

A CALL TO SEEK AND TELL THE 'TRUE TRUTH' OF INJUSTICE

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Servant of God Sr. Thea Bowman spoke to the National Conference of Catholic Bishops at their June 1989 meeting, less than a year before her death from breast cancer. From her wheelchair, Sr. Thea preached, sang, exhorted and teased the gathering of bishops. The first Black woman to speak at the bishops' annual meeting, she began by asking, "What does it mean to be Black in the Church and in society?" She then broke into song with: "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child."¹

An acclaimed evangelizer, teacher, writer and singer, Sr. Thea generously taught young people about the fulfillment and glories of being Christian, and along with the joy of the Gospel, she shared her rich cultural heritage and spirituality to audiences throughout the nation. Through her work, she was able to promote cultural awareness and racial reconciliation.

Sr. Thea was from Canton, Mississippi. Raised as a Protestant, she converted to Catholicism in grade school with her parents' permission. In high school, she was called to religious life and, overcoming her parents' initial reluctance, she headed to Wisconsin to join the congregation of sisters who had educated her, the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, where she was the only Black sister in the order. After taking her first vows, she returned home in 1961 to teach in her parish school and went on to earn a doctorate in English language and literature from Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. She was a college professor and English department chair at Viterbo College in La Crosse, Wisconsin, and co-founded the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University of Louisiana in New Orleans. When her elderly parents needed care, she returned to Mississippi and was invited by the bishop of Jackson to establish a diocesan office of intercultural awareness.

Throughout those years, she traveled across the country evangelizing and advocating for interracial understanding and greater appreciation of Black Catholics within the Church. One of her messages was to embrace the "true truth": the truth of the Gospel, the truth of who we each are

in our deepest being, and the truth of racism in our Church and society. "I'll tell you the truth," she would often say, "only if you can stand to hear the 'true truth!'"²

Sr. Thea's life and words call us to our shared responsibility as Americans to learn, listen and acknowledge the racial injustices of our past and present, and to take the time to seek out and understand the personal testimonies of those who have experienced these wrongdoings firsthand. We must face these realities to truly address the effects of racism in our nation and in our communities.

SEEKING AND HEARING THE TRUTH

I recently had the opportunity to travel to Mississippi for the first time to visit Canton with the Missionary Servants of the Most Holy Trinity, an order of priests and brothers with several mission parishes in the area, including Holy Child Jesus Church, Sr. Thea's home parish. It was the Missionary Servants who first invited the Wisconsin Franciscan sisters to open a school for Black children in the 1940s, and the Missionary Servants still serve the parish and several others in the area.

The visit was moving for several reasons, including our visit to the home where Sr. Thea grew up and later died. But what touched me most were moments that brought me — a white woman from the Northeast — closer to the "true truth" of racism and discrimination.

We heard from the priests and the parishioners who welcomed us and told us stories about the Jim Crow laws that enforced racial segregation through the mid-1960s, and their lingering

legacy. When Sr. Thea came back to Canton in the early 1960s to teach at Holy Child Jesus Catholic School, laws forbidding Blacks and whites to cohabitate were still on the books, which meant Sr. Thea could not live in the convent with the other sisters, who were white. So, a small trailer was obtained and parked just a few inches from the convent, allowing Sr. Thea to pass through the adjacent doors into the convent for meals and community with her sisters; however, to observe the letter of the law, she had to sleep in the trailer.

In the mid-1960s, Holy Child Jesus parish needed a new church, but local officials refused to give a permit. So, one Sunday, parishioners walked over to attend Mass at the white Catholic church. In short order, the permit was issued, but with conditions: the new church had to be set far back on the property and could not face the street, just to show who was in control.

Well, one might say, that all happened a long time ago, but the effects of Jim Crow still linger. We heard the story of a new pastor who arrived in the late '90s/early 2000s at the Missionary Servants parish in nearby Camden. He noticed that only half of a cemetery was mowed and well-maintained. Upon inquiry, he was told that the man who did the mowing only tended to the white side of the cemetery. Although the fence that once

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divided the white and Black sections of the cemetery was now gone, the discriminatory attitude was not. The pastor put a quick stop to this.

We also visited other Missionary Servants parishes touched by injustice. Holy Rosary Indian Mission, located in a town called Philadelphia, serves members of the Choctaw nation, descendants of those who remained on their ancestral land when the U.S. government moved the tribe to a reservation in Oklahoma.³ Another, St. Anne Catholic Church in Carthage, became command central for immigration lawyers and social workers in 2019 following U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids on chicken processing

plants in Mississippi, affecting at least 100 families in the largely Guatemalan parish.⁴ The parish provided hot meals, services and counseling for traumatized children missing one or both parents following the raids.

I grew up in an integrated town in Connecticut in the 1970s, attended diverse universities where I had friends of all backgrounds, and for the past 10 years have been staff lead for CHA's health equity work. Even so, I thought of segregation as an evil from the past, and I had never heard someone I know personally speak about life under Jim Crow and its lingering effects today. Shame on me, perhaps. But as I spoke to people and listened to their life stories in Mississippi, it was like a previously unnoticed fog was lifted and my perception of injustice sharpened.

FACING OUR NATION'S TRUTH

I believe white people of goodwill, who have no personal frame of reference for the reality of the injustices committed against our sisters and brothers, would be moved if they heard stories like these. Their eyes must be opened by hearing the "true truth" of the historical realities of racism and the lived experiences of those affected by it. As "educated" as many white people may think they are, the white experience in the United

States by its nature means they do not have a full understanding of the experiences of people of color in our country. Maybe I am being naïve — there are certainly people who are racists or just do not want to hear about it — but people cannot know what they have no knowledge about, and we have an obligation to tell them. It is crucial, for a start, that we teach about race massacres that occurred in Tulsa, Oklahoma; Rosewood, Florida; and too many other places,⁵ as well as the day-to-day indignities suffered by victims of racism.

CHA's introductory video for the We Are Called initiative⁶ talked about racial restriction covenants in housing and redlining. I had younger acquaintances tell me they were shocked, as they had never heard of this type of racial discrimination. Well, I was shocked that this could be new to anyone; but people cannot know what they do not know.

We must face our country's past and present.

We must acknowledge that, as author David French has written, “Systems and structures designed by racists for racist reasons are often maintained by nonracists for nonracist reasons.”⁷ That’s what it means to recognize the existence of systemic racism. The social and cultural effects of over 300 years of racist laws and practices did not magically disappear when the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was enacted. We have to do the hard work of intentionally looking for and eradicating the effects of racism in our nation and in our communities — looking for the places where the fence may have come down, yet the practices and attitudes have not changed.

GETTING OUR OWN HOUSES IN ORDER

Given how polarized our country is today, I fear some reading this are thinking, “You just want white folks to feel guilty.” I felt many things while I was in Mississippi — sorrow, shock and disbelief, but not guilt. Rather than “white guilt,” I felt red hot anger at the betrayal of the values we say we hold as Americans and the injustices committed in the name of and with the support of our institutions. Almost 60 years after Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream Speech,” we still have work to do to fully honor what King called the promissory note of our founding: “... a promise that all men — yes, Black men as well as white men — would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

If we truly believe the values espoused in the Declaration of Independence and U.S. Constitution, then as Americans we have the collective and individual responsibility to accept Sr. Thea’s challenge — to have the courage to hear the “true truth” and to do something about it. One of the pillars of the We Are Called pledge is to get our own houses in order. Take the time to learn about your local community, town or state’s racial history.⁸ Read about the forced marches of American Indians to reservations, the race massacres and the lynchings. And don’t “just learn the facts,” for as important as those are, reading people’s personal testimonies is how we can begin to authentically embrace the truth.⁹

Only if we face and acknowledge injustice — past and present — can we do something about it. This is our shared responsibility as Americans.

Maybe it sounds overwhelming, maybe you do not see how taking the first steps of learning and listening can matter. Take heart, and listen again to Sr. Thea: “I think one difference between me and some other people is that I’m content to do my little bit. Sometimes people think they have to do big things in order to make change. But, if each one of us would light the candle, we’d have a tremendous light.”¹⁰

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NOTES

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