



**We are
Called**

TO HEAL. TO UNITE. TO JUSTICE.

Team Reflection

No. 5 Naming Racism as a Public Health Crisis

Naming racism is a first and critical step to addressing and reversing its hold. In Cleveland, Ohio, and Milwaukee, Wisc., the coronavirus outbreak and simultaneous protests for racial equity spurred the municipalities to name racism as a public health crisis. Both of these cities suffer from unusually high infant and maternal mortality rates for Black moms and babies. The data show that Black and brown populations experience higher rates of life-threatening disease, higher rates of gun violence, HIV infection, food scarcity and lower life expectancy. These municipalities are not alone. Over 185 jurisdictions have made similar statements. [5.1] There is power in naming experiences and reality.

In the wake of the racial and civil unrest of 1968, the U.S. Catholic Bishops issued the statement, "The National Race Crisis." They called for the total eradication of discrimination in Catholic institutions, including specific mention of hospitals and homes for the aged. [5.2] In 1979, a pastoral letter forcefully and unequivocally condemned racism, saying, "blots out the image of God. ... Racism is not merely one sin among many; it is a radical evil that divides the human family and denies the new creation of a redeemed world." [5.3] More recently, the U.S. Bishops issued a pastoral letter against racism in 2018. It acknowledges systemic racism and is inclusive of Native Americans, African Americans and Hispanics. [5.4] And yet, we know naming is the first rather than the last step.

Much like a bodily illness, naming a social crisis like racism is the only diagnosis. Actions and remedies can then follow. Like many complex diseases, remedies for racism are painstakingly difficult. Fr. Bryan Massingale, professor of Christian ethics at Fordham University, identifies the power of lament as an essential component of racial reconciliation.

Lament is a profound response to suffering that acknowledges the harsh realities involved. He writes, "laments are cries of anguish and outrage, groans of deep pain and grief, utterances of profound protest and righteous indignation over injustice, wails of mourning and sorrow in the face of unbearable suffering." It is a passionate protest of such brokenness in the world. Lamenting is a paradox of protest and praise. While it

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expresses the wrenching circumstances, it also proclaims that God is present amid the hardship and offers a message of compassion and deliverance. [5.5]

Without lament, Fr. Massingale fears we feed into our "American tendency to believe that we can solve our social problems solely through rational analysis, hard work and tenacious determination."

In the face of racial injustice, he urges white individuals to lament as well. The privileged can lament. Those who have benefitted from injustice can grieve and protest as a form of acknowledging their individual and communal complacency and complicity with racial inequities. The lament of the privileged is an essential step toward reconciliation. It can be the beginning of compassion and solidarity. It opens up a new horizon for understanding others and society. [5.6]

Consider

- Have I ever lamented or shed tears because of an injustice I experienced or observed? It may have been in a movie or performance.
- What would it look like and mean to you if a leader in your health care system publicly apologized for historic wrongdoings (explicit or implicit) to communities of color, be they black communities, native or indigenous, or Hispanic communities?

Let us pray together,

*Nobody knows the trouble I've seen,
Nobody knows my sorrow but Jesus;
Nobody knows the trouble I've seen,
Glory, halleluiah!*

Fr. Massingale comments how the African American spirituals express unbearable grief and anguish. He writes, "the singers declare that nobody but Jesus — only the Divine — can comprehend the depths of agony, affliction and desperation this community bears because of the injustice visited upon it. The pain, so raw...can scarcely be expressed

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even through the song's haunting cadence." However, the lament turns to end on a note of praise, "Glory, halleluiah!" [9.6]

[5.1] <https://www.apha.org/topics-and-issues/health-equity/racism-and-health/racism-declarations>

[5.2] *The Pope Speaks*, 13 (Spring 1968): 176.

[5.3] <https://www.usccb.org/committees/african-american-affairs/brothers-and-sisters-us>

[5.4] <https://www.usccb.org/resources/open-wide-our-hearts-enduring-call-love-pastoral-letter-against-racism>

[5.5] Bryan N. Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (New York: Orbis Books) 2010, 205–207.

[5.6] Massingale, 111–121.

[5.7] Massingale, 107–108.