

RACIAL JUSTICE  
—— and the ——  
CATHOLIC CHURCH

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## Chapter One

# What Is Racism?

**T**HIS IS PERHAPS the most important chapter of this book. To know that Christians are to shun and struggle against racism is intuitively obvious. But to know what is meant by “racism,” especially in a so-called “post-racial” society, is another matter. What exactly are believers called to reject and combat? Part of what makes racism such a difficult issue to address is that most Americans lack an adequate understanding of its depth, extent, and true nature. Thus, this chapter’s question is critically important, for one’s perception of this social evil will influence decisively one’s theological interpretation, ethical guidance, and pastoral strategies.

In this chapter, I will situate the contemporary concern about racial justice in light of the major shifts in race relations now underway in the United States, changes occasioned by the election of the first African American as our president and the significant racial/ethnic demographic transition now underway. I will then consider what I call the “common sense” understanding of racism: Person A, usually but not always white, does something negative to Person B (usually but not always black or Latino) because of the color of his or her skin. This reality is real, but inadequate to deal with the racial quagmires we continue to experience in the United States.

Using the understanding of “culture” developed by Bernard Lonergan, I will demonstrate how racism is a culture, that is, part of the range of meanings and values that define a human group. Racism then refers to the underlying “set of meanings and values”

attached to skin color, a way of interpreting skin color differences that pervades the collective convictions, conventions, and practices of American life. This understanding of racism as a culture helps to explain its stubborn tenacity. This culture also has interpersonal and systemic effects — not the least of which is the justification of systems of racial privilege and advantage.

## AN EXPLANATION OF TERMS

One of the challenges present in discussions about race and racism is that the terminology used to refer to the various racial and ethnic groups is fluid, evolving, contested, and rarely emotionally neutral. Among such terms are “white,” “people of color,” “nonwhite,” and “racial/ethnic minority.” For the sake of clarity and understanding, I want to clarify how I use these terms in this book.<sup>1</sup>

The term “white” refers to the dominant cultural group in our country. Originally, this group was primarily of Western European descent. It is important to note that “white” is a fluid category that has come to include over the years ethnic groups from other parts of the world. For example, the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (1999) defined “white” as “a person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa.” The U.S. Census Bureau further explains that “white” encompasses those who wrote on their census forms entries such as “Irish, German, Italian, Lebanese, near Easterner, Arab, or Polish.” “White,” then, does not refer to a “race,” but rather to a social group that has access to political, social, economic, or cultural advantages that people of color do not share.

The terms “people of color” and “nonwhites” are collective terms that refer to all other racial and ethnic groups in U.S. society. While these terms make reference to skin color, they refer much more to social groups that, for the most part, find themselves without easy access to the political, social, economic, or cultural advantages enjoyed by those designated as white.

It should be further noted that “race” is a troublesome term, as is the idea that human beings constitute or can be divided into discrete and racially distinct social groups. The U.S. Census Bureau’s understanding is important for the discussion in this work. It notes: “These categories are *social-political constructs* and should not be interpreted as being scientific or anthropological in nature.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, “race” is a term of limited *scientific* usefulness, at best. Yet the enduring *social significance* of physical and cultural differences among human groups gives rise to the moral concerns at the heart of this project.

Difficulties also surround the use of the terms “minority” and “minority group” when referring to people of color collectively, or to African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, or Asian Americans specifically. Among the issues raised with this usage is the fact that the term is not consistently employed to mean a “numerical”<sup>3</sup> minority; rather, it often carries connotations of power, prestige, value, and/or inclusion — or the lack thereof. However, no commonly accepted substitute for these terms has yet emerged, and their use is still widespread in social science literature. I try to account for this difficulty by using the modifiers “racial” or “ethnic” before the word “minority,” while acknowledging the limitations of this approach.

## PRELUDE AND CONTEXT: THE ELECTION OF AN AFRICAN AMERICAN PRESIDENT

“I thought I would never see the day!” This sentiment was echoed over and again by millions of African Americans, both on November 4, 2008, and on January 20, 2009. I myself felt a wondrous mixture of stunned disbelief, joy, and pride as the Obama family took the stage at Chicago’s Wrigley Park on that late autumn night after being introduced as the “next First Family of the United States.” Shortly after the news networks made the announcement of his election official, my cell phone began to ring. The first call

was from my sister. In the midst of her joy, a wistful tone: “I wish Mom and Dad were here to see this.” Another sentiment commonly voiced throughout black America.

The night of the inauguration, after a marathon day in front of the television incessantly flipping channels to follow every event of that historic day, I paused for a moment of quiet reflection. I wrote in my journal:

I am overwhelmed and full of AWE at the momentous, seismic, epochal, unprecedented, ground-shifting nature of what we are experiencing in this country. For the first time in my life, I cried as I sang the National Anthem; I at last felt included in “America.” This is not a *new* face of America, as this dark-skinned, nutmeg-hued man assumes one of the world’s most important positions of leadership. For the darker face has always been here, but rarely acknowledged, at least not in celebration. Rather, what we witnessed today was the public recognition of that face — and its talent, beauty, and contribution. We, America, don’t know how to act in this “brave new world.” But here we are. *I cried*. I’m happy. I’m in stunned disbelief and amazement at the power of God and this new thing being done in our midst: the culmination of so many who kept faith in America through our darkest days, years, and centuries. Because it took almost 400 years to get here . . . through the horrors of slavery, civil war, Jim Crow, and civil rights . . . through nightmares of despair, humiliation, and exclusion . . . through trials of hurt, death — and hope. Through our most enduring sin and stubborn stain, maybe we have begun to overcome.

## Yet Race Still Matters in America

For many, Obama’s achievement represents the fulfillment of Martin Luther King’s dream: a black man whose ambition is bounded not by the color of his skin but by the content of his character. They view Obama’s election for the nation’s highest office as an affirmation of the fundamental soundness of the American project and the

decency of the American people. Some even take this to be a moment of racial redemption, a sign that America has finally transcended its ugly racial past. Others see this as an occasion of racial vindication, that is, indisputable evidence that we live in a “color-blind” society where one’s progress is no longer limited by skin color, but only by the strength of one’s own drive, effort, and initiative. They also hold that with racism’s demise we no longer need affirmative action policies, which are at best passé and at worst reverse discrimination. Obama’s ascendancy, according to these narratives, hails the arrival of a “post-racial” society, a descriptor, it should be noted, that Obama himself has never adopted.

There is much that is remarkable about this moment. It is a watershed event in our national history. The momentous nature of this development is demonstrated by the fact that the U.S. president is not only the leader of the government and the nation’s chief executive, but also its “head of state.” The presidency, in a real way, stands in our nation in the same relationship as Britain’s monarchy. As “head of state,” the president is the chief public representative of the United States, the living embodiment of the nation’s values, ideals, and character. The president is an important, even primal, symbol of who “we” are, leading us both in public joy and celebration (as when welcoming a returning Olympic team), and in collective grief and mourning (as in the aftermath of 9/11). This symbolic charge of representing — indeed, *in-bodying* — who we are as a nation and people is what many mean when they take measure of a candidate and ask whether he or she is “presidential.”

Thus, Obama, the ultimate “Other” — a descendent of those marked for slavery, considered subhuman for most of their history, and deemed as “having no rights that a white man is bound to respect”<sup>4</sup> — has now been deemed to be “presidential,” that is, the personification of the country and its values. A black body is now the embodiment of “America.” By any measure, this is a seismic moment in American life.

However, before we uncork the champagne in an explosion of national celebration and self-congratulation, let’s take a deeper look.

Consider how race has framed, haunted — even “colored” — Obama’s presidency from the very beginning of his quest for the nomination. Recall the first questions asked about him and his candidacy: “Is he black enough?” “Is he too black?” “Is the nation ready for a black president?”

Then the concerns became: “Is he an angry black man, à la the Reverend Jeremiah Wright?” Is he the (illegitimate) beneficiary of political affirmative action, as suggested by those who avowed that his race had been an advantage to his campaign? Why is he “black” if his mother’s white? Why were most white primary voters in Pennsylvania and West Virginia who stated that race was an important consideration for their choice unwilling to vote for a black man?

Then consider the following events, all of which occurred within days of his election and the first two hundred days of his presidency:

- ♦ It has been widely reported that Obama has received more death threats than any previous presidential candidate, president-elect, or president. He received Secret Service protection eighteen months before the election, earlier in the campaign than any previous presidential candidate. The Secret Service has openly acknowledged that the “historic nature of his presidency poses ‘unique’ challenges with which to contend.”<sup>5</sup>
- ♦ On campuses across the country, reports surfaced after the election of students writing anti-Obama comments, including one that said, “Let’s shoot that [N-word] in the head.”
- ♦ In Standish, Maine, a sign inside the Oak Hill General Store read: “Osama Obama Shotgun Pool.” Customers could sign up to bet \$1 on a date when Obama would be killed. “Stabbing, shooting, roadside bombs, they all count,” the sign said. At the bottom of the marker board was written, “Let’s hope someone wins.”
- ♦ The day after his election, second- and third-grade students on a school bus in Rexburg, Idaho, chanted “assassinate Obama.”<sup>6</sup>
- ♦ A national political leader, Newt Gingrich, described then Supreme Court nominee Sonia Sotomayor — the first person

of Hispanic ancestry to be named for the highest court — as a “Latina woman racist.” Though he later retracted his comment, this was typical of the vitriol heaped upon her on the part of overwhelmingly white conservative activists.<sup>7</sup>

- ◆ There has been a resurgence of race-based hate groups and militia movements. The Southern Poverty Law Center has documented an alarming increase in the number, membership, recruitment efforts, and vitriolic rhetoric of white supremacist organizations and armed right-wing paramilitary militia groups. These armed bands, they note, “are just one part of an explosion of extremist rage in America — a backlash to the Obama election and the progress we’re making toward social justice and tolerance.” They further document what they call a “remarkable rash of domestic terror incidents since the presidential campaign, most of them related to anger over the election of Barack Obama.” These incidents include cross burnings and violent attacks, as well as assassination plots and threats. The rage in these groups stems from, they conclude, increased nonwhite immigration and a decline in the percentage of whites in America.<sup>8</sup>
- ◆ Thinly veiled racially charged protests over health care have gained strength. Veteran Congressman John Dingell of Michigan commented, “I haven’t faced crowds this angry since I voted for the Civil Rights Act of 1964.”<sup>9</sup> The scene is the summer of 2009, as “town hall” discussions about health care reform across the nation are overwhelmed by vehement, boisterous, and angry crowds of mostly white middle-class citizens. I am struck by the connection made between the two events: the Civil Rights Act granting a semblance of legal equality to a long downtrodden black minority, and efforts to ensure a floor of decent health care for the vast majority of the poor and vulnerable. It manifests the racial undercurrent present in the health care debates by a portion of the white middle-class who apparently feel threatened by “something” they cannot clearly name. Maybe they sense (perhaps rightly) that things are changing, that the social order



and the cultural codes they have taken for granted are shifting in fundamental, decisive, and seismic ways.

- ◆ In April 2008, a local Mississippi high school holds its first integrated school prom, ending decades of officially sponsored separate dances for white and black students. However, in March a group of white parents organized and held the usual separate “white prom,” vowing that their children would never dance with blacks. (The exact words used by one parent were, “No nigger’s going to be rubbing up on my daughter.”) In the spring of 2009, a group of white parents organized and held a second unofficial “white-only” prom.<sup>10</sup>

My point is obvious, even belabored: Obama’s presidency reveals that despite the indisputable changes in race relations of the past fifty years, it is also indisputable that race still matters. Race is far from being an insignificant reality in American life. It remains our deepest national obsession; it is still a principal and all too often decisive lens through which we filter our perception and understanding of the world. We continue to live in a highly racialized society, that is, “a society wherein race matters profoundly for differences in life experiences, life opportunities, and social relationships.”<sup>11</sup> We are a nation “that allocates differential economic, political, social, and even psychological rewards to groups along racial lines; lines that are socially constructed.”<sup>12</sup> Despite the obvious and welcome changes from the harsh and often savage brutalities of enforced segregation, it yet remains true that “the color question is pervasive in our lives, and it is an explicit tension or at least subtext in countless policy debates.”<sup>13</sup>

Obama’s presidency, then, does not mark the end of our racial dysfunction. Rather, it is dramatic proof that we are far from being a “color-blind” society. His quest and the discussions around it demonstrate that African Americans must still contend with and negotiate through a complex minefield of entrenched racial obstacles that whites do not have to consider. Even now, Obama runs the risk that any small misstep can transform him from being an acceptable racial “exception” to being the embodiment of white

America's racial fears about black men. Or, to put this point more colloquially, using the words of a CNN political pundit: "There's a reason why all of our presidents have looked like me. And Obama is rolling a huge stone up a steep hill."<sup>14</sup>

Thus a most important reality that this event tells us about "us" is that pronouncements concerning a "post-racial" America are premature at best; at worst, they are ideological evasions of reality. "Color-blindness" is a naive illusion. Obama's presidency does not herald the arrival of a racial promised land. In this nation race still matters.

## THE BROWNING OF AMERICA AND RACIAL RESISTANCE

What accounts for this eruption of racial animus and hostility? Why would Obama's election be such a catalytic occurrence that commentators contend that some in the United States have become mentally or emotionally "unhinged" by this event? A deeper look at such questions requires us to probe the discomfort and unease that exist among some over the changing faces and voices of America.<sup>15</sup> The resistance encountered to genuine racial equality stems, in no small degree, from a deep anxiety among some quarters of white America to the nation's changing demography.

Any discussion of racial justice today must take account of the seismic shift occurring in the composition of our population. We are becoming more racially and culturally diverse than ever before. At least one out of three Americans is now "Latino or nonwhite." The Census Bureau reports that almost half of the nation's children under the age of five are members of racial minorities. Many of our nation's urban centers are now so-called "majority-minority," meaning not only that people of color are the majority of the population, but also that no single racial or ethnic group constitutes a numerical majority. Because of immigration patterns and differing birthrates among the various racial and ethnic groups, it appears likely that by the middle of this century (if not sooner), whites will no longer be the majority race in the United States. Indeed,

it is probable that our country will have no single racial majority group.<sup>16</sup>

Not only is American society becoming more multiracial and multicultural, it is also more religiously diverse. In May 2001, National Public Radio noted that there are now more Muslims than Jews living in the United States. Indeed, the Muslim population is more numerous than many Christian denominations, whether singly or combined. This same source further reports that Hindus and Buddhists also are an ever-more significant presence in our social life.

Thus the landscape of U.S. society is being, and already has been, decisively altered. Our schools and workplaces are becoming ever more racially, ethnically, and religiously diverse in ways many might never have imagined, dreamed, hoped, or desired. It is increasingly difficult — even false — to assert without qualification that the United States is a “white Christian nation.” But if not, then who, or what, is really “American”?

We are no longer a white Christian nation, and many white Christians are anxious. A March 2008 Pew study found that 56 percent of high school educated voters see newcomers as threatening, compared to less than a third of those with a college degree. This leads some to argue that while antiblack racism is still quite alive, as the face of America is changing, so is the face of American racism. Race still matters because for many Americans, dark skin now is associated also with a dangerous “foreignness” that is alien — if not hostile — to genuine “American” identity.

This provides a context for understanding how racial anxieties about Obama have been and continue to be discussed in coded reference to his “foreignness.” Consider the following incidents:

- ◆ Someone at a rally late in the campaign said, “I don’t trust him. He’s an Arab.” (Recall Senator McCain’s response, “No, ma’am, he’s a decent family man.” Apparently, “Arab” and “decent” are mutually exclusive).
- ◆ Throughout the campaign, and continuing to this day, there is a sentiment voiced to the effect that “he doesn’t see America the

way we do” (as if it is self-evident who “we” are and how “we” see America).

- ◆ A September 2008 Pew survey found that “white voters who haven’t graduated from college . . . were twice as likely to think that Obama is a Muslim as those who have.”
- ◆ A persistent yet false e-mail circulated rumors that Obama took his oath of office as a senator on the Koran.
- ◆ An anxious reservation is conveyed in the following sentiment: “His name is just too much like Osama.”
- ◆ Finally, a recent manifestation of this trend is the oft-proven false but maddeningly persistent belief that Obama was born in Kenya. Thus he is not a native-born U.S. citizen and therefore was illegally elected and exercises no legitimate authority.<sup>17</sup>

These events demonstrate how it is more acceptable to express reservations about Obama’s so-called “foreignness” than to express a direct racial prejudice.<sup>18</sup> “Foreignness” and “Muslim” have become placeholders for “race” and “black.”

It is tempting to dismiss these incidents as either naive or ignorant bigotry, as beyond the serious consideration of thoughtful persons. But to do so would miss the deeper point: Obama has become a walking “ink blot,” a living Rorschach test upon which a number of whites project their deep-seated fears, resentments, and anxieties over no longer being a “white Christian nation.” Obama, again, becomes important not only for who he is in himself, but for what he is revealing about us.

Obama, in his heritage and outlook, represents an inexorably changing American identity. His is the face of our inevitable future. That someone who is so “Other” — with the strange name, dark skin, and unusual background — is now the symbolic embodiment of what it means to be “American” is a confirmation of some people’s worst fears. It is not surprising, then, that this evokes from some a kind of “tribalism,” that is, a defense of self- and group interests — what is “ours” — against those “others” who are seen as a

threat to one's entitlements.<sup>19</sup> This carries the danger of social fragmentation and division, if not worse. A noted social commentator expresses this fear:

My biggest fear, as this nation moves into an inevitable browning, or hybridization, is that there will be a very powerful minority, overwhelmingly composed of Euro-Americans, who will see themselves in significant danger as a consequence of the way democracy works: winner-take-all. And they will begin to renege on some of the basic principles that created the United States and made it what it is.<sup>20</sup>

Thus Obama's presidency forces us to confront the changing faces and voices of America, that is, the new national identity in the process of becoming. For some, this is profoundly disorienting, a source of visceral fear and existential unease. Many, it seems, are experiencing *culture shock*. I use the term "culture shock" quite deliberately and intentionally. It describes the anxiety and other feelings (such as surprise, disorientation, uncertainty, and confusion) felt when people have to operate within an entirely different cultural or social environment, such as in a foreign country. It grows out of the difficulties of assimilating the new culture, in knowing what is appropriate and what is not.

This seems an apt description of what lies behind many of the reactions that an Obama presidency has aroused. Many white Americans are experiencing "culture shock" in their own homeland, as the country is being transformed into something that is strange, unfamiliar, "foreign," and threatening. They react with confusion, anger, and even disgust; for example, consider the sometimes voiced sentiment: "I resent having to speak Spanish in my own country." They feel that America is being morphed into something they don't understand, and desire even less. Such feelings of unease, disorientation, confusion, and resentment are often manipulated all too easily by the unscrupulous and the demagogues who always arise in times of cultural upheaval and uncertainty.<sup>21</sup> This anxiety is projected onto Obama — hardly surprising, given the symbolic role of the

presidency in this country and his strange name, dark skin, and unusual background.

This emerging multiracial and multicultural society is an America we have never been, and, for some, it is a source of visceral fear and existential unease that motivates passive (and possibly active) resistance. Confronting the possibility of social tribalism, then, is absolutely essential to any adequate understanding of the dynamics of our political moment and justice struggles that we face. Obama's presidency, and the public discourse and the reactions it continues to arouse, make manifest the latent anxiety among many: Whose country is this? Who are we — and what is America? — if we are not white and Christian? This is another reason why race still matters.

## RACISM AND CULTURE

All of these considerations are germane to addressing the question, "What is racism?" For the answer to that question must be one that accounts for the diffuse anxiety on the part of those who view the election of a black man with a dismay bordering on rebellion. The response to that question should also help explain the persistence of racism despite momentous progress and seismic change. This reflection must also enable us to understand the paradox of undeniable racial progress coupled with apparently intractable opposition to full racial equality and inclusion.

To understand this new era of race relations, the persistence and intransigence of racial inequality, and the challenges we face in this moment, we must have a deeper understanding of racism than what I call the "commonsense" understanding that prevails among the vast majority of Americans. This understanding could be expressed as follows:

Person A (usually, but not always, white) consciously, deliberately, and intentionally does something negative to Person B (usually, but not always, black or Latino) because of the color of his or her skin.

Note the following characteristics of such an understanding:

- ◆ It focuses on interpersonal transactions or behaviors, that is, upon individuals — or at most, small groups with clearly identifiable actors — acting negatively toward other individuals who are racially different.
- ◆ It focuses on conscious, deliberate actions, that is, someone intentionally chooses to act in a negative manner toward another.
- ◆ It focuses upon the harm that another experiences because of race-based actions, rather than the advantages that may accrue to those doing the harm.
- ◆ Finally, while it acknowledges that whites may be the “default” perpetrators, this social group is not the only one that can engage in such behaviors (which is the basis for the often heard rejoinder, “But blacks and Latinos are just as racist as whites”).

Thus the commonsense understanding discusses racism as personal acts of rudeness, hostility, or discrimination usually but not always directed against persons of color.

It needs to be acknowledged that such an understanding encompasses no small amount of racially motivated bias. No one disputes the fact that acts of blatant insensitivity still stain our social fabric. Most fair-minded people grant that acts of racial hostility and callous bigotry still occur. Members of any racial group can, and sadly too often do, act unjustly toward those they consider racially different.

Nonetheless, such an understanding does not account for the anxiety we see in U.S. society over the election of an African American as its head of state. A focus on individual behaviors and attitudes does not adequately explain the existence of a racialized society, where race is a principal lens for social interpretation and understanding. A preoccupation with the discrete acts of individual actors cannot explain the persistence and pervasiveness of racial discrimination in hiring, such that white ex-offenders are more likely to be hired for entry-level jobs than black applicants with no criminal record (what one author calls “race trumps criminal records”).<sup>22</sup>

Individual acts of racial animus — even when perpetrated by persons of color — cannot alter the fact that in the United States, one racial group is socially advantaged and the others endure social stigma.

In short, an emphasis upon personal attitudes and actions — what social psychologists call prejudice and discrimination<sup>23</sup> — cannot explain the persistence of racism despite undeniable changes. There appears to be something “more,” an underlying dynamic that remains constant despite significant watersheds and shifts, and that morphs to assume new forms and manifestations. What is this “X” that remains constant, impervious even to the election of a black man to the highest office of the land and his selection as the symbolic embodiment of the nation’s values? And what dynamic accounts for the resistance to and rejection of that very black embodiment? To respond to such questions, we need a fuller and more robust concept of racism than the “commonsense” understanding allows.

My answer, in brief, lies in the realization that racism is a *cultural* phenomenon, that is, a way of interpreting human color differences that pervades the collective convictions, conventions, and practices of American life. Racism functions as an ethos, as the animating spirit of U.S. society, which lives on despite observable changes and assumes various incarnations in different historical circumstances. Analyses that focus only or principally upon interpersonal dynamics (what person A does to person B) miss the more important and pivotal cultural setting that not only facilitates such acts, but makes them understandable and intelligible.

I advance this insight by first developing what I mean by “culture,” and then describing the “culture of racism.”

## Toward an Understanding of Culture

Developing an adequate understanding of culture is a complex undertaking, as there seems to be no standard uniform definition. The prominent anthropologist Clifford Geertz describes culture as “a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which [humans] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.”<sup>24</sup> The noted



Canadian theologian Bernard Lonergan provides the following succinct definition: “A culture is simply the set of meanings and values that inform the way of life of a community.”<sup>25</sup> Culture thus denotes a system of meanings and values, expressed in symbolic form, that conveys and expresses a people’s understanding of life. Culture is the set of attitudes toward life, beliefs about reality, and assumptions about the universe shared by a human group.

Note that culture in this sense is more basic and fundamental than society, social institutions, or social policies and customs. Culture expresses the meaning of society, the value of the patterned ways of social interaction humans construct, and the significance of the ways in which we live and order our communities.<sup>26</sup> Simply put, culture provides the meaning of the social. Lonergan declares, “Over and above mere living and operating, [humans] have to find a meaning and value in their living and operating. It is the function of culture to discover, express, validate, criticize, correct, develop, [and] improve such meaning and value.”<sup>27</sup> Shawn Copeland concisely explains Lonergan’s distinction between a “society” and its “culture” this way: society is “the way human persons live together in some orderly and predictable fashion”; culture is “the meaning of that way of life.”<sup>28</sup>

To put this another way, culture provides the ideological foundation for social, political, and economic policies. The cultural meaning or significance of social life, Lonergan notes, “is felt, intuited, and acted out” and “communicated” in symbolic forms. That is, the underlying meanings and values of social life are expressed and conveyed through “rites and symbols, language and art.” Thus he concludes that “culture stands to social order as soul to body”<sup>29</sup>; that is to say, culture is the spirit that animates social institutions and customs, makes them intelligible, and expresses their meaning and significance.

I want to emphasize several observations:

- ◆ First, cultures are *shared* or group realities. An individual cannot have a “private” culture. One’s culture is also shared by others who belong to a given social group.

- ♦ Second, cultures are *learned* communal beliefs and values. The set of meanings and values that animate a social group are “transmitted from generation to generation through learning.”<sup>30</sup> This learning happens both formally and informally, through conscious instruction and tacit understanding, by intentional training and unconscious socialization.
- ♦ Third, cultures are *formative*, that is, they shape the personal identities of a community’s members, as they express their way of being in the world and their understanding of their place within it. Even though people create culture and it is in a state of constant development, culture also shapes behavior and consciousness within a human society. It conditions our thoughts, values, and actions. Lonergan’s formulation is instructive: “*All human doing, saying, thinking, occurs within the context of a culture and consists in the main of using the culture. It is within culture as it is historically available that provides the matrix within which persons develop and that supplies the meanings and values that inform their lives.*”<sup>31</sup>
- ♦ Fourth, a group’s set of meanings, values, and beliefs about life are expressed *symbolically*. That is, culture is carried and expressed through visible markers (for example, art, music, language, clothing, literature, and dance). As Lonergan puts it, “Meaning is embodied or carried in human intersubjectivity, in art, in symbols, in language, and in the lives and deeds of persons.”<sup>32</sup> Such symbols are not only badges of difference and markers of tribal membership. They are also the icons of a people’s identity, or representations of the *soul* of a people.

This last point is extremely important. Discussions about culture, cultural differences, and cultural sensitivity often focus solely on the externals, that is, what we can see, hear, taste, touch, or smell. We too often focus only on the symbols, symbolic carriers, or social patterns and do not attend to the set of assumptions, meanings, and values about life that these symbols express or convey. This is a very shallow notion of culture.

For example, I lived as a student in Rome for three years. During this time, I became fairly proficient in the Italian language; I could distinguish and appreciate many kinds of pasta; I became adept at negotiating the bewildering Roman traffic; I mastered Italian telephone and social etiquette; and I even grew accustomed to the Italian pronunciation of my name. Nonetheless, I never considered myself “Italian” — nor was I ever mistaken for one. Despite my extended stay in Italy, I never arrived at a point where I felt that I truly understood the Italians. There is something about the Italian sensibility, something about the Italians’ approach to life, something about how they understand themselves, that will always elude and mystify me — no matter how detailed my mastery of the external symbols or carriers of their culture.

My point is quite simple: mastering the external symbols of a culture does not make one a member of that culture. And attention solely to the external carriers or patterns of a culture gives one a very limited understanding of its adherents.

This is because culture, at its core, is something internal. It is a people’s soul, a set of meanings and values that is an individual’s and a social group’s identity. It is the frame of reference through which they look at the world, the template or lens through which they interpret life. Culture shapes consciousness. This is why cross-cultural encounters — and especially times of cultural change or imposition — are occasions of personal and group trauma (that is, “culture shock”). One’s frame of reference is disrupted and one’s sense of self is disoriented, even threatened. Culture, then, is more than what one eats, wears, and drinks. Culture is not principally a way of acting, but a way of being. Culture comprises totality of the way a group is in the world. The external symbols give meaning, direction, and identity to a people in ways that touch not just the intellect, but most especially the heart.

Thus in order to understand the cultural differences and distinctiveness of black and white Americans, we cannot merely list or attend to the external differences in speech, customs, dress, time, art, and literature that mark these groups. We must go deeper and try to understand the “soul” of these groups, that is, the set of

meanings and values that informs their ways of life. I now turn to the task of articulating the “soul” of these respective cultures. This exercise will help make Lonergan’s insights more concrete and also bring us closer to the core of the reality of racism.

## **The “Soul” of African American Culture**

If culture is the set of meanings and values that informs a people’s attitude and stance toward life, what set of meanings and values constitute African American culture?<sup>33</sup> This is obviously a complex question. I admit at the outset that my response will not be a comprehensive one; my hope is to stimulate further reflection upon this important topic.

I begin by acknowledging that African Americans are a diverse people. We are not a monolithic cultural entity. We live in urban, rural, and suburban settings. We are among the poor, the working class, the middle class, and even the wealthy. We are unemployed, factory workers, farmers, and professionals. We are Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Jewish, and unchurched. We are northern, southern, and western. We are male and female. Our loving relationships encompass a variety of sexual orientations and expressions. Our musical tastes encompass Leontyne Price, Wynton Marsalis, Whitney Houston, Boys-II-Men, and Tupac Shakur. Black life in America evidences a plurality of lifestyles and cultures.

Can one, then, speak of a common African American culture without negating our legitimate diversity? I believe that we can. This culture is rooted in a common experience that black folk cannot avoid in the United States: the experience of racial prejudice, discrimination, rejection, and hostility — both subtle and overt — based upon the simple fact of our physical blackness. The following statement articulates this experience well:

No matter what part of the country black people come from, they are beset with indignities traceable to the single fact that they are black. However well-to-do economically or however extensive their formal training, however correct their behavior, black people can never protect themselves from the fact

that they are not accepted as they would be if they were white and had the same achievements.<sup>34</sup>

In fact, the historical event that melded the diverse African peoples brought to this country into an identifiable community in the United States was that of slavery and its aftermath: the experience of having one's humanity denied, questioned, or attacked. What was common to all was the experience of being regarded and treated as less than fully human. In the provocative words of Audre Lorde: "To survive in the mouth of this dragon we call america, we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson — that we were never meant to survive. Not as human beings."<sup>35</sup>

Because of this common experience, African Americans share a common history. Black history, according to James H. Cone, is a "record of joy and pain" that chronicles both "the history of white inhumanity" toward black persons, and "the record of [black] resistance against a condition of bondage."<sup>36</sup> Out of this shared history emerges a common culture — conveyed in music, poetry, dance, prose, speech, and dress — that articulates the unbearable pain, the unimaginable joy, and the unbreakable beauty of carving out one's humanity in an atmosphere of racist insanity.

If one were to try to capture the "soul" of African American culture in a word, perhaps it would be *struggle*. Here I agree with the thoughts of law professor Roy L. Brooks, which merit extensive citation:

If a residual racial perspective that cuts across class lines and other intra-racial differences does inhere in African Americans, surely it consists of at least two ingredients. *One is the expectation of struggle*, that is, the belief that whether an African American wants simply to get through the day or to tackle more complex endeavors (obtaining a quality education, finding and holding a good job, successfully raising a family), he or she should expect to encounter no dearth of artificial, racial barriers and must be prepared to recognize and deal with them effectively. I doubt that this vision of existence is *fundamental* to the way white Americans approach

their lives, or, if it is, that it is as *pervasive* among whites as it is among African Americans. . . . *The second ingredient is the belief that society (“the system” or “the Man”) is more foe than friend*, a theme echoed by African American writers and social activists from the days of slavery to recent times.<sup>37</sup>

If this analysis is correct, then the external manifestations of black culture are symbolic representations of a basic stance toward life: the fundamental and pervasive struggle to be recognized, welcomed, and accepted as a human being. This entails a passionate quest for freedom, equality, and dignity in a racially hostile milieu. I argue that this fundamental struggle for humanity is the “soul” of black culture. Even if one does not believe that it exhausts the whole of black culture, no one can deny that “struggle” is a constitutive part of it. One simply cannot understand black people if one does not understand the pervasive sense of struggle that informs their lives and identity.

## The “Soul” of White Culture

What, then, is the set of meanings and values that informs the way of life of white Americans? In other words, what does it mean to be “white?” Here we face two difficulties. First, as with African Americans, white Americans are not a cultural monolith. White Americans also exhibit a wide diversity of lifestyle and cultural expressions.

Second, for the most part white Americans do not think of themselves as “white” or as belonging to a “white culture.” For most white Americans, the phrase “white culture” is meaningless. The few white authors who advert to this issue note, “Most whites have not thought much about their race. Few, upon being asked to identify themselves by attributes would name whiteness among their primary characteristics.”<sup>38</sup> The emerging research in the field of “white studies” confirms a phenomenon that I have often noted in classes and workshops I have conducted. When asked what their racial/cultural identity is, many whites will state an ethnic background (for example, a hybrid of German/Irish) — but then relate that this ethnic background is not a significant part of their personal

identity. Most whites will describe themselves as “American” — which is significant because if “American” is their specific cultural identity, what does that make people of color? Few in my experience spontaneously describe themselves as “white.” As the sociologists Feagin and Vera observe, “Apparently, for most whites, being white means rarely having to think about it.”<sup>39</sup>

This is an extremely significant observation. Not thinking of oneself as “white” and the easy equation of “white” with “American” are keys to determining the “soul” of white culture. “White” denotes a frame of reference that is *unquestioned*. It is unquestioned because it is *invisible* and *unnamed*. It is unquestioned and invisible because it is the *norm* by and against which all other frames of reference (that is, cultures) are measured. Much as a fish is unaware of water, so whiteness — for white folk — exists on the fringe of consciousness because it is so “normal,” obvious, and “just the way things are.” That is why it is so easy for white people to equate “white” and “American.” For white Americans, whiteness is “reality.”

Hence, the “soul” or essence of white culture is a worldview that — when it adverts to itself — sees itself as the measure of what is real, standard, normative, and/or normal. White culture is a perspective that measures, but is seldom measured; studies, but is rarely studied; analyzes, but is not often analyzed; evaluates, but is typically not evaluated. Let me make this point clear with an example. When I was a student for the priesthood, the annual evaluation by the seminary’s faculty often raised the concern about how I, as a black person, would fit into a white parish. But never were questions raised about how a white parish would accept me, nor of how the overwhelmingly white seminary community handled living with a black man. This is because “whiteness” studies, but is rarely studied; and evaluates, but is seldom evaluated — at least by whites themselves.

Because it purports to encompass reality, white culture does not have to be aware of itself unless those who are “other” challenge its presumption (or pretense) of being normative or standard. Hear the following perceptive observation offered by a white woman:

White is transparent. That's the point of being the dominant race. Sure the whiteness is there, but you never think of it. If you're white you never *have* to think about it. . . . And if white folks remind each other about being white, too often the reminder is about threats by outsiders — nonwhites — who steal white entitlements like good jobs, a fine education, nice neighborhoods, and the good life.<sup>40</sup>

Is there a historical or paradigmatic event that melded the diverse group of European ethnicities and social classes into an identifiable white group? Many scholars point to two: First, the coalition forged between the white southern elite and the white poor before, and most especially after, the Civil War. Derrick Bell, among others, avows that the southern elite skillfully manipulated white skin privilege to keep the white poor and black poor from forming a common cause. Poor whites in the South often fared no better than most black folk. Both were victims of an exploitative system that benefited an aristocratic minority. However, poor southern whites, because they possessed the benefits associated with white skin, enjoyed the consolation of knowing that they were not “niggers.” This social status, despite their poverty, provided them with a psychological cushion and legal protections not enjoyed by black Americans. Thus “white” became understood as a culture of advantage and privilege uniting whites across class lines.<sup>41</sup>

A second historical event that melded the various white groups together in a common culture is the assimilation process by which southern and eastern European immigrants became members of the dominant group and thus considered “white.” The historical details of this process are too complex for presentation here. Suffice it to note that by 1940, the Census Bureau ceased separate classifications for southern and eastern European immigrants, subsuming them under the general heading of “Caucasian (White).”<sup>42</sup>

In summary, Ruth Frankenberg offers this succinct “definition” of “whiteness”:

First, whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second, it is a “standpoint,” a place from which



white people look at ourselves, at others, and at society. Third, “whiteness” refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed. . . . Among the effects on white people both of race privilege and of the dominance of whiteness are their seemingly normativity and their structured invisibility.<sup>43</sup>

So, if a key component of black culture is “the expectation of struggle,” then a core element of white culture is *the presumption of dominance and entitlement*, that is, the presumption of being the norm or standard that measures all other frames of reference and to which all “others” should conform. To put this another way, white culture is a particular frame of reference or understanding of reality that does not acknowledge its particularity.

“*The struggle to be recognized and accepted as human in a racist society*” versus “*the presumption of dominance and measure of normativity*”: these are the set of meanings and values that undergird the cultural products of black and white Americans. They also give us an important window into the dominant frame of reference that undergirds the meanings and values present in American public life and the personal identities of many white Americans. This perspective, that is, understanding racism as a cultural set of meanings and values informing a particular way of life, enables us to better grasp how a focus on culture helps us attend to the deeper roots of this social evil.

## The Culture of Racism

Understanding culture as the set of meanings and values that inform a people’s way of life enables us to get beneath the various interpersonal manifestations of racial animus and discrimination and thus better understand “racism” and its insidious tenacity. In the United States (and Western societies in general), racism functions as a culture, that is, a set of shared beliefs and assumptions that undergirds the economic, social, and political disparities experienced by different racial groups. This set of meanings and values provides the

ideological foundation for a racialized society, where society's benefits and burdens are inequitably allotted among the various racial groups. This set of meanings and values not only answers questions about the significance of social patterns, customs, and policies. As a culture it is also formative; racism is a communal and learned frame of reference that shapes identity, consciousness, and behavior—the way a social group understands its place and worth.

In a perceptive analysis, theologian Gary Chamberlain articulates the cultural significance of racism in terms strikingly similar to Lonergan's understanding. Defining racism as a "symbol-system," he argues:

In order to understand the depth of racism in American society and among practicing Christians, to grasp its persistence despite all rational arguments against it, racism is viewed as a substitute religion. . . . In this sense, racism is a symbol-system which functions as an unconscious, unreflective meaning system resting upon symbols of color and sex which are deeply embedded in the fears and anxieties of white Americans. The terms *white*, *black*, *mixing*, *mingling*, *blood* take on symbolic meanings and identity functions which reflect a world-view as strong or stronger than the Christian symbols of *cross*, *bread*, *wine*, *resurrection*, *brotherhood*, *family of man*.<sup>44</sup>

Chamberlain continues by positing that racism functions as an identity formation system that shapes the inner awareness and self-understanding of white Americans:

Racism in American history has answered questions of meaning and identity for a people engaged in a struggle to determine who they were and why they existed as they did. . . . Blacks historically have told whites who they are not and what their place is not, a contrast identity. Racist symbols, institutionally expressed, gave meaning, motivation, and identity to white Americans' existence.<sup>45</sup>

Hence, he contends that racism is a symbol system that malforms, conforms, and deforms us into an alien identity radically at odds

with authentic Christian belief, so much so that most whites are unaware of how their identity is shaped by this consciousness. As a consequence, note how Christianity itself becomes coopted, malformed in order to conform it to an alien identity.

Chamberlain's insight was expressed more colloquially in an earlier section. Recall the observation offered by a white woman who reflected on the invisibility of white identity until it is challenged by nonwhite others:

White is transparent. That's the point of being the dominant race. Sure the whiteness is there, but you never think of it. If you're white you never have to think about it. . . . And if white folks remind each other about being white, too often the reminder is about threats by outsiders — nonwhites — who steal white entitlements like good jobs, a fine education, and the good life.<sup>46</sup>

This woman thus demonstrates how the cultural symbol "white" functions as a privileged racial "contrast identity," one that defines itself in opposition to that which is "other." And on the basis of this group identity, her racial group is "entitled" to social advantages and benefits.

### The Reality of Unconscious Racism

Deeper insight into this understanding of racism as a culture — that is, as an underlying symbol system that (1) justifies race-based disparities, and (2) shapes identity and consciousness — comes from considering the phenomenon of "unconscious racism" as developed by critical race scholars. I focus on the ideas of a seminal advocate to this school of thought, Charles R. Lawrence.

In brief, "unconscious racism" connotes how race can operate as a negative — yet not conscious, deliberate, or intentional — decision-making factor, due to the pervasive cultural stigma attached to dark skin color in Western culture. Race functions as a largely unconscious or preconscious frame of perception, developed through cultural conditioning and instilled by socialization.

The core insight of “unconscious racism” is conveyed in the following paragraph. Though lengthy, it merits citation and reflection:

Americans share a common historical and cultural heritage in which racism has played and still plays a dominant role. Because of this shared experience, we also inevitably share many ideas, attitudes, and beliefs that attach significance to an individual’s race and induce negative feelings and opinions about nonwhites. . . . At the same time, most of us are unaware of our racism. We do not recognize the ways in which our cultural experience has influenced our beliefs about race or the occasions on which those beliefs affect our actions. In other words, a large part of the behavior that produces racial discrimination is influenced by unconscious racial motivation.<sup>47</sup>

Put more simply, because a racialized set of meanings and values permeates all of our society’s cultural products, we learn our culture’s “racial code” almost by osmosis. We absorb it tacitly through the everyday process of socialization and learning what it means to be an “American.” So much so that this racial code can function on a level beneath our conscious awareness. This is what happens when a person who is otherwise well meaning and without conscious prejudice spontaneously acts or thinks in a racially negative way. “Where did that come from?” she may think in dismay or embarrassment. Such a reaction betrays the influence of the tacitly learned and absorbed racial meanings inherent in our culture.

Unconscious racism, then, denotes the influence of a cultural frame or lens that we have learned and act out of in unintentional and preconscious ways. It is a shorthand for the concrete effects that result from a racial conditioning that is transmitted through unconscious socialization, or what Lawrence calls “tacit understandings”:

Culture — including, for example, the media and an individual’s parents, peers, and authority figures — transmits certain beliefs and preferences. Because these beliefs are so much a

part of the culture, they are not experienced as explicit lessons. Instead, they seem part of the individual's rational ordering of her perceptions of the world. The individual is unaware, for example, that the ubiquitous presence of a cultural stereotype has influenced her perception that blacks are lazy or unintelligent [or more prone to violence]. Because racism is so deeply ingrained in our culture, it is likely to be transmitted by *tacit understandings*: Even if a child is not told that blacks are inferior, he learns that lesson by observing the behavior of others. These tacit understandings, because they have never been articulated, are less likely to be experienced at a conscious level.<sup>48</sup>

The tacit, covert, hidden character of such racial bias, motivation, and conditioning is critical to an understanding of unconscious racism's insidious, pervasive, and largely unacknowledged impact:

*A crucial factor in the process that produces unconscious racism is the tacitly transmitted cultural stereotype. If an individual has never known a black doctor or lawyer or is exposed to blacks only through a mass media where they are portrayed in stereotyped roles of comedian, criminal, musician, or athlete, he is likely to deduce that blacks as a group are naturally inclined toward certain behavior and unfit for certain roles. But the lesson is not explicit: It is learned, internalized, and used without an awareness of its source. Thus an individual may select a white job applicant over an equally qualified black and honestly believe that this decision was based on observed intangibles unrelated to race. . . . Even the most thorough investigation of conscious motive will not uncover the race-based stereotype that has influenced his decision.*<sup>49</sup>

Just as culture shapes one's consciousness and conditions one's thoughts, values, and actions, so too does racism shape behavior and belief. Two examples illustrate this point. Recall the research cited above in conjunction with the undesirability of black male applicants even when the alternative is a white male with a criminal

record. Researcher Devah Pager acknowledges that most employers consciously want to do the right thing. Yet the problem is that they often “rely on instinct when hiring,” with the result that latent biases influence the hiring process. She states, “One of the things I observed [is that] employers will ask black applicants upfront whether or not they had a criminal background. That suggests that there are some automatic associations between race and criminality. When employers are confronted with a young black man, some employers might automatically think that this young man may have a history of criminal involvement.”<sup>50</sup>

Another example illustrating the influence of unconscious racism comes from its impact on voter decisions during the 2008 presidential election. This is well articulated in the following posting from a blogger on CNN’s “political ticker”:

As a white male in a white state who has seen more black people on COPS than in real life, I have to say it does feel odd sometimes that I’m supporting Obama with every ounce of my being. But when I think of how irrational it would be to give into that weird feeling in favor of a man . . . all because he is white . . . well, that just isn’t a prejudice I can live with. That’s why I’m voting for Obama, no matter what COPS has led me to believe about minorities.<sup>51</sup>

Note how strange or weird he reports feeling when acting contrary to the dominant meanings and values that have formed him as he learned the racial code inherent in our culture. Yet also note how this influence, while formative, need not be determinative. One can choose to act out of another cultural frame or set of values. We will discuss this possibility in depth in later chapters.

Lawrence concludes that racism is a much more complex reality than our current system of jurisprudence recognizes. He declares, “requiring proof of conscious or intentional motivation as a prerequisite to . . . [a] recognition that a decision is race-dependent ignores much of what we understand about how the human mind works. It also disregards the . . . profound effect that the history of

American race relations has had on the individual and collective unconscious.”<sup>52</sup>

### Katrina as a Case Study of “Cultured” Unconscious Racism

Let us further consider the culture of racism and its formative influence in light of some events that occurred in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Because of the culture in which we live and the socialization we have received, “race” provides a major lens through which we witnessed, processed, and evaluated this event. Let us take but one example, yet a particularly emblematic one. The Associated Press published two photos of people in identical situations in the flooded waters of New Orleans. The first, of a black young man, carried the caption, “A young man walks through chest-deep flood water after looting a grocery store in New Orleans.” The second showed two white men, with the caption, “Two residents wade through chest-deep water after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store after Hurricane Katrina came through the area of New Orleans.” The people are engaged in identical actions, yet one is described as “looting,” the other as “finding.”

After a storm of protest ensued, the photos were removed from the Associated Press website. But the incident is telling. Clearly racial bias was at work. But was it deliberate and/or intentional? More than likely not. We need not, and must not, limit ourselves to a choice between deliberate conspiracy, racial innocence, or blatant bigotry. Using the concept of unconscious racism, Angela Davis explains the photo controversy by noting the widespread and pervasive association of dark-skinned people with crime and danger:

One unconscious phenomenon that contributes to, or forms the basis of, this unconscious racism is the association of crime with black and brown people...It is that association and these unconscious beliefs that result in the captions on these photographs, and that causes so many to care more about

black people stealing televisions than white people causing the death of black lives through their neglect. And because these beliefs are unconscious, they are so difficult to eliminate or even address.<sup>53</sup>

This association of blacks with crime and criminality had effects far more devastating than biased captioning. It fueled frenzied reports of lawlessness, mayhem, murder, and rape occurring at the Superdome, the Convention Center, and throughout the city. Yet subsequent investigations showed little credible evidence of such behaviors. These nonverified rumors were simply reported as facts by the media. Racial bias? To be sure. But not necessarily intentional. Unconscious bias seems especially prevalent in chaotic or ambiguous conditions. As Lawrence notes, “In ambiguous social situations, it will always be easier to find evidence supporting an individual’s assumed group characteristics than to find contradictory evidence.”<sup>54</sup>

But attributing this reporting to unconscious bias is not to dismiss its often dire consequences. As a result of such erroneous news coverage, rooted in unconscious racial associations, public sympathy for Katrina’s survivors was replaced by “anger and disdain.”<sup>55</sup> Rescue efforts and food drops were suspended out of a fear of getting shot; police and the National Guard were given license to “shoot to kill”; suburban police forces turned back blacks fleeing the city at gunpoint, fearing that “they would turn their city into another Superdome.” The sheriff of neighboring St. Tammany Parish openly admitted telling his deputies to engage in racial profiling and targeted policing, out of a conviction that people of color were more likely to be engaged in criminal activity than whites. He stated: “Now I don’t get into calling people names and all that fact, but if you’re gonna walk the streets of St. Tammany Parish with dread locks and ‘Chee Wee’ hairstyles, then you can expect to be getting a visit from a sheriff’s deputy.”<sup>56</sup> All of this because of the influence of unconscious racism, which causes us to see or fear danger in situations involving blacks that would not evoke such reactions in circumstances involving whites.<sup>57</sup>



There is yet another impact or effect of unconscious racism that needs to be noted, what Lawrence calls “racially selective sympathy and indifference.” By this he means, “the unconscious failure to extend to a minority the same recognition of humanity, and hence the same sympathy and care, given as a matter of course to one’s own group.”<sup>58</sup> This manifestation of unconscious racism is important for understanding Jesse Jackson’s assertion, made at the height of the storm: “America has a high tolerance for black suffering.”<sup>59</sup> “Racially selective sympathy and indifference” also renders intelligible (though not excusable) the apparent negligence of public officials who knew that many would not be able to leave the city in the event of a catastrophe, yet did not care enough to develop comprehensive plans for their evacuation. Again, note that this was not necessarily a conscious decision, but perhaps due to the unnoted effects of socialization in a culture of racism. Certain lives thus become easier to ignore or, put another way, certain lives have a higher claim upon public energy and concern. “Racially selective sympathy and indifference” was also evidenced in the evacuations of white tourists from hotels and certain hospitals while the black and poor languished.<sup>60</sup>

Thus the events surrounding Katrina illumine both how and to what extent racial bias is still a major force in U.S. life. But it is a type of racism that is unacknowledged and easily denied, for it is largely unconscious or outside of personal awareness. Selective indifference and sympathy, rooted in tacit racial beliefs, underlies a great deal of society’s neglect of poor persons of color.

Lawrence concludes that racism is a much more complex reality than is commonly recognized:

Racism is a set of beliefs whereby we irrationally attach significance to something called race. . . . But racism in America is much more complex than either the conscious conspiracy of a power elite or the simple delusion of a few ignorant bigots. It is part of our common historical experience and, therefore, *a part of our culture. It arises from assumptions we have learned*

*to make about the world, ourselves, and others, as well as from the patterns of our fundamental social activities.*<sup>61</sup>

In summary, racism functions as an ethos — as a pervasive symbol system of meaning, identity, and significance — much more than as a set of discrete, consciously motivated acts. Racism, understood as a pervasive symbol system of meaning, gives us the framework for comprehending the significance of personal acts of racial animus. It is a system of meaning that rests upon the fears and anxieties of white Americans and is expressed in the cultural symbols, social order, and public policies of the country. Racism is a cultural phenomenon, a way of interpreting human color differences that pervades the collective convictions, conventions, and practices of American life. It significantly forms the identity of the dominant group, that is to say, “the matrix in which persons develop and that supplies the meanings and values that inform their lives.”<sup>62</sup>

This understanding of racism as an identity-shaping culture explains the diffuse yet palpable “culture shock” and intense resistance encountered among not a few white Americans at the election of an African American president. Such an event, and the major demographic changes underway, are a threat to their sense of identity and shake the foundations upon which they believe the country was built. For many white Americans are ensnared, entangled, and enmeshed — malformed, conformed, and deformed — by a value-laden web of racial significance and meaning that it is largely invisible and outside of their conscious awareness.

## TO WHAT END? THE JUSTIFICATION OF WHITE PRIVILEGE

This analysis helps us now appreciate *why* racial justice is resisted in American life, the persistence of racism despite obvious changes, and why racial tribalism is an ever-present threat. Recall that for Lonergan, “culture stands to social order as soul to body, for any element of social order will be rejected the moment it is widely judged inappropriate, meaningless, irrelevant, useless, just

not worthwhile.”<sup>63</sup> That is, culture animates social institutions and customs and expresses their meaning and significance. Culture provides the ideological foundation for social, political, and economic arrangements, which will be changed only when they are seen as contrary or foreign to the underlying cultural ethos. Hence, we must now consider the purpose of social arrangements that arise out of a culture of racism and endure despite major shifts and challenges.

This obviously is a complex matter. In what may be the most comprehensive examination of current race relations by an official body, the National Research Council concluded that the attitudes of the majority of whites toward blacks are fundamentally “ambivalent.” Despite endorsing in principle the concepts of equal opportunity and respectful treatment, this body noted that “most whites do not yet accept blacks as social equals.”<sup>64</sup> The Research Council’s description of this fundamental ambivalence is worth citing in full:

Black-white relations are important in determining the degree to which equal opportunity exists for black Americans. Whites desire equality of treatment in social institutions and in governmental policy; however, many whites are less likely to espouse or practice equality of treatment for blacks in their personal behavior. Thus, *at the core of black-white relations is a dynamic tension between many whites’ expectations of American institutions and their expectations of themselves.* This state of affairs is a significant improvement from 45 years ago. . . . But the divergence between social principle and individual practice frequently leads to white avoidance of blacks in those institutions [e.g., housing, employment, and education] in which equal treatment is most needed. The result is that American institutions do not provide the full equality of opportunity that Americans desire.<sup>65</sup>

As a result of this fundamental racial ambivalence, most whites, while endorsing equality of opportunity in the abstract, endorse it far less when equal treatment results in:

- ◆ close or frequent social contact;
- ◆ or involvement of significant numbers of blacks;
- ◆ or blacks being promoted to positions of significant power and decision making.<sup>66</sup>

The Research Council's conclusions resonate quite well with the insights offered by Martin Luther King Jr. in his last major text. Toward the end of his life, he provided what I consider a classic description of the fundamental racial ambivalence in contemporary America:

Negro and white have a fundamentally different definition [of "equality"]. Negroes have proceeded from a premise that equality means what it says, and they have taken white Americans at their word when they talked of it as an objective. But most whites in America in 1967, including many persons of goodwill, proceed from a premise that equality is a loose expression for *improvement*. White America is not even psychologically organized to close the gap — essentially it seeks only to make it less painful and less obvious but in most respects to retain it. . . . *The great majority of Americans are suspended between . . . opposing attitudes. They are uneasy with injustice but unwilling yet to pay a significant price to eradicate it.*<sup>67</sup>

What this suggests is that the opposition to racial equality — for the most part — no longer is rooted in deliberate malice or an explicit espousal of white superiority. This is a major and significant change from the not too distant past. Most Americans today are committed to the values of interracial decency and respect. However, opposition to full equality now takes the form of various strategies employed to justify and defend *white privilege, entitlement, and social dominance*.<sup>68</sup> Again, the observations of the *Common Destiny* study are cogent:

[Today] differential treatment of blacks infrequently takes the form of blatant hostility and overt discrimination. Differential

treatment is most likely to occur when it allows someone to avoid close interracial contact; *it prevents the establishment of interracial relations of equal status or black dominance*, especially in employment and housing; and it is possible to find a nonracial explanation for differential treatment. For example, blacks who find little difficulty gaining entry- and even middle-level employment positions frequently encounter barriers to upper-level positions that would involve *significant authority over whites or the need to interact with them in social settings* like private clubs.<sup>69</sup>

White privilege, then, is the reason for the ongoing presence of racism and the resistance that efforts to unseat it encounters. Racism, understood as an underlying set of meanings, values, and beliefs, provides the ideological justification for “constellations of political and economic power.”<sup>70</sup> The concrete forms of these social arrangements have varied in U.S. history, taking the forms of slavery, colonialism, Jim Crow segregation and humiliation, overt discrimination, and token presence. Racism’s manifestations change, sometimes dramatically. But at its core, racism always involves the use of skin color differences for the purpose of assigning social rank or privilege. What results, then, is a system of racially conferred — and denied — privilege, advantage, benefits, and status. Racism connotes a social context where color differences are used for saddling ostracism and stigma upon some, and conferring advantage and benefit to others. In a racist society, “white” is more than a skin color. It is a social status that gives those designated as white “the ability to enjoy privileges and benefits which flow from it.”<sup>71</sup>

## The Nature of White Privilege

Most of us are trained to see how racism disadvantages or burdens people of color. Racism obviously results in inferior and unjust treatment for many. We are not so accustomed to see how racism results in unfair advantages or benefits for the dominant racial group. “White privilege” shifts the focus from how people of color

are harmed by racism to how white Americans derive advantages because of it. White privilege is the flip-side and inescapable corollary of racial injustice. Racial injustice comes about to preserve and protect white privilege.

“White privilege” refers to the reality that in U.S. society “there are opportunities which are afforded whites that people of color simply do not share.”<sup>72</sup> These advantages range from greater ease in hailing a taxi and moving into whatever neighborhood they can afford, to easier access to positions of social influence and political power, to the presumption that their race will not work against them when seeking employment and in other social situations. Being racially advantaged might be unwanted or undesired by individual white Americans. In fact, some white Americans are distressed when they become aware of the reality of white privilege. Regardless of an individual’s desires, an “invisible package of unearned assets” is enjoyed by white people because of the racial consciousness that is subtly pervasive in our social customs and institutions.<sup>73</sup> White privilege illustrates how pervasive beliefs about the inadequacies of people of color become expressed by or entrenched in our society’s institutional policies, social customs, cultural media, and political processes. These social habits and policies then function to reinforce the individual white person’s beliefs about a sense of entitlement and to instill in racial minorities a sense of inferiority.

### **The Genesis of White Privilege: A Case Study**

The privileged status of whiteness did not “just happen.” It has been intentionally constructed over a long period of time. White privilege is the result of social policies, institutions, and procedures that deliberately created a system to advance the welfare of white Americans and impeded the opportunities of persons of color.<sup>74</sup>

Among the most important effects and manifestations of white privilege are the economic advantages that have been conferred upon white Americans by public policy and political power throughout our history. Racism inevitably causes economic disadvantages and burdens for groups of color. Here are several key events and movements that illustrate the links between race, economic impoverishment, and

economic opportunity — events that both burdened people of color seeking to escape poverty and eased the way for white Americans desiring to advance their economic fortunes.

- ◆ *The institution of slavery.* Slavery means exploited labor; the labor of enslaved Africans was essential for creating wealth for others from which they often derived no benefit. Slavery resulted in the creation of wealth not only for the white slaveholding elite, but for all who benefited from and participated in a “slavery-centered” economy (for example, merchants, bankers, fishermen, shipbuilders, traders, auctioneers, bounty hunters, and immigrant farmers).<sup>75</sup>
- ◆ *The Indian Removal Act of 1830.* By this act of Congress, Native Americans were forcibly removed from their lands and resettled in territory that was of no interest to whites. Their property was then made available for white settlers. This stolen land became the basis for white economic enrichment that could be passed on as an inheritance to future generations. This economic disenfranchisement also led to the impoverishment of future generations of Native Americans.<sup>76</sup>
- ◆ *The Supreme Court Decision of Plessy v. Ferguson (1896).* This decision enshrined the realities of racial segregation, second-class citizenship, and “separate but equal” facilities in our national life. Among the many pernicious effects of this decision was the creation of inferior educational opportunities for African Americans. They and other communities of color endured severely restricted access to quality education. Segregated schools were poorly funded in comparison to their white counterparts. This created a deficit of educational attainment — the effects of which are still with us — that translated into economic disadvantage in the labor market and compromised participation in higher paying and socially prestigious professions.<sup>77</sup>
- ◆ *The exclusion of Asian Indians from eligibility for U.S. citizenship.* In 1923, the U.S. Supreme Court (*U.S. v. Bhagat Singh Thind*) ruled that while Asian Indians were indeed “Caucasians”

by race, they could not be considered “white.” The result was that many Asian Indians were stripped of their naturalized citizenship. This meant that they were unable to legally own property; many had their assets taken from them and given to whites.<sup>78</sup>

- ◆ *The exclusion of domestics and agricultural workers from the Social Security Act of 1935.* At the height of the Depression this law created a new public policy that established a basic level of economic security for many of the country’s workers. However, by excluding domestics and agricultural workers, this act effectively denied Social Security pensions and benefits to 75 percent of black workers.<sup>79</sup>
- ◆ *The provisions of the Wagner Act (1935), allowing unions to exclude African Americans from union membership.* This legislation granted new legal protections and recognitions to labor unions and gave many working-class whites access to higher wages and benefits. However, because the act also allowed unions to exclude blacks from union membership and its benefits, it legally protected white laborers from competition in the job market, creating economic opportunities reserved for whites and further maintaining the existence of a lower paid, exploited labor pool of color.
- ◆ *The failure of the Federal Housing Administration (1940s and 1950s) to grant loans to even minimally integrated neighborhoods.* This agency provided low-cost government-guaranteed loans to working-class families, enabling mass home ownership and the accumulation of wealth that could be passed on to heirs. Ninety-eight percent of these loans were given to whites; blacks were granted less than 2 percent. The refusal to grant loans to integrated neighborhoods was a practice known as “redlining.”

Many more historical examples can be cited. These suffice to demonstrate how white privilege was deliberately created and often state-sanctioned. They demonstrate how pervasive beliefs about the inadequacies of people of color — the underlying cultural set of meanings



and values — become expressed by or entrenched in our society’s institutional policies, social customs, and political processes for the purpose of maintaining white group privileges and advantages.

## **A Personal Reflection on White Privilege**

Racism and white privilege are not abstractions or sociological theories. They harm — and benefit — real people. I have just documented how the privileged status of whiteness was socially constructed and officially sanctioned and how this resulted in economic advantage for some and a burden for others. The story of my family illustrates this well. My father was trained as a carpenter; he received his associate’s degree in carpentry from Milwaukee’s technical college in the mid-1950s. Yet he was never employed as a carpenter nor did he ever practice his trade. For he was refused admission into the local carpenter’s union, due to that union’s informal but iron-clad exclusion of blacks from membership. He was relegated to the ranks of unskilled laborers: working as an orderly in the county mental hospital, stocking shelves at a local department store, and sheltering his family in the local housing projects. He forfeited not only the higher salary that should rightfully have been his, but also the accumulated capital that could have come from home ownership and investment, which could also have been a legacy for his children and their descendants. Racism translated into economic disadvantage and exploitation. That’s real. It has affected not only me, but many others in this nation and continues to do so.

But my family’s story also illustrates the reality of white privilege. For some person, some other family, some racial group, benefited from my father’s exclusion as a competitor for a valued job. Some other family was able to purchase a home and benefit from the economic stability which that resource conferred. Some other family was able to pass on that value in an estate to its heirs, providing them with a “leg up” in life — perhaps the seed money for a college education, for a first house, or for a business opportunity. And some members of those families are also readers of this work.

This, then, is white privilege: the uneven and unfair distribution of power, privilege, land, and material resources favoring white

people. White privilege is not an abstraction; it is real. White privilege is the range of unearned (and at times, unwanted) advantages that come simply from possession of an attribute our society prizes, namely, the status of being considered “white.” When I say members of those families who benefited from my father’s exclusion are now readers of this text, I am not saying that they (or you) are bad people. The individuals may not have chosen it, realized it, or even desired it. They may not have had a prejudiced bone in their bodies. But the advantages are real nonetheless, as is the damage of racial injustice. We will never adequately deal with the reality of racial injustice, and its generational effects, unless we name its causes and attack its sources.

In summary, today the continuing resistance to racial equality, despite undeniable progress, can be largely explained by a fundamental ambivalence on the part of the majority of white Americans: their desire to denounce blatant racial injustices, and yet preserve a situation of white social dominance and privilege. To say it plainly, most Americans are committed to both interpersonal decency and systemic inequality. Racial equality encounters ongoing resistance because this nation is still committed to maintaining relationships of white cultural, political, and social dominance, that is to say, a culture of “white supremacy.”<sup>80</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The goal of this chapter was to articulate an understanding of racism that is more adequate than the “commonsense” one: Person A deliberately, consciously, and intentionally acting in a negative way to Person B because of his or her skin color. Such an understanding cannot account for the pervasiveness of racial discrimination despite momentous changes nor for the deep anxiety that many feel in the face of the changing racial demography of the United States.

Racism has never been solely or principally about insults, slurs, or mere exclusion, as demeaning and as harmful as these are. These are but the symptoms of a deeper malady. Racism entails more than conscious ill will, more than deliberate acts of avoidance, malice,

and violence perpetrated by individuals. Though such events are still of concern, they do not take us to the heart of the matter. For despite measurable progress in combating individual prejudice and blatant discrimination, the systemic obstacles and barriers that stymie the life chances of persons of color still endure, and race remains a principal lens for interpreting and understanding U.S. society.

Racism, at its core, is a set of meanings and values that inform the American way of life. It is a way of understanding and interpreting skin color differences so that white Americans enjoy a privileged social status with access to advantages and benefits to the detriment, disadvantage, and burden of persons of color. It is the set of cultural assumptions, beliefs, and convictions that justify the existence of a “kinder, gentler” racism, that is, one that advocates interpersonal decency, kindness, and respect for all while it yet protects white systemic advantage and benefit.

U.S. Catholic ethical reflection, if it is to be adequate and effective, must adopt a structural and systemic approach to racism. This means approaching this social evil as a cultural phenomenon, that is, as an underlying color symbol system that (1) justifies race-based disparities; (2) shapes not only behavior, but also one’s identity and consciousness; and (3) often operates at a preconscious or nonrational level that escapes personal awareness. Effective moral analysis and action require understanding racism as a culture of white advantage, privilege, and dominance that has derivative personal, interpersonal, and institutional manifestations. In the words of David Wellman:

Racism is not simply about prejudice. . . . Racism can mean culturally sanctioned beliefs which, regardless of the intentions involved, defend the advantages whites have because of the subordinated positions of racial minorities. . . . Thus racism is analyzed as culturally acceptable beliefs that defend social advantages that are based on race. . . . Racism today remains essentially what it has always been: a defense of racial privilege.<sup>81</sup>