

One good Friday: A Re-Focusing of Moral Imagination

by Angela C. Elrod-Sadler

It was a cool morning in Chicago's south-side neighborhood, the day clear and bright. Hundreds of people filled the streets which had been swept clean and cordoned off in preparation of an event— a Good Friday “Walk for Peace.” Its purpose: to gather people of good will in peaceful protest with those living each day under threat of violence.

Together we traced the Stations of the Cross through Englewood, pausing to pray at each of the neighborhood's recent “Golgothas”: the corner of “turf” disputed by rival gangs, a rusted and ramshackle playground, a viaduct, and the community hospital. There, mothers, cousins, and first responders shared their memories of loved ones tragically lost; of the grief and fear that accompanied those losses; and of their anger at living within a system that renders their pain invisible, their needs insufficient. They urged us all to see ourselves as members of one family, one community, in both our dreams and in our pain.

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Listening to these testimonies left me at a crossroads. On the one hand, the survivors' raw emotions were ones with which any person could identify— grief, loss, anger, fear, longing, hope. Who wouldn't grieve for a child whose future is so viciously stolen? Who wouldn't despair if one's cry for help went systematically unheard? Who wouldn't long for a day when fear was not palpable? Who wouldn't hope that one's dignity and the dignity of (her) people are recognized? On the other hand, I had not ever faced such situations. I inhabit a context shaped by white, middle-class, American culture. My life was and is comfortable. My children are safe, healthy, and whole. I can ask for and expect to receive help. I can walk along the streets in my neighborhood without concern. I live a humane life secure in the awareness that others want this for me. But I am privileged. I have benefitted from a system that I and others like me do not (often) question and which has remained (largely)

invisible. And so, that day, I was confronted with a very real, very striking contrast between my life and those I had come to walk with. I heard in their voices an urgent call to solidarity.

Coming to terms with this contrast has been eye-opening. It has meant struggling with the realization that a set of invisible systems of privilege operate in society. These systems have historically utilized power to control who flourishes and who does not. Moreover, their hierarchies are interwoven. They are neither reducible to nor collaps

ible into each other. One system, first named “white privilege”¹ by Peggy McIntosh, confers on those considered “white” a variety of unspoken advantages. Another, male privilege, operates similarly on behalf of men. And still another, class, serves to intensify the other two. The advantages of these systems accrue in almost all aspects of daily life. Whether in popular culture or professional life, in expressions of popular piety or formal theology, these advantages indicate a whole host of assumptions about what is normative.

I was not taught to see them, however. Like McIntosh, I was schooled to see privilege as something one earned and systemic racism as something that existed in the past. (Though, if asked, I would have said I was more aware of systems of male privilege or class than I was of white privilege.) In short, I was told I “belonged.” The cultural assumptions passed on to me exempted me from engaging with the voices of other racial groups. Still, thinking through those Good Friday testimonies, I began to wonder why our society receives them with indifference, to question just whose turf is under fire when peoples’ experiences are ignored and their humanity denied.

Elie Wiesel once famously declared that indifference imperils our humanity. The danger it poses manifests itself in a hardened heart; in an inability to see victims as neighbors, as persons. Yet moments when we are touched by another’s pain or struggle contain an invitation to grow. In what follows I want to focus on what accepting this invitation entails. To that end I will discuss the phenomenon of privilege and its impact on our spirituality. I first suggest the wisdom tradition offers an antidote to indifference in its interpretation of the liberative elements of Christ’s life. Wisdom also inspires us to awaken to the historical and concrete aspects of privilege’s invisibility. Secondly, I want to consider the moral implications of privilege as a set of interlocking oppressions. To accomplish this I briefly describe the concept of white privilege and explore ways to strengthen our moral imaginations through iconographies of womanist theologians.

Wisdom’s Invitation

Womanist and liberation theologians have long noted the presence of both white privilege and male privilege within the Church. Along with feminist theologians, their critical reflections bring to conscious awareness discriminatory interpretations of symbols, narratives, and teachings about the Christ which conceal God’s life-giving love. And they prompt lay persons and ecclesial leaders to conversion. Charles Curran succinctly describes the three dimensions of this conversion as personal, intellectual, and spiritual.² Each is a form of integration; each is a form of awakening to the complexity and influence of these systems within daily life. This is spirituality writ large and small. Beyond acknowledging that such unjust structures exist, one must recognize their connections to the empowerment one enjoys at the expense of others. Rather than seek a return to ignorance, or escape from the institutional and systematic oppression of privilege, spirituality instead evokes a change of practice. For spiritual growth, what has been revealed cannot and should not be concealed again.

Once aware, we must then ask ourselves some critical questions: How did these systems become the accepted norm? What can I learn from those who have been disadvantaged? What is my role now that I am aware? How am I to speak a theology that better images Christ? These and other critical questions will help ensure our conversions continue, for embedded in each of our lives these moments are our windows and doors to Jesus’s transfiguring presence. They show us the tension between living in Christ as the Christ lives in each of us (Jn 15:4).

In answer to the first question, Jamie Phelps chronicles African Americans’ long sorry history of exclusion by the Church. She writes:

1 Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” *Independent School* 49, no. 2 (Winter 1990): 31.

2 Charles Curran, “White Privilege, My Theological Journey,” in *Interrupting White Privilege. Catholic Theologians Break the Silence*, eds. Laurie M. Cassidy and Alex Mikulich (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 81.

During the first three quarters of the nineteenth century Black women were not accepted into congregations of religious women. Black men were not admitted to seminaries in the U.S., and Black laypersons had to struggle to have their voices heard. The establishment of separate religious congregations for Black women in 1829 and 1842 was the official beginning of Blacks engaging in the mission of the Church within the U.S. Catholic Church.³

This was due, in part, to the deep divisions among the U.S. Catholic episcopate regarding slavery. Some regarded it as a social issue, while others viewed it as a moral one. Citing Cyprian Davis's *History of Black Catholics in the United States*, Phelps notes that the results of this ambivalence were sluggish displays of leadership at best, and overtly racist (through outright resistance to integration) at worst.⁴ They marked attempts to suppress and control Black spirituality, and they imply, as we have seen above, normativity to white interpretations and experiences of the Christ.

For black women, then, these interpretations continue to result—at times—in multi-layered oppressions. Their experience of racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of discrimination gather them into “the least” with whom Jesus shares a special affinity. In particular, theology's indifference to their (and other women's) experiences raises hurdles to genuine solidarity. By interpreting God as exclusively male, sexist theology instantiates a hierarchy of privilege both material and divine. Repeated use of Jesus's maleness in metaphor, iconography, and anthropology limits women's abilities to image Christ precisely because of their sex. It reinforces a belief that men have a greater capacity to image Christ while truncating women's own, all of which imply that a certain “dignity, honor and normativity accrue to the male sex.”⁵ Such oppression is magnified and further stifles black women's personhood once it roots itself in structures of racism and caste.

Yet despite barriers past and present, there lives within Christianity something subversive, something inviting a new appreciation of lived daily experiences—the wisdom tradition. Wisdom transcends the limitations we tend to impose on ourselves and others (Jas 1:5). Radically inclusive and radically accessible, wisdom makes itself available to any who seek it (Prv 8:17). Its symbolism embraces an interpretive matrix of dynamic elements crucial for sharing Jesus's loving mission—friendship, hope, and a passion for justice. These three elements are simultaneously relational and oriented toward liberation. They manifest our deeply human desire to live fulfilling, peaceful lives, and these elements appear throughout stories that capture Jesus's inclusivity, generosity, and creativity.

Elizabeth Johnson tells Wisdom's story in her article “Redeeming the Name of Christ.” She brings to critical reflection a survey of Jesus's parables, healings, table fellowship, and restoration highlighting the egalitarian character of communion. Jesus's life and teaching, she concludes, overturn entrenched assumptions about justice and violence and their roles in the search for peace. Beginning with friendship, old patterns of relationship characterized primarily by hierarchy are rejected by the women and men among Jesus's disciples in favor of mutual regard and responsibility. Continuing with Jesus's crucifixion, his death reveals the power of love to create new life. Though his death may have resulted from an act of violence, his life did not end because of it. Hope and wholeness carry the day. Finally, Jesus's resurrection reflects his life of solidarity. It demonstrates the strength of compassionate love allied with Wisdom's concern for justice on behalf of the oppressed (Ws 10:15-19). “Wisdom's gift is ultimately life.”⁶ Wisdom therefore extends an invitation of freedom to all. Not only women, but men also can be free of the

3 Jamie T. Phelps, OP, “Communion Ecclesiology and Black Liberation Theology,” in *Walk Together Children*, eds. Dwight N. Hopkins and Linda E. Thomas (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010). 274-79.

4 Phelps, “Communion Ecclesiology and Black Liberation Theology,” 276, notes 29 and 30.

5 Elizabeth A. Johnson, “Redeeming the Name of Christ,” in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, ed. Catherine Mowry LaCugna (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993), 120.

6 Johnson, “Redeeming the Name of Christ,” 132.

constraints that these systems and their hierarchies impose. In other words, men too can be free of the interlocking oppressions of male privilege and white privilege.

Still, as McIntosh points out, men are more likely to express concern over the exclusion or oppression of women than they are to acknowledge ways their lives benefit from unearned privilege and power. Similarly, “obliviousness about **white** advantage, like obliviousness about male advantage, is kept strongly inculcated in the United States so as to maintain the myth of meritocracy, the myth that democratic choice is equally available to all.”⁷ But recognizing and identifying these systems generates strong internal resistance. Even when one experiences a personal or intellectual conversion of the kind Curran describes, the task is difficult. Its multiple levels require phenomenological unpacking to begin to even challenge or change unjust systems of privilege. Two examples may serve to illustrate my points.

As former president of the Catholic Theological Society of America, prolific author and respected teacher Jon Nilson has led a distinguished career as a theologian. But he once provocatively declared himself a white, Catholic, racist theologian “insofar as [he] had rarely read and never cited any black theologians”⁸ in his own work. That is, Nilson felt called to account for his silence in response to the scholarship of black theologians such as M. Shawn Copeland, James Cone, and, in particular, Jamie Phelps, who (just as provocatively) had compared the silence of US Catholic theologians about racism to the silence of leading German theologians about Nazi atrocities during the Holocaust. Hers was a bold and challenging analogy, one that Nilson continued to reflect on repeatedly. And so, Nilson chose his final address as CTSA president to make a public “confession” as well as to highlight the conditions within American Catholic theology and society occasioning its necessity. His confession therefore recounts the sociopolitical turmoil within both the Church and American culture during the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as each grappled with an identity crisis.

During these periods, questions of identity merged with questions of mission in tangled and often counterproductive ways. The realities of racism—e.g., segregation, dehumanization, and oppression—and a lack of reparation for its wounds clashed with the healing intended by the ideal of integration and the hope expressed in the aims of Vatican II. Documents such as *Lumen Gentium*, *Gaudium et Spes*, *Octagesimo Adveniens*, and *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, though articulating a broader, more inclusive vision of each person as the *imago Dei*, gave little concrete direction for developing pastoral support of blacks within parish life. And the council’s project of crafting a distinctively American Catholicism through inculturation found many scholars unprepared to reflect on the experiences and gifts of black Catholics because their distinctive voices had been too long neglected or kept absent. Paradoxically and ironically, Nilson says, American theologians were asked to engage with the “other” as a means for developing a particularly American Catholicism but could not see in black theology’s “fragmentary and charismatic” style its appeals for a dialogue among equals. Black theologians and their message were either misperceived as short-term special-interest theologies or rejected for their anger; these issues are still without consensus today.⁹

If Nilson’s address highlights the factors obscuring racism’s systemic and dysfunctional presence in our society as well as its marginalization by Catholic theology, it also spotlights the internal resistance he and other whites must overcome when responding to the challenges of Wisdom’s voice. In coming to terms with Phelps’s challenge, Nilson began to see himself as part of a system in which he was an oppressor, a system that ignores the value of blacks, their cultural history, and their Christian spirituality and theology by default. For Nilson this default position evidenced itself in a previous lack of engagement with black theology previously in his curricula, syllabi, and

7 McIntosh, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.”

8 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), 18.

9 Nilson, “Confessions of a White Catholic Racist Theologian,” 29-30.

research. It further manifested itself in his casual acceptance of this lack of engagement as the legitimate status quo within Catholic theology generally. At that time Nilson could not yet imagine himself to be “the problem” because he could not imagine what black theology could contribute to his own intellectual and spiritual growth as a theologian. This changed over the course of preparing his address, however. As Nilson told one *U.S. Catholic* interviewer:

I used to understand racism the way many people understand racism: as deliberate, overt forms of speech and action that denigrate people of another race. But I came to understand that it's far more than that. It's oppression and marginalization, and this oppression and this marginalization goes on simply as a matter of course. It's a part of the common sense of the dominant white majority.¹⁰

Shedding himself of this “common sense” meant becoming more attuned to the plight of those who are discriminated against or who are disempowered, but just as importantly it meant becoming attuned to his participation in a system that normalizes and perpetuates these injustices.

James Keenan, SJ, reaches a similar conclusion as he writes of his own recollections about male privilege in “The Gallant: A Feminist Proposal.” Reflecting upon his own experiences as a scholar and clergy member, Keenan came to recognize that within the Church, the academy, and society there are all-male domains of power. Further, he explains these enclaves perpetuate a system of unseen, acritical advantages on behalf of men, especially with respect to moments and structures of decision making. In this system women are effectively silenced, whether deliberately or *de rigueur*, either by exclusion from leadership or suppression of their voices. Such exclusion and suppression renders women “silent” because it minimizes their insights, experiences, contributions, and concerns, which are all ways of devaluing women’s agency and their personhood. Silencing women thus becomes a deliberate (if, at times, unconscious) strategy, Keenan argues, to maintain and protect male privilege.¹¹

One instance from Keenan’s work as a scholar bring these insights together in an especially vivid fashion. While planning for the 2006 international conference of Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church, Keenan and his fellow committee members wanted to encourage participation by scholars from Asia, Latin America, and Africa. So, they set out to facilitate inclusion by sponsoring forty invitees from each region. Committee delegates were then tasked with compiling a list of potential invitees. When the lists were compiled, women made up less than 30 percent of the proposed 120 participants. (These absences were most notably among the African delegation: there were none.) Keenan’s questioning of this situation provoked strong resistance from the other male committee members. There were no female *theological* ethicists in Africa, they said; cross-over scholars—those speaking about ethical issues but trained in other disciplines—simply didn’t possess the requisite expertise. Somewhat surprised, Keenan pressed the need for diversity among the conference’s participants. He insisted that African women theologians also be included. With his support, the conference eventually sponsored four women among the forty African scholars who attended.

By Keenan’s own description, this episode has sadly been just one of many where he has noticed the obfuscating and exclusionary practices of his fellows toward women. Rather than illustrate male privilege as a phenomenon endemic to the West or to the United States more particularly, it demonstrates the global and systematic nature of male privilege. This awareness has ultimately moved Keenan beyond recognition and dismay to action. As he points out, “recognition is only part of the change [needed]; one must act to divest.”¹²

10 “Racist Like Me: The Editors Interview Jon Nilson,” *U.S. Catholic*, 71, no. 12, December 2006, <https://www.questia.com/magazine/1G1-155783869/racist-like-me-the-editors-interview-jon-nilson>.

11 James Keenan, SJ, “The Gallant: A Feminist Proposal,” in *Feminist Catholic Theological Ethics: Conversations in the World Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014), 225.

12 James Keenan, SJ, “The Gallant: A Feminist Proposal,” 226.

Keenan's statement represents a fundamental option of sorts. Like Nilson, Keenan's choice to divest reflects a new-found awareness of the historical and concrete impact of the invisibility of (male) privilege, and it underscores the challenges that arise when confronting privilege's various manifestations. For Keenan, divesting involves not only raising awareness of women's discrimination and oppression, not only recognizing his complicity to such behavior, nor simply recognizing his position as beneficiary of such privilege, it entails acting to eliminate male enclaves. Likewise, divesting inspires him to ensure that women's voices are included whenever and wherever decision making must occur, even if it means he must give up his place to do so. In the above instance, stepping aside was not necessary. To the contrary, Keenan's position as committee chair and fundraiser assured both his participation in the conference and those of African women. It added heft to his concerns when he spoke out. Had he remained silent, he realized, he would have been complicit to male hegemony.

But in placing the examples of these two theologians alongside one another I do not wish to imply that experiences of racism are *the same as* experiences of sexism (or caste, genderism, and other forms of oppression). Rather, I wish to highlight, as did the members of the Combahee River Collective in their "Black Feminist Statement," that all oppressions are interrelated.¹³ Disentangling aspects of male privilege from white privilege—so that one clearly perceives which advantages result more from one aspect of a person's social location (i.e., sex, race, religion, caste, or class) than another—is difficult. Perhaps this is why Roger Haight finds "white privilege" a dysfunctional rhetorical category.¹⁴

A Distorted View

When considering his contribution to discussions of white privilege, Haight admits to a bit of difficulty. According to Haight, the critical impact of the term "white privilege" comes not from what it adds to discussions of racism or oppression but rather its pithiness. Why? Because while it may succeed in a consciousness-raising of sorts, the concept of white privilege ignores the complexity of moral agency and its role in creating structural oppression in the first place; further, it diverts what should be critical reflection on the sufferings of blacks and black agency to whites' agency. Worst of all, it offers critique without pointing toward an achievable vision of solidarity.

Some black theologians would seem to agree with Haight's point that, as a concept, white privilege may serve to further disenfranchise blacks. Bryan Massingale, for example, suggests that "the white tendency to treat Blacks as objects of white study, analysis, and charity rather than as subjects capable of independent action or creative initiative has inhibited the recognition of Black agency and the possibility of engagement of Blacks in Catholic moral discourse."¹⁵ Likewise, James Cone—the universally respected "father" of Black theology—initially questioned (white) Catholic theologians' preference for Latin American liberation theology only to conclude that blacks' passionate intensity was too alarming, too non-traditional.¹⁶

However, as Massingale later attests, and as womanists continue to explain, the infantilization and objectification blacks experienced (and still experience) results from the phenomenon of white privilege operative *within Catholic assumptions regarding moral inquiry itself*, not from this privilege's conceptualization. In other words, the methods ethical inquiry assumes to be normative are themselves products of assumptions about what is normatively "human." In both areas, white privilege shapes what practitioners consider ethically neutral and can speak for all. Such

13 Combahee River Collective, "The Combahee River Collective Statement," April 1977, http://americanstudies.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/Keyword%20Coalition_Readings.pdf. Noted by McIntosh in "Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack."

14 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), 85-94.

15 Brian Massingale, as cited in Phelps, "Communion Ecclesiology and Black Liberation Theology," 285.

16 James H. Cone, as cited in Nilson, "Confessions of a White Catholic Racist Theologian," 29.

unreflective postures, though perhaps unconscious, lead to separation of belief from genuine moral discussion or action in Christian ethics. They skew authentic understandings of justice, the world, and other persons.

Massingale's personal reflections on his life as a scholar supply a powerful example. In them he contrasts African Americans' intuitions about justice with more typical academic methodology:

Indeed, in [the academy] passionate discourse is often seen as a "red flag" that an unwarranted bias has infiltrated one's reasoning and compromised one's objectivity in the pursuit of truth. ... In the African American tradition justice is something visceral; it is an ache, a groan, an inner fire. This visceral or "gut" characteristic of justice is seldom reflected in the standard accounts upheld by accepted academic discourse. Yet as I continued to ponder this disconnect over the years, I have begun to believe that it is the standard accounts that are lacking and deficient.¹⁷

The cultural divide exemplified by the two approaches to justice in Massingale's reflection indicates still another means by which white privilege operates: ethical fantasy. Paul Wadell describes fantasy as a distorted moral vision. While we might ordinarily think of fantasy as something playful or imaginative, in more sober terms fantasy persistently caricatures other people and their experiences "precisely because to see them truthfully would challenge us to conversion."¹⁸ When operative, this kind of fantasy inhibits both moral imagination and moral discourse because it strips others of their agency, as Massingale and Cone foresaw. Those who benefit from privilege therefore need the stories of those who suffer injustice. Their stories show us the narrowness, self-interest, and bias of our moral reasoning. We are challenged to look beyond the "object" of the stories toward the persons alive within them, and to be present there with them. But if we do not see others as persons, we do not treat them justly. Their stories are, then, a gift. Through them we ready ourselves for communion by refocusing the lens of our moral imagination to see each other as co-creators and co-sufferers.

This is what was at work in the testimonies I heard that Friday in Englewood. Those stories vibrated with just the sort of intensity Massingale notices in African Americans' discourse about justice. Rooted in their concrete experiences of tragedy, loss, and indifference, their pain is visceral. As Cone pointed out, hearing their pain can be alarming. It should be. It is a gross injustice. Catholic theologians' neglect of black experience thus amounts to more than enlightened self-interest; it moves beyond and below formations of social contract; it denotes a critical commitment to the American myth of meritocracy overcome only by a more total commitment to the Christ.

Moral Imagination and New Iconographies

Within the dynamics of commitment rests a paradox, however. On the one hand commitment involves a decision leading to action. Action demonstrates whether the decision taken is genuine. On the other hand, commitment also involves a deliberately expansive orientation of self—a way of being—with or toward another. Present in our loving, it appears at first as our active engagement must be continually sustained; that doing must supersede being if the momentum of our loving, i.e., our conversion, is to move forward. In her work *Personal Commitments*, Margaret Farley calls this paradox "relaxation of heart."¹⁹

Relaxation often refers to a lessening of tension or allowing something to go slack, but Farley understands it differently. For her, relaxation describes a state of fruitful tension necessary to sustain a just, compassionate, truthful

¹⁷ Bryan N. Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 131.

¹⁸ Paul Wadell, "Response to Bryan Massingale," in *Black and Catholic: The Challenge and Gift of Black Folk: Contributions of African American Experience and World View to Catholic Theology*, ie (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1995).

¹⁹ Margaret A. Farley, *Personal Commitments* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 75-76.

love. Akin to the flexibility found in great runners, relaxation of heart imparts both strength and resilience to one's loving. It aids us in rethinking those things we have too long taken for granted, to develop a way of remembering that is inclusive, to fashion new images of mutuality so that our behavior changes too. Relaxation is therefore to be contrasted with the hardness of heart Jesus tells us prevents true compassion and justice (Jn 3:17).

An important consequence of loving this way is that a decentering occurs. It enables moral imagination to develop and helps to explain moral imagination's pivotal role in an ethics of encounter. Because of its twofold dynamism of first filtering and next focusing on certain aspects of our experience, moral imagination processes disparate elements into a coherent whole. With it we infer patterns. We shape our understandings of ourselves and others. Or, as Sharon Parks says, "we imagine our world into being."²⁰

Three features of relaxation articulated by Farley become salient for strengthening moral imagination: patience, hope, and "letting go." These features are both prerequisite to and preparation for an ethic of encounter. Together, these features create a hermeneutic circle of love that resonates deeply with the value of communion found in black culture.

Patience sets the stage for acceptance and trust essential to communion. Farley stresses that patience arises from a belief in fulfillment calling to us from beyond the horizon of our experience. For all who suffer oppression this means God identifies with victims of injustice in images that disrupt interpretations of the gospel favoring the status quo. The liberation promised by these images is decisive. They envision a reality made immediately present by Jesus's loving action: by his words and his deeds. To womanist theologians these images communicate a vision of liberation and agency further nuanced by Jesus's inclusivity. It is a vision oriented toward community. It draws on the strength to wait until the time for action is right so that *all* might find liberation, while trusting (as Hagar did) in God's providence. Patience thus allies itself with hope, and together they hold open the possibility for encounter because they accept our vision is partial. We must grow. At the same time, hope calls us onward toward the realization of a better reality.

Diana Hayes explores these linkages in her essay "Movin' on Up a Little Higher."²¹ Borrowing from Delores Williams, she invokes a broadly inclusive view of solidarity grounded in cooperation with God and one another. Kept alive by the continuity and memory of God's active, comforting presence, cooperation involves both activity and receptivity, not just to survive but also to change and transform. It involves developing communal memories that are as inclusive as the solidarity hoped for. And so, Hayes asserts that cooperation must rely on a new language of liberation, one viable for female and male theologians alike and engaging the injustices of any who experience oppression due to their race, sex, gender, or class. It is a challenging but delicate balance since it requires people to be both with and *for* each other without denying each other's agency, or need for fulfillment. Her insights thus point to another critical aspect of expanding and strengthening moral imagination: developing memory, both personal and communal. With it we learn to re-member—to hope—and so, to grow in mutual presence.²²

Similarly, M. Shawn Copeland develops her idea of solidarity as mutual achievement on the basis of a common anthropology found in the Mystical Body of Christ.²³ We are a single family of God's creation. United in transcendent and self-transcending love, the Mystical Body of Christ is present here through us and among us, but not yet

20 Sharon Parks, *The Critical Years* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 116.

21 Diana L. Hayes, "Movin' on Up a Little Higher: Resolving the Tension between Academic and Pastoral Approaches to Black and Womanist Theologies," in *Walk Together Children. Black and Womanist Theologies, Church and Theological Education*, eds. Dwight N. Hopkins and Linda E. Thomas (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 13-25.

22 Farley, *Personal Commitments*, 80.

23 M. Shawn Copeland, as cited in Roger Haight, "'White Privilege' and 'Racial Solidarity,'" 94, note 8.

in its fullness. We are therefore to live as Jesus lived, to be active members of this Body in our one graced world. Such activity has several elements ripe for encounter. For example, naming and analyzing those structural sins that prevent this Body from reaching wholeness—racism, sexism, clericalism, etc.—bring healing. It acknowledges the presence of interlocking oppressions which cannot be reduced or collapsed into one another. It recognizes that these oppressions influence, and, in some cases, intensify each other. Further, in the articulation of new iconographies and new Christologies this activity responds to profound questions having to do with images and symbolism. Through them God invites us to “let go” of illusory images of ourselves and others, to accept others as they are rather than as we assume, and to recognize the truth of our relatedness to them. By accepting the invitation, we simultaneously broaden and deepen the scope of our moral imagination. We relax and enlarge our hearts. Then solidarity’s appeal to a common good—the desire all persons have to thrive with respect and dignity—can be made concrete. We are better prepared to hear the truth in others’ experiences when they share them with us.

To put it another way, the development of new images and new iconographies expresses a longing for unity found within the heart of Christ’s mystical body. Focusing on Jesus as black and as human enables womanists like Copeland to particularize the manner in which they identify with God’s gracious act of solidarity: the incarnation. With this image they describe Jesus as co-sufferer. He stands with them in protest against experiences of racism and indifference. But the significance of his blackness, like his maleness, rests neither with genealogy nor biology. The import of Jesus’s blackness and his humanity lay instead in the circumstances of his life, death, and resurrection. Through these incarnational moments Jesus identifies with all who suffer oppression whether by race, sex, creed, or class. This black Jesus who is also the Christ is, then, no “painted” figure. His very being overturns social and ecclesial systems of privilege otherwise considered normative. As an icon of metanoia “the black Jesus calls us to conversion of heart and mind—to transformation and to change; to embrace the responsibility of resistance and creativity in order to honor and respect the human other . . .”²⁴ Moreover he represents an egalitarian meaning of blackness encompassing the oppressed as well as those allied with them in their struggle for liberation. For the black Jesus can help us all embrace a new way of seeing and imaging the Christ. The imagery and symbolism of this icon give shape and form to what, in our limited understanding, appear disparate experience but are truly one graced reality. Focused in this way, patterns of exclusion for the sake of control become visible. Copeland’s black Jesus offers us a way to recover and reenter moral discourse in solidarity.

Womanists thus respond to Wisdom’s invitation with particular care as they craft their understandings of solidarity. Mindful of the dynamic in which the oppressed may quickly become the oppressors, they advocate a widely inclusive vision, one articulating a way to speak liberation to all and one faithful to the capacity of images to nurture a transformative change of heart. Copeland’s potent images of the black Jesus wedded with the Mystical Body of Christ are especially evocative. They reveal opportunities for moments of encounter drawing us to greater wholeness and unity.

Conclusion

The first two stages of a journey toward spiritual maturity illuminate what it means to awaken to the invisibility and complexity of privilege. One begins in and from a world taken as given. Then she or he encounters a problem that forces the adoption of a drastically different perspective. This opens the person up to a new vision of herself or himself and others as structurally related. New vision results in new perception, with its attendant potential for transformation.

24 M. Shawn Copeland, “The (Black) Jesus of Detroit. Reflections on Black Power and the (White) American Christ,” in *Christology and Whiteness*, ed. George Yancy (London: Routledge, 2012), 194.

Sustaining this openness requires effort, however. Something more is needed to prevent relapsing into blithe immaturity. “This is what many call commitment to a ‘third,’ to something larger than ourselves, in relation to which we share choices, concerns, responsibilities, and hence mutual enlargement of heart.”²⁵ It is a fidelity that expands instead of restricts because through it a person becomes more expansive in their ability to love. They “let go” of fantasy, refusing either to escape into the status quo or to deny the personhood of others.

Franciscan Richard Rohr might describe these stages as moving from a first naiveté to a second naiveté, that is, as a slow process of transformation which arrives at an identity that can include rather than exclude, and which has come to view its starting presuppositions in a broader, fuller way. We may arguably say it is the cultivation of a “lens” whose vision grows increasingly clear. It prepares us to respond to God’s gracious invitation of communion and to treat others justly. Hayes makes this abundantly clear when she proclaims true liberation a life of mutuality in patience, hope, and solidarity for all.²⁶

But is it too much to hope that our Church would wish to move in this direction as well? Rohr contends that this is a process possible more for individuals than for institutions. “They (institutions) must and will be concerned with identity, boundaries, self-maintenance, self-perpetuation. ... This is their nature and purpose.”²⁷ And it is a Church that Copeland and other womanist theologians criticize for distorting and co-opting the Christ; for readings that divinize masculinity and whiteness; for structures that dominate, alienate, segregate, and oppress.²⁸ Yet, as Copeland reminds us, this institution is not the Mystical Body of Christ. Christ’s Body is present whenever and wherever we express Christ’s self-transcendent love.

It was present that Friday on Chicago’s south-side too. By gifting us with their stories, the people of Englewood gave us a glimpse of their courage as well as their struggle. They spoke to us about manifold experiences where systems of privilege weave oppressions together into a single horizon and do violence to their dignity. Jesus knew this kind of violence in his own life. It culminated, finally, in the anguish, brutality, and injustice of his long walk to crucifixion. Tradition recounts this story in the Stations of the Cross. The images, or stations, of this devotion summarize moments of Jesus’s solidarity with us. How fitting it was, then, while in remembering how large God’s heart is, we were also called to enlarge our own. It was a good Friday.

25 Farley, *Personal Commitment*, 83.

26 Hayes, “Movin’ on Up a Little Higher,” 25.

27 Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward. A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 141.

28 Copeland, “The (Black) Jesus of Detroit,” 187.