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Let the Church Roll On

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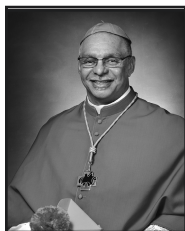


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The Catholic Church in the United States, primarily a white racist institution

LET THE CHURCH ROLL ON

*Let the church roll on . . .
Let the church roll on . . .
Let the church roll on . . .
Let the church roll on.*

WHAT NOW?¹

On June 5th, the Archdiocese of New Orleans held a prayer protest rally from its Chancery Office to the front steps of Notre Dame Seminary. The idea was suggested by chancery officials who wanted to publicly do something in response to the death of George Floyd. Instead of a public rosary with 8 minutes, 46 seconds of silence (to commemorate the length of time that officer Derek Chauvin had his knee on Floyd's neck), I wrote a "Requiem for Black Children of God," a confession and a moment of remembrance of 47 Black men and women from across the country killed in recent years by police violence. This powerful Catholic witness and call for justice touched and surprised us all. With only two days of advertisement on social media, about 300 people were in attendance. A news reporter asked me, "What are you feeling at this moment?" I said, "The church showed out; let the church roll on."

While I grew in a spirit of confidence, compassion, and integrity as a Black Catholic leader amid this COVID-19 pandemic, I watched chancery officials becoming more anxious, bewildered, and restless as the challenge "what now?" rang through the building and across the diocese. The unsettled tension of church leaders reminded me of the reactions to the statement made by the members of the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus in 1968 when they said,

"The Catholic Church in the United States, primarily a white racist institution, has addressed itself primarily to white society and is definitely a part of that society."²

Here we are in 2020 and I find myself saying, as my daddy would say, "You can't make it up."

"The Catholic Church in the United States, primarily a white racist institution, has addressed itself primarily to white society and is definitely a part of that society."

The church is in the same place, the same space, with new faces. Our Catholic identity is so wedded to our American ideals and systemic racism that Catholics scratch the surface—do

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good things, but don't get too deep into systemic issues. The system keeps protecting itself.

We are comfortable with death, weapons of violence and greed, but not the profound revolutionary life of Jesus Christ! The USA is the greatest producer of weapons in the world. We are the most violent society. We are a country that baptizes greed. These things put a heavy load on Black/Brown bodies. Churches, with our actions or our silence, sanction what is going on. Where is the church? How do we stop the killing of Black/Brown people? Racism promotes violence. Hence, the violence on Black bodies is okay. There is a theological position and tradition that gives permission to shoot Black bodies in the name of protecting a system that favors the privileges enjoyed by white people. Our church operates with a bias that forces Black people to question her catholicity. A substantial conversion and subsequent conversation cannot happen until this local, American, and global church reconciles with her God-given mission.

We have a responsibility as faith communities to lead the way to God. Therefore, we must TELL THE TRUTH—REPENTANT TRUTH. Not just *mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*, but the truth that then compels us to action, to do something different. Truth that leads to *metanoia*, truth that protects the human dignity from the human condition. Truth that reveals where we stand with God who appears when humanity is being denied. We need to tell the truth of the past and our complicity with what undergirds white supremacy, so we can understand all its complexities that strike out against Black/Brown bodies that don't conform to Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism. This notion of what it means to be a faithful citizen fits the mold of what has been described as the default setting for American white male heterosexual—and this feeds white supremacy. Systemic racism is an immoral monster. The root problem is our incapacity to confront this brutal immoral monster who violates Black people and people of color.

The church must lead all to God, but when church leaders speak of one body in Christ, they only support white male heterosexuality as the norm of true Catholicity. The Catholic Church has a knee on the neck of Black people and people of color. Now, if what I'm saying is unsettling, good, you are listening. Listen! Listen, the church, the Body of Christ, the people have taken to the streets crying out, "Enough is enough!" "I can't breathe" in this perfect storm of COVID-19 and this unjust systemic racism. The church has taken to the streets; do we join them in solidarity or do we hold them in contempt? It begs me to question just who is wrapped in error and who is standing in truth? What do we see and what do we

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hear? The Catholic Church leaders of New Orleans in that rally stood in solidarity, calling for gospel values and truth. The risk outweighed the cost. We were no longer silent, afraid, but resolved to work for justice and truth, not in violence, but in peace. Let the church roll on.

After the June 5th protest, a woman called me complaining about who George Floyd was. During her tirade, she confessed to being a pro-life advocate. I asked her, "Did you see the same video I saw about what happened to George Floyd?" Didn't you see that his life was publicly aborted? If you are a pro-lifer, you don't get to pick and choose what pro-life issue to defend! Either you are or you are not for life. There was a dead silence.

WHAT WILL IT TAKE TO VALIDATE WHO WE ARE?

The church's teaching on human dignity states:

Created in the image of the one God and equally endowed with rational souls, all men (and women) have the same nature and the same origin. Redeemed by the sacrifice of Christ, all are called to participate in the same divine beatitude: all therefore enjoy an equal dignity (CCC no. 1934).

What does it mean to be Black and Catholic?

It is so easy to get choked up in the darkness of racial discrimination, the gloom of blunders committed by the Catholic Church, and the systemic evils of racism in America and beyond. *OPEN WIDE OUR HEARTS*³ calls racism America's original sin and evil. One easily can get cynical, especially when two bishops stated publicly at our USCCB meeting that "we (the bishops) don't even know what racism is; we can't define it." I had to emphatically state, "Everyone in this room can identify incidents of racism; to identify it, one has to be able to define it; so, don't insult my intelligence."

The author, James Baldwin, liked to talk about Black people achieving ourselves, finding who we are, what we're for, and making that possible for others. Black Catholics have to do this in the church. Are there some things that are even deeper that we are meant for, meant to be, meant to do, meant to achieve?

Sr. Thea Bowman, when asked, "What does it mean to be Black and Catholic," replied:

It means that I come to my church fully functioning . . . I bring myself, my black self, all that I am, all that I have, all that I'm worth, all I hope to become. I bring my whole history, my traditions, my experience, my culture, my African-American song and dance and gesture and

movement and teaching and preaching and healing and responsibility as a gift to the church.⁴

We see how this experience of Black Catholics is a gift to the Church. Does this scare you? What will it take to validate who we are? Might I suggest the movie BLACK PANTHER? The film centers around the question, “Who are you?” The answer was not only for the main character to answer, but for each person in the film. The discovery of who you are was not only in what you said about yourself, but also what you showed to others. It is the quest of everyone to define and redefine who you are in encountering each situation before you. Relationships were vital in the decisions made throughout the film. Don’t we believe that same thing in the church? The Sacraments are relational.

A BLACK MAN’S JOURNEY TO THE PRIESTHOOD

I was reminded about my journey toward the priesthood. I decided that to be the Black priest I needed to be, I needed to do my Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) not in a hospital, but in a prison. I applied at 10 prisons and was accepted at 9. The chaplain at the last one wrote me a letter criticizing my Black Catholic identity. My honest response to his criticism and racial bias, simply saying who I am, was received with a welcome to join the program. He wanted me to know clearly that I would be challenged. I ate, played sports, went to therapy sessions, shared Scripture readings, counseled and prayed with the inmates for 10 solid weeks. I returned to the seminary knowing I was ready for ministry. I was ready for ordination, not because I was successful in everything, but because of how God made a way. Six months later, before the formation committee, I was criticized for being too independent as a Black man. The archbishop refused to ordain me. That day I went to the all-Black boys’ high school, St. Augustine, to tutor a football player. He saw that I was distracted, so I explained my plight. Out of the mouth of a child, he declared, “Well, I know that you are a good minister. God knows that you are a good minister and it is God who ordains anyway.”

Many Black Catholics who have survived in the Catholic Church through the *Middle Passage*, slavery, the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation, Reconstruction, Jim Crow Laws, Redlining, Civil Rights, not to mention being treated like 2nd class Catholics, can say like Paul to the Church at Corinth:

*We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed;
perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted but not
forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always*

*I was criticized
for being too
independent as a
Black man. The
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ordain me*

carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body (2 Cor 4:8-10).

*African people are
the face of God, and,
until Black people are
free, no one is free*

THE GIFTS OF BLACKNESS

Black Catholics need to have a healthy dialogue about the church as a white supremacist, patriarchal institution and decide if the church remains the right vehicle for Black Catholics to love God, to serve and to worship God in the world, so that we may be happy with God in the next life. In this present climate, Black people can and are able to respond to the call to be the signposts of new possibilities for the church? The humanity of Black people is our contribution to society, and to our church. Our gift is the resilience against systemic oppression. African people are the face of God, and, until Black people are free, no one is free.

In their Pastoral Letter of 1984, *What We Have Seen and Heard*, the Black Catholic Bishops of that time told their Black brothers and sisters that we were called “to the work of evangelization,” but as we see all around us, that evangelization is not just to other Black men and women. As Paul VI said to the people of Africa, in 1969, “You must give your gifts of Blackness to the whole church.” Today we must understand that the people who learned to *resist* the utter dehumanization of forced separation and enslavement, who developed strategies, both spiritual and social, to *persist* on their way out of the Hell of their bondage to the freedom found “way up in the middle of the air,” as prophets and messengers of hope—these, *my* brothers and sisters, are brothers and sisters to all who find themselves at the crossroads, facing either the destruction of all we have held dear or the smallest hope of a light that will guide us out of darkness. We must choose to “walk together, children,” ask the guidance of those who have been on this journey for centuries.

BLACK LIVES MATTER

The Black Lives Matter movement, its rallying cry, has branched into the undocumented and into the global struggle for the human dignity of all people of every race, language and way of life. Black Lives Matter should be no issue for our church, if we believe in respecting the dignity and personhood of each individual, the first principle of Catholic Social Teaching, and know, without a shadow of a doubt, that each of us is made in the image and likeness of God. Black Lives Matter, where do we go from here? Bishops and church leaders have to go beyond the Black Lives Matter Movement itself and capture and claim the rallying cry of the church on the streets. That means:

Stop saying “all lives matter”—for you belittle the present reality of racial injustice

The immoral monster lives in us; but also, the revolutionary love of Jesus

The church on the streets is calling you

All Catholics need to recognize the virus is in our church

- Stop saying “all lives matter”—for you belittle the present reality of racial injustice.
- Investigate Black Lives Matter and define it as we are called to live it in our individual dioceses, religious communities, and communities of faith.
- Don't try to create another slogan.

We need accountability. Work with a community—listen—develop what is right and of Christ. The immoral monster lives in us; but also, the revolutionary love of Jesus Christ lives in us. We have to move to that radical LOVE *space, place, and grace*. Develop a new language that speaks more clearly.

WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO TOGETHER?

This is our moment, this is our question. What are we going to do together is a question that demands a faith-filled answer. An answer from a people who believe in the unity created by and required by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. What are we going to do together as people baptized into this union? What are we going to do together as formatters of those to whom this mission has been entrusted? What are we going to do together not only in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, but more deeply, what are we going to do together as God is calling and leading us to do what he obviously wants done?

Remember the story of Zacchaeus—the story of truth-telling from different places bombards the structures upon which people stand. “*Prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves*” (James 1:22). When Jesus invited himself to dine at Zacchaeus house and the people complained, Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.” Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:8-10). Jesus changed the structure of behavior and Zacchaeus responded to the Word of transformation, being repentant and offering restoration and reparation to others.

CMSM, the church on the streets is calling you, “Come out of that tree—your provincial offices, motherhouses, and friaries—and come join us. Stand up, confess your complicity with systemic racism. Speak up about your conversion, your repentance. Offer restoration and reparation. The church on the streets is calling you.

All Catholics need to recognize the virus is in our church.

Look at the protest, isn't the church on the streets? The knee on the neck, isn't it more than a Black issue—an immigration issue, a DACA issue, a LGBTQ issue, a Women's issue, a health care issue, an economic issue, a voter suppression issue, an essential workers issue, e.t.c.

Does not the fact that racism infects every piece of our past and present make it a Catholic issue that needs a Catholic God, a Catholic people, and a Catholic prayer?

Does not the fact that our shared history has no stories of how we got over or how we have overcome this most basic sin make this a Catholic issue?

Does not the fact that the truth of American history is not taught in our schools make this a Catholic issue?

Does not the fact that we are still talking about the Negro problem and have yet to admit that there has always been a white problem make this a Catholic issue?

Does not the fact that the calls and cries for justice continue to come from the oppressed and not the beneficiaries of the oppression make this a Catholic issue?

God created us equal six million years ago.

Science has considered us evolved for 200,000 years.

Politics has deemed us civilized for 6000 years.

Economics has defined us as industrialized since the 1800s.

Jesus rose from the dead 2000 years ago.

Was not the entire point of coming from heaven to earth in order to empower a global institution to correct a global problem? Did not Jesus rise from the dead so that someone could tell a white boy and someone could tell a black boy, y'all are equally brothers? Because God knew that the only place, for the foreseeable future, they could live out that truth would be the church?

**OUR MOMENT TO LEAD
OR GET OUT OF THE WAY**

This is our moment to lead or get out of the way. It will not go well for us if we continue to throw holy water on the lies instead of simply blessing the truth. The salvation of the world depends on a church that is more pastoral and spiritual than she is complicit. We need to ask:

- In what ways has the virus affected us?
- What issues have surfaced for action?
- What can we do as we live with the virus over the next year?
- What have we learned from the virus that should guide our advocacy for election?

This is our moment to lead or get out of the way

*Stop talking about
color-blindness*

To have this dialogue, we need church leaders to:

- Listen more, talk less. “*Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger*” (James 1:19).
- Resist the need to respond with a better or different insight about something.
- Be an ally. Being an ally is different than simply wanting not to be a racist. Being an ally requires you to educate yourself about systemic racism in this country.
- Try not to repeat, “I can’t believe that something like this would happen in this day and age.”
- Ask when you don’t know—but do the work first—educate yourself.
- Stop talking about color-blindness.
- Be about transformation, restoration, and reparation, and the Resurrection.

Scripture states Jesus says to the young man: “*Go sell what you have, and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me*” (Matt 10:21). Can you let go of your white privilege; your white male norms? Then, listen to the people of color God sends your way? God is sending you prophets!

Like the historian Vincent Harding, I call you to work with the so-called marginalized young people. We need to help them stand in that gloom and deep hurt, and open up new possibilities. They can be the candles, the signposts, bringing forth truth. “*If My people **who are called by My name** humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and will heal their land*” (2 Chr 7:14).

How do we work together? How do we talk together in ways that will open up our best capacities and our best gifts? Let me give you two examples:

When I was first ordained in 1978, my first assignment was at a church that had a Sunday Mass with 50 people, the average age was 65. I took a group of boys who were playing basketball in the gym each Sunday, called them to go to church. They got their girlfriends, made a choir, and within one year we had 500 people in church, average age was 24.

In 2002, when the Franciscan Friars wanted to live in East St. Louis, Bishop Wilton Gregory built a friary in the heart of the city. We moved into the city while residents

were looking to move out. We fortify the Catholic Church's presence in the city still today. With a handful of young people we brought forth truth. Many thought we were crazy, like that magnificent madman Jesus, who was really talking something very truthful and powerful when he said if you allow yourself to really hunger and thirst after the right way, then if you just keep after it, then you will find the way.

CONCLUSION

*Let us pray for a day
when more people will
think we are crazy
because we are doing
something with faith,
not fear*

Let us pray for a day when more people will think we are crazy because we are doing something with faith, not fear. The key is in the “we.” Not the “we” who are Black or the “we” who are white. Not the “we” who are poor or the “we” who are rich. Not the “we” who are female or the “we” who are male. Not the “we” who are in charge nor the “we” who are falsely charged. But the “we” who are not afraid, the “we” who believe, the “we” who are united and refuse to be divided, the “we” who shall overcome, the “we” who are Catholic. Let us pray and let us be faithful for life. The key is in “the we”.

“Prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves” (James 1:22).

LET THE CHURCH ROLL ON . . .

*Bishop Fernand J. Cheri, III, OFM
Auxiliary Bishop of New Orleans*

ABBREVIATIONS

- CCC *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1998.
- USCCB United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

ENDNOTES

1. Talk given to the Conference of Major Superiors of Men (CMSM) USA, August 04, 2020.
2. *Black Theology Documentary History, Volume 1: 1966–1979*. 2nd ed. Revised and ed. James Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993, 230–2, at 230.
3. *OPEN WIDE OUR HEARTS: The Enduring Call to Love – A Pastoral Letter against Racism*. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. November 2018.
4. Nutt, Maurice J., *Thea Bowman: Faithful and Free (People of God)*. Reprint ed. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2019.