

BIRTH OF A MOVEMENT

Black Lives Matter and the Catholic Church

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Introduction

When signing the contract for this book in 2019, my intention at the time was to provide Catholics with a history of the Black Lives Matter movement, including both its successes and its criticisms. I knew people had misconceptions of the movement, including the belief that all the founders were irreligious or had no understanding of faith. Throughout my years of reporting, critics told me that the movement was not concerned with human dignity (false); the movement was violent (false); and that the founders have all publicly identified as atheists and completely denigrate religion whenever possible (false). One male critic even sent me a Twitter direct message explaining that I “clearly misunderstood both Catholicism and the terrorist group that was the BLM,” because the movement’s “rejection of capitalism was dangerous and antithetical to Christianity.” I never responded, yet this particular fallacy is one that I have often heard, and which, when used by Catholics, demonstrates how little they know about its founders—Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi—and Pope Francis.

I envisioned a book that would reject such ideas and gently challenge our white bishops to grapple with the movement’s mission. I wanted the body of all male, almost all white, bishops to internalize the movement’s beliefs and imagined white Christians reading this book and feeling inspired to dismantle the white supremacy within our church—one that seems as fundamental to the American church as the Eucharist is integral to

our faith. This book, I thought at the time, could be the Catholic version of Ibram X. Kendi's *How to Be an Antiracist*; but then 2020 happened.

For the first time since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the city that raised me—one that was always noisy, crowded, and alert—shut down. The first COVID-19 case in the United States was confirmed in January; by the end of that month, the Trump administration had closed our nation's borders to people traveling from China. By March, the New York Department of Education, which oversees the largest school district in the United States, closed all public schools; the subway system shut down; companies across all industries transitioned to remote work; stores closed; restaurants went out of business; and the theater district, Broadway, closed. People were furloughed and lost jobs. Mothers, for a brief time, gave birth in hospitals without partners or a support system, just the medical staff. By May, the state had the largest number of confirmed cases and deaths. The sheer number of people who died daily overburdened hospitals; many did not have enough beds, ventilators, or staff. One of the richest cities in the world was clearly struggling with the global pandemic. By June 1, thousands of New Yorkers were dead; many more had lost jobs and health insurance; and a large percentage could not afford their month's rent. I struggled to understand why the U.S. government was willing to let so many people from my communities die; why working class Americans were only given a single \$1,200 (\$2,400 for families), while billionaires like Jeff Bezos grew richer during a global pandemic that was robbing Blacks and Latinos of their lives.

In April, my father became ill. At first, we thought it was just a regular cold, but steadily his symptoms grew worse. He slept for days at a time, had a cough and fever, and his body ached. When my father tried to get tested, he was told that his

symptoms were not serious enough. My father, and all of us, accepted this. “There were people who literally couldn’t breathe when I went to the hospital—I felt bad even going,” he told us. However, this was not an anomaly. Across the United States, Black women, men, and children were being denied testing by a medical system that was created by white doctors, who had experimented on Black bodies without consent and anesthetics. Across the country, ZIP Codes with more money—areas that were predominantly white—disproportionately received access to testing. By April, studies confirmed that Blacks and Latinos were dying at almost three times the rate of white citizens. Black and Brown families were being devastated, while our political leaders continued to publicly spar with the president. The first COVID-19 death in New York happened in March; by July, more than thirty thousand New Yorkers were dead.

As the global pandemic ravaged Black and Latino communities, police officers across the country were harassing and killing Americans. In New York, the police used the enforcement of social distancing to justify their disproportionate harassment of Black and Brown citizens. In the first half of 2020 alone, police officers killed more than five hundred Americans, including twenty-eight-year-old Xavier Jaime Rovie, who was shot and killed in Phoenix, Arizona; seventy-five-year-old John Daniel Dixon, who was shot and killed in DeKalb County, Georgia; fifty-five-year-old Deanne Marie Owsianiak, who was killed in Ormond Beach, Florida; forty-two-year-old Charity Tome, who was shot and killed in Myerstown, Pennsylvania; twenty-five-year-old Catherine Gomez, who was killed in Long Beach, California; twenty-two-year-old Heba Momtaz Al-Azhari, who was shot and killed in Temple Terrace, Florida; eighteen-year-old Andres Guardado, who was killed in Los Angeles, California; seventeen-year-old Vincent Demario Truitt, who was shot

and killed in Cobb County, Georgia; and twenty-two-year-old Hannah R. Fizer, who was killed in Sedalia, Missouri. Since 2015, police officers across the country have killed more than five thousand Americans. I understood, in a way I never had before, the legal power law enforcement is given to harass, assault, and murder, with nearly universal impunity. By the summer, antipolice protests erupted across the United States following the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd. Black women, men, and children filled American streets demanding justice; cries that have existed since the days of the first anti-slavery rebellion. Alongside them, white men, women, and children, including Catholic clergy, were publicly calling for an end to murder by police. In June, I attended a protest—my first in years. The message from the marchers, a majority of whom carried Puerto Rican and Dominican flags, was clear: there could be no equality in a world with policing. A liberated world meant abolishing law enforcement and the prison industrial complex that belonged to it.

The antiracism rebellion and the COVID-19 global pandemic politicized me, and countless others, unexpectedly. This book, in turn, was reimagined as a call to white Catholics, both lay and clergy, to work actively and consistently to abolish every system that oppresses, rapes, and murders Black women, men, and children.

Birth of a Movement is structured to include histories of the Black Lives Matter movement and the church's history with white supremacy. We discuss the Catholic perspective, the birth of modern American policing, abolition, racial capitalism, reparations, and church leadership. This book is also, to borrow Garza's words, my love letter to the women—both within and outside of the church—who have shaped my politics and Catholic identity. These women include Shannen Dee Williams,

whose scholarship taught me about our church's active participation in chattel slavery and who guided my focus on citing, almost exclusively, Black women throughout the book; M. Shawn Copeland, whose work inspired me to consider, for the first time, the power of the resurrection and its role in the struggle toward Black liberation; Tia Noelle Pratt, a sociologist, creator of the "Black Catholic Syllabus," and writer of the foreword; and the founders of the Black Lives Matter movement, Garza, Cullors, and Tometi, who have given purpose to my life, faith, and career. The goal is to help Catholics, and all Christians, work toward a Christ-centered, Black liberation.