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## If bishops want to face racism, own your own complicity, theologian says

John L. Allen Jr. Inés San Martín and Shannon Levitt  
Aug 24, 2017  
EDITOR



Father Bryan Massingale, author of "Racial Justice and the Catholic Church" (2015), speaking at a 2015 gathering at the Archdiocese of New Orleans. (Credit: CNS photo/Peter J. Schmitt/Clarion Herald.)

[Editor's note: On Wednesday, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops announced a new Committee Against Racism, with the hope of galvanizing both the Church and the broader society. Last week, in the immediate wake of Charlottesville, "The Crux of the Matter," a radio program on [the Catholic Channel, Sirius XM 129](#), asked Father Bryan Massingale to discuss what the Church has done on the race issue, and what it could do going forward.]



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America's leading Catholic expert on African-American theological ethics, and perhaps the country's best-known black Catholic priest, says the Church still has a long way to go to live up to the U.S. bishops' own 1979 declaration that racism is a "radical evil."

"If indeed it is a radical evil, then where's the evidence for that in our Catholic concern? Where is it in our Catholic catechesis? In our Catholic seminary formation?" asked Father Bryan Massingale, who teaches at Fordham University in New York.



"If we really believe this is a radical evil, then it calls for a radical response," Massingale said. "That's what we haven't seen, unfortunately, in the Catholic Church in the United States."

Among other things, Massingale cited what he described as a pattern of bishops issuing statements in the wake of racial incidents, but not really following through.

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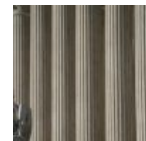
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“Our tendency in Catholic circles, when something like this happens, has been to issue - in my mind, anyway, and I’m being honest here - a rather bland statement deploring the violence, calling for calm, saying we’re all brothers and sisters in Christ,” he said.

“But we never really have the courage to address how central this issue is in our public life, and the deep call to conversion to which it summons Catholics,” Massingale said.

In terms of what such courage might look like, he lifted up the example of Georgetown University and the Jesuit order, which recently held a public ceremony of lament and apology for their role in the slave trade.

“I think that if that were done across our country - because each diocese has its own story to tell here, and their own kind of complicity to acknowledge - it would be a powerful, powerful Catholic witness, which could give our nation some needed light and break through some of the impasse that we find ourselves in.”

Massingale is a priest of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, and formerly taught at Milwaukee’s Marquette University. He’s served as president of the Catholic Theological Society of America and convener of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium, as well as an adviser to the U.S. bishops.

The following are excerpts from the radio interview, which aired on “The Crux of the Matter” on August 14. It was conducted by *Crux’s* John Allen, Shannon Levitt and Inés San Martín.

***Crux:* Where were you as Charlottesville was happening?**

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Colleges and Universities, made up by 28 Jesuit institutions of higher education, was having its convention, dealing with the challenges of justice in American society. That afternoon, I gave a keynote address on the central challenge of racism to the pursuit of justice in America and its implications for Jesuit higher education.

Little did I realize how apropos it would be, given what was unfolding in our midst that day, as well as what happened previously on Friday.

### **In *Reader's Digest* form, what did you make of Charlottesville?**

In *Reader's Digest* version, I was dismayed, disgusted, but not surprised.

What we saw in Charlottesville is something that's been building for a long time in America, especially in the political discourse we've seen over the eight years of the Obama presidency and over the course of the campaign we saw too [in 2016]. We've seen a particular segment of the American population, called the 'alt-right' or the 'white nationalist movement,' seemingly empowered. Their presence in Charlottesville was not a surprise, they had telegraphed that this gathering was going to happen for months.

It revealed forces that have been present in our nation for a disturbingly long time. Unfortunately, these are forces that have not received the appropriate push-back that they should have, either from civil leaders or, even, sadly, religious leaders as well.

**Archbishop Charles Chaput of Philadelphia said in the wake of Charlottesville that “we need more than pious public statements” if we’re going to make progress on race. It seems sometimes all we do is talk, and nothing changes. Why do you think that is?**

That's a great question, because I share your sense of dismay that we seem to be caught up in this destructive feedback loop in America, where we limp from racial crisis to racial crisis to racial crisis, from Ferguson to Baltimore to Charlottesville, and we never seem to be able to break out of the impasse.

We react with surprise, in part because we don't do a very good job of teaching the history of race in America. When we do, we often teach it in a very superficial way ... of course, there were past incidents that were horrible, but that's no longer a pressing issue. Unfortunately, because of that, we don't grapple with how deeply rooted this social evil is and its various manifestations, because we don't want to be honest about who we are. What happened in Charlottesville was not an aberration. It was an exaggeration, perhaps, but not an aberration, of a real deeply rooted evil.

Archbishop Chaput is absolutely correct. Our tendency in Catholic circles, when something like this happens, has been to issue - in my mind, anyway, and I'm being honest here - a rather bland statement deploring the violence, calling for calm, saying we're all brothers and sisters in Christ. But we never really have the courage to address how central this issue is in our public life and the deep call to conversion to which it summons Catholics.

**Chaput called it the “original sin” of our country.**

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wonderful, with the initial statement issued by the conference president on Saturday, that was a rather bland, tepid statement. Unfortunately, that's typically the way in which the American bishops tend to deal with these issues.

Let me give you another example. In the aftermath of racial disturbances last summer, I was invited to a major archdiocese to give a presentation on faith and racial justice. I was asked to lead a special session for the clergy of the diocese. This archdiocese, which I won't name, has over 350 priests who are active, but only 25 came to the session. I was easily the youngest in the group, and it was scheduled at a time when Catholic clergy could be free to come.

I think this speaks to something. It speaks to a reluctance in Catholic circles to engage this issue, or to see this issue as being a moral concern. We don't see it as being a particularly 'Catholic' moral issue, not in the same way as, perhaps, religious liberty, or standing against abortion, or being against same-sex marriage. Standing against racism has never really been a major badge of Catholic identity.

We see that, unfortunately, with very few exceptions - Chaput being one of them, and Cardinal [Blase] Cupich of Chicago came out with a great tweet about this issue - but the fact we can name them says something about how Catholics don't really engage this issue in a very forthright way.

**From the beginning, the "Black Lives Matter" movement has been controversial. Yet when you consider that, especially from the point of view of many young black men in America, they've been given good reason to think their lives don't matter, what do you do about that?**

That's a very good question. I get in a lot of trouble in certain circles because I do call for the Catholic Church to be a more forthright supporter of the movements for black lives, and I got a lot of pushback for that, saying, 'Why do you have to say black lives matter? All lives matter.'

I said, let's conduct a thought experiment here. Would we be upset if we said, 'Women's lives matter'? Or, 'Student lives matter'? Or, 'Unborn lives matter'? None of those statements are seen as controversial. It's only the ones with the word 'black' in front of it that make people very uncomfortable and nervous.

I think the reason why is that it points out that we live in a country where certain lives, in this case African-American lives, don't matter. That's a very uncomfortable truth, because if we face it squarely, we have to ask ourselves why. Or, even more pointedly, who benefits from the fact these lives don't matter? That leads us into very uncomfortable territory. It's a conversation we desperately need to have, but it's one for which our country is very poorly prepared.

I think the reason people are nervous about saying 'Black Lives Matter' is because it points to a persistent, terrible injustice, that we have not yet summoned either the political or social will to face.

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their last collective statement on racial justice, “Brothers and Sisters to Us.” They haven’t issued a collective statement on racism since then, which to me is kind of appalling. But in 1979, they said that racism is not simply one sin among others it’s a radical evil.

*[Note: In a recent Crux interview, Archbishop Wilton Gregory of Atlanta confirmed that the bishops are now working on a successor document.]*

One of the things to which I’ve committed my life and my priesthood to is to say, if indeed it is a radical evil, then where’s the evidence for that in our Catholic concern? Where is it in our Catholic catechesis? In our Catholic seminary formation? If we really believe this is a radical evil, then it calls for a radical response. That’s what we haven’t seen, unfortunately, in the Catholic Church in the United States.

**Going forward, can you suggest a couple of practical, concrete things dioceses and parishes across America could be doing to contribute to this conversation?**

I will lift up for dioceses around the country the example of the Jesuits at Georgetown University.

I don’t know if your listeners are aware that this past April in 2017, Georgetown University held a public ceremony of lament and apology for Georgetown’s and the Jesuits’ complicity in the ownership and sale of 272 enslaved African men, women and children. The Jesuits owned them and sold them, and in the process sundered and fractured families. It’s a terrible scandal and disgrace.

What happened is that there was a public gathering where the president of the Jesuit conference here in the United States got up before this audience of their descendants, in a livestreamed national address and said, ‘We have greatly sinned.’ He said that even though we’ve read the same scriptures, celebrated the same sacraments, said the same prayers and prayed to the same God, how could we not see that we were all one in Christ?

I offer that because I think what needs to happen in dioceses around the country is that, first, they need to study and own the ways in which their local church, through action and silence, has failed to address the sin of racism, how they have been actively and tacitly complicit in this evil. Then, they need to publicly come forward and, without any kind of equivocation, say, ‘We were wrong. We need to lament, we need to seek contrition.’

After contrition, in good Catholic form, we make a firm purpose of amendment and we describe what acts of penance we’re going to do to repair the harm that’s been done.

I think that if that were done across our country, because each diocese has its own story to tell here, and their own kind of complicity to acknowledge, it would be a powerful, powerful Catholic witness that could give our nation some needed light and break through some of the impasse that we find ourselves in.

We need to be pivotal participants in this conversation that’s badly needed.

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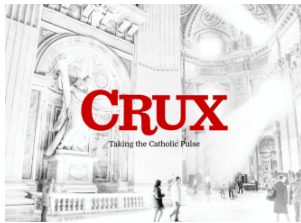
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