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A White Catholic's Guide to Racism and Privilege

Daniel P. Horan, O.F.M.

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In the introduction to one of his most recent books, *A White Catholic's Guide to Racism and Privilege*, Daniel P. Horan shares that he does not remember ever hearing a homily address racism, racial justice, or white supremacy in a meaningful way during his time growing up in the Catholic Church (xiii). This is a sentiment to which I can relate even

though I grew up attending weekly mass during several significant periods of racial justice reckoning in the United States and around the world. Perhaps this is why Horan's guide is a refreshing change of pace as it seeks both to educate and to push the institutions in which he participates to confront their own shortcomings and move beyond them.

At its core, *A White Catholic's Guide to Racism and Privilege* is designed as a resource to help the titled group in the United States, white Catholics, begin relearning what racism means, a goal which the book entirely achieves (xv). The writing itself progresses naturally through a number of complex ideas, from what racism is and how whiteness plays a significant role in it to the systems and structures that perpetuate racism and how to become a better ally. In each section, Horan accurately and concisely summarises complicated sociological concepts like implicit bias and race as a social construct, frequently providing examples of how these concepts have played a role in his own development towards racial awareness. For example, he shares about his experience working in the Hispanic neighbourhood of the South Bronx during his first year of formation as a Franciscan friar, a space where he was in the ethnic and racial minority, before talking about the importance of naming his whiteness and the power it carries (30). Similarly, he tells a story about being able to jog where he chooses without being targeted on account of his race before explaining how whiteness can operate as a form of property and convey tangible benefits (38).

By providing these personal case studies and weaving his own struggles with his whiteness into the guide, Horan intentionally builds a conversational and free-flowing discussion on racism and privilege which makes the book significantly easier to read than more academic texts in the field. Furthermore, he writes about times where he was not a perfect ally, for example when a person of colour alerted him that he had unintentionally committed a microaggression and he became defensive instead of acknowledging the harm he had caused (143). By admitting that he can fall short, he creates a more accurate and relatable guide to the lifelong work of addressing our own internalised racism.

However, because of the book's core goal, it does contain some potential limitations. First and foremost, Horan openly acknowledges that he has focused on examples from the United States. This does not preclude international readers from picking up the publication, especially in our increasingly globalised world, but it does require that individuals in other countries take additional time to apply the knowledge they gain from his guide to their own specific contexts in their country.

In addition, Horan's book walks a fine line by covering the Church's history and the central tenets of Catholic teaching which support the need for racial justice, including its pro-life teachings, without focusing so heavily on them that individuals who are not part of the Catholic Church cannot find significant meaning within the text. Because he finds this balance, the book is an excellent resource regardless of whether or not you are Catholic. However, individuals who are looking for a more in-depth guide to racism in the Church may want to look to resources like Bryan Massingale's *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* or M. Shawn Copeland's *Uncommon Faithfulness: The Black Catholic Experience*, both of which are among the sources which Horan lists for readers who want to continue learning once they have finished reading his guide.

The incorporation of these additional sources is another strong point of *A White Catholic's Guide to Racism and Privilege*. As Horan acknowledges, 'I follow the lead of anti-racist scholars and activists, many of whom have studied, lived, and risked much for the sake of racial justice in our communities. As I continue to learn from them, especially my brothers and sisters of colour, I invite you to learn as well and put into practice what you have learned' (141). We cannot grow without a community to support us, and he is careful to acknowledge the sources which helped him become educated enough to write this book, including several quotes from Thomas Merton's most well-known piece on race, 'Letters to a White Liberal'.

Indeed, beyond these quotes, Merton's spirit and mission permeates Horan's book. In the last decade of his life, Merton spent much time reading pieces by authors of colour like James Baldwin and Malcolm X which influenced him to use his platform as a renowned Catholic writer to uplift their messages and educate other white people about the harmful impacts of their own actions. Similarly, Horan recognises that he has a significant platform as an author, columnist, and speaker which must be leveraged to educate other white people about racism and privilege, continuing Merton's mission through his own work.

Importantly, Horan has also addressed one of the major stumbling blocks in Merton's writings in *A White Catholic's Guide to Racism and Privilege*. In 'Letters to a White Liberal', Merton lays out a list of action items which white liberals must take to reduce the harmful effects of their actions on the anti-racism movement. He then suggests that, 'in making these demands [of white people, African Americans] are committing themselves very heavily to provide answers, in case we should ever ask them any questions.'¹ As Horan emphasises several times

in his book, this suggestion is no longer appropriate (if it ever was) as it is not the responsibility of people of colour to educate white people (xix). By stepping up and creating resources for white people with his Catholic community, Horan demonstrates a way around this stumbling block while following in the footsteps of Merton's own actions.

On the whole, Horan's newest book is an engaging and useful guide to racism and privilege which provides food for thought for beginners and long-time racial justice activists alike. One can only hope that as more dioceses across the world incorporate trainings to educate their parishioners about racism and inequality, this book finds its way into these communities and plays an active role in moving the Catholic Church and broader society towards a more equal world.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1964), p. 55.

Anne Pearson is a recent graduate from Bellarmine University where she completed a thesis about Thomas Merton's writings on racism. She is currently living in Washington, D.C. and pursuing a career in policy research.

David Scott recounts his first encounter with Merton

It was while I was still at school and having just two periods of time allotted to going out to the village between four and five o'clock, I decided to go into the public library. I had never heard of Merton, but using the spaces between the shelves to spy on the young female librarians, my eye slipped sideways to the cover of a book, set up on the shelf to show its front. The cover showed a monk staring out over a forest. There was something hugely attractive to me about this picture. The mood was quiet, peaceful and thoughtful, and all those abstract feelings were focused onto a person intent on contemplation. I borrowed the book from the library. It was summer and warm, so I went into the churchyard of the parish church and read bits of it. It was utterly compelling. ... There were words like 'silence' I had not heard anyone use creatively before. I had heard them shouted as orders, but never whispered as an invitation. This was in 1963 when I was sixteen. It should have been girls, but actually it was contemplation.

from David Scott – The Mind of Christ