

MOVED WITH COMPASSION!

Mark 6:34

“When Jesus disembarked (from the boat) and saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with compassion for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd...”

Many of you know that I have a ministry in East Africa where I am dedicated to serving the needs of our brothers and sisters there seven months each year. Due to the dire situation of poverty many of them face from day to day, I am often overwhelmed with the number of requests for assistance that gets placed in my hands. Because this ministry operates strictly by donations, I am able to help some but I am not able to give assistance to so many more who come to me.

One afternoon, I received a knock on my door. It was one more person in need, a young man of 20 years old named John, carrying a large brown envelope. As I suspected, the brown envelope contained his school papers and he was looking for some financial assistance to pursue further education. He did not open the envelope right away nor did he bring up the subject of further education for himself at the start. What he shared with me, instead, was his life experience of the past five years—which was to explain his present situation.

Five years ago (when he was fifteen years old), John’s father died and left behind him, his mother, an older sister and a younger brother. As is sometimes their custom, his uncles tried to convince his mother to marry one of them. Obviously, this was all about ownership of their deceased brother’s property and money. The mother refused, so they encouraged her to take the children to the home village for a period of mourning with the other family members. When the young man’s mother and children returned to their place, they discovered that these uncles had seized all their property and sold everything—leaving him and his family with nothing. John’s mother suffered a nervous breakdown and she continues to be under medication for it to this day. Somewhere in the midst of all these events, the younger brother also died. So, this young man’s family has no assets and no family members to turn to for support.

I said to John: “Let us put aside the paperwork and let me hug you.” He complied immediately and, once I put my arms around him to give him a hug, he just cried and cried. I realized that these tears were five years of suffering from abandonment, deception and looking at a hopeless future. In those moments of hugging this young man, I felt deeply the compassion that Jesus felt, i.e. looking at sheep without a shepherd. There was no way that I could turn John down and hand him one more disappointment in his life. I resolved that I must do something for him and his family—not just financially but relationally, as well. No sacrifice was too great to bring some healing and restoration to John and his family members.

I share this story with all of you because, if we are going to take seriously the challenge of dismantling the damaging effects of racism in our lives, we must, first, allow ourselves to be moved deeply with compassion for those who have been marginalized and alienated for the benefit of others. We offered a number of video series to implement the five steps in Year I of our Anti-racism Strategic Plan. For those who joined us in those video series, we began with open and honest sharing based on articles, TED talks and related video presentations. After a while, we realized that this was not very effective in helping us reach into the depths of our hearts to feel compassion for those who have suffered because of this sin in our lives. Things were feeling just a little too comfortable for us to be moved by those who have never been afforded any comfort in our society and in our church.

What made Year I work best for those who continued the video series with us was the decision to “get into each others’ guts”. Each week, one of our participants was invited to share his or her story about what effects systemic and structural racism has had on their lives. Through their own personal experiences, each speaker would share their own truth—a truth that could neither be denied nor debated. All who listened had the opportunity to respond with words of empathy and support, hoping to bring some healing to longstanding wounds. Most importantly, this sharing was a blessing to all of us because this is what caused each one of us to be moved deeply with compassion for one another’s struggles.

Mark’s text says that Jesus’ heart was “moved with compassion for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd”. Perhaps this text requires of us not a second reading but a second hearing. If we hear Jesus saying “Follow me”, perhaps the most genuine and faithful way we can do that is to let our hearts be moved with compassion for God’s people. Lord knows that we do not have to look far to find sheep without a shepherd.

With this in mind, may I present to you Year II of our three-year strategic plan by saying: “It is not too late—it is never too late to do Year II!” As we move into Year II of the plan, we must be prepared to do an honest assessment of our Church’s role in upholding racist practices, historically and presently. In my own archdiocese, we had a Symposium on Racism held on March 1st of this year. The first presenter was Sr. Anita Baird, giving a lengthy historical view of the Church’s efforts to uphold racist practices on a global scale. If you don’t know about that, begin by reading “The Doctrine of Discovery”. The second presenter was Fr. Dan Horan, giving a current and relevant perspective on a white person dealing with the effects (good and bad) of racism in his own life. I was the third presenter and my job was to “bring it home”. So, I shared my own personal experiences—my own truth—of the effects of systemic and structural racism in our Church through my years of ministry there.

In the very next issue of our diocesan newspaper, this was a front page article. It named all three presenters and gave content on the first and second presenter. There was absolutely nothing reported on everything I presented at that symposium. I addressed it immediately with the editor of the diocesan newspaper, only to be given excuses: 1) there is a shortage of staff; 2) the reporter had to leave at lunch time to

meet a deadline; 3) an apology that the contents of my presentation was left out. After thirty-six years as a Black priest in that archdiocese, why would they even think that I would buy this stuff! The clear evidence of racism in this scenario is that there has never been a follow-up article—not even an offer to do a follow-up article on my presentation. Several others have written their own letter to the editor, raising the same questions and expressing the same concerns. There has yet to be any statement of apology to appear in our archdiocesan newspaper on this matter. Somebody decided that no one else was supposed to know the personal experiences I shared as a Black priest in my own archdiocese. Nevertheless, anyone can watch my presentation on YouTube. Now, I don't know about you but it is not easy for me to stand before God on Sunday mornings and profess: "I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church."

A few thoughts for those who will do the action steps of Year II in this strategic plan:

- a. Can you see and acknowledge the people around you who are "like sheep without a shepherd"? Will you allow your hearts to be moved with compassion to address their needs as Jesus did?
- b. In meetings where discussion and decision-making happens that directly affect the lives and faith-life of people who are not white, are any of the non-whites invited to be present in the discussion and would their input be valued in determining the best form of action to be taken for all concerned?
- c. Should questions be raised about how culturally diverse are our diocesan-wide worship services? I am not talking about the tokenism of just one song or just one liturgical movement that everybody else can move beyond to stay comfortable. I am talking about designing a worship experience that reflects and includes the cultural identity of all those who will come. Have we already forgotten the birth of the Church on Pentecost? "We are Parthians, Medes, and Elamites, inhabitants of Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, etc. etc. etc."
- d. There is a young white male who once asked me: "What do you think the Church needs to do to bring healing to those affected by its racist practices?" My response was quick: "The first thing some leaders in the Church need to do is stop inflicting the hurt. We can heal ourselves if others in the Church will stop injuring us!" If you are not sure where to find the infliction of injury, just ask the non-whites in our Church. I am sure that they will be ready to tell you.
- e. With all the recent racially-motivated events that are taking place, can we really say that we are actively and purposefully dismantling the systemic and structural components of racism in our Church? In my own mind, the answer is "No"! We have heard apologies made for the sins of racism in the past. We are waiting to see atonement for the sins of racism in the present. We know of many acts of reparation being offered. Beyond the reparations, perhaps we have yet to undergo true repentance.

Come, Holy Spirit, and renew the face of the earth! It begins when the Holy Spirit renews the depths of our hearts. That will begin when we decide to be true followers of Jesus—when we open our hearts to be moved with compassion because what is placed before us are sheep without a shepherd.

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STRATEGIC PLAN ON ANTI-RACISM PRESENTATION - YEAR II

AUSCP ANNUAL CONFERENCE

UNIVERSITY OF SAN DIEGO

SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA

Fr. John T. Judie

June 14, 2023

