

# Leveling the Praying Field

*Can the Church We Love,  
Love Us Back?*

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## Introduction

On May 22, 2019, we celebrated our final school mass at St. Peter Claver Catholic School before closing after ninety-eight years of serving the Black Catholic community of New Orleans. This elementary/middle school has been an evangelical space where youth and families were able to grow in their faith. It was a safe space that molded many civil rights leaders, doctors, lawyers, and an array of public servants during its history. This space was a beacon of hope in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina, after which it reopened as a central school that took in students from surrounding areas so that families, especially Black families, could move back knowing that there was a space where their children could get a good Catholic education that was grounded in culture.

This day marked the end of an era—when Black children could come to a school and learn about their faith from a Black perspective; where families could come to a school where they were

taught about faith from a Black perspective; where Catholic school students, faculty, and staff would come into a school building with Catholic art featuring images of Jesus and other biblical figures that looked like the people in their school and community. As part of the uniform, the students wore vests made of kente cloth, a Ghanaian textile, made of handwoven cloth strips of silk and cotton. These images and uniforms sparked a sense of pride in our community. It also reminded those who attended, worked at, or entered our school, that they too are part of the salvation story. Many fear that our church might have the same fate in the near future.

Yes, there are still many other schools and churches around the country that continue to promote cultural understanding and awareness of their spiritual traditions, but they are too few and most of them are struggling to keep their doors open. Too many times, I, and others from my community, have had to “defend” our way of living our spiritual life as being genuinely Catholic, whether our artwork, our gospel music, or other culturally unique practices that may not be part of the usual Eurocentric worship at local and national gatherings. I have heard my brothers and sisters from the Hispanic/Latino community say the same thing,

although some of their traditions are being more accepted by the church because of their growing numbers. Unfortunately, this lack of understanding and appreciation of our differences often points to the effects of racism within our church. Our safe spaces are diminishing and, often, the church hierarchy does not give its attention and resources to the issues affecting communities of color unless it deals with a public relations crisis.

Racism is nothing new in the church. In fact, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., during his 1960 “Meet the Press” interview, said, “I think it is one of the greatest tragedies, one of the most shameful tragedies in America, that eleven o’ clock on Sunday morning is one of the most, if not the most, segregated hours in Christian America.” Racism is referred to as America’s original sin. Just like human sin originated from the fall of Adam and Eve, so also many of the ills of division and injustice in America stem from racism. This racism originates in humans that make up the church. With the average American becoming “brownier,” due to various factors, it appears that white America is reacting to preserve an America where whiteness, and the values that come with it, are maintained; hence the popularity of the political slogan, “Make America Great Again.”

So how does racism play out in our church today? As noted earlier, frequently church leaders don't address issues facing communities of color until they are forced to. Furthermore, racism is often at issue when people of color are only put in positions of authority in order to accept and promote values that promote Eurocentric ideals and values; when they challenge such ideals they are punished, ostracized, and labeled as "trouble-makers" or "antichurch." Thus, many national organizations that are created to serve communities of color are often so preoccupied promoting Eurocentric ideals in order to win over those in authority that they ignore the real needs of the people they are called to represent and serve.

There have been several church documents written about racism, especially in the Catholic Church, but whether they were written in 1979 or 2019, the same issues exist. It seems that the same events play out every time a racial incident happens locally or nationally: people are in shock; communities of color that are affected are terribly upset and start to take action; media attention brings the issue before those in church authority; some meetings, or gatherings, take place where people express their emotions; a church docu-

ment is issued; some prayer services are held; and finally, things return to normal. There is no power shift or racial reconciliation where real issues are addressed, or people in authority—who may be part of the problem—removed. Thus, the cycle continues, and more people of color lose faith in the church—*especially our youth*.

Millennials (those born between 1981 and 1995) and Gen Z (those born between 1995 and 2010) are unique in that they have been shaped by the events of the world. In 2005, for example, the world witnessed my hometown flooded by the effects of Hurricane Katrina. The poverty of New Orleans was on full display to the world. So was the slowness of help to assist these expendable lives. And furthermore, across America, every year from 2014 on, there have been shootings by police of unarmed Black males including Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, and Michael Brown. Our youth have grown up seeing the media coverage of the murder of nine church members at Emanuel AME church in Charleston, South Carolina, by a white supremacist. These generations have witnessed the video of a white supremacist driving his car into a crowd of people protesting racism in Charlottesville, Virginia, injuring many and

killing one. With the advent of social media these young people have been inundated with images and information dealing with a country and world that is still grappling with racism.

These generations have witnessed the rapid growth of hate groups throughout the past decade. They grew up under the message of “hope” under President Barack Obama, a president who faced many obstacles and insults that his white predecessors never faced, and some that came from the church itself. During the 2016 election, they witnessed the return of overt racism due to the effects of the previous presidential campaign, thus making it OK to say and do certain things toward others that were once taboo. Millennials and Gen Z are more social-justice oriented. Consider the many recent movements that have been formed and led by youth and young adults that we will discuss in this book. Many have left the church because of the hypocrisy when they hear that the church preaches one thing, but its members live by a different set of values.

To understand these generations, one must understand and appreciate their characteristics. According to a 2016 CARA study on diversity in

the Catholic Church, 36 percent of parishes in the United States are culturally diverse,<sup>1</sup> a number that will only increase as time goes on. Forty percent of Catholics come from a Hispanic background compared to only 10 percent in the 1960s.<sup>2</sup> Fifty-six percent of nones (former Catholics), teens and young adults are non-white or multicultural.<sup>3</sup> Gen Z is majority non-white and the most diverse generation in US history, and they have more interactions with more diverse colleagues in person or through the internet.<sup>4</sup> Only 33 percent of Gen Z believe minorities have equal opportunities for success, compared to 43 percent of all other generations combined.<sup>5</sup> Seventy-two percent of Gen Z consider racial equality to be one of the most

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<sup>1</sup>Center for Applied Reserach in the Apostolate (CARA), “Cultural Diversity in the Catholic Church in the United States,” special report (October 2016).

<sup>2</sup>Hosffman Ospino, “The Church’s Changing Face,” *Our Sunday Visitor*, May 18, 2014.

<sup>3</sup>Robert J. McCarty and John M. Vitek, *Going Going Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics* (Winona, MN: St. Mary’s Press, 2018).

<sup>4</sup>The Center for Generational Kinetics and Jason Dorsey, *iGEN’S Political and Civic Outlook*, The Center for Generational Kinetics, LLC., 2016.

<sup>5</sup>*iGEN’S Political and Civic Outlook*.



important issues today.<sup>6</sup> These stats indicate that “ministry as usual” from a Eurocentric perspective will not work.

Another challenge in addressing racism with the next generation is that, just as much as they are idealistic, they are also individualistic. In this era of social media it is important to help youth understand how addressing racism affects them and society. We, as a church, must remember not only to look at the systemic roots, causes, and effects of racism, but also at how our faith compels us to address this sin. We must not just teach *about* it, for this generation is asking us how we are going to act upon it to make a difference—otherwise known as “praying with our feet.”

Despite all these changes in the demographics, most minorities still do not have the same opportunities as their white counterparts. This is known as the “unleveled playing field.” This phrase takes into account that people of color do not make the same wages as their white counterparts and do not have the same access to safe housing, environmentally safe communities, appropriate education, job opportunities, wealth attainment, and a myriad of

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<sup>6</sup>“The Power of Gen Z Influence: How the Pivotal Generation Is Affecting Market Spending,” *Millennial Marketing* (January 2018).

other opportunities as their white counterparts. Even in dioceses across the country most of the attention and resources usually go toward churches or ministries that are in line with Eurocentric values, while many churches of color or ministries that serve them are underresourced, left to fend for themselves, and only receive attention during Black History Month or when holding special “diverse” liturgies. However, during these diverse liturgical events it has been my experience that any type of multicultural expression is seen as an entertaining sideshow and not an authentic expression of the faith. Many of those communities of color are not invited to be a part of the decision-making process in a diocese where policies and procedures may affect them negatively. At times, they may even feel like second-class citizens in a church that they, and their ancestors, have sacrificed so much to build. These and several other realities are what I refer to as the “unleveled *praying* field” in the church.

Millennials and the Gen Z generations see these issues and choose either to fight to create equality in the church they love or to leave. Unlike some of the older generations, they are not afraid to ask *why* when it comes to doctrine, policies, and, at times, lack of action on the part of the church,

specifically on social justice issues. They are not afraid to speak out to bishops, priests, youth ministers, catechists, or other forms of authority, on issues that they feel need to be addressed to make the world a more just and “beloved kingdom.” These generations see all global issues as just as important as what they may be facing in their own neighborhood. Their understanding of being one body takes on a whole new meaning in the age of modern technology.

These younger generations are inspired by Pope Francis because of his constant call for us to be church outside of our walls and to be a voice for the voiceless. It is our duty to make sure that we continue to examine our ministries in an ever-changing world. The message is the same, but the delivery has to change. How are we living out the walk of “accompaniment,” as Pope Francis continues to challenge the church to do, with the young and those who are marginalized? When we talk about racism, do we refer to the past, when pictures were in black and white, or are we fearless enough to pull up recent social media posts that point out that it still exists today? Are we able to have frank conversations about institutional, environmental, and personal forms of racism that our communities face? Are we able to discuss the

unearned privileges our community may have, and benefit from, that may unintentionally oppress others, and how we can rectify these situations?

These are the type of questions and reflections that our youth and young adults are thirsting for from our church. They want us to be prophets in a world that seems to be losing its moral ground. In a world where media constantly shows the disparity of life among people and the stereotypes that can be reinforced by such reports, our faith calls us to step out, be bold, and to challenge our society to conform to our faith values, not for us to conform to society's values. Our youth and young adults are drawn to those who are countercultural because they challenge the norms. Is that not what we preach when we speak about the life of Jesus? He was the most countercultural person that ever existed, and our youth and young adults are hungry to know about this man.

Yes, our parish school may have closed today, but my prayer is that what it represented in our community may live on through the youth and families that it served. It is institutions like St. Peter Claver Catholic School that have been the backbone that has supported and nurtured the faith for so many who may have otherwise been ignored. A faith that I believe Jesus called us to

witness to the forgotten around the world. It is through Christ's inspiration that I write this love letter to the church. For if you love something, you will challenge it to live up to its full potential. It is through the hope of those I have met, been mentored by, and ministered alongside that I continue to uplift the future generations that continue to motivate me to keep pushing a church that sometimes chooses to ignore the voices of my community. Finally, it is through the power of my ancestors, who sacrificed much for me, that I now pave the way for those coming after me to make a more just society for others. It is time to level the *praying* field.