

Racial Sobriety: Answering the Prayer of Jesus

By Fr. Clarence Williams, CPPS, PhD

A Kairos Moment

The unprecedented and unexpected event of electing a Black president created a seismic shift in race relations. The shock waves rocked the soul of many Americans and were felt around the world. Those touched by the spirit that uplifts the downtrodden of the earth danced in the streets – of the nation and the world.

The dramatic outcome of this election was inevitable no matter which party or candidate gained the Oval Office. Both parties made women eligible for Commander in Chief, one candidate advanced the issue of ageism in the workplace of the highest office in the land, and another candidate addressed the needs of the poor and working class as the major issue in a country that has canonized its middle class electorate. Any candidate would have triggered a seismic change in the landscape of American culture. In the dynamics of the democratic process, Americans created a moment for race, gender and class to be viewed through a different lens.

The inevitable conversation about race and its implications for this administration will be as historical as the result of the election itself. The prophetic voice can seize this kairos moment, this special time whose length cannot be determined. Any hope for a more enduring cultural transformation will depend on the formation of leaders who can facilitate social civility in the discussions and discourse on race – and by extension racisms, the belief that “the other” race, gender or class is not to be respected with equal regard as “the we.” The prophetic voices of a hoped for future are challenged to respond to the kairos that is upon us today.

2008 marked the 60th anniversary of the de-segregation of the Armed Services; the 50th anniversary of Jackie Robinson integrating baseball; the 45th anniversary of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy; and the 40th anniversary of the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Those living through these seismic shifts were often heard saying, “I never believed that I would live to see the day when we would have a Black president!” A similar statement would have been made about a woman president. This moment, though, can lapse into remote history unless we embrace the lesson of the teachable moment.

A Voice of Racial Sobriety

Those who commit to leadership in the kairos moment will need to acquire their Voice of Racial Sobriety in the days, weeks, months and years ahead. Racial sobriety is a commitment to see each person – whether white or nonwhite - as my brother or sister. It is the opposite of racial dysfunction – i.e., the “stinking thinking” within everyone, white and nonwhite, which is the source of our toxic race relations. Whatever our racial background, racial sobriety is necessary to free ourselves from “living under the influence” of our racial dysfunctions. The staggering number of auto accidents due to people “driving under the influence” of alcohol or drugs is no comparison to the human toll resulting from people “living under the influence” of racial dysfunction.

“At 11:00 on Sunday morning when we stand and sing... we stand at the most segregated hour in this nation.”

Martin Luther King, 1963. Interview at Western Michigan University.

Our voice of racial sobriety is needed to talk ourselves sober. There is little support in our society, schools or churches to find or develop our voice of racial sobriety. Leaders who seek to find their voice of racial sobriety will need courage in a culture in which r-a-c-e is treated like a four-letter word.

Overcoming any fear takes courage, which can emerge when we identify the origin of our anxiety. The journey toward racial sobriety is challenged by forces within and outside of ourselves. One hurdle follows the “Don’t Talk Rule” popularized by dysfunctional family theory.

This rule describes “the elephant in the living room” where a family or group colludes to deny its existence. Racism is the elephant in the American living room; and by extension, in the White House living room. The “Don’t Talk Rule” of the culture will discourage any conversation on this topic. There are voices proclaiming that “now the issue of race is over.” A second hurdle is the racial anxiety stirred up within ourselves. Three elements of racial anxiety are fear, ignorance and guilt—the FIG complex. The fear element is that of not knowing what might happen if we break the silence. The ignorance element is that of not knowing how to respectfully refer to someone’s race, nationality, ethnic group. Where do we begin the conversation? The guilt element of the FIG complex is a feeling that we should be better at dealing with the subject and at responding to situations in a more positive manner. Unfortunately, the more guilt we feel, the more fearful we become and our racial anxiety forms an emotional cage in which we are imprisoned. However, when we identify any element of our racial anxiety, it loses its power over us. We literally break a leg of the stool and topple our cage of racial anxiety. We are set free in that moment. Racial sobriety as a spiritual exercise continually calls the FIG devil by name and provides a grace-filled moment of deliverance from living under the influence of our racial dysfunction.

Any consideration of addressing the issues of race in the present moment will begin with leaders who can identify the sources of racial anxiety for themselves and others. As in any spiritual quest it appears to be an awesome task. The adage—“How do you eat an elephant? A bite at a time.”—is helpful. We need the anointing of the Holy Spirit to encourage our hearts in the midst of our fear, ignorance and guilt.

Racial Sobriety and the Christian Ethos

Throughout the chronicles of Christian record we see the human family gripped in racial dysfunction, stifling the grace of God. St. Paul’s Letter to the Galatians frames the issues of race, gender and class at the birth of the Christian reality. In the second chapter of his Letter to the Galatians, St. Paul observes the racially dysfunctional behavior of St. Peter in regards to the Gentile converts. Peter, as head of the Church, visited Galatia in order to see Paul’s Gentile converts. Peter initially embraced the converts, ate with them and lived with them. However, upon the arrival of other Jews from Jerusalem, he avoided the Gentiles.

Paul’s letter is a witness to his intervention on Peter’s behavior as creating a form of supremacy of Jewish culture over the construction of Christian culture in the growth of the

church. The core Christian message on racism is that there is no place for it in the faith community: “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) Racism is a sin against God, as the creator of the human family, and against his children, our brothers and sisters.

The Ministry of Racial Sobriety

The ministry of Racial Sobriety begins in discipleship and ends in apostleship. The discipleship requires a formation journey to the heart of Jesus. Jesus’ prayer for unity in the human family as seen in the Holy Trinity—“... so that they may be one just as we are” (John 17:11, 21)—is the heart of the ministry of racial sobriety. The apostolic ministry of racial sobriety is a ministry of transformation, or more aptly, trans-formation. It is a process by which we transfer our racial sobriety formation to those around us. The Bishops of the United States in their 1979 pastoral letter, “Brothers and Sisters to Us” made the sinfulness of racism clear. Many bishops also have taken it upon themselves to write their own epistles exhorting the faithful in their archdioceses and dioceses. In addition, the transfer of conscience formation through Catholic education was the focus of the 1988 Vatican publication, “The Church and Racism.” The ministry of racial sobriety begins with the commitment to “become the change you want to see.” It transforms the culture around us. In our interpersonal relationships, S-O-B-E-R means *Seeing Others as Being Entitled to Respect*. From a social perspective, S-O-B-E-R means *Seeing Others as Being Equally Regarded*. From a global perspective, S-O-B-E-R means *Seeing Others as Being Extended Relations* in the human family. The spiritual and emotional gift of racial sobriety is to see each person as a brother or sister. It is to realize that our American family dream is not color coded. The anniversary of the desegregation of the Armed Forces reminds us that President Truman saw integration as also setting free those white soldiers assigned to maintain segregation. Freedom from racial dysfunction frees us all. The accomplishments of the Rev. Dr. King were made possible by the protection of President John Kennedy. To champion the integration of baseball was the life time ambition of the baseball executive, Branch Rickey. He succeeded when he broke the “colorline” by signing Jackie Robinson, and later Roberto Clemente as the first Hispanic player. The grace of these prophetic leaders prepared America for this moment in history in which the majority of white voters broke the “colorline” of the American dream as the world watched.

Pope Benedict XVI dedicates this year to honor the gift and legacy of St. Paul to Christianity. Let us take up the mantle of Paul and enter this moment to evangelize our culture by answering the prayer of Jesus, “*that they all may be one.*”

Spiritual Exercises for Racial Sobriety

These suggestions come from the book, *Racial Sobriety: Becoming the Change You Want to See*

Mon. Explore your capacity to think about what you see around you as having racial significance.

Tues. Understand that you are not responsible for the history of racisms; but you are responsible for your response to them.

Wed. Ask yourself when you are avoiding the reality of race, “What benefit am I seeking by this act of denial?” The answer gives the purpose of your denial.

Thurs. When you reflect on racial anger, ask yourself, “What am I losing in this situation...my self-esteem, power or control?” The reason for racial anger will become obvious.

Fri. What benefits am I receiving from my racial sobriety journey this week?

Sat. Go to the following website and prepare for Sunday liturgy and reflection: www.racialsobriety.net

Sun. Celebrate the Liturgy as if you wanted to answer the prayer of Jesus that “they all may be one.”

- In the Penitential Rite, examine your issues of race (gender and class). • Open your being to the Word proclaimed (Saturday meditation).
- In the Prayers of the Faithful, find your “voice of racial sobriety” and receive others’ voices.
- At the Offertory Rite, present the gift of your struggle to grow racially sober to God.
- In the Eucharistic Prayer, realize and accept your issues of the past week.
- At the Our Father, lift up that person/people who anger/s you most.
- In Communion, receive the Bread of Life as food for the journey toward spiritual, emotional and behavioral wholeness.
- Post Communion, be open for the prompting of the Holy Spirit.
- With the Recessional Rite, leave transformed to continue in the social liturgy of constructing a racially sober society.

The Rev. Clarence Williams C.P.P.S., PhD is the former senior director of Racial Equality and Diversity Initiatives at the national office of Catholic Charities USA and the founder of the Institute for Recovery from Racisms.