



"The Last Supper to be" mural at St. Sabina Parish in Chicago depicts a modern, multi-ethnic group with Jesus at the Last Supper. The image challenges viewers to consider whether Jesus can be fully present if those at the table are not fully welcomed.

The Eucharist itself calls religious communities to look within and dismantle all forms of White privilege and racism.

## Transforming religious communities to be intercultural and antiracist

**I**N THE CHAPEL OF ST. SABINA CHURCH in Chicago is a large mural on the wall behind the altar. It is entitled "The Last Supper To Be." Around the table are people from every nation and tongue, men, women, and children. At the center of the table is a faint image of Jesus breaking bread. When I asked my pastor why the image of Jesus was so faint; his response is one that will forever be etched on my heart. In fact, it is the reason that I continue to work for racial justice and equity. His answer was simply this: "Until everyone is equally welcomed at this table, Jesus cannot come into the fullness of his glory."

Our religious institutions reflect that not everyone has been welcome at the table. Because racism is such an endemic and pervasive force, we are ensnared, entangled, and enmeshed in a web of racial subordination and dominance that is largely invisible and outside of the awareness of most, except those who suffer the effects of systemic disadvantage. This is true within the American Catholic Church, including our religious communities.

Father Bryan Massingale, professor of theology at Fordham University, suggests that certain shifts need to occur in the dominant approach to U.S.

BY SISTER ANITA BAIRD, D.H.M.



Sister Anita Baird, D.H.M. is a member of the Society of the Daughters of the Heart of Mary, having served as U.S. provincial from 2011-16. She has ministered

in racial justice efforts for decades and has been widely recognized for her activism by organizations including the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and Catholic Theological Union. She is a board member of the National Black Sisters' Conference and resides in Oak Park, Illinois.

Catholicism in order to achieve a more adequate ethic of racial justice, a shift from a stress on racism to White privilege; from passivity to personal responsibility. He writes in his book *Racial Justice in the Catholic Church*, “If dark or skin color means rejection and humiliation, then it follows that racism also connotes a social context in which white skin color means advantage and privilege, a sense of comfort and belonging that whites everywhere unconsciously or consciously assume.”

He goes on to say: “We need to adopt a more structural, and systemic approach to racism, one that views this evil primarily as a cultural phenomenon, a culture of white advantage, privilege and dominance that has personal, interpersonal, spatial and institutional manifestations.”

## Racism woven into the culture

Although as religious most of us believe that we are living relatively faultless lives, all of us are entangled in a form of evil that is every bit as pernicious as the blatant race crimes of long ago. Twenty-first century institutional racism is the immoral and independent child of institutionalized slavery. Racism and ethnocentrism are diseases, which have not only affected our nation but our church and our religious communities since the beginnings of their foundations in this country. As some religious congregations struggle to come to terms with their shameful history of owning and selling human beings during slavery, the majority of religious communities in this country, while not having owned slaves, have practiced racism and segregation in their acceptance policies and in the operation of their sponsored institutions.

Our congregations must own these truths, repent, and be reconciled through our words and actions. If we, who claim to be vowed to the Lord, cannot overcome the sin of racism through grace, then there is little hope that the larger church will ever be healed of the sin of racism.

Since the early beginnings of the church we have struggled to be one in Christ, a community of believers, where all are welcomed and valued and where diversity is embraced, where the community of believers is of one heart and one mind regardless of racial, ethnic, or cultural differences. We can only authentically claim to be catholic or universal when we begin to reflect this diversity in our lived experience.

## Let's ask hard questions

Religious communities must always honor and celebrate their unique charisms, histories, and stories of faith; but we cannot become complacent, wedded to the past, and unwilling to create a new model of community where we reach out, invite, and welcome women and men of color not only to enter our congregations, but to transform them and re-create them while remaining faithful to our living charisms.

Too often we “talk the talk” but fail to “walk the walk” in our communities. We give lip service to diversity but do little to make it a reality. We must ask the hard but necessary questions.

Are we intentional and deliberate in our vocational mission to invite young people of different cultures to journey with us? Are we willing to receive people of color with authentic, genuine hospitality?

Are our motherhouses bathed in Whiteness in art, music, food, literature, etc.? Do we find it uncomfortable to accept cultural differences in the way others pray, celebrate life, eat, and recreate?

Do we cover ourselves in green on the feast of St. Patrick but express discomfort when our members dress in Afrocentric garb during Black History Month or when our Latino and Latina members desire to speak their native language?

Are we open to praying in different ways, and not just on the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe or Martin Luther King day?

Are we willing to become more flexible in our community living, or do our members of color often find themselves isolated and alone after professing vows? Are we willing to listen to their pain?

Are we willing to be vulnerable enough to admit we don't have all the answers, that we need to be patient with ourselves? Are we humble enough to ask others to be patient with us, as we embark upon this journey of learning new ways of being a community?

Are we willing to admit to our stereotypes, our biases and prejudgments of those we consider different? Are we willing to learn from our members of color, who have so much to offer our communities?

## Embrace the gifts of members of color

In the words of Sister Thea Bowman, F.S.P.A. when

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she spoke to the U.S. bishops' conference in 1989, a few months before her death:

What does it mean to be and Catholic? It means that I come to my church fully functioning. I bring myself, my self ... all that I am, all that I have, all that I hope to become. I bring my whole history, my traditions, my experience, my culture, my African American song and dance and gesture and movement and teaching and preaching and healing and responsibility as gift to the church.

Our members of color come with gifts that can enrich and strengthen our communities if only we are open to receiving them. Our prayer life will be deepened. The way we worship will be enriched. Our community celebrations will be enhanced.

Until we are willing to openly discuss our biases, fears, and apprehensions as we enter unknown territory, our congregations will continue to be impoverished by our own limitations and misgivings. In our predominantly Eurocentric congregations, we need to ask ourselves what we are willing to do both individually and corporately to move beyond our limitations and fears in order to address the sin of racism, to acknowledge how White privilege and power has shaped us, and therefore has shaped our communities.

Are we open, honest, and accountable to our members of color? What concrete steps have we taken? In our discomfort how often do we try to deflect the conversation from racism to other "isms," like sexism? Is the commitment to the work of anti-racism given major consideration in choosing congregational leadership?

Until we find the courage to acknowledge and accept that the majority of our congregations are "racist" in that they were founded by White Catholics to serve the needs of White Catholics—and while that is not the total summation of who we are—until we acknowledge that reality, we will never find the courage to begin to transform our institutions into antiracist, intercultural communities.

## What holds us back?

If we are truly serious about becoming inclusive, we must understand what keeps us from wanting to be inclusive. We must understand the cultural indoctrinations that have shaped and defined who we are both individually and as a community. We need to be honest with one another in challenging our very identities.

We spend too much time waiting for people of color

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to come while knowing that we have done little to transform our congregations to receive them if they are being called to embrace our charism. Our congregations are

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solidly White and middle-class in world view and values, and too often this shapes the way we see the poor and people of color, not as equals but as those who need us to show them the way.

Most of our houses of formation are in largely White, suburban, or rural settings that may not be inviting to people of color. We

cannot remove people from their support systems, from what is familiar and nurturing to their souls, replacing it with what is foreign and often hostile and expect them to stay and thrive.

When people of color leave, do we say that “they did not have a vocation”? Perhaps a better response would be to acknowledge that we have failed to honor the distinctiveness of their vocation. We have failed to be communities of transformative grace.

True discipleship does not come without cost, and working to create antiracist, intercultural communities will not happen without a cost. It will require a prophetic vision of the future that we want to create. It will demand that we die to the old ways of being and believing in order that we might be reborn for such a time as this to bear witness to our catholicity, our oneness in the body of Christ, becoming a visible sign of the transformative, Eucharistic power of God’s grace.

## Eucharist unites us

To become what we eat is to enter into communion with the Trinitarian Godhead, dwelling together in God’s indivisible unity. We are invited into a body of love where the weak are at the center and no longer is there a hierarchy of power where people of color are always at the bottom. In the beginning is communion, and in the end is communion. Eucharist makes us one race in Christ Jesus.

Eucharist enables us to work tirelessly for justice. Eucharist allows us to celebrate our diversity while embracing our unity. Eucharist loves us from the point of tolerance to genuine acceptance.

Once we truly come to understand the mystery of the Eucharist, we cannot continue coming to the table if we do not desire from the depths of our hearts to stop

treating the other as a stranger and begin to love the other as our sister and brother in Christ.

We can only hope to learn to dwell together in God’s love through the power of the Eucharist, which invites us to the one banquet table, where all are equal and all are welcome. This union with God in the Holy Eucharist makes us interdependent on one another.

The Eucharist compels us to live lives of truth, built on justice and animated by love, to build a new heaven and a new earth where all of God’s children can live with human dignity and respect regardless of the color of their skin. Through the power of the Eucharist we are one in him. The common denominator is no longer color, ethnic origin, common language, or common interests. As St. Paul wrote to the Galatians (3:26-28):

For through faith you are all children of God in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

To become what we eat is to receive the power of the Holy Spirit and become disciples and witnesses, not only in Jerusalem but throughout Judea and Samaria and indeed throughout the world. Nothing is more powerful than the image of the table where we gather day after day, week after week, year after year, to celebrate the life, death and resurrection of Christ. We come to be fed and transformed.

With this Eucharistic vision in mind, it is my hope that religious congregations will seriously acknowledge that addressing White privilege and power is self-work and that they will commit to the long-term effort of re-defining and restructuring their own institutions to address the legacy of racial superiority and systemic injustice. People of color have not been afforded equality and favorable circumstances, even in religious life.

Now is the acceptable time. Now is the day of salvation. Now is the time to create an inclusive table of welcome. Our congregations must speak and act boldly, honestly, and prophetically against systemic racism. The truth will set us free.

This is our appointed work as women and men of the gospel, to preach, not with words but deeds that will transform our church, religious communities, institutions, nation, and world. May the One who has begun this good work in us bring it to completion so the prayer of Jesus might truly be our own, that all may be one in the Eucharist, which is at the heart of racial justice. ■