



RESPONDING TO RACISM

by Ernest J. Miller, FSC



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We are living in a historic moment.

The wave of public outrage in reaction to George Floyd's 21st-century lynching launched protests of a scope and scale unseen in decades in the United States and, indeed, around the world. These protests arrive at a moment when many people are hungry to end the moral pandemic of systemic, interlocking injustices. These protests arrive at a moment when many people aspire to heal the nation and expand the quest for human freedom, human dignity, and democracy.

This struggle requires frank discussion of the dimensions of human freedom and dignity—mercy, love, courage, resistance, imagination, empathy—all of which are essential to building a better world.

We watched crowds of people—of every age, skin color, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, and no religion—take to the streets to cry out against deep-seated structural anti-blackness. The racist ideology that emerged out of American slavery persists, framing Black people “as dangerous and likely criminals.”¹

This racist ideology shows the distorted moral narrative of our democracy, which we must play our own part in deconstructing. We cannot abide a world in which Black mothers and fathers must educate, as a matter of course, their children in how to survive an encounter with the police. We cannot accept a society that tells Black youth: “You are worth less than. Your life is cheap.”

At present, our society is in the depths of anguish and despair, what Martin Luther King Jr. calls “the disjointed elements of reality.” In this broken place, our nation needs to heed the ancient wisdom of the Hebrew prophet Zechariah: Take inventory of yourself and community. Publicly own the deep wounds and painful consequences of oppression and suffering in the land.

Zechariah calls us to become prisoners of prophetic hope.

We must shift from pleasant poetics of charity to a prophetic praxis of hope “capable of [transforming] the status quo.”² It opens up the possibility to create a movement that enacts transformational justice, that is to say, a movement that brings about the fruits of the Reign of God.



However, what exactly is the problem against which we must dedicate ourselves to struggle? At the opening of the 20th century, the great sociologist and civil rights activist W. E. B. Du Bois asserted: "The problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line."³ This analysis remains desperately relevant today, as the nation continues to be affected by the fumes and odors of systemic, structural racism in American democracy.

"[W]e have ingested the idea," says Resmaa Menakem, "that the white body is the supreme standard of humanity."⁴ "While we see anger and violence in the streets of our country, the real battlefield is inside [all of] our bodies, [of every color]." Menakem continues: "If we are to survive as a country, it is inside our bodies where this conflict needs to be resolved"; that "the vital force [behind] white supremacy is in our nervous systems."⁵

If you do not understand this truth, everything about this moment will confuse you. Everything about racial inequities, poverty, and social unrest will confuse you.

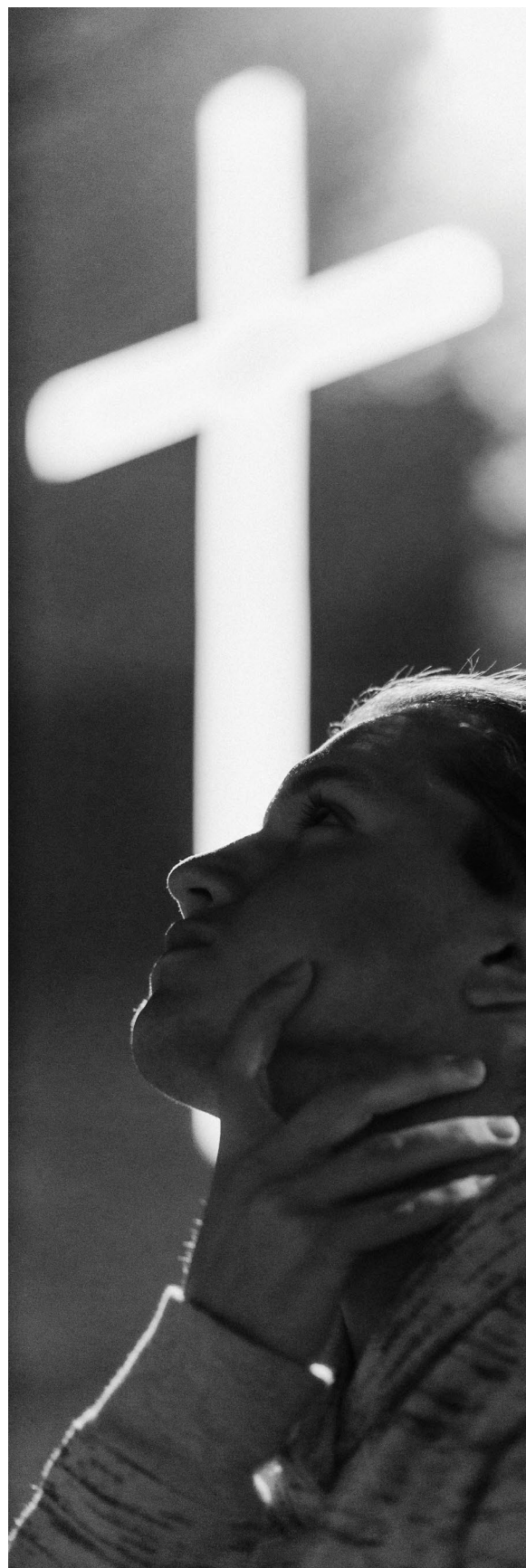
Let us pray that God will keep this knowledge close to our hearts.

The foundational motivation of Saint John Baptist de La Salle—the patron saint of Christian teachers and the founder of the Brothers of the Christian schools—was to establish schools that were a sign of the Reign of God and a means of salvation. Theologian-educator Br. Luke Salm, FSC, helps us critically understand the mission of salvation at the heart of Catholic education. Salvation is both a human reality and a religious concept rooted in hope. God’s will is that everyone be saved from “failure and disintegration of every kind” and to promote “health instead of sickness, knowledge instead of ignorance . . . relationship instead of loneliness . . . justice instead of injustice . . . love instead of hate.”⁶

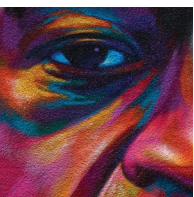
What, then, is required of us? What is required of the mission of Catholic education—a mission of salvation—to enact racial justice and participate in creating an anti-racist society?

As prisoners of prophetic hope, we are trying to keep track of not only our wounds and suffering but also our strengths and our tremendous possibilities for coming together to take decisive steps as communities of struggle “toward widening and strengthening human democracy.”⁷

If we are to amplify our participation in justice creation, Catholic education needs to embrace a critical pedagogy—a discourse of educated hope and possibility—across the curriculum and co-curriculum of each of our schools, universities, and other centers of education.



Let us provide those entrusted to our educational care with the prophetic sensibility of Br. John Johnston, FSC, who calls us to be indignant like Jesus about human beings suffering under the weight of social imbalance. Let us provide those entrusted to our educational care with Martin Luther King Jr.'s prophetic quest to become not just a Good Samaritan; rather, let us provide them a deep education that leads them to become an agent who transforms the Jericho Roads of life so no one is terrorized or traumatized or hated by other human beings.



To conclude, I encourage you to reflect on what you can do today—not tomorrow, not next week but today—to keep bending the arc of the moral universe toward transformational justice. To be a prophetic prisoner of hope is your vocation, your calling. It is a long-distance run.

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1. Tomiko Brown-Nagin, "A Reading List on Issues of Race," at <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/06/a-reading-list-on-issues-of-race>.
 2. Stan Chu Ilo, "Healing of the Mindset of Racism," at <https://international.la-croix.com/news/religion/healing-of-the-mindset-of-racism/12676>.
 3. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903.
 4. Resmaa Menakem, "A Conversation on Compassion with Resmaa Menakem," at <https://compassioncenter.arizona.edu/podcast/resmaa-menakem>.
 5. Resmaa Menakem, "Notice the Rage; Notice the Silence," at <https://onbeing.org/programs/resmaa-menakem-notice-the-rage-notice-the-silence>.
 6. "Together for Mission," *AXIS Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 7, no. 2, 2016.
 7. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 1935.

This article is adapted with permission from Br. Ernest J. Miller, from the opening meditation for an online event on June 25, 2020, titled *"Responding to Racism: A Lasallian Dialogue."* The full event can be viewed online at youtu.be/XabjRfQYvxo.

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