White Complicity as a Way Toward Racial Solidarity

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White people of faith frequently raise the question of individual guilt in discussions of white privilege, power, and racism. Most often the issue of guilt arises through white assertions of racial innocence. This essay draws contrast between the framework of individual culpability and that of social complicity as a way toward solidarity.

Certainly, guilt is very tricky. While honest people may utilize guilt as the “prick of conscience” that leads to confession, guilt may not be the best way to inspire conversion. People are not prone to accept public blame or ridicule. Guilt tends to focus on needs of the individual to achieve personal righteousness, but does not necessarily invite relationships with persons victimized by racial injustices.

Too often, as a society, “racism” is often reduced to individual acts of intentional racism. We commonly associate racism with such historical figures as Bull Connor, the racist police chief of Birmingham, Alabama, who unleashed violent dogs on civil rights protestors. Good white people rightfully abhor this form of overt white supremacy.

The framework of individual culpability is partially helpful for moral clarity and identifying individual perpetrators. As a society, we want and ought to hold individuals responsible. Establishing individual culpability is also critical legally to hold individuals and institutions accountable for legal violations.

The Civil Rights legislation of the mid-1960s established legal parameters for free, individual access to integrated institutions and the responsibility of government to establish nondiscriminatory practices in private business, employment, and housing, among other areas.

Catholic Social Thought and Health Care

Recent Catholic calls for health care reform have included fundamental values that reflect the dignity of the human person, protect basic human rights, and respond to the unique claims of those who are poor and vulnerable.

Catholic discussion of health care begins with the Catholic teaching that health care is a basic human right. As the U.S. Bishops recently explained, “The first right of the human person, the right to life, entails a right to the means for the proper development of life, such as adequate health care.” The key enunciation of this right was made in 1963 when Blessed Pope John XXIII articulated human rights that are “universal and inviolable, and therefore altogether inalienable.”

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In 1981, to protect and promote this right, the U.S. Bishops called for a national health insurance program:

Following on these principles and on our belief in health care as a basic right, we call for the development of a national health insurance program. It is the responsibility of the federal government to establish a comprehensive health care system that will ensure a basic level of health care for all Americans. The federal government should also ensure adequate funding for this basic level of care through a national health insurance program.

Articulating governmental responsibility for the right to health care was consistent with increasing recognition in Catholic social teaching of government’s responsibility to ensure the common good—including individual human rights—and awareness that Catholic social teaching emphasizes both individual conscience and political, legal, and economic systems and structures. This proclamation by the bishops echoed an earlier call for comprehensive health insurance in 1959 as part of their proposals for recovery from World War II.

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ENDNOTES
2 Ibid., no. 63.
5 Ibid., no. 63.