

Racism as Soul Sickness: Interview with Bryan Massingale

November 27, 2017

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BY [BILL MCCORMICK, S.J.](#) | November 27, 2017

Editor's note: Bill McCormick, S.J., sat down with Father Bryan Massingale, professor of theology at [Fordham University](#) and priest of the [Archdiocese of Milwaukee](#), at the [20th Ignatian Family Teach-In for Justice, Rowing into the Deep: Magis Meets Justice](#), where he gave a soaring [keynote](#) address on race and America. This conversation is a continuation of Part 1, [published by ISN on November 16, 2017](#). This portion of the conversation was [originally published](#) by The Jesuit Post on November 20, 2017.



Fr. Bryan Massingale at the 2017 Ignatian Family Teach-In for Justice.

Photo courtesy Antonio De Loera-Brust/America Media.

You offer a challenging vision of the *magis* that pulls us beyond ourselves and beyond our comfort zone. How would it challenge us on race?

I have recently begun thinking about racism as a soul sickness. We can talk about racism as a political issue, as a sociological phenomenon, but for me, as a faith-based scholar and activist, I understand racism as a soul sickness. It's that profound warping of the human spirit that enables us to create communities that favor one racial group, white people, over darker skinned people. By creating an inner spirit that's indifferent. So even if white people aren't deliberately racist, they're not using the "N" word, they're not actively discriminating. We become complacent or indifferent to what's going on in our society. We don't know, and we don't want to know. And that's a shriveling of the human spirit. So if racism at its core is a soul sickness, then we need to provide a remedy that can reach the inner reaches of the human spirit.

I think for so long we tried to address racism with rational arguments. We simply give people the facts. Give them the information. Then something magical's going to happen. But I think that racism is something that malforms us. I think of racism as a formation system.

It tries to form an identity. And I think racism in America forms us into false identities. So it's not a matter of things that we do that are wrong; we're formed in a way of looking at the world, which in some cases keeps us from seeing the injustice that's there. And so we need not just change policies, but we change policies without changing a malformed identity, that malformed identity's going to find new ways of expression and that's where spiritual concepts like the *Magis* can be very helpful. Not in terms of dictating public policy, but in terms of forming, correcting our malformed identities so we can be open, then, to the more creative public policies that need to be in place.

“Racism in America forms us into false identities... which in some cases keeps us from seeing the injustice that’s there.”-Fr. Bryan Massingale

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Where does the soul sickness come from?

I wish I knew the answer to that.

I’ve often thought about this, that the opposite of love isn’t hate. The opposite of love is fear. And I think what’s happened in America is that many white people lack the empathy or resist the empathy that would call to change because they fear what that change might look like. It’s kind of akin... let’s take it out of the realm of race for a moment. We know about ecological irresponsibility and we hear the fact that the Earth cannot sustain everyone on the planet living the way Americans do.

And it calls us to very fearful types of choices. And I think that because we’ve never had a racially just society, if we did it’s going to call for us to live in ways that we’re not accustomed to. I think many white people, if they’re honest with themselves, they realize, they know that the playing field isn’t level. They have an understanding of that. But then they fear, “okay, what does it mean if we level the playing field? Where does that leave me?”

And that is a really painful realization to come to. And a fearful realization to come to. Because if I really accept that as true, then I can’t live at peace with the way things are. And that’s going to call me to live in ways that I can’t even imagine what that’s going to look like and what that’s going to feel like. I think it’s that fear that holds us back, and it’s the genesis of the soul sickness.

Another thing I find challenging and hopeful in your book, [Racial Justice and the Catholic Church](#), is the need for lamentation.

Yes, because I think lamentation is the response that happens when you realize how broken the world is and all you can do is grieve and rage. The

inspiration for that came from something I remember reading about Apartheid South Africa. During Apartheid South Africa one of the few times that blacks and whites could be together on a quasi-integrated basis was at funerals.

Especially for... what happened at funerals for activists who were killed for protesting Apartheid brought whites and blacks together, and together they could mourn and they could grieve. And they became situations of mourning and grieving and protest not simply at the loss of life, but at the whole situation of injustice. And so you had people from both the socially advantaged, the racially advantaged, and the racially disadvantaged coming together. And what could unite them both was their common grief, their common lament. These protests, these funerals became catalysts for resistance because it gave people the visceral strength and energy to continue in a struggle despite the pain and despite the risks and despite the dangers. And it becomes ways for white South Africans to say that “I am not going to define myself the way my society has defined me. And I can grieve over the social injustice that makes me more privileged than others and it gives me the energy, then to continue to protest and to work against that system.”

And so lament, again, is not something that's rational or intellectual. It's much deeper than that. It gives you the passion to continue to work for a justice that will take you into places that you can't even imagine. It makes you realize, “this is not right. This is not right and I am not going to let my society define the limits of my convictions and my values and my faith.” And both groups can be brought together over a common lament and grief. Even though they are in different social situations and they are defined different racially, but this becomes the common space then. Where they can work together to change a system which is harming both of them. But harming them in different ways.

“[Lamentation] gives you the passion to continue to work for a justice that will take you into places that you can't even imagine.” -Fr. Bryan Massingale

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Do you see spaces for lamentation in the United States?

There haven't been yet. You know, the closest analog to this is what happened at Georgetown with the apology over Georgetown and the Jesuits' complicity in the sale of 272 African men, women and children slaves. I remember being in my office at Fordham, and I watched the whole thing on Livestream. In that moment, in that whole prayer experience, you had a model for lament in that you had honest recognition and accounting and responsibility, you had the descendants of the enslaved community present, and you had a real acknowledgment that there was a real, not just injustice, but a real evil that was done.

And it was a ceremony that was not... it wasn't an uplifting or joyful ceremony. It was at times painful, and yet it was also a tone of hope that this could be the basis for a new beginning. Not a pretty type package and now it's over, but this is the basis for a new beginning. As I said, I sat in my office, and I was almost dumbfounded. I couldn't believe I was hearing what I was hearing. I thought I would never hear a group of largely American, white men come to the insight of admitting that "we were wrong. We did great harm. We're sorry, and we know that nothing we can do can undo that, but with you, the descendant community, we want to move forward. But we're not going to tell you how that's going to be done. We want to walk with you and learn from you how we do that." That can be a tremendous model for what needs to happen not only in the Catholic Church and other places, but in our nation.

And my hope and prayer is that the Society of Jesus continues and becomes a real trailblazer in pointing the way for what genuine lament and further steps can be. That we can be a model then for not only what the Catholic community needs to do to really come to grips with this horrible evil of racism, but that we can also then be a model for the rest of society.

Amen.

It is beautiful. So what I'm thinking is that. These are the things we're doing. They're not public policy things, but they're the things that have to happen if we're going to implement better the policies that we do have and we're going to create better public policies and institutional practices. But we've got to be moved and have our hearts cracked open, and that's what happened during that Stations of the Cross service. And that's what I think happened at Georgetown. It wasn't perfect by any means. But it was certainly the most forthright effort that I've seen to date in the Catholic Church.

It's clear, Father Massingale, you have a clear sense of mission and a vocation to this priestly life you live for justice.

I think, again, the narrative we can get trapped in is to think, "it can never change." Or it's going to be hopeless, or there's no way out. And I don't believe that. I believe that every generation has its own challenges, and so, our hope is to pass the baton on and have you guys do it. The fact that you're doing this media thing, which I don't always understand. I'm not on social media at all. But you're using it, you're creating this platform by which the message of Gospel can reach other people in different ways. And that gives me a great deal of hope. So thank you.

[Bill McCormick, S.J.](#)

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