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Catholicism, Race, and Social Justice: Historical Realities and Lasallian Visions for the Future

Luisa Marcela Ossa, PhD[1]

Introduction

Since 2017, members of the Lasallian Association of Colleges and Universities (LACU) of the Lasallian Region of North America (RELAN), have been meeting to explore intersections between Lasallian heritage and racial justice issues on campus, ranging from hiring to curriculum to student engagement and many other such topics. One of the aims of these colloquies is to “shape Lasallian responses to racial justice moving forward.” As part of their collaboration, participants Maureen O’Connell, Jordan Pascoe, Jeff Sable, and Jack McClure created a working draft of a “Mission Mandated Lasallian Vision for Racial Justice.”[2] It is important to note that, as indicated, the Vision is a draft and the authors have indicated that the document is a starting point. They expect it to change and evolve based on feedback from the Lasallian community. The Lasallian principles outlined are: (1) concern for the poor and social justice; (2) faith in the presence of God; (3) respect for all persons; (4) inclusive community; and (5) quality education.[3]

In regard to “faith in the presence of God,” the document suggests that some of the intersections between faith and racism are that “racism renders faith a private experience, rather than something that animates our concern with and commitment to – in relationship with others – the common good.” The authors also add, in speaking of the Western world, that “racism has made an idol of the Christian God, rendering that God as exclusively white, male, and Christian.”[4] As a Lasallian value listed to address these matters, the document points to “all are created in the image of God,” and that currently, “the theme of God in the Lasallian heritage is welcoming people of all faiths and recognizing non-Catholics as a valued part of the Lasallian community.”[5]

Before continuing, I will make clear that I am neither a theologian nor a religious scholar. However, as a scholar of Latin American literature and culture who specializes in the study of Afro-descendants in Latin America, I suggest that an important element to add to the “Lasallian Vision for Racial Justice” is an acknowledgement and careful examination of the Catholic Church’s role in the establishment and perpetuation of slavery and other racially based discriminatory practices in the Americas, the consequent racial hierarchies established, and the repercussions that reverberate to this day. I think it is important to examine how the Lasallian vision (dis)connects to the Catholic Church at large.

As I will demonstrate, historically, factions of the Catholic Church have not always viewed all people as created in the image of God, as they did not see some people as human, and other segments of the Church saw them as inferior human beings. In fact, the humanity of indigenous and black people was a controversial and debated issue during colonial times. In *The Sin of White Supremacy,* Jeannine Hill Fletcher explains that during the colonization of the Americas “the most skilled of theologians and scholars who shaped Christian thought and practices of domination and destruction of indigenous ways" also disagreed on the humanity of the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas.[6] Furthermore, the Catholic Church was not welcoming of other religions during colonial times. Forcing indigenous and Afro-descendants, among others, to convert to Catholicism was common practice. But even prior to the colonization of the Americas, as scholars such as Ibram X. Kendi, James H. Sweet, and A.J.R Russell-Wood note,[7] while the term "race" was not used at that time to categorize people by color and phenotype, in medieval Portugal and Spain, which were considered Catholic nations at the time, people were in fact being classified by their skin color and physical characteristics – what would now be called "race." According to Sweet, "many historians of colonial Latin America insist that racism was not present in Iberia before 1492. They argue instead that racial stratification was a product of American economic conditions."[8] However, Sweet counters that "racism and capitalism were not inextricably bound together and that the racism that came to characterize American slavery was well established in cultural and religious attitudes in Spain and Portugal by the fifteenth century."[9] He further details that, "though the pseudoscientific classification of persons based on race in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries gave greater legitimacy to racism, this new science merely reinforced old ideological notions." In regard to these "old ideological notions," he explains:

> Early modern Europeans conflate what we now call "culture" with what we now call "race." Thus, for the early modern period, race and culture cannot be easily separated. A people's inferior culture implied biologically inferior people. Behavioral patterns and lifeways that Europeans viewed as aberrant were linked to genetically fixed qualities – especially phenotype and skin color. Even when these inferior Others adopted European cultural and religious forms, they could not avoid the stigma of cultural inferiority that their physical appearance proclaimed. The dialectic between culture and phenotype operated in such a way that sub-Saharan Africans were unable to escape their inferior status. Skin color, as an insignia of race, remained an indelible marker of cultural, and thus racial, inferiority.[10]

These ideologies, their consequences, and connections to the Catholic Church and slavery will be explored in detail in forthcoming sections of this article. To fully address issues of race and social justice in a Lasallian context, the historical views, stances, and practices of the Catholic Church should not be ignored.

The Church and Race in Medieval Europe and Colonial Latin America: An Overview

During the fifteenth century, Prince Henry the Navigator, "the brother and then uncle of Portuguese Kings"[11] described by *National Geographic* as "a strong Catholic,"[12] created a new form of slavery. According to Kendi, "until his death in 1460, Prince Henry sponsored Atlantic Voyages to West Africa by the Portuguese, to circumvent Islamic slave traders, and in doing so created a different sort of slavery than had existed before."[13] He notes that "pre-modern Islamic slave traders, like their Christian counterparts in pre-modern Italy . . . were enslaving what we now consider to be Africans, Arabs, and Europeans alike. At the dawn of the modern world, the Portuguese began to exclusively trade African bodies."[14] Kendi goes on to explain that King Alfonso V, Prince Henry the Navigator's nephew, commissioned Gomes Eanes de Zurara to write a biography about Prince Henry, which was entitled *The Chronicle of the Discovery and*

Conquest of Guinea.[15] According to Kendi, one of the events the biography chronicles is "Prince Henry's first major slave auction in Lagos, Portugal, in 1444."[16] Kendi explains that while Zurara recognizes that the Africans have different skin colors, features, and languages, he "blended them into one single group of people worthy of enslavement."[17] Rusell-Wood explains how many Portuguese writers of the time, including Zurara, disseminated racist views in their writings, and how those writings were connected to the Church:

> Writers were not content merely to list the physical defects (as they saw them) of blacks: authors excoriated not only the slaves' blackness, but their supposed savagery, their "brutish ways," their libidinousness, their moral degeneracy, and their unorthodox religious practices. Zurara referred to their "great bestiality" and their disordered – by Portuguese standards – physical and moral conduct. He lamented that blacks were both ignorant of the need to provide food and shelter on a regular basis and shameless enough to go naked. Their apparent failure to distinguish clearly between moral right and wrong was no less disturbing to the chronicler than the apparent absence of a "work ethic." Zurara and some contemporaries thought the Portuguese were charged with a dual responsibility: as Catholics their duty lay in bringing unbelievers into the Christian fold; as agents of civilization their moral obligation lay in civilizing blacks who would otherwise remain in "bestial sloth."[18]

Concurring with Kendi and Russell-Wood, Sweet outlines how the Portuguese and the Catholic Church treated Africans differently from other non-Catholics:

> While Portuguese intellectuals agreed that "right authority" existed to conduct war against those nations that impeded the spread of Catholicism, they treated the African case differently. Despite Africans' submission to Portuguese missionary efforts, the Portuguese still considered the capture and subsequent enslavement of Africans as part of a just war to convert heathens. Africans' willingness to accept the Christian faith had no bearing on the Portuguese decision to seize them as human property. Papal approval reinforced this contradiction.[19]

Sweet later suggests that "the Catholic Church either turned a blind eye toward Spanish and Portuguese enslavement of converted Africans, or it embraced a belief in the natural inferiority of peoples of color. A great deal of evidence points to the latter."[20] He points out that the Church "tolerated the enslavement of blacks regardless of their religious beliefs, and neither the church nor the Catholic rulers were concerned with ensuring that Africans received the sacraments."[21] He also states that during the fifteenth century enslaved Africans generally were not given Christian burials, and in Lisbon their bodies were simply thrown out on the streets.[22]

The Catholic Church's role in the African slave trade and dissemination of racist views is also outlined by Carl Wise and David Wheat in "Pope Nicolas V and the Portuguese Slave Trade."[23] According to Wise and Wheat,

> Pope Nicolas V issued a series of papal bulls that granted Portugal the right to enslave sub-Saharan Africans. Church leaders argued slavery served as a natural deterrent and Christianizing influence to "barbarous" behavior among pagans.

They go on state that the Pope issued a mandate to King Alfonso V, which instructed him

> to invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens and pagans whatsoever . . . [and] to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery, and to apply and appropriate to himself and his successors the kingdoms, dukedoms, counties, principalities, dominions, possessions, and goods, and to convert them to his and their use and profit.

Upon their arrival in the Caribbean and Latin America, Portuguese, Spanish, and other European groups looking to expand their power and wealth beyond Europe, established societies based on the racial hierarchies explained above. Indigenous peoples were exploited and enslaved and forced to mine precious metals and work on sugar cane plantations as well as coerced into abandoning their spiritual belief systems and converting to Catholicism. After these native populations were decimated by exploitation, abuse, and illness, Europeans then brought enslaved Africans to the Americas throughout the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries. Peter N. Carroll and David W. Noble describe how European ethnocentrism and Catholicism intersect leading to exploitation and inhumane treatment of Africans and Native Americans. According to Carroll and Noble:

> Europeans in the age of Columbus saw themselves as Christians, the most spiritually pure people in creation. This ethnocentric idea found reinforcement in the ideals of the Roman Catholic Church, which claimed to be a universal spiritual community. Yet this ideology clearly excluded such religiously different people as Muslims, against whom Christians had waged holy wars for centuries, and Jews, who remained outsiders throughout European society. Believing in a single unitary religion, members of the Catholic Church viewed [nonbelievers] as suitable either for conversion to the true faith or worthy only of death or enslavement. Such religious attitudes shaped the Europeans' relations with Africans as well as Native Americans.[24]

During the nineteenth century in Cuba, fearing that the enslavement of Africans would soon be abolished, Chinese contract laborers were brought over to ensure that Cuba's sugar economy would continue to thrive. These laborers often signed contracts they did not understand, under false pretenses, or under coercion. Once in Cuba, contracts, as a general practice, were not honored; and these laborers found themselves living under conditions similar to Africans. Moreover, the two groups often worked alongside one another on plantations under inhumane conditions. These racial hierarchies established in Latin America and the Caribbean during the Colonial and Independence periods were not erased by the abolition of slavery and indentured servitude in the nineteenth century. These systems set the foundation for the continued institutionalized discrimination and marginalization of these groups throughout the twentith century, and the effects continue to reverberate.

In reference to the Catholic Church's role in the slave trade in the Americas, Carmen Curley, referencing Richard Miller, points out,

> The Catholic Church had a major presence in slavery in the New World. According to Richard Miller, Catholic countries were "the prime movers in the revival of slavery in

> the Old World and the introduction of it into the New World." The five major countries that dominated slavery and the slave trade in the New World were either Catholic, or still retained strong Catholic influences including: Spain, Portugal, France, and England, as well as the Dutch.[25]

Christopher Columbus himself was a devout Catholic. However, as Rev. John I. Jenkins, CSC, president of the University of Notre Dame has noted, while many view Columbus as the "discoverer of the New World,"

> For the native peoples of this "new'" land, however, Columbus's arrival was nothing short of a catastrophe. Whatever else Columbus's arrival brought, for these peoples it led to exploitation, expropriation of land, repression of vibrant cultures, enslavement, and new diseases causing epidemics that killed millions.[26]

Furthermore, during colonial times the Catholic Church was the most powerful entity, entrenched and ingrained in all aspects of life. As John F. Schwaller notes, at the time of colonization of the Americas in Spain, Church and State were one:

> The Spanish Crown took an active role in the development of the Church in the New World. Spanish claims to the Americas were based on the Christianizing mission. The Spanish kings came to exercise the Royal Patronage over the Church: that is, the right to appoint major officials to administer the Church, including bishops and archbishops, members of cathedral chapters, and even local beneficed curates.[27]

Schwaller also indicates:

> The Catholic Church was undoubtedly the single most important institution in colonial Latin America. Everyone who lived in the region was nominally a member of the Church. The Church controlled all aspects of life from birth, through marriage, until death. The Church became the single largest landowner within the colony, developing commercial agriculture to support many of its activities. Religious Orders within the Church created vertically integrated commercial activities such as sheep production and weaving, grape production and brandy. The missionaries of the Church had the principal responsibility of converting the millions of natives of the New World to the faith, which was a daunting task because of significant linguistic and cultural differences. Through the local bishop and the powers of the Inquisition, the Church also monitored the homogeneity of the philosophical underpinnings of the society, assuring conformity of thought. In short, the colonial Church touched nearly every aspect of life.

Returning to the matter of native populations, they were exploited and enslaved, in particular, to mine precious metals. As Michael Wood notes, their humanity was debated and

> the deeds of the Conquistadors, for example, led to a passionate debate in Spain, among politicians and theologians, on the fundamental principles of justice and morality raised by the conquests. In particular, what were the rights of the native American societies? Were the "Indians" fully human, like Europeans?[28]

In *July 2015: Bartolomé de las Casas and 500 Years of Racial Injustice*, Dani Anthony notes that during the sixteenth century, slavery was a widely accepted practice in Spain, despite the growing debate of the time. Anthony states that under Spanish law, all captives of war were considered potential slaves, as long as they were not Catholic.[29] Anthony explains that in 1502, Dominican Friar Bartolomé de las Casas arrived in Hispaniola (the Island now comprising Haiti and the Dominican Republic). According to Anthony, soon after his arrival, Las Casas

> became a land and slave owner, joining military expeditions against the native peoples and becoming a priest in 1510. However, after Las Casas' participation in the violent and destructive Spanish invasion of Cuba in 1513, he began to view European interference in native affairs as illegal and amoral.[30]

The BBC film *Racism: A History* explains that Las Casas documented the atrocities committed against indigenous people by the Spanish, and the narrator states that his documents read like "a catalog of genocide."[31] However, while on the one hand he defended the rights of the indigenous, he gave the Spanish government permission to enslave Africans. As the film, Dani Anthony, and other scholars have noted, Las Casas suggested that African slaves should replace indigenous labor because he believed they could withstand the conditions. Las Casas later grew to regret taking this position and tried to advocate for the rights of Africans as well; but by then, the damage had been done. Las Casas' initial position on enslaving African people was utilized not only by the Spanish to justify the practice, but also by the British. According to Alisa Roberts, the English translation of Las Casas' text, *Brevísima Relación*, was used to justify Anglo-American colonialism.[32] Finally it is important to note that it is not until 1839 that the Church officially condemns slavery.[33]

Afro-Descendants in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries: Lasting Consequences

As discussed in the previous sections of this article, since colonial times, Latin America and the Caribbean have been meeting points for a range of people and cultures. Sometimes by choice, but often by force, the convergence of people of Indigenous, European, African, and Asian descent contributed to the formation of diverse societies with complex interactions. Despite the diversity of many of these societies historically, Indigenous, African, and Asian voices have been suppressed. In the case of Afro-descendants in Latin America, part of the World Bank's summary of their 2018 report entitled *Afro-Descendants in Latin America: Toward a Framework of Inclusion* succinctly explains the current environment for Afro-descendants in Latin America:

> The inclusion of Afro-descendants is important in itself, to make Latin American societies more just and equitable, but it is also important for the region. Afro-descendants are disproportionately represented among the poor. In Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, Peru, and Uruguay combined, Afro-descendants represent 38 percent of the total population, but about half of all the people living in extreme poverty. They also have fewer years of education, and are more often victims of crime and violence. Despite their growing visibility, they are still vastly underrepresented in decision making positions, both in the private and in the public sector. They also have fewer chances of social mobility, as they are 2.5 times more likely to be chronically poor. The extent to which

> Latin America will be able to end extreme poverty and boost shared prosperity will therefore depend, to a very large degree, on their social inclusion. To do so, the region must first understand and visualize Afro-descendants' needs and agendas, reversing decades of policy and analytic neglect.[34]

The Dominican Republic and Colombia serve as just two examples of the lasting consequences of racial hierarchies established centuries past and the current climate for Afro-descendants described by the World Bank. In "My Mother Told Me Never to Marry a Black Woman: How Race Works in the Dominican Republic," Roque Planas, referencing historian Robin Derby, explains that in the early twentieth century "anti-Haitian sentiment became closely associated with race" and furthermore, "in the 1930s USA-trained and -backed Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo eliminated the option to identify as 'black' on a new national identity card, leaving Dominicans no choice but to describe themselves as either 'white' or some variety of 'Indian' – meaning 'indigenous'" as noted by historian Samuel Martinez. Planas concludes that the move made little sense in a country "where most indigenous people had been killed or died from disease by the close of the sixteenth century."

The anti-Haitian and anti-Black leadership of Trujillo "culminated in a 1937 massacre ordered by his government that left somewhere between 9,000 and 20,000 Haitians dead."[35] Trujillo's government was supported by the Catholic Church. Howard J. Wiarda explains:

> During the long Trujillo era, 1930-1961, Church and state in the Dominican Republic were mutually supporting institutions; the dictator favored the Church and it, in turn, supported his regime. Trujillo sought to project the image of a devout Catholic in whom religiosity was natural. His political philosophy was couched in moral and religious terms and his belief in God formed the basis of his theory. The Church, as a result of the many favors he showered on it, was very pro-Trujillo; Archbishop Ricardo Pittini, especially, was outspoken in his praise of the Generalissimo.[36]

Wiarda goes on to describe the 1954 Concordat between the Vatican and Trujillo. In exchange for the Church's recognition of his divorce and remarriage:

> The dictator granted vast concessions to the Church. The Dominican Republic's status as a Catholic nation was affirmed in the first article which stated that "The Catholic, Apostolic Roman religion continues to be that of the Dominican nation and will enjoy the rights and privileges that are rightfully hers in conformity with divine canon law.[37]

The effects of Trujillo's whitening campaign have been long-lasting. It was not until 2011 that the Dominican government finally allowed the inclusion of black and mulatto as identifiers on official documents. The consequences of the vilification and erasure of blackness in the Dominican Republic continue to be felt today, as evidenced by the title of Planas' article "My Mother Told Me Never to Marry a Black Woman," which references what Roque Feliz, the director of Centro Bonó which has advocated for Haitian migrant rights, revealed in an interview his mother told him despite his father being black. She would reinforce the sentiment by stating, "we have to refine our race." This deep-rooted discrimination toward Afro-descendants is also apparent through the fact that many schools and businesses bar black women from wearing natural hairstyles, and afros and curly hair textures are regularly referred to as “pelo malo” – bad hair.

Dr. Ariel F. Tolentino noted, in an August 2018 talk at the twelfth biennial conference of the Afro-Latin/American Research Association (ALARA), that “buena presencia” – good appearance – in reference to employment and education is widely understood to mean white or fair complexioned with straight hair. He cites as an example the case of Nicky González who claims the minister of education, Ligia Amada Melo, denied her a scholarship because of her afro.[38] While Melo denies the claims, González insists that after applying for a scholarship to pursue a master’s degree related to conducting research in the social sciences, Melo told her, “I don’t give scholarships to people with hair like yours.”[39] However, citizens and activists have been organizing and mobilizing to challenge discriminatory practices.

Go Natural Caribe, established in 2011, promotes inclusivity and acceptance of Afro-descendants and believes natural hair “is not a problem to hide, but instead identity and beauty.” The group believes reclaiming one’s natural hair can be empowering.[40] Afro Alianza Dominicana (Afro Dominican Alliance) has as its mission to draw awareness to issues of racism and racial discrimination in the Dominican Republic and to work toward the full inclusion of Afro-descendants in Dominican society so that they may share the same rights and opportunities as others. One of the steps taken by the group in 2013 was to create an alternate report on racism and discrimination in response to government reports to the United Nation’s Committee on the Elimination of Race (CERD) denying the existence of racism and discrimination in the country. In its report, presented to CERD with the assistance of the organization Global Rights, Afro Alianza emphasizes that it is precisely this governmental and institutional denial of these issues that is at the root of the problem and impedes progress and change.[41]

Colombia serves as a second example of a Latin American country with deep Catholic ties, in which Afro-descendants continue to feel the lasting effects of colonial systems. Colombia is the Spanish-speaking country with the largest Afro-descendant population, and is second only to Brazil in number of Afro-descendants in Latin America. According to the World Atlas, the Roman Catholic Church was the official state church until 1991, when changes in the constitution eliminated this status. However, Roman Catholicism continues to be the dominant faith, as 75% of the population identifies as Roman Catholic.[42] The city of Cartagena, on the Caribbean Coast, was one of the main ports in South America for the Spanish slave trade. Adam McConnaughhay explains,

> The city also emerged as a major point of entry for African slaves, a fact that is unfortunately often overlooked or glossed over in the history of Cartagena. Cartagena also held a monopoly on that trade in mainland Spanish South America. It is believed that at least a million slaves entered the port of Cartagena. Slaves were sold at the Plaza de los Coches, the plaza just inside the city gates where the Clocktower and the Statue of Pedro de Heredia (founder of Cartagena) is located today.[43]

A 2010 report by United Nations’ independent expert on minority issues Gay McDougall directly links slavery to contemporary issues faced by Afro-Colombians stating, “the legacy of slavery endures and is manifested in socially and economically marginalized communities facing racist attitudes and structural discrimination."[44] McDougall provides more detail explaining:

> The story of Afro-Colombians begins with slavery and gross violations of the rights of African descendants. As slaves escaped coastal plantations, they were forced to find refuge in geographically remote regions of the Pacific and Atlantic coasts. They built communities and livelihoods under extreme climate conditions, in isolation and poverty. Consequently, Afro-Colombians have a special attachment to their ancestral lands, as a source of refuge and survival and the environment in which their distinct cultures have been maintained.[45]

The report stresses that Afro-Colombians face:

> pervasive structural discrimination, including access to quality education, employment and participation in economic life, housing, effective political participation and access to justice. The estimated illiteracy index within the Afro-Colombian population is 30 percent, compared with the national average of 16 per cent. Nearly 10 percent of Afro-Colombian children from 6 to 10 years of age do not access primary education, with the percentage believed to be far higher in some regions.[46]

Additionally, the report indicates that Afro-Colombians are "grossly underrepresented in public sector employment, rarely represented at senior levels, and face discriminatory barriers in private sector employment." Furthermore, they have a disproportionate experience of poverty, lower life expectancy than the national average, and are significantly vulnerable to violence.[47]

However, in contrast to the government of the Dominican Republic, McDougall states that the Colombian government acknowledges that Afro-Colombians "are still victims of various forms of racial discrimination." She also lists a number of government programs created to address these issues. Yet the implementation, execution, and efficacy of these programs remain questionable, as the social and economic marginalization of Afro-Colombians persists today.[48]

The fight for equality is visible not only through the work of organizations such as the UN, but also through the work of many Afro-Colombian activists and organizations (for example, the previously cited UN report was compiled with the cooperation of numerous Afro-Colombian leaders and citizens). However, these activists face significant resistance and backlash, and many have paid the ultimate price for fighting for equality for their communities. A year-end 2018 report by the Consultoría para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento (CODHES) (known as the Consultancy on Human Rights and Displacement in English) presents alarming statistics stating that by the end of 2018 there were 168 assassinations of social activists and leaders, and of those 54 were leaders of ethnic communities. Twenty were Afro-descendants and 34 were indigenous.[49] The Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) in its own report on these issues has called the situation an "alarming security crisis facing Afro-Colombian and Indigenous leaders."[50]

In a 2017 visit to Cartagena, Pope Francis made a point of acknowledging the plight of Afro-Colombians and other marginalized people. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that despite Cartagena's fame as a tourist destination,

> Pope Francis focused on its dark history and current woes, such as slums teeming with people uprooted by a long guerrilla war and child prostitution rings catering to foreigners. Many of those suffering here are Afro-Colombians, and in his last hours in Colombia the pontiff centered his message on them.[51]

The Pope chose to speak in front of the Church of Saint Peter Claver, which was a symbolic gesture. Saint Peter Claver (known as San Pedro Claver in Spanish) was born in Spain 1581.[52] He entered the Jesuit order in 1602, was sent to Cartagena in 1610, and was ordained in 1616. Claver, disturbed by the inhumane treatment of the enslaved West Africans who arrived in Cartagena, dedicated his life to baptizing and encouraging the Catholic faith among them, as well as alleviating their suffering, all of which helped lead to his canonization in 1896. Claver is the Patron Saint of Colombia and of ministry to African-Americans and to African Missions. At times, he is also described as the Patron Saint of Slaves. While speaking to the crowd of thousands outside of the church named for Claver, Pope Francis addressed the continued injustices faced by Afro-Colombians and other marginalized groups declaring,

> here in Colombia and in the world, millions of people are still being sold as slaves. They either beg for some expressions of humanity, moments of tenderness, or they flee by sea or land because they have lost everything, primarily their dignity and their rights.[53]

The Lasallian Vision for Social Justice and Where Do We Go from Here?

I would like to preface this final section by saying that it is very difficult to summarize hundreds of years of history in a journal article. I also want to make clear that the issues of systemic racism addressed in this piece are complex and the result of many factors as well as the actions of many individuals, groups, and institutions, so I am not resting the sole responsibility for racism on the Catholic Church. And though it is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to acknowledge that throughout history there were also members of the Church actively fighting against these forms of oppression. However, history demonstrates that the Church has been a major player in the establishment and perpetuation of slavery and systemic racism in the Americas, particularly Latin America.

This should matter to those of us at Lasallian institutions of higher education for numerous reasons. In addition to the fact that racism and discrimination go against the Lasallian values of respect for all persons and inclusive community, Lasallian institutions have an extremely strong presence throughout Latin America. Specific to the countries mentioned in this piece, De La Salle Christian Brothers have had a presence in the Dominican Republic since 1933; and there are numerous Lasallian schools and centers in the country.[54] In Colombia, there are numerous primary and secondary schools, as well as at least three Lasallian institutions of higher education.[55] In terms of the USA, many of our universities serve significant populations of Hispanic and Latino students. We do a disservice to Hispanic and Latino students if we lack an understanding of their histories and social issues that they face not just in the USA as people classified as Hispanic or Latino, but within these groupings due to the racial issues outlined in this article.

I do not claim to have all of the answers. However, I will pose some questions that we might contemplate. Are our institutions teaching about the Catholic Church's historical involvement in the slave trade and discriminatory practices? If so, how? If not, why not? For those of us in disciplines like Spanish, history, and religion, how can we collaborate to ensure these topics are taught from the broad scope necessary? How has the Catholic Church responded historically to these matters? How is it responding now? What steps, if any, are being taken by the Church to address its role in systemic discriminatory practices? The "Lasallian Vision for Social Justice" referenced at the start of this article suggests that we need to take risks "to stand in solidarity with the vulnerable" (Table 1[56]). I believe that I have taken a risk by writing a piece that may make some readers uncomfortable; but as the "Vision" proclaims, in order to address social justice issues, we must go beyond simple assistance and instead must get to the roots of the problems to "find structural solutions and educate to justice."[57] As Jack Downey and Kathleen Holscher explain, "transformation won't happen without dismantling the systems that form their biases."[58]

I hope that through this piece I have brought awareness to a topic that may have been unfamiliar to many and have shined a light on some of the root causes of these issues. Finally, I hope to stimulate a dialogue in hope of addressing and finding solutions to these complex problems so that someday we will live in a world where there truly is respect for all.[59]

Endnotes

1. Luisa Marcela Ossa, who is an associate professor of Spanish at La Salle University in Pennsylvania, earned her doctorate in Spanish at Temple University. [The author offers special thanks to Dr. Jack Downey for his invaluable feedback on portions of this essay and to Alison Manzella for her assistance proof-reading and formatting this article.]

2. Danielle M. Young, Jeffrey J. Sable, and Jack Curran. "Exploring the Intersections: Racial Justice, Our Lasallian Heritage and the Catholic Tradition." *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 9, no. 2 (2018), page 19. http://axis.smumn.edu/uncategorized/exploring-the-intersections-racial-justice-our-lasallian-heritage-and-the-catholic-tradition/.

3. Cf. Table 1 in Young, Sable, and Curran, pages 23-26.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Jeannine Hill Fletcher. *The Sin of White Supremacy.* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis), chapter 1, loc. 215 of 3579, Kindle Cloud Reader.

7. See Ibram X. Kendi, “Power.” *How to Be an Anti-Racist.* (New York: One World, 2019); James H. Sweet, “The Iberian Roots of American Racist Thought.” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (January 1997): 143-166; and A.J.R. Russell-Wood, “Iberian Expansion and the Issue of Black Slavery: Changing Portuguese Attitudes, 1440-1770.” *The American Historical Review* 83 (February 1978): 16-42.

8. Sweet, 143-144.

9. Ibid., 144.

10. Ibid., 144-145.

11. Kendi, 39.

12. Caryl-Sue Micalizio. “March 4, 1394 CE: Henry the Navigator Born.” *National Geographic,* last modified February 20, 2014, https://www.nationalgeographic.org/thisday/mar4/henry-navigator-born/educator/.

13. Kendi, 39.

14. Ibid., 39.

15. Ibid., 39-40.

16. Ibid., 40.

17. Ibid., 40.

18. Russell-Wood, 39.

19. Sweet, 157.

20. Ibid., 158.

21. Ibid., 158.

22. Ibid., 159.

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52. I have focused on Saint Peter Claver because of his connection to Colombia. However, other noteworthy saintly personages from and/or known for their work in Latin American are Saint Archbishop Oscar Romero (1980), Blessed James Miller (1982), The Salvadorian Martyrs (1989), and Dom Hélder Câmara (1909-1999). These all serve as additional examples of members of the Church who have championed the cause of people, who in the words of Pope Francis, are forced to live "on the margins" of society.

53. Otis, "Pope Francis Reaches Out to Afro-Colombians, Calls for End to Modern Slavery."

54. This information is from the website for the De La Salle Christian Brothers in the Dominican Republic. "República Dominicana," Hermanos De La Salle. http://www.hermanosdelasalle.com/republica_dominicana.php.

55. In addition to the Utopía campus of Universidad de La Salle (Yopal, Colombia) that is referenced in the article "Exploring Academic Collaborative Opportunities" in this issue of the journal, a couple of other resources about Lasallian education in Latin America would be: *Bulletin #253: Children and Youth at Risk: A Lasallian Response* (Rome, 2011), especially pages 32-41 concerning Latin America; and *Bulletin #248: Lasallian Educational Initiatives* (Rome, 2003), especially pages 39-42 concerning Latin America.

56. Cf. Table 1 in Young, Sable, and Curran, pages 23-26.

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59. Small portions of this article were initially part of a talk entitled, "(Re)Writing Erased Histories: Afro-descendants in Latin America and the Caribbean," for my participation as a panelist by invitation in the "Cultural Transitions" panel at the Fall 2018 Colloquium.