

Racism, Poverty and Conversion in the Season of Mercy

By Fr. Bryan Massingale

The installation ceremonies for our new shepherd, Archbishop ListECKI, were a wonderful celebration of the diverse Body of Christ in this local church. Every aspect of the rituals -- the chants of American Indian drummers at evening prayer welcoming the archbishop to the Cathedral; the Scripture readings proclaimed in Spanish, Korean, Polish, and English; the offertory procession with gifts from parishioners from Ethiopia, the Philippines, Italy, Laos, Vietnam, and India -- all manifested a marvelous fact: by God's grace, the Church of southeastern Wisconsin is a microcosm of the world.

By God's grace, we are a "people of every race, language, and way of life." By God's grace, our society and our church are more racially and culturally diverse than at any time in our living memories.

By God's grace: For the variety of languages, cultures and colors in the human family is a holy gift of God, whose Trinitarian life is a loving embrace of difference.

When one exits from the beauty of church rituals, however, we encounter a grittier reality. We meet the severe racial disparities in our schools, where the quality of education depends too much upon class and geography rather than equal opportunity. We reside in one of the nation's poorest metropolitan areas where tens of thousands live in enclaves of hidden misery and quiet despair. We live in an area where white men with a criminal past are more preferred for entry level employment than black youths with no record of lawbreaking.

Perhaps most of all, our lives beyond (and even within) the church are marked by racial isolation and economic insulation. Despite our diversity, we have little experience of those who differ from us.

The terrible truth is that we live in a world where the comfortable, the secure and the satisfied are segregated from and unaware of the neglected, and the poor. Many of us live in cocoons of privilege, safely insulated from "those" people. Our isolation feeds indifference; our indifference supports injustice; and our collective injustice wounds us all . . . though some more directly than others.

This past May, the Archdiocese announced that Lent 2010 would be observed as a “Season of Mercy.” This “Season of Mercy” invites people to a deeper appreciation of God’s forgiving love, to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation, and to reflect upon the need for healing in personal and public life.

During this Lenten Season of Mercy, we hear the call to conversion and a profound change of heart. However, this call is not only addressed to us as individuals. The biblical prophets delivered this message to a community whose public life failed in concern for the poor and those on the margins of society.

This is why the bishops declare in their pastoral letter on the sin of racism: “The sinfulness is often anonymous but nonetheless real. The sin is social in nature in that each of us, in varying degrees, is responsible. All of us in some measure are accomplices . . . each of us as Catholics must acknowledge a share in the mistakes and sins of the past. Many of us have been prisoners of fear and prejudice.”

This Season of Mercy calls us to acknowledge how as a civic and faith community we have not heeded the prophets’ summons to care for the poor and those on the fringes of society. The lessons of Lent remind us that though the work of remedying racial injustice is difficult, there is abundant grace for the task if we but ask. This time of reconciliation challenges us to be what we say we are, that is, a truly “catholic” inclusive community less insulated from those we’ve been taught to fear, avoid, exclude, or disdain.

In the final hymn of the archbishop’s installation mass, the community sang: “Stir us to hear your call, O Christ and rise; Striving for right where justice fallen, lies; Serving in love where pain for healing cries.” May this Season of Mercy and grace help us to live the words we sing.

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