

Our national DNA includes racism



**by Joseph Nangle, OFM
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Only one theme can possibly occupy this column today—the events of the last ten days in our nation. Anything else would be to ignore this saddest and challenging moment.

What to say, however, when so much has already been expressed, often eloquently and always heartfelt, out of enormous pain, sorrow and, yes, rage? What could one possibly add to all of that?

Without trying to answer such a hard question, let me simply remind myself and, I hope, all in Pax Christi USA of some historical facts for further analysis and action which this moment calls us to. Most of this is well known to us, but to others perhaps not. I believe they do add up to an ongoing and much needed examination of conscience for white Americans in general, and Pax Christi USA in particular.

Our national DNA clearly includes racism. The celebrated foundational document of our country, the Declaration of Independence, was steeped in racism.

- Item: “*all men are created equal*”

No mention of the socially accepted and “lawful” systemic slavery of that day in the soaring rhetoric of these protesting American founders (of the 54 signatories to this document 41 were actually slave owners).

- Item: quote from that declaration, incredibly, calls Native Americans “*merciless Indian savages.*”
- Item: the dreadful racial history of our country between this flawed beginning and the realities of today: Civil War over slavery; constitutional attempts to correct the injustices of this national sin—efforts that were effectively thwarted by those who profited from a slave-based economy; horrible Jim Crow practices; a hope-filled Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s followed by the nefarious “war on drugs” waged principally against people of color; and all of this accompanied by the brutalities committed too often by “defenders of law and order,” such as we have witnessed this week.



One final item in this sad listing. *The New York Times* of May 24th published a fine editorial titled, **“Why Does the U.S. Military Celebrate White Supremacy?”** One fact cited there is astounding. Referring to this cancer on our nation’s soul, the *Times* reported that: “Adolf Hitler himself took notice [of our racist system], praising the United States as the NEAR EPITOME of the racist state. The Nazi movement normalized its agenda in Germany by pointing out that ‘racist policies and practices’ had been successfully applied in the Southern United States.”

With reason then, racism is commonly referred to as “America’s Original Sin.” Our nation has lived in this sin for all of our 244 years of “freedom.”

This whole dreadful dimension of our national history gives us some idea of what we are up against as “a Catholic peace and justice movement that seeks to model the Peace of Christ...” While individual or collective gestures of inclusion and respect for people of color must always be our way of acting, the overriding challenge goes much deeper. Racism is defined as discrimination joined with power. Our society requires systemic/structural change in our economics, educational opportunities, employment practices, housing, access to medical assistance – in a word, a total overturning of what Dorothy Day called “this whole rotten system.”

A few final thoughts...

Jesus once said to his disciples who could not drive out an evil spirit in a person: “... this kind of demon is cast out only through prayer and fasting” (Matthew 17:21).

Speaking of the demonic system of racism, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. said: “With this system, a small privileged few are rich beyond conscience, and almost all others are doomed to be poor at some level. That’s the way the system works. And since we know that the system will not change the rules, we are going to have to change the system.”

And particularly for Pax Christi USA: “Society is also enriched by a countless array of organizations which work to promote the common good... Thus, a community can break out of the indifference induced by consumerism. These actions cultivate a shared identity with a story, which can be remembered and handed on. In this way, the world and the quality of life of the poorest are cared for, with a sense of solidarity...” (Pope Francis – *Laudato Si*’).

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