

Race in America and the Church

By

Steve Terenzio

The issue of race once again dominated the news across America in the summer of 2016 following the horrible deadly shootings that occurred during the first week of July. In the space of three days, a 37 year-old black man in Baton Rouge and a 32 year-old black man in suburban St. Paul were fatally shot by the police. This was followed by the killing of five Dallas police officers by a black gunman during a protest rally. As of this writing, the investigations into these incidents continue.

Following up on these events, a July 19, 2016 story from the Catholic News Service (<http://www.catholicnews.com/services/englishnews/2016/healing-racial-divide-starts-with-dialogue-black-bishops-say.cfm>) featured the thoughts of two African-American bishops regarding the heightened racial tensions across the country. “Healing racial divide starts with dialogue, black bishops say,” read the CNS headline. As I went through the article, I was hoping that Catholic bishops of all people would *start* such a dialogue on race by acknowledging first principles grounded in Catholic teaching. These principles might begin with the affirmation that the entire human race shares a common origin and a common destiny, i.e., Almighty God. Further, that God has directly infused into each human being an immortal soul and, through the redemption of all mankind by Jesus Christ, He wishes each soul to be united with Him forever in heaven. Consequently, all men must give an accounting to Him at the end of their earthly lives.

Unfortunately, the story – put out by the bishops’ own Catholic News Service – is silent on all questions metaphysical. Instead, the emphasis is on secondary procedural and structural matters. Retired Bishop John H. Ricard, rector of St. Joseph’s Seminary in Washington, D.C., does affirm that “the Catholic Church has a lot to ‘bring to the table’ to bridge racial divides.” Similarly, Louisiana Bishop Shelton J. Fabre of Houma-Thibodaux said the diversity within the Church potentially gives her a unique voice in bringing about racial harmony. Yet, at least in view of the content of the CNS piece, Catholic doctrine will not be emanating from that voice nor included in the items brought to the table. Instead it speaks of “encounters” (Pope Francis’ term) as “a process that begins with people talking and listening to each other about race.” Further cited is a pastoral letter from last year by Bishop Edward K. Braxton of Belleville, Illinois that emphasizes “transform[ing] nationwide social structures that reinforce the racial divide.”

As a school teacher, I have learned from experience that dialogue or “class discussions” will prove fruitless and decidedly *not* contribute to understanding if those engaged in the conversation don’t have a prior agreement on some basic principles. In the classroom, students typically are eager to have their voices heard but are sometimes frustrated when the teacher insists that what they say be directed to some purpose previously set down as integral to the lesson. Otherwise they will simply be talking passed each other and education (or in the present instance “healing”) will not take place.

Thus, and despite all the good intentions, I am pessimistic that such proposed encounter sessions would be beneficial unless all the participants first acknowledge the Fatherhood of God. Secondly, the reality of fallen human nature needs to be admitted. The dialogue the bishops seek seems to presume a natural goodness and good will on the part of all. Yet this presumption does not square with the Catholic understanding of a fallen humanity and the existence of evil. Therefore, merely talking and listening to one another, or “dialogue”, is no panacea: “hearing they do not hear” (Mt. 13:13).

When I’m instructing my students on the subject of the virtues, I invariably begin the lesson by reminding them that 1) God is the creator of all men; 2) for that reason all mankind shares the same supernatural end; 3) it is ultimately only from the reality of a common nature endowed by God that concepts such as equality and human rights derive their meaning; 4) from this it follows that there are certain things one human may not do to another simply because of the common humanity originating from God. One of these prohibitions is the direct killing of innocent, human life. Whether that life is the destruction of the unborn by abortionists, non-combatants directly targeted in war by military personnel, citizens not posing a lethal threat to anyone killed by law enforcement, or police officers on duty shot by angry protesters, these things are condemnatory because of the dignity inherent in each human person made in God’s image and likeness.

The Catholic Church, the bishops say, is in a good position to “remind all that racism is a sin.” But one might ask how the Church may best communicate this? It seems that there is no more viable way than a clear presentation of God as the Father and Christ as the Redeemer of the entire human race. And as the horrendous killings in July also remind us, there are other sins that need to be admitted as part of any such dialogue. Attacks on innocent life and property under the pretext of revenge – taking the law into one’s own hands – are also sins clearly proscribed in the Catechism and consistently condemned by Catholic moral theology. There was no mention of these sins in the CNS piece.

Admittedly, one cannot anticipate a Catholic anthropology is carried about by all those engaged in such discussions on race, but Bishop Fabre himself states that it is “going to take a lot of time to restore trust and bring healing.” Can there then be a better place to begin this restoration than by clearly stating these first principles based on Catholic teaching and the natural law?

The girlfriend of the man who was shot and killed in St. Paul, having recorded the aftermath of the incident on her phone, can clearly be heard several times invoking the name of Jesus in a passionate plea that her boyfriend might not be dead. Though understandably uttered in an emotional outburst, it perhaps inadvertently provides a sober direction toward some good that may be derived from this tragedy: prayers for our bishops, if they are to effectively contribute to ending the violence plaguing our nation, that they will fearlessly proclaim the Holy Name of Jesus and forcefully declare that “all are one in Christ” (Gal. 3:28).

Steven Terenzio is former headmaster of Montfort Academy in New York and has taught high school and middle school for more than 30 years. He also has written for Chronicles and The Latin Mass magazines.