

COMMUNION ECCLESIOLOGY AND BLACK LIBERATION THEOLOGY

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[The author argues that the focus of both communion ecclesiology and Black liberation theology have as their central theme the unity of the human community. This unity is also an explicit value of traditional African religions. Only recently has the silence and indifference of the U.S. Catholic Church regarding racism been more widely recognized. The Black liberation theology of James Cone has emphasized that the Church as the Body of Christ must exhibit five specific characteristics. These are central to the realization of communion.]

THE INTERNATIONAL BISHOPS' SYNOD of 1985 identified *communio* or *koinonia* as the fundamental idea of the Second Vatican Council. This judgment has promoted a notable emphasis on ecclesial communion in subsequent papal and other magisterial documents. In most instances, this has led to increased emphasis on the internal relationship between the local churches and its members and has led also to stress on communion as the goal for ecumenical and interreligious dialogue.¹ While these discussions are important to a fuller understanding of the mission of the Church, this new emphasis on the Church as communion also provides a term by which to argue its mission to foster the recognition and manifestation of the essential unity of the whole human family.

Here I argue that the central theme of the unity of the human community is the teleological focus of both Black liberation theology and communion ecclesiology. The synodal and papal documents on social justice promulgated following Vatican II were an elaboration of the churches' self-understanding of communion that linked the intraecclesial communion of the Christian churches with the extraecclesial communion of the human community. This unity of the human community is also an explicit central

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¹ Synod of Bishops, "The Final Report," *Origins* 15 (December 19, 1985) 444–50.

value of African traditional religions and the African American religious tradition.

The historical development of the Black Church and Black organizations and conferences within predominantly White churches has been motivated by the desire of Black people to maintain their human dignity and their sense of human equality in the context of a dominant social and ecclesial context previously denied to them. Protestant and Catholic churches compromised Christianity by conforming to the social institutions that embodied a White supremacist ideology and the social patterns of slavery, segregation, and Black servitude. Ecclesial institutions themselves adopted the White supremacist ideology which allowed its members to own slaves, and restricted the participation of its Black members. The emergence of a formal Black liberation theology, within the context of the Civil Rights Movement, provided a theological interpretation of Black people's quest for liberation. It identified and critiqued the structures and patterns of relationships that continued to marginalize, devalue, exploit, and otherwise perpetuate the oppression and dehumanization of Black people in the United States as antithetical to the gospel of Jesus Christ. This theology focused on racism as the root ideology that legitimized the oppression of Black people. In a similar vein, Latin American liberation theology provided a theological interpretation for the class oppression experienced by the poor and marginalized people within Latin America. Both theologies reread the tradition to identify a previously de-emphasized image of the historical Jesus. Jesus is and was the Liberator and God of the oppressed. Many U.S. Catholic social-justice activists, including theologians, engaged Latin American liberation theology and took up the war against poverty and oppression in Latin America. But many of these same activists, blinded by bias, ignored Black liberation theology and the racial oppression identified as a root cause of poverty and oppression within the U.S.

Black liberation theology has called the churches to become a model of the pattern of relationship that it seeks to establish in the world. It challenges all churches to refute the dehumanization of Blacks and all oppressed peoples within their communities as they assist the oppressed in the struggle to obtain full freedom and equality in society. This challenge of Black liberation theology makes clear that the final goal of liberation theology is identical with the ultimate goal of communion. At the 1985 synod the bishops focused on intraecclesial communion, ecumenical communion, and the social challenges facing society. These foci suggest that commitment to justice, peace, and freedom of men and women, and to a new civilization of love, is a fundamental perspective for the Church as communion. Commitment to communion is integrally related to commitment to liberation. Human freedom or liberation is a precondition of ethi-

cal living since persons cannot form an authentic visible community unless they are free.

The new emphasis on communion ecclesiology and Pope John Paul II's call for repentance and conversion provides a new opportunity for the Church in North America to become a living sign of the unity of the human community. Toward this end, the Church in the U.S. must speak the truth of its sinful past, ask and give forgiveness, and commit itself to creating a visible worldwide ecclesial and human communion of reconciling love and solidarity. In this human communion the full humanity, dignity, and equality of Blacks and others who had been historically oppressed peoples will be recognized. In ecclesial communion peoples of all cultures and classes will be recognized as full human beings empowered by the Holy Spirit to be active and primary agents of the Church's mission.

Ecclesial Communion and Human Communion

The human dimension of the Church as communion implicit in the documents of Vatican II was further elaborated in the social justice documents issued by the popes and various bishops' conferences from 1965 to 1975. The goal of communion was the promotion of a worldwide communion within the Church, between the particular churches, between the churches and other religious faiths, and ultimately within the whole human family. Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, argued that God's plan of salvation includes all those who seek to know God, live a good life, and persevere in charity. The document explicitly identified Catholics, other Christians, members of other religious faiths such as Jews and Muslims, as well as those who seek the unknown God, those who do not know the gospel or the Church of Christ, and those who have no explicit knowledge of God. The Church is to preach the gospel "to the ends of the earth."²

The bishops at the council understood that God's universal salvific will implies that no living person is beyond God's will for salvation. Consequently, no living person is beyond the call to live in communion with others. God's plan has made Christ the source of salvation for the whole world. This communion gathers every good found in the hearts, minds, rites, and customs of peoples, purifies and perfects them to glorify God and to ensure the happiness of humanity.³ Clearly, *Lumen gentium* suggests

² *Lumen gentium* no. 1. See also nos. 14–17. I cite from *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, inclusive language ed. (New York: Costello, 1996).

³ *Ibid.* no. 17.

that a central aspect of the Church's mission is to transform the whole world from a situation of disunity based on race, class, nationality, religion, gender, or age to one of unity or communion.

The papal and episcopal documents following Vatican II made more explicit the ultimate goal of the social justice mission of the Church as the realization of human or world communion. Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Populorum progressio* (1967) noted that the social question "tied all human beings together." Catholics must work to address social inequities by "building a human community where men and women can live truly human lives, free from discrimination on account of race, religion or nationality, from servitude to other men or women . . . where liberty is not an idle word . . . where the needy Lazarus can sit down with the rich man at the same banquet table."⁴

Octogesimo adveniens (1971), Paul VI's apostolic letter on the 80th anniversary of *Rerum novarum*, decried the egoism and domination that still characterized some human relationships within an urban industrialized world. The need for greater justice and sharing of responsibility among workers was noted. Attention was focused on the division between youth and adults, men and women, and the need to recognize the place and dignity of marginalized groups such as "the handicapped and the maladjusted, the old, and different groups . . . on the fringe of society."⁵ *Octogesimo adveniens* noted in particular the sufferings of victims legally discriminated against because of "their race, origin, color, culture, sex or religion."⁶

The document of the 1971 Synod of Bishops, *Justice in the World*, strongly underscored that social justice directed both toward the transformation of the world and relationships within the Church were "a constitutive dimension of preaching the gospel."⁷ Acknowledging the continuance of the ancient division between "nations, empires, races, classes" it warned about the intensification of such division due to the development of new technological means of destruction. Economic growth had contributed to the increase of "marginal persons" bereft of food, housing, education, political power, and responsible moral agency.⁸ All of these conditions of injustice require Christians to discover new paths toward justice in the

⁴ Pope Paul VI, "Populorum progressio" no. 47, in *Proclaiming Justice and Peace: Papal Documents from Rerum Novarum through Centisimus Annus*, ed. Michael Walsh and Brian Davies, rev. ed. (Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-Third, 1991) 234. See no. 63 for the pope's extended comment on racism.

⁵ "Octagesimo adveniens" nos. 14–17, in *Proclaiming Justice and Peace* 252–53.

⁶ *Ibid.* no. 16.

⁷ "Justice in the World" nos. 6, 7–8, 40–46, in *Proclaiming Justice and Peace* 270–71, 277–78.

⁸ *Ibid.* nos. 9, 10.

world. Like Jesus, our actions and teachings must unite in an indivisible way, the relationship of men and women to God and to one another. Like Jesus, Christians must be willing to give their total lives for the salvation and liberation of men and women by defending the dignity and fundamental rights of the human person.⁹ Men and women must be able to exercise their freedom of expression and thought both within Church and society.¹⁰

Finally, Paul VI's summary of the 1974 Synod of Bishops, *Evangelii nuntiandi* (1975), echoed the previous documents in identifying social transformation as an essential aspect of evangelization. Through the power of the gospel the Church evangelizes "by upsetting [hu]mankind's criteria of judgement, determining values, points of interests, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life which are in contrast with the word of God and the plan of salvation."¹¹ Most notably *Evangelii nuntiandi* emphasized the "profound link between evangelization, and human advancement—development and liberation—in the anthropological order . . . which touches the very concrete situations of injustice."¹²

This short and incomplete survey of the Catholic Church's teachings on social justice indicates a strong ecclesial tradition that understands its mission as proclaiming the gospel through the twin actions of preaching and embodying Jesus' call to liberation and communion. The social sins of racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, ethnocentrism, imperialism, etc., limit the freedom of some and divide the whole human community. These patterns of oppression contradict the gospel that proclaims the essential unity of all human beings who are made in the image and likeness of God and are called to unity by Jesus' proclamation of the reign of God.

Liberating the Church and society from the interpersonal and socially unjust structures and patterns of relationship that oppress and divide the human community is an essential aspect of evangelization. Those who call themselves disciples of Christ have by their baptism begun a journey of faith that is a gradual process of being liberated from sin and all that oppresses. By the power of the Spirit acting in and through us we are enabled to cease participation in oppressive patterns of relationship and to enter into full communion with God, one another, and all creation.¹³

Black and Womanist Liberation Theologies

The social justice mission of the Catholic Church elaborated in its document are in harmony with the social justice mission as articulated by Black

⁹ Ibid. nos. 31, 37, 39.

¹⁰ Ibid. no. 44.

¹¹ "Evangelii nuntiandi" no. 19 in *Proclaiming Justice and Peace* 292–93.

¹² Ibid. no. 31.

¹³ Ibid. That liberation from sin and all that oppresses (social systems) is an integral part of evangelization is noted in no. 9 and carefully nuanced in nos. 29–36.

and Womanist liberation theologies. The distinguishing focus of Black and Womanist theologies is the insistence that this mission needs to include the particular experience of Black people. These theologies also focus on the realities that divide the human community but place emphasis on those root dynamics at the heart of Black alienation and oppression within society, namely the social sins of racism, sexism, and classism. Both the social justice mission at the heart of the Church and the social justice mission at the heart of Black and Womanist theologies is ultimately directed toward liberation, the overcoming of the oppression of human division, and communion, the visible realization of full human communion.

Traditional African and African American Religious Value of Community

The emphasis on communion, the communion of churches and peoples rooted in the presence of the Holy Spirit, has been a source of hope for those of us who recognize in this emphasis a continuity between traditional African and African American religious values that are the foundations of Black theology. The term of this continuity is a central value that characterizes African and African American religious tradition namely belonging to a community. John Mbiti, the African philosopher, has noted:

[T]raditional religions are not primarily for the individual, but for the community of which he is part. Chapters of African religion are written everywhere in the life of the community, and in the traditional society, there are no irreligious people. To be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of that community. A person cannot detach themselves from the religion of his group for to do so is to be severed from one's roots, one's foundation, one's context of security, one's kinships and the entire group of those who make a person aware of their own existence. . . . To be without religion amounts to a self-excommunication from the entire life of the society, and African peoples do not know how to exist without religion.¹⁴

The African thirst for "community" was not destroyed but strengthened through the ordeal of the Middle Passage. Our African ancestors longed for the intimacy and comfort of the family, kin, and clan. To meet this need, they forged an extended family as well as a new culture from the diverse African cultures that were fused during slavery. Peter Paris reminds us that when African American slaves and their descendents referred to themselves using the terms African, Negro, and Colored, they were reconstituting themselves into a new tribal unity or community. Through this

¹⁴ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd rev. ed. (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1990, orig. ed. 1969) 3. For a more extended discussion of African and Black American continuity in values, see also Jamie T. Phelps, "Black Spirituality," in *Taking Down Our Harps Black Catholic in the United States*, ed. Diana L. Hayes and Cyprian Davis (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1998) 179–98.

community they sought to preserve their dignity and self-respect, even though the same terms were used by the dominant culture to denigrate, divide, and oppress Africans. They therefore adhered to “the primary goal of African moral life [which was] the preservation and enhancement of the community. . . .” When the “slave appropriated the formal features of their slave holders’ Christianity, with respect to ritual practices, language and symbols, they invested each of them with new meanings. . . . [Community remained] the paramount moral and religious value among African peoples.”¹⁵

The concept “Black community” became the metaphor for the community understood as an extended family that was not restricted to blood-relatives but embraced neighbors and friends. The use of family appellations such as brother, sister, uncle, aunt, and cousin to refer to playmates, family friends, and neighbors, common in African communities, persisted among succeeding generations of African Americans.¹⁶

King and Thurman

The writings of two of the most prolific activist theologians and spiritual leaders born and initially nurtured in the Black community during the 20th century were Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr. Their writings emphasize the continued centrality of community in the African American religious ethical tradition and the integral relationship of love, justice, and community within that tradition. Katie Cannon has correctly observed that “for both Thurman and King everything moves toward community.”¹⁷ Although each offered distinct interpretations and application of the concepts of *imago Dei*, love, and justice, both argued that love and justice are to be ordered toward community. Both insisted that all men and women, including Black men and women, were made in the image and likeness of God who is the source and means of the inter-relatedness of all human beings. Luther Smith has summarized the essence of Thurman’s theological ethics as follows:

Thurman’s greatest legacy may be his vision of inclusive community: a community based on reconciliation, which recognizes and celebrates the underlying unity of life and the inter-dependence of all life forms. Justice and a sense of innate equality are ruling principles for community, and love-ethic established and maintains the community’s creative character. Person identity is affirmed while unity is sought with one’s fellows. Thurman’s inclusive community harbors all races, classes, faith claims and ethnic groups, for in the eyes of God, every human being is His beloved child.

¹⁵ Peter Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples: The Search for a Common Moral Discourse* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 63, 64, 72.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 89.

¹⁷ Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988) 168.

Difference among people are not ignored or depreciated, though their importance does not overshadow the bond of kinship between individuals. And because of this bond, difference can be appreciated rather than feared, for the variety of truth perspective they bring to understanding. In cultural pluralism persons come to know the many faces of God, and what God is doing in diverse ways. Hopefully, this will give individuals a proper sense of self and neighbor such that one does not fall into destructive righteousness, inclusive community confirms what Thurman understands as God's will for human relationships.¹⁸

As Cannon also observed, Thurman held that "mystical experience, love and community relatedness are part of the same continuum. Inclusive community is nonspatial. It is qualitative."¹⁹

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s leadership in the Civil Rights Movement, although public, was never essentially political; rather, it was a theological and ethical movement grounded in a notion of community quite similar to that of Thurman. King's dream of the future for America and the world was expressed in his concept of "the beloved community," his metaphor for the achievement of a qualitatively inclusive community. King's creative activism involved three basic strategic principles "assessing the character and logistics of the situation; naming the primary evil to be dramatized; and identifying the meaning of non-cooperation with evil."²⁰ King was outlining strategic principles for the achievement of political and civil rights, but the purpose of that achievement was ultimately the establishment of an inclusive human community rooted in the Judeo-Christian love ethic. King once noted: "It is true that as we struggle for freedom in America, we will have to boycott at times. But we must remember . . . that a boycott is not an end in itself . . . the end is reconciliation, the end is redemption, the end is the creation of the beloved community."²¹

The writings of both Thurman and King are precursors of the liberation theology that would emerge in the late 1960s. Their speech, writings, and actions demonstrate the integral relatedness of liberation and communion. Both initially struggled for the liberation of oppressed Black people within the U.S. Both eventually expanded their concerns to include all oppressed people and their oppressors as their analysis and vision took on global dimensions.

Church Disunity: The Racial Divide

The Black struggle for liberation and community within Church and society has an interrelated history. Both the Protestant and Roman Catholic churches in the U.S. compromised their authentic Christian identity by

¹⁸ Luther Smith, as quoted in Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* 169.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid. 173.

²¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., as quoted in Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* 173.

imitating within their own structures the same racial division characteristic of the surrounding society. Black members were subjected to the same segregation, marginalization, and devaluation within the Church as they were accorded in society. The churches uncritically adopted the prevailing racist ideology and relegated the Christian principle of the unity of humankind exclusively to the spiritual realm. Historically, White supremacist ideology and an uncritical ethnocentrism led to the relegation of Blacks to the back pews of White churches.²² The separation of the Protestant churches on the basis of racial discrimination or the relegation of Blacks, both rich and poor, to the invisible margins within Roman Catholic and other “predominantly White” congregations or denominations was and is common.

African Americans responded creatively and constructively to their oppressive marginalization. Excluded from community within slaveholding congregations or denominations, separate Black Protestant denominations began to be established in 1750.²³ The first Black Protestant denominations arose out of the desire of Blacks to overcome the structural oppression of the White “Christian” churches whose social and religious practices denied the full humanity of its Black members and thus their identity as person made in the image of God.²⁴ In separate churches, Black Protestants were able to nurture and sustain their God-given identity, dignity, and culture as well as to experience community as a spiritual and visible reality. The use of the adjective “African” suggests that these separate Black Protestant churches sought to adhere to the cultural value of community within their new churches in a manner that characterize their African ancestors *and* the authentic Christian tradition.

Black Catholics, in their attempts to hold fast to the Christian tradition of class and racial inclusion (Galatians 3:28), initially resisted the formation of separate parishes. They chose to establish “colored Catholic” organizations and fraternities. These groups focused on three activities simultaneously. First, they provided the spiritual nurture and affirmation of their full humanity and dignity denied to them in mixed congregations. Secondly, they combated the mistreatment of Blacks within Church and society. Finally, they struggled for inclusion by active participation within the mission and ministries of the Church as religious women, ordained men, and active laity.²⁵ During the first three-quarters of the 19th-century Black women were not accepted into congregations of religious women. Black

²² Ibid. 78.

²³ Melva Wilson Costen, *African American Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993) 78; for a listing of separate Black Protestant congregations and denominations founded between the years 1758 and 1908, see 83–86.

²⁴ See Carol V.R. George, *Segregated Sabbaths: Richard Allen and the Emergence of Independent Black Churches, 1760–1840* (New York: Oxford University, 1973).

²⁵ See *Three Catholic Afro-American Congresses* [reprint] (New York: Arno,

men were not admitted to seminaries in the U.S., and Black lay persons had to struggle to have their voices heard. The establishment of separate religious congregations for Black woman in 1829 and 1842 was the official beginning of Blacks engaging in the mission of the Church within the U.S. Catholic Church.²⁶ The first “Black priests” in the Catholic Church in the U.S. were three sons born to Michael Morris Healey and his slave mistress. The eldest, James Augustine Healey was ordained in 1854. Because of their mixed ancestry, many did not recognize the Healey priests as Blacks. Augustus Tolton, the first *recognized* Black priest was born in 1854 and ordained in 1886.²⁷ The emergence of vocal laity is documented by the record of the Black Catholic Congresses initiated by Daniel Rudd in 1888.²⁸ Prior and during the emergence of Black ordained, religious, and lay leadership, White bishops, priests, and sisters and several congregations of men and women religious committed themselves to ministry among Black Americans.²⁹

Most of the attention of the Catholic Church during the 19th and early-

1978; orig. ed. 1893). These 19th-century lay congresses sought to combat the impact of racial prejudice on Blacks within the Church. In addition they provided a space where Blacks could act as agents of their own mission and evangelization in collaboration with White priests, religious women and men, and others engaged in Catholic ministry among Blacks. See also Jamie T. Phelps, “John R. Slattery’s Missionary Strategies,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 7 (Spring 1988) 202–5. Black Catholics often argued against separate churches since these accommodated racial prejudice rather than combating it. Slattery argued for separate churches for Blacks.

²⁶ Cyprian Davis, *The History of Black Catholics* (New York: Crossroad, 1990) 98–115. The first congregation of women religious was a failed attempt started in Kentucky in 1824. Five years later in 1829 four women took vows as the first members of the Oblate Sisters of Providence founded by a French refugee priest from Haiti and four Haitian women. The Sisters of the Holy Family were founded in New Orleans in 1842.

²⁷ Cyprian Davis’s work just cited is the most succinct record of this history. For an excellent account of the ordeal of admitting Black men to priesthood in the U.S., see Stephen J. Ochs, *Desegregating the Altar: The Josephites and the Struggle for Black Priests, 1871–1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1990).

²⁸ See *Three Catholic Afro-American Congresses* and Davis, *History of Black Catholics* 163–94.

²⁹ Davis, *History of Black Catholics* 28–56. While the history of this ministry has not been fully documented the presence of Black Catholics in the U.S. dates back to 1536 and the population of Black Catholics in the Spanish, French, and English colonies was notable. Many of these Catholics were slaves. In a letter written by Bishop John Carroll in 1785, he noted that of the 16,000 Catholics in Maryland about 3,000 of them were Negro slaves from Africa. See Jamie T. Phelps, “The Mission Ecclesiology of John R. Slattery: A Study of an African American Mission of the Catholic Church in the Nineteenth Century” (Ph.D. diss., Catholic University of America, 1989) 368. The first parish committed to the mission of the Catholic Church to Blacks was St. Francis Xavier, founded by the Jesuits in Baltimore.

20th century focused on issues facing immigrant Catholics. The majority of church leadership and members remained neutral or silent about the social and moral evil of slavery as well as the subsequent segregation, subjugation, lynching, and other forms of social violence that victimized Black people in America. Catholics considered these practices as social rather than moral issues. Hence the actions were not judged as a proper concern of official church decision-making bodies.³⁰ While there were notable exceptions, all too many ethnic European Catholics conformed to the ethos that perceived Negroes and Blacks to be inferior and marginalized.³¹

John Richard Slattery (1851–1926), the second superior of the Josephites, was one of the 19th-century missionaries working in ministry among Blacks within the U.S. Catholic Church. He struggled to found a seminary open to Black seminarians. During the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore (1884) he submitted a proposal advocating the creation of separate churches for “Negroes” because interracial congregations tended to neglect Blacks. Slattery wrote:

It is admitted generally that if the Negroes who have been baptized Catholics are to be kept in the Faith, and if the non-Catholic [Negroes] are ever to be brought into the Church, it must be under God’s blessings, by priests. [These priests must be] willing to devote themselves exclusively to the colored people of their parish with the same care which they bestow on the White members of their congregations. Yet now . . . the colored people of their flock gradually diminish in number, while their attendance usually grows in number when chapels are set apart for their exclusive use.³²

Oppressive patterns of segregation, marginalization, Black servitude, and

³⁰ Catholic bishops during the 19th century were divided over the question of slavery and the inclusion of slaves in the ministry of the Church. Some supported slavery and others condemned it. Some Catholics made provision for ministry to the slaves while others were preoccupied with the demands of the immigrant population. At the Second Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1866 the question of the emancipated slaves was delayed until after the official closing so that the record of the discussion is not contained in the official *Acta et decreta*. The *Josephine Newsletter* for November, December, and January containing the English translation of the post-council discussion and the original Latin text are located in the Archdiocese of Baltimore Archives: AAB9A-D4 and AAB 39A-D4. For a detailed and nuanced summary of this issues, see Jamie T. Phelps, “Caught between Thunder and Lightning: An Historical and Theological Critique of the Episcopal Response to Slavery,” in *Many Rains Ago: A Historical and Theological Reflection on the Role of the Episcopate in the Evangelization of African American Catholics*, ed. Secretariat for Black Catholics, National Council of Catholic Bishops (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1990) 21–34.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Josephite Archives (henceforth JFA), 3-H-13; JFA: Copybook 3 (henceforth CB-3). This citation is from Slattery’s original proposal that describes a system of “large centers whence missionaries might radiate to a distance of, say 200 miles.”

racism rooted in a White supremacist ideology tear at the very heart of the central meaning of Jesus' universal call to salvation. They violate the essential meaning of the concept of communion and distort the meaning of Jesus' mission and that of the Church. The resistance to accept Black men and women in the seminaries and religious congregations denied the call of Black people to act as subjects, that is as evangelizers and mediators of peace and justice in the Church and society. The call of Black men and women to discipleship and participation in the liberating mission of Jesus and the Church was and is often muted and strained by racist resistance to the presence of Blacks within all strata of the Church and society. The past and present exclusion of Black men and women from ministerial roles within the Church is a denial of their equality and full humanity. While today there are many, though not enough, Black Catholic priests, religious women and men, deacons and an increasing number of Black Catholic lay ecclesial ministers, the assumption of Black intellectual or moral inferiority still clouds their full acceptance and integration within the Catholic ministerial community. Often they are marginalized within the broader Catholic community and denied legitimate inclusion as full participants in the ministerial and hierarchical priesthood and the common priesthood of the faithful.³³ Marginalization and denial militates against an effective increase of Black Catholics engaged in full time church ministry and Black Catholic evangelization. The universal aspect of Jesus' proclamation and saving actions as well as the nature of the Church as a universal sacrament of salvation are abrogated. That the Church is a locus of revelatory communion of the human community with one another and all creation with God was and is often suppressed or ignored in discussions of the Catholic Church's presence in the Black community.³⁴

The tragic history of racism within the Catholic parishes of the urban North during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s is documented by John T. McGreevey's research. A misguided ethnocentrism became the springboard for the overt racist rejection of Blacks and other non-White people within Northern Catholic parishes. The efforts of White Catholic leaders like John LaFarge and Daniel Cantwell of the Catholic Interracial Councils to struggle against racism within the Church were overshadowed by daily encounters in local parishes.³⁵ In the case of the Archdiocese of Chicago,

For details of the early efforts of evangelization of Blacks in the U.S. Catholic Church, see Jamie T. Phelps "The Mission Ecclesiology of John R. Slattery" 273.

³³ *Lumen gentium* no. 10.

³⁴ Economic rather than theological considerations seem to be more prominent in such discussions.

³⁵ John T. McGreevey, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996). This

misled by their pastor's affirmation and insistence that segregation was not wrong, many parishioners of European ethnic heritage resisted the admission of African American Catholics to their parishes and schools.³⁶ The movement of one single family into an ethnic Catholic neighborhood or parish was often cause for protest. In one such crowd one Catholic man was heard to say, "I don't want those jigs sitting in the same pew with me!" while a 17-year-old quickly responded that "those niggers don't join the Church anyhow."³⁷ The phenomenon of the "changing parishes" and migration of European ethnic Catholics to the suburbs seemed to have been fueled both by a complex mixture of ethnocentrism, the desire for economic prosperity, and racism. Still, courageously, some ethnic European Catholic clergy and religious condemned the "middle class materialism" that attempted to "justify segregation by saying that it produces peace and harmony by keeping separate people who would otherwise be in conflict."³⁸ During the social transformation, which occurred during the Civil Rights Movement, many ethnic European Catholics were blinded by their fear and their desire for security and economic stability. Many turned deaf ears to the cries for justice from their Black Catholic and Protestant brothers and sisters and to the Catholic social teachings that condemned segregation and racism. Too many Catholic men and women failed to respond to the vision of an inclusive community and the call to be in right relationship with one's neighbor that was central to Jesus' proclamation of the Good News illustrated through the Parable of the Good Samaritan. They took flight to the suburbs abandoning the possibility of truly integrated churches and neighborhoods. Blacks were not seen as neighbors nor as brothers and sisters created by a common God and made in the divine image. Blacks were perceived as enemies who were to be feared and despised rather than loved.

excellent history chronicles the perspective of White Catholics. It does not however reflect the involvement of Black Catholics as subjects in the struggle against racism nor does it discuss the Black Catholic organizations who struggled against racial segregation and racism. For this perspective see Cyprian Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States*, and *Black and Catholic: The Challenge and Gift of Black Folk*, ed. Jamie T. Phelps (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 1997). For additional information on the Church and reflection see, Jamie T. Phelps, "Racism and the Church: An Inquiry into the Contradictions between Experience, Doctrine and Theological Inquiry," in *Black Faith and Public Talk: Critical Essays on James H. Cone's Black Theology and Black Power*, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1999) 53–76. For reflection on environmental racism see, Bryan Massingale, "The Case for Catholic Support" in *Taking Down our Harps* 147–62.

³⁶ For data on select Chicago parishes during the 1940s, see McGreevey, *Parish Boundaries* 89–93.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 97.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

Breaking the Silence: Black Theology of Liberation

Until 1958, most U.S. Catholic bishops were silent and appeared indifferent to racism.³⁹ Even when some bishops took public stances against racist behavior,⁴⁰ the majority of Catholic theologians and lay people persisted in their silence. Martin Luther King, Jr., as theologian and pastor, was the first prophetic voice that effectively challenged the Christian churches and the U.S. to confront their complicity with racial injustice. King galvanized the prophetic *anawim*. Black Christian clergy and laity and attentive and committed White and Black members of predominately White churches, including Catholics, began to protest the racism that divided both Church and society. King welcomed all who were prepared to march and protest as a necessary prelude to the realization of his vision of the world as the beloved community.

Inspired by the Civil Rights Movement, James Cone attempted to confront the silent complicity of Christian theologians and the churches in the continued perpetuation of racism. His initial work called for a profound paradigm shift in theology as well as within ecclesial structures and social patterns of relationship. Such a shift required an examination of the limits of the prevailing interpretations of Christology and ecclesiology that had legitimized ecclesial and social "American Apartheid."⁴¹

The formal articulation of liberation theology emerged almost simultaneously on the North and South American continents in the writings of James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969) and shortly thereafter in his *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), as well as in the volume of Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (1971).⁴² Interestingly,

³⁹ See *Many Rains Ago* passim.

⁴⁰ Fortunately this silence was broken by the U.S. Catholic Bishops in their issuance of a series of letters beginning in 1958 addressing racism. In 1979 the U.S. Catholic Bishops issued a pastoral letter *Brothers and Sisters to Us* (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1979). The pastoral was encouraged by the Black Catholic community; its actual writing and development was shepherded by Bishop Joseph Francis, S.V.D. Later the Vatican's Pontifical Commission Iustitia et Pax issued *The Church and Racism: Toward a More Fraternal Society* (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1988).

⁴¹ Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1993). This text provides a historical and sociological examination of how the Black ghetto was created by Whites during the first half of the 20th century in order to isolate the growing urban Black population. This systemic segregation continues today to perpetuate Black economic poverty.

⁴² Unfortunately many Catholic theological texts and essays ignore this reality and make no mention of Black liberation theology, exploring Latin American liberation theology exclusively. Collections or summaries of modern theology and theologians published by Catholic publishers sometimes omit the category of Black

both these expressions of liberation theology began by challenging the interpretations about Jesus and the Church in the prevailing theologies of the period. Thus, each theologian took up his own “quest for the historical Jesus.” Cone and Gutiérrez began to reread the Bible and theological traditions from the perspective of the oppressed. Cone gave emphasis to the plight of oppressed Blacks in the U.S., Gutiérrez focused on the oppressed indigenous peoples in Latin America. Both discovered a Jesus who did not condone slavery or the devaluation and dehumanization of human beings. Both discovered a Jesus who was God of the oppressed, a Liberator.

In their search for the full meaning of the Bible and Christ for those whose existence is characterized by oppression, both Cone and Gutiérrez touched and embraced the profound mystery of Jesus’ sojourn on earth. Both identified Jesus as the heart of Christian life and the gospel. For Cone, Jesus Christ is the essence of the Gospel.⁴³ For Gutiérrez, Jesus Christ is the center of God’s salvific design.⁴⁴ For Cone, “Jesus is the Oppressed One whose task is that of liberating humanity from inhumanity. Through him the oppressed are set free, to be what they are.”⁴⁵ For Gutiérrez, “[t]he work of Christ . . . a new creation . . . is presented simultaneously as a liberation from sin and from all its consequences; despoliation, injustice and hatred.”⁴⁶ Both acknowledged Jesus’ option for the poor. “He was” declared Cone, “for the poor and against the rich, for the weak and against the strong.”⁴⁷ Gutiérrez wrote: “Jesus accompanied this criticism with a head-on opposition to the rich and powerful and a radical option for the poor.”⁴⁸

Both theologians see contemporary liberation movements as a central aspect of the mission and meaning of Jesus Christ. According to Cone: “The life, death and resurrection of Jesus reveal that he is the man for others, disclosing to them what is necessary for their liberation from op-

liberation theology as well as the names of James Cone and other Black and Womanist Protestant theologians.

⁴³ James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1986, orig. ed. 1970) 119–23.

⁴⁴ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988; orig. English ed., 1973) 151.

⁴⁵ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* 117.

⁴⁶ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* 158.

⁴⁷ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* 120.

⁴⁸ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* 228. Cone and Gutiérrez differ in their attitudes toward the rich. While both see the rich as the object of Jesus criticism, Gutiérrez sees the condemnation of the actions of the rich not as being against them but rather as an invitation to conversion. I agree with Gutiérrez’s approach since this is consistent with the concepts of Jesus as a universal Savior who calls rich and poor alike to salvation and liberation.

pression. If this is true, then Christ must be black with black people so they can know that their liberation is His liberation.”⁴⁹ Similarly, Gutiérrez insists: “All the dynamism of the cosmos and of human history [is] the movement towards creation of a more just and fraternal world. The overcoming of social inequalities among men, the efforts so urgently needed on our continent, to liberate man from all that depersonalizes him, physical and moral misery, ignorance and hunger, as well as the awareness of human dignity . . . all these originate and are transformed and reach their perfection in the saving work of Christ.”⁵⁰

Both Cone and Gutiérrez see the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ as the central mystery of Christian life, a mystery that calls for the profound and salvific transformation of the oppressed from their stated of dehumanized oppression to a new creature as human beings. Cone writes: “His death is the revelation of the freedom of God, taking upon himself the totality of human oppression; his resurrection is the disclosure that God is not defeated by oppression but is transforms it into the possibility of freedom.”⁵¹ Gutiérrez affirms that “the center of God’s salvific design is Jesus Christ who by his death and resurrection transforms the universe and makes it possible for man to reach fulfillment as a human being. . . . The redemptive action of Christ, the foundation of all that exists, is also conceived as recreation.”⁵²

Although the Christological perspective of both these theological pioneers is analogous, their work was received differently in the U.S. Catholic theological community. In the earliest reviews of their work only two Catholic critics engaged their texts. The reviewer in the *Journal of Religious Thought* addressed Cone’s second book, *A Black Theology of Liberation* and identified Cone’s approach as extreme. The reviewer correctly asserted however the necessity of an authentic Black theology to be rooted in the indigenous art and thought forms found in the Black community but failed to acknowledge Cone’s social location as an authenticating source for his views. Using loaded rhetorical phrases such as “the simplistic nature of his analysis,” the reviewer seems to challenge his intelligence and his authenticity. Indeed, the reviewer comes perilously close to personal attack in concluding: “such a ‘Black theology’ . . . [b]ecomes possible only when a Negro intelligentsia has arisen [and has] become alienated from the living

⁴⁹ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* 120.

⁵⁰ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* 178.

⁵¹ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* 118.

⁵² Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* 151 and 158. As I reread these texts almost 30 years later, the continuity and distinctions in the work of these two theologians is more apparent to me. Both insist that Christian salvation is intimately connected with our historical liberation. Cone’s work is anthropocentric whereas Gutiérrez’s work is creation centered.

context of the black community.”⁵³ On the other hand, the reviewer of Gutiérrez’s *Theology of Liberation* in the Jesuit weekly *America* applauded his attempt “to explore the relation between the redemptive work of Christ, of the Church, and movements for liberation of men from oppressive and dehumanizing conditions.”⁵⁴

Catholics’ Silence: The Black Experience and Black Liberation Theology

Cone has challenged Catholics who are concerned about justice regarding their indifference and silence on racism and their lack of knowledge about Black history and culture. He has been equally critical about their lack of interest in Black theology.⁵⁵ The majority of ethnic European American Catholic theologians men and women have failed to engage the Black liberation theology that emerged over 30 years ago in the U.S. Even many of the theology departments and seminaries that teach other forms of liberation theology, such as Latin American, Feminist, Latino/Latina, African omit U.S. Black theology of liberation from their curricula and syllabi. Cone noted many years ago that this omission of the Black experience suggests that “the black experience is not and has never been regarded as essential to the life and work of the church.”⁵⁶ The silence of most Catholic theologians on the issue of racism and the U.S. Black theology of liberation, in contrast to the number of Catholic theologians who engage and teach the theology of Gutiérrez and other liberation theologians in Latin America speaks volumes.⁵⁷

The papal letters that I cited earlier in this article as well as several individual and collective letters by U.S. Catholic Bishops from 1958 on-

⁵³ Rosemary Ruether, “Review of *A Black Theology of Liberation* by James Cone, *Journal of Religious Thought* 28 (Spring-Summer, 1971) 75–77.

⁵⁴ Joseph A. Komonchak, “Review of *A Theology of Liberation: History and Politics of Salvation*, by Gustavo Gutiérrez, *America* 128 (March 31, 1973) 291.

⁵⁵ James A. Cone, “A Theological Challenge to the American Catholic Church,” in *Speaking the Truth: Ecumenism, Liberation and Black Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 50–60; and “White Theology Revisited,” in *Risks of Faith: The Emergence of Black Theology of Liberation, 1968–1998* (Boston: Beacon, 1999) 130–37.

⁵⁶ Cone, *Speaking the Truth* 57.

⁵⁷ One must balance this dismal portrait with the seeds of hope seen in the steady and relatively large number of Catholic theologians who participate in the annual session of the Black Theology Group of the Catholic Theological Society of America. Some have attended these sessions faithfully for years and each year one sees new faces of colleagues taking seriously the need to engage the theological thought arising from the perspective of the Black experience. This special issue of *Theological Studies* honoring the work of James Cone is the fruit of Euro-American Catholic theologians engaging their Black Catholic colleagues at a session of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium at Marquette University held recently.

wards clearly identify racism as a social and moral evil or sin.⁵⁸ Bryan Massingale in his contribution to this present volume looks closely at the publications of the U.S. Catholic bishops in the light of Cone's writings. But how does one explain the collective and loud silence of American Catholic theologians? The annual proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America from 1946 to 1972 produced only two references to race as a moral issue. Even the "Notes on Moral Theology" published from 1940 to 1993 in *Theological Studies* produced similarly meager results. This silence is astonishing in a country in which the "Negro problem" dominated the first-quarter of the 20th century, a country in which racism and its negative impact on Black life and freedom was so dramatically challenged during the Civil Rights Movement in the third-quarter of that same century. Until the recent emergence of Black Catholic and Protestant theologians and ethicists, as well as other liberation theologians, with a few exceptions, the theological academy has failed to acknowledge or discuss and develop a moral argument against racism as a moral issue and social sin.⁵⁹

Why has Cone's work and the subsequent work of Black and Womanist theologies of liberation been ignored by most Catholic theological scholars? Why are so many moral, systematic, biblical, and moral theologians mute about the contradiction between our theological traditions and the racism that is embedded in our national psyche and institutional patterns? Why do liberal, contextual, and global theologians often overlook the racism that permeates the U.S. and world reality? Are we suffering from a hardness of heart that blinds us and makes us deaf to the implications of the way and teachings of Jesus within our own local and global context? "You shall indeed hear but not understand, you shall indeed look but never see. Gross is the heart of this people, they will hardly hear with their ears,

⁵⁸ Note the U.S. Catholic Bishops' 1979 letter *Brothers and Sisters to Us* and the Pontifical Commission *Iustitia et Pax*, *The Church and Racism: Toward a More Fraternal Society* cited above in n. 40. See also, Jamie T. Phelps, "Racism and the Church: An Inquiry into the Contradictions between Experience, Doctrine and Theological Theory" in *Black Faith and Public Talk*, ed. Dwight Hopkins (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1999) 53–76.

⁵⁹ Bryan Massingale, "The African American Experience and U.S. Catholic Ethics: Strangers and Aliens No Longer," in *Black and Catholic: The Challenge and Gift of Black Folk* 81–86. Notable exceptions among moral theologians include Gerald Kelly, John La Farge, Joseph Leonard, Daniel Maquire, Barbara Hilkert Anderson, Paul Wadell, Bryan Massingale, and Anne Patrick. In more recent conferences of the AAR, the Catholic Theological Society and other Catholic theological societies, questions regarding the silence of the theological communities on race relations and on racism have surfaced and a positive engagement of the issue seems promising. The U.S. Catholic Bishops' pastoral on racism *Brothers and Sisters to Us*, already cited, clearly states: "Racism is not merely one sin among many, it is a radical evil that divides the human family and denies the new creation of a redeemed world" (10).

they have closed their eyes, lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart and be converted and I heal them” (Matthew 13: 14–15). Massingale suggests that the White tendency to treat Blacks as objects of White study, analysis, and charity rather than subjects capable of independent action or creative initiative has inhibited the recognition of Black agency and the possibility of engagement of Blacks in Catholic moral discourse.⁶⁰

Paul Wadell submits three reasons for this “pattern of omission and neglect” of racism as sin.⁶¹ First, he locates a problem with the prevailing methodological assumptions of Roman Catholic moral theology that equate Christian ethics with human ethics. In its effort to demonstrate that Christian ethics and human ethics are basically the same, too often Christian ethics is collapsed into an abstract and unhistorical understanding of humanity so that our concrete and particular beliefs have little or no impact on moral thinking. Once Christian ethics has been made so abstract and unhistorical, Roman Catholic moral theology loses all sight of the concrete and particular.⁶² Second, Wadell argues that American Catholic ethics and moral theology have failed to engage African Americans about their experience of racism, they have rendered themselves incapable of generating an ethics of justice that moves beyond “enlightened self-interest.” As such, American Catholic ethics fail to recognize the “limitations, bias and self-deception that creeps into so much of what ethicists take for granted.”⁶³ Third, American Catholic ethics and moral theology neglect the Black experience because it is marked by “too much fantasy and not enough reverence and repentance.” Wadell uses the definition fantasy provided by Iris Murdoch. Accordingly, fantasy is “a distortion of moral vision based on a chronic misreading of the world and other people precisely because to see them truthfully would challenge us to conversion.”⁶⁴ Persistence in ethical fantasy prohibits one’s vision and actions from being truthful.

Drawing on the work of Bernard Lonergan, M. Shawn Copeland develops the concept of bias that is related to the concept of fantasy used in Wadell’s analysis. She argues that the notion of “intellectual bias” provides a rational explanation of the silence and lack of solidarity for liberation on the part of many theologians from the dominant culture in the U.S.

[In]difference, ignorance, egotism and selfishness are the obstacles to solidarity. We must push pass our own personal indifference, ignorance, egoism and the selfishness of our society. These obstacles to solidarity can be understood comprehen-

⁶⁰ Ibid. 84.

⁶¹ Paul Wadell, “Response to Bryan Massingale” in *Black and Catholic* 102–6.

⁶² Ibid. 102–3.

⁶³ Ibid. 104.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

sively as failures in authentic religious, intellectual, and moral living they can be expressed compactly as bias. By bias, I do not mean unswerving commitment to personal preference in the face of contrary and contradictory evidence; nor do I refer to personal temperament. Rather, by bias I mean the *more or less conscious decision to refuse corrective insights or understandings, to persist in error. Bias, then is the arrogant choice to be incorrect.* Thus anti-Semitism, racism, sexism, homophobia, class exploitation, and cultural imperialism, are explicit concrete forms of individual and group bias. . . . Moreover, [these instances of bias] are forms of consciousness that, at once sustain the hegemony of the patriarchal, white supremacist ordering of the society in which we live, and undermine our efforts, to critique the consciousness, to participate in the person and social transformation and thus move authentically beyond mere rhetoric about solidarity.⁶⁵

Copeland's analysis implies at least that silence about a particular issue or question in fact represents an active, intentional choice and statement about an issue.

Berel Lang's intriguing book-length essay, *Heidegger's Silence*, thematizes bias as silence or omission in the presence of evil and oppression. Lang's thesis is that Heidegger's view of the Jewish Question, his denial or silence—is reflectively articulated *thought* and the view emerges as reflective and thought, notwithstanding the fact that it sometimes expresses itself in the same forms that otherwise suggest mere prejudice or the influence of social or cultural tradition.⁶⁶ Heidegger's silence before and after the Holocaust, Jacques Derrida writes, “leaves us the commandment to think what he did not think.” Heidegger's silence suggests that “it was by thinking, not its absence, that Heidegger chose silence.”⁶⁷ Heidegger's own words, “Man speaks by being silent,” condemns him and supports Lang's thesis.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ M. Shawn Copeland, “Toward a Critical Christian Feminist Theology of Solidarity,” in *Women & Theology*, ed. Mary Ann Hinsdale and Phyllis H. Kaminski, Annual Publication of the College Theology Society 40 (Maryknoll, N.Y. Orbis, 1994) 3–38.

⁶⁶ Berel Lang *Heidegger's Silence* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 1996) 6. This intriguing essay articulates one of the many perspectives by which philosophers have sought to explain Heidegger's silence during the Holocaust. In some way's Lang's arguments provide a lens through which to interpret the silence of Catholic theologians and other intellectuals on the question race and racism as parallel to Heidegger's silence on “The Jewish Question” and the Holocaust. Gunnar Myrdal's classic, *An American Dilemma* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944) is an extensive analysis of the White denial of “a Negro Problem” as a conscious choice of masking the thoughts about Negroes that occupied their minds. See “Explaining the Problem Away” 1:30–31.

⁶⁷ Lang, 29.

⁶⁸ Here Lang is quoting Heidegger's “What is Called Thinking” 13. Heidegger's silence about the Jews and the Holocaust has been often discussed. See “And into Silence,” in *Heidegger and the Political: Dystopias* (New York: Routledge, 1998) 146–62.

The arguments of Massingale, Wadell, Copeland, and Lang lead me to conclude that the silence of U.S. Catholic theologians about racism is parallel to the silence of leading German theologians and intellectuals during the Nazi atrocities and prosecution of the so-called “final solution” against Jewish people. The theologians’ failure to engage the experience and thought of Black people in America is, in my judgment, parallel to the failure of German theologians and philosophers to engage the experience and thought of the Jewish people.

Black Liberation Theology and Communion

Examining the meaning and mission of the Church from the perspective of Black liberation theology can both strengthen and challenge the theological understanding of “communion.” Black liberation ecclesiology, according to Cone, insists that “the Church is that people called into being by the power and love of God to share in his revolutionary activity for the liberation of man. . . . The Church . . . consists of people who have been seized by the Holy Spirit and who have the determination to live as if all depends on God. It has no will of its own, only God’s will; it has no duty of its own, only God’s duty. Its existence is grounded in God.”⁶⁹ Therefore, the Church of Christ is not bounded by standards of race, class, or occupation.

The Black liberation ecclesiology of James Cone has emphasized that the Church as the Body of Christ must exhibit five characteristics: it must suffer with the suffering;⁷⁰ it must proclaim the kerygma of liberation to Blacks—and other oppressed peoples and nations—as the liberating message of God’s reign, confronting the world with the reality of Christian freedom;⁷¹ it must join in the struggle for liberation against the political, economic and social systems that contradict the Good News of Jesus liberating activity;⁷² it must be in its own community what it preaches and what it seeks to accomplish in the world, it must be a visible manifestation that the gospel is a reality;⁷³ and it must challenge both Black and White churches to refute the dehumanization of Blacks and all oppressed peoples in their own communities as they struggle with them to obtain full freedom and equality in the society.⁷⁴

As his conversations with womanists, feminists, and other liberation

⁶⁹ James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* 63, 65.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 66. For a fuller development of Cone’s theology of suffering see his “Divine Liberation and Black Suffering,” in *God of the Oppressed* 163–93.

⁷¹ *Black Theology and Black Power* 67; and *A Black Theology of Liberation* 131.

⁷² *Black Theology and Black Power* 67.

⁷³ Ibid. 70–7; see also *A Black Theology of Liberation* 131–32.

⁷⁴ *Black Theology and Black Power* 110; *A Black Theology of Liberation* 132–35.

theologians from other cultural contexts such as Africa, Latin America, and Asia multiplied, so Cone's understanding of the liberating mission of the Church expanded. His understanding began to embrace not only the Black victims of racial oppression, but also the victims of gender, cultural and class oppression within both the Black and White Protestant and Catholic congregations.⁷⁵ Cone had always understood that the Church must be on the side of the poor, because Jesus was for the poor⁷⁶ but his understanding of the poor in his later thought has embraced not only the Black poor in the U.S. but the poor all over the world. His Black, Asian, and Hispanic women students and their friends and associates at Union Theological Seminary were among the first articulators of womanist, mujerista, and Asian women's liberation theologies in the U.S. As he deepened their social and theological analysis of racial oppression, they made him more cognizant of the oppression of the distinct nature of the oppression of Black, Hispanic, and Asian in Church and society.⁷⁷

Cone's most recent essays on Black theology and the Black Church continue to challenge the Black churches to embrace both the demand of being agents of liberation and the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. The broadening of the horizons of Black liberation theology and the realization that the whole world is caught up in one dynamic struggle between estranged members of one culturally diverse human family, has led to understanding the relationship between the diverse forms of liberation theology within and beyond the U.S. This helps us to understand that we are seeking *liberation from* oppressive divisions in the human commu-

⁷⁵ James Cone, *My Soul Looks Back* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982) 93–94, 99–108. Cone recognized the continuity and discontinuity of the theologies of liberation in Africa and Latin America. While all theologies of liberation focus on the dehumanization, marginalization, and oppression of the poor, African liberation theology outside of South Africa, focused primarily on cultural oppression or imperialism while the later focused on class oppression (ibid. 108–13). These different foci have implications for the mission of the Church. In the former, there is a dramatic focus on inculturation of the local churches; in the latter, there is a struggle to have the Church identify with the struggle and liberation of the economically poor masses.

⁷⁶ *A Black Theology of Liberation* 120.

⁷⁷ Among Cone's students who have published are: Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1989); Kelly Delaine Brown, *The Black Christ* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1994); Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to be Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990). Through the years many other women, theologians participated in the student circle of women theological students at Union Theological Seminary. Among those who have published are Katie Cannon, Delores Williams, Ada Maria Isasi Diaz, and JoAnn Terrell. These women and many others were directly or indirectly influenced by Cone and influenced his thought through the years.

nity and *liberation* for a new or beloved community that embraces all into one communion under God.

The Call to Repentance and Conversion

In his 1998 apostolic letter, “Tertio Millennio Adveniente” Pope John Paul II declared that the year 2000 was to be a Jubilee Year during which Catholics were called to embrace the joy of repentance and conversion, a joy based upon the forgiveness of sins.⁷⁸ Foremost in the Pope’s mind was disunity within the Christian Church, intolerance, the use of violence in the service of truth and religious indifference.⁷⁹ Because those sins “have been detrimental to the unity willed by God for his People” are among those which require a greater commitment to repentance and conversion, the Church has been invited to become “more fully conscious of the sinfulness of her children recalling all those times in history when they departed from the spirit of Christ and his Gospel and instead of offering to the world the witness of life inspired by the values of faith, they indulged in ways of thinking and acting which were truly forms of counter-witness and scandal.”⁸⁰

In his post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in America* summarizing the Synod of America held in late 1997 John Paul II had also stressed this call for repentance and conversion.⁸¹ He urged Catholics on the American continents to engage in a new evangelization. He emphasized that conversion is possible only if it is rooted in one’s encounter with Jesus in the New Testament, in the liturgy, and in the “real and concrete situation” of the complex reality of America.⁸² Only by being reconciled with God can we be “prime agents” of “true reconciliation with and among [our] brothers and sisters.”⁸³ The Catholic Church, which “embraces men and women of every nation, race, people and tongue” (Revelation 7:9) is called to be ‘in a world marked by ideological, ethnic, economic and cultural division,’ the ‘living sign of the unity of the human family.’⁸⁴ The

⁷⁸ John Paul II, “Tertio millennio adveniente,” *Origins* 24 (November 24, 1994) 401–16, at no. 32. More recently the International Theological Commission addressed various issues raised by the pope’s call to repentance, “Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past,” *Origins* 29 (March 16, 2000) 525–44.

⁷⁹ *Tertio millennio adveniente* nos. 34–36.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* no. 33.

⁸¹ John Paul II, “*Ecclesia in America* (The Church in America),” *Origins* 28 (February 4, 1999) 565–92, at no. 3. The theme of the American Synod was “Encounter with the Living Christ: The Way to Conversion, Communion and Solidarity in America.”

⁸² *Ibid.* nos. 12–13.

⁸³ *Ibid.* no. 32.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

Church in America is being called to a communion within and beyond the American continents.

Commitment to communion is integrally connected to a commitment to Black and other forms of liberation. A social historical appropriation of communion ecclesiology in the context of the Americas in general and the U.S. in particular will require a radical conversion by which we acknowledge the sinful nature of the systems of oppression within our ecclesial institutions and society which divide the human community.

Acknowledgment of our complicity in the social sins that divide us is only the beginning of our conversion. Secondly, we must seek the forgiveness of those whom we have victimized by our past injustices. Finally, both parties must work together toward human solidarity rooted in our spiritual communion. Concretely this reconciliation will be manifested in the development of more inclusive patterns of relationship. These patterns will allow the full participation in decision making, ministerial and social actions of Church and society according to their capacity by those who previously were excluded, devalued or marginalized by the overt and covert boundaries of racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, cultural imperialism, and all other systems of oppression.

The call to communion resonates with our deepest desire for liberation from the oppression of dehumanizing patterns of relationships of racism, sexism, and classism manifest by our continued marginalization, devaluation as responsible and active participants of the church mission of ecclesial and social transformation. This call to communion resonates with our deepest desire for inclusion within community of humankind as respected and capable human agents of God's mission. Most marginalized and oppressed peoples passionately desire to be in union with one another and all of humankind and creation. Yet true community is only possible if it is founded in the radical truth of our personal and collective history of joy and sorrow.

Posing the question of what it means for a local church to live in "Pentecost communion," Richard Marzheuser suggests that a local church or parish must "welcome all Catholics . . . regardless of their nation, people, tribe or language. . . . In the triumph of Pentecost 'there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, and free, but Christ is all in all' (Colossians 3:11)."⁸⁵ In view of the history of oppression within the U.S. and the world, I most heartily agree with Marzheuser's interpretation regarding the ideal of Pentecost communion. But I also insist that such a reality is possible only if we engage in the process of conversion here outlined.

⁸⁵ Richard Marzheuser, "The Holy Spirit and the Church: A Truly Catholic Communion," *New Theology Review* 11 (August, 1998) 63-64.

BROADENING OUR THEOLOGICAL HORIZONS

Conversion within the context of the theological community has specific implications. The social justice tradition of the Christian churches impels Catholic and Protestant theologians in the U.S. to break their silence about the marginalization, devaluation, and systemic oppression of Blacks and other groups within the ecclesial, social, academic, economic, and political institutions of this nation. Catholic and Protestant theologians must begin to engage the new theological voices that have emerged in the last half of the 20th century. A global approach to theology requires that one critically engage the new African/African American, Latino/a, Hispanic American, Asian/Asian American, and Indigenous/Native American, European/European American theological perspectives both male and female that have emerged in the U.S. and around the world.⁸⁶ These voices must continue to mature and deepen as they engage people and theologians whose cultural, class, and religious traditions differ from their own. Such a theological dialogue will reveal areas of continuity and discontinuity. New questions will be raised and new understandings of God, Christ, and Church will emerge. Both liberation theologies and communion ecclesiology compels us to engage in a rigorous and expansive dialogue with scholars from diverse cultural contexts within this nation and around the world as we search the images and metaphors for God and God's mission that embody the truth and justice of those who desire to live in communion with God.

Theologians are called to use their resources for the empowerment of the poor, the weak and the marginalized. Black theologians and Black Christians, Catholic and Protestant, must move beyond a mere reaction to White racism in America and begin to extend their vision of a new human and cosmological community for the whole inhabited world. Christians must be concerned about the quality of human life not only in the urban centers and the small rural towns of America, but also that of their brothers and sisters in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Oppressed people live on the margins of their societies and are the victims of systemic oppression and violence both within and beyond the U.S. Humanity is one and, as Martin Luther King, Jr., observed many years ago, no one is liberated until all are liberated. While maintaining a commitment to those who are op-

⁸⁶ Admittedly this is a daunting task, but in a global society such as ours to omit any theological voice might lead to a too narrow interpretation of God's rich and complex revelation and self-expression and a too narrow understanding of the Church's mission in the today's society. The task requires a shift from an individualist narrow approach to theological scholarship to the formation of intentional broader, interdisciplinary and multicultural community of men and women scholars.

pressed locally, theologians must also broaden their horizon to those who are oppressed globally. They must recognize that oppressed peoples within the U.S. and those beyond the U.S. exist in a culture of death, one that was created by the dominant culture and characterized by the poverty of unemployment and unending debt, political and economic corruption, racial and cultural discrimination, inadequate or irrelevant education, personal devaluation, and marginalization.⁸⁷ Refusal to hear the voices of poor Black people and other marginalized people throughout the world condemns many to live by an alternate violent economy of a global drug community.⁸⁸ Those who practice theology from the perspective of the poor and marginalized must continue to create liberating communities with all whom they encounter so as to discover and embody the power of Spirit that enables patterns of complicit silence about social sin to be broken.

Black theology of liberation must continue the rich legacy and creative vision of human liberation and include in it the distinctive contributions of the Black experience that our ancestors have passed on. Black people have been struggling for more than 430 years. We must identify the wisdom that our experience has taught us would be useful in the creation of a new historical future for all oppressed people. Black theologians must seek what others can teach us from their historical experience in the struggle for justice as we participate in the liberation of the world from its patterns of oppression.⁸⁹ America and the world must be liberated from the image of a Church and society that continues to be a nightmare for the masses of Black and oppressed people. America and the world must embrace that communion imaged by the metaphor of the beloved community envisioned by Black liberation theology and communion ecclesiology.⁹⁰

Cone's early experience made him initially less optimistic than King

⁸⁷ See *Church in America* nos. 59–64.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* no. 61.

⁸⁹ Cone, "Black Theology and the Black Church," in *Risks of Faith* 45–47.

⁹⁰ See James Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or A Nightmare* (Maryknoll N.Y.: Orbis, 1991) 111, 127. Malcolm X called our attention to the fact that for most Blacks in the U.S., life was not characterized by Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream of a community that would judge people by the content of their character rather than the color of their skin. Malcolm argued separation to make it possible to nurture Black self-love as the road to Black authenticity and full humanity. King recognized that one cause for the nightmare was the consequence our having broken community. "Through our sin, through our evil and through our wickedness, we have broken communities." Cone wisely concludes that both Malcolm and King are right. Malcolm was right in encouraging Blacks to embrace liberation, that is, their own human dignity and freedom as Black people to avoid participation in Black genocide. King encouraged liberated Black people to stand against racism and poverty while seeking the beloved community. Later Black, Womanist, and other liberation theologians would add sexism, class exploitation,

about the possibility of U.S. Christians and other citizens transcending the boundaries of racism and the other systems of oppression that mitigate against the full historical embodiment or visible manifestation of communion in our ecclesial, national, or world communities. Still he holds fast to the image of King's beloved community and urges the Black churches to engage in the ongoing conversion and transformation that will signal the full realization of this vision of communion in its broadest and most inclusive manifestation in our world. Cone insists with Malcolm X that the distinct contribution of the Black experience and scholarship including Black theology must become primary agents of both liberation and communion. With King he asserts: "We were created for each other and not against each other. We must, therefore, break down the barriers that separate people from one another. As we seek the beloved community of humankind."⁹¹ Cone's vision is faithful to that of the Church understood as communion. Fidelity to that vision will lead church theologians to broaden their horizons to embrace the whole human community through intra-ecclesial, ecumenical, and interreligious dialogue. Such a broadening of horizons will enable the theological community to provide the theological interpretations that enable the community to grasp more fully the truth about ourselves and God's self-revelation to us. Such a broadening will lead to commitment to the realization of a just Church and society in which brothers and sisters dwell together in the communion of love.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Black liberation theology and communion ecclesiology are not opposing theologies. One presupposes the other. No one can enter into full communion with an individual, group, nation, or world, if one's relationship to the other is marked by indifference or oppression. Communion is predicated on the assumption that such a union is freely embraced and that both partners are freely saying a "yes." Human freedom is a precondition for the ethical action of living in right relationship with one another and with God. As Christians celebrate the start of the third millennium, they have an opportunity to acknowledge their past individual and social sins, to ask forgiveness of one another, and to commit themselves to the living in communion as the people of God that Jesus envisioned at the end of his earthly sojourn.

One can become one with others only if one can speak the truth of one's sinful past, asking and granting forgiveness, and reaching out to one an-

imperialism, and homophobia to the list of those demonic "isms" from which we must be liberated to embrace one another in love.

⁹¹ Cone, *Malcolm & Martin & America* 318.

other in a spirit of reconciling love and solidarity. Oneness cannot be built on lies, denial, or the pretense of reconciliation. Oneness or unity in diversity is the pattern of communion manifest in the Triune God. This oneness can serve as a model of ecclesial and human communion. Rooted in that communion born of the Spirit, this oneness will be manifest concretely as diverse individuals and cultural groups are allowed to use freely their gifts and talents. As more people exercise their human freedom and responsibility to participate in service motivated by the love of God and focused on justice within ecclesial and social communities, authentic communion will deepen. Only when Christians speak and live in truth can they become a Church and a nation whose patterns of relationship become a sacrament of radical unity in diversity. To get to the truth one must break silent complicity with the social evil that has marred the past and continues to mar the present reality. What must be confronted are the White supremacist, gender, and class ideologies that lead to the current patterns of interpersonal, social, and ecclesial relationships that contradict God's call to communion.

Today many are questioning the relevance and necessity of liberation theology or pronounce its death with the emergence of contextual and global theology.⁹² I suggest that liberation theology will cease to be necessary when and only when all men and women are free of sin and all that oppresses. Then and only then will it be possible for us to experience the fullness of communion that was the basic ecclesial paradigm of the Second Vatican Council. Then and only then will our world truly image the unity in diversity that characterizes the nature of the Triune God. Only then will we be embraced into the oneness for which Jesus prayed in fulfillment of his mission to lead all creation back to the fullness of communion with God, with one another, and with all creation.

⁹² Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation* (Boston: St. Paul, 1984). This document did not totally condemn liberation theologies but spoke rather against "certain aspects," most notably a too exclusive use of Marxist analysis, and an understanding of liberation emptied of its theological and spiritual dimensions and restricted to class analysis borrowed from Marxism (see Parts 6–10). Much of the document seems to affirm as the introduction suggests that "The Gospel of Jesus Christ is a message of freedom and a force for liberation . . . from the radical slavery of sin and the many different kinds of slavery in the cultural, economic, social and political spheres, . . . derive[d] ultimately from sin . . . that of preventing people from living in a manner befitting their dignity" (5). See the development of this major theme as it relates liberation to the Bible and earlier teachings of popes and bishops including evangelization and social justice (Parts 1–5, 11).