



Dear Friends,

Well the elephant in the room has gotten up and now walks the streets of our cities and cities around the globe. We've seen him before, most strikingly during the 1960's. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) has recently issued a letter laying bare the racism that has infected our country from the beginning. It's hard to read. The bishops have presented a history of self-aggrandizing superiority found in our country's European ancestors almost from the time the first European foot set down on our shores. Reading it, I became defensive despite the fact that I knew what the bishops were saying was true.

It's hard to publicly admit to being wrong. To hear that the history we learned in school distorts or covers up the systemic wrong doing against peoples different from ourselves arouses defenses and anger. How dare they bad mouth our country and the founders of our nation!! Our forebears were only trying to provide a better life for the peoples who lived here. They brought the modern world to them, including Christianity to save their souls.

Our history doesn't take into consideration that the native peoples, who had lived on this continent long before the arrival of the Europeans, had languages, traditions, customs, and well-established cultures. Instead the native peoples were labeled "savage" by the immigrants. That label instantly identified the native peoples as less than white Europeans. The theory of "Manifest Destiny" sealed their fate since God himself gave all this land to us and those "savages" needed to become one of us or suffer the consequences. Winners write the history.

[“Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of the Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too.” Rm 3:29]

Then came the slave ships and a whole new way of life built on the work of others. The only way “Christian” people could justify enslaving another human was to de-humanize them. Laws and even the Constitution enshrined the notion that black people were less than human. The notion, enshrined in the Book of Genesis, that all humans are created in the image and likeness of God, was negated by a culture wanting cheap labor. The Church, too, treated the native peoples and blacks sinfully. There was even a bishop, identified by name in the USCCB letter, who owned slaves! None of us are in a position to judge the colonists and settlers. They lived in a very different time. Nonetheless, we can't deny wrongdoing.

I would like to think we have grown as a people since the 15th century. Most recently, I think of the movements of the 1960's which profoundly altered our culture by challenging our understanding of women, individual rights, racism, our educational system and more. Since that time, we have been challenged, even within our Church, to rethink ourselves and how we should live. In the middle of the

last century, Marshall McLuan, a noted philosopher, pointed out that modern technology was turning our world into what he called a “Global Village.” Today, we live in that Global Village and a *Global Village* is a multiracial one. Before we can fully move into our future, we need to face the realities of our past and how those realities still affect our attitudes towards people of color. We can only accomplish this via the painful road of highlighting hidden systemic racism both in us individuals as well as woven within our American culture.

The Lord said to Martha in St. John’s Gospel, “I am the way, the truth and the life.” the way to life is through the truth, even if that truth hurts. The “truth” of racism is hard to hear. It’s hard to hear an African-American father have to teach his young son how he is to act when confronted by a policeman. It’s hard to admit to racial profiling. I find it hard to admit to my own fear of young black men, especially in areas that are predominantly black. I have to check myself when I’m in a grocery store and find myself musing on how many of “them” have moved into “our” neighborhood and what effect that will have on property values. That’s racist! And I don’t think of myself as racist. It’s hard to admit the truth.

Once we fall into the trap of thinking of “them” regardless of who “they” may be, we tar every person in that category with the same brush. And I know the feeling. The sex scandal within our Church tossed me and most of my priest brothers into the category of perverts. Studies have shown that at most 2% of all the priests in the nation are pedophiles. That leaves 98% of us who are not. And yet, we priests are still looked at with suspicion. Even knowing how that feels, I still do the same with our black brothers and sisters. Repentance is our only hope.

Where do we start? As we should...with the word of the Lord.

“Come now, let us set things right, says the Lord; though your sins be like scarlet, they shall become white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they may become like wool. If you are willing and obey, you shall eat the good things of the land; if you refuse and resist, you shall be eaten by the sword, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” [Is 1: 18-20]

If we heed God’s invitation to change, we can have hope for the future. If not, we flirt with disaster.

“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.” [Gal 3:28]

The voice of the Black community calls us to get to know them and their pain. That means just that: spend time with people of color and *listen*. We have a lot to learn.

*Fr. Denis*