

THE CRUCIBLE OF RACISM

Ignatian Spirituality
and the Power of Hope

Patrick Saint-Jean, SJ

ORBIS  BOOKS
Maryknoll, New York 10545

A Man of Hope

To Christians, the future does have a name, and its name is Hope. Feeling hopeful does not mean to be optimistically naïve and ignore the tragedy humanity is facing. Hope is the virtue of a heart that doesn't lock itself into darkness, that doesn't dwell on the past, does not simply get by in the present, but is able to see a tomorrow.

— Pope Francis¹

Until I was eleven years old, I had never stepped inside a Catholic church. Then, when my Catholic godfather died, I attended his funeral mass. During it, I experienced a moment of epiphany that changed my life forever.

The words of the priest entered into me as though they were something physical. My heart began to race. The world looked suddenly different to me, as though I now understood new things, things that had never occurred to me before. I felt as though I had

¹ Pope Francis, “Why the Only Future Worth Building Includes Everyone,” TED Talk, April 2017, <https://www.ted.com>.

stepped onto a pathway that I had never known existed. As James Baldwin said, “A journey is called that because you cannot know what you will discover on the journey, what you will do with what you find, or what you find will do to you.”² That day—at my godfather’s funeral—I set out on a journey that changed my life. I am still on that journey.

During the funeral homily, the priest looked out at us—directly at me, it seemed—and said that all of us had received a unique call from God. “God calls each one of us,” he said, “to do something special in the kingdom of heaven.” I didn’t understand exactly what the priest was saying, and yet I knew his words were somehow meant for me. I felt it in my very body.

After the service, I asked my mother about the priest’s words. She said, “The priest was talking about people who are going to be priests in the Catholic Church. You are not Catholic—so you don’t need to worry about what he said.”

I continued to think about the homily, though, and eventually, I talked to my grandmother, who was my best friend back then. She was a Southern Baptist minister, but she had also worked with a broad and varied religious community. She said, “My son, you are not Catholic, but I will pray for you, and God will provide.” The hug she gave me filled me with a sense of peace and hope.

I was born in Haiti, where the second-largest denomination (after the Roman Catholic Church) is the Southern Baptist Church. My beautiful and loving family has been Southern Baptist for generations; my mother’s family came to Haiti in 1875 to begin a medical mission and evangelize. Continuing her family’s legacy, she was the main preacher in the church where I grew up.

As a kid, I often got into fights with my mother. I was curious about everything, and so I was constantly asking questions. Often she had no answer for me; instead, she would simply say, “Well,

² *I Am Not Your Negro*, Magnolia Pictures, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com>.

you will have to deal with your eagerness yourself. Go to your room and pray about it.”

When it came to questions about social justice, however, she always made time for me. With care, love, and patience, she helped me understand the complexity of these subjects. Our devotion to social justice was woven into our family, and I understood that the community was an essential part of our identity as Christians. Both my parents are well versed in social ministry, and from them, I learned many things.

The person who had the strongest impact on my life, though, was my grandmother, Félicie Saint-Georges. She was my first role model, a model of love. Sharply intelligent, a nurse by profession, a Southern Baptist preacher by passion, and an avid politician and social worker, my grandmother taught me to be a man of hope. She believed that tomorrow will always be better; it is just a matter of waiting for what God will do. Equality, justice, and freedom were the themes of the songs she sang to me, and her love of community shaped my life. It inspired me to also become involved in social action and seek God in others through justice and love. I grew up believing that I was born to serve God in active ministry. But my family never dreamed where my vocation would take me.

For a couple of years, I did not speak further about the feelings I had experienced at my godfather’s funeral. New ideas were waiting inside me, but I was busy with my life: school, church services, and the community. I had not forgotten, though, and the Divine Spirit was continuing to work in my life. I had a sense I was waiting for something to unfold.

My grandmother worked for the Haitian consulate in Paris, where she often met with various religious leaders, including Father Pedro Arrupe when he was the Superior General of the Jesuits. Father Arrupe’s passion for working with Vietnamese refugees inspired her, and she had come to love the Ignatian way because of its commitment to social justice. She had also heard Father Arrupe allude to a Christ who was not a white man;

instead, said Father Arrupe, Christ looks like all of us, no matter our race, no matter our gender. Christ is each of us.

“Be open to God in everything,” Father Arrupe said. His words encouraged my grandmother to persist in her work for justice. Ignatian spirituality does not discriminate—and through its lens, she came to see more deeply that standing up for those who are racially and economically on the margins is a spiritual practice.

“Learn to see Christ in everyone, in everything, everywhere,” she taught me. Ignatian spirituality was helping her find a wider and deeper path to the Divine. Since I too was eager to learn more and follow the urging in my heart, she introduced me to her friend Father Moreau Joseph, a Jesuit who also taught in the school I attended.

I was thirteen, and he was eighty-two; I was Black and a Southern Baptist, while he was white and a Jesuit—but soon we were hanging out together as though we were simply two friends who could talk about anything and everything. Together, we created a place of hope, a place where I felt safe to explore the ideas I’d been pondering ever since my godfather’s funeral.

Until his death in 2004, Father Moreau was my dear friend. Through him, I learned more about the Jesuit practice of finding God in everything, in everyone. Even on the path of suffering, he told me, I would encounter Christ. He showed me the way of justice, healing, and reconciliation that he had learned as a follower of the Ignatian way.

Perhaps most important, through Father Moreau’s teaching, I came to see a Christ who is not white. When I found myself in all-white settings at school, he would say to me, “Stay on the path, Patrick. Hang on. Remember Jesus was not white.” His words inspired hope in me, a hope I have needed more than ever in recent years.

Because of Father Moreau’s influence, I was eventually confirmed as a Catholic. He helped me understand that the feeling I had carried within me ever since my godfather’s funeral was

God's voice calling me to the priesthood. And all the while, my friend was teaching me more and more about the Society of Jesus.

The Society of Jesus

Father Moreau told me that in the sixteenth century, Saint Ignatius of Loyola had helped found the Society of Jesus, what today we know as the Jesuits. Ignatius taught that we can encounter Christ in every aspect of life. He insisted that each of us needs to ask ourselves these questions:

What have I done for Christ?

What am I doing for Christ?

What ought I to do for Christ?

In the answers to these questions, the life of contemplation and that of active ministry are welded together. This practical, down-to-earth spirituality has remained at the heart of the Jesuits for nearly five centuries.

In his book *God's Soldiers*, the great English historian Jonathan Wright gives a good summary of the broad scope of Jesuit activity:

They have been urban courtiers in Paris, Peking, and Prague, telling kings when to marry, when and how to go to war, serving as astronomers to Chinese emperors, or as chaplains to Japanese armies invading Korea. As might be expected, they have dispensed sacraments and homilies, and they have provided education to men as various as Voltaire, Castro, Hitchcock, and Joyce. But they have also been sheep farmers in Quinto, hacienda owners in Mexico, winegrowers in Australia, and plantation owners in the antebellum United States. The society would flourish in the worlds of letters, the arts,

music, and science theorizing about dance, disease, and the laws of electricity and optics. Jesuits would grapple with the challenge of Copernicus, Descartes, and Newton, and thirty-five craters on the surface of the moon would be named for Jesuit scientists.³

This wide spectrum of professions and vocations all lead to the same destination: God.

Ignatian Spirituality

Father Moreau taught me that Ignatian spirituality affirms that God is as close to us as the daily details of our lives. As the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins put it, “The world is charged with the grandeur of God.” We encounter God in the specifics of *this* moment, the *now* that is electrified by the Divine Presence. In other words, through active involvement in the world around us, we come to know God more deeply, and we also offer God our love in return. In the words of Ignatius: “All the things in this world are gifts of God, created for us, to be the means by which we can come to know him better, love him more surely, and serve him more faithfully.”

Ignatius went even further. He taught his followers that as we become active in God’s work, we participate in the presence of Christ in the world. In doing this, Ignatians focus on one goal: deepening their connection to God in order to become men and women for others. Spirituality—being in connection with God—is inextricably linked with service. And like my grandmother, Ignatius was a person of hope, a believer in possibility. He was certain God uses human beings to transform the world.

As my friend told me more about the Jesuits, I heard God’s

³ Jonathan Wright, *God’s Soldiers: Adventure, Politics, Intrigue, and Power—A History of the Jesuits* (New York: Doubleday, 2005), 8–9.

call for my life even more deeply. Ignatian spirituality, I sensed, would be the bridge that I would cross to connect my heart with God. It would also become the vehicle through which I engaged with the world around me.

Jesuit formation is not a quick process. It requires about twelve years before we are ready for ordination. The length, depth, and breadth of this process takes stamina. But for me, the hard work has been well worth it.

Through the process of Jesuit formation, the lens of Ignatian spirituality has allowed me to focus more sharply on the work of justice. The teachings Ignatius left us do not create a philosophy or even a theology; instead they act as a doorway through which we can enter a new way of living in the world. Ignatian spirituality is a powerful tool in my work for racial justice, healing, and reconciliation.

Ignatian spirituality offers an alternative to the forms of Christianity that have been used to justify slavery and colonization, which, in their more modern forms, continue to be used to deny justice to the Black community. The white church has often cherry-picked its way through the Bible, ignoring scripture's clear and consistent support of those whom society has marginalized. Meanwhile, the actual message of the Hebrew Scriptures and the message of Christ in the Gospels and throughout the rest of the Christian scriptures challenge us to build a world based on justice, equality, and love. The teachings of Ignatius of Loyola give us practical ways to respond more deeply and effectively to Christ's call to an inner spiritual transformation that is expressed through social justice in the world.

This is not to say that this is the *only* spiritual tradition that supports the antiracist struggle. There are obviously many others, within both Catholic and Protestant Christianity as well as in other faith traditions, but this is *my* way. It is my doorway into the Divine Presence. It gives me the tools I need to do the work to which God has called me. Through the Society of Jesus, I lay claim to the identity my grandmother embodied: I am a person

of possibility, a firm believer in the power of love. I am a man of hope.

For nearly five centuries, members of the Society of Jesus have been using the tools of Ignatian spirituality to lead people to Christ, promoting reconciliation and healing for the marginalized—but these same tools are freely available to everyone, not only Jesuits. Ignatius insisted that his teachings were not intended only for the clergy; they are also open to laypeople. Today, Ignatius continues to invite everyone—through their own experiences, whatever they may be—to *find Christ in everything*. Ignatian spirituality helps us know that God is at work, always knocking at the door of our lives. No matter where we are, God is there with us.

Included in the tools that Ignatius offers us are *The Spiritual Exercises*, a detailed structure for personal prayer and reflection, as well as the Daily Examen. We will spend more time with both of these in later chapters, but let me say now that the Examen lies at the very heart of this book.

The Examen is an open invitation to act with awareness, usually consisting of five steps:

1. Become aware of God's presence.
2. Review the day with gratitude.
3. Pay attention to your emotions.
4. Choose one feature of the day and pray about it.
5. Look toward tomorrow.

Each step is applied to life's practical realities, offering opportunities for contemplation, Divine encounter, and transformation. Ignatius encourages us to talk to Jesus as though he were a friend, opening our hearts to him. Secure in the knowledge that we are divinely loved, we gain the courage to be honest as we look into our own hearts. This is a spirituality that meets us where we are. It comes to us in quiet moments—and it stays with us throughout the busyness of each day. Whether we

are at a protest, at the office, at church, on the bus, or in our beds at night, God is always with us.

As a part of the Examen, Ignatius encourages us to focus on the “interior movement” of our hearts, the “motions of the soul.” These interior movements consist of thoughts, emotions, desires, feelings, repulsions, attractions, and imaginings. Ignatius taught that “discernment” requires a sensitivity to these movements, reflecting on them and understanding where they come from and where they are leading us. Through the daily practice of the Examen, we can discern our inner attitudes. We begin to see what is holding us back—and where God would have us go. At the end of each chapter in this book, I invite you to discern your own interaction with racism using an Examen.

The Crucible of Racism

In my own life, the daily practice of the Examen has led me to a new perspective on my identity. When I joined the Jesuits, I also came to America, where I encountered something I had never experienced before: racism. I learned I am a Black man—and that America, including the Society of Jesus here in this country, is white space where people of color are often not welcome. This direct experience of racism became a crucible for me.

In the medieval practice of alchemy, a crucible was a container where different elements were heated to extreme temperatures in order to create an entirely new substance. For me, the racism I encountered after I joined the Jesuits generated a space of both fire and transformation, both deep pain and startling new hope. It began a process of transformation within me. As I write this book, I realize I am still dwelling within that crucible.

Recently, while talking with a friend, a fellow Jesuit, I commented that the stories that I use in this book to illustrate racism come mostly from my experiences with Jesuits in America. At the same time, I feel pressured to disguise the identities of the individuals involved in these incidents. My friend compared my

difficulty to the sexual scandals within the Catholic Church. In the beginning, as the scandals came to light, the Church would not reveal the names of the men who had committed these acts of sexual violation. The underlying understanding was that by protecting the individuals, we were also protecting the Church. Then, after the Pennsylvania grand jury report, the Church was asked to release the names. As I listened to what my friend was saying, I recognized the accuracy of his comparison, and my stomach began to cramp. My head was spinning, my hands were sweating, and I felt as though I could not catch my breath. When I tried to speak, I choked. Tears sprang from eyes. My church, my own order, is still protecting itself rather than face the truth and bring renewed justice and healing into the world.

In writing this book, it is not my intention to complain about my fellow Jesuits. I know that they, like me, are imperfect human beings, struggling to live out their calling as followers of Christ, as well as followers of the path left for us by Ignatius of Loyola. I want to affirm all that is good about the Jesuits and testify to the good they do in the world. But at the same time I ask myself: *Why are we not allowed to speak the names of those who have mistreated Blacks? Why do we care more about shielding the wrongdoers than we do those who spend their lives on the margins of society? Are we going to side with the Gospel—or are we going to take our stand as “Christians” or as Jesuits, seeking to protect the “good name” of those identities? If we are truly followers of Christ, won’t we follow his example and care more about those who have been abused and overlooked than we do the reputation of any group to which we belong? What would God have us do?* As I wept over these questions, I knew I was once more feeling the fiery pain of the crucible in which I live.

You do not need to be Black to live within this crucible. My experience is as a Black man and as a Jesuit, so this is the perspective from which I write this book, but you may have lived within some other branch of the BIPOC (Black, indigenous,

and people of color) experience—or you may be a member of the LGBTQ+ community. You may have some form of physical challenge that has placed you at the margins of society, or you may be forced to confront ageism or sexism. Regardless of your race or gender, racism and the other “isms” that have shaped your life in some way, you too are in the crucible.

This book is for us all, because Ignatian spirituality can convert this place of fire—regardless of its form—into a place of regeneration. Through Ignatius’s powerful tools of discernment, we can all—no matter what our individual experiences—come to understand more deeply what God asks of us from within this container of pain and possibility. Together, we can be transformed.

Despite the danger my skin color represents in the white spaces I move through, Ignatian spirituality has allowed me once again to live with the hope my grandmother taught me. Hope is fundamental to me; it is reinvented every day, and it underlies my thirst for justice.

As a Black Jesuit, I have learned to have hope in my brother Jesuits. I have learned to have hope for America and for our entire world. That hope, as well as my love for the Catholic Church, for the Society of Jesus, for America, and for our global community, is what has inspired this book. I write this book neither to protect nor to denigrate these institutions but because of my faith in their potential.

The Structure of the Book

As you read this book, I hope you will join me on a spiritual pilgrimage of healing and hope. In the first part of the book, we’ll discuss the nature of racism’s crucible. In the second part, we will focus on how we can apply Ignatian teachings more specifically to the work of antiracism. Finally, we will go through the four phases of Ignatius’s *Spiritual Exercises*. Although Ignatius divided the *Exercises* into weeks that can be practiced over thirty days, each “week” actually represents a stage in the process of enter-

ing into relationship with God through Christ. Each stage has a different theme, and we will apply each one to the crucible of racism.

In each of these chapters, I invite you to encounter a Christ who is yearning for justice, healing, and reconciliation. I pray that in all this you will hear God's call to you. Racism is a sin against the image of God in our fellow human beings, but antiracist work is a ministry of transformation. This is what my grandmother taught me, and this is also what I have learned from Ignatian spirituality.

We can't take action, though, unless we can breathe, for breath is essential to our life. In fact, it is so essential that we often take it for granted. The year 2020 taught us to look at breath differently, though. That seemingly endless year of pandemic, isolation, racial injustice, and protest made us aware of one another in new ways. We could no longer ignore the very essence of our lives. We discovered that we live in what I call the Age of Breath—a time when we are all being called on to learn once more how truly to breathe.

Invitation to Discernment

Author Ibram X. Kendi wrote: “Hopefully, every individual will . . . look in the mirror, no matter the color of their skin and ask themselves the same question: Have I been challenging the system of racism or white supremacy or have I been upholding it?”⁴ Through the following Examen,⁵ we will begin the work

⁴ “‘Racism Is Death, Anti-Racism Is Life,’ Says Author Ibram X. Kendi,” interview with Eric Deggans and Audrey Nguyen, npr.org, October 24, 2020. Kendi is a leader in the work of antiracism and the author of *How to Be an Antiracist* (New York: Random House, 2019), and *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Nation Books, 2016).

⁵ Adapted from my “An Examen for Racism,” June 22, 2020, <https://www.jesuits.org>.

of antiracism by taking a look into that mirror, examining how systemic racism influences our lives and how we engage in the sin of racism.

An awareness of God's presence. Become aware of God's presence; sense his love and compassion. His love for creation is universal, encompassing the oppressed and marginalized. Notice God's presence, his love for creation, in the Black community and in other communities of color. Ask yourself:

- When have I failed to notice or respond to the needs of my brothers and sisters?
- Have I turned a blind eye to racial injustice? How? Why?
- How is my compliance, my inaction, and my sense of fear directly or indirectly contributing to maintain this structure?

Review your participation in systems of racism. Now, review your day through the lens of racism. Recall your actions and thoughts with attention to how racism or privilege manifested itself. Often our actions are guided by our self-interests or personal biases, which can perpetuate harm. Sometimes, we see injustice and choose to detach from it, saying, "It's not my fight." Inaction is complicity, and it is wrong. For example, did you turn away from news about Black Lives Matter protests? Did you stay silent when a family member or friend said something ignorant or racist? Ask yourself:

- How have I been complicit in the suffering of my Black brothers and sisters?
- How have I benefited from social and systemic racism today?

Think about the community you live in, the social networks to which you belong. How have Black people been excluded from those spaces?

Examine your emotions. As you review how you have participated in racism, pay attention to your feelings. Do you feel upset, angry, or uncomfortable? Confronting white privilege and racism is challenging. Sit with this discomfort. Feel deeply the plight of your sisters and brothers, and recognize your compliance in this suffering. Pray for guidance. Remember, we have the opportunity for transformation through the merciful compassion of God.

Look forward. Antiracism requires active training and continuous learning about systemic racism. It is empowered by hope. Ask yourself:

- How can I leverage my privilege to uproot systemic racism?
- How can I use my privilege to make space for Black voices and other communities of color?
- How can I open my heart to make room for the transformation to the deeper love to which God calls us all?
- How can I become a person of hope?

Do not expect to have ready answers to these questions! Instead, continue to keep them in mind as you read this book. Allow them to be heated within the crucible of racism. Wait to see what new thing will emerge in your thoughts, heart, and life.

Prayer against the Sin of Racism

God, we recognize that racism is a social sin that has taken root in the garden of our hearts. We need you to convert us and purify our hearts, so that we can become agents of care, walking by faith in justice, hope, love, healing, and reconciliation for your greater glory. We know that racism harms your creation. Guard our hearts against it, and move us forward to enact change. Empower us to be people of hope. Amen.