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Review

Bryan N. Massingale

***Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Orbis Books, 2009)**

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As Bryan Massingale notes in his chapter on the vocation of a black Catholic theologian, the community of scholars forging a distinctly black American Roman Catholic theology is small. But Massingale's book, along with other recent collections of essays by his colleagues, shows a passionate, committed, and intellectually lively community of scholar-activism presenting a true gift to the Catholic Church, the larger Christian community, and to the theological academy. *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* is an important contribution to this growing field.

Massingale is a priest of the Milwaukee diocese who teaches theology at Marquette University and at the Institute of Black Studies at Xavier University in New Orleans. He recently

finished a term as president of the Catholic Theological Society of America and has been actively involved in church-based social justice movements and ministries. His involvement at the grass-roots provides his theological writing with a groundedness that resists abstract theologizing about “justice.” The book's main purpose is to analyze U.S. American Catholic social thought on racism in both its strengths and weaknesses and to discover how Catholic teaching and ethical reflection can be enriched by the contribution of African American experience. Seeking to overcome the obstacles of ignorance and the fear of discussing race, the question that animates Massingale’s analysis is “How can we struggle together against an evil that harms us all, though in different ways?” (xiv).

Massingale insists that most Catholics know that “racism” is wrong but there is little reflection about what racism actually is. Chapter one deals with this question of what racism is, a question that is especially important to revisit in light of the current U.S. context. Although the election of Barack Obama to the presidency has led some Americans to believe that U.S. society has reached a “post-racial” or “color-blind” status, racially charged politics and cultural phenomena are reemerging and ethnic and religious demographic diversification is taking place at the same time. Continuing racist dynamics in the United States are obscured by what Massingale calls the “commonsense” definition of racism by which most U.S. Americans simply equate racism with prejudice and discrimination. This understanding of racism focuses on the deliberate and conscious attitudes of individuals as well as acts of harm toward people of color that flow from such attitudes, and according to this view all social groups can be equally “racist.” Contrary to this “commonsense” understanding, Massingale presents a clear account of a social and institutional understanding of racism as a system in which power and privilege are distributed according to a racial hierarchy. According to this view, “white” does not designate a singular race but a category of racial groups who have access to political, economic, and social privileges. Likewise “people of color” designates those who lack access to such privileges. Most

importantly, Massingale's description includes a strong reflection on the place of white privilege in the racial dynamics in the U.S.

More than an institutional reality, racism is also cultural. Drawing on the work of Jesuit theologian Bernard Lonergan, Massingale describes racism's effects on both black and white cultures in the United States. Despite the diversity among African Americans and among U.S. whites, Massingale discerns the “soul” of each of these cultures in their common experiences. The “soul” of African American experience is an expectation of the struggle to be accepted fully as a human being and the pervasive feeling that “the system” is more foe than friend (20-1). The “soul” of white culture includes the often unexamined presumption of whiteness as normative, dominant, and entitled (24). Racism as a culture shapes the identities of those who are part of the cultural system, encouraging the largely unconscious perpetuation of cultural stereotypes (28) and racially selective sympathy and indifference (32). The culture of racism is perpetuated and protected by systems of white privilege that appear simply as “the way things” are to the dominant culture rather than by making outright claims of white superiority. Today's racism, Massingale argues, is “kinder, gentler” racism that advocates equality and opposes overt hatred but simultaneously defends white privilege (42).

Chapter two provides a detailed analysis of official Catholic social teaching's discussion of racism. Massingale points out that since the beginnings of the civil rights movement, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has made only three statements on racism, and in the same time period only two statements on racism have come from Rome. These social teachings are placed within their ecclesial and historical context in great detail. At the start of the civil rights movement, the U.S. Catholic Church was so resistant to serious reflection on race that the U.S. bishops' first statement on racism, *Discrimination and the Christian Conscience*, was issued only after persistent orders from the Vatican in 1958, much later than similar statements from other Christian communions. Massingale describes how this first, timid statement was

followed by progressively stronger statements (in 1968 and 1979) that expressed greater urgency and a greater recognition of the institutional nature of racism as well as the existence of racism in the Roman Catholic Church and the Church's complicity in societal racism. In addition to these collectively promulgated teachings, Massingale highlights statements from a few individual Catholic bishops (such as George Melczek of the diocese of Gary, Indiana) that address the structural reality of racism, the reality of white privilege, and Catholic complicity with it. Despite these few exceptions, Massingale analysis finds that Catholic social teaching on racism generally contains little social analysis or deep theological reflection, offers no formal plans for implementing its teaching, does not listen closely enough to the voices of the victims of racism, tends toward paternalism, and is overly optimistic in the face of what the bishops themselves have called a “radical evil.” Often, he says, a black Catholic will feel like a “motherless child” in a church culture where whiteness is the norm (78-81).

Although Massingale mostly finds official Catholic teaching on racism to be inadequate in the face of this social evil, in chapter three he probes the Catholic tradition more broadly for resources that can contribute toward racial understanding and reconciliation between social groups. Massingale admits that this chapter is an exercise in “theological pioneering” as serious reflection on racism in Catholic theology is scarce. He first engages in “thought experiments” to envision imaginatively what a future of racial reconciliation might look like, rejecting two inadequate but popularly accepted versions of racial utopia: colorblindness, which is focused on the mere elimination of racial difference, and proportional representation, which he says would have little effect on racial division. Both of these versions of racial utopia ignore the core issue of racism: “the linkage of power and prestige to racial difference” (90). Massingale argues that “racial reconciliation is not concerned with the elimination of racial differences, but rather the elimination of the stigma and privilege associated with race. Racial reconciliation, then, is the process of healing the estrangement, division, and hostility between racial groups by overturning

or severing the linkage between race and social, cultural, and/or political subordination and dominance” (90-91).

Next Massingale examines the insights of Evangelical theology which has already produced a significant body of reflection on racism. But like their Catholic counterparts, he says, Evangelical analysts of racism tend to overlook its institutional and social dimensions, focusing merely on the intentional prejudicial feelings of individuals. Christian theo-ethical reflection on racism, he says, must acknowledge that racial reconciliation requires not just dialogue and changed personal feelings but social transformation (96). In particular, it will require truth-telling in the form of a radical recognition of the historical events and decisions that contributed to the current systems of white privilege and the challenging of dominant social narratives that obscure these dangerous memories of history and the way these memories impact the present (97-100). Authentic racial reconciliation must also include “affirmative redress” which seeks “to rectify the harms caused by a long history of race-based unjust enrichment and unjust impoverishment” (100). Massingale points out that the Catholic magisterium affirms two general forms of affirmative redress that many U.S. Americans find controversial: reparations and affirmative action (100-2). Without concrete efforts toward redress, apologies and church teachings about racism are only empty words (102).

Although racism must be combated concretely and with attention to its systemic dimensions, Massingale reminds us that it requires more than rational “techniques.” Because racism is cultural and “engages us viscerally” (104), the response to it must also engage the “pre-rational” and the Catholic tradition contains resources that can do just that, including a biblical tradition of lament that gives rise to acts of compassion and bonds of solidarity. The latter, an increasingly important theme in Catholic social thought, is not a mere feeling of sympathy but a commitment to the common good rooted in “the conviction that the concerns of the despised other are intimately bound up with our own” (116). In terms of race, Massingale argues along

with sociologist Joe Feagin that for U.S. whites the true sign of racial solidarity is “autopathy,” the willingness to enter into the world of the oppressed by “becoming black,” and in doing so “endur[ing] some of the same racial rejection and exclusion” (118). Concrete practices of the Catholic faith such as the process of continual conversion, baptism, and Eucharist “immers[e] us in a larger reality that bursts the limits of our social imagination, limits that are necessary for our complacency with the status quo” (125), and encourage the formation of an “alternative community” that anticipates the inclusivity of God's reign (129).

In chapter four, Massingale offers reflections on justice and hope from an African American perspective. In contrast to “standard” abstract, detached, conceptual accounts of “justice” in academic ethical discussion, Massingale approaches justice as “a pathos, a desire, a longing, a yearning... indeed a *passion*,” that is, as something visceral (130-1). Massingale here demonstrates that merely applying Catholic social teaching to the issue of racism is not enough, and that the particularities of African American experience can contribute to the faith tradition of the Catholic Church (132). African American religious ethics is based on the foundational belief in the absolute equality of all human beings under God, a belief that arises from the passionate images of the “welcome table” and “Beloved Community” that permeate African American culture (132-43). Unlike the dominant streams of U.S. Christian ethical discourse, African American tradition refuses to settle for abstract notions of “justice” and “hope.” It asks about the radical consequences of justice for specific communities of persons (143), and its hope is not simply a naïve optimism about the triumph of good over evil, but a “blues hope” that struggles for the good in the face of the possibility of constant defeat (145-50). Among the many gifts that African American experience gives to the church is the concretization of otherwise abstract concepts and the revelation of the relationship between struggle, justice, and hope to sustain a passionate vision and praxis for justice.

Finally, chapter five is a reflection on what it means to be a black Catholic theologian, an intellectual working within two traditions: the African American intellectual community and the community of Catholic theologians. Massingale describes the black Catholic theologian's work concretely as the response to a vocation within a context, i.e. a service that is accountable to “something outside of oneself” and that acts “in response to the needs and concerns of a specific time” (153). As black scholars, the work of black Catholic theologians is “engaged in, on behalf of, and in solidarity with a community-in-struggle” (155). They are called to speak the truth to white America, but also to speak truthfully and self-critically to the black community itself and in solidarity with other communities-of-struggle (155-57). As Catholic theologians, they are called to wrestle with a “complex and complicated religious tradition” in all of its “moral ambiguity” (158-9), listening to the voices of the marginalized and oppressed and drawing out from the tradition strains that offer “good news” to communities-of-struggle (160-61). The “ultimate goal” of the black Catholic theologian “is to help transform the Catholic Christian community into a less imperfect witness to the broad, expansive, and inclusive ‘welcome table’ that is the reign of God” (162). Massingale then reflects on the challenges that the community of black Catholic theologians faces, including its small numbers of practitioners, the greater demand for direct pastoral involvement and “non-academic” activity, the community’s invisibility among religious studies and theological circles, and the fear and despair that arise in the face of such overwhelming tasks. But along with these challenges come great joys, which Massingale identifies as the joy of being trusted with the deep longings of the black community, the joy of acting with purpose, and the joy of collaborative theological and activist community.

Massingale is to be commended for this courageous work that so obviously comes from a deep but critical love of his ecclesial tradition. He provides an up-to-date overview of scholarship on racism and white privilege, including a helpful, if brief, list of additional resources on race at the end of the book. He contributes to the corpus of black Roman Catholic

theological work through a detailed engagement with Catholic social teaching, offering a fine corrective to the blind spots of this tradition's dominant stream of thought by drawing from African American experience. His reflections on the vocation of the black Catholic theologian are eye-opening and important reading for theologians of Catholic and non-Catholic traditions alike as he provides an “alternative model and/or needed corrective” for imagining theological work as committed, engaged truth-telling (173).

There are very few critiques that I could make of this book, and I will discuss only one here, that of the relatively weak discussion of the Catholic sacramental tradition as a resource for the generation of the anti-racist ecclesial “alternative community” that Massingale envisions. In particular, I had hoped for a greater exploration of the ways in which the “alternative community” of the church can give rise to the radical social transformation that is necessary in the United States. Indeed, as Massingale insists repeatedly in the book, changed attitudes and feelings are not enough to combat the radical evil of systemic racism and white privilege. And sadly, it is well known that participation in the Catholic sacramental life has not generally resulted in the kinds of communities Massingale hopes for. While the sacramental life of the church contains symbols and language that can contribute to an alternative social imagination, how is the move made progressively from these imaginative conceptions of human relationships free of domination, to the changing of consciousness of individuals and small communities, and then again to the essential task of changing political and economic structures that embody and perpetuate that domination? The “alternative community” conception is provocative and increasingly used in justice-oriented visions of church, but is it able to inspire and handle the essential move toward the larger kinds of social transformation that are necessary?

Surely, the seeds of the answer to these questions are to be found in Massingale's profound and important book which provides a solid foundation for further reflection on racial justice and the Catholic Church. This book is not only fitting and timely in a post-Obama U.S.

context, but will become necessary reading for courses in black and liberation theologies, Catholic social thought, and U.S. American Catholic history. It offers detailed analysis and probing questions for graduate level courses, but will also be accessible to undergraduates and those engaged in various kinds of pastoral and social justice ministries. Catholic and non-Catholic theologians alike will benefit from the challenges Massingale puts forth here to a church and theological academy that still participate in the defense of white privilege and will learn much from the vision of engaged theological reflection that he models so clearly.