

RACIAL JUSTICE  
—— and the ——  
CATHOLIC CHURCH

BRYAN N. MASSINGALE

ORBIS  BOOKS  
Maryknoll, New York 10545

## Preface

**T**HIS BOOK HAS BEEN long in the making. It grows out of a struggle that is both personal and professional: the integration of my experiences as an African American and my Catholic faith. Over the years, the articulation of this struggle has taken many forms. Yet the fundamental and abiding conviction has been that there is a valuable and essential contribution that the black experience — the experience of creating meaning and possibility in the midst of the crushing ordinariness of American racism — can make to Catholic faith and theology.

When I began my graduate studies in the mid-1980s, one of my mentors cautioned me about focusing on issues of race. He observed, “If you do that, people will pigeonhole you and think that is all you can do.” I received this advice with external politeness and respect, though inwardly I wondered: “But if I don’t, who will?”

My professor’s warning has proven to be more accurate than I would wish. Though I have taught courses across the range of Catholic moral theology and have lectured on issues ranging from terrorism to just war, from homosexuality to health care ethics, my published writings do focus on the issue of racism. This has led to a certain “pigeonholing,” as my professor feared. Yet it is a risk that I have chosen to assume for two main reasons.

First, because of the existential concern I expressed above, namely, if my Catholic faith has nothing significant to say about a social evil that impacts my life every day in ways both small and large, hidden and blatant, then I and millions of other Catholics of

color are fools and wasting our time. This compels me to give an account for the “reason for my hope,” that is, to continue to engage in passionate and reasoned reflection demonstrating that there is no necessary contradiction between Catholic faith and an effective concern for racial justice and equality — despite the sad counterwitness of its concrete practices and omissions.

There is a second reason for assuming the risk of being a black Catholic ethicist who focuses on racial issues: a concern for the integrity and adequacy of the church’s agency for justice. Virtually every social challenge facing the United States — education, care for the environment, access to health care, poverty, capital punishment, immigration reform, workers’ rights, HIV/AIDS, criminal justice, right to life, concern for women — is entangled with or aggravated by racial bias against people of color. Racism is one of the central human rights challenges facing the country; it is the subtext of almost every social concern in our nation. It is my conviction — one that has only grown stronger with sustained study and reflection — that “Catholic failure to engage adequately the pivotal issue of racial injustice decisively compromises its theology of justice and renders its praxis of justice ineffective.”<sup>1</sup>

This book, then, seeks to explore both the contributions and limitations of Catholic social reflection on racial justice. It addresses the question: Does Catholic faith have any relevance for the struggle for racial justice and equality in twenty-first century America? My aim is twofold: to develop a Catholic approach to racial justice more adequate to a nation, church, and world of increasing diversity and pluralism; and to demonstrate how a serious reckoning with the African American experience would enable Catholic social ethics to address some of its deficits and lacunae.

A word about the focus of this study. I concentrate on exploring racism from the perspective of the historic and continuing divisions in the United States between those social groups designated as “black” and “white” Americans.<sup>2</sup> I grant that a study that focuses upon these two racial groups is somewhat inadequate, especially given the increasing racial and ethnic diversity of the U.S. population. I also do not deny the existence or importance of racial

tensions between or among other racial groups. Yet I contend that the estrangement between black and white Americans has shaped American life in decisive ways not matched by either the estrangement between whites and other racial/ethnic groups, or the tensions among the “groups of color.”

In this, I agree with sociologist Joe Feagin, who characterizes the relationship between blacks and whites as “archetypal,” meaning “it is the original model on which whites’ treatment of other non-European groups” was patterned. Thus other racial and ethnic groups upon coming to this country were defined by their place within the racial ladder with whites on the top rung and blacks on the bottom. He further argues that the relationship between blacks and whites is archetypal in the sense that no other racial group has proved so central to the “white-controlled economy,” white social life, and indeed the “white sense of self.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, those who have studied America’s changing racial demography note that while our society is becoming more racially complex than a simple “white/nonwhite” divide, dark skin color or “anti-blackness” yet remains the pivotal element that determines a group’s position in American social life. That is, “white” and “black” remain the critical reference benchmarks for measuring a social group’s place in our public life.<sup>4</sup>

Historically and culturally, the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of white Americans toward blacks have most plagued and decisively formed us as a nation. This division is still the paradigm of racial injustice and thus merits privileged attention.

Yet there are serious obstacles to a forthright engagement with the issue of racism. I have taken to introducing lectures on racism by stating that there are three obstacles to overcome:

- ♦ *We don’t know what we are talking about* — that is, we lack clarity and agreement as to what constitutes “racism” in a so-called “post-racist” society;
- ♦ *We don’t know how to talk about it* — especially in mixed-race settings. The various racial and ethnic groups talk about “race” among themselves and in “safe” company. But we don’t know

how to talk about race productively in an interracial situation, where we often are inhibited by concerns of not wanting to appear insensitive, ignorant, or intolerant; and

- ♦ *We really don't want to talk about it* — that is, most Americans are very reluctant — even unwilling — to address the core reason for racial tensions and inequality in the United States, namely, the fact that a specific racial group benefits from our nation's racial hierarchy. We don't want to talk about the core issues that an honest discussion of racial injustice or racial disparity would entail, fearing the personal and social changes that such honesty would demand. Therefore, most prefer to tinker at the edges of the problem, basically saying, "Let's be nice to each other," rather than address the terrible truth and harsh reality of what we mean by racial injustice and racism. This is an especially difficult discussion for many (if not most) white Americans who (1) lack any first-hand experience with racial discrimination (except perhaps as perpetrators); (2) thus tend to minimize the occurrence or reality of racial discrimination; (3) lack awareness of how they benefit from the racial harms endured by others; and (4) are loathe to redress a system that benefits them.<sup>5</sup>

This is the reason for the failure of so many attempts at interracial "dialogue." We cannot have an honest engagement with racial injustice without addressing the unequal social status that results from it and is the reason for it. Why we need to overcome this hesitancy and address the core dynamic that feeds systemic inequality among the races is part of the reason for this book.

Another obstacle to overcome in discussions about race is their emotional charge. I have taught a course entitled "Christian Faith and Racial Justice" for several years. Much of what I write stems from my classroom experience. Inevitably, at some point in the course I have to suspend my planned lecture to allow space for the students to acknowledge and deal with the powerful emotions that are triggered by what they are learning. With the possible exception of homosexuality, no other issue engages us so emotionally and viscerally as that of racism. I have also discovered that until these

emotions are acknowledged, no real learning or transformation can occur. The students become so overwhelmed that they literally shut down and tune out any further information or reflection. So at the beginning of this book, I want to acknowledge some of the emotions that may occur in its reading.

Discussions about race in the United States often are marked by unease, tension, anxiety, fear, anger, and confusion. For some, facing the reality of racism surfaces many *fears*, such as a fear of not being heard or understood; a fear of being blamed; a fear of the personal changes that might be required for a more faithful discipleship. Some feel *defensive* when the talk turns to racism; they do not want to be made responsible for wrongs that they lack a direct role in causing. Others feel *embarrassed* or *ashamed* as they confront a terrible history of human degradation and suffering perpetrated by members of their race. *Anger* is another common response in racial discussions, especially on the part of those who have been most directly harmed by this insidious social evil.

An examination of racism can also cause a sense of deep *sadness* as we come to realize the depths of human wrongdoing and tragic evil. Discussions of race can also lead to a sense of *weariness* and *discouragement*; after so much struggle and pain, there can seem to be too little progress to show for all of our efforts. Oftentimes we can feel *overwhelmed*, *paralyzed*, and *helpless* in the face of racism's seeming intransigence. Some approach the whole issue with *denial*, either willfully blind to or naively unaware of the ongoing reality of racial injustice. Finally, some feel that raising the issue of racism is counterproductive and needlessly *divisive*; they argue that we should focus upon what unites us rather than calling our attention to the divisions that exist among Americans.

These emotions are real. Confronting racism is difficult and challenging work. My aim in raising this issue to the forefront of our consciousness is not to foster division, but to heal a tragic brokenness in our society and church. Racism is an evil that afflicts us all. Though we are scarred in different ways and in varying degrees, no one living in the United States is immune from racism's terrible

damage. We all are wounded by the sin of racism. Rather than promoting division, we are called to a solidarity in healing and struggle. The central question for us is this: *How can we struggle together against an evil that harms us all, though in different ways?* The central message of Catholic Christian faith is this: *The wounds of racism are real and deep, but healing is possible.* Thus I invite you to undertake this study, despite its difficulties and risks, sustained by Christ's assurance that the truth — however painful — will indeed set us free.