From the Ivory Tower to the Pews

Theology’s Role in Shaping Catholic Racial Thought and Practice in the Twentieth Century

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The Catholic theological approach to race, justice and charity significantly informed the church’s thought and practice in the twentieth century. How does this shed much-needed light upon racism and the Catholic response today?

When and where I grew up shaped my experience of Catholicism and race. I was born in 1966, just after the final meetings of the Second Vatican Council closed and as the reforms of this council started to make their way into the everyday religious thoughts and practices of Catholics in the United States. The Southern Catholic church in which I grew up was the only Catholic church in the city or for that matter in at least a 30-mile radius. Consequently, all practicing Catholics in my hometown and in the surrounding communities no matter where they lived, whatever their racial/cultural background or their social class status was, shared membership in the same parish. This high degree of geographical, racial, cultural, and class integration that is a hallmark the Catholic Church in the South was definitely against the grain. I grew up feeling proud that I went to such an integrated church that had room for everyone who wished to be there. Yet, despite this strong sense of Catholic community that I enjoyed, I can still identify events in my life in the church that were marked by racism. Allow me to share one example.

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My first grade class was arranged in alphabetical order. We did everything in alphabetical order from our assigned desks, to going to the library, to receiving our returned homework. Here I had my first encounter with racism when one of my classmates demanded to be reseated because he did not want to sit beside me because I was black. I know this because he plainly told this to our teacher and to me. Our teacher promptly reseated him. At home I told my mother that my classmate did not want to sit by me because I was black and that sister reseated him. That evening at Mass my mother, who was a daily communicant, approached my teacher about what I said had happened. When she returned from Mass, I asked her if she spoke to sister. She had. She said that sister was sorry that I was hurt but she thought it better that she move my classmate “because after all he came from a very well-bred family.” I really did not understand this then. It did not explain how what was done to me was fair or right or just. And, then and now, I have difficulty seeing how in any way his family was better or more special than mine. But, this was not something we decided to fight. And, for the rest of the year our first grade class alphabet was more than slightly off.

As an adult studying the history of Catholicism in the United States and in particular the experience of African American Catholics, I have learned through my research that this experience I had as a child was something that I shared with generations of black Catholics before me and that the reasons behind these experiences had a lot to do with how Catholics were taught to regard race and their obligations toward African Americans in the first half of the twentieth century. I was born after the thick of the Civil Rights movement and the Second Vatican Council in a church that was progressive on social justice issues, highly integrated, and inclusive in so many ways. However, what Catholics had been taught formally and informally through day-to-day Catholic pastoral practices continued to consciously and unconsciously inform their behavior, attitudes and practices for long after the church began to teach very differently about race and the Christian response to racial difference. In this article, I will present a history of a Catholic theological approach to race, justice and charity that significantly informed Catholic thought and practice for quite a bit of the twentieth century. I believe this can shed much-needed light upon racism and the church’s response to it.

**Asking The “Race Question”**

Spurred on by the mass movement of African Americans from the South to the North in the early twentieth century, American Catholics, primarily theologians, began to address the so-called “race question.” For the most part the Catholic African Americans met in the urban North and Midwest were European immigrants or second- and third-generation Americans. Often these two communities found themselves competing with each other for jobs and living accommodations.
But they also met under less contentious social circumstances, such as in schools and in churches. All of these situations prompted white Catholics to seek advice from their religious leaders about what their obligations to blacks were and about how they should relate to their new black neighbors.

For several decades many American Catholic priests, religious, and laity employed U.S. history, sociology, and economics to develop a theological response to the “race question” for the faithful. Distinctive features of this theology were the essential equality of all created in God’s image and likeness, a distinction between natural rights and civil rights, the insistence that blacks had the right to earn a living wage and to benefit from adequate educational opportunities, a definition of Christian love that emphasized the importance of outward acts of charity to blacks while it minimized the requirement of internal affection for blacks, by privileging self-regard above love of neighbor.

Mainline American Catholic theologians of racial justice consistently advised that the virtue of prudence was the answer to the race question. With time, patience and judicious behavior things would change for blacks in America. In regard to their moral obligations to African Americans, white Catholics owed blacks a minimum of Christian justice and charity. The minimum of Christian charity and justice demanded working for and not standing in the way of economic and educational opportunities for African Americans. The minimum of justice did not include “social equality,” which meant anything that might lead to friendship because friendship could prove a slippery slope to miscegenation (Southern, 67–93). Social equality also included anything that made whites feel “inconvenienced” or that would upset the American social order. For the most part this theological perspective was formed in a Catholic ivory tower, but it was for the people, and it had a profound influence on how white Catholics thought about African Americans and related to African Americans for quite some time. But it also would be challenged by other Catholic scholars who rejected any attempt to minimize or qualify the Christian command to love neighbor as self and to recognize the inherent dignity in all people regardless of race.

*The Morality of the Color Line*

One of the most comprehensive Catholic theological responses to the “race question” was *The Morality of the Color Line* by Father Francis J. Gilligan. Gilligan was a priest of the Diocese of St. Paul, Minnesota. He received his doctorate in sacred theology at The Catholic University of America and wrote his dissertation under the direction of Monsignor John A. Ryan. Monsignor Ryan was best known for his advancement of the theory of distributive justice, his advocacy for a living wage, and as an advisor to President Franklin D. Roosevelt on the New Deal (Broderick). According to Gilligan, Ryan suggested that he do a study of
Catholic theology and the American race question. Using American history, sociology, economics, and medieval Catholic theology, particularly St. Thomas Aquinas, Gilligan wrote a landmark study on the race question and provided answers for Catholics about the nature of their obligations of justice and charity to African Americans. *The Morality of the Color Line* was published in 1928.

Gilligan thought his study was necessary because “humanitarians” and “unbelievers who completely misunderstood the words of Christ” had advanced incorrect notions about Christian love that confused Americans seeking to understand their obligations of justice and charity to African Americans. Indirectly, Gilligan accused the Social Gospel movement and liberal Christianity of elevating notions of love of neighbor over love of self (Gilligan, 48). Gilligan asserted that the manner in which liberal Christians demanded white Christians to love their black neighbors was unattainable especially when American law and culture seemed to justify and promote hatred of the Negro. He argued that the only thing that would bring American Catholics to clarity of thought and then proper action was medieval Catholic theology. Gilligan believed medieval theologians and philosophers had already given Catholics the correct understanding of Christian charity. These writers, such as St. Thomas Aquinas, had discovered that love had orders and levels. And though the Christian was always obliged to love his or her neighbor, the Christian also had to know the proper order of that love (Gilligan, 49).

Gilligan introduced his study with a history of the Negro from Africa to America. In this brief survey, he highlighted African accomplishments in civilization and culture. He also used sociological and economic studies to show that when blacks and whites had access to the same educational opportunities they preformed at similar levels in academics and business. For Gilligan, these findings of historians, anthropologists, economists, sociologists, and theologians buttressed the Christian conviction that all people were created in God’s image and likeness. The scholars’ findings also showed blacks as fully human and essentially equal to whites and others. And, according to Gilligan’s reading of Catholic theology, essential equality was the foundation of racial justice.

**Making Distinctions**

Gilligan also discussed the notion of rights in the Christian tradition. He defined rights as “inviolable moral claims to personal goods” (Gilligan, 49). He also made a distinction between natural rights and civil rights. God granted natural rights to all. Natural rights were essential for the person to attain his or her natural end, which was to glorify God. Natural rights could never be abrogated, but the State had a right to limit the extension of natural rights. He also claimed that Americans most commonly understood natural rights to be “the rights to life, liberty, and property” (Gilligan, 40). Because God created blacks in his image and
likeness, whites must never interfere with blacks’ access to enjoy the same number and the sacredness of natural rights that whites enjoyed (Gilligan, 48). Because blacks possessed natural rights, whites were obliged to love blacks as neighbors. Gilligan explained, “the Negro being a rational creature is capable of obtaining eternal happiness, is made to the image of God, and was redeemed by Christ. The white individual is obliged to love the Negro, not because of his swarthy color, but because of his relation to God, because he is loved by God, because: “The Lord, of them and you, is in heaven and there is not respect of persons with Him” (Gilligan, 41).

God was “no respecter of persons,” but the State was and Gilligan’s theology did not change the justice of this. In other words, there was the theological ideal that Catholics accepted as truth, on the one hand, but there was the real world that Catholics had to negotiate, on the other. This world did not order itself to the theological ideal. Gilligan defined civil rights as rights “bestowed by the State for a civil purpose” (Gilligan, 47). The State enjoyed the power to confer civil rights. Gilligan explained, “some rights if the common good demands, may be restricted to certain classes of citizens and may be abrogated by the State if they have already been bestowed” (Gilligan, 39).

He used the right to vote as an example of a civil right the State could choose to grant or to revoke. This was just one of many of Gilligan’s justifications for the morality of the American color line. More than merely explaining how this was moral, Gilligan provided Catholics with a form of reasoning to determine whether their attitudes or actions were just and charitable. In the case of voting rights, he contended that grandfather clauses and literacy tests could be regarded as just when one considered American history, Southern culture, and the common good. He argued that Americans had learned during Reconstruction that the majority of Negroes were not competent to vote or to hold public office. Using accounts from Southern historians, Gilligan painted a bleak picture of the black capacity to vote prudently and to serve in public office with integrity (Gilligan, 39). Though Gilligan admitted that it was perhaps unfair to judge blacks in the 1920s by their ancestors in the 1860s and 1870s, he asserted that the memory of uneducated recently emancipated blacks taking control of and botching Southern politics after the war was still strong in American memory, particularly in the South where most blacks still lived. Each year African Americans were achieving more education, culture, and political wisdom, but it was still not prudent for them to vote en masse. African American voters possessed the

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ability to do much harm to the common good. Time and prudence would bring blacks into the electorate; therefore, Catholics did not err in justice or in charity by not supporting universal franchise for African American men and women.

Charity Does Not Demand “Social Equality”

Along with this discussion of voting rights, Gilligan introduced a principle that would persist in the mainline Catholic theology of racial justice, and that was that blacks were not yet real Americans, who fully appreciated American heritage and customs. Again, time, education, and economic stability would naturalize blacks into Americans (LaFarge, 24). The “not quite” American status of blacks was another justification for maintaining the color line. And more than providing Catholics with examples of when and how to do justice and charity to blacks, Gilligan provided them a mentality by which they could justify racially prejudiced ideas and actions. In this mentality the realities of African American history and their slow educational and economic progress made them ineligible to vote and ineligible to be regarded as the social equals of most white Americans. And, social equality was what white Americans seemed to fear the most.

Sympathetic to Catholics who might be seeking just this kind of answer, Gilligan acknowledged that it was “arduous or repulsive to many whites to accept the obligation to love the Negro a neighbor” (Gilligan, 47). But, he also reminded Catholics that “the Christian is commended only to love his neighbor as himself,” and he quoted St. Thomas Aquinas’s maxim “man’s love for himself is the model of his love for another” (Gilligan, 48). It was natural for one’s primary wishes of happiness to be for himself or herself. Love of self was not condemned but was commanded by Jesus. Jesus did say that his followers were to love their neighbors, but Gilligan translated or interpreted love as “good will.” He advised “that goodwill however, need not be as passionate or as intense as love of self or kin, since man is attracted to self and kin by natural bonds. Moreover, in the external pursuit of happiness a man is generally permitted to seek first those objects which are reasonably necessary for the welfare of self and family, only secondly need he concern himself with others” (Gilligan, 48).

To hate blacks was sinful, to fail to suppress such hatred was sinful, but removing one’s self from situations in which one would have to interact socially with blacks was not sinful in and of itself. Gilligan made this case even though he insisted on the equality of blacks and whites before God. In the real world of America black and whites were unequal in Gilligan’s mind; in fact they were of different classes. Their inequality had nothing to do with God’s design but with history and culture. Because of the realities of slavery and cultural racial animosity in the United States, whites were of a class that was distinct from and higher than the class to which blacks belonged. And, again, using Aquinas, Gilligan reminded American
Catholics that within their theological tradition there was a respect of class distinctions and levels. He compared whites to nobles and blacks to the peasants of Aquinas’s day. As Thomas warned against the practice of nobles marrying peasants, Gilligan warned against the social equality of blacks and whites and strongly recommended that whites not put themselves in circumstances with blacks that might result in friendship. Whites did not owe blacks friendship. Invoking Thomas again, Gilligan quoted, “outside of cases of urgency to show such favors belongs to the perfection of charity” (Gilligan, 50). The following narrative demonstrates how what Gilligan proposed in terms of an authentic Catholic approach to the race question worked practically.

**Gilligan’s Theology in Action**

A little more than a month before Gilligan’s mentor Monsignor John A. Ryan delivered his Charter Day address in 1943 to Howard University faculty, students, and guests, Jean Quarterman, a student writer for *The Hilltop*, the Howard University paper, responded to an *Atlantic Monthly* article titled “Nearer and Nearer the Precipice” by Virginius Dabney (Quarterman, 5). Dabney was a renowned Jeffersonian and Southern historian, editor of the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, and self-described “Southern liberal.” As a Southern liberal, he claimed to be progressive on the issue of American race relations. As a white sympathetic to black concerns, Dabney felt justified in his criticism of African American leaders and newspapers that demanded immediate desegregation and “political and social equality” with white Americans. Such was the subject of “Nearer and Nearer the Precipice.” Dabney accused black leaders like A. Phillip Randolph and black newspapers like *The Pittsburgh Courier* of sowing seeds of racial violence and strife in America by agitating for the federal government to immediately end racial discrimination. Dabney believed that Americans would one day live in a desegregated society, but such a society would be “the fruit of gradual evolutionary development” rather than “forced by executive fiat” (Dabney, 100).

He also criticized black leaders and newspapers for not being thankful enough to whites who were committed to helping blacks achieve more rights and privileges in the United States, and he warned that constant criticism by blacks of white efforts would ultimately alienate sympathetic whites. Dabney concluded by accusing blacks of failing to support the American war effort fully. He wrote,

... while the Negroes are overwhelmingly patriotic, too many of them have been indoctrinated with the belief that since the Japanese are a colored race the blacks might be more equitably treated by Tokyo than by Washington, and that consequently the Negroes have little to fear from a Japanese victory over the United States. (Dabney, 99)
In an impassioned and severe response, Jean Quarterman took issue with practically every assertion and accusation Dabney made in “Nearer and Nearer the Precipice.” But, she directed her strongest comments at Dabney’s charge that black race leaders and newspapers were guilty of fomenting potential racial violence in America. Quarterman wrote,

. . . he [Dabney] continues by saying that if the race question reaches such a pitch that resorts to violence, that is armed violence, we will suffer the most in the end. But will we? I imagine that “Brother Rat,” Adolph Hitler to you, would enjoy getting hold of Mrs. Roosevelt as well as Miss Bethune. Probably more so! But can we suffer any more outrage like race riots after the last war to preserve democracy, lynching after Pearl Harbor, and other discriminations? (Quarterman, 5)

Quarterman declared that blacks could not and would not wait until the war was over to demand equality and civil rights, and she was convinced that it was precisely the time to fight for these rights. She said African Americans were engaging in this fight, “not by complete armed resistance, but by uniting sanely, and strategically.” And she concluded her response with a sharp rebuke of Virginius Dabney. She wrote, “frankly, I think Mr. Dabney displays the symptoms of a moron, and if he thinks that we are Uncle Toms, he is an imbecile, and I do mean imbecile” (Quarterman, 5).

Knowing Your Place

Apparently, Ryan was keeping up with both The Atlantic Monthly and The Hilltop because in his Charter Day address, Ryan defended Virginius Dabney by name and called for prudence in American race relations. In his address, “The Place of the Negro in American Society,” Ryan focused on economics and job discrimination. Following very closely the form of reasoning Gilligan employed in The Morality of the Color Line, Ryan discussed several ways in which white employers discriminated against blacks. Ryan said it was almost always unjust to deny blacks work because of skin color, but he added, “sometimes the motive is racial; sometimes it is mainly economic” (Ryan, 5). If employers refused to hire blacks because they did not want blacks in their presence or to be in contact with blacks this was an “unreasonable prejudice” and could not be justified. If an employer refused to hire blacks because in the past he had experienced blacks to be unreliable workers then the employer acted unfairly, punishing all blacks for the actions of some. But, if an employer refused to hire blacks because white employees protested, the employer’s motive was economic and was “in the circumstance excusable” (Ryan, 5). And finally, if the employer refused blacks employ-
ment because the employer thought blacks should not have such high positions then the employers act was “uncharitable and contemptible” (Ryan, 5).

Ryan declared that in each of these cases “the human dignity of the Negro is outraged and the virtues of justice and charity, or both, are violated.” Discrimination in the area of employment was the most offensive form of racial discrimination to Ryan because it denied the person a right to earn a living wage, and to Ryan the living wage was part of the person’s natural rights that could never be abrogated. But, he also had great confidence in the way the United States was addressing employment discrimination. He told the Howard audience, “happily our government is endeavoring, however feebly and temporarily to fulfill its obligation of enforcing this natural right of Negro workers, through the Fair Employment Practices Committee. I repeat that in so doing it is merely performing a definite moral obligation” (Ryan, 5).

Ryan urged blacks to be patient in their demands for universal enfranchisement and said that laws that prevented blacks from voting were not “necessarily a violation of the Negro’s moral rights” because the only moral right a person had in politics was “the right to have a government that promotes the common good. This end can be attained without universal suffrage” (Ryan, 7). Instead of demanding the right to vote, Ryan suggested a better use for black efforts would be to secure “elementary schooling” for education was the prerequisite for voting in the United States. Although Ryan did not support universal enfranchisement for blacks, he did support the desegregation of the armed forces saying, “I did not see any valid reason why black and white soldiers cannot be placed in the same regiment” (Ryan, 7). Ryan also advocated desegregation in higher education, theatres, concert halls, public transportation, and restaurants. He concluded his Charter Day address by calling black Americans to accept that changes in America had to come gradually, and he urged them to accept gratefully the help offered to them by white people like the “very good friend of the Negro, Virginius Dabney” (Ryan, 11).

Ryan’s invocation of Dabney was intentional. It revealed the attention he paid to the discussions and arguments that were happening at Howard specifically and in the United States about whether blacks had a just claim to demand radical changes in the American social structure. At the end of his speech, Ryan told the
audience “if Christ’s gospel of love were put into practice by all classes, neither the Negroes nor any other minority group could honestly complain of unfair treatment” (Ryan, 11). Ryan warned the black audience that as they claimed that whites had an obligation to love them that blacks had an obligation to love whites as well. He said blacks “should love especially friends like Virginius Dabney, even when they advocate patience and a realistic approach to interracial conditions and practices” (Ryan, 11). Ultimately, Ryan identified education as the answer to interracial justice because “prejudices, discriminations and artificial conventions from which the Negro suffers” were based in prejudice. He cited a proposal made at the American Catholic Sociological Society for interracial justice education as a ray of hope for America’s future. Prudent youth educated in interracial justice would create an American society where racial discrimination and prejudice no longer existed. The true hope was with the future, and those in the present day would have to accept the realities of American society and prepare for the future day of justice.

_The Washington Afro-American_ reported on Ryan’s address. It claimed that “Monsignor Ryan provoked a controversy among his hearers, some of whom thought he did not go far enough in urging an all-out attack on intolerance.” That Ryan would come to a black university and present such an address on the occasion of the founding of the university indicated the degree to which some Catholic leaders had committed themselves to the mainline theology of racial justice. Because Ryan was the featured speaker at Charter Day, he did not have to deal directly with black criticism of his message. Directly after his address, the Howard University Choir sang the spiritual “O, Mary” to honor and thank their Catholic guest.

### The Legacy and Continuing Challenge of Gilligan’s Theological Approach

Gilligan’s theology of racial justice was important for three reasons. First, it provided white Catholics living in the wake of the Great Migration with clear answers about what their obligations as Christians were to blacks they met and worked with in the cities. Secondly, he provided a model of how to apply Catholic theology to the race question, a question that would not be settled in any satisfactory ways until the latter 1960s. And, thirdly, it provided a theological justification for those who decided to acquiesce to American racial discrimination. Though there were serious and successful Catholic challenges to Gilligan, the history of U.S. Catholicism for the first half of the twentieth century shows that Gilligan’s theological reasoning and teaching on race, justice and charity made its way into the practices and thinking of many American Catholics. While some Catholics were arguing and working ardently for racial justice, desegregation, and under-
standing of all people as children of God and as essentially equal, others endorsed and practiced a stratification of love and obligation that inadvertently justified racist acts.

Having knowledge of this history of U.S. Catholic teaching on race, helps me to understand what happened in my first grade class. Carefully taught and deeply engrained practices and thoughts such as these are difficult to unlearn and erase. It is my hope that historical knowledge about the roots of our racial practices and thoughts can help those who really care about addressing racism in the church to know where to start.

References


