
Responding to Racism: A Lasallian Dialogue and Call to Action

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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 around the United States, and indeed, 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 democracy, human freedom, and human dignity.

This struggle requires frank discussion of the dimensions of human freedom and dignity – mercy, love, courage, resistance, imagination, empathy – all of which are part and parcel of 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 criminal."²

This 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 the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called, "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."³ 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.” 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]. “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 don’t 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.

After registering for this event, you received a copy of the “Mission Mandated Lasallian Vision for Racial Justice.”⁶ Take an opportunity to consider this document and offer comments and suggestions about how we move toward enacting racial justice on a personal and communal level. This dialogue is an opportunity to take up the responsibility, as Kevin Ahern states, “to name God’s activity in the world, to be a prophetic critic of society”⁷

Saint John Baptist de La Salle and his first Brothers gave birth to our Lasallian association, which – to this day – draws from the deep wells of their encounter with the Holy Spirit. Their foundational motivation was to establish Christian schools as a sign of the reign of God and a means of salvation.⁸

Theologian-Educator Brother Luke Salm, FSC, helps us critically understand the mission of salvation at the heart of Lasallian 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 the promotion of “health instead of sickness, knowledge instead of ignorance . . . relationship instead of loneliness . . . justice instead of injustice . . . love instead of hate.”⁹

What, then, is required of us? What is required of the mission of Lasallian 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.”¹⁰

If we are to amplify our participation in justice creation, there is warrant for Lasallian education 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 Brother John Johnston, FSC, who called us to be indignant like Jesus about human beings suffering

under the weight of social imbalance. Let's provide those entrusted to our care with Martin Luther King, Jr.'s prophetic quest to become not just a Good Samaritan; rather, let us provide them with a deep education that leads them to become agents who transform 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.

Let us take courage in the words of writer and social activist Audre Lorde:

My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you. But for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other [people] while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences.¹¹

Endnotes

1. Brother Ernest Miller, who serves as vice president for mission, diversity, and inclusion at La Salle University in Pennsylvania, earned his doctorate at the Chicago Theological Union in Chicago. What is presented here is the inspiring “Opening Meditation” of *Responding to Racism: A Lasallian Dialogue and Call to Action*, an initiative of the Mission Officers of the Lasallian Association of Colleges and Universities in the USA (LACU) that engaged hundreds of Lasallians from 34 countries; and many others, individually or in groups, have subsequently accessed and viewed the dialogue. The 90-minute online exchange, which was conducted on 25 June 2020, was sponsored by the International Association of La Salle Universities (IALU) and co-hosted by the Office for Lasallian Education at Christian Brothers Conference and three of the Districts of the Lasallian Region of North America (RELAN): District of Eastern North America, Midwest District, and District of San Francisco New Orleans.

2. Tomiko Brown-Nagin (<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/06/a-reading-list-on-issues-of-race/>).

3. “Racism, the Church, and Healing for a Shattered World,” Stan Chu Ilo (Pan-African Catholic Theological and Pastoral Network, June 23, 2020).

4. Resmaa Menakem (<https://compassioncenter.arizona.edu/podcast/resmaa-menakem>).

5. Resmaa Menakem (<https://onbeing.org/programs/resmaa-menakem-notice-the-rage-notice-the-silence/>).

6. Cf. “Mission Mandated Lasallian Vision for Racial Justice” in *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 9, no. 2 (2018): 23-26.

7. “Towards a Sacramental Civil Society.”

8. Cf. *The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (Rome, 2015).
9. Cf. “Together for Mission” by Luke Salm, FSC in *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 7, no. 2 (2016): 90.
10. Cf. W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction* (1935).
11. *The Cancer Journals* (1980).