

# Unlearning Racism: The Privileged, Catholic Boomer and the Racial Divide in the United States

by Gary Umhoefer

“We didn’t start the fire. No, we didn’t light it, but we tried to fight it.”<sup>1</sup>

July 30, 1967—Milwaukee, Wisconsin, was on fire. I had turned twelve years old a couple of months earlier and lived in the same town that my immigrant German family had settled in 119 years earlier. It had been a rural farming village in the hinterlands of Waukesha County then; while there were still quite a few farms, by 1967 it had somewhat morphed into a commuter suburb on the northwest edge of the Milwaukee metropolitan area. My family of seven lived on a quiet street in one of the modest three-bedroom, one-and-a-half-bath homes that had been built in the post-WWII construction boom. We were members of a large and growing Catholic parish, and my siblings and I attended its recently expanded grade school staffed by dedicated nuns and lay teachers.

On that summer Sunday evening, a riot occurred in Milwaukee over open housing. “Anger. Arson. Gunfire. Looting. Rocks flying. Vandalism. Arrests. Blame. Calls for calm.”<sup>2</sup> My hometown was one of the suburbs that instituted a nighttime curfew to “keep the trouble from finding them.”<sup>3</sup> But I felt that my relatively tranquil world had been literally rocked and I remember my fearful, pre-adolescent mind thinking, “Please don’t let *them* come here and start my house on fire.” I had no real comprehension of what had caused this violence in Milwaukee; I simply concluded that *they* were violent and should be feared. The fire, I learned much, much later, however, had been burning for a very long time.

Gary Umhoefer retired from St. Norbert College after seventeen years as its human resources director to pursue a master’s degree in Christian Ethics. He is currently completing his last course at Catholic Theological Union.

Looking back on that vivid, personal experience, remembering my pre-adolescent fear looking southeast toward the City for a hint of flames licking the night sky, I realize that I had no understanding of the systemic and individual causes that fueled the outrage. Perhaps this was not unusual for a pre-teen, white boy in the 1960s. However, my faith formation at that point

had provided no context for me to attempt to understand it either. I recall no discussion that subsequent school year as I entered the seventh grade, and once I entered the public high school two years later I was formally done with my religious formation. If I didn’t “get” my Catholic faith by then, the common wisdom held, I wasn’t going to get it at all.

1 Billy Joel, “We Didn’t Start the Fire,” vocal performance from the album *Storm Front*, Columbia Records, 1989, compact disc.

2 Jim Stingl, “A Look Back at Milwaukee’s 1967 Riot,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, August 17, 2016, <http://www.jsonline.com/story/news/columnists/jim-stingl/2016/08/16/look-back-milwaukees-1967-riot/88825546/>.

3 Stingl, “A Look Back”

No, I didn't start the fire, but I had no way to understand its causes, much less to fight it from a Catholic perspective. My sincere and well-intentioned parochial education, which arguably could have provided a courageous and challenging opportunity to understand the racial divide of which I became so dramatically aware that summer, appeared mute. As I moved through the stages of my life journey, informing my conscience on this critical issue did not appear to be actively encouraged in the various parishes I subsequently joined.

Catholics born, as I was, between 1945 and 1965 were a part of the large post-World War II "baby boom" in the United States. These Catholic "boomers," primarily of European heritage, were educated in the tenets of the faith within an ecclesial and societal environment that was strongly racially segregated. Thus formed as children, from the ecclesial perspective today we potentially approach or already engage our retirement with a nascent or limited understanding of the Church's contemporary teaching on the racial divide in the United States. From the broader societal perspective, we are perhaps reluctant to acknowledge or even consider the ways in which being perceived as "white" has provided advantages and privileges unavailable to others.

Perhaps we didn't start the fire, but if we truly want to fight it, we need more than a squirt gun. To engage in fighting the fire of racial divide in the United States requires significant personal reflection and a larger set of adult Catholic, faith-based tools. This article will examine the ecclesial, educational, and societal contexts within which we received our foundational (and perhaps for many of us our only) structured Catholic formation; explore the concept of white privilege and its potential to inform our consciences; and propose actions that we now firmly adult Catholic boomers can consider to potentially unlearn racism and ground our lived experiences and personal engagement in our communities with a more fully nuanced personal understanding of race and the Church's teaching on the racial divide in the United States.

## **Formation: Learning about Race**

### *What We Learned About Race in General*

"Unlearning" something suggests that it was initially "learned." At least in the primary grades, the acquisition of knowledge for the boomer generation was frequently through rote memorization. We memorized the "times" tables ( $8 \times 8 = 64$ ,  $9 \times 8 = 72$ ), the two types of flowering plants (monocotyledons and dicotyledons), and the different Greek columns (Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian). Other than the cause of the American Civil War (slavery) and the Emancipation Proclamation (Abraham Lincoln's executive order of January 1, 1863), we memorized very little about race. However, while we hadn't formally memorized facts about race, we had learned something about racism. By July 1967, I had somehow learned about *them* and *us*.

This learning had potentially come from a couple of sources. First, that I personally never had a significant individual connection with anyone of a different race was certainly a significant source. Everyone I interacted with in my neighborhood, in my classroom, at my swimming lessons, and in my parish had a northern European background.

Second, my personal lack of significant connection extended to my broader social circle; there were no models for such on-going relationships in my world. My family of German origin had, since its arrival, interacted primarily with other German farm families. (While my grandmother was Irish, even she had been adopted as a child by a German couple.) The homogeneity of the farm village in Germany transferred easily to the farming communities of Wisconsin, so historically no one in my family appeared to have lived near people who were different.

Such homogeneity was structurally sanctioned and reinforced by the federal government. Journalist and Distinguished Writer in Residence at New York University Ta-Nehisi Coates notes that the U.S. government mortgage

insurance programs had actually set the stage for the housing lending industry to minimize my opportunity to have neighbors whose race was dissimilar. Founded in 1934 as part of Roosevelt's New Deal, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) had mapped out neighborhoods that it considered safe risks to insure. Such insurance was a significant catalyst for a surge in single-family home ownership in the financial uncertainty of the times. Single-family home ownership was also an important vehicle for accumulating and passing on wealth.<sup>4</sup> Coates writes:

On the maps, green areas, rated "A," indicated "in demand" neighborhoods that, as one appraiser put it, lacked "a single foreigner or Negro." These neighborhoods were considered excellent prospects for insurance. Neighborhoods where black people lived were rated "D" and were usually considered ineligible for FHA backing. They were colored in red.<sup>5</sup>

According to Coates, this governmental program "spread to the entire mortgage industry, which was already rife with racism, excluding black people from most legitimate means of obtaining a mortgage."<sup>6</sup> This meant it was unlikely that black people would obtain a mortgage and move into my hometown, onto my street of modest Cape Cod houses, which was well outside the red lines.

Lacking both interactions with anyone who was racially different and any meaningful, immediate role models of such relationships, I quietly learned within my social and familial worldview that there was little value, perhaps even disvalue, in such interactions.

#### *What We Learned About Race in the Catholic School*

Foundationally, at least until the Second Vatican Council, many boomer children were instructed in the Catholic faith with the aid of the Baltimore Catechism. Based on the learning model of rote memorization, mentioning this title frequently elicits a smiling nod and occasionally a recitation of a memorized question and answer. This catechism, initially written in 1885 (roughly twenty-two years after the Emancipation Proclamation) and revised in 1941, was a primary source for pre-Vatican II Catholic faith formation. While the 1941 revision was more coherent and clear, its substance was identical to the initial version, and it remained grounded in the cultural worldview of the late nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Number 189 in the Baltimore Catechism has this question and answer:

[Question] Which are the two great commandments that contain the whole law of God?

[Answer] The two great commandments that contain the whole law of God are: *first*, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart, and with thy whole soul, and with thy whole mind, and with thy whole strength; *second*, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.<sup>8</sup>

In later editions, the questions and answers remained consistent with this 1941 revision, however the commentary and illustrations varied. Father Bennet Kelley, the editor of the St. Joseph Baltimore Catechism first published in 1962, added this explication. "Our love must go first to God and then to all God's children, our brothers and sisters in Christ. All the other commandments simply show us in detail how we are to love God and our neighbor."<sup>9</sup>

---

4 After 30 years, in 1991 the home in which I spent my childhood sold for about five times its purchase price.

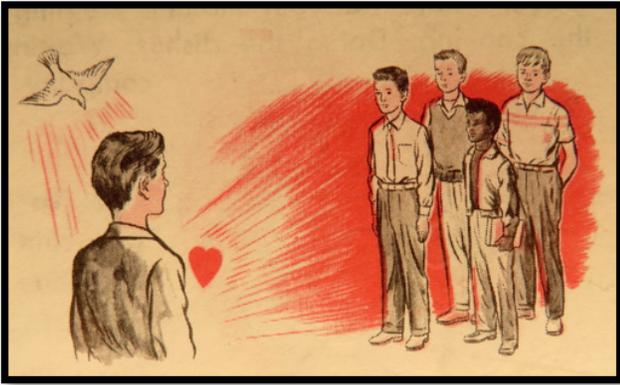
5 Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Case for Reparations," *The Atlantic*, June 2014, 58.

6 Coates, "The Case for Reparations," 58.

7 Melvin Lloyd Farrell, *Theology for Parents and Teachers* (Milwaukee: HI-TIME Publishers, 1972), 12.

8 *A Catechism of Christian Doctrine: Revised Edition of the Baltimore Catechism No. 3* (Paterson, NJ: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1949), 149.

9 Bennet Kelley, CP, *Saint Joseph Baltimore Catechism: The Truths of Our Catholic Faith Clearly Explained and Illustrated* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing, 1969), 95.



© 1969. Catholic Book Publishing. Used by permission.

This illustration is from Fr. Kelley's edition and accompanies Q/A 189. It is captioned, "The Holy Spirit helps us to love others."<sup>10</sup> Throughout this entire edition (the one used during my grade school experience) this is the *only* illustration that appears to portray a person who is not white. (It is interesting to note the diminutive stature of the significantly outnumbered black child and the implied attitude of hierarchical power from those surrounding him.) Throughout the Baltimore Catechism, this is the closest it edges to the racial divide. It is focused exclusively on the individual's requirement to love other people; question 189 and the small black boy in the small illustration in the bottom right corner of page 95 are the

only instances the racial divide is remotely presented.

Attending a Catholic day school during this period did not assist in the development of a significantly different attitude about racial matters between parochial school students and our Catholic friends enrolled in public schools who attended religious education classes.<sup>11</sup> Either way, a Catholic child during this period needed to be incredibly insightful, mature, and persistent to see in this instruction a faith-based perspective on racism. As far as understanding and fighting the fire, this really was, at best, a wet sponge.

#### *What We Learned About Race from the Catholic Church*

Of course, the Catholic Church is bigger than the parochial school or the CCD class. Of potential influence in our Catholic understanding of the racial divide were the actions of the Archdiocese, individual clergy, and documents from the bishops during this period. Patrick D. Jones, Associate Professor of History at the University of Nebraska, notes, however, that during this period the Catholic Church in Milwaukee, the diocese in which my parish was located, was not particularly active:

Because Milwaukee's black population remained relatively small until the mid-1950s, race played only a minor and occasional role in the Catholic world of Milwaukee. In general, church authorities opted for a hands-off approach to race relations, and when they did weigh in, it was usually to maintain the status quo. For most white Catholics, race, no doubt, went largely unexamined.<sup>12</sup>

Quoting a priest who had been pastor at one of Milwaukee's black parishes during the late 1960s, Jones writes, "[most Milwaukee Catholics] had no sense of social justice or that love your neighbor was just about as important as love God."<sup>13</sup> From this pastor's observation, it appears that there had been few insightful, mature, and persistent Catholic children in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee who had been able to link the Catechism's question 189 to black people.

While the Archdiocese of Milwaukee overall did not appear to actively engage in a broad concerted bridging of the racial divide among the Catholic faithful, it is important to note that there were individual vowed religious, both nuns and priests, actively engaged in this work who helped inform Catholic consciences on racism. The commit-

<sup>10</sup> Kelley, *Saint Joseph Baltimore Catechism*, 95.

<sup>11</sup> William A. Osborne, *The Segregated Covenant: Race Relations and American Catholics* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 41-42.

<sup>12</sup> Patrick D. Jones, *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 85.

<sup>13</sup> Jones, *The Selma of the North*, 85.

ment of individual pastors could profoundly affect their congregations and its young parishioners' understanding of race.

From that period, two priests were within my limited sphere of awareness—Father James Groppi and Father Francis Eschweiler. Certainly the better known was Father Groppi; however his activism for open housing and subsequent confrontational notoriety potentially retrenched white immigrant Catholics in Milwaukee who, according to Jones, “embraced a narrow and rigid traditional theology that emphasized hierarchy and tolerated little dissent.”<sup>14</sup>

Father Eschweiler, whose parish was within walking distance of my home, had been active in social justice issues for decades. He had historically engaged his congregations in informed discussion and discernment. One of the priests profiled in Catholic writer Paul Wilkes's book *These Priests Stay*, Father Eschweiler said, “[W]e'd take a problem like race relations and after carefully observing and judging on the matter the people would realize they really couldn't go on calling themselves Christians and still harbor these hatreds, and they had to do something about it.”<sup>15</sup> Likely there were others within the Archdiocese who took a similar “see-judge-act” approach with their congregations, but such an approach to understanding and acting on the racial divide was not consistently promulgated, so few of us likely experienced it within our Catholic faith formation.

Likewise, during this period the United States Catholic bishops did not provide proactive direction for the faithful on the racial divide. Following by four years the Supreme Court decision that desegregated schools, in 1958 the bishops published *Racial Discrimination and the Christian Conscience*. According to Father Bryan Massingale, Professor of Theology/Ethics at Fordham University, the statement's delay and its failure to provide specific proposals for action resulted in its having little impact. He notes, “Clearly the bishops had no intention of making this document a bold clarion call to action. Catholics were not being urged to become proactive agents of racial justice.”<sup>16</sup> Massingale more broadly asserts that, “standing against racism is not a core component of Catholic corporate identity.”<sup>17</sup>

Unless a young Catholic was in a parish whose clerical staff was personally committed and actively engaged in the quest for racial justice, the overall message of the Church during this period was not a demonstrative and challenging refutation of racial injustice. It was difficult, perhaps impossible, for the young Catholic to learn from the Church how to bridge the racial divide. It wasn't that racism was directly encouraged, but the Church's lack of prophetic and courageous challenge to racism—that racism was and is an actual refutation of Christ's call to love one another—was an endorsement of the status quo. Writing in 1967, William Audley Osborne lamented that

Catholic youth are left with no living heroes. They are not, in effect, inspired to form themselves by the Gospel. Christian character, which is the foundation of future leadership in the Church, seems to be far down on the list of priorities in diocesan education offices, if indeed it is on the list at all.<sup>18</sup>

Tragically, the Church failed its critical mission to teach; *in absentia*, it gave permission to this generation of Catholics to either passively accept, or worse actively promote, the racial divide in the United States. It failed to teach and challenge this enormous generation of Catholic boomers how to smell the smoke and fight the fire.

---

14 Jones, *The Selma of the North*, 84-85.

15 Paul Wilkes, *These Priests Stay* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), 139-40.

16 Bryan N. Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 53. Later documents by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops became increasingly direct; however, this exploration is limited to the experiences of this earlier timeframe.

17 Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, 77.

18 Osborne, *The Segregated Covenant*, 242.

## Being White Provides Significant Advantages: “I thank God I’m white.”

While it appears obvious that we did not receive a strong and explicit, faith-based grounding to acknowledge and address the racial divide, in being perceived as “white” we did absorb a strong though implicit sense of being inside, of holding a social passport that allowed us ease of movement without concern or fear, of basically having the ability to not even consider how our whiteness—which we could not control—could allow, even stoke, the fire we didn’t start. Passive acceptance was easily absorbed.

The comment of a middle-aged Midwesterner, when asked by a researcher if she thinks about her racial identity, could be reflective of many white boomers’ experience of race. After initially observing that the concept of “whiteness” generally operates outside of her consciousness, not something she thinks about, she candidly added, “I thank God I’m white because I don’t, I don’t (sic) have to go through the persecution.”<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps in our unknowing or inability to recognize the relatively privileged ease with which we are able to “live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28, New American Bible Revised Edition), we have been likewise unable to recognize the individual and structural difficulties that have confronted those not perceived as white in likewise simply living and moving and having being. We did not start the fire, but in some ways we may come to realize that we actually benefit from its selective warmth and find ourselves embarrassingly hesitant to fight it.

This structural, rather than personal, manifestation of racism is generally labeled “white privilege.” Framing this dynamic within the language of “white privilege” can certainly risk leading to a visceral and emotional disengagement. As a result, Jesuit theologian Roger Haight asserts that using such language is dysfunctional. He contends that, “it focuses the problem on whites in a negative, accusatory way without a positive, constructive, or visionary horizon.”<sup>20</sup> Haight contrasts the concept of “dismantling white privilege” with “striving for racial solidarity,” suggesting that the latter has greater appeal to “a common humanitarian interest and to Christian self-transcendence in the interest of the common good and community.”<sup>21</sup> Haight is probably accurate in his assessment, but it seems that the necessity to strive for solidarity is in direct response to systemic and perhaps unrecognized privilege; in this realm of human engagement, without privilege there would be less need to strive. It therefore seems necessary, even in its disruption and with the discomfort it causes, to use the language of privilege.

What are the advantages of being perceived as white? Very few of us have been handed our educations, our jobs, and our homes; this all required effort and not infrequently sacrifice. We have earned our place. The American belief is that if you work hard, success will follow. Certainly, work does yield rewards; however, the experience of this type of meritocracy does not have the same veracity for everyone in the United States. Peggy McIntosh, Senior Research Scientist at the Wellesley Center for Women, wrote that such a sense of pure meritocracy is unwarranted because being white in this society provides “an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks”<sup>22</sup> unavailable to those who are not white. These special provisions have silently facilitated our living and moving and being. Their invisibility to those who have access is apparent to those who do not have such access. Derald Wing Sue, Professor of Counseling at Columbia University, concurs that white privilege is “premised on the mistaken notion of individual meritocracy and deservedness

19 Andrea L. Dottolo and Abigail J. Stewart, “‘I Never Think about My Race’: Psychological Features of White Racial Identities,” *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 10, no. 1 (2013): 110.

20 Roger Haight, “The Dysfunctional Rhetoric of ‘White Privilege’ and the Need for ‘Racial Solidarity,’” in *Interrupting White Privilege: Catholic Theologians Break the Silence*, eds. Laurie M. Cassidy and Alex Mikulich (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 89.

21 Haight, “The Dysfunctional Rhetoric,” 92.

22 Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondence Through Work in Women’s Studies,” in *Privilege: A Reader*, 2nd ed., eds. Michael S. Kimmel and Abby L. Ferber (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2010), 14.

(hard work, family values, and the like) rather than favoritism; it is deeply embedded in the structural, systemic, and cultural working of the U.S. society; and it operates within an invisible veil of unspoken and protected secrecy.”<sup>23</sup> Hard work and diligence do not guarantee everyone success.

How do these invisible codes, these weightless speed passes, operate? To shine some illumination on what can be illusive, McIntosh reflected on her own experience of privilege, and provided a list of the ways in which these codes can be manifest. Among her examples:

- I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
- I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
- Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.
- I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.
- I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
- If a traffic cop pulls me over or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race.
- I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having co-workers on the job suspect that I got it because of race.
- I can choose public accommodations without fearing that people of my race cannot get in or will be mistreated in the places I have chosen.<sup>24</sup>

The invisibility of these “codebooks” once exposed can be surprising and sobering. After walking out of a store in an upper-middle-class area in suburban Pittsburgh, a black friend asked if I had noticed how disrespectfully the sales clerk had treated her compared to me. In frustration, she said that sometimes she feels the urge to go into a place like that and do some physical damage.

While I may have noticed that the clerk had spoken with me when Cheryl was clearly making the purchase, I had not noticed the underlying, unspoken “code,” though it was a code that McIntosh would have immediately identified. As I reflected at the time, however, I realized that I could only vaguely sense what my friend had experienced. Like most of us, I considered my worldview as universal. Sheryl Kujawa Holbrook, Professor of Practical Theology and Religious Education at Claremont College, comments on this phenomenon.

The human tendency to universalize our own experience notwithstanding, it is important to understand that what we value as truth, may not be perceived the same way by persons of different cultures who have their own versions of truth. For white persons, humility means that we can never really know what it means to be anyone other than a white person, and that part of the skills needed are

---

23 Derald Wing Sue, *Overcoming Our Racism: The Journey to Liberation* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 137. Also see Michael J. Monahan, “The Concept of Privilege: A Critical Appraisal,” *South African Journal of Philosophy* 33, no. 1 (2014): 74.

24 Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” in *Gender Through the Prism of Difference*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 235–38. First published in 1988, McIntosh has since expanded her list to include fifty behavioral examples that she believes evidence white privilege.

those that help us identify how to be an effective ally to people of color given our own experience, attributes, and limitations.<sup>25</sup>

Sue echoes this sentiment. “[P]eople assume universality—that everyone regardless of race, culture, ethnicity, or gender shares the nature of reality and truth. This assumption is erroneous but seldom questioned because it is firmly ingrained in our worldview.”<sup>26</sup> Perhaps I assumed that my friend Cheryl’s worldview was my worldview. Or perhaps I really had a sense that her worldview was different, but I chose not to acknowledge that difference.

To “thank God” for being white, even casually, is an acknowledgment of the privilege that comes with whiteness in American society. The irony is that such gratitude, expressed to God, is an evisceration of the Christian message we espouse. In personally considering this contradiction, Mary Elizabeth Hess, Professor of Educational Leadership at Luther Seminary, concluded that “the ‘internalized dominance’ I have been formed in, growing up in the United States, is thoroughly at odds with the Christian commitment I profess.”<sup>27</sup>

Yet that unguarded “thank God” comment and its underlying belief need to be examined by all Christians. It starts by acknowledging that such a belief may quietly inform our conscience, our most secret core and sanctuary. Margaret Guider, OSF, Associate Professor of Missiology at Boston College, notes how difficult that examination, and where it leads, can be. Her concern echoes the difficulty that Haight noted. She writes,

Speaking from within the contexts of North America and Europe, racism has been largely understood as a system of white supremacy and white superiority. These words fall heavy on the ears of white Christians as we scramble to distinguish ourselves from men in white hoods or brown shirts or youths with Confederate flags, shaved heads, and swastika tattoos. As the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of immigrants, refugees, and exiles, our appeals to our poor and peasant European roots do not alter the fact that we are the white-skinned beneficiaries of the very system we repudiate.<sup>28</sup>

As the great-great grandson of a German immigrant, I am a generation removed from the net that Guider casts, but I am still caught by the tendrils of her assertion.

In considering some of the examples that McIntosh details, Michael J. Monahan, Associate Professor of Philosophy at Marquette University, questions if it is appropriate to consider them as evidence of privilege. He suggests rather that many of these behaviors are not evidence of privilege but rather normal expectations within society that are withheld from “non-elites.” He writes,

Privilege, therefore, might be best understood in part as the limitation of what should be universal human rights to an exclusive elite that all the while publicly denies its status as elite. This does not mean that all the various exemplars of privilege work like this but it seems plausible that a great many do. Such privileges do not place the elites above and beyond the norm, but rather are straightforward manifestations of that norm. The moral problem is thus not one of the possession of privilege, but rather the illegitimate exclusion of those who *lack* these so-called privileges.<sup>29</sup>

---

25 Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook, “Beyond Diversity: Cultural Competence, White Racism Awareness, and European-American Theology Students,” *Teaching Theology & Religion* 5, no. 3 (July 2002): 144.

26 Sue, *Overcoming Our Racism*.

27 Mary E. Hess, “White Religious Educators and Unlearning Racism: Can We Find a Way?” *Religious Education* 93, no. 1 (Winter 1998): 115.

28 Margaret E. Guider, “Moral Imagination and the *Missio Ad Gentes*,” in *Interrupting White Privilege: Catholic Theologians Break the Silence*, eds. Laurie M. Cassidy and Alex Mikulich (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 101.

29 Michael J. Monahan, “The Concept of Privilege: A Critical Appraisal,” *South African Journal of Philosophy* 33, no. 1 (2014): 76.

Monahan suggests that, rather than considering white privilege something that *happens*, it needs to be more directly understood as something that is actively *perpetuated*.

The phenomenon described by the concept of white privilege is . . . not something that white people *possess*, but rather something they *do* or *act out* with the support and cooperation of numerous formal and informal institutions and systems, the collective function of which is the oppression of non-whites.<sup>30</sup>

Revisiting the partial list of McIntosh's privileges, it appears that these should be norms applied to everyone rather than privileges available only to a select group. Regardless of how these differences are understood or interpreted, what remains is a systemic inequity, sometimes displayed in personal actions but also displayed and supported in broader, socially imposed limits on those who are not white.

If our Catholicism is primarily a sincere, Sunday morning exercise, but not the heartbeat through which we live and move and have our being, then perhaps we experience no need to move beyond the Baltimore Catechism and the wet sponge. However, if as Catholic baby boomers we can discern even the edges of broader systemic inequities and our own personal acquiescence (or complicity) in perpetuating a racial divide in the United States, then perhaps we need to move beyond.

Actually, if we can discern this at all, our Catholic faith requires that we move beyond. Once aware of the fire, how do we fight it? Most importantly, we should not be afraid. As St. Paul noted in his letter to the Philippians, "I have the strength for everything through him who empowers me." (4:13, NABRE) But how then do we become empowered Catholics and engage the conflagration?

### **Re-formation: Re-learning about Race**

"Re-forming" ourselves as we engage the racial divide in the United States is in some ways similar to a personal conversion. Irish Jesuit Peter McVerry discusses the process of conversion as necessarily involving our feet, our head, and our hearts.<sup>31</sup> These steps are not strictly linear or distinct one from the other, but they can provide a Catholic framework for approaching personal re-formation—encounter with our feet, consider/reflect with our heads, and transform our hearts. It requires an intentional transformation from one state of understanding to another.

This is not an easy process. Shannon Sullivan, Professor of Philosophy at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, notes that the tenacity and generally subconscious nature of habits can make it very difficult. However, such change is possible. Sullivan writes,

While unconscious habits of white privilege will continue to thwart attempts to expose and change them, change can occur and habits of resistance can be developed, but only if a person takes responsibility for her unconscious life.<sup>32</sup>

#### *Feet—Encounter*

The most human and potentially most sacred encounters we can have are in person, face to face. To look into the eyes, grasp the hands, and hear the words of another provides a window into our being, the best opportunity to feel

<sup>30</sup> Monahan, "The Concept of Privilege," 82.

<sup>31</sup> Peter McVerry, "Sin and Conversion," *The Way*, July 1984.

<sup>32</sup> Shannon Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 197.

the *imago Dei* in each other. Unfortunately, systemic patterns as referenced above have made such relationships within our parishes very rare. As Jon Nilson, Professor Emeritus at Loyola University Chicago, noted,

Urban residential segregation . . . guaranteed that few Catholics and few Catholic theologians would have anything close to friendship with a black person. Without such friendships, there was nothing to impel white Catholics to explore how racial differences could transform an “other” into a “beloved other” and what gifts these differences might bring to the church.<sup>33</sup>

The numbers exacerbate the challenges of establishing such friendships or even having encounters within our church. Edward K. Braxton, Bishop of the Diocese of Belleville, observes that less than three million of the seventy million Catholics in the United States are African American. “With such a small number,” Braxton comments, “there are many diocese where there are no black Catholics at all and many where there are very few. This means that many white Catholics, in certain states and rural communities especially, have virtually no contact with African-American Catholics.”<sup>34</sup>

As Nilson suggests, sincere friendships are catalysts to change; such friendships, however, require commitment and nurturing and cannot be manufactured. Being unable or unlikely to have such dynamics within the confines of many Catholic parishes, feet must be creatively turned in another direction. Moving beyond the pews, pastors and other parish administrators may be involved with or aware of ecumenical or interreligious organizations whose faith communities have greater diversity. Active encouragement by congregants of parish leadership to reach out to such communities can perhaps result in opportunities to establish connections and friendships.

In addition, ministries that extend beyond the parish can provide opportunities to establish relationships. However, recalling Jesus’s washing of the disciples’ feet (Jn 13:4-15), such service must be firmly grounded in personal humility, which may be a subconscious challenge as Sullivan pointed out; a mutuality of willingness and vulnerability must be reflected in such encounters for all the parties to fully engage the omnipresent *imago Dei*.

Less personal encounters can occur by other means. Sue suggests that it is possible to learn about people of color primarily from sources within the group. “Especially important is information that originates from the groups you hope to understand,”<sup>35</sup> and Sue suggests that reading fiction and nonfiction literature, acquiring information from media (radio, television, film, magazines), frequenting businesses, and attending religious services or social events that reflect different cultural worlds can all provide meaningful encounters.

Literature specifically about or by black Catholics can provide meaningful insights. According to Cecilia A. Moore, Associate Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Dayton, the genres of biography and autobiography can throw open windows onto the experiences of black Catholics. Prefacing her survey of such literature, she notes,

Black Catholics writing their own life stories and others writing the lives of Black Catholics have shed light on how race and religion have shaped them as individuals as well as the wider communities they represent. These texts also give a more intimate look at what it has meant to be Black and Catholic over time.<sup>36</sup>

---

33 Jon Nilson, “Confessions of a White Catholic Racist Theologian,” in *Interrupting White Privilege: Catholic Theologians Break the Silence*, eds. Laurie M. Cassidy and Alex Mikulich (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 22.

34 Edward K. Braxton, “The Catholic Church and the Black Lives Matter Movement: The Racial Divide Revisited” (the 14th Annual Tolton Lecture, Chicago, February 28, 2017), <http://www.ctu.edu/story/article/bishop-braxton-delivers-14th-annual-tolton-lecture-catholic-church-and-black-lives>.

35 Sue, *Overcoming Our Racism*, 205.

36 Cecilia A. Moore, “Writing Black Catholic Lives: Black Catholic Biographies and Autobiographies,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 29, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 43.

An exploration of the trove of fiction by American black writers can also provide encounters. Willard Motley was born in Chicago into an African American, Roman Catholic family and, while not explicitly Catholic in content, his short story, “The Almost White Boy,” conveys a sense of the social tension and hypocrisy that confronted a biracial young man maneuvering through his first love affair.<sup>37</sup> While not strictly Christian or even religious, accomplished black writers such as James Baldwin, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Alice Walker, and many others provide opportunities for encounters.

The important thing is to have the courage to actively seek encounters, even if such encounters cause discomfort. Sue notes, “The courage to engage in activities that challenge your assumptions or that place you in situations that produce discomfort is a precondition to change.”<sup>38</sup> St. Paul has promised that strength will be provided; we will have the courage and the strength to toss out the squirt gun and take up the fire hose.

#### *Head—Consideration/Reflection*

McVerry believes that the encounter that results from the movement of the *feet* must lead to a reflection and discernment in the *head*. How do we understand the encounters and how can they challenge and inform us as Catholic boomers? As already suggested, discomfort can be a tremendous obstacle to sincere reflection. Hess noted, however, that the onus for the reflection is on us. She writes,

It is not the responsibility of people of color to “teach” us how not to be racist. Whenever a person [of color] does reach out to us to do so—I am reminded here of close friends who have shared their pain with me . . .—we need to value that gift in all of its preciousness, and accept it with great humility.<sup>39</sup>

As I reflect on the pain that my friend Cheryl shared with me outside that store that summer afternoon, I did not accept the gift she had provided in “all of its preciousness.” I had neither the language nor the confidence to have the conversation. I had not learned how to ask the sensitive racial questions that could have so profoundly informed my reflection. “Persons subjected to racism seldom get a chance to talk about it with an undefensive and non-guilty person from a majority group,” Sue noted; he continued, “White Americans, for example, often avoid mentioning race even with close minority friends.”<sup>40</sup> Here was I, a sincere person raised in the Catholic faith, yet this was my case. Regrettably, this missed opportunity may have initiated the slow suffocation of our friendship, and a decade later the sadness still echoes.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ (USCCB) most recent statement on the racial divide, *Brothers and Sisters to Us*, was written nearly forty years ago. Coming after many Catholic boomers had completed their grade school faith formation, this 1979 statement explicitly raised issues surrounding both structural injustices and personal responsibilities for Catholics in the United States. According to Massingale, even though *Brother and Sisters to Us* has rarely been taught and “its existence . . . and its teachings are unknown to most Catholics,”<sup>41</sup> it nonetheless provides the most current teaching on the racial divide from the USCCB. It provides some direction for our reflection and discernment. The bishops call on us personally as individual Catholics.

To the extent that racial bias affects our personal attitudes and judgments, to the extent that we allow another’s race to influence our relationship and limit our openness, to the extent that we see yet close

---

37 Willard Motley, “The Almost White Boy,” in *The Best Short Stories by Negro Writers: An Anthology from 1899 to the Present*, ed. Langston Hughes (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), 134–44.

38 Sue, *Overcoming Our Racism*, 194.

39 Hess, “White Religious Educators and Unlearning Racism,” 124–25.

40 Sue, *Overcoming Our Racism*, 213–14.

41 Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, 74.

our hearts to our brothers and sisters in need,—to that extent we are called to conversion and renewal in love and justice.

As individuals we should try to influence the attitudes of others by expressly rejecting racial stereotypes, racial slurs, and racial jokes. We should influence the members of our families, especially our children, to be sensitive to the authentic human values and cultural contributions of each racial grouping in our country.

We should become more sensitive ourselves and thereby sensitize our acquaintances by learning more about how social structures inhibit the economic, educational, and social advancement of the poor. We should make a personal commitment to join with others in political efforts to bring about justice for the victims of such deprivation.<sup>42</sup>

As we reflect and discern at this critical juncture in our lives, our influence can likely extend well beyond our children (referenced by the bishops) to our grandchildren and, for some of us, our great-grandchildren! Both our Catholic obligation to reach across the racial divide and the reach of our lived example should not be underestimated.

#### *Heart—Transformation That Leads to Action*

In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, “I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (13:34-35, NABRE).

Conversion is incomplete if it does not transform, and such transformation is manifested in love. And love is evidenced by action. Encountering and discernment are not enough, as McIntosh asserts: “Disapproving of the systems won’t be enough to change them. I was taught to think that racism could end if white individuals changed their attitudes.”<sup>43</sup> But to bridge the racial divide, to fight the fire, requires leaping the gap between discernment and transformation. The potentially overwhelming, oxygen-depleting nature of this issue, however, can immobilize us, especially in its systemic pervasiveness.

If we are transformed, however, we have no choice. Sue does not advise belaboring the question of personal complicity; rather he suggests, “Perhaps the question you should ask yourselves is not whether you engage in or benefit from racial oppression. The more important question is, Once you become aware of your role in the racial oppression of others, what do you do about it?”<sup>44</sup> Bishop Braxton echoes this sentiment and accepts no reluctance. “Every one of us can do something,” he asserts. “Do not say that, because you cannot do something radical to change the world, you will do nothing.”<sup>45</sup> Approximately 24.5 million strong,<sup>46</sup> Catholic boomers engaging in even small actions are a significant combined force. We could add up to something radical.

---

42 United States Catholic Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Brothers and Sisters to Us” (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1979), <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/cultural-diversity/african-american/brothers-and-sisters-to-us.cfm>.

43 McIntosh, “White Privilege and Male Privilege,” 25.

44 Sue, *Overcoming Our Racism*, 65.

45 Braxton, “The Catholic Church and the Black Lives Matter Movement.”

46 “Religious Landscape Study - Catholics,” *Pew Research Center*, May 30, 2014, <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-tradition/catholic/>. The Pew Research Center estimates that 35 percent of the 70 million U.S. Catholics fall into the Baby Boom generation.

## Conclusion

It is time for us to aggressively fight the fire. While it was our inheritance, we have become its guardian and we may have perhaps unknowingly embraced it. But the consequences of inaction—or squirt guns and wet sponges—to fight this conflagration are too great. We cannot leave these consuming flames as a legacy for the next generation. Massingale argues that “almost every major social question or phenomenon in the United States today—whether education, crime, health care, poverty—is entangled with, and/or exacerbated by, historic racial animus and present-day discrimination against people of color in general and African Americans in particular.”<sup>47</sup> The stakes have been and continue to be too great.

We cannot accomplish this individually. We need concerted and consistent effort. And we need our Church to equip us as adult Catholics. St. Paul told the Corinthians, “When I was a child, I used to talk as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I put aside childish things.” (1 Cor 13:11) Our bishops and our clergy, in their roles as teachers, must take this responsibility above and beyond the writing of occasional statements; they must preach, encourage, challenge, and model the behaviors of a prophetic Church. Then each of us, working together, can be the face of Christ, the body of Christ living the Gospel message. And whether our personal style tends toward soaking rains or cloudbursts, fire hoses or Super Soakers, we can each engage in fighting the fire. Regardless of our talents, we can fully and actively do our part.

As Catholic boomers, fifty years after that dry and explosive summer of 1967, we need to faithfully do our part to contribute to the Reign of God in a still dry and thirsty world.

---

<sup>47</sup> Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, 87.