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Heeding founders' call, women religious combat racism

Kate Childs Graham | Feb. 27, 2010

Mercy Sr. Cora Marie Billings

In 1945, when Mary Paul heard God?s call to religious life, she could not enter any community of women religious in her hometown of Philadelphia, including the Sisters of Mercy. Not because her vocation was untrue, but because she was a person of color. At the time, women of color in the city were referred to three orders: the Oblate Sisters of Providence in Baltimore, the Franciscan Handmaids of Mary in Harlem, N.Y., or the Sisters of the Holy Family in New Orleans -- communities comprised mostly of women of color. Paul entered the Baltimore order. Her story is the story of many other women of color who were refused entrance to so-called ?white? communities.

Just a year later, however, Mother Mary Bernard became the superior of the Merion Regional Community of the Sisters of Mercy in Philadelphia. Bernard asked her novices to pray for the entrance of a ?colored sister? into the community. And in 1956, after being educated by the Mercy sisters in high school, Sr. Cora Marie Billings, Paul?s niece, entered the community and Bernard?s prayers were answered.

Reflecting on her journey as a Sister of Mercy and a person of color, Billings said, ?I?ve always been either the first or the only.? Being the first or the only was not easy, especially in the beginning. ?It was difficult for the sisters I lived with because some of them had never interacted with an African-American person, much less lived with any,? she recalled.

In 1980, at a gathering of Sisters of Mercy, Billings gave a presentation on racism. ?At the time, there were about 10,000 Sisters of Mercy,? she explained, ?and only five were African-American.?

During that presentation, she explained how the congregation?s foundress, Mother Catherine McAuley, always reached out to the people in the neighborhoods, and vocations grew from her outreach. ?In 1980,? Billings said, ?we had been working in at least 20 or more neighborhoods of African Americans. But we weren?t drawing vocations from those neighborhoods. We weren?t fulfilling what Mother McAuley wanted.?

This realization -- that the work of antiracism and multiculturalism is a part of their mission, that racism hurts not only people of color but all people, that they were not doing what their founders wanted -- spurred the Sisters of Mercy to begin to look inward at the racism that existed within the very bones of their congregations.

Other congregations have followed the same path of self-examination in recent decades, including the Sisters of Providence of St. Mary-of-the-Woods, Ind., and the Dominican Sisters of Sinsinawa, Wis. And their zeal for racial justice in church and society is rooted in their founding moments.

When St. Mother Theodore Guerin, the foundress of the Sisters of Providence, traveled to New Orleans in the 1840s, she witnessed the selling of slaves. In her writings, Guerin noted what a ?painful sight? this ?shameful traffic? was. She declared, ?Lo! I said to myself, these Americans, so proud of their liberty, thus make game of the liberty of others. É I would have wished to buyÊthem all that I might say to them, ?God bless Providence. You are free!? ?

Venerable Fr. Samuel Mazzucelli, founder of the Sinsinawa Dominicans, saw similar injustices, those faced by Native Americans. As a young priest, Mazzucelli was sent to be a missionary in the Great Lakes region, where he witnessed the plight of the Menominee and Winnebago natives. As the government tried to remove Native Americans and take their land, Mazzucelli decried these actions of injustice. The priest incorporated Native American culture, language and spirituality into the schools he built, employing native teachers. And in 1833 and 1834, he published a Winnebago prayer book and liturgical almanac in Chippewa.

Throughout her life, McAuley ministered to those who were living in poverty or uneducated. She told her sisters, ?Never speak with contempt of any nation, profession, or class of people.?

Despite these calls for justice from their founding members, the communities were subject to the same strictures of institutional racism that were at work in the United States. The history of racism, that of segregation, discrimination and the misuse of power, subsequently became the history of racism within many communities of women religious.

In the mid-20th century, though, as racial injustice grew less acceptable in the United States, and Catholic women religious were among the first to speak out. Sisters of many congregations marched in the streets in Montgomery, Ala., or registered voters in Georgia. They provided education for children of color, when these children were turned away from churches and schools. They ministered to immigrant communities. They defended the rights of Native Americans to keep their land and maintain their cultures.

However, racism within communities of women religious was still prevalent.

?What sisters of color find with our white sisters is the insensitivity and unawareness to differences in cultures,? Sr. Patricia Rogers of the Sinsinawa Dominicans remarked, ?such as not knowing that you wouldn?t put your hand in a black sister?s hair, or treating all Spanish-speaking people as if they areÊthe same, or being clueless to why the tomahawk-chop and Chief Illini are offensive to Native Americans.?

The Sinsinawa Dominicans, the Sisters of Providence and the Sisters of Mercy have all affirmed their commitment to dealing with racism on an institutional level at their community-wide chapter meetings.

The Sisters of Providence first made this commitment at their 1996 chapter. That same year, the sisters filed a

federal housing discrimination complaint.

Kathy Burke, a former Sister of Providence, had been living in an apartment in Chicago with another white sister for several years without issue. When the other sister moved out, Burke asked then-Sr. Phyllis Sheppard, a woman of color, to move into her apartment.

Shortly after Sheppard moved in, the landlords asked the sisters to move out, stating that they needed the apartment for a family member. No family member ever moved in. The landlords put the apartment back on the rental market and a white tenant moved in.

In 1994, Sheppard filed a discrimination complaint with the Chicago Commission of Human Relations. Eleven months later, the commission ruled in her favor.

When no resolution was reached at a conciliation conference between the landlords and Sheppard, the Sisters of Providence filed a federal housing discrimination complaint.

Reflecting on this experience, Burke stated, ?I felt like [racism] was behind us and in the history books. I was wrong.?

The Sisters of Providence promised that any financial gains the community won in the lawsuit would go toward the antiracism effort to which they had committed. They settled the lawsuit for $250,000.

After that, the Sisters of Providence engaged an organization called Crossroads. Founded in 1986, Crossroads provides ways to understand and combat institutional racism, while establishing structures of accountability to people of color. The organization offers a series of trainings that ?provide a framework for institutions that are striving to achieve antiracist and anti-oppressive transformation.? They also help institutions analyze any internal policies and procedures that maintain white privilege, and create antiracism teams that ?build an intervention strategy to dismantle these oppressive systems.?

The Sinsinawa Dominicans and Sisters of Mercy have also turned to Crossroads. For all three communities, the journey with the organization began with a two-and-a-half day training, ?Analyzing and Understanding Systemic Racism,? which explores the history of racism in the United States, how racism still exists in institutions today, and how this affects people of color and white people.

This first training for the Sisters of Providence was in 1997. ?We weren?t just addressing personal prejudice,? said Sr. Jenny Howard. ?We all have prejudice about something. É What made it different for us was that the definition was: Personal prejudice plus misuse of power by systems and institutions equals racism.?

The Sinsinawa Dominicans had their first training in 1999. ?We wanted to find the best ways, by using facilitators, to actually talk about racism, to bring other members in the conversations and to have honest conversations with each other,? Rogers explained.

The Mercy sisters? journey with Crossroads began a bit later. At their 1999 chapter, the delegates passed a resolution to ?admit, own and ask forgiveness for our racism as individuals and as institute.? In this resolution, they committed to ?identify and participate in existing programs and organizations? to combat both personal prejudice and institutional racism.

After this chapter, many sisters and regional communities within the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy participated in trainings, workshops and seminars. And the Alliance of Sisters of Mercy of Color, which had formed in 1996, continued its work of ?fostering self-growth and liberation.?

However, at the 2005 chapter, Sr. Marie Chin, president of the community, suggested that as an institute, they ?had not reached the moment for asking forgiveness.?

?Each of us is at a very different level of consciousness regarding the issue of racism,? Chin said. ?We have only touched the tip of the iceberg. É One day we will know with our heart and soul that it is time to ask forgiveness.?

At that chapter the delegates passed a act ?to deepen our response to the unrecognized and unreconciled racism past and present within our community.?

The institute held its first training with Crossroads in August 2008. Afterward, the Sisters of Mercy decided to form an antiracism team. Team members were announced in January 2010, and they were to participate in a weeklong training this month.

For many years now, the Sinsinawa Dominicans and Sisters of Providence have both had antiracism teams working to carry out 20-year strategic plans, which have included providing some version of Crossroads? trainings to their members and associates.

Most Sisters of Providence have participated in some form of antiracism training, as well as directors, staff, and some boards and staff from sponsored institutions. ?If we could come to a deeper understanding of racism as systemic, then together we could work to dismantle racism among ourselves,? said Howard.

However, the work goes much deeper than providing trainings. It is also about looking at power and privilege and the structures that keep white privilege in place.

?As a white person, I am so accustomed to access,? Howard explained. ?Any motel, any restaurant, any neighborhood. É Yet I know that experience is not the same for some of the other members of the antiracism team. É I will never forget the day, when one of our persons of color from our team said to me, ?Jenny, you can think about racism whenever you want to. I have to think about racism every day of my life.?

?I haven?t done anything to earn these opportunities, these rights, these freedoms, this access,? Howard said. ?So, how can we use this power of privilege in a positive way to work together for racial justice??

The Sinsinawa Dominicans have set up nearly 15 caucuses for people of color and white people. These caucuses meet once a month, in person or on the phone, to further their exploration of how racism and white privilege manifests itself at an individual, community and society level. Jana Minor, an associate of the Sinsinawa Dominicans, said, ?The caucuses help us dig deeper. They help me be much better at seeing racism when it is happening.?

The changes the sisters have seen are small and slow at times, yet significant.

?We?ve seen a greater bond with the sisters of color,? Rogers said. ?I think we?ve moved away from trying to get examples from sisters about what has happened to looking at what continues to preserve the structures of racism.?

Minor said, ?More people are beginning to get it. We aren?t talking about discrimination -- we are talking about the sin of racism that is buried so deep in our country and our community.?

For the Sisters of Providence, it?s about becoming ?more aware of our white privilege,? Howard said. ?And we?ve tried to become more inclusive É even in our environment, our liturgy, our prayer, we put up artwork or sayings of different cultures, trying to become aware of and appreciate the diversity among us.?

Providence Sr. Kathleen Smith added, ?Antiracism is very complicated. It?s not easy to deal with because it changes momentarily. One thing will be fine and something will happen and it?s not fine. It?s a very complicated awareness of life.?

When asked what an antiracist, multicultural community of women religious would look like, the sisters are not entirely sure. As there are no good examples of communities in the United States that have reached this goal, their uncertainty is understandable.

?We know that it is going to take a great amount of time to do this,? Rogers said. To become more transparent, to work toward collaboration and cooperation, to embrace a new worldview that acknowledges an abundance of resources, ?is going to take a lot of work on our part.?

[Kate Childs Graham writes for the ?Young Voices? column on NCRonline.org.]

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