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On August 12, 2017, several hundred carefully organized, mostly young, heavily armed white supremacists, neo-Nazis, and KKK members participated in a “Unite the Right” rally in the college town of Charlottesville, Virginia, carrying torches and chanting racist and anti-Semitic slogans, “they will not replace us” and “Jews will not replace us.” They were met by counter-protesters, including University of Virginia students, committed to non-violence and anti-fascist groups ready to meet forces with force. Clashes broke out and late Saturday morning 20-year-old James Fields from Maumee, Ohio, near Toledo, allegedly rammed his silver Dodge Challenger into a group of the counter-protesters, killing 32-year-old Heather Heyer and wounding 19 others. Later in the day, two state troopers, H. Jay Cullen and Berke Bates, engaged in surveillance of the situation, died when their helicopter crashed.

President Trump has made various public comments on Charlottesville. His initial statement on Saturday condemned “in the strongest possible terms the egregious display of hatred, bigotry and violence on many sides, on many sides,” without naming the white supremacist groups involved. On Monday, he read a statement specifically condemning violence by white supremacists, neo-Nazis and the Ku Klux Klan. The next day, in a wide-ranging news conference, the president repeated his claim of moral equivalence between the two contending groups at Charlottesville, insisting that the white nationalists included “some very fine people,” and suggesting “there is blame on both sides.” He went on: “not all of those people were neo-Nazis, believe me, not all of those people were white supremacists by any stretch.” Many “were there to protest the taking down of the statue of Robert E. Lee,” a cause the president seemed to embrace, warning that statues of Washington and Jefferson could be next. Reinforcing his criticisms of the counter-protesters, Trump accused the “alt-left” of being “very, very violent” as they attacked the alt-right “swinging clubs.” The president’s claim of moral equivalence has drawn criticism from political and religious leaders and invites reflection on how to respond to the horrendous public display of hatred and bigotry evident in the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville.

As Christians, we are called to empathize with the victims, to honor the deceased, to pray for the injured and to comfort the grieving. We are guided by certain fundamental Gospel truths: Our loving Father wills the salvation of all people and extends maternal care to each individual; Every human being is stamped with the image and likeness of God; Before God all humans are equally dependent and poor; As representative of the whole human race, Christ died and rose to save all of us; Divine grace is abundant, available to all people; God’s revelatory word knows no favorites; The Church is sign and instrument of the all-inclusive kingdom of God. Those core beliefs rule out all forms of discrimination and prejudice, including the anti-Semitism and racism propagated in Charlottesville. They also challenge the pernicious claim of moral equivalence between the hate mongers and those who stood against them. We do not have to claim moral perfection among the counter-protesters or ignore the presence of anti-fascist groups in order to condemn white supremacy as anti-Christian and to affirm courageous efforts to support truth and justice. Furthermore, our Christian beliefs ground a moral obligation to avoid words or activities that reinforce stereotypical prejudice or violate the dignity of individuals.

An authentic Christian response to Charlottesville, however, cannot settle for a moral minimalism that merely avoids exacerbating the problem. We need broader theological perspectives for understanding the dynamics of white supremacy and more effective strategies for overcoming it. We are interdependent persons, social beings who need healthy communities, especially families, to flourish. Sin has a social dimension, infecting cultures, systems and institutions. Social sin generates false consciousness, which accepts injustice and prejudice as normal, without recognizing how this privileges some and disadvantages others.

In the United States, racism is a prime example of social sin. Slavery was a legal institution in our country from its founding until the end of the Civil War and the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865. Slave traders captured Africans and shipped them in deplorable conditions to the U. S., where they were bought and forced into hard labor, making cotton growing in the South extremely profitable. For many white persons slavery was simply a normal part of society. Many of our Founding Fathers owned slaves, including George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin and James Madison. Universities, including Harvard, Columbia and Georgetown, owned and sold slaves. Christian preachers justified the practice as part of God’s plan and urged slaves to accept their fate as a path to heaven. After the Civil War, Jim Crow Laws (a pejorative expression for blacks) enforced segregation in the South in all public facilities, including schools, buses, lunch counters, and restrooms. In the North, discriminatory housing practices and limited job opportunities created segregated cities to the disadvantage of racial minorities. The Civil Rights legislation of the 1960’s brought an end to legal segregation but not to the ideology of white supremacy. The presence of the Ku Klux Klan in Charlottesville reminds us that organized hate groups, though small in numbers (at most an estimated 8,000 Klansmen nationally), can still disrupt the social order and foment violence. Racism rooted in the dehumanizing (for both the perpetrators and the victims) practice of slavery is a particularly virulent form of social sin which continues to distort our fundamental institutions and to blind good people to ongoing injustice.

Recalling the broad outlines of the history of racism in our country is one part of a more comprehensive response to Charlottesville. In addition, we also have to ask ourselves to what degree racial stereotyping still pervades our own consciousness. Before we absolve ourselves too quickly, we might recall the confession of Nelson Mandela that he worried about his safety when he boarded a plane and saw the pilot was black. How do I really feel about being treated by a black dentist or a black doctor, about driving through black neighborhoods, about passing young blacks when walking on the sidewalk, about working for a black boss?

We can also reflect on white privilege, which scholar Peggy McIntosh described in 1988 as “an invisible knapsack of unearned assets” that we routinely take for granted: for example, being surrounded by people and media types who look like us; being viewed as normal and belonging; being unafraid to speak out against injustice without fear of racially motivated retaliation; and being confident in a crisis that the person in charge will be someone like me. McIntosh invites us to reflect on our own experiences of privilege not to make us feel guilty about unearned advantages, but as a way of revealing the racist structure of our society and finding motivation to work for greater justice. Other scholars have levelled important criticisms of her work, especially that many poor whites are not so privileged and that upper class blacks do not face the economic disadvantages of the poor. Without judging the validity of white privilege theory, some things are clear: whites in our society receive higher salaries than blacks and accumulate more wealth; whites are less likely to end up in prison for illegal drug use than blacks; whites are less likely than blacks to be stopped by police for a traffic violation. Personal reflection on white privilege can deepen our gratitude for blessings, sharpen our recognition of unearned gifts, and ignite our compassion for the victims of racism.

The biblical theme of liberation provides a faith perspective for deeper reflection on Charlottesville. According to the Exodus story, Yahweh liberated the Israelites from the cruel fate of slavery in Egypt, granting them political, economic and social freedom. The Hebrew prophets drew on that experience to remind the Israelites of their obligation to care for oppressed groups in their own society, the widows, orphans and aliens. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus continues that tradition by identifying his mission to preach the good news to the poor and to liberate the captives (4: 14-22). Furthermore, the Lord identified himself with persons who are hungry, thirsty, homeless and imprisoned, promising salvation for those who attend to their needs (Matt 25: 31-45). Today, white Christians are called to see Christ in our black sisters and brothers who are undernourished, underemployed, ill-housed, and over represented in the prison population. Salvation remains the promised reward for those who respond with concrete acts of charity.

Shortly after Charlottesville, a group of Christian ethicists published a statement, subsequently signed by hundreds of theologians, myself included, condemning “racist and anti-Semitic, neo-Nazi ideology as a sin against God that divides the human family created in God’s image.” The statement rejects “the sinful white supremacy at the heart of the Alt Right movement as Christian heresy.” It goes on to invite all Christians to resist this evil in various ways: reflecting on any way “we have been complicit in sins of racism and white supremacy”; praying for strength and courage to stand against racism; participating in peaceful protests against “the heresy of white nationalism”; and engaging in political action to oppose “structural racism.”

One of the strongest episcopal statements came from Archbishop Charles Chaput of Philadelphia, who called racism “a poison of the soul” and the “ugly original sin of our country, an illness that has never fully healed.” In this situation, “we need more than pious public statements.” We need “to keep the images of Charlottesville alive in our memories” and we need to start immediately with “a conversion in our own hearts and an insistence on the same in others.”

Georgetown University, a Jesuit institution in Washington D.C., provides an instructive example of the kind of conversion process needed today. In 1838, Jesuit leaders of the Maryland province sold 272 slaves working on their plantations for over $3 million in today’s dollars to pay off debts incurred by the university. The slaves were sent to plantations in Louisiana where they were forced to endure horrible conditions, and, for some, the break-up of their families. In 2016, the university administration, under pressure from protesting students and concerned alumni, established a university working group to study ways the university could acknowledge its slavery connections and make amends. On April 18, 2017, less than a week after Charlottesville, at a morning liturgy on campus in the presence of more than 100 descendants of the 272 slaves, the Rev. Timothy Kesicki, the top Jesuit official in North America, publicly apologized for their slave trading. “We pray with you today because we have greatly sinned and because we are profoundly sorry.” The university has taken other remedial actions: renaming a campus building Isaac Hawkins Hall after one of the slaves; sponsoring various educational opportunities to learn more about the evils of racism; tracking down descendants of the slaves and offering them scholarships.

The Georgetown experience could encourage other universities to deal more forthrightly with their own history of slave trading. It could also remind all of us that confession, which includes examining our conscience, naming our sins of commission and omission, and making restitution, is an important exercise for spiritual growth, especially appropriate for transforming hatred into love and the vice of racism into the virtue of solidarity.

Charlottesville can be a great moment of opportunity, but only if we all find ways to be part of the solution. For white Christians this means recognizing racism as a particularly persistent form of social sin, which distorts our institutions and creates false consciousness that blinds us to existing prejudices and the unearned advantages of white privilege. It means combating racism with valuable resources in our Christian tradition: the biblical theme of liberation; the example of the compassionate Christ who identifies with those in need; the rich body of Catholic Social Teaching; and the spiritual exercise of confession. Finally, it means engaging in appropriate actions that challenge racism and promote justice in our own circle of influence.