

Breaking Silence on Racism

From AP, CNS, RNS, Staff and other sources

November 19, 2015

A “seismic shift in demographics” in both society and the U.S. Catholic Church in the coming decades will create a church that is far less white, the Rev. Bryan Massingale told an audience in New Orleans on Nov. 6. The church will be unprepared to deal with that reality, he continued, unless it addresses “the ongoing struggle for racial equality.”

Father Massingale made the comments in an address to priests, seminarians and other officials of the Archdiocese of New Orleans. The author of *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* and a professor of ethics and theology at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Father Massingale said the church must become “a proactive agent for racial justice” if it is to “remain viable and relevant in the 21st century.”

He said the issues of racism and racial justice are not spoken of frequently by priests because the topics are so sensitive.

“When we get together, there is a tendency for silence,” Father Massingale said. “We don’t dare say anything because we don’t want to say something wrong or make someone upset. We don’t want to go there. Most of all, as priests, we want to be liked. Your parish is your family. You don’t want to alienate people. So, you’d rather keep silent than run that risk.”

Just as the topic of sexuality is sensitive, discussions about race “become emotional and visceral.” In his years of teaching a course on racial justice at Marquette, Father

“We have to acknowledge those emotions so we’re not paralyzed or overwhelmed by it,” he said.

Acknowledging the issues surrounding race is important for the church “because our faith gives us no other choice,” Father Massingale said. “Reality gives us no other choice. We must deal with the signs of the times.”

While the church now is a mix of 60 percent white and 40 percent Latino, African-American and other ethnic groups, census figures indicate that by 2043 white will no longer be the majority race in the United States, he said. Those statistics have “wide-ranging implications” for the church’s formation and evangelization programs.

“The landscape of both the church and society is being significantly and dramatically altered,” Father Massingale said. “If we are going to be Catholic, our future can only be a brown one. The church is browning. It’s inexorable.”

The massacre of nine African-American worshipers in a Charleston, S.C., church is just the most recent reminder of the racial divide in America, he said, adding that there is other “subtle racism” exposed when anonymous comments are posted online in response to news stories involving race and ethnicity.

“Racism is a soul sickness,” he said, “a profound warping of the human spirit that enables us to create or tolerate callousness or indifference toward each other. Racism is a soul sickness that says some lives are worth less than others and some are beyond our concern. We are called to lament, to grieve, to mourn, to be aware because that’s what leads to racial conversion.”

Catholics can confront the sin of racism in a pastoral way by first recognizing their own “fears, blindness and need for education, growth and healing,” he said. “But there can’t be fire in the pew if there’s ice in the pulpit.”

This article also appeared in print, under the headline “Breaking Silence on Racism,” in the November 30, 2015, issue.