

# Racism, the Church and the suffering of people of African descent

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## Reflections from a Nigerian Catholic priest studying and teaching in the United States

Among the most important contributions of the Catholic Church in the modern era to healing the legacy of racism and anti-blackness were Pope John Paul II's public apologies to people of African descent.

During a visit to Cameroon in 1985 he apologized to blacks throughout the world for the involvement of white Christians in the slave trade.

He apologized again in 1992 at the *Door of No Return* on the Island of Goree in Senegal, from where more than 60,000 enslaved Africans were transported by sea from Africa to the Americas during the slavery period.

The Polish pope not only asked Africans for forgiveness for the crimes committed against her sons and daughters by Christians and their nations, he also emphasized that the world should never forget the "enormous suffering", the abuse of human rights and "the black pain" of what he calls the horrors and drama of slavery "by a civilization that called itself Christian".

This singular penitential act preceded John Paul's invitation to Christians and the institutional Church, for an examination of conscience and purification of memory by all Christians at the dawn of the New Millennium in his 1994 apostolic letter *Tertio millennio adveniente*.

He spoke strongly on the need for the Church to embrace the path of repentance by first becoming, "more fully conscious of the sinfulness of her children, recalling all those times in history when they departed from the spirit of Christ and his Gospel and, instead of offering to the world the witness of a life inspired by the values of faith, indulged in ways of thinking and acting which were truly forms of counter-witness and scandal".

Many black people throughout the world prayed then that the pope's example would encourage all Western governments who were involved in the shameful enslavement and dehumanization of blacks, indigenous peoples and all God's people to publicly apologize for these grave evil against God and humanity, and undertake a comprehensive step towards repairing the harm caused and its continuing consequences.

Many blacks and peoples of color in the Global South have continued to bear this burden brought upon them as a result of slavery, colonialism and racism. It is built on the neo-liberal capitalism that sustains the present iniquitous global order and the "economy that kills", as Pope Francis consistently calls it.

Many Africans and oppressed people the world over had hoped that the global movement for justice, democracy and human rights – which led to the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the dawn of a New Millennium – would lead to restorative justice for blacks.

Sadly, it did not. And it did not even usher in a new wave of apologies, following John Paul II's example. Particularly in the United States, there has been no concerted and honest effort to confront this demon of the past.

This is why African Americans and subsequently black immigrants continue to suffer today because the United States has not embarked on a serious national process of healing and restorative justice for blacks.

Instead, blacks continue to bear the brunt of individual, institutionalized and systemic racism and discrimination, which many US Church leaders and theologians constantly refer to as America's "original sin".

## **Racism: a daily reality for most blacks in America and throughout the world**

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The current anti-racism movement – which began as a response to the painful public asphyxiation of an unarmed African American man, George Floyd – has also elicited strong condemnations and *mea culpas* from activists, as well as Church and political

leaders.

Pope Francis reacted to Floyd's killing by reminding the world "we cannot tolerate or turn a blind eye to racism and exclusion in any form and yet claim to defend the sacredness of every human life".

But asking for forgiveness as John Paul II did or condemning the brutal killing of an African American as Francis did are not enough.

The Church can and should do more, because racism and anti-blackness is a global pandemic. It is worse than COVID-19 and has tainted human history since time immemorial.

Racism is not only a crime against humanity. It is also a crime against God.

First, the Catholic Church needs to denounce racism as a heresy. She must unhinge herself from any form of political ideology or political figures, corporations and entities who through their words and actions continue to promote racist thinking, policies and rhetoric.

Those who advance the false ideology of the superiority of one race or nation over others in any shape or form should be condemned as enemies of God and enemies of life. Being pro-life for the Church should also include an anti-racism stance.

Second, the time has come for the Church to revise the Code of Canon Law and its penitential rites to integrate the penal precepts against her racist members.

There needs to be put in place some rites and rituals for purging and healing both the racist members, Church leaders and ministers who espouse racist teaching and actions in order to purge the lifeblood of the Church of this filth.

This is one concrete and sacramental way of trying to repair the harm any racist actions bring upon people and the wound it brings on the heart of our loving God, whose heart is open to all creation in its diversity and beauty.

Third, George Floyd's death has shown only one facet of the persistence of racism against black people in the United States and in the world. The public display of his brutal killing pulled the heartstrings of many women and men of goodwill.

However, the greatest and most insidious aspect of racism today, is that it is hidden from the public eye in many ways. Implicit bias is an "invisible" form of racism that many "good" people display in their attitudes towards blacks.

It masks hidden hatred with empty platitudes or sermons about the good intention of "good" people; it deploys all kinds of pretty language and social policies and educational programs that all reinforce existing structures of oppression, social hierarchies and white privilege.

And it foists a cycle of dependency upon blacks in America.

## **Hidden bias and ideologies of power**

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Hidden bias is so virulent for three reasons.

Firstly, it *pathologizes black people* – by claiming that there is something wrong with African Americans.

Secondly, it *victimizes the black victims of violence* a second time – by claiming that their crimes or behaviors contribute to the unjust treatment they receive at the hand of society, for their incarceration or the capital punishment which continues to decimate a large section of black men.

Thirdly, it *minimizes the extent and devastating impact of racism* – by pointing to successful black people and social policies put in place to help blacks.

The response in the United States to George Floyd's death has also revealed the ideologically driven nature of racialized thinking, action and hatred in the country.

One immediately sees in the face of the national and international outrage, how bias, stereotype, and internalized racism function.

The topic of racism has always been polarizing in America, the Church and elsewhere because it is tied up with power and privilege. The kinds of institutional reform, as well as personal and group conversion, required to heal America and the world of racism will demand surrendering power and privilege to the poor.

This will unsettle the balance of power and require giving those on the lower rungs of the economic and social ladder access to upward mobility.

In the United States racism, the prison-industrial complex, rising gun violence and drug use in the black neighborhoods all continue to persist because there are many white people who are benefiting from this state of affairs.

## **A Church where we black people can lament and be heard**

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The good news in all these is that George Floyd's death seems to have shaken the world from its slumber. There is a feeling of change in the air.

The Catholic Church in United States and around the world must seize this moment of grace.

The global Church and the American Church must take a stand with the poor and the downtrodden marginalized blacks in America and many other Western societies, as well as in Latin America and on the African continent.

The Church must be on the side of this movement of the Spirit in present history by being on the side of truth, justice, healing and restoration of those whose ancestry has been one long history of blood, death, destruction and tears.

In the past, the Catholic Church has often been a latecomer in some of the most important social progress made in the world for liberating Africans. The Church has often been cautious, afraid and reactionary.

For instance, the reason the Catholic Church in the United States failed African-Americans during the slave trade was because it stayed mostly neutral during the anti-slavery movement. Some Catholic religious orders even continued to hold on to the enslaved peoples it owned.

The Catholic Church failed to correctly read the signs of the times. The Roman Church was more concerned with protecting her institutional standing in a country where she was still struggling to win acceptance as a minority religious group in a society dominated by Protestantism.

However, the universal Church also had another internal problem. The slave trade was not simply an American problem, even if the United States had the highest number of African slaves in the world, which was connected to the political, social and economic convulsion that later led to the Civil War.

The heart of the internal ecclesial problem was how the Church understood social movements and calls for human rights at a time when Europe was also convulsing with nationalistic sentiments that were upending the powers of the papacy.

The internal problem of the Catholic Church during the abolitionist movement has to be seen within a larger political balancing game.

The Church sought to remain relevant in world history by not ruffling any feathers, particularly in countries like France, the United Kingdom, Spain and Portugal, while retaining its own influence in Europe and the rest of the world.

All these countries had different imperialistic and economic stakes in the slave trade, colonialism and the missionary enterprise of the Churches from the West to the rest.

The lives and future of blacks became a mere bargaining chip in the balancing of the interests that have often been referred to as the battle for "God, Glory and Gold".

Even after Gregory XVI published *In Supremo Apostolatus* in 1839 the US bishops did not publicly and clearly fight for the abolition and emancipation of blacks.

The American Church leaders could not come to terms with whether the evils of slavery should be interpreted as a moral issue or a political problem.

Many of them saw slavery and the slave trade as a political issue and sought the path of compromise and silence, while moralizing with a view to changing the minds of the

South and all pro-slavery diehards.

The Catholic Church concentrated its efforts on providing spiritual and social support to enslaved and formerly enslaved people.

But it did little to fight for the dismantling of the structures of racism that grew out of slavery. It was not the leading voice in calling for an end to lynching, promoting the Civil Rights movement or fighting for desegregation.

What is obvious in the light of recent events in the world following the death of George Floyd is that the Church can no longer work within this status quo characterized by systemic racism, institutionalized violence, internalized racism, implicit bias, health inequity, environmental racism and the flagrant abuse of the dignity and rights of African-Americans and blacks in many parts of the world.

It is against the Gospel to make compromises with political systems, institutions or global structures that promote racism or that tolerate unjust systems and all forms of intolerance and bias against people because of who they are.

## **Everywhere many blacks are embracing Catholicism**

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However, African-Americans are embracing Catholicism today. Their numerical presence in the Church has grown from about 300,000 in 1940 to 3 million today, outnumbering one of the oldest historical black churches, the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

The same exponential growth in black Catholicism is happening around the world in Africa, Latin America and among indigenous peoples in places like Brazil, Peru and Canada.

What is evident is that blacks throughout the world have embraced Christianity in large numbers, and a significant number of them have embraced Catholicism.

But one needs to ask some important and troubling questions.

What does it mean to be a black Catholic? Has belonging to the Catholic Church significantly altered the fate and fortune of blacks throughout the world?

Has the Church offered them a sacred canopy and a healthy space where they can lament their past, bemoan and show anger at their present condition and be heard? Has our Church become a champion for the emergence of a new agency to reverse the course of history?

As Matthew Cressler points out in *Authentically Black and Truly Catholic*, "Black Catholics bore the brunt of racism in their own churches."

What this means is that the Church did not protect Catholics in America or elsewhere from racism, racial profiling bias and discrimination.

This is why Pope John Paul II's calls to white people to acknowledge their collective responsibility for racism, and Pope Francis' renewed call for a rejection of this mindset of racism, are not enough.

The sad truth is that most blacks carry the wounds of racism wherever they go. In the ideological battles that characterize racial discourse in America and the rest of the world, black Catholics look to their Church.

The expect it to be a sign of contradiction and a site for hope, which can reverse the trajectory of the unacceptable history that has been the lot of blacks in world history.

The question is: Is the Catholic Church prepared to lead humanity in reimagining a better world for blacks, and all peoples, in our longing for a new heaven and a new earth?

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