White Complicity as a Way Toward Racial Solidarity

BY ALEX MIKULICH, PH.D.

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 protesters. 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 critically held 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.

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Catholic Social Thought and Health Care

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.”55 The key enunciation of this right was made in 1963 when Blessed Pope John XXIII articulated human rights that are “universal and indivisible, and therefore altogether inalienable.”7 This right is contained in the Catechism of the Catholic Church.8 The U.S. Bishops explained its foundations as follows:

This right flows from the sanctity of human life and the dignity that belongs to all human persons, who are made in the image of God. It implies that access to health care which is necessary and suitable for the proper development and maintenance of life must be provided for all people, regardless of economic, social and legal status. Special attention should be given to meeting the basic health needs of the poor.

The basic right, then, is derived from human life and dignity. In 1981, to protect and promote this right, the U.S. Bishops called for a national health insurance program:

Following on these principles and in 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.9 This proclamation by the bishops echoed an earlier call for comprehensive health insurance in 1919 as part of their proposals for recovery from World War I.

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ENDNOTES

2. Ibid., no. 57.
5. Ibid., no. 63.
7. Administrative Committee of the National Catholic War Council, Popes of Social Reconstruction, 1919, no. 25.
corruption, and one fled for his life to the U.S. Juan’s daughter was robbed at gunpoint. His sister-in-law was robbed and beaten after breaking into her neighbor’s home to pay the employers of her small business. She suspects that a bank employee tipped off the criminals.

“No one trusts anyone there anymore,” he explained. “There’s no faith in the system.”

Nora, who came to the United States in 2005, was robbed twice at gunpoint in 2002. She broke down crying when she recalled the attempted murder of her father. In 2009 October his sister was surrounded by five construction workers. Raul described how a gunman boarded a bus in Tegucigalpa in 2004 and sprayed bullets everywhere while Raul and the other passengers dove for cover. Honduras, with a homicide rate at 91.6 victims per 100,000 inhabitants, is one of the world’s most violent nations. The Jesuit research and advocacy center, ERIC (Equipo de Reflección, Investigacion y Comunicacion), estimates that every 12 hours a Honduran is executed for money. A pervasive and well-documented fear of violence affects everyday life. When Molina was growing up in Tegucigalpa she thought nothing of returning home at 2 a.m., after a night out with friends. However, when he and his wife and children visited family there in 2012, they did not venture outside until after sunset. When Miriam returns to visit family members, she does not wear jewelry or carry a purse for fear of being robbed. She recalls that during her childhood, her family never locked the doors and windows of their home. When she was 8 years old, 30 miles northeast of the capital. Recently she paid for security locks for her parents’ home. Still, her parents often feel they do not leave the house unguarded—and have arranged their lives so that one of them is always at home. During Busodúin’s recent visit, delegation members were not allowed on the streets by themselves or to go out at night—even a stroll to a corner store was too dangerous. Much of the violence is attributed to the drug trade and gangs. When drug interdictions disrupted narcotrafficking routes in Michoacán, Honduras became the transit route of choice. It is estimated that a third of the cocaine destined for the United States from Colombia and Venezuela passes through Honduras. Gang violence began taking root in Honduras when gang members deported from California reestablished their criminal organizations upon return. Gangs are now believed to be closely connected to the narcotics trade.

The police have also been widely implicated in the drug trade as well as extrajudicial executions. The Honduran judicial system is weak and has been highly compromised by the arbitrary dismissals of judges after the 2009 coup. Many believe that June 28, 2009, coup for the marked increase in violence. Following the coup, civil liberties were suppressed by the de facto government as police and soldiers violently repressed protesters, forced the shutdown of radio stations and other media, and carried out widespread, arbitrary detentions. In U.S. Congressional hearings, human rights advocate Lisa Hagedorn testified that the coup unleashed violence by creating a sense that “any authority or anyone who simply felt entitled could do what they wished with little consequence.”

At times during her visit, Busodúin was under DUsten with despair. Just before leaving Honduras, however, the delegation visited Radio Progreso, a project of ERIC, headed by Fr. Isabelo (“Padre Melo”) Montenegro. S.J., Radio Progreso reaches 15.5 million listeners, providing an array of programming—including news, talk-in shows, storytelling, music, and circulating reports on corruption and human rights abuses by governmental and criminal organizations. Almost everyone at Radio Progreso has received death threats, including Padre Melo—who has friends who were murdered because they refused to keep paying extortion money. Padre Melo’s show on his radio show the anthem of the U.S. civil rights movement We Shall Overcome. As the record spins, Padre Melo closed his eyes and sang along. Then he realized this song knows the challenges facing his country more than anyone really does believe that the people of Honduras shall overcome. She left Honduras knowing that if he has that kind of hope, what right does she have not to hope?

**ENDNOTES**

1. One of the largest fruit importing companies, Standard Fruits, was founded in New Orleans and later set up an headquarters in the city of La Ceiba, on the northern coast of Honduras. Throughout the early to mid 20th century, a small but的手数 of entrepreneurs of Standard Fruits arrived to New Orleans. Many went to work on the docks unloading bananas. Wealthy Hondurans sent their children to boarding school in the city. From Santiago Estrada, “Nuestra Memoria,” klienten, Race, Place and Memory in New Orleans. Louisiana. Mentor’s There, Louisiana State University. May, 2004. By 1979, the two hospitals that were the largest of the state’s hospitals’ population, according to Capitaline Empresas.

2. Export for John Molina, none of the Hondurans answered for this article warned their real names.

3. Sue United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, International homicide, count and rate per 100,000 people.


At a deeper level, complicity concerns spirituality, how we love and neighbor. The opening paragraphs of Vatican II’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes) best orient the Church and people of faith.

The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the peoples and the Church.

This paragraph concludes: “This is why Christians cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history.”

Vatican II invites our shared reflection: How do we people of faith listen and attend to the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of people of all colors? At issue is our daily spiritual practice and how we live (or not) the Gospel call to solidarity.

**ENDNOTES**


The continuum between willing and unwilling perpetrators, willing and unwilling accomplices, and willing and unwilling bystanders is complex and vast.

Everyday practices of ordinary, good white people contribute to the maintenance of institutions and structures that systematically benefit white Americans to the detriment of communities of color. The frame of white complicity, alternatively, offers a different and more dynamic way to explore how good people contribute to the practice. Indecisively, In the Scandal of White Complicity in U.S. Hypervisitation: A Newsized Spirituality of Whiteness Margaret Pfeil, Laurie Cassidy, and I consciously chose complicity as a way to explore how white power operates. We reflect on our shared white social, moral, and spiritual complicity in the historical, structural, and cultural ways of contemporary U.S. racial inequality, especially as it is manifested in the hypervisitation of African-Americans and Latinos. So, briefly, why focus on complicity?

First, in contrast to American individualism, complicity is a way of proceeding that helps people perceive the myriad ways we are entangled within interdependent networks of human interaction. It invites a sense of humility and wonder before all other people.

Complicity recognizes that all people, and especially white Americans, need to learn from many others who are too often forgotten by history. Complicity suggests that we need to learn from slaves and their descendents, who teach us about the humanity in the midst of oppression. Whites tend to forget also how African slaves, to cite one only example, resisted racial oppresion and demanded fundamental changes to practices of religious faith and democracy. Second, whites utilize a language of innocence that renders white privilege and power invisible to conscious critique. The language of innocence and guilt is deeply colorized into the binary imagery of white innocence and black criminality in U.S. history. The Scandal of White Complicity explores how the rhetoric of white innocence is a “trigger that brings up the stereotype of criminal, promiscious, lazy black people.” The problem is that invoking innocence “draws power from the implicit contrast of black deficit.” In other words, the assertion of white innocence actually implicates whites in the cultural trails of racial inequality.