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Author evokes passion for racial justice

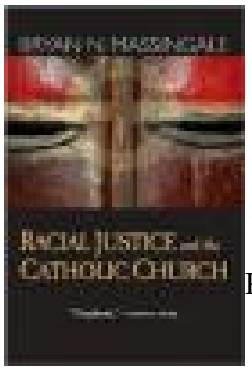
Michelle Gonzalez | Jan. 17, 2011

Paulita DaCosta-Campbell plays the tambourine with the Sr. Thea Bowman Rockville Centre Diocesan Gospel Choir during a special Mass for Catholics of African ancestry at St. Agnes Cathedral in Rockville Centre, N.Y., in February. (CNS/Long Island Catholic/Gregory A. Shemitz)

Having been baptized into the waters of liberation theologies through a course on black theology as an undergraduate at Georgetown University, I eagerly sat down to read ethicist Bryan Massingale?s volume *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*. The cynic in me would have placed a question mark at the end of those four words, yet Massinagale?s book does not allow for such broad stereotyping. As he reminds the reader early on, the focus of his book is both the contributions and the limitations of Catholic social thought on racism.

I must confess that in my eyes the limitations greatly outweigh the contributions. While there are moments in the U.S. church?s history that embody a public denouncement of racism, this is not a definitive feature of the church. I think, for example, of Los Angeles Cardinal Roger Mahony?s current public protests of Arizona?s immigration law and his work with Cesar Chavez on behalf of farm workers when he was first ordained a priest in the 1960s. The examples, unfortunately, are exceptions rather than the norm.

At the heart of the text is an exploration of the relevance of the Roman Catholic faith for the struggle for racial justice in the present-day United States. The book has a twofold focus: demonstrating how a Catholic method of approaching racial justice can be significant today, and second, how an emphasis on racial justice can challenge and develop Catholic social ethics.



RACIAL JUSTICE AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

By Bryan N. Massingale
Published by Orbis Books, $26

The opening chapter takes on the task of defining racism. Lest we bask in the election of President Barack Obama, Massingale reminds us that even today race still matters. In fact, given the current ?browning? of America through the growth of Latino/a and black populations and symbolized by Obama?s election, ?whites? today more than ever feel anxiety and shock over the contemporary United States. The current vilification of all illegal immigrants in Arizona caricatured as drug dealers and criminals affirms this trend. At the heart of this is racism and scapegoating, with a little xenophobia thrown into the mix.

Chapter two turns to Catholic social teachings on racism, analyzing the Catholic response to racial injustice. While acknowledging the presence of a Catholic voice on this topic, Massingale highlights the lack of social analysis in the church?s reflection on racism. Even more challenging is the claim Massingale makes that the U.S. church is a white racist institution where whiteness is normative for U.S. Catholicism. One only has to look at the demographics of Catholics in the pews and Catholics behind the altar (particularly bishops) to see the disconnect.

Similarly, I agree with Massingale?s claim that the institutional culture of U.S. Catholicism is white. If that weren?t the case, why would the U.S. bishops? conference have cultural diversity subcommittees for African-Americans, Hispanics, Asian and Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans? Apparently, white or Euro-American Catholicism is not a dimension of U.S. Catholicism?s diversity, it is normative.

In order to prevent us from falling too deeply in despair, chapter three emphasizes a more appropriate theological and consequently pastoral response to racism in light of Catholic social teachings. Also drawing from the broader Christian tradition, Massingale presents a renewed engagement of racial reconciliation for Catholics. However, if Catholics do not understand racism as a force in direct conflict with their faith, they will never become active in the struggle against racial injustice.

A passionate account of justice informed by African-American intellectual, cultural and aesthetic sources is the subject of chapter four. This chapter reminds us of the importance of hope in the struggle for justice, a deep-rooted notion in the African-American community. The final chapter, appropriately titled, ?The Vocation of the Black Catholic Theologian,? emphasizes the challenges, struggles and joys of the Black Catholic scholar, yet reminds all of us, regardless of our race, of the challenges of Catholic vocation.

As a Cuban-American and self-proclaimed brown Latina, I must admit I was disappointed to find that Massingale?s study limits his analysis to white and black racial groups, arguing that they are archetypal for understanding race in the United States. This may be the case if you are white or black. I am sympathetic to his argument yet feel that in the 21st-century United States to reduce race to whiteness and blackness is to oversimplify the lived complexity of racial identity in this country.

Early on in the book, Massingale acknowledges that racism is an emotional topic. As it should be. Too often accounts of racism -- and, frankly, Catholic social ethics -- are devoid of the passion and emotion that fuel the debates and lived experiences on which these areas focus.

It is refreshing and emotional (and I mean that in the most positive sense) to read a text that is written with passion and evokes it in the reader.

This academic yet accessible book is a must-read for those interested in racial injustice and Catholic social ethics narrowly conceived, but more broadly relevant for anyone who is interested in exploring what Catholic thought has to say about the life-and-death issues that mark our contemporary era. This is a much-needed book, but as I closed the back cover I could not help but think what we need is action.

Catholicism, both in the everyday life of believers and in the broader institutional culture, must understand racism as a threat to the full humanity of God?s creation and thus an affront to our creator.

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