

The Church and the Racial Divide

Reflections of an
African American
Catholic Bishop

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Preface

Are We Finally Woke?

Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.

—James Baldwin

Two hundred fifty years of slavery. Ninety years of Jim Crow. Sixty years of separate but equal. Thirty-five years of racist housing policy. Until we reckon with our compounding moral debts, America will never be whole.

—Ta-Nehisi Coates

The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.

—The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

I can't breathe! I can't breathe! Mama! Mama!

—George Floyd

I am writing this preface on June 19, 2020, or, more to the point, on Juneteenth, 155 years after the enslaved free human beings¹ in Texas learned that President Abraham Lincoln had

¹I avoid the use of the words “slave” or “slaves” in my writings. Instead, I speak of “enslaved free human beings.” The substantive “slaves” can be read to imply that there is a group of human beings in the world, namely slaves, who can be bought, sold, and owned. Obviously, this is not true. As a Catholic priest and theologian, I hold firmly to the position that, from the perspective of sound philosophy, anthropology,

signed the Emancipation Proclamation two and a half years earlier. I am writing this Preface on the day that the president of the United States was scheduled to have a huge reelection rally, where he expected at least 20,000 people (and thousands more in an overflow area) in Tulsa, Oklahoma, ninety-nine years after the Tulsa Race Massacre in the Greenwood District, during which over 300 African American people were murdered. As I write, I am wondering, are we finally “woke”?

When I wrote the pastoral letter *The Racial Divide in the United States* in 2015, the expression “Black Lives Matter” was widely perceived as the radical slogan of a small, fringe, in-your-face extremist movement, which many, if not most, Americans looked upon with anxiety and suspicion, associating the phrase with mob violence and militant extremist ideologies. I now write five years later, in the summer of 2020, a month after the murder of Mr. George Floyd (arrested for attempting to use a counterfeit \$20 bill) in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Former police officer Derek Chauvin ended Mr. Floyd’s life on Memorial Day, May 25. Mr. Chauvin casually knelt on George’s neck for 8 minutes 46 seconds with his hands in his pockets, while George’s hands were cuffed behind him. Mr. Floyd, who had been arrested a number of times, may have been intoxicated, but his family and friends described him as “a Christian, a good man, who loved to help people.” Many Americans still feel uncomfortable with and threatened by the phrase “Black Lives Matter,” but surveys indicate that more and more find the expression acceptable. The expression is ever in the news, analyzed in serious journals, and shouted at peaceful demonstrations by people of different races, ages, religions, and economic, political, and social backgrounds. Heads of corporate

and authentic Catholic theology, no one can “own” another human being despite the political, social, and economic reality of human bondage. In my view, they were free human beings who, even when “enslaved” by others, remained ontologically free. This is also true of victims of human trafficking in our own day. (The word “slave” is derived from “Slav.” In the late Middle Ages, Slavic people were forced into labor so often that they gave their name to human bondage. See also Old French *selave*, from Medieval Latin *sclavus*.)

America have joined athletes, entertainers, and some political and religious leaders in affirming boldly in newspaper ads and television announcements that they not only believe that Black Lives Matter but, they say, they intend to put their financial resources and their considerable influence behind their new affirmation.

The death of Mr. Floyd, 46, was not the first time an African American man or woman died in a questionable altercation with a white representative of law enforcement. It was simply the next incident in a painfully long list. But precisely because the list is so long, because the horrific details of the killing were made visible for all to see through widespread social media, because so many people staying home due to the coronavirus pandemic had time to talk and think about what they had seen and heard, this single death triggered a tsunami reaction not only in this country but also worldwide. Huge throngs of people protested in cities around the country and beyond shouting, “Black Lives Matter!” “No Justice, No Peace!” “Say His Name, George Floyd!” “Stop Killing Us!” and “Defund the Police!” In Washington, DC, a section of 16th Street leading to the White House was renamed Black Lives Matter Plaza and the words were painted on the street in huge yellow letters. Demands for the arrest and charging of all four police officers involved in the death of Mr. Floyd were eventually met. His funeral services, meanwhile, were must-see television events for millions of Americans. The phrase “Get your knee off our necks!” became a metaphor for centuries of racial oppression, police brutality, and systemic racism.

Nonviolent protests, which many Americans seemed to think were understandable, became, in some cases, violent and destructive social upheavals. People were killed. Buildings and police cars were burned, and shops were vandalized and plundered. In some cases, these stores were the livelihoods of poor People of Color. Terms like “rioters” and “looters” were frequently used. While most commentators acknowledged that the destruction was the work of a few (perhaps organized outsiders bent on destruction and turning the tide of public opinion against the peaceful demonstrators), the damage was done. The demand for “law and

order” became the primary message from the White House. Other voices argued that African Americans were taking a posture of “victimhood” expecting others, including the government, to solve problems that they should solve themselves.

“Looters,” “looting,” and “loot” are oddly used words. In today’s context, “looters” are often presumed to be African Americans, even though white people also steal during social disturbances. “Loot” usually refers to the “physical things” stolen during social unrest. However, the word has a far deeper connotation, largely ignored today. The United States was established by “looting.” The lands of Indigenous people were “looted,” along with the labors of African people brought here during the Middle Passage. The bodies of enslaved free human beings (especially the women taken and cruelly used and abused by their so-called masters) and the wealth they produced on plantations were “looted.” During the race massacres of 1917 (East St. Louis, Illinois), 1921 (Tulsa, Oklahoma), and 1923 (Rosewood, Florida), African American people were murdered by white people, who, with little objection from the police, burned and “looted” the homes of many.

Civil rights advocates and some in the media regularly remind the country and the world of a near endless litany of deaths of African Americans who, like George Floyd, lost their lives in conflicts with white police officers or civilians.

- Eric Garner, 44, died July 17, 2014, in Staten Island, NY, when former New York policeman Daniel Pantaleo used a banned chokehold while arresting him for selling unlicensed cigarettes. He cried out eleven times, “I can’t breathe.” Mr. Garner’s death was ruled a homicide. The grand jury did not indict the officer. On June 8, 2020, the New York State Assembly passed the Eric Garner Anti-Chokehold Act.
- Laquan McDonald, 17, was shot to death in Chicago by former Chicago police officer Jason Van Dyke on October 20, 2014. At first, police said Mr. McDonald refused to drop his knife and was walking and acting erratically. The police reports ruled the shooting justified and the officer was not

charged in the fatal shooting. Thirteen months later, the police were ordered by the courts to release a dashcam video of the shooting. The video showed Mr. McDonald being shot as he walked away from the police. Officer Van Dyke was charged with first-degree murder and later found guilty of second-degree murder.

- Freddie Gray, 25, who died on April 19, 2015, was arrested April 12, 2015, by the Baltimore Police Department. He was charged with possessing a knife. Mr. Gray became comatose after being tossed around while traveling in a police van without restraints. His death in the hospital was attributed to injuries to his spinal cord. Six Baltimore police officers were suspended and faced criminal charges. But in 2017, the US Department of Justice decided not to bring federal charges against the police officers involved in the in-custody death of Freddie Gray.
- Sandra Bland, 28, was stopped for a minor traffic violation on July 10, 2015, by Texas State Trooper Brian Encinia. There was an altercation between Ms. Bland and the trooper and Ms. Bland was arrested and charged with assaulting a police officer. Trooper Encinia's dashcam, Ms. Bland's cell phone, and a witness recorded part of the encounter. The trooper was placed on administrative leave because he did not follow correct procedures for a traffic stop. On July 13, 2015, three days after her arrest, Sandra Bland was found hanged in a jail cell. It was ruled that she had committed suicide. The FBI determined that the jail did not do time checks on inmates. Nor did they ensure that employees had the necessary mental health training. Many protested her arrest, arguing that she was the victim of racial bias and questioning the ruling of suicide. A grand jury did not indict the county sheriff or the jail staff for a felony relating to Ms. Bland's death. Trooper Encinia was fired by the Texas Department of Public Safety for making false statements about the circumstances surrounding Ms. Bland's arrest.
- Ahmaud Marquez Arbery, 25, was fatally shot on February

23, 2020, near Brunswick, Georgia, where he was jogging. Two armed white men, Travis McMichael and his father, Gregory, pursued and confronted Mr. Arbery in their truck. William Bryan, who was following Mr. Arbery in his truck, videoed the shooting. The video went viral and on May 7, 74 days after the shooting, the Georgia Bureau of Investigation arrested the father and son, charging them with felony murder and aggravated assault. Later, William Bryan was arrested and charged with felony murder and attempted false imprisonment. William Bryan said Travis McMichael called Mr. Arbery a “fucking nigger” while standing over his dead body, leading to possible hate crime charges. The incident was widely condemned as an example of racial profiling in America. All three men have been charged with multiple counts of murder.

- Breonna Taylor, 26, an emergency medical technician, was shot to death in Louisville, Kentucky, by Louisville Metro Police Department officers on March 13, 2020. Carrying out a no-knock search warrant, plainclothes officers entered her apartment. Her boyfriend thought someone was breaking in and began to shoot in self-defense. Ms. Taylor was shot eight times by the officers who were actually looking for two men suspected of selling drugs from a drug house ten miles away. Ms. Taylor’s apartment was included in the search warrant because they thought one of the drug dealers received drugs at Ms. Taylor’s apartment. However, no drugs were found there. The incident report filed by the police said that Ms. Taylor had not been wounded when, in fact, she died from gunshot wounds. The report said forced entry had not been used. But the police had actually used a battering ram. The three officers were placed on administrative reassignment awaiting the results of the investigation. Later, Officer Brett Hankison was fired by the city’s police department because he violated procedures by showing “extreme indifference to the value of human life” when he “wantonly and blindly” shot ten rounds of gunfire into Ms. Taylor’s apartment.

No one has been charged in her death. In September 2020, the city of Louisville paid a \$12 million wrongful death settlement to her family. On September 23, 2020, a grand jury ruled that the two officers who shot Ms. Taylor six times would not be charged, leading to national protest.

And now, since the death of George Floyd, Mr. Rayshard Brooks, 27, was shot and killed in Atlanta by Garrett Rolfe, an Atlanta police officer, on June 12, 2020. Mr. Brooks was asleep in his car, which was blocking the drive-through lane at a Wendy's restaurant. Officer Devin Brosnan responded to a complaint, and Officer Rolfe arrived after Officer Brosnan radioed for assistance. They found Mr. Brooks's blood-alcohol content to be above the legal limit for driving. Mr. Brooks offered to walk to his nearby sister's house. Instead, as the officers began to handcuff him, Mr. Brooks wrestled with the police. He took an officer's taser and began to run away, turning to point the taser, which is not considered a weapon, at them. Officer Rolfe shot Mr. Brooks twice in the back. He died a short time later. Various videos of the incident spread rapidly on social media. Prosecutors argued from these videos that after Mr. Brooks was shot, Officer Rolfe said, "I got him" and kicked him while Officer Brosnan stood on Mr. Brooks's shoulder. Officer Rolfe was charged with felony murder and other offenses on June 17.

By the time these pages are published, many more names will surely be added to this list.

I share the view that the majority of police officers are committed to serve all members of the community with justice and fairness. I also agree that the work of law enforcement is very difficult, requiring split-second decisions that can be a matter of life and death, especially when they encounter individuals suspected of wrongdoings that endanger the lives of the officers or others. It is a fact that some African Americans commit serious crimes for which they should be arrested, charged, convicted, and

punished. However, when they are suspected of minor offenses, the police have no right to impose a death sentence on the streets. Good and fair police deserve our respect and admiration and, in most cases, they deserve the benefit of the doubt. Nevertheless, the cumulative evidence of many years makes it almost impossible to argue that we are dealing with only “a few bad apples.”

The evidence suggests that there are some serious issues of bias in the culture and internal attitudes of at least some police forces, where systemic racism may be present. It is in the face of this culture of uneven treatment of People of Color that the calls to “Defund the Police” or even “Do Away with the Police” have emerged. Some individuals and groups may wish to do away with all forms of police forces and replace them with new forms of community policing. However, I share the view of those like Mr. Jacob Frey, mayor of Minneapolis, who argue strongly for major structural, attitudinal, and policy reforms in police departments (including reevaluating “qualified police immunity”) that will create an environment within which police and members of diverse communities will see themselves as working together for the safety, well-being, and harmony of everyone. Have we reached a tipping point where such radical reform can be undertaken not only in our police departments but also in our places of government, education, employment, worship, and in our hearts and consciousnesses?

Commentators and demonstrators, observers and critics alike are saying that the ongoing protests born from the death of George Floyd might actually be the start of not only an era of change but actually a change of eras in the United States equal to and even surpassing the Civil Rights Movement of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who had a dream. Have a critical mass of Americans come to a willingness to look at a most shameful aspect of its history with open-eyed honesty and set out on a self-examination and commitment to real and lasting change that uproots systemic racial bias and prejudice spawned from human slavery and the near destruction of the Indigenous peoples, the original sins of the country? Have we initiated an urgent, long-

overdue nationwide conversation about racism that can yield lasting results? In these dystopian times, are we finally “woke,” or are we just in a moment that will pass? We have been sleeping for so long, perhaps since the murder of the dreamer. Are we really and truly “woke”? Has our social consciousness been roused and raised? Are American people ready to “#staywoke”?

“Woke” is used here in the sense of what is sometimes called the African American Vernacular English meaning of the word, where being or staying woke refers to those who are alert, self-aware, and committed to change for as long as it takes. To be “woke” requires a willingness to question prevailing paradigms and consider paradigm shifts that will forge social orders that are new and better. Does the willingness of large numbers of people to at least think about the meaning of “Black Lives Matter” for the first time suggest that the consciousness of the nation has been raised to a level of awareness of racial injustice that will lead to dedicated actions for reform? Are we experiencing a sea change?

This much we know is true. The coronavirus pandemic kept large numbers of Americans home from work and school for long periods of time. They used this new “free time” in different ways. There is some evidence that many have read more, studied more, watched the news more, Googled more, spent more time on Facebook, written letters to the editor, and engaged in Zoom conversations with relatives and friends with whom they do not often speak. Because they had the time, many people who had never done so before participated in protest marches. At least for some, this has led to conversations of substance. George Floyd has often been the starting point of these new dialogues.

Conversations have moved from topic to topic. White people have been fired from their jobs for making cruel jokes about Mr. Floyd’s murder on social media. The House and Senate bills and President Trump’s executive order contributed to debates about new ways for police forces to operate, about practices such as chokeholds and warrantless arrests that might be reconsidered, and the ways that some of their funds might be used in other community services. There have been fierce arguments about the

value and long-term effectiveness of massive peaceful protests. Doctors and social scientists have offered opinions about why the pandemic is killing more African American people than others. Many conversations have focused on the expanding dialogue about race in American culture. The Curatorial Department of New York's Guggenheim Museum wrote to the museum's leadership insisting on immediate changes in "an inequitable work environment that enables racism, white supremacy, and other discriminatory practices." Major newspapers, which often in the past carried mainly negative stories about People of Color, began to feature numerous positive stories about various aspects of the African American experience, which opened the eyes of many. Books addressing racial bias like Ibram X. Kendi's *How to Be an Antiracist* and Robin Di Angelo's *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism* have soared to the top of best-seller lists.

HBO Max temporarily removed David O. Selznick's classic popular film *Gone with the Wind* from view and returned it with an introduction and panel discussion on the true dehumanizing nature of plantation slavery in contrast to the romanticized depiction in Margaret Mitchell's novel. Meanwhile, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) announced it would name its Washington, DC, headquarters after "Hidden Figure" Mary W. Jackson, NASA's first African American woman engineer. Hopefully, more than a few Catholics were reading "Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love," the new pastoral letter of the American Bishops acknowledging and challenging the enduring presence of racial hatred in our church and our country.

Quaker Oats announced that it would rebrand Aunt Jemima pancake syrup, because the character is based on a racial stereotype. Mars, which owns Uncle Ben's Rice, announced plans to change the rice maker's "brand identity," which has long been criticized for perpetuating a harmful racial stereotype. Meanwhile, the popular trading card game *Magic: The Gathering* removed seven cards with racist imagery, including the Invoke Prejudice card, which depicts

figures in pointed hoods suggestive of the Ku Klux Klan. Then, pressed by their only African American driver, Darrell “Bubba” Wallace Jr., NASCAR, the Talladega, Alabama, Superspeedway decided to ban all displays of the Confederate flag from its grounds.

On June 22, 2020, Governor Gina Raimondo issued an executive order that the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations will eliminate “Providence Plantations” from its official name on state documents. She said, “We can acknowledge our history without elevating a phrase that’s so deeply associated with the ugliest time in our state and in our country’s history.” In November voters will decide whether to change the state’s official name.

On June 26, 2020, the Board of Trustees of Princeton University voted to remove the name Woodrow Wilson from its famous School of Public and International Affairs, judging that President Wilson’s racist thinking and policies make him an inappropriate namesake. As Princeton President Christopher Eisgruber said, “Wilson’s racism was significant and consequential. He segregated the federal civil service after it had been racially integrated for decades, thereby taking America backward in its pursuit of justice.” Wilson called racial segregation “a benefit” and enslaved people “were happy and well-cared for.”

On June 28, 2020, legislators in Mississippi voted to abolish the state’s 126-year-old flag, which bears the Confederate battle emblem as its centerpiece. This long-opposed action is a key moment in the long history of efforts to remove offensive relics of the Confederacy from the South. Though many white Mississippians had claimed the flag as a proud expression of their Old South heritage, Philip Gunn, the Republican House Speaker said, “People’s hearts have changed. We are better today than we were yesterday.”

At the same time, the impetus to remove the most offensive monuments of Confederate leaders, who fought against the United States to preserve the “lost cause” of enslaving free human beings, gained momentum, along with moves to change the names of federal military bases in the South, named after Confederate

generals, both of these over the objections of the president and many of his supporters.

All these things were happening as the country quietly noted the fifth anniversary of the “slaughter of the innocent,” the terrible Charleston, South Carolina, church massacre on June 17, 2015, when nine African American people were brutally murdered as they prayed over the Word of God at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church by a man whose sole purpose was to start a race war. But their heartbroken relatives forgave him despite his heinous crime.

Do these and many other signs of change give us reason to think we really are “woke”?

One of the significant reasons to think that more Americans were finally “woke” after George Floyd’s murder was the renewed awareness of Juneteenth and the Tulsa Race Massacre after President Trump announced that he was planning a major political rally in Tulsa on June 19, 2020, even as the coronavirus pandemic was spreading in Oklahoma. When there was an outcry about having this political event on the historic Juneteenth holiday, he did not seem to understand the reason for the outcry. He was criticized for being insensitive to the racial crisis the country was going through and indifferent to the sensibilities of African American people about the date and the city. People wondered out loud if he would address the convergence of Juneteenth with the events in Tulsa in 1921 and the murders of African Americans by white people. He did not. In response, the rally was rescheduled for the following day, June 20. In a *Wall Street Journal* interview, the president said he learned about the importance of Juneteenth from an African American Secret Service agent. He said that he had done something good by making the unknown unofficial holiday “very famous.” “It’s actually an important event. But nobody had ever heard of it.”

Actually, many people have heard of it. Juneteenth has been well known for a long time, not only in the African American

community but also to many others. In recent years it has been commemorated in more and more cities, and there are serious efforts to make it a national holiday. Still, the president's insensitivity paradoxically may have brought Juneteenth into the consciousness of many white people for the first time.

Juneteenth celebrates June 19, 1865, when Major General Gordon Granger went to Galveston, Texas, and announced that the War Between the States had ended. He read an order informing enslaved free human beings there that President Lincoln's January 1, 1863, Emancipation Proclamation had declared that all persons held as slaves within the rebellious states are, and henceforward, shall be "free." But slavery was not abolished until later that year when the 13th Amendment was ratified. There were more than 250,000 enslaved free human beings in Texas at that time. When this joyful news finally reached Texas, the president was already dead, assassinated on April 15, 1865.

The jubilation over the news that they were "free at last" led to annual celebrations in many African American communities in Texas, and the tradition of Juneteenth, also known as Freedom Day or Emancipation Day, continued. Juneteenth festivities usually included prayers, readings, songs, picnic meals, fishing, horseback riding, and remembrances of beloved dead enslaved ancestors. Juneteenth, the oldest known celebration commemorating the end of slavery, became an official state holiday in Texas in 1980.

Contemporary celebrations of Juneteenth often include public readings of the Emancipation Proclamation, singing African American songs like "Lift Every Voice and Sing" as well as the reading of works by noted African American writers such as Ralph Ellison, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Ta-Nehisi Coates. Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" and Nina Simone's "You Know How I Feel" might be playing in the background.

Opal Lee, a 93-year-old activist from Texas, has been working tirelessly for years to make Juneteenth a national holiday. Many others are campaigning for Congress to recognize Juneteenth as a national holiday. Forty-seven states recognize Juneteenth in some way. Only Hawai'i, North Dakota, and South Dakota do

not recognize it. Texas, Virginia, New York, and Pennsylvania are the only states that recognize it as an official paid holiday for its employees.

During this year's celebrations of Juneteenth, many white Americans who were interviewed said they felt embarrassed that they never celebrated or thought about Juneteenth until this year. They asked, "How is it possible that we didn't know about it? Why weren't we taught about it in school? Was it deliberately left out of our history books? All Americans should know about a holiday that is such a critical moment in our history." Perhaps they are now "woke."

When President Trump announced that he was going to Tulsa, Oklahoma, for a political rally on June 19, many in the media and the city wondered why he was going to Oklahoma, a state he is favored to win by a large margin and a state where instances of Covid-19 infection were on the rise. Some African American people wondered if he was going to use this historic location of the Tulsa Race Massacre ninety-nine years ago to announce specific proposals of his administration to address the urgent concerns of African Americans, to express his awareness of increasing racial tensions in the country, and suggest actions that might help bridge the racial divide.

However, on June 20, he did not speak about the racial divide of the past or the present. He referred to those peacefully protesting in the name of George Floyd outside the Bank of Oklahoma Center as "bad people," "trouble-makers," "thugs," and "anarchists." Nevertheless, his very presence in the city and his silence raised awareness of the tragic events of nearly a century ago that still influence Tulsa today. If we are to be truly "woke," there is wisdom in refreshing our memories about the terrible days, beginning May 30, 1921. Those who ignore the sins of the past run the risk of repeating them.

The massacre was one of the most destructive episodes of racial terrorism in American history. On May 30, 1921, a young African American man was arrested. No one seems to know exactly what happened. He was accused of attempting to assault a white

teenage girl in an elevator of an office building in Tulsa's thriving African American Greenwood District. Greenwood at the time had a business district that was known as the Negro Wall Street. It was the proud center of African American affluence in the Southwest, with some of the finest Black-owned businesses in the country. The story of the alleged assault attempt appeared in a newspaper the next day. The white press lit the match for the destruction of Greenwood by labeling the community as "Niggertown," full of "jazz clubs" and places of vice. An armed mob of angry white people formed, bent on vengeance. Things escalated quickly into mob violence. The goal was "to run the Negroes out of Tulsa."

White vigilantes systematically burned nearly forty square blocks, destroying more than 1,000 homes, a dozen churches, five hotels, thirty-one restaurants, four drugstores, eight doctors' offices, the public library, and the local hospital. Ten thousand were left homeless. It is estimated that 300 African Americans were slain.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, lynch mobs commonly hanged, shot, or burned African Americans alive. They also roped men of color to cars and dragged them to death. The killers in Tulsa reenacted this barbaric ritual. One helpless elderly African American blind man, whose legs had been amputated, was shredded alive behind a fast-moving car. This "good old colored man" was tied to a convertible that sped down the street for all to see. The bodies of the dead were stacked up on street corners, carried out of town on city-owned trucks, burned in an incinerator or dumped into a river. Photographs survive showing the bewildered survivors as they were led at gunpoint to what could only be called concentration camps. No one was arrested, charged, or convicted for these horrid deeds. No restitution was made.

This deeply disturbing episode was long hidden from view. This episode was often referred to as "the Tulsa Race Riots," which suggested that African Americans were the agents of horror, since "riot" has been given racial overtones. In 2001, serious research into the events was undertaken and historians rightly began to speak of the "Tulsa Race Massacre." In 2019, HBO's highly praised series *Watchmen* brought the story of the Tulsa Massacre back into

the consciousness of many Americans, as did *Greenwood*, the 2019 Dance Theater ballet choreographed by Donald Byrd, continuing the Alvin Ailey legacy of challenging social injustice through dance.

This year Juneteenth was celebrated in Tulsa with greater exuberance than ever. The community celebrated the moment in history when the news of Abraham Lincoln's bold, pragmatic action reached their ancestors; they celebrated the resilience of African Americans today, in the face of a pandemic that is disproportionately affecting our communities, resilience in the face of police brutality against People of Color, and in the face of a president who boasts of how much he has done to strengthen African American communities in spite of stark evidence to the contrary. They ask what does "Make America Great Again" mean. At what point in the country's history was America great for all Americans? Since no such date exists in the past, that greatness must lie in the future.

The people of Tulsa fully understand the country's renewed anxiety ignited by George Floyd's senseless death because they lived through such senseless death at the hands of white supremacists intent on maintaining white privilege a century ago. Many Tulsa residents of all races are "woke." They believe their journey can be a model for the rest of the nation. Hannibal Johnson, a Tulsa historian and a professor of African American history, argues that the way forward is a three-step journey of "*acknowledgment, apology, and atonement.*"

Is this country now on that journey? Is there a critical mass of the American people who are ready to acknowledge the truth of the nation's long history of racial injustice? Is the country ready and willing to express its remorse and apologize from the highest levels of government? Are there grounds for hoping that rank-and-file citizens are ready for atonement? Or, as Nikole Hannah-Jones asks, is there a willingness to move toward atonement and even reparations?

I am fearful that for all of the momentum that suggests the country might be "woke," the long, sharp eye of history may look back at the present ferment as our Prague Spring—that period of

political liberalization and mass protest in Czechoslovakia under reformist Alexander Dubček, that began January 5, 1968, that ended August 21, 1968, when the country was invaded and the reforms were suppressed by the Soviet Union and other Warsaw Pact members.

My hope is that we are at a crossroad, a moment in history of “*kairos*” in the Christian sense of “the appointed time in the purpose of God,” an opportune moment, a time when the grace of God will prevail. Theologian Paul Tillich spoke of *kairoi* as crisis moments in history which seem to demand that human beings make existential decisions. He considered the emergence of Jesus Christ in human history to be the supreme example. Liberation theology and Nelson Mandela’s confrontation with South Africa’s oppressive, racist apartheid regime was a smaller example. *Kairoi* constitute “the crucial time” when individuals and communities must make life-altering decisions.

I have several concerns that temper my hope.

My first concern is this. Will the current relatively large number of white people who have either participated in the protests or said they sympathize with the cause of racial justice be sustained? The outcry over Mr. Floyd’s death seems to have moved many white Americans to acknowledge that, to some degree, they have contributed to the racism that is ingrained in much of American society. A wellspring of awareness has prompted many, especially younger people, to concede their own culpability for the racial divide. Growing numbers of white people feel that they cannot and should not collectively ignore the ordeals experienced daily by many African American people.

Many white Americans of different nationalities say they have attended demonstrations for racial justice for the first time. They have bought books on race in America and even made a conscious effort to protect their children from the poison of racial prejudice. Talk show panelists, thinking out loud, have asked: Does being white give me advantages to which I simply presume to be entitled? Is that “white privilege”? What part can I play in creating a more level playing field for People of Color?

Will this new awareness continue to be a motivating force in their lives for years to come? Or will it dissipate? Real change will not come about without a multiracial coalition. Are these white people who today are sincerely concerned truly “woke”?

I remember well the enthusiastic talk about a “post-racial America” after President Barack Obama was elected. Those who were hopeful that this historic event was a “kairos” moment in American history were proven wrong. Are the positive developments that seem to signal a change in consciousness causing us to ignore the evidence right before our eyes that the attitudes of the past are simply festering just below the surface?

I began writing the essays in this book five years ago. Each chapter, in its own way, addresses different aspects of being “woke” to the challenges caused by the racial divide in this country. The events of this past year make them timelier and more relevant than when I wrote them. I have written from the “moving viewpoint” of my experiences as a human being, a person of color, a Catholic priest for fifty years, and a Catholic bishop for twenty-five years. I have lived in many different parts of the country from Chicago to Cambridge, from Cleveland to Washington, DC, from New York to South Bend, from St. Louis to Lake Charles to Belleville. I have not only seen but also have personally experienced the impact of the racial divide on my life in society and in the Catholic Church.

And through these many years with their negative and positive experiences, I now realize that I personally have become more and more “woke.” I have no fear of what James Baldwin and Toni Morrison have called “the master’s narrative” and “the white gaze.” I have found my own voice.

Are the people of the United States ready for atonement? Are more of us finally “woke”?

I hope so!

Bishop Edward K. Braxton
JUNETEENTH 2020