based hostility, fear, and aversion on the part of Blacks toward Whites cannot be called “Black racism.” The essence of racism is a social situation of racial subordination and domination; African Americans are in no position to create or maintain a situation of social dominance over White Americans. Black hatred or anger toward White Americans cannot become a structural reality. Moreover, while not denying that some Black people do harbor fear, resentment, and anger toward Whites, Cone maintains that these attitudes are, to a large extent reactive. That is, they are understandable—and at times, justifiable—reactions to living with the crushing ordinariness of everyday racism. See his discussion of this matter in *Black Theology and Black Power* 14–16.

tary acts, conscious decisions and unwitting collusions, individual deeds and group blindness: “It is characteristic of sin that it permeates the whole of one’s being, distorting one’s humanity, leaving the sinner incapable of reversing the condition or indeed of truly recognizing it.”<sup>97</sup> Cone’s chief criticism of the U.S. Catholic account of racism’s sinfulness is that it is not radical enough. One cannot adequately account for the enormity, depth, and pervasiveness of racism’s presence in U.S. culture through a preoccupied concern with individual acts of personal sin.<sup>98</sup>

### Cone’s Critique of Moral Suasion

Recall how the bishops, assuming the goodwill of their audience, use the method of moral suasion. That is, through reasoned argumentation and appeals to faith convictions, they seek to point out the incongruity of racist attitudes and behaviors with Christian identity. Once this is recognized and accepted, personal conversions will occur which will eventuate in the transformation of society. Cone’s own experience causes him to have dim hopes for the success of this process. In fact, he criticizes the early pioneers of Black theology—including himself—for over-reliance upon the method of moral suasion and appeals to the conscience of the oppressor. He relates how the early proponents of Black theology assumed that a prophetic denunciation of racism would make racists aware of the sinfulness of their actions and lead to meaningful change. Cone now states that this expectation was “naïve.” He attributes this naïveté to the lack of a serious social analysis that could take into account the deep-seated character of American racism and its relationship to other forms of oppression:

The response of black theologians to white racism was based too much upon moral suasion and too little upon the tools of social analysis. The assumption of the black clergy radicals . . . was that the racism of the white members of the clergy could be eliminated through an appeal to their moral guilt and consciousness as Christians. Although the un-Christian behavior of whites caused us to question their Christian identity, we still assumed that if the contradiction between racism and Christianity was clearly pointed out to them, they would change and act in a Christian manner. We were naive, because our analysis of the problem was too superficial and did not take into consideration the links between racism, capitalism, and imperialism, on the one hand, and theology and the church on the other. The connection between theology and racism became clear to us only gradually. . . . If we had used the tools

<sup>97</sup> Cone, *God of the Oppressed* 232.

<sup>98</sup> Pope John Paul II voices almost precisely this same concern when he asserts that the category of structural sin is essential for without it “one cannot easily gain a profound understanding of the reality that confronts us,” i.e., “the situation of the contemporary world.” See, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, no. 36; this document can be found in *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, ed., David J. O’Brien and Thomas Shannon (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1992) 395–436, at 420.

of the social sciences and had given due recognition to the Christian doctrine of sin, then it is unlikely that we would have placed such inordinate dependence on the methodology of moral suasion.<sup>99</sup>

Thus it is likely that Cone would think that the U.S. Catholic bishops are overly optimistic and “naïve” for expecting widespread success from a strategy of moral suasion. First, this stance underestimates the power of human sinfulness to warp our perceptions of the moral good. It has already been noted how Cone believes that racism is so deeply embedded in the fabric of American life that those who benefit from it are hardly conscious of its presence.

Second, the strategy of moral suasion, as employed by the bishops, reveals an innocence about how the prevailing ideas of a society can be used as ideological tools to justify the existing social order with its injustices, and thus support the interests of the dominant social group. In other words, the bishops are seemingly unaware of how normal and justifiable racist beliefs and practices can be made to seem.<sup>100</sup> Cone implies that appeals to conscience are unlikely to succeed if consciences have been malformed and blinded by ideological distortions of the truth.<sup>101</sup>

Finally, Cone suggests that a “too superficial” social analysis prohibits the bishops from recognizing the limits of individual action and initiative in the face of structurally and culturally rooted sinfulness. The evil of such a situation resides not only—or even primarily—in individual hearts, but is embedded in cultural patterns, social conventions, and civic institutions that endure beyond the individual. The systemic manifestations of sin, then, cannot be attacked through strategies aimed at individual repentance alone. These are necessary, but not sufficient. One also must seek to change the policies and institutions of a society in order to eradicate social evils.<sup>102</sup>

For all of these reasons, then, Cone believes that seeking to eradicate situations of social sin solely or principally through an appeal to individual consciences is sociologically and theologically naïve, and therefore ineffective, counterproductive, and self defeating.

### Solidarity with Racism’s Victims

A final, and perhaps the most damning, critique that Cone levels at Catholic theology about racism is that it is not rooted in the experience of

<sup>99</sup> Cone, *For My People* 88.

<sup>100</sup> Cone himself illustrates this by detailing Christianity’s collusion with and defense of the institution of slavery. Through various efforts and practices, the enslavement of Africans was seen as consistent with the will of God. See *The Spirituals and the Blues* 23, 41, and 70.

<sup>101</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* 145.

<sup>102</sup> Cone, *For My People* 205–5; *My Soul Looks Back* 136.

those who suffer most directly the effects of this injustice. That is, Catholic teaching on racism tends to speak *about* and *for* aggrieved African Americans, but seldom reflects, acknowledges, or encourages Black thought, initiative or leadership. Thus, there is little sense that African Americans themselves have a contribution to make toward understanding or changing the climate of racial injustice. Cone's comments on this benignly arrogant paternalism are forthright, sharp, and provocative:

[M]ost liberal and radical whites are only concerned about justice from the perspective of their own history and tradition and not from the vantage point of the history and culture of the victims, especially those of African descent. Whether liberal, conservative, or radical, there is one thing that most whites have in common: they act as if whites know everything, and they are therefore seldom open to learning anything from black history and culture. . . . [W]hen Catholics think about theology and ethical concepts of justice, they assume that blacks are incapable of making any significant contribution. That is why most white Catholics do not know or care to know anything about black theology. . . . Racism among white Catholics is similar to the racism of white Protestants: it is sophisticated in that it can best be defined by black invisibility in Catholic theology and history. There are very few white Catholic theologians, priests, and sisters who think that knowledge of black history and culture is indispensable for an adequate understanding of justice in this society and the world. . . . Although the Catholic Church tolerates black people, and sometimes encourages their liturgical participation, the black experience is not and has never been regarded as essential to the life and work of the church.<sup>103</sup>

I cite Cone's views at length so that the reader may appreciate the force with which he presses his critique. Again, the essence of this criticism is that Catholic teaching on race speaks *about*, *to*, and *for*—but seldom if ever *with*—the victims of racial injustice, and almost never *from their experience* of racism. In plain speech, the Catholic critique of racism is severely compromised by the Church's unconscious complicity in the very injustice it seeks to criticize.<sup>104</sup>

Cone made these observations in 1983. How applicable are they to the recent episcopal statements under review in this study? Two observations are revealing.

First, Bishop Joseph Francis, in an already cited statement, speaks of the frustration occasioned by Black invisibility in the articulation of U.S. Catholic social thought:

As an African American who happens to be a Catholic bishop, I am often terribly frustrated, most of the time puzzled. Why? Because we African Americans fail to see ourselves included in the great social pronouncements of the church except in

<sup>103</sup> Cone, *Speaking the Truth* 53–59.

<sup>104</sup> “Unfortunately, the Catholic Church is not what it claims to be: it is not a truly *universal* church, seeking to be accountable to the whole of humanity. It is a white *European* church, almost exclusively defined by issues and problems arising from that history and culture” (Cone, *Speaking the Truth* 57; emphasis in the original).



very generalized and marginalized ways. . . . [W]e have wondered and waited for the time when the church in this country would specify, qualify, and quantify in very specific, creative and bold ways the place of African Americans [and other people of color] in the entire scheme of Catholic social teachings.<sup>105</sup>

My own research through studying the last ten years of *Origins*, and my analysis of the major pastoral statements issued by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, confirms the substance of Bishop Francis's remarks. Except for the statements already documented, one does not find sustained magisterial attention given to issues of racial justice. Some documents, e.g., the quadrennial statements on political responsibility issued in election years, make reference to racism in only marginal, peripheral, and passing ways. In Cone's words: "It is amazing that racism could be so prevalent and violent in American life and yet so absent in white theological discourse."<sup>106</sup>

A second observation concerning the current relevance of the criticism that African American perspectives are absent in Catholic teaching on racial justice is this: of the 21 recent statements under consideration, only three<sup>107</sup> make use of or refer to the 1984 pastoral letter on evangelization issued by the African American Catholic bishops, *What We Have Seen and Heard*.<sup>108</sup> Other than this resource, it is not apparent that African Americans played significant roles in drafting these statements.

Why is this point so important? I offer three reasons. First, it goes to the credibility of the Catholic Church's witness to racial justice. If the Catholic community marginalizes, ignores or overlooks the presence, talent, and ability of its members of color, then its teaching on racial justice will be perceived as being hollow, insincere, and even hypocritical. In the words of the 1971 Synod of Bishops: "While the Church is bound to give witness to justice, she recognizes that everyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes."<sup>109</sup>

Second, attentiveness to the experience of those who most directly endure the pain of racism is essential for the adequacy of Catholic social reflection on race. It seems self-evident that there are important insights that can only be derived through direct encounters with this moral evil.

<sup>105</sup> Francis, "Revisiting Five Bishops' Pastorals" 658.

<sup>106</sup> Cone, *Risks of Faith* 133.

<sup>107</sup> Friend, "That All May Be One"; Florida Bishops, "The Education of Black Youth"; and Bevilacqua, "Healing Racism through Faith and Truth."

<sup>108</sup> *What We Have Seen and Heard: A Pastoral Letter on Evangelization from the Black Bishops of the United States* (Cincinnati, Ohio: St. Anthony Messenger, 1984).

<sup>109</sup> *Justice in the World*, in O'Brien and Shannon, *Catholic Social Thought* 295. This statement is also cited by the U.S. bishops in their landmark statement *Economic Justice for All*, no. 347, found in *Catholic Social Thought* 659.

Therefore, not attending to the experience of racism's victims and their insights cannot but render Catholic reflection on racial justice inadequate and impoverished, if not even erroneous.

Finally, and most significantly, it is of the nature of systemic injustice that those living in a social situation—especially those whom it benefits, advantages, and privileges—are blind to its damaging effects. Ideological blindness and captivity are inherent features of structural sin. This means that conversion is a difficult task for those belonging to a socially dominant group. Cone explains: “Whites, *because* they are white, fail to perceive . . . the nature of [social] sin. It is characteristic of sin that it permeates the whole of one's being, distorting one's humanity, leaving the sinner incapable of reversing the condition or indeed of truly recognizing it.”<sup>110</sup>

Given this situation, Cone posits that if Whites are to be free to accept the grace of conversion and to cooperate in the building of a just society, they will have to be liberated from their bondage to the status quo in large measure *through the efforts of the oppressed community*: “When the oppressed affirm their freedom by refusing to behave according to the master's rules, they not only liberate themselves from oppression, but they also liberate oppressors from enslavement to their illusions.”<sup>111</sup> A conscious, intentional stance of solidarity with racism's victims is often the only path to genuine conversion, authentic humanity, and release from the bondage of White supremacy's unconscious hold: “The truly free are identified with the humiliated because they know that their being is involved with the degradation of their brothers and sisters. They cannot stand to see them stripped of their humanity. This is so not because of pity or sympathy, but because their own existence is being limited by another's slavery.”<sup>112</sup>

This, then, is what Cone sees as the essential meaning of solidarity: through “becoming one with the unwanted,”<sup>113</sup> White Americans can come to deeper and truer insight regarding the demonic system of White supremacy that holds them hostage,<sup>114</sup> and African Americans have an opportunity to redeem their experience of social suffering by becoming God's agents in a mission to heal the soul of a nation.

Hence, when viewed from the perspective of the Black experience—that is, the perspective of those who most immediately endure the injustice of racism—as articulated by one who has devoted his theological project to struggling against this evil, there are serious shortcomings and deficits in the dominant strain of American Catholic teaching on racism. Cone would likely judge that this teaching is superficial in its social analysis of racism;

<sup>110</sup> Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* 107–8; emphasis in the original.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.* 103.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.* 95.

<sup>113</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* 111.

<sup>114</sup> Cone, *God of the Oppressed* 232.

deficient in its theological interpretation of racism's sinfulness; naïve in its reliance upon moral suasion; blind to its own deep complicity in the ideology of White supremacy; and unconscious of how the Church's bondage to the culture of White supremacy compromises its teaching and identity. In short, Catholic reflection on racism, as articulated in recent American episcopal teaching, is not radical enough to do justice to what the bishops themselves call "a radical evil" and "a distortion at the very heart of human nature."<sup>115</sup>

### Proposals for Future Ethical Reflection

In view of this analysis and critique of American episcopal reflection upon racism, I propose that the following six shifts need to occur in the dominant approach present in U.S. Catholicism in order to achieve a more adequate ethics of racial justice:

(1) *A shift from stress on racism to White privilege.* If racism is a context where black skin color "means rejection and humiliation," then it follows that racism also connotes a social context in which white skin color means advantage and privilege, e.g., "a sense of comfort and belonging whites everywhere unconsciously assume."<sup>116</sup>

There is much evidence to suggest that this second connotation of racism is the one more operative in the dynamics of American life today.<sup>117</sup> Contemporary racism is not so much a matter of deliberate malice or explicit espousal of White superiority—though these forms are still very much real. Racism today is more an intricate set of rationalizations and defenses employed to preserve a condition of White privilege, entitlement, and social dominance. The observations of the National Research Council, based upon the most comprehensive examination of current race relations by an official body, are worth citation:

[Today] differential treatment of blacks infrequently takes the form of blatant hostility and overt discrimination. Differential treatment is most likely to occur when it allows someone to avoid close interracial contact; *it prevents the establishment of interracial relations of equal status or black dominance*, especially in employment and housing; and it is possible to find a nonracial explanation for differential treatment. For example, blacks who find little difficulty gaining entry- and even middle-level employment positions frequently encounter barriers to upper-

<sup>115</sup> National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Brothers and Sisters to Us* 8 and 10.

<sup>116</sup> Jane Lazarre, *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University, 1996) 47.

<sup>117</sup> See Feagin and Vera, *White Racism*; David T. Wellman, *Portraits of White Racism* 2nd ed., (New York: Cambridge University, 1993); Andrew Hacker, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal* (New York: Ballantine, 1995, orig. ed., 1992).

level positions that would involve *significant authority over whites or the need to interact with them in social settings* like private clubs.<sup>118</sup>

Racism is not so much manifested by overt practices of Black humiliation as it is by covert strategies of Black containment (e.g., “glass ceilings”). In sum, the persistence of racism can be largely explained by a fundamental ambivalence in the majority of White Americans: the desire to denounce blatant racial injustices, and yet to preserve their position of social dominance and privilege.<sup>119</sup> As Martin Luther King, Jr., observed, the majority of White Americans are neither “unregenerate” racists nor committed activists. Rather, “they are suspended . . . between opposing attitudes. They are uneasy with injustice, but unwilling yet to pay a significant price to eradicate it.”<sup>120</sup>

This means that while Catholic reflection on racism must have continued concern for acts of deliberate racial malice, these cannot be its central or primary focus. Ethical analysis about American racism must give the existence of White privilege “privileged” attention. Until Catholic ethicists and bishops explicitly name this reality and engage the social sciences in a serious analysis of “whiteness” as a social location of structured advantage and dominance, their understanding of racism will continue to be superficial and result in ineffective pastoral practice.

(2) *A shift from parenesis to analysis.* The existence and maintenance of racial disparities are often justified by appeal to commonly espoused beliefs deeply rooted in the American ethos, e.g., the idea of individual merit and achievement.<sup>121</sup> As a result, many people of goodwill defend and engage in practices that result in racial harm and detriment. Because the existence of White privilege is opaque to most White Americans, Bishop Daily’s observation is right on target: love and goodwill alone will not

<sup>118</sup> National Research Council, *A Common Destiny: Blacks and American Society* ed., Gerald D. Jaynes and Robin M. Williams Jr. (Washington: National Academy, 1989) 49; emphases added.

<sup>119</sup> The National Research Council, noting that the attitudes of the majority of Whites toward Blacks are fundamentally “ambivalent,” describes the significant decrease in the endorsement of equal treatment for African Americans when this involves significant numbers of Blacks or “leads to blacks being promoted to positions of significant power and decision-making” (ibid. 49 and 155).

<sup>120</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston: Beacon, 1967) 11.

<sup>121</sup> For example, many Whites oppose strategies of racial remediation, not out of racial malice, but a commitment to the American cultural values of individualism, merit, equality, and just desert. See Wellman, *Portraits of White Racism* 206–22; and National Research Council, *A Common Destiny* 148, 56.

suffice to move people to different perceptions and practices.<sup>122</sup> Therefore, parenetic exhortations and admonitions are insufficient. They do not take into account how deeply affected U.S. Catholics are by a cultural ethos of White racism. Catholic theological reflection and episcopal teaching on racism will have to incorporate more analytical modes of argumentation, e.g., making a sustained case for practices of racial remediation that are not overly reliant upon the goodwill of its audience. Well-meaning ethical criticism of racial injustice that is inattentive to the prevailing ideologies of a social system—that is, moral criticism which does not take into account the deep-seated cultural roots and justifications for racial neglect and exclusion—is likely to be ineffective.

(3) *A shift from personal sin to “structures of sin.”* As already noted, a theology of sin that stresses the deliberate acts of individuals operating out of conscious malice cannot give an adequate account of racism’s pervasive, demonic, and enduring presence. One is dealing not only with “sins against fraternal charity,” but also with culturally sanctioned injustice.

In view of this, I make my own the observation of Pope John Paul II who asserts that without the category of structures of sin “one cannot easily gain a profound understanding of the reality that confronts us.”<sup>123</sup> Catholic theological reflection on the sinfulness of racism must incorporate and further develop the reality of social sin in a substantive and not merely rhetorical way. Here, the pastoral letters of Bishop Daily and Cardinal Mahony are splendid examples, and provide a solid basis upon which future American episcopal reflection can build.

(4) *A shift from “decency” to “distributive justice.”* Interracial relationships of decency and respect are important yet their overemphasis in the dominant strain of Catholic thinking is problematic. Such practices are necessary, but not sufficient. Personal friendships, interracial dialogue, acts of kindness and charity, and avoidance of racial jokes and slurs do not change structures of inequity or pervasive cultural beliefs. We need constantly to remember that the task of Christian ethics is not simply to guide individuals to good decisions of conscience, but also to shape communities of justice and peace.<sup>124</sup> Future Catholic reflection on racism then must also incorporate the concern for distributive justice—i.e., the equitable distribution of social harms and benefits—and the essential role of government as servant of the common good articulated in the heritage of Catholic social teaching. The U.S. bishops have already employed these concepts in their

<sup>122</sup> Daily, “The Image of God Revisited” 524.

<sup>123</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis* no. 36; in O’Brien and Shannon, *Catholic Social Thought* 419–20.

<sup>124</sup> Paul Wadell, “Response to Bryan Massingale,” in *Black and Catholic* 105.

teachings about economic justice. It remains for them to do the same in teaching about racial justice.<sup>125</sup>

(5) *A shift from moral suasion to liberating awareness.* Cone's extensive critique of an over-reliance upon moral suasion demonstrates that appeals to conscience are of limited value when consciences have become blinded by the cultural bias of racism. In the haunting question of Bernard Lonergan: "How, indeed, is a mind to become conscious of its own bias when that bias springs from a communal flight from understanding and is supported by the whole texture of a civilization?"<sup>126</sup> Given the racial ethos of American society, there may be only so much that (White) people can "see." And since one cannot struggle against what one is unaware of, moral suasion is of limited use in combating racial injustice. An alternate strategy of fostering liberating awareness or "consciousness raising," through moments of interruption needs to be seriously explored and developed.<sup>127</sup>

(6) *A shift from unconscious racial supremacy to intentional racial solidarity.* Finally, American Catholic ethical reflection must be proactive and intentional about seeking out and making use of the contributions, insights, and talents possessed by Black Catholics and other Catholics of color. This, as I have noted, is essential for the credibility of the Church's witness, the adequacy of its ethical reflection, and the integrity of its very identity. Moreover, reverent listening to the voices of those at the margins—being attentive to their values, fears, hopes, dreams, pain and anger—is often the only way that the authentic demands of justice can become known and the gospel call to conversion can be heard: "Those in positions of power and influence need those who have suffered from injustice to show us the limitations, bias, and self-deception that creeps into so much that we take for granted. . . . Hospitality is a precondition for justice."<sup>128</sup> This hospitality toward the "darker brother and sister" is a reflection of the solidarity with the vulnerable that is a core tenet of Catholic social reflection. A test of the sincerity of Catholic leadership in this regard might well be concrete deeds of repentance and restitution for past acts of exclusion and attitudes of neglect.

<sup>125</sup> *Economic Justice for All*, nos. 68–83, 119–124. Mahony's pastoral letters on affirmative action are excellent models in this regard.

<sup>126</sup> Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1970), xiv.

<sup>127</sup> The theologians I am aware of who have done the most extensive research in this area are those who work out of the paradigm of liberation theology. The following texts are particularly valuable for discussing the ethical implications of consciousness raising: Patricia McAuliffe, *Fundamental Ethics: A Liberationist Approach* (Washington: Georgetown University, 1993); and Thomas L. Schubeck, *Liberation Ethics: Sources, Models, and Norms* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

<sup>128</sup> Wadell, "Response to Bryan Massingale" 104.

In short, what I propose is that U.S. Catholic ethical reflections adopt a more structural and systemic approach to racism, one that views this evil primarily as a cultural phenomenon, a culture of White advantage, privilege, and dominance that has derivative personal, interpersonal, and institutional manifestations.

On the occasion of his most recent pastoral visit to this country, John Paul II issued this challenge to the Catholic community for the new millennium, namely “to put an end to every form of racism, a plague which your bishops have called one of the most persistent and destructive evils of the nation.”<sup>129</sup> Through constructive engagement of Catholic theology with the African American experience, this challenge will hopefully be pursued more earnestly and effectively.

<sup>129</sup> Pope John Paul II, “Homily in the Trans World Dome,” *Origins* 28 (February 11, 1999) 601.