



READING THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES: RACIAL DISCRIMINATION AND WHITE PRIVILEGE

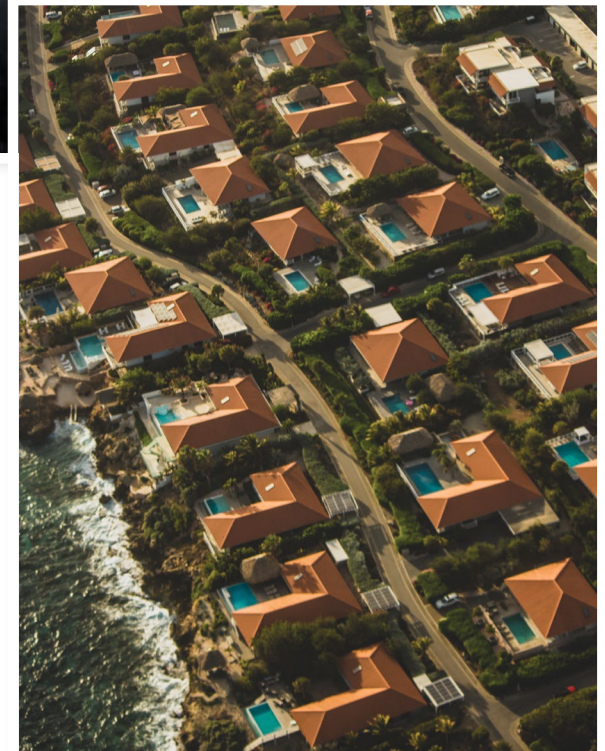
by Erin M. Brigham

“HANDS UP, DON’T SHOOT.”

In the fall of 2014, protestors gathered in Ferguson, Missouri, a suburb of St. Louis, chanting, “Hands up, don’t shoot.” Many of the protestors believed these to be the final words of Michael Brown, a Black teenager shot and killed by a white police officer on August 9, 2014. Although witnesses disputed details of the events surrounding Brown’s death, the results were tragic—the unarmed teenager was fatally shot. The Jesuit St. Louis University, along with the Archdiocese’s Human Rights Commission, joined other community leaders in advocating for racial justice and accountability.¹ The St. Louis County grand jury did not indict the police officer involved, reinforcing for many the racial injustice perpetuated by the criminal justice system in the United States.²

Brown’s death was one of the events that gave rise to the Black Lives Matter movement. The activists behind Black Lives Matter advocate for criminal justice reform, pointing to the systemic nature of police killings of young men of color. In February 2017, a study published by the American Journal of Public Health found significant racial disparities in the use of force by police officers. The author found that Black, Hispanic, and American Indian / Alaska Native men were disproportionately represented among young men who died from police force between 2010 and 2014.³ This study, consistent with previous research, illustrates the systemic reality of racism.

Despite such evidence pointing to the systemic nature of racism, polls show remarkable differences between white and Black Americans when it comes to perceptions of racism in the United States. In a 2016 survey, the Pew Research Center found that 88 percent of Black adults think the country needs to change in order to promote equal rights for Blacks. The same survey found that 53 percent of white adults expressed the same view about racial equality.⁴



Black theologian and Catholic priest Bryan Massingale explains the ambivalence that many white people have toward racial justice through the concept of white privilege. Examining white privilege requires a shift in attention away from the ways that racism disadvantages people of color and instead focuses on how racial injustice sets up advantages for white people. Massingale offers concrete examples such as redlining, the practice of designating certain neighborhoods based on racial demographics as high-risk lending zones, making it nearly impossible for people of color to obtain a mortgage. In the 1940s and 1950s, when the Federal Housing Administration offered low-cost loans to promote home ownership, the vast majority of the loans went to white people, enabling them to accumulate assets that they could pass on to their children.⁵ In her classic essay “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” Peggy McIntosh proposes a number of examples of white

privilege. As a white person, she observes, “I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group. I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having coworkers on the job suspect that I got it because of race.”⁶

Coming to terms with white privilege is crucial for overcoming the power imbalances that are engendered by racism, but it is not an easy process. Massingale observes:

Being racially advantaged might be unwanted or undesired by individual white Americans. In fact, some white Americans are distressed when they become aware of the reality of white privilege. Regardless of an individual's desires, an 'invisible package of unearned assets' is enjoyed by white people because of the racial consciousness that is subtly pervasive in our social customs and institutions.⁷

Massingale challenges the Catholic Church to do more to address racism on a pastoral level and in official teachings. In his reading of the bishops' statements on racism since *Brothers and Sisters to Us*, Massingale suggests that "the dominant approach found in recent Catholic episcopal reflection on racism is marked by (1) stress on its interpersonal manifestations; (2) a strategy of moral suasion and appeals to an enlightened conscience; and (3) calls for decency, civility, respect, and fair treatment, which will translate into improved social relationships among America's racial groups."⁸ What is lacking, Massingale argues, is an examination of racism on a cultural level. Culture carries the beliefs, symbols, and stories by which a community gives meaning to its experience and passes on that shared meaning to future generations. Addressing racism on a cultural level requires challenging deeply held beliefs and reshaping the systems that perpetuate these beliefs. With the exception of a few bishops, Massingale notes that the official Catholic response to racism emphasizes the need to change attitudes and personal behavior and is missing an analysis of the systems that structure racial inequalities.

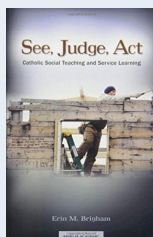


Massingale stresses the "systemic nature" of racism and notes that racism is not limited to the sins of individuals; it exists within the very fabric of society, embodied in systems that disadvantage and oppress people of color. Theologians, including Massingale, join the USCCB in identifying racism as a social sin. Social sin is not the same as personal sin, which emerges out of the freedom and responsibility of an individual; therefore, social sin requires a different framework to understand and address it. Social sin, however, is

rooted in human decisions and so cannot be separated from personal sin. Because social sin is larger than personal sin, it requires social as well as individual change. Describing social sin, Massingale states, “Social institutions and processes are not morally neutral; they reflect the values and the biases of those who create and maintain them.”⁹ It can be challenging to identify social sin because, as Massingale continues, “we are then born into a world already formed by these structures, and we grow up thinking that these structures and the values that they incarnate are perfectly normal and legitimate. One of the characteristics of social sin, then, is that we’re often blind to its existence.”¹⁰ Massingale’s work suggests that efforts to eradicate racism should consider the need for societal and ecclesial transformation in addition to personal transformation.

-
1. Colleen Dulle, “If St. Louis is the ‘New Selma,’ what role will Catholics play in racial reconciliation?” in *America*. (October 3, 2017), <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2017/10/03/if-st-louis-new-selma-what-role-will-catholics-play-racial>.
 2. Larry Buchanan, Ford Fessenden, K.K. Rebecca Lai, Haeyoun Park, Alicia Parlapiano, Archie Tse, Tim Wallace, Derek Watkins, and Karen Yourish, “Q&A What Happened in Ferguson?” in *The New York Times* (August 10, 2015), available at <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/08/13/us/ferguson-missouri-town-under-siege-after-police-shooting.html?mcubz=0&r=0https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/17/black-lives-matter-birth-of-a-movement>.
 3. James Buehler, MD, “Racial/Ethnic Disparities in the Use of Lethal Force by US Police, 2010–2014,” in *The American Journal of Public Health* (February 2017), available at <http://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/full/10.2105/AJPH.2016.303575>.
 4. Pew Research Center, “On Views of Race and Inequality, Blacks and Whites Are Worlds Apart” (June 27, 2017), available at <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2016/06/27/on-views-of-race-and-inequality-blacks-and-whites-are-worlds-apart/>.
 5. Bryan Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010), 37–40.
 6. Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” *Peace and Freedom* (July 1989): 10–12.
 7. Massingale, *Racial Justice*, 37.
 8. Bryan Massingale, “James Cone and Recent Catholic Episcopal Teaching on Racism,” *Theological Studies* 61:4 (December 2000): 714.
 9. Bryan Massingale, “Are You a Social Sinner?” interview with *U.S. Catholic*, *U.S. Catholic* 70, no. 2 (February 2005): 21.
 10. *Ibid.*

This article is an excerpt from “Defending Human Dignity against Discrimination,” by Erin M. Brigham, in *See, Judge, Act: Catholic Social Teaching and Service Learning*, revised edition (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2018), pages 67–70. Copyright © 2018 by Erin M. Brigham. All rights reserved. www.anselmacademic.org.



Erin M. Brigham is an adjunct professor in the department of theology and religious studies and the faculty coordinator of research in the Joan and Ralph Lane Center for Catholic Studies and Social Thought at the University of San Francisco. She holds a doctorate in systematic and philosophical theology from Graduate Theological Union. Her most recent book, *Sustaining the Hope for Unity: Ecumenical Dialogue in a Post-modern World*, was published by Liturgical Press in 2012.