

## An Interview with Bryan Massingale – A Response to Racism; ‘Worship of a False God’

By Regina Munch

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Fr. Bryan Massingale is a professor of theology at Fordham University, and the author of *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*. Assistant editor Regina Munch recently spoke with Fr. Massingale about the racist policies and structures in the country and the Church for the Commonweal Podcast. Drawing on his training in theology and his personal experiences of racism, Fr. Massingale highlights the necessity of moving from anger to action in order to dismantle racism wherever it's experienced. You can listen to the full episode here. A transcript of the interview follows.

**Regina Munch:** Fr. Bryan, we're talking now as activists and protesters nationwide are demanding justice for George Floyd and seeking an end to systemic white supremacy. You wrote an article for *National Catholic Reporter* in which you say that Amy Cooper holds the key to understanding racism in the United States. What did you mean by this?

**Fr. Bryan Massingale:** Great question. Thank you. Let me tell you a bit about how that essay came to be. It was Pentecost weekend, and even though people call me a progressive Catholic, I'm still old school enough in my spirituality to believe in novenas. I was in the midst of the nine days of praying before Pentecost. That Monday before Pentecost was when the incident happened in Central Park when Amy Cooper, a white woman, basically called the police on an African-American man, Christian Cooper—no relation—who asked her to comply with the posted park regulations and leash her dog. She did indeed do so, saying that there was an African-American man who was threatening her. That same day was when the murder of George Floyd took place in Minneapolis, and the nation's attention fixated on that horrific outrage. And so that week as I was praying, I found I just could not pray. I just couldn't, and as I was trying, tears were falling. I knew people wanted me to say something. I wanted to say something, but I didn't know what to say.

And then it occurred to me: Amy Cooper held the key to help us understand what happened in Central Park. It tells us a great deal about what we mean by white privilege, white supremacy, and why these more blatant outrages occur. We see a white woman who exemplified all of the unspoken assumptions of whiteness. She assumed that she would be presumed innocent. She assumed that the black man would be presumed guilty. She assumed that the police would back her up. She assumed that as a white woman, her lies would hold more credibility than his truth. She assumed that she would have the presumption of innocence. She assumed that he, the black man, would have a presumption of guilt. She assumed that the police would back her up. She assumed that his race would be a burden, and that she had the upper hand in the situation. She assumed that she could exploit deeply ingrained white fears of black men, and she assumed that she could use these deeply ingrained white fears to keep a black man in his place.

It occurred to me that she knew exactly what she was doing, but also that we all know what she was doing. Every one of us could look at that situation and understand exactly what was going on, and that's the problem. Whether we want to admit it or not, we all know how race functions in America; it functions in a way that benefits white people and burdens people of color, and especially black people. That systemic advantage, that awareness that most white Americans have even if they don't want to admit it, means that they would never want to be black in America. We need to be honest about the centuries-old accumulations of the benefits of

whiteness that make it easier to be white than it is to be a person of color. Until we have the courage to face that reality and to name it explicitly, then we’re always going to have these explosions and eruptions of protest, but we will never have the courage and the honesty to get to the core of the issue and to deal with the systemic ways in which inequality works in America.

**RM:** You’ve compared the way that racism functions to a liturgy. How does that work?

**BM:** I got that insight from a sociologist named Joe Feagin, and he says that just as in a liturgy you have an officiant or presider, you have acolytes, and you have a congregation, so too does racism. You have officiants, the people who are the obvious perpetrators of racial injustice. They’re the people who are telling awful jokes, the people who pass policies that would disadvantage persons of color—for example, policies that create an unequal distribution of educational resources. Then you have the acolytes, who are, in a sense, the enablers. The enablers are those who carry out those policies, who give approval to the heinous actions that are going on. But then you have the congregation. The congregation are the bystanders—the people who see what’s going on, know what’s going on, but who take no action to intervene.

When I talk about the bystanders, I ask people to think about going to their family meal at Christmas or Thanksgiving. You have the family member who tells a racist joke or who says a racist thing. What bystanders or the congregation will often do during that situation is to say things like, “Well, your grandfather comes from a different generation,” or, “That’s just the way your aunt was raised,” or, “It’s a terrible thing that he said, but deep down he’s a really good person.”

Bystanders teach onlookers a very important message: doing racist things is okay because white people will let you get away with it. We create safe spaces for racism to fester and to brew, and it’s out of that toxic atmosphere in our country that more heinous actions take place—the murder of George Floyd or the brutal killing of Ahmaud Arbery simply because he was jogging in a neighborhood. We create the atmosphere that says when white people do terrible things, other white people have your back. Other white people won’t call you out.

Feagan talks about how white people act one way in public, but when they’re backstage, as it were, in the company of whites, there’s a whole different set of behaviors that come into play. Even if you don’t do anything negative, if you are not actively anti-racist, if you’re not actively challenging people when they say and do terrible things, then you’re creating the permissive atmosphere that allows these blatant things to happen.

**RM:** Let’s talk about racism within the Catholic Church. In 2018 the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops published the pastoral document *Open Wide Our Hearts*, which was meant to address racism in the United States after the events of Charlottesville and a rise in white nationalism. You’ve called the document a missed opportunity. What did it say and what didn’t it say?

**BM:** I’m going to be very honest because I think that we’ve reached a time in America where if we don’t say uncomfortable truths, then we will never make any progress when we deal with racism. Yes, in my public talks before, I’ve said that the document was a missed opportunity. But I now have to say that the document then and now is so inadequate as to be virtually useless.

That’s a very strong statement, so let me document that. The 2018 statement came, as you said, in response to the events of Charlottesville, when we saw white nationalism resurgent in this country in a way that we’ve not experienced in decades, since the darkest days of the civil-rights movement. We have open white supremacists marching in the streets of an American city with torches saying, “You will not replace us. Jews will not replace us.” The document unfortunately fell far short in that it never named white nationalism as a social crisis in America. The phrase “white privilege” does not appear in the document. The phrase “black lives matter” doesn’t appear in the document, despite the fact that this has been a major social movement in the United States since the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the killing of Trayvon Martin.

There is a normative whiteness present in the church, but I would also say that it’s a form of idolatry. It’s the worship of a false god.

The other thing that the document does is that when it speaks of racism, it speaks of it in the passive voice. African Americans were excluded from opportunities, but it never says who did the excluding or why. In other words, the document was written by white people for the comfort of white people. And in doing so, it illustrates a basic tenet of Catholic engagement with racism: when the Catholic Church historically has engaged this issue, it’s always done so in a way that’s calculated to not disturb white people or not to make white people uncomfortable. Even when the document talks about police violence, it does so in a very, to me, bizarre way. It says that we must admit that people of color their encounters with police officers to be fearful. But then it goes on to say it condemns violent language directed at police. They never condemn police abuse of power or police misconduct—despite the fact that at that time, the Department of Justice had investigated over twenty-four police departments in the United States and entered into consent decrees with them over blatant police abuse of power. But that’s never reflected in the document.

So, I think that the document really is woefully inadequate to the challenge of the time. And I think there are a couple of reasons for it. One is that they never use the Catholic Church’s leading scholars on racism and racial injustice in composing the letter. I think the other major factor is, again, the Catholic Church wants to deal with these issues in ways that won’t disturb the comfort of whites.

I think this is a very critical point. Whenever I give workshops on racism, sooner or later someone will ask a question that goes something like this: “Father, how can we talk about this in my parish, in my classroom, at my university, and not make white people uncomfortable?” I challenge them to think about that question. Why is it that the only group in America that is never allowed to feel uncomfortable about race is white people? Doesn’t that discount the real discomfort, the real fear, the real terror that people of color have to live with and endure because of racism? And if white comfort sets the limits of conversation, then that means we will never face the difficult truth: the only reason for the persistence of racism is because white people benefit from it.

I challenge them to think of this: if it were up to people of color, racism would have been over and done, resolved a long time ago. The only reason that racism continues to persist is because white people benefit from it. If we’re always going to have conversations that are predicated upon preserving white comfort, then we will never get beyond the terrible impasse that we’re in, and we will always doom ourselves to superficial words and to ineffective half-measures. That difficult truth is something that the Catholic Church in America has never summoned the courage or the will to directly address.

RM: Part of the reason for such accommodation for white people’s comfort, you’ve said, is that the church sees itself as white, for white people. Can you say more about that?

BM: In my book *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* there’s one sentence that goes something like this: what makes the Church white and racist is the pervasive belief that European aesthetics, European music, European theology, and European persons, and only these, are standard, normative, universal, and truly Catholic. In other words, when we talk about what makes something Catholic, the default is always to the products that reflect a white cultural aesthetic. Everything else is seen as Catholic by exception, or Catholic by toleration.

We see it in a number of ways, so let me just sketch out a few. One instance I could point to is when I went to celebrate a Mass at a suburban parish in Milwaukee. A priest friend of mine had suddenly taken sick and he asked me to say Mass for him. I showed up at church and I asked the usher to direct me to the sacristy. He looked at me and he wanted to know why I wanted to know. So I explained the situation, thinking that the Roman collar that I was wearing would make it kind of obvious why I would like to know where the sacristy was. And he said, “You’re a priest? Who sent you?” I explained the situation again. Then he said, “Well, next time, I hope he sends us a real priest.”

Now, we can get very upset with him and his individual insensitivity, his bigotry. But he’s reflecting something that’s very ingrained in the Church, and that is that we expect the person who’s going to be the priest to be white.

Another example came during Pope Benedict’s pastoral visit in 2008, when he celebrated Mass at the stadium in Washington D.C. The theme of the liturgy was to celebrate the cultural diversity that’s present here in the United States. The readings were done in a number of languages. The first reading was the classic account of Pentecost where the Spirit descended and enabled the peoples of the world to hear the Gospel proclaimed in the world’s languages. The prayers of the faithful were offered in a variety of languages. The gifts were presented to the accompaniment of vigorous Gospel and Spanish singing. After which the commentator on EWTN opined—and I remember these words because they’re emblazoned in my mind—“We’ve just been subjected to **an overpreening display of multicultural chatter, and now the Holy Father will begin the sacred part of the Mass.**”

I note the disjunction between “multicultural chatter” and “sacred.” “Sacred” had nothing to do with “multicultural”. Being “sacred” means speaking in a white idiom, praying in a white idiom, using European hymns. It’s this normative whiteness that’s ubiquitous in the Catholic Church—which is its greatest hindrance to dealing effectively with issues of race.

People always ask me, well, how many African-American priests are there? Currently there are less than a \*hundred of us on active duty in the United States, out of tens of thousands. And it’s always been that way. African-American priests in the United States constitute less than one half of 1 percent of the total Catholic clergy.\* That’s not by accident. It’s a reflection, a manifestation of this normative whiteness that, to be blunt, is a form of idolatry—that God can be imaged and God can only manifest God’s self through Europeans and European cultural products. Yeah, there is a normative whiteness present in the Church, but I would also say that it’s a form of idolatry. It’s the worship of a false god.

[\*USCCB: 2018 71M Roman Catholics in USA...2015 37.3K priests, 19K Deacons. 2.1M black Catholics (3% of all Catholics)...250 black priests (.67% of all priests), 437 black Deacons (2.3% of all deacons)]

**RM:** You’ve talked about courage as a sort of neglected virtue. Why do Christians need courage? What happens when we don’t have it?

**BM:** Courage, I discovered, is perhaps the least studied of the virtues. For example, we learn in the Catechism that the cardinal virtues are prudence, temperance, fortitude (or what we call courage), and justice; the theological virtues are faith, hope, and charity. We say a lot about every virtue except courage.

But Thomas Aquinas taught us that courage is the precondition of all virtue. Without courage, we’re not able to be prudent. We’re not able to be just, because courage is that virtue that allows us to surmount the fear that comes with the following of the Gospel. If we’re going to do anything that is difficult, there is going to be hesitation; there are going obstacles and opposition, and the fear that those obstacles engender in us. Courage is that virtue that enables us to not be afraid. We still feel afraid, but it’s a virtue that enables us to not let fear keep us from doing the right, actualizing the good.

Another way of putting it is that moral courage is what translates conviction into action. To put this into the conversation we’re having today: there are a lot of good white people who know what the right thing to do is. But they don’t do it because they’re afraid of the disapproval of their friends or family, or they’re afraid of the consequences of speaking up and speaking out, being in solidarity and being an ally. Courage is what enables conviction to be translated into action. It isn’t that people don’t have the conviction, but they don’t have the courage to act on those convictions. So this is the reason why we need courage, especially in the pursuit of racial justice.

What St. Thomas of Aquinas says is beautiful: **anger is the passion that moves the will to justice**

There’s always going to be a cost to speaking out. Whenever I do an interview like this, my email will fill up with people telling me everything that was wrong about what I said. I can guarantee you that—it just happens. Whenever you speak for the cause of justice, whenever we follow Jesus, to be honest, there are going to be consequences. It’s not that we don’t know what the right thing is. We are people of conviction, but if we don’t have courage, you won’t translate that conviction into action.

**RM:** What does anger have to do with courage? How does anger play a role in, as you said, moving from conviction to action?

**BM:** That’s a great question, because anger has gotten a pretty nasty reputation in Catholic catechesis. I think most of us of a certain age learned that anger was one of the seven deadly sins, that we were supposed to avoid it.

But again, let’s go back to Thomas Aquinas. (I keep talking about Thomas Aquinas because, as a Catholic, you don’t get into trouble when you quote St. Thomas. You’re on safe ground!) Let’s go back into our tradition. **St. Thomas Aquinas says that we can incur the sin of anger in three ways. The first is by excess. That’s when anger becomes wrathful, when it becomes rage, when it becomes out of control. He says the second way we can sin anger is by inappropriate object, or a misdirected anger. A trivial example would be that, say, I’m angry at my spouse or significant other and I take it out of my students at school or my employees at work. That’s a misdirected anger. But then he says the third way we sin against anger is by deficiency.**

**And he’s very clear here: we sin by deficiency when we’re not angry when we ought to be, as in, he says, in the presence of injustice. What he says is beautiful: anger is the passion that moves the will to justice.**

**This is a great insight because it means that all too often injustice festers in our world because people aren’t angry enough to do something about it. To use an example: when I see a woman being abused by a man, I should be angry, because when I am angry, then I’m going to do something about it. I’m angry, so I’m going to call the police. I’m angry, so I’m going to intervene. I’m angry, so I’m going to tell someone to stop it.**

What allows racism to exist in our society, quite frankly, is that we don’t have a critical mass of people who are angry. To put it more directly, we don’t have a critical mass of white Americans who are angry about the situation. Anger is a passion that moves the will to justice. Thomas understood that unless we are angry in the presence, at the reality, of injustice, then the status quo will all too often continue.

There’s a lot of concern, especially among some circles, about the violence that is a part of some of the protests. I want to be very careful here, because I think that we have a tendency to overstate the reality and the presence of violence. Burning buildings and broken windows make for more compelling video and images than people who are peacefully protesting. And so I don’t want us to get the understanding that violence is what characterizes all of the protests that we were seeing. Yes, violence can be an instance of misdirected anger. It can be this kind of out-of-control rage that Thomas speaks about.

But that’s too easy. People always say that there are better, more effective, more ethical ways of people making their point. I hear that, but I want to press them on that. If there are better, more effective, more ethical ways of people making their point, I wish they would tell me what they are. Because people of color, black Americans, have marched. We have demonstrated. We have organized. We have protested. We have voted. We have studied. We have taught. We have begged. We have pleaded. We have cried out. We have wept—for years, for decades, even centuries. And still we are being killed while jogging. Or poor Tamir Rice, a twelve-year-old kid killed for just sitting in a park. If there are better and more effective ways to do this, then don’t just homilize about that. Tell me what they are.

That’s a way of avoiding a very difficult truth. The reason why these measures haven’t proved effective up till now is because white Americans, or not enough white Americans, don’t want substantial change. When people despair of a political solution to their legitimate grievances, then we cannot be surprised when at times violence appears as an attractive option.

Martin Luther King Jr. said that most white Americans are neither unrepentant racists, nor are they forthright racial-justice advocates. The majority of white Americans, he says, are suspended between two extremes: they are uneasy with injustice, but they are also unwilling to pay a price to eradicate it.

So for those who would condemn the violence—and I think we all agree that nonviolence is the preferred way of making our grievances known—I challenge them to say, we’ve done that and we’re still here. It’s time now to not simply decry the violence, but to start looking at the legitimate grievances, and to summon the will in this country to do it.

**RM:** Fr. Bryan, thank you very much for talking with us.

**BM:** You’re more than welcome.