

“Although racism impacts us profoundly, it remains a sensitive and polarizing topic that is difficult to broach in many faith communities. Conor Kelly provides an opening. Drawing from the traditional frameworks and resources of Catholic moral theology, he supplies an introduction to the social dimensions of racism. *Racism and Structural Sin* is both nuanced and accessible, useful for faith formation as well the seminary, undergraduate, and high school classroom.”

—Joseph S. Flipper, Mary Ann Spearin Chair of Catholic Theology,
University of Dayton

Racism and Structural Sin

*Confronting Injustice
with the Eyes of Faith*

Conor M. Kelly

Foreword by Carolyn Y. Woo



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Foreword

This book by Conor Kelly serves all Christians by calling us to see the realities of racism, acknowledge our roles in both our personal behavior and its cumulative effect on existing structures, contrast this with the teachings of God, and seek conversion relying on God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit.

When our granddaughter was born, with utmost attention we studied her features looking for any traits of her quarter-Chinese heritage. With strawberry fuzz (hair), blue eyes, and the fairest complexion, Sammie at this point shows no indications of her Oriental parentage.

My first emotion: relief.

It caught me by surprise. After all, I have managed to prosper in America as a Chinese immigrant. I have pushed deep down all the jokes, assumptions, and taunts directed at me as a person of Asian descent. There were “Chinese whore” jokes from the sweetest young woman who wanted to draw me in and who eventually became a minister; an assignment by an academic counselor to a remedial English class without any testing—her intention was to help me succeed; a retort from a classmate whom I was tutoring in math when he told me the best help I could give him was to withdraw and not blow the curve in the class.

I remember the heartbreak and fury when my son was taunted as a “China-man” when he started his first day in kindergarten. The hapless student intern managed the only apologetic response she could muster by throwing up her hands. Come to think of it,

it was the first time I allowed myself to feel fury, not just resigned acceptance: the price to pay for being an outsider. A neighbor was intentionally knocked down to the ground by a teenage boy on a bike screaming at her to go back to her own country: she is US-born Japanese American. There are good friends of mine, supporters of racial justice, who would make jokes of a non-native speaker's English and others who would laugh at it. They attribute the other's discomfort to "over-sensitivity."

Lately, each story I hear of random slurs and violent acts against different groups have raised my wariness that we are indeed targeted, even while being celebrated, for our skin color, religion, sexual identity, etc. I feel acutely the pernicious infection of racism in our country.

At the same time, I know my success also derives from a system that favors merit with little attention to the accessibility to factors that make success more likely in the first place. Recently, an acquaintance lost her son to gun violence. Our zip codes differ by one digit at the end: we are essentially neighbors. Yet our worlds might as well be separated by unpassable rivers, canyons, and mountains far beyond the other side of Main Street. Our children face vastly different probabilities of being shot; enjoy vastly different educational resources; navigate vastly different daily challenges; and imbibe vastly different visions of what is possible and within reach.

This book takes on the personal behavior and social structures that perpetuate racism in our society. Kelly correctly points out that many people do not embrace ill or explicit intent to act as a "racist." They would find such behavior repugnant. At the same time, referencing St. Thomas Aquinas, good intentions do not always yield good outcomes. He calls us to recognize our narrow and partial understanding of the other, and the influences of our environment in shaping our judgments. Kelly is not after indictments, but humility and awareness of our own limitations.

Centuries of personal attitudes, biases, and the pursuit of self-interests of those in power shape policies, regulations, practices, and enforcements that comprise the structure of our society.

The structures are as real physically as the walls, hallways, and doorways that block or enable access within spaces. Embedded in social and political structures, these elements govern the ease and pathways by which different groups, delineated by economic, ethnic, and racial markers, find their ways to education, housing, healthcare, and professions.

As Kelly writes, the desire for safe neighborhoods, quality education for our children, or resources that enable flourishing are genuine goods. It is right to want them. Structural sin emerges when such endowments are systematically blocked for other groups, when we derive advantages at others' expense, or when we keep silent, condone, and actually lock in such asymmetries.

Kelly accesses our Christian faith through the teachings of scriptures and the magisterium to label both personal and structural racism as offenses against God. God created all people in his image and thus imbued them with sacredness. Human dignity is imparted by God as his personal handprint on each person. As Kelly rightly notes, to be complicit in systems that diminish others' dignity and subordinate their well-being for our own comfort is a form of spiritual sickness.

The way back is conversion: an about-face turn of our eyes and our hearts toward God. Kelly urges us to pursue a genuine faith that trusts in the power of the Holy Spirit and commit to fervent prayer. We are to act on this conversion: advocate for and contribute to the education, healthcare, and safety for other groups that we want for our own children; or raise our voice and objection when these are missing for lower income, migrant, or minority segments. On a personal level, to not let a joke casually overlook the dignity of the person bearing the brunt of the joke; and to accept that consideration of the impact on others is a responsibility beyond benign intent. Racism is an ugly and wicked problem: it is perpetuated by ignorance, fear, and self-interest. Even so, it is no match for God's grace, which is available to us for the asking.

I am committed and energized to teach Sammie about her Chinese heritage: the incredibly beautiful traditions, devotion to

family, rich culture, history, and innovations as well as her challenges, suffering, and mistakes. I also embrace the responsibility to teach her how to engage a society that pegs her as “the other.” However, I felt something was missing until I finished this book. The first lesson is not the magnificence of China, but the magnificence of God who made all people to be like him, to be glorious, and to be love for each other.

Carolyn Y. Woo, PhD

Introduction

For much of my life, I thought I was in a good place with respect to the challenges of racism. I never witnessed overt forms of racial bigotry among anyone I knew growing up, so I assumed my social circle was accepting and understanding. My parents instilled in me and my older brother a deeply Catholic respect for the innate dignity of every human person, leaving little room for racist tropes about the “inferiority” of some and the “superiority” of others to take hold. And in school, I learned about the injustices of legalized racial segregation and came to lionize the leaders of the civil rights movement as true American heroes who paved the way for a more just and equitable society. In short, I was taught to cultivate what (White) people typically describe as “enlightened” attitudes about race and racism: we are all equal, there should be no discrimination based on the color of one’s skin, and there is no reason to harbor animosity toward those who might look different from us. As a result of these experiences and convictions, I felt I could happily—and credibly—claim that racism, with the possible exception of the isolated attitudes and actions of a few bad apples, was mainly a thing of the past in U.S. society.

During my college years, however, my confidence in the adequacy of these convictions began to waiver. My college campus, while still predominantly White, was more diverse than the community where I grew up. I assumed my enlightened attitudes would allow me to make new connections across racial lines, but my peer group was not instantly diverse. An attitude of openness

and acceptance, I realized, may be necessary in a diverse society, but it is hardly sufficient for building meaningful relationships. There were larger structural factors that left many students of color, especially Black students, uncomfortable on campus. Individual attitudes could only go so far.

Helpfully, I did have substantive conversations, both inside and outside the classroom, with my classmates from all racial backgrounds about race and racism in the United States. More than anything, these discussions taught me that I did not have the complete picture I once thought I had. My experience of a childhood free from racial bigotry may have been genuine, but it was just that: my experience. Not all my classmates could say the same. In fact, many of them—again, especially my Black classmates—had experienced bigotry and discrimination directly. I therefore lost my confidence that racism was a thing of the past. Even more importantly, I slowly began to appreciate that a comprehensive awareness of life in the United States could not emerge from the narrow slice of my own experience alone but instead required insights from others whose respective experiences with this country and its long, varied history could fill in the gaps I did not even see. As a result, I arrived at a place where I finally recognized that diverse relationships were not a nice benefit for those who wanted them but a true necessity for anyone who wanted to affirm the sacredness of every human life and whose faith calls them to foster an “authentic culture of encounter,” to borrow one of Pope Francis’s favorite phrases.¹

Flash forward about a dozen years, though, and we get to the point where my personal story becomes much more embarrassing. I can talk a good game about my intellectual journey to an appreciation of diversity, but then I must also admit that I do not have much to show for it in practical terms. More than a decade after my collegiate epiphanies, my social circle is *less* racially diverse. I have since planted roots in what is, by some measures, the most segregated metropolitan area in the United States, but I am not leading the charge for happily integrated neighborhoods.

I have instead ensconced myself and my family in a rich suburb with good schools, beautiful green spaces, and overwhelmingly White neighbors. I am—not to put too fine a point on it—part of the very problem I thought I had begun to overcome with my cognitive transformations.

How do I reconcile this reality with my convictions, including my Catholic faith? The short answer is that I do not, or at least not completely. I live with an uneasy tension, and, quite frankly, I struggle with it.

Sometimes, the struggle fades into the background, like when my wife and I recognized that the call to care for our extended family made this community the obvious place to stay long-term. Other times, the struggle bursts into the foreground. I remember a student's heartfelt question after a class discussion on racial segregation in Milwaukee in which she indicated she had no idea how she could find a morally "good" place to live if she stayed in the area after graduation. That generated a lot of soul-searching. Then, of course, as a national racial reckoning took hold in summer 2020 in response to the brutal police killing of George Floyd, I could hardly pretend the tensions in my own life had been resolved. Instead, I had to once again confront my own complicities in racism and its legacies in the United States, and I cannot claim my conscience was especially relieved by the results.

I say all this here because I want to be clear that I am not writing this book about racism based on the assumption that I have all the answers. I am writing this book precisely because I am still trying to figure out what those answers should be. On matters of race and racism, I resonate much less with the image of a perfect anti-racist who has broken free from the constraints of a flawed society and much more with the humble self-description of Pope Francis, who famously answered a question about his true identity by claiming, "I am a sinner whom the Lord has looked upon."² This book, therefore, is not an attempt to condemn others for their failure to reach the rarefied illumination I enjoy. It should be quite clear from my own brief admissions that I do not occupy the perch

that would be necessary to lob such accusations. Instead, this book is built around the efforts I have taken—and continue to take—to remove the “wooden beam” (Matt 7:3-5) from my eye so that I can live a more faith-filled life in a country riven by racial injustices.

A part of my ongoing struggle, this book is meant to be a resource for other Catholics who are similarly interested in wrestling with the challenges of race in the United States today using the eyes of our faith. If the past few years have taught us anything, it is that we should all be invested in this task, but I continue to see that we, as a church, have not yet responded to this call. In parish after parish, we seem more reluctant than ever to have an honest conversation about race and racism. Part of the problem is that we are not sure how to have such a frank discussion. The other part is that we know this process will force us to confront our own failures, and we would rather avoid that uncomfortable evaluation.

This book is designed to address both of these challenges. First, it uses the resources of our shared faith to give ordinary Catholics a clearer entryway into the ongoing national conversation about racism in the United States. By offering an expressly theological account of the current racial injustices fracturing our nation, the book connects larger ideas like structural racism to Catholic concepts like structural sin, making it easier to see that our faith does call us to action in this pivotal moment. In this way, the book builds on my expertise not so much as an anti-racist (although I am certainly working on being one) but as a Catholic moral theologian, for although I admitted that I do not have all the answers on these matters, the thing I have not yet acknowledged is that I am in a unique position to know where to look for them. Between a Ph.D. in theological ethics and an active teaching and research agenda that includes writing about the implications of Catholic social teaching for everyday life, I am intimately familiar with the tools our faith provides for the difficult conversations we need to have. I ask, therefore, that readers not dismiss me for my limitations but instead assess the significance of the theological claims found throughout this book on their own terms. I am not appeal-

ing to my own life as an exemplary illustration of how to live; I am appealing to our common faith tradition to highlight the ends for which all Catholics—myself very much included—should strive.

Second, because the book is grounded in my own efforts to wrestle with the legacies of racism in my life, it also responds to the hesitancy many U.S. Catholics have about tackling an uncomfortable topic that is directly tied to our past shortcomings. I hope that my honesty about my own moral failures in this area can lay the groundwork for others to explore what our faith tells us about confronting racism without feeling threatened by the fear of what that examination might reveal about themselves. Here, I am thinking most especially of my fellow White Catholics. Our Black Catholic brothers and sisters stress that we are the people who need to have a faith-inspired conversation about racism the most, but we are simultaneously the ones who are the least inclined to do so.³ At the heart of this tension is something that public discourse often refers to as “white fragility,” which essentially describes the tendency of many White people to avoid conversations about race and racism at all costs because these discussions often make them feel bad.⁴ If we are going to make any progress as a church and as a nation, White people like myself need to overcome this initial reaction. Helpfully, I believe that my own experience and my expertise can combine to chip away at some of this reflexive resistance. Let me offer one quick illustration.

Precisely because I have been struggling as a theologian to interrogate the ways I continue to contribute to larger racial injustices like residential segregation, not just as a theoretical question but as a very real practical matter, I have a personal grasp of the complicated factors shaping the status quo on race relations in the United States. I know, for example, that my contributions to this problem did not emerge from a malicious set of discriminatory beliefs but rather resulted from an effort to pursue genuine goods. I wanted good schools for my children, walking paths for my family’s health and safety, a sense of community that left everyone feeling valued, and security for us and our neighbors. These are

not ill-formed desires; they are precisely the kinds of goods that the Catholic tradition recognizes as essential to human flourishing. They are, in other words, the same goods that any human person would want—and, in fact, *should* want—for themselves and their families. Theologically, I would identify these goods as an essential part of the “common good,” which the Second Vatican Council’s *Gaudium et Spes* describes as “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily” (no. 26).⁵

The trouble, of course, is that our society is not yet built to ensure that these common goods are equally available to all social groups and their individual members. On the contrary, in areas of the country marred by racial segregation (a description that sadly captures most areas of the country, at least according to current census data), these goods are not just unevenly distributed; they are unjustly clustered by race. By pursuing these genuine goods in such a context and prioritizing them without any real thought to the larger forces involved, I pushed myself and my family toward the Whiter areas of our metropolitan region, ultimately reinforcing a situation that I would swear I never wanted to exist let alone persist.

My training as a moral theologian points to an obvious explanation for this result, for the Catholic moral tradition reminds us that the best of intentions are not sufficient to yield the best moral outcomes. Indeed, good, albeit mistaken, intentions are often at the heart of our worst moral choices. As St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) explained in his famous treatise on Catholic doctrine, his *Summa Theologiae*, human beings who are made in the image and likeness of God never turn toward evil for its own sake. Instead, we always seek to achieve some good, and we can therefore trace all our sins back to a fundamental misperception: we chose a bad end under the guise of a good; what we thought was in our best interest actually undercut our human nature.⁶ In many ways, my housing choices were a simple manifestation of this classic mix-up. I saw good things that I wanted for my family, but I focused on a partial good alone. I got good schools, but I also became yet another data point enshrining racial segregation in Milwaukee.

Significantly, this traditional perspective from Catholic moral theology offers two insights that can preclude a reactionary retreat into White resistance when matters of racism arise. First, Aquinas's account of how White people like me go astray shows that there is no reason to indict people's motivations or even doubt their good intentions. His moral vision insists that it is not only possible but also highly likely for someone to contribute to a bad outcome without consciously seeking evil. In fact, such a disconnect between good intentions and bad results is, in this quintessential framework of our faith, the expected explanation for most of our worst actions as human beings. Thus, to put this first insight into more personal terms, Aquinas's analysis allows me to admit that I am part of the problem of racial segregation without suggesting that I intended to perpetuate the injustices that I know I loathe.

For any White Catholics who find themselves in similar circumstances, this interpretation should be disarming, hopefully to the point that it can provide an opening for a more serious assessment of racism in the United States and our relationship with it. Nevertheless, this analysis does not get anyone off the hook, for as much as this explanation can leave one's motives intact, it simultaneously underscores, in its second insight, that a form of evil has occurred. Furthermore, it directly challenges any attempt to ignore responsibility, because this explanation also insists that the evil transpired because of failures on our part. Aquinas's interpretation may grant that we were seeking a good end, but it also asserts that we missed the mark, largely because our priorities were corrupted. We pretended we were seeking what we should have been, but because we were operating with an incomplete view of what it means to "have life and have it more abundantly" (John 10:10), we continue to suffer the effects of sin and evil in our world.

To shift this sinful state of affairs, we need to better understand the ways we have managed to undermine that common good, both in what we have done *and in what we have failed to do* (to draw from the *Confiteor* we say at Mass). Specifically, we need to take an explicit look at race and racism and examine the moments in which we, as Catholics, have ceased to be a people who "thinks in

terms of community and the priority of the life of all over the appropriation of goods by a few” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 188)⁷ and have instead become consumed as individuals—and especially, for those to whom it applies, as White individuals—with the goal of securing goods for ourselves at the expense of others. We need to get to a place where we can attend to the crucial point that Aquinas, and the broader Catholic moral tradition, reveals so emphatically: good intentions are not enough to bring about the goodness of our flourishing as human beings, let alone the goodness of our flourishing at a societal level.

We need, in other words, to look beyond personal choices to see the broader, structural features shaping our world because the hard truth is that those structures are dictating the effects of our choices, generating racial injustices that few of us would ever accept if we had to select them directly for ourselves. To make sense of this reality, we need to take a long hard look at the systemic features that make it easier for us to choose narrow forms of self-interest rather than prioritize the life of all. We need to have a conversation about structural racism through the eyes of our faith.

Through four parts, each containing two short chapters, this book provides resources for this essential conversation so that we can emerge with a more critical account of what it takes to pursue the common good in a society whose structures remain very much haunted by the legacies of slavery, Jim Crow, outright bigotry, and numerous other forms of racial exclusion. The first part examines the Catholic obligation to confront racism in all its forms, demonstrating that an attentiveness to racism’s personal *and* social dimensions is very much a presupposition of the Catholic challenge to this persistent sin. The second part explains how the concept of structural sin found in Catholic social teaching can help us make sense of racism’s structural manifestations so that Catholics, who are informed by Aquinas’s awareness of the potential gap between intentions and results, can recognize how racism persists even when a community’s shared intentions are not aiming at this end. The third part applies these categories to interpret the

current state of four shared social institutions—policing, housing, healthcare, and education—revealing ways racism functions as a structural sin in the United States today. Finally, the fourth part explores strategies for confronting this structural sin using insights from what the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* describes as the four “permanent principles of Catholic social doctrine” (no. 160).⁸ The result is a new set of tools for a distinctly Catholic contribution to the conversation about racial justice that we desperately need to pursue as a country and as a church. It is, in this sense, another chapter in my struggle and, hopefully, a new step in our journey of faith.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. To what extent do you resist conversations about race and racism? What in your experiences has contributed to this hesitancy or lack thereof?

2. How do you react to Aquinas’s assertion that sin arises from our pursuit of genuine goods to the wrong extent or in the wrong manner, rather than from a desire for an evil outcome on its own? Does the application of this account to racial segregation resonate with you or frustrate you? Why?

3. As you review the brief outline of this book’s four parts in the last paragraph of the chapter, which parts are you most interested in exploring? Which are you most apprehensive about?

PART I

The Catholic Obligation to Confront Racism

As noted in the introduction, the point of this first part is to articulate the ways our Catholic faith demands a rejection and active confrontation of racism in all its forms. Chapters 1 and 2 demonstrate this point by discussing two distinct manifestations of racism, one personal and one social, to lay the foundation for what a comprehensive response to racism will look like. Although these categories are increasingly common in our public discourse, especially as conversations shift to include notions like systemic racism, the emphasis in these next two chapters is intentionally theological. At times, I will talk about the ways personal and social forms of racism are described in our broader public discourse in order to further explain the categories, but the fundamental claim in part I is that these conventional categories align with the Catholic condemnation of racism as a sin and are valuable for that reason.

CHAPTER ONE

Personal Manifestations of Racism

On June 3, 2020, just over a week after a Minneapolis police officer's physical restraint killed George Floyd and sparked nationwide protests, Pope Francis concluded his regularly scheduled weekly audience with a poignant appeal to his "dear brothers and sisters in the United States." Acknowledging the "tragic death of Mr. George Floyd" and the ensuing "social unrest," the pope insisted, "We cannot tolerate or turn a blind eye to racism and exclusion in any form and yet claim to defend the sacredness of every human life."¹

Pope Francis's words situate racism as a theological challenge and helpfully illustrate why Catholics have an acute obligation to confront racism. Our faith calls us to recognize and honor the inherent dignity of every human person, for we believe each human being is made in the image and likeness of God. Racism denies that dignity and contradicts our commitment to uphold the sanctity of life. As the U.S. Catholic bishops explained in their most recent pastoral letter against racism, *Open Wide Our Hearts*, "The injustice and harm racism causes are an attack on human life." Racism is, as they go on to explain, "a life issue" (30).²

How, then, do we honor our commitments to the sanctity of life in a world where "instances of racism continue to shame us

. . . show[ing] that our supposed social progress is not as real or definitive as we think” (*Fratelli Tutti*, no. 20)?³ On one level, the answer is simple. To borrow Pope Francis’s language, we refuse to turn a blind eye to racism and exclusion in any form. On another level, however, the answer is much more complicated, for racism and exclusion come in many forms. This fact means that an effective Catholic response to racism, one that honors our recognition of racism as a life issue in a church that is committed to the protection and promotion of the intrinsic value of every human life, must be multifaceted. We must appreciate that racism is a sinful phenomenon that operates on more than one plane, and we must develop distinct responses for each of these manifestations.

The point of this chapter is to address the personal plane, where Catholic theology helps us recognize that an effective stand against racism needs to begin within. To explain this responsibility, the chapter discusses what racism means at a personal level and provides a theological explanation for the fact that racism continues to haunt our society on this personal plane. This yields a clearer sense of the kind of response to personal racism that our Catholic faith demands and lays a foundation for the next chapter, which provides a similar analysis of racism on the social plane.

An Intuitive Account of Racism

At the personal level, we can define racism according to what Bryan Massingale, a Black Catholic priest, moral theologian, and leading expert on the theological dimensions of racism in the United States, calls the “commonsense understanding” of racism. In this definition, “Person A (usually, but not always, white) consciously, deliberately, and intentionally does something negative to person B (usually, but not always, black or Latino) because of the color of his or her skin.”⁴ As Massingale notes, this account pinpoints racism in the *intentional* actions of *personal* agents that have a *negative, discriminatory* effect on others *based on* their racial identity.

For reasons that will be discussed in further detail in the next chapter, this definition of racism is not sufficient on its own to support a robust Catholic contribution to the ongoing racial reckoning in the United States. Nevertheless, it offers a detailed way of appreciating how racism functions on the personal plane, and so the commonsense definition provides an appropriate starting point for a theological analysis of racism. In fact, simply reflecting on the commonsense definition yields two valuable insights.

First, the reason Massingale calls this intentional, interpersonal description of racism the commonsense definition is that it is the understanding that is most readily denounced. Virtually all observers would agree with labeling an action that meets the above criteria as racist, and the condemnation of such behavior would be swift and strict. Thus, although it technically remains legal for private clubs in the United States to discriminate on the basis of race—say, by admitting only White members—few people would agree with the argument that this practice is entirely acceptable simply because it is not illegal. Instead, most would bristle at the idea that potential members are excluded strictly due their racial background and would castigate the practice.

This instinct to reject displays of commonsense racism is a good and commendable one that reflects one way in which our collective conscience is at least attuned to the right values. Not too long ago, we would have had trouble asserting that the commonsense definition of racism was truly a matter of common sense in the United States. There was a time, for instance, when parents actively encouraged their children to commit conscious, deliberate, and intentional acts of vilification and hate against other human beings because of the color of their skin. How else can one explain the hostile crowds seeking to prevent the “Little Rock Nine,” the brave group of nine Black students who were the first to integrate Little Rock’s Central High School in the aftermath of *Brown v. Board of Education*, from entering their new school in 1957? That kind of animosity, which we would now decry as commonsense racism, only flourished then because the social context allowed it to do so.