

CHAPTER 1

Establishing a Common Understanding of Racism and White Supremacy

Over the next several weeks, we will examine how society in the United States has been deliberately organized to advantage white people over people of color. This structural advantage occurs at all levels: the political, social, and individual. We will include both “big picture” analysis as well as particular instances where our society has been built on unfairness and racial injustice, from our founding through today. Our goal is to examine how racism is not just a matter of individual actions and attitudes, but a pervasive and predominant social order. This systemic injustice, in the end, harms all of us by preventing us from fully living out Jesus’s command to “Love one another as I have loved you.” (John 13:34)

Of course, we would be remiss not to recognize that despite institutional barriers and disadvantages, people of color have not only survived, but also positively contributed to our society. Too often, history books and public narratives minimize and erase the contributions of people of color. From Native American and indigenous people, to enslaved Africans and their descendants, to immigrants and refugees, communities of color have been integral to the success of our nation. It is impossible to live in our country and avoid benefitting from the contributions of people of color.

A frank and realistic look at racism and its impact on our nation will help us see the truth of our social sin. As Father Bryan Massingale writes in *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, “We will never adequately deal with the reality of racial injustice, and its generational effects, unless we name its causes and attack its sources.”¹ This is the process we hope to begin in this guide. Of course, there is more information, deeper knowledge, and additional understandings on all of the topics that we will touch on. Along with the additional resources provided at the end of each chapter, we encourage you to do your own learning and seek out other sources of information to continue your education about racism and white supremacy.

With the help of the Holy Spirit to guide our learning, we will be prepared to commit ourselves re-ordering our policies, systems, and actions to reflect the truth that we are all created in God’s likeness and deserving of God-given dignity and respect.

Focus on Race and Racism

Race affects every part of our lives. While this is at the forefront of the lived experiences of people of color, for white people there is no incentive to think critically, or even consciously, about the ways that race affects them as well. Therefore, for white people, it is critical to “pull back the veil,” or take time to reflect upon the lens out of which they have been socialized to see. This lens, which is shaped by our country’s dominant white culture, has unavoidably absorbed racist beliefs which influence how everyone experiences the world and acts. Writers and artists have termed this “the white gaze,” while sociologist Joe Feagin calls this “the white racial frame.”

It may be uncomfortable to acknowledge this. Indeed, Martin Luther King, Jr. declared his hope for his children to be judged “by the content of their character,” not the color of their skin. Most white people, who don’t intentionally hold racist beliefs, would like to

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Focus cont.

believe that they do this. They refer to themselves as “colorblind” or say things like “I don’t see race.” However, white people must confront the reality that their perceptions and their own lived experiences have been shaped by racism, just surely as the lived experiences of people of color are affected by racism.

Fr. Massingale characterizes the “soul” of white culture as “the presumption of dominance and entitlement, that is, the presumption of being the norm or standard that measures all other frames of reference and to which all ‘others’ should conform.”² Only by first grappling with their own socialization into a racist culture, can white people begin to engage in the ongoing work of racial justice authentically.

Talking about Race and Racism

Since it is the norm in white culture to avoid direct, authentic discussions about race, it may not be something that everyone is familiar or comfortable with, or even have a common language to use in these conversations. Therefore, let us begin by naming some terms and ideas that are important to understand. The definitions and explanations that follow were developed or taken from various sources cited at the conclusion of this chapter.

We at NETWORK use the word **race** to mean “an arbitrary socio-biological category created by Europeans (white men) in the 15th century and used to assign human worth and social status with themselves as the model of humanity, with the purpose of establishing white skin access to sources of power.”³

Next, is the familiar concept of **prejudice**: “the favorable or unfavorable opinion or feeling about a person or group, usually formed without knowledge, thought, or reason. It can be based on a single experience, which is then transferred to or assumed about all potential experiences.”⁴ Prejudice can exist in many different forms. **Power** is “the legitimate control of, or access to, institutions sanctioned by the state; the capacity to act.”

By putting the concepts of **prejudice** and **power** together, we can begin to generate an adequate definition of **racism**, which states that racism only exists when “racial prejudice and institutional power are joined to result in the misuse of institutional, systemic, and social power.”⁵

The second component of racism – institutional power – is what guarantees that “reverse racism” against white people does not exist in the United States. For the time being, and likely for the foreseeable future, our institutional power is controlled by white people (even in times when we have political leaders who are people of color). **Therefore, it is impossible for there to be racism against white people.** If this challenges you, reflect upon this: There could be racial prejudice against white people, but not racism, because our current society is structured to protect and preference white people over people of color.

Another concept critical to our examination of race and racism is **white supremacy**. We define white supremacy as “the ideology of racial hierarchy born out of historical European domination that drives the system of white superiority, power, and control in our country. This ideology is often unconscious and impacts class and social status for whites and people of color.”⁶

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Talking cont.

As you may notice, the most-recognized use of white supremacy – when an individual or association professes an ideology of white racial dominance – is of course included in this definition. White supremacy, however, is not limited to those instances. Instead, it extends to the ideology that preserves systems of power and control that uphold whiteness in our country. White supremacy, then, is much more prevalent in the structures of our society than we are comfortable admitting. **White privilege** results from white supremacy, it is “the product of white supremacy that confers unearned societal benefits – tangible and intangible – on white people because of the color of their skin.”

Many people are familiar with the next term, **oppression**. Oppression can be based on various identities. We define oppression as “marginalization and domination of the psychological, emotional, and/or physical nature of a person or group by a person or group.” **Institutional oppression** is “the systematic mistreatment of people within a social identity group, supported and enforced by the society and its institutions, solely based on the person’s membership in the social identity group.” One’s **identity** is straightforwardly defined as “belonging to or relating to the experience(s), tradition(s) of a single or multiple communities.” While **intersectionality** is “the understanding that our multiple identities must be recognized to fully understand our experiences with systems of power, privilege, and oppression.”⁷

Now that we have established these definitions and terms for the concepts that surround race and racism, we can begin to have a meaningful experience learning and reflecting on systemic racism in our nation.

Other Manifestations of Racism

As we develop comfortability using the definitions above to discuss race and racism, there are a few more terms that are important to be aware of, particularly for white readers. These terms are pertinent to understand and be conscious of in many instances: in personal and professional scenarios, in secular and religious settings, in one-on-one interactions or group encounters, and in one’s hometown or even outside of the United States.

Cultural appropriation occurs when “a member of a dominant culture takes elements from a culture of people who have been systematically oppressed by that dominant group.”⁸ You may have heard of high-profile instances of artists or celebrities engaging in cultural appropriation, but cultural appropriation happens on a smaller-scale as well. One specific example is the idea that one might dress up for Halloween as an “Indian” (Native American) or even as a beloved Disney “character” like Pocahontas. Culture is not a costume for white people to put on. Cultural appropriation is harmful because it isolates a single part of culture from its full historical and contemporary expression, including oftentimes the oppression or violence that was imposed by the dominant group.

In many mainstream cases in our capitalist society, the person or company doing the cultural appropriation profits financially from what has been taken. This reality emphasizes the sense of entitlement that comes with power and privilege. Even if one is not profiting, it is still inappropriate and unjust to benefit from something that others developed, or that fails to communicate the full truth about another culture. It is important to put cultural appropriation in the correct context: Cultural appropriation is a manifestation of the white supremacy that dominates our society. We should see instances of cultural appropriation as an entry point to examine structural racism in our social and political systems.

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Words of Wisdom

In this country American means white.

Everybody else has to hyphenate.”

— Toni Morrison

Other Manifestations cont.

Racial **microaggressions** receive their name as the counterpart to “macro-aggressions” which are the large, open acts of racism that are more blatant and more readily identified. Microaggressions are “the everyday verbal or nonverbal slights, snubs, or insults, intentional or unintentional, to communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to members of a marginalized identity group.”⁹ Racial microaggressions often come from well-meaning white people who do not consciously realize the bias that they are communicating and its harmful effects. Despite not intending to offend – in some cases even intending to compliment – racial microaggressions do harm people of color by demeaning them or communicating that they do not fit in.

Some examples of racial microaggressions include: “You’re so articulate” and “Where are you *really* from?” which subtly communicate the idea that you expect people of color to be less educated or that a person of color’s ethnicity makes them belong in their community less. Microaggressions are also widely present in the workplace – even in the progressive or faith-based environments that pride themselves on being racially inclusive. Some examples of racial microaggressions in the workplace include imbalanced standards of professional dress (including how a Black woman must style her hair), and comments about alleged “colorblindness” or expressing lack of responsibility for hiring a diverse staff with comments such as “people of color just don’t apply to these jobs.”

Racial microaggressions must be identified and interrupted in order to limit their harm. Some ways to address a microaggression that you have heard or seen somebody else communicate to a person of color are: asking what they meant by that, reflecting what they said back to them, or telling them how you felt when you heard their words or saw their actions.¹⁰ If we do not identify and interrupt microaggressions, they will continue to reinforce existing racial power dynamics

The **white savior complex** refers to the dominant narrative that often shows up in Hollywood movies of a white person who single-handedly helps or saves people of color. For example, the Oscar winning movies *The Blind Side* and *The Help*. Because of the structural racism that pervades our culture and our political and economic systems, it is tempting for white people to fit stories and experiences into the white savior narrative. This is a problem in movies as well as everyday experiences, and the framing of volunteer projects and mission trips deserve special scrutiny. Not only is the white savior complex factually inaccurate, it is unjust and perpetuates the racial hierarchy.

The white savior complex works to conceal the structural inequality that exists and exaggerate the effects of one white person’s involvement while minimizing the agency, expertise, and accomplishments of people of color. All people of faith are called to work for justice and serve those in need. Additionally, white people of faith are called to resist narratives that glorify white people while oversimplifying the truth and obscuring systemic oppression against people of color.

The Catholic Church’s Response to Racism

Because NETWORK is an organization founded by Catholic Sisters to promote Catholic Social Justice, we wanted to briefly address the way race and racism manifest within the Catholic Church in the United States. Overwhelmingly, the predominant narrative of Catholics in the United States centers on European Catholic immigrants to the United States who were initially despised, but due to hard work and individual virtue eventually

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Church Response cont.

gained acceptance in white culture. Even today, when we look at Catholic leaders – from institutional leaders of the Church to the news and other media – the prevailing representation is white. This erases the existence of Black Catholics, Latinx Catholics, Native American Catholics, Asian Catholics and more. (It also avoids naming the role the Catholic Church played in colonialism around the world).

In late 2018, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops released a new pastoral letter on racism called “Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love.” It follows an earlier pastoral letter from 1979, “Brothers and Sisters to Us,” and in many ways is more specific than its predecessor in naming the oppression of African-American, Native American, and Hispanic people in our society. Many praised the letter, however, other analysis found the document too focused on the personal nature of racism instead of the structural and institutional aspects. Other readers identified numerous places where the letter failed to hold colonizers and other white people who oppressed people of color accountable.

The process of writing the letter also identified some of the shortcomings in the leadership of the U.S. Catholic Church when it comes to dealing with race. The Bishops rejected an amendment to the letter that would condemn the display of the Confederate flag as a symbol of hate because some view it “as a sign of heritage.”¹¹ This process – and that particular vote – highlighted the reality that the Bishops placed the comfort and “heritage” of white, southern Catholics over the comfort and safety of Black Catholics – and Black Americans everywhere.

Looking at how the Church has worked to address racism, prompts several questions: For one, why are there so few letters spaced more than 50 years apart, on the topic of racism? What is the Church in the U.S. doing to ensure the issue is addressed in each individual church? And where is the urgency?

Encountering Race and Racism

There are no easy answers here. We are not going to “solve racism” or become perfect at discussing race by the time this Lenten journey concludes. There is no checkbox to mark for white people that says you’re not racist. In a racist society that has been structured to benefit white people and disadvantage people of color, the act of promoting racial justice must be a constant. White people must continuously choose to think and act in ways that oppose white supremacy in all its forms, even when not doing so would be to your benefit. In the following chapters, we will begin to examine some of these historical and contemporary structures that enforced and continue to perpetuate white supremacy.

Sources

1. Massingale (2010). *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books. p. 41
2. Massingale (2010). *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books. p. 24
3. Dr. Maluna Karenga
4. <http://www.pcc.edu/resources/illumination/documents/institutionalized-oppression-definitions.pdf>
5. http://www.euroamerican.org/Library/Resources/Occupy/White_Priv_Terms_Resources.pdf
6. Developed by NETWORK staff based on multiple sources.
7. http://lgbtq.unc.edu/sites/lgbtq.unc.edu/files/documents/intersectionality_en.pdf
8. <https://everydayfeminism.com/2015/06/cultural-appropriation-wrong/>
9. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/microaggressions-in-everyday-life/201010/racial-microaggressions-in-everyday-life>
10. <https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/gretakenney-interrupting-microaggressions.pdf>
11. <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2018/11/14/us-bishops-adopt-new-anti-racism-letter-first-almost-40-years>

You can find the USCCB pastoral letters on racism here: <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/racism/>

We Pray

The Courage to Be Your Love

God of Justice, we give you thanks for your great glory. God of Love, we give you thanks for your great mercy. We pray during this Lenten season, that you will help us to see all your children veiled in the dignity of love.

God, we acknowledge the current times. The times of growing fears, growing violence, and growing hate. This world needs your love. Give us the courage to be your love.

God, we acknowledge the child who lost their mother because of our broken immigration system. Our children need your love. Give us the courage to be your love.

God, we acknowledge the parent who lost their child because of our broken criminal justice system. Our parents need your love. Give us the courage to be your love.

God, we acknowledge the youth who are left to bear the pain of our broken racial systems. Our youth need your love. Give us the courage to be your love.

God, we acknowledge the oppressors who have been given positions of power. They need your love. Give us the courage to be your love.

God, I acknowledge my responsibility to my sisters and brothers in the current times and in the future. I need your love. Give me the courage to be your love.

Amen.

El Valor de Ser Tu Amor

Dios de Justicia, te damos gracias por tu gran gloria. Dios de Amor, te damos gracias por tu gran misericordia. Oramos durante esta temporada de Cuaresma, para que nos ayudes a ver a todos tus hijos cubiertos en la dignidad de tu amor.

Dios, reconocemos los tiempos actuales. Los crecientes tiempos de miedo, violencia y odio. Este mundo necesita de tu amor. Danos el valor de ser tu amor.

Dios, reconocemos al niño que perdió a su madre debido a nuestro incierto sistema de inmigración. Nuestros hijos necesitan de tu amor. Danos el valor de ser tu amor.

Dios, reconocemos a los padres que perdieron a sus hijos debido a nuestro incierto sistema de justicia penal. Nuestros padres necesitan de tu amor. Danos el valor de ser tu amor.

Dios, reconocemos a los jóvenes que quedan para soportar el dolor de nuestros inciertos sistemas raciales. Nuestra juventud necesita de tu amor. Danos el valor de ser tu amor.

Dios, reconocemos a los opresores que han recibido posiciones de poder. Ellos necesitan de tu amor. Danos el valor de ser tu amor.

Dios, reconozco mi responsabilidad hacia mis hermanos y hermanas en los tiempos actuales y en los tiempos futuros. Necesito de tu amor. Dame el valor de ser tu amor.

Amén.

Written by Edith Avila Olea, Justice and Peace Associate Director at the Diocese of Joliet in Illinois.

Por Edith Avila Olea, la Directora Asociada de Justicia y Paz en la Diócesis de Joliet en Illinois.

Reflection Questions

1. What are some ways that my attitudes or beliefs have been shaped by “whiteness”? How have I accepted/internalized those messages? Is it difficult for me to examine this impartially and why?
2. Which definition was the easiest to understand or agree with? Which one was the most challenging?
3. Think of when you witnessed cultural appropriation. What, if anything, alerted you to the damaging effects of cultural appropriation?
4. What do you think about the Catholic Church’s official responses to racism? What is one instance when the Church could have taken a stronger position or concrete action to oppose racism?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Read

- *White Fragility*
June 26, 2018
www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/566247/white-fragility-by-robin-diangelo/9780807047415

Robin DiAngelo’s book explores the counterproductive reactions white people have when their assumptions about race are challenged, and how these reactions maintain racial inequality.

- “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack”
July/August, 1989
www.nationalseedproject.org/Key-SEED-Texts/white-privilege-unpacking-the-invisible-knapsack

Peggy McIntosh’s much-cited article comes from her intention to identify some of the daily effects of white privilege in her life and describe these advantages.

- “American Racism in the ‘White Frame’”
July 27, 2015
www.opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/07/27/american-racism-in-the-white-frame

An interview conducted by George Yancy, professor of philosophy at Emory University, with Joe Feagin, sociologist and author of *The White Racial Frame*. The two discuss the extent and influence of the “white racial frame” on white people and people of color.

- “Dear White America”
December 24, 2015
www.opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/12/24/dear-white-america/

George Yancy, professor of philosophy at Emory University, wrote this column to summarize concepts that came up over 19 interviews he conducted on race (including the one linked above with Joe Feagin). In the incisive column, Yancy calls on white people to find the vulnerability to face their own racism and stop avoiding responsibility for their racism and its effects.

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Additional Resources cont.

- “What’s Wrong with Cultural Appropriation? These 9 Answers Reveal Its Harm”
December 24, 2015

www.everydayfeminism.com/2015/06/cultural-appropriation-wrong/

Maisha Z. Johnson defines cultural appropriation and describes the very real reasons why it is so harmful to people of color.

- “The Messiness of Microaggressions”
October 10, 2017

www.youngclergywomen.org/the-messiness-of-microaggressions

Shavon Starling-Louis introduces herself as a young(ish) clergy woman, African-American woman, mother, and pastor at Providence Presbyterian Church. Starling-Louis then goes on to describe the “messiness” of racial microaggressions in her ministry and experiences as a person of faith.

- “Did you really just say that?”
January 2017

www.apa.org/monitor/2017/01/microaggressions

Rebecca A. Clay provides advice on how to confront microaggressions, whether you’re a target, bystander or perpetrator.

- “Sister Antona Ebo’s lifelong struggle against white supremacy, inside and outside the Catholic Church”
November 22, 2017

www.americamagazine.org/faith/2017/11/22/sister-antona-ebos-lifelong-struggle-against-white-supremacy-inside-and-outside

This profile of Sr. Antona Ebo demonstrates the racism she faced within the church during her life as a woman religious, as well as her dedication to her faith and to opposing racism.

- “The Bishops’ letter fails to recognize that racism is a white problem”
February 20, 2019

www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/faith-seeking-understanding/bishops-letter-fails-recognize-racism-white-problem

Father Daniel Horan critiques the USCCB’s letter on racism “Open Wide Our Hearts” for failing to openly acknowledge that racism is a white problem and that systemic racism benefits white folk to the disadvantage of people of color.

- “The History of Black Catholics in America”
June 7, 2018

www.smithsonianmag.com/history/history-black-catholics-in-america-180969271

An in-depth look at the history of Black Catholics in the United States, read this piece from Smithsonian Magazine about the ways Black Catholics both challenged the Church’s racism and contributed much to the Church.

Watch

- “The Urgency of Intersectionality”
October 2016

www.ted.com/talks/kimberle_crenshaw_the_urgency_of_intersectionality

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Additional Resources cont.

Kimberlé Crenshaw is a civil rights advocate and a leading scholar of critical race theory, contributing foundational works to two fields of study that have come to be known by terms she coined: critical race theory and intersectionality. In this TED talk which lasts 19 minutes, Crenshaw explains the meaning of the term “intersectionality” which she developed to address the fact that many social justice problems like racism and sexism are often overlapping, creating multiple levels of social injustice.

- “Why ‘I’m not racist’ is only half the story”
October 1, 2018

www.youtube.be/kzLT54QjclA

Robin DiAngelo, author of *White Fragility*, explains how the good/bad binary makes it impossible for white people to recognize and acknowledge their racial bias and leads to white defensiveness. She concludes the 6:30 minute video by saying that this defensiveness and unwillingness to acknowledge race preserves the current racial hierarchy.

- “White Savior: The Movie Trailer”
February 21, 2019

www.youtube.com/watch?v=T_RTnuJvg6U

The *Late Show with Seth Myers* created this six minute video satirizing how many movies have used the “white savior” narrative, and their commercial success.

Listen

- With Friends Like These Podcast: “White Fragility 101”
August 24, 2018

www.crooked.com/podcast/white-fragility-101

Ana Marie Cox talks with Robin DiAngelo, author of *White Fragility*, who shares white fragility is, and the impact that it has on all white people and white progressives in particular. During the 55 minute podcast episode, they also discuss how white women often fail to be allies for people of color.