

JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

TRUTH IN LOVE

More Alike Than Different

By Parris J. Baker
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Editor's note: Following is the last of a three-part series on Catholic social teaching and Black Liberation Theology.

When you think of Catholic Social Teaching and Black Liberation Theology you might erroneously conclude that these religious philosophies have little in common. You would be wrong. Just as our group discovered, we are more alike than different, and so it is with Catholic Social Teaching and Black Liberation Theology. In both constructs, Catholic Social Teaching and Black Liberation Theology, recognition of the inherent dignity and worth of every human being, created in the image of God, is paramount.

The task of Christian theology, according to James Cone, is to analyze the meaning of hope in God in such a way that the oppressed community of a given society will risk everything to achieve earthly freedom – freedom made possible in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Therefore, liberation, from the spiritual condition of sin and social condition of slavery and oppression, becomes a central identifying theme.

The concept of liberation and freedom is fundamental to understanding the worldview of each theology. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., himself a black liberation theologian, asserted in his 1963 Letter from a Birmingham Jail, “We will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom.”

Each doctrine originates from Old Testament scriptures that present Hebrew prophets, such as Moses, Ezekiel, Amos, Isaiah, and Micah, as embassies who proclaimed God's special love for and identification with the poor, powerless, and oppressed. This identification with the oppressed is revealed in the life, words, and purpose of Jesus Christ recorded in Luke 4:18:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, Because He has anointed Me to preach the good news to the poor. He has sent Me to announce release (pardon, forgiveness) to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed (downtrodden, bruised, crushed by tragedy).

The demand that Christ the Liberator imposes on all men *requires* all Black people to affirm their full dignity as persons and all whites to surrender their presumptions of superiority and abuses of power. Liberation theology does not ask what the church is, but seeks to answer the question: "What does it mean to be the church in the context of liberating the poor and the oppressed?"

It is vital that religious leaders begin to bridge the gap between the true purpose of Jesus and Christianity, as revealed in the scriptures and our socially influenced and racialized Christianity. Though difficult to pronounce correctly, the supposition of *rapprochement* (pronounced raw-proSh-mant) differs meaningfully from its synonym reconciliation. Reconciliation, defined biblically, is the process of two alienated groups (enemies) coming together to establish peaceful relations through cultural pluralism or coexistence. *Rapprochement* moves beyond the establishment or resumption of harmonious, peaceful relations. The idea of *rapprochement* is the amalgamation of entities to form one new organization. The Body of Christ represents the amalgamation of God and redeemed humanity.

One way to visualize the integrating Catholic Social Teaching and Black Liberation Theology is to think of making a cake. Whether it is angel food cake or devil's food cake, the concept of *rapprochement* is analogous to making a cake from scratch. Though all the major individual ingredients are present: flour, sugar, salt, eggs, baking powder, and cocoa or vanilla extract, they do not become a cake until all the ingredients are combined or amalgamated in such a way as to form a cake. The bridge to racial *rapprochement* will be discovered when theologians, clerics, and religious educators devote serious attention to the spiritual attributes that bind us together rather than debate the differences (race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and political affiliation) that create barriers that separate us.



To address the rapid changes in society, due primarily to the impact of the Industrial Revolution, Pope Leo XIII wrote the encyclical, “Rerum Novarum: Rights and Duties of Capital and Labor.” Written in 1891, it provided an alternate way, a Catholic approach to addressing poverty, pauperism, the defense of the worker, and the rejection of the communist teachings of Marxism.

Catholic Social Teaching is based on the commitment of the church to the poor, similarly to the commitment Jesus had with the poor and the oppressed, expressed in Luke 4:18. Stephen Colecchi^[1], director of the International Justice and Peace of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, affirms the writings of the Catechism of the Catholic Church: “The church’s social teaching comprises a body of doctrine, which is articulated as the church interprets events in the course of history, with the assistance of the Holy Spirit.” (#2422) The rich tradition of Catholic Social Teaching is “always living and active.” (#2421) Sadly, most Catholics are unaware of the Catholic social doctrine because it is not shared regularly in religious education programs at all levels nor is it presented consistently in liturgies, homilies, public discourse, or among congregants.

At the heart of the modern-day Catholic social tradition are the following seven themes:

Seven Themes of Catholic Social Teaching

1. Life and Dignity of the Human Person
2. Call to Family, Community, and Participation
3. Rights and Responsibilities
4. Option for the Poor Vulnerable
5. The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers
6. Solidarity
7. Care for God’s Creation

Black Theology, as defined by the Committee on Theological Prospectus and adopted by the National Committee of Black Churchmen on June 13, 1969, reads:

Black Theology is the theology of liberation. It seeks to plumb the black condition in the light of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, so that the Black community can see that the gospel is commensurate with the achievement of Black humanity. Black theology is the theology of ‘blackness.’ It is the affirmation of Black humanity that emancipates Black people from white racism, thus providing authentic freedom for both white and Black people.

It affirms the humanity of white people in that it says 'no' to the encroachment of white oppression.

The message of liberation is the revelation of God as revealed in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Freedom is the gospel. Jesus is the Liberator! The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord (Luke 4: 18-19). Thus, the Black patriarchs and we ourselves know this reality despite all attempts of the white church to obscure it and to utilize Christianity as a means to enslaving Blacks. The demand that Christ the Liberator imposes on all men requires all blacks to affirm their full dignity as persons and all whites to surrender their presumptions of superiority and abuses of power.



James Cone, considered that father of Black Liberation Theology, believed the need for Black theology is rooted in our essential understanding that God is not color-blind nor is he aloof or separated from the sufferings of Black people. To define the purpose and function of Christianity in isolation from the Black social conditions and experiences was to reinforce a Eurocentric theology of white oppression. The centrality of the Black experience cannot be absent for Christian theology.

Cone asserts that God is for Black people because he is the God of the oppressed. Black Liberation Theology reinterprets the person of Jesus Christ in the light of liberation of Black people. You cannot separate theology from the people it serves, according to Cone. Black theology emerged because Black clergy began to reimagine Christianity from the perspective of the Black struggle for liberation in America.

Black Catholic priests began to express, in tone, substance and reported experiences, the ideas and sentiments of Black Liberation Theology.

Assumptions of Black Liberation Theology

Black Liberation Theology is not a traditional theory with a set of plausible assumptions and explanatory or predictive propositions. Nor is it a scientific, sociological, or theological model in which a set of ordered data, stages, or steps can be arranged to offer a visible representation of a theory in which hypotheses or postulations can be evaluated. It is a theological framework that is useful for observing historical and contemporary Christianity and the role of the Christian

Church in the liberation of the poor and the oppressed. Below are the basic assumptions of Black Liberation Theology:

1. God acts on behalf of the oppressed.
2. Black Liberation Theology is rooted in Black power and the liberation of Black people.
3. The core values of Black Liberation Theology are self-determination, autonomy, racial affirmation and pride, social justice, and economic and political efficacy.
4. That Jesus is Black and viewed as a Liberator of Black people.

Black Liberation Theology is the reasonable, logical, and expected ideology in which one reflects on how Black people would free themselves from white enslavement and their oppressive institutional practices. To reflect on the institution of slavery and the subjugation, oppression, control, segregation, and discrimination of enslaved Black people, without the use of barbaric and abusive power, is either naïve or willfully ignorant. The entire ecology of Black people was a space of total rule by white people – from the violent capture and enslavement of Africans to forced separation and dissolution of families and tribes, slave trips, and plantations. Therefore, it is equally naïve to imagine the liberation of Black people from slave owners, who were determined to maintain the institutions of slavery without the creation and use of Black power. Fredrick Douglass helps us to better understand the necessity of Black power:

If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.[2]

Kairos Moment for the Catholic Church

In the United States it is estimated that 52 million adults identify as Catholic and of that number about three million adults (5.7%) are Black Catholics.[3] Faced once again with a Kairos moment – a special time or the right opportune moment – the United States Catholic Church can make significant advancements in race relations within its Catholic communities and among its Christian brothers and sisters. Catholic Social Teaching can be used to prioritize the reduction and elimination of racism. In 1984, ten Black bishops of the United States wrote, “What We Have Seen and Heard,” a pastoral letter on Evangelization from the Black bishops of the United States. Below are excerpts of relevant segments of the pastoral letter:

We, the 10 Black bishops of the United States, chosen from among you to serve the people of God, are a significant sign among many other signs that the Catholic community in the American church has now come of age. ... We write to you, Black brothers and sisters, because each one of us is called to a special task. The Holy Spirit now calls us all to the work of evangelization.

When we as Black Catholics speak of missionaries, we shall never forget the devoted service that many white priests, vowed religious, and laypersons gave to us as a people and still give to us today. ... We shall remember and never forget that this ministry was often given at great personal sacrifice and hardship.

We remember, especially, that those of us who have grown up in the faith owe this faith to the Black men and women who have gone before us, strong in the faith and steadfast in their personal conviction. If we have reached adulthood in the fullness of the age of Christ, it is most of all thanks to our fathers and mothers and all our ancestors who kept alive an unflagging commitment to Christ and his church throughout the bitter days of slavery and the troubled times of segregation.

We thank God for the gifts of our Catholic faith, and we give thanks for the gifts of our Blackness. ... African American spirituality is based on the sacred scriptures. In the dark days of slavery, reading was forbidden, but for our ancestors the Bible was never a closed book. ... God will lead his people from the bondage of Egypt. God will preserve his children in the midst of the fiery furnace. ... For Black people the story is our story; the Bible promise is our hope ... and the good news of the Gospel has been enmeshed in our past of oppression and pain. ... The good news of the Gospel is the message of liberation.

The historical roots of Black America and those of Catholic America are intimately intertwined. ... We are victims of oppression and racism, and like them we are fighters for the same freedom and dignity. ... Unhappily, we must acknowledge that the major hinderance to the full development of Black leadership within the church is still that fact of racism. ... We, like St. John the Baptist, proclaim a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and we call on the American church to produce the fruit of repentance.

In order that this work can be carried on more fully within the Catholic tradition and at the same time be enriched by our own cultural heritage, we wish to recall the essential qualities that should be found in a liturgical celebration within the Black Catholic community. It should be authentically Black. It should be truly Catholic. And it should be well prepared and well executed.

Currently, the Catholic Church has six Black Catholics in the United States under formal consideration for canonization or sainthood:

Candidates for Sainthood

1. Venerable Pierre Toussaint (1766-1853)
2. Servant of God Mary Lange (1784-1882)
3. Venerable Henriette Delille (1812-1862)
4. Servant of God Julia Greeley (1833/48-1918)
5. Venerable Augustus Tolton (1854-1897)
6. Servant of God Thea Bowman (1937-1990)

In 2018, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops wrote “Open Wide Our Hearts, an Enduring Call to Love, A Pastoral Letter Against Racism.”^[4] The bishops stated:

What is needed, and what we are calling for, is a genuine conversion of heart, a conversion that will compel change, and the reform of our institutions and society. Conversion is a long road to travel for the individual. Moving our nation to a full realization of the promise of liberty, equality, and justice for all is even more challenging. However, in Christ we can find the strength and the grace necessary to make that journey.

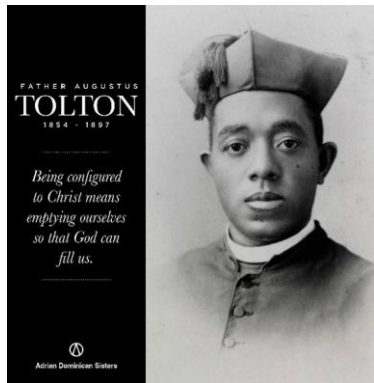
Examining our sinfulness – individually, as the Christian community, and as a society – is a humbling experience. Only from a place of humility can we look honestly at past failures, ask for forgiveness, and move toward healing and reconciliation. This requires us to acknowledge sinful deeds and thoughts, and to ask for forgiveness. The truth is that the sons and daughters of the Catholic Church have been complicit in the evil of racism.

Therefore we, the Catholic bishops in the United States, acknowledge the many times when the church has failed to live as Christ taught – to love our brothers and sisters. Thirty-four acts of racism have been committed by leaders and members of the Catholic Church – by bishops, clergy, religious, and laity – and her institutions. We express deep sorrow and regret for them. We also acknowledge those instances when we have not done enough or stood by silently when grave acts of injustice were committed. We ask for forgiveness from all who have been harmed by these sins committed in the past or in the present.

The canonization of the first African American saint would serve as an essential ecclesiastical event to move the Catholic Church forward on the journey to racial rapprochement.

Most recently elevated to the status of Venerable by Pope Francis in 2019, Augustus Tolton (1854-1897) was born to enslaved parents, baptized Catholic and

tutored by priests and nuns. Due to overt racism and racial segregation, Tolton did not regularly attend Catholic schools. After his high school graduation, Tolton attempted to enroll in seminary to study for the priesthood. However, no seminaries in the U.S. would accept him. Tolton was accepted into the Urbanum Collegium de Propaganda Fide in Rome and ordained to the priesthood on April 24, 1886, after years of failed attempts for enrollment in America.



When confirmed by Cardinal Giovanni Simeoni, Father Augustus Tolton believed he would receive a missionary assignment to Africa. However, Cardinal Simeoni directed Father Tolton to return to the United States, with this challenge: “America has been called the most enlightened nation. We will see if it deserves the honor. If America has never seen a Negro priest, it will see one now.” Father Augustus Tolton became the first recognized Black priest in America.

Father James Healy was the first Black native-born American to be ordained a priest. However, considered white due to fair skin color, he did not acknowledge his African ancestry. Bishop Healy had two brothers who served as priests. Jesuit Father Patrick Healy, the first African American to earn a Ph.D. and the 29th president of Georgetown University, and Father Alexander Sherwood Healy, seminary professor in Boston, Massachusetts. Both Patrick and Alexander were ordained priests in Paris, France.

Suggested Readings

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