



Combating the Pandemic of Racism: Lasallian education in times of turmoil



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This is a historic moment in our world.

We are facing a pandemic within a pandemic within a pandemic: COVID-19, a global economic crisis, and systemic racism. In reaction to George Floyd's 21st century lynching in May in Minneapolis, a wave of public outrage mobilized millions of people in anti-racist protests. Their shouts and slogans became a clarion call for systemic social transformation of a scope and scale unseen in decades around the United States, and indeed, the world.

These protests arrive at a moment when many people are hungry to end the moral pandemic of systemic, interlocking injustices: racism, poverty, ecological devastation, militarism, and the bankrupt moral narrative of religious nationalism that ignores these injustices. They arrive at a moment when many aspire to broaden the quest for human freedom, human dignity, and a political life in which all peoples can flourish.

As we heard in the *Lasallian Dialogue on Racism: A Global Pandemic* sponsored by the International Association of La Salle Universities (IALU), systemic racism is not just a problem in the United States; it is not just isolated incidents in Louisville, Ferguson, and Rochester. Race and racism are shared legacies around the globe.

Say their names.

Jose Caicedo, a 15-year old black Colombian.

Domingo Choc, a 56-year old indigenous Guatemalan.

Joyce Clarke, a 29-year old Aborigine in Australia.

Falikou Coulibaly, 33-year old Ivorian in Tunisia.

Eishia Hudson, a 16-year old indigenous Canadian.

Nathaniel Jules, a 16-year old South African of mixed heritage.

Masonda Ketanda Olivier, 24-year old Congolese national in India.

Joao Pedro Mattos, a 14-year old black Brazilian.

Adama Traore, a 24-year old French black man.

Stop killing us.

While racial violence at the hands of police or vigilante groups is all too common, long-standing structural racism affects the human dignity and human rights of darker-skinned and indigenous peoples in myriad other ways, including inequities in education, employment, housing, and health care. In countries where many dismiss racism as a U.S. problem, George Floyd's murder has sparked a long-delayed critical self-reflection.

Mexico is a case in point. *Americas Quarterly* reports "Government and independent studies show that socioeconomic outcomes in Mexico do indeed correlate to skin tone."¹ Quoting a 2019 Oxfam report, the article continues: "35% of Mexicans who self-identify as dark skinned and 72% of those who speak an indigenous language fall in the bottom quartile of an index that measures occupational, educational and economic indicators."² Likewise, in a report by Vanderbilt University, the data reveals that inequality is connected to skin color—not ethnicity or socio-economic status. The study indicates that lighter skin Mexicans generally have higher incomes and better educational achievement.³ Racism remains a topic that much of the Mexican public refuses to readily acknowledge. However, since the Spanish conquest, the color line—the divide between light-skinned and dark-skinned persons—remains an acute reality.

¹ <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/mexicos-messy-reckoning-with-racism/>

² <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/mexicos-messy-reckoning-with-racism/>

³ <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/news/121317.mexico-theconversation.pdf>

Like the U.S., Brazil created its own Jim Crow racial discrimination laws that favored white people. Brazilian activists claim that anti-Black police violence is “part of a necropolitics which aims to destroy black bodies.”⁴ Clearly, anti-blackness violence is at pandemic levels. *Americas Quarterly* observes: “Only in the state of Rio de Janeiro, police killed 1,810 people – roughly five per day, and almost twice the number of police killings documented in the entire United States. 80% of the people killed by Rio’s police in the first half of 2019 were black [persons].”⁵ This notion of necropolitics, a term coined by the Cameroonian intellectual Achille Mbembe, captures a range of inequities besides the police brutality affecting dark-hued people in Brazil. Black Brazilians also experience inequities in housing, employment, education, health, and civil rights.

The U.S. and other countries around the world are in the depths of anguish and despair, what Martin Luther King, Jr. calls, “the disjointed elements of reality.” For King, these disjointed elements constitute humanity’s turn away from the vision and social hopes of the prophetic Hebrew literature and the gospel of Jesus, which instructs us to unleash “the transformative faculty of unyielding, unpretentious, and unbounded love.” It is a call to bind humanity into a single garment, an inescapable network of mutuality, to create the “beloved community.”⁶ King understands and embraces the ethic of love grounded in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 5:43-45 (NRSV): “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.”

So what, ultimately, causes race and racism as an organizing principle of the world, undermining humanity’s capacity to build the beloved community?

The answer lies in what the great African American sociologist and civil rights activist W.E.B. Du Bois asserted at the opening of the 20th century : “The problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line.”⁷ While writing thirty-eight years after the end of slavery in the U.S., this analysis remains “desperately relevant today” as the fumes and odors of race and racism, that is, the problem of the color line, continue to wreak havoc on humanity in the 21st century.

Somatic therapist and author of *My Grandmother’s Hands*, Resmaa Menakem, uncovers a deeper layer of the race and racism under which we live. “[W]e have ingested the idea that the white body is the supreme standard of humanity,”⁸ he writes. “While we see anger and violence in the streets of

⁴ <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/why-americas-protests-resonate-so-deeply-in-brazil/>

⁵ <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/why-americas-protests-resonate-so-deeply-in-brazil/>

⁶ <http://www.theafricanamericanlectionary.org/PopupLectionaryReading.asp?LRID=307>

⁷ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, “Of the Dawn of Freedom” (New Haven: First Yale University Press Edition, 2015), 12.

⁸ <https://compassioncenter.arizona.edu/podcast/resmaa-menakem>.

our country, the real battlefield is inside [all of] our bodies, [of every color].” He continues: “If we are to survive as a country, it is inside our bodies where this conflict needs to be resolved”; that “the vital force [behind] white supremacy is in our nervous systems.”⁹

Menakem opens our eyes to questions about white body supremacy often left unexamined. He draws attention to the need for white bodies to deal with the uncomfortableness of confronting white body supremacy—it is a culture that wounds—and begin *somatically* abolishing it. It does not matter if a person of white is a progressive or devout racist. At the same time, people of color have to interrogate themselves. Menakem posits people of color “have ingested the idea that the white body is the supreme standard of humanity. [E]ven within our own cultures, across cultures, across communities of color, there is anti-blackness that’s woven into things.”¹⁰ In other words, white body supremacy induces people of color to damage people of color.

One aspect of this damage often set aside and unresolved is colorism—a prejudicial or preferential treatment among Black and other people of color (white people, too) that favors a lighter-skinned person of color rather than a darker-skinned person of color. The childhood experiences of Kimberly Jade Norwood, a Professor of Law at Washington University (she is a darker-hued woman while her mother was lighter-skinned), illumines our understanding:

“I grew up to understand that the color hierarchy was simply the way of the world. I would eventually marry and have children of my own. And through those children, I would again see colorism grow and sting. I saw in my male children a preference for white over black. My girls watched boys make choices based on skin color and hair length and texture. I listened to their friends and observed the interplay in their social interactions. I watched school plays with Black children playing roles but almost never Black children with my skin color.”¹¹

If we are to reckon with the global pandemic of race and racism, we cannot pretend we do not see color because “it results in a divisive society.... It [wreaks] havoc within families. It challenges friendships....it actually feeds stereotypes, tensions, bigotry and hate. The purported blindness to color hurts; it harms; it kills. We cannot begin to detangle this problem if we won’t recognize it.”¹²

If you do not understand this truth about the effects of white body supremacy, everything about the racial reckoning in your country and in our world will confuse you. Everything about examining race, racism and the consequent trauma will confuse you. White body supremacy will seem merely incidental as opposed to foundational, in the marrow of the human condition.

Breathe.

⁹ <https://onbeing.org/programs/resmaa-menakem-notice-the-rage-notice-the-silence/>.

¹⁰ <https://compassioncenter.arizona.edu/podcast/resmaa-menakem>.

¹¹ https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1547&context=law_globalstudies (586-87).

¹² https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1547&context=law_globalstudies (606-07)

How, then, do we, Lasallians, move from confusion to moral and spiritual renewal to fix our individual and the collective human condition?

Speaking for God, let us listen to and meditate on these words of the prophet Amos in Chapter 5 of *The Message Bible*:

Seek good and not evil –
and live!
Hate evil and love good,
then work it out in the public square.

Do you know what I want?
I want justice—oceans of it.
I want fairness—rivers of it.
That’s what I want. That’s all I want.¹³

In these troubled times, Lasallians must not only bear witness to a different way of being in the world, but also reveal the willful ignorance about how our own choices make racism possible and keep the pandemic of racism – a social sin – alive. We must continue to discern how to define and shape what the future should be: anti-racist, a community of persons all of equal dignity, committed to each other’s flourishing, bound together to achieve Ubuntu, the Southern African expression that means, “I am, because you are.”

Drawing from the wellspring of the founding story, Lasallian association calls us to remain united—*Indivisa Manent*—for the mission of Lasallian education in our times. Saint John Baptist de La Salle and his first Brothers gave birth to association, which—to this day—draws from the deep wells of their encounter with the Holy Spirit. The foundational motivation of De La Salle and his Brothers was to establish Christian schools as a sign of the reign of God here and now and as a means of salvation.

Salvation is both a human reality and a religious concept rooted in hope. De La Salle posits that God’s will is that everyone be saved. Here, Brother Luke Salm, FSC, theologian-educator,

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¹³ *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*, Catholic/Ecumenical Edition, verses 7-9, 13-15, 21-24, 1513-1514)

interrogates the notion of salvation at the heart of Lasallian education: salvation means wholeness that involves all our being. The Lasallian perspective is salvation from “failure and disintegration of every kind” and to promote “health instead of sickness, knowledge instead of ignorance ... relationship instead of loneliness . . . justice instead of injustice . . . love instead of hate.”¹⁴ *The Declaration on the Lasallian Educational Mission* further articulates our educational perspective: “build societies where peace, equity, social justice, civic participation, the raising up of common dreams, and respect for freedom and differences are possible”¹⁵ These values and commitments are central to our identity.

Our values and ideals are neither bound by time nor bound by social location. Hence, Lasallians must reflect on our failures to demonstrate visibly our commitment to dismantle structures of white supremacy and privilege that encode race and racism in the fabric of our Lasallian educational institutions and society. We must undertake a critical inventory of self and institutions to recollect how we perpetuate racial inequities, and give witness to what the biblical vision of justice looks like in which none is “no longer strangers and aliens...” (*Letter of Paul to the Ephesians, 2:19 NRSV*). As Socrates said, “the unexamined life is not worth living.”

In this difficult time in our history, political leaders and ordinary citizens need to heed the ancient wisdom of the Hebrew prophet Zechariah: take inventory of yourself and community. Publicly own the deep wounds and painful consequences of oppression and suffering in the land. The writer and social critic James Baldwin accordingly observe: “To accept one’s past –one’s history—is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it.”¹⁶ “To do your first works over means to reexamine everything. Go back to where you started, or as far back as you can, examine all of it, travel your road again and tell the truth about it.”¹⁷

Lasallian education must provide young people and adults entrusted to our educational care with the prophetic sensibility of Brother Superior General John Johnston, FSC, who calls us to be indignant like Jesus about human beings suffering under the weight of social imbalance. Let us provide those entrusted to our educational care with Martin Luther King, Jr.’s prophetic quest to become not just a Good Samaritan; rather, the quest is to become an agent who *transforms* the Jericho Roads of life so no one is terrorized, traumatized or demonized by other human beings. King’s hope is that the Jericho Roads of life become safe for everybody.

¹⁴ “Together for Mission,” *AXIS Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 7, no. 2, 2016.

¹⁵ *The Declaration on the Lasallian Educational Mission* (Rome: Generalate of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2020), 122.

¹⁶ Eddie, S. Glaude, Jr., *Begin Again: James Baldwin’s America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own*, (New York: Crown, 2020), 26.

¹⁷ Glaude, 196.

To achieve these ends, Lasallian education must move from a “pleasant poetics of charity” to a “prophetic praxis of hope”—it is a perspective of “constructing a new pathway of reversal through a conscious counter-witnessing” to the pandemic of racism.¹⁸ Embodying this ethic opens up the possibility to create a movement that enacts transformational justice, that is to say, a movement that brings about the fruits of the reign of God.

I conclude with three points in the spirit of the Trinitarian dimension of Lasallian spirituality.

First, be uncomfortable. Rev. Bryan Massingale, a Professor of Applied Christian Ethics, points out that white people find the term white supremacy an even greater stumbling block than white privilege. He asserts: “Understand the difference between being uncomfortable and being threatened. There is no way to tell the truth about race in this country without white people becoming uncomfortable. Because the plain truth is that if it were up to people of color, racism would have been resolved, over and done, a long time ago. The only reason for racism’s persistence is that white people continue to benefit from it.”¹⁹

Second, witness courage. Discover in yourself that you can act. Courage is the great enduring virtue that allows one to realize other virtues such as love, hope and faith. Courage requires knowledge that transforms who you are. Professor of Religion and African American Studies Eddie Glaude maintains: “We have to find the courage to confront honestly the lies that rest in us, if we are to dismantle structural racism.”²⁰ To create a different world, says Massingale, “We must learn how this one came to be. And unlearn what we previously took for granted.”²¹

To undo the “skillful miseducation” about Black, Brown and indigenous peoples, Lasallian educators ought to embrace what the ancient Greeks called *paideia*—deep education, not mere schooling. If we are to amplify our participation in justice creation, there is warrant for Lasallian education to adopt a critical pedagogy—a discourse of educated hope and possibility— across the curriculum and co-curriculum of each of our schools, universities, and other centers of education.

An observation and question posed by a participant from Singapore in the IALU dialogue foregrounds the critical discourse to consider: “I’m thinking about the collusion of Christianity with white supremacy and imperialism in its understanding of mission. In this regard, how can we begin to confront whiteness in our own Lasallian tradition that has its beginnings in France? Have we begun to think about what decolonizing the Lasallian tradition look like?” These questions invite Lasallian educators to engage in this sociocultural discourse with scholars and activists inside and outside the Lasallian field of education. There are individuals and institutions already on this journey

¹⁸ “Racism, the Church, and Healing for a shattered World,” Stan Chu Ilo, Pan-African Catholic Theological and Pastoral Network, June 23, 2020.

¹⁹ <https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/assumptions-white-privilege-and-what-we-can-do-about-it>

²⁰ Glaude, 143.

²¹ <https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/assumptions-white-privilege-and-what-we-can-do-about-it>.

to rethink, reimagine, and reconstruct curriculum. Here, I share three resources as a base for probing decolonizing the curriculum and history:

- www.brynmawr.edu/tli/syllabusdesign/theprocess
- www.dukeupress.edu/decolonizing-native-histories
- www.cmu.edu/cas/initiatives/narrative-initiative/decolonized-futures.html

Third, remain committed for the long haul. The struggle for justice and the struggle for peace is a long-distance run. Find a way to rest “because this battle of ours isn’t going to end soon.”²² We have a summons to become prisoners of prophetic hope, declares the prophet Zechariah. Consequently, our exacting task is to keep track of not only our wounds and suffering, but also our strengths and our tremendous possibilities for coming together to take decisive steps as communities of struggle and hope “toward widening and strengthening human democracy.”²³ If we are to rid the world of the problem of race and racism, it is by first ridding our bodies of this contagious evil.

²² Glaude, 142.

²³ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935).