TOWARDS A BLACK CATHOLIC
THEOLOGY OF RECONCILIATION

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Margretta Stokes Tucker

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By

Margretta Stokes Tucker

Approved November 13, 2013

Dr. Gerald Boodoo
Associate Professor of Theology
(Committee Chair)

Dr. Maureen O’Brien
Associate Professor of Theology
(Committee Member)

Dr. Anna Floerke Scheid
Assistant Professor of Theology
(Committee Member)

Dr. James Swindal
Dean, McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Dr. Maureen O’Brien
Chair, Theology Department
Associate Professor of Theology
ABSTRACT

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Dissertation supervised by Dr. Gerald Boodoo.

This research proposes and examines the development of a Black Catholic
teology of reconciliation based on the 1984 Catholic document, “What We Have Seen
and Heard: A Pastoral Letter on Evangelization from the Black Bishops of the United
States.” The bishops cite that African American Catholics have gifts to share with the
Catholic Church—their racial, cultural and spiritual gifts. The research reviews these
claims in light of African American Catholic theology and draws upon Black theology,
particularly Black liberation theology. Given the history of racism that the U.S. bishops
call a sin, the research includes a historical review of the multifaceted dimensions of
racism, particularly institutional and social. The research raises the possibility of a praxis
for reconciliation in light of the common history and experiences of African American
Catholics and the overall African American community. It includes an overview of sacramental history and understanding of penance and reconciliation.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Vincent and Alysia in gratitude for their patience.
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Introduction

The focus of this dissertation is to develop a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation.\(^1\) “What We Have Seen and Heard: A Pastoral Letter on Evangelization from the Black Bishops of the United States” is the basis for the rationale and research of the dissertation.\(^2\) Published in 1984, the pastoral letter forms the context for understanding and investigating a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation. This dissertation takes seriously the call to reconciliation enunciated by the African American bishops to African American Catholics and the Catholic Church in the United States, and works toward elucidating the possible form and content of a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation.

The African American bishops of the United States authored an important document in What We Have Seen and Heard. The intent of the dissertation is to expand and further develop the bishops’ theological insights on reconciliation as a gift that African American Catholics have to offer the Church. Reconciliation, as a gift of African Americans, is a small section in the pastoral letter, but is the central theme for this work. In addition, the bishops celebrate and affirm that African American Catholics have come of age in the Catholic Church in the United States. The contribution of the dissertation is to add another voice to the pastoral letter that is significant and pivotal in the history of African American Catholics and the Catholic Church in the United States. It will offer

\(^1\) Black and African American will be used interchangeably, although Black will be used more globally to include persons of African descent who may not be represented in the history and cultural experience in the United States. Whereas African American will imply a historical rootedness in the United States. In addition, Black will be used not only to indicate race, but as an ethnic or cultural designation like Italian, Latino, or Native American. Therefore, it is capitalized.

\(^2\) What We Have Seen and Heard: A Pastoral Letter on Evangelization from the Black Bishops of the United States, (Cincinnati, Ohio: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1984). In order to minimize the use of the abbreviation “ibid” in footnotes referring to the Pastoral Letter, the page number of the quoted Pastoral Letter text will be placed in parenthesis throughout the dissertation text.
another perspective on the discussion of a Black Catholic theology within the context of a theological and sacramental response to a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation. While the examination of the historical and cultural dimensions of this theological development is vital, it is not the end product. Rather, it provides the impetus and necessity for the theological development of a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation.

There are two main sections in the Pastoral Letter. Part 1, “The Gifts We Share,” discusses the richness of African American culture, spirituality, and the gifts American Catholics have to share with the entire Church. They reflect on the gifts that all African Americans, including African American Catholics, share culturally as a people. This distinguishing gift is their “Blackness.” The bishops cite three other distinctive gifts: freedom, reconciliation, and spirituality. These positive gifts are expressive of the Black experience and culture, and are formed by faith. They are invaluable gifts for the entire Catholic Church. While significant to the Church, these theological gifts are also a worthy and necessary challenge for African American Catholics.

The Gift of Reconciliation forms the primary focus for the development of a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation. As one of the seven sacraments, reconciliation has a prominent place in Catholic theology. The African American bishops do not explicitly refer to reconciliation as a sacrament or express its sacramental nature. Nor do the bishops confine reconciliation to the ritual of confession. Rather, they situate the gift of reconciliation within the broader experience of religion and human action. Consequentially, they provide an existential framework for this particular gift and for the development of an African American Catholic theology of reconciliation. The African American bishops write, “The Gospel message is a message that liberates us from hate
and calls us to forgiveness and reconciliation.” (6) They do not identify the “us” as only African Americans, thereby implying that the call to forgiveness and reconciliation is universal rather than a challenge exclusively for African Americans.

The African American bishops speak of the necessity for a commitment to reconciliation with an understanding that “true reconciliation arises only where there is mutually perceived equality.” (6) Justice is the requisite condition for this equality without which there could no true reconciliation. “Without justice, any meaningful reconciliation is impossible. Justice safeguards the rights and delineates the responsibility of all.” (7) Central to the theme of justice is the mutual respect and recognition that one must have for another. Reconciliation challenges African Americans and all who are oppressed to reconcile with those who may be the oppressors. The inference is to White Americans and Catholics who are to reciprocate the respect and justice. In addition, African Americans are to respect themselves, which may be demonstrated by the appreciation and celebration of their own cultural identity. Conceptually, reconciliation, justice, and liberation are connected. In order for there to be reconciliation, there first has to be justice. The bishops write, “We seek justice, then, because we seek reconciliation, and we seek reconciliation because by the blood of Christ we are made one. The desire for reconciliation is for us a most precious gift, for reconciliation is the fruit of liberation. Our contribution to the building of the Church in America and in the world is to be an agent of change for both.” (7) Justice and liberation as a foundation for true reconciliation leads to Christian love. Christ, who is love and calls all to forgiveness is the supreme gesture of love.
While their inspired message of reconciliation, guided by liberation and justice, is directed to African American Catholics, the bishops judiciously move beyond the theological and social confines of the Black condition in the United States and the Church in America. They wisely connect the fruits of the gift of reconciliation, particularly justice and liberation, to the plight of those in developing countries who also seek justice and liberation. The bishops challenge African American Catholics to be “instruments of peace” which they call the fruit of justice. (7) African American Catholics, with knowledge of their unique history, are called to be active agents in seeking justice for the oppressed worldwide and to become agents of peace as bridge builders to reconciliation. The challenge that they present to African American Catholics and to all Black Americans through the gift of reconciliation is one that connects the presence reality with a painful past. “It is in chains that our parents are brought to these shores and in violence are we maintained in bondage. Let us who are the children of pain be now a bridge of reconciliation. Let us who are the offspring of violence become the channels of compassion. Let us, the sons and daughters of bondage, be the bringers of peace.” (4) A reading of the “Gift of Reconciliation” presents several pertinent themes that are also praxes for the development of a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation: love, justice, freedom-liberation, and forgiveness. As complementary themes, each will receive greater treatment as a theological basis for the pastoral letter and the context for a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation.

The publication of “What We Have Seen and Heard signaled a historic and significant moment for Catholics of African descent in the United States. The ten African American Catholic bishops who ascribed their names to the pastoral letter seized
the moment by issuing it at a time when the country and the Church were wrestling with many social issues. These issues included Civil Rights and the post-1960’s era; continued racism in Church and society; the Supreme Court Bakke decision and cries of reverse discrimination; the emergence of new Black American leadership in the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church; and the resounding voices of African American Catholic laity who demanded seats within Church structures.

While specifically focused on African American Catholics, the pastoral letter has a clear message for the Catholic Church in the United States. It signifies a “coming of age” for African Americans in the Church, and it offers a sharp reminder that African American Catholics, who have gifts to offer, also have a rightful place in the Church. The pastoral letter, with overtones of a Black theology of liberation, captures the African American Catholic consciousness that had begun to emerge in the previous decade and helped African American Catholic leadership to reflect on themselves, their role, and contributions in the Catholic Church. The pastoral letter was and continues to be a valuable resource for the entire Catholic Church in the United States.

*What We Have Seen and Heard* is historic in that it is the first Church document to be issued by the African American hierarchical leadership and about the African American Catholic community. According to Bishop Terry Steib, “We knew that it would be significant for our people; that it would lift them up. We knew that this was

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3 In 1978, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled on a very emotional and controversial case involving a student who had been twice denied admittance at a California medical school. The student, Bakke, claimed reverse discrimination citing that his academic record was higher than the minority students accepted. With this case, the very ideal and constitutionality of affirmative action went on trial in just a little over a decade of the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act to level the “playing field” for persons of color.
accomplished because of the reaction of Black Catholics to the pastoral letter.”

The publication of What We Have Seen and Heard is the culmination of a process that began a few years earlier by the six African American bishops who were ordained by that time. Bishop Steib was one of the bishops who was ordained before the pastoral letter was completed, and who participated in the final phase of the drafting process. He recalled that,

The [Black] bishops felt that it was time to address Black Catholics in the United States Catholic Church. As more Black bishops are ordained, there was an expectation among Black Catholics that the bishops would speak to them in some way. Many Black Catholics knew about the Black bishops, but were distanced from them unless a bishop was in their diocese. They looked forward to the Black bishops assuming a more definitive leadership role. The Black bishops wanted to speak to Black Catholics about their own history and past, and therefore they knew that the message had to come from them, the Black bishops speaking to Black Catholics. There was consensus that evangelization had to be the central point of the pastoral letter.”

Developing the content of the pastoral letter was a consultative process with the African American bishops and Black Catholics nationally. Bishop James Lyke, who was then the auxiliary bishop of the Diocese of Cleveland, was chosen to coordinate the writing of the document. He wrote the initial draft that framed the content of the pastoral letter. Fr. Cyprian Davis, OSB, author of The History of Black Catholics in the United States, recounts his involvement with the writing of What We Have Seen and Heard. According to Davis, he and Fr. Joseph Nearon, SSS were to work together on the second draft with Fr. Nearon providing the theological content and Fr. Davis providing the literary style. However, Fr. Nearon died soon after completing his second draft. Fr. Davis was given the task of

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4 Bishop Terry Steib, Diocese of Memphis, telephone conversation with author, 12 June 2008.

5 Ibid.
reworking the total text. He wrote the initial section on Black spirituality and Bishop Wilton Gregory rewrote the section on the liturgy. Interestingly, while Fr. Davis did not write the initial draft of another major document, *Brothers and Sister To Us: U.S. Bishops’ Pastoral Letter on Racism in Our Day*, he is the document’s final author. He believes that the African American bishops invited his participation in the process of writing *What We Have Seen and Heard* because of his experience in writing the final version of *Brothers and Sisters to Us*.\(^6\)

Bishop Lyke, according to Bishop Steib, was commissioned by the other African American bishops to coordinate the development of an instrument to gather reactions and information about the pastoral drafts from a broad spectrum of African American Catholics. A draft of the pastoral letter was distributed to African American Catholics through various national African American Catholic organizations that included: the National Black Clergy Caucus; National Black Sisters’ Conference; National Association for Black Catholic Administrators; National Black Seminarians Association; National Black Deacons’ Association; Knights of St. Peter Claver; Ladies Auxiliary of St. Peter Claver; religious communities of Black Catholic women; and African American Catholic theologians and academicians. With the information gathered, the bishops painstakingly edited each draft and reviewed each line in the document for which there had to be unanimous agreement. Fr. Davis participated in that final review process with the African American bishops. Afterwards, they made additional changes and then finalized the version of *What We Have Seen and Heard* that was eventually published and promulgated.

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\(^6\) Fr. Cyprian Davis, OSB, telephone conversation with author, September 2008.
During the one and a half year consultative process, the number of African American bishops increased to ten. Although only one of the bishops, Joseph L. Howze, was an Ordinary, it was the largest number of African American bishops ever in the history of the United States.\textsuperscript{7} They recognized the awesome responsibility of leadership they had as African American Catholic leaders and that they had been given to them for not only African American Catholics, but for the Catholic Church in America. This was indeed a prophetic moment in the history of the Catholic Church in the United States and for African American Catholics. The bishops were called to serve, to witness and to speak truthfully, justly, and charismatically on behalf of their people, African American Catholics, and for all people of African descent in the United States. The bishops wrote, “We, the 10 Black bishops of the United States, chosen from among you to serve the People of God, are a significant sign among many other signs that the Black Catholic community in the American church has now come of age. We write to you as brothers that ‘you may share life with us.’ We write also to those who by their faith make up the People of God in the United States that ‘our joy may be complete.’” (2)

In the pastoral letter, the African American bishops express that the African American Catholic community has reached a level of maturity in which they have an obligation to proclaim and to share their gifts with the Church, particularly in the United States. For African American Catholics, it means they have certain responsibilities for their own faith. For the greater Church, it suggests that African American Catholics are asserting their rights in a Church that is truly theirs. As already noted, this is an effect of the evolving Black Catholic consciousness. \textit{What We Have Seen and Heard} signals this

\textsuperscript{7} When named the first bishop of the newly formed Diocese of Biloxi in June 1977, Bishop Joseph L. Howze also became the first African American Ordinary in the 20th century.
maturity and highlights the culture, spirituality, and gifts that Black Catholics assume.

The African American bishops write,

Within the history of every Christian community there comes the time when it reaches adulthood. This maturity brings with it the duty, the privilege and the joy to share with others the rich experience of the 'Word of Life.' Always conscious of the need to hear the Word and ever ready to listen to its proclamation, the mature Christian community feels the irresistible urge to speak that Word.” (1)

African Catholics in the United States, and indeed all Catholics, where challenged to disseminate, read, study, and discuss the pastoral letter. The encouragement came not only from the African American bishops, but also from national Black Catholic organizations. Black Catholic parishes, and even some dioceses, sponsored study and dialogue opportunities for Black Catholics, and those who worshiped with them and ministered to them. In the conclusion of the pastoral letter, the bishops write,

We urge you to study and discuss the points laid before you in this, our pastoral letter. We ask that you heed the opportunities that are ours today. Let us not deprive the Church of the rich gifts that God has granted us. . . . We urge the Black people of these parishes to take to heart our works of encouragement to spread the message of Christ to our own and to those of all other ethnic and racial groups.” (34)

For African American Catholics, it is a pastoral letter written specifically for them, thereby setting the stage for a future response and action by African American Catholics and the Catholic Church in the United States. This exclusivity, however, does not negate the responsibility of the Church in its response to African American Catholics. Indeed, the publication of the pastoral letter was a significant and historical moment for the Church and for African American Black Catholics. The first anniversary of its publication was commemorated by a national symposium in the Harlem section of New York City, hosted by Cardinal John O’Connor of the Archdiocese of New York on
September 9, 1985. Two months later, Bishop Joseph Howze spoke at the National Catholic Conference of Bishops on behalf of the ten African American bishops who had signed the pastoral letter. Bishop Howze remarked, “It is in this spirit of collegiality that we, the ten black Catholic bishops, address you. We also wish to be the voice of our black priests, deacons, sisters, brothers, seminarians and laity and other dedicated white clergy and religious who minister with black Catholics and make our cause their own.”

His remarks indicate that African American Catholics often felt unwelcome in the Catholic Church, and raises concern that the Church in the United States is viewed as a European Church [White Church] rather than a deposit of the vast racial, ethnic and cultural diversity in the United States. Bishop Howze said,

> We regret to report that there are a number of black Catholic lay leaders, clergy and religious in various parts of the country who believe that white Catholics really do not wish for the Church to grow in the black community. They have the impression that many priests, sisters and bishops do not actually think of the Church as “Catholic,” as universal and open to all. Rather, the Church is still European, the special home of the great ethnic and national groups from Europe. It is the custodian of their customs, their traditions, and their mores, and it is in some way incompatible with the experience in America.

Clearly, the African American bishops were challenging the bishops of the United States to reach out to African Americans Catholics with greater urgency and deliberation.

The shared identity and consciousness of African Americans and African American Catholics is shaped by their common historical and cultural legacy of slavery, racism, and oppression in the United States. As people of African descent, they share

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8 I attended the New York commemoration along with a busload of mostly Black Catholics from the Diocese of Pittsburgh.


10 Ibid.
some cultural traits with Africans such as a spirituality characterized by an internalization of faith that is very personal, yet communal. The expression of the deep internalized belief in God is realized in prayer, emotive celebration of worship, in the physical response to connection between God and person, and the personalization of God and faith. An understanding and appreciation of this Black consciousness is important in *What We Have Seen and Heard*. It establishes the context for the process of enculturation by African American Catholics to themselves.

Acknowledgement of the gifts mentioned by the African American bishops recognizes the African American Catholic experience as meaningful and significant, and elevates it as a value that has enriched its people and is worthy to be shared with others. The bishops lay the foundation for the richness of the Black experience as a gift of African Americans to share when they write,

> There is richness in our Black experience that we must share with the entire People of God. There are gifts that are part of an African past. For we have heard with Black ears and we have seen with Black eyes and we have understood with an African heart. We thank God for the gifts of our Catholic faith and we give thanks for the gifts of our Blackness. In all humility we turn to the whole Church that it might share our gifts so that ‘our joy may be complete.’ . . . Just as we lay claim to the gifts of Blackness so we share these gifts within the Black community at large and within the Church. This will be our part in the building up of the whole Church. This will also be our way of enriching ourselves. (6)

Freedom is another gift cited by the African American bishops to share with the Church. They use freedom and liberation synonymously as connected to Jesus, the ultimate liberator. Freedom and liberation demand truthfulness that is found only in and through Jesus as proclaimed in the Gospel. The social and historical experience of African Americans heightens the significance of this gift. Freedom is an important theme in the annuals of Black culture. Because it is a gift from God, African Americans have to
be accountable for the acceptance of their own freedom.

Freedom brings responsibility. It must never be abused, equated with license nor taken for granted. Freedom is God’s gift, and we are accountable to him for our loss of it. And we are accountable for the gift of freedom in the lives of others. We oppose all oppression and all injustice, for unless all are free, none are free. Moreover, oppression by some means freedom’s destruction for both the oppressor and the oppressed, and liberation liberates the oppressor and the oppressed. (6)

The section, “Our Spirituality and Its Gifts,” refers to African American Catholic spirituality and the spiritual gifts that are shared by all African Americans. Through the Holy Spirit, these spiritual gifts are given through the shared cultural patterns of African Americans. The bishops offer four dimensions or characteristics to describe African American spirituality: contemplative, holistic, joyful, and communitarian.

In the second part of the pastoral letter, “The Call of God to His People,” the African American bishops cite the interrelated history of African Americans and the Catholic Church in the United States by situating African American Catholics prominently in American Church history. While often neglected or not known, Blacks who were slaves and free persons helped to shape the Catholic Church in the western hemisphere from its earliest days. Therefore, people of African descent in the Americas have deep historical roots in the Church in their various countries. According to the bishops, “From the earliest period of the Church’s history in our land, we have been the hands and arms that helped build the Church from Baltimore to Bardstown, from New Orleans to Los Angeles, from St. Augustine to St. Louis.” (17) Fr. Cyprian Davis has written extensively about the history of Black Catholics and the Catholic Church in the United States. He writes, “The people who are the subject [Black Catholics] of this history are quite conscious of theirs. The Catholic Church is theirs, and they saw
themselves as an integral part of that church. . . . The story of the black Catholic community in the United States begins with the story of the Catholic church in Africa.”

In Part 2, the African American bishops enunciate the responsibilities that African American Catholics have for themselves and to the Catholic Church. As in the previous section, they also draw a connection between the spiritual and cultural identify of African Americans and African American Catholics. The bishops address the identity issue that has been of contention for African American Catholics and widely believed by their African American brothers and sisters—namely that in order for Blacks to be Catholic they have to lose their Black cultural identity. The bishops’ address it when they write, “The Catholic Church is not a ‘White Church’ nor a ‘European Church.’ It is essentially universal and, hence, Catholic. The Black presence within the Catholic Church in the United States is a precious witness to the universal character of Catholicism.”

The history of racism in the Catholic Church in the United States is problematic and presents a serious obstacle to reconciliation. It was acknowledged as a sin five years before the publication of What We Have Seen and Heard, by the bishops of the United States in Brothers and Sisters to Us: A Pastoral Letter on Racism in Our Day. Racism hinders efforts to evangelize and to promote equal opportunity and participation in the leadership of the Catholic Church. An African American Catholic theology of reconciliation must address this serious impediment within the Catholic Church in the United States and in the history and culture of the United States. The topic will be

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addressed in Chapter 1 of the dissertation, “The Sin of Racism: The Underlying Ideology.”

The African American bishops conclude Part 2 by identifying opportunities for evangelization by African American Catholics to the Black community. They do not offer specific strategies or recommendations for evangelization to the broader Black community. However, when understood in light of Part 1 and the first section of Part 2 of the pastoral letter, it is clear that the African American bishops provide a pastoral framework for African American Catholics to assist them in assuming their rightful leadership within the Church and within the African American Catholic community. First, the bishops establish in Part 1 that African American Catholics who share a common history and heritage with their African American brothers and sisters also have gifts to share with them and the Catholic Church. They propose that because of this shared history and heritage, African American Catholics are best suited to evangelize among themselves and to African Americans.

What We Have Seen and Heard provides a pastoral and theological framework for a movement that had already begun among African American Catholics and that audaciously proclaimed their place in the Catholic Church in the United States. Despite the brevity of the pastoral letter, it touches upon several themes that are important for the growth and the leadership formation and development of African American Catholics. These themes are still relevant for African American Catholics today and the growing number of African Catholics who immigrate to the United States. The African American bishops probably did not intend to write a full-blown theological treatise; but rather, wanted to offer a pastoral reflection on the nature and role of Black Catholic spirituality,
identity, and relationship to the universal Catholic Church, particularly in the United States.

The pastoral letter signaled a coming of age for Catholics of African descent in the United States. It proclaimed that African American Catholics have a “rightful” and legitimate home in the Catholic Church in the United States, and that the presence and history of the people of African descent are rooted deeply in the universal Catholic Church. It signaled a period of cultural, religious, and racial pride for African American Catholics. The phase by the bishops—Authentically Black, Truly Catholic—became a popular slogan that could be found on buttons, bumpers stickers, and the titles of articles, books, and media resources. A central feature of this dissertation understands the self-consciousness of African American Catholics and their status in the Catholic Church.

The African American bishops raise the issues of Black and Catholic identity. They voice the deep-rooted quandary of African American Catholics about their Black racial and cultural roots and their religious identity as members of the Catholic Church, because many in the mainstream African American community see the two as incompatible or contradictory. However, the African American bishops assert that African American Catholics can be and are definitely both Black and Catholic, thus popularizing the phrase, “Truly Black and Authentically Catholic.” They establish the roots of Black Catholics deep within the Catholic Church, beginning in Africa and continuing in the Americas. African American Catholics are authentically Black and genuinely a part of the African American cultural experience, and truly Catholic in their creedal affirmation and witness of faith. Bishop Edward Braxton has written extensively
on Black Catholic identity. In his 1985 article, “Black Catholics in America: Authentically Truly Catholic,” he argues for the full inclusion of Black Catholics in the American Church and opportunity for the intentional evangelization of African Americans.

‘What We Have Seen and Heard’ builds on Pope Paul VI’s Evangelii Nuntiandi and the 1979 U.S. bishops’ pastoral “Brothers and Sister to Us” which condemned racism in the world and the church as a sin and heresy. ‘What We Have Seen and Heard’ invites black Catholics to meditate upon the appropriate richness of their historical experience and spiritual heritage. It challenges religious and laity alike to take up their responsibility as active evangelists in Christ’s church.

Braxton reiterates the challenge articulated in the pastoral letter for the cultivation of African American Catholic leadership. Recognizing the roles of clergy and religious, the emergence of a strong Black Catholic laity is a necessity in assuming greater visibility and responsibility for evangelization and outreach to the Black community.

The first chapter in this dissertation, “The Sin of Racism: The Underlying Ideology,” addresses the issues of racial ideology and racism in the United States. The chapter is foundational for the development of a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation. It will provide the context that is cogent and necessary for a theological response to racist ideology. Integrally connected to the development of a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation is an understanding of the sinful nature and manifestation of racism. The redemption of both the oppressor and the oppressed is predicated on understanding and embracing reconciliation. This chapter will set forth the theological

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13 Prior to his ordination to the episcopacy in 1995, Braxton was a noted Church theologian.

problems and challenges of racism in light of the racial ideology that has permeated the history and development of the United States, including its affect upon the Church.

Understanding the pathos of the multifaceted and multidimensional manifestations of racism is crucial in the discussion of reconciliation from an African American perspective. It is beneficial for this study that the particularity of the discussion on a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation is from the context of Catholic theology and the impact of the sin of racism upon the Catholic Church in America. The history of slavery and post-slavery racism and oppression in its various forms (e.g., personal, institutional, social) manifested in the United States raises several challenging questions, including the unmerited or redemptive suffering of African Americans.

Crucial to the investigation is an understanding of Black liberation theology and the perspective of Black Catholic theologians. They will provide the context for understanding the role and relationship of God as Father, Jesus Christ as son and brother to African Americans, and Jesus as liberator and redeemer who identifies with the oppressed. Significant theological voices of Protestant Black liberation theologians will include James Cone, J. Deotis Roberts, Wilmore Gayraud, Kelly Brown, and Delores Williams. A significant part of the discussion will be the growing number of Black Catholic theological voices, which are essential to the working development of a theology of reconciliation from an African American and Catholic perspective. These theological voices include Sr. Jamie Phelps, Shawn Copeland, Fr. Brian Massingale, Toinette Eugene, Fr. Cyprian Davis, Diana Hayes and Phillip Linden, Jr. These theologians are attuned to the essence of Black spirituality and theology that are necessary for the development of a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation.
A significant contribution of the research has been the preservation and explication of the religious history and cultic experience in the development of Black people, especially as they matured in the United States. The important retrieval and documentation of this religious history and culture, along with establishing its legitimate place and role in the religious fabric of America, has inspired much of the research in Black theology. This has translated into a Christian activism that has downplayed the role of reconciliation because it tends to be understood as a passive, ineffectual and counter-productive means to achieve the eradication of racism and its effects. An exception is J. Deotis Roberts’ book, *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology*, which conceptualizes an ethical model for Black liberation theology by connecting liberation and reconciliation. Work in the area of Black theology and Black liberation theology, both Protestant and Catholic, has dealt primarily with the search for identity and meaning—theologically, religiously, and historically. With the exception of Roberts and a few others such as Massingale, there has been a lack of significant attention to the active and transformative dimensions of reconciliation in Black theology. This omission requires a redress in order to move the theological discussion of the role and significance of Black theology to a new level. This dissertation is one attempt to forge the expanded discussion. Though situated within the wider endeavor of Black theological reflection and drawing on the wide range of Black theological resources, this dissertation uses these resources with a view to construct a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation.

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Chapter 3, “The Catholic Church’s Understanding of Reconciliation,” will focus on the historical development and theological understanding of reconciliation as found in Catholic Church teaching. Special attention will be given to the sacramental and theological significance of reconciliation. If reconciliation is to be lived, not only theoretically but also practically, a theological scrutiny of the sacrament of reconciliation as practiced in the Catholic Church may present concepts and procedures that can help shape a contemporary theology of reconciliation with application for a Black theology of reconciliation. Therefore, a thorough understanding of the history and nature of the sacrament of reconciliation is important in order to establish the Catholic theological context for a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation. To assist in this endeavor, documents by the Holy See, the American bishops and theologians will be studied. They will include Pope John Paul II’s Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Reconciliation and Penance*; the pastoral reflection, *On Forgiveness and Reconciliation*, by the bishops of the United States; *Reconciliation and Justification: The Sacrament and Its Theology* by Kenan Osborne; *Reconciling Embrace* edited by Robert Kennedy; and Joseph Martos’ *Doors to the Sacred.*\(^{16}\)

Chapter 4, “Towards a Black Catholic Theology of Reconciliation,” is the basis for the major development of this theological treatise. The African American bishops highlight racism, past and present, as one of the challenges that Black Catholics

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encounter in sharing their faith and gifts. If this is so, then how does memory, whether individual or collective, for an oppressed people affect their spiritual process of forgiveness if it is a necessity for reconciliation?

Parallels will be drawn from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa.\footnote{At the end of apartheid in South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established as a way for victims and perpetrators of apartheid to speak at formal hearings.} Who God and Jesus are, and their relationship to those of African descent, will help to shape the relevancy of a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation for African Americans and particularly for African American Catholics. Within the context of a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation, reconciliation is not just a desired endeavor between individuals or peoples; rather, it is a sacramental process ultimately directed towards God and mediated by Christ through the Holy Spirit working in and among African American Catholics. This view raises questions such as “How can a people be a ‘gift of reconciliation?’”

The conclusion will summarize the arguments of the dissertation. It will integrate the research towards a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation and the continued discussion of Black theology. A proposal will be offered for how the investigation enhances the discourse on the theology of reconciliation and its benefit to the Catholic Church in America. In addition, it will critique the value of the research in light of the conversation on Black Catholic theology and the pastoral letter, \textit{What We Have Seen and Heard}.
Chapter 1

The Sin of Racism: The Underlying Ideology

1.1 Introduction

The Bishops of the United States call racism a sin and an evil in the 1979 *Brothers and Sisters To Us: U.S. Bishops’ Pastoral Letter on Racism in Our Day*. As a sin, the bishops argue that racism has divided the human family, which demeans God’s act of creation and Jesus’ message to “love one another.” The impact of racism has deep roots within the religious, social, and historical fabrics of the United States. As a phenomenon and ideology, racism asserts that people of color are inferior to Caucasians. As a sin, the endemic of racism affects the very institutions that give shape and identity to this nation, which is found on the principle that all are created equal. Yet, the betrayal of this foundational principle that establishes the existence and vision for this country was expressed first in the subjugation of its native peoples [Native Americans], and then by the enslavement of people from Africa. The institution of slavery left its indelible mark upon the United States of America and subsequent generations of both African Americans and White Americans.

The investigation to support a theology of reconciliation, which emanates from the faith, religious practice, and historical experience of Black Catholics, contends that reconciliation is possible through God’s gift of grace bestowed through the redemption and salvation of Jesus. Salvation comes from Christ, the truth and liberator, whose sacrifice brings freedom from the repression of racism and can lead to true forgiveness

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18 People of color will refer to African Americans, Africans, Native Americans, Latinos, and Asians.
and reconciliation. Jesus Christ is present and in the midst of those who are the object of racial oppression and suffering through his passion, death and resurrection.

While the history and legacy of racism has affected people of color, the primary focus of this research is the people of Black African descent in the United States. Central to the development of a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation is an understanding of racism and its disparity upon African Americans as an ideology and practice. It is precisely in light of racism towards African Americans and the institutionalization of racism in the Church that the Black bishops speak with a prophetic voice in What We Have Seen and Heard. The need for reconciliation emerges from the iniquitous racist systems of disparity in the United States. The process of developing a concept of reconciliation from the circumstances of Black Catholics is in light of the effects of racism as experienced by African Americans in this country and in the Catholic Church in the United States.

This chapter will focus on racism as a sin and the theological implications for this pronouncement. The Catholic Church in the United States has been implicated in this divisive sin, therefore a thorough understanding of the role of the Church and its response to racism is warranted. The chapter will examine the various definitions of racism that help to shape its ideological premise and its role in the United States. It will address the institutionalization of racism, including religious institutions and most significantly the Catholic Church in the United States. Finally, the chapter will wrestle with the theme of suffering as redemptive. The question to be considered is whether there can be value—redemptive value for African Americans—in suffering that is associated with the sin of racism. Therefore, what is the theological meaning of the suffering and oppression of
African Americans and their descendants? Where has God been during the suffering? The quandary is that the unmerited suffering and oppression endured by African Americans, a result of systemic racism and discrimination, may be considered as redemptive suffering.

1.2 Racism: Concept and Ideology

Racism, as ideology and practice, asserts that some human beings are inferior to others and that God does not create all equally. This ignominious distortion of God’s creation has polarized humanity for generations. The beliefs and practices associated with racism have been the cause of oppression for people of African descent in the United States.

There are innumerable definitions for racism that range from the simplest to the complex. For this research, the working definition of racism is “any attitude, action or institutional structure, which subordinates a person or group because of their color. Racism is not just a matter of attitudes; actions and institutional structures can also be a form of racism.”

As the operative definition for this research, it includes the elements that are essential for the discussion of racism in the context of the development of a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation. A brief examination of other definitions will show an evolution in the understanding of the word and concept.

Interestingly, a cursory examination of dictionaries from the mid-1920 to the 1960’s reveals that there is an evolution in the understanding of racism as seen in the definitions. The 1923 edition of the Chambers’ Twentieth Dictionary of the English

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Language, the 1925 Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English, and the 1940 edition of the Funk and Wagnall College Standard Dictionary have no listing for racism.20 Was the term unfamiliar to the editors and publishers? Had the word and concept not yet entered the public domain or the conscience of Americans? Notably, dictionaries published in the 1950’s and 1960 have entries for racism and a word not in common usage today—racialism. Webster’s New World Dictionary describes racialism as “a doctrine or feeling of racial difference or antagonisms, especially with reference to supposed racial superiority, inferiority, or purity; racial prejudice, hatred, or discrimination.”21 It also defines racism as racialism and as the “program or practice of racial discrimination, segregation, persecution and domination, based on racialism.”22

The 1955 American College Dictionary has

A belief that human races have distinctive make-ups that determine their respective cultures, usually involving the idea that one’s own race is superior and has the right to rule others. A policy of enforcing such asserted rights. A system of government and society based upon it.23

The 1967 Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary cites racialism as well as racism, and describes racism as “a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and those racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular

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22Friend, Webster’s, 1198.

Institutional or structural racism is alluded to in the 1968 Random House College Dictionary. Racism is,

A doctrine that inherent differences among the various human races determine cultural or individual achievement, usually involving the idea that one’s own race is superior; a policy, government, etc. based on such a doctrine; hatred or intolerance of another race or other races.\(^\text{25}\)

Clearly, from just these few resources, there seems to be an evolution of thought and understanding of the concept of racism. Additionally, these definitions introduce systematic or institutional racism that involves doctrines, policies, and structures. The definitions indicate that value or worth is assigned to skin color; but do not explicitly express that positive or superior value is assigned exclusively to Caucasians and inferiority to Blacks and other people of color. However, the belief that those of Black African descent, along with anyone not considered White, are inferior to Caucasians is normative in the United States as evidenced by its history. This depraved history or racial oppression continues after the abolition of slavery with discriminatory beliefs and practices that are explicit and implicit, conscious and unconscious.

The definition of racism that is operative for this study is “any attitude, action or institutional structure, which subordinates a person or group because of their color. Racism is not just a matter of attitudes; actions and institutional structures can also be a form of racism.”\(^\text{26}\) While noting the role of attitudes and behaviors, the definition moves the discussion from personal or individual prejudices, beliefs and actions to institutions and societal structures that support racism through its programs, policies, and laws.

\(^{24}\text{Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary. (Springfield, MA.: G. & C. Merriam, 1967), 704.}\)


\(^{26}\text{Racism in America, 5.}\)
Psychologist and educator Dr. Beverly Tatum argues that using prejudice, as the basis for defining racism is inadequate. In citing David Wellman, she writes,

Many people use the terms *prejudice* and *racism* interchangeable. I do not, and I think it is important to make a distinction. In his book *Portraits of White Racism*, David Wellman argues convincingly that limiting our understanding of racism to prejudice does not offer a sufficient explanation for the persistence of racism. He defines racism as a “system of advantage based on races.” In illustrating this definition, he provides example after example of how Whites defend their racial advantage—access to better schools, housing, jobs—even when they do not embrace overtly prejudicial thinking. Racism cannot be fully explained as an expression of prejudice alone.

Incorporating in the definition of racism, “system of advantage,” helps to clarify the existential nature of racism as more than personal ideology based on racial prejudices, beliefs, and actions of individuals; although, these are significant and brutal. However, the system involving coded messages, systemic practices, institutional policies are more insidious and detrimental to not only African Americans, but to the entire nation. Having advantage based on race also includes having privilege based on race. Fr. Clarence Williams, *Racial Sobriety: A Journey from Hurts to Healing*, offers a sociological perspective in his definition of racism.

Racism is a social illness that is characterized by thinking, feeling and acting as if one race is superior to another race. The origin of racism is the belief that some people are not fully human and therefore do not deserve to be treated like full human beings. The full human beings have supreme rights over the less human groups, and therefore have the power of racial supremacy to shape social relationships. In this social structure the dominant culture can hurt and exploit the targeted racial groups.

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28 Ibid., 7.

The notion of superiority is present in his definition. An added element is the consideration for what makes human beings human. If racism has as its basis a belief that there are levels of human beings, then what constitutes being human? Even within this sociological definition, the theological presupposition that all are created in the image of God is evident. Also new in Williams’ definition is the linking of racism and illness. It implies that racism, like other human illnesses, may be curable. His theory of racial sobriety builds on the belief that racism is a treatable sickness. “Racial dysfunction,” writes Williams, “is the major social illness that is toxic to everyone in the world today. . . . Racism like any other disease is a deadly force in the human family.”

The key to change are societal attitudes and behaviors found in the process of healing. Williams uses the metaphor of healing as the archetype for what he describes as the Recovery from Racism.

Forgiveness is one of the steps in the healing process. Therefore, healing is an important theme in the discussion of racism for both the oppressed and the oppressor. Healing can ultimately lead to forgiveness and reconciliation, thereby becoming a sacramental experience. The early definitions of racism cited above have no concept of healing, nor do they indicate that there is anything so grievous for which healing is required. The definitions provide a window into the evolution of thought and understanding of racism, particularly as applied to the treatment of people of color in the

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30Ibid. 29.

31Williams’ “Recovery from Racisms” is copyrighted as part of the title of the Institute for Recovery from Racisms, a treatment programs to explore individual, institutional aspects and process of racism and recovery from racial supremacy in society.
United States by White Americans. For too long, racism has been defined as a dislike for a person of another race. This passive definition eliminates the moral culpability associated with racism as a sin and does not account for the full dimensions of the racism phenomenon. Yet, all the definitions imply that someone or a particular group has been wronged and disenfranchised, and that it is characterized by institutionalized, systematic, and social disregard for segments of the American population. While the dictionaries do not identify who is superior or inferior based on race, the history of the United States clearly indicates that the major infractions of racism have been towards African Americans.

1.3 Racism: The Religious Dimension

Racism is a negative force that divides one group from another and assigns value based on the color of skin or race. Racism is a moral sin and an evil that has permeated and shaped the various institutions of the United States, including its religious institutions. In 1979, the bishops of the United States issued a critical document on racism in the United States. Promulgated in English and in Spanish, “Brothers and Sisters to Us: U.S. Bishops’ Pastoral Letter on Racism in Our Day” boldly declares that racism is an evil and a sin. The bishops challenge the Church to address this sin and evil by placing racism within a theological context. They connected as a sin Christian faith and racism, along with personal and institutional beliefs and actions that perpetuate and sustain racism. Nine years later, the Pontifical Justice and Peace Commission issued The Church and Racism: Towards A More Fraternal Society. The task of the Pontifical

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Commission was to examine racism from an international perspective, its manifestations within discriminatory attitudes and conflicts between racial and ethnic groups. Both documents explain the Church’s views on racism and locate the context for such discussion within the framework of Christianity, and more specifically Catholic theology. The Church, through these documents call for personal and collective reflection and dialogue on racism in an effort to work towards its eradication.

The bishops declare that racism is a sin with direct implications for how one views a relationship with Jesus Christ and his teachings.

Racism is a sin: a sin that divides the human family, blots out the image of God among specific members of that family, and violates the fundamental human dignity of those called to be children of the same Father. Racism is the sin that says some human beings are inherently superior and other essentially inferior because of race. The sin is that it makes racial characteristics the determining factor for the exercise of human rights. It mocks the words of Jesus: ‘Treat others the way you would have them treat you.’ Indeed, racism is more than a disregard of the words of Jesus; it is a denial of the truth of the dignity of each human being revealed by the mystery of the Incarnation.  

Not only do the bishops call racism a sin, they assert, “it is a radical evil that divides the human family and denies the new creation of a redeemed world.” Racism negates the fundamental theological principle that all people are created in the image and likeness of God as found in the book of Genesis. In addition, racism is diametrically opposed to the tenets of Catholic social teaching that declare the human dignity of all persons.

In addressing racism, the Pontifical Commission noted that in order to “eradicate racist behavior of all sorts from our societies as well as the mentalities that lead to it, we

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34 *Brothers and Sisters to Us*, 3.
must hold strongly to convictions about the dignity of every human person and the unity of the human family.”

They write,

According to biblical Revelation, *God created the human being* – man and woman—*in his image and likeness*. This bond between the human person and the Creator provides the basis of his or her dignity and fundamental inalienable rights of which God is the guarantor. To these personal rights obviously correspond duties toward others. Neither the individual nor society, the State nor any human institution can reduce a person, or a group of persons, to the status of an object.

Indeed, this is just what racism does; it rejects the bond established by God with certain groups of people and makes them objects based solely on the color of their skin. The Church challenges this nefarious view that negates the common origin of all humans and asserts that some are not created in the image of God or share in the relationship of Jesus Christ through his incarnation, revelation, salvation, and redemption of humanity. In rejecting racism, the Church proclaims the necessity for respect for one other, the essential rights due to all persons, and the right to the basic dignities afforded to all human beings. As part of the body of Christ, we are brothers and sisters to one another, equal before God.

Central to understanding the pathos of racism and its eradication is the fundamental principle of the dignity and worth of every person who is created in the likeness and image of God. This conviction, which is the foundation of Catholic moral theology and Catholic social teaching, is critical for understanding the role of racism and its significance in the development of a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation. Because they are created in God’s image, human beings are elevated to a higher status than the creatures of the earth. They are given greater responsibility to maintain and

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36*Church & Racism*, 24.

37Ibid., 27.
protect the earth and all living things, and to be in communion with one another and with God, who is the creator. The quintessential relationship or special bond is established with the first parents, Adam and Eve, and their descendants thereby forming community. It is significant that all, therefore, are created by God and in God’s image. In the act of creation, all humanity is endowed with the spirit of God. In quoting Pope John Paul II, the Pontifical Commission writes, “Man’s creation by God in his own image confers upon every human person an eminent dignity; it also postulates the fundamental equality of all human beings.”38 The dignity that is afforded to every human being comes not by merit, but initially through the grace of God.

The mystery of the Incarnation is that God assumes human nature through the embodiment of Jesus, the Son or Word of God that becomes flesh. Divinity and humanity become one and are revealed through Jesus. The birth of Jesus is the manifestation of God’s enduring love and redemption. Through his salvific work, and his death and resurrection, Jesus Christ brings deliverance from evil caused by sin and death. Jesus connects humanity to one another in community and in loving relationships. As noted in What We Have Seen and Heard, community and its interrelatedness is a powerful symbol of divine love and presence in the world. Jesus, who is both the proclaimer and the proclaimed in the Good News, is the manifestation of how we are to live with justice and compassion for one another.

Racism defies the Incarnation of Jesus and the Good News by denying the sacred dignity that each person possesses regardless of the color of his or her skin or by any division sanctioned by human beings. Jesus Christ redeems all humanity through his

38Ibid., 26.
death and resurrection because of God’s love for all humanity. Redemption and salvation, through Jesus, is extended to all. “Faith in the one God, Creator and Redeemer of all humankind made in his image and likeness, constitutes the absolute and inescapable negation of any racist ideologies.”39 In God the Father and Creator, and Jesus the Son, there are no distinctions based on racial ideologies; rather, there is unity that transcends the human differences. The theology of the Church, in regards to its moral and Catholic social teachings, posits that all human beings are created in the image of God and possess a sacred dignity that comes with inalienable rights and responsibilities. All life, therefore, is sacred and all human beings are to be treated equally, equitably, justly, and with respect.

Racism is contrary to the Gospel that compels believers to see God’s presence in the other. Christ is present in the world and reflected in God’s people. To deny the humanity and dignity of any of God’s people because of the color of their skin or culture, nationality or state in life is to reject the presence of Christ in each person. Ultimately, this is a rejection of the Incarnation and the active presence of God within the world and among God’s people. The challenge from the bishops is to see the Church as universal, representing people of all races, languages, ethnicities, and nationalities. Through the Incarnation God came in human form to redeem the world through his son Jesus Christ, and to bring all peoples to God, the Father. For God so loved the world that he sent his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. (John 3:16). Because of God’s love, and the salvific act of Jesus, human beings share a distinctive bond. “This is the mystery of our Church,” said the bishops, “that all

39Ibid., 27.
men and women are brother and sister, all one in Christ, all bear the image of the Eternal God. The Church is truly universal, embracing all races, for it is ‘the visible sacrament of this saving unity.’”

Christ is the bridge that connects people who are different from one another whether the differences are based on race, national origin, ethnicity or culture. It is because there is but one God in whose image all have been fashioned, one Father whose children we all likewise are, that all men are brothers, in a way that no created power can destroy. The only means of denying his brotherhood is to set oneself outside the Fatherhood of God. Here again, the logical conclusion of racism is the abandonment of Christianity.

The bishops of the United States, while acknowledging that there have been racial improvements for African Americans through the passing of laws and the changed attitudes of many White Americans, nevertheless speak earnestly that it is not enough. In many cases, what has been achieved is superficial. According to the Pontifical Commission, “It is indeed not enough that laws prohibit or punish all types of racial discrimination: these laws can easily be gotten around if the community for which they are intended does not fully accept them.” Both documents, *The Church and Racism* and *Brothers and Sisters to Us*, purport that the eradication of racism begins in the human heart. The Pontifical Commission writes, “A change of heart cannot occur without strengthening spiritual convictions regarding respect for other races and ethnic groups.”

A change of heart opens one to embrace the message of Christ proclaimed in the Gospels that we are neighbors to one another. It is the motivation and will to think and act

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40 *Brothers and Sisters to Us*, 7.


42 *Church and Racism*, 34.

43 Ibid., 34.
differently out of Christian love for one another through faith in Jesus. The bishops, in *Brothers and Sisters to Us*, remind the church in the United States that, “It is important to realize in the case of racism that we are dealing with a distortion at the very heart of human nature.”44 The transformation that is necessary to eradicate racism is found in our minds and hearts.

1.3.1 Racism as Original Sin

The 1992 edition of *Sojourners* devotes its entire issue to examining various aspects of racism. That edition entitled, “America’s Original Sin,” adds a new dimension to the study of racism in the United States by focusing on what it calls White racism. The unique title connects racism and sin as a moral issue. As a phenomenon that began before the founding of the nation, racism is intricately woven into all aspects of this country, thereby having the distinction of being an original sin. The publication’s theme addresses the religious dimension of racism by connecting it to the concept of original sin.

In spiritual and biblical terms, racism is a perverse sin that cuts to the core of the gospel message. Put simply, racism negates the reason for which Christ died—reconciling work of the cross. It denies the purpose of the church; to bring together, in Christ, those who have been divided from one another, particularly in the early church’s case, Jew and Gentile—a division based on race.45

Racism, as an original sin, embraces the concept that the perpetual enslavement of peoples from Africa was not an accidental occurrence. Rather, it was a deliberate and conscious choice by profiteers of slavery, those who indirectly benefitted and the

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44 *Brothers and Sisters to Us*, 8.

founding leaders of the United States. It also implies that racism has deep roots in the establishment of the United States. Can racism be viewed as a sin either theologically or analogously? It is certainly a moral evil and therefore a sin in which individuals may engage. It is possible for individuals not to commit overt acts of racism and still participate in racism or to benefit from racism. In such cases, have these individuals sinned? Are they responsible for sin? This is a complex issue because the conditions of consent and intentionality are necessary for the act of sin.

The question that the original sin analogy raises is whether the concept of original sin is effective in understanding racism, particularly the societal and institutional implications. Today racism is acknowledged as a sin and an evil. However, the full understanding of racism as a sin may be elusive to those without a religious perspective or who cannot connect racism to faith. For those who assert that the discussion of racism can occur only within the realms of politics, history, or sociology, then such an analogy may not be useful. However, one might argue that it was the accommodation of and absence of a firm theological position for racism as evil and sinful that was missing during the historical development of the United States. It is necessary to search for meaningful and affective ways to help bridge the understanding of racism and its sinful nature.

Understanding racism from the perspective of sin or original sin may lead to other concepts such as forgiveness, God’s judgment, and reconciliation. While the bishops in *Brothers and Sisters to Us* refer to racism as sin and evil, the Pontifical Commission does not explicitly call racism a sin. They do say that, “While she [the Church] is not afraid to examine lucidly the veils of racism and disapprove of them, even to those who are
responsible for them, she also seeks to understand how these people could have reached that point.\textsuperscript{46}

The doctrine of original sin may be a useful analogy for racism; however, it is first necessary to understand this theological doctrine originated by Augustine of Hippo in the 5th century. Because of the first sin described in Genesis—the sin of Adam and Eve—humanity has inherited the inclination to sin. Evil and sin have entered the world, thereby becoming a reality in human history. Human beings continue to reject God and to alienate themselves from God’s love and grace because of their sinful nature. The doctrine of original sin explains the existential nature of sin and evil in the world and upon humanity. The disruption of original grace sets into motion this universal sin, which is the inclination to sin and to do evil. Original sin is expunged only through God’s grace and salvation that comes through the redemption Christ. It is acts of sin that human beings continue to perpetuate even after the removal of original sin. The classical understanding of sin involves free will and voluntarily turning from God. Thus, locale for all sin is within the human heart and is engaged through human free will. The manifestation of sin is in human acts that require awareness, knowledge, and free choice. These are prerequisites for committing a sin. Catholic doctrine maintains that sin is both an action and a relationship consisting of personal deeds and the state of being in sin. Therefore, the intentions of the individual, the human agent, and the freedom to choose or to act with the full consent of the human will are at the apex of determining what sin is.

Is there any significance between an analogy of original sin and the acts of sin? “Original sin is called ‘sin’ only in an analogical sense: it is sin ‘contracted’ and not

\textsuperscript{46}\textit{Church & Racism}, 36.
‘committed’—a state and not an act.” 47 Unlike the acts of sin that are either by commission or omission, original sin that originates as a result of the fall of Adam and Eve is involuntary and unintentional and does not consult the human will. Original sin is an unconscious state into which one is born and is inherent in human nature. God’s love, grace, and redemption expunge the original sinful condition. Yet, the consequences of original sin are the residue of the personal and individual acts of sin in human history, the “peccatum originale originatum.” The defect in human nature caused by the sin of Adam and Eve is transmitted to humanity, thereby conditioning the sinful nature of all human beings. The impediment of original sin is removed through the sacrament of baptism.

Is it possible that the concept of original sin can lead to an understanding of collective or corporate sin? All humanity is imperfect because of the initial sin of Adam and Eve. Participation in racism as a sin is through collaboration and uninformed ignorance as well as conscious and deliberate behavior. “The absence of personal fault for evil does not absolve one of all responsibility.” 48 Racism as a sin and as an evil is not only individualistic, but is very much communal. As perpetuated and experienced in the United States, the perpetuation of racism is generational, passing from one generation to the next, thereby contributing to its institutionalized nature. Since the perversion of racism is embodied in human hearts, minds, and the structures of society, its citizens are affected even when the racism is unconscious and overt.

What insight does the nature of original sin offer for an understanding of the sin of racism? Moreover, what insights does the sin of racism have to offer to an understanding


48 Brothers and Sisters to Us, 4.
of original sin? Unlike the attitude of racism, original sin is inherent from birth. One is not able to see original sin nor can it be obtained or avoided by one’s own initiative. It is removable only through the redemptive act of Jesus through God’s grace. Conversely, racism is learned behavior and attitudes that can be seen in individual acts and in the social structures and institutions that form the human agents of sin. No one is born a racist; however, from a very early age, racism can enter unconsciously in one’s familial and social realm, thus becoming an ontological part of one’s reality. Although original sin is removed for all time through baptism, there is no one occasion or act that can dislodge or eradicate racism from the human heart or from society.

The elimination of racism requires conscious and intentional reflection and action. The infant is unconscious that as an act of its birth, it has inherited the nature of original sin. In addition, many people, while acknowledging racism exists, are unconscious or unaware of the extent to which they have been infected and affected by the sin of racism or their complicity in its perpetuation. As stated earlier, a condition of original sin is that it is involuntary. The sin of racism is committed primarily through voluntary acts and deeds. Yet, it can be involuntary, particularly with regard to the collective or corporate nature of racism as a social sin and unconscious or unintentional. While some individuals may choose the path of racism, many individuals may not voluntarily choose to participate in the structures and privileges afforded White Americans, but do so out of ignorance or a lack of knowledge of their own complicity in the manifestations of racism.

Original sin is not an action but a state into which one is born, whereas racism as a sin involves acts fostered by personal or social beliefs. There is a direct correlation between the actions and beliefs, which do not exist within the understanding of original
sin. While the intention of the person and the consent of the human will are important factors in racism, they are absent from the nature of original sin. Therefore, the initial question, can the doctrine of original sin be useful as an analogy in understanding the sin of racism? The response is yes, but with certain limitations. First, the issues of free will and intentionality are at the basis of this conclusion. Since free will and intentionality are absent in the nature of original sin, the analogy is not constructive. Secondly, the redemptive nature for the removal of original sin comes from God’s grace through the singularly sacramental action of baptism. Unlike original sin, the redemptive nature for the sin of racism, which is a defect of the heart and spirit, is not confined to a one time sacramental act; but rather, is found in the repetitive seeking of forgiveness and the conversion of heart through the sacrament of reconciliation. God may be and is involved in the elimination of racism, but again that is part of the free will of the individual to be open to the intervention of the Holy Spirit sacramentally.

The analogy, therefore, is useful in explaining the inherent nature of racism, if one accepts the concept of a social sinful structure or racism as a social sin. Even though a person has not or does not intend or will to be racist or participate in social structures that support racism, racism is so imbued in the American society that the inherent characteristic of original sin may lend itself as an explanation of the systemic and ingrained nature of racism in the United States. Here it may be beneficial to speak of an individual’s unconscious and involuntary adoption of racist attitudes. This is where the analogy must end. One must be careful with the analogy and not over emphasize an inherent nature of racism. To do so without relating racism to freedom or free will and responsibility runs the danger of deemphasizing and limiting the importance of individual
conscience, responsibility, and accountability. In other words, racism could be justified with excuses such as, “I cannot help it,” or “It is not my fault,” or “it is part of my inherent nature.”

1.3.2 Racism: An Anomaly for the American Catholic Church

Racism and the effects of racism manifested in bigotry and discrimination continue to be an ignominy for the Catholic Church in the United States. The Church, as a visible institution, is established and ordained as a sacramental sign of the presence of Jesus Christ working in and through the Church, the Body of Christ. The living beings who are the Body of Christ and who comprise the Church are called to holiness. However, the Church that has been called to holiness has at times failed as evidenced in the history of the Catholic Church in the United States. As part of the Body of Christ, the Church has been responsible for racism and its perpetuation; and yet, has demonstrated its call to holiness by its work to eradicate racism and the oppression of God’s people regardless of the nature of the oppression. For the bishops, the response to racism and any injustice is Jesus who is the Good News of salvation, liberation, and forgiveness. They write,

> The new forms of racism must be brought face-to-face with the figure of Christ. It is Christ’s word that is the judgment of this world; it is Christ’s cross that is the measure of our response; and it is Christ’s face that is the composite of all persons but in a most significant way of today’s poor, today’s marginal people, today’s minorities. ⁴⁹

> In Mathew 28:16-20, the disciples are commissioned to go forth throughout the known world to proclaim the Good News that Jesus had come and died to redeem

⁴⁹Ibid., 6.
humanity. This charge given by Jesus and supported by the Holy Spirit is not to selective
groups based on the color of their skin; rather, the kerygma is to be proclaimed to all. As
the Body of Christ, the Church is a sign and witness of unity among the diversity of
God’s people. Chapter 2 of Acts describes the empowering role of the Holy Spirit that
propels the disciples from the upper room to preach to the world. Thus, the Church
established by Jesus Christ and given life by the Holy Spirit is a witness of its own
universality and the eminence of Jesus, its founder.

Quoting “To Live in Christ Jesus,” the bishops of the United States offer a very
poignant statement, “The absence of personal fault for an evil does not absolve one of all
responsibility. We must seek to resist and undo injustices we have not caused, lest we
become bystanders who tacitly endorse evil and so share in guilt for it.” In this
statement, the bishops of the United States acknowledge that the act of racism is not
merely by co-mission— one’s behavior expressed in actions or through verbal
articulation. Racism also exists by omission— the failure to respond appropriately. One
of the most beautiful liturgical prayers is the Confiteor, an option for the Penitential Rite.
“I confess to almighty God and to you my brothers and sisters that I have sinned in my
thoughts and in my words, in what I have done and in what I have failed to do.” The
prayer expresses the co-mission and omission nature of sin. In the prayer, the penitent
seeks forgiveness and reconciliation from God and from the community of faithful, not
just for recognizable offenses, but also for the neglect or absence of responsible behavior.
In addition, it raises the notion that while sin and forgiveness are personal, so too are they

\[50\text{Ibid., 4.}\]
communal. This communal aspect is central to the development of a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation.

1.4 Social Dimension of Racism

While concepts such as knowledge and freedom are crucial in understanding sin, it is important to recognize that sin is also social. People as human agents are communal and the affects of their sins are social in nature. “Sin gives rise to social situations and institutions that are contrary to the divine goodness. Structures of sin are the expression and effect of personal sins. They lead their victims to do evil in their turn. In an analogous sense, they constitute a ‘social sin.’” The concept of social sin is found in the Old Testament in which Israel, as a community, must face God’s judgment and call to repentance because of the sins of one or a few.

The bishops introduce the concept of social sin when they propose that, “The sin is social in nature in that each of us, in varying degrees, is responsible.” Existentially, racism is social in that it affects the existence of human beings within their social context. While racism is perpetuated through individual acts and attitudes, it also is perpetuated in social systems and in its policies, programs, and institutional practices. Moreover, because racism is a sinful offense not only against God, but also against humanity, it is often called a social sin. Mark O’Keefe writes,

Though disagreements exist as to the exact nature and range of a concept of social sin, it is a clear affirmation of the Christian tradition that sin is social as well as a personal reality.

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51 Catechism, 457:1869.
52 Ibid., 3.
Inasmuch as God is the one creator and parent of the human family, harm done by one person to another is a violation of the social ordering of persons, which God has created—it is therefore sin.\textsuperscript{54}

The bishops reiterated this moral position in \textit{Brothers and Sisters To Us}.

The structures of our society are subtly racist, for these structures reflect the values which society upholds. . . . The sin is social in nature in that each of us, in varying degrees, is responsible. All of us in some measure are accomplices.\textsuperscript{55}

However, it is important to remember that social structures do not commit evil or sin; rather, the evil or sin is the result of human beings who have given structure to society and institutions. This is regardless of whether the racism is intentional or unintentional and with or without the full consent of the human will. The concept of a social sin is beneficial in examining the collective nature of a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation.

The personal and institutional forms of racism shape the numerous ways that racism is defined and manifested. The working definition for racism is “Any attitude, action or institutional structure, which subordinates a person or group because of their color. Racism is not just a matter of attitudes; actions and institutional structures can also be a form of racism.”\textsuperscript{56} Like most modern definitions of racism, this one defines racism with personal and institutional characteristics. The personal and institutional dimensions of racism provide the most clarity and expression of the history and experience of racism in the United States. According to “Sojourners,” an ecumenical Christian publication,

When we examine institutional racism, the issue of power must be emphasized. Racism is more than bigotry or racial prejudice—having distorted opinions about

\textsuperscript{54}Ibid., 59.

\textsuperscript{55}\textit{Brothers and Sisters to Us}, 3.

\textsuperscript{56}\textit{Racism in America}, 5.
people of other races. Racism is backed up by power—it is the power to enforce one’s prejudice. . . . There are the forces that make us, as individuals, into racists. They are the forces that transform individual prejudice into corporate racist action. Through these institutions, the subordination and exploitation of America’s people of color take place.57

The bishops of the United States speak of both personal and institutional racism when they locate the sin of racism in hearts and in societal structures or institutions. They recognize the role of oppressive institutional structures that either foster racism or participate in its degradation of others. The Pontifical Commission cites institutionalized racism as the most palpable and prevalent form of racism today. Both individuals and institutions construct barriers of avoidance and denial of racism as ways to deflect it from themselves out of guilt and a lack of understanding of the history, nature, and perpetuation of racism. For White Americans, serious reflection on racism must include the themes of white privilege and power, and the culpability of the White community in perpetuating the climate of racism in the United States. The perpetractions, whether conscious or unconscious, continue through silence and refusal to examine the institutionalization of racism and personal, religious, and societal attitudes and norms towards African Americans and other Americans of color. In noting the structural or institutional dimensions of racism, the bishops write, “The structures of our society are subtly racist, for these structures reflect the values which society upholds. They are geared to the success of the majority and the failure of the minority.”58


58Brother and Sisters to Us, 3.
Institutional racism may be direct and intentional, or indirect and unintentional. Direct and intentional racism is conscious and deliberate. For example, realtors and mortgage lenders who use their powers to limit or deny housing to Blacks and Whites in certain neighborhoods based on race, it is an intentional and conscious act. This practice, known as “redlining” is illegal. Conversely, institutional racism that is indirect may be intentional or unintentional. Following the above example, the White individual who knowingly purchases a home that was initially restricted to a Black individual participates indirectly, yet consciously, in racism, although she or he is not responsible for the discriminatory housing policies. The White individual that buys property without knowing that Blacks have been denied purchasing access also participates in institutional racism; however, in this case, the individual unintentionally and unconsciously participates in racism. Even though participation is indirect and without knowledge, the person benefits from a racist system that rewards some and disadvantages others based solely on the color of their skin. Indirect racism, however, that is unintentional is far more complex and difficult to eradicate.

1.5 Rooted in History: The Institution of Slavery and Racism

The history of African Americans in the United States did not begin with their arrival to the American shores. Rather, the history of slavery and oppression of peoples of African descent began on the African continent where they were captured, confined in slave dungeons, shackled, and transported on ships across the Atlantic Ocean. The survivors of the Middle Passage to North America were sold into perpetual slavery and oppression. Other repressive systems of sanctioned institutional discrimination and racism were erected after the abolition of slavery. Today, while many of the legal
barriers have been removed, racism and the disparity that it brings still permeate within
the United States and its institutions. The suffering caused by the dehumanization and
indifference of African Americans is documented in the historical, religious, and cultural
genres of African Americans: slave narratives, spirituals, sermons, literature, blues, and
annals of history.

1.5.1 Institution of Slavery

Racist ideology was used to justify the African slave trade and the
institutionalization of slavery in the United States. The justification for the racist ideology
that debased persons of Black African descent was used in order to build and maintain an
economic system that used Africans for slave labor. Africans, and those of Black African
descent, were devalued as less than human beings. “The professed high ideals of Anglo-
Western society could exist side by side with the profitable institution of slavery only if
the humanity of the slaves were denied and disregarded.”\textsuperscript{59} The history of racism as
experienced in the United States towards peoples of Black African descent is unique and
particular to this country, as exemplified in the institutionalized system of slavery.

Before the beginning of the American democracy, racism had become institutionalized
within the fabric of American society. Religious institutions did not escape participation
in the moral depravity of racism. Protestant and Catholics churches emulated the same
racist beliefs and behaviors as the rest of American society and benefitted from the
economy of slavery. Often, they justified racism and its practices by distorting scripture
and theology to indicate that Africans and their descendants were inferior and subhuman
to Whites; and therefore, God ordained their subjugation.

The abolishment of slavery did not end racism, bigotry, and discrimination towards those of Black African descent. In fact, racism became imbued in all levels of American society. As new groups of immigrants, particularly from Europe, sought to achieve the American dream, racism persisted. Many of these immigrants faced rejection, prejudice, and discrimination as newcomers to the United States; and yet, they were not immune to the perpetuation of the American disease of racism. One would expect that racism would have waned with the succession of new immigrant groups, especially following the Civil War and the abolition of slavery. Since new immigrants had not been subjected to the impious social fabric of racism in the United States, one might conjecture that the intensity of racism would cease and institutional racism would diminish. On the contrary, the acts of Jim Crow, lynchings, segregation, and the perpetuations of racist ideology flourished. Racism and the privileges it afforded to White Americans were so ingrained or institutionalized in American society that newly arrived immigrants, whether conscious or unconscious of racism, adopted the same attitudes, behaviors, and actions that continued to perpetuate racism toward African Americans. The new immigrants became very much Americanized—embracing the sin of racism by adopting the same attitudes and behaviors that existed in the general society towards African Americans rather than rejecting them.

The consequence of racism upon all structures and entities in the United States cannot be overestimated. Racism is imbedded in its foundational pillars: history, ideology, institutions, and structures. Whether one considers the years from the arrival of the first Africans at Jamestown, Virginia in 1619 or the establishment of American
democracy in the drafting of the Constitution of the United States in 1789, racism is intertwined in the fabric of the United States for centuries. Yvonne Delk writes,

“We can never forget that we were taken by force, in chains, or that some of us came on slave ships called Jesus. We were seen as chattel, not human beings; as objects, not subjects; as property that could be bought, owned, possessed, and sold. In this nation of the free and the brave, we were only three-fifths of a human being, and we possessed no rights that whites had to respect.”

Africans were already viewed as different, inferior, and subhuman. Therefore, it was not a large leap to use them as slaves—as a cheap economic labor pool. Racist attitudes and oppressive practices began in Africa, before the establishment of the United States and the arrival of the first African slaves.

From a black perspective, however, the Constitution’s references to justice, welfare, and liberty were mocked by the treatment meted out daily to blacks from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries through the courts, in legislative states, and in those provisions of the Constitution that sanctioned slavery for the majority of black Americans and allowed disparate treatment for those few blacks legally “free.”

The tenacious disregard and question of the humanity of peoples of African descent made them vulnerable and subject to oppressive conditions legally sanctioned and socially applied. The denial of their humanity helped colonial Americans justify the enslavement of Africans.

In terms of moral and religious issues, there was the underlying question of whether or not America had the right to treat differently and more malevolently people whose skins were darker. From this perspective it became necessary to determine whether blacks were part of the human family and whether, after they had adopted your “religion,” they were then entitle to be treated as equals, or at least less harshly.

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Africans moved from a position of indentured servitude to institutionalized slavery that bound them and their descendants to perpetual slavery for life. Every institution at that time was involved in justifying and maintaining the racist system of oppression. Financial institutions safeguarded the monies that were deposited to finance the purchase of slave ships, the voyages, the ships’ crew, and to purchase slaves. Insurance brokers insured the ships and its human cargo. The media of the day printed advertisements that announced auctions in which the slave cargo would be sold, rewards for the capture of runaway slaves, and the portrayal of Africans and their descendants in distorted and grotesque caricatures. Local, state, and federal governments enacted laws, ordinances and policies that justified and sanctioned the practice of slavery and that disregarded the sanctity of marriage and family.

Systematic racism and oppression towards African Americans was institutionalized. Once institutionalized, it was perpetuated consciously and unconsciously. Joseph Barndt writes, “Racism structures a society so that the prejudices of one racial group are taught, perpetuated, and enforced to the benefit of the dominant group.”63 The structuring enables racism to take root and to be perpetuated over time and from generation to generation. Immigrants to the United States, particularly from Europe, faced their own challenges of national or ethnic prejudice upon their arrival. Yet, they quickly learned the subtleties of racism and in turn began to imitate the

oppressors. “Racism,” according to Barndt, “is an evil weed sown in the garden of humanity.” He argues,

Racism is clearly more than simple prejudice or bigotry. . . . To be prejudiced means to have opinions without knowing the facts and to hold onto those opinions, even after contrary facts are known. To be racially prejudiced means to have distorted opinions about people of other races. Racism goes beyond prejudice. It is backed up by power. Racism is the power to enforce one’s prejudices. More simply stated, racism is prejudice plus power. . . . Racial prejudice is transformed into racism when one racial group becomes so powerful and dominant that it is able to control another group and to enforce the controlling group’s biases.

Wallis asserts, “The United States of America was established as a white society, founded upon the near genocide of another race and then the enslavement of yet another.” In fact, the Bishops of the United States speak of racism as a social condition in North American by noting the effect that the European colonization had upon not only Africans who were used in the slave trade, but also upon Native American, Mexicans and other Latinos. The bishops admonish, “All have suffered indignity; most have been uprooted, defrauded or dispossessed of their lands; and none have escaped one or another form of collective degradation by a powerful majority.”

While acknowledging that there have been attitudinal changes by White Americans and that African Americans have progressed in spite of racism, Wallis argues, “What has not changed is the systematic and pervasive character of racism in the United States and the condition of life of the majority of black people.”

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64Ibid., 11.
65Ibid., 28, 29.
66Wallis, America’s Original Sin: The Legacy, 8.
67Brothers and Sisters To Us, 5.
68Wallis, America’s Original Sin: The Legacy, 8.
between racism and prejudice citing that “prejudice may be a universal human sin, but racism is more than an inevitable consequence of human nature or social accident. Rather, racism is a system of oppression for a social purpose.”69 In order for racism to be enforced and sustained, there has to be some level of power, control, intimidation, and reward for those who are the oppressors. What is required is a conversion of heart that opens the oppressor to the possibility of God’s grace and redemptive love. Often the focus is on the oppressed, but the Bishops say that, “The ultimate remedy against evils such as this will not come solely from human effort. What is needed is the recreation of the human being according to the image revealed in Jesus Christ. For He reveals in himself what each human being can and must become.”70 The role of the church, therefore, is to be the unifying agent, the sign and symbol of Christ’s redemptive love for all people.

The hegemony of slavery, and its impact as an economic institution in the United States, embroiled the nation in an intractable moral quandary. The acquisition of wealth that came from the raw goods produced in the United States gave rise to greater demands for African slaves, which in turn encouraged the institutionalization of slavery. The profitable business enterprise that was centered on the slave industry made it a lucrative venture initially for Europeans and eventually for the American economy. Phillip Linden writes,

slavery became the economic articulation of the expansion of entrepreneurial interests of the merchant traders into the New World. For, it cannot be denied that slavery played a key role in the conquering and colonizing of the New World. . . Just as the merchant class cannot be considered apart from the rise of

69Ibid., 8.
70Brothers and Sisters To Us, 8.
capitalism, neither can slavery. Slavery was of paramount importance as a labor force in the securing of trader interests in the New World. Thus, a specific look at slavery as a labor system and its relationship to capitalism is warranted. This is so because of the role of slavery not as an evolutionary stage, but as a labor system used in the establishment of the modern nation-state.  

Slaves in the Americas were not recognized as human beings; rather, they were considered an economic commodity. Their less than human status projected them as objects devoid of their God-given humanity. “The professed high ideals of Anglo-Western society could exist side by side with the profitable institution of slavery only if the humanity of the slaves were denied and disregarded.”

Like cattle or chattel, the slave was not a person, but a piece of property to be bought, sold and bred. In fact, the principal debate among religious thinkers focused on the humanity of the slave. Even moral theologians in the Church in the United States, in order to accommodate for the existence of slavery, are reputed to have developed a theory called the “plurality of species.” This theory meant that not all people are fully human.

This theory negates natural law and its centrality for the dignity and sacredness of the human person. Because it is universal, natural law is applied to all human beings regardless of distinctions of race. It provides the foundation for moral and ethical principles and reasoning as a condition of God’s eternal law. The institution of slavery was a rejection of God’s law and a denial of God’s creation in which all life is deemed holy and valued.

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72 Wallis, America’s Original Sin: The Legacy, 8.

1.5.2 Slavery and the Catholic Church

As already noted, the discussion of racism in the United States must include the institution of slavery, a shameful and brutal period in American history that affected all areas of American life and its institutions, including the Catholic Church. Whether the racism in the United States was a consequence of slavery or slavery a consequence of racism, the outcome was the same. The Catholic Church in America participated in slavery through some of its religious institutions, clergy, and laity and adopted the same racist ideology and practices used by other Americans. In spite of this, there were Catholic voices, particularly in Europe, that condemned slavery and the dehumanization of people of African descent.

And, it was not until slave-raiding in West African for profit, the discovery of America in 1492 and the conquest of the natives of Latin American during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that there was a change in Church teachings from “pro to con” regarding slavery. The first such denunciations of slavery by Roman Catholic Church pronouncements, even though it was limited to opposing the enslaving of Christians, were rendered by Pope Eugenius IV in 1433 and 1435; by Nicholas V in 1452; by Pope Calixtus III in 1456; by Pope Pius II in 1462; by Pope Sixtus IV in 1476, etc., with all of them having excommunication as the punishment for anyone who was engaged in the enslaving of Christians.74

John Eppstein writes in *The Catholic Tradition of the Law of Nations*, “Between the fourth and the eleventh centuries so many statements were made prohibiting the enslavement and traffic of human beings and stressing the duty to buy back prisoners that it can be said that Christianity put an end to the institution of slavery in Europe.”75 The decrees addressed slavery in general including the treatment of slaves, baptism, and

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74Ibid, 52-55.

religious instruction. Included were the treatment of Jews, enslaved because of wars; indigenous peoples of conquered nations; and Africans who were held in servitude in Africa and throughout European as slaves. While many of the statements during this time did not admonish slavery or advocate for its demise, in time the Church began to give the slave equal status with the slave master. Kenneth Zanca, who has compiled a compendium of documents on slavery and the Americas, provides the decrees of several pontiffs on slavery in general. Pope St. Gregory the Great, ca 586, writes,

> Since our Redeemer, the Creator of every creature, in His loving kindness vouchsafed to assume human flesh for his purpose, that by the grace of His divinity He might break the bonds of the slavery in which we were formerly held, and restore us to freedom, it is a salutary deed to restore by the benefaction of manumission to the state of liberty in which they were born, men whom nature originally begot free but whom the law of nations subjected to the state of slavery. . . .

> Slaves are to be admonished in one way, master in another, that is, slaves are to be admonished to consider always the lowliness of their condition, masters, ever to bear in mind their own nature, namely, that they have been created equal to their slaves.76

In speaking of the views of Thomas Aquinas on slavery, Zanca writes,

> Yet, for all his brilliance and sincere practice of religion (he was a priest for 30 years), Thomas was still a man of his age who accepted the tradition and practice of slavery as they came down to him. We read in his works a careful discussion of the origin, meaning, and consequences of slavery, along with the limitations placed on masters of slaves. Once Thomas systematized the theology of slavery, it would remain in place until the 20th century.77

> “The African slave trade began as early as 1425 when Spanish and Portuguese merchant traders first went down the West Coast of Africa, captured Africans and

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returned them to the Iberian peninsula.”

“Slavery became the principal business of those migrating to the Atlantic world. These ventures from their inception were entrepreneurial establishing an extraordinary demand for human labor.” In 1452, Pope Nicholas V granted King Alfonso V of Portugal the right to enslave unbelievers, pagans, and Moslems and their descendants. The result of this action was the beginning of hereditary enslavement. European Christians saw the Africans and their religions as primitive and infantile, therefore many Church leaders believed that contact with Christian Europe would bring salvation to the primitive Africans, even as slaves. It was the cultural period of the Renaissance when Christian Europe saw itself as intellectually and spiritually mature and advanced. Although some popes maintained the view of natural superiority over Africans, in time most denounced the selling and enslavement of Africans as antithetical to the gospel. Pope Pius II believed that slavery was a criminal activity.

1482 Pope Pius II denounces Portugal’s African slave trade; 1537 Pope Paul III condemns the international slave trade; 1639 Pope Urban VIII condemns making slaves of Native Peoples but says nothing of the treatment of Africans; 1741 Pope Benedict XIV condemns the continued enslavement of Native Peoples. Again, nothing is said of the Africans; 1839 Gregory XVI’s In Supremo Apostolatus condemns universal slave trade including that in Africans.

By the late 1700’s, most European nations had declared the slave trade and slavery illegal in their respective countries. Even with these official edicts, the trading of human cargo did not completely end, but continued illegally. In addition, the edicts did

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78 Linden, “Slavery, Religions and Regime,” 55-60.

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid., 37-46.
not automatically end the slave trade to the Western Hemisphere. Its continuation filled the void from the decreased profits that resulted in the European ban on the slave trade. European governments and religious leaders made a distinction between the slave trade and domestic slavery--domestic slavery to Europe was banned, but not the slave trade to the Americas. Therefore, the slave trade and the institution of slavery began with full alacrity in the American colonies and continued into statehood because of the lucrative financial gains that it brought, particularly from agriculture and other goods. The United States officially ended the slave trade in 1806, but the formidable institution and practice of slavery continued until the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863.

African slaves had been brought to the shores of North and South Americas as early as 1511. However, it was Bartolome de las Casas, a Spanish priest that encouraged the use of Africans as slave labor in 1516 that began the official slave trade in the Western Hemisphere. Las Casas, who deplored the abusive treatment of the Native Indians of Hispaniola, present day Haiti and the Dominican Republic, recommended the use of Africans as a substitute for its indigenous peoples. In 1517 “Charles V granted the authorization to a Flemish gentleman to import 4,000 slaves a year into the Spanish West Indies . . .”81 In discussing las Casas’ role in the institution of slavery in the Americas, Cyprian Davis writes,

“Bartolome de las Casas played an important role in the history of black Catholics in the New World because of an opinion that he expressed on two separate occasions concerning the enslavement of Africans. In writing his History of the Indies, de las Casas wrote that he regretted the opinion that he had given when still a young priest. In 1516 he had urged the Crown to grant a licence to the Spanish colonists to import Africans into the colonies to replace the Indians who

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were being destroyed by the harshness of slavery. De las Casas wrote later that he was unaware that the African slaves were as unjustly treated as the Indians.”  

Las Casas, like many Christians at that time, held strong views about Moslems and defended their enslavement as a consequence of wars. “Black Africans were seen as inhabitants of Moslem territory. Hence, they could be enslaved like the North African Moslems.”

Pope Urban VIII (1639) condemned the slave trade, the enslavement of native peoples of East India and the Americas, and forbade Catholic involvement in the slave industry. Future pontiffs used his bans against slavery to reiterate their opposition to the enslavement and treatment of Blacks in the United States. In 1839, Pope Gregory XVI issued a bull, In Supremo Apostolatus, condemning slavery.

Wherefore WE, desiring to turn away so great a reproach as this from all the boundaries of Christians, and the whole matter being maturely weighed, . . . with apostolic authority do vehemently admonish and adjure in the Lord all believers in Christ, of whatsoever condition, that no one hereafter may dare unjustly to molest Indians, Negroes, or other men of this sort; or to spoil them of their goods; or to reduce them to slavery; or to extend help or favor to others who perpetrate such things again them; or to exercise that inhuman trade by which Negroes, as if they were not men, but mere animals, howsoever reduced into slavery, are, without any distinction, contrary to the laws of justice and humanity, bought, sold, and doomed sometimes to the most severe and exhausting labors; and moreover, the hope of gain being by that trade proposed to the first captors of the Negroes, dissentions, also, and as it were, perpetual wars are fomented in their countries. 

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83 Ibid.

84 Zanca, American Catholics and Slavery, 29.
Zanca explains, “Catholics of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were citizens of their age. To understand their racial attitudes, we need to understand the theological and historical context which shaped them.”\textsuperscript{85} Sadly, he writes,

There were no outstanding Catholic abolitionists and none gained any distinction in the Underground Railroad operation to aid fugitive slaves. There were a few voices among the laity, clergy, religious and bishops who saw slavery for what it was; however, they were not agitating for a change in church teaching as much as expressing their own personal revulsion at the ‘peculiar institution’ of the Southern states or acting on pastoral compassion for suffering humanity. The Catholic Church in America publicly avoided the issue as much as possible, and hence became part of the silent support of legalized bondage.\textsuperscript{86}

Zanca’s critique is that Southern Catholics did not condemn the institution of slavery; rather, they conformed to the pro-slavery social and political norms of Protestant Christians. Southern bishops, as well as many Northern bishops, supported slavery, believing that Blacks were inferior.\textsuperscript{87}

The Second Plenary Council of Baltimore was convened in 1866, a year after the end of the Civil War. The spiritual care and evangelization of the newly emancipated slaves was one of the agenda items at the Council. Archbishop Martin J. Spalding, Archdiocese of Baltimore, was sympathetic to the conditions of the freed slaves and pushed for a national evangelization plan for their spiritual well-being. In preparation for the Council, which he encouraged Rome to approve, Spalding wrote a letter that he sent to the bishops encouraging their endorsement of several strategies for evangelization and pastoral ministry among Blacks. The bishops’ response was contained in “The

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{85}Ibid., xxiii.
\item\textsuperscript{86}Ibid., xxiv.
\item\textsuperscript{87}Ibid., 110-111
\end{itemize}
Emancipated Slaves” section of the Council’s proceedings. “Unfortunately, no national program to help the former slaves was adopted at the Council. The matter was left in the hands of each bishop for his diocese.”

The refusal of United States bishops to establish specific and institutional pastoral policies and plans for the intentional evangelization of the former slaves, although for a myriad of reasons, has had long-term consequences. According to Stephen Ochs’ description of the struggle of African American priests in his documentation of the Josephites, the Catholic Church in the United States did not make many inroads into the African American community in the nineteenth century because of its restrictive policies that did not welcome African Americans fully into the life of the church. Many African Americans left because of the segregation and humiliating practices such as receiving the Eucharist only after Whites had done so, and the exclusion of African American men from seminaries. The rejection of African American priests eliminated the American Church from having indigenous African American clerical and pastoral leadership for African American Catholics that could have aided evangelization efforts. The denial of priesthood to African American men before and following the Civil War left a leadership void among African American Catholics. The lack of evangelization efforts, unlike some of the Protestant denominations, and racist pastoral practices were a few of the reasons that African Americans did not join the Catholic Church or left for other denominations.

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“Little real enthusiasm existed for the black apostolate because of the indifference and sometimes hostility of most white Catholics, both clerical and lay, to Afro-Americans.”

While there was definite hostility towards the ordination of African American men by bishops in the southern states following the Civil War, bishops in the northern states did little to promote or support vocations among African Americans. Bishops, clergy and laity in the southern states held the same racist views and prejudices towards African Americans as their southern neighbors. Two reasons were often cited for the vocational discrimination for the priesthood. First, African American men lacked the moral fortitude for a life of celibacy and spirituality. Second, they lacked the necessary intellect for seminary study and vocation to the priesthood. It is the legacy of racism and racial discrimination within the Catholic Church in the United States that the African American bishops address in What We Have Seen and Heard and call for the leadership of African American Catholics to evangelize themselves, the Catholic Church, and among their Black brothers and sisters in the United States.

1.5.3 Racism: A Modern Reality in the Church

Like other institutions, the Catholic Church in the United States participates in the same oppressive and racist ideology and societal structures. The lack of knowledge about the history of Blacks in the Catholic Church and a lack of appreciation of their role in the history and development of the Catholic Church in the United States led to missed opportunities for welcoming those of African descent into the American Church. The pervasiveness of racism in the Church and in American society contributed to this denial and disregard.

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90 Ibid., 10.
Theologian Jon Nilson acknowledges the racism in the Catholic Church in the United States. In his article, “Confessions of a White Catholic Racist Theologian,” he acknowledges that Catholic theologians have been silent in addressing racism and have not genuinely confronted racism as they have other social issues. He quotes James Cones, “What is it that renders White Catholic . . . theologians’ silent in regard to racism, even though they have been very outspoken about anti-Semitism and class and gender contradictions in response to radical protest?” Nilson contends that the silence of white theologians on racism is a result of their “ignoring, marginalizing, and dismissing that body of theological insight and challenge born of the black struggle for justice, black theology.” He offers four perspectives as an attempt to explain white theologians’ silenced and dismissal of racism.

First, he cites the affect that segregation had on the Catholic community. The American Catholic church is largely a White immigrant church. In spite of the discrimination that many Catholic European ethnic groups endured upon their arrival to the Unites States, they quickly became identified as White Americans based on skin color and other physical features. Strong Catholic identity was woven around the ideal concept of parish, family, and neighborhood. With the migration of African Americans to cities in search of employment and other opportunities denied to them in southern states, White Americans retreated to the suburbs, in what was called “white flight.” According to Nilson, “Catholics saw integration as a threat to this configuration” of parish and

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92 Ibid., 18.

93 Ibid., 21.
neighborhood, and therefore participated in the white flight. Because of segregation, “Catholic theologians saw no faces that made Black suffering as intolerable to us as to the victims.”

According to John McGreevy,

By 1959 this Catholic emphasis on ‘neighborhood’ and ‘community’ remained, but in a less defensible context. Catholic defense of segregation now depended upon skin color, not simply culture, and a clear bifurcation between ‘black’ and ‘white.’ But ‘black’ and ‘white’ were unacceptable theological categories. Denying a home to an African-American family simply because whites or whatever religious or cultural background might flee the neighborhood placed prudence above morality, and tore at the heart of the Mystical Body of Christ.

Nilson explains that the second perspective is the church’s belief in integration as an ideal. He writes, “The particular ways the church understood integration served to obstruct its progress and even to foster the racism that it was supposed to conquer.”

In this interpretation, racism was not a factor within itself to explain the social injustices, disparity, and relationship between African and White Americans. Racism could be explained by other factors affecting Whites such as economic competitiveness between Black and Whites, the lack of education or culture, social or psychological dysfunction, or isolated experiences with Africans Americans. “In short,” according to Nilson, “racism was framed as an affliction of individuals not a systemic social dysfunction.”

Furthermore, he acknowledges,

Most important, in my view, was another element of the prevailing sociological consensus, the notion that the assimilation of blacks into the mainstream of American life would follow the same pattern as the assimilation of white

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94Ibid., 21.


96“Confessions of a White Catholic Racist,” 23.

97Ibid., 24.
immigrant groups, like the Irish, the Polish, and the Italians. This prognosis acknowledged no distinctive features of black history that might retard this assimilation or even prevent it altogether.98

Catholics, like other White American who embraced the concept of integration, often marginalized and refuted Black history, experience, suffering, and leadership.

The third perspective addresses Vatican II and its impact upon Catholic theologians. Nilson defends Catholic theologians and the Church for their inattentiveness to African Americans. The decrees of the Second Vatican Council required the full attention of the Church in the United States, its bishops as teachers, and its theologians charged with the task of absorbing, assimilating, teaching, and promoting the effects of the new direction of the Catholic Church upon all aspects of Catholic life and identity. Vatican II introduced the conversation of inculturation. Nilson poses and answers the question as to why Catholic theologians in the United States looked to Latin American and its emerging theology of liberation to broaden the discussion of inculturation, but did not dialogue with African American theologians on Black theology. His response, “... we gravitated toward Latin American liberation theology because it was both indigenous and Catholic.”99

The issue of Black theology leads Nilson to his fourth perspective, which he proposes as a problem that discourages and prevents White theologians from engagement with Black theology and its theologians. Nilson offers several reasons for the dismissal, which will be discussed more fully in the chapter on “Black Liberation Theology.” However, it is important to note briefly that Nilson’s concerns are based on the nature

98Ibid., 24.
99Ibid., 29.
and scope of black theology as derived from the Black Power movement and what he contends as its separatist vision. This includes the lack of knowledge or understanding of the Black experience that is an important component of Black theology, and the view by many White theologians that Black theology is a special interest discipline. Nilson concludes, “So there are many good reasons for white Catholic theologians to have marginalized black theology. But these reasons are ‘good’ in the sense of explanatory, not ‘good’ in the sense of exculpatory, not good enough to refute the charge of racism, however nonviolent our racism has been.”

These are four reasons Nilson offers for the silence of White Catholic theologians to racism and the lived experience of African Americans. Nilson touches upon themes that are not confined to Catholics or theologians. Isolation between Black and Whites and the negative perceptions born out through centuries and generations of unjustified prejudice and discrimination have affected the decisions and actions of Catholic laity and its American hierarchy.

Racism, the suffering of African Americans, and evangelization were not primary concerns for the American hierarchy. The bishops of the United States had tremendous challenges: how to provide pastorally for the spiritual and social needs of the multitude of new Catholic immigrants coming into the country, along with the continued ministry to Catholics already here, and how to minister to the newly freed slaves. Rome challenged the bishops to attend to the freed slaves; however, they did not heed Rome’s challenge. The body of literature documenting the development of the Catholic Church in America, particularly after the Civil War, clearly shows that the bishops’ focus was

\[100\text{Ibid., 30.}\]
directed elsewhere and did not include African Americans, especially the newly freed slaves.

In the late 19th century following the Civil War, European immigrants flooded into the United States seeking economic, political, and social freedom, and advancement. The great majority of these immigrants were Catholic. Parochial parishes were established to provide pastoral ministry to the new immigrants. Most often, this included the erection of a church and school for a specific nationality. If indigenous clergy and religious were not available in the diocese, they were recruited from other dioceses or from the country of that particular nationality. In time, dioceses had conclaves of parish neighborhoods with nationality parishes often within proximity to other nationalities. The identity of the parish came from the particular neighborhood in which the immigrants resided, and the neighborhood shaped the identity and life of the parish and its catholicity. It was based on nationality and language, particularly European. These immigrants had to face ethnic, cultural, and religious prejudices and discrimination from other Catholic immigrants and from Protestant Americans. Besides their catholicity, what they had in common was that they were not Black.

The attention of the bishops of the United States in the years following the Civil War was on the new immigrants who were poor, uneducated, but Catholic. Preoccupation with the new immigrants is cited as one of the reasons for the lack of attention and evangelization to African Americans, especially to the freed slaves. Cyprian Davis echoes Ochs analysis when he writes, “The history of the Catholic church’s efforts to evangelize the black people of the United States in the period
following the Civil War is not a very glorious one.”

Davis cites that the American bishops lost a critical opportunity to reflect the universally of the Catholic Church with its indifference towards African Americans. He writes, “The bishops did not bring credit to themselves in their failure to work for a unified and practical way to meet the crisis caused by the emancipation of the slaves. The large influx of European immigrant at this time can scarcely be sufficient reason for the lack of a national plan on behalf of the African Americans.”

Because of neglect and racism, evangelization among African Americans was dismal. John Gillard quotes Rev. Francis Gilligan when he writes,

> While it is true that the Church cannot be held entirely responsible for the prejudice and the discriminations practiced by its member, the American Church must recognize some responsibility for the constant and persistent co-operation of her members in discriminations which are objectively wrong. It would seem that the church has some obligation to instruct its members a regards the moral character of these activities.

The history of slavery and post-slavery racism and oppression manifested in the United States and in the Catholic Church raises several challenging questions, including the unmerited or redemptive suffering of African Americans. Jesus, crucified and resurrected, is central to the traditional Christian understanding of redemption and salvation. Jesus, the sacrificial lamb, suffered in order to save humanity, thus the development of a Black Catholic theology that does not view suffering as redemptive will be examined.

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101 Black Catholics in the United States, 136.

102 Ibid., 122.

1.6 Suffering as Redemptive

The previous sections reviewed the history of oppression, racism, discrimination, and indifference by the Catholic Church in the United States and in American society towards African Americans. A consequence of these pervasive conditions is found in the crux of African American suffering through intentional laws and policies to debase and control them physically, socially, psychologically, and economically from White Americans. The bishops of the United States declared that racism, and its consequent of oppression and discrimination, is a sin and evil in *Brothers and Sister to Us*. African Americans have a long history of suffering because of the sin and evil perpetrated against them. This assertion raises several pertinent questions about the suffering and dehumanization of African Americans and their relationship with God. What insights, therefore, are gained from the Christian understanding of redemption when viewed through the lens of African American suffering and history? Is there any redemption in their suffering? If so, for what purpose did slavery and the subsequent discrimination towards African Americans serve for them or for God and the building of God’s Kingdom?

The African American bishops, in *What We Have Seen and Heard*, affirm reconciliation as a virtue for which African American Catholics should strive. The development of a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation must reconcile African American suffering and oppression with the reconciliation that the bishops identify as a gift of Black Catholics. Generally, when the Church speaks of sin, redemption, and salvation, it reminds us of our alienation from God because of individual transgressions and God’s salvific act of love and mercy through the passion, death, and resurrection of
Jesus, the Christ. When speaking of the suffering of African Americans, to whom injustices have been inflicted, the focus is not merely on individuals, but with a people. For African Americans, the discourse brings into question new theistic views about the existence and sovereignty of God, God’s goodness, and the nature of evil.

The concept of African American suffering and therefore their relationship to God are documented throughout their history from slavery to the present, and in African American literature, folklore, and writings of Black theologians. For example, African American spirituals as a genre of religious songs from the slave period contextualize the existential reality of the slaves versus their heavenly pursuit as reward for physical suffering. Slaveholders and those involved in the slave trade justified the institution of slavery by claiming to have removed Black Africans from heathen lands to a civilized New World, and thus exposure to Christianity, the civilized religion. When applied to the history and experience of African American oppression, unmerited or redemptive suffering is uncomfortable, for it evokes a justification for the racism and oppression as beneficial and a consequence of the unmerited suffering. If so, can there be true reconciliation if the oppressed or the oppressor believes that there are intrinsic positive values for the oppression?

The Apostolic Letter, “On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering,” by John Paul II offers a vision of the salvific meaning of suffering. Suffering is a natural part of the human existence and is where human beings and the church meet intimately bound together through the redemptive act of Christ. Together they enter into the mystery of
redemption. “Human suffering evokes compassion; it also evokes respect and in its own way it intimidates. For in suffering is contained the greatness of a specific mystery.”

A distinction is made between physical and moral suffering. “This distinction is based upon the double dimension of the human being and indicates the bodily and spiritual element as the immediate or direct subject of suffering.” Let us consider that African Americans have experienced physical suffering and White Americans moral suffering. The physical suffering has occurred through slavery by way of bondage, servitude, beatings, death, and the effects of racism. Existentially, the moral suffering, or as the Apostolic Letter describes is the “pain of the soul,” for White America is exemplified in the depravation for how the United States has treated people of African descent, as well as others such as its Native Americans.

The suffering of African Americans is a result of evil and the absence of a good that is denied. This position of the good helps to explain why racism is a moral evil that has existed within the history and experience of African Americans. Racism, therefore, is a privation boni debiti, the privation or absence of a due good. The goods denied to African Americans because of racism are the same that have been afforded to all Americans—justice; freedom; equality; respect; and economic, educational and social opportunities. The central focus of these due-goods is based on the understanding that all persons are created in God’s image and are thus one with God. It affirms the oneness of

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105 Ibid., 3.

106 Ibid., 3.
the human family and that African Americans “have the same nature and origin, and being redeemed by Christ, they enjoy the same divine calling and destiny; there is here a basic equality between all [men] and it must be given ever greater recognition.”

The manifestation of suffering because of racism, through individuals and institutional structures, denies and withholds from African Americans their due-goods that determine and affect their spiritual, physical, financial, and social quality of life. The absence of these goods is both an evil and a sin because it demeans those of God’s family based merely on the color of their skin. At the center of this theology is a belief in the unity, dignity and equality of all humanity. The consequence of a “privation boni debiti” for African Americans also affects White Americans. As a sin against God and humanity, White Americans are equally challenged to be open to God’s redemptive grace as persons who consciously or unconsciously are responsible for the continuance of racism in American society and who benefit from racist policies, practices, and structures.

Scripture provides insight for various reasons for humans suffering. Most often suffering is connected to punishment for sins and transgressions before God. Collectively, the Hebrew people suffered for alienating themselves from God. God, who is a just God, is viewed as exacting punishment for sin and providing rewards for righteous living.

Corresponding to the moral evil of sin is punishment, which guarantees the moral order in the same transcendent sense in which this order is laid down by the will of the Creator and supreme lawgiver. From this there also derives one of the fundamental truths of religious faith, equally based upon revelation, namely that God is a just judge, who rewards good and punishes evil.

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107 *Church & Racism*, 25.

However, scripture also presents another challenge, the suffering of the innocence or just person without fault. The Book of Job, in which the just and righteous Job suffers immensely, is the classic example of the dilemma of suffering without guilt and undeserving of punishment. “The Book of Job poses in an extremely acute way the ‘why’ of suffering; it also shows that suffering strikes the innocent, but it does not yet give the solution to the problem.”109 This accentuates the problem of suffering within the context of a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation. Like the Israelites, did people of African descent commit some grave offense against God in which God’s judgment was the forceful removal from their homelands into perpetual slavery and degradation thousands of miles away? From the standpoint of redemption, are they saved from their offenses or saved because of the unmerited suffering?

1.6.1 Olin Moyd

Olin Moyd, in Redemption in Black Theology, argues that African American theologians must explore the understanding of redemption for African Americans by using the folk and religious expressions of their people in light of their oppression. He writes,

Redemption, in its original meaning, and when used metaphorically in theology, meant deliverance from all the evils which threaten humankind in actual living and secondly from their guilt for participating in the forces which tend to defeat the divine purpose. The oppressors in this country need redemption from the guilt of dehumanizing Blacks. The oppression of Black people is a temporal defeat of the divine purpose. Black folks need redemption from oppression. They need an Exodus out of the state and circumstances of dehumanization.110

109Ibid., 10.

In Moyd’s exhortation on Black theology and liberation, African Americans are called to actively participate in their redemption—being saved—from the oppression caused by other human beings. He writes, “Since humanity is created in the image of God, and since God as Redeemer is active in the process of redeeming people from humanity-caused states and circumstances which distort that image as well as from sin and guilt, Black people have come to know God through his acts of redemption.”¹¹¹ Moyd does not deny that African Americans commit sins, as do others. His point is that African Americans are not responsible for their own suffering caused by oppression, nor have they as a people caused the oppression of others in a similar or dissimilar manner as their own oppression. He asserts that the “symptoms of the sins of the oppressors in this country are evident in racism and bigotry—white power or overlords in their human relationship with nonwhites, denying them their humanity.”¹¹² While African Americans are not guilty of sin and oppression regarding their own suffering, Moyd believes they sin in how they have internalized and expressed the racism directed towards them. “They are guilty of and need to be saved from the unconscious self-hatred that affects their image of themselves and how they live. For example, a symptom of this sin has led to submissiveness to White power in order to gain acceptance by White standards. In addition, an effect of racism and self-hatred has led to unhealthy ideas of superiority among themselves. African American have sinned by “their failure to participate in God’s redemptive movement in breaking the effects of racism.”¹¹³

¹¹¹Ibid., 112.
¹¹²Ibid., 99.
¹¹³Ibid., 99.
In Moyd’s view, African Americans are chosen by God based on God’s willingness to elect them, but not because of suffering attributed to him. The electedness was during their experiences of suffering caused by humans. Like the Hebrews, their election by God was not the result of their suffering, but was because God chose to elect them. Undeserved suffering is caused by the oppressors’ human weakness, exploitation, and misuse of divine freedom; but not because God who is omnipotent and merciful wills it. In the context of African Americans as a people, God’s redemption alleviates their own suffering, oppression, and self-hatred. Thus, African Americans become a mirror of redemption and salvation.

African slaves were told that their fate was sanctioned by God as a way to subdue them mentally and for them to acquiesce to their state of life. Moreover, they were told that their life in the Christian United States, even as slaves, was more advantageous than their “heathen” life in Africa. Therefore, their suffering and oppression was ordained by God and any notion of liberation was based on an eschatological view of salvation. Their idea of God, however, evolved differently through the lens of their African ancestry and oppression. With little hope of ending their own condition, they depended on God for salvation, if not in this life, then in the eternal life to come. This, however, does not mean that Blacks did not fight for their own liberation. History documents numerous slave revolts, escape to non-slave states, sermons and spirituals that voice themes of liberation. And, after emancipation there was the creation of civil, professional, religious, and community organizations that continued to challenge the suffering due to personal and institutional racism and oppression.
1.6.2 Anthony Pinn

Any argument for redemptive suffering as a positive value for African Americans’ suffering and oppression is unacceptable because it denies and thwarts their liberation by suggesting the suffering has intrinsic value. Anthony B. Pinn, in *Why, Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology*, approaches the dilemma of redemptive suffering and the nature of evil from a different perspective. Traditionally, Christian theology often attributes the nature of suffering to sin, punishment, or as conditional for salvation. Pinn raises the existential questions that challenge the idea that there is value in the oppression and suffering of African Americans. Moreover, he questions the position of Black theology on redemptive or unmerited suffering, and the accountability and responsibility of God in the moral evil of suffering. He describes the problem as “evil and theodicy attempts at resolving the contradiction between traditional Christian understandings of God as powerful, just, and good, and the presence of suffering without negating the essential character of the Divine.”

According to Pinn, many African American spirituals and religious thinkers have wrestled with the theodical questions that raise the contradiction of God’s goodness and righteousness with suffering and liberation. He writes,

> . . . Approaches to Black suffering that leave intact God’s goodness and existence are doomed to collapse into redemptive suffering apologetics. Theistic approaches to this question are inherently trapped within a theodical games. (i.e., a compromise with evil/suffering). Only a questioning of God’s existence provides a working resolution (i.e., a full rejection of redemptive suffering).\(^{115}\)


\(^{115}\)Ibid., 147
He offers three propositions to the problem of evil for Black theology: rethinking evil’s nature, rethinking God’s power, and rethinking God’s goodness/righteousness.116 The first acknowledges that unmerited suffering is inherently evil but may have a redemptive quality when God, or God working through Christ, transforms the evil into a redemptive state. For Pinn, the consequence of this view makes human suffering a perquisite for salvation. This paradox is often used to justify slavery as a means to Christianize or civilize Africans or to build the character and humanize the African slaves. Often, African Americans express heaven or the afterlife as the beneficial reward. The second suggests an interdependence of God and human beings as coworkers in eliminating moral evil. African Americans are responsible for working with God to obtain their liberation. In this view, God is limited, distance from human beings, and evil is a consequence of imperfect beings. There is no critique of God or God’s goodness. The third questions if God deliberately allows African Americans to suffer an intrinsic moral evil, and if so, is God a racist? God’s existence is questioned.

Pinn persuasively argues that redemptive suffering and the African American struggle for liberation are diametrically opposed with Black suffering having no intrinsic value. Does Black suffering have value? He believes that predominate Black religious thought rejects the notion of redemptive suffering because it impedes efforts for liberation by placing value on Black suffering. Pinn acknowledges and responds to the challenges of falling into the trap of redemptive suffering when questioning the teleological nature of Black suffering, Black theodicy, and the paradox of God’s goodness. He traces the conscious and unconscious development of the value of Black

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suffering—redemptive suffering—in the writings of several noted African American voices in history, including Martin Luther King, Jr. and James Cone. Regarding King, he writes,

Intimately connected to agape love and nonviolence is the power of unmerited suffering. This is King’s response to the problem of evil. In addresses and sermons, King remarked that Black suffering was redemptive when encountered and dealt with nonviolently. . . . King would come to recognize that unmerited suffering was redemptive because it led to the reconciliation of Black and white Americans. Furthermore, it was redemptive because God was on the side of those who suffered. That is, when God sided with the oppressed, suffering could not result in frustration or despair.117

Rather than the substance of suffering, Pinn believes that King focused on the results or consequences of suffering, which he saw as a beneficial tool for African Americans in that the suffering would affect the moral consciousness of White Americans who were the oppressors. With his principle of nonviolence, Black unmerited suffering was used by God to strengthen the self-concept of African Americans and transform the hearts of racist and Americans. Pinn suggests that “as with other figures examined, King does not directly attribute Black suffering to God; rather, suffering is the result of human misconduct, but God uses it for fruitful ends.”118

Pinn’s critique of James Cone leads him to assert that Cone also aligns Black suffering with redemptive suffering. He writes, “In spite of Cone’s call for new revolutionary praxis, much of his thought suggests allegiance to the very ideas he claims to reject. More to the point, Cone’s rhetoric of revolution betrays a sense of special mission based upon suffering reminiscent of previously discussed positions.”119

117Ibid., 75.
118Ibid., 77.
119Ibid., 85.
Cone asserts in *A Black Theology of Liberation* that,

> Despite the emphasis on future redemption in present suffering, Black Theology cannot accept any view of God that even *indirectly* places divine approval on human suffering. The death and resurrection of Christ does not mean that God promises us a future reality in order that we might bear the present evil. The suffering that Christ accepted and which is promised to his disciples is not to be equated with the easy acceptance of human injustice inflicted by white oppressors. God cannot be the God of black people and will their suffering.\(^{120}\)

However, Pinn sees within Cone’s narrative two dimensions of suffering, one negative that involves oppression such as racism, and the other positive. Positive suffering, like King’s position, is a result of struggle that can become redemptive through the suffering of Christ. According to Pinn,

> Cone rejects divine approval of suffering which makes necessary an attitude of grateful acceptance or passivity. Nonetheless, his critique fails to destroy the argument for redemptive suffering in that it leaves intact a sense of contentment with (positive) suffering. That is, Cone rejects the causes of negative suffering such as racism and restrictive social institutions while envisioning the suffering resulting from struggle as a positive phenomenon.\(^{121}\)

He offers several of Cone’s statements as evidence for his embrace of redemptive suffering.

> To be elected by God does not mean freely accepting the evils of oppressors. The suffering which is inseparable from the gospel is that style of existence that arises from a decision to be in spite of nonbeing. It is that type of suffering that is inseparable from freedom, the freedom that affirms black liberation despite the white powers of evil. It is suffering in the struggle for liberation.\(^{122}\)

> Black people, therefore, as God’s Suffering Servant, are called to suffer with and for God in the liberation of humanity. This suffering to which we have been


\(^{121}\)Why, Lord?, 86.

\(^{122}\)A *Black Theology of Liberation*, 81.
called is not a passive endurance of white people’s insults but rather, a way of fighting for our freedom.\textsuperscript{123}

Pinn’s solution to the unmerited redemptive suffering of African Americans is to position the debate within the framework of Black humanism, specifically what he refers to as strong humanism distinguished from weak humanism. The latter “entails an increased sense of self and one’s place in the human family. This position does not call God’s existence into question. . . . It sees enough evidence of divine activity to leave unchallenged God’s place in the universe.”\textsuperscript{124} Conversely, God’s existence and relationship to Black humanity is questioned in strong humanism, which Pinn offers as a system for addressing the question of redemptive suffering. “For strong humanism, relatively sustained and oppressive world conditions bring into question the presence of any Being outside of the human realm.”\textsuperscript{125} In addition, “Strong humanism considers theistic answers to existential questions simplistic and geared toward psychological comfort without respect for the complex nature of the human condition.”\textsuperscript{126} Because sinful conduct is the result of human activity and not God’s, Pinn asserts that God, therefore, is not responsible for redemptive suffering. His context for strong humanism denies the existence of God or removes God from the discourse on Black theodicy, thus removing any burden or allegiance to theological doctrines that engage the notion of redemptive suffering. He writes,

This form of humanism understands suffering as wrong and sees it as being solely a result of human misconduct. Suffering is evil and it must end; contact with it
and endurance of it do not promote anything beneficial. To think otherwise is to deny the value of human life by embracing a demonic force that effectively mutates and destroys the quality of life. *Suffering Has No Redemptive Qualities.*

The challenge for Pinn is to maintain the divinity of God as good and just alongside the existence of suffering, evil and injustice. However, the dilemma for African American theologians begins with the immorality and evil of forced perpetual slavery, racism, and racial oppression and the reconciling these moral evils with God as a God of love and justice. Pinn argues for an African American humanism within the concept of humanist theology as an alternative religious and theological system to address the issue of redemptive suffering and the broader problem of evil and God’s omnipotence and goodness, the dilemma of theodicy. He writes, “Therefore, humanism is a religion because it is one way to gain orientation and motivation toward the framing of human life through useful goals and agendas. Humanism does not replace other traditions, instead it contributes to the diversity, the polarity that characterizes the religious landscape.”

Pinn does not promote humanism or an African American humanism as an alternative to Christian theology or religion; rather, it is “to broaden the possibilities, the religious terrain, and to foster conversation concerning liberating ways of addressing the problem of evil.”

African American humanism focuses on community as the center of life rather than God, specially, the African American community. For Pinn, the underlying

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127Ibid., 157.


129Ibid.
rationale for African American humanism and the elevation of its community as an alternative to the question of theodicy is based on their experience of oppression that was justified by Christian theology and the inadequacy of Christian theology to denounce moral evils such as slavery and racism. It removes God from the question of moral evil and redemptive suffering. He writes,

Ultimately, humanism provides a world-picture, one that I suggest avoids the harmful effects of redemptive suffering in ways the Christian tradition does not. Humanism, I believe, is a way of ordering our world and our lives through giving equal attention to human failure and human potential as the launching platform for more sustained engagement with community and dignity.\footnote{Ibid.}

Responsibility for the perpetuation of evil, in this case the sins attributed to slavery, is assigned to human beings and not to God. His strong humanist approach does not involve God; rather the culpability is solely on the imperfection of human beings.

In conclusion, Pinn raises new hermeneutical challenges and insights for a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation that offers a perspective for the history of slavery and oppression of African Americans. His argument for an African American humanism provides an alternative for the current Christian dilemma. What is hopeful is that the humanism he espouses vigorously rejects unmerited redemptive suffering. I agree that God is not responsible for the plight of African American slavery and oppression, and that the fault is in human activity and disregard for the value of life. However, Pinn’s arguments do not address the issue of God’s intervention in human activity and history. To fully embrace Pinn’s position ultimately denies God’s existence and involvement in God’s creation. Pinn’s position is inadequate and his advocacy for an African American humanism does not satisfy the need for a Christian theological response that does not co-
opt into unmerited redemptive suffering as the “default” position. Reconciliation, as an
African American Catholic theological virtue, must acknowledge the pain of suffering
and may provide a system for which to work through the suffering. Perhaps a suitable
theory might come from phenomenology. For now, the question of redemptive suffering
may best be answered by Moyd, “The problem of Black suffering is still veiled in eternal
mystery and the theological answers which have been advanced are inadequate. Much
more research needs to be conducted in the problem of Black Suffering.”131 It gives
encouragement for further theological reflection by African American theologians.

131Moyd, Redemption in Black Theology, 105.
Chapter 2

Black Theology: A Response from the Oppressed

2.1 Introduction

Chapter 1 focused on the sin of racism as one of the major issues that has affected African Americans in the United States and in the Catholic Church. Institutional racism may be more devastating than the personal racist attitudes of individuals. The response to racism and racial oppression has varied depending on its form of institutionalization. One response has been theological. The institutionalization of racism, and the policies and practices that it generated, have helped to shape the religious experience and the development of religious thought of African Americans. Chapter 2, Black Theology: A Response from the Oppressed will examine one of the major responses to the racial ideology that affects African Americans and all Americans in the United States.

Black theology with its specific focus on Black liberation will provide the framework for a Christian theological response and understanding of the Black experience in the United States. It is important to recognize that there are Black theologies, not just one theological response and experience. However, unless otherwise indicated, the language in this dissertation will speak of Black theology for a collective or broad understanding of Black theology that represents the faith experience of most Black Americans. This faith experience constitutes what the majority of African Americans have with their ancestors who endured slavery and post-slavery America. African American Catholics and African American Protestants share the same historical, racial, and cultural experiences in the United States. Therefore, their quest for liberation is
multifaceted: physical, spiritual, and psychological. Moreover, they share a symbiotic relationship with Americans of European descent.

The examination of Black liberation theology is crucial in the formation of a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation. Moreover, it is important to situate the perspective of Black Catholic theologians for they provide the context for understanding the role and relationship of God as Father and Jesus Christ as liberator and redeemer who identifies with the oppressed. To offer direction, significant voices in Protestant Black theology will be examined. They include James Cone, who is credited with the initial formation of a Black theology of liberation, and J. Deotis Roberts, whose views on Black theology will be of particularly importance towards the development of a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation. Additional theological voices will include Gayraud Wilmore and Dwight Hopkins. These Protestant voices offer a foundation for understanding the significance of the Black religious experience and relation to the divine. Within the discipline of Black Catholic theology, there have been a growing number of theologians whose voices are essential to the overview. They include, Fr. Joseph Nearon, Shawn Copeland, Diana Hayes, and Sr. Jamie Phelps. Their understanding and incorporation of Black spirituality and theology are essential. Finally, the contributions of Womanist voices will be explored. These voices include Jacquelyn Grant, Delores Williams, and Diana Hayes.

African American Catholic theologians continue to give authenticity to the voices of Black Catholics in the United States through their publications and the process of documenting and giving structure to the thoughts and expressions of the emerging Black Catholic theology. For African American Catholics, who have been disenfranchised in the Church in the United States, it is necessary that they first come to know themselves, the
gifts they bring to the Church, and to assume ownership of their faith. Addressing religious identity and the meaning and experience of being Black and Catholic in a racist Church and society are necessary priorities.

The African American Catholic bishops do not mention Black liberation theology in *What We Have Heard and Seen*. However, as noted in Chapter 1, they do speak of freedom and liberation. The absent of any specific reference to Black liberation theology does not necessarily mean that they were unaware of its development nor that they opposed this theological perspective. Since Black liberation theology began with Black Protestant theologians, they will be the starting point for this overview. Theological research in Black theology and Black liberation theology by Protestants and Catholics has dealt primarily with the search for identity and meaning in the areas of theology, culture, and history.

2.2 Origin and Development: Black Theology & Black Liberation Theology

Black theology addresses the critical question of what it means to be Black and Christian. Black Catholic theology raises the same question; however, it adds a unique perspective in specifically asking what it means to be Black and Catholic. Like all theologies, Black theology engages in “God talk” as it examines and defines God’s redemptive and salvific acts within the particularity of the African American historical and religious experiences. African American theology, as Black theology, arise out of the collective experiences and consciousness of African Americans, and is critiqued and articulated in light of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. It reflects and interprets what it means to be Black in a racist and oppressive society, and focuses on the Gospel themes of liberation, the poor and suffering, hope, and justice. “Black Theology is a theology of ‘blackness.’ It is the affirmation of black humanity that emancipates black people from
white racism, thus providing authentic freedom for both white and black people. It affirms the humanity of white people in that it says no to the encroachment of white oppression.\textsuperscript{132} Jesus is the sign and symbol of Black theology.

The racial origin of African Americans begins in Africa. Although they have a divergent history from Black Africans on the African Continent, African Americans share a similar heritage through the African slave history, experience and faith. This African connection is important for Black theology. “From the beginning Black Theology and Black History have been inseparable. Our interpretation of history, its triumphs and tragedies, has come out of an encounter with the God of history”\textsuperscript{133} Arising from the lived and historical experiences of African Americans, and in relation to Christianity, Black theology rearticulates the Gospel message in light of it and the oppression of people of African descent in the United States. It, therefore, involves a transformation of how Christianity is understood and lived out in the daily experience of African Americans.

Black Theology is not a gift of the Christian gospel dispensed to slaves; rather it is an \textit{appropriation}, which black slaves made of the gospel given by their white oppressors. Black Theology has been nurtured, sustained and passed on in the black churches in their various ways of expression. Black Theology has dealt with all the ultimate and violent issues of life and death for a people despised and degraded. . . . The black church has not only nurtured black people but enabled them to survive brutalities that ought not to have been inflicted on any community of men. Black Theology is the product of black Christian experience and reflection. It comes out of the past. It is strong in the present. And we believe it is redemptive for the future.\textsuperscript{134}


\textsuperscript{133} Ibid., 3.

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., 100.
Black theology articulates the particularity of the religious experience of African Americans and their enduring faith in the Triune God in spite of the silence from much of White Christianity to their history of dehumanization.

Black theology is a theological and philosophical response to the emergence of the Black Power Movement during the Civil Rights era. James Cone’s publication of *Black Theology and Black Power* addresses the oppression of African Americans, affirming their blackness. He connects these concepts with liberation, faith and the Black church. African American oppression, freedom and identity are no longer confined to a social context; but rather, they are connected to Christian theology and its message of freedom, especially for the poor, as exemplified by Jesus, the messenger of salvation and liberation. While God is the subject of Christian theology and Black theology, Black liberation is its content and identity with and empathy for oppressed African Americans who suffer from racial, social, and economic disparity.

According to Cone, the origin of Black theology can be traced to several significant developments that occurred nationally among African Americans and that inspired the initiation of Black theology. They include the inception of the civil rights movement led by Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the 1950’s and 1960’s to 1964; the publication of Joseph Washington’s book, *Black Religion: The Negro and Christianity in the United States*; and the rise of the Black Power Movement and its philosophy of black nationalism influenced by Malcolm X. Cone writes, “Unlike most other contemporary theological movements in Europe and North American, black theology did not arise in the seminary or the university. In fact, most of its early interpreters did not even hold advanced academic
degrees. Black theology came into being in the context of the struggle of black persons for racial justice, which was initiated in the black church . . .”

With television and a more mobile media, the Civil Rights movement of the 1950 and 1960’s brought the racial dehumanization of African Americans into the homes of Americans and to people in other nations. Although a movement of that particular era, its antecedents were in earlier African American struggles for liberation, social justice, racial equality, and political and economic impartiality. The racial disparities and oppression already noted in the previous chapter became headlines in the United States and internationally. The Civil Rights movement not only challenged the consciousness of White Americans for an egalitarian society, but also challenged African Americans on interrelated themes for their own liberation, justice, retrieval of their history and culture, faith, resistance to oppression, and Black Nationalism. African Americans became more conscious and articulate about their racial identity. The increasing awareness was fused with and foundational in their pursuit of equality with grassroots political, community and religious organizations formed to confront the inequality.

During the Civil Rights movement, African American clergy began to question the effectiveness of Western Christian theologies and philosophies in light of the racism and social oppression of African Americans. Martin Luther King, Jr. is only one of numerous African American clergy who epitomize the theological reflection on the relationship between the issues of social justice, liberation and Christianity in light of the racial oppression of Africans Americans. Until then, there was very little theological

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focus on the marginalization and social oppression of African Americans by White theologians and clergy. There was a drastic disconnect between Christian theology based on the Gospels, the sitz im leben of African Americans, and the attitudes of many White Christians. Those involved in the formation of a Black theology hoped to affirm the Black church, the struggle of African Americans for liberation, and to recognize the Gospel as consistent with the struggle for social equality. The Black church, which was the prominent institution in the African American community, was the cornerstone in the organization and advancement of the Civil Rights movement. King, who understood the significance of the Black church, used this knowledge to mobilize the activities and events that challenged America and its religious institutions on the moral implications of racial oppression.

Joseph Washington’s *Black Religion: The Negro and Christianity in the United States* was controversial. While he recognized the importance and influence of the religious experience in the formation of the Black church, Washington questioned the authenticity of the Black church in America or the African American religious community. He believed that Black religion lacked a substantial theology. Moreover, he questioned if the Black church was indeed Christian, thus reducing it to a folk religion. Cone wrote, “He contended that black religion exists only because blacks have been excluded from the genuine Christianity of white churches. Because blacks were excluded from the faith of white churches, black churches are not genuine Christian churches. And if there are no genuine Christian churches, there can be no Christian theology.”

African American clergy and scholars viewed Washington’s book and theory as an

137Ibid., 8.
affront to the Black church as though it was less significant than White religious institutions. His arguments incited African American scholars to refute his claims. Their response was the formation of a Black theology, whereby they reflected on the authenticity of a Black theology and its perspective on the Christian gospel in light of the racial oppression of African Americans.

There were other extreme Black voices, both religious and secular, that challenged the credibility of Christian churches about their silence on Black social justice issues; and thereby, their complicity in the subjugation of African Americans. Christianity, for them, was a White religion that suppressed Blacks, but also kept them ingratiated to a church and religion that was indifferent to their immediate plight. King’s non-violent approach to full integration and racial justice relied on the Black church for support and leadership. However, leadership emerged that was more radical and insistent on Black Nationalism as part of the freedom agenda. In June 1966, Stokely Carmichael, a leader in the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), introduced “Black Power” while on the James Meredith March between Memphis, Tennessee and Jackson, Mississippi. Black Nationalism was not a new concept in the African American community, but given the political and social tides of the day, it took on new and intensified meaning and direction. The most prominent advocate for Black Nationalism was Malcolm X, a ranking member of the Nation of Islam led by Elijah Muhammad. Malcolm broke with the Black Muslin group in 1964 and was assassinated in 1965. Self-educated and the son of a Baptist minister, he drew a correlation between slavery, Black oppression, and Christianity. Malcolm attacked Christianity as a “White religion” that oppressed Blacks by convincing them to remain docile in their own struggles and to
pursue social and economic justice for those it oppressed. Malcolm could not understand nor accept a religion—Christianity—that contributed to the oppression of a people and tolerated their disparagement. His anti-Christianity teachings were met with hostility from many African American clergy and laity; although, there were many others in the Black church who listened because he raised legitimate questions about Black suffering and the silence of Christian churches.

Black Nationalism and its chant of “Black Power” challenged African Americans to take control of their own destiny. Carmichael’s call for “Black Power” and the subsequent radical development with the Civil Rights Movement were in opposition to King’s approach and caused contention with King’s non-violent movement and among some African American clergy and churches. However, one of its affects was to empower Black churches and clergy to begin theological debates from a new dimension of examining the distinctiveness of a Black perspective on Christianity in light of the religious and historical experience of African Americans.

The publication of the “Black Power Statement” by the National Committee of Negro Churchmen in the New York Times in July 1966 was a definitive moment in the inauguration of a Black theology that was uniquely separate from what was considered White Christian theology. The statement was a response to the political and social events that continued to shape the lives of African Americans and White Americans. According to Cone,

The “Black Power Statement” represents the beginning of a radical theological movement towards the development of an independent black perspective on the Christian faith... Black leadership believed that the time had come for black Christians to make their own interpretation of the gospel by separating black
religion from white religion, and then connecting the former with their African heritage and their contemporary fight for justice.\textsuperscript{138}

Each of these three contributions towards the developments of Black Theology cited by Cone focuses in some way on Black consciousness, which is a significant aspect of African American self-identity. African American identity involves the collective experiences of a people through bondage and slavery, and racism and oppression that have given rise to the conditions that initiated the need for a Black theology.

Gayraud Wilmore also cites various stages in the development of Black theology between 1964 to the late 1970s. The first stage focused on the emerging theological debates within the Black church, the Civil Rights movement, and Black Power. This stage was highlighted by the 1966 Black Manifesto signed by prominent Black church leaders. Written by James Foreman, the document confronted White America and its churches on its racist mentality and social responsibility towards African Americans. He marks Cone’s publication of \textit{Black Theology and Black Power} as the first attempt to integrate Black Power, politics and Black liberation with the gospel by reflecting on what it means to be Black and Christian in a racist and oppressive society. Wilmore’s second stage was dominated by the National Conference of Black Churchmen and the issuance of several statements leading to theological discourse. Highlights of the third movement were the emergence of liberation theologies from Latin American, Third World theologies, dialogue with African theologians, and dialogue with Black women.

The primary and definitive sources for Black theology are the experiences of the African American people and Jesus as revealed in the scriptures. The experiences are

\textsuperscript{138}Ibid., 11.
examined in connection with the lived faith of African Americans as they reflect on what it means to be Black and Christian in a society where racism and oppression have been normative. Black theology, therefore, cannot be separated from the experience of African Americans. The experience is both secular and sacred, and rooted in their African past and slave memory. This history of African Americans cannot be separated from the experience of being Black in the United States, and their religions and traditions. The slave narratives give evidence of these inherent religious beliefs and how these beliefs were infused with the new Christianity.

The experiences of the African slaves in the United States found cultural expressions that influenced the daily lives of African Americans and gave further definition to the Black experience such as the art, songs, and especially the spirituals and gospels, sermons, and prayers that show the depth of faith and religious expression. These were commentaries on how individuals and the community lived out its faith while struggling to overcome the dehumanizing conditions of society. The Bible, both the Old Testament and the New Testament are sources for Black theologians because scripture transcends the Black experience, whereby God speaks to this people with whom he identifies. God is identified with the oppressed; and, Jesus the Son is the liberator who proclaims justice and equality. These same sources are necessary for a Catholic perspective on Black theology. For African American Catholics, however, it also includes the role of the magisterial and ecclesial bodies of the Church.

The context from which one views Black theology will shape the questions and responses concerning its nature. Black theology maintains that the traditional theological approaches coming from a Western religious tradition are inappropriate and inadequate.
In addition, European and Third World theologies do not fully address the particularities facing African Americans, and therefore, do not fully comprehend the experience as the source or model for Black theology. Black theology like all theologies comes from a particular culture influenced by a particular set of norms. Coming from the religious experience and tradition of African Americans, it seeks to understand the particularities of the people in relation to how God interacts in the life of the African American community. It requires critical reflection and a critical response. The conditions of racism and oppression experienced by African Americans are the context from which Black theology has risen. Thus, the context for critical reflection begins with the relationship between God and the affirmation of the humanity of African Americans.

2.2 Protestant Theological Voices

Several significant African American protestant theologians have contributed to the development of Black theology. Besides James Cone, this section will briefly examine the contributions of J. Deotis Roberts, Gayraud Wilmore, and Dwight Hopkins whose theological voices broadened the Black theology and Black theology of liberation debate. More attention will be given to James Cones, the progenitor of this movement and theology, because he is regarded as its formative leader and as one who developed the concept of Black liberation theology. Cone’s contribution was to influence the socio-political context of Black theology in light of the Gospel, and connect it to Black liberation theology. Therefore, this section will begin with a synopsis of his influence and contribution to Black theology, particularly from the context of liberation theology.
2.3.1 James Cone

James Cone’s decisive 1969 publication, *Black Theology and Black Power*, followed by his 1970 seminal work, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, propelled him into the national and international theological debate as the preeminent theological voice on Black theology. Liberation, which is the core of Cone’s theology, expresses the Black struggle for freedom and how that struggle against oppression is viewed. Moreover, it articulates the relationship between the struggle for liberation and the gospel of Jesus. His goal is to develop a systematic theological approach to engage the academic and theological communities in understanding and articulating a theology whose initial framework is the suffering and liberation of oppressed African Americans.

“According to Cone, four fundamental questions challenge Black theologians and clergy and have contributed to the development of Black theology, in particular a theology of liberation.

What does it mean to be black and Christian? If God is the Creator of all persons and through Christ has made salvation possible for everyone, why are some oppressed and segregated in the churches and in society on the basis of color? How can whites claim Christian identity, which emphasizes the love and justice of God, and still support and tolerate the injustice committed against blacks by churches and by society? Why do blacks accept white interpretations of Christianity that deny their humanity and ignore their own encounter of God (extending back to Africa) as the liberator and protector of black victims of oppression?^{139}\footnote{Ibid., 6.}

These questions speak directly to the identity and mission of Christianity in light of the sin of racism and the marginalization of Blacks. Christianity and the gospel of Jesus are intricately linked with the struggle of liberation and the eradication of racism in all its
forms and manifestations for African Americans and all peoples who are oppressed because of race. The Christian identification of love as a central tenet of Jesus’ Gospel and as reflected through his incarnation and salvific act is less vivid because of racism in the American Christian Church and society. For Cone, there is a dichotomy between what Christians profess and the lived reality of that profession experienced in relationship to Blacks in the United States. His concern is not solely on how White Christians interpret and live their faith within this racial environment, it extends to what he considers the unquestionable acceptance by Blacks of a Christian ideology that denigrates and victimizes themselves in the name of Christ.

Cone’s Black theology was influenced by his experience of racism and experience of the Black church. Like many African Americans of his day, he was affected and shaped by the Civil Rights era of the 1950’s and 1960’s identified by Dr. King that challenged the racist and unjust laws, policies, and practices that oppressed African Americans in society and the Christian Church. With the inception of the Black Power statement hailed by Stokley Carmichael in opposition to King’s rhetoric of love and non-violence, Cone was compelled to respond. As a product of the Black church, Cone understood the impact of the Black Power banner as a slogan and challenge to the Black Church. As an African American theologian, he understood the dilemma that it presented to Black clergy.

Black Power opposed the love and non-violent model adopted by King and his followers as ineffective and too dependent upon the good nature and will of the oppressors. According to Cone, the Black church was faced with two theological dilemmas. The first was that Black clergy could “either reject Black Power as a
contradiction of Christian love thereby joining the white church in its rejection and
condemnation of Black Power advocates as un-American and unchristian; or accept
Black Power as a social-political expression of the truth of the gospel."140 Cone feared
that if Black clergy and the people saw Black Power as opposition to the Christian faith,
they would not support the concept that was trying to empower them to respond to their
own political and social struggle for justice. The dilemma in accepting the Black Power
mantra was that it would appear that Black clergy, and therefore the Black Church, had
separated from King and his religious-political model of Christian love and non-violence.
He supported King, but opposed his rejection of Black Power. In his critique Cone
argued, “[we] had to create a new theological movement to fight on a theological and
intellectual level as a way of empowering our historical and political struggle for justice.
To accept Black Power as Christian, we had to thrust ourselves into our history in order
to search for new ways to think and be black in this world.”141 The challenge for Cone
was to create a compatible theology that embraced Black Power and Christian love that
would serve as both a theological confession and praxis for the African American life.

Cone understood that the Civil Rights movement was grounded on the religious
experience of African Americans, which was not limited to the traditional church
experience. Within the context of this encompassing experience of African Americans
was the existential and ontological truth of a people. Essential to this truth was that

140 James H. Cone, “Black Theology and the Black Church: Where Do We Go From Here,” ed.
Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone, Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979, (New York,
NY: Orbis, 1979) 351.

141 Ibid., 352.
African Americans, as an oppressed people, were engaged in their own struggle for liberation. It was against this backdrop that Cone emerged as a theological voice for a Black theology contextualized as a theology for and from African Americans rising up from the Black experience and struggle for liberation from oppression and the sin of racism.

Essentially, the polemic of Cone’s Back theology is that it is a theology of liberation. There would be no Black theology or liberation theme had it not been for the oppression and struggle for the freedom and justice of African Americans and the coalescence of White Christians in the role of oppressor in the history of the United States. “In a society where persons are oppressed because they are black, Christian theology must become black theology, a theology that is unreservedly identified with the goals of the oppressed and seeks to interpret the divine character of their struggle for liberation.”

Black theology is a theology of social justice and liberation having emerged as an attempt,

To theologize from within the black experience rather than be confined to duplicating the theology of Europe or white North America . . . It represented the theological reflections of a radical black clergy seeking to interpret the meaning of God’s liberating presence in a society where blacks were being economically exploited and politically marginalized because of their skin color.

God identifies with the oppressed. However, Cone believes that the image of God has been misappropriated by the White church and given language and ideology that reinforces and legitimizes the racial oppression of African Americans. The question of


\[143\] Cone, *For My People*, 5.
God in Black liberation theology is not of God’s existence; rather, it is a question of God’s nature in light of oppression and the struggle for justice.

Cone’s Black theology of liberation asserts the electiveness of Blacks as God’s chosen. This electiveness is because God identifies with them and takes up the cause of their liberation. Cone writes, “And God has chosen them not for redemptive suffering but for freedom. Blacks are not elected to be Yahweh’s suffering people. Rather we are elected because we are oppressed against our will and God’s, and God has decided to make our liberation God’s own undertaking.”\(^1\)

He raises the question of how to speak of God without associating God with the oppressors and with racism. Cone overcomes this dilemma by deconstructing the image of the “white God” constructed by the oppressors and replacing it with the image of a God that is of and for Blacks and all oppressed peoples. God of the oppressed is revealed in the biblical accounts of the liberation of Israel, in particularly the Exodus experience. As the God of the oppressed, Cone’s reconstructed image of God is revealed in the Incarnation in which Jesus, Emmanuel, is the liberator who is both divine and human. He explains,

> The Christian understanding of God arises from the biblical view of revelation, a revelation of God that takes place in the liberation of oppressed Israel and is completed in the incarnation, in Jesus Christ. This means that whatever is said about the nature of God and God’s being-in-the-world must be based on the biblical account of God’s revelatory activity. . . . The doctrine of God in black theology must be of the God who is participating in the liberation of the oppressed of the land. This hermeneutical principle arises out of the first. Because God has been revealed in the history of oppressed Israel and decisively in the Oppressed One, Jesus Christ, it is impossible to say anything about God without seeing him as being involved in the contemporary liberation of all oppressed peoples.\(^2\)

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2. Ibid., 60.
The Exodus experience and the gospel and ministry of Jesus serve as Cone’s biblical source for a liberation theology that acknowledges God’s liberating activity for God’s oppressed people, the Israelites. Therefore, God, the liberator, is on the side of the oppressed and involved in their liberation.

Central to the nature of God’s solidarity with the liberation of oppressed Blacks is Cone’s concept of God as black. He writes,

> The blackness of God, and everything implied by it in a racist society, is the heart of the black theology doctrine of God. There is no place in black theology for a colorless God in a society where human beings suffer precisely because of their color. The black theologians must reject any conception of God which stifles black self-determination by picturing God as a God of all peoples. Either God is identified with the oppressed to the point that their experience becomes God’s experience, or God is a God of racist.¹⁴⁶

God is Black because God identifies with oppressed Blacks. It is not a superficial or sentimental adoption of blackness; rather God is Black because God’s nature and work is towards the liberation of oppressed Blacks. For Cone, one may know the essence of God and God’s saving activity by knowing the history of racism and the struggle against Black oppression. Because those who have perpetuated the oppression, racism, and injustices have been White, Cone rejects “whiteness,” seeing it as synonymous with these evils. The foundational understanding of God, theology, and Christianity are based on the assumptions of White perceptions. Thus, Christian theology was informed by those who denigrated Blacks or did not consider them at all, thereby participating in their oppression. Cone invites Whites to receive the gift of newness by becoming Black with God, which occurs by accepting and joining in God’s liberation activity. His paradigm

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¹⁴⁶Ibid., 63.
for God’s liberating activity is continued in the presence of Jesus whose ministry was among the poor, oppressed and marginalized.

Cone’s argument for a Black God was not understood or accepted by most Whites and had some difficulty among African American theologians and preachers. Cone’s response to the disapproval was that White theologians were unable to appreciate the theological position because they viewed theology from the perspective of White racism that did not address the theological aspects of oppression, racism and justice for African Americans. Moreover, for African American theologians, he said they were trained in the same seminaries and traditions of the White oppressors and so were unable to free themselves from participation in the same racist theology that abounded.

The relationship with the oppressed is carried forth through Jesus Christ as liberator. Cone’s Christology connects Jesus, his life, death and resurrection with the socio-political context of the Black experience. The dialectic focus is the Jesus of history, faith and his humanity and divinity. The subject of Black liberation theology is the historical Jesus known through scripture and who is the content and point of departure for relating the gospel to the oppression of African Americans. Jesus of scripture joins African Americans in their plight and struggles for liberation by entering into their condition as one with them. “The meaning of Jesus is an existential question. We know who he is when our own lives are placed in a situation of oppression, and we thus have to make a decision for or against our condition. To say no to oppression and yes to liberation is to encounter the existential significance of the Resurrected One.”

\[147\] Ibid., 119.
“Cone asserts that Jesus is the Black Christ through his oneness with oppressed African Americans. Because the oppression of African Americans is based on their blackness, Cone argues, “Our being with him is dependent on his being with us in the oppressed black condition, revealing to us what is necessary for our liberation.”\textsuperscript{148} The ontological issue about the blackness of Jesus is not about his skin color or the degree of blackness. While also symbolic, Cone believes that Christ’s blackness is literal in that Christ

truly becomes one with the oppressed blacks, taking their suffering as his suffering and revealing that he is found in the history of our struggle, the story of our pain, and the rhythm of our bodies. . . . Christ is black, therefore, not because of some cultural or psychological need of black people, but because and only because Christ really enters into our world where the poor, the despised, and black are, disclosing that he is with them, enduring their humiliation and pain and transforming oppressed slaves into liberated servants.\textsuperscript{149}

As Jesus became one with humanity in the incarnation, he becomes Black in order to be authentically present to African Americans today in their present condition. Jesus is one with those he has come to liberate by entering into their world of oppression. Without Jesus Christ, there can be no liberation for Blacks. As the liberator—the Black liberator—Christ changes the present reality to one of newness and divineness through his redemptiveness, thus affirming his solidarity with subjugated Blacks and God’s presence with the oppressed as God was with the Israelites in Egypt.

Cone’s view of liberation contends that humanity was intended to live in freedom rather than oppression, which is a basic condition of humanness. He connects liberation and freedom as gifts of God’s divinity for those who are oppressed and as the

\textsuperscript{148}Ibid., 120.

fundamental right afforded to all humanity. African Americans, as the oppressed, have a history and experience of faith that realizes its struggle for freedom is a divine endeavor. This divine encounter is a result of their creation by God in the image of God. While being a reality of God’s faithfulness expressed in the transcendence of God and the Pascal mystery of Christ, the gift of divine freedom also leads to an eschatological freedom. For Cone, this “over worldliness” is important in that it gives the oppressed a way to exist and struggle for freedom, not acquiesce to oppression, knowing that death without liberation is not the final goal of freedom. Rather, they are able to transcend death because of Jesus’ resurrection. African Americans are obliged to engage in their own efforts towards liberation knowing that Jesus is the foundation of all freedom. This presupposition is rooted in faith that assures them that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and the incarnated Jesus, the Christ, is with them in their suffering and historical struggle for freedom from injustices. Without oppression and injustices, there would be no struggle for freedom. Therefore, it is through the lens of oppression and injustice that one is truly able to understand the necessity and quest for freedom and the disparaging injustices. The oppressed come to know themselves in their own intentional struggle for freedom.

Since Cone’s initial arguments, he has critiqued some of his earlier positions and provides a critical post-Civil Rights analysis of Black liberation and theology. He contends that,

Black theology, then, was not created in a vacuum and neither was it simply the intellectual enterprise of black professional theologians. . . . black theology was born in the context of the black community as black people were attempting to make sense out of their struggle for freedom. . . . Without the dream of freedom,
so vividly expressed in the life, teachings, and death of Jesus, Malcolm, and Martin, there would be no black theology. . .\textsuperscript{150}

He offers a positive critique of the early development of Black theology in that the faith and struggles of the Black church and civic leaders are now linked to Christian faith and the struggle of African Americans for freedom. African American clergy are now forced to reread scripture in consideration of the social plight of the oppression and injustices of their people. He makes the argument that they are connected and that God identifies with the oppressed and the struggle for liberation. Black theology, like the Black Power movement, attacks White racism and challenges the institutional racism and leadership complacency in the Christian Church and society, with an emphasis on freedom and injustices. The nascent development of Black theology compels Black church leaders to differentiate between Black and White churches. Central to this dichotomy is the creation of a strong bond for Africa and an appreciation for their African historical roots, ancestry, and culture.

Cone also identifies weaknesses in his Black theological approach. In speaking of Black theologians and clergy, Cone writes, “We allowed our definition of black theology to be too much a reaction to racism in the white churches and society.”\textsuperscript{151} In his initial writings, and that of other Black theologians and advocates, they argue adamantly that solely the elimination of racism was the basis of their writings and movements. While he does not deny the earlier contention regarding the elimination of racism, he believes that

\textsuperscript{150}Cone, \textit{Black Theology and Black Church}, 353.

\textsuperscript{151}Cone, \textit{For My People}, 86.
the focus on racism was more of a reaction than a positive and deliberate grounding for a
Black theological perspective on racism and liberation. He writes,

Black theology, then, was being created out of a negative reaction to whites rather than a positive reaction to the history and culture of blacks. . . .

. . . A measure of reason was necessary and appropriate because racism is evil and must be attacked and destroyed. But one’s theological vision must be derived from something more than merely a reaction to one’s enemy. 152

Another weakness that Cone articulates is the absence of a sufficient social analysis to respond to White racism. Besides their negative overreaction to white racism, they had a naiveté that if White Christians understood the morality of racism and its injustices, then White Christians would change their hearts and work to eliminate institutional racism.

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 church on the other. If we had used the tools 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. 153

In hindsight, an economic analysis, certainly, would have helped in the analysis of institutional racism. In addition, Cone, along with other African American theologians argue that the disregard for any consideration of sexism and its significance in light of racism and classism is a significant oversight and weakness of Black liberation theology. With the predominant focus on racism as a social injustice, the absence of a social analysis meant there is little or no attention given to the interconnectedness of other social issues such as sexism and classism within the African American experience and as

152 Ibid., 87.
153 Ibid., 88.
a global phenomenon for oppressed peoples. Womanist theology that will be examined in this chapter offers a corrective to Cone’s omission.

2.3.2 J. Deotis Roberts

Although Cone was a leading advocate for Black theology and liberation, his was not the only Protestant voice. In 1971, theologian, J. Deotis Roberts published *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology* in response to Cone’s two earliest works on Black theology. Roberts’s concept of Black theology will be reviewed in this section; however, a more extensive treatment of his emphasis on reconciliation will be included in the final chapter on the development of a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation. Both Roberts and Cone recognized the systematic and institutional racism in American society and the Christian Church in the United States, and acknowledged the racial oppression of African Americans. Each author held a unique perspective on the proper role of Black theology in relation to White America and the Christian Church, with Roberts emphasizing the cultural aspects of liberation.

Roberts acknowledges that the context for Black theology is the Black religious experience. Essential to Black religion, and therefore for Black theology, is the Black experience. He states,

> The abundance of raw materials for Black Theology is overwhelming. Among the sources that may be freighted with the religious insights we may list literature, history, sermons, spirituals, folklore, art, and the testimony of some saints and sages of the black community. All these feed into a Black Theology that is a process of reasoning about God in the context of the black experience.\(^{154}\)

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Therefore, Roberts believes that the goal of Black theology is the Christian experience as ordained by Christ, which is not necessarily the Christianity that is practiced and defined by White Christians. This foundational experience is relational to the ethics and morals of Black theology. Both African Americans and White Americans may benefit from the influence of Black theology. The benefit for African Americans comes when they are genuinely recognized and welcomed as equals in God’s humanity. Whites may benefit from Black theology when they denounce the racial oppression and power from which they have lead and benefitted, and when they understand that they, too, have been hurt by the oppression of African Americans.

While Roberts did not reject the concept of Black Power, he did not wholeheartedly embrace all elements of the Black Power Movement. He opposed Cone’s endorsement of the Black Power Movement and his inclusion of it in his concept of Black Theology. Roberts believed that the reproof of Christianity by the Black Power Movement also included the rejection of Black religion and its religious traditions, which were the foundations of the Black experience and the context for Black theology. The renunciation of Christianity also alienated many African American church leaders, laity, and theologians. Although Roberts understood the source of the anger articulated by those in the Black Power Movement, and agreed with the underlying premise that African Americans were denied power and existentially needed to claim power for their people, he opposed the Movement’s broad abjuration of Christianity. He criticized Cone arguing that as a Christian theologian his theology was too narrowly aligned with Black Power in its denunciation of reconciliation and Christian ethics. He advocated that the proper place for a Black theology of liberation was within the Christian theological arena.
Roberts wrote, “A Christian theologian is not an interpreter of the religion of Black Power. He or she, as black theologian, may be the interpreter of Afro-American Christianity. He or she may be in tune with the meaning of Black Power. But he or she is attempting to understand the Christian faith in the light of his or her people’s experience.”  

Roberts’s theological training was grounded in European theological scholarship just as his White theological contemporaries. He, like other African American theologians, believed that all theology was contextualized, and that the particularity of Black theology offers a methodology that is unique and different from Western theology. In speaking of methodology, Roberts says,  

When the black theologians began their task, there was no time to consider the question of method. ‘The message they had was ‘like fire shut up in their bones.’ . . . Black theologians were not permitted the luxury of becoming methodological experts. Furthermore, their message was different. They needed new ways of thinking and entering into theologian discourse.  

The new ways include an embrace and understanding of Africa and attentativeness to its connection or influence on the religious experience of African Americans. As already noted, Roberts draws dichotomy between the Christianity as instituted by Christ and the faith as practiced and defined by White Christians who support racism and oppression of Africans Americans. Black theology is a corrective to the “misinterpretations and the omissions of ‘white theology,’ which have often provided justification of the oppression of blacks, but it is considerably more than this. It is most of all a constructive

155 Ibid., 5.

‘reconception’ of the Christian faith.”¹⁵⁷ This reconception of Christian faith promotes a new consciousness for African Americans that is free of the oppressive forces that cause self-hatred and self-doubt. The new Black consciousness also reinforces the constitutive inherent dignity and self-worth of African Americans because of their existential relationship to God through the redemptive role of Jesus Christ.

An essential dynamic of Roberts’s Black theology is what he calls a “Black political theology.” His conception of a Black political theology is a theology of power in which the synthesis of ethics and faith, and praxis and theology are used to express and address the institutionalization of racism in all areas and social structures of American society, including the Christian church. It, therefore, provides a theological foundation for the praxis or action for liberation from Black oppression and suffering. Roberts writes,

Political theology is not primarily involved in a repetition of its creeds and dogmas. The situation of man in the world is normative for political theology, of which black theology is an expression. Political theology brings an essential corrective to existential theology because it perceives existence no longer as purely spiritual, but as socio-politically conditioned.”¹⁵⁸

Roberts’s Black theology is an ethical theology of humanization and survival in which love and justice are intricately linked in the struggle for justice and liberation of African Americans. He argues,

A method that is psychosocial and cultural will be more appropriate than a metaphysical model. The descriptive-confessional method is closer to what we need. . . . In some sense, we are allowing a manifestation of our experience of the ‘holy’ to provide the symbols or the images that are to receive theological treatment. We do not desire to force prepackaged theological categories upon our experience. We seek an increasing acquaintance with the faith of our fathers in

¹⁵⁷Ibid., 40.

¹⁵⁸Ibid., 190.
Africa and the New World as a matrix out of which a theological treatment of the Christian faith may take shape.”

Foundationally, he argues that Black theology must be more than a reaction to White racism, which he fears is the basis of Cone’s theology. Two central components of Roberts’s Black theology are love and reconciliation, which are necessary for a transformative Christianity that integrates theology and praxis in the liberation of subjugated African Americans. The ethical command by Jesus to love is at the heart of justice, liberation, forgiveness and reconciliation. Love and reconciliation are two dimensions that Roberts shares with Martin Luther King, Jr., but finds missing in Cone’s Black theology.

The superlative model of love for Roberts is found in the ultimate event—the crucifixion-resurrection—in which the selfless act of Jesus raises love from a contractual obligation to a demand for concern, respect, and justice for one another. For African Americans, the moral challenge of love begins with oneself as an act of removing the shackles of oppressions that have come from fear, degradation, and alienation. Self-love, or acceptance of self, is a precondition for the love of others. Love, according to Roberts is often a costly grace, but never a cheap grace. He writes that love “requires that we challenge unjust power structures to see that they are humane. . . . With emphasis on praxis in liberation theology, there is no way to think of love in a meaningful sense without the possibility of solidarity in suffering with the oppressed.”

Sincere and transformative reconciliation is available only when genuine love and liberating justice

159Ibid., 43.

160Ibid., 70.
result in sincere requests for forgiveness by the oppressors. Roberts’ Black theology contains two essential elements, liberation and reconciliation. This thought is found in the pastoral letter, *What We Have Seen and Heard*, in the bishops’ focus on the gifts of freedom or liberation and reconciliation.

### 2.3.3 Other Protestant Theological Voices

Another prominent theologian, Gayraud Wilmore, collaborated with Cone on numerous books on Black theology. In fact, Cone credits Wilmore as an influence on his development of Black theology. Wilmore’s contribution to Black liberation theology is his emphasis on the investigation of Black religion beginning with slavery and drawing correlations with African traditional religions, African American theology and church today, and the political and social dynamics of the Civil Rights movement. He insists that Black theology be informed by the Black experience originating in Africa and through the slave experience in America, and to modern times. Wilmore emphasizes the necessity for an analysis of Black culture, particular its religious experience as foundational for an authentic development of a Black theology. He offers three sources for Black theology: the African American community; the corpus of African American writings and orations; and African traditional religions.

The first source is based on the African American community and its suffering and struggle for freedom in society and the Christian Church, and is rooted deeply within the African American community, its experience and identity. The second source of Black theology is the anthology of public and private orations and writings of Black preachers and secular leaders, particularly the sermons and prayers from the slave period.

This compilation of folklore, ethical norms, literature, oral tradition, and the arts contain
the essence of Black theology in its understanding of God, the reciprocal relationship with Jesus and the Christian Church, and the consciousness of an oppressed people within the context of their suffering and struggle for freedom. Wilmore argues that this block requires the development of a Black hermeneutic as an interpretative tool in order to examine the root source of Black theology and the validation of the African American experience. The importance of the traditional religions of Africa is the third source, which connects African Americans to Africa and African religions with the religious experience of African Americans. According to Wilmore, “we need to know what ancient and modern Africans have to contribute to our knowledge of God and the survival and liberation of the human race.” He argues that although the course of time and historical distance from the slave conquest and the assimilation of African Americans into westerns culture and Christian religions may have diminished some of the religious meaning and consciousness from the psyche of Africa Americans, their consciousness may not have been eliminated. In other words, assimilation into American society as slaves and the adoption of Christianity did not fully destroy the African religious beliefs and practices that the slaves brought with them. Wilmore suggests that African and African American theologians may find African traditional religions beneficial as an interpretative tool in searching for meaning in the shared struggles relating to oppression and liberation. Wilmore writes,

The gift of black faith was wrought out of the distinctive way God was revealed to pre-colonial Africa and it was shaped, for five hundred years, by the experience of suffering and struggle related to oppression. Its lasting contribution will be its demonstration of what it takes for a people to survive and achieve inner and

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external liberation under the strange circumstances of being downtrodden under the heel of Christian racists.\textsuperscript{162}

The dominant motifs of the slave religion were affirmation and joy. Included in their traditional belief was the concept of the individual and the community as continuously involved with the spirit world in the practical affairs of daily life. These themes were infused in the spirituality of African American Catholics as cited by the Black bishops of the United States in \textit{What We Have Seen and Heard}.

Wilmore believes that it would have been difficult for the Black slaves to have fully embraced and accepted Christianity in the same way that White Christians believed because the lived experiences and reality of oppressed slaves were drastically different from Whites Christians who were the oppressors. The faith of the slaves was shaped and reinterpreted in light of their oppression and struggle for freedom; thereby, making their religious understanding and experience different from White American Christians. The African American Catholic bishops allude to this understanding in \textit{What We Have Seen and Heard}. Many African American Catholics, while authentically Catholic express their spirituality in a way that closely identifies with others of African descent. A different and unique form of liturgical and theological expression has been developed by African Americans as a result of their oppression. This has its own distinctive moral view conditioned by the oppression, bondage, denial of freedom, struggle for liberation, protest, and hope for deliverance. What developed in the consciousness of the African American religious experience is a combination of African religious spirituality and Christianity affected by the experiences of racism and oppression.

\footnote{\textsuperscript{162}Ibid., 241.}
For Wilmore, this consciousness is a source for Black theology. It has the potential for having an effective role in the Black church by helping Black theological scholars and church leaders to raise Black theology to the level of public discourse. However, the public discourse has not been fully realized. Wilmore cites reasons for this lack of achievement in the Black church and with its Black laity, and in theological academia. They include the absence of an infrastructure among Black academic scholars and church leaders that could have helped to advance the concept of Black theology within the Black church, particularly within seminaries. There were no educational programs for Blacks that could instruct and articulate the ideology of Black theology and its potential discourse, and embrace of the poor and disenfranchised.

Another theologian, Dwight Hopkins argues “that Black religion is public discourse. His position advocates, black faith is public talk about God and the human struggle for a holistic salvation, liberation, and the practice of freedom.”163 In his view, the role of Black theology is to liberate African Americans and the Black church from oppression and the freeing of their minds from self-hatred caused by racism and oppression. Hopkins writes,

. . . The Christian part of black theology states that the God of freedom, through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ the liberator, has provided a journey of faith and hope to be free. Now God’s spirit of liberation offers empowerment to the oppressed African American community to struggle for the full realization of that community’s structural and personal free humanity. It is God’s will for the oppressed to be free of racism and become a fully created people of God. This is what it means to be black and Christian. And a black

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theology of liberation works to keep the church and the community accountable to that claim.\textsuperscript{164}

Black theology frees African Americans to reach their full potential as human beings created in the image of God with special emphasis on justice and the empowerment of the poor. Originating within the Black church, Black theology is a theology of liberation that is transformative for African Americans personally, collectively, and with the possibility of liberating oppressors as well as the oppressed. Like Cone and Wilmore, Hopkins identifies God as the mediator of justice for the oppressed and marginalized with whom he has a special affinity. The liberating God of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures is the same God who through the saving activity of Jesus will liberate African Americans from oppressive structures and debilitative poverty.

Hopkins’ offers four building blocks for the development of a Black theology of liberation. The first encapsulates the story of slavery in which African slaves and African American descendants create a new religion, a black religion rooted in African religious beliefs and traditions for the oppressed and poor shaped by the context of their slavery. The second building block is a rereading of scripture and its reinterpretation of the themes of freedom and partiality for the poor and oppressed. The birth and development of the Civil Rights Movement during the 1950-1970’s is the third building block that he considers the most important in the development of a Black theology. The fourth, involving the method of Black theology, extrapolates theological insight about the message of Jesus Christ and the liberation of oppressed African Americans. It addresses the questions of purpose, content, source, and direction of Black theology, which are

posed by the communities and churches that embrace it as a viable method and theology for justice and the liberation of African Americans, especially the poor. The value of a Black theology of liberation for Hopkins is that it provides the church with a way to assess and question the African American church’s beliefs, practices, and accountability in relation to God’s divine revelation for African Americans.

2.4 Black Catholic Theological Voices

In comparison to Black Protestant theologians, African American Catholic theologians are fewer in number. However, this nascent group of African American Catholic theologians has given voice to a theological perspective that is both Catholic and Black and focuses on the faith, culture, and life experiences of African American Catholics. While the African American bishops in What We Have Seen and Heard do not refer to Black Protestant theologians or specifically to Black theology, they are clear that African American Catholics have a relationship and identity with the larger Black community in the United States. Both share a common ancestry, historical experience, culture, and spirituality that are rooted in their African heritage. At the time of Cone’s contribution to Black theology, the national African American Catholic apostolate did not have the comparable number of theologians as did Black Protestants. There were contributing factors. They include the absence of African American hierarchical leadership in the ecclesia structures of the Church; the history of racism; and the negative and often indifferent perception of Black Catholics in the Church by both White Catholics and Black Protestants. The few African American Catholic voices spoke to a Church that was fearful of Black theology. Moreover, the American Church lacked the will to understand African American Catholics within the context of their ancestral
history, their experiences in the Church, and the Church’s history of racial injustice.

Just a few years post-James Cone’s decisive work on Black theology and liberation, the Catholic Theological Society (CTSA) of America sought to understand the affect and role of this new and challenging theological inquiry for Roman Catholic theology in the United States and for the CTSA. In 1973, they invited Professor Preston N. Williams to address the Society on the relationship between Blacks and Roman Catholics. Williams, an African American Protestant ethicist and theologian at Harvard University, challenged the universality of the Catholic Church in the United States. He argued that the Church had not recognized and adapted to the culture of African Americans as it had eventually done for the Church in Africa, the Caribbean, and other American cultural groups of European descent. He said,

Black Americans need not become either Puritans or Irish. They ought to be able to maintain themselves and become Roman Catholic. . . . I am affirming that a universal Church must be more than a Roman, or European, or German, or American Church. It ought to be a universal Church and that means African and black American as well as Mexican-American and Brazilian.165

Williams maintained that the Catholic Church did not have a strong or credible voice in racial justice because of its silence in social justice issues involving race. In addition, he cited the Church’s failure to embrace fully the concept of universalism, thereby accepting an attitude of European or White hegemony as the norm for catholicity, and its lack of genuine welcome and respect for African American culture as part of the universalism of the Catholic Church in the United States. For many African Americans, membership in the Roman Catholic Church then and now means assimilation into a European-White cultural experience that negates the African American ethos. Williams challenged the

CTSA to promote Black Catholic theological scholarship citing the vast considerable absence of African American Catholic leadership in seminaries, universities, and the hierarchy of the church and as theologians.

If the Roman Church is to take more seriously black experience and culture, and encourage blacks to design new cultural and religious forms, and give a larger role to blacks within the Church, then it need not only to convert and recruit more blacks to holy orders, but also to educate more blacks to be doctors of the Church. While I do not have any figures to quote at this point, my experience tells me that there are few, if any, fully trained black Catholics scholars in America. The most lily-white theological schools that I am acquainted with are Roman Catholic schools. . . . Moreover the white men and women students have shown almost no interest in taking courses in black religion or experience that is given in Protestant or secular institutions. In brief, American Catholics are simply not equipping themselves to know or to understand blacks.\textsuperscript{166}

He chided White Catholics, noting that they did not educate themselves about the Black religious experience or the life of African Americans. This, he felt was a weakness of the Catholic Church in the United States and an indicator of an arrogance of superiority.

2.4.1 Fr. Joseph Nearon

The CTSA’s response to Williams was to designate its only African American theologian and member, Fr. Joseph Nearon, to form a research committee to explore “black theology as it affects Roman Catholic theology and as it should be a concern for the CTSA.”\textsuperscript{167} The year after Williams’ 1974 address, Nearon gave his preliminary report that cited as most urgent Williams’ contention that Catholic theologians had little regard for the life and faith experience of African Americans and the Black diasporas.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[166] Williams, “Religious and Social Aspects,” 24.
\end{footnotes}
Nearon offered three fundamental questions regarding the Catholic Church to guide the purposed research: “To what extent are our black brothers and sisters correct in accusing us of having ‘a racist theology?’ How can incorporation of the black experience enrich our theology? How can the Roman Catholic tradition contribute to the quest for black liberation and identity?”¹⁶⁸ He challenged his colleagues and the Catholic Church by declaring that Catholic theology was racist, primarily by omission, but nevertheless a moral challenge. He said, “Blacks have been accepted (or more accurately allowed to join) to the extent that they assimilate to an already established cultural pattern and no one ever even thought that the black Catholic had something to contribute to Catholicism, and especially to Catholic theology, as well as something to receive.”¹⁶⁹

Nearon, again, addressed the CTSA the next year with a report that affirmed the relationship between African Americans, Black theology and Catholic theology. The report addressed several issues Nearon thought were necessary for the development of a Black theology within the context of Roman Catholic theology. “First he noted that Catholics could make a contribution to Black theology; and secondly, that there is an authentic African American approach to engaging Catholic theology, which is significant for the Black theological and Catholic theological discourse.”¹⁷⁰ Nearon offered an analogy between Black Catholic theology and Black Protestant theology indicating that each is worthy of study and dialogue by White Catholic theologians. “Black theology,” he said, “is an effort to understand the relationship between two realities: the Black experience

¹⁶⁸Ibid., 414.
¹⁶⁹Ibid., 414.
¹⁷⁰Ibid.
and the Christian faith.” Nearon agreed with James Cone in that only those who are Black can do Black theology or validate the experiences of Black people because Black theology is a combination of Christianity and the Black experience. “The black theologian is accountable to the black community, which has the right to demand that what he is interpreting is indeed the black experience and that his interpretation does give an authentic Christian meaning to his experience.”

Nearon believed that one of the dilemmas for Catholic theology was the Catholic hierarchy’s acceptance and critique of Black theology and Black theology’s accountability to the hierarchy. Once the claim that Black theology was accountable to Black people and based on the repository of their experience, the dilemma for Catholic theology was its absence of Black theologians and Black bishops in the magisterium of the Catholic Church in the United States. The solution, for Nearon, was to appoint Black bishops to the magisterium who would have the cultural experience in which to judge Black theology and to do so within the context of Catholic theology.

Still relevant today is the issue that Nearon addressed concerning the tendency to universalize the particularity of race and culture in the Church, thus denying the unique identify and significance of people of color who are often the marginalized. This, he cautioned, may lead to racism when the contributions of the marginalized, in this case African Americans, are minimalized, not recognized or appreciated because they are viewed in the context of the “melting pot” myth that has excluded them. The Catholic Church in the United States is an immigrant Church. Millions of White Catholics from

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European nations came to the United States and brought with them their priests and religious women who helped them to maintain their cultural identity and spirituality while becoming assimilated into the American cultural fabric. As already noted in the previous chapter, the experience of African Americans was different. They, for the most part, did not come as free immigrants nor did they have a significant number of priests and religious to speak on their behalf in the hierarchical Church in the United States until the 1960’s and later. The Church was slow to recognize the gifts and spirituality of African American Catholics and to develop the vocational structures and programs to raise up African American ordained and consecrated leadership. For Nearon, the inability of the Catholic Church to embrace the religion, spirituality and culture of African Americans presented “a major problem for the elaboration of a black theology in the Roman Catholic tradition.”

Nearon presented CTSA with three significant areas for a theological investigation of Black theology within the Catholic Church. The first was an understanding of the theology and mystery of the Trinity. The affirmation of the “otherness” of God in the Trinity and the mutuality of the three divine natures in one Person offered a lens in which to see that the differences among human persons does not negate their connectedness or commonality, nor does it indicate exclusivity for some. Nearon concluded, “. . . because God is what he is, otherness is not destructive of unity but is the only way to constitute unity which is formed in the ‘image and likeness of God.’”

The second investigation was the role of the local community as a result of the decentralization of the Church after Vatican II and the publication of Lumen Gentium. This, he believed, was an opportunity to

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174 Ibid., 192.
foster a greater reality of unity in diversity with focus on the local community—parish or diocesan—where the Church is realized rather than the national or universal Church.

Nearon wrote,

The religious dimension of black culture presupposes a different world outlook from that of the dominant culture and its expression will be different. In an ecclesiology which operates “from the top down” it is difficult to assimilate this difference. On the other hand, an ecclesiology which starts with the local community, accepts diversity as a “given” and seeks to find true unity through this diversity rather than imposing uniformity from the top. In a word, such an ecclesiology will understand that unity is not something over and above or along with diversity but that it is constituted by diversity.175

The relationship between Black theology and liberation theology was Nearon’s third area of investigation. He affirmed that Black theology is liberation theology calling for the liberation of oppressed Black people. In addition, the methodology of liberation theology provided Black theology with an investigative framework that focused on areas such as the social sciences rather than philosophical inquiry.

Nearon believed that liberation theology is often associated with Latin American theology; and while Latin Americans, like African Americans, speak of oppression there was a difference between liberation theology and Black theology. “The difference,” he offered, “is that the nature of Latin American oppression is most often focused on economic justice whereas Black theology’s oppression is attributed to racial injustice.”176

He identified three categories for discussion about oppression: the oppressed, oppressor and the free.

If we approach the matter from the viewpoint of sociology, it becomes apparent that in a society composed of oppressed and oppressors no one is free. Such a society is as dehumanizing for the oppressors as it is for the oppressed. Indeed, it

175Ibid., 193.
176Ibid., 195.
may well be more dehumanizing for those in the groups which are oppressors. The oppressor is not only not free, he does not know he is not free, for he does not have as self-image the fact that he is oppressor.\textsuperscript{177}

The benefit of this approach to black theology was its ability to derive from liberation theology a way to understand the sin of racism as a social reality and not merely as an individual transgression. In connecting the sin of racism to redemption and salvation, Neiron raised these theological principles from the conversion of the individual to the affect and conversion of humanity and society.

2.4.2 Black Catholic Theological Symposium

Three years after Neiron’s critical report and address to the Catholic Theological Society of American, he participated in the first meeting and establishment of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium (BCTS), at which time he presented his CTSA paper. He articulated the task of Black theology at that 1978 Symposium.

Black Theology has a two-fold task. First it may seek to give a black articulation of the Christian faith. Secondly, it may strive to give a Christian interpretation of the black experience. . . . In the first case one starts with the reality which is blackness and Christianity will be incorporated and harmonized with this reality. In the second instance one starts out with the reality which is Christian faith and strives to understand blackness in the light of this faith.\textsuperscript{178}

BCTS is still a viable Catholic organization today that focuses on the development of theological insights from the perspective of Black Catholic theology. It provides African American Catholic scholars a forum for reflection, mentoring, and the development of African American scholarship in systematic theology, ethics, morality, Church history, and related academic disciplines that support and enhance the study of Black Catholic

\textsuperscript{177}Ibid.,

theology. BCTS was founded when African American Catholic scholars assembled to
discuss the uniqueness of Black theology as a context for African American Catholic
identity and religiosity in the Catholic Church in the United States.

The gathering that consisted primarily of African American Catholic clergy and
religious articulated a synthesis of Black theology and Catholic theology, tradition,
eclesiology, and experience, thus forging a unique concept of African American
Catholic theology. Besides their embrace of Black theology, they affirmed the
compatibility of a Black Catholic theology that was both constitutive of the African
American experience and truly Catholic. Fr. Thaddeus Posey, BCTS organizer and chair
on behalf of the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus conveners, wrote in the Preface
of the Symposium’s Proceedings,

The Black approach to theology is rooted in a positive identification and creation.
It is positive because we affirm ourselves, our history and our destiny in the
Faith. . . . Until recently, the Church has not encouraged this through
identification among Black Catholics. . . . The question of Black Theology has for
some time produced tension in the Catholic Church. This tension stems from
many levels of uncertainty about both parts of the term: BLACK and
THEOLOGY. Too often Black and thus black consciousness within the Church
is identified with hatred, violence and separatism.179

Posey aligned African American Catholics with African Americans, uniting them as one
people—as Black Americans—with a shared history, culture, and experience of God.

“As Black Americans we have a history as a people, our own aspirations, longings, and
desires; our own expressions, traditions and culture. We are in no way a dark mirror of
White society.”180 Posey situated Black theology in the classical understanding of

179 Thaddeus Posey, O.F.M., Cap., “Preface,” in Theology: A Portrait in Black, ed. Thaddeus J.
Posey, O.F.M. Cap., working paper, Proceedings of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium 1 (October

180 Ibid., 3.
theology as “faith seeking understanding.” Black theology, therefore, is seen as a natural response of Christianity and relationship to the divine. Like Cone and other African American Protestant theologians, Posey agreed that African American Catholics have a role in the raising of consciousness of racism in the Catholic Church and Christianity in the United States.

In the Proceedings, Nearon emphasized the particularity of blackness within the universality of the Church, and conjoined faith and heritage as a way to understand how Black people had significantly enriched the Church by their contributions. Therefore, Catholics of African descent, in this case African Americans, are indispensable in helping the Church in the United States to reflect the Church of Pentecost. In Nearon’s observation of the Symposium, he said,

We are here because we are Black and we are here because we are Catholic theologians and we are here because we feel impelled to be close to our people and to be close to our Church. . . . We are here to examine our heritage in the light of our faith and strive to articulate our faith in the light of our heritage. We do this as a contribution to our people, but we also do it as a contribution to our Church.”

Black Theology dialogue benefits the entire Church, not just Black Catholics; and therefore, both Black and White Catholics have a unique opportunity and obligation to contribute to the dialogue as Catholics, and as colleagues with African American Protestants theologians. As noted earlier, Nearon challenged the limited view of the universality of the Church, thereby equating unity with uniformity. He believed that the American Catholic Church had little understanding or appreciation of the particularity of African American spirituality and heritage because the church did not see Black diversity

in the same way it viewed and accepted the diversity of European or White Catholics. Why?  Nearon attributed it to the mistrust of the Black Catholic religious experience and its similarities with the heritage and experiences of Black Protestants. This fear and mistrust made it difficult for White American Catholics to embrace and acknowledge the particularity of African American Catholic identity and to see it as a part of the universal Catholic Church. Nearon wrote,

> It is this ecclesiology of uniformity that made Black Theology and Black Religious expression seem incompatible with Catholicism . . . . I honestly think that the American Churches in many ways are afraid of Black religion. Black style preaching, Gospel music, etc., are suspected as being “Protestant.” This needs to be reflected upon because it is at the center of a Black approach to ecclesiology. . . . The objection that Black ways of expressing the Christian mystery are too Protestant is really a camouflage. The real problem is Blackness.\(^\text{182}\)

The significance of BCTS is that it has become the premier professional Black Catholic theological organization and is the vehicle for mentoring Black Catholic scholarship. Convened by African American Catholic theologians and other doctoral professionals, BCTS provides a forum for the investigation and discussion of theology and related disciplines, and promotes the publishing of scholarship on topics of relevancy for African American Catholics—theological, pastoral, catechetical, historical, ethical, liturgical, and sociological. Individually and through the BCTS, African American Catholic theologians in particular have been able to formulate a context for Black Catholic theology within the purview of Black theology. Through their insightful dialogue and publications, they have challenged and corrected the conventional

theological views of the Catholic Church that negate or minimize the significance and authenticity of the African American cultural and religious experience in the Church. African American Catholic theologians provide a framework in which to articulate and engage in pastoral ministry and catechesis in parishes and in the life of African American Catholics. Moreover, they are the representatives of African American Catholics as they dialogue with White Catholics and Protestant African American theologians. They give voice to African American Catholic faith and spirituality as people who are both genuinely Catholic and part of the Black Church and African Diaspora.

2.4.3 M. Shawn Copeland

M. Shawn Copeland, African American Catholic theologian and participant at the BCTS, writes that “. . . the posture of the symposium was (and remains) constructive: evaluating the historical, cultural, psychic, and social situation of black people and proposing ways to initiate a dialogue between black history and culture and Catholic doctrine and theology.” Two decades later, Copeland was the president of the Catholic Theological Society of America (CTSA). Copeland notes that there were attempts in the early 1970’s by several African American Catholic theologians to articulate a Catholic theology based on liberation theology. Their efforts were met with indifference from other Catholic theologians. This was unfortunate.

An African American Catholic perspective on Black theology is critical for this thesis in that it provides a context for the development of a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation. Copeland, for example, notes

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that there are a myriad of questions and misunderstandings about Catholic theology and Black theology. On the one hand, one of the most blatant misunderstandings about Catholic theology is that it merely repeats what the magisterium dictates; on the other hand, one of the most blatant misunderstandings about black theology is that it is turned in on itself and displays little concern for objective criteria.  

These questions have helped her to shape her theological perspective. She situates Black theology in the heart of the Black experience, which also confronts racism as a lived reality and struggle for liberation.

Like all Christian theology, black theology strives to understand and interpret the word of God and its meaning. But black theology explicitly confronts the historical, cultural, and structural subordination of black peoples within societies dominated by white supremacist rule. Black theology contests the heretical use of the Bible, of doctrine and practice to justify the subordination of black peoples and to sanctify the hegemony of white supremacy.

Copeland describes Black theology as prophetic in that its goal is liberation from oppression in social suffering, social structures, and from the subjugation of people. The prophetic nature of Black theology occurs in and through its dialogue and interpretation of scripture. This is from the lens of liberation as it affirms the humanity and dignity of the oppressed. Both the oppressed and the oppressor require liberation. Black theology links the gospel message and the African American struggle for freedom and liberation.

The methodology she uses for her Black Catholic theology is correlation. Its value for Black Catholic theology is that it responds to the contemporary experience of African Americans by posing the necessary questions and articulating faith responses that reveal and situate Christ in the midst of their lived experience. As a method, the value of

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184Ibid., 120.

correlation is that the Christian message, with its particular language and symbols, can transcend time and engage in dialogue with contemporary culture. Copeland rightly observes, however, that the methodology poses several risks for Black theologies. Besides its vulnerability to biased interpretation by the dominant culture, she sights that correlation methodology “lacks criteria for its correlation. It offers no grounds for the necessary criteria for appropriating the tradition, for the choice of analysis of the present situation, or for the criteria for bringing the two into correlation, leaving each theologian free to adopt her or his own criteria.”

186 In order to counter this problematic challenge to the correlation methodology, African American Catholic theologians have proposed and use various criteria in their theology. Copeland uses as her corrective Bernard Lonergan’s theory that focuses on the theologian’s moral responsibility and intellectual commitment to seek the truth in their theological pursuit.

Copeland’s Black Catholic theology, like that of her colleagues, proposes four interrelated processes for the correlation methodology: critique, retrieval, social analysis, and social science. It is necessary for Black Catholic theology to critique the culture, the social structures and Christianity. Using the critical historical method, it retrieves Black culture, history and the lived Catholic experience that may have been suppressed or overlooked. Social analysis and social science are important in that they provide an important understanding of the Black experience within the context of religion, culture and society. The integration of these perspectives was already noted earlier as crucial in the investigation and recovery of the African American experience and underlying

African cultural roots. The correlation methodology supported by Copeland has Black identity as its priority.

Consistent with other African American theologians, the methodology for a Black Catholic theology hinges on the religious beliefs and traditions, cultures, and histories carved from Black identity. Copeland’s praxis includes what she calls the “triangulation—religio-cultural Africanisms, Catholic faith, American history.”\(^{187}\) The important ubiquitous challenge for people of African descent and for Christianity is the ontological and anthropological disparagement of “Blackness” as it relates to Black people, in this case to African Americans. Therefore, self-determination of a people involves the act of naming themselves. The formation of identity enables African Americans to move from a negative and destructive view of “black” and “blackness” to a positive and affirming conceptualization of black identity. Copeland writes,

To name ourselves, our history, culture, intellectual and social movements, and Catholic religious praxis “black” is an act of self-determination, defiance, and courage. When we do this, we acknowledge and embrace an identity that has been shaped under duress, anxiety, and rejection in society and in our church. When we call ourselves and our enterprise “black Catholic,” we are not repudiating the universal nature and mission of our church; rather, we are giving a name to our particularity, to our gift and presence within it. In conformity with our baptismal vocation, we are naming ourselves as church—not something to which we belong, but who we are.\(^{188}\)

The emphasis on naming or identity of Africa Americans as Black and Catholic acknowledges the particularity of their human experience and the exigencies as people of African descent.

\(^{187}\)Ibid., 121.

\(^{188}\)Ibid., 122.
Like her Protestant Black theology colleagues, Copeland values the Black human condition and experience as the hallmark of any analysis or theological development which calls into question the religious experience of African Americans. Of Black Catholic theology, she writes, “By uncovering the intelligibility, truth, and relevance of Catholic Christian faith to meet the exigencies of the black human condition, black Catholic theology supports black Catholic identity and engages black experience as an authentic source of theology.”

In order to develop what she calls an “authentic” Black Catholic theology, Copeland offers several fundamental and challenging issues that must be critically addressed. The issues derive from the misconception that Catholic theology and theologians are restricted to the directives of the magisterium, and therefore, so too is Black Catholic theology and its theologians.

Copeland’s first response to the challenge to Black theology is to assert that Black Catholic theologians are faithfully committed to the authority of Catholic tradition with responsibility to what she calls creative and critical mediation. The onus of the faithful authority obligates the African American Catholic theologian to moral and intellectual truth to God, the Church, the Black community, the theological pursuit, and to other theologians, especially to African American colleagues. The second issue raises the question of Black Catholic theology and the dogmatic tradition. Copeland’s critique is that,

For the most part, we black Catholic theologians have not entered into rigorous constructive or analytical engagement with the doctrinal tradition. Our work has focused mainly on social sins—racism, sexism, heterosexism, and class exploitation; in this, Catholic social teaching has served as the primary dialogue partner. Although black Catholic theology has been alert to those doctrines (for

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189 Ibid., 132.
example, theological anthropology and ecclesiology) that undergird this teaching, it has not pushed beyond the edges of Catholic doctrinal teaching.\textsuperscript{190}

This, however, does not mean that African American Catholic theologians do not engage in dogmatic inquiry; rather, their theological foci use the lens of the Black human condition as the foundation for the Black Catholic theological quest.

The third, fourth, and fifth issues deal specifically with race and racial perspectives. The ecclesia history of the segregation of Catholic parishes under the theme of the “color-line” is Copeland’s third concern. She reviews the early history of the United States when African Americans broke with their Church denominations over the issue of slavery and racism. While this did not occur in the Catholic Church, it did not mean that the Church was immune to racism and segregation. Seen as a political rather than a moral issue, the Catholic Church embraced the racism and segregation of the day. Copeland sites the dilemma this has created for African American Catholics that extends to today.

On the one hand, the moral integrity of black Catholicism and the theology that would mediate it requires an unequivocal rejection of segregation in any form. As members of the Body of Christ, we too desire to live as Jesus lived, to put our communal and personal, cultural and social decisions at the service of the coming Reign of God. On the other hand, pastoral neglect and disregard by white clergy and hierarchy have forced black Catholics to seek out separate sites for the development of our own spiritual life.\textsuperscript{191}

The dilemma for African American Catholics that Copeland addresses, being “authentically Black and truly Catholic,” was discussed in Chapter 1. Full integration into the Church without having to sacrifice “blackness” existentially or ontologically is

\textsuperscript{190}Ibid., 133.

\textsuperscript{191}Ibid., 134.
the challenge. The fourth issue Copeland postulates is an analysis of the critical race theory as an optimum method to help Black Catholic theology in its formation of a positive Black identity that is not based on oppression. Based in legal studies, it offers a method for genuine and respectful dialogue and collaboration with other underrepresented groups in the United States. This method

. . . would take into account the complexity of contemporary social (that is, political, economic, and technological) relationships; that would be global in scope; and that would be grounded in historical analysis. . . . Such a theory ought to dissolve the black-white polarity of race relations, without either purchasing the hazardous fiction that racism is dead or uncritically reviving the essentialist position.192

The Afrocentric method and Afrocentricity are Copeland’s fifth considerations. She defines the method and these terms as intellectual, potential ideology, and praxis that places Africa and Africans at the center of a worldview in order to deconstruct the prevalent historical and cultural ideology of Europe and its descendants as the quintessence authority. This view places Egypt at the center of Africa and African history and culture. Without a critical analysis, the danger is that Afrocentricity has the potential to become as much an ideology as Eurocentricism. Copeland articulates the concern of African American historian Cyprian Davis.

Davis argues that dispassionate study of the history of Africa was of utmost importance to the integrity of African and African American or Black Studies. However, he argued that any attempt to romanticize Africa or to adopt unexamined, even biased, positions violates the canons of historical method and cheapens not only history but Black Studies as a discipline. Wary of Afrocentricity’s possible slide into ideology, Davis cautioned black Catholic theologians against indiscriminate appropriation of Afrocentric-derived content. He advocated careful attention to the historically conditioned perspectives of texts as well as of interpreters and called for the nuance distinction between a working hypothesis in history and verified judgments grounded in data.193

192Ibid., 136.

193Ibid., 137.
Although she warns of the potential danger and misuse of the Afrocentric method, Copeland acknowledges its divergent worldview value that affirms the multidimensional concept of “blackness.”

Copeland uses a metaphoric image of being at a “crossroads” and “the blues” to reflect on Black Catholic theology and the theologian. The analogous crossroads imagery offers numerous possibilities for African Americans who stand in the intersection of this metaphor. In light of the culture and history of people of African descent, crossroads can signify danger, risk, mystery, anguish, uncertainty as well as choices, opportunities, possibilities, expectations, turning, and discernment. “When a theology goes down to the crossroads,” she writes, “it risks encounter with new wisdom found at the heart of black vernacular culture.” 194 As an original form of American music, the blues began as an authentic expression by African Americans of their oppression in a racist and unjust society.

Copeland connects the crossroads image with the blues trope as an expression of African American pain, sorrow, and longing epitomized at the crossroads. “A theology, black and Catholic, must go down to the crossroads, to listen to and learn from black vernacular culture, to the blues.”195 The value of the crossroads imagery for Copeland is that it provides a context from which to engage in theological and social dialogue and praxis for African Americans. The Christian message must speak truthfully of God’s


195 Ibid., 98.
salvation and have relevancy for the “blues people” at the metaphoric crossroads. As an art form birthed from the human experience of enslaved and oppressed African Americans, the blues expresses the adversity, ethos, spirit and resilience of African Americans who found themselves at a precarious crossroads. The blues points one to the cross, to the crucified Jesus, who identifies with the anguish of his people. Copeland writes,

If the blues function as a trope for theology, then the black Catholic theologian must take on the identity of the blues musician. . . . Like the blues musician, the black theologian is steeped in a desire and an excellence. Like the blues musician, the theologian is sensitive to structure, idiom, and rhythm. Like the blues musician, the theologian is disciplined, but crosses boundaries in creative search of an authentic blue note.  

The African American theologian who genuinely embraces the blues metaphor also has a precarious journey that leads the theologian to the crossroads from where the sounds of the blues emulate from the oppression of Black people.

2.4.4 Other Black Catholic Theological Voices

As previous noted, there are several African American Catholic theologians who have contributed significantly to the development of Black Catholic theology. Sr. Jamie Phelps, also a participant at the BCTS, is a theologian who has written extensively about African American Catholics and Black Catholic theology. Her presentation at the BCTS, entitled “Black Self-Concept,” focused on the psycho-social theme of Blackness in relation to an ecclesiological perspective of Black Catholic theology. Phelps wrote,

One of the challenges of the Church then, is to develop a community in which the members experience a sense of “aliveness,” a spiritual, physical and psychological “aliveness.” Racism, which is internalized by the oppressed individual in the form of a negative self-concept, is sinful, precisely because it

196Ibid., 104.
negates the perception of a human being as a gifted, creative reflection of the Creator.  

Her BCTS presentation paralleled the history of racism in the Church with the racism that was operative in the United States. Additional consideration was given to the ecclesial statements by Pope John the XXIII in Pacem in Terris, Pope Paul VI in Populorum Progresso, and Ad Gentes by Vatican II, in which these encyclicals affirm the equality and human dignity of each individual. They elevate social justice, scripture and theology; the importance of a people’s culture in the missionary task of the Church and their self-determination; and racism and discrimination as obstacles to the salvific life of the Church. The obstacles that Black Catholics face in the Church and society, according to Phelps, are a result of the sin of racism. The Church’s silence and marginalization of African Americans has been a failure to fully realize the gospel of Jesus Christ and the true essence of the Catholic Church founded in the scripture narratives of Pentecost.

Phelps is in agreement with other African American Catholic theologians that the source of Black Catholic theology is the history and experience of African Americans and in particular that of Catholics of African descent in dialogue with the theology and traditions of the Catholic Church. “African-American Catholic Theology insofar as it is an articulation of the black experience of the Christian faith shares common ground with Black Theology. It may diverge in areas of the theological assumptions which still divide the Protestant and Catholic communities and Black-Catholic Theologies.”  

In order to

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198 Ibid., 169.
remain true and consistent to a Catholic conception of theology and dogma, Phelps, like other African American Catholic theologians, must include and engage Roman Catholic tradition in developing a Black Catholic theology of liberation.

There were earlier movements and efforts by African American Catholics in the late 18th century and early 1900’s to address their marginalization in the Church. Contemporary initiatives parallel the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements of the 1950s to the early 1970’s. Speaking of these initiatives, “Black Catholics,” says Phelps, “simply wish to make it possible to be Black, Catholic, and American without being cursed and spit upon, devalued and marginalized by other Blacks, Catholics or Americans.”199 It is worth noting that this statement acknowledges another dilemma for African American Catholics. The dilemma is often caused by other African American Christians who challenge African American Catholics about their “Blackness” or “Christianity” as Black and Catholic. In addition, African Americans of other Christian denominations often do not perceive African American Catholics as members of the traditional Black Church in the United States. African American Catholics have had to struggle for acceptance and understanding in the Catholic Church in the United States, but also contend with recognition and embrace by their African American Protestant brothers and sisters.

With her focus on the mission of the Church as proclaimed by Jesus, Phelps argues that the Catholic Church has not been faithful to this prophetic mission in its relationship with people of African descent. The mission calls the Church into community and in communion with one another and all creation. Human beings,

199 Ibid., 18.
therefore, who are made in the image of God and given God’s gift of grace are called to be in transformative life-giving relationship with one another. Phelps contends that the mission of Jesus Christ is challenged by the insensitivity, devaluation, and oppression of not only Blacks, but all people who are marginalized by race, color, ethnicity, nationality and gender, particularly women.

Theologian Diana Hayes focuses on the contextualization of theology as known and lived through the Black experience in the United States. She contends that all theologies are particular and that African Americans cannot speak about faith, their knowledge or understanding of Christianity and the Church except from the context of their lived faith experience as a people. Black theology is rooted in the contextual development of the particularity of the history of African Americans and the convergence of oppression and their struggle for freedom and survival. The contextual developmental roots were laid by enslaved African Americans who reflected upon and articulated their own faith response to Jesus Christ and the Gospel. As a theology of liberation, Hayes notes that Black theology developed in response to the various ubiquitous conflicts or racism, discrimination, and invisibility that challenged the heart and soul of African Americans, American society, and its religious institutions. “Black Liberation Theology is the product of African American peoples, both slave and freed, who sought and continue to seek to understand and articulate their faith in God and that faith’s persistence over almost four hundred years of slavery, persecution, discrimination and dehumanization.”

They reconceptualized and articulated scripture and a Christian theology that rejected a God of oppression and acknowledged a God of justice and

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freedom. They forged their own theology, a Black theology, expressed in the rituals, prayers, stories, songs, trials, and joys of enslaved and freed African Americans.

Hayes sees the retrieval of Black history and the faith history of Black people, especially in the United States, as crucial in the theological development of a Black theology. However, she sees it as a greater necessity for African American Catholics in their self-reflection, and for the American Roman Catholic Church, where they have been marginalized, for it provides the opportunity for them to have an awareness of the history and spiritual gifts they bring to the Church. For Hayes, the Catholic Church in America is revived by the affirmation, acceptance and acknowledgment of the enrich tradition, spirituality, history and gifts of African Americans in the Catholic Church. She cites the impact of the Protestant evangelical revivalism on the creation of Catholic parish missions or revivals as antecedents for an authentic form of African American Catholic worship.

While lamenting the history of invisibility of African Americans in the Catholic Church and among Black Protestants who make up the historical Black Church, Hayes argues that the emergence of Black Catholic scholars, organizations and initiatives have begun to challenge the perfunctory attitudes about African American Catholics.

As Black Catholic men and women have begun to explore their richly diverse history and to speak out of their own unique contexts, they are challenging and reformulating our understanding of Black Theology. In so doing, they make the assertion that to be Black and Catholic is not paradoxical, contradictory or contrary to the Black Liberation Movement but is simply one of the many flowing streams which make up the river of the Black experience in the United States.\footnote{Ibid., 162.}
In spite of the neglectful history, Black Catholics remain in the Church, while affirming their unique contribution, celebration, and articulation of their Catholicity within the context of their lived experience. For Hayes, the distinctiveness of Black Catholicism is its scripture and tradition, both foundational for Catholic theology and doctrine. Tradition, she argues, is based on the intermingling of the multiple heritages and religious experiences of the People of God, rather than that of just one heritage and experience of God. Additionally, Hayes acknowledges the centrality of Sacred Scripture and focuses on the liberation that is found in the transcendent God and the historical sacrifice of Jesus Christ. She connects the Church’s rituals, symbols, and celebration of feasts and saints to the African roots of Black Catholics. Mary, the Mother of God, epitomizes those who are oppressed but find the courage to respond to God’s liberative act. As with Catholic theology, Black Catholics theology places emphasis on the Eucharist as a symbol of healing, welcoming, acceptance and belonging for all God’s people of diverse races and nationalities. In somewhat echoing the Black Bishops’ pastoral letter, *What We Have Seen and Heard*, Hayes asserts,

> It is now time for African American Catholics to take ownership of this church in which they have for so long lived marginalized and often alienated lives. . . . There is “plenty good room” in God’s Kingdom. We must only choose our seats and sit down. As African American Catholics, however, we must ensure not only that we are doing the choosing but that the seats actually “fit” us, that we have participated fully in their construction and placement at the center, not the periphery, of our church.\(^\text{202}\)

It is essential that African American Catholics, other marginalized peoples, and women proclaim their rightful place in the Roman Catholic Church without relinquishing their

identity. For Hayes, this expression of self-love and acceptance is liberative for the marginalized as well as the Church in general. It signals the radical breakthrough of the beloved community of Jesus Christ as reflected in the gospel to love one another.

2.4.5 James Cone on Black Catholic Theology

“Black Liberation Theology and Black Catholics: A Critical Conversation,” an article written by James Cone in 2000, challenged African American Catholics on their participation and serious contribution to Black theology. Cone cited what he considered potential restrictions by the Catholic Church upon African American Catholic theologians. He questioned their freedom to articulate and engage in critical theological discourse that will challenge the Catholic Church and its theologians on their silence about racism and other social justice issues that affect African Americans. Cone questioned whether African American Catholic theologians could engage in a critical and responsive dialogue or contribute to Black theology. He did acknowledge the scholarship of African American Catholics in this theological field when he wrote, “Black Catholic theology is good for the continuing development of Black theology. We need a variety of theological voices, representing every segment of Black life. . . . I welcome Black Catholic theologians to the conversation about the meaning and future directions of Black liberation theology.”

Nevertheless, Cone argued that African American Catholic theologians avoid the difficult and critical issues and questions that might challenge the Catholic Church’s doctrine and theology. He maintained that African American Catholic

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theological research had been primary historical rather than theological and concerned primarily with religious, liturgical, ethical, and pastoral praxis. He said,

But I also would like to see Black Catholic theologians critically examine faith issues, especially as they relate to White supremacy in the Catholic Church and American society. . . . I urge Black Catholic theologians to offer a critical theological perspective on the Catholic faith and challenge Blacks and Whites to respond to it. . . . We need to hear not only what Black theologians have to say about Black theology but also what White Catholics have to say about the Black theological critique of White theology.”

Cone cited Nearon’s 1975 presentation to the CTS in which he declared that the accountability of African American theologians was first to the Black community and secondly to the Church. Cone’s assessment and challenge is that African American Catholic theologians have not been audacious enough in their attempt to develop a palpable and definitive African American Catholic theology that adopts Nearon’s approach to engagement and accountability within the Catholic Church. He argues that the authority by which African American Catholic and Protestant theologians speak is from the Black experience as defined by their struggle for liberation from racial supremacy and their ancestors, culture, and history. Cone believes that the necessary critical critique of Catholic theology and the development of a new African American Catholic construct, in light of the Black experience in the Church and United States, is absent in African American Catholic theological scholarship; and is simultaneously the challenge for African American Catholic theologians.

Cone challenges African American Catholic theologians to advance a stronger theological perspective for an African American Catholic theology and one that confronts

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204 Ibid., 731-748.
the dire questions about racism and the Catholic Church. This includes the inconsistency of the Christian Church on the moral issue of racism, particularly institutional or systemic issues of privilege. He believes that African American Catholic theologians’ emphasis on the proclaiming that they are “authentically Catholic and truly Black” is more about self-identity, belonging, and assurance to White Catholics of their place in the Catholic Church, rather than tenable theological positions born from critical reflection on the Church. He contends that:

Black Protestants and White Catholics create a theological dilemma for Black Catholic theologians. As a minority in both groups, Black Catholics should never feel comfortable with the faith of a community that ignores their history and culture, and with a racial community that does not take seriously their religious heritage. The pull on both sides appears to be in opposite directions. This contradiction demands a radical theological response, critiquing and affirming both sides of the paradox. The theological alternative that emerges from this struggle is not just Black or merely Catholic or a mixture of the two but a completely fresh theological voice that affirms the humanity of all.205

Shawn Copeland affirms the dilemma Cone’s cites coming from Black Protestants and White Catholics by suggesting that neither group respectfully acknowledges the Black identity and scholarship of African American Catholic theologians. She counters that African American Catholic theologians must stand firm and grounded in the Catholic tradition, a tradition in which they have a significant history. She asserts,

If Blacks are part of Catholic tradition there ought to be no problem in working within the tradition. . . . So when we Black Catholic theologians commit ourselves to fidelity to the authority of tradition, we take as our task the formulation of a critical theology that mediates between Black Catholic communities of witness and worship on the one hand and the racist religious and cultural matrices in which they exists on the other.206

205 Cone, “Black liberation theology and Black Catholics:” 731-748.

While Cone’s overall critique is cogent and offers constructive direction for African American Catholic theologians, he misunderstands the vast compendium of theological and doctrinal issues and positions for which Catholic theologians have to critique and advance theological discourse in regards to African Americans in the Church. Because of the Black Protestant and White Catholic paradox that Cone chides, it has been important that African American Catholic theologians address the identity issues and their rootedness in the Catholic Church. However, in agreement with Cone, African American Catholic theologians having matured in their theological thought are making great strides to develop an authentic African American Catholic theology. Copeland argues that African American Catholic theologians can work within their Catholic tradition to foster an African American Catholic theology of liberation. She challenges Cone’s insistence that radical critique necessitates public friction and conflict.

No one ought to assume that the mere absence of public protest is synonymous with acquiescence and internalization of those iniquitous values and decisions detrimental to our people, our faith, and our theology. At the same time, because we are doing theology and history from within a Church with a highly stratified, complex, and deliberate polity, Black Catholic theologians and historians are obliged to employ more self-critical methods... We situate the authority of our theology in the mission and ministry, death and Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ of God, as witnessed in Scripture and Black experience.207

2.5 Womanist as a Corrective to Black Liberation Theology

A discussion of the womanist theological position must be reviewed before concluding this chapter on Black theology and Black liberation theology. Conceived by literary author, Alice Walker, womanist conceptualizes the experiences and realities of

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207 Ibid.,
African American women. Cone and other Black theologians have acknowledged that one of the criticisms of the Black liberation theology is the omission of a feminist perspective. Whether it is from a Protestant or Catholic perspective, Black theology and Black liberation theology is not complete without mention of the unique contributions of African American female theologians. Therefore, it is important that there be a brief review of the womanist theological insights, as derived from African American women’s faith and life experiences. It offers a unique perspective that challenges the oppressive androcentric view of theology, and the role and relationship of African American women in the historical analysis of the Black church.

Contributions to this unique body of theological research include several African American Protestant scholars such as Delores Williams, Jacquelyn Grant, and Katie Cannon. Diana Hayes, Shawn Copeland, and Jamie Phelps have led the discussion from the Black Catholic perspective. These pioneering women use Black liberation theology and feminist theology as the context in the development of womanist theology, which they propose as a corrective for the Black theology of liberation articulated by their African American male colleagues. In addition, they offer a critique that challenges the normative methodologies of theological criticism they view as androcentric and bias.

Racism and sexism have shaped and impacted the lives of African American women during their sojourn in the United States from the pre-colonial period to the modern era. The womanist concept offers a reconstruction of the image of African American women and the oppressive gender, race and class status to which they have

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been assigned in the African American community and American society. The tridimensional characteristic of womanist explores the dynamics of the suffering and survival of African American women. Besides White patriarchy, a womanist perspective includes an analysis of gender oppression by African American men. In addition, it asserts that the feminist critique of the experience of women is inadequate for providing an authentic context for understanding the experience of African American women.

Jacquelyn Grant provides a broad characteristic of the womanist concept.

A womanist then is a strong Black woman who has sometimes been mislabeled as a domineering castrating matriarch. A womanist is one who has developed survival strategies in spite of the oppression of her race and sex in order to save her family and her people. Walker’s womanist notion suggests not “the feminist,” but the active struggles of Black women that makes being feminist as traditionally defined, and for others it involves being masculine as stereotypically defined. In either case, womanist just means being and acting out who you are. It is to the womanist tradition that Black women must appeal for the doing of theology.

The womanist perspective and theology is concerned about the African American community, as well as African American men, and maintains that both must be included in the dialogical discourse, especially in consideration of the racism and classism that have oppressed African Americans.

The subject in womanist theology is the African American woman and her experience. African American women’s consciousness is shaped by the exigencies of her survival, thus making her experience distinctive from that of White women’s experience. From their capture in Africa to the plantations in the Americas, African American women have experienced the degradation and brutality of slavery that denied them and their offspring their inherent God-given humanity. As African American women, their fate

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has not been limited to the racial subjugation that African American men have experienced because they have had the additional burden of gender exploitation and oppression from both White and Black men. They have had to confront the same gender biases that White women have experienced, even from African American men, and the oppression of White women.

The faith and experience of African American women are interwoven and integral in the analysis of race, gender and class. “Black women must do theology out of their tridimensional experience of racism/sexism/classism. To ignore any aspect of this experience is to deny the holist and integrated reality of Black womanhood. When Black women say that God is on the side of the oppressed, we mean that God is in solidarity with the struggles of those on the under side of humanity.”\textsuperscript{210} The role and value of the repressive experience of African American women is important in both the discussion of a theology of Black liberation as a framework for the development of a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation.

2.5.1 Delores Williams

In 1993, Delores Williams published a landmark book on womanist theology, \textit{Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk}. Williams proposes that a womanist theological perspective advocates for and fosters critical dialogue with diverse communities of religious, political and socially oppressed, most particularly African American women. For Williams, a womanist perspective offers a change in the

\textsuperscript{210}Ibid., 209.
perception and survival of oppressed African American women, essentially it articulates the experience of African American women and their survival. Williams contends that,

Womanist theology attempts to help black women see, affirm and have confidence in the importance of their experience and faith for determining the character of the Christian religion in the African-American community. Womanist theology challenges all oppressive forces impeding black women’s struggle for survival and for the development of a positive, productive quality of life conducive to women’s and the family’s freedom and well-being. Womanist theology opposes all oppression based on race, sex, class, sexual preference, physical disability and caste.\footnote{Delores Williams, 

Womanist theology, therefore, begins with the critique and articulation of the experience of African American women and the African American community-at-large. The retrieval of this experience is consistent with the initial methodology and source of Black theology. However, its departure is the articulation of the oppression and the quality of life of African American women and the disregard of African American women in the initial corpus of Black theological publications and theological thought.

Essential to Williams womanist theology are her emphasis on surrogacy and wilderness experience of African American women. The central focus of the surrogacy theme is the Genesis portrayal of Hagar, the slave woman, who is given by Sarah to Abraham in order to produce his progeny. This particular surrogacy is a biological substitution intended for procreation. Hagar, who is often depicted as African, an Egyptian woman, is the progenitor of a tribal wilderness people through her son Ishmael. Williams represents Hagar as an outsider, a slave who has no voice over her body or her quality of life and whose position renders her powerless. Through the lens of womanist theology, Hagar’s oppressiveness and precarious position in the house of Sarah and
Abraham result in her procreative surrogacy and eventual banishment into the wilderness with her son, and their ultimate survival. The significance of Hagar for African American women, according to Williams, is that they too have experienced coerced and voluntary surrogacy through slavery, powerlessness over their bodies, oppression, economic deprivation and providing for their families, the burden of raising children as single parents, and sustaining their churches and communities. “Surrogacy,” writes Williams,

has been a negative force in African-American women’s lives. It has been used by both men and women of the ruling class, as well as by some black men, to keep black women in the service of other people’s needs and goals. . . . Thus generations of African Americans can understand the struggle black women wage against the devaluation of their womanhood that social-role surrogacy supports.212

The womanist theological task, for Williams, is to explicate the religious experience of African American women, an experience shaped by the African American community. To achieve this understanding, the influences of the African American community must be considered because they affect the quality of life and struggle of African American women. The wilderness experience was a positive, transformative religious experience for Hagar and for the antebellum slaves who sought and formed a relationship with God through his Son, Jesus.

In her symbolic function she stands for the connection between the African-American antebellum heritage of “sacred-space-meeting-Jesus” content of the wilderness experience and the postbellum secular and social notion of the wilderness experience in a wide, hostile world where the economic struggle is severe. In her function as signal, Hagar calls attention to the presence and importance of black women’s experience in African-American culture, while she simultaneously calls attention to the unity of black males and black females in certain community experiences. This means, then, that black women should not

212Ibid., 81.
separate “women-experience” from their experience in the community’s survival and liberation struggles involving black men. As Hagar struggled for survival in the wilderness, found God’s intervention, and forged a life for herself and her son, the wilderness experience speaks of the human activity and quality of life of African Americans. Williams maintains that the term and concept of the wilderness experience is more palatable to African Americans and Anglo-Americans than the negative perception of the “Black experience.” And, the wilderness experience is more positive in that it supports and elevates the sense of African American resilience and leadership in the midst of struggle. Finally, she suggests that wilderness experience opens the door for discourse between womanist theology and Black liberation theology in that wilderness provides an approach for dialogue as opposed to Black experience that begins with androcentric and anti-quality of life perspectives that disregard and disparage African American women’s experiences.

Williams raises several issues in the development of Black liberation theology and purposes three areas with which womanist can dialogue: Christian theological method, doctrine, and ethics. The theological methodology focuses on the use of scripture in understanding and articulating the role of experience, specifically that of African American women in Black liberation theology. Using Hagar as the paradigmatic symbol, Williams questions the use of the Bible as a norm for Black liberation theology when the Bible contains passages that are the antithesis to liberation. She opposes Cone’s appropriation of scripture to express the connection between the election of the Hebrew people and the African American slave experience, particularly the biblical Exodus experience. Her concern is that the emphasis is on the election of the Hebrews

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213Ibid., 120.
without regard for the oppression of non-Hebrews. She does not deny the role that the Exodus event has had upon the religious identity and historical stride for freedom within the African American community. However, she locates the community’s identity with the God of the Exodus and the event in the antebellum period of slavery without giving it relevancy in the postbellum religious experience of African Americans.

Williams expresses these concerns by raising critical questions for Black liberation theology and its use of scripture as a source for liberation theology today given the moral implications such as slavery, violence and oppression, and the androcentric focus in the Bible. Since Black liberation theology begins with the experience of its people, for Williams the experience is limited without a holistic critique of that understanding and inclusion of the experience of African American women. Therefore, she advocates for the use of African sources, non-Christian and non-Jewish sources that interpret scripture, and the insights of African American women’s experiences to correct the exclusion of African American women in Black liberation theology. Williams encourages a theological dialogue with Black theologians that will engage a womanist perspective in the development of a Black theology that is liberative and challenges all African Americans.

2.5.2 Diana Hayes

Using Williams’ Hagar and wilderness experience metaphors, Diana Hayes presents womanist theology to Black Catholics in the United States. She is one of the most prolific of the African American Catholic theologians on womanist theology, she, too, locates womanist theology within the parameters of Black theology and specifically within the context of a Black theology of liberation. However, as womanist speak of the
tri-dimensional aspects of race, gender, and class, Hayes asserts that for African American Catholic women and men, it is quadra-dimensional. Besides race, gender and class, Catholicity is an important aspect for African American Catholic women and for men who have been invisible in the Catholic Church and in the traditional Black American Church. Therefore, she believes that the best contribution African American Catholic women may offer to the womanist dialogue is a reexamination of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, from the lens of a womanist perspective.

The Marian tradition, according to Hayes, has presented Mary as humble and docile. From a womanist perspective, Mary does not submissively accept the angel Gabriel’s news about her conception; rather, she asks several questions of the angel for clarification. As proof of her choseness and God’s power, she is told that her cousin Elizabeth, who is beyond child-bearing years, has conceived a child and travels to Elizabeth to confirm the angel’s announcement. There Mary proclaims her unequivocal faith in God. Hayes argues that a womanist lens sees a young girl who is approached and responds without the intervention and permission of the men in her life. Mary is aware of the cultural and religious consequences of what is being asked of her as a young girl who is supposed to be a virgin engaged to be married; but, who is suddenly pregnant. She knows the potential shame, broken engagement, and possibility of being stoned to death. Hayes argues that with her “yes” to God and her proclamation of the Magnificat, Mary becomes a sign of hope, not passivity. A young girl from a poor and oppressed people, she exemplifies a strong woman of faith and courage, not a pious submissive person.

She stands, therefore, as a symbol of hope and courage for so many women, poor and invisible, who, by their actions throughout history, by their willingness to stand up and walk out on faith, like so many black Catholic women have done, can bring about a new and better world for all of humanity. They and their
children serve as a catalyst for change in the world and for hope beyond it. Mary, therefore, is sign of contradiction, and a model not of passivity or voicelessness but a bold, daring, audacious, and courageous model for black Catholic women. She is a source of hope for young pregnant girls of today, children giving birth to children, for in her coming to voice through the intervention of her God, they can see the possibilities that exist in what would otherwise for so many seem a hopeless situation.\textsuperscript{214}

For Hayes, the womanist position is “a theology that seeks to give women of African descent in the United States a voice by enabling them to speak the truth of their historical and contemporary experiences as black and Catholic women, a truth both bitter and sweet, a truth that relates how they were able to ‘make it through.’”\textsuperscript{215} Womanist are concerned with the struggle of the individual woman as well as those of the entire African American community. It is the community that provides Black identity and culture that stems from their African heritage. This womanist view is consistent with the communal aspect of the gift of African American spirituality in \textit{What We Have Seen and Heard}. Hayes advocates for the necessity of African American generational and cultural continuity by preserving and passing on the customs, culture, and values from Africa to life in the United States, along with the personal history that expresses the life and experiences of African Americans through stories and other mediums individually and communally.

Like Hagar, African American women were not intended to survive, at least not with a sense of dignity and fulfillment of purpose. Hayes stresses that a womanist outlook has a holistic view that elevates life and death as a cycle of the human journey.


\textsuperscript{215} Ibid., 135.
Hope, courage, tenacity, dreams, and faith become life-giving in contrast to hopelessness, fear and powerlessness that lead to depression and death. The Catholic vision of womanist underscores life and encourages the retrieval of the survival stories of the oppressed. “For Catholic womanist theologians the ongoing challenge is to recover and reclaim these and the lives of so many black Catholic women, and men as well, whose stories cry out to be told.”

African American Catholic women, according to Hayes, have preserved the Catholic faith, the faith stories of their people, and the African and African American cultures in a church that has often been indifferent to them, their families, and communities, and where they have been invisible. Focusing on the universal “catholic” theme of the Church, Hayes believes that womanist theological perspective summons women of all races and ethnicities to look at themselves first and then to engage in respectful dialogue with one another in recognition and appreciation of the gift of human diversity. She acknowledges that the African American womanist perspective is still new; but, she believes the challenge is for African American women, especially theologians, to develop a hermeneutical approach that reflects the experience and history of African American Catholic women. As African American Catholic theologians continue to develop and promote a Black Catholic theology, especially one that includes the theme of Black liberation, a womanist theological approach should be positioned alongside this development as it offers an inclusive and life-giving perspective for African American Catholics, and potentially, to the African American community.

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216 Ibid., 141.
2.6 Critical Analysis

This chapter addressed Black Catholic theology. Although the discussion began with an overview of Protestant Black theology and its theologians, it was not to insinuate that Black Catholic theology is lacking a theological foundation or adequate paradigm. On the contrary, the Protestant development is discussed first in light of Cone’s development of Black liberation theology. In addition, the corpus of work by African American Catholics theologians is more recent.

The essential question is, “Who is a Black Catholic?” “What does it mean to be Black and Catholic?” The questions converge around the issue of identity that is specifically related to the Catholic Church in the United States. It is not a question that White Catholics in the United States are asked or would ask of themselves. The questions may not be relevant to Catholics of African descent in other countries where the issue of race is not a dominate factor in determining identity, one’s dignity or status. These questions, however, are pertinent in the United States because it is still a race conscious country, particularly in regards to Black and White Americans. The history of African Americans and African American Catholics give the questions its unique existential character and particularity.

African American Catholics are persons who choose to be Catholic, to remain in the Church despite its racist history. African American Catholics are not new to the Church but have been present from the beginning. They are “cradle Catholics” who have a long Catholic ancestry, converts, and Christians received into full communion with the Church from other Christina denominations. They are in all dioceses and all
geographical areas throughout the United States representing all strata of education, economics, and pastoral ministries.

In 2011, the National Black Catholic Congress commissioned a study in collaboration with the University of Notre Dame’s Institute of Church Life and the Office of the Office of the President to assess African American Catholics. The study’s report, “The 2011 National Black Catholic Survey (NBCS)” is the first national survey to assess the level of religious engagement of African American Catholics. According to the report, “African Americans in general are rarely surveyed and traditionally aren't studied. This survey is the first of its kind and the largest sampling of African-American Catholics in academic history.” The religious life of approximately 900 African American Catholics was compared to White Catholics, African American and White Protestants in the United States. The NBCS findings indicate,

A clear theme in the study is that African American Catholics’ faith and religious identity are quite strong. In terms of their level of religious engagement, African American Catholics appear similar to African American Protestants and are much more engaged in their church than white Catholics. African American Catholics are highly involved in parish life. By comparison, white Catholics stand out for their low level of religious commitment. Religious engagement among African Americans is enhanced through the extent to which they are socially networked. African American Catholics value social interaction in their parishes and churches. The challenge on the parish level is to find ways to connect individuals in parish life outside of Mass. Strengthening social connectedness enhances religious engagement.

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217 Darren W. Davis and Donald B. Pope-Davis, 2011 National Black Catholic Survey, for The National Black Catholic Congress, The Institute for Church Life at the University of Notre Dame, and Office of the President, University of Notre Dame, 2011.

218 Ibid.

219 Ibid.
For African American Catholics, the practice of one’s faith has spiritual and social dimensions. The NBCS corroborated the African American bishops’ claim that the spiritual dimension is very important in the faith life of African American Catholics.

African American Catholics register more satisfaction with having their spiritual, emotional and social needs met by their parish than white Catholics. . . . An overwhelming 85.7% find it important to include African American religious expression into Catholic worship. . . . The need to hear God’s Word and to feel spiritually uplifted are the two most accepted motivations for attending Mass. Of African American Catholics, 82% said they attend Mass to feel spiritually uplifted compared to 61.7% of white Catholics.\footnote{220}

Interestingly, the study confirms that “most African American Catholics (76%) do not attend a predominately black Catholic parish. For African American Catholics who attend a black parish, Mass attendance and satisfaction with the church improves. On every measure of racial inclusiveness or sensitivity, African American Catholics who attend a black parish are more satisfied than African Americans who do not attend a black parish.”\footnote{221} African American Catholics want to be fully incorporated and welcomed in all areas and all ways in the life of the Catholic Church, but not as an afterthought. This includes the decision-making bodies, the hierarchy, parish and diocesan life, vocation, education, and leadership.

African American Catholics are not a monolithic group of believers, but are loyal to the Church. They have different viewpoints and religious experiences within the Church. What they share is their existential and ontological experience and being as people of African descent, of slave ancestry, and Catholic in the United States. From a phenomenological perspective, their Black consciousness and Catholicity are in

\footnote{220}{Ibid.}

\footnote{221}{Ibid.}
discourse. Because of their history, this is not necessarily a phenomenon for White Catholics in the United States or in other countries. As a note above, the history reality of African American Catholics places them in two experiential realities. Therefore, what does it mean to be a Black or African American Catholic? It is to be “truly Black and authentically Catholic.

Regarding Cone’s inception of a Black theology of liberation, in the intervening years it continued as a dialogue among theological scholars and academicians. On one hand, this is good because it allows scholars the necessary space to develop the crucial theological language and framework with sources and methodologies to enrich the theological understanding of Black theology. While it is likely that some African American clergy are introduced to Black liberation theology in seminaries, it probably depends on the seminary, the number of African Americans in the seminary and if the seminary has a mission to prepare clergy for ministry with African Americans. In many cases, Black theology is consigned to special programs that prepare Black clergy and laity in African American ministry. Two such programs are the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University in New Orleans, Louisiana and the Metro Urban Institute at the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvanian. While still in academia, both programs have the opportunity to inform and present models for moving the discussion inside the church within the ministry and formation of the laity. Although the two programs cited do not necessarily present a systematic approach nationally, they are at least an attempt to introduce a Black liberation theology beyond the classroom.
Often, programs and curricula with “African American” or “Black” in its title or description are perceived as selections for Blacks. Therefore, White seminarians, clergy, and students in the academy are reluctant to pursue these subjects. This includes most Catholic seminaries. The inclusion of Black theology in academia and seminaries gives students an opportunity to study and reflect upon a topic that will expand their understanding of the African American historical and spiritual experience. Because liberation is the essential foundation of Black theology, it opens the door to discussion about justice, oppression, struggle, dehumanization, racial privilege, forgiveness and reconciliation.

The inability of this theological construct to become integrated in the common language and piety of the Black Church is also a missed opportunity. The reasons given for the importance of Black theology and liberation in seminaries are the same for its introduction to laity in the Black church. It would provide the opportunity for laity to gain knowledge and understanding of Black theology and its focus on the liberation of African Americans and any oppressed people. Just as the compendium of Catholic social teaching provides a framework for understanding the social mission of the Catholic Church, Black theology could provide the language and foundation for the Black church to discern, comprehend, and engage in reflection and actions for self-realization and for building the kingdom of God. Love, justice, freedom forgiveness and reconciliation would have new meaning.

Historically, the Black church has held a prominent place in the African American community. It has been the lifeline of the community and the focal point of interaction between the faith community and the community at large, and the intermediary between
the church and the family. African American religious, political, social, education, business, community and other leaders have been born and raised in the Black church. The Black church is called to be the extended family for African Americans whose image of family has been distorted and who seek refuge in the church from the weariness of social stigma, isolation, exploitation, and broken families. The Black church must challenge the systemic institutional racism that continues to define and fragment the black family, the Christian church, and American society. Roberts writes,

> We black people have known what it means to be “exiled,” to be strangers and pilgrims. It would be natural for the black church to become the “pilgrim church,” and thereby lead the white church toward its true nature and mission. To this end we may not merely be called but chosen—to show the churches that dare not risk the loss of funds, respectability, and social acceptance, how to be the church. . . .

. . . Therefore, the black church, in setting black people free, may make freedom possible for white people as well. Whites are victimized as the sponsors of hate and prejudice which keeps racism alive. Therefore, they cannot know for themselves the freedom of Christians, for they are shackled by a self-imposed bondage. The cry for deliverance, for authentic freedom for existence, on the part of black people, may be salvific for all regardless of the nature or cause of oppression.  

Traditionally, the church has been the center of life in the African American community, even if individuals and families do not belong to a church or attend on a regular basis. Roberts’ Black theology is a theology of liberation that calls for the liberation of African Americans and their embodiment of reconciliation. Roberts is correct in arguing that the Black church is to become an agent of reconciliation. . . . Christians are called to be agents of reconciliation. We have every reason to hate, but we have been able to love and forgive. What but the grace and power of God can enable a mere human to rise to such heights? Reconciliation must be based upon a sound Christian understanding of God. Reconciliation must be based upon a proper appreciation of our dignity as

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222 Ibid., 33.
those created in the image of God. While others speak of the nature and destiny of humans, the black theologian must first speak of the God-given dignity of humanity. This is necessary if we are to go on to a “moralize” understanding of reconciliation.\(^\text{223}\)

The Black bishops offer the same view in *What We Have Seen and Heard*. They argue that because African Americans understand the gift of freedom, they are obliged to use it responsibly to insure that no one is denied their freedom. (6) And, “the Gospel message is a message that liberate us from hate and calls us to forgiveness and reconciliation. As a people we must be deeply committed to reconciliation.” (6)

The thesis of this research is essential for the placement of reconciliation in Black theology and the potential healing that must occur between African Americans and White Americans, and within the Black Church among African Americans. This is Roberts’ exceptional contribution to Black theology. African American Catholics understand the sacramental theology and language of reconciliation. They bring that gift to the discussion of Black theology as a sacramental people. African American Catholics have a tremendous opportunity and gift of experience to model reconciliation and to be the paradigm that intersects Black theology and the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

2.7 Conclusion

The goal of this chapter is to present an overview of the history and development of Black theology as a theology of liberation and its influence on the development of Black Catholic theology. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the roots of Black Catholic theology and to situate it within the historical context of the Black Church in America. In addition, it is necessary to review the events and movements in the United

\(^{223}\) Roberts, Liberation, 34
States that contributed to James Cone’s articulation of a Black theology of liberation. Although the Catholic Church and African American Catholics were not prominent in the Civil Rights Movement, there were individual White and African American Catholics who stepped forth in the name of the Church and social justice. African American Catholics were not formally involved in the emergence of Black theology; however, there were African American Catholics, particularly clergy and religious who were attuned and supportive of this crucial theological development.

Given the historical occurrences in the United States that affected African Americans in the 1960’s to 1980’s, one can only conjecture that the African American bishops were influenced also by the changes and upheavals that affected the nation. Christianity, and contributed to the development of a Black theology of liberation. We know from Fr. Nearon that Black Catholics were aware of Cone and his decisive arguments for a Black liberation theology. The 1978 initial meeting of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium focused on the formation of such a theology. In addition, four of the African American bishops who co-authored What We Have Seen and Heard were present, along with Fr. Nearon and Fr. Cyprian Davis who drafted the document.

African American Catholic theologians focus their work in both the experience and culture of Black peoples, including Africans, and the theology and tradition of the Catholic Church. As important, many African American Catholic theologians incorporate the womanist principles, which interrelates race, gender and class in the theological argument. Although African American Catholic theology is not inconsistent with Cone’s Black theology of Liberation and owes much to his methodology, it also has
much in common with Deotis Robert’s Black theological analysis. He advocates an interdisciplinary approach for Black theology that uses cultural anthropology, social and natural sciences, political, and economics. There is an ethical task that is required in the process for a conceptualized theology for African Americans. This thought will be further developed in Chapter 4, “Towards a Black Catholic Theology of Reconciliation.”

Finally, a comment must be made about the perceptions and acceptance of Black liberation theology today in light of the disparaging comments made about this theological thought during the 2008 United States Presidential campaign, which was contentious and polarizing. One reason for the acrimony was that a man of African descent, Senator Barack Obama, was one of the frontrunners. America’s unresolved dilemma and comfortableness with its inability to understand and address the issues of race and racism contributed to the high level of campaign divisiveness. The result was subtle, and sometimes explicit, overtones of racism by a segment of the American populace. During the campaign, the country became fixated on a televised sound bite from a sermon given by Rev. Jeremiah Wright, African American pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, who was at the time the pastor of Senator Barack Obama. The controversial sound bite featured a very brief and specific section of a lengthy sermon that Rev. Wright had delivered to his congregation seven years earlier. The American public was not given the full text; rather, the provocative debate that ensued was centered on 19-seconds of the approximately 40-minute sermon.

With some political overtones, the context of the sermon was the role and failure of government versus the role, providence, and salvation of God through Jesus Christ the redeemer. Out of context, the deliberately chosen sound bite appeared to attack the
United States, Christianity, and White Americans in Rev. Wright’s appeal to his congregation for Black self-determination, pride, and reliance on God rather than governments. Political pundits, journalist, and some religious spokespersons used Rev. Wright’s extracted remarks to denounce Black liberation theology and to portray it as racist, aberrant, divisive, anti-American and anti-Christian—basically, anti-White.

Although a few journalists tried to understand Black liberation theology and sought the expertise of African American theologians like James Cone and Dwight Hopkins, the vast majority of political pundits, journalist and news media distorted views about Black liberation theology. Hopkins in an interview said, “The biggest mistake that most of the media have made is to use a political analysis in their analysis of Jeremiah Wright. . . . Actually, they should apply a religious analysis to him.”

Many Americans condemned Wright, his church and Black liberation theology because they were told it was the foundational principle for that sermon and his ministry. For most, they critiqued and passed judgment on a theological concept for which they knew very little or nothing at all. Without any understanding of today’s theological discourse on Black theology, they recited old critiques of Cone’s initial works: *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969) and *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970). With the exception of the United Church of Christ, Wright’s own denomination, the silence of White Christian leadership from most denominations, including the Catholic Church, was most notable. This includes theologians and theological societies and associations that might have recommended a hermeneutical or religious analysis to Wright’s sermon.

Regardless of their opinions of Wright or Black liberation theology, they failed to speak

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and to focus the media and other respondents on critiquing Wright and Black liberation theology from a religious or theological lens. In addition, they did not question or challenge the media’s use of a 19-second extraction from the larger context of the sermon.

The purpose here is neither to defend Rev. Wright nor to imply that theologians or Church leadership of any race or denomination should accept Wright’s sermonic comments or embrace Black liberation theology. Rather, it is to argue that Christian leadership allowed those without a theological or religious analysis, and who had political agendas, to denigrate a person; a faith community; a denomination; African Americans; African American spiritual and cultural experiences and its articulation; and forty-some years of a corpus of theological work. And, that it occurred without having the full text upon which to reflect. It is not merely that there were unbiased judgments in this incident, but that it was often charged with racial bias and a lack of knowledge about the historical and religious experience of people of African descent in the United States. This raises several questions. Has the silence given further license to media and political pundits to continue to use their non-theological lens to scrutinize theological discourse? Should faith denominations be concerned that a 19-second sound bite from the sermons of their clergy might possibly appear on future newscasts, talk radio, and the internet?

The Rev. Wright and Black liberation theology saga magnified the challenge in this particular theological research towards the development of a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation, and the positioning of African American Catholic theology within the context of Black theology, and as a theology of liberation. There is still misunderstanding and dispute about Black liberation theology. Although Black theology is an underpinning
of the Black Church, it is not necessarily articulated, known or understood by the majority of African American Christians, including African American Catholics because it remains primarily in the realm of academia. Moreover, White pastoral and theological leadership, like White Catholics, are reluctant to engage in dialogue. Perhaps this is because the historical realities of race and racism are challenging and hard to avoid, which oftentimes is as difficult for African Americans to engage.

The development of a Black Catholic theology, while still evolving, has begun to move beyond the formative stage with the emergence of new African American Catholic theologians and scholarship from related disciplines. Scholars are able to critique this particular theological contextualization within Roman Catholicism and to dialogue with African American Protestant theologians. It is within this context that this dissertation research engages the Catholic theology of reconciliation and Black Catholic theology in order to explore the theological and pastoral implications for the Church and African Americans. The next chapter will offer a review of the Church’s history and theology of reconciliation.
Chapter 3

The Catholic Church’s Understanding of Reconciliation

3.1 Introduction

The Catholic Church has a long and rich sacramental history, which includes the sacrament of reconciliation. This chapter will provide an overview of the sacramental theology and history of the Catholic Church. Special attention will be given to the sacramental and theological significance of reconciliation. A thorough understanding of the history and nature of the sacrament of reconciliation is important in order to establish the Catholic theological context for a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation. If reconciliation is to be lived, not only theoretically but also practically, a theological scrutiny of the sacrament of reconciliation as practiced in the Catholic Church may present concepts and pastoral considerations that may help to shape a contemporary theology of reconciliation with application for a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation.

Chapter 3 is divided into three primary sections. The first is a review of sacramental theology; the second is an overview of the history of the sacrament of reconciliation; and the third is a contemporary understanding of the theology and nature of reconciliation. Primary resources used for the chapter are Joseph Martos’ *Doors to the Sacred; The Reconciling Community: The Rite of Penance* by James Dallen; Pope John Paul II’s Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Reconciliation and Penance*; and *Symbol and Sacrament: a Contemporary Sacramental Theology* by Michael G. Lawler.

Jesus and the apostles never used the word sacrament, nor did the scribes of scripture use it to identify the rites, ritual celebration, or sacramental theology. The
Greek and Latin terms from which it was derived were already in common usage in the Greek and Latin worlds. The early Christians Fathers during the Patristic Period appropriated the term and expanded its meaning to explain their understanding of the sanctifying nature of Christ and the rituals associated with his life, death, and resurrection. The Greeks had in common usage the word, *mysterion*, a religious term that referred to something that was a secret or not fully revealed something that was hidden.

*Mysterion*, while found in Old and New Testament scripture, does not designate the seven sacraments that would be developed later or refer to sacramental symbols or rituals. For example, in Corinthians 2:6 and 3:1 “the *mysterion* is made known to those of mature faith, or to spiritual persons, not because it is an esoteric knowledge restricted only to the initiated, but because only those who are spiritual, that is, Spirit filled, accept the knowledge which the Spirit gives.” While *mysterion* was used to describe sacramental actions and signs, the 3rd century Church Fathers did not use the term for the rites or sacraments themselves. Although they did not use *mysterion* for specific sacraments, Latin Fathers Clement and Origen used *mysterion* to describe the nature of the signs of symbolic ritual celebrations.

Although *mysterion* referred simultaneously to a secret and to its revelation, the primary emphasis was always on something secret and mysterious. The revelation of the secret or mystery still left it mystery...The sacred realities proclaimed and made explicit and celebrated in symbols in general and in sacramental symbols in particular are not the kinds of realities and meanings that men and women fully understand, even after revelation. The depth of meaning embodied in symbols is always inexhaustible.

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225 Dan. 2:18-19; 27-30; I Cor. 2:7-10; Rom. 16:25-26; Col. 1:26-27: Eph. 1:9-10; 3:3-12;


227 Ibid., 30.
In ancient Roman times, the Latin term *sacramentum* referred to a solemn and serious oath of allegiance that soldiers made during a religious ceremony when inducted into the military. Since scripture was written in Greek, the Latin *sacramentum* was used to translate the Greek *mysterion*. Tertullian, the third century Church father, was the first to use *sacramentum* theologically for baptism and for the mysterious presence of God signified in the baptism initiation rituals. The baptism promises were analogous to the oaths of allegiance that Roman soldiers took in the Roman military ritual. Therefore, the focus was on general sacramental actions such as the gestures and rituals that expressed the mystery of God’s grace, rather than the development of a doctrinal or theological treatise on sacraments. At that particular time, neither *mysterion* nor *sacramentum* referred to the Christian rites know as sacraments today. The evolutilional development of sacramental theology retained the original meanings expressed in *mysterion* and *sacramentum*.

A brief comment will be given about sacramental signs and symbols that offer insight into the understanding of sacramental history and theology. The distinction between the two is not always clear.

A sacrament is a sign. . . . A sacrament, however, is not a simple sign, and its meanings are not simple meanings. It is, rather, that specialized kind of sign called symbol and, indeed, that specific kind of symbol called prophetic or religious symbol. A prophetic symbol is an ordinary human action which on one level of reality, the natural-physical level, has an ordinary meaning, but which on another level of reality, the representative symbolic level, has quite another meaning, indeed set of meanings.\(^{228}\)

\(^{228}\)Ibid., 51.
A sign has a clear identifiable meaning that is abstract and not mysterious. “It is a directional pointer which makes an unknown reality known. Through the experience and knowledge of a particular sign, the receiver has knowledge of another reality which is not immediately present. A sign acts as a substitute for an unknown reality to which it is related.”

Examples of a sign are the traffic light, holding hands as a sign of affection or smoke that signifies a fire are signs. A sign indicates what it signifies; therefore, it is objective and directs attention to the known entity that it symbolizes. Signs are transparent and have no depth of meaning.

All symbols are signs, but symbols are more powerful and symbolically richer in meaning. “Symbols are not made by humankind. They are discovered in reality. . . . A symbol points to a reality different than itself and makes it present without being identical to it.” They are mysterious with inexhaustible depth of meaning that is elusive, indefinable, but yet tangible. “A symbol, however, is more potent than other signs. It is supercharged with a meaning which is not created, but discovered by humankind. Symbols reach down to the depths of reality. They are ontological in character.”

Symbol, then, is a way of knowing. . . . The meanings mediated in symbols are not objectively defined and detailed. Rather they are subjectively and confusedly grasped, so that the knowledge resulting from them seems vague and opaque. But it is vague and opaque not in the sense that its meaning is obscure or that it is empty of meaning, but rather in the sense that its depth of meaning is unfathomable. The human mind can never get to the bottom of it, can never substitute rational sign for holistic symbol and be done with it.”

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230 Ibid., 41.

231 Ibid., 123.

232 Lawler, Symbol and Sacrament, 19.
Symbols communicate meanings beyond itself, its own reality and mystery that it signifies. “Symbols bring us into touch with realities which are at once familiar and mysterious. We use symbols to bring into our heads and hearts realities which are intimate to us, but which always lie beyond the power of our heads to pigeon-hole and absorb into abstract ideas.”²³³ Because it invites further reflection, a symbol is a living exhaustive reality that touches the senses as it “leads us into the profound mystery which it signifies.”²³⁴

3.2. Overview of Sacramental Theology

The classic definition for sacrament is “an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace.” This definition is no longer sufficient for a post-Vatican II Church, in that it fails to explicate the shift from a metaphysical understanding of sacramental theology to an existential view that raises questions about the number of sacraments, the role of grace, and the efficacious nature of symbolic rituals. According to Edward Schillebeeckx, “each sacrament is the personal saving act of the risen Christ himself, but realized in the visible form of an official act of the Church. . . . To receive the sacraments of the Church in faith is therefore the same thing as to encounter Christ himself.”²³⁵ Traditionally, sacrament referred to seven designated liturgical rites each with its own particular ritual actions, symbols and signs. However, the work of theologians such as Edward Schillebeeckx and Karl Rahner has been instrumental in expanding the concept


²³⁴ Ibid., 50.

of sacraments to an existential view that includes christological and ecclesiological perspectives. According to Joseph Martos in *Doors to the Sacred,*

> Schillebeeckx suggests that the closest equivalent to what happens in a sacramental experience is an existential encounter between persons. When two persons deeply encounter each other—in contrast to simply meeting each other—they discover something of the mystery that the other person is. . . . For Schillebeeckx the sacraments are outwards signs that reveal a transcendent, divine reality. They open up, so to speak, the possibility of falling in love with God.236

The understanding of sacraments and its definition has evolved since Vatican II. New theological insights and contemporary ways to articulate the nature of sacraments has not only expanded sacramental theology, but also its pastoral implications. Discussion about sacrament is no longer focused merely on a set of rituals and action, but rather the human experience that encounters God and God’s saving grace through symbolic actions.

> Sacraments inform believers that the encounter between God and them in this world is sacramental. They say in actions that both God’s offer of gracious presence and the believer's acknowledgement and acceptance of that offer are proclaimed, made explicit and celebrated in ritual actions. . . . They learn, in short, that the presence of God in the world is proclaimed and realized and celebrated in sacramental symbols, or not concretely at all.237

> Sacraments lead us into a deeper and more profound awareness of the saving power of Jesus through his life, death and resurrection. They lead believers into a deeper reality and experience of God’s grace. The manifestation of God’s saving grace is expressed in human actions and through symbols, signs and rituals. Through the incarnation, Jesus reveals and elevates humanness. We come to know more fully what it is to be human through God’s love revealed in Jesus Christ and celebrated in sacramental

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237 Lawler, *Symbol and Sacrament,* 60.
actions. God works through the sacraments to confer his redemptive love. The understanding and experience of God evokes a communal celebration of worship through symbolic action. The celebration of the sacraments is our response to this on-going relationship with God through Jesus Christ using the human senses to communicate God’s love through the sacramental celebration of human actions expressed by symbolic rituals.

One’s faith is essential in order for sacraments to have an effect and for the realization of God’s grace as an effect of the sacramental reality. The encounter with Jesus, the living Christ, in the sacraments is ultimately an effect of faith in God and Jesus Christ. All sacraments bestow grace, sacramental grace. This gift of grace is God’s free and self-giving love to us that human beings may accept or reject. In addition, God’s grace is transformative producing a deeper conviction of faith and relationship with God. The participation in the life of God is sanctifying grace. Jesus is both the source and gift of the effect of God’s grace, in that they are revealed in Christ.

Schillebeeckx argues that Jesus in his humanity is the primordial sacrament. In his human nature, Jesus is the sign of God’s redeeming grace for all humanity. Schillbeeckx’s contribution to sacramental theology was to elevate Jesus, the Son of God, as not only a sacrament, but also the primary sacrament. He wrote,

The man Jesus, as the personal visible realization of the divine grace of redemption, is the sacrament, the primordial sacrament, because this man, the Son of God himself, is intended by the Father to be in his humanity the only way to the actuality of redemption. . . . Human encounter with Jesus is therefore the sacrament of the encounter with God, . . . 238

238 Schillebeeckx, Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter, 15.
As a sacrament, Jesus is both the sign and cause of God’s love, thus he effects or brings about redemption and salvation through the ministry and actions during his life. With the sacramentality of Jesus established through his human nature, he became the sacrament of God in the world and expressed its sacramentality through symbolic acts. The human Jesus, as a sacrament through his life, death and resurrection, is the symbol of God’s ubiquitous love. Sacraments draw us to the human Jesus and his ministry enabling believers to encounter Christ. In Kenan Osborne’s focus on the christological nature of sacramentality, he argues,

Jesus makes all the sacraments Christocentric. But since Jesus, in his humanity, is the sacrament of God, all sacraments and their spirituality are ultimately theocentric. Spirituality is the journey to God, but for a Christian it is a journey mapped out and signed by individual sacraments, by the sacrament of the Church, but above all by the sacrament of the Church, but above all by the sacrament of the humanness of Jesus, the Lord.DataProvider did not return a number of expected files. If you are viewing this as a webpage, it is possible that the files are still loading. If you are viewing this as a PDF, it is possible that the files are not included in the PDF. Please check the source material for the exact citation.

As sacrament, Jesus embodies and manifests both human and divine love, and he is and simultaneously brings about the realization of God’s redemptive love and salvation.

In addition to elevating Jesus as sacrament, Schillebeeckx also recognizes the Church, with its hierarchy and members, as a sacrament, the mystical body of Christ. Jesus is the primordial sacrament that points to the Church and signifies the Church as a universal sacrament. The earthly Church, established by Jesus, is the fulfillment of Christ as the visible sign of God’s saving grace realized in the death and resurrection of Jesus. “The Church therefore is not merely a means of salvation. It is Christ’s salvation itself, this salvation as visibly realized in this world. Thus it is, by a kind of identity, the body of the

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Lord.”⁴⁴⁰ Schillebeeckx says of the Church, “And in its entirety it is at the same time both community of the redeemed & redeeming institution.”⁴⁴¹

Karl Rahner agrees that sacraments have an ecclesial nature. The Church is a sign, an efficacious sign, of salvation and thus the basic sacrament. The Church is the fundamental sacrament because its very existence is and directs one to the salvific offer of God that Christ conveyed and initiated in the establishment of the Church. It is both the locale for the administration of the sacraments and simultaneously is itself a sacrament. The sacraments are imbued with the efficacious nature and word of God. It is with this context that Jesus and the Church initiate and fulfill their salvific and redemptive missions. Rahner understands the salvific offer of sacraments as the opus operatum; however, the offer of God’s grace requires a tangible human response, the opus operantis. Therefore, the Church is the sign of God’s self-communication to humanity. The sacraments become the way in which this is done in the life of its members and through the Church. Sacraments, however, do not exist in and for themselves. They point to the connection between God and human beings that is actualized in the context of the Church established by Christ who is the primordial sacrament.

The Church, as an institution and community, is the public witness of redemption and salvation, and its sacred actions are encounters with Christ. Osborn contends,

Ecclesiology has indeed been enriched by this emphasis on the Church as sacrament. . . . The Church as a basic sacrament, in many ways, sacramentalizes

⁴⁴⁰ Schillebeeckx, Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter, 48.
⁴⁴¹ Ibid., 49.
each and every aspect of Church life, since Church itself can only exist when it sacramentalizes the primordial sacrament, Jesus.\textsuperscript{242}

He adds, “only when the Church reflects Jesus is the Church really Church.”\textsuperscript{243} The Church is an explicit efficacious symbol of the continued presence of the risen Christ in the world and proclaims through celebration and symbolic action the saving mystery of God’s grace and salvation. Sacraments helps the Church and its faithful to encounter God and to acknowledge God’s love for all persons. The celebration of sacraments allows us to enter into sacred time and space through symbolic rituals and signs that help us to embrace God’s love in our humanness.

The development of the Church’s sacramental theology is an example of how religious thought evolved over centuries and continues today. Often, it was an arduous task of debating and discerning the theological nuances and interpretations of scripture, the writings and actions of the early Church, and the pronouncements of Church edits by Councils to respond to religious disputes, heresies, and questions about Christianity and the intent of its founder, the resurrected Jesus. The result of the evolution of theological understanding and articulation of sacraments was the establishment of seven distinctive and defined sacraments each with a specific theological premise, symbols and rituals.

3.2.1 From the Early Church to Augustine

\textit{Doors to the Sacred}, the historical review of sacraments by Joseph Martos, will be the primary resource used in this section to summarize the development of sacramental history. Christian sacramental history and theology begin in scripture. As

\textsuperscript{242} Osborne, \textit{Sacramental Theology}, 97.

\textsuperscript{243} Ibid., 89.
noted in the “Introduction,” early Christians did not use the actual term sacrament to describe the seven rituals that eventually became known under the heading of sacraments. Instead of a generic term to indicate all symbolic rituals, they spoke of specific sacramental actions performed in each ritual. The earliest of these rituals was baptism, whereby the sacramental actions involved gestures, baptizing with water, and the imposition or the laying on of hands. Martos describes other sacramental actions associated with the early Christian community. He contends that these ritual actions expressed the memory and experience that the early Christians had of the human Jesus: prayer, healings, interpreting scripture, prophesy, and symbolic meals. Martos writes, “These ritual actions—ritual, because they were repeated roughly the same way each time—were genuinely sacramental because they symbolized realities which were invisible and mysterious, even if the effects of those realities could be witnessed by others.”

In addition, he explains that the New Testament writers and community used the sacramental actions to describe their religious experience and religious interpretation. Such theologizing gave these experiential realities meaning as signs of God’s grace. According to Martos,

> Although they were familiar sacraments in the Jewish and Greek cultures, those who wrote about the early Christian sacraments had no preestablished theology which they could use to explain what they were experiencing. Instead, they had to develop their theology as they went along, relying on what they remembered of what Jesus had said and done, relying on the religious interpretations given by the spiritual leaders of the community, and relying on their own insight into what they and others experienced.\(^\text{245}\)

\(^{244}\)Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 27.

\(^{245}\)Ibid., 27.
Again, while the New Testament does not use sacrament as a general term, it does record other sacred moments celebrated in symbolic rituals such as the sharing of a communal meal and the breaking of bread symbolizing the broken body of Jesus and as a sign of unity with Jesus. Martos, for example, suggests that preaching was a sacramental action because it had an effect on hearers and was often combined with other ritual actions such as baptisms, ritual washings, and healings. In addition, he believes that the laying on of hands was an important symbolic action that was imparted by the Holy Spirit as the apostles had been filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. A significant feature of the early Church’s understanding of sacramental experience through sacred symbolic ritual was that it had an effect on the recipient regardless of whether it was a visual or internal experience. Therefore, the effect was transformative and transcendent, thus bringing one closer to God.

The concept of sacramentology began to evolve with a distinctive theology and particular rituals during the Patristic Period, second to sixth centuries. During this time of the Church Fathers, the idea of “mysterion” became associated more with the notion of mystery, secret or something that was hidden. Their philosophical understanding of Christianity as revealed by Christ and established by God, required faith. As already noted, Tertullian was the first to use the Latin term “sacramentum” in the year 210 to express the initiatory idea of allegiance in baptism. Martos cautions that sacramentum did not have the same meaning as the current Roman Catholic understanding of sacrament. He writes, “Thus by the third century, Greek Christian writers were using mysterion in two different senses, but the Latin authors now had two words to use: sacramentum to refer to the Christian rituals, and mysterium to refer to the mysteries of
faith. They could now speak of 

\textit{sacramenta} as signs of \textit{mysteria}.

The early Church fathers who were also bishops combined their ecclesia experience and theology in preaching about sacraments.

Over the course of a few hundred years baptism had evolved from a simple bathing into a richly symbolic ceremony, and the Lord’s super had developed from a simple meal into an elaborate liturgy. And it was incumbent on the educated Christian leaders to explain the meaning of these “awe-inspiring liturgies,” as Theodore of Mopsuestia called them. Especially in their instructions to new Christians, the fathers often explained every detail of the liturgy, giving the sacred meaning of every word and action in the sacred space and time of the ritual. . . For the fathers, then, there was a close parallel between the details of the sacramental rituals and the mysterious realities that they symbolized; and by understanding the symbolism it was possible to enter into those realities experientially.  

Sacraments, then, became identified as the means by which Christians could participate symbolically and ritually in God’s plan of salvation through these sacred mysteries.

During the Patristic Period, the Church fathers began to develop a theology of the sacramental seal to explain the effects of sacramental rituals. It was a theory put forth in light of the scriptural references that pertained to being “sealed with the spirit.” The effectiveness of some sacraments was obtained through a single rite while other rites were repetitive. Initially, a seal had various meanings. It could indicate an actual stamp or impression; refer to something that was private and secured until authorization to opened; or designated as a sign of authority or authenticity. Using New Testament scripture, Church leaders adopted the seal language to explain metaphorically an inward effect of sacraments as something that belonged to God, given to the faithful as a stamp or seal by God and Christ, and affirmed by the Holy Spirit. Eventually, the sacramental

\begin{itemize}
\item 246\textit{Ibid.}, 29.
\item 247\textit{Ibid.}, 31.
\end{itemize}
seal came to refer to a mark on the forehead or a permanent spiritual marking as the sign for the followers of Christ. The persecutions, controversies and schisms that later erupted raised legitimacy questions about the ordination of bishops and priests, and therefore, the validity and effectiveness of the sacramental seal administered in rituals and signs. Besides the theological concerns, there were pastoral and juridical issues associated with the development of the sacramental seal. For example, there were baptismal controversies regarding the necessity for rebaptism if the disposition or validity of the priest’s ordination was in question or dispute. This was eventually resolved so that it was unnecessary to repeat baptisms. It was reasoned that the validity of the sacramental seal was preserved in the initiatory sign of baptism and in the effect of its removal of original sin. In time, the effectiveness and validity of all the sacraments as given and received were upheld in the sacramental seal debate.

The full theological development of the sacramental seal spanned several centuries and continues as an aspect of current sacramental theology. St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, was an influential person during the Patristic era that influenced the sacramental seal debate. His contribution began with this confrontation with the Donatists who argued that bishops, priests, and heretics who renounced their faith or the truths of the Church separated themselves from the believing community and the Holy Spirit. This belief put the sacramentum, as the administering or giving of a sacrament, in question. The Donatist position was that one could only give and receive the faith one had and do so only as members in good standing in the Church. For the apostates, their sacramental actions or symbolic rituals in ordinations and baptisms were invalid. Moreover, any future sacramental actions by these clergy, who were thus improperly
baptized or ordained, were equally invalid. Therefore, the question of repeatable
baptisms and ordinations was a decisive issue during this early period in the Church’s
history. If the Donatist position had become the prevailing theological doctrine, it would
have challenged the authenticity of a believer’s faith; the legitimacy of membership in the
Catholic Church; the validity of the ordination of church clerics; and the efficacy of the
sacraments.

Augustine’s contribution to this theological debate was to elevate the sacramental
seal as the corrective for the Donatist dispute. He reasoned that there was something
outside or independent of the person receiving or administering the sacrament. And, that
the validity of the sacrament was in the rite that conferred the seal—the sacramentum or
sacrament—and not in the minister who administered the sacrament or the rite. Martos
explains,

> The seal was a sign, an image, a character; baptism imprinted this character on
> the recipients, making them Christians, impressed with the likeness of Christ.
The seal, therefore, bore not the image of the minister but the image of Christ, and
it was conferred on the recipients because the baptism was Christ’s baptism.
Baptism was from Christ and in Christ, and so the Sacrament was Christ’s not
the minister’s.\(^{248}\)

Thus, Augustine argued for the sacramental seal or the sacrament as a seal. He believed
that,

> . . . there must be two effects of baptism, one which was permanent, and one
which could be lost through sin. The permanent effect was the seal, which all the
fathers testified was indelible. The other effect was God’s grace, removing sin
from the soul of the baptized. Thus if Christians sinned, what they lost was God’s
grace, not the seal. And if people were baptized in a heretical sect, the reason
why they could not receive the grace of forgiveness was that they were still,
wittingly or unwittingly in a sinful state of separation from the church until they

\(^{248}\)Ibid., 41.
repented or their error. If and when they did repent, that sin too would be forgiven.\footnote{249}

According to Martos, Augustine’s ingenuity had three important consequences for long-term sacramental theology. First, by addressing the Donatists, he offered a new conceptualization of sacrament rituals as processing the means and effects of the rites instead of the primary focus on the ministers. Secondly, by referring to sacraments as being received and administered, and in particularly the indelibility of the seal on one’s soul conferred at baptism, the idea was eventually extended to the other sacraments. And third, Martos believes that Augustine’s theology on sacraments, in conjunction with some of his other writings, provided a framework for future theologians to distinguish between sacraments and the spiritual fruit obtained from the sacrament. The effectiveness of the rites in offering graces was not dependent upon the openness and spiritual disposition of the recipient. He laments that with Augustine’s death, there was little innovative advancement in sacramental theology until the Middle Ages. Martos summaries the general thinking of the church fathers during the Patristic Period when he writes,

The father’s spokes about sacraments primarily in objective, metaphysical terms since that was the manner of speaking which their philosophical tradition demanded. So later generations came to understand sacramental practices primarily as signs of unseen metaphysical realities such a change in one’s soul or in one’s spiritual relation to God and other Christians. Since the changes were unseen, faith was needed to believe in them. And since the changes were metaphysical, they were automatic: as long as the rituals were correctly performed, the spiritual effects objectively resulted.\footnote{250}

\footnote{249}{Ibid., 41.}

\footnote{250}{Ibid., 43.}
3.2.2 The Middle Ages

The Middle Ages spanned about ten centuries from the 5th to the 15th centuries. During this period, the Church in the East and West experienced great upheaval and transition with a drastic population increase, particularly in Europe. The spread of Christianity characterizes the period. In addition, the Medieval Period saw political destabilization and change in the European landscape due to barbarian invasions and the creation of new city-states and kingdoms; feudalism; Islamic conquest; the Crusades, the Black Plague, death, and famine; warfare and peasant revolts; the development of Scholasticism, establishment of universities; and the transformation of Europe through technological, cultural and intellectual advancements.

Sacramental theology continued to develop and what was conceived during the Middle Ages became normative for the Catholic Church until the 20th century. The numbering of seven specific sacraments, as known today, was fixed by the 12th century. By the 13th century, the distinctive catholicity of the sacraments in its theology, number, and rituals had evolved. During the Middle Ages, the “rituals became more standardized, their religious meanings became more solidified, and the theological explanations for them became more unified.”251 This development was influenced by the political and historical occurrences that shaped the Catholic Church and Christian identity.

The political and civic turmoil and transition of the Middle Ages also had an impact on the Roman Catholic Church. Its leadership had to contend with a tumultuous European landscape that included weak governments and political powers, economic

251Ibid., 47.
instability, invasions by non-Christian feudal entities, conquest by the Moslems, missionary efforts to Christianize Europe, and the eventual collapse of the Roman Empire. The split between the West and East, the Roman and Byzantine traditions, further shaped the evolution of the Church’s sacramentology. The Roman Catholic Church was influenced by the West culturally, theologically, politically, and geographically. Uniformity and standardization in liturgy, rituals, practices, and language became the norm for the Catholic Church. In addition, the bubonic plague known as the Black Plague or Death indiscriminately claimed the lives of millions throughout Europe.

As already noted, the number of sacraments and sacramental practices evolved between the 6th and 11th centuries, from the Patristic to Medieval periods, with seven primary sacraments. According to Martos, the greatest change occurred during this time.

The rite of confirmation became separated from that of baptism. The Eucharistic liturgy became a clerical affair with little lay involvement. The practice of public penance disappeared and was replaced by private confession. Marriage became a church ceremony and came to be regarded as a sacramental rite. Ordination to the priesthood developed into a sequence of holy orders. The anointing of the sick became the anointing of the dying. . . . These practical developments were followed in later centuries by theological developments.  

Subsequently, the liturgical rituals associated with the seven major sacraments, and the theological understanding for them changed substantially. Initially, as the Medieval Church was engaged in its own internal transformation, and that of Europe, it had little time to reflect theologically about the changing sacramental rituals and theology. However, once the major threats to the Church’s stability had settled, Catholic hierarchy and theologians began to revisit sacramental theology in light of scripture and various texts of the early Church fathers and Councils. They now had time to reflect on Church

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252 Ibid., 48. 
teachings in order to better comprehend and articulate a more developed theology for the sacramental rituals and theological understanding that had emerged. Eventually, the seven became known as “the sacraments” implying that they were a sign of God’s invisible grace.

A significant contribution of theologians in the Middle Ages was in resolving the definition for sacrament. When a controversy arose in the 11th century, they discovered that Augustine’s definitions, “a sign of a sacred reality” and “a visible sign of invisible grace,” were inadequate. Berengar of Tours rejected the established belief that the consecrated bread and wine became the literal body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist. Instead, he concluded that while they were not literally Christ’s body and blood, Christ was real and present spiritually. Using Augustine’s definitions, Berengar believed that the consecrated bread and wine were signs of Christ’s body and blood, but could not be a reality since they did not resemble an actual body or blood. He refuted that a sacrament could be both a sign and reality.

Medieval theologians revisited Augustine’s writings and applied Greek logic to further comprehend Augustine’s thoughts. In their explication of his definitions, they eventually used them as the basis for a revised response to Berengar’s dilemma. In time, they argued that the visible sign or sacramentum of the Eucharist was the bread, wine and consecration. The reality or the res of the Eucharist was both the real presence of the body and blood of Christ on the altar and the spiritual union with the resurrected Christ in the reception of his body and blood. In other words, Scholastics recognized three distinctions or components of the sacraments. The sacramentum tantum, which was only a sign or external rite, was the element that constitutes the sacrament such as the
symbolic words, actions and objects. The first effect of the sacrament caused by the
eternal rite was the *sacramentum et res*, which was both sign and symbolic reality, thus a
spiritual *res* or reality that affected the soul. *Res tantum* was grace alone, freely given by
God as the spiritual benefit or ultimate reality conferred by receiving the sacrament. In
their resolution for consistency and uniformity, Medieval scholars eventually applied the
new understanding of the nature of sacraments to each of the seven rituals designated as
sacraments.

According to Martos, the 12th and 13th centuries were energized and productive
times in the Church. The emergence of Scholasticism in the Middle Ages affected the
Medieval Church and its sacramental development. Thomas Aquinas, a key architect of
Scholastic philosophy and theology, was influential in retrieving and applying Aristotle’s
philosophy. He developed a methodology to analyze, systemize, formulate and articulate
a renewed sacramental theology that other Scholastic scholars borrowed and articulated.
Aquinas utilized Aristotle’s terminology to explain the metaphysical effects of the
sacramental sign and reality. His context was the natural order and the supernatural order
that elevated Christ as mediator in sacramental activity and God as the source of grace.
The early Medieval theologians adopted Aquinas’ argument for grace, God’s gift as a
hidden reality, a *res tantum*. Grace, then, was an additional sacramental effect caused by
the *sacramentum et res*, the sacramental reality, instead of the *sacramentum tantum*,
expressed by the ritual performance. The only certainty was God’s gratuitous divine
offer of grace in the sacramental reality, not the reception of the fruits of the sacraments.
Distinction between the sacramental reality and sacramental graces lessened the influence
of religious experience in assessing the effectiveness and causality of the sacraments.
In addition to discussing the sacramental character, Aquinas applied Aristotle’s matter and form to capture the technical explanation for what occurred in sacramental rituals. Sacramental matter referred to the action performed during the ritual; and form referred to the opus operandi as the prescriptive words spoken that gave meaning and actualized the underlining faith. Fundamentally, Aquinas viewed sacraments as sacred signs of God’s grace, with the sacramental efficacy in the Passion of Christ. However, his arguments included elements of causality that gave significant focus and power to the sacramental matter over the sacramental form that emphasized the words in the rituals. Later Middle Age theologians and canonists applied Aquinas’ sacramental concepts with without fully understanding his intent and position on matter, form and the elevation of grace, and without comprehending the consequences of an over simplification of causal power.

Martos observes that the theological discussion on the proper sacramental matter and form, particularly after Aquinas, was soon entwined with rigid legalism and nominalism as it became concerned with ecclesial regulations. Influenced by canon law, canonist addressed sacramental effects, issues of validity in administering sacraments, minimalistic questions about prayers and liturgical pronouncements, and the interior disposition of clergy and laity. The shift from sacraments as primary signs to the instrumental causes of the sacramental realities and grace led to a minimalistic approach to administering the rites and understanding the sacramental effects.

The topic of efficacy, or how the sacraments work, was much discussed, especially in terms of what is necessary for a valid or true sacrament and what is required for a lawful or fruitful reception of the sacrament. Attention to causality eventually overshadowed the revelatory and celebrational function of the
sacraments. The danger then arose of overemphasizing the rite itself in a kind of magical or mechanical way.\textsuperscript{253}

Now, the validity of a sacrament was the \textit{sacramentum et res}, the sacramental reality it caused by the use of proper or valid ritual performance. This led to issues of liceity and validity of sacramental performance.

Later Medieval scholars focused less on methodology and experience in the development of theological thought. Rather, they “erected an elaborate intellectual system of theological terms that had little or no reference to the lives that people actually led or to the religious experiences that they actually had.”\textsuperscript{254} Forming themselves around particular schools of thought or personalities, their metaphysical articulation of sacramental theology emphasized the authority that signified sacramental validity and liceity necessary for salvation. There were consequences, however, for the Scholastic’s sacramental theology. As their theology formed, the theoretical was eclipsed by the practical application of sacramental practices.

Arguing for a new school of thought was the English Franciscan friar, William of Ockham. Ockham championed the philosophy of nominalism as a reform for the Scholastic metaphysic philosophy of universal principles. He argued that there were different methodologies to understand the nature of God and disputed the singular focus on metaphysics and its universal terminology and labels to comprehend real things. The Medieval nominalists believed that language used to express such principles and abstractions did not provide certitudes for what was real or for God. Rather, words were intellectual representations or substitutes for the real things. The human mind and its


\textsuperscript{254} Martos, \textit{Doors to the Sacred}, 71.
reasoning did not give absolute knowledge about God. Ockham’s contribution was an emphasis on revelation and faith. His nominalism, however, eroded the philosophical basis to further develop a sacramental theology. The void was filled by canon law and its legalistic focus on the necessary form and matter required in sacramental rituals to cause the sacramental realities.

With less focus on philosophy and more on the right ritualistic formulas for sacramental legitimacy, laity began to associate ritual actions and prayers with the automatic attainment of spiritual graces and salvation. If the correct and valid symbols, actions, and words were given by the celebrant and worshipper, then the effect of the sacramental action was automatically obtained. Sacraments and their rituals became synonymous with superstition and magic. Over time, this fallacy became entwined with sacramental theology, thereby resulting in Church abuses and questionable theology. Eventually, there were demands for Church reforms by Catholic leaders and dissidents that would pave the way for the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Church’s Counter Reformation.

3.2.3 The Protestant and Catholic Counter Reformations

The end of the Middle Ages ushered in a new era, the Renaissance or Modern Era, a rebirth for European culture. New developments in technology, especially the Gutenberg printing press, meant that literacy and intellectual pursuit were no longer limited to the privileged aristocracy or clergy; instead, the general populace could be educated. The Bible, books, and other reading materials were massed produced and affordable. Overlapping with the Late Middle Ages, the Renaissance Period was marked by the dissemination of ideas and a revival of Latin and Greek classics. Scholars studied
scripture, particularly the Greek New Testament. Humanism as an ideal and intellectual methodology was prominent and influenced the education in the universities by emphasizing the study of several major disciplines such as the sciences, art, philosophy and math as opposed to singular subjects like law, medicine, and theology. These new cultural and intellectual realities also contributed to the eventuality of the Protestant Reformation and the Church’s response, the Counter Reformation.

As observed in the previous section, the rise of religious schools of thought and challenges by Church reformists during the late Middle Ages were factors for the ensuing Protestant Reformation. Initially, the call for reforms was internal and championed by clergy who questioned doctrinal and ecclesia structures, and canonical abuses by priests, bishops, and popes. The abuses had begun to erode the faith and confidence in the hierarchy. Reformers like the Augustinian monk, Martin Luther, challenged the Church. Luther challenged Church leadership on what he considered its systemic corruption. According to Martos,

\[\text{It was this change in Europe that finally made a change in Christianity possible. Martin Luther challenged what was passing for Catholic theology on the grounds that it was unintelligible, and what he said seemed to make sense. He attached scholasticism for being unscriptural, and those who read the Bible saw that it was so. He denounced the corruption of the clergy and the superstition of the faithful in a vigorous attempt to spark reform in the church. But his attack was too pointed and his attitude was too adamant for Rome to tolerate, and within a few years, he was excommunicated.}^{255}\]

Luther was incensed by the sale of indulgences and acts of simony by clergy and nobility.\(^{256}\) He criticized popes who had offspring by various women and objected to

\(^{255}\)Ibid., 78.

\(^{256}\)Simony is the buying or selling of clerical offices, positions, sacraments or spiritual things. The term is comes from Acts 8:9-24 where Simon Magus offers payment for the laying on of hands to selected persons.
certain doctrinal teachings on sacraments, celibacy, purgatory, and Mariology. Many scholars mark October 31, 1517 as the official beginning of the Protestant Reformation when Luther posted his “Ninety-five Theses” citing his objections on the doors of Castle Church in Wittenberg.

Luther and other reformers had multiple issues with the Church. One of the areas confronted was the Church’s sacramental practices. With regards to the sacrament of penance, Luther opposed the Church’s abuse of indulgences. The practice of indulgences began as an attempt by the Church to be more compassionate to sinners in the act of confession in contrast to the stringent practices that had developed in the early church. Instead of harsh and often very public penances given to sinners by clergy, they were encouraged to be more compassionate or “indulgent” in the punishment they gave to penitents. According to Martos,

> During the Middle Ages, popes extended this practice by granting special indulgences to those who participated in or financially supported the crusades. But by the sixteenth century, indulgences were frequently used to entice people to donate money to the church in exchange for dubious assurances that they would not be punished for their sins in this life or the next. It was this abusive indulgence system which Luther knew, and which he set out to challenge.\(^\text{257}\)

Indulgences became the object of Luther’s grievances after he reflected on his own salvation. He believed that the Church had distorted the theology of soteriology and rejected the Scholastic theology of salvation. He came to the realization that salvation did not come by faith alone; rather, it was only obtainable through faith and God’s mercy, not merely good works or rituals. From this he concluded that the current view and practice of sacraments was wrong and ineffective because the sacramental system was

\(^{257}\)Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 81.
riddled with superstitions, belief that one could magically obtain God’s favor, and other abuses. Therefore, Luther believed that the practice of selling indulgences, especially as it was connected to the sacraments of the Church needed to be reformed. Luther and many of the reformers reacted against the Church’s sacramental theology. The spiritual connection to the Scholastic sacramental practice had been lost. Luther lamented that while there was supposed to be a spiritual effect, his personal experience of sacramental rituals was empty, thereby suggesting that the sacraments were ineffective. The reformers, along with Luther, used their personal religious experience to gauge the effectiveness of sacraments. Luther assigned God as the cause of the sacramental effect and faith as the necessary element for recognition and reception of the effects.

Church leadership disapproved of Luther’s actions and denouncements. They believed that Luther questioned their authority as the Church’s hierarchy, and thereby condemned him as a heretic. Pope Leo X demanded that he recant his writings and when he refused, he was excommunicated in 1520. In response, Luther encouraged other reformers to speak publicly and to demand Church reforms. Other reformers did speak, but the result was not reform in the Catholic Church; rather, additional schisms were formed along national boundaries and eventually a complete broke with the Romans Catholic Church. “Luther’s reformation was a success because it came at time when in the spirit of the Renaissance people were beginning to sense that there could be an alternative to the medieval mentality, that individuals could think for themselves, and that states could govern their own affairs.”

The protest begun by Luther and other reformers resulted in the establishment of breakaway independent churches with their own theologies.

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258 Ibid., 79.
From the viewpoint of the Christian church as a whole, then, the reformation marks as great a turning point in Christianity’s attitude toward the sacraments as the patristic and medieval periods had been. . . .Medieval theology and canon law erected the theory and practice of Christian sacramentalism into an elaborate intellectual and ritual system in the Catholic church. The reformation demolished what remained of the medieval synthesis and abolished most of what had become misused and misunderstood sacramental practices in large portions of Europe.259

The Church’s reaction to the reformers, and ultimately to the Protestant Reformation, led it to convene the Council of Trent in 1545. The mission of the Council of Trent, which was not completed until 1653, was to address the egregious issues exposed by the reformers and to reform the church from within. This thirty-year period known as the Counter or Catholic Reformation was an era in which the Council of Trent, under several popes, led the Church in its focus on internal reforms. The Council’s primary goal was to deter further impairment to the Church and to counter the condemnation of the Protestant reformers.

The Counter or Catholic Reformation was a period of introspection, changes and strengthening of the Church under the leadership of Trent, in which several issues were addressed, that included spiritual and theological doctrines such as sacramentology, reconciliation, religious piety and devotions, indulgences, and justification. In addition, Trent encouraged the establishment of more theological seminaries to educate clergy, the sole use of the 4th Latin Vulgate Bible; and greater uniformity in sacramental and liturgical practices. Trent’s emphasis on uniformity had an impact on the sacraments in that “over half of its doctrinal decrees dealt with the sacraments.”260 While the specific impact on the sacrament of reconciliation will be discussed in the next section, it is noted

259Ibid., 80.
260Ibid., 88.
here that Trent maintained the language and theology of Medieval Scholasticism to reiterate sacramental theology even reaffirming the traditional definition that sacraments were instituted by Christ. Sacraments were the medium by which God worked to instill grace and were necessary for salvation.

The Protestant Reformers had criticized the Church’s emphasis on the metaphysical effective of sacraments as magical. In response, the Council of Trent maintained the metaphysical connection, but emphasized the role of faith and God’s grace. They defended the Church’s sacramental view and affirmed the tradition of seven sacraments. Martos observed,

They limited their pronouncements to those points which had been attacked by one or another of the reformers. Among other things, they declared that the sacraments were necessary for salvation even though not all of the sacraments were needed by each individual; . . .that some sacraments bestowed an indelible character on the soul with the result that they could be received only once; that all of the sacraments contained and conferred grace and so they were not just signs of the grace that God was always offering to people; that God’s grace was always offered through the sacraments even though individuals might place obstacles in the way of receiving that grace; that the grace of a sacrament was conferred by the rite itself and not by the faith of the recipient or the worthiness of the minster. . . .

The gulf between Catholics and Protestants was widened when some Protestant Reformers rejected many of the sacraments. The Church accepted only the reformers’ baptism ritual as a valid sacrament as long as the ritual prayer contained the right formulaic wording. Sacramental validity was the essential question that the Church raised about the intent and understanding of the clergy and recipients in the execution and reception of a sacrament. Once the Council of Trent had finished its work, sacramental theology and ritual would remain intact until II Vatican Council.

\textsuperscript{261}\textsuperscript{261}Ibid., 91.
3.2.4 Rise of the Modern Era: Trent to Pre-Vatican II

As already noted, the Council of Trent established seven official sacraments that are still observed today. The Council felt it was necessary to reaffirm seven as the number of sacraments because the Protestant reformers rejected all but two, baptism and Eucharist. The issue for the reformers was the role of grace and how the sacraments instituted grace. Reformers agreed with the Church that sacraments were instituted by Christ, and therefore not by human design or intuition. However, there was no unanimity with the Church that all seven sacraments were divinely instituted nor acknowledged in scripture. Therefore, the reformers recognized only baptism and Eucharist as valid sacraments. In reaction to the reformers’ criticism, the Council of Trent reaffirmed its sacramental theology of seven rituals, thus signaling that all questions and issues were resolved.

Once the Council of Trent declared that the number seven was normative for sacramental theology and rituals, it provided little impetus for future theological discussion on the possibility of other sacraments. Instead, what developed were various sacramentals and devotions that had greater meaning and impact on the laity, and that could be observed outside of formal liturgical celebrations. The period between the counter-reformation and the modern era saw intensification in the number of devotions to Jesus, saints, and Mary. The included novenas, Stations of the Cross, Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, use of religious images, church music, and sacred actions. Some Church scholars, like Martos, argued that the emerging sacramentals were actually sacraments. Clergy and bishops raised concerns about how to better engage laity in sacramental rituals and liturgical celebrations.
The Church during this period was challenged by new social and intellectual ideas and advancements. In some cases, it had to refute its earlier beliefs and positions, especially those impugned by new biblical and scientific research. Clergy became more educated and were expected to pursue academic studies in seminaries as part of their vocation preparation. With the mass production of printing, scholarly books and journals were more readily available to theologians and the masses. They could be translated into many languages, which enabled the quick dissemination of new philosophies, ideas, and historical research throughout the Church worldwide.

Some of the philosophies advanced were incompatible with Catholic theology, while others were incorporated into new theological concepts. Many Catholic scholars looked to antiquity to gain insights and understanding of the Church Fathers and philosophical thoughts. Again, the Church was forced to reexamine its philosophy and theology that was rooted in Medieval Scholasticism. “Then in the 1800’s some Catholic scholars began a sustained attempt to revitalize scholasticism, purge it of antiquated ideas that had been disproven by modern science, and form it into an intellectual system as coherent and comprehensive as any other. . . . Before the new Catholic philosophy could be constructed, however, the old philosophy had to be recovered.”

Modern and Scholastic sacramental theologies had differences and similarities. For Scholastic, they differed in that the role of faith for the sacramental affect was less emphasized and the sacramental effect was considered automatic when receiving the sacrament. One similarity was the close reliance on canon law and moral theology.

Martos proposed several developments that were responsible for opening the door to new visions for sacramental theology: Attention was given to

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262Ibid., 104.
renewed philosophical interest in the Middle Ages and philosophers like Aquinas; renewed liturgical interest in early sacramental worship and pre-medieval fathers of the church; renewed scriptural interest in the biblical foundations of the Christian religion and pre-patristic writings of the New Testament; less homogeneous twentieth century societies; social sciences that offered new ways of thinking and gauging behaviors and cultural practices; two world wars; improved transportation; cultural, technological, and electronic mass communication evolutions; and ecumenical dialogue.263

These new developments impacted the Church, its laity and clergy, and influenced theologians in their theological pursuits on sacraments.

Scholars began to question and seek the historical roots of Christianity in order to understand its dogmatic foundation. New emphasis on biblical scholarship was timely in that it offered an evaluative model for theologians in their renewed interest in sacramental theology, particularly in light of its definition, “instituted by Christ.” Theologians and philosophers returned to scholasticism and Aquinas as a possible bridge to the modern theological discussion. These neo-Scholastics attempted to merge modern philosophy and theology with Medieval Scholasticism. Difficulty arose because the modern scholars read and interpreted Aquinas and Medieval Scholasticism from their modern experience; which was vastly different from that of the Medieval scholars. Unable to reconcile Medieval Scholasticism with the new emerging theories of the modern times, they were compelled to seek alternate philosophical frameworks and theologies to broaden the discussion on sacraments.

The early writings of three theologians, who also participated in the Second Vatican Council as theological experts helped to influence the sacramental theology for the modern era and the Second Vatican Council. In 1953, Fr. Otto Semmerloth

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263Ibid., 99.
published *The Church as Original Sacrament*, introducing the concept of the Church as a sacrament. Edward Schillebeeckx’s decisive work published in 1963, *Christ, the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, had international success. Karl Rahner, in 1961, published *The Church and the Sacraments*. Although Semmelroth is credited with renewed identification of the Church and Jesus as a sacrament, the works of Schillebeeckx and Rahner, particularly Schillebeeckx, gained greater international attention. *Christ, the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* was published in a number of languages that provided the opportunity for more theologians to become acquainted with the new theological concept of Jesus and the Church as sacraments. Therefore, many bishops and cardinals who participated in Vatican II, particularly the theologians invited as experts, were already familiar with the theological arguments that positioned Jesus and the Church as sacraments.

### 3.2.5 Vatican II

The Second Vatican Council came at the cusp of a changing world that had experienced two major world wars and the threat of atomic and nuclear warfare; the evil of the holocaust; rise of communism; new developing nations, particularly in Africa; the call for the liberation of peoples throughout the world due to racial, ethnic, national, religious and ideological tyranny; modern advancements in technology; and renewed biblical scholarship. Pope John XXIII convened Vatican II in 1962 in the wake of these international challenges and developments in order to modernize the Church. He opened the largest ecumenical council in the Church’s history, but died in 1963 before the Council had completed its vital work. Steering Vatican II forward was left to his successor, Pope Paul VI, who was elected in 1963 and presided over the historic Council to its completion.
in 1965. Vatican II produced significant conciliar documents and reforms that would impact the Roman Catholic Church for decades, and in some cases led to dissension in the Church.

One of the accomplishments of Vatican II was to reconnect sacramental theology to the Church as an external sign and mystery of God and its biblical roots. In several of its conciliar documents, the Council decreed that the Church was a mystery, a basic sacrament and a sacrament of salvation. Lumen Gentium stated, “Since the Church, in Christ, is in the nature of sacrament—a sign and instrument, that is of communion with God of unity among all men—she here proposes, for the benefit of the faithful and of the whole world, to set forth, as clearly as possible, and in the tradition laid down by earlier Councils, her own nature and universal mission.”\textsuperscript{264} The connection between Church and sacrament was not entirely new and was referenced in other Church documents. Vatican II illuminated the sacramental nature of the Church in a manner different from previous Scholastic theology. In previous ecclesiology, Christ was the instrument of God, the ex opere operato. Now, the Church, too, was the ex opere operato. The Council reaffirmed that the Church was God’s plan for salvation in which God was actively present. Therefore, the Church was the visible sign of the invisible God who was manifested in the mission, rituals, and the community of faith—the people of God. The Church’s identification with the people of God—the faith community—was less hierarchical and provided a different framework for subsequent theology and practices. Vatican II elevated

the sacramental discussion by embracing some of the theological positions endorsed by Semmelroth, Schillebeeckx and Rahner.

Semmelroth’s work, *The Church as Original Sacrament*, influenced Rahner and Schillebeeckx. Semmelroth argued that “as the source sacrament, the Church is a sign of the gracious God, as the body is a sign of the soul that animates it.”

He was influenced by Pope Pius II’s encyclical, *Mystici Corporis*, and its emphasis on the life of the Church in which God continues to work through Christ. Semmelroth believed that God was present and involved in the Church where salvation occurred. The Church, then, was the divine reality or instrument of God that God used to carry out salvation. The role and effect of sacramentality was to deepen faith through the sacramental life of the Church. The sacramental life of the Church was in essence the life of salvation that the Church offered to its faithful. The Church, therefore, was the sign of salvation that was instituted by Christ as was the other sacraments. In Semmelroth’s theology, the Church was established as a result of the encounter between God and God’s people. Moreover, the Church assumed its identity and mission in that same encounter, thus signifying the grace offered by Christ. The essence of the Church as a consequence of the encounter was that it became a sign of that very union. According to Semmelroth, the encounter initiated what it became. It “is the mission which calls the members of the Church; . . . it is the guarantee that the Church as sacrament makes as a salvific sign.”

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266 bid., 33.
Schillebeeckx’s pre-Vatican II, *Christ, the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, offered an expanded ecclesiological and Christological view of sacrament that focused on the Church and Jesus in his humanity as sacraments. Using an existentialist approach, he explored the deeply religious experience that came from the experience of the sacramental ritual. He invited readers to consider the personal human encounter with God mediated through God’s grace. He wrote,

> In this book we are directing our attention to sacramentality in religion in order to arrive eventually at the insight that the sacraments are the properly human mode of encounter with God.\(^{267}\)

The act itself of this encounter of God and man, which on earth can take place only in faith, is what we call salvation. On God’s part this encounter involves a disclosure of himself by revelation, and on the part of man it involves devotion to God’s service—that is religion.\(^ {268}\)

The mediated encounter was through Christ, who Schillebeeckx called the “primordial sacrament” because Christ was the visible and tangible human sign on earth of God’s grace and divinity. “Human encounter with Jesus is therefore the sacrament of the encounter with God, . . .”\(^{269}\) It was in the humanness of Christ that this encounter occurred because it was the way in which human beings encountered him and his redemptive saving powers. “The man Jesus is personally a dialogue with God the Father; the supreme realization and therefore the norm and the source of every encounter with God.”\(^{270}\) Schillebeeckx asserted that “the sacraments are: the face of redemption turned

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\(^{267}\) Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter*, 6.

\(^{268}\) Ibid., 4.

\(^{269}\) Ibid., 15.

\(^{270}\) Ibid., 18.
visibly towards us, so that in them we are truly able to encounter the living Christ. The heavenly saving activity, invisible to us, becomes visible in the sacraments.”

From the position of Christ as the primordial sacrament, Schillebecckx was able to connect Christ as sacrament to the ecclesia nature of sacrament. This he did by asserting that the Church was a sacrament because it was the visible manifestation of Christ in the world. Through Christ, the Church was both the visible actualization of salvation as well as the means of salvation. As the visible body of Christ, the Church was the actualization of the saving mystery of Christ. It was a sign of God’s invitation for redemption and the visible sign of God’s grace and salvation.

The fact must be emphasized that not only the hierarchical Church but also the community of the faithful belong to this grace-giving sign that is the Church. As much in its hierarchy as in the laity the community of the Church is the realization in historical form of the victory achieved by Christ. The inward communion in grace with God in Christ becomes visible in and is realized through the outward social sign. Thus the essence of the Church consists in this, that the final goal of grace achieved by Christ becomes visibly present in the whole Church as a visible society.

The Church, as the visible outward sign of God’s grace, reflected this through the sacramentality of Christ. Through the Church, the faithful will encounter the risen Lord and his saving grace. Schillebecckx wrote, “We must remember that the essential factor in ecclesial sacramentality is Christ’s eternally actual redemptive act, made to concern each one of us personally.”

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271 Ibid., 43.
272 Ibid., 48.
273 Ibid., 197.
Rahner’s ecclesiology of the Church as the basic sacrament was derived from his Christology that proclaimed the Church as the symbol of Christ and his grace. Without Christ and his grace, there would be no Church. Consistent with Schillebeeckx, Rahner posits the sacramentality of the Church as having derived from Christ, the primordial sacrament. In his theology, the Church is the “basic sacrament of salvation.” He cautioned, “this means that the Church is a sign of salvation and is not simply salvation itself. . . . the Church is an efficacious sign. And to this extent the church is what is called opus operatum.” Rahner believed that while the sacramental Church was the means by which humanity obtained salvation, it was much more. It, also, was the result of God’s redemptive love and the offer of salvation for the community of believers and non-believers. Christologically, Rahner saw the Church as the actual presence of the resurrected Jesus, the tangible reality of his earthly ministry. Rahner emphasized the revelatory nature of God’s self-communication to humanity through the Church that was both the symbol of Christ and the means by which the grace of the incarnated Jesus was manifested. The sacraments, particularly the designated seven, were just one of the ways that God’s revelation was revealed. Rahner asserted, “the Church is the irrevocable sacrament of the salvation of the world that perdures in the world. The Church is the great and unique gesture of God and the accepting gesture of humankind, in which divine love, reconciliation, and the self-communication of God are forever manifested and imparted.” For Rahner, the sacramental nature of the Church rested on its redemptive and salvific qualities instigated by the incarnation.


275 Ibid.

The sacramental revisions of Vatican II were not confined to its theology. The Church’s liturgical practices were significantly affected by the reforms. One of the most significant reforms was the change in the language of the Mass from Latin to the vernacular of the people and symbolic of their cultural experiences. Bishops in each country and region have more authority to make liturgical decisions for their local Church. Although the antecedents of the liturgical reforms began prior to Vatican II, the Council and its conciliary documents sanctioned the reforms and expanded the hermeneutical discussion on worship, rituals, and symbols. According to Martos,

In the 1880s, however, desire for liturgical reform began to spread beyond the monasteries, and during the first half of the twentieth century historical research by Catholic scholars steadily increased. . . . It became apparent that the Tridentine mass was actually a composite of prayers, readings, and gestures which had become part of the church’s worship at different times and which did not always agree with one another. 277

Vatican II’s liturgical reforms had a direct effect on sacramentality. Since most of the sacraments were observed through rituals and celebrations, the new liturgical guidelines and theology helped to revise how sacraments were understood and celebrated.

3.2.6 Postmodern

Sacramental research today continues on the nature and role of sacraments in the life of the Church and the sacramentality of the Church and Jesus. While the Church continues to highlight the traditional seven sacraments, sacramental hermeneutics includes a broad array of sacramental topics, encounters and experiences that contemporary scholars explore. They include understanding sacraments as symbols; as ritual and liturgical celebrations; as symbols of human life; as occasions and moments of grace; and

277 Martos, Doors to the Sacred, 105.
development of pastoral approaches. According to Martos, “The Council and post-conciliar church have accepted pluralism in ways that the Tridentine church did not: cultural pluralism which allows sacramental practices to differ in different regions of the globe, and theological pluralisms which allows a variety of sacramental theologies to exist at the same time.”

The recognition of the cultural diversity and pluralism within the universal Church has enabled the Church to celebrate the sacraments in many languages and with cultural adaptations.

Contemporary sacramentality is informed not only by theology, but also by religious history and traditions, scripture, cultural nuances, the arts, and social sciences. Although the seven traditional sacraments are still the primary operative sacraments, the expanded view of encounters with Christ and symbolic signs of grace offer the potential for additional sacramental experiences in the ordinariness of life and one’s faith journey. In addition, there are salient viewpoints for which to approach contemporary sacramentology that include phenomenology and existentialism analyses. There is a greater focus on worship and the religious experience that the Christians found meaningful in their own life experiences. The transcendent nature of symbols, rituals, celebratory actions, and preaching has replaced the traditional scholastic conversation about causality, reason and the effacious nature of signs. With the de-emphasis on cause and reason, contemporary sacramentology looks for meaning in religious experience. This postmodern period has brought renewed interest in sacramentality and an eagerness to move beyond the scholastic’s metaphysical precepts. Sacramental theology is characterized by themes such as the Paschal Mystery, memory, rituals, and symbols and

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Ibid., 127.
the totality of life or the fullness of human experience. Sebastian Madathummuriyil offers a hermeneutical discussion of postmodern sacramentology in his dissertation.\(^\text{279}\) He writes,

> The classical treatise of the sacraments according to the categories of “sign” and “cause” is subject to criticism today. A recent and general trend in sacramental theology is a growing appreciation for rituals and symbols. It is evidenced by numerous conferences, books, and articles dedicated to the themes of ritual and symbols ranging from the mid-nineties. Efforts have been made to investigate the importance of symbols for theology in general and sacramental theology in particular. More recently, charges have been leveled against the scholastic theology of the sacraments, especially the concept of presence and sacramental efficacy informed by classical metaphysics.\(^\text{280}\)

God works through the human person and the human experience of language and symbol. As language expressed in ritual and symbol, sacraments have the potential to convey the essence of the Christian message and the complexity of the Church’s theology.

Louis-Marie Chauvet sacramental theology reacts to the Thomistic stress on efficacy and causality that reduce sacraments to magical works devoid of spiritual meaning. His sacramental theology emphasizes human experience, symbol, language and bodily existence, and corporeality. In his view, human experience, although multidimensional, is particular for the human being in comparison to other forms of animate and inanimate existence, in other words, they a particular and specific way being human. The physical human body takes center stage in the unique nature of humanity as symbol. Louis-Marie Chauvet believes that the physical body mediates the presence of God in the world. He writes,

> In effect, in the sacramental celebrations, the faith is at work within a ritual staging in which each person’s body is the place of the symbolic


\(^{280}\)Ibid., 41.
convergence—through gestures, postures, words (spoken or sun), and silences—of the triple body which makes us into believers. . . . The sacraments are thus made of significant materiality: that of a body which cannot experience them without submitting itself to them through a program already specified, a gesture duly prescribed, a word institutionally set; that of a communal “we” presided over by a minister recognized as legitimate.  

The Church as the body of Christ is not just a metaphor, but is very real. The body becomes a sacrament. Chauvet’s discussion of symbolic order offers new ways of conceptualizing sacramentality in relation to the meaning of human experience.

Today, there is less fidelity to the observance of sacramental rituals. The value of sacraments has diminished along with an understanding of the role and effect of sacraments in general and in the life of the Church, the community, and the individual. The question that lingers theologically and pastorally is whether the sacraments, or certain sacraments, are still viable and have spiritual meaning for the faithful. Basically, are the sacraments still relevant? George Worgul, From Magic to Metaphor, maintained that the Church was experiencing a sacramental crisis. “There is a sacramental crisis in the Church, but in view of the whole sacramental mosaic it appears to be symptomatic of more serious problems i.e., the crisis of faith and the crisis of membership spawned in the crisis of culture.”  

Basically, the crisis is the ineffectiveness of sacramental meaning and ritual in the Church intertwined with the changing cultural norms. Worgul maintains, 

There is an urgency, however, in raising a general consciousness that the crisis goes deeper than many have portrayed or expected it. It reaches down to the very heart of Christianity. The sacramental crisis indicates that the basis for the Christian worldview is being called into question. It suggests that people are increasingly abandoning the Christian root metaphor as the key reality which

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282 Worgul, From Magic to Metaphor, 223.
brings meaning to their experience of life. It suggests a decline in membership which implies fragile faith. \(^{283}\)

Worgul offers “celebration” as a model to address the sacramental crisis and to restore meaning and confidence for sacramentality in the Church. “Celebration model avoids any indication that sacraments operate mechanically or physically.”\(^{284}\) His sacramentology elevated the celebration of rituals as the mode for reinvigorating the sacramental life of the Church. “Celebrations are human events. They participate in the human historicity exhibited in its triple modality i.e., past (anamnesis), present (kairos), and future (eschaton). . . . Each temporal mode or dimension contributes to the richness, fullness and depth of its meaning.”\(^{285}\) Sincere faith is the central feature of his celebration model, which believers must have in order to negate the magical overtones and meaningless mechanical observances that have become associated with the sacraments. His definition for sacrament is active, not passive, and incorporates the notions of a sacrament as the encounter with Christ and the Church as a sacrament of Jesus. He observed that, “. . . sacraments are symbols arising from the ministry of Christ and continued in and through the Church, which when received in faith, are encounters with God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”\(^{286}\) Worgul adds,

Sacraments are not isolated entities. Each sacrament is not encased in a little box that is opened at the right occasion. All the sacraments are essentially related to each other by their power to unfold aspects of Jesus’ ministry. The relation of the sacraments to Jesus’ ministry is the key to understanding the continuity between

\(^{283}\)Ibid., 229.

\(^{284}\)Ibid., 220.

\(^{285}\)Ibid., 220.

\(^{286}\)Ibid., 123.
Jesus’ intention in forming a community, and the communities’ faithfulness to Jesus in evolving and celebrating the sacraments.” 287

Bernard Cooke, for example, would agree on the necessity of sacramentality in the life of the Church and its people. He offers a broad focus on sacramentality and the active and vibrant transformative nature of sacraments for humanity and for the world. He believes that, “Sacraments are moments of reflection, share with one another in celebration that bring together and deepen all our other reflections about life. They are key experiences that provide new insight into our other experiences and so deepen them.”288 Identifying Christ and the Church as basic sacraments, Cooke adds human friendship to the sacramental list. He contends that human friendship and love as sacraments reveal something about the human experience and God.

To see this as truly sacramental of divine presence means that human love does more than make it possible for us to trust that God loves us. The human friendships we enjoy embody God’s love for us; in and through these friendships God is revealing to us the divine self-giving in love.289

If, however, we realize the fundamental sacramentality of all human experience and the way Jesus transformed this sacramentality, there is good reason for seeing human friendship as the most basic sacrament of God’s saving presence among us. Human friendship reflects and makes credible the reality of God’s love for humans . . . 290

The sacramental overview in this chapter was not intended to be exhaustive nor review each of the seven sacraments. From this brief review, it is apparent that sacramental history has not been static and that the post-Vatican II sacramental theology

287 Ibid., 125.


289 Ibid., 84.

290 Ibid., 91.
and practice is still evolving. Contemporary theological exploration of sacramentology encompasses a broader array of possibilities as sacramental realities. Once the Church proclaimed that sacraments were essential in the sacramental debate, it opened the discussion for other sacramental possibilities. While sacraments are an important part of the Church’s theology, the current pastoral and theological outlook and understanding is still in flux.

3.3 Historical Review of the Sacrament of Reconciliation

Since reconciliation is one of the seven sacraments, it was necessary to provide a cursory overview of sacramental history. Because this dissertation is specifically focused on reconciliation, this section will offer a brief overview of the history of the sacrament of reconciliation, which is known by different titles—penance, confession, forgiveness of sins, contrition, and reconciliation. Each points to sin, wrongdoing, and alienation from God, the Church, and one another. Until recently, the sacrament was most often referred to as the Sacrament of Penance. Penance derived from the Latin *poenitentia.* “It originally meant the same as the Greek *metanoia,* which also meant conversion or change of heart, but it later came to be applied to outward acts of repentance and to the ecclesiastical discipline of public penitence.”291 Penance, which expresses the turning away from sin, is associated with the words penitent, referring to the person, and penitence indicating the punishment that is given or the act that is to be satisfied as a condition of confession and absolution. Martos notes that an element of sacramental forgiveness or reconciliation is an essential feature in some of the other sacraments,

291Martos, *Doors to the Sacred,* 276.
namely baptism, Eucharist, and the anointing or healing of the sick. These sacraments, however, will be cited only when necessary to clarify an aspect of the sacrament of reconciliation.

Like sacramental theology, the sacrament of reconciliation has had an arduous history and development influenced by theology, Church history, local religious traditions, and reactions to internal and external pressures and forces upon the Church. However, the notion of transgressions and forgiveness for the violation of religious and societal norms precedes Christianity. Ancient societies and religious cults had rituals to symbolize an awareness of sin and culpability in order to make amends and seek forgiveness from a deity, often as a means of reunification with the community. For Israel, the covenantal relationship with God—Yahweh—was established with Abraham and his descendants. Everything, including their relationship with God, with one another, and the land was rooted in the covenant and subsequent laws that could be severed by sin. Ancient Israel had various ways to restore a broken covenantal relationship with God. Expiation for sins could be satisfied with fasting, sacrificial offerings of certain animals, burnt offerings, prayers, and ritual cleansings. In speaking of the annual observance of the Day of Atonement prescribed by Jewish law in the Old Testament, Martos notes that “the high priest had to confess his sins and the sins of the people to God before offering the sacrifice which would symbolize their sincerity and willingness to rectify their lives (Leviticus 16:21; Nehemiah 1:6-7; Confession was also prescribed by the Torah for certain individual sins (Leviticus 5:1-6; Numbers 5:6-7, . . .”\textsuperscript{292} The roots of ritualizing forgiveness and reconciliation are embedded in the Jewish and Christian communities

\textsuperscript{292}Ibid., 278.
and their scriptures, thus establishing its sacramental nature in the early history of sacramentology.

3.3.1 Patristic Period: The Early Church

Jesus ushered in and preached that the Kingdom of God was established for the just and for sinners. His life, death and resurrection began a new era in which one’s disregard for the covenant, and the relationship between God and humanity, no longer required animal sacrifices or burnt offerings for atonement. Jesus, the Christ, was now the symbol of God’s forgiveness and love signified through his pre-eminent sacrifice on the cross that offered redemption and salvation to all human beings. During his earthly ministry, Jesus challenged the Jewish people and his disciples on sin and forgiveness through his words and examples. Parables, exhortations and healings focused on individual and communal sins that required forgiveness in order to be reconciled with God and with one another. Jesus challenged sinners to repent, to change their lives, and to enter into an experience of holiness and conversion. The symbolic baptism of John the Baptist was a sign of conversion and God’s forgiveness for sins that caused alienation from God.

The early Church believed that Jesus’ instructions to the disciples to “bound or loosed” what was on earth was their authority to forgive sins. Having received from Jesus the power to forgive sins, the apostles formed communities that were to emulate the holiness of Christ, and for which reconciliation was a sign of God’s love and forgiveness. As Christ was holy, the Church—the faith community—was to be holy. James Dallen notes, “In the New Testament, sin and community are always viewed from the perspective of mutual love and responsiveness to others’ needs. Both in adding new
members and in maintaining holiness, churches saw themselves serving the kingdom, humanity, and individual sinners. Thus, repentance and forgiveness were associated with physical and spiritual healing. These apostolic and post apostolic Christian communities were challenged by pagan society and Jewish ostracism as they struggled to live faithfully and to preserve their identity and mission of Jesus. Preservation of the community was important for their Christian faith and identity as minorities struggling for recognition and survival.

Baptism enjoined converts to the Christian community. It gave them their Christian identity for which the Eucharist was at the center of what it meant to be a Christian. Baptism, which removed sin, was “the only ritual of forgiveness known to the earliest Christian community.”

“Even the words of Jesus to the disciples about the forgiving and retaining of sins (John 20:22-23) are seen as referring to baptism or the discipline of binding and loosing rather than to a special sacrament of penance, in the later Catholic sense.”

To avoid the consequences of post baptismal sin, many converts delayed the ritual, often waiting until advanced age or close to death. It was expected that once baptized, grave moral sin separated one from full inclusion in the community and Eucharist. As they looked forward to the imminent return of Christ, it was even more important to preserve the community as the place of salvation for those who were holy and to distinguish themselves from non-believers—the unbaptized—in their midst.

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294 Martos, Doors to the Sacred, 279.

295 Ibid., 279.
The conversion experience culminated in the baptism ritual. As the ritual of initiation into the Christian community, baptism was understood as sacramentum. The original definition of sacramentum was an oath of allegiance to Christ and to the community, the ecclesia where God’s love and salvation were possible. To break the oath with grievous sins was to deny God’s love and to forsake the community that Christ had established as his church. Led by bishops and presbyters, the early communities were faced with a serious challenge regarding grievous post-baptismal sin by its members. If baptism removed sin, what then was the consequence for someone who committed a grave sin after baptism and then sought remission to the community?

Based on Jesus’ instructions to the disciples, Paul had advised communities to avoid contact with sinners, but also encouraged welcoming them back as an example of Christ’s love. Some Church leaders advocated that sinners be excommunicated, while others allowed for readmission after a period of repentance. This process, although different, was paralleled with the baptismal catechumenate. The fear was that returning persons to the community who had committed serious sins such as murder, adultery, and apostasy would degrade the community and cause a scandal. Others looked to the forgiveness of Jesus as the model. In the first century Church, there was no formal ritual to readmit sinful members. The process for the readmittance of repentants frequently included prayers, almsgiving, and the renunciation of sin. For those who could re-enter the community, it involved the bishop’s laying on of hands and prayers before they were able to receive communion. However, there was only one readmittance for the life of the penitent. Without formal rituals, sinners in the first two centuries of the early Christian era could be forgiven and reinstated into the community, although only once.
By the middle of the second century, the problem of post-baptismal sin had escalated. As the early Church continued to organize, it faced pressures from within and outside, including heresies, questions of faith, and persecutions.

The rigorism grew in the second century was largely due to Christianity’s growth and its changing social and cultural situation, which led Christian communities to reassess the informality and leniency with which they had received converts and dealt with sin and sinners. . . . Living as they did in a suspicious and often hostile society, Christians had to exercise greater care in receiving new members and in deciding whether to welcome back those who had once proved untrustworthy, for to the Roman empire the rapidly growing Christian movement was more a threat than before and it struck back with both propaganda and persecutions.296

Many Christians were fervent in their faith during times of persecution, some becoming saints, while others recanted their faith. While some suffered martyrdom for their religious convictions, the primary concern was for those who disavowed their faith. During the periods of persecution, apostasy was a primary concern for Church leadership. Regional churches and their bishops had to contend with apostasy, as well as other egregious sins. The problem, then, was whether the recantants could later be forgiven and readmitted to the Church. Some Christians believed that apostasy, denying Jesus, or participating in sacrifices and rituals to other gods was the ultimate sin that required permanent excommunication, isolation, and ostracism from the believing community. Others recommended they be readmitted, but only after a prescribed period of public penance that could last for weeks or years. Penance, the interior disposition and change of heart, as well as the demonstrative display of sorrow, was necessary for a second conversion and reunification with the community.

296Dullen, Reconciling Community, 29.
As the Church continued to develop and grow, strict policies were enacted regarding the nature of sins, appropriate penances, and ritual process for reconciliation and reunification with the faith community. Martos asserts, “by the third century, however, a general pattern for the public reconciliation of known sinners began to appear in many churches. Those who wanted to rejoin the community went to the bishop and confessed their error, but before they could be readmitted to the ranks of the faithful they had to reform their lives. 297 There was no uniformity in the penitential procedure nor length of time for penances. Just as baptism was a sign of membership in the Church that distinguished Christians from non-believers and permitted them to receive the Eucharist, so, too, was the reconciliation process established for penitents who sought readmittance to the Church. According to Martos,

This public penitence was sacramental, for it was a sign both to those who witnessed it and to those who endured it that God was merciful to the contrite and that the church was a place where people could find salvation from their sinful ways. And it was an effective sacrament, for by the conversion of the heart that it demanded, the communal support that it provided, and the public approval that it gave to repentance; it brought about a real release from sin—if not from all sin, at least from scandalous behavior. 298

Both prebaptism and post-baptism involved an experience of conversion. While baptism erased all sins to that point, post-baptism repentance offered forgiveness for the lesser daily sins that converts continued to commit after baptism. However, for those who committed grave post-baptism sins, there was a reconciliation process for reunification with the community. There was no uniformity in rituals or the process among the bishops and between the regional churches in the East and West. Penitents were

297 Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 281.

298 Ibid., 282.
classified as those in the catechumenate seeking initiation into the Church through baptism and as penitents who asked for acceptance into the order of the penitent, the process for readmittance and reconciliation into the Church. Because of the protracted public process of contrition and the strict penances, many early Christians continued to avoid both practices.

The Catholic Church gained a new status when Christianity became the state religion in 313. Consequently, Christians were now free from persecution. Thus, apostasy was no longer the primary concern for Church leadership. Furthermore, after time had elapsed without the parousia, Church leaders had to reinterpret the theology around forgiveness and reconciliation without consideration of Christ’s imminent return. As larger numbers of converts turned to the Church, the sense of community was suppressed. As a result, sin, repentance, penance and reconciliation became more private without regard for the effect of one’s sin upon the community.

The norms for ecclesiastical forgiveness and public penance became stricter and more formal. Similar to what was noted in the overview of sacramentality, there was an emphasis on legalism that eventually led to canonical statutes and oversight, thus the designation of canonical penance. “The extensive legislation of canonical penance distinguished it from what had preceded. Early informal procedures and interim policies of the second and third centuries gave way to an established and easily recognized ecclesiastical institution. The community’s involvement was public and shown through elaborate community liturgies.”

The canonical decrees for readmittance, while austere, established policies and procedures. Communal liturgical rituals were created to mark

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299 Dullen, Reconciling Community, 57.
the penitent’s repentance and readmittance. In time, spiritual counseling by priests before the penitent’s confession became an integral part of canonical penance. The public nature of the order of penitents, its liturgical rituals and practices such as fasting, almsgiving, charitable service, prayers, and restrictions on marriage, employment and associations made it undesirable for most Christians.

Young people were not permitted to become penitents, nor were those in certain occupations or professions, including the clergy. . . . Most people, understandably, postponed penance until they were on their deathbeds. The penitential institution came to have little place in everyday life and became simply a way of preparing for death. . . . Since as a rule it dealt with only the more grave sins, its public character made entering it tantamount to a public confession and in some areas such a confession was at times required. Since it could take place only once in a lifetime and since it often had consequences for the remainder of penitents’ lives, people’s distaste was understandable. 300

The emphasis on the legal and canonical aspects of individual and personal sins overshadowed the communal component and led to guilt and shame for the penitents and those who would not enter the order of the penitent.

By the 6th century a canonical structure was in place that institutionalized and acknowledged the Church’s authority to forgive repentants of their sins and to reconcile them with the Church and community. However, the penitential practice had begun to wane because of its lengthy order of penitence and its severe and long penances. More damaging were the ecclesia restrictions that permitted only one post-baptism for repentance, which was considered a second conversion. Repentance’s early formational period was characterized by its primary focus on genuine contrition and metanoia, a deep change of heart.

300 Dallen, Reconciling Community, 76.
3.3.2 Middle Ages

The most significant changes in the penitential practice occurred during the Medieval period with contributions from Irish monastic life. It was already noted that canonical and ecclesia penance was rarely practiced in European Churches. The penitential practice and tradition used in Ireland eventually became normative in Europe. The conversion of Ireland and the consequence of its penitential practices on the European Church were an ineffaceable part of Irish Church history, which had an indelible influence on the Roman Catholic Church and its sacrament of reconciliation.

There were several contributing factors for the branding of a Celtic form of penance. First, the canonical penance observed in other regions was not established in Ireland. Secondly, as monasticism grew as an ascetic way of prayer and living, monasteries were founded throughout Europe and the British Isles. While there were indigenous priests, many of them were ordained monks from monasteries throughout Europe who lived simple lives among the people. Since there were not many bishops for ecclesia penance, the ordained monks served as spiritual advisors offering guidance. As priests, they listened to confessions of sins and offered forgiveness after a prescribed penance. However, because they were not bishops, the absolution was in the form of a blessing rather than the imposition of hands restricted for use by bishops. In essence, penance and forgiveness were repeatable, thus eliminating the notion that it should be reserved for death. Gone were the long and often public penances required before obtaining forgiveness. To assist the clerics, eventually, monks created a variety of penitential books that ranked the sins and prescribed penances based on the severity of the sins and who had committed the transgressions. St. Patrick, who had been a slave in
Ireland in the early fifth century, was introduced to Irish monasticism. Many years after his escape, he returned to Ireland as a bishop to convert the Celtics. Patrick was one of the monks credited with helping to formulate and spread the Irish version of penance throughout Ireland and the European continent. “By the time he died in 461 the country had a thriving new religion. . . . It had a style of liturgy which was distinctively Celtic even though it was performed in Latin. It also had a penitential discipline that was unlike any other in Christianity.”\(^{301}\)

After the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476, the Church sought to establish stability within its Catholic provinces and to commence with the conversion of Europe. Clergy, particularly the monks, engaged in catechizing the uneducated European masses. Many of the ordained monks from Ireland participated in the missionary activity, thus bringing with them their unique form of penitential observance. Although the Celtic form of penance had its detractors, it eventually became normative in the Church as the formal penitential ritual. By the Middle Ages, the popular penitential books were the standard rubric for assigning penances and for the penitential observance. As in the canonical period, however, penances could be long and severe. Confessors began the practice of commutation, shorting the period of penances, and substitution, replacing a penance with a less severe one. Both became standard practices that led to abuses. The most notable abuse was the selling of indulgences, which eventually led to contentious demands for reforms that ignited the Protestant Reformation. While there were bishops that attempted to abolish or reform the abuses and to regulate the penitential practice during this formative period, these practices were already entrenched in the

\(^{301}\)Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 291.
sacramental penitential ritual. In addition, the persistence of private penances eliminated and devalued the communal role in the sacramental observance.

During the Middle Ages, the process for the penitential rite of reconciliation had become institutionalized in the Church with repeatable confessions, private penances, and absolution and reconciliation immediately after confessions rather than after the completion of penances. Liturgically, penances became associated with the Lenten season whereby all were required to participate in a penitential observance with ashes on Ash Wednesday, fasting, confession, and Holy Thursday reconciliation and absolution. Its importance was elevated when the Church mandated that communion be received yearly and that confession was a perquisite for receiving the Eucharist. Referring to the Lenten penitential ritual, Dallen noted, “The season was no longer a time for spiritual renewal in order to live more fully the Easter mystery of redemption but rather a time for purification to prepare for the customary (and later obligatory) annual communion.”

Medieval scholars debated the various stages in the sacramental practice of forgiveness and reconciliation in light of sacramental theology. At the core of these debates and reforms were the practices of penance, confession, contrition and absolution. Initially, penance was the sign of contrition. However, the changes in the frequency of confessions and the lack of sufficient time to require the kinds of penances previously prescribed changed the nature of the sacrament. The role and nature of confession, as a step in reconciliation with the Church and community, had a sober tone when it was originally prescribed as occurring once in a lifetime as was baptism. When confession became repeatable, the frequency of confession inadvertently implied that it was less

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302 Dallen, Reconciling Community, 123.
serious and necessary. In addition, as Christianity grew with more converts and the frequency of confessions increased, it was no longer possible for confessors to give long and involved penances. This was one reason for the growth of indulgences and its abuses.

By the end of the late Medieval Period, the Church’s sacramental theology and ritual for penance formalized the norm that transitioned into the modern era. Many scholars cite the period of the 4th Lateran Council as the bridge between the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the modern era of sacramental penance. Decrees and juridical regulations from the Lateran Council solidified the individualistic practice and belief that forgiveness and reconciliation were obtained by the recitation of sins and the immediate absolution by the priest. This praxis for reconciliation raised the importance of priests and connected their role in giving absolution with ordination. In addition, without specifying an age, the Council decreed that all who were of the age of discretion were to avail of annual private individual confession. Once children were deemed to be at the age of discretion, there had to be catechesis and formation for them in preparation for confession, which would eventually precede the sacrament of Eucharist.

Penance as it was known and practiced centuries earlier at the beginning of the Medieval Period, transitioned from a communal experience of ritual to an individual or private act with little liturgical significance. Unlike the sacramental celebration associated with the earliest Church, penance rituals became separated from the life of the community. Here, too, the sacramental penitential symbol was reduced to a magical formulation for salvation. The individualism and privatization of penance and reconciliation had a profound effect on the development of later theology and praxis.
around penance. Conversion was not part of the communal experience; rather, the avoidance and confession of sin replaced it as necessary components for redemption. “Sin became the prime paradigm through which the Christian life was viewed. . . . Penance itself came to be defined as consisting of the vow to avoid sin, the act of confessing sin, and the act of satisfying sin.”

The controversy over abuses, particularly those that stemmed from penitential practices and indulgences, opened the door to theological and pastoral criticism and scrutiny by earlier councils and Church leadership. Martin Luther, an Augustinian priest, was one of the most tenacious critics who objected to the range of abuses that defiled the penitential practice. In 1517 he leveled his harshest criticism against the Church for the selling of indulgences. Moreover, Luther questioned the penitential form of individual confession and priestly absolution, and renounced that this form of penitence was scripturally based or sanctioned by Christ.

As the title implied, Luther and his comrades were reformers whose intentions were not to establish new faith denominations; rather, Luther and the reformers sought to raise crucial theological concerns that they hoped would lead to internal Church reforms. Both Protestant reformers and Church leaders were concerned about people obtaining salvation and God’s gratuitous mercy and forgiveness; however, they disagreed on how the prevalent penitential system of private confession achieved reconciliation with God. The reformers rejected the pervasive individual and private confessional practice that had become institutionalized in the Church, and was responsible for the myriad of abuses they opposed for ecclesial forgiveness. Pope Leo X and other Church leaders reacted strongly.

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303 Dallen, Reconciling Community, 154.
over what they considered a fallacious affront to the papacy and Church hierarchical authority. In 1520, Luther was excommunicated. These actions and reactions by both sides brought about the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation. The Council of Trent reaffirmed the Medieval sacramental system known at the time, thereby making the penitential model of private confession with priest absolution normative until the twentieth century. Dallen explained,

Neither party to the controversy was aware of the historical importance of reconciliation to the Church or of the communal significance of the sacrament. It is understandable, then, that the reformers eliminated the ecclesiastical intermediary to enable sinners to go directly to God and that the Council of Trent appealed to a juridical priestly power. In any case, the late medieval penitential format and experience was fixed, in modern confession, as a primary component of Catholic religious life into the twentieth century.304

The transition, then, to the modern era of the penitential rite began with the Lateran Council IV in 1215. Individual confession as the indicator of remorse and desire for forgiveness with immediate absolution by a priest became the norm for the penitential ritual, thus replacing the performance of a penance as demonstrative of one’s desire for forgiveness prior to absolution. Eventually, performing an act of penance became less important in the forgiveness sequence of confession absolution. Dallen offered several developments to explain the transformation of the Late Medieval penitential system to the modern penitential observance.

The ritual had to evolve to the point where confession absorbed satisfaction and the absolution was considered to have a causal role in the forgiveness of sins; 2. Theological understanding had to attain precision in relating the personal and ecclesial factors to one another and in determining the sacramental essentials; 3. Canonical regulation and popular understanding had to give the ritual primacy in the forgiveness of all sins committed after baptism, generally as preparation for communion.305

304Ibid., 161.
305Dallen, Reconciling Community, 139.
In response to the reformers, Church leaders were challenged in maintaining and strengthening the Church and its penitential system. For Church leaders, it was essential that they defend and elevate the Church, its theology and leadership. In doing so, the Council of Trent fortified its penitential theology and individual practice of private confession to a priest with absolution. The post-Tridentine confessional ritual closely resembled the Medieval practice. Trent institutionalized reforms, but the basic Medieval structure remained. The linkage between frequent confession and communion was strengthened and heralded as the means to sanctification. Dallen observed,

> The Counter-Reformation did not, however, merely continue the medieval view of confession as a therapeutic means of purification from sin and liberation from guilt. It supplemented this with an ascetic element that, though acknowledged in medieval times, had received less attention: confession as a means of sanctification. Over the centuries, the sacrament had ceased to focus on reconciling sinners to the community of salvation and had become instead the source of forgiveness and grace for individuals. In the perspective shaped by tariff penance (and particularly by its Celtic monastic form), the primary motivation was purification and liberation so as to be right with God. The Counter-Reformation altered this significantly by also seeing confession as the means to grow in holiness and come closer to God.306

The Counter-Reformation’s penitential challenges and consequences for the Church and Protestants spanned several centuries. As the Lateran Council IV introduced the modern era of penitential observance, the period of the Enlightenment ushered in the modern era of scholarship. Just as the lived experience and history of each era influenced the Church, and vice versa, the Enlightenment had an effect on the post-Tridentine Church with its focus on scientific methodology, research, and retrieval of history. Theologians initiated extensive examination of scripture, explored the evolution of

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306Ibid., 181.
liturgies and rituals, and sought to understand sacramental development and Church documents by using new theological tools to question, examine, and articulate new thoughts and discoveries. Reason, empirical data, and the exploration of knowledge framed the theological pursuit. The next section will examine the development of the contemporary sacrament of reconciliation found in the Vatican II Rite of Penance and implications for a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation.

3.4 Contemporary Sacrament of Reconciliation

Vatican II and the development of the new Rite of Penance emerged at a time of moral incertitude, political and social unrest throughout the world, the Holocaust, media and technological advancements, and a greater sense of globalization. The United States had emerged after World War I and II as a major powerbroker and world peacekeeper. The U.S. was involved in military conflicts in Korea and Vietnam. Moreover, the first half of the twentieth century in the U.S. involved social, civil and economic unrest, as well as prosperity as new immigrants continued to resettle in the United States thus creating a greater demand for the establishment of parishes and Catholic institutions. Although the period of Post-Civil War Reconstruction was to address and implement the integration of African Americans into American society, it was not fully successful. Lynching, segregation, and discrimination due to racism continued and intensified in many areas of the country, including faith communities. There was a loss of innocence, and for some the Church was the compass to navigate the world around them for some kind of normalcy. For others, the Church, too, had its own identity crisis and was no longer the anchor and compass for their faith, especially its penitential theology and ritual.
During the time preceding Vatican II, the Church was still using the 1614 Tridentine Rite for the Sacrament of Penance, in which the ecclesial nature of sin was understood from a canonical perspective that focused on canonical laws and moral codes. It was an individualistic notion of personal sin and confession from the context of one’s alienation from God and the enumeration of codified infractions. Absent was the communal nature of sin and collective responsibility for the world and environment in which one lived. Vatican II acknowledged the need for penitential liturgical reforms and decreed that the sacrament of penance be revised; however, it was the last sacrament by the Council to be revised. According to Martos, “it is perhaps significant that the Second Vatican Council, apart from its directive to revise the confessional ritual along with the other sacramental rites, said nothing about the sacrament of penance that had not been said in traditional Catholic theology, and what it did say about it was very little.”

The Enlightenment provided theologians with modern tools of scholarship in which to examine the contemporary penitential understanding, most notably the expanded view of sin in light of the new academics and philosophical theories. The conception of the social sciences had a tremendous effect on the Church and its theology. Catholic theologians examined long held views on the legalism of sin, morality, and its role and relationship to the Church and individuals. Martos correctly indicates that these discoveries “gave Catholic theologians a whole new way of thinking about morality.”

The Church provided new doctrinal, theological, and liturgical pronouncements as contemporary debates offered additional insights. The change in title and identity from a

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307 Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 315.

308 Ibid., 314.
sacrament of penance to reconciliation was a significant shift. With continued theological reflection and additional directions from biblical theologians and philosophy, a liturgical commission was established and given the task of addressing the penitential ritual in light of Vatican II reforms and decrees. Ten years later and having undergone numerous revisions, the new Rite of Penance was promulgated by the Congregation for Divine Worship in 1973 and implemented in the United States in 1977. Not without controversy and theological tensions, the Rite of Penance was adopted into the 1983 Code of Canon Law by the Synod of Bishops.

The liturgical commission recommended three distinct penitential rituals for the Rite of Penance in order to shift the focus of the sacrament from absolution to reconciliation and to de-emphasize its long held juridical and Tridentine influence. These new developments not only prescribed how to celebrate the sacrament, but also addressed the sacramental life of the individual and the Church in light of the new emphasis on reconciliation. The introduction to the Rite of Penance (or do praenotanda), laid the theological and sacramental foundation. “The Introduction to the RP begins by showing that the mystery of reconciliation is key to perceiving God’s work in our world and understanding redemption, conversion, and the sacraments (RP1-2). This mystery gives focus to the Church’s mission and ministry.”

The introduction situates and clearly identifies the Church as having the authority to forgive sins. This authority, given by Jesus to the apostles, was the basis for the sacrament and reiterated the connection between the forgiveness of sin and the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist. The Rite of Penance restored the relationship with God, the Church and one another. “Penance

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309 Dullen, Reconciling Community, 250.
always therefore entrails reconciliation with our brothers and sisters who remain harmed by our sins.”310 This hint of the communal nature of sin and restoration is important in recognizing the dilemma of social sin and the significance of the community.

The Rite of Penance introduced the sacrament as a covenant relationship between God, his Church and his people. The communal notion was conveyed by reconciliation with one another as was in the early penitential development. Instead of sin, contrition, and forgiveness as individualistic acts that focused on the penitential relationship merely with God, the new Rite redirected the penitent relationally to the community, a bond that was diminished through sin, but yet, a source of healing as the penitent was reunited with the community. The Church and community model God’s salvific love. Dallen eloquently stated that,

The Rite of Penance gave three forms or rites to celebrate the sacrament. The first was a rite for individual penitents with individual, private confession and absolution. The second rite was a communal celebration with several penitents that included individual,

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311 Dallen, Reconciling Community, 299.
private confession and absolution. The third rite, also a communal celebration with several penitents, offered general confession and absolution. “. . . The third rite in the RP is a fully developed sacramental liturgy wherein penitents responding to God’s Word ritualize their conversion to the Church and seek reconciliation. It is internally coherent and its structure is complete. It more thoroughly expresses the council’s guiding principle for reform than do the other rites.”

However, Pope John Paul II, in his 1984 post-apostolic exhortation, *Reconciliation and Penance in the Mission of the Church Today*, deemphasized the use and importance of the third rite for general confession and absolution in the new Rite of Penance. He wrote:

> The first form—reconciliation of individual penitents—is the only normal and ordinary way of celebrating the sacraments . . . The third form, however—reconciliation of a number of penitents with general confession and absolution—is exceptional in character. It is therefore not left to free choices but is regulated by a special discipline.”

The third ritual was not to be used exclusively, but infrequently and only for penitents who after celebrating the third form at some point availed themselves for individual confession. Penitents were not to participate in the third rite again until they received individual confession. It was clear that individual confession followed immediately with absolution was to be the normative sacramental celebration for the Church. In spite of the revisions and new developments in the Rite of Penance, participation in the post-Vatican II celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation

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312Ibid., 232

continued to be misunderstood, theologically criticized, awkwardly positioned among the
three sacraments of initiation, and its observance in decline among laity.

The Introduction of John Paul’s exhortation cited the human, societal, political
and ideological divisions that attributed to human discord and polarization, including that
within the Church. Sin, beginning with original sin, was offered as the root of the
alienation and divisions and the Church was the source of all healing. God was the
source of all reconciliation with Jesus, the Christ, as the one who reconciled.

What is significant for this study is the Pope’s supposition that the interconnected
social dimension of reconciliation links humanity’s reconciliation with God and
reconciliation with one another and between human beings. The text read, “. . . we
should be reminded always of that ‘vertical’ dimension of division and reconciliation
concerning the relationship between man and God, a dimension which in the eyes of faith
always prevails over the ‘horizontal’ dimension, that is to say, over the reality of division
between people and the need for reconciliation between them.”314 In other words, the
communal dimension of reconciliation is secondary to the personal reconciliation with
God through Christ. The Church’s task and mission for reconciliation are entrusted to the
clergy who are representatives of Christ. The Church has as its mission the responsibility
“. . . of reconciling people: with God, with themselves, with neighbor, with the whole of
creation . . .”315 This premise posits the “vertical dimension” as the reason for sin, the
impetus for reconciliation and penance, and the prescription for penitential conciliation
and conversion. However, one of the criticisms of Medieval and Tridentine penance and

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314 Ibid., 21.
315 Ibid., 22.
reconciliation was the limited understanding of the significant role of the community in the reconciliation process, which was voiced by Luther. The exhortation continues the emphasis on equating penance and forgiveness with the words of absolution that only priest may give. While the acknowledgment of sin to God is essential, acknowledging wrongdoing and expressing forgiveness from one another is equally important for a life of reconciliation.

We must not so stress our relationship with God that we forget our relationship with one another. And we must not so stress our relationship with one another that we have no need to look to God forgiveness. Reconciliation involves both God and neighbors. Anyone committed to living a life of reconciliation must attend to the dynamics of love in relationship with God, others, self, and the world.316

Of Pope John Paul II’s exhortation, Dallen observes,

The points that are emphasized are those most prominent in the teaching of Trent: individual confession and the priestly ministry of absolution. Vatican II’s focal themes, reconciliation with the Church and the sacrament’s social and ecclesial nature and effects, are put into the background. . . . Inconsistencies and internal contradictions show the difficulty of integrating social consciousness and personal piety and seem to derive from a perceived need to maintain an institutional model of Church.317

In *Reconciliation and Penance*, individual sinfulness is elevated as the primary offense against God and people. Personal acts of sin are attributed to one’s freedom to choose; however, such sin must not become the “. . . blame for individuals’ sins or external factors such as structures, systems or other people.”318 According to John Paul II, “The mystery of sin is composed of this twofold wound which the sinner opens in himself

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316Gula, *To Walk Together Again*, 16.

317Dallen, Reconciling Community, 226.

318John Paul II, Reconciliation, 36.
and in his relationship with his neighbor. Therefore one can speak of personal and social sin: From one point of view, every sin is personal; from another point of view, every sin is social insofar as and because it also has social repercussions.”

Social sin or evil arises because of human solidarity and the affect that personal sin has on the human family. From this premise, Reconciliation and Penance proposes three meanings for social sin.

The first meaning for social sin acknowledges that humans are interconnected and that one’s individual sin affects others because “. . . every sin has repercussions on the entire ecclesial body and the whole human family.” Secondly, social sin is the indifference and affront against the commandment to love one’s neighbor, which diminishes and hinders holy and meaningful interpersonal relationships to develop. This indifference denies and limits the human dignity and God-given rights and freedoms of the other, whether “. . . committed either by the individual against the community or by the community against the individual. . . The term social can be applied to sins of commission or omission on the part of political, economic or trade union leaders. . .”

Injustices directed towards one’s neighbor are unequivocal transgressions against God. Similar to the second meaning, the third meaning of social sin describes the contentious relationships between communities, nations, or groups of people instigated by odious indifference, injustices, economic depravity, and a lack of moral fortitude. Reminded of

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319 Ibid., 35.
320 Ibid., 37.
321 Ibid., 37.
the initial premise that all sin is personal, committed by individuals, the exhortation cautions,

Now it has to be admitted that realities and situations such as those described, when they become generalized and reach vast proportions as social phenomena, almost always become anonymous, just as their causes are complex and not always identifiable. Hence if one speaks of social sin here, the expression obviously has an analogical meaning. However, to speak even analogically of social sins must not cause us to underestimate the responsibility of the individuals involved. It is meant to be an appeal to the consciences of all, so that each may shoulder his or her responsibility seriously and courageously in order to change those disastrous conditions and intolerable situations.\textsuperscript{322}

While acknowledging social sin, the exhortation clearly admonishes any effort to deemphasize personal sin over and above social sin. This view, which can lead to a denial of personal culpability, places the responsibility for sin on “some vague entity or anonymous collectivity such as the situation, the system, society, structures or institutions.”\textsuperscript{323} This clearly makes human beings and human conduct pivotal in addressing personal transgressions as well as social sin.

Reconciliation is a gift from God given as a sign of his love for humanity. This love, however, is most visible in and through the love and reconciliation that is given to one another. As the source of reconciliation, Jesus Christ is both the way to reconciliation and the reconciler. Through his passion and death, he is the means by which humanity is redeemed and finds salvation and reconciliation with God. The mission of the Church, then, is to proclaim and witness God’s reconciliation and to be the instrument by which this is accomplished in and through Christ. Similarly, Pope John Paul describes the Church as reconciling and reconciled. It must first be the body of the reconciled in order

\textsuperscript{322} Ibid., 38.

\textsuperscript{323} Ibid., 39.
to be the reconciling agent for the world, thus embracing all peoples by offering God’s gratuitous redemption and salvation manifested in Christ. “The church has the mission of proclaiming this reconciliation and as it were of being its sacrament in the world. The church is the sacrament, that is to say, the sign and means of reconciliation in different ways . . .”

The exhortation, therefore, reiterates the Council of Trent’s position that the sacrament of penance is the ordinary way that the faithful are reconciled to God and to each other.

3.4.1 African Tradition

A connection between Africans and African Americans was made in the previous chapter. The relationship is important since they share a common racial ancestry and a similar heritage from which the American Black slaves created a new identity because of and in spite of their repressive existence. Given the American experience of subjugation for the African slaves, this section will offer brief comments about the African understanding of sin and ritual for reconciliation. However, when speaking of African traditions, religious beliefs or practices, one must remember that Africa is a vast continent many countries and hundreds of ethnic groups and languages. Just as there are many theologies and liberation theologies, so too are there different African religious expressions. Therefore, these cursory comments will be more general with the caution in mind.

Traditionally, Africans believe in a supreme God and lesser intermediaries and deities, and many different names for God. According to Diana Hayes,
The African understanding of sin, as a result, must be understood within the greater context of communal life, which itself is a much wider concept than it is in Western thought. . . . Life is the most basic category of the African’s religious worldview. Sin is therefore understood as “anything that diminishes, opposes or destroys life. . . . As life is a shared category, sin is an attack or disruption of community as a whole, not just on the individual.”  

God is seen in all areas of life and the cosmos. The importance of community in the African worldview cannot be overemphasized because it is that relational view of life that gives them their identity. Moreover, how members of the community are treated has significance. For example, Desmond Tutu, explains, “to dehumanize another inexorably means that one is dehumanized as well.  

Hayes explains, “the criterion of good and evil in the African world is humanity itself.” She quotes Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator,  

Sin is not a reality to be dealt with solely on the level of abstraction; it manifests itself as concrete and experiential and has palpable effects on the destiny of the individual in community. There is always an agent (human or spiritual) behind or at the origin of the evil or sinful act, and this act exits as such only in the actions of people toward one another. Sin is relational. Something is considered as sinful insofar as it destroys the life of the doer and the life that he or she shares with the rest of the community and nature.  

The interconnection between God and society and among themselves is expressed through rituals. “The aim of most rituals is to help the people with their problems and/or to make sense of the interaction between the spiritual and material worlds and to bring harmony. In speaking of

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328 Hayes, Forged, 17.

329 Ibid., 23.
African indigenous traditional spirituality, Hayes notes,

There is no understanding or notion of original sin or redemption, a fact which caused significant problems for slave masters seeking to instill the ‘fear of God’ in their slaves. Thus, there is no final judgment either. The religious experience of African can be seen as a product of a cyclical, repetitive time, one lacing the ‘mark of eternity,’ as opposed to Christianity’s linear time scale. For Africans, the past and future are always connected, and time is unending.\textsuperscript{330}

The work of Elochukwu Uzukwu on West Africa’s traditional concept of Christianity is insightful in light of the African American bishops’ claim of the relationship between traditional African spirituality and African American spirituality. Interestingly, in speaking of the holistic characteristic of Black spirituality, the bishops write, “Like the biblical tradition, there is no dualism. Divisions between intellect and emotion, spirit and body, action and contemplation, individual and community, sacred and secular are foreign to us.”\textsuperscript{331} But, is this correct? An assumption of Uzukwu’s research is that “duality, the basis of rationality is the lens through which reality is received—the measure of everything that exists in the West African world. The Igbo say ife kwulu ife akwudebe ya (“Whenever Something stands, Something Else will stand beside it”). Nothing stands alone. Life in the universe is relational.”\textsuperscript{331} Perhaps it is a matter of metaphysical semantics. The bishops express the need for a relational understanding between philosophical dichotomies such as mind and body, mental and physical, the “I” virus the “we.” They use “dualism” to articulate the separation or unrelational dimensions of spirituality, whereas their later use of “divisions” might be more appropriate if using Uzukwu’s theological methodology. Uzukwu writes, “… the social experience of

\textsuperscript{330} Ibid., 28.

relationship opens thought to flexibility and relationality. . . . However, for West Africans, the Hellenistic qualities of being are meaningful only in relationship: when something stands, something else must stand beside it. Therefore, I believe that the intent of what the bishops express is valid; however, in light of Uzukwu’s research, the use of dualism may not be appropriate.

Africa is infused with the concept of God and multiple deities. The universe, human beings and deities are in relationship. According to Uzukwu, this complex dynamic has four structural elements. The first is a positive view of the world in that the world created for human habitation is good. Relationship or relatedness is the overriding criterion of being in the world. To be is to interact or to interrelate reflections the second element. Third is that the hierarchy is perceived in dynamic or relation terms and the fourth is the role of mediators or therapists. He sees cosmology as offering a perspective for Christian insight that retains Christian monotheism of God. This view has elements of African American spirituality, particularly the relational dynamics alluded to by the African American bishops.

Uzukwu raises the human body as an instrument of movement vital for worship. Referring to the movement of the body as gesture, he writes, “Among humans, the gesture retains the characteristic of motion. It is the movement of the body; a measure movement. The pattern of this movement depends on place, time, and space.” Gesture is how the

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332 Ibid., 12.
333 Ibid., 66.
human body is used in whatever way, for ritual, celebration, respect, work, and dance. He cites examples of gestures that show greeting and respect.

A young Yoruba or Nupe person in Nigeria sinks to the ground or prostates full-length on meeting an elder; also the Urhobo of Nigeria greet the elder or chief by touching the ground with both hands. On the other hand, among the West Niger Igbo of Asaba (Nigeria), young people keep their hands in their pockets when being scolded by elders. This restrains them from hitting back when hit by an elder in the interchange.335

The human gesture is an interplay or interaction of activity between human beings and the universe. Uzukwu explains that,

human consciousness makes human gestural activity a design and not a simple instinctual response to external or internal stimuli. There is style or strategy in the rhythm or human body movement. This measured motion is intimately connected with speech (verbal gesture). It is thus a rational activity. Repetition is the law that guides the rhythm of human gesture.336

Gesture theory is communal and both verbal and nonverbal. It has a multitude of expressions for every life situation and is particular for every ethnic group. Uzukwu’s goal is to explore and identify the African ethnic roots of gestures that create meaning through symbolic body movements in worship and rituals. He brilliantly connects the African rhythm of the universe through sounds, drumming, and bodily gestures to reconciliation. “The harmony Africans seek to live through rhythm displays their preference for the reconciliation instead of the separation of opposites. Basically, nothing stands alone. . . . The problem of the positive and negative, the certain and uncertain, is not resolved by exclusion, but by harmony.”337 I believe this is the harmony as a legacy

335 Ibid., 2.
336 Ibid., 3.
337 Ibid., 13.
of their African slave identity and experience that the African American bishops seek to illuminate in *What We Have Seen and Heard*, and the gift that African Americans and as Catholics have to offer the Church. Uzukwu writes,

Gestures are symbolic codes. In worship, rituals and symbols are aspects of gestural behavior. The ritual action as a presentation of the community before god and spirits goes back to the ethnic group for its meaning—like all gestures. Insofar as ritual gestures involve bodily movement, they are particular; they thus display a particular ethnic pattern of interaction within the universe. The difference we noted between African and western attitudes toward the body and movement express this particularity. It shows that bodily motions are variously interpreted from one culture area to another. . . . Even at the deepest level of the experience of the mystery that life is to all of us (religion), the ritual expression of this mystery (whether verbal or nonverbal) remains particular.338

There are considerations for continued reflection on Uzukwu’s appropriation of West African worship. What additional insight might his conception of gesture and rhythm have towards the development of a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation and its underlying theme of the gift of Blackness—personhood? How might it be ritualized in the celebration of reconciliation? The treatment here of traditional African rituals and spirituality is certainly not intended to be exhaustive. Rather, it is a cursory acknowledgement of the value of this body of work towards the development of a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation and from a sacramental perspective. The purpose is to link the traditional African religious experience and spirituality with that of African Americans. It is a topic for additional research and incorporation in the development of this theological approach towards a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation.

3.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, theologians have argued for a new understanding of the Church’s penitential sacrament since the promulgation of the new Rites of Penance. The post-Vatican II rituals offer potential for reengagement of the faithful in acknowledging human sinfulness and God’s redemptive love for humanity. This is apparent, particularly, in the third rite for communal celebrations in that it reveals the social and ecclesia necessity for reconciliation. The value of the Rite of Penance is that it offers a variety of rituals for penitential celebrations. Even with the revised rite, the Church in the United States must still envision ways to reinvigorate laity in celebrating the sacrament of reconciliation and to have meaning in the life of the Church and its people. Richard Gula writes, “No amount of changing the ritual can altogether solve the problem. The roots of the problem lie deeper than rites. The quiet revolution is part of a larger problem of faith, God, Church, personal conversion, and more.”

Contemporary theologians suggest there is no longer the sense of “awe,” the awakening of one’s soul and inner conscience among laity for the practice of neither confession nor full understanding or appreciation of the rituals of reconciliation. Lacking is an understanding that reconciliation is not something that is done, but is lived. What is ritualized is an expression of what we live and practice with one another. “This means that the effective celebration of the sacrament depends on a heightened awareness of the need for reconciliation, and of participation in it throughout the whole of one’s life.”

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339 Gula, To Walk Together Again, 4.
340 Ibid., 15.
Reconciliation, then, is not a single moment, act nor event; rather it is a process with stages and dimensions.

A dimension of the reconciliation process is its importance in the on-going conversion of individuals and the Church. “Our challenge” according to Dallen, “is not so much to imagine new forms for reconciling sinners as it is to creatively call one another to deeper conversion. Such conversion is a process—not a program, not a ritual. It is a process intimately personal and deeply communal.”

If reconciliation is the desired effect or consequence in the on-going penitential conversion process, then attention must be given to the earlier stages that are just as beneficial, actually that are necessary—contrition and forgiveness. The Church’s primary focus is on individual confession; however, the Church must recapture and reemphasize the communal aspect as equally contributive of genuine reconciliation and its conversion process. H. Kathleen Hughes, RSCJ suggests, “And since it is each one of us who makes God tangible and who embodies, or not, the forgiving Christ, the quality of our own conversion and our common life will determine whom we call to conversion, whose friendship with God we nurture as well as whose experience of God we distort.” She questions, “Should we not develop a clear theological position about the ministry of each member of the community that recognizes our ambassadorial role that acknowledges and validates our human—religious experience that the need for reconciliation is ubiquitous and that the


responsibility for healing and care belongs to all?"343 In the next and final chapter of this inquiry, towards a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation, the communal dimension of reconciliation as a social phenomenon will be explored. The impetus for the communal aspect is the capacity for hope that girds human life in light of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The communal focus compels an examination of reconciliation as a virtue and spirituality. It raises several questions about how we are to embody reconciliation, strive for reconciliation amidst suffering and injustice, and the role of forgiveness in achieving human and social reconciliation.

343Ibid., 104.
Chapter 4

Towards a Black Catholic Theology of Reconciliation

4.1 Introduction

Chapter 4 will offer an additional perspective and contribution to the often overlooked and underappreciated pastoral letter, *What We Have Seen and Heard*, a significant and pivotal text within the compendium of pastoral letters in the Catholic Church in the United States.\(^{344}\) This chapter, *Towards a Black Catholic Theology of Reconciliation*, will develop a theological approach for reconciliation as a gift that African American Catholics have to offer the Church. The nature of God and the mission of Jesus, and their relationship to people of African descent, will help to shape the relevancy of a theology of reconciliation for African Americans, particularly for African American Catholics. Within this context, reconciliation is not just a desired endeavor between individuals or peoples; it is also a sacramental process ultimately directed towards God and mediated by Christ through the Holy Spirit working in and among African American Catholics. The African American bishops asserted that reconciliation is a gift that African Americans have to share with the universal Church and all peoples. This gift is a result of their unique historical experience as a people whose lives have been formed in the United States. This view in light of sacramental theology raises the question, “How can a people be a gift of reconciliation?”

The historical, cultural, and sacramental examination in the previous chapters was fundamental for the theological evolution of a Black Catholic theology of

\(^{344}\) In order to minimize the use of the abbreviation “ibid” in footnotes referring to the Pastoral Letter, the page number of the quoted Pastoral Letter text will be placed in parenthesis throughout the dissertation text.
reconciliation, thereby providing the foundation for its development. The African American bishops did not develop an epistemological approach on reconciliation in the pastoral document. However, one can postulate from their thesis a theological and pastoral praxis for further reflection and development. There are several foundational themes for this praxis that will be developed in light of the thesis for a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation. Freedom and liberation, forgiveness, love and grace and justice will provide the starting point for an expanded understanding of reconciliation within the context of Black Catholic theology.

This final chapter begins by situating J. Deotis Roberts’ Black liberation theology as pivotal for the development of a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation. His insightful contribution to the Black theology dialogue was addressed in Chapter 2. Significant for this chapter is his foundational treatise, *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology*. Roberts elevates the discussion by articulating an ethical model for Black liberation theology that connects liberation and reconciliation. His theological perspective will serve as the basis for the theological and pastoral praxis towards the development of a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation. Roberts’ methodology, which includes the lived experiences of African Americans, will serve as a paradigm for the development of a methodology. Therefore, Roberts’ theological scholarship is essential for this inquiry, especially in light of and as a response to the unique history and spiritual journey of African Americans and Catholics of African descent in the United States.
4.2. J. Deotis Roberts: Providing an Ethical Framework

Deotis Roberts unequivocally positions his Black liberation theology within Christian theology and ethics. His theological construct is distinguished from other Black liberation theologies of his era by its persuasive inclusion of an ethical context that connects Black liberation with reconciliation, an aspired virtue. As a theology of Black liberation and reconciliation, Jesus Christ, the liberator and reconciler, figures prominently. Roberts reminds us that “the liberating Christ is also the reconciling Christ. The one who liberates reconciles, and the one who reconciles liberates.”\textsuperscript{345} His ethical goal for Black theology is to bring about the social transformation of the life of African Americans so that they may claim their inherent human dignity. Black theology affirms this dignity rooted in liberation, justice and equity. It denounces the challenges that prevent African Americans from realizing their inherent human dignity and basic human rights.

For Roberts, African Americans must not only claim and embrace this solemn responsibility, they also must reject and challenge systemic racist values, beliefs, and structures that impede them, and other oppressed people, from realizing their full acclimation in American society. Roberts rejects Christian theology and religious interpretations that acquiesce to racist and exploitive beliefs that distort the gospel of Jesus Christ. He distinguishes between the faith instituted by Christ and the Christianity proclaimed and practiced by White Christians who misinterpret and support the racism and oppression of African Americans. His Black theology corrects the omissions and

misinterpretations that come from a White perspective of Christianity and Christian theology that justifies Black oppression and alienation, thus denying the liberation of African Americans and reconciliation with Whites.

Like many African American theologians, Roberts contends that all theology is contextualized, including Black liberation theology. Integrating theology and praxis, Roberts emphasizes the cultural aspects of African American liberation by positioning the context for Black theology distinctly in the Black religious experience. Therefore, Black theology must respond to the social, political, and religious conditions that affect African Americans. He identifies his theological construct as a “Black political theology,” defining it as a theology of power in which the synthesis of ethics and faith, and praxis and theology are used to express and address the institutionalization of racism in the social structures and other areas of American society, including the Christian church. While Roberts acknowledges that each faith has its confessional creed, theological nuances, and dogmas, his Black political theology is concerned with the situation of Black people in the world. Black theology, then, for African Americans is focused on mission and ministry. The mission of Jesus and his Church is to bring liberation, salvation, healing and equity to African Americans in such a way that their lives are transformed. He writes,

A people chosen of God is a people who have entered into a new understanding of their mission in the world. Instead of being victims of suffering, such people transmute suffering into victory. It becomes a rod in their hands to enter into a redemptive mission among themselves and others. . . . They enter into a “stewardship of suffering” with the “wretched of the earth.”346

346 Ibid., 26.
The social transformation and liberation occur through ministry. In turn, ministry provides the theological foundation for the praxis or action necessary for Black liberation from oppression and suffering. Roberts asserts, “It was to our credit that instead of hatred and revenge, our Christian faith enabled us to transmute suffering into many victories in our own lives and in the lives of other blacks and whites.” Since his initial treatise on Black theology, Roberts has noted his earlier oversight of attention to other theologies and oppressions from in developing nations, ethnic conflicts, and various feminist theologies. This includes applying his ethical theology to the environmental or ecological theological discussion, particularly in how it relates to African Americans.

Roberts raises concern about the concept of Black redemptive suffering and cautions African Americans on the continued use of the biblical imagery of chosenness as a people to explain the suffering. Like Anthony Pinn, he recognizes the value of a more comprehensive understanding of suffering that is independent of the Christian interpretation of suffering and redemption as application for the experience of African Americans. While Pinn looks to humanism as an alternative, Roberts’s visceral reaction is that of a Christian theologian who champions a Black theology that embraces African American chosenness in order to conceptually and experientially moves from suffering and victimization to victory. Chosenness by God, then, is not relegated to merely redemptive and passive submission; rather, it involves a new understanding of relationships to God as mission in the world and with others who are oppressed. Chosenness is not elitism. Instead, they are in communion with God and with other suffering people as God’s instrument.

A people chosen of God are a people who have entered into a new understanding

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347 Ibid., 17.
of their mission in the world. . . . It becomes a rod in their hands to enter into a redemptive mission among themselves and others. . . . Upon entering into a deeper understanding of how their own lives have been purged and purified by unmerited suffering, they become ‘a saving minority,’ instruments of God’s salvific purpose for all humans.\(^{348}\)

Roberts’s concept of choseness provides a context for the African American bishops’ statement citing African Americans as a gift and with gifts to share with the Church.

4.3 A Gift of African American Catholics to the Church

In the pastoral letter, *What We Have Seen and Heard*, the African American bishops present African Americans Catholics as a gift to the Church and as a people with valuable gifts to offer in building the kingdom of God. For Christians the gratuitous gift is grace, God’s self-communication of love to humanity. Grace, as gift, is Godself and the power of God moving and working in and through human nature through the gift of the Holy Spirit. God, who is the ultimate, perfect gift, offers other gifts so that human beings may come to know God and be joined with God. God’s gift is exemplified by divine eternal love manifested in creation. Grace is the saving love and power of God magnified in salvation and salvation history through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Church universal, the body of Christ, must be reflective of the people of God in order to maintain its universality. God’s love and grace are extended to people of every race, culture, ethnicity and nationality because they are members of the body of Christ. In order to be truly Catholic, the Church in the United States must welcome and embrace all persons. To deny anyone, is to deny the body of Christ. All are invited to the altar to share in the paschal sacrifice instituted by Christ in memory of his suffering.

\(^{348}\) Ibid., 26.
crucifixion and resurrection. It is the gift of grace that brings believers to the Eucharistic table of thanksgiving and where the gift of grace strengthens us to receive Christ and to go forth in love and service to one another.

4.3.1 Gift of Blackness

The bishops believe the overarching gift of African Americans is the gift of their Blackness, their racial heritage. Citing Pope Paul’s exhortation to African Catholics to give their gift of blackness to the Church, the bishops write, “We believe the Holy Father has laid a challenge before us to share the gift of our Blackness with the Church in the United States. (3) The bishops do not define or explain “blackness” other than to describe it theologically from the premise of Black Catholic theology. The image or essence of “blackness” is more than an anthropological reference. In this race conscious nation, racial identity to determine blackness was legislated. The determinant was not merely confined to the degree of the “darkness” or black melanin in the skin, but the amount of blood or length of descendants from a person of African descent.

According to Manning Marable, “‘Blackness’ in the cultural context is the expression and affirmation of a set of traditional values, beliefs, rituals, and social patterns, rather than physical appearance or social class position.” Therefore, the exclusive use of an ontological lens is not sufficient because blackness, while denoting race, is also an attitude, a way of living, and a consciousness of self in relation to White Americans, to African slave descendants, pan-Africanism, and circumstances based on historical realities. It can be discussed from various lens including existential and phenomenology.

For too long, the nature of what it means to be Black is projected against White or Eurocentric values and identity, which become the standards of goodness, beauty, giftedness, wholesomeness, purity, authentic, and godly. We need only recall the European fairytale drawings that are prominent in children’s literature. They portray and reinforce the notion of White purity, beauty, diligence, ingenuity, and superiority. Conversely, black (and blackness) is portrayed as evil, detrimental, and a problem to be corrected, avoided, legislated or eliminated. African Americans who internalize the negativity and judge blackness against the White paradigm do not see themselves or blackness as positive, joyful, graced, good or valued; rather as ugly and contemptuous. Those who rebel against these stereotypical images and values are often deemed arrogant and subject to scrutiny.

In the United States, the humanity of African Americans is intricately connected to “blackness,” their understanding and acceptance of blackness, whether they see it as a gift or curse, and how they contribute to society and to African Americans in light of their “black humanity.” Black humanity is expressed in the lived experience, which is a central theme in Black theology and liberation theology. In his article, “Blackness and the Quest for Authenticity,” Robert Birt writes,

I hold that blackness and whiteness are not equivalent, and that blackness (unlike whiteness) does not necessarily imply a denial of existential freedom. Blackness and whiteness are not equivalent because the situations of black and white people are not equivalent. . . . Abstracted from the historical, lived situations of the people themselves, blackness and whiteness are meaningless. Indeed human existence is not meaningful (or possible) void of the lived situation in which it happens.350

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Birt is not glorying the African American historical experiences over and above any other group of people. Rather, the experience of African Americans is significant in light of their development and lived historical experience. To deny it is to deny the presence of African Americans, to make them objects without meaning. Birt argues that,

Objects are not thought to seek a meaning, but to have meanings imposed by a subject. The seeking of a meaning is an act of transcendence, but this is what the black is denied. When black internalize this denial there is a devaluation of self, a loss of self. Is this not what Dr. King had in mind when he spoke of a “degenerating sense of nobodiness . . .?”

. . . The reclaiming of our human status as subjects, the liberating of repressed black transcendence, is an indispensable condition of black authenticity. 351

Birt, like Marable, avoids the ontological view of Blackness as the sole criteria for determining Blackness. He embraces an existential view in which Blackness is a choice, at least the option to consider oneself “Black” and to embrace the characteristics and historical lived experience of African Americans. The African American bishops exclaim that African American Catholics are “authentically black and truly Catholic.” Choosing blackness is being authentic, which according to Birt, “means that we embrace our freedom and the exalting privilege of responsibility it entails. It means that we embrace the ambiguities of our condition . . .” 352 I agree with Birt’s assessment about authenticity and transcendence when he says,

We can hardly reclaim our transcendence through an escape from blackness, at least not without running the risk of inauthenticity. If it is as blacks that our transcendence is denied, then it is at first as blacks that we ought to reclaim our transcendence. And as this reclaiming of our denied transcendence is a most essential condition of our being authentic, it is wholly fitting to describe it as a quest for black authenticity, or at least as existence in black. . . .

351 Ibid., 268.
352 Ibid., 267.
. . . Black authenticity would similarly mean choosing and affirming oneself as black, choosing and affirming solidarity and community with one’s black sisters and brothers, and affirming our legacy of struggle and the universal worth of liberating values emerging from that legacy.\textsuperscript{353}

A Black Catholic theology of reconciliation affirms “Blackness,” but recognizes that there may be African Americans who struggle or deny their blackness existentially and phenomenologically because of their lived experience that includes the history of an oppressed people. I agree with Birt that a denial of blackness is a denial of oneself, a denial of one’s humanity and therefore describes an inauthentic person. He is correct when he writes,

But blacks cannot affirm their denied humanity without affirming \textit{themselves}. We cannot affirm human transcendence or existence as such without affirming our own existence in black. Asserting our own existence need not mean negating the existence of others, or even our possible community with them.\textsuperscript{354}

Birt’s perspective of Blackness gives new meaning and emphasis to the African American bishops’ proclamation, “authentically black and truly Catholic.”

The African American bishops also speak of the challenge to be evangelizers embracing their gift of “Blackness,” and therefore want to write about this gift which is also a challenge. (3) A challenges has been the dehumanization of African Americans discussed in chapter one. Although there has been tremendous racial progress in American society and in the Church, the sin of racism is not, yet, fully eradicated from hearts, minds, and institutional structures. Acknowledgement of such gifts recognizes the Black experience as meaningful and significant, and elevates the African roots of Black people as a value that has enriched its people and is worthy to be shared with others.

\textsuperscript{353} Ibid., 270.

\textsuperscript{354} Ibid., 271.
Giftedness brings the obligation and challenge to love others as God loves us. The bishops lay the foundation for the richness of the Black experience as a gift of African Americans to share when they write,

There is richness in our Black experience that we must share with the entire People of God. There are gifts that are part of an African past. For we have heard with Black ears and we have seen with Black eyes and we have understood with an African heart. We thank God for the gifts of our Catholic faith and we give thanks for the gifts of our Blackness. In all humility we turn to the whole Church that it might share our gifts so that ‘our joy may be complete.’ . . . Just as we lay claim to the gifts of Blackness so we share these gifts within the Black community at large and within the Church. This will be our part in the building up of the whole Church. This will also be our way of enriching ourselves. (6)

The bishops’ affirmation of the giftedness of African American does not mean, nor do they suggest, that other racial and cultural groups do not also have gifts to enrich the Church.

African American Catholics are rooted in the universality of the Catholic Church. As mature members in the life of the Church, their participation brings responsibilities and challenges in sharing these gifts. African American Catholics embody God’s grace by using their gift of Blackness to benefit the Church and themselves. Therefore, they have a responsibility to evangelize themselves and to share the Good News to African Americans and all peoples. The Good News is not just the story of physical liberation; rather, it is the proclamation of the dignity of personhood elevated by the ability of free will to choose what is holy, the God of salvation. Evangelization, therefore, is a call to African American Catholics to claim their African racial heritage, their Blackness, as a gift for themselves and to enrich the Church, particularly in the United States.

As evangelizers, African American Catholics may testify to the divine grace as the saving power of God present in their ancestral history from the holding cells of the
Gold Coast of Africa through the Middle Passage and present life in the United States. As a people who longed for freedom from repressive powers, African American Catholics can proclaim the Advent proclamation, “Immanuel, God is with us.” As evangelizers, they can attest to the transformative power and love of the Holy Spirit, the grace of God, working in the lives of African Americans. In the faith experience of African Americans, grace, God’s revelation of Godself and God’s self-communicated love was embraced by Africans bound on ships for distance new lands; was felt in the “steal away moments” when slaves secretly gathered to offer laments, petitions and praise to the God of love and liberation; and was in the emancipation of newly freed slaves. God’s sanctifying grace was revealed in the gathering of African Americans in the churches established as places of worship and refuge from the oppression around them; and was revealed in the lives and sacrifices of the African American heroes and “she-ros” that helped to shape American society and its institutions. African American Catholics experienced divine love as they sat and prayed at Masses in special designated pews for “the colored.” Because of God’s love and grace. African Americans are transformed through the power of the Holy Spirit working within their lives and in the world to liberate, transform, and redeem humanity, especially the most vulnerable. It establishes the context for evangelization by African American Catholics for and to themselves.

While being authentic to their racial identity, the bishops explain that African American Catholics are called to share three invaluable secondary gifts with the Church: freedom, reconciliation, and spirituality. As previously discussed, people of African descent share common elements of African spirituality characterized by an internalization
of faith that is very personal, yet communal. Their belief in God is realized in prayer, emotive celebration of worship, in their physical response to the connection between God and person, and the personalization of God and faith. This understanding and appreciation of Black consciousness is important in *What We Have Seen and Heard*. African American Catholics have the same racial identity and consciousness as the general population of Africans Americans because they have a common history and culture that includes an African ancestry and the legacy of slavery, racism, and oppression in the United States.

4.3.2 Gift of Freedom

Freedom, reconciliation and spirituality are the gifts cited by the African American bishops that are shared by African Americans. While the bishops refer to freedom as one of the secondary gifts, it is also one of the four praxis or foundational themes for the development of a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation. It will be mentioned here, but given a more thorough review in the next section. The freedom that the African American bishops cite as a gift to share is not merely freedom from detainment or physical bondage; rather, it is an existential view of freedom. This particular understanding of freedom affects the conscious and unconscious relationship of African Americans to White Americans, their connection and view of the world, their judgment about themselves as a people, and their relationship with God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For African American Catholics, it affects their participation in the Church and the challenge to evangelize in terms of welcoming other African Americans into the Catholic Church.
Freedom and liberation demand truthfulness that is found only in and through Jesus as proclaimed in the Gospels. Jesus, who is both truth and freedom [liberator], leads believers to truth, freedom [liberation], and holiness. Specifically, the bishops refer to a spiritual freedom that is a gift from God. “Black people know what freedom is because we remember the dehumanizing force of slavery, racist prejudice and oppression. No one can understand so well the meaning of the proclamation that Christ has set us free than those who have experienced the denial of freedom. For us, therefore, freedom is a cherished gift. For its preservation, no sacrifice is too great.”(6) The social and historical experience of African Americans heightens the significance of this gift. From the earliest, freedom for the Black slaves was not just ontological. Their entire lives were consumed with how they might be free in spite of their physical bondage. James Cone writes,

While white religion taught blacks to look for their reward in heaven through obedience to white masters on earth, black slaves were in fact carving out a new style of earthly freedom. Slave religion was permeated with the affirmation of freedom from bondage and freedom-in-bondage. Sometimes black religious gatherings were the occasions for planning overt resistance. At other times the reality of freedom was affirmed in more subtle ways. The themes of liberation that ran through slave religion explains why slaveholders did not allow black slaves to worship openly and sing their songs unless authorized white people were present to proctor the meeting.355

The struggle for freedom is captured in Black or African American spirituals. A unique genre of American music,

The spirituals are historical songs, which speak about the rupture of black lives; they tell us about a people in the land of bondage, and what they did to hold themselves together and to fight back. . . . The spirituals enable blacks to retain a measure of African identity while living in the midst of American slavery, providing both the substance and the rhythm to cope with human servitude.356


356 Ibid., 30.
The spiritual, then is the spirit of the people struggling to be free; it is their religion, their source of strength in a time of trouble. . . . But the spiritual is more than dealing with trouble. It is a joyful experience, a vibrant affirmation of life and its possibilities in an appropriate esthetic form. The spiritual is the community in rhythm, swinging to the movement of life.357

Two spirituals considered to be freedom songs, and have hidden meanings, are “Wade in the Water” and “Steal Away.” Many scholars believe that “Wade in the Water” has two meanings with the first being a religious hymn that would go unnoticed by the slave master. The hidden meaning is actually an instruction to runaway slaves to use the rivers and creeks in their escape to avoid detection from the dogs used to find escaped fugitives. “Steal away to Jesus” might seem innocuous; but to the slaves it might indicate a clandestine meeting or gathering, or signal an imminent escape.

4.3.3 Gift of Reconciliation

The African American bishops speak of reconciliation as a gift and challenge, the primary premise for the development of a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation. They argue that any potential commitment for meaningful and sustainable reconciliation must include an understanding that “true reconciliation arises only where there is mutually perceived equality” (6) between and among peoples and groups. Justice is the requisite for this equality without which there could be no true reconciliation. In a sense, the bishops make justice a precondition for reconciliation. “Without justice, any meaningful reconciliation is impossible. Justice safeguards the rights and delineates the responsibility of all.” (7) Central to the theme of justice is the mutual respect and recognition that one must have for another. Reconciliation calls for African Americans to

357Ibid., 30.
reconcile with those who are or have been oppressors. The inference by the African American bishops is to White Americans and Catholics that they are to extend respect and justice to African Americans. In addition, African Americans are to respect themselves, which may be demonstrated by the appreciation and celebration of their own cultural identity through the lens of “Blackness.”

The effect of justice is liberation from which meaningful and sustainable reconciliation can emerge. The bishops write, “We seek justice, then, because we seek reconciliation, and we seek reconciliation because by the blood of Christ we are made one. The desire for reconciliation is for us a most precious gift, for reconciliation is the fruit of liberation. Our contribution to the building of the Church in America and in the world is to be an agent of change for both.” (7) Justice and liberation as a foundation for true reconciliation leads to Christian love. Christ, who is love and calls all to forgiveness is the supreme gesture of love.

While their inspired message of reconciliation, guided by liberation and justice, is directed to African American Catholics, the bishops judiciously move beyond the theological and social confines of the Black condition in the United States and the Church in America. They wisely connected the fruits of the gift of reconciliation, particularly justice and liberation, to the plight of those in developing countries who also seek justice and liberation. The bishops challenge African American Catholics to be “instruments of peace” which they call “the fruit of justice.” (7) African American Catholics, with knowledge of their unique history, are called to be active agents in seeking justice for the oppressed worldwide and to become agents of peace as bridge builders to reconciliation. The challenge the bishops present to African American Catholics, and to all Black
Americans, in light of the gift of reconciliation is one that connects their present reality with a painful past. “It is in chains that our parents are brought to these shores and in violence are we maintained in bondage. Let us who are the children of pain be now a bridge of reconciliation. Let us who are the offspring of violence become the channels of compassion. Let us, the sons and daughters of bondage, be the bringers of peace.” (4)

The road that proceeds from justice and freedom-liberation should move towards the horizon of reconciliation.

4.3.4 Gift of Spirituality

Spirituality is the third of the secondary gifts identified by the African American bishops. Perhaps this is the most recognizable of the gifts in that it is often visible and is portrayed in the celebration of worship. “The ‘spirituality’ of a people,” according to Peter Paris, “refers to the animating and integrative power that constitutes the principal frame of meaning of individual and collective experiences. Metaphorically, the spirituality of a people is synonymous with the soul of a people: the integrating center of their power and meaning.”358 A metaphor for African spirituality is that it “is never disembodied but always integrally connected with the dynamic movement of life.”359

The unique characteristics of African American spirituality and faith are because of their slave history in the United States. What is significant is that the African slaves formed a new religion and expressions of faith created from African and Christian religions? Paris supports modern scholarship, which maintains that


359 Ibid., 22.
Africans brought their world views with them into the diaspora and, as a result of their interaction with their new environments, their African worldviews were gradually altered into a new-African consciousness. As a result of the influence of traditional African cosmological thought on each, important continuities of moral thought and practice exist between African Christians in the diaspora and those on the continent. Further, both the African and African American appropriation of Christianity evidence a complex amalgam of religious and moral values drawn from both the African and Western cultural contexts.\(^{360}\)

Dwight Hopkins writes,

Though slaves did not have direct access to the specifics of their former African religious practices and beliefs, they did maintain some theological remains—religious Africanisms. Unfortunately, the European slave trade, the practice of mixing Africans from different villages, the prohibition by white people of the use of African languages, and the fading memories of succeeding slave progeny all served to dampen the vibrancy of a coherent African theology in slave thought. Nevertheless, enslaved Africans brought religious ideas and forces of theological habit with them to the “New World.\(^{361}\)

These perspectives recognize the contribution of African spirituality on the development of African American spirituality and worship. It supports the theory that what is understood and described as African American spirituality is influenced by the American experience.

African American Catholic spirituality shares cultural and spiritual traits with African Americans and others of African descent. The characteristics of African American spirituality are rooted in their African ancestry and formed by their unique American history. According to Paris,

Thus the condition of slavery did not cut them off from their ultimate source of meaning, God, who was the reservoir for all their religious and moral strivings. Hence, in spite of the massive pathological impact of three and one half centuries of inherited chattel slavery, the acculturation of the Africans to their new

\(^{360}\) Ibid., 24.

environment did not result in a total loss of their religious and moral understanding. On the contrary, Africans in the diaspora were able to preserve the structural dimensions of their spirituality: belief in a spirit-filled cosmos and acceptance of a moral obligation to build a community in harmony with all the various powers in the cosmos. The preservation of their spirituality under the conditions of slavery was an astounding accomplishment, due principally to their creative genius in making the Euro-American cultural forms and practices serve as vehicles for the transmission of African cultural elements.\textsuperscript{362}

The bishops offer four dimensions or characteristics to describe African American spirituality: contemplative, holistic, joyful, and communitarian.

4.3.4.1 Contemplative Dimension of Spirituality

The contemplative dimension is expressed by the value and awe of prayer, particularly spontaneous prayer found in the African American tradition. Shackled and oppressed, the African slaves and their descendants learned to rely on God for healing, liberation, and basic substance. Thus, in African American spirituality, prayer establishes and offers a way for intimacy with God who transcended the mundane conditions of life and the suffering of African Americans. The contemplative dimension presupposes the existence of God and the preeminence of the divine. Through the contemplative dimension, God is one with God’s people, in this case Black people. In prayer one surrenders oneself to God, which is in itself an act of liberation. Thus, one is empowered, sustained, and freed to face challenges and to answer God’s call, God’s gift of grace and salvation. Its eschatological hope is for a better life as human beings in the present time as well as in eternal life. Redeemed by the love of Christ, African Americans express their trust in God’s love and mercy through the contemplative dimension of the gift of spirituality.

\textsuperscript{362} Paris, \textit{Spirituality of African Peoples}, 35.
Visceral and emotive, prayer provides a powerful connection to the divine by a people who live precariously and as the marginalized. Prayer is expressive and anthropomorphic. Found throughout the prayer reservoir of African American spirituality, including its music, are vivid phases such as “Jesus is on the main line, tell him what you want;” “Jesus is a doctor;” and Thomas A. Dorsey’s prayerful moving hymn, “Precious Lord, Take My Hand.” Harold A. Carter, author of the *Prayer Tradition of Black People*, writes,

> The act of prayer in the Black tradition reflects a personal involvement that colors one’s total response to and expectations from life. This heritage of prayer is identifiable among Black people in language, style, imagery, and spirit. . . . [However,] impact of the Black prayer tradition has been so powerful that it has colored the life-style of this people and has surfaced as a pillar in support of all their efforts in liberation and community development.\(^{363}\)

Harold recalls a traditional African American prayer, “Lord, you snatched my soul from the gates of hell, you put a new song in my heart and a new word in my mouth, you gave me a mind to do right and a mind to pray right.”\(^{364}\) While Harold writes from the context of the Black Protestant Church, this tradition of prayer as a gift of African American spirituality is also the legacy of Black Catholics who share in the broader spirituality of African Americans. In a sense, African American Catholics are enriched and infused with two traditions, one that is characterized by African American spirituality and the other that is uniquely Roman Catholic.

### 4.3.4.2 Holistic Dimension of Spirituality

The holistic dimension is the second characteristic of African American

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\(^{364}\) Ibid., 61.
spirituality. By holistic the African American bishops mean the absence of dualism and highlight the richness in the African American faith experience.

Divisions between intellect and emotion, spirit and body, action and contemplation, individual and community, sacred and secular are foreign to us. In keeping with our African heritage, we are not ashamed of our emotions. For us, the religious experience is an experience of the whole human being—the feelings and the intellect, the heart as well as the head. Moreover, we find foreign any notion that the body is evil. We find our own holistic spiritual approach to be in accord with the Scriptures and the logic of the Incarnation.” (8)

The holistic dimension is best observed in predominately African American churches, both Catholic and Protestant. It, too, is rooted in the shared African past. It describes the African American experience and concept of personal and intimate faith with God and with community. The essential characteristic is the emotive dimension often associated with African American worship. It symbolizes the anthropologic connection between African Americans and the transcendent God in their present lives. So powerful and joyful is the knowledge and experience of God’s grace that the heart must be affected, not solely one’s intellect.

4.3.4.3 Joyful Dimension of Spirituality

Joy is the third dimension. “Joy is a hallmark of Black Spirituality. Joy is first of all celebration. Celebration is movement and song, rhythm and feeling, color and sensation, exultation and thanksgiving.” (9) Joy is linked to the holistic dimension whereby it is clearly observed in worship, usually in music. This characterization of African American worship, although often stereotyped by the media and the entertainment industry, is what defines the style of African American worship from that of White Churches. Often, it is incorrectly called “Baptist” or “Baptist style” as though it is unique to them and foreign to African Americans of other Christian denominations,
including African American Catholics.

Joy comes from profound Trinitarian faith and the gratuitous work of the Holy Spirit. It, also, expresses faith. Throughout their history, African Americans have had much in which to despair. Yet, in the midst of oppression and suffering, as a result of slavery and centuries of racial discrimination, they have been a people of profound and expressive joy and hope. The joy did not condone suffering; nor, is it a result of suffering. Rather, it transcends the oppression and is a sign of hope and deep abounding faith that God, who is one with God’s suffering people, also hears their cries and mourning. According to the African American bishops, “It is never an escape from reality, however harsh it may be. Indeed this joy is often present even in the midst of deep anguish and bitter tears.” (9) The eschatological vision according to Paris,

enabled Africans in the diaspora not to view heaven merely as a distant reality far removed from historical experience. Rather, the Christian slaves maintained certain aspects of their fore parents’ understanding of a sacred cosmos wherein the three realms of reality (namely, nature, history, and spirit) are united. For certain, that harmony occurred in the realm of spirit. Thus the slave Christianity viewed heaven as the locus of harmony manifested in the experience of freedom: the community of peace and justice (that is, goodwill) and the fruit of their lifelong hopes and dreams.\(^{365}\)

The African American bishops connect the gift of joy to evangelization. “If the message of evangelization is the ‘Good News’ about Jesus, we must react to it with joy.” (10) Evangelization is a central theme for the bishops. In the pastoral letter, they call their Black brothers and sisters to the task of evangelization in writing, “Evangelization is both a call and a response. . . . “Evangelization means not only preaching but witnessing; not only conversion but renewal; not only entry into the community but the building up

\(^{365}\text{Paris, Spirituality of African Peoples, 47.}\)
of the community; not only hearing the Word but sharing it.” (2) The African American bishops are very clear that their call to evangelization is a call to a Black people whom, in and through their Blackness, are called to share their gifts with the larger Catholic Church in America. These gifts include the gift of Blackness as found throughout Black history, culture, and spirituality. The bishops warn that sharing the gift of Blackness is also a challenge to African American Catholics, in which they are to embrace and to share with the Church.

In light of the task of evangelization and the marred history of the Catholic Church in the United States towards African Americans, the bishops’ inclusion of joy as a gift is very insightful. Indeed, the gift of joy will be significant in understanding a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation. As a gift of African American Catholics and their Black brothers and sisters, joy is expressed in many ways, as both inward and outward manifestations of one’s spirituality. In this context, joy is an intrinsic virtue, and thereby signifies something much more than outward signs of happiness or frivolity. Rather, joy expresses the effect of a relationship with the loving and forgiving God. The African American bishops write,

One who is joyful is impelled to love and cannot hate. A joyful person seeks to reconcile and will not cause division. A joyful person is troubled by the sight of another’s sadness. A joyful person seeks to console strives to encourage and brings to all true peace. Such is the gift so clearly needed in our time. Such is the gift that Jesus passed on to us on the evening he died. (10)

4.3.4.4 Communal Dimension of Spirituality

The fourth dimension of African American spirituality suggested by the bishops is community. Paris connects the gifts of joy and community by stating, “In the experience of joyful worship they sought to give full expression to this vision, and it became the
moral norm for their communal life. Since authentic worship reflects the life of the people and their pressing needs, African peoples have always viewed the political struggle for freedom as mirrored in their worship.\textsuperscript{366} The African American bishops emphasize the African concept of the communal “we” versus the individuality of “I” in which the community is to benefit from individual aspirations and where one’s identity is formed from within the community. This concept is similar to John Mbiti’s concept of the African individual’s consciousness of self: “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.”\textsuperscript{367} For African American, the concept of community has been pivotal in the development of their identity and consciousness. Historically, African Americans have placed great value on the notion of community in which history and culture are conveyed generationally, social norms are promoted, and faith is lived. Church and family are two important institutions that support the community. Worship and prayer are significant aspects of the communal experience. The African American bishops write, “Worship must be shared. Worship is always a celebration of community. No one stands in prayer alone. One prays and acts within and for the community.” (10)

It is within the context of community that the African American bishops locate justice. They write, “Community, however, means social concern and social justice. Black Spirituality never excludes concern for human suffering and other peoples concerns.” (10) An over extended focus on the “I” or the individual may lead to self-centeredness, selfishness, and a diminutive view of community and its significance. This can give rise to social upheaval, suffering, oppression, and the devaluing of those within

\textsuperscript{366} Ibid., 47.

and outside the community. A Black Catholic theology of reconciliation also must focus on the communal, rather than merely a personal expression of reconciliation. This theological position begins with individual attitudes and responses, and an understanding of the redemptive nature of the Christ event. The question and challenge for the development of a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation is not simply about offenses made to individual African Americans. Rather, the underlying premise involves the historic institutional suppression of a people based on the color of their skin and justified through institutional racist ideology, practices, and laws.

“Family,” according to the African American bishops, “is the heart of the human community.” (11) African Americans have never viewed family as merely the nuclear family. For family, according to the bishops is “the extended family—grandparents, the uncles and aunts, the godparents, all those related by kinship or strong friendship. This rich notion of family was not only part of an African tradition but also was our own African-American experience.” (11) The bishops speak of the erosion of the African American family. The Church, through the local parish and the community, are significant in the life of the African American Catholic family where social justice, forgiveness, reconciliation, and love are taught and affirmed. Although the African American family has been challenged in recent years, it is still seen as a major supportive institution that is the basis for the African American family in the United States. While these challenges have had a significant impact upon the family, the challenges have not completely destroyed institution of family or the sense of community.

The African American bishops proclaim that African Americans have gifts to share with the Church, thereby signifying their role as leaders to themselves and within
the Catholic Church in the United States. Their gifts of Blackness, freedom, reconciliation, and spirituality are inclusive, gifts given by God to bring others to Christ. In addition, while unique to African Americans, they are gifts to enrich the Catholic Church.

4.4 Foundational Themes as Praxis

As previously noted, there are four foundational themes that are essential to the development of an ethical Black Catholic theology of reconciliation. Using the Black bishops’ pastoral letters as a framework, the themes of love, justice, freedom-liberation, and forgiveness will provide a theological perspective that will shape the discussion. The bishops express that “sincere reconciliation builds on mutual recognition and mutual respect. On this foundation can be erected an authentic Christian love.” (7) Love and justice are intricately linked for any meaningful and enduring reconciliation. The discussion on forgiveness will lead to the quintessential thesis on reconciliation. Each praxis is a fundamental link to the faith, well begin and survival of people of African descent in the United States who often continue to live in the shadows of marginalization, exploitation, and victimization.

4.4.1 Love

Without love, there is no reconciliation. As complementary virtues, love and justice are roadmaps to reconciliation. “By taking the initiative, love does something to justice; it energizes, sensitizes, and guides justice. Yet justice also affects love by giving it direction, protection, and structure.”

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the cosmos out of love. God’s love for humanity is equitable and everlasting. It is the reflection for how we are to love God, one another, and ourselves. Old Testament scripture resounds with the obligation to love and act with justice as requisites for fidelity to the covenant, which also means love of God and just relations among themselves. The prophets Amos and Micah provide a social criticism in their day for justice and righteous behavior that influence Jews and Jewish life. The prophets rebuke them for their lapse in moral actions towards one another primarily because it diminished their covenantal relationship with God. “You have been told, O mortal, what is good, and what the LORD requires of you: Only to do justice and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8) God’s love motivates and empowers the Hebrew people to act justly.

Justice makes love concrete by establishing conditions that help to foster their relationships with God and prohibit actions that mitigate the divine relationship. Justice specifies responsibilities and establishes boundaries. Love calls person to love God with all their heart, mind, and soul; justice prohibits them from loving false gods. Love commands individuals to love their neighbor, justice specifies how they should love them and helps love set priorities, such as caring first for those with the greatest need. What, then, is love? Paul Wadell offers a concise, definitive explanation of love: “God is love. And we should be too.”

He asserts,

. . . We are loved and we are called to love. We are created from love; exist because we are loved; and find joy, depth, peace, and fulfillment in loving and being loved. . . . Love is not one virtue among others for Christians; it is the animating principle for the entire Christian life. . . . Love is the lifeline to God, to or deepest selves, to the hearts and souls of others, and to the heart and soul of the world. Love is not only each of us at our best; it is what all of us have been both.

into existence to do.\textsuperscript{370}

God’s love cannot be bought, earned, or negotiated. Love, as well as faith and hope, is a theological virtue. 1 Corinthians 13 positions love as the greatest of the three. As such, virtues are habitual, internal qualities that guide and empower human persons towards God, who is the object of the virtue. Aquinas argued that the trajectory of the theological virtues is God. Supernatural in nature, they are infused moral virtues that are given or infused directly by God in one’s soul to help human beings live a life in union with God. Wadell expresses,

Love is the language of God. Language each of us was spoken and it is the language we are called to learn. . . .

God gave the world hope when the divine word of love was spoken in Jesus and took flesh in our world. That word has to be heard, received, and taken to heart by each of us if the joy God wants for us is to be ours. Our task is to become eloquent in God’s language or love, so articulate with the word we call Jesus that we bring that word to life in everything we do.\textsuperscript{371}

God’s divine love, or grace, is at the heart of New Testament theology. It is revealed in and through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the incarnate word of God. “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14) The word of God is love. Jesus is the enfleshment, the embodiment of God’s word. Jesus is love. The love of God is revealed in and through the life and teachings of Jesus Christ who is also the criterion by which human beings are to love one another. Grace signifies God’s self-communication to human beings and God’s offer of the ultimate, perfect love,

\textsuperscript{370} Ibid., 201.
\textsuperscript{371} Ibid., 202.
Godself. As gift, grace is both the offer of God’s love and the effect of that love on humanity. While it is a gift, it requires a response of acceptance or rejection. Our acceptance of God’s grace is our participation in the moral life with God and all humanity. The transformative power of grace is actualized in this relationship to God as Father and Jesus Christ as the crucified and resurrected Son sustained by the Holy Spirit.

The Christian love described is the New Testament is the Greek form of love, agape. Agape is love unmerited, freely given by God called grace. James Hanigan writes, agape has the primacy of place morally in all our relationships precisely because it is love, as a theological virtue, which is the inner shaping force of all other virtues.  

Distinguishing agape from other forms of Greek love, Hanigan notes,

> It is at work in human beings insofar as God has poured out his Holy Spirit into their hearts, enabling them to love one another with his own love. Agapaic love, therefore, is an enabling, transforming power in the life of the individual person; it is a power which enables one to act freely and deliberately, and not merely to feel a certain way.\(^{373}\)

Human beings are called to love as God loves; however, as finite, imperfect beings are incapable of the totality of agape love as God is, reveals, and extends to human beings.

Hanigan describes three characteristics of Christian agape. The first characteristic describes agape as “free, a gift, or in the language of theology, a grace. . . . Human beings are capable of this form of love only because God has first loved them and redeemed them in Christ, only because something has first been done to them and for them.”\(^{374}\)

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\(^{373}\) Ibid., 149.

\(^{374}\) Ibid., 149.
magnanimous love of other is expressed in the second characteristic: “. . . It is unmotivated by any quality or function in the object of love. . . . God does not love in response to the beauty or the goodness of his creatures. Instead, God creates that beauty and goodness by loving his creatures into being. God’s reasons for loving are to be found in himself, not in the objects of his love.” 375 Human beings are not capable of the superlative love described in this characteristic of agape. It is unselfish love and caring for the well-being others without any expectation of being loved in return but given simply because the other shares in the dignity and image of God. “It is rather a love exemplified perfectly in the parable of the good Samaritan (Lk.10:29-37). The third distinctive characteristic of agape is that it is a forgiving, redeeming love.” 376 Scholars emphasize that God’s love in the form of agape and experience as grace cannot be reduced to pensive naivety. Its object is God, rather than human nature, desires, and motivations.

What does Roberts’s Black theology, as a theology of humanization and survival, have to say about Christian love? Essential for his ethical theology, Christian love and reconciliation are the major tenets of Black theology and encapsulate the ethical and moral teachings of Jesus. Intrinsically linked to justice, liberation, and forgiveness, love calls African Americans, who live in the shadows of marginalization, exploitation, and victimization, to active engagement among themselves for their own internal survival. Reconciliation and love are necessary for a transformative Christianity that moves beyond the correction of theological omissions and misinterpretations about African

375 Ibid., 150.
376 Ibid., 151.
Americans. In describing what love does, Roberts writes, “love heals the brokenness between persons, it overcomes estrangements, and it brings people together—it reconciles.”

Love, as a moral imperative is, therefore, a condition of his Black theology for African Americans and White Americans. The challenge for African Americans begins with themselves, self-love, which is necessary for their own spiritual, mental, and psychological liberation from the history of racism, discrimination, and oppression. It is an indispensable prerequisite for the ability to sincerely love others, including other Blacks with dignity and respect. This is part of the Black healing process that Roberts recommends. In addition, Roberts writes, “Love is compassion. Loves is redemptive. Love contains self-respect. It gives one a real appreciation for the dignity of others.”

Love and God are indistinguishable with Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection as the supreme acts of love. For Roberts, this unmitigated act of love elevates human love for one another to a new level of commitment that is intensified with justice, respect, equity and appreciation for the other. God’s love points to the divine creation in which human beings have innate dignity and are called to holiness. God’s love, an ethical love from the heart that binds human beings together as brothers and sisters, equates with justice and forgiveness. God’s perfect love is the paradigm for the human love of one another. Roberts writes, “The love ethic must have a human dimension as well as a divine dimension. In its application, we as human beings must be laborers together with God.

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377 Roberts, Liberation, 44.

378 Ibid., 44.
for a just social order.”

4.4.2 Justice

Without justice, there is no reconciliation. As praxis for the methodology for a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation, justice will offer an important perspective to the dialogue. The history of African Americans means that justice must be one of the core foundational themes. Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. understood the ubiquitous and injurious nature of injustice. In his infamous “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” he wrote, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” Justice is a fundamental element of Christianity and central in Catholic theology, particularly as reflected in Catholic social teaching.

Undoubtedly, for many Americans, and perhaps globally, the first consideration of justice is from a legal perspective. However, there are numerous definitions and types of justice. The primary focus of justice for this body of work is social justice that includes an aspect of racial justice. The Black bishops explain that reconciliation emerges from justice that “safeguards the rights and delineates the responsibilities of all.”

The Hebrew Scriptures apply the justice concept to both God and the people of Israel. The covenant established by God between God and the Jewish people is the primary is the central focus of the Old Testament. The covenantal relationship is not only between God and his chosen people, but also dictates the right relationship the Hebrew

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people have with one another and with creation. Fidelity, then, means faithfulness to the sacred covenant relationship. “God is just because God always acts as God should, is invariably faithful to God’s promises. Justice is an intrinsic equality manifest in relation to human beings; God’s justice is revealed in saving deeds.”381 In the relationship with the Jewish people, God called them to faithfulness, trust and obedience. The nurture of God’s justice is not merely because God is omnipotence, but from the fact that God is faithful to the promises God made to Abraham and his descendants.

Another way of phrasing it: Justice, for the Jew, was not a question simply, or primarily, of human deserving, of human law. The Jews were to give to others what they themselves had been given by God, were to act toward one another and toward the stranger as God had acted toward Israel—and precisely because God had acted this way. Their justice was to image not the justice of woman and man but he justice of Yahweh.382

Justice is not one-dimensional; it is multidimensional; although all justice extends from God who is righteous and just.

The communal focus of justice extends to the New Testament where Jesus, who is just and righteous, articulates and epitomizes a new covenant. Justice in the new covenant is the command to love—love of God and neighbor. Jesus links justice and love. To love God is to love one’s neighbor. Justice is both what is received and what is given in obedience to the love command and in right relationship to God through Jesus. It is connected to one’s own behavior, attitude and actions. To be just is to follow Christ and to love as he loves us. Jesus often uses parables to preach and teach about justice, which is primarily about relationships, communal. He admonishes, affirms, heals,

382 Ibid., 11.
protects and forgives in defense of justice. Divine justice in the New Testament is connected to salvation. Salvation comes through Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God, who has redeemed all humanity. Free will allows human beings to accept or reject the gratuitous gift of salvation and grace by which one is justified with God through Christ. God’s love is the source or power that motivates and brings about divine justice.

Justice as a moral virtue contributes to the Catholic social tradition and its ethical teachings. Building upon Catholic theology that affirms the relational bond between God and human beings and interdependence between human beings individually, communally and socially, the Church identifies three types of justice: commutative, distributive, and social. Commutative justice describes the reciprocity between individuals, companies or parities outside the political arena when engaging in contractual or legal transactions. Distributive justice involves the common good of society by fostering a just relationship between persons and public entities. By nature of their participation and membership in society, each person has a right to equitably receive from or share in the common goods that are the rights, services, opportunities and productions of the community.

A key term of Catholic social teaching, distributive justice protects the common good by insisting that all persons have a right to some share in the basic goods and services of a society, goods such as adequate food and housing, education, medical care, employment and a fair wage, and opportunities for advancement. And they have a right to goods that are essential for human beings even if they are unable to directly contribute to society.\footnote{Wadell, \textit{Happiness}, 230.}

Because of racism, distributive justice was often denied to African Americans in the United States through its social, political, religious and civic institutions. While the legal challenges and changes in attitudes have allowed African Americans a greater sense of
distributive justice, this form of justice still eludes too many African Americans, along with other marginalize in American society based on race, language, economics and abilities.

Social justice, the third type, refers to the responsibility and obligation of every member of society to create, contribute and protect the common good for all, especially the most vulnerable. The basis of this interaction in the common good and the creation of a just society is love for God and one another. For social justice to be operative, members of the community or society must not only care about the overall well-being of the entire community or society, they must commit in action, behavior, and rhetoric to make it just so that all are afforded the same opportunities and fundamental rights.

Social justice reminds us that justice does not end when our personal rights are secured and our own good is honored, but only when the good of all person is secured. And it especially reminds us that just societies depend on just person, persons who see beyond their own needs, security, and comfort to the welfare of all citizens of the world, and who remember that justice is not only about personal rights, but also about social responsibilities. 384

It recognizes that all human beings are brothers and sisters to one another because they are created in the image of God; and, they reflect God’s love in their responsible participation in the common good. “It also calls for all members of the community to be treated in accord with their dignity as members of a human community. This means recognizing that the ability to contribute is significantly shaped by the structures of community interdependence.” 385 The Black bishops recognize this form of justice in

384 Ibid., 233.

asserting that Black Catholics have shared in the formation of the Catholic Church since the beginning of Christianity and specifically in the Church in the United States. They recognize the same contribution of African American in the development of the United States. In addition, they understand that African Americans have a responsibility to the common good of the Church, the United States, and globally. David Hollenbach writer,

In the terminology used here, social justice requires an overall institutional framework that will enable people both to participate actively in building up the common good and to share in the benefits of the common good. . . . For social justice to become a reality, however, the social frameworks that enable individuals to contribute to and benefit from these community attainments must themselves be just.386

With African Americans still subject to racial prejudice and at the bottom of the social strata, social justice in particular offers a viewpoint for the discussion of justice and reconciliation. However, the communities and distributive also contribute to the development of the theological praxis. Justice requires that institutions and their structures that protect, induce or permit inequalities and injustices be challenged, dismantled or reformed.

Without justice there is no true reconciliation. If freedom or liberation is denied, then justice is absent. Often there is a leap to reconciliation with disregard for the conditions that transpired to warrant the reconciliation. Justice is empowering and transformative work that lifts up those who experience injustice and affirms those who offer and work for justice. Justice recognizes injustice and opens the door to the possibility of hope. It allows for any healing that is crucial for reconciliation. “It is not possible to conceptualize reconciliation apart from justice, and one cannot be a justice-

386 Ibid., 201.
seeking person without an ongoing practice of reconciliation. . . . Reconciliation as a social, political and theological virtue is within the parameter of justice." Justice, therefore, is a path to reconciliation and peace. If the ultimate goal of reconciliation is peace, then Pope Paul VI message is pertinent today.

If you want Peace, work for Justice. It is an invitation which does not ignore the difficulties in practising Justice, in defining it, first of all, and then in actuating it, for it always demands some sacrifice of prestige and self-interest: Perhaps more greatness of soul is needed for yielding to the ways of Justice and Peace than for fighting for and imposing on an adversary one's rights, whether true or alleged. We have such trust in the power of the associated ideals of Justice and Peace to generate in modern man the moral energy to actuate them, that we are confident of their gradual victory. Indeed we are even more confident that on his own modern man has an understanding of the ways of peace, sufficient to enable him to become a promoter of that Justice which opens those ways and sets people travelling them with courageous and prophetic hope.

The complementary of justice is love. Love awakens and strengthens one’s fortitude to recognize and act with justice.

4.4.3 Freedom-Liberation

Without freedom, liberation, there is no reconciliation. The gospel is the Good News of freedom, liberation. Often, freedom and liberation are used synonymously. Freedom connotes having a choice, the ability to choose, or the state of being free. St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas described freedom in relation to God who is freedom and offers freedom. In their schema, freedom is choosing the good, who is God. Freedom, therefore, is doing what one ought to do or can do, which is understood and

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found through divine knowledge. In contrast, liberation has the same root as liberty and means to set free or liberate. A subtle distinction is that liberation is often used socially or politically to express the ability to be set free or to act requiring the consent or authority of someone else. Some theologians and theological documents, including the compendium of Church writings, use the two terms interchangeably. Often freedom is cited as freedom “from, to, of” in reference to human rights, the exercise of free will and remission from sin; with liberation used in conjunction with themes such as salvation and redemption. What We Have Seen and Heard uses them interchangeably, whereas Roberts denotes a difference between the two terms in his theological construction of a Black theology. He writes, “It is obvious that I could speak of ‘freedom’ instead of ‘liberation.’. . . Liberation is revolutionary—for blacks it points to what ought to be. Black Christians desire radical and rapid social change in America as a matter of survival. Black theology is a theology of liberation.”

Both terms and their derivatives are used interchangeably in this research without inference to any particular theological or philosophical variance between the two words.

The Black bishops situate the freedom-liberation concept within the context of scripture and the gospel exaltation of the Good News of Jesus Christ. They note the historical experience of African Americans that involve the denial of freedom and basic human rights and privileges. From the historical reality, the bishops propel the reader to the ontological nature of freedom as the ultimate gift from God manifested in the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. They write, “Black people know what freedom is because we remember the dehumanizing force of slavery, racist prejudice and oppression. No one

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389 Roberts, Liberation, 8.
can understand so well the meaning of the proclamation that Christ has set us free than those who have experience the denial of freedom.” (6) Freedom, therefore, is not merely about rights, privileges, and choices; but rather, it speaks of personhood and relationship to God oriented through the eschatological mission of Jesus.

Human beings have the freedom to act, to choose, but that freedom is based on one’s dependence on God. The *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation* provides a description of a free person and the obstacle to human freedom.

. . . “What does being free mean?” . . . A person is free when he is able to do whatever he wishes without being hindered by an exterior constraint and thus enjoy complete independence. The opposite of freedom would therefore be the dependence of our will upon the will of another.

. . . Thus the obstacle which opposes his will does not always come from outside, but from the limits of his own being. This is why, under pain of destroying himself, man must learn to harmonize his will with his nature.390

Human beings are finite creatures endowed with the image of God and called to holiness. Although finite, God gives them the freedom to choose God and the moral good or the volition to alienate themselves from God. Obdurate and egotistical, human beings obscure their relationship with God through sin. The adage, “we are our own worst enemy” has a ring of truth. Liberation comes from the freedom to seek the truth, which is God and God’s call to holiness. Jesus Christ liberates human beings from the dire consequences of sin bringing salvation to a world desperately in need of hope and love that can only come from God, the creator of all humanity. “Through His cross and resurrection, Christ has brought about our redemption, which is liberation in the strongest sense of the word, since it has freed us from the most radical evil, namely sin and the

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power of death.”

The Black bishops express a communal dimension of freedom, writing, “And we are accountable for the gift of freedom in the lives of others. We oppose all oppression and all injustice, for unless all are free, none are free.” (6) The freedom they assert is not solely for individuals; rather, it is communal and not just declared for African Americans, but for all who are oppressed and in need of liberation. In obtaining liberation the oppressed are free from external constraints and the oppressors are free from internal exigencies. A Black Catholic theology of reconciliation recognizes the importance of community whether the value is theological, pastoral or social. Since human beings do not live in isolation from and are part of a historical reality, freedom and liberation point to God’s participation in history and a teleological lens towards the future. “Furthermore, every individual is oriented towards other people and needs their company. It is only by learning to unite his will to the others for the sake of true good that he will learn rectitude of will.”

In obtaining liberation, human beings have a responsibility to one another and how the freedom is used. Especially in situations of oppression, alienation, abuse, and violence, the obtained freedom must not lead way to retribution upon the oppressor or offender. The Black bishops write, “Hence, freedom brings responsibility. It must never be abused, equated with license nor taken for granted. Freedom is God’s gift, and we are accountable to him for our loss of it. And we are accountable for the gift of freedom in the lives of others.” (6)

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391 Ibid., 2.
392 Sacred Congregation, Instruction, 15.
Roberts discusses liberation from the perspective of Black liberation theology and towards reconciliation. He argues that liberation for African Americans must precede reconciliation. Liberation, therefore, is not merely the freedom to act or the absence of barriers; but is also existential. While not in the same context as African Americans, liberation for Whites means that in order to live authentically as Christians, they must free themselves from the negativity of what and how they think about African Americans. They must challenge and correct the information and misinterpretations that abound about African Americans, especially as members of the Christian family. Existentially for African Americans, liberation begins with addressing what Roberts call the unauthentic existence of Black Christians. He writes, “Black Christians who have passively accepted the blunt end of the misinterpretation and malpractice of white Christians have also lived an unauthentic existence. It is the goal of a worthy Black Theology to lead both blacks and whites to an authentic Christian existence.”

According to Roberts, Black theology is a theology of liberation that calls the Christian Church to manifest in work and action its internal beliefs that the Church, through Christ, is both liberator and liberating. For African Americans, the Black church has historically been the locus of that liberation and where liberating protest began. Liberation springs from protest—protest in the sense of non-acceptance of denigrating and racial, social, political and religious norms that repress African Americans. Protest for African Americans is refusing to embrace cognitively and spiritually the defeating racial self-hatred that is a debasing residual of racism. Roberts challenges African Americans to move from victimhood of suffering to the victory of liberation. He writes,

393 Roberts, Liberation, 7.
Much that we have undergone has been a result of ‘human inhumanity’ an does not arise out of a Christian understanding of God’s providence. This is the cross of our experience that we must be rid of. At the same time, we seek to transmute suffering into victory; we must strive to transcend suffering that we as individuals and as a people may know that the liberty of children of God here as well as hereafter. At the same time that we seek reconciliation through our role as suffering servants, we are to seek liberation from suffering stemming from being black in a white world. Once again our Christian faith as a search for the making of life and as a protest against unjust and inhuman treatment is justified. 394

Liberation through Jesus’ paschal sacrifice brings salvation. Where there is a regard for the freedom-liberation of another, there is denial of the human dignity others and God’s gratuitous love in the incarnation of Jesus. As such, there is a denial of God and a refusal to see and acknowledge the image of God in each human being. What then does freedom or liberation have to offer in the development of a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation? Without freedom, liberation there will be no genuine reconciliation.

4.4.4 Forgiveness

Without genuine forgiveness, there can be no reconciliation. Chapter 2 was a review of the sacramentality of forgiveness through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Forgiveness in this discussion will focus on the experience and process of forgiveness as a necessary condition towards reconciliation. A praxis for a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation, forgiveness is closely intertwined with love, justice, and freedom. Understanding the process from wrongness and sin to forgiveness is essential for movement towards a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation. The African American bishops wrote in What We Have Seen and Heard, “The Gospel message is a message that liberates us from hate and calls us to forgiveness and reconciliation.”(6) Forgiveness offers healing and hope for reconciliation.

394 Ibid., 27.
Jesus is the preeminent model of forgiveness. The Church provides the means by which to ritualize, theologize, and pastorally provide for the individual and communal expressions of forgiveness and reconciliation. God, the source of forgiveness, welcomes all humanity to be in relationship with the divine. God’s merciful love frees us from the bondage of sin and infidelity to God and to one another. God’s forgiveness is an acknowledgment of the sinful nature of human beings who are created in God’s image. Through the crucifixion, Jesus Christ embodies God’s forgiveness and love for all humanity. As the embodiment of forgiveness, Jesus is both the exemplar of forgiveness and the means by which sinners seek God’s forgiveness and offer of redemption. The Church established by Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit may be holy, but the people of God, who are the Church, are imperfect beings called to holiness. Thus, the Church as the people of God, are in need of God’s forgiveness, and simultaneously, is also the means by which God’s forgiveness is obtained. In *Embodying Forgiveness*, Gregory Jones argues that,

> . . . the forgiving grace of Jesus Christ gives people a new perspective on their histories of sin and evil, of their betrayals and their being betrayed, of their vicious cycles of being caught as victimizers and victims, so that they can bear to remember the past well in hope for a new future. But this is not simply a release from the past; it is also freedom for holiness, a holiness that requires prophetic protest and action directed at any situations where people’s lives are being diminished or destroyed. Paradigmatically, such forgiveness in the pursuit of holiness is embodied through the practices of Christian community. That is, the new life of holiness signified by baptism is found and lived in communities of God’s Kingdom: People learn to embody forgiveness by becoming part of Christ’s Body.395

May an individual express sorrow on behalf of others? The problem is that it may not lead to reconciliation because members of the institution may not support nor agree

with its institution or organization’s position; nor will every African American want to forgive. Similarly, when a member of an institution or organization discriminates, it does not mean that all members are discriminatory. The institution’s policies, structures, and procedures must be examined to determine the level of institutional complicity. Interestingly, the Jewish understanding of forgiveness only recognizes the person who has been wronged as the one who is able to accept or reject the contrition of the offender. There are Jews who are vehement that only a survivor of the Holocaust has the right to forgive those involved in the atrocities. The Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in South Africa and Rwanda provided a process by which the violators of moral decency could offer contrition and the victims of apartheid and genocide could face the accused and possibly extend their forgiveness. South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu who supported the Truth Commissions argued, “Does the victim depend on the culprit’s contrition and confession as the precondition for being able to forgive? There is no question that, of course, such a confession is a very great help to the one who wants to forgive, but it not absolutely indispensable. Jesus did not wait until those who were nailing him to the cross and asked for forgiveness.”

Christian theology embraces the possibility of vicarious contrition and forgiveness because of the mission, passion and resurrection of Jesus. During his ministry, Jesus preached forgiveness and healed those who were repentant. In addition, he forgave those with repentant hearts even before they asked for forgiveness. The Gospel of Luke describes the encounter that Jesus’ followers had with him as the resurrected Jesus Christ on the road to the Emmaus. In that encounter, as they broke

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break and shared a meal with Jesus, the followers experienced Jesus’ love and forgiveness. He demonstrated the relational and communal nature of forgiveness. While on the cross, Jesus forgave the murderer crucified with him, offering him a place in the kingdom of God. Jesus prayed that God would forgive his capturers and executioners, although they did not seek his forgiveness. He forgave Peter who denied multiple times. Moreover, in the post-resurrection encounters, Jesus continued to mentor the disciples, an expression of his forgiveness and their restoration with him and God.

There is a fundamental connection between the forgiveness and reconciliation virtues. In order for there to be genuine reconciliation there must be genuine forgiveness. An internalized process, forgiveness begins with the acknowledgement that a wrong was committed. The very nature of forgiveness presupposes that there has been a transgression, an injustice. Clearly, forgiveness is not a denial or rationale for the offense; it is a rational and deliberate response to the memory and experience of wrongdoing. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting. The axiom to “forgive and forget” is cheap forgiveness that does not honor those who have been wronged nor does it lead to sincere and meaningful reconciliation. Retaliation and hatred are antithetical to love and mercy, the impetus for forgiveness. It is liberating, freeing so that the past does not control on one’s presence and future.

Forgiveness implies there is a relationship. The ability to seek and to offer forgiveness is a virtue that indicates a mature attitude that leads to healing and the restoration of relationships. There is a communal underpinning in that we are in relationship with God and with one another. A wrongdoing may alienate the perpetrator and the victim from the community, but forgiveness sought and offered brings healing.
and restoration to the relationship and community, thus providing the potential for reconciliation. The Church’s sacramental theology requires an acknowledgement of the sin or offense, an expression of contrition and desire for absolution, and a form of penance. However, there are those such as Desmond Tutu who advocate that in human interaction, the movement to forgiveness and reconciliation may not include contrition or retributive justice. Tutu reflects,

 Forgiving and being reconciled are not about pretending that things are other than they are. It is not patting one another on the back and turning a blind eye to the wrong. True reconciliation exposes the awfulness, the abuse the pain, the degradation, the truth. It could even sometimes make things worse. It is a risky undertaking but in the end it is worthwhile, because in the end dealing with the real situation helps to bring real healing. Spurious reconciliation can bring only spurious healing.\(^{397}\)

Enduring reconciliation, then, must reply on forgiveness. Ontologically, the situation that results in the need for forgiveness is a past reality. The past may be only one day, a few months, years or even centuries; but, until the infraction is forgiven the wrong and memory of it will continually move from a past reality to a future reality. “True forgiveness deals with the past, all of the past, to make the future possible.”\(^{398}\)

Often, White Americans, and even Africa Americans, are reluctant to grapple with the issues of race, racism and the history of racial oppression and disparity in the nation and in the Church. This reluctance does not help Whites Americans and African Americans to move towards reconciliation. The past continues to become the future. Guilt and fear are impediments that prevent open dialogue and resolution on these issues. In the Christian context, any sinful offense to our neighbor also offends God. As an

\(^{397}\) Ibid., 270.

\(^{398}\) Ibid., 279.
impediment to forgiveness, guilt and fear can obfuscate the spiritual process of forgiveness to reconciliation by not addressing the faults. J. Norman King’s says of Karl Rahner’s exposition on guilt that it “refers to a free, responsible, capable act.” He defines it as “a free, culpable and definitive ‘no’ to and personal betrayal of the infinity. It takes the concrete shape of refusing the response due to another person or persons at the interpersonal or social level.”

Guilt is a conscious act that may be influenced by external conditions. Conversely, fear, although not necessarily a conscious act, will be subjected to external factors. Raymond Studzinski observes several reasons for one’s fear: “thought of as weak; uncertainty about the response of the one to whom forgiveness is extended; uncertainly about what it would be like without the long held resentment; way to distance relationship and encounters.” An external condition for White Americans might be their comfort level around African Americans, a lack of racial or cultural understanding and comfort or the inability to reconcile an oppressive African American experience with their values. While African Americans bear no culpability for the history of slavery and subsequent racial oppression, they may, however, be influenced by the impediment of guilt in how they have internalized the racism in their own lives or their refusal to forgive. In addition, some African Americans may fear economic, social, political, or religious reprisal as persons of African descent. Theologically, guilt is an inhibitor that


400 Ibid., 46.

restrains one from acknowledging and accepting God’s love through forgiveness. It differs from empathy. “It is a “rejection of self in its grace transcendence and a rejection of the infinite mystery which is the source and goal of self.”402 The opposite of guilt is love of self and others, honesty with oneself and God, and moral responsibility. As inimical impediments, guilt and fear have no spiritual trajectory towards hope and its finality or reconciliation with God and one’s neighbor.

The God of the oppressed is acutely invested in the human and social condition of the most vulnerable, in this case African Americans. God, therefore, is concerned with the Black experience. God’s revelation is made manifest in and through the experiences of love, justice, freedom and forgiveness. While each praxis is of value, the interdependence of the four offers a methodology for a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation.

4.5 Conceptualization of a Black Catholic Theology of Reconciliation

In the midst of their 1984 pastoral letter, What We Have Seen and Heard, the African American bishops made a profound statement. The inspiration for this dissertation inquiry is based on their insightful premise that reconciliation is both a gift African American Catholics have to share with the Church and a challenge. The previous section reviewed this fundamental assertion by the bishops. Therefore, the primary objective for this section and the heart of the dissertation is to develop a theological understanding of reconciliation from an African American Catholic perspective. The bishops’ supposition raises several pertinent questions. If, as the African American bishops have announced, reconciliation is a gift that African American Catholics have to

402 King, The God of Forgiveness, 30.
share with the Church, then what gives this gift its unique characteristic? How are African American Catholics “gifts” of reconciliation? Why are African Americans a gift of reconciliation? And, what are the challenges and responsibilities for this giftedness? The basis for a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation is derived from Deotis Roberts’ conception of Black liberation theology in dialogue with Black Catholic theology. The methodology incorporates the four foundational praxes: love, freedom-liberation, justice and forgiveness, and the hermeneutics of memory. God, as creator and the source of perfect love, is the trajectory for genuine reconciliation.

Reconciliation is a process, a journey, a movement towards the horizon of the divine. It is neither a program nor an abrupt encounter with the other. Reconciliation is a transformative experience of God’s grace that recognizes the divine in one another. It calls all human beings to holiness as liberated beings saved and redeemed by Christ to be in harmonious relation with one another. As such, it is embodies the mission of Jesus Christ and his teaching to love one another as evidence of the in breaking of the Kingdom of God. Established by Jesus through his life, mission, death and resurrection, the kingdom is God and God’s redemptive presence working in and throughout the world, especially in reconciliation, justice, peace, freedom, healing, and truth for the oppressed, the poor, and those who suffer. Jesus proclaimed, “The kingdom of God is close at hand,” (Mk. 1:15) and “called all to conversion and repentance.” (Lk. 10:13-15) The Church, as a sign of the kingdom, proclaims the kingdom of God through scripture, sacraments, and the community of faith living the mission of Christ in and through the Church and in the world. Maria Duffy recounts Paul Ricoeur’s view on the kingdom and reconciliation.
Can there be reconciliation between the perpetrators of the most serious forms of injustice and their victims and is there a way of breaking the laws of mutuality whereby the historic relationships between opposing parties are no longer based on vengeance for past wrongs and sufferings? The rhetoric of the kingdom suggests reconciliation is a gift that is open to reception in the sphere of human action to heal the effects of evil and violence. . . . The faithful then have a two-fold task: to act as a community of reconciliation called to witness to the world not only by proclaiming the gospel in word and sacrament but second: to enter into critical and constructive engagement in political, social and cultural life.\textsuperscript{403}

Of the interrelationship between the kingdom of God and reconciliation, Toinette Eugene believes that the “kingdom of God is closely allied with healing and reconciliation. Jesus, as the model of the healing, the reconciling kingdom, associates himself with poor people and sinners.”\textsuperscript{404} African American Catholics participate in the unfolding of the kingdom through the Church that models the kingdom. African American Catholics, for example, use their unique gift of spirituality to praise God and to welcome others to the Catholic Church. They, therefore, participate in the evangelizing mission of the Church to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with all the world. African Americans enflesh and make active the kingdom of God when they strive to love as God loves by opening their hearts to love and forgive their oppressors. They do this when they seek to reconcile with those from the dominant American culture; when they work to alleviate the persecution and injustice of others; and, when they remove the self-inflicted chains of despair and self-doubt, and begin to love themselves as created.

As a gift of African American Catholics, the gift of reconciliation has a specific character. The gift is intricately woven with the sensitive and aggrieved history of racial

\textsuperscript{403} Maria Duffy, \textit{Paul Ricoeur’s Pedagogy of Pardon: A Narrative Theory of Memory and Forgetting}, (New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009), 118.

slavery, dehumanization, and oppression of African Americans. It is a gift bestowed from God that African American Catholics have to share with the Church so as to glorify God. It is a precious gift to be used with care. The sin of racism and the oppression of African Americans are deeply ingrained in the history of the United States and the Catholic Church. The attempt to deny, cover-up or exploit the sordid past is a lie and shows disdain for all of good conscience and leads to a re-victimization. In regards to racial inclusion and diversity in the American Catholic Church, race—“blackness”—is still the primary issue, and will all that comes with this racially charged assertion as a result of the history of the country.

Although there were Catholics of African descent with early European explorers or later as indentured servants, the lineage of most African Americans, including those who are Catholic, is intricately linked to slavery. Sometimes African American Catholics seem to be an anomaly in the Church in the United States. They do not have a history of intentional immigration to the United States, thus bringing with them clergy, religious and a collective Catholic ethos. Many African American Catholics embrace two worlds, one with the history, consciousness and spirituality of African Americans in general and the other with the language, religiosity, and spirit of Catholicism. African American Catholics understand the sacramental language and symbolism of peace and reconciliation.

While certainly not the only people to experience oppression, their persecution based on racial identity gives them a unique perspective in discussing reconciliation. The sin of racism continues to threaten the Church and society, and is a sin that many White and African Americans avoid, especially in dialogue together. Sin hardens hearts and alienates the encounter with God and with one another. Given the magnitude of the sin,
past and present, remorse, an expression of sorrow and repentance is expected for the discrimination, racial indifference, and inequalities that continue today. However, a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation does not insist upon repentance or retribution in order to extend forgiveness. The offer of forgiveness in this theological model is not exclusively for the sake of the transgressor. Rather, it enables the offended to move forward; it is for the humanization of the offended and their communion with God. It is accomplished through the salvific and redemptive power of the Triune God at work in the kingdom of God on earth. The ability to forgive those responsible for the sin of racism, past and present, in all its manifestations is a sign of love, God’s love that involves reconciliation with God. It opens the door for reconciliation with the Church, American society, and individuals of American of European descent. How may African Americans be a gift of reconciliation? African Americans must embody forgiveness. Forgiveness becomes more than a symbolic gesture to maintain peace. Rather, according to Gregory Jones,

> Forgiveness is at once an expression of a commitment to a way of life, the cruciform life of holiness in which people cast off their “old” selves and learn to live in communion with God and with one another, and a means of seeking reconciliation in the midst of particular sins, specific instances of brokenness. In its broadest context, forgiveness is the way in which God’s love moves to reconciliation in the face of sin. This priority of forgiveness a sign of the peace of God’s original Creation as well as the promised eschatological consummation of that Creation in the Kingdom, and a sign of the costliness by which such forgiveness is achieved. In this sense, the, forgiveness indicates the ongoing priority of the Church’s task to offer the endlessly creative and gratuitous gift of new life in the face of sin and brokenness.\(^{405}\)

Regarding the embodiment of forgiveness, Jones adds,

> However, for Christians this can only happen when we simultaneously learn to embody what is means to be forgiven—by God and by one another. At the center

\(^{405}\) Jones, *Embodying.*, 5.
of Christian forgiveness is the proclamation of God’s Kingdom and the call to repentance so that we can live as forgiven and reconciled people with God with one another. We learn to become more forgiving as an integral feature of our life in God’s Kingdom, precisely as we are also unlearning our deeply entrenched habits of sin.

. . . The invitation to God’s Kingdom, the call to conversion and new life, is an invitation to discover our selves, not as something to be “possessed” or obsessively concerned about, but as a people called into communion through forgiving and reconciling love. We are called out of our obsession with ourselves by the One who invites us to friendship with God and with one another in Christian community. 406

An important consideration is justice. Without justice, meaningful reconciliation is not achievable. Justice is not vengeance or hate. Ultimately, God is the ideal justice. Roberts says of justice, “I do not mean to imply “equality—the sense that blacks are expected to fulfill certain standards set up by white powers in order to be admitted to the mainstream controlled by white people. Justice, then, in the sense of equity, implies a ‘God-given’ right of the black person to expect dignified acceptance as a person “with all the rights and privileges of other persons.” 407 The work of justice is deliberate, conscious and leads to the healing of wounds and divisions. Justice demands truthfulness and both are necessary for sincere reconciliation. The Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in South African and other nations are an example. The absence of justice does not prevent African Americans from the practice of forgiveness.

A Black Catholic theology of reconciliation embraces hope, which is the gift or fruition of reconciliation. Hope redirects the focus of African Americans to God who is the source and initiator of liberation and reconciliation through God’s son Jesus Christ. Hope enables those who are broken, alienated, suffering, and bruised by sin, the human

406 Ibid., 47.

407 Roberts, Liberation, 45.
condition, and the disregard of other human beings to find refugee, salvation and
redemption in and through the life, crucifixion and resurrected Jesus and the body of
Christ, the Church. Hope firmly situates African Americans in their present reality, the
here and now, while projecting them towards the future, the eschatology of hope. It is an
affirmation that the kingdom of God is in the present, as well as the past and future, so
that God’s love may consume hearts and minds here on earth to work for justice and to
alleviate the oppression, suffering, and dehumanization of all of God’s people. Hope is
the assurance for African Americans that God’s gift of love, justice, freedom or
liberation, and forgiveness will bring them closer to the kingdom of God. A Black
Catholic theology of reconciliation must include both the present and transcendence
realities of what is seen and unseen, realize and unrealized, fully achieved and
incomplete.

Roberts’ Black theology of liberation situates hope for African Americans in faith
and the resurrection of Christ. Roberts writes, “Black hope is rooted in the faith that the
God of the ‘end time’ is also the God of the ‘present time.’ . . . This faith has kept hope
alive when there was no tangible basis for hope. A people cannot survive without hope.
Our faith in God as kept hope alive.” He adds,

Without the resurrection, there is no good news to preach and no faith to sustain
us. Faith is futile and sins remain unforgiven if there is no resurrection. Without
the resurrection, there is no life beyond death. . . . Faith in the Christus Victory,
“the victorious Christ,” is the basis of our hope, as blacks, that both liberation and
reconciliation are assured and the meaning and the quest for social justice are
proper goals for our lives.  

408 Ibid., 92.

409 Ibid., 93.
The crux of reconciliation, and therefore hope, is the acknowledgement of the oppression and inequality that many African Americans continue to experience in American society, including the sin of racism that is not, yet, completely eradicated from the Catholic Church. Hope, then, must not be confined to a future kingdom, but clearly visible in the presence because God’s justice is active among the body of Christ. Roberts rightly observes that “Instead of moving from the future to the present, we move from the present to the future—at least to begin. Only after we are aware of what God is doing in this world to make life more human for blacks, may we speak of God’s future breaking into our present and look forward to the new age.”

Reconciliation from an African American perspective is opposed to any defense or contention that promotes equity and justice for African Americans or any oppressed people as rewards to obtain in the afterlife, but says little about justice in this life. Roberts contends that the “God of the past is in command of the present and the future. No future God, no waiting God, is adequate for our hope.” “Black hope present and future is bound up with an understanding of the kingdom of God as present and future.” Besides being the object of a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation, hope is the dynamism that defeats despair and encourages African Americans to be open to reconciliation, in spite of their dehumanizing history. Hope, therefore, is the realization that with God, all things are possible.

410 Ibid., 84.
411 Ibid., 85.
412 Ibid., 90.
A Black Catholic theology of reconciliation embraces the Black identity and consciousness of its people as a gift to the Church. The Church in the United States does not have the exemplary history in regards to its welcome, mission and pastoral care of African Americans. Certainly, there are pastorals and encyclicals, individual laity and clergy, religious communities, organizations, and parishes that desire commendation; however, as an American institution of faith, there have been lost opportunities. African American Catholics come to the Church in the totality of who they are as created by God in God’s divine image. That includes their Black consciousness, spirituality, and history. “Blackness” is not a problem to mitigate or disregard. Rather, the diversity of African Americans in the Church, as well as all other racial, cultural and ethnic peoples, gives the Church its distinctive catholicity as universal.

The act of forgiveness is part of a process with various stages that often has painful memories. As two essential dynamics in the process of forgiveness and reconciliation, the role and interdependence of memory and healing offer insight on the African American spiritual journey of oppression and the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation. Slavery, forced racial segregation and discrimination are part of the collective memory of African Americans. The African American bishops noted it as one of the challenges that Black Catholics encounter in sharing their faith and gifts. Given this history that spans several centuries and is imbedded in the conscience and subconscious of African Americans, and Americans in general, the issue of memory is relevant and raises several significant questions. Does the memory of an oppressed people, whether individual or collective, affect the spiritual process of forgiveness and reconciliation? How, then, can memory be a value rather than an obstacle to the
reconciliation process in the development of a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation? Paul Ricoeur writes, “We must remember because it is our moral duty to the victims.”\footnote{Paul Ricoeur, \textit{Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination}, trans. David Pellauer, ed., Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), 290. [Although Ricoeur was speaking of the atrocities of the Holocaust, it can be extrapolated for the history of slavery, Jim Crow and discrimination of African Americans.]} Is it not, then, an obligation for African Americans, to remember the Africans who were imprisoned and died in forts along the African coast while waiting to be transported in slave ships to the Americas and those during the Middle Passage that did survive the journey and are entombed in the ocean. African American have an obligation to remember the millions who survived this ordeal, their ancestors in a new land, who developed their own understanding and interpretation of Christian faith and a spirituality that of deep conviction in God’s love and justice in relation to Jesus as savior and redeemer. Reflecting on Ricoeur, Maria Duffy writes, 

In other words, the memory of oppression becomes a stimulus to change history on behalf of those who are being overwhelmed by it. The future is still open and is to be wrested from the power of those who control the present. The demand to redeem the memory of the past oppression by changing the course of history is the responsibility of humans who through memory are commissioned with the task of liberation in the name of generations of the downtrodden.\footnote{Duffy, \textit{Paul Ricoeur Pedagogy}, 60.}

Memory is remembering and sometimes “feeling” the past. Raymond Studzinski states, “forgiveness is an acceptance of what has happened as past and is not the final word on the other or on oneself. It is an act of integration in which the painful event is incorporated into one’s personal history as a past event but one that does not foreclose the future.”\footnote{Studzinski, \textit{Remember} 17.} In addition, he notes that “the injury is held in memory and returns to
consciousness to re-inflict its pain. Memory is charged with negative emotional energy and may easily come to mind as a burden to be carried in the present.”

Experience has shown that often the recounting of history and painful memories by those who have been marginalized or oppressed because of race, ethnicity or culture is met with defiance and indifference. African American narration of historical memory that includes personal and collective experiences of racism may invite reactions such as, “move on,” “that was in the past,” “can’t you just forget it.” Memory and articulation of these historical experiences, past and present, are sometimes deemed as justification for the continued racism.

Interestingly, Virgil Elizondo titled an article he wrote, “I Forgive but I do Not Forget.”

In describing an experience of memory, Elizondo writes,

All of a sudden, I realized that the real virtue came in forgiving precisely while remembering. Yet, if I could forget, I would not have to forgive . . . it would not even be necessary. But that remembering only too well the offence, I could forgive with all my heart. That is the very point of forgiveness. For to forgive is not to forget but to be liberated from the inner anger, resentment and quest for vengeance that consumes every fiber of my being.

Clearly, memory and remembering have an important role in the process for forgiveness and reconciliation. It should not be viewed as detrimental, but rather as healthy and spiritually liberating. Memory becomes detrimental when it leads to bitterness, resentment, reprisal and anger towards the offender, others, and oneself. Desmond Tutu writes,

In forgiving, people are not being asked to forget. In the contrary, it is important to remember, so that we should not let such atrocities happen again. Forgiveness does not mean condoning what has been done. It means taking what happened seriously and minimizing it; drawing out the sting in the memory that threatened

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416 Ibid., 17

to poison our entire existence. It involves trying to understand the perpetrators and so have empathy, to try to stand in their shoes and appreciate the sort of pressures and influences that might have conditioned them.\footnote{Tutu, \textit{No Future}, 271.}

Remembering becomes a burden when there is no contrition or justice. Remembering is injurious when the oppressed remain the oppressed because the oppressors do not recognize their own culpability and the common humanity and dignity of those victimized and their inherence in the kingdom of God in this life, not just in the eschatological horizon. Studzinski sees remembering as “a creative act of forgiveness in that it allows the forgivers to change his or her perception of the offender and perception of oneself as victim to one who is able to rise above the injury.”\footnote{Studzinski, \textit{Remember} 17.} The value of remembering the past is that it provides information for the future so as not to repeat the same mistakes.

Maria Duffy’s review of Paul Ricoeur’s theory of narrative and memory offers insight on the dialectic of forgiveness and reconciliation.\footnote{Duffy, \textit{Paul Ricoeur’s Pedagogy}, 48.} The narrative discourse becomes a modern tool to address suffering and evil in order to heal the wounds of memory as a prelude to reconciliation. In her opinion, Ricoeur insists that, “reconciliation and healing cannot be taken forward before Truth and Justice is achieved.”\footnote{Ibid., 6.} In his theory, forgiveness is a gift and bridge between memory and future. The narrative discourse and stories of the past from the victims, the oppressed or wounded are the starting point for forgiveness, which leads to healing and reconciliation.

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\textsuperscript{418} Tutu, \textit{No Future}, 271.
\textsuperscript{419} Studzinski, \textit{Remember} 17.
\textsuperscript{420} Duffy, \textit{Paul Ricoeur’s Pedagogy}, 48.
\textsuperscript{421} Ibid., 6.
Memory as the potential for healing and reconciliation is connected to love and justice.

Duffy says of Ricoeur,

> No forgiveness is possible until memory has been dealt with because it is essential to understanding and acceptance, these being forms of reconciliation and healing in their own right. . . . Ricoeur situates his discourse on memory in the context of social and national reconciliation and conflict resolution. As such, his attention to the moral issues of memory belongs to a deeper trajectory on love and justice as the authentic values of peace.\textsuperscript{422}

Ricoeur’s analysis “show there is a bond between narrative, memory and forgiveness.

Narrative creates an opportunity for the reconciliation of memories, for mourning what is lost which opens the way to forgiveness, then possibly to healing. A willingness to enter into an exchange of memories opens up a certain flexibility concerning the past and renders it less black and white . . . .”\textsuperscript{423}

African American Catholic theologian Toinette Eugene reflects on the relationship between reconciliation and the kingdom of God and the meaning of redemption for sinful a world and sinful individuals. Using womanist theology as her lens, Eugene believes that Christian anamnesis helps us to remember not only our own past and history, but also that of others who are oppressed and alienated. The remembering engages persons in compassion and empathy for others. She writes, “The call to anamnesis, to remember, is quintessential; it is said that if we forget the past, we are destined to repeat it. May we never forget if we expect a future for reconciliation as God’s great gift to the church and the world.”\textsuperscript{424} The power of anamnesis in the Mass is to invoke collective memory of the Christ event, Jesus’ life, crucifixion and resurrection.

\textsuperscript{422} Ibid., 46.

\textsuperscript{423} Ibid., 99.

\textsuperscript{424} Eugene, Reconciliation, 6.
“Therefore, in the Eucharist, thanksgiving is through the act of memory. There is a close connection between the liturgical acts of praise and thanksgiving (blessing), anamnesis (memorial), and presence.”425 More than just a memory, the faithful are impelled to actively enter into the passion experience where they encounter Jesus. Eugene advocates for a more developed sacramental theology of reconciliation that focuses on healing and alienation between persons and with the Church. From this renewed theology, she calls for the restoration of the Rite of Reconciliation with attention to memory or what she calls “re-remembering.” She says that reconciliation, “. . . must not simply address individual alienation and religious dislocation but it must redress social, racial and economic differences by seeking a valuation of these experiences that leads to social, sacramental expressions of communities of sacred solidarity and of covenantal alliances of grace and mercy.”426

In a pastoral context, a clear and consistent connection between liturgical anamnesis and the collective memory of African Americans may advance the process of forgiveness and reconciliation for African American and White Americans. It will enable African Americans to recover and celebrate their attributes and accomplishments as well as serve as an instructional tool for the future. It has the potential to seek truth and justice by exposing and resolving the social sins that oppress, alienate, and dehumanize human beings in order to avert the same mistakes in the future. Therefore, the role of memory is beneficial to African Americans and White Americans in their healing process. Memory


426 Ibid., 13.
has an important role in the life and faith of African American Catholics and the Church. It exemplifies the gift of African Americans in the process of reconciliation. A Black Catholic theology of reconciliation embraces the value of memory or remembering as an important and necessary dimension in the process of reconciliation. It is helpful for African Americans to consider that,

The seeds of forgiveness and reconciliation are sown in memory. The right use of memory saves us from remaining only victims of the past. In other words the story of who we are can expand and this is a type of resurrection. Good things can grow out of remembering. While accepting that it is not possible to restore the past and its losses fully, remembering can realize new potentialities of being and change the meaning of tragic events for the future. New connections with the past can help to create a better future. . . . There is a need to remain connected to events of the past but not tied to them—and this he posits is ‘the art of memory’ (ars memoriae).”

The danger is when remembering ceases. African Americans have assumed greater authority over their lives and reaped the benefits of the 1950 to 1970 post-Civil Rights era. Is it possible in the decades that followed many African Americans, including African American Catholics, disassociated themselves from the collective memory of themselves as a people and their historical roots? The African American bishops spoke of the challenges of the gift of Blackness. The challenge and sin is not only how African Americans are perceived and treated by White Americans, but as importantly how they perceive themselves and treat one another. It is a disease expressed by aversion of their race and racial identity—anything associated with ontological “Blackness.” Self-hatred is a residual affect of the sin of racism, in which the symptoms have a devastating effect upon African Americans. A symptom of the oppression is the denial and avoidance of one’s own African. Many African Americans were able to integrate and seize a piece of

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the middle class American dream, but neglected to recall the collective memory of an historical experience of struggles and perseverance with their children as a lifelong context for success and wellbeing. This might suggest redemptive suffering; however, it more aptly expresses how to use memory as an investment for future welfare and pursuits. Overwhelmed with survival and maintaining status, the poor and oppressed within the African American community and the Body of Christ are forgotten. When African American memory of slave children, parents, and spouses forcibly separated; lynchings and beatings; bombings and assassinations are not conveyed, there is the possibility that life is devalued and underappreciated. Abortion clinics are free to operate in African American communities. For a multiplicity of reason, including despair, there are more young Black men dead and incarcerated than graduating from institutions of higher education. Many African American Catholics do not know or understand their gifts and therefore are not able to neither evangelize to the Black community nor share them with the greater Church. When the collective memory fades, the collective voice is dimmed or silence.

A Black Catholic theology of reconciliation acknowledges the sin of self-hatred and the devastation of prolonged racism within the African American community and the need for metanoia and forgiveness of one another in order for them to be reconciled to each other and to God through the cross and resurrection. In this theological approach to reconciliation, African Americans must embody forgiveness of others and themselves. It must deal with the human situation of African Americans, the life and death issues that still pervade their existential situation, not just the eschatological hope for the future. The journey from forgiveness to reconciliation empowers them to see the Triune God at the
center of their lives and in the midst of despair and obstacles. Freedom has brought responsibilities and new challenges.

Roberts calls upon the Black church to take a stronger and prophetic role as the voice in the continued struggle for freedom from oppressions. “To this end we may not merely be called but chosen—to show the churches that dare not risk the loss of funds, respectability, and social acceptance, how to be the church.”428 The Black church must be a church of empowerment against all forms of oppression in church and society for African Americans. He challenges the Black church to heal itself and to be Christ, the liberator and reconciler, for the sins of African Americans. “Chosenness must not be confused with perfection, sinlessness, or super Christian. The Black church, as part of Christianity, is both sanctified and sanctifier, broken and healer. The Black church must address itself to internal strife and the sins of the oppressed.”429 For Roberts, the Black church is called to be the example and agent of reconciliation, engaged in liberation and reconciliation, the two complementary poles of Black theology that are the mission of the church.

When African Americans are empowered to support and advocate for the welfare of their community, they are actually engaged in uplifting the human condition for all persons who suffer, are oppressed and marginalized. They become the face of truth and a symbol of God’s love, freedom-liberation, justice and forgiveness actively at work in God’s kingdom. Thus, a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation is sacramental in that it is God’s self-communication about the divine present engaged in the lives of African

428 Roberts, Liberation, 33.

429 Ibid., 33.
Americans. Sacramentally, it finds expression in the indwelling of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit working in the lives of African Americans and all human beings. This sacramental presence is celebrated in the Eucharistic celebration, as African American Catholics, indeed all Catholics, become the Body of Christ and the extension of the work of the Holy Spirit to each other and in the world. It is also celebrated in other sacraments, particularly baptism and reconciliation. African American Catholics have gifts to share with the Catholic Church, their gift of Blackness, freedom, reconciliation and spirituality. They also have a responsibility to share not only these gifts, but also their Catholic faith with African Americans and the entire Church. Because these are shared gifts, African American Catholics have a point of experience in which to evangelize themselves and the Black community in the United States. Their sacramental history and faith give them the opportunity to lead the journey towards reconciliation with White Americans, and with their own community.

4.6 Conclusion

The focus of this Black Catholic theology of reconciliation is African Americans and their spiritual journey towards God, the life-giving creator of human beings, the cosmos, and nature. It is a spiritual journey towards grace—towards all that is good and holy. A core value is that it recognizes and affirms the dignity of all human beings who are created in the divine image of God. Humanity is called to holiness, to be in relationship to God. It addresses the oppression and dehumanization of African Americans through the sin of racism. Therefore, a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation is about relationships and interrelationship between God and African Americans, between African Americans and White Americans, between African
American and African American Catholics, and among African American of all religious backgrounds. Because of sin in the world, the brokenness of human relationships, African American and those with whom they are in relation need healing.

The four interrelated foundation themes support the development of this work. Love, justice, freedom-liberation, and forgiveness are also the praxes for a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation. As praxes, they provide the framework for an ethical approach to reconciliation. Each is a dialectic response to reconciliation from the context of the African American experience. Central to each is Christ’s salvific and redemptive mission in the life of African Americans. Satisfaction of the four praxes will lead to healing and transformed hearts and minds necessary for true reconciliation. The praxes provide the content for a theological dialogue within the context of the African American struggle for social justice in the Church and society.

In order for there to be genuine healing that leads to meaningful reconciliation, the truth about the dehumanization must be told and accepted. Memory guides truth and love provides the courage to face the truth. Freedom or liberation and justice are necessary because they ensure the reconciliation occur between equals. Even when forgiveness is not sought for the racism and injustices in our day or in the past, extending forgiveness is something that African Americans must consider. There may be circumstances when it is important to offer forgiveness, even if it does not lead to reconciliation.

The spiritual process or journey of a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation is not a program to solve the racial tensions and malaise in the United States and the Catholic Church. It offers a point of introspection from the vantage of a Black theology
of liberation. It is the attempt to add a comment to Deotis Roberts’ ethnics in his Black liberation theology. A Black Catholic theology of reconciliation wishes to be involved in the building of the kingdom of God on earth and in heaven.
Conclusion

The Sankofa Experience

Sankofa, an expression of the Adinkra people in Ghana, describes the experience of “looking back” into the past in order to “bring forth” something new. A Black Catholic theology of reconciliation is the experience of sankofa in that it addresses the anthropology of African Americans and their place in salvation history. In looking back, the African American bishops’ offered hope and joy in the publication of the pastoral letter on evangelization, *What We have Seen and Heard*. It signaled a historic and significant moment for Catholics of African descent in the United States. The ten African American Catholic bishops who ascribed their names to the pastoral letter seized the moment by issuing it at a time when the country and the Church were still wrestling with many social issues. *What We Have Seen and Heard* provides a pastoral and theological framework for a movement that had already begun among African American Catholics. It provides the source for the development of a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation.

Chapters 1 and 2 provided an overview of the historical and religious experiences that have given rise for a discussion on reconciliation from an African American perspective. At the center of this discussion have been the descents of the sons and daughters of former African slaves and free persons who endured discrimination, oppression and death as devalued human beings because of the color of their skin. The African American bishops believe that Catholic descents of these slave ancestors have gifts that will help the Church to address the sin of racism and the oppression and alienation that it has caused African Americans in the Church and society. In a way, the
African American bishops “reintroduced” African American Catholics to the Church by highlighting the gifts they offer to the Church, which bring responsibilities and challenges. Having been disenfranchised in the Catholic Church, African American Catholics, and indeed all African Americans, have the opportunity, and yes, a responsibility as recipients of God’s grace and forgiveness, to lead the Christian Church and the nation towards reconciliation. First, however, they must be open and willing to seek forgiveness and to forgive.

The research attempts to explain why and how African Americans Catholics are a gift to the Church. This declaration does not diminish the gifts and role of other racial, cultural, and ethnic groups that comprise the universal Catholic Church. At the core is the affirmation of humanity’s creation in the image of God. Giftedness is gift of God’s infinite love and mercy. The gifts that African Americans have to share are bestowed by God in order to advance the mission of God’s the kingdom on earth. These gifts reflect the interrelated dynamism of African American Catholic spirituality and the sacramental life of the Church. Therefore, a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation is rooted in the Church.

It is important to clarify that the reconciliation imagined in this research is primarily between individuals or groups of peoples. Certainly, I would be naive to think that this paradigm is sufficient for global conflicts and the most heinous of crimes and dehumanization. However, if change can begin in individual hearts and minds, then it is possible to impact what might appear untenable. The kingdom of God is a sankofa experience in of memory and memorial of the Paschal Mystery, the Christ event, and God actively involved now in building of God’s kingdom on earth.
Sin and transgressions require looking at the past, whereas reconciliation looks towards a future of hope, love and justice. Reconciliation is risky because it involves relationships. J. Deotis Roberts conceptualized an ethical model for Black liberation theology by connecting liberation and reconciliation with Jesus as both liberator and reconciler. Roberts’ Black liberation theology provides the methodology for reconciliation to occur between African Americans and White Americans and among African Americans themselves. The challenge that Roberts presents to Black and White Christians, separately and collectively, is that they must reflect and dialogue on the meaning of liberation and reconciliation as complementary poles necessary for the integrity and movement in race relations in the United States.

Chapter 3 grounds the discussion in the sacramental history of the Church, particularly in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. Considering the history, particularly in light of post-Vatican II revisions and more modern considerations in the sacrament of penance, there are some pastoral dimensions for the development of a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation. As a sacramental people who have traditionally valued the idea of community, African American Catholics have a tremendous opportunity to share their gift of Blackness and faith. Pastorally, the 1983 Rite of Penance could be used as a path towards a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation. The Rite has three distinct penitential rituals to celebrate penance and reconciliation. The third optional celebration of the Rite connects penitents communally as well as offers an opportunity to reflect on personal sin. However, since racism, oppression of one another, prejudice, alienation, and dehumanization are social sins, it is important that the penitential refection and expression
of sorrow also be social or communal for White and African Americans together and for African Americans with each other in prayer, silence, and respect for one another.

In this rite, the scripture would have prominence along with general absolution. Because individual confession would occur outside the communal celebration of the rite, welcome could be extended to their African American Protestant brothers and sisters in faith, in deed to all descents of Africa. It would afford African American Catholics the opportunity to share their sacramental faith with the larger African American populace and for African Americans to engage in intra-healing and reconciliation as a people and a community. It would provide the possibility for what “Black folks” do best: listen and reflect on scripture, share and release painful memories about the past and the “everyday stuff” that burdens them, sing from the depths of their souls the words of the spiritual, “fix me Jesus, fix me. As people, they would be able to acknowledge and rejoice in the gratuitous gift of grace, God’s love and mercy for them and among them, and to embody God’s gift by extending it to others. It could be a repeatable, communal experience of forgiveness—sought and given—on the journey towards reconciliation.

Whether one is White or Black, it offers a pastoral dimension to live and make visible the kingdom of God. Under the guise of Christian anthropology, the pastoral use of the Rite and a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation are necessary for the Church’s new evangelization. It offers a perspective for welcoming back to the Church those African Americans who have left. The communal nature of forgiveness and the potential for reconciliation become a process of seeking out those not present in the life of the church, possibly voicing and listening to the memories they recite as reasons for the
separation, and the sincere invitation to come home, to rejoin African American Catholics around the Eucharistic table of sacrifice, thanksgiving, and joy.

Chapter 4 argues for a methodology towards a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation. Significant are the themes and praxes necessary for human reconciliation, especially reconciliation between African Americans and White Americans and in the context of American history and culture. Love, justice, freedom-liberation and forgiveness are necessary values for reconciliation if it is to be sincere. Reconciliation does not depend on whether individuals or groups “like” each other or want to create bonds of friendship. Reconciliation must begin with the acknowledgement that the other is also endowed with God’s grace and dignity. Reconciliation demands mutual respect and agape love.

Some scholars and practitioners of reconciliation might insist on freedom and justice as pre-conditions for forgiveness. Some may argue that while important, forgiveness can be granted without them. Jesus, his passion, death and resurrection is the model for the kind of love necessary for this kind of faith and commitment to imitate Jesus. It is my belief that it is possible to forgive when freedom and justice are not fully apparent. Whether to do so is a premeditated choice. However, forgiveness will not necessarily lead to reconciliation. The four praxes—love, justice, freedom-liberation and forgiveness—are a reflective paradigm for movement towards reconciliation from the construct of a Black theology. They offer a starting point for conversation or dialogue on race and related issues from the context of sacramentality.

The descriptive “towards” for a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation is deliberate. A significant observation is that many book and articles on liberation and
even forgiveness gave little or no attention to reconciliation. Sometimes what is discussed is an international political crisis or a therapeutic model. Most noteworthy is the absent of the reconciliation discussion in light of the African American experience of slavery and racism. Additional reflection is necessary on redemptive suffering discussed in Chapter 1. Presently, Christianity does not have the language and philosophical insights for a more adequate response to the theological dilemma. Another area for future discussion is on memory or remembering as an effectual and insightful way for Whites and African American to discuss racism in movement towards forgiveness and reconciliation. African American Catholics have the potential for leadership, to be the a gift of reconciliation while reflecting the universality of the Church necessary for God’s kingdom to be alive and embracing and welcoming all because all are graced with God’s love. Towards a Black Catholic theology of reconciliation recognizes the presence of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit in the life of African American Catholics and people of African descent in the United States who may be wounded, but can rejoice over “what they have seen and heard.”
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