Got Privilege? The Ironies of White Privilege and the Gospel Call to Conversion

by Alex Mikulich, Ph.D., JSRI Fellow

One irony of American history is the tendency of good white Americans to presume racial innocence. White ignorance of how we are shaped racially is the first sign of privilege. In other words, it is a privilege to ignore the consequences of race in America.

Guilt, accusation, or moralistic finger-pointing at the “cabal of bigots” who keep people of color down, misses the problem. Rather, the complexity of white privilege concerns how good people—including myself—perpetuate and benefit from racial hierarchy.

The deeper religious irony, the influential Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr warned, is that until privileged Christians humbly learn from those whom we oppress, we will miss the conversion to which the Gospel calls us. Ultimately, to fully address racial privilege, the church calls the faithful to practice dialogue, sharing, mutual aid, and collaboration with all others.

The Social Construction of Race

Irony hardly ends there. The church and science agree that there is only one race—the human race—and that we all trace our roots to Africa. The African proverb that “I am because we are” says it best. Drawing upon this African insight, the rock star Bono asks: “Could it be that all Americans are, in that sense, African-Americans?”

Contrary to science, however, society uses discrepant terms for “race.” For example, application forms that request an individual’s race, use terms that refer to color (white, black), a common cultural and linguistic heritage (Hispanic), or a broad geographical region (Asian). These divergent terms reveal how race lacks scientific basis.

The U.S. social construction of race delivers deadly consequences. Race is not about biology or color; rather, it is a set of power relations that grant whites “unearned advantage and conferred dominance” while it severely impairs the life chances of people of color.

Historically, white privilege was inscribed in the Declaration of Independence—which assumed that only landowning white men were created equal—and the Naturalization Act of 1790—that restricted citizenship to whites, remained in force until 1952, and was not completely repealed until the 1965 Civil Rights Act.

Although the meaning of “white” has been fluid and applied differently to nearly every new immigrant group, white privilege pervades U.S. democracy. The basic contradiction between American claims to equality and the fact of systemic racial oppression persists, even after the historic election of President Barack Obama.

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Catholic Social Teaching on Race:
A Select Bibliography of Papal, Conciliar, Vatican,
and U.S. Episcopal Statements and Pastoral Letters

by Alex Mikulich, Ph.D., JSRI Fellow

In-depth theological reflection and social analysis of the reality of race, racism, and xenophobia were not developed in magisterial Catholic social teaching until the late 20th century. This annotated bibliography of official Roman Catholic and U.S. episcopal teaching regarding racism highlights key points of the most significant documents from the past 70 years. This teaching contributes critical theological, biblical, and moral insight for personal, institutional, and societal conversion, including that of the church, in the struggle for racial justice and equality. For additional background and resources, see Dawn M. Nothwehr, That They May Be One: Catholic Social Teaching on Racism, Tribalism, and Xenophobia. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2008.

Papal, Conciliar, and Vatican Documents

Mit Brennender Sorge: On the Church and the German Reich
Pope Pius XI (1937)
**Key Points:** (This document was smuggled into Germany and read from Catholic pulpits on Palm Sunday, March 21, 1937.)
1. Condemns idolatry of particular races, peoples, or States.
2. Hebrew scriptures (Old Testament) convey divine revelation.

Gaudium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution in the Modern World
Vatican Council II (1965)
**Key Points:**
1. Universal human dignity means that any “social or cultural discrimination against basic personal rights” is incompatible with “God’s design” (No. 29).
2. Economic and social disparities are a scandal against social justice (No. 29).

The Church and Racism: Toward a More Fraternal Society
**Key Points:**
1. Doctrines of racial superiority are “scientifically false, morally condemnable and socially unjust and dangerous” (Nos. 2 and 33).
2. All human beings belong to one biological species (No. 18).
3. Develops critique of the following forms of racism:
   a. Institutionalized racism and apartheid systems that legally or culturally sanction superiority of European peoples over African, Indian, or “colored” peoples.
   b. Social racism that isolates, exploits, or maintains particular populations in inferior social or economic situations.
   c. Xenophobia or racial hatred that exaggerates nationalist or superficial chauvinism against new immigrants.
   d. Eugenic racism—ways that genetic manipulation, abortion, and sterilization campaigns may racially select human beings.
4. Ending legal discrimination is insufficient. Conversion to lived racial equality means living a spirituality of dialogue, sharing, mutual aid, and collaboration with other ethnic groups (No. 25).

Contribution to World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance
Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace (Durban, South Africa, 2001)
**Key Points:**
1. Globalization has intensified racial and economic divides (Nos. 4 and 21).
2. Condemns new forms of economic, migrant, and sexual slavery.
4. Reaffirms requests for pardon for the church, so the church may be purified of “counter-witness and scandal” (No. 6).
5. Reparation “should erase all the consequences of the illicit action and restore things to the way they probably would be if that action had not occurred” (No. 12).

The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church
**Key Points:**
1. Human dignity before God begins Christian reflection on race and racism.
2. Jesus Christ is the definitive witness of love and prototype of a new humanity.
3. The Spirit, through baptism, calls everyone to rediscover the unity and diversity of the human family, and build an effective common good.

U.S. Conference of Bishops

Victory and Peace
National Catholic Welfare Conference (1942)
The Essentials of a Good Peace
National Catholic Welfare Conference (1943)
**Key Point:**
1. Advocates political equality, fair economic and educational opportunities, a just share in public welfare, good housing, and full chance for social advancement of the Negro race.

Discrimination and the Christian Conscience
United States Catholic Welfare Conference (1958)
**Key Points:**
1. Race question is moral and religious.
2. “Full and equal justice must be given to all citizens, specifically those who are Negro.”

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Catholic Social Teaching on Race: A Select Bibliography

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Statement of the Bishops of the United States Concerning Racial Harmony (1963)

On Race Relations and Poverty
National Conference of Catholic Bishops (1966)

National Race Crisis
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (1968)

Key Points:
1. White segregationist mentality responsible for present crisis and "to varying degrees, we all share in the guilt" (Nos. 6-7).
2. Affirms Kerner Commission Report (February 1968) that U.S. becoming two societies, "one black, one white: separate and unequal." (No. 9).
3. Unfinished business of eradicating racism in every institution of the church.
4. Develop jobs, affordable housing, and welfare assistance that does not break up families, citing the scandal of the "Man in the House" rule which limited national welfare payments to single mothers.
5. Complacency will only lead to further alienation and polarization of society (Nos. 27-28).

Statement of U.S. Catholic Bishops on American Indians
United States Catholic Conference (1977)

Key Points:
1. Calls Americans to reflect upon past injustices toward American Indians (No. 12).
2. U.S. nation building filled with sorrow and death for diverse Indian populations (No. 14).
3. American Indians struggle with multiple ways tribes have been uprooted.
4. Jesus' command to love neighbor demands that U.S. Catholics struggle together with Indian brothers and sisters to secure justice (No. 20).

Brothers and Sisters to Us
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (1979)

Key Points:
1. Racism is a "radical evil." Laments loss of sense of urgency since 1968.
2. Must address interconnection between racial and economic oppression.
3. Societal structures are geared to success of majority and failure of minority.
4. Condemns racist practices of social steering and blockbusting and disproportionate numbers of incarcerated minorities.

What We Have Seen and Heard: A Pastoral Letter on Evangelization
Black Catholic Bishops of the United States (1984)

Key Points:
1. African-American spirituality is rooted in scriptural promise of liberation and hope learned through the "dark days of slavery." Four characteristics mark Black spirituality: contemplation, holism, joy, and community.
2. Equality prerequisite for true reconciliation.
3. Black communities celebrate kin networks and value all life. Due to historical racial hatred toward Black men, calls for reevaluation of vocation of fatherhood.
4. Affirm call to celebrate being Black and Catholic—the Catholic Church is not a "White Church." African-American witness precious to universal character of Catholicism.
5. Racist Church is still a hindrance to full development of Black leadership.

The Hispanic Presence: Challenge and Commitment

Asian and Pacific Presence: Harmony in Faith
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (2001)

Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility

Key Point:
1. Racism is intrinsically evil, a direct assault on human life, and can never be justified (No. 23).

Statements of Gulf South Catholic Conferences of Bishops

Florida
The Social Concerns in Florida (1985)

Louisiana
Confronting with Courageous Hearts (section on race relations) (1984)
Statement Against Racism (1989)
Statement Against Racism (1990)
Racial Harmony (1997)

Pastoral Letters of Archbishops of New Orleans

The Morality of Racial Segregation
Archbishop Joseph Rummel (1956)

Made in the Image of God: A Pastoral Letter on Racial Harmony
Archbishop Alfred Hughes (2006)

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A Must Read

William Julius Wilson

*More than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City*  
(New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2009)

by Alex Mikulich, Ph.D., JSRI Fellow

The demand that social science and public policy address both inner-city behavior and social structures is a key insight of William Julius Wilson’s scholarship. Even so, social scientific and policy debates create a dichotomy between culture—the beliefs, modes of decision-making, and meaning-making that pervade the inner city—and social structure—the ways larger institutions of the economy, polity, and education shape the life chances of groups and individuals. Wilson avoids this false dichotomy.

After the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, a new politics of poverty converged with a new politics of race that eventually led to the Welfare Reform Act of 1996. That law constituted the culmination of a historic shift away from the New Deal politics of the previous 50 years, which featured national policy initiatives designed to protect citizens against the harshest economic and social structural forces beyond their control.

During this period, conservatives advocated a narrow version of the “culture of poverty” thesis, the notion that urban crime, antisocial behavior, underachievement, and out-of-wedlock births are solely the failure of poor individuals themselves. Liberals rightly criticized this argument as “blaming the victim.”

However, some liberals went further, claiming all examination of individual behavior amounts to blaming the victim.

Unlike his conservative and liberal critics, Wilson does not separate local culture from larger social structural forces. Rather, he unpacks complex relationships between individual agency, local culture, social structures, and globalization.

Wilson agrees that categorical forms of racism that assert the biogenetic inferiority of blacks have declined. However, against a naïve post-racialism, the idea that racism is no longer a significant fact of American life, he argues that racist assumptions remain embedded in institutional norms and practices. For example, school tracking tends to segregate African-American students, placing them in lower-level classes even though they may have the requisite skills for learning in higher courses.

Countering critics on the left, who claim he ignores the role of historic racism, Wilson does not minimize the enduring impact of slavery and Jim Crow institutions. He clearly states that, from an historical perspective, “it is hard to overstate the importance of racist structural factors.”

Wilson’s inclusive account details how urban neighborhoods were negatively impacted by:

- slavery;
- Jim Crow segregation;
- public school segregation;
- legalized discrimination;
- residential segregation;
- the Federal Housing Administration’s redlining of black neighborhoods in the 1940s and 1950s;
- the construction of public housing projects in poor black neighborhoods; and
- employer discrimination.

All of these factors contributed to the ways metropolises feature predominantly white, affluent suburbs separated from predominantly impoverished African-American and Latino central cities. These forces eviscerated institutions that were vital to previously healthy neighborhoods, including businesses, schools, churches, and social networks tied together through religious, voluntary, and civic organizations.

To whites who assert that these issues are all in the past—“get over it”—Wilson explains how past practices endure in the present. For example, Kathryn Neckerman’s *Schools Betrayed* demonstrates that a century ago, when African-American children in northern cities attended schools alongside white children, there were not problems of low achievement and high dropout rates. Neckerman documents a process of how school officials segregated black and white children and provided more and better resources for white immigrant children. Over the course of 60 years, generations of black children were denied opportunities afforded their white counterparts. This history provides critical insight into the reason so many black parents lose faith in public schools.

Wilson also details how indirect global economic forces have exacerbated the consequences of enduring racist structural forces. These include how the computer revolution decreased relative demand for low-skilled labor, the decline of manufacturing in cities (previously the largest employer of African-Americans), as well as the shift to service industries that negatively impacts inner-city black males. Wilson illuminates how mistrust develops as a mode of survival in urban neighborhoods and, as this “code of the street” shapes negative individual behavior, individuals lack the social skills suited for consumer services.

The complexity of Wilson’s analysis is most critical for public policy. Policies and programs that only address inner-city behavior, without addressing the structural problems of joblessness and inadequate education, will not be able to connect individual aspirations for a better life with concrete opportunity. Conversely, policies designed to address structures, such as improving economic opportunity, will fail unless they are interconnected with an effective strategy to prepare individuals with the social skills requisite for economic mobility.

Wilson concludes with two key public policy recommendations.

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Catholic Social Teaching (CST) and Racism

by Fr. Fred Kammer, S.J.

The Moral Judgment on Racism

Consideration of racism is grounded in fundamental scriptural beliefs: equal dignity of all people, created in God’s image; and Christ’s redemption of all.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church spells this out:

The equality of men rests essentially on their dignity as persons and the rights that flow from it: “Every form of social or cultural discrimination in fundamental personal rights on the grounds of sex, race, color, social conditions, language, or religion must be curbed and eradicated as incompatible with God’s design.”

Moral judgments on racism, based on equality, are consistent: “any theory or form whatsoever of racism and racial discrimination is morally unacceptable”; and “racism is not merely one sin among many, it is a radical evil dividing the human family.”

Jesus tells the Good Samaritan story—one of his three “great parables”—to answer “Who is my neighbor?” His response addresses entrenched divisions between Jew and Samaritan and sets the stage for the unity of “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph. 4:5). This unity admits “no inequality on the basis of race or nationality, social condition or sex.”

The Many Faces of Racism

Catholic teaching “emphasizes not only the individual conscience, but also the political, legal and economic structures...”

Racism is about people and about group behaviors and societal organization. Individual racism includes conscious acts, spontaneous attitudes, “the tendency to stereotype and marginalize,” indifference, and “the triumph of private concern over public responsibility.”

Laws such as U.S. segregation or South Africa’s apartheid represent blatant systemic racism. More subtle racism treats groups as “second-class citizens with regard, for instance, to higher education, to housing, to employment and especially to public... services.” Even more subtle racism is now masked in appeals to equality that guarantee that past inequalities are perpetuated by blocking corrective efforts. “At times protestations claiming that all persons should be treated equally reflect the desire to maintain a status quo that favors one race and social group at the expense of the poor and non-white.”

Social, economic, educational, and political advantages from the past are cemented as the often-unconscious privilege of the present. Thus, “Racism obscures the evils of the past and denies the burdens” that history imposes on people of color today.

Pope John Paul II maintained a four-fold personal responsibility for social evils: the very personal sins of those who cause or support evil or who exploit it; of those who are in a position to avoid, eliminate or at least limit certain social evils but who fail to do so out of laziness, fear or the conspiracy of silence, through secret complicity or indifference; of those who take refuge in the supposed impossibility of changing the world; and also of those who sidestep the effort and sacrifice required, producing specious reasons of a higher order.

Thus we can be involved in societal racism as: 1) supporters or exploiters; 2) accessories through complicity or indifference; 3) accessories through fatalistic acceptance; and 4) accessories through consecration of the status quo.

Responses to Racism

Personally, we are called to conversion—to respect the rights, dignity, equality, and sanctity of racially different individuals and groups. “This does not mean erasing cultural differences,” but “…a positive appreciation of the complementary diversity of peoples” and the distinct contributions of racial minorities to “the internal strength of our nation.” Moreover, the tradition emphasizes “respect for foreigners, acceptance of dialogue, sharing, mutual aid, and collaboration with other ethnic groups.”

Systemically, we must unmask social evil and, like prophets, denounce injustice. We must eradicate overt and covert racism. This requires solidarity with those suffering from disadvantages woven into society and our self-perceptions. For John Paul II, this solidarity is “not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people... On the contrary it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good.”

Our interdependence globally implies a moral responsibility for human development; this, Pope Benedict writes, “depends, above all, on a recognition that the human race is a single family working together in true communion, not simply a group of subjects who happen to live side by side.” For those who benefit from the express and hidden advantages of racial inequities—still continuing—the church urges honesty about the past and present so that everyone’s future will be different. “An honest look at the past makes plain the need for restitution wherever possible—makes evident the justice of restoration and redistribution.”

3. United States Catholic Bishops, Brothers and Sisters to Us, 1979, No. 39.
5. Vatican II, Lumen Gentium, No. 32.
7. Brothers and Sisters, No. 22.
8. Ibid.
10. Ibid., No. 11.
First, policy makers must confront the institutional entrenchment that perpetuates disproportionate benefits for relatively affluent whites and disproportionate burdens for people of color. For example, equity in public school funding and outcomes will not be achieved without significant changes in the established mechanisms for allocating resources and staffing, “which have become ‘normal’ and gained constituencies willing to fight to maintain their current privilege.”

Second, concerning how to produce public support for public policy, Wilson admits a change in his thinking. Previously, Wilson advocated universal programs that would appeal to all Americans, not only people of color. Now he advocates an open conversation about the relationships between race and poverty in order to convince the nation of the urgent need to address these issues directly.

Then-candidate Barack Obama’s speech on race (March 18, 2008), Wilson contends, is a model of the kind of discourse that is necessary to address the complexity of our current predicament. Obama interconnected cultural and social structural factors in a way that challenged both whites and people of color.

In that speech, Obama invited whites to acknowledge that what ails the African-American community “does not just exist in the minds of black people; that the legacy of discrimination—and current incidents of discrimination, while less overt than in the past—are real and must be addressed, not just with words, but with deeds, by investing in our schools and our communities; by enforcing our civil rights laws and ensuring fairness in our criminal justice system; by providing this generation with ladders of opportunity that were unavailable for previous generations.”

Conversely, Obama also addressed negative responses to these inequalities, including challenging black men and communities to take full responsibility for their lives and to demand more from their fathers, in order to nurture future generations “so that they can write their own destiny.”

More Than Just Race is a must read for citizens and people of faith alike. If Americans are ready for the intellectual, moral, and political transformation this scholarship invites, we may yet create socially just and racially equitable cities worthy of a democracy.

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**White Privilege and Racism: 10 Must Reads**

*By Alex Mikulich, Ph.D., JSRI Fellow*


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**CST and Race**

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**PEOPLE ON THE MOVE AND THE COMMON GOOD: MIGRATION, POVERTY, AND RACISM, CONVERGING CONCERNS FOR OUR FUTURE**

*A JSRI Conference made possible by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York*

**Wednesday, October 28**

“Trouble the Water” Viewing and Discussion with Film Protagonists (invited)
7:30 – 9:30 p.m.
Nunemaker Auditorium, Monroe Hall

**Tuesday, November 3**

Migration in the South: Emerging Trends and Critical Issues
Dr. Manuel Vásquez
7:30 p.m. – 9 p.m.
St. Charles Room
Manuel A. Vásquez, Ph.D., is an associate professor of Religion at the University of Florida and author of *The Brazilian Popular Church and the Crisis of Modernity* (1998).

**Tuesday, November 10th**

Kim Bobo
7:30 – 9 p.m.
St. Charles Room
Kim Bobo is the founder and executive director of Interfaith Worker Justice and author of *Wage Theft in America*.

**Tuesday, November 17**

Dr. Katrine Camilleri
7:30 – 9 p.m.
St. Charles Room
Katrine Camilleri is the attorney director of the legal team of Jesuit Refugee Service Malta and recipient of the 2007 Nansen Award from the United Nations Refugee Agency.

All events at Loyola University New Orleans.
The Truth and Consequences of White Privilege

This contradiction permeates U.S. life. “My white wherewithal,” explains the Protestant theologian Jim Perkinson, “is constituted in Afro- (as indeed Latino- and Filipino-, and Aboriginal-, etc.) American impoverishment. Their loss is my gain. The relationship is utterly asymmetrical and the asymmetry is utterly relational.”

Too many of us remain oblivious to the following indices of persistent racial inequality:

- On average, black males die in the U.S. at the age of 64.3 years old, often of stress-related diseases—before receiving a single dollar in social security. By contrast, white males live beyond age 74. The Institute of Medicine of the National Academies finds that racial minority patients receive a lower quality and intensity of health care and diagnostic services across a wide range of procedures and disease areas. Minority patients procure the worse outcomes in many cases.

- Although whites make up 70 percent of the U.S. population by 2042, some argue that the U.S. is “a post-racial society” of about racial sameness. Others argue that the new influx of Latinos threatens white European American culture and the nation’s political integrity. Neither view accurately describes reality.

A Post-Racial Society?

The sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva persuasively argues that the U.S. is “evolving into a complex and loosely organized triracial stratification system similar to that of many Latin American and Caribbean nations.”

Roughly stated, (see Bonilla-Silva’s full analysis), the three groups in order of relative power are 1) whites; 2) lighter skinned Latinos, and Japanese-, Korean-, Chinese-, and Middle Eastern-Americans; and 3) blacks, dark-skinned Latinos, Vietnamese, Cambodians, Filipinos, and Laotians. Although the emerging order will be more pluralistic and exhibit more racial fluidity than before, it “will serve as a formidable fortress for white supremacy.”

New forms of white racism do not depend upon the overt racism of Jim Crow. Instead, white colorblind ideology adapts four tropes or strategies to maintain privilege: 1) Utilize an abstract liberalism that rhetorically supports equal opportunity but opposes any policy to alleviate persistent inequality; 2) Explain away race by claiming it is natural; for example, segregation occurs because “everybody is attracted to people who look the same”; 3) Claim inequality is due to cultural difference, for example, “Mexicans don’t value education as much as Japanese”; and 4) Minimize racial consequences by arguing, “It’s past—get over it.”

White use these tropes consciously or not to form an ideological wall that may be more difficult to dismantle than Jim Crow.
This ideological wall becomes impenetrable by employing a safe, colorblind way to state racial views without appearing to be irrational or overtly racist. The wall is further reinforced as whites adapt the four tropes, often in tandem, to project racial innocence and avoid the absolutism of Jim Crow.

A deeper irony for whites concerns how we dehumanize ourselves as we collectively deny complicity in racial oppression. Most whites have yet to explore the profound damage racism has done to us and the way we need people of color to become authentically human. As both Reinhold Niebuhr and Catholic social teaching recognize, there is a way beyond American irony through two wells of transformation: God’s love and those whom we oppress. Dare we drink from these wells?

4 Ibid., Church and Racism, No. 18.
17 Samuel P. Huntington, Who Are We?: The Challenges to America’s National Identity (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005).
18 Ibid., Racism without Racists, p.179.
19 Ibid.

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Got Privilege?—Continued from page 7