



Racism is a sickness of the soul. Can Jesuit spirituality help us heal?

Bryan N. Massingale

November 20, 2017

Dealing with the reality of racism in the United States is not easy. If it were, we would be well on our way to a more just world. But to have an honest, adult conversation about race, people might need to feel uncomfortable—embarrassed, ashamed, fearful, angry, overwhelmed, helpless and/or paralyzed—because there are few issues that grip and affect us emotionally more than the issue of race.

What ought to be the Ignatian contribution to the fight for racial justice, given our mission and our values? We start by looking at “the signs of the times,” that phrase from

the Second Vatican Council that reminded theologians and church leaders that if we are to speak with credibility and effectiveness to our world, we have to ground ourselves in what is really going on.

A good place to start is by looking at our world through the lens of the college students who will graduate this spring as the class of 2018. What has been the experience of this senior class, and our country, when examined through the lens of race?

Four Years of Seismic Events

When the class of 2018 were first-year students, buying their school supplies, packing up their belongings and moving into residence halls in August of their freshman year, Michael Brown Jr. was killed on the streets of Ferguson, Mo. That summer ignited a series of protests, epitomized by the slogan “Hands up. Don’t shoot.” But Michael Brown was simply one of many—all too many—people who were killed: unarmed African-Americans, men and women, killed for doing nothing except shopping in a mall, ringing a doorbell in the middle of the night to ask for help, or sitting on a playground swing and playing with a toy gun.

In their sophomore year, the class of 2018 heard the news that a group doing Bible study in a historic black church in Charleston, S.C., welcomed in a young white man. While they were at prayer, he opened fire, killing nine people. It was the worst shooting in a black church since the 1960s. It ignited a nationwide debate over the display of the Confederate flag and Confederate monuments, one still going on today.

What ought to be the Ignatian contribution to the fight for racial justice, given our mission and our values?

Their junior year was defined by the U.S. presidential campaign. The leading Republican contender began his journey to the White House by calling Mexican immigrants rapists and holding campaign rallies filled with chants of “Build the wall.” He promised to implement a Muslim travel ban. He wanted to reinstate the unconstitutional law enforcement practice of stop-and-frisk. He denigrated a “Mexican” judge who is actually a U.S. citizen. He talked about how he was going to protect us from the “bad hombres.” He called our inner-city neighborhoods “hotbeds of violence” and encouraged us all to be afraid. He engaged in conduct that even a leader

in his own party, Paul Ryan (hardly a liberal), denounced as “textbook racism.”

I was teaching a course on Catholic social teaching at Fordham University during the presidential campaign. The election was on Tuesday. That Thursday I was supposed to give an examination. When I woke up on Wednesday, I encountered something that had never happened in all of my years of teaching: I had over 25 emails from students begging me to cancel or postpone the exam, because they were too distracted and too distraught to study. That was junior year.

Now in their senior year, as the class of 2018 prepares for graduation, our nation is dealing with Charlottesville and the sight of white nationalist marchers carrying tiki torches through an American street, sights that we have not seen since the days of the civil rights movement. The class of 2018 had not ever witnessed these kinds of scenes in the United States, except in grainy black-and-white videos perhaps shown to them by a history teacher.

Any one of these events of the last four years would have been seismically significant. All of them taken together are sad proof that we are living in a time of racial tension, polarization and division worse than this country has experienced in over two generations.

Three Obstacles to Honest Talk About Race

We must address racism because of this simple fact: Almost every social justice challenge that faces us in the United States is entangled with or exacerbated by racism against persons of color, and African-Americans in particular. No matter what issue you bring to the table, whether it be health care access, immigration, mass incarceration, educational disparity, living wages, justice for women, pro-life, poverty or L.G.B.T.Q. issues, they are all entangled with and enmeshed in racism. If you want to deal with educational access, or immigration, or care for the environment, or poverty, and you do not deal with race, you are on a bridge to nowhere. You cannot get justice right if you do not get racism right.

Yet when we try to have an honest adult conversation about race in this country, we have to overcome three obstacles: We do not know what we are talking about; we do not

know how to talk about it; and we do not really want to talk about it.

First, we do not know what we are talking about. Many think we are living in a “post-racial” society; so then what exactly is “racism”? Second, we don’t know how to talk about it, especially in an interracial context. I know black folks talk about race among ourselves, and I have it on pretty good authority that white people, Latinos and Asians talk about race among themselves. But when we come together, we have this code of silence, where we do not say anything, or become polite, or do not raise the issues—out of fear of sounding ignorant or giving offense. We do not know how to talk about it. Third, we do not really want to talk about it. Talking about the core reasons for racism takes us to places that we do not want to go because we have to face some very unsettling and deeply uncomfortable truths.

Many Americans have what I call a “common-sense” understanding of racism—namely, committing individual acts of meanness, usually but not always directed against persons of color: Person A doing something negative to Person B. Person A, usually but not always being white, does something negative deliberately, consciously and intentionally to Person B, who is usually but not always black or Latino, because of the color of Person B’s skin. It is obvious, it is deliberate, it is intentional and it is easily photographed. You know what you are doing and why you are doing it. Now this kind of racism is a problem. But it is not *the* problem.

This understanding of racism makes it easy to conclude that racism is simply a problem of bad white people, like the ones who marched in Charlottesville. But the issues with this common-sense understanding are twofold. First, it does not take us deep enough into where we need to go; and second, it can too easily let many white Americans, especially justice-centered ones like those who gather for the Ignatian Family Teach-In for Justice, off the hook. After all, they say: we are the good people. We do not use the “n-word.” We do not mind sitting next to someone who looks a little different from us.

So we have to go deeper.

Implicit Biases

Most of us have heard about Flint, Mich., and that city’s contaminated water situation.

The crisis started in April of 2014, and the water there has still not been certified, over three years later, as safe to drink. For over a year and a half, public authorities said, “The water is fine to drink. No worries here. No problem,” even though it was later found to have toxic levels of lead contamination. The Michigan Civil Rights Commission in 2017 asked a pertinent question: “Would the Flint water crisis have been allowed to happen in Birmingham, Ann Arbor or East Grand Rapids?” All three are very white areas of the state. “We believe the answer is no.” They then asked a further question: “Was race a factor in the Flint water crisis? Our answer is an unreserved and undeniable yes.”

In other words, what happened in Flint happened because of the social vulnerability of the people, because of the social and racial class to which they belonged. But this was not a case of public officials saying, “Oh, you’re black, so we’re not going to take care of you,” which would be a classic example of Person A doing something to Person B. Something more insidious and more subtle was going on in Flint. It was an example of what social science calls “racially selective sympathy and indifference,” the unconscious refusal to extend the same level of recognition and care to another that we would give to members of our own group, because of pervasive cultural implicit bias.

Because we live in the society that we do, in which meanings and values are attached to skin color, and learned almost by osmosis, when we relate to one another, we carry implicit biases and associations. These unacknowledged biases and associations, when they become widespread and commonly shared, lead to making public policies that benefit some and disadvantage others.



Allow me to give an example of implicit bias from my own life. I was giving a talk to a group of women religious, and at the break one of them came up to me and said, “Father Massingale, you are so intelligent and so articulate. You must have been taught by one of our sisters.” I said, “No, I was taught by my mother and father.” She didn’t understand why I responded as I did. I explained, “Sister, would you have gone to a white priest and told him, ‘You’re so intelligent and articulate. You must have been taught by one of our sisters?’ Didn’t you assume that the reason I could be intelligent or articulate was because some white person made me that way?”

She walked away and did not talk to me for the rest of the weekend. But note: I was not calling her a “racist,” because she did not deliberately and consciously try to insult me. That was not her intention. Yet the offense happened because she was acting on automatic pilot. She was speaking out of what she had been unconsciously taught.

Pervasive cultural implicit bias answers the question: Who counts as “us”? Such “racially selective sympathy and indifference” allows us to assume implicitly that some

count and some do not, or that some lives are more disposable than others. To quote one of the final scenes of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, "All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others." That is the essence of racially selective sympathy and indifference: People with lighter skin matter more than those with darker skin.

White Comfort

Thus when we speak of racism in the United States, we are talking about a *system* of white supremacy. White supremacy fundamentally is the assumption that this country, its political institutions, its cultural heritage, its social policies and its public spaces belong to white people in a way that they do not belong to others. It is the basic assumption that some naturally belong in our public and cultural space and others have to justify being there. Further, it is the suspicion that those "others" are in "our" space only because someone has made special allowances for them.

This is the most uncomfortable truth we must face as Americans about racism. Many want to believe that people of all races are equally guilty of racism; it is a way for the majority to let itself off the hook. But the honest truth is that if it were up to people of color, racism would have ended a long time ago. This is the deepest reason why racism is so often avoided or only dealt with in very superficial ways: because naming white supremacy makes white people uncomfortable. And white comfort sets the limits of engagement.

For a believer, it is important to see racism as a soul sickness.

I am consistently amazed that whenever I speak or write about racism, sooner or later someone will ask the question, "How can I talk about this on my campus, in my classroom, or in my parish and not make white people uncomfortable?" Think about that question. Why is it that the only group in America that is never supposed to feel uncomfortable about race are white people? There is no way to have an adult, honest, intelligent conversation about race without making white people uncomfortable as a group, because the system of white supremacy exists precisely to benefit one group and not another. If we are unwilling to face that truth, then we doom ourselves to superficial and ineffective responses to social injustice.

For a believer, it is important to see racism as a soul sickness. Racism is that interior

disease, that warping of the human spirit, that enables us to create communities where some matter and some do not. To quote the paired signs worn by protesters at a recent Black Lives Matter rally: “Is his—a black man’s—life worth less than mine? Is his—a white man’s—life worth more than mine?”

I saw this soul sickness at work recently as I was passing through an airport. On the overhead televisions, a reporter was interviewing an uncle of Michael Brown Jr., who was grieving the loss of his nephew. When people are sad and overcome with grief, they do not always think about what they saying. The uncle was angry, he was upset, he was tearful, and his voice was loud. I watched the mostly white faces of those staring at CNN; instead of seeing sympathy, empathy, sorrow, compassion, or understanding, I saw stone-cold anger.

What can so poison the soul that we cannot see the grief of an uncle and understand his pain?

What Would Ignatius Do?

Albert Einstein once noted, “The world we have created is a product of our thinking. It cannot be changed without changing our thinking.” Then he added, “No problem can be solved at the level of consciousness that created it.” So if we want to change the world, we need a new way of seeing, a new way of being, a new way of loving, a new way of living.

This leads us to the *magis*, the “more” that St. Ignatius asked of those who embraced his spirituality. The *magis* is the antidote, a response to the soul sickness that so binds us that we cannot hear another person’s pain. It is probably the most subversive word in the entire lexicon of Ignatian vocabulary. The *magis* is that longing, that yearning, for what is beyond us. It calls us to be “bigger souled” than we ever thought that we could be—for God. It is the “ever more” for God that St. Ignatius calls for in the Spiritual Exercises; it is the *maioem* in the Jesuit motto *Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam*, “For the Greater Glory of God.” It is not about being more simply for ourselves, but being more for God.

If we want to change the world, we need a new way of seeing, a new way of loving, a new way of living.

The *magis* is that sacred, holy restlessness that leaves us dissatisfied, that longing for more that breaks our hearts and breaks us open, so that we can become co-creators of the new, with God's help and for God's greater glory.

The *magis* can be illustrated by the biblical story of the prodigal son. We all know the story. One of two sons demands his share of his father's inheritance and squanders it. After he is flat broke, he wakes up and realizes, "This is crazy." The passage reads: "Coming to his senses," that is, "coming to his true self." He leaves his world of delusion and he comes to his true self. He becomes the man he is supposed to be as he sees through his illusion. Only when he sees through his false self and begins to make the journey home does he discover that his father has been waiting for him all along. The son could not see it until he was willing to come to his true self and come to his senses. He then also realizes that the father's mercy is more than he could imagine, just as God's mercy is.

That is part of what what the *magis* is: an invitation to come to our senses, to our true selves, and to see through the lies. The lies that say some people are more important and less expendable simply because they have less color in their skin. We have built a whole society on an illusion, a delusion, a lie, and it is time that we came to our senses. That is what the *magis* does for us, by stretching us beyond this craziness toward the "more," the *majorem*, the truth.

When we are soul-sick, we need to be re-created. We need to become new beings. We need a new way of thinking, a new way of living, a new way of loving. We need to become new creations. But are we ready for the *magis*? Are we ready to do this for God?

As I write this, anticipating a resounding "yes" from the readers, I can hear my grandmother saying, "Y'all are fibbing." If we are honest, we can only respond to a *magis* invitation with hesitation. Few truly desire to be re-created. Most of us, honestly, fear the *magis* and its summons to the unknown. Everybody wants to improve, but few truly want to change.

The Race to End Racism

No, we are not ready for the *magis*. We are not ready to become a nation of equals, a

nation that we have never been. The good news is that we do not have to be. When we need to be ready for the *magis* summons, the Spirit of God will make us ready and give us what we need. We also do not answer the *magis* call to greater justice on our own. We do it with each other. Racial justice is a *magis* relay race. The goal is not for us personally to cross the finish line and enter into the racial promised land. Our goal is to simply run our leg of the race and do our work, so that we can pass the baton to those who will come after us.

The Letter to the Hebrews says, “Now that we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, let us continue to run the race, leaving behind every encumbrance and weight of sin, keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, who is our final goal and our perfection.” I am running my leg of the race, trying to do my part, but it is not for me to reach the finish line. It is only up to me to do what I am supposed to do, so I can hand the baton to someone else. I will not be the one who breaks the tape at the end of the race, but if I do not run my race and do what I need to do, then we together cannot win at all.

I ask others to join me in this race for racial justice, to do your part, so that together we can create a new world. The society we live in is the result of human choices and decisions. That means that human beings can change things. For what human beings break, divide and separate, we can—with God’s help—also heal, unite and restore. What is now does not have to be. Therein lies our hope and our challenge.

This article also appeared in print, under the headline “The Sickness of the American Soul,” in the December 11, 2017 issue.

More: **RACE // US POLITICS // JESUITS**