

2016 Assembly of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious

Response to Presentation on Racism and US Religious Life

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Good morning. I am Sister Dawn Tomaszewski, a member of the leadership team of the Sisters of Providence of Saint Mary-of-the-Woods, Indiana. I accepted this invitation to be a responder because I knew the context for this topic of racism was prayer, prayer asking for forgiveness, seeking God's mercy.

And into our midst comes Dr. Shannen Dee Williams to remind us of the painful truth: that not only does our country need healing but also our congregations. We need forgiveness. We need God's mercy.

In the book *Rising to Common Ground, Overcoming America's Color Lines*, Danny Duncan Collum stresses that—in bridging divisions between people—always begin with acknowledging the wrongs of the past. When sin is confessed and the sinner is willing to make amends, forgiveness and healing follow.

Collum uses the Sisters of Loretto as a brave example of how a group's public confession of past complicity in racism can lead to the beginning of new relationships.

After discovering that they had, in fact, owned slaves, slaves that had been accepted as "gifts," the Sisters of Loretto, found the names of those slaves and constructed a monument to them. Sisters and associates gathered for the unveiling of that monument and the reading of the name of each slave.

We could offer other examples of our heartfelt efforts to eradicate racism as part of our atonement for these sins. But in a week where we have focused on transformation, we need to acknowledge that our greatest task is the transformation necessitated by the sad truth of white privilege—the gifts that come to us because we are white.

Peggy McIntosh, formerly of the Wellesley Centers for Women, says white privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks. We were taught to see racism only in individual acts of meanness, not in invisible systems conferring dominance on a group. Our oppressiveness is unconscious. Therefore, acknowledging white privilege requires surrender.

In preparation for today I sought out the files of all the African-American women who joined our community since the late 1950s and subsequently left. I wanted to know why they left or more importantly why they couldn't stay.

It was especially hard for me to read one woman's words: "I have felt my self-esteem plummet over this past year and my confidence in my ability to deal effectively with the racism here diminish. Can I live with the reality?" And in another place, she wrote: "I have an aversion to

the racism—some of ignorance and some malicious. I had not expected such resignation to it within the community.”

I want to make amends with these women.

We have had a mission in Asia since the 1920s and in addition to having founded a native Chinese community of sisters, we have happily welcomed native Chinese into our own community—all required, of course, to learn English, whose vocation was sometimes judged by how well they learned English. How many of us have learned Chinese? Or any other language for that matter? That is the gift of white privilege. I don't have to.....

I need to make amends with these women.

Because you have heard Dr. Williams this morning, I invite YOU in the days to come to find what might have been erased from your history, to learn where you need to make amends, to bring the power of our contemplative processes to bear on this issue.

The National Black Sisters' conference has as one of its objectives:

To collaborate with our Native American, Latino/a-Hispanic American, Euro-American and Asian American sisters and brothers who share with us the goal of serving the poor and marginalized by creating a communion of people committed to forging unity within the global community.

A communion of people committed to forging unity within the global community. May we be open to the possibilities offered by our Provident God to help forge this communion. Truly that would further the evolution of love. To borrow Pat Farrell's mantra: Nothing matters more. Nothing matters more.

*My own community's anti-racism work has been funded through the monetary award received from a federal lawsuit successfully charging housing discrimination against one of our African American members.