

"We cannot tolerate or turn a blind eye to racism and exclusion in any form and yet claim to defend the sacredness of every human life. Any Catholic who claims to defend the sacredness of every human life must combat racism and exclusion in all its forms."

~ Pope Francis, *America* magazine

Recently a friend of mine objected to a "Black Lives Matter" sign with the comment, "I believe all lives matter." I agree, but I also know that this has not been true for many Black Americans in our country up to the present day. Consider:

- Blacks are 3 ½ times as likely to die of Covid-19 as Whites. (*Wall Street Journal*)
- Black households make nearly 40% less than the median income of all households in Louisville. (*Business First*)
- A Black newborn is twice as likely to die in infancy as a White newborn.
- Blacks born poor in southern states have a shorter life expectancy than children born in Bangladesh. (*New York Times*)
- The poverty rate among Black Americans is more than twice the rate for White Americans.
- African-Americans are incarcerated at more than five times the rate of White Americans.
- Black Americans are more than twice as likely to die at the hands of a police officer as White Americans. (*America* magazine)

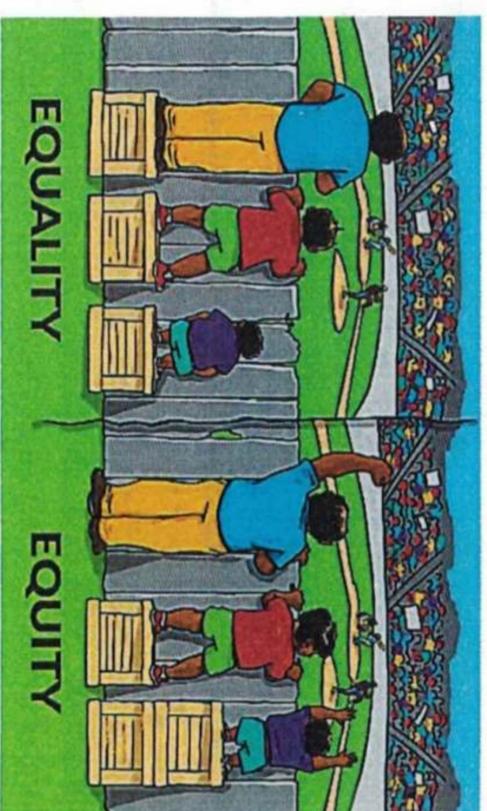
If we truly believe that "all lives matter," then we have a lot of work to do, and there is no time to lose!

Question

How have I turned a "blind eye" or been blinded to the realities of racial disparity in my community and my country?

Prayer

Lord our God, see how oppression and violence are our sad inheritance from one generation to the next. Fill us with your Spirit; where our human community is divided by racism, torn by oppression, saddened by fear and ignorance, may we give ourselves to your work of healing. We pray this in Jesus' name...Amen.



'Love your neighbor as yourself.'
~ Mt 22:39

I have been told from a young age that we have to treat everyone equally but over time, I have realized that the world looks at the word "equal" in two different ways. Sometimes we see "equal" and we think "same" but we grow up and notice that "equal" means something different when we consider "opportunity" or "end result." For instance, if we look at someone who can walk and someone in a wheelchair, we know that when a building only has steps, these two people do not have equal access to the building. The needs of the person in the wheelchair are ignored. They are not treated equally.

We can expand this metaphor to look at race. If we try to treat everyone the same and seek to be "colorblind," it sounds like we are just following what our parents have taught us from day one. But by ignoring someone's race, we are actually ignoring who they are and any struggles they have gone through because of their race. It is vitally important to treat people equally, but not necessarily to treat everyone the same. It might result in ignoring the individuality of each person.

Question

When have you experienced being treated *unfairly* by being treated exactly the same as everyone else?

Prayer

God, help us challenge the systems in our world that lead to inequity and create systems that provide equality because each person is my neighbor.

"Isolation fuels ignorance, indifference, and fear."

~ Unconscious Racial Bias and the Challenge of Solidarity,
Rev. Bryan Massingale, SJ (YouTube, 2015)

In his talk to students at Holy Cross College, Fr. Massingale begins with a roll of some of the unarmed black men who have been killed by police, security guards and private citizens since Travon Martin's shooting. He explains unconscious racial bias as a malformation in our culture that makes the actions of these shooters seem reasonable. And he calls upon people of faith to reflect on the challenge of solidarity, to go beyond their comfort zone to be their brothers' and sisters' keeper.

In this Advent season, we are trying to open ourselves to God's promise and God's call to us to help be keepers of the promise. Fr. Massingale's message is a challenge to each of us to become aware of our OWN ingrained racism. The chief obstacle to having meaningful conversation across the racial divide in our city, in our country, is isolation. Because our (white) social networks are 91% white, because white people talk to white people, there is very little reality check. Whites cannot identify with the struggle of darker skinned people because we don't interact with them.

Question

After listening to Fr. Massingale's talk, how do you see systemic racism play out in your life?

Prayer

Jesus, you came to show us how to love, how to reach out to those who are suffering in our midst. Lead each of us, Jesus, to search for ways to be our brothers' and sisters' keeper. Amen.

"Until the killing of black mother's son becomes as important to the rest of the country as the killing of white mother's son, we who believe in freedom cannot rest until this happens."

~ Ella Baker 1960's

There is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised,
barbarian, Scythian, slave or free,
but Christ is all, and is in all.

~ Col. 3: 11

My daughter has a close friend at school. Her face appears so often on a variety of different promotional materials for the school that I once asked, "Are you in some club that puts all of this together?" She laughed and said, "No, it's because I'm Belizean. They use my picture to help with their diversity factor." I felt sad. While we know and love her for who she is, she is aware that people view and treat her differently.

The other day, I sent my daughter and her friend into a home improvement store to exchange something for me. As it turned out, I had to go in any way to bring my credit card. As I walked to the back of the store where my daughter and her friend stood, I overheard a salesman on the floor referring to them on his walkie-talkie. He said, "Keep an eye on them, especially the one in the hat (that is, my daughter's Belizean friend)." I didn't say exactly what I overheard, but I asked the two girls, "What were you doing? Security is onto you." My daughter's Belizean friend came right out and said, "They think I will steal something 'cause I have brown skin." Then turning to my daughter, she said, "Sorry, you'll always be watched closely because of me."

She also shared how scared she was to drive to her East End home on the nights of the recent protests, in case she got pulled over. Spending time with my daughter's friend has really opened my eyes to what it's like to be a person of color living in Louisville. Having a different skin color changes the way others think of you.

Question

What is one concrete step I can take this Advent season to acknowledge the inevitable biases I experience and address the assumptions and judgments I make about others?

Prayer

Loving God, may we see and listen to others who are different from us with the intent to learn and truly understand. Be with us as we journey together closer toward your vision of inclusion and unity made possible through the new life of Christ who "is all and in all."

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

~ Letter from the Birmingham Jail, Martin Luther King Jr.

My first visit to the Civil Rights Museum in Birmingham ten years ago was very much an eye-opening experience for me because I learned how Blacks had suffered discrimination due to the color of their skin. It has continued to affect their lives and community in education, health care, economy and so on. As I was going through the museum, I noticed many people have struggled to bring justice, equality and peace in this country. I read many quotes from different Civil Rights leaders and listened to some of the great preachers' videos. The above quote from Martin Luther King Jr. struck me.



During this Advent season, we experience God becoming one among us through Jesus and we await for his coming again. He came to love us and to teach us how to love one another. He came to bring peace, establish justice and bring unity in diversity. Let us make an effort to bring peace and justice in our world and continue the mission that Jesus has entrusted us, "the Mission to Love."

Question

Have I ever experienced discrimination in any place by any people? How did I feel? Have I ever witnessed anyone being discriminated against just because he/she is different? Did I do anything about it?

Prayer

Merciful Father, we thank you for creating us, making each one so precious and unique. Help us to recognize and respect all people as they are and love everyone as you love us. May we join with Dr. King as he echoes the words of the Prophet Amos exclaiming, "No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until 'justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.'" (Amos 5:24) We make this prayer through Christ our Lord. Amen.

A poor choice can become a better choice with thoughtfulness.

A bad day can become a great day with kindness.

I can act with compassion and lend a helping hand.

I can treat others with equality and be fair.

I can choose not to fight but instead to listen and find common ground.

I can say, "I'm sorry," and ask for forgiveness.

I am Human.

One of billions but unique.

~ I Am Human: A Book of Empathy, Susan Verde
Illustrator, Peter H. Reynolds

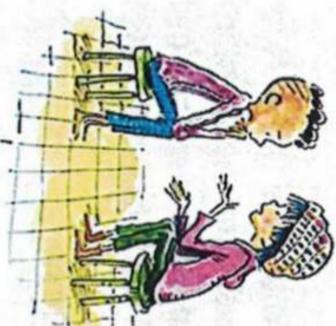
The Kindergarten class of St. Agnes School read and discussed *I Am Human: A Book of Empathy*. The above selection reminded us of the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10: 29-37), a story Jesus told to teach that we should treat everybody as our neighbor. The Samaritan man made the choice of helping a stranger who was badly beaten by robbers and left half-dead by the road. He saw that the wounded man was his neighbor and needed his help. He only considered what they had in common as human beings, not their differences. The story reminds us to seek common ground, by seeing and acting as the Good Samaritan did. Like him, we should treat others with love and understanding, mercy and compassion.

Question

When was a time I did not choose to listen and find common ground? What could I have done differently to reach common ground?

Prayer

Help me to be more like the Good Samaritan and treat others with an open heart. Amen.

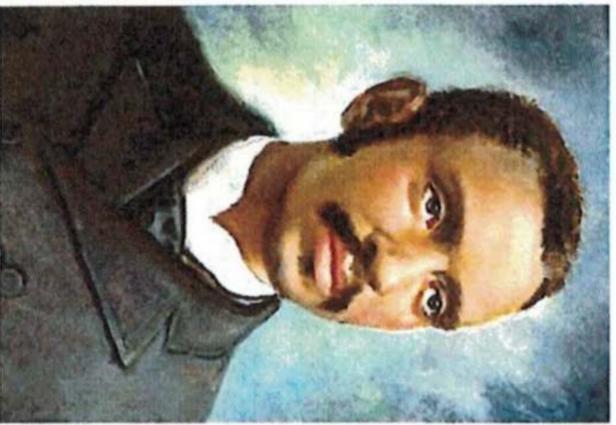


The great Catholic Church...is the only place on this continent where rich and poor, white and black, must drop prejudice at the threshold and go hand in hand to the altar.

The Catholic Church alone can break the color line. There could be no greater factor in solving the race problem than that matchless institution whose history for 1900 years is but a continual triumph over all assailants.

~ Daniel Rudd, *American Catholic Tribune*, first Black-owned and operated national Catholic newspaper

One of the beautiful things about being Catholic is that our Church transcends the divisions of country, nation, and race. Even on the small scale of our



archdiocese, we have members who are rural and urban, English speaking and Spanish. It comprises those born here and born afar, including priests and religious from India, Africa and Asia. This Church is a model of a new country, a new society, a new kingdom that breaks down human barriers, united as we are by one Lord, one spirit, sharing in the Holy Eucharist.

I have been to Masses celebrated in many different languages on four different continents. Each was recognizably Catholic while being distinctively rooted in the culture and people gathered there.

Question

What gave Daniel Rudd such steadfast confidence in the Catholic Church to overcome the structural sin of racism? Do you share his confidence? What special role are you called to play in this process in your home, parish, school or workplace and beyond?

Prayer

Christ Jesus, you broke down the "dividing wall of enmity" between Gentiles and Jews in the early Church. We pray that you will continue to break down the walls of racial divide that we have erected in our day, establishing peace, and reconciling us all in you.

"Then Momma'd look hard in my face, grab a holt of my arms real tight and say, 'And Bud, I want you to always remember, no matter how bad things look to you, no matter how dark the night, when one door closes, don't worry because another door opens.'"

~ Bud, *Not Buddy*, Christopher Paul Curtis

Sixth Graders of St. Agnes school have been discussing *Bud, not Buddy*, a novel set in MI during the Great Depression. It is told from the perspective of Bud, an orphaned ten-year-old African American boy, who sets out in search of his father. His only clue to his father's identity and whereabouts are some flyers his mother left behind advertising Herman E. Calloway and his famous band, the Dusky Devastators of the Depression. During his quest, Bud experiences many dire conditions of the time period, which are especially difficult for a child to bear. He witnesses the pain of homelessness, poverty, hunger, unemployment, and discrimination. Despite it all, he holds fast to the hope of finding a family and a place to belong. Students have been touched by Bud's innocence, courage, determination, humility, compassion, gratitude, and spirit.

Prompted by Bud's story, they call to mind those who struggle similarly today in prayer. Prominent among these are those in need of acceptance and equal treatment because they are different. They have expanded their list to include all those without a voice, those who are afraid, hopeless, isolated, or ill, those who suffer from racism, those whose families are separated, and those who grieve.

Question

Have you experienced a dark time when a door closed, but another one opened? Despite the suffering by so many during the times we live in today, what gives you hope?

Prayer ~ The Memorare

Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary, that never was it known that anyone who fled to thy protection, implored thy help, or sought thine intercession was left unaided. Inspired by this confidence, I fly unto thee, O Virgin of virgins, my mother; to thee do I come, before thee I stand, sinful and sorrowful. O Mother of the Word Incarnate, despise not my petitions, but in thy mercy hear and answer me. Amen.

December 7 * Monday of the Second Week

"God has created all human beings equal in rights, duties and dignity, and has called them to live together as brothers and sisters"...Let us dream, then, as a single human family, as fellow travelers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all."

~ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, #2

Do we accept that we ARE "fellow travelers in the same flesh" regardless of the social myth that we call "race" in this country? There is no specific "race" gene that puts a person in a separate category of humanity. There is no biological rationale for racial divisions and far less for social or economic discrimination based on characteristics of skin color, hair texture, ancestry, or any other attribute or stereotype. We know better than that now.

So what do we do? Pope Francis exhorts us to take action by "...seeking and pursuing the good of others and of the entire human family...helping individuals and societies to mature in the moral values that foster integral human development...Let us return to promoting the good, for ourselves and for the whole human family, and thus advance together towards an authentic and integral growth. Every society needs to ensure that values (of goodness) are passed on; otherwise, what is handed down are selfishness, violence, corruption in its various forms, indifference and, ultimately, a life closed to transcendence and entrenched in individual interests." (*FT*, 112-113)

We are all one flesh and one blood. We can and we must act like it ourselves, and demand it of our family, our friends, our neighborhood, our community, our state, and our nation.

Question

All this sounds nice. Of course it does, and it is. But what does it mean? What does it mean to us in our homes or at work? In our social life or volunteer activities?

Prayer

Gracious God, forgive for the times when we have failed to love and respect each other. Grant us the grace we need to overcome the evil of racism and to build a just society together, brothers and sisters all.

December 16 * Wednesday of the Third Week

"Climate change is a global problem with grave implications: environmental, social and economic ... Many of the poor live in areas particularly affected by phenomena linked to warming."

"Exposure to atmospheric pollutants produces a broad spectrum of health hazards, especially for the poor and causes millions of premature deaths."

"Today, however, we have to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment."

"It needs to be said that, generally speaking, there is little in the way of clear awareness of problems which especially affect the excluded...."

This is due partly to the fact that many professionals, opinion makers, communications media and centers of power, being located in affluent urban areas, are far removed from the poor, with little direct contact with their problems. They live and reason from the comfortable position of a high level of development and a quality of life.... This lack of physical contact and encounter, can lead to a numbing of conscience and to tendentious analyses which neglect parts of reality."

"Disregard for the duty to cultivate and maintain a proper relationship with my neighbor, for whose care and custody I am responsible, ruins my relationship with my own self, with others, with God and with the earth. When all these relationships are neglected, when justice no longer dwells in the land, the Bible tells us that life itself is endangered."

~ *Laudato Si: On Care for our Common Home*, Pope Francis

Pope Francis' encyclical makes clear that issues of justice such as climate change, poverty and health care are all interrelated. Moreover, only an integrated approach, involving personal encounter can resolve them. Failure to do so brings dire consequences.

Question

How might St. Agnes move toward a more integrated approach, involving personal encounter in its quest for racial justice?

Prayer

Creator God, help us to see what truly binds all reality together and grant us the wisdom and imagination needed to bring healing to our wounded world.

"The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of convenience and comfort, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy."

~ Martin Luther King Jr.



As students, we are constantly absorbing information and imitating the behavior of those around us. When I hear students my age make racist or discriminatory comments, I often wonder, "Who taught them to think that way? Who led them to believe that spreading hate would garner attention and popularity? Those questions can be answered by merely observing their role models, whether they be family members, friends, or celebrities on the news. It appears that their role models would rather be comfortable and ignorant than do what is objectively right.

When our brothers and sisters of color are facing injustice and hate, hiding in the shadows of comfort and ignorance is being complacent and irresponsible. As a role model, a parent, or a teacher to children, make it your mission to instill values of respect and justice in those that follow your lead. In our predominantly privileged community, it is easy to avoid the reality of injustice when we do not see or experience its effects and resulting anxiety each and every day. Be a voice for justice and stand up to hate, no matter the circumstances. Young people are watching and learning.

Question

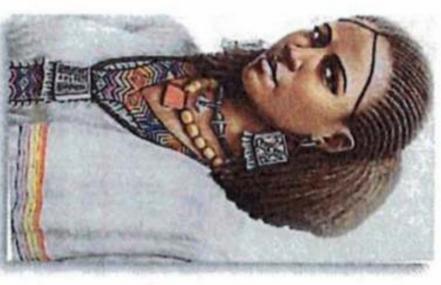
Do I flee to comfort and convenience when I witness injustice? Who is watching and learning from me?

Prayer

Lord, grant me the courage and fortitude to stand up to injustice when I witness it. I recognize that my brothers and sisters face systemic challenges and discrimination. Give me the strength to respond as Christ would when I or others face challenge and controversy. I know it is my responsibility to be a positive role model for those who look up to me. Help me to be a leader and advocate for justice. Let me stand up for those who cannot stand up for themselves.

I am black and beautiful, O daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon.
~ The Song of Songs, 1:5 (trans. from the Greek LXX)

The early Church Fathers believed that the Song of Songs in the Old Testament was a love poem composed by King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba (today's Ethiopia), who was a beautiful woman with black skin. In their allegorical vision, this couple symbolized Jesus and the Church.



As Fr. Cyprian Davis writes, "Solomon is a type of Christ, and just as the queen of Sheba came to Solomon to consult him because he was wise, so the Church comes to Christ who is Wisdom himself. As a result, since the queen of Sheba is black, so must the church be black and beautiful. Her very blackness is a symbol of her universality; all nations are present in her."

In America, having black skin carries a heavy burden. Black men routinely see others cross the street to avoid sharing a sidewalk with them. Police "stop and frisk" teenagers and detain drivers for "driving while Black." In countless subtle ways, Black Americans are told they are less beautiful, less worthy, less human. Yet Scripture tells us that the beloved of Christ is black and beautiful. That we who call ourselves Christian are incorporated into a black body that is the image of universality, completeness, and the unity of all peoples in time and eternity.

Questions

What might it mean for us to picture the beloved of Christ as a black woman? What might it mean for me to imagine myself incorporated into a black, beautiful feminine body? In a Church where our icons of saints, angels and Jesus himself are so often white (even when the people they represent were black or brown), can I begin to reconceive of blackness and identify it with holiness?

Prayer

O God, who dwells in mystery and darkness, we pray with longing for the day when we are brought into one in You and in the body of your Beloved. Help us to see your image in the faces of Your Black children, shining with beauty, holiness, and dignity.

"Looking for the brown people."
~ Sophia

I was sitting in the front of church with my oldest daughter, Sophia, one Sunday morning. She was about four years old and had started kindergarten. As Mass got underway, Sophia kept turning her head around. I finally asked, "What are you doing?" She responded very plainly, "Looking for the brown people."

Sophia's kindergarten class was predominantly ESL students and a rainbow of cultures and skin tones. This was probably her first experience of being with people who did not look or speak like her. Sophia's response felt like a smack across my face because our family, neighborhood, and sports teams are full of people who look like her. I genuinely did not know that she even recognized skin color. She used to call people "the green guy," "the purple girl," "the black woman," or "the pink boy." She referenced people by the color of their shirt.

How did I respond? I honestly was at a loss...and totally embarrassed. I told Sophia not to be rude and that calling attention to the color of someone's skin is impolite like pointing out someone's weight, hair color, or physical limitation. I told her that while she would not find many people who looked different from her in our church, we do have two priests (Indian friars) who are "brown people."

Sophia was hoping to find the diversity of her classroom reflected in our faith community. In reality, our parish is mostly white, mostly older. They are an amazing community and it feels like home for me there. I've been part of Holy Family my entire life, but diversity isn't really there. My response to Sophia was not my proudest moment as a mom. It was our first salient moment of race. I wish I had been better prepared.

Question

When a child notices skin color, why is that a cause of embarrassment or considered impolite? How might parents talk with their children about race in ways that lead to a deeper understanding and appreciation of differences?

Prayer

Spirit of Wisdom, guide parents in teaching their children that people of all races and backgrounds are to be valued and respected equally.

Ms. Albert brought a big bowl into class and filled it with water. We all gathered around her desk and watched her drop a small stone into it. Tiny waves rippled out, away from the stone. "This is what kindness does," Ms. Albert said. "Each little thing we do goes out, like a ripple, into the world."

~ *Each Kindness*, by Jaqueline Woodson



The first graders of Saint Agnes School discussed the picture book, *Each Kindness*. In this story, Chloe eventually comes to regret the way she treated Maya, a new girl who arrives at her school one day in the middle of winter. Chloe and her friends won't play with Maya and even

make fun of her second-hand clothes and shoes. Time and again Maya tries to join Chloe and her friends, but they reject her. Then one day in springtime, Maya does not come to school. The next day, Ms. Albert, Chloe's teacher, gives a lesson about how even small acts of kindness can make a difference in the world. When classmates share examples of the kind acts they have done, Chloe is silent. She can't think of even one. She realizes how unkind she has been to Maya and decides to treat her differently the next time she sees her. Although Chloe watches for Maya day after day and looks forward to Maya's return to school, she learns that Maya is not coming back. Chloe thinks about how much better it could have been if she had shown a little kindness toward Maya.

In class, the first graders talked about kindness and shared ideas of how kind acts cause a ripple. They also considered the way people can look and act differently and why those who are different are often the ones who need love and kindness the most.

Question

Give an example to show how a small act of kindness can ripple outwards to make a big difference in someone's life. Who is someone in need of kindness right now and what can you do this Advent season to spread kindness?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, teach us to welcome and care for all people the way you do, no matter what they look like or what they wear, and help us to always be kind to others.

“God heals the broken hearted, binds up all their wounds; He numbers all the stars; calls them each by name. Great is our Lord and mighty in power: to his wisdom there is no limit.”

~ Psalms 147:3-5

Our Fourth Grade Class at St. Agnes has been reading the novel, *Number the Stars*, by Lois Lowry. This book tells the moving story of a young girl in Denmark during the German occupation of World War II. The story tells of the personal sacrifices Annemarie Johansen, her family, and her neighbors endure. It relates the courage, compassion, and integrity of the Danish people who help their Jewish friends. With determination, the welcoming Danes brought over 7,000 Jews to safety in Sweden where they were free from persecution for their faith.



Throughout her family's ordeal, Anna ponders the above verses from Psalm 147 which explains in part the title of the book. But it also ties in with the Star of David, a symbol of Judaism and conveys a deeper, spiritual meaning. Even though there are millions of stars, God knows each star and calls them by name. Similarly, God knows each human being and calls each one by name. God loves each human being who has ever lived, is living now, or will ever live. This is God's gift to us! This is God's gift to a world longing for "human decency," a longing that people of all countries, creeds and color hunger for still. Such a world is possible.

Question

Do you have any special verses from Scripture (or elsewhere) that bring you comfort or motivate you to overcome seemingly insurmountable odds? How do you nurture a sense of hope that God's dream for the world is possible?

Prayer

Gracious God, as we reflect on Psalm 147, we are reminded of your loving care for fill us with your strength, peace and hope. May these words, inspired by the Holy Spirit, help bring a change in our lives, a change in the lives of those around us and a change in our world.

“The trigger for white rage, inevitably, is black advancement. It is not the mere presence of black people that is the problem; rather, it is blackness with ambition, with drive, with purpose, with aspirations, and with demands for full and equal citizenship. It is blackness that refuses to accept subjugation, to give up.”

~ Carol Anderson, *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide*



WHITE RAGE traces the historic journey of our African American brothers and sisters as they fight for their inalienable rights and freedoms over the past 250 years. Sadly, the brutality and injustice they experienced in the past continues to happen in our communities and institutions today simply because of the color of their skin.

Reading the book, I am constantly questioning, “How can one treat another person so brutally and still continue to go on living as if nothing had happened? How does one justify such inhumane treatment of others?” One incident in the book described how a young, pregnant black woman was killed by hanging. Her child was then cut out of her womb and his head stomped underfoot by the white perpetrators. These same people went home afterwards to their families as though nothing had happened!

This Advent season we prepare our hearts and minds to truly ‘Behold the Promise’ that the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem came to share with all of God’s people, no matter their race, color or creed.

Question

During this Advent season and beyond, what concrete actions can I begin to take to walk with my black sisters and brothers to give them hope and promise?

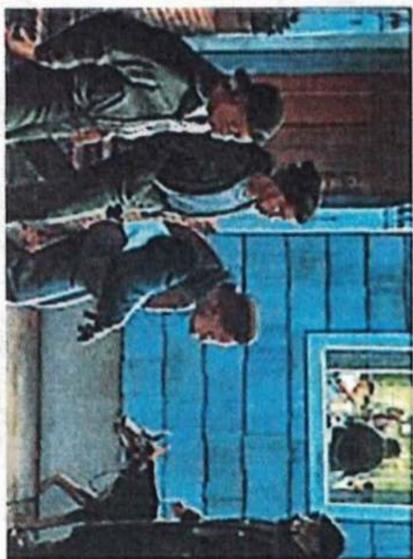
Prayer

God of hope and promise, enlighten our minds and hearts as we prepare to welcome your son, Jesus, into our lives. May we never forget that this promise we behold comes to bring justice and peace to all humankind. Amen.

December 3 * Thursday of the First Week

"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies."

~ Psalm 23:5



The third graders at Saint Agnes School discussed Tim Ladwig's book *Psalm Twenty-three*. Ladwig is an artist, teacher, and Christian minister from Wichita, KS. While working as a teacher, Ladwig came up with the idea for this meaningful book after a discussion with his principal about the need for culturally accurate children's books. His beautiful illustrations, set in a contemporary, urban setting, help bring to life the 23rd Psalm.

New meaning is discovered when the lines of the psalm are placed alongside scenes of two Black children as they move through their day from morning to night. The children wake up in a loving home ("The Lord is my shepherd, I want for nothing."), have fun with their friends ("He makes me lie down in green pastures"), receive devoted attention from their teachers ("He guides me in paths of righteousness") and given a bath by their grandma ("My head is anointed with oil; my cup overflows"). These comforting scenes stand in sharp contrast to those showing the children going to and from school through their neighborhood where shadowy figures wait along crowded streets ("Though I walk the valley of the shadow of death") or gathering with family around their dinner table in the light while just outside their window lies darkness and possible danger (as illustrated above).

Question

How are the pictures above both similar and different to your family's experiences at home? What do these similarities and differences make you wonder?

Prayer

Shepherd God, you care for the needs of all children. May each child grow up surrounded by loving family members and live in security and peace.

December 20 * Fourth Sunday of Advent

"Racism is inextricably bound up with our culture. As we search for our individual identity in life, we become aware very early in that quest that culture has already assigned us a place in society by virtue of where we stand in relationship to the dominant cultural group."

Thus, the sin of racism is seen as social. It is not just the sin of individuals but has become so ingrained in the institutions of society itself that it is a social as well as personal sin.

The ranking which is assigned to you in the "color scheme" also affects your self-image. We are social beings looking for acceptance, and oftentimes your self-image is determined by how you are regarded by others.

For Whites, this passport makes possible full membership in the dominant culture with rights and privileges which flow from that membership. This, in turn, reinforces feelings of positive self-worth.

For People or Color, the image assigned allows for a more restricted membership and access to the same rights and privileges is not automatically guaranteed and sometimes denied. A negative self-image is sometimes reinforced."

"Created in God's Image:

A Pastoral Letter on the Sin of Racism and a Call to Conversion,"
Most Reverend Dale J. Melczek, Bishop Emeritus, Diocese of Gary

Question

Can I think of times when I have resisted dealing with the reality of racism either by denying its existence or being indifferent to any meaningful dialogue concerning it?

Prayer

Let all of us respond to the guidance of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit calls upon each of us to address the sin of racism as found within our own hearts and to summon the courage to face our own insecurities and fears and to be open to Jesus' call to deeper conversion which we receive through Scripture and the teachings of the church.

"Come, all you who are thirsty...."
~ Isaiah 55:1

The stewardship focus for fifth graders at St. Agnes School is the Global Water Crisis. Organizations like World Vision raise awareness regarding the lack of access to quality, clean water for all people on earth. Limited access to clean water disproportionately affects developing countries and poorer communities. Unfortunately, this also means that people of color are disproportionately impacted. For instance, nineteen of the twenty-five countries ranked as having the least sustainable access to clean water are located in Africa.

Closer to home, the predominantly Black residents of Flint, MI carry on the fight for access to clean, safe water. While Flint was once a thriving manufacturing center as the home of General Motors, it suffered a dramatic economic downturn beginning in the 1980s when the company downsized. In 2014, civic leaders decided to build a new pipeline to deliver water from Lake Huron to save money. While the pipeline was under construction, the city turned to the Flint River for water. Soon after the switch, residents reported problems. There were changes in the water's color, smell and taste due to the high levels of lead and iron. To this day, residents still struggle with lawsuits and health effects from contaminated water going into their homes.

Recognizing this disparity of access, we are compelled to respond. Action steps may include: researching more about the Global Water Crisis, donating time or money to foundations committed to providing resources for clean water or prayerfully considering your daily water use.

We recognize as Christian believers that Jesus is the Water of Life. Jesus fills us, nourishes us, and cleanses us from our sins. During this Advent season let us rely on Him in the same way that we rely on physical, clean water.

Question

If you are not experiencing the effects of the water crisis in your home, why should you be concerned about it?

Prayer

Loving God, we ask for your blessings on children, mothers, fathers, and communities who are thirsty. Purify, protect, and multiply their water sources. Strengthen their resolve so they may fully enjoy the benefits of clean water — essentials like education, gardens of fresh produce, and good health.

At the end of a brief phone conversation, you tell the manager you are speaking with that you will come by his office to sign the form. When you arrive and announce yourself, he blurts out, I didn't know you were black!

I didn't mean to say that, he then says.

Aloud, you say.

What? he asks.

You didn't mean to say that aloud.

Your transaction goes swiftly after that.

~ Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*



When Tess Taylor reviewed Rankine's book of prose poetry for National Public Radio, she says, "Rankine's lyrics don't look like poems. They're more like parables." Indeed. And just like some of Jesus' parables, drawn from ordinary, everyday, relatable experiences, they can be provocative, or even painful, because of the truths they uncover (e.g. In what way am I like the brother in the Parable of the Prodigal Father?)

Because I am white, I will never fully see and understand what it means to live as a black citizen in the U.S. today. However, Rankine's creative format provides some measure of access into the many indignities and wounds suffered by blacks that are all too commonplace. Rankine's vignettes motivate me to grow in awareness of my contribution to sustaining racism and to work for change. Causing harm to a black person and simply saying, "It was unintentional" or "I didn't know," just doesn't cut it anymore.

Question

Have you ever experienced a time when you were treated differently from a black person? What did you do with that awareness?

Prayer

Gracious God, may your Spirit grant me the courage to rid myself of whatever fears keep me locked into complacency or ignorance without due regard for the real people who suffer as a result.

December 1 * Tuesday of the First Week

...that is why I swore never to be silent when and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim.

~ Elie Wiesel, Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech for *Night*

Without question the year 2020 has been a difficult one. It honestly feels like we can't catch a break. The troubles just keep piling up: a pandemic, racial unrest, political turmoil, economic hardship, and loss. This summer I realized I had chosen to ignore some fundamental truths about our community because it was easier as a white person not to have to think about racism unless it was in the context of history, literature, or a podcast. It was safer, more comfortable to talk about racism in the past tense, as a parable, or as an exception to the rule. My privilege allowed me to opt for ignorance. I had the luxury to choose when I thought about racism.

Initially, I felt rage, guilt, sadness, and a call to action, but it didn't take long before I eased back into my world of advantage. How many times have I kept silent because I didn't want to offend somebody? How many times have I tweaked my words to appear neutral or apolitical? How many meaningful class discussions or texts have I shelved so as not to be misconstrued as indoctrinating? How many times have I abandoned the oppressed to spare the feelings of the oppressors? Sadly, too many to count.

The effects of this disease will settle as a vaccine becomes available. The election year will come and go. The stock market will stabilize. The racial unrest will fade as it gets less media coverage. As these issues subside in my own privileged life, they continue to rage on in the lives of many. I must now make a new choice, or rather a daily series of choices that requires action on my part and faith in those around me.

Question

What does such action look like? What does *inaction* look like? How can I promote the former and discourage the latter?

Prayer

Lord, please guide us as we dare to embrace the uncomfortable. Give us the strength to recognize the change that needs to happen within us and the fortitude to take action to incite change in the world around us.

December 22 * Tuesday of the Fourth Week

You are white.
Yet a part of me - as I am a part of you.
That's American.

Sometimes perhaps you don't want to be a part of me.
Nor do I want to be a part of you.

But we are - that's true!
As I learn from you, I guess you learn from me -
although you're older - and white - and somewhat more free.

~ Theme for English B, Langston Hughes

I met Robert in 1987 when he was introduced to me as an illiterate adult. At age 27, my prospective pupil wanted desperately to read. Although he graduated from high school, he could not recite the alphabet.



NOT STUPID." He continued by expressing how humiliated he had been, how he suffered as a child while living in a chaotic, abusive environment, how he was unable to concentrate because his mind was scrambled, or that he often went without food. He emerged as a misunderstood student. Robert carried the baggage of lacking support and trust from family, friends or school. He asked me repeatedly, "Why, you a white woman, want to voluntarily teach me, a black man? Why do you care? Do you have confidence I can learn?" As we blended our experiences, and taught one another, Robert reclaimed his dignity as a wise, literate adult and I gained a 30-year friendship.

Question

Could intellectual achievement be reflected by individual circumstances, support, and nurturing? When blacks over-achieve, does this create fear in whites?

Prayer

*Will you love the 'you' you hide - if I but call your name?
Will you quell the fear inside and never be the same?
The Summons, Text: John Bell*

As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ.

~ 1 Cor. 12:12

St. Paul was a man of great vision and love. And one of the most prolific themes in his writings is sometimes, sadly, one of the most overlooked: unity and harmony with one another. The above passage is just one example in a much greater body of work from Paul appealing for unity. Just as Paul's did not shirk his responsibility to affirm the equity of all in his Roman-Palestinian culture for fear of controversy, so it would be a great disservice to our brothers and sisters today if we fail to probe our own cultural biases. In such a pursuit, our faith finds an often neglected and misunderstood ally: science.

Through advancements in gene research, it has been proven that there is but a .1% variation in the genetic code of all humans. Beyond this striking number, geneticists have been making the argument for many years now that collecting and aggregating data in categories of "race" is a flawed system. The idea of race is a social construct; the categorization of genetic data according to ancestry is a scientific one. Yet how much of human history has been a frenzy over that .1% difference? How much hatred turned violence has sharpened that .1% to a symbol of our worst sins?

For those curious about the beautiful field of genetic research (in particular when it comes to ancestral influences), you are urged to seek out more reading and study. God knows with technologies like CRISPR, much of our shared human construction has become less veiled, more understood.

Question

How often do we trade the enormous, life-changing themes and appeals of Scripture for the one, often debated, verse that feeds our biases? Do we view every human life on this planet as worthy of the same service, compassion, equality, justice, and peace that we seek for ourselves?

Prayer

Christ Jesus, just as Paul sought equal dignity for all in a troubled Roman world with earnest focus, let our prayer come before you with a disposition grounded in intentional discovery, dedicated research, and ongoing, open-minded seeking. May we not be blinded to the 99.9% of what matters most.

Why should I feel discouraged / Why should the shadows come /

Why should my heart feel lonely /

And long for heaven and home /

When Jesus is my portion /

A constant friend is He /

His eye is on the sparrow /

And I know He watches over me /

I sing because I'm happy /

I sing because I'm free /

His eye is on the sparrow /

And I know He watches me.



~ "His Eye is On the Sparrow," Civilla D. Martin and Charles H. Gabriel

For several years I was a parishioner at a predominately Black Catholic parish in Oklahoma. Of the many things I loved about this community, the gorgeous music sung by the Gospel choir every Sunday stood out. They sang a range of songs from Negro spirituals to contemporary hymns more familiar in predominately white parishes. My favorite is the hymn above, "His Eye is On the Sparrow."

The house sparrow is one of the most common animals in the world—so familiar and so small that it is easy to ignore. Yet Jesus assures us in the Gospel passage that this song is inspired by that not one sparrow "falls to the ground without your Father's knowledge." How much more so for us? "Even all the hairs of your head are counted. So do not be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows" (Matthew 10:29-31).

The history of Black Catholics has been a story of struggle. And yet, with great faith the choir sings, "Why should I feel discouraged? Why should the shadows come? Jesus is my portion!"

Questions

Have I considered the ways that Black Catholics have enriched the American Church? How might I learn more? Do I share in their faith that the Father's eye is always on me?

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we pray for you to keep watch over us just as you do the sparrow. Keep us from feeling discouraged and dispel the shadows of our doubt.

"...if one really wishes to know how justice is administered in a country, one does not question the policemen, the lawyers, the judges, or the protected members of the middle class. One goes to the unprotected—those, precisely, who need the law's protection the most!—and listen to their testimony. Ask any Mexican, any Puerto Rican, any Black man, any poor person—ask the wretched how they fare in the halls of justice, and then you will know, not whether the country is just, but whether or not it has any love for justice, or any concept of it. It is certain, in any case, that ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have."

~ James Baldwin (1924-1987)

Witnessing the determination of peaceful protestors in Louisville and around the globe this year, it is easy to turn a blind eye to their message. Their message is: awake from our sleep of ignorance in our comfortable beds of power.

The reverberating message of Christ is to break down any structure, any illusion, any rationalization that keeps us ignorant of the needs of our brothers and sisters, especially those on the margins of life. It means constantly questioning what keeps us in a bubble of ignorance.

Question

In a sacred moment of quiet I ask myself: what am I ignoring around me? Who in my neighborhood, my city, my state, my nation, my world am I shunning to maintain my own security and comfort?

Prayer

Dear Brother Jesus, as I await your coming into our broken world on Christmas, let me examine my life in light of the needs of those who are hurting the most. Let me see you in their eyes and respond with love. With your love in my heart, help me to challenge, in the ways you direct me, anything that keeps someone from experiencing justice in education, housing, healthcare, the criminal justice system, employment and support for children. Let me do your work in our broken world.
Amen.



Syrian Refugee, Mother and Child,
~ Credit Catholic Relief Services

Amid widespread expressions of anti-Muslim and anti-refugee bigotry after 2016, the number of refugees from conflict zones admitted to the USA diminished from over 100,000 in 2016 to nearly zero by 2020. Our brown and black brothers and sisters continue to live in squalid refugee camps in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Catholic Relief Services is a major actor in ministering to these refugees, the Rohingya from Burma, Sunni Muslims from Syria, and mostly Christian Africans from war-torn areas in Congo and Rwanda. Many brown and black refugees from places like Nepal and Somalia who have enriched our community in Louisville have been blocked from joining us for reasons which are nothing short of racist.

We can expect that soon the number of refugees admitted to the USA and to Louisville will again begin to grow in number. You are called to join our Refugee Ministry to help them resettle. St. Agnes needs you.

Question

What feelings are evoked in you as you ponder the picture above of a Syrian Refugee Mother and Child?

Prayer

Lord, protect all refugees in their travels
May they find a friend in me
And so make me worthy
Of the refuge I have found in you.

"In every age, no matter how cruel the oppression carried on by those in power, there have been those who struggled for a different world. I believe this is the genius of humankind, the thing that makes us half divine: the fact that some human beings can envision a world that has never existed."

~ Anne Braden (1924-2006), Louisville racial justice activist

Anne Braden was a local white advocate in the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and '60s. She and her husband, Carl, are most famous for purchasing a house in the then exclusively white neighborhood of Shively for a Black couple. Both Bradens were arrested as "Communists" for their act and the house was dynamited after irate neighbors shot it up and burned a cross in the front yard. Anne was not deterred and continued to fight for racial justice the remaining fifty years of her life, founding a newspaper and several antiracist organizations.



Anne provides an excellent example of what it means to be a white ally in the struggle for justice, but this Advent, I would like to highlight the intense message of *hope* in her quote above. Seventy years ago, it was difficult to imagine a world without Jim Crow's legalized segregation and dehumanization of Black Americans. Now, we might feel similar despair about changing the persistently racist institutions of our country. Yet, Anne reminds us that envisioning a world of justice is our particular human genius. It is the spark of God within us calling us to bring forth the Kingdom.

Questions

How might I be an ally in the fight for racial justice? What might a world without racism look like?

Prayer

Dear God, help us to believe in the words of the Civil Rights anthem that "we shall overcome one day." Take away our fear and loneliness and make us all free. Help us to be courageous activists for a better world so that we might help to usher in your Kingdom.

INTRODUCTION

As 2020 draws to a close, historians will note not only the global pandemic, but the widespread social activism and protests against racial injustices both locally and nationwide. Through the initiative of Fred Meirose and under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, a group convened in August, 2020 to address racism as a faith community. Since then, consciousness-raising efforts have been underway among our St. Agnes parish and school community members in Louisville, KY as a first-step measure of our response. This Advent Booklet is part of that overall, ongoing effort.

The season of Advent corresponds well to this endeavor. Advent (meaning "to come") is a time of waiting. But it is not a time of waiting for the birth of Christ, for that has already taken place. Nor is it really a time of waiting for the end of the world. Rather, Advent is a time of hopeful expectation for the appearance of the reign of God. Current events brings a heightened sense of longing for God's dream for our world to become more fully manifest because we are painfully aware that the world is not as God intends it to be.

A case in point is the distressing results of a recent study conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute that investigated racist attitudes among white Christians and compared them to opinions among white Americans who are not affiliated with any church. The results showed that white Christians, both Catholic and mainline Protestants, consistently scored higher in terms of holding more racist attitudes, especially on issues of systemic racism, than those who claim no religious affiliation at all. (*Commonweal*, October, 2020) One cannot help but ask, "How can this be?"

A review of the weekend readings for this Advent season makes clear that, perhaps unlike any other time in the past, we have before us the unique opportunity to awaken and make a change for...

Behold! The Promise...

- ...that reshapes and restores our brokenness.
- ...that brings forth justice and peace.
- ...that accomplishes salvation in surprising, confounding ways.
- ...that transforms oppressive social structures and makes all things possible.

It is hoped that these reflections, questions and prayers will spark "Spirit-filled" conversations as you gather with others over a meal, drive together in the car or share a special night time ritual before bed. May God's promised vision come true. Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus, come.

CONTRIBUTORS

Advent Prayer

O God, Trinity of love,
 from the profound communion of your divine life,
 pour out upon us a torrent of fraternal love.
 Grant us the love reflected in the actions of Jesus,
 in his family of Nazareth,
 and in the early Christian community.

Grant that we Christians may live the Gospel,
 discovering Christ in each human being,
 recognizing him crucified
 in the sufferings of the abandoned
 and forgotten of our world,
 and risen in each brother or sister
 who makes a new start.

Come, Holy Spirit, show us your beauty,
 reflected in all the peoples of the earth,
 so that we may discover anew
 that all are important and all are necessary,
 different faces of the one humanity
 that God so loves.

Amen.

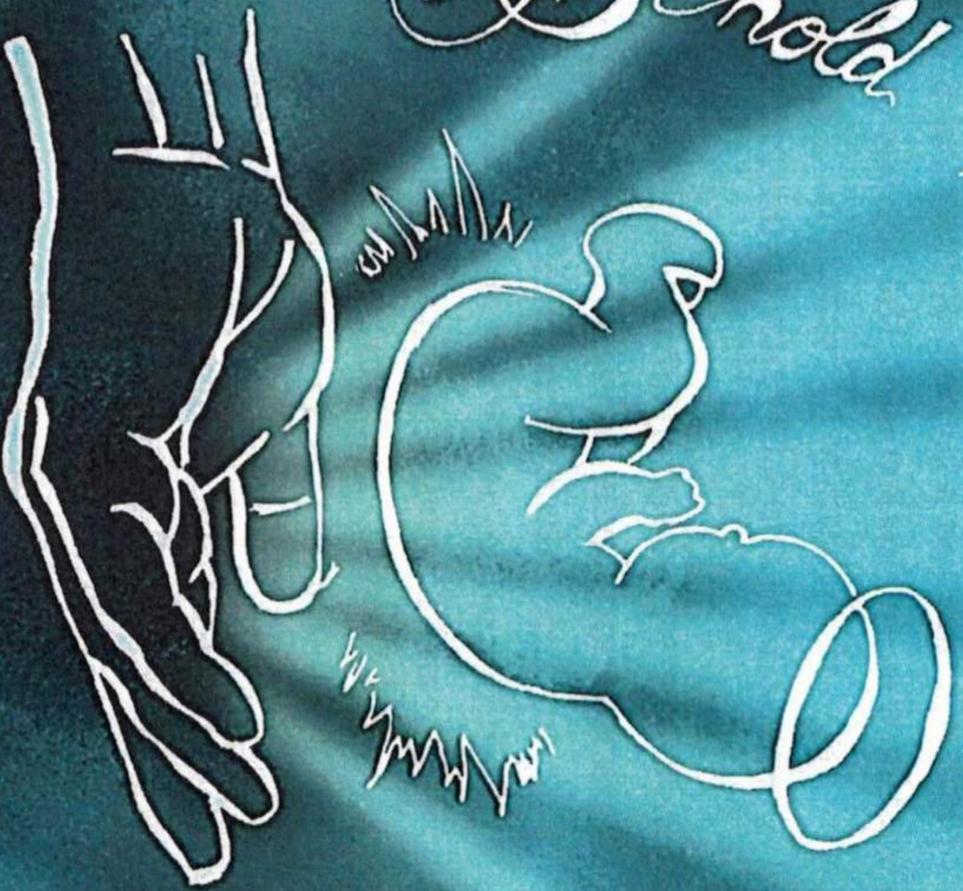


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If you would like to learn more about our parish's efforts
 on behalf of racial justice, please contact:

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*Behold The
Premise*



Advent 2020

Reflections, Questions, and Prayers on
Racial Justice



Saint Agnes
Catholic Community